

**Gynesis****or****A Matter of Form****I REMEMBER OUR HONEYMOON**

*Majorca was a good choice. It was not Florida, or Puerto Rico, or Jamaica or the Virgin Islands or Hawaii, or the Poconos where everyone had already been. It must be warm there, I thought, on an island off the coast of Spain. We're going to Majorca, we'd say—they'd nod and smile, trying to remember what they'd heard about it. You had to be careful in Spain, people said, there were soldiers in the street, Franco's men. Spain was a gloomy country, full of sour old ladies with their black dresses and lacey mantillas and rosary beads. Spain must be dark, and dry—a country filled with churches. But Majorca was floating, Majorca was lush and mountainous, and floating in the blue blue blue of the Mediterrean. Majorca was an island, Majorca was free and far from home—Majorca was a place to start.*

*So we went to Majorca and ate boiled vegetables and fish; we went to Majorca and drove up and down and all around, switching back and forth and back up the mountains, me hanging on and you honking the horn on the hairpin turns. We went to Majorca and drank wine, we went to Majorca and saw chickens hanging in the market where the women turned suddenly quiet as we passed, me in my halter top and you in your tie dyed jeans. We went to Majorca where we couldn't talk to anyone, where no one knew our names. We went to Majorca and drank a toast to the beginning of our life together under the palm trees near the terraced foothills that circled the valley where the sheep stood by the roadside just past the olive groves on the road to the north where from atop the mountains we sighted the sea. We could see, we could see, we could see so far, Oh I said, the world is so big, and you laughed just a little. We sat under the palm trees and marvelled at this island we'd found—*

*together we laughed, as if we'd never have to go back. But what did we know? We were young and didn't understand.*

*Do you remember every night at dinner, that fussy little wine steward tried to give us a bottle of water that we hadn't ordered? Every night we'd refuse it, and he'd go away, shaking his head and muttering in Spanish. It took us all week to figure out the the water bottle had been ordered by the people who had stayed in the room before us, who hadn't had a chance to finish it before they checked out of the hotel. On the last night we accepted the bottle finally if only to relieve him of the worry of passing it on someone new. Then we laughed and drank a toast to the couple we never met.*

*I think about her often now, the woman who stayed at that hotel before me. I imagine her traveling and seeing the world, living her life. She might be back there right now, in that same hotel, trying to get back to the beginning, trying to see where she's been.*

I see her standing at the top of the stairs preparing to descend. She looks like me, but her face is in shadows and she hasn't yet turned it to the light. She could be you, too—my mother, my sister, my daughter, my friend. Someday.

Her name is Ruth—her sisters call her Ruthie, but her husband never did. She's just a little off balance, that's what her son Frankie thinks—her only child, the one she crooned to—hush little baby—protected from the dark—Don't say a word. That's what she thinks he thinks, anyway—the blue eyed boy she ached for as he grew and grew, his eyes turning steely grey, till he looked more and more like a stranger. What else could he be thinking—watching, always watching her from behind the mask that covered the little boy's face. He leaves her all alone now mostly. You turn invisible once your children go off to school.

"Remember," she's about to say, "remember when..." The words rush to her lips and pause there, unformed. Remember, she thinks, pressing the sides of her tongue to the back of her teeth. Remember. But there's no one to say it to. She sighs and stares down the flight of steps to the lobby. Even the leaves of the potted plants

at the foot of the staircase seem to be drooping. Ruthie feels wilted herself what with too much wine last night and too little sleep, and she leans heavily on the banister. When the wooden doors below creak open she hopes for a breeze, but only a shaft of sunlight enters framing the dark figure of a man whose face is invisible in the glare. Heels clicking against the tile like castanets, he crosses the lobby and hurries up the stairs.

His white suit is wrinkled she observes, her lips curving up so tight in a smile that her eyes disappear into slits. He's mopping his brow as he passes and doesn't notice her. Is it Frankie's voice, "Don't smile so' hard," or her husband's that she hears insisting again, "Stop trying so hard to please." She runs her fingers through her graying hair, tugging at her newly cropped curls.

Her foot leaves the step, hovers in the air. No songs to sing, no stories left to tell, no one to hear them.

Still, she will descend, she must descend.

