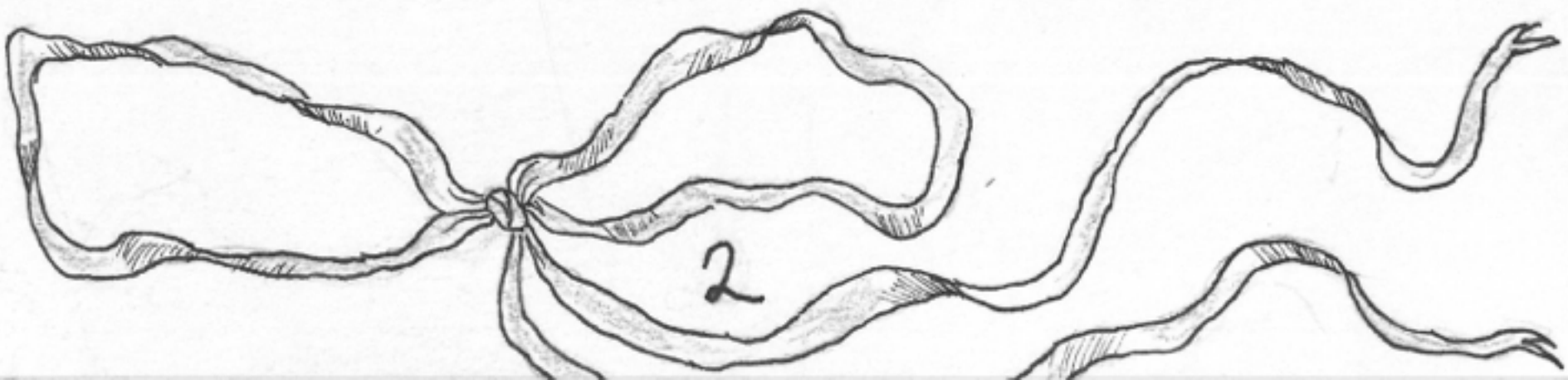
Borthe



Berthe. It is 2 days since the end of our love. I do not eat, because my lips cannot touch the spoons from which you slurped countless soups. I find no rest in the bed you once warmed. I stumble around dazed, my skirts in tatters. The moths got to them. I wore no clothes when I loved you! My room was an Eden of vast undiscovered nooks and crannies. When we made love I could almost believe we were inventing it. You loved me, so much it made me clean again. I know it to be true. Now you walk in whispers across this house, woman I do not recognize, and it wounds me. Berthe. I love you still. I am a fool for it. I do not in particular care.

Berthe, it has been 5 days since our love ended and I continue, against the odds, to live. All that keeps me tethered to this foul realm is the thought of you. I feed on delusion! And the warm retreat of memory. You must have none, the way you look right through me, shutting doors to rooms I wish to be in.

The other girls hiss and laugh at it all. They are masters of indifference, the cold heart.



But they offer me wine, the opium pipe, names of the ones whose love they thought would open up their worlds like a portal and let them step into the light.

Don't look so surprised, they tell me. None of us were born with the spikes. You grow them.

I don't want spikes. I want you. Why is it possible to love what hates you — or worse, feigns indifference to you? If you hated me, we could still make great love. But you can never make great love to someone you feel nothing for.

The other girls murmur, sigh. It's true.

In the 6 days since our love ended, Berthe, I have thought relentlessly of your perfect ~~little~~ ears. They were always dirty on the inside. I liked to fetch a basin of warm water and run a rag along the delicate bones and folds of each ear.

Who washes them now?





Berthe, it is 1 week since I held your cunt in my hand, your precious cunt, stroking the thick curled hairs. I felt the lice crawling around in there but I never minded. I did not care one bit that every man who's ever wanted you has had you. I did too.

10 days, and the painter keeps coming around asking for me. He's kind, with stunted legs and calloused hands and turpentine in his beard. The other girls say he's from some mangled aristocratic line up north. He'd forgotten about him. He calls me Angel Face and Raspberry Nipples and Velvet Pussy. He tells me I taste like a cream puff. I tell him to leave. My bed still belongs to you. He says, Pretend I'm her.

