

# Birdie

Chelsea Laine Wells

Birdie died at night. It was worse for her at night. She could sleep evenly in the daytime but once the sun went down and the room filled with feverish yellow lamplight filtered through cracked shades, the cancer worm ate faster, as though struggling to do the bulk of his shameful work under cover of darkness. She grew restless in small ways. Her legs would not stay still. Her eyes opened and blinked at the ceiling but would not focus on anyone's face. Her lips dried and cracked and she would not swallow water.

When Birdie died the whole family was in the room. The hospice worker had told them it would be any day; then any hour. John and Birdie's father was standing on the far side of the hospital bed with Birdie's limp hand in his and their mother was doubled over on the other side, her face resting against Birdie's. John leaned his shoulder against the wall next to the door. There were marks made with a carpenter's pencil all along the doorframe, like a ruler—their heights. Birdie, 2; John, 4. He was already taller by a head than last summer's mark—John, 12. Under that was Birdie, 9. That would be her last, he realized, while the ladder of his life climbed the wall, towards the top of the doorjamb; he would continue to grow, unbridled and apologetically alive.

Birdie's breathing went suddenly bottomless. It was a gorge of breathing so deep it seemed she would never stop inhaling, as though her body was an endless vessel for the static air inside their little house; and then she exhaled and the breath unraveled like a never-ending skein of thread from the center of her chest. And then she inhaled, and then she exhaled, and everything was so quiet around Birdie's breathing it was as though silence was a color that had bled into everything; you could see the silence. John felt the weight of it against his skin. His father's face was tense and dark, shut like a door, and the line of his

mother's bent back was rigid as iron. Birdie inhaled, and then she exhaled, and then there was nothing else.

It was raining. The sound of the rain filtered in, as though it had been waiting politely just outside the door, and now there was nothing else to hear.

John swallowed and felt that he had swallowed his heart.

His mother made a noise that was not quite words but not quite crying; and then she breathed his sister's name, and when there was no answer she released the word *no*, and this one small syllable swelled and twisted until it tore its way out like an animal trapped in the hollows of her throat, tore through flesh and bone and the harp strings of her vocal cords.

John understood suddenly that his sister was dead and the brutal actuality of this pulled him into its orbit. He had the dizzy feeling that everything was rising around his rigid, fixed body. His blood reversed in his veins and crawled upwards, up the walls of his heart and into his scalp. His hair lifted at the roots. The dust motes caught over the lamps spiraled up into the ceiling. The rain on the windowpanes streamed up towards the roof. Everything surged up, as though Birdie's rising soul had caught the world in its backwards gravity.

John watched his father leaning across the bed, his hand hooked gently around the back of his wife's neck, so that his arm formed a bridge over Birdie's body. His mother's face was lowered over Birdie's. She was crying, murmuring a stream of words that bled together at the edges and became more sound than meaning. Birdie's little feet pointed outwards under the white sheet. One of her hands, shell white and curled into itself, lay palm up, as though it cradled a secret. John moved just to see if he still could. He lifted one foot, ripping the tender roots that fastened him to the floor, breaking the moment of her death with proof of his stubborn life, and the world fell back down around him.