

Bird

Owen was buried yesterday. From the room next door, Boy's childhood bedroom, Martha hears something from Boy, then his wife, "Your mother can't manage. This house is falling apart. Your father let things go to hell around here, same as with the business. . . ."

Patch's Hardware, three generations, is all Boy's now, and he can do as he pleases without Owen complaining.

Martha's been awake since the birds started their racket, thinking about what she read, how in India the dead are left on the top of towers for vultures to pick clean.

"She's got a bucket under the sink. I'm afraid to use the stove. Half the outlets—"

"Lower your voice. Mom'll hear." Then whispers.

Martha turns over. The wallpaper with sweet-pea vines has yellowed. And the sheets stink. She can't remember when she last laundered them. Before Owen went into the emergency room the first time, two weeks ago? No, three. The smell of him must have faded by now, so it's just her. She smells like a washrag that's wiped up too many spills.

A suitcase wheels across the floor next door. From downstairs, there are noises in the kitchen. Everyone's leaving: Boy and his family back to their house across town, and Paul to Portland.

Martha pushes back the limp sheet and swings her feet to the ground. At her dresser, she looks at her favorite picture of her sons: Boy's around eleven, twelve; Paul, wearing too-big sunglasses, grins, accommodating Owen, the picture-taker. Boy refused to. Boy was the brave one. But Paul was the one who managed to get away. She sets down the picture and reaches for the pearls she wore yesterday to the funeral. Gazing at her reflection in the mirror, she drapes the pearls over her collarbone, her speckled, saggy skin dissolving. Her throat is smooth and young and Glenn is standing behind her, his tousled dark head nuzzling her neck as he slips off her bra strap. Young Martha reaches out to steady herself and touches the wall beside the mirror, touches the new wallpaper with the sweet pea pattern she'd hung recently, hoping to transform her marital bedroom into a romantic bower for her and Glenn. She had told Owen she hated the old stripes.

During the year she and Glenn were lovers, they'd been so careful.