

THE FALLS WE TAKE

W *aaaahhhhh!*

Jerry is falling, head first, toward the metal floor. His mouth is open, his eyes contorted, one eye screwed shut and the other open: blue and clear enough to swallow in the wind rushing past him, the metal, the swatches of grass peeking through the honeycombed floor, the air that suspends us between playing ground and earth.

Because I am right behind him, I can see how this fall will unfold: how he'll instinctively put his malformed arms in front of himself as a barrier to keep his face from smashing into the hard floor, how his tiny hands will be frail and useless, crumpling before his face—his glasses shattering into shiny fragments, glimmering across his cheeks and eyes. I can see him as an adult (though now at seven years old, all the records predict he will not make it past his early teens), his neck twisting into a question mark in front of the bathroom mirror, another headache. He'll groan, shake his head hard like a dog, grip the white sink with his fingers, and with his other hand smash his head over and over again until a piece of glass, a sliver like a tear, slips out the corner of his eye. Always the headaches. This embedded piece of glass will only partly explain the headaches. He is an angry young man, and he is alone.

There are times when I hate Jerry. I hate his tantrums and how we have to bind him into his special chair because of them, the foam vest snug on his underdeveloped chest. It's a dark contraption, a morbid safety vest that closes with three black buckles attached to a relic of a metal wheelchair. I hate knowing how it feels to snap those buckles one by one, restraining a strange child a third of my own weight, knowing how his chest beats against the force of my hands pushing the foam pieces together, his heart wild underneath. *One. Two. Three. Snap. Snap. Snap.* Or how when I don't back away fast enough after securing him, he'll grab my hair by the fists and pull me into

his sweet-smelling face. So much of Jerry is still like a newborn baby—his coloring, his smell, the translucency of his underdeveloped fingernails, pink from the skin below and pinker still from scratching his own face and mine.

I am thinking this as I watch him fall before me.

There is always time during a fall. The wind stills a little. Suddenly I can feel the skin of my face. And the colors get bright around us, intense hues. How green the blades of grass are in the diamonds of space between the metal, so Technicolor.

As we fall, we approach the speed of light and gain more time, more perspective. Things slow down. I've been rushed and frazzled all day by these special education kids, thinking only about three o'clock, when the bell rings, when I can get into my car and breathe in the black leather and escape these kids, this town, this job I hate. But because Jerry is falling, suddenly I notice that it's spring. The air is sweet, like hazelnut. The wind slides past my temples. I can see the spidery veins of Jerry's hair shooting out his scalp by thin, blond roots.

I'm the second person to arrive at the elementary school in the mornings. I come after the front-desk receptionist and before the other three caretakers, and certainly before the teachers. When I'm too early, I wait outside the front doors and rub my arms in the cold before the always-smiling receptionist, Martha or, I don't know, Barbara Jean—someone from rural Oklahoma and *nice*—comes, jangling her keys and ready to start our day. When I enter, I walk immediately to the side door in front of the turnaround and unlatch it and stand inside the metal door-frame between the inside and the predawn dark. I'm waiting for the third person to arrive, Jerry's father, the school custodian.

I treasure these silences, the coldness of a morning, how Jerry's mother sneaks up in the family Taurus and drops off both father and son.

Later in the day, when the roar of screaming children is everywhere, cafeteria chairs banging around, and teachers yelling: "Jimmy, *stop* it!" or "Cheyenne, one more time and—*that's it! That's it, I told you!*" this man, mopping, will be watching us.

"That's all he does, all day long," my coworker says, "just eyes 'em all day long."

"He never gets nothin' done," the other caretaker says. She shakes her head at me because I'm the substitute caretaker for

her friend Barbara, who's on maternity leave. Barbara is the woman normally assigned to Jerry.

When I push Jerry's wheelchair down the empty halls, as all the other public school children are busy mumbling in their classrooms, I hear the slow, plastic slide of his father's pail, the regular squeak and thump of his boots, and the one circular push of a mop. He is always following us.

