

Paula Carter

RADIO SIGNALS

My mother and father are in the front seat listening to WOO Radio. The announcer pronounces radio with a W, wadio, and each time he does it my mother sighs and my father laughs. I listen for these sounds as if they are a homing device, because my older brother, Ryan, and I are lost, thousands of miles away in the backseat which has become a desert then a jungle and wadio signals can no longer reach us out here. Our car, heading from Illinois to California in the summer heat, has successfully navigated the Nile and after Nebraska will have to make its way through the Sahara. Ryan and I are ready. At each rest stop we have gathered stones and like little gods we will turn them into bread and water when the time is right.

In the land of the backseat I am his sidekick, the lookout, the one who saved him from the alligator; I am the one who amputated his arm, saving from gangrene. And when I look out at the Sahara going on and on and on I don't care if we die here because as night approaches and the sandy stars come out and Ryan becomes tired of sitting, he might punch me or bend my finger back, a luscious pain that we both know is a privilege, never to be attempted back home, in our large, quiet house where we each have our own room, where a mispronunciation like "wadio" would not go uncorrected, and where we are never forced or able to sit side by side with our shoulders almost touching.

What we don't know as we head through Nevada is the fact that my brother will inherit this car in a few years. Ryan will sit in the front seat then, the driver's seat, and the back will still be a part of another world, but it will be another world entirely, shared with some other girl. I will watch him leave from our driveway on a summer evening, his window down and when he reaches to turn the radio on a sound will come out unlike anything that car or this house has heard. It is then that I will know he is starting on a journey without me, without anyone. And I will worry that he has forgotten how to turn stones into water, because sitting together in that backseat I have saved him from the jungle and the desert so many times.