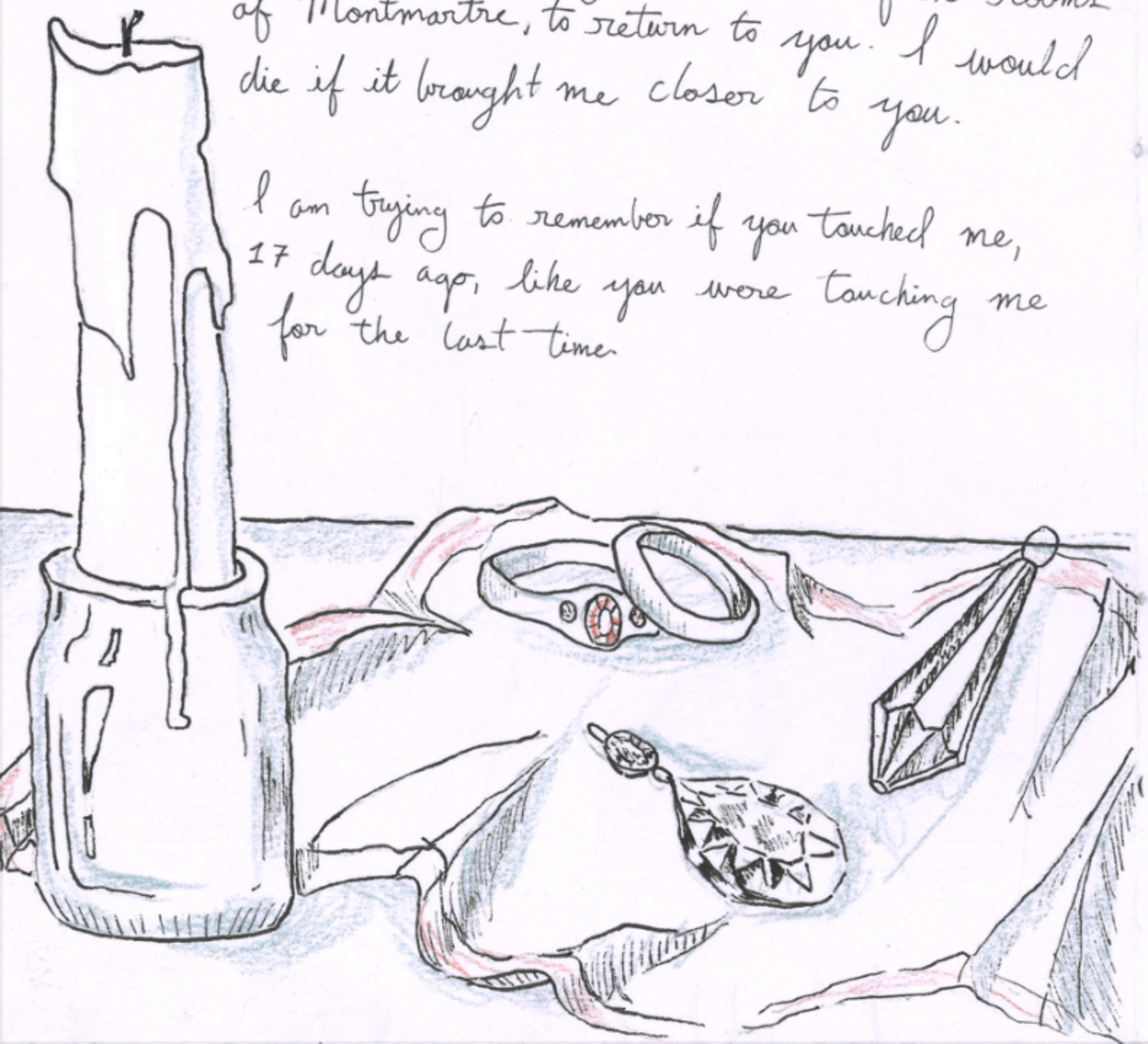
Sometimes I think I love him in the way a person can love a dog who depends on them completely. Is this what you feel for me? I hold him and he shivers with contentment, closes his eyes. He has a brutish face, long eyelashes for catching raindrops. He moves his lips, whispering into my chest. I am not the one he loves, either. Of course I am not. They can't love us, Berthe. They would not know how.