Click, click, click the shoes tap out behind her, like the dancer last night, who'd started his dance so gently that she had to hold her breath to hear the movement of his feet at first. Tap, tap, tap. Just a little tap. Tap, tap, tap. Leather, wood and clap. Tap, tap, tap.

Dressed all in black with a red sash tied at his waist he held himself stiff and aloof, his shoulders rigid and his face pointed up and over the crowd. It wasn't until he drew near that the tassels swinging from the brim of his hat were visible. He was younger than she'd thought, with skin like porcelain, smooth and unlined. His eyes were unwavering beads of coal—he never blinked, never moved a muscle in his face—but those fat black tassels kept bobbing and bouncing into one another. Snap, snap, snap. Tempo quick and mean. Slap, slap, slap. Then the guitar wailed, and he raised one arm over head and extended the other to the audience as his feet beat the floor with a staccato drill that shook the tables.

Ruthie makes a note to check the night school catalog to see if they offer flamenco dancing, then flits down the last three steps mimicking his relentless rhythm, her sandals sucking noisily at her

damp feet. When she reaches the bottom, the hotel clerk is grinning at her from behind the counter. She smooths her skirt, looks for a clock, then approaches the counter.

She asks something simple like, "When will the bus arrive?"

*"Si Senora."*

She likes the soft look of his small brown hands folded on top of the paper he's been reading, and that he looks at her when she talks. "When," she continues, "when is the bus coming?"

*"Si, Senora."* He says something else in Spanish and then shrugs, still grinning with those awful yellow teeth of his, as the phone rings. She thinks he might be trying to tell her that the bus will be late, but isn't sure, and now he looks worried that she hasn't understood him. She starts to smile back at him, then thinks better of it. Shouldn't be too friendly. Does that count for the hotel personnel, too?

The phone jingles in short little bursts and he uncrosses his hands, gently tugging at his moustache now and waiting, she suddenly realizes, for her to finish so that he can answer it. "*Gracias*," she says, smiling after all. The driver is probably still having his siesta. No matter she tells herself, wandering into the bar where she sips vodka and tonic from a tall narrow glass. It tastes all lemony and cool, like spring, and in the dark of the bar with the wet glass pressed against her cheek, she can almost pretend it's April and she's there for the first time, just like she was years ago on her honeymoon.

When she'd been in Majorca with Frank, the bus had been late, too, she remembers now. They had a drink in the bar, wondering if the bullfight would start without them as it got later and later. Drunk on rum and each other, they forgot about the bullfight that afternoon, went back to the room and made love silently on the tiny lumpy bed. Even in the beginning Frank never talked when they made love. Ruth tried to get him to, but he never would, so she gave up and stopped talking herself. After a while she stopped even thinking the things she would have said to him.

## I REMEMBER WHAT I MISSED

*Later we stayed in that same hotel, in the same room, slept in the same lumpy bed that Ruthie had shared the week before with Frank. We laughed at the unfamiliar bidet. I said I'd wash my feet in it. Then I found her hairbrush in the rickety drawer of the wooden bureau where she'd left it, pulled the long red strands of hair from the bristles before tossing it out, wondering who'd been there before us, who'd come after—never wondering about us, where we were going, where we'd been.*

*Later: wanting things, having things, keeping them. Later: furniture, a house to put it in, rugs and lamps. Later: a broken down stove, a new washing machine. Later: mowing the lawn and hanging wall paper. Having babies. But always: the distant deeps of that shadowy sea framing the rocky shore, the skies. A world apart, calling me.*

*I always hoped to go back there, hoped to soak up the heat I grumbled about in the twisted olive groves, to climb again in crazy spurts and dips up winding hillside roads to the mountains where we gazed out over hills, and hills and hills. I wanted to take in the rugged landscape with more seasoned eyes, to taste the food I refused to try, to see what I could not see the first time, to be with you there, again. But there were babies and bills and budgets to manage. We had other places to be. Still, isn't it pretty to think about finding our way back so we could sit by the bar and sip drinks for old time's sake?*

When Ruthie is nearly finished with her drink some Americans who checked in that morning arrive in a noisy group, two couples who by their own account haven't had a moment's peace since they left the "good old U.S. of A" as the loudest of them drawls. He wears boots and Stetson hat, but doesn't look the least bit like a cowboy with his wide pink face beaming from under the brim and his soft belly protruding over his scrolled belt. "You'll have one of those strawberry things, right, Suzanne," he says to the blonde woman who calls him Beau.

