

The Way Things Are Built

Miss Pointy loves to show us slides of the way things are built. She says it's *architecture*. The way Miss Pointy talks about architecture, it's as if it is a person, something built from the inside out. She gave us drinking straws to try to construct what we think the skeletons of skyscrapers look like. "Beams are the bones that hold the body," she said. While we worked, she showed us black-and-white photographs of men balancing on these beams, eating lunch, talking, at home in the sky. The sky is definitely Somewhere Else. Looking at these men, I thought about Heaven. I wondered if my father was working construction.

This arch in Paris, France. That dome in Florence, Italy. This wall, that pillar, this doorway, that window. Miss Pointy pointed out details in stone that looked like piped whipped cream. She showed us palaces, cliff dwellings, tipis, shanties, barns. Fountains, filigrees, spires, gargoyles watching from on high, stairs, pillars, bridges. I love these words, I couldn't write them down fast enough, magic words that bring your mind to Somewhere Else. But they aren't all somewhere else. Some of them are right here in Chicago. She showed us pictures of our own city. The Bahá'i Temple, Wrigley Field, the Water Tower, the Tribune building. She showed us the beautiful stones in the Graceland cemetery. She showed us the pink Edgewater Beach apartments off of Lake Shore Drive near Bryn Mawr, from the days when Uptown had movie studios and fine hotels. She showed us the skyline of Navy Pier, the long jetty with its elegant Ferris wheel slowly turning amid the seagulls. She said she would take us to see Buckingham Fountain at night when the weather gets warm, she said she'd treat us all to *churros* and we could watch the colors change in the

water. She said we would all go to the bathroom at the Palmer House Hotel.

She said she would take us to the top of the Sears Tower someday. We were afraid, but we didn't mention it exactly.

"Grandma says skyscrapers is a sin, it's bad for man to try to reach God," Angelina said.

"I think it's a sin not to try," said Miss Pointy. "If we are all God's children, as your grandmother would probably say, then isn't it natural for a child to reach up to a parent?"

I knew the answer. But then I had another question: isn't it just as natural for a parent to reach for his child? When I thought of my father's architecture, I hung my head and closed my eyes. In my imagination I heard the roar of heavy machinery approaching, I felt the walls of myself shimmy and crack. Even though I told myself it was in my head, I had to hold on to my desk for a minute, a hand tight on each side, thinking the words I didn't write.

Dear Daddy, My heart is a shanty. So why did you send a wrecking ball? Why didn't you build me a house instead, or a skyscraper a million stories high?

The only stories I can build are on paper, but I thought of that hungry file cabinet in the counselor's office and I didn't dare write anything here at school. In my mind's eye, I wrote the letter to my father. In my mind's eye, I crumpled that letter into a ball.

Then the sound I imagined rolls away. I blinked, and I was surprised to see walls still standing all around me. Everyone but me was building skyscrapers.

"Finish your structures for homework," said Miss Pointy.

Everyone finishes their homework for Miss Pointy, because Miss Pointy gives beautiful glittery stickers for prizes. Luz gets a lot of stickers from Miss Pointy. I am not the sticker police, I just know this because I sit right behind her to the left. I couldn't help but notice how after a short time had passed, her collection had spread all over the front

of her journal like measles. Then it was so full, she had to start putting them on the inside cover.

"Doesn't that make your journal kind of heavy?" I asked.

"Ees okay." Luz smiled at me. "I don mind."

Whenever a paper is passed back, I see Luz bounce just a little bit on her bottom, she's so excited. Then she takes her fingernail and goes pick-pick-pick at the corner of the sticker until it comes off of her paper, and she re-sticks it on her journal cover. Luz isn't all that smart, but she gets them anyway, because Miss Pointy says trying your best is a success in itself.

What does that make me? I don't have a single sticker.

Once Miss Pointy saw that Luz's cover was filled and she said, "When I was a little girl, I collected stickers, too," and they smiled at each other. I guess I wasn't the only one who overheard this gross conversation, because then all the girls and some of the boys started peeling stickers off their papers and sticking them on their journals. But I'll bet two bags of chips Miss Pointy brought her old

collection from home and secretly gave it to Luz, because Luz suddenly turned up with glossy photo-album pages of stars and hearts and unicorns and what-all. I also think Miss Pointy secretly gave Ernie a book of Aesop's Fables, too. For keeps! I complained to Rachel about this.

"I don't want a book of Aesop's Fables." She shrugged.

"Even if she offered it to you?"

