

**Kathryn Burak**  
from *The Dress*

Room 1200 is completely full of girls whose hair is unnaturally smooth and boys with hair shaped like baseball caps, hair that flips up where the cap left off but is otherwise molded to their heads. The boys' legs and arms are splayed out as if they are required to take up as much space as possible. Walking over the legs and around their arms is like trekking through a disaster forest full of downed trees. As I take the only empty seat, the girls shrink away. Even though I'm dressed like them, they sense my camouflage, retracting their elbows into their slender bodies. Like some insects with a similar nature, even the most benign contact with one of them is taboo.

*"My life closed twice before its close."* The words are coming from an all-beige man. I watch as Mr. Perzan's beard opens and he carefully pronounces the words: "What does that mean?"

His question unfurls and falls over the room like a silk cloth. One of the larger tree trunks shifts in his seat, but no one else moves. I doubt they are even breathing. "Come on," Mr. Perzan urges. "What could Emily Dickinson mean in that line?" *My life closed.* Out the window, the early September sun sears away at the football field.

In the corner, there's a pretend teacher. He's doing a bad job impersonating a grown up, wearing a shirt and tie. He looks like he'd could have just finished the surfing championship—longish honey-colored hair and golden skin and broad shoulders. "Guess," the Mr. Perzan's beard begs. The field out the window seems to hiss. Even the pretend teacher seems drowsy.

*My life closed twice.*

It truly did.

"Dying," I say, cracking through the silence, my voice rusty, being pulled out of the attic this way. The smooth heads turn slowly. Forest eyes are upon me. "Or giving up on living," I say quietly, but the whole room hears it, maybe the whole school.

*Not dead, but not living, either.* I know a little something about this. I have lived with the unliving, with one who was not-quite dead.

"Ahhh," Mr. Perzan says. A wave crashes. The surfer looks at me across the ruined forest and smooth heads. He seems to be waking up.

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“This is the window she looked out of,” the tour guide with the white moustache says. *Step right up folks and see that certain slant of light.* Immortality looks like everyday stuff: chairs, doorknobs, Emily Dickinson’s white dress yellowing on a dummy.

If you live in Amherst, your English class goes to Emily Dickinson’s house. You look around at old furniture with a sincere appreciation of the day off. For some people, though, it’s a church. You can see it when they get out of their cars, that they look up the driveway with a kind of light in their eyes. That they have come to worship.

For me it is a lot like looking at the flying Elvises. I imagine Emily Dickinson alive —knowing full well what the outcome is.

“It really puts you into her head,” the tour guide continues. I imagine the Elvises speeding to earth like three white gods on a doomed mission, what might have been in their heads.

I imagine the moment they knew that — for whatever reason — the parachutes failed.

“We’ll head upstairs to see the bedroom window from which she lowered baskets with candies and cake for the children,” the tour guide says.

*As if she were fishing for kids,* someone whispers. *Creepy.*

“That’s horrible.”

I look to my left. It’s the champion surfer and teacher-impersonator, Mr. Tate, standing right next to me shaking his head. Just the two of us are left, standing by the headless dress dummy. He’s so close to me, I can almost identify the brand of his shampoo. “I don’t think it’s right. *Her clothing.*” He turns from the dress to look at me. His eyes are crunched up.

Were we having a conversation?

“I mean, she couldn’t even stand to be in the room with her visitors. She’d talk from another room.”

I could imagine Emily Dickinson, from the next room, asking about things. *How’s the weather, Claire? How’s tricks? Is your life like a loaded gun?*

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Mr. Tate sighs in the saddest way, from deep inside his big chest. I have never seen a man so upset about a dress.

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“Don’t unpack,” I say. “It’s not so bad running.”

My father peels back the top of a box, and all the world’s evil starts escaping. I think I can smell it.

“Time to move in,” he says, “and move ON.” He is ripping the tape off the boxes dramatically, all arms and elbows. It’s a violent sound that makes me shudder, a Band-Aid torn off a wound.

“We can’t keep living in empty houses,” he says.

Amherst is our second new home. The other one, in Providence, didn’t work out so well and thus stayed empty. What is it they say about bad news traveling fast? I imagine the word on us hurtling over the New England states to Massachusetts in the form of a weather system, clouds that howl. *Watch out. She’s coming. Lock up your loved ones.*

“Not empty,” I say. “Our house is full of shadows and echoes.” I pick up some of the books he has started to remove. Sylvia Plath. Anne Sexton. Randall Jarrell. Emily Dickinson. My *mother’s* books.

“Why do we still have these?” I ask.

“They’re just books,” he says. “Good books. You might want —”

“I won’t.”

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Yesterday, Mr. Perzan nearly died in a car crash. Nearly. He did break both his legs, so the imitation teacher goes prime time.

“Emily Dickinson described herself to a friend this way: *I am small like the wren, and my hair is bold, like the chestnut bur, and my eyes like the sherry in the glass that the guest leaves.* Does this mean she was actually small?” When Mr. Tate, champion surfer, asks a difficult question, his forehead seems to suffer. It crunches up, tightly.

I’m thinking it’s a puzzle, something like the question about how did Ethel die, if she’s in a room in the middle of a puddle of water, and the trick is in the clue that Ethel didn’t drown. I don’t say anything about this puzzle that’s on my mind because Mr. Tate

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is pacing around the front of the room. He resembles a panther when he is deeply thinking.

“Describe *yourself*,” Mr. Tate says, “both inside and out.” His forehead uncrunches. He nods.

The eyes of the forest roll: Each year in school, we are asked who we think we are. Every year the forest brings in pictures to illustrate: they play soccer, they hug dogs. Sometimes they are hanging upside down. Sometimes the sun is setting at the end of their day at the beach.

I am usually in a picture with a missing person. Imagine that.

So.

*I am medium, almost always, and  
loosely held together with string, taped on the edges.  
My hair falls just to my shoulders and  
In the cracks between brown and yellow.  
A woman once said this about my eyes:  
They are like the ocean on stormy days, the color that has  
No Exact Name. She also said  
You don't look anything like me and  
Where did you come from?*

What takes some time to figure out is that Ethel was a goldfish and that my mother wasn't always sure where I came from. She was unpredictable that way.