I search for reasons. I search for shadows hiding in the life I shared with you. Behind silks and gold-plated brass and velvet and wax and glass crystals. But there are no shadows. I suppose you are completely without reason. It is why I love you dearly. The truth, as I now understand it after 13 days, is that it will never end for me. I will always debase myself for you in any way. I will crawl on my hands and knees through the streets, the gutters, the rubbish, the snow, through all the fuck rooms of Montmartre, to return to you. I would die if it brought me closer to you.

I am trying to remember if you touched me, 17 days ago, like you were touching me for the last time.



22 days. You once said my love had no value, that I could find a way to love anything and therefore truly loved nothing. I do not believe you. Do you remember my first? The poet, your boy. You brought him to me, saying he would make it a good one. Skinny and hairless and fair like a girl. Cold to the touch. I had him keep his socks on. He stayed after he finished, holding me. All he wanted to talk about was the workers uprising, about wrongs being righted, blood for blood on the scales of justice. I was looking for the heart in the story of it all.

I like you, he said when he rose, detached himself from me. You're sweet, but you're the kind who doesn't get it.

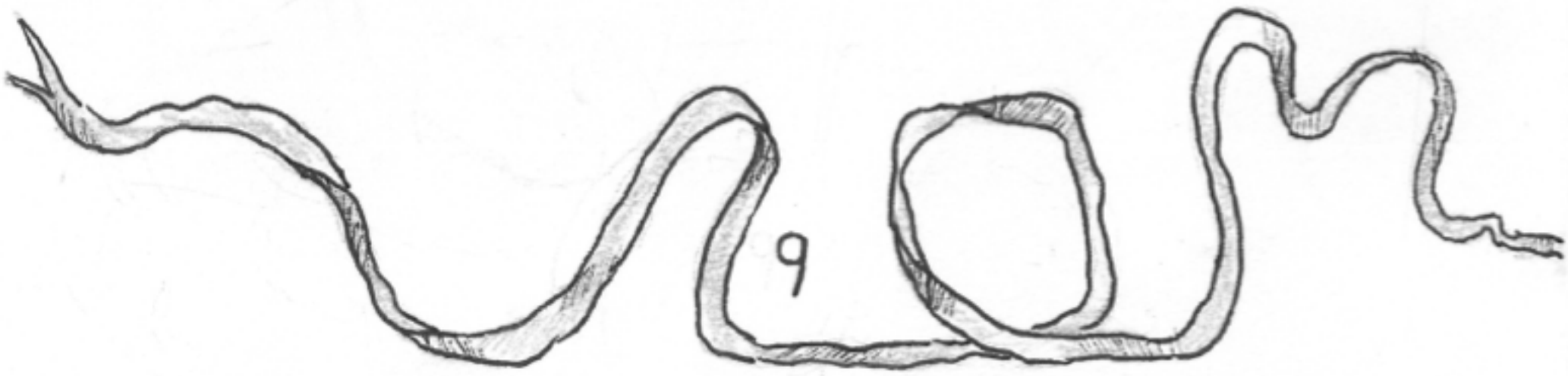
His penis swung as he hopped back into his pants. Patches on the knees, and living in a musty garret somewhere, yet he paid with shining coins. You're the one who always falls in love, he said.

I laughed, thinking it would make me seem brave. Men are always wrong, even when they have the right ideas. Because they have no hearts. What was the point, if not to fall in love for the night?

23 days since the end of our love, I wish for lice. I wish for anything of yours. The time rushes on, and I am snagged on this branch, hopelessly parted from you. I would miss the pain if I were to lose it. The pain is still something I received from you.