"Oh, you know that's just too sweet in this heat, darling," she answers fanning her pale face with the floppy brim of a straw hat. "Aren't you just dying for a beer, Julia?" she asks turning to the other woman.

"Lemonade," Julia answers, perching her slim frame daintily on the edge of the bar stool as though it might soil her gauzy lavender dress, "the only thing that will quench my thirst is lemonade."

"Forget it," Julia's husband says, "they don't have lemonade here." He's a short man with thick glasses that magnify his eyes so they appear, even from across the bar, to be swimming in pools of water. He checks his watch again. "It's nearly two," he says. "When will that bus be here anyway?" he asks, wagging his finger at the bartender.

The bartender shrugs. "Would you like to order a drink, *Signor*?" He pours a whiskey for Beau, then waits for the rest of them to order, his lips parted ever so slightly and drawn back from his teeth in an imitation of a smile. The the swatch of white toweling in his hand glides back and forth over the dark pitted surface of the bar.

Ruth wishes she'd left before they came in, not wanting to have to explain herself to any more couples, and not wanting the bartender to think she's one of them. She sucks the last bit of juice from the lemon she retrieves from the bottom of the glass, trying to decide how to pay her bill and make her exit without speaking any English. She could pretend to be French, but the only word she remembers is *derriere*, and with her reddish hair she's more likely to be taken for English, anyway. She'll say she's from London and here on holiday. Her husband is a businessman, she'll say—quite busy really. Just couldn't tear himself away. Not to worry, she'll add. I sort of like a bit of time to myself.

By then they've all started on their drinks and the hotel clerk comes in and announces the arrival of the bus.

"Here's to the toreador," Beau proclaims, draining his glass with a flourish, which reminds Ruth vaguely of Frank, only because it's something he would never do. She spits the lemon back into the

empty glass which she'd half raised to Beau's toast.

They leave as noisily as they came in, the woman called Suzanne protesting squeakily that she hasn't finished her drink and that the country must be quite uncivilized if they haven't even heard of "to go" cups.

Ruth waits until they've left, then pays her bill smiling sheepishly at the bartender, wanting to apologize for their rude behavior. "You're very patient," she tells him. He merely nods with the same blank face and dead eyes he reserved for the others, wiping the counter, waiting for her to ask for something else.

She's lost the knack of talking to people, Ruth thinks then, hurrying off to the bus.

### I REMEMBER PREPARING FOR THE WEDDING

*You had to lie back then, to get married in the Church. Do you remember, the priest put us in separate rooms? He let you read the paper and sign it, but me he questioned. He looked me in the eye, stared across that huge metal desk of his, in the darkened upstairs room of the rectory, next to the red brick building where I'd gone to school, next to the old wooden Church where I'd been baptized, on the south side of the tracks, at the bottom of Main Street, in the heart of the village where I was born. He sat there looking at me with no expression, across all those years—choir practice and feast days, First Friday devotions, and Lenten fasts—and I looked back. I saw a procession of girls in blue uniforms, heads wreathed in flowers, singing sweet praise to the Virgin:*

*O Mary we crown you with blossoms today,*

*If I tell you a melody—tell you the rise and fall. The gentle pause. The pitch. If I tell you the harmony—the lilt of young voices entangled with the scent of blue bells and forget me nots. If I tell you, will you hear it, now and forever after—hear the whisper of the clean blue flowers, smell the sweet honeyed breath of the young girls passing? Will you feel their love? their belief? their passion?*

*Queen of the Angels, Queen of the May.*

*We learned early to walk in line, hands folded in prayer. Pretending to be brides in our white lacy dresses and veils, we marched to the altar to receive the body of Christ, but had to make up sins for Confession because we didn't know what we'd done wrong.*

*I looked across the desk, whose grey metal chill was inching over me, creeping up my arms to my shoulders where I was suppressing a shudder—I looked across the desk and I lied—said I'd never—I lied—use any—I lied—artificial form—I lied—of birth control—I lied. Straight out without flinching, I lied. Swore I wouldn't do what I was already doing. Fucking you just for the fun of it.*

*Afterwards I went home and cried.*

The box office outside the *plaza de toros* is jammed with people, but those with tickets seem in no hurry to enter. Ruth stands at the edge of the group of tourists who've been collected from several hotels, watching the young men who buy cardboard sunshades for their fiancées, then linger to inspect the bright red and yellow poster at the gate.