"She didn't offer it to me. She offered it to Ernie. I guess she must have been tired of him asking for the same old stories over and over." I must have been looking grumpy, because Rachel added, "I think it was nice of her. Don't be jealous."

"Jealous!" There was no use talking to Rachel. I suppose she also thought it was nice that Miss Pointy gave Boris the same book, even though he doesn't speak a word of English, not one word! Ernie can go over to Boris's desk and look at the book with him whenever he wants, he doesn't even have to ask, he just goes, and there they are, Miss Pointy doesn't even look up.



This class has class pets.

I wanted to write, *Why does some girl who just learned to speak English two years ago get twenty million stickers, while I get zero?* But then I remembered what Miss Pointy's answer would be. She even wrote it in my journal, in red ink, after I hadn't done a journal entry in four days straight.

A writer writes.

Why can't she be normal and say "Do your work" like any other teacher? Why can't she take me out in the hall like I was Darrell Sikes and tell me that I'm capable of so much more, talk about disappointment and calling my mother and grades? But no, she's trickier than that. *A writer writes*, she says. Like she's saying, *Are you writing, or are you nobody?* That's the way it feels.

Maybe she doesn't mean it like that, maybe she's just giving matter-of-fact writing advice, like

she always does in my journal. I understand some of it, like

If you hear a good word that belongs to someone else, write it down somewhere so it belongs to you, too.

I already do that. What's she telling me that for?

Don't ever end a story, "And then I woke up. It was just a dream!" That's a very cheap trick.

Don't kill your characters. The worst ones should go on and on and on, just like in real life.

Some of her comments I don't understand very well.

Kid vs. nature, kid vs. kid, kid vs. himself. Pick a fight.

Words that don't mean much: nice, pretty, ugly, bad, good.

Know how to tell who's the main character? It's not always the one you like the best. It's the one who changes.

During journal time, I stare at her words, moving each piece of advice in my mind like a hand explores a stone in a collection of stones. But the same one stands out every time: "A writer writes." This is not a stone, this is a rock, and I don't want it. I just want a sticker, and I know she'd give me a thousand stickers if I would only do my work. But I'm no begging dog. I can buy me all the stickers I want at the store.

I taste the flavor of sour grapes, like the fox on the cover of Ernie's book of fables. I swallow it down.

Usually Miss Pointy hands back the journals, but one bad day she was busy fixing some equip-

ment in the back of the room, so she let Leon pass the journals back. He wasn't paying attention and gave them to all the wrong people. A star-covered journal appeared on my desk. I quickly slid it under my desk and into my lap, and stared at the collection of bears and clowns and unicorns and brightly colored words:

GOOD JOB!

YOU CAN DO IT!

FAR OUT!

I'M IMPRESSED!

In the left corner was a star with a rainbow streaming behind it. All that glitters is not gold, says Aesop, but if it was gold glitter, that was good enough for me. I felt my finger tweaking at one of the star's points, only it wasn't my finger, it was a robot's finger, programmed to do some other, bad girl's bidding. I felt the useless resistance of the sticker, trying to stay on poor Luz's notebook. The star curled away.

Luz raised her hand, waved it, panicked. "Mees Pointee! Thees ees not my journal!"

"This isn't mine, either," said Ernie.

"Well, don't open them! They're private!" Everyone opened them. "Darrell! Sakiah! Hey! Close those books!" Miss Pointy directed, turning away from the VCR to confiscate the journals. "I'll pass them back myself. Heavens, Leon, can't I count on you?" I felt Luz's notebook being lifted from my grasp. I hadn't had a chance to put the star back. I meant to. I was just seeing how sticky it was. My journal was handed back to me. I stuck the star on the inside cover. I glanced over at Luz. She was looking at the cover of her journal, then she began to crane her neck. Would she raise her hand? No, she just leaned back hard in her chair, and slowly ran her fingers across the stickers she had left. Plenty of stickers, in my opinion. She didn't write anything, she just made fists and rested her cheeks on them. She frowned.

"Wanna see what I wrote in my journal?" Paris offered, tapping my shoulder from behind across the aisle. I was surprised.

"Sure," I said.

I read:

Miss Pointy, Please DO read.
IMPORTANT!!!

Luz's collection isn't the only sticky thing in this room. Someone has STICKY FINGERS. Just thought you should know.