In the lunchroom, he watches his only son, and me touching his son, slowly spooning baby food into Jerry's small pink mouth, an action at the center of both of their ice-blue eyes. And indifferent to anything else but us, with the gray rag in his hands, he wipes away pizza and vomit from the tile in practiced strokes.

But for now, in the morning, he steps out of the car and unbuckles his seven-year-old son from the backseat. He carries Jerry slowly, like a baby, to me. He releases the grip of Jerry's thighs from his own torso and hands him over like a gift, one large hand under the child's butt, the other under the armpits, over the rib cage, and holding his small, humped back. I take on Jerry's weight, his father's weight, the privacy of Jerry's skin on my breasts, the contact of this skin to his father's chest.

His thighs wrap above the bones of my pelvis, where it is easiest to support a child's weight, on the hip, and though I have no children of my own, the mother waiting inside me knows this. Jerry knows this. He knows that instinctively I want to press his head underneath my palm and to my breastbone, that I want to rub my mouth against the honey smell of his hair. He murmurs, and his father and I are quiet here, like husband and wife. When Jerry's father leaves to light up the school, I will do what I've restrained myself not to do in front of the man: I cradle the child snug into my own body and snap him in to fit there, my arms wrapped so firmly around him that they cup his shoulders, his ears, his neck. I think about the rumors I've heard about this child because I don't have the authority to access his files: *autism, Asperger's syndrome, extreme retardation*. I kiss his forehead and he murmurs again, sleepily. I hum us down the empty halls together.

Kevin and I are in his hometown of Knoxville, Tennessee. We're sitting cross-legged on the floor of a wooden cabin, where his two young nieces are lying down on temporary cots. We're all

in town for a wedding, and the girls have just woken up, their blonde hair slipping across their faces. Kevin had been talking to the girls before he called me in to come sit too.

“You’re not married already?” five-year-old Anna asks me urgently, wide eyed and sitting herself up.

“No, honey.”

“Oh.” Katie, the seven-year-old, looks confused. “But I thought you were our aunt already.”

I look across the room at Kevin. He’s petting Anna’s hair.

“Soon,” he says, “we’ll get married soon.” Yesterday, the cousin closest to his age waited at the end of the aisle, fingering the black hem of his sleeve nervously, and now Kevin’s the last unwed male in a family that pressures us all for grandchildren.

“And you know what? You guys can help us plan it all!” he says.

The girls stir excitedly.

“C’mon, let’s get y’all dressed so we can go fishing,” I say.

I’ve made them promises about the lake outside, promises that over the last five years have built me into a kind of favorite relative with them. Katie asks me what kind of dress I’m going to wear for *my* wedding, and I turn away from Kevin. I lean down so I am completely facing Katie, my black hair falling to her cheeks. Crusts of sleep shine from her eyes.

“What kind of dress do *you* think I should wear?”

“The princess kind, of course. Like Cinderella,” Katie says.

“And *pink!*” Anna says.

For them, a woman’s wedding dress is the ultimate symbol of fantasy. They remember how their new aunt passed by us yesterday, organza crinkling down the satined aisle. What the girls do not know is that in two months I will ask their uncle to leave our home, and that this is the weekend I’ve been telling him we cannot go on, and that he will not understand, will refuse to understand. They do not know that, fingering his great-grandmother’s diamonds on my own finger, I’ve never been able to set a date. Or that in two weeks Katie will not be able to walk anymore, her rare muscular disease further atrophying her body. Later today, this last time I see her, when she runs to me during the family fish fry, she will trip—not on a toy or a protruding knot in the wooden deck but from the simple weakness of her own legs. We will watch her fall reaching for my hands, her

body stiff as a board, her throat in a warbled cry, and her falling unstoppable, uncontrollable.

All of us will be too far away to rush up and catch her, and she will no longer be able to manifest the hot direction that runs from brain to blood to muscle, that simple jerk of pushing her arms out in front of her to catch herself, her body's protective instinct lost.