Someone's complaining—it's Julia's husband, from the bar. Their tickets are *Sol y Sombra*; that means they'll be stuck in the sun for the first half, he tells them. Ruth avoided them on the bus, sitting up front with Sergio the tour guide, who pointed out all the important sights in French and German and another third language that almost sounded like English. By the time he said anything Ruth could understand, they were so far past the spot that she wasn't sure what he was describing.

They enter the arena finally and Sergio escorts them to the third tier of seats, which offers a fine view. Horns trumpet, then a band plays some kind of dancing or marching music. Ruth thumbs through her little pocket dictionary whenever an announcement comes over the loudspeaker, but can't find words to match the liquid



sounds which all seemed melt into each other.

Three matadors and six bulls is all she can make of the program, so she uses it to fan her face instead which is becoming flushed from the sun beating hot down on her head. The crowd, she notices, consists mostly of middle aged and older men who talk and smoke, eat sunflower seeds — talking and joking — drinking — talking quickly, always talking as if they are all engaged in one long unending conversation.

The matadors, wearing their funny flat hats and shiny tight suits, emerge marching three abreast. It grows so quiet that Ruth hears her stomach rumbling. There should be bells and incense she thinks, coughing to disguise the noise growling out of her as the procession of assistants follows behind each matador. When the entire group has entered, the crowd regains its breath—a gasp of pleasure ripples through the audience and then a cheer.

Retreating to the shade, the matadors stand doll like in a row. Their costumes are the color of icing Ruth thinks, licking her lips—strawberry and lemon and minty green. Frank would never wear pink—it was a dizzy color, he said. She'd like to slide into one of those slim tight suits, feel the taut smooth skin covering her own, her muscles rippling beneath its cool embrace. She would not have to speak if she were a matador or ever have to ask for things.

The first bull charges from the pen into the ring, stops suddenly and stands motionless, except for the frenzied twitch of its tail. "*Toro, toro,*" the young men in front of her call out while the picador, mounted on horseback, approaches. Thirsty and hot, Ruth looks to see if there isn't a vendor nearby who can sell her one of those cups of water. If Frank were there he'd have planned ahead and filled a thermos, been prepared. He would have insisted that she wear a hat. The crowd roars again, and when she looks back the picador is retreating from the charging bull who stops in the center of the ring, snorts and wags his head from side to side, shaking the blue and gold ribbons that wave gaily from atop the two white sticks that now protrude from his shoulder. A dark wet patch spreads out from where the sticks meet his skin. It's a wound, Ruth realizes. He's bleeding. She thinks she can feel his heart beat in her ears.

If only she could get a drink of water. Shielding her eyes from the scene she fights the urge to vomit, but finds herself peering through splayed fingers for a closer look. The pink matador emerges and the crowd roars. He faces the bull then begins his elaborate dance, his cape floating, flying up and around. And the bull lowers its head, and joins in the dance, following the flight of the fluttering one winged bird that's always just beyond horn's reach.

Blood drips down the animal's side now in a dark stream. Sun beating down on her, Ruth stares at the spectacle till the crowd seems to fade around her and she is hurtling down a long dark tunnel towards a hot white circle of light.

Then she is sitting in the front seat of the Buick again with Frank, and he has that expression on his face, that expression he had at the moment he died. It didn't look like sleep, or anything you might expect—not surprise, or regret, or even surrender. It was like he just stopped, or was turned into a wax figure. And she heard it, actually heard his last breath, though she hadn't realized it at the time. It wasn't like any sound she'd ever heard before, the sound of his breath leaving his body—and then just silence—his head slumping down, his hand resting there on the seat by her leg. He'll move, she'd thought; he's just teasing that's all. He was going to turn his head and tell her again. "You don't trust my driving. You just don't trust me."