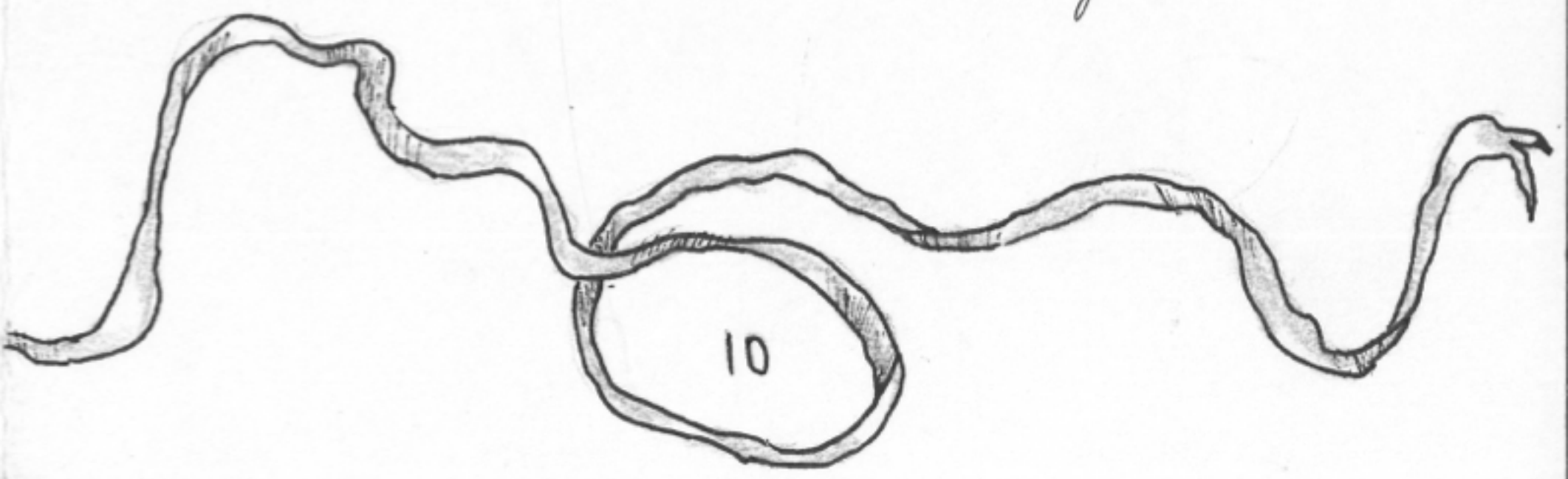
On the 28th day, Berthe, you looked at me as we crossed paths in the hall. Could I have it all back? Do I just need to take it?

You returned to me after 31 days. Hunched over in my doorway at midnight, your hair clark with grease, skin scaly and warm, smelling of wet clog. I picked you up and took you to my bed, stacked my many quilts over you. I fed you chicken soup and turkey legs and flaky pastries.



I brought you a pot to piss in and lifted you as you strained against my weight, both of us silent as the water rushed out. I combed your snarls and weaved pearls into your hair. You breathed low and heavy, thrashed while you dreamed hours away, and sobbed wordlessly upon waking. He is not taking care of you, Bertha. How does he spend his days, if they are not wholly devoted to treasuring you?

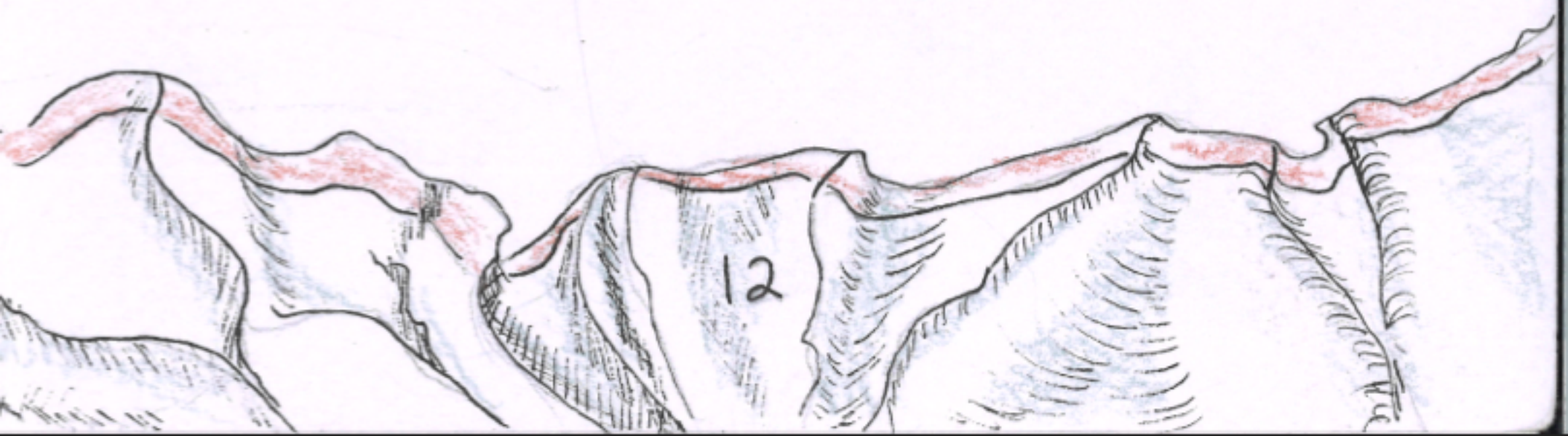
One morning you sat up. You were different, a part of you washed away with the illness. I could not tell which part. You touched my cheek and we were one body, inseparable. Your hand reached under my nightgown and caressed each knob in my spine, taking account of me to see what had been altered in these weeks of grief. We retreated beneath the covers, your face enshadowed and strange. I did not recognize you for a moment. You who is half of me, who knows how to ruin me. But you touched me as only you can. Thank you.