For now, in the cabin, I lift Katie up from her blanket. With both arms tugging hard on my neck, she lets me wrest her complete weight, and I hold her torso with my hands because she doesn't have the strength to sit up herself. I start dressing her.

"The Superman shirt," she says, and her head pushes through the blue fabric and my fingers. Her blonde hair slips around her cheeks, and with the red cape attached to her shirt, she looks like she has just come home from running in a field, a child dizzy from adventure, her fingertips still tingling from cattails.

"You shouldn't have done that," I tell Kevin, walking back to our room.

"We should've had it," he says.

I remember the constant nausea, the rising ache of my breasts, how fast a body can change.

"It's too late now," I say.

When I met him, Kevin had been rock climbing for seven years, and just a year into the sport myself, I was already firmly addicted. I loved the way my otherwise clumsy body could find its joints suddenly ascending. It seemed such a phenomenal coupling of both the physical and the intellectual, a tingling sensation of thinking, "Twist, toe," and then the delicious response. I loved how an entire body's weight could be balanced on a specific left edge of a big toe. I loved the precision that climbing required, the quiet detail, the technique.

And because climbing is a sport dominated by men, I seemed special to those I climbed with, not because my skill was in any way really special but because, at five-two and ninety-eight pounds, of the feminine flashes of will my body showed in its ascent. What my partners used their body-building muscles for, I learned to strategize through. Instead of grunting up, I twisted my weight up onto my hip for momentum. Unlike my heavily muscled friends, I didn't need the strength to lift up a two-hun-

dred-pound bulk as much as I needed just a small thrust to start.

When I'd met him as a stranger at the crag, Kevin saw me through an experience that my other climbing partners hadn't: not the steady rise up a mountain, but a forty-foot plummet down instead. It was a fall that in our climbing community granted me some small fame, as "the chick who took the big-ass whip." I was the girl whose body blossomed into three steak-sized bruises, who, by taking the fall, became better than a girl, or a boy, or for that matter, anyone who hadn't felt his or her body hit continuously against an indifferent shin of granite.

But the two people who were there that day at Looking Glass, North Carolina—my best friend and regular climbing partner, Nic, and Kevin, the stranger whom I would later agree to marry—would say that my fall didn't look right. They'd say that I looked like a Super Mario Brother running sideways across the cliff's side, fully suspended, before gravity took over and I came toppling down.

If I thought about any of this when I saw Jerry trip on the playground bridge right in front of me years later, it couldn't have been for more than how long I felt the hazelnut wind flashing along my face, which is to say, only a millisecond. What feels like a "slowing down" in the phenomenon of falling, or in a stroke, or in a high-speed car accident, is the unrestrained rapid-firing of synapses:

"This is Jerry throwing a tantrum," I thought, or

"This is Jerry scratching," or

"I hate how he watches me."

Though I didn't really *think* as much as my brain seized into itself, a concentration so intense that I could pay attention. There were ideas, notions, or perceptions that I couldn't grasp, that slid into and past my senses and the control of my intellect. And it's these same synapses that fired into my limbs as well as my head that in the outcome of reflex forced my right arm to circle around Jerry's rib cage, and my left to push down against the coming ground, and the weight of the rest of me to brace around and on top of him.

Had I time to *think*, I may have considered first how my body (small, but thrice as big as his) could crush him. I may have

wondered where his father was, before I saw nothing but blue sky and grass and a play set, saw that this emptiness meant his father was still mopping in the building and we were alone. Or, I could have planned it better—I could have swooped Jerry up and turned us around so that he fell on top of me instead. I could have carried his weight, the both of us falling onto my back.

Instead, I hear a *waaaaahhh!!* and a woman's voice calling his name, and "Noooo—"

But I haven't been completely honest.

I've been having fantasies about Jerry.

