

Shards

Emily is beautiful.

Sometimes I watch her late in the evenings when she sits on the back porch and works on a painting or a sculpture. I lie in the grass on my stomach or on my side and watch the intricate movements of her hands as she guides a paint-soaked finger across a canvas or molds clay into shapes. Her skin seems soft and smooth as porcelain. Her wavy golden hair seeping in the hues of the setting sun makes her face glow and I usually fall asleep just as the sun sets and a breeze flows from over the mountain and into the yard.

She kisses my forehead briefly to wake me and it seems like I haven't slept at all. The dried paint or clay on her hands rubs my arms gently when she helps me from my place in the grass. *Come to bed*, she says. And I do.

In the morning she is usually the first to wake, padding barefoot to the kitchen and making tea, which she brings to me in bed. Usually it is the tea we chose together while in Chinatown, and it tastes like honeysuckle.

The bedspread is a deep purple, decorated in fabric painted butterflies and tree branches. The sheets are the color of honey. Our bed is iron, with an array of swirling bars as the headboard; something Emily bought at a flea market before we met. When she lies next to me beneath the sheets her hair wraps around her face in soft curls. *Why do you let your hair grow so long?* I ask her sometimes, twirling pieces of it around my index finger. She says she only cuts it when it's time for a change.

Our bedroom is small, but opens to a much larger room. Emily removed the wooden door to this room when we moved in and replaced it with strings of glass beads she threaded herself. This room is where she works. Every wall has a window and a shelf. The shelves are filled with jars of buttons, egg cartons, paints and brushes in cans, sequins and shakers of glitter. There is a desk stained with paint and glue and covered in scraps of magazine and newspaper cutouts she likes. Pressed flowers are tacked to one of the walls from the ceiling to the floor; some I have given her and some we collected ourselves from the backyard.

Our yard has no fence and only one tree. The tree is tall and billowing at the top and larger around than my arms can stretch. Emily hangs bird feeders from the branches, and wind chimes that tell us the direction of the breeze. Our yard opens into a field, which grows up a hill and, eventually, into the mountains. We call the mountain our backyard, too.

Emily keeps one jar on her bedside table and fills it with things she does not want lost in the containers and corners of her work space.

Once, right after we moved in together, we were on a hike and Emily tackled me from behind. We fell into a meadow of thick grass and dandelions. It was late fall and the dandelions were puffs of seed that burst as we fell onto them and scattered with the wind. She kissed me softly on the mouth, then hard on the neck, and I ran my fingers through her tangled hair. It was short back then. Her mouth tasted sweet, but salty at the corners from the sweat off her cheeks, and as I kissed her I felt something bite me in the back. I reached beneath me and found four human teeth in the grass.

Those are in the jar.

When I first met Emily she was by herself. She sat at a table in the front section of a small restaurant I visited often with my friends. She was eating white wine soaked muscles from the shells and lady finger cookies from a large plate drizzled in chocolate. I walked in with friends from work and found a place at the bar between them. I drank club soda and leaned with my back against the counter, elbows propped on either side of me, and watched this fascinating woman eating alone.

She seemed complacent. She wore a dress of deep cerulean that had thin straps and a short hem and made her hazel eyes bright like marbles under a flashlight. As the time became later and the evening dining crowd began to leave, table by table, she stayed. She ordered a glass of red wine.

I remember this because, as I began to walk out, I told my friends to go ahead and I would catch up. They shrugged and left, while I approached Emily. She looked up as I stopped beside her table. *Hello*, she said in a smooth voice; just the voice I imagined would belong to her. I said Hello back and sat in the opposite chair. *I like your dress*, she

said, gesturing to the lavender dress I was wearing. Square buttons lined the collar, and she complimented those, too.

As I opened my mouth to say something like thank you or compliment her dress in return, I bumped the table and sent her wine glass tipping towards me. The contents splattered on my front and I sat, horrified, waiting for words that were awkwardly trapped in my throat. *I'm so sorry*, she said and handed me her napkin. *Can I take you out tomorrow to repay you for your dress?* I blushed and agreed, pulling off four of the buttons she liked so much from the collar of my ruined dress and placing them in her palm.

Those are also in the jar.

When driving home from breakfast out one morning we passed a field of Sun Flowers. Emily smiled widely and told me to pull over. I did, and she rushed from the car and ran through the rows of flowers. She stretched her neck towards the sun like the flowers and stood watching the clouds drift by slowly. I joined her at the edge of the field. We sat in the tall shadows of the flowers and ran our fingers through the soil. In one sweep of the dirt my fingers came back tangled in a silver chain. A single charm hung at the end: a Sun Flower. *Good luck*, Emily said, and brushed the dirt off the necklace.

The necklace is also in her jar.

Emily has become interested in mosaics and mobiles. She buys mirrors, old ones and new ones, and breaks them in the grass right off the porch in the backyard. She collects and dyes the pieces of glass different colors and attaches them to yarn and chains. She adds feathers or beads, then hangs them from places in the house. Fairies of light dance on the ceilings, walls, floors and furniture when the sunlight washes through the windows and reflects off her glass mobiles. At night I feel as though I'm being watched because everything is a reflection.

Our living room wall is now a full mosaic of cracked glass, mirrors, and marble pieces. Emily stands on the couch, on the tips of her toes, hot gluing and cementing each piece into place.

I cannot lie in the grass and watch her work because, when I do, shards of glass push into my skin. I watch now from the dining room table, in a chair facing the porch. We made the dining room table together as a house warming gift to ourselves. It is an old door with a glass covering. Beneath the glass are Polaroid pictures we have taken of each other and of things we find beautiful. Emily likes Polaroid the best because it is something she can instantly hold in her hand.