We went through the work of itemizing what we'd lost, the parts that had been missed most dearly. Your neck. The rough hairs on your legs. The soft fat inside your upper thighs. My freckles, my eyelids, my left breast but especially my right breast. We spent 3 days and nights under the covers in that bed that was also a world. We fucked like someone was coming to cut our tongues off the next day. You made music on my chest. I looked into your vagina and saw right through you. We lived on each other's juices. We wanted for nothing. We fucked in our sleep, quiet, serene fucking. When we finally stopped, you looked at me, bangs pressed to your damp forehead. We were breathing the same air, using the same lungs, beating the same heart. We were thinking the same thought. I know it. Am I alive when you are not touching me?

You were gone when I woke yesterday morning. Berthe, I believed your body was a promise. I am often wrong about you.



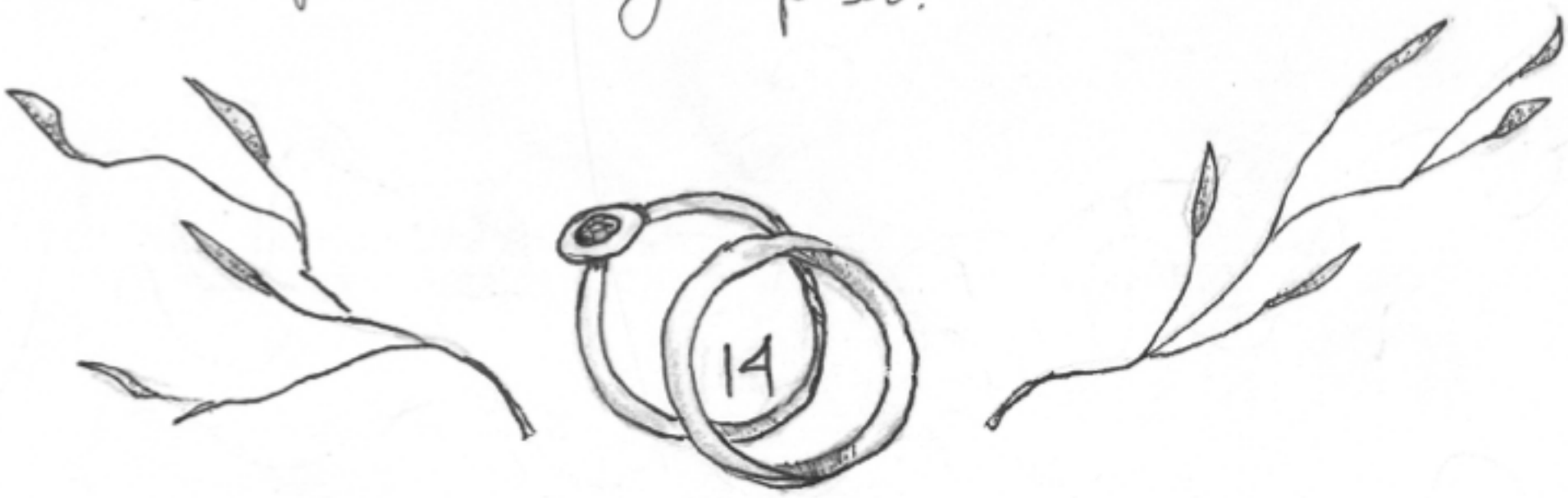
Do you think they feel how empty my body is when they touch me? That was what scared me at first, how hollow men could be, how they rammed themselves inside me and it felt like nothing because they were nothing men. Devoid. I have always liked the sad ones, the artists with crushed hats and flowers in their buttonholes. They feel it all. You laughed at them. Of course you chose the writer of cold, coarse lines about revolution and counting the dead. The broken bodies of people like us. I think you are terrified of love. You learned to act hard, to hide yourself away, and at one point the soft thing in you died for want of light, air. I wished to bring you peace. But now you can only run from goodness. Give in to me, Berthe. Let's go be weak. I like living on my hands and knees. It is closer to the essence.