I've been his caretaker, a substitute for the past three weeks, and in order to get here, I'll have relived that fall in Looking Glass for years, over and over again, that uneasy sensation of an abruptly silent world and how it's zooming in toward me but I can't sense my own motion, a fall that has traveled with me, with Kevin, through college, across the country from our hometown of Atlanta to Oklahoma, fear stiffening in my pulse as the land clears before the windshield, the lush East Coast forests suddenly gone, and the land now brown and breathless.

By now, I've spent nights looking for order in ceilings, blinking in the swirling plaster. I've rubbed my Formica counters over and over again, watching the wetness of the rag and my handprints evaporating, disappearing. When Kevin comes home from his job at the railroad and lays his big black bag down, it looks like Jerry's wheelchair in the corner of my eye, and I can feel his fingers dig into my cheek.

I've started to pretend. I've started to imagine Jerry tucked into my armpit at night, his spidery hair tickling the crooks of my spooning body, as if those filaments had sprouted from my own brown belly. In my house, I change Jerry's diapers because he is mine, and there is no black chair here because for me, he sits quietly and patiently. He twiddles his thumbs, makes sweet mewling noises. He tugs on my dress and leaves chocolate-fingered prints on it, is beginning to acquire language, his mouth forming a "mah" and "mah," for *Mother*.

Because of Jerry, I've begun to believe that I have a purpose here in Oklahoma, where because of my black hair and dark skin, everyone calls me *Chinese*. I've begun to believe that my

always being in the kitchen now is OK, that Kevin's becoming more and more macho is OK, that following a man to a land where there is no place for me, no *real* job, is OK. None of the furniture in this house is what I would've chosen, and the decorations in each classroom where I substitute teach aren't mine. But my car is mine, and this child could be mine too.

"Jerry!" I cry out. "Noooo—" and I can see the pink of his scalp, his small body falling away from me. I need to protect. *I need to hold on.*

I am between states, between what I want to do for myself (write and go to graduate school) and a commitment I've made to this man, who each day comes home more dusty, wearing brown canvas coveralls stiff as the land. I want to hold on to something, anything, in order to let go of my growing rage, of feeling like a substitute woman. I feel like a ghost, a clumsy beast who floats between classes and kids, where my only permanence in this landscape is in the daily growing steam of the hot oven and dishwasher. At night, I watch the ceiling etch itself into heavy patterns, and I turn away from the man lying next to me, the closest human contact I should have, my spine a tense arc against his touch.

Jerry is tight inside my chest. We are falling, and for this moment, his body is a part of mine, and as we fall we fall a single mass.

In Sandrock, Alabama, bored and without access to better, larger climbing, I once watched one of the more notorious Southern climbers ascend a route barefoot, soloing up the crumbling volcanic rock without any gear, rope, or protection—without a belayer below to connect him to solid ground. We watched him go up—*that* was easy; we'd all felt the pulls and twists of the route ourselves, knew where it got hard, and as his body edged further away from us, our own muscles twitched while his lean knots rippled under his thin white skin. We knew he would make it to the top; his instinct always propelled him there, and so did ours.

But when I watched Chris's hand slap the leveled top surface of the cliff to show he'd made it, when I saw his legs and arms then bend in unfamiliar angles to crook for the climb downward, I held my breath. This was new territory. This was where,

typically, he should've had a rope attached to a harness so his partner could've belayed him down like a safe, dangling spider. His body, thin and white but densely muscled on its boyish frame, going down now, seemed suddenly vulnerable.

Chris's leg shook, or I think it did, in that uncontrollable shuddering that comes with fear, or a cramp in the thigh, loud as a snake's rattle and so naturally exaggerated that we call it *Elvis leg*. None of us talked about what we would do if he fell, if he succumbed to that simultaneously horrible and exhilarating feel of endless air, of release, the sudden white vistas of freedom in allowing himself to fall.