Mom says, in the city, there's a million windows. Someone's always watching you, seeing what you are doing, what's happening to you. It always made me feel safe, like wherever I was, I had guardian angels. I realized, suddenly, that maybe other people have guardian angels, too. I handed the journal back to Paris, careful to keep my mouth a straight, closed line. Then I couldn't help it. I turned back to Paris and opened my mouth.

"What do you want?" I hissed.

"Not a thing." She smiled innocently. Paris plays with Luz on the playground every day. Luz's best friend, kitty-corner behind me! How could I have been so careless!

"I was going to give it back," I turned around again.

"So give it," Paris folded her hands.

"Stop acting so grown-up," I growled.

"Sahara? Is there a problem?" Miss Pointy asked from the back of the room. "Please stop turning around and get to work. You, too, Paris."

Paris's smile makes me think I am going to go crazy.

We were supposed to write about architecture where we live. I stared at my blank page. Finally I wrote,

Do teachers have secrets?

That's all I wrote. Certainly not enough to earn a sticker. Suddenly, I realized I couldn't hand this journal back up to Miss Pointy, not with the star on the inside cover. So I peeled it off. It ripped a little, and curled into a coil. What should I do with it? I wondered. I didn't know, so I dropped it on the floor. From the corner of my eye, I saw Paris dip down to get it. Time went slowly.

Finally, Miss Pointy started collecting the

journals. Paris half-stood, reaching over my desk.

"Here, Luz!" she called.

Luz took it, but she did not look happy. "Eees dirty. There's dirt all over eet," she remarked. "Why you take eet, Paris?"

Paris looked shocked. "Me!"

"I thought we were friends," she said to Paris.

"I didn't take it," said Paris.

"Then who deed?" Luz raised her hand. Paris seemed frozen, searching for her breath. Finally, she glared at me, set back down and crossed her arms.

"Yes, Luz?" Miss Pointy turned. I braced myself.

"I need some escotch tape," said Luz. "One of my esteeekers ees loose."

Miss Pointy frowned, and got some clear Contact paper. She showed Luz how to cover her whole book with the film. "Now, none of them will come off," she explained. Luz looked up gratefully. "I'm sorry I didn't think of it sooner."

Me, too, I thought.

At recess, Paris marched up to me.

"You gonna take care of your business or not?"

I couldn't even look at Paris in the eye.

"Cordelia told me you were bad, but I didn't believe her. I told her I like to make up my own mind. I thought we could be friends. Thanks, Sahara." She clucked her tongue, disgusted. I saw her feet turn and walk away.

I watched Paris and Luz make careful circles as they played, not crossing each other's paths. I leaned against the chain-link fence with Rachel, who said nothing, as usual. I had a conversation with myself, instead. More of a lecture. About how I read all those books, wishing life could be like what I read, wishing there would be such things as heroes and adventures. But a hero is the one who does what's hard, like Paris, taking the blame and losing a friend. Or Luz, saying words in another language, a language her own mother doesn't speak. Could I do what she does, take a risk with every word? The answer made my cheeks feel hot.

I looked at Kiarre, overgrown and pushy, trying so hard to be the policewoman instead of

the criminal. Raphael, with his big mouth, wanting to laugh even if it's at himself. I thought about Ernie, hiding from the gangs in the library after school, and being called a chick. Sakhiah, telling on everyone and talking too much, tagging along like everybody's little sister. Even Darrell, beaten in front of the whole class, held back, mean and slow but present, every day; is school still better than home? He was a hero, too. *They told me you were bad, Darrell, but I didn't believe them. I like to make up my own mind. I thought we could be friends. . . .*

I looked at my classmates, sprawled across the playground, their noise swirling all around me. *I like my class, I thought, surprised. Aside from Cordelia, the rest of them were decent, not one of them had yet mentioned how I was held back, not one of them called me stupid or slow. They could have, couldn't they? What do they see, us girls against the chain-link fence? Is Rachel a shy girl, or a snob? Am I a mysterious girl, a secret-keeper, or just a thief, a girl who steals other people's rewards, telling herself she could earn them herself if she really wanted? If she really wanted! I*

turned away, my back to everyone, and closed my eyes tight.

Rachel noticed. "Are you okay?" I shook my head violently. I thought of saying, *Let's play with everyone else. Let's not stand here, by ourselves.* But I couldn't, not today. I knew I was standing where I belonged.

Before we entered the classroom, I whispered to Miss Pointy, "I need the trouble basket." She motioned to me with her finger, and pulled it out from under her desk. She held it low, by her knees, so it was private. I pretended to put my troubles in it. I put and I put and I put, while she watched silently, holding the handle with both hands. Then I looked at her and nodded that I was through.