The other girls say he's come back with a ring for you. They stroke my hair, coo in my ear, offer me cowpeas. It's not a very big one, they say as though it offers any consolation. Nothing special about it. The rub of their bare flesh against mine is repulsive. The opium smoke makes my eyes water.

Days are broken without you. I pull the curtains closed and wait to unravel. Everyone who leaves takes a part of me with them.

The painter comes up for air, wipes a bit of me off his chin. He takes my hands in his. He says, We'll go away. At once. Let's go away together. I fit well inside you. We make each other happy. We make each other scream. We could get married. It'd be a good time. We've got a castle, you know, up north. It would piss my mother off to no end, making you the lady of it.



I'm no lady, I say.

You could be.

He seems not to feel the terminal sorrow radiating out from my bones. Finally, I manage to explain to him that he is a good time, he makes me laugh and all, and I enjoy the drawings he makes of me while I sleep, the tattoos on his chest, and the dopey way he dances around my room. But I do not like fucking him one bit. I do not enjoy fucking him I would gladly give up on sex if it weren't for the money and leave my vagina to the spiders, let them build webs over it.

You like it when it's with her, he says.

That is not sex. That is entirely different.

All right. He kisses me on the cheek as he goes. I'll be back next week.

I nod.



When I was a girl in the village, I snuck out one night to the tall grasses behind our home. It was my sister's week to wear the shoes, and the warm spring mud curled between my toes. My hands groped through darkness until they found Maxine, who herded sheep across hill towns with her brothers. She told me she'd heard rumors of something that could change our lives. So we covered ourselves into the grass and laid together all night, unmoving. We closed our eyes, our bodies went slack, we breathed into each other's mouths, but fell asleep we did not, for fear of losing a perfect moment. When light broke, we got up and went on our way.