When I climb, it's that morbid exhilaration that I am always trying to grip against, to will my way through. Gravity pushes against me with each move I make, and it would be easier to just fall in, to succumb, to be vulnerable. This is what the bear-heaviness of my body craves, wants to cling to, and I must slip past this body in order to ascend. But if I fall, if I yield to the temptation of *just letting go*, then for a moment I can live in the space outside of myself, which must be better than the terrors I carry inside.

Perhaps climbers like Chris and I are always really fighting ourselves, our own helplessness, and we take a secret thrill in that. But when I see Katie's face (one eye screwed shut, the other bulging out, her mouth open as a wound) as her body snaps to the ground, it seems a different kind of falling.

As time slows down for her, she can feel nothing now but the indifference of her muscles, the dullness that has been creeping over her so that in kindergarten, she has to drag herself from desk to desk, her hands sweating with weight on the pressed surfaces. She feels what it is like to be turned into a baby again, her thighs hot and limp around our hips, and her hands gripping our necks, when she has known what it is like to race across fields with her sister: wheat and wild grass and coarse cattails rushing past her. Her legs are stiff. Her seven-year-old body unyielding as a wooden board.

She can feel the dungeon of her own body and the ghost of the girl inside it trying to crawl out, her systems failing, synapses flickering like a broken electrical circuit. When Jerry trips, I am behind and close to him, and we take in the wildness of the world rushing past us together, a premonition for Katie, whom

I will watch fall from the front, and in slow-motion vision, my camera lens too far away to touch her.

Katie's uncle and I are just kids. We don't know each other yet, and we're hiking the three miles in to Looking Glass for a first date, with my friend Nic as our chaperone. Kevin has blond hair and oversized blue eyes and is wearing a tie-dyed Grateful Dead T-shirt, and though I've wanted to do this kind of climbing for a while now ("traditional," where you lead with your own gear and there are no preset anchors), can hardly stand my hunger for it, I'm wary of driving four states away from Georgia to a secluded mountain with a stranger. Nic is thirty pounds heavier than Kevin, Bolivian, a black belt, and can beat up any blue-eyed hippie just in case.

They walk ahead of me with their thick, strong legs, and because I can hardly keep up, I run a few feet, then stop and breathe, then run again. Their gear, hooked onto their packs, chatters like castanets, and when I'm taking time out to breathe, I'm afraid this sound will fade out of my reach.

Nic drops his pack. I'm trying to silence the haggardness of my gasping.

"Tight, huh?" he says.

"Yeah," I say, "it's . . . awesome . . . out here. No school . . . no . . . people."

"Yup, tight stuff."

"Shivvy," Kevin says.

The granite stands up above us, oak branches twisting in the wind. We unpack our gear. As we organize our pieces by size and function, throwing them into different piles, dust rises up from the earth and chokes our throats. Kevin flakes his rope out, feeling the entire length for kinks, smoothing away its tangles. I hand out the tuna sandwiches I've made for all of us, and we chew loudly, rolling the taste of fish and soil against our teeth.

"You'd make a cool wife, baby," Nic says, as I unpack more food for the men: Clif Bars, fresh fruit, and water. I give him a look that signals I want him to shut up. He knows that I have a horrible fear of heights despite all the climbing we've done, and the last thing I need is to be nervous about a boy too.

We spend the day clipping rope, gear, rope and gear, and

each other up the shins of this granite body before us. As we ascend past a hundred feet, our rope no longer connected to the ground and only to each other, we know we are committed. We slip into the rhythm of our metals needling the granite.

This is the first time that Nic and I will both lead trad. In lead climbing, you string up the rope first for your partners, stitching in piece by piece, so it's more dangerous. If you fall, you fall twice the distance of your length of rope above your last piece of gear (or "protection") because gravity whips you below it. We're with Kevin today because he's led trad for years; he can take us both up where we haven't been before.

And Nic likes to take falls. An adrenaline seeker, he loves the contact of his fist against a rib cage, or another man's heel digging into his neck. He has told me how when he fights, he loves the rush of movement, then the sudden snap of contact, feel of skin. He loves the closeness of another man's heart, frenzied under his hands.

