Eustice

On the morning of Hammond's fall recital I'm upstairs with a Q-tip in my ear. Since Gary's death, the ear-cleaning has become a sort of obsession—a rummaging habit. I clean in there all the time, and not just with cotton swabs, either. Stuck in traffic or waiting for Hammond to finish his piano lesson, I poke a finger in my ear, twisting against the cavity. Lately I've been finding strange things there. First a twig, tiny, bent around on itself like a swan's neck. I tossed it in the trash with the tampon wrappers and spent dental floss. Then it was a clump of earth the size of a peanut that I found there. When I hooked it with my pinkie nail it crumbled into dust. Today I feel the Q-tip bump against something hard-topped and dense, something that knocks back into my ear, out of reach.

"Can you get the flashlight?" I yell down to my son, who is practicing scales on the electric keyboard in the dining room. He mutters and kicks something, flummoxed by the interruption, and I bend my ear toward the ground, shaking my head to loosen whatever is inside.

"Anyway, the batteries are probably dead," Hammond says when he comes into the bathroom with the flashlight. He gives it to me and spins away, his hands still practicing scales in the air.

#

Gary used to say he was the fulcrum in our family between two extremes: me, with my certainty that things are supposed to work, and Hammond, with his expectation that we're doomed. During Gary's illness I did my best to try on his perspective that things are as they are, both broken and whole. I'd ask the hospice nurse if I could be the

one to clean Gary's bed-pan. I thought about collecting parts of him: funneling his pee into a series of jam jars; storing his shedding hairs in Ziploc bags. When Hammond grew up and said, "I never really knew my father," I could point him to the basement shelves and say, "There he is."

You can search and search for the reasons for things. Maybe Gary got sick to prove that bad things happen, and you survive them—that Hammond and I are equally wrong and right.

#

We arrive late to the recital and my ear tingles from whatever is still wedged inside. Hammond says, "See, they already started, and it's YOUR FAULT!" We hustle into seats and I show him the program, trying to reassure him that he hasn't missed his chance to play. He plugs his fist against the back of the pew. "I told you, I told you, I told you," he says. The rest of the audience makes little coughs and rustling sounds. The girl lurching her way through a two-handed version of "Go Tell Aunt Rhody" has to stop and start over. Her dad, who is recording her performance on a tiny video camera, looks like he wants to flip us the bird.

But when Hammond begins to play, the "Aunt Rhody" dad looks back at me again, and his eyes have softened.

I remember asking Gary once if he thought Hammond was a prodigy.

"Have some humble pie," Gary said. "Let's just be grateful our kid sometimes eats his vegetables. Don't force him into the stars."

"Don't force him into the ground," I said.

I cooked a quiche for dinner. I put asparagus tips in it, and they fanned out in the oven until they looked like green spurs.

"Star pie," I said when I put the quiche on the table.

Hammond didn't like the asparagus.

Now he plays a Chopin Fantaisie Impromptu. It begins with a frenetic passage, all bustle and tangle. Then longer, measured strides transform the melody into a phrase of needs made poignant and plain. It is my son who plays this longing.

We stay for punch and dry cookies in the church basement, and the discomfort in my ear worsens. At the co-op on the way home, the clerk suggests ear candles, telling me the process doesn't hurt, that the heat works as a vacuum to pull out whatever is stuck inside. The box is dioxin free, and the red lettering reminds me of the warnings on fireworks.

#

I use the ear candles after Hammond has fed his gerbils and gone to bed. I blanket my head with a damp towel, and poke the candle through a ring of tin-foil and then into my ear. When I light the candle I feel warmth deep in my head, and a subtle pressure. Flakes of ash peel away into the sink. When the flame gets close to my head, I douse the candle stub in cold water. I cut open the linen cylinder to reveal what has been lodged inside me.

It isn't a twig or a rock this time, but a crab, pearly and skittering, scratching its claws against a nub of hardened wax.

#

We were eating dinner when Gary told our son about the tumor on his lung.

"It's growing there, like a barnacle," he said.

"Oh," Hammond said. "May I please be excused to practice piano?"

When I went into Hammond's room later to tuck him into bed, he was playing with Thelonious and Hieronymus, his gerbils, letting them run up his arms and over his shoulders.

"Will we have to move when Dad dies?" he asked, gesturing around us at the house, at what must have felt to him like too much space to fill.

"He won't die," I said.

#

I can't imagine putting the crab outside or flushing it down the toilet, so I fill an old jam jar with an inch or two of water and nudge the crab inside. I add the heel of the baguette we didn't finish at dinner, thinking it might approximate a patch of land, or serve as a food source until I can get to a pet store for whatever it is crabs eat. I tap holes into the lid and put the jar in Hammond's playroom, on his old toy chest, which is covered in Greenpeace mailing labels that he once used as stickers. The crab bobbles in the water, our address and paintings of endangered whales visible through the bottom of the glass.