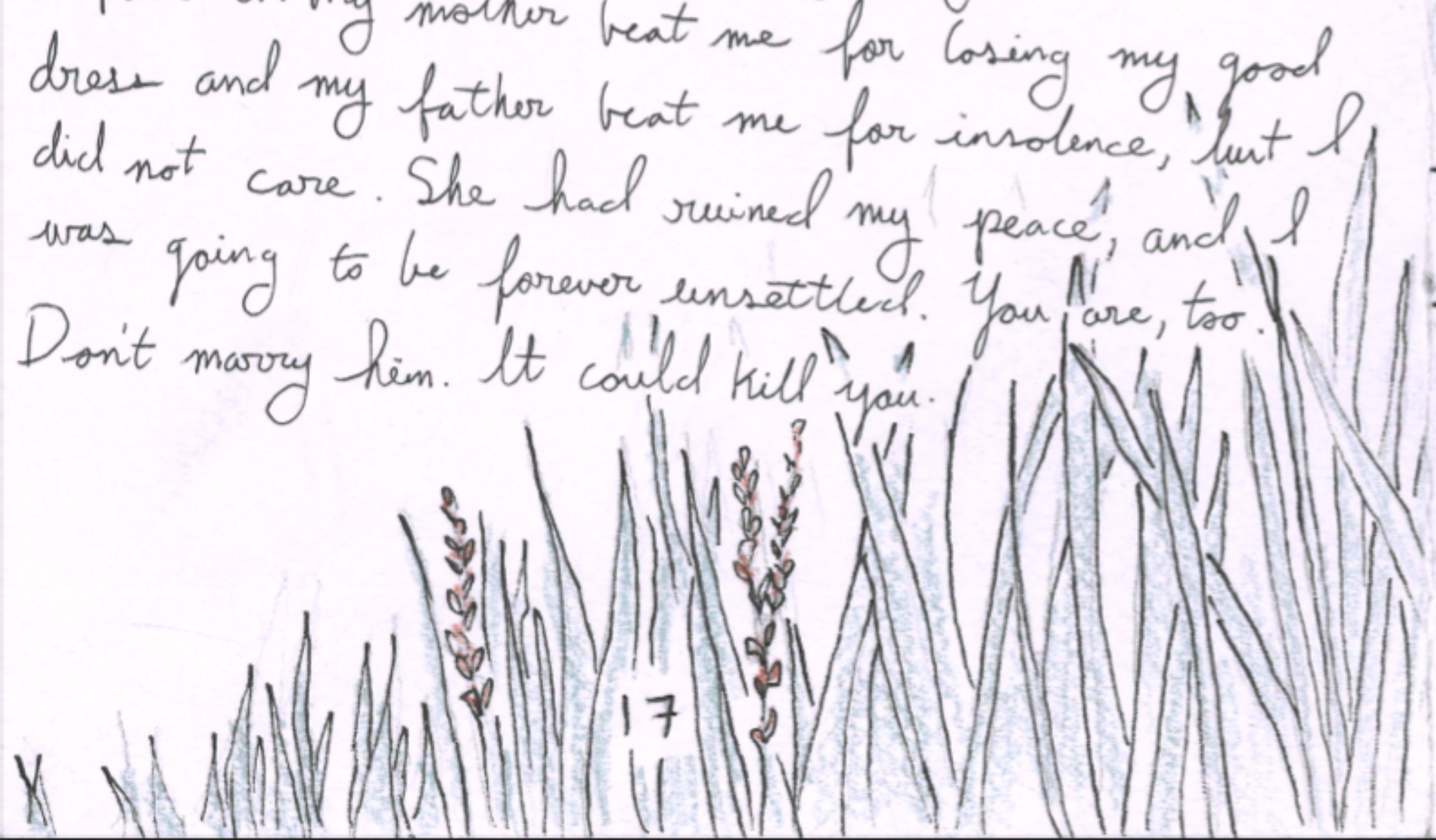
And over the weeks that followed something in me came undone. I cried in the milking shed for hours and raged against the gentle schoolteacher. I broke out in a strange pattern of hives and soaked 2 days and nights in an oatmeal bath. They talked about marrying me off to the simple son of the cobbler in the next village, that he was all I was good for now.



I told Maxine we had to meet again. This time we were not shy about it. We took our clothes and threw them into the tall grasses. We fell to the ground and dirtied our knees, our backs, our hair. We loved desperately. We were desperate for more. There was a moment at the end when she put a hand to my waist and it went right through me. We laughed with surprise.

Then it was morning and we separated, solicified. She got up up to leave for another ~~another~~ hillside. She said nothing when she went. A goodbye would have ruined it.

I waded through the grass, but my clothes were gone. Walking home through the village, the wind pricked my nipples. I knew I could not stay. Men were saddling horses for market day and they hung their heads as I passed. My mother beat me for losing my good dress and my father beat me for insolence, but I did not care. She had ruined my peace, and I was going to be forever unsettled. You are, too. Don't marry him. It could kill you.