But now, on this climb, none of us fall because we are three hundred feet up and negligible specks against the giant form of this mountain. Kevin leads most of the route but lets Nic lead the last pitch of rope. When we get to the top and rappel ourselves back down to the ground, the men are breathless. They've fought the continual compulsion to just let go, their muscles still hot from ache.

I start packing our gear to start the short hike home, but Kevin touches my elbow.

"Why don't *you* try leading a route? A small one."

I freeze. I don't want to. I've just learned how to lead, and I certainly can't lead *trad*. I don't even know how to place the gear.

"I'll show you how to set," he says, and I nod slowly.

Kevin is a stranger. What would he think if I backed out?

"You can do it," Nic says.

A toothy grin plasters his face. He's like a brother I've always wanted to please.

"C'mon," Kevin says, and takes my hand, walking me to the base of the mountain again. He inserts different shapes and sizes of metal into the rock, and as he enters each piece of gear into different cracks, the metal and rock glint together, flaring out like fresh wounds.

“This is called a nut. They’re bomb to use, but hard to take out later. You use this on small cracks.”

I don’t want to learn now, but my hand places the nut correctly. I tug on its wire tail to feel for its hold.

“This is a tricam. You have to bend its strap back first, then pull for the head to catch.”

I can smell the oak trees hovering above us. The summer dust clings to my throat.

Twenty minutes later, I’m sitting on the ground, clipping quick draws to my harness, and nuts, tricams, and cams to a sling I’ve tied diagonally across my chest. Gnats swarm around me as I organize the gear onto my body, saying their new names out loud. I won’t know what sizes I’ll need until I’m up there looking for a piece of protection to attach myself to a fissure in the granite.

“Look at her,” Kevin says to Nic, smiling. “Not a bug’s bothering that chick.”

Maybe he’s right, maybe I can be strong and brave. Maybe this will be easy. But I shouldn’t be carrying this much gear up—it’s extra weight and will eventually add to the gravity that my small body will fight. For now, however, Kevin is too impressed by the idea that I am a girl not minding a swarm of gnats, and he forgets to tell me.

I climb, terrified. Each step up is like pushing through a wall of metal with all this gear hanging to my knees, and the only holds to bear my hands and shoes against are smaller than the nail on my pinky finger. I have to rub my hand against the rock to feel for any formation that might stick out, that I might be able to use. I have to press my cheek to the mountain, the salt of my sweat dripping down the channel that cheek against rock makes, squinting for holds.

My body is too heavy, my gear is too heavy, and Nic, belaying me, isn’t giving me enough slack, and the rope is pulling my hips down.

“Slack!” I yell, frenzied, and I feel the rope ease on my harness. I know I cannot rest because I am leading. I’m above my last piece of protection. I know I can’t rest even when I put in a piece because I don’t know if I’ve placed it correctly.

For seventy feet, I make my way up like this, slowly, step by step. My legs are rattling, and I’m singing “MacArthur Park”

just a little too loudly. Each time I lift a leg to move up, it's too hard to thrust the entire weight of my body on just the point of one toe. I am thinking, "Twist, *leg*, damn it!" but there is no response, and I want to hold on to something, anything, as much as I want to let go. I am between states, between the solidity of the ground and the air of the heavy blue sky above me, and I feel like a ghost, clumsy and slipping past everything, trapped on a long bone of this earth.

Someone left the cake out in the rain, I sing, and I don't think that I can take it!

'Cause it took so long to bake it!

It's too much. I *have* to fall. I set my heels back and unstick my fingers one by one.

And I'll never have the recipe again! Oh nooooo!

"Hey! What're you doing?" Kevin yells. "Push! Fucking push, Sasha!" He's wild with anticipation.

I grip into the granite again. But I don't place a nut because the only crack available is about an inch long and six feet to my right. It takes all I have inside me just to push up. And somehow, I've fought the fall, that overwhelming urge to allow the sensation of frightening ecstasy that comes with entering a loss of control, of *nothing more I can do*.