## **I REMEMBER HOW WE ARRIVED**

*The stewardess served orange juice just before we landed in Palma, as if the trappings of breakfast would fool our sluggish bodies into waking. Passport in hand I stepped on foreign soil for the first time, squinting into the sun, trying to ignore the gritty tiredness settling behind my eyes, sweating already in my New York clothes. In my suitcase I had bellbottom jeans, platform shoes, a safari jacket, a slim calendar of tiny pills marked with the days of the week.*

*I was still thin enough then to wear a bikini. It would be too cold for swimming though, as we found out later, but I'd wear it anyway, draping myself across black boulders on a rocky shore. I*

*know because there's a picture of me in the album—eyes closed—am I sleeping or just sun bathing? — stomach flat and tight, unscarred yet by childbirth—legs bent, shins shiny with suntan lotion. The next picture is a formation of black rock in the shape of an arch framing a tiny figure of you. I must have been standing on the cliff above taking the picture. The sea beyond is aquamarine.*

*You seem to be talking to me as I snap the picture, your hand raised, gesturing. Were you telling me again how to use the camera? I wrote something like this about us then:*

*In all logic I should not love you, as unlike me as you are. Yet somehow we blend together. My coolness mingles with your warmth as colors that melt to form one. I think perhaps we are aquamarine. I the blue and you the green.*

*It was on the third day of our honeymoon that we started wondering what our friends were doing. Is green a warm color?*

Ruth hears a fly buzz—swats at it, but it won't stop worrying her, swooping and diving, buzzing around her face. She stands up. "Excuse me, excuse me, please," she says, the fly still whining in her ear as she steps over feet and makes her way to the aisle.

She runs down the steps to the fence, where she stands gaping at the matador, while her head pounds with the throbbing, beating pulse of the bull's heart. Eyes wild now it charges past her, flesh rippling with a final burst of power toward the raised sword of the matador. No air. The sun glints off the blade, blinding her, and she waves to the matador calling, "Frank, Frank," her knees buckling as she sinks to the ground.

## **I REMEMBER HOW WE LOST OUR WAY**

*Red is warm. It was a red car we rented, I think. Yes, in a tiny red car that barely held our luggage we put-putted away from the airport. The Spanish lodging with private beach and formal gardens from the tour book eluded us, as we wound through the residential streets high into the hills above the city. We stopped to ask directions, then drove further and further away from the harbor.*

*The doorman at the big American hotel told us something in Spanish, something like, "Turn left at the big tree," you said. But there was no way to turn left at the tree when we got there, and we were lost again. Your three years of high school Spanish were three years of Spanish One I learned then. What else didn't I know about you?*

*—that you talked in your sleep, didn't read books, made noises in the shower, hated my poetry—*

*If it hadn't been for that little boy on the bicycle, pedaling fast and furiously in front of the car, we never would have found the hotel, the one I chose for its Spanish atmosphere—the formal gardens (a bunch of plants our room looked over), the private beach (a slimy green pool they cleaned the day we left).*

*It was, I'll admit, a mistake to try to describe us as two colors blended into one. Later I'd write:*

*Our lives run parallel, yet forever apart—like railroad tracks that meet only in the distance.*

*There was more, something about being an also-ran in the race for your attentions. I remember liking that line.*

*Do you think it's true what they say—that it's easier to lose a mate to death than to divorce?*

After the bullfight, Ruth rests her eyes under a cool wet cloth as the bus bumps along the dusty country road. The chattering of couples buzzes annoyingly around her. She can't make out their conversations, but the rattle and hum of their voices keeps her listening, trying to decipher some word or phrase that will unravel the secret. What are they saying? Frank would know. She's sure Frank would know.

Sergio is talking on the microphone again. Then the bus stops at the side of the road and they all disembark, one behind the other forming a line that weaves snake-like down a narrow lane to a garden.

A wall of boxy shrubs separates the terrace of fruit trees and rows of flowers from the wild tangle of growth on the other side, and a small arbor of grapes nearly hides the gate across the shadowy crevice in the hill.

"You can't go in," the woman at the gate says, passing a leathery palm over her face. "The cave is closed." Under shaggy white brows her eyes shine like dark mirrors, and Ruth sees in them only her own glossy reflection.

Julia hands Ruth a rose and tilts her face to the wind. "There are spirits here," she says with a sniff.

Pulling a white handkerchief from the pocket of his suit and giving it a quick shake, her husband lifts his black sunglasses and wipes the sweat from the bridge of his nose. Squinting at his wife he says, "I don't believe in things I can't see."