#

In the morning when I check on the crab—whom I've already begun to think of as Eustice—I feel like I used to feel coming home from errands when Gary was sick: nervous, cold, avoidant. I both dreaded the worst, and refused to expect it. I feel that now, walking into Hammond's playroom to look at the crab I birthed. And when I see the

cracked shell it is relief I sense first, the relief of calamity, the crab another broken thing, the shell cracked open, one piece adrift in stale water.

But when I kneel closer I see that on the other half of shell a tiny woman sits. Her hair is dark and wet and she is shivering on her shell, braiding her hair on her island of bread.

She feels my presence and jumps, then stands with her feet planted wide, admirably stable on the soggy piece of bread. When her tiny eyes find my enormous ones she hisses at me, and hurls the shell-half she has been sitting on so that it strikes the glass.

#

Gary's colleague once brought Hammond a box of worry dolls from Guatemala. She said it, "Woah-tay-mah-la." They came in a painted yellow box, and there were six inside, smaller than matches.

"One for every worry," she said. "Put them under the pillow when you sleep, and they will worry for you so you don't have to."

At bedtime, Hammond lined up the dolls by color.

"So, tell them your worries," I said. I was a little drunk.

"I'm worried about global warming," he said, tucking the one with blue pants under his pillow. "And I'm worried about what happens if Thelonious or Hieronymus gets out and we don't know it and we step on them by accident." He started to put another doll under his pillow, then hesitated. "I guess that's two worries," he said.

"You get three more."

"Well I'm worried about the clicking sound at school when kids click their pens. And I'm worried about getting in trouble when I yell at them for bothering me."

"One more." I had to pee.

"I'm worried about what if a meteor came like with the dinosaurs and we all went extinct."

"No more worries," I said.

Then and now it is easy to let my head slip back to when we didn't know—to wonder what words we would have minced or summoned if we'd known what was about to come. At the beach during the summer before we learned Gary was sick, we believed that there on the sand the wind alone was the strongest thing. The wind was the only force that could knock us off our feet. We laughed at a kite-flyer who got scooped up, and planted down, and scooped up, and planted down by sheets of wind off the sea. Hammond complained about the sand in his eyes, but loved that he could shout at the top of his voice and still we'd call out, "What? What did you say? We can't hear you!" The wind and water and edges of voice were the only sounds. Gary lifted me off my feet, tucking my face warm and sheltered against his shoulder. He walked me in circles that way. My eyes were smarting from the wind and he held me and moored me. I felt his sweatshirt and arms. My body was pressed against his body where cancer grew and we didn't know and life seemed funny with wind that pitched at us and let us yell ourselves silent and all it seemed we had to do in the driving wind was land and settle. I still fall down when I think of this. I fall down as if he has suddenly let go.

#

"Don't worry," I tell Eustice now, and I think of things to soothe her: Gary pulling a wailing Hammond into bed with us and singing until he slept, our son's legs hung across mine, his head snugged up against the cove between Gary's arm and chest.

I sing Hammond's favorite song for Eustice. She stops hurling the shell and comes to the edge of the jar, putting her palms against the glass. I keep singing:

> *I bought me a little dog, its color it was brown.*
> *Taught him how to whistle, to sing dance and run.*
> *His legs, they were fourteen yards long, his ears they were broad.*
> *Around the world in half a day, on him I would ride.*
> *Sing tarry-o-day, sing autumn till May…*

I run out of words. Eustice stares at me, the Greenpeace stickers beneath her large and distorted through the water.

I open and tip the jar so that she can climb into my waiting hand. She is the height of the first joint on my ring finger, her body as light as a grain of rice. I assemble the basics first: for food, I rip a slice of whole wheat bread into crumbs and use my fingernail to peel shards of baby carrot; for clothes, I cut off tiny strips of my cotton underwear that Eustice wraps around herself in a makeshift skirt and shirt. She squats several times to make sure the fabric will hold, and then she smiles at me. I give her a thumbs-up, and she imitates the gesture. I want to teach her a high-five too, but I'm afraid I'll knock her down.

I show Eustice the rest of the house, the way Gary used to give tours to his colleagues when we had them over for dinner, telling them, "This house is a Museum of Unfortunate Taste." The previous owners added a split-level den to the farmhouse sometime in the 70s, and put in terrible carpeting, but I loved the house, even the dubious Smurfs and solar system wallpaper in the bedrooms upstairs. I show Eustice the little portholes cut into the closets of the attic room where I used to imagine our brood of children playing pirate ship or Peter Pan. I show her the kitchen, pointing out the knives, the stove, the toaster oven, telling her, "Ouch! Sharp! Hot!" I run the garbage disposal so

she can get used to the noise. When I show her Thelonious and Hieronymus in Hammond's room, she starts to hiss, but when I walk her close enough to see that all they do is churn around in their wheel, she laughs. I like the sound. I set her on Hammond's dresser and do a somersault, just to hear her laugh again. She does a somersault too.

I take her into my bedroom, and show her my bed and the empty place in it. I let her explore my dresser-top: vitamin bottles, rubber bands still sprouting hairs from old ponytails, framed photographs. She pauses by one of me holding Hammond when he was a baby. She makes a cradling motion with her tiny arms, and hums as she rocks them. She gets up close to a wedding photo of me and Gary, and puts her hand on the lace of my dress. She touches Gary, too, making a soft "ooh" as she points at his boutonnière.