For the next twenty feet, I fall instead into a spiritual rhythm of silence that comes with climbing, and I can feel the wind brushing around my shoulders, my cheeks, wind muzzling the soft ridges of my ears. Before I know it, I'm at the top of the route, ready to pull myself up over the cliff's edge and onto the plateau top, victorious.

Kevin and Nic whoop down below.

I press my left foot against the granite for one last step, but I never get there.

The rock, still wet up here, doesn't hold it. My body, attached to this foot, slips too.

As I tumble down each slow space of granite, I become a true ghost, flanked by the world of the concrete where Kevin and Nic are waving their hands, and the world of the dead, where linear time doesn't matter. Here, space and time are inseparable, and as I fall, I fall into every collapse, every small and large plummet that has happened before me and after me, my body in motion within the moment of space, my body slipping into the ghosts

of my future. Jerry is falling, head first toward the metal floor. Katie is falling, her body stiff as wood. They shoot their arms out in front of themselves, and I reach out too, our three forms a merged point of light.

I wish I could say for certain whether I fell on purpose or by accident. For years I've told myself that the top part of the route was still wet from rain, and that up there I was clumsy, brash, thinking of the ascent and not the process of it, much too fearless. *That's* why I fell. It was a mistake. But the more that this memory has the chance to grow, shifting and moving with me through the years, I look back and realize that I was in great climbing shape. My muscles were lean with use, and I'd already found that zone of determination that a climber needs to ascend. I *should* have been able to hang on. I *should* have been able to pull past the small slip of my foot to finish the route. I *should* have pushed on the balls of my hips and shoulders and muscled my way through, hanging for dear life.

But I also know now, watching myself waving, a flickering shape on the horizon, that with each step up, I wondered what it would be like to just let go. To deliberately abandon the instinct to survive. I had watched my own mother, mysteriously bedridden for much of my life, stagger from room to room, her legs crumpling beneath her, her arms using my body as a cane. Later, I would watch Katie and Jerry and the slow evolution of their helplessness. And though I didn't know it yet, later my own legs would weaken too, echoing into my mother's legs for weeks at a time as I limped to the kitchen, Kevin watching me from the living room. Perhaps the falls we take are really just ways of rejecting that slow agony of hanging on.

I am falling forty feet, twice the distance of my last piece of protection.

A ledge juts out directly below me. And I'm not wearing a helmet.

I run as fast as I can to the right, and as I fall, I am also running sideways across the mountain. I can feel the wind rushing past me. I sense the endless slack of my rope. As I tumble down, each sensation slips into and past my control of perception, becoming my will. Each second of time becomes a wide space of

granite, growing into a breathless landscape before me, and everything small and crouching and terrified I keep inside bursts out, and suddenly, I want nothing more than this.

I look like I am floating. I look like I've run out on purpose.

As I fall, I fall with my body curled up like a comma, my head tucked in to the flickering tail of the rest of me. I roll down the mountain hitting my back, my hands, my butt with each bounce down. These are the hard parts of my body that push out by reflex in order to protect my delicate insides. These are the parts of myself I'll discover later, peeling my clothes off, my flesh blooming like raw steak.

I am falling, head bowed to the rising earth.

When it is over, the rope whips me into its last end of slack. Nic belays me down. I am in shock. I can hear the loud shouting of the world again, and someone crying, who can only be me. Kevin, reascending the route to retrieve all the gear I've needed in it, will watch each piece of pro I've set pop a little too easily from the rock. He will say, later that day, holding me in bed, that he doesn't know how those placements held me. Nic slings my body onto his back and carries it the three miles out.

They will say that it happened too fast: one minute they thought I was safe and on top, and the next minute I was running to the right and toppling down—but for me, falling, there was nothing but time and silence.