Ruth holds the red petals to her nose. "It has no smell," she says, but the two of them have already gone to pose for a picture with the others under a fruit tree. A drop of blood bubbles up from the thorn at her fingertip.

Sergio calls from above as Ruth probes the broken skin, then sucks the wounded finger. "On to the museum," is his bold pronouncement. When she turns back to look, his dim shape melts into the glow of the sun.

The scattered couples hear him finally and regroup in a slow march up the hillside. "Ah, the classics. Now there's something worth seeing," Julia's husband says, leading them back to the bus.

Ruth remains behind, and they do not miss her.

Under the arbor the old woman plucks grapes, laying the bunches in a basket. "What do you seek," she asks after they've gone, her gums spreading in a toothless black grin.

"I don't know."

Gesturing for Ruth to follow she disappears into the mouth of the cave.

Ruth starts to follow, but just beyond the gate she hesitates. "I can't see."

"You have to give yourself up to the dark."

*The words cast shadows on the page, and there are blank spaces between them that you can get lost in. It's time for us to talk about Ruth, for it is she who's brought us back to those days when we were young, when we thought we knew.*

*I took your name—gave mine up willingly. It did not seem strange. Only the "misses" was strange—"misses" was your mother, or mine, and I was nobody's mother.*

*Was it there that I lost myself, (was it in you?) in your smooth broad back, and strong hands, in your lopsided grin and dark eyes, (there was that, of course, but that's not what I mean), what I mean is the quick and busy way you did things—always running, moving, getting something done—and me following behind—no time to stop to think to breath—one body, one motion, pressing forward, keeping track, making time—all the glorious clutter of our lives swept up and packed away into tidy little boxes stacked in even rows on ordered shelves—separated/intact/organized. That fearful symmetry stalks my brain, wants to bind me to its balanced frame, gag me with its hot white core, bend me to its shape.*

*When we were young, we thought we knew. When we were young, we said things like, "I do," and thought we knew what it meant. When we were young, the solid center of the world was held safe in the translucent word. Now, like the slim cool thermometer that slipped from my lips once when you made me laugh, the glass has shattered and the mercury center, not solid after all, is here—no there, splitting off, now there, and there, and there, running free, changing shape, becoming newer and new and new.*

*Here, we are a memory. But Ruth is real, on the page. She is the sentences between us, the voice crying out in the dark, the sounds our lips mold themselves around, the things we try to say.*

*This is the hard part, where one thing stops and another begins—where we have to change direction. After all the years we are still opposed. You can't follow Ruthie where she's going. You'd want to install electric lights, build a stairway, have safety inspectors with badges that read AIR QUALITY MAINTENANCE.*

*She has to slip in quietly without disturbing anything. This then is the story. You'll have to abandon your equipment and trust*

*me.*

She steps over the edge of the pale circle of light as though off a precipice and then she's there beside the woman blinking into nothingness. "Feel your way," the voice commands moving away and Ruth gropes damp earth and stone to its sound.

The entrance is steep and rocky, more a hole than a path. She has to bend low and then crawl, scraping along, clinging to the sides to keep from tumbling. "Don't fight the force that pulls you," her guide says sliding down easily, "let it take you where you want to go."

At the bottom she can stand again. "The hardest part is getting in," the woman tells her. Lighting a match, she pulls a lantern from behind a rock, and its flickering beam lights the remainder of their descent through a maze of damp tunnels. After several dead ends Ruth wants to know where they're going. "Don't give up so easily," she's told as they duck into a new wider passage that leads to the cathedral of the cave, where the air smells of musk.

"We must refresh ourselves." With the lantern between them, they sit cross legged on the ground in the pillar of light that reaches up the vaulted ceiling. In Ruth's hand the woman places a cluster of grapes. "Eat," she insists, watching intently as Ruth chews the sweet pulp, swallowing the bitter skin and seeds along with it. Fingers stained purple with juice, Ruth rubs them in the dirt and stands up.

"Now," the woman says extinguishing the lamp and producing a flashlight from the folds of her voluminous skirt. Ruth points it ahead, and from out the brown darkness draping the wall a golden stag bounds into the light. He's running up towards the ceiling—on two legs it seems, but his great hind quarters anchor him in permanent motion there. In profile his painted figure faces her yet looks away, his single jagged horn forming an eternal question mark.

Ruth's guide is gone. "Where are you?" she calls out, but only hollow echoes answer. Her skin prickles in the coolness.