I went back to my seat. My stomach had started to hurt. I put my head down and hid in the dark of my own arms. Miss Pointy didn't call on me for the rest of the day.

Miss Pointy Gets Me Where I Live

Rachel's brother, Freddie, was to blame for our stomach flu. Rachel and I were taking turns holding him, cuddling him, kissing him. He's so chubby, like a baby doll, we couldn't resist. Until he started throwing up. Then we handed him back to my aunt. Two days later, Rachel and I were throwing up, too.

We were lying with our feet sticking in each other's faces on the sofa in my living room. Rachel's momma couldn't take off any more work, so my mom took a sick day to take care of us. The hours passed slowly. The drone of cartoons had become wearisome, and the flickering of the screen began to nauseate us. Freddie drooled in his playpen, not knowing or caring what he had done to us with his evil, germly cuteness.

We tried entertaining ourselves by drawing pictures of each other. I stared at Rachel. Her hair looked like the Bride of Frankenstein. Her eyes had half-moons of green underneath, and the corners of her mouth had little fans of spittle. I didn't mention this. I imagined I looked the same. We showed each other our unimpressive work.

"Now what do you want to do?" I asked her.

"I don't know." Rachel shrugged.

We lay there, weak and staring at each other, thinking the word that Miss Pointy had trained us not to dare to say aloud. *B-o-r-i-n-g*.

"Let's eat toast," I suggested. We ate our toast, crust first, then middle.

"Ooogh," said Rachel.

"Mom!" I called.

Mom came running in. She put her arms around Rachel, and walked her to the bathroom. Strange, painful, wet cries drifted down the hallway. Pungent smells, and then the sound of teeth being brushed, the toilet being flushed, Lysol being sprayed. Rachel was walked back after a time, looking like Kiarre had given her the once-over.

"Oooogh," said Rachel.

"Now what do you want to do?" I asked.

"Sahara! Leave her be," Mom said, pulling over a pail within puke-shot. "Do you need one of these, too?"

"No, I don't think so," I said. "I feel okay. Except when I look at *her*."

Rachel smiled from the other end of the sofa, her eyes closed. Then she frowned, and leaned over the pail. She made some noises, but nothing came out.

"Don't excite her. Read a book. Read to her. Do something quietly."

"Her toes are about two million degrees," I complained. "I think I'm getting blisters where her toes are touching my leg."

My mother felt Rachel's head. "Oh, honey," she said, and got some Tylenol. Rachel swallowed the pills, and took noisy, experimental sips from a glass of water. Mom and I watched with interest. Nothing came up. "Try to sleep, boo-boo." Then she turned to me. "You let her sleep," she warned.

After Mom left the room, Rachel lay there

with a cool rag on her forehead, moaning exotically. "Let's pretend you're sick," I suggested.

"I am sick," she reminded me.

"No, really sick. We're sisters, lost in the desert."

"Nnnngghhh. Too hot."

"All right, the tundra. I'm nursing you back to health on seal blubber and fish."

Rachel leaned over the pail.

"Sahara!" My mother's voice scolded from the kitchen.

I whispered. "It seems like you're close to the end, but don't go on that ice drift, Rachel-Quiet-River-Flowing. Your betrothed, Darrell-Whose-Mother-Pounds, will be heartbroken." Rachel eyed me from over the pail.

"Make it Dominique," she croaked, leaning back into the pillows.

I waited for her to ask me who I liked. The question never came.

"I am your older sister. I have to get married first," I explained. "Who will it be?"

Rachel snored delicately at the other end of the sofa. Freddie shifted in the playpen, sucking

on the paw of his worn-out teddy bear. I sighed, and picked up *Julie of the Wolves*. Time moved more quickly with my book friends than my real friends, I noticed, a little sadly.

The doorbell rang. I heard my mother say, "Who is it?" into the intercom.

"Madame Poitier," said the voice. "Miss Pointy."

"Miss Pointy?" My mom couldn't hide her surprise. She buzzed her in. I buried myself under the blanket and closed my eyes. I couldn't stand to see Miss Pointy, not after stealing Luz's sticker, even if she didn't know it was me. And then getting sick! And missing school! It was too embarrassing, too weak. I flopped my arm over the side of the sofa.

"Sahara?" Mom came in. I tried to breathe evenly. Mom clucked her tongue, believing I was asleep. She went to the door.

"Ms. Jones?" I heard Miss Pointy's voice at the door. "Is Sahara here? I brought her homework."