In Einstein's Theory of Relativity, if you're moving at a constant velocity, there's no way to know if you're in motion, unless there's a sudden acceleration or deceleration. A passenger on a train, for example, if the rail is smooth enough and all the shades are down, would never know he was moving because the world feels constant and, thus, still. Jerry's father, mop in hand at the train station and waving goodbye to his son approaching an early death, sees it all moving away too fast. He recognizes the speed. But Jerry on the train feels nothing. *Motion is relative.*

When I fall at Looking Glass, it doesn't feel like other falls I've taken or will later take climbing again. Most "whips" are five, ten feet and take only a few seconds, just long enough for pure acceleration, so it feels like sudden freedom, that adrenaline of a rush. But over the distance of forty feet, I fall at a speed

so constant that I don't notice my own body thumping against the rock.

I am completely still.

Instead, I feel a euphoria, that terrible ecstasy of surrender that washes over me like drowning, ecstasy that silences everything.

I will feel this silence again, clutching my pelvis and lying on a metal table when a masked doctor hovers over me. I will be asked to count backward, *ten, nine, eight, no . . .* before I swim into anesthesia. I will feel it in bed between Kevin and me, our losses grown into great balls of weight against us, before I learn to thicken and develop my own hard silences, where, with Katie and Anna giggling in the next room, Kevin will whimper to me quietly, "No, please, no." I will feel it walking in the halls away from Jerry's father, who, eternally suspended, is contemplating his son's hard tumble down the uterus.

This silence will overwhelm me, then dissipate. Falling, and realizing the sudden stop at the end of that fall, I will sense everything come to life again, suddenly moving and wild, too frenzied with color. When I snap into the end of my rope, I will be shocked back into motion.

But now, still coming down the landscape of granite, I feel my senses flare out and sharpen. It is quiet here and I watch the precision of detail that comes with deafness. Nic's knuckles are whitening, gripping the rope. Kevin's hands are reaching up, as if he can catch me. His mouth opens into a bright, pink ring. I smell the honeysuckle and oak nearby.

I feel the wind everywhere.

But I never hear my own voice, as they did, wailing out a strangled *Nooooooo* over forty feet.

But a falling body cannot always stay at a constant velocity.

Newton's laws of motion tell us that as we fall, we pick up speed, accelerating from the outside force of gravity, and we push faster, closer to time and each other, nearer to everything, our hands nervous, our bodies in motion within the shifting moments of space. Things speed up. Things fall apart. Kevin and Nic become fragments flickering in the horizon. The gnats crowd around, eating at my skin and blood as I let my head fall limp into the rest of me. Katie's small hands reach out to me.

Kevin and I make love, our bodies sinking into and collapsing from one another, falling into the separate hollows on the bed, and my body rushing through now, drops through time and into this place where I am standing, at school, with Jerry down the hallway and apart from me.

Barbara, secure now that she has something to take care of at home, has returned to push Jerry in his wheelchair. Together and so far away, the three forms look like a merged black point. But as they drive closer, wheels squeaking across the tile, their images sharpen. Their bodies separate.

Jerry's underdeveloped figure takes shape, comes into view, and I watch him trying to connect, his small pink fist clutching at her sleeve. But Barbara shakes her arm hard, away from his grip. She tells him firmly, "No."

This voice echoes out to me and shrinks the distance of the hallway—*no*. And as they draw closer in, I come closer too. I can see Jerry's face, where the gash on his right cheek marks our sudden collision and separation. And behind his glasses, there is something blue and adult and flickering. I swear that he can recognize me.

But today, he is no longer mine to take care of. I'm a substitute teacher for a second-grade class, herding children down the halls as different girls cling to my arms and legs, giggling, and as Jerry rolls one way, the crowd I'm in goes another.

I want to reach out to him, to stop this moment where we can intersect, our lives and bodies rotating around each other, our fall a sudden and common axis.

But Jerry looks small and helpless, dwarfed in his big black chair. The fragments have already fallen between us. And he slips past me, his glasses shiny and glinting in the corner of my eye.