Behind her hooves clatter as the herd charges. She swings around dropping the flashlight which spins for a moment, lighting a procession of images. The walls are filled with them—stags and giant birds and great cats—prancing, preening, leaping in a blaze of color.

She retrieves the flashlight and turns it into the dark. There's nothing there behind her after all. She can hear Frankie now, yelling at her for going off on her own, right again—like his father. She has to keep moving to turn off his voice, so she follows the wall around feeling for the exit until she comes upon a row of handprints, nearly fifty of them in a row, white shadows of hands outlined in red, the way children trace their fingers in kindergarten. Ruth lays her fingers over one—a perfect fit.

A slight wind from above whispers faint music. "You," she called out, "I hear you." It is their heat she feels first, steamy breath warming her cool skin. She thinks she should run, but finds herself turning her face into the damp and letting the warmth rush over her like the soothing mist of a shower. Their hands are small and strong, pushing her down and down and down, groping, pressing, stroking until she is rolling on the ground—beneath them and on top of them—their faces pressing up against her, lips parting, tongues flickering—nibbling and whispering—all of them around her. She is one of them and they are with her, all of them, who've been there since the beginning. She hears them chanting animal sounds, and wants to be one of them wearing their skins. She feels their fire die and sleeps with them, dreaming their dreams.

*Here's where we always pause. In the cave. With no guide. Perhaps she doesn't want to leave. Perhaps she'll keep me there with her. She has to break the silence to get out, but doesn't know the right words. I think she has the answer, knows the secret of the cave. You think I do—that I am like the hand of her god. You think I could send her son to rescue her, or a search party lead by Julia's husband. The guide could return. But they're gone now, all of them. Only Ruthie is left, and me watching her in the dark. Meanwhile, I can tell her story, but I can't save her. And since I have never been*



*known for my plots, I can only tell about the visions, not what they mean. I will sing it like this.*

*In the beginning there was light  
in the circle of fire—  
and animal sounds*

*Coo coo coo ya*

*Chanting*

*Coo coo coo ya.*

*The eagle, the wolf, the lion,  
their voices  
trilling,*

*howling,*

*roaring from your throat.*

*Wearing their skins,  
dancing the dance of life,  
panting,  
hearts beating  
like  
drums,  
drums,  
drums.*

*Drink power of blood, gnaw  
strength of bone.*

*In your eyes glowing  
the beast charges again*

*as your tongue*

*warms to the moist*

*flesh and the tale of the kill.*

*When the fire dies,*

*sleep and in your dreams see it*

*again,*

*the beast that lives*

within  
     you  
 now.  
 Aching with hunger,  
     awake to the force  
 that kindles  
     your desires  
 animates  
     your dreams.  
     What name to give it?  
     What meaning?  
 In the belly of the earth,  
 deep, probe the  
  
 wells  
     of memory.  
 Bold,  
 bright as life,  
 paint images  
     that soar,  
     leap,  
     and  
     charge  
 through the night.  
 Imagination unleashed,  
     spirit takes flight,  
     the hunt goes on.

*The visions survive, but Ruthie's missing—my voice has supplanted hers—she is lost, trapped in the cave, sleeping silently in the shadows, dreaming the life behind the word. But she doesn't sleep forever.*

When she wakes she is hungry and wonders how long she's slept. Frankie would yell if he saw her now all covered with dirt and lost in a cave. "Pre-med students don't know everything" she says, then laughs. It's a hearty laugh that tumbles back to her in the dark. She reaches for the flashlight, but can't find it. She laughs again, louder this time, pleased with the full sound of her own voice.

She kicks the flashlight when she stands up and it clicks on illuminating the narrow passage where they entered. How long ago had that been, she wonders, licking her dusty lips. She needs water. She'll have to find her way on her own. Picking up the flashlight she sees that her knees are skinned and her sandal is broken. Frankie would be so mad, she tells the empty passage before her, laughing just at the thought his fretful face.

*I never know how Ruthie will get out of this. She has to solve a riddle, I think, in order to emerge, but it's not something someone can tell her, she has to learn it for herself—something with a ring of truth to it—something she should have known all along.*

*Perhaps it would be easier to send out a search party. Or, I could tell her story again, recite the poem.*

*In the beginning there was light.*

She's getting angry now. She doesn't like my beginning.