As I watch her from the table one evening the moon is high and full, giving her light to work beneath. The wind is warm and soft and blows through the open porch door and inside the house. The sound of the crickets and the wind chimes on our tree lull me almost to sleep. I lay with my head resting on my crossed arms and my eyes open more widely when I see Emily knick her finger on a piece of her glass. She draws her finger to her mouth and sucks in the blood. She sits for a moment like this: one finger to her mouth and one hand hovering, holding the broken piece of mirror.

She moves quickly, then, and pulls her hair into a pony tale with one hand and slices the hair off with the shard of glass. Golden strands fall to the porch and settle between the broken mirrors. She cradles one bit of hair in her hand and rises from her place on the porch step. I close my eyes and pretend to be sleeping as she closes the screen door. I hear her bare feet stick slightly to our hardwood floor with each step as she walks to the bedroom.

When I finally come to bed the strand of her hair is in her jar and she is asleep. I crawl into the bed beside her and listen to her breathing until I also fall into sleep.

I wake in the morning to a crash in the kitchen. I jump out of bed and walk quickly down the hall, appearing in the kitchen where I can see Emily breaking a sheet of glass on the porch. It is the glass cover of our dining room table. *What are you doing?* I approach the open porch door slowly. *I am making a mobile*, she says quietly, crunching broken glass beneath her bare feet in the grass. I lead her slowly into the house and wash her feet in the bathtub. The water runs red with her blood from the cuts and I ask her if she is ok. She nods and resists the soap I try to rub on her heels. *I'm fine*.

She repeats that she is fine and walks to her work room where she squeezes brown and orange and blue paint onto a paper plate and dips her hands into the colors.

She begins painting the wall with smears of her fist. I ask her what she is doing and she says the walls look dull and bare.

We once went to the opening of a local art studio where paintings of animals and charcoal drawings of fruit covered the walls. *How dull*, Emily said as we walked quietly through the exhibit. We walked through one section until we came to a small hallway, which led to another room of the studio. Emily pressed me against the white wall in the shadows and pinned my arms above my head and kissed my ear, my jaw line. I looked around frantically to be sure that no one was watching. *Close your eyes*, she said. And I did.

As we left the exhibit she took a business card from the curator.

That card is in her jar.

When we decided to move to Colorado, it was because Emily wanted to feel majestic. She wanted to be surrounded by the rocks of the earth pushed into peaks towards the sky. She wanted to feel the grains of soil beneath her toes and wanted to have snow and sunshine in the same day. So I took Emily to the mountains, to Colorado, and we moved into a college town where the houses merged with forest and the mountains were part of our home. I carried in her art supplies and small pieces of furniture from the moving truck as she sat on our new porch and sketched. That's when she made a habit of working on the porch and that's when I first fell in love with watching her. She sketched the peaks of the lowest mountains and the clouds hugging the highest; she smiled and left her feet bare for days, walking in soil, grass, rocks, earth.

One evening we picked flowers at the base of our mountain. We found wild Blue Columbines and Black-Eyed Susans and other flowers that Emily had never seen. We took a few of each home.

When they dried, Emily put them in her jar.

One summer evening we opened all the windows and doors of the house because even the breeze was hot. We were both in our underwear and I cut strawberries into thin slices while Emily made crepes from memory. I beat cream until it was thick, and then

added four pinches of sugar for taste. We drank champagne from coffee cups and wrapped crepe after crepe. We lay on the kitchen floor and I fed Emily crepes from my fingers until the sun was below the mountains. We moved to the backyard where we laid in the grass and watched the stars appear and stretch across the sky. We held hands and listened to the crickets and the owls. Bats flew above us and we counted them as they went.

The champagne cork is in her jar.

The sky is dark and I walk into Emily's work room where she is sitting on a stool and staring at the mixture of orange and blue and brown paint she smeared on the wall. I run my fingers through her short hair and kiss her on the top of the head. *It's late*, I say. *Come to bed.*

Not yet.

I sigh, give her a brief squeeze on the shoulder, and walk back through the curtain of beads and crawl into bed. I try to stay awake and listen for the creek of the stool and her soft footsteps, but I fall asleep before they come.

I came home from an evening with my friends once and found Emily in her work room asleep. She sat on her stool, sleeping with her ear to one outstretched elbow that lay across the desk. Her other hand rested in her lap. I walked in quietly, stepping between piles of newspaper, paper plates and cups, and glass jars filled with stale paint water. I wrapped my arms around her waist and kissed her on the cheek. She stirred slightly and breathed deeply in her sleep. I noticed a painting in all red on watercolor paper lying beneath her arm.

I shook her shoulders softly and she lifted her head. I wiped a bit of saliva from her cheek with the edge of my thumb and she smiled. Her eyes were full of sleep, so I walked her to bed with my arm wrapped around her hips.

As I tucked her underneath the sheets I noticed that each of her finger tips were smeared with red from slivers of cuts. Emily had already fallen asleep again and was breathing slowly, rhythmically. I frowned and kissed the tips of each of her fingers and held her hands to my stomach. I closed my eyes and waited for sleep to come.

I wake on my own. The sunlight filters through the bedroom window. The birds are already awake and chirping outside and the bedspread next to me is still made. I rub my eyes slowly and place my feet on the warm hardwood floor. I wander to the kitchen. The Polaroids are gone from the dining room table. I open the backdoor and look outside. The porch is covered with glass and a few pieces of her hair, but Emily is not there. I walk back to the bedroom.

The jar is gone from her bedside table.