"That was nice of you," said Mom. "Especially since she doesn't do it, does she?"

"Well, it's still hers, to do or not do."

"I guess so," said Mom. "She and Rachel are

sleeping. Won't you come in? Or are you on your way somewhere? Special?" I supposed Mom had just noticed her wardrobe. Miss Pointy must have been wearing one of her party dresses. Or maybe her sparkling tiara. Or her ankle-length leopard-skin coat? I opened one eye, but couldn't see anything.

"I just came from somewhere special," said Miss Pointy.

"I thought you were coming from school."

"I am."

"Oh," said Mom.

"I'm sorry to intrude. I just wanted to drop this off. I know you weren't expecting me. . . ."

"That's fine. I've been home with three sick kids all day, I'm so *bored*." I cringed at the B-word. "Come in for just a few minutes. I have marble cake," said Mom.

I wondered if Mom had her by the arm. The door closed, and I heard the footsteps into the kitchen, the next room over. I heard the kettle bang on the burner. I heard the women sitting together, Mom taking drags on her cigarette.

"Smoke?"

"No, thanks."

"Did you quit?"

"I never quit anything," Miss Pointy said. "I just finish."

"I wish I could finish smoking," said Mom.

"Finish what you start," said Miss Pointy. *Good grief, I thought, how do teachers ever have friends outside of school, if they always talk like teachers?* Mom just laughed.

"You're a real teacher, aren't you," she said.

"Having any luck with Sahara this year?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, considering her history. You read her records, didn't you?"

"No," said Miss Pointy. "I hate reading records. I never do it, until the end of the year. Then it's fun. You can see if other people think you're right or wrong." Mom must have been giving her a strange look, because she kept explaining. "If a kid is wild, or slow, or can't read, it'll show in good time. I have eyes. I don't need those records."

"Seems the records would save time, though."

"Not if they're wrong."

The kettle sang. "So you haven't seen Sahara's file, huh," said Mom.

"Nope. I just see Sahara."

"Well. What do you see?" I knew Mom was holding her breath a little bit. So was I.

"She is going to be a writer," said Miss Pointy. I felt myself blow up suddenly, like a balloon that just had been attached to a helium tank.

"Is she?" Mom finally breathed. "What else?"

"Sorry," said Miss Pointy. "That's all I know about her right now. She doesn't show me a lot."

"Does she write for you?"

"No, not really," said Miss Pointy. "This is good tea."

"Then why do you say she's a writer?"

"I didn't say she was a writer. I said she's going to be a writer. A writer writes. When she starts writing, she'll be a writer," Miss Pointy explained.

"Oh." Mom sounded annoyed. "Well, maybe when she starts practicing rocket science, she'll be a rocket scientist."

"Maybe," agreed Miss Pointy in a muffled voice. It sounded like her mouth was full of cake.

"Except I don't think she's going to be a rocket scientist. I think she's going to be a writer."

"Well, what should I do with this great talent?"

"Read to her. Even though she's a big girl. Leave a lot of pens and paper around the house. Give her a lot of books to read to herself. Probably stuff you've been doing all along."

"You really haven't read the file, have you?" Mom marveled. I thought I heard a little relief in her voice. "You know, she's been held back."

"It'll be great material," said Miss Pointy, her mouth full again. "Great artists suffer. She keeps a journal at school, you know."

"She does?" said Mom. "Can I read it?"

"I lent her the money for the journal. She owes me two bucks," Miss Pointy said abruptly. "Can you advance her?"

"Now?"

"Now's good."

I wondered what Mom's face looked like, fetching the money from her purse.

"Can I read it?" Mom repeated.

"Sorry. Her debt's paid. It's her journal now. You've got to ask her," said Miss Pointy.

"I bought her a notebook too, you know," Mom told her, lowering her voice. "She keeps it in between her mattresses. I sneak to look at it. It's just blank pages and pages ripped out."

Mom!

"Tsk, tsk. Maybe she knows you're snooping. Don't be embarrassed. I like snooping, too," Miss Pointy confessed. *Me, too*, I thought. "But either way, she wouldn't rip out blank pages, would she? She's probably writing something on them."

"Like letters," said Mom. I felt a pang.

"Sure. Or stories," said Miss Pointy. "Could be anything, really."

"She does love stories. Reads all the time, here at home," Mom tattled. "She'd rather read than play outside. She'd rather read than go anywhere." *Well, that's not true. Why do you think I read? To go everywhere.* "She's got a great vocabulary, too. She could talk to the queen of England."