*In the beginning there was light, I tell her again. That's the way it always begins.*

BUT THAT'S NOT THE BEGINNING AT ALL.

*What is it then if not the beginning? It's not the end.*

NO, IT'S NOT THE END. IT'S NOT EVEN THE BEGINNING OF THE END.

*What is the light, then, if not the beginning?*

IT'S THE END OF THE BEGINNING.

*Then what was there in the beginning?*

THE DARK. IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE DARK. Black and deep. It was smooth inside, pulsing—ebb, ebb, ebb, flow, flow, flow—and warm. It was solid and growing. It was desire. Turning and turning and turning. The dark is not empty. It is full and thick; it is rich and deep. It is full. It is filled to overflowing—it is seeping out and spilling over; it is leaking and leaking and leaking. It is swollen and thick; it is round. Bursting open. It wants to leave and stay; it wants to be and not be; it is me and not me; it is you and not you. Desire is not empty. Desire. Desire is not waiting; desire is not without; desire is not alone. In the beginning was the dark. It was desire. In the beginning was the darkness of desire—not quiet not empty not silent—roaming and rummaging, probing and grasping,

swiftly smoothly sweetly surely. Desire. Reach—with desire—chase—with desire—hold—with desire. In the beginning was the dark. It was desire. In the beginning was the darkness of desire.

The light came after.

*I should have known that.*

This, she thinks, turning off the flashlight is where I belong.

*I decide to send the search party after all.*

They're too late. She's already clawed her way up and out into the night. Like eyes blazing out of the dark a pair of head lights blind her. She hears footsteps on the path and a dark form approaches from out of the glare. It's her laughter that leads them to her.

"It's all right, we've found her. You can turn off the lights," Sergio calls up to the driver.

When Ruthie stops laughing and opens her mouth to speak its as if the whole world is rushing into her, blades of grass and hills of ants, sandy shores littered with plastic and brown stubbly hills, slushy winter streets and steamy summer nights without the hint of a breeze, girls jumping rope, dogs barking, trees that crack the sidewalk and sweltering subways, horns blaring and lights lighting, the rhythmic swing of a cradle rocking—and the stars, the flickering stars, like candles casting pale shadows across the dome of the sky.

The moon is just rising over the hill as the tourists from the bus rush down the path toward her, wild eyed and worried, "You must be crazy," they say, "a woman alone, wandering around. You could have died."

Calm, white, lucid—the moon's milky gaze drips down the sky to light the hillside. If she tells them about the creatures in the belly of the earth that soar, leap and charge through the night, they will want to own them, Ruthie thinks. By next year she sees a theme park financed by Beau and run by Sergio's tour company. Suzanne and Julia will open a boutique and sell customized T-shirts. Julia's

husband will keep the books and protect the copyright for the "Secrets of the Cave."

"My husband is dead," she tries to say. When she opens her mouth bits of bone sputter out.

"Oh," Suzanne squeals as a splinter strikes her bare shoulder.

"My husband is dead," Ruthie tries to say again, pulling a sliver of bone from between her front teeth and roaring as a wad of fur rolls off her tongue.

"There, there, dear," Julia says leaning toward her.

"My husband is dead," she begins again, hissing through the stream of tiny pebbles rushing past her teeth—"but I am not alone," she coughs out finally, as two silvery feathers float to the ground.

"Crazy," someone says.

*There is no secret message here. I am not Ruthie and she is not me. But I offer her, for she is all I have. And without her, after all, what is there—but all that white space on the page—all that silence and light?*

*As for you and I—what do we really know about each other after all—except that chance, or luck, or fear keeps us together. I have not lost you, nor you me. Though, sometimes I have lost myself, died little deaths—lost words, sentences, paragraphs, whole volumes of myself. Who might I have been?*

"Silly woman," some man says.

The beast that lives within her now growls, and Ruthie bares her teeth, "coo coo coo ya, coo coo coo ya," she trills giving a little dance.

The men shake their heads.

But the women look past her, leaning expectantly toward the yawning dark mouth of the cave.

*Can you feel it? The ache, the shudder, the tremble of desire.*

Holding our breath we wait—hoping,  
listening intently within  
for the pulse and kick,  
the throbbing beat of  
our own monsters  
straining to be  
born.