I show her the den last. When Gary was sick enough that we had to bring in a hospital bed, it was too wide to fit through our bedroom door, so it had to be set up in the room he detested. "At least give me a week to change the carpeting," I begged the home health people when they came to deliver the bed.

After the funeral, we all gathered there. His colleagues made toasts, and it felt like a wedding; what I felt most on the day of his funeral was love.

I don't go in the den much now. There are still divots in the shag from the legs of his hospital bed. I can't vacuum there.

#

When it's time to meet Hammond's bus, I take Eustice with me, letting her ride in my hair where she can tie strands of it around her like a seat-belt.

Hammond is upset when he gets off the bus.

"Those stupid kids are so loud!" he says. "They won't listen when I ask them to shut up!"

"Sweetie, they don't understand how much the noise bothers you. And when you get angry, it just encourages them."

"I hate them!" he says.

He goes straight to his keyboard when we get home. When he's done practicing I introduce him to Eustice.

"She's tiny," he says. "What can she do?"

"She laughs," I say.

#

We set up a home for Eustice in the potted spider plant on my dresser, where she can feel dirt under her bare feet, and where the greenery of the plant will give her privacy if she needs it. I make her some bedding out of an old washcloth. On a whim, I plant a birthday candle at the edge of the soil, thinking she might like a fire to sleep by. Hammond takes on the responsibility of cutting up bits of food for her. He lets her rest on his head while he practices piano and draws her pictures of his classroom and of the beach where we camped that summer. Eustice draws pictures too, using pencil lead that Hammond crumbles for her. She swirls her finger in the dust, and rubs images onto Post-It notes. She draws murals of mountains, of a river, of people making pots, dancing, rendered in the motions of daily life. One of the images she draws is scary: a crab-legged monster breathing fire and wielding spears. Hammond sticks her drawings to the wall beside my dresser so she can look at them from her little washcloth bed.

We try to teach her our names, and learn her actual one, but our languages have few mutual syllables. The name she makes for me sounds like "Meh-meh." Hammond she calls "Hah."

#

"What would Dad think of her?" Hammond asks on a Saturday when Eustice is napping. She has been with us for almost a month, frost on the grass in the mornings now.

"Let's ask him," I say.

Hammond looks at me funny and I wish I could take back my words. I can anticipate the calls from his school social worker—the one who referred to Gary's death as "the transition in your family"—accusing me of running a séance, of misleading my son about the reality and permanence of death.

But Hammond's face relaxes and he says, "You mean like ask him out loud?"

"Sure," I say. "Why not?"

And so Hammond does. "Dad, what do you think of Eustice?" he says. He doesn't raise his head up like he's talking to the sky. He just says it to the kitchen where we are fixing a snack. We listen to the refrigerator and the ceiling fan and the rain on the roof. Hammond puts peanut butter and raisins on a slice of apple.

Later, when we're folding laundry, Hammond says, "Dad thinks Eustice is sad."

"Do you think he's right?" I ask.

"Yeah. She doesn't laugh so much anymore. She hasn't been combing her hair."

Hammond suggests that we give Eustice his worry dolls, for company. She smiles at first and clasps their wire hands. She leans them along the trunk of the spider plant, and sleeps the whole night in their painted yellow box.

#

When we wake up on Sunday, Eustice is despondent again. She spends most of the day napping or sitting with her knees pulled into her chest, looking at her Post-It note drawings. She barely touches the lunch Hammond offers her.

“Those dolls aren’t working,” Hammond says.

“What should we do?” I ask him.

“We should probably just let her go home.”

“How will she know how to get there?”

“I don’t know,” he says, “but I think she can figure it out.”

We make a tiny knapsack for her out of more pieces of ripped up underwear, and we fill it with another blanket made from a washcloth, and plenty of crumbled up bread. We add a few curds of cottage cheese for protein and a stamp-sized picture Hammond drew of us standing by our house. When we show her the knapsack of provisions, she nods, and clutches the end of her braid.

We make a special goodbye dinner: roast chicken, candied carrots, garlic mashed potatoes and pecan pie for dessert. Eustice climbs inside one of the pecans on my plate, and pretends to row a boat, and we all laugh. At bedtime we light her birthday candle fire and sing the little dog song, Eustice humming a harmony line, and Hammond helping me to remember all the words. Hammond asks to sleep in my room so we can be together when she leaves.

Late in the night he claims to see Eustice hoist her knapsack and slip through a crack in the window frame. I swear I feel her nestle once again inside my ear.

She is gone to us when we awake.

#

Hammond and I are grumpy with each other at first. I get cross at him for forgetting to put his headphones on when he's practicing. He snaps at me for nagging him about cleaning the gerbil cage.

At dinner time Hammond starts to cut up bread and carrots, and then we remember. I suggest we order Chinese, and we make a picnic of dinner, spreading a blanket over the shag in the den, eating by candlelight.

"I like this room," Hammond says.

He says it and I know that the rolling, spinning world is the actual one. We eat and think of the two who have left.