"You don't have to sell me, Ms. Jones," said Miss Pointy. "I believe you. That's great."

The women sipped their tea. "Are you going to fail her?" Mom asked finally.

"Oh, I've never failed a child," said Miss Pointy cheerfully. "She, on the other hand, might fail herself."

"Maybe I failed her," Mom said quietly. I bit my lip, hearing Mom's voice tremble. "She's a good girl, she's just a little freaked out. Sometimes she still comes in my room, in the middle of the night. Is that normal, at her age?"

Mom! Do you have to tell her everything?

"I guess, if she's freaked out," said Miss Pointy.

Mom didn't seem to be listening. "Stuck in the apartment all day, you know how it is in the city. Maybe I could have made a better home, worked things out with her father. . ."

"Excuse me," Miss Pointy broke in. "May I be perfectly honest? You're a class act, Ms. Jones, and you have nothing to feel bad about. I'll put it in your permanent record, if you like. *Good mother. Serves tea and cake without prompting. Just a little freaked out. See Sahara Jones for further details.*"

My mom laughed, but it crackled, like it

might have been a choice between that and crying. "I see why the children like you," said Mom.

"Compliments make me break out in a rash," said Miss Pointy. "Please tell Sahara to get well soon. Rachel, too."

After Miss Pointy left, Mom came in and dropped the homework on the coffee table and went back into the kitchen. I could hear her singing along with the radio.

I tried to go to sleep for real, not because I felt tired, but because I felt sad. Failing other people, I could just say "Sorry," but it hadn't occurred to me that I was failing myself. I didn't want to fail myself. I wouldn't know how to apologize for it. I sat up. Hidden in the pile of homework was my journal. I decided to do the assignment Miss Pointy had given us the day I stole Luz's sticker.

Where I Live

I live in the city. I wonder what it's like, to live in the suburbs or the country. I imagine if you live in a house, it's easier because you have a yard or a bike and when your mom

sends you on an errand, she doesn't stare out the window till you get back and you don't have to run. I wonder what it's like, not to hear sirens and yelling, not to hear your neighbors. When Mr. Martinez who lives below us comes home from the factory in the middle of the night, he gives himself a welcome-home party by putting on his Cuban music so loud, his music is full of trumpets and drums and the word corazón, corazón all the time. His music shakes like a bad woman. His music is a bigger woman than his wife, who is small boned, who I imagine is frowning in her housedress because he's sitting on the sofa drinking with his favorite woman. I think this as I watch the crystals on the old light fixture quiver from the throb of his corazón. His coming home is really something.

It's something to me, too. It's someone coming home. I listen for my mother, in the other room. Is she sleeping? Or is she waiting, too? Sometimes I go to her room, but she usually sends me back. She says her bed's too small. She says, Put a pretty picture in your

mind's eye, you'll fall asleep, you won't be scared. You don't need me.

So I go back and lie down and listen to Mrs. Rosen, in the apartment above us. Shuffle, shuffle, thump. Shuffle, shuffle, thump. The thump is her cane. I hear her move to the kitchen. The chair scrapes against the linoleum. What is she doing in the kitchen, in the middle of the night? She's nice, she smiles at me on the street, she gave me a butter-scotch candy out of her handbag with the little gold clasp. When she gave it to me, I looked at her hands, wrinkled with more lines than a road map, speckled with lakes of brown. What is it like to be old, I wonder, to have skin with lines for every mile you've walked, for every trip around the sun? When I watch TV, I never want to be old, they laugh at oldness on TV. But in the dark, I hold my hands up straight above me in the air like two stars and I wish for lines that prove I have been here. I wonder about Mrs. Rosen at the kitchen table, looking at the lines in her hands in the middle of the night. Who is she waiting for?

I imagine if you live in the country, you can look out your window and see the Milky Way. Anytime I want I can look out my window and see a thousand other windows, half-shaded or blaring yellow awake. I don't play outside much. I can't swim on concrete. My ears can hardly make out the rattling of the cicadas. But Mrs. Rosen says, life is with people. So maybe I can get along without cicadas.

I looked up and saw Rachel leaning back on her pillow and staring at me. Without blinking, she put out her hand to see what I wrote. I handed it to her, and she read it, her mouth in a line, her eyes moving right, then left. She didn't smile, but when she looked up at me, into my eyes, I knew she saw past the brick, to what is sparkling and moving like Lake Michigan. Good things, exciting things.