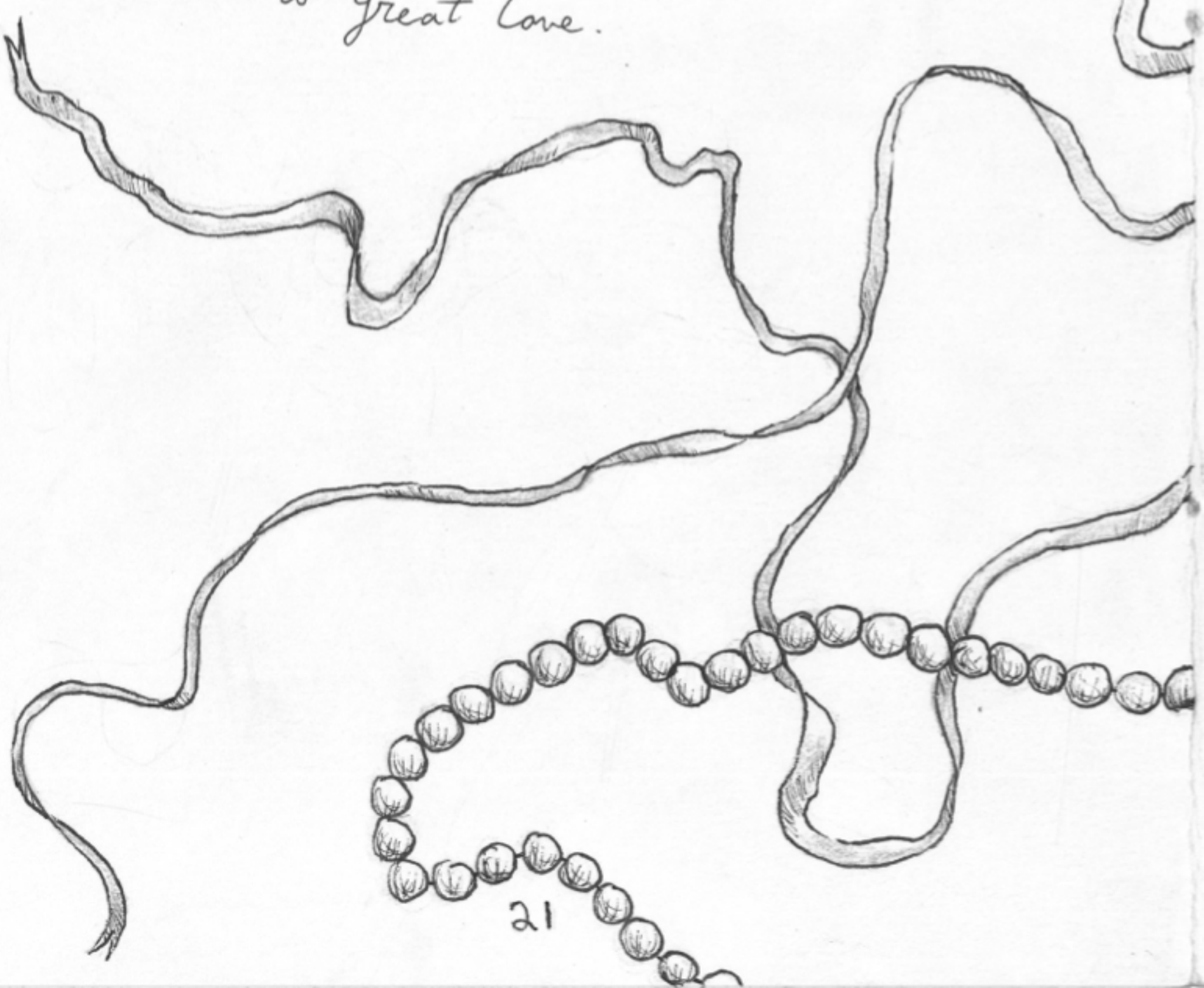
After the ring, he brings flowers, chocolates, and strong men to heave your trunk down the stairs. He carries you over the threshold of the house, into the world again. You look beautiful in your new gown, but it is not the beauty I knew you for. You are legible. Defined. It is disappointing, this simple radiance that time will weaken. I keep thinking you'll turn back and we'll share a look and this look will sever the bindings of time, space, agreeability, and reason. We'll strip naked and run away together, fuck in big feather beds in all the wondrous cities of the world. We'll be old and ugly and no one will look at us but we'll be looking at each other. You do not look back, of course. Your eyes are closed. He whispers in your ear. You are laughing. I feel a pain so profound it is physical, a hand gripping my organs and squeezing. A pain, then the absence of it. You toss flowers from the carriage. The other girls let the petals fall into their open palms. I've been emptied out. The carriage wheels turn, crack on the cobblestones, roll you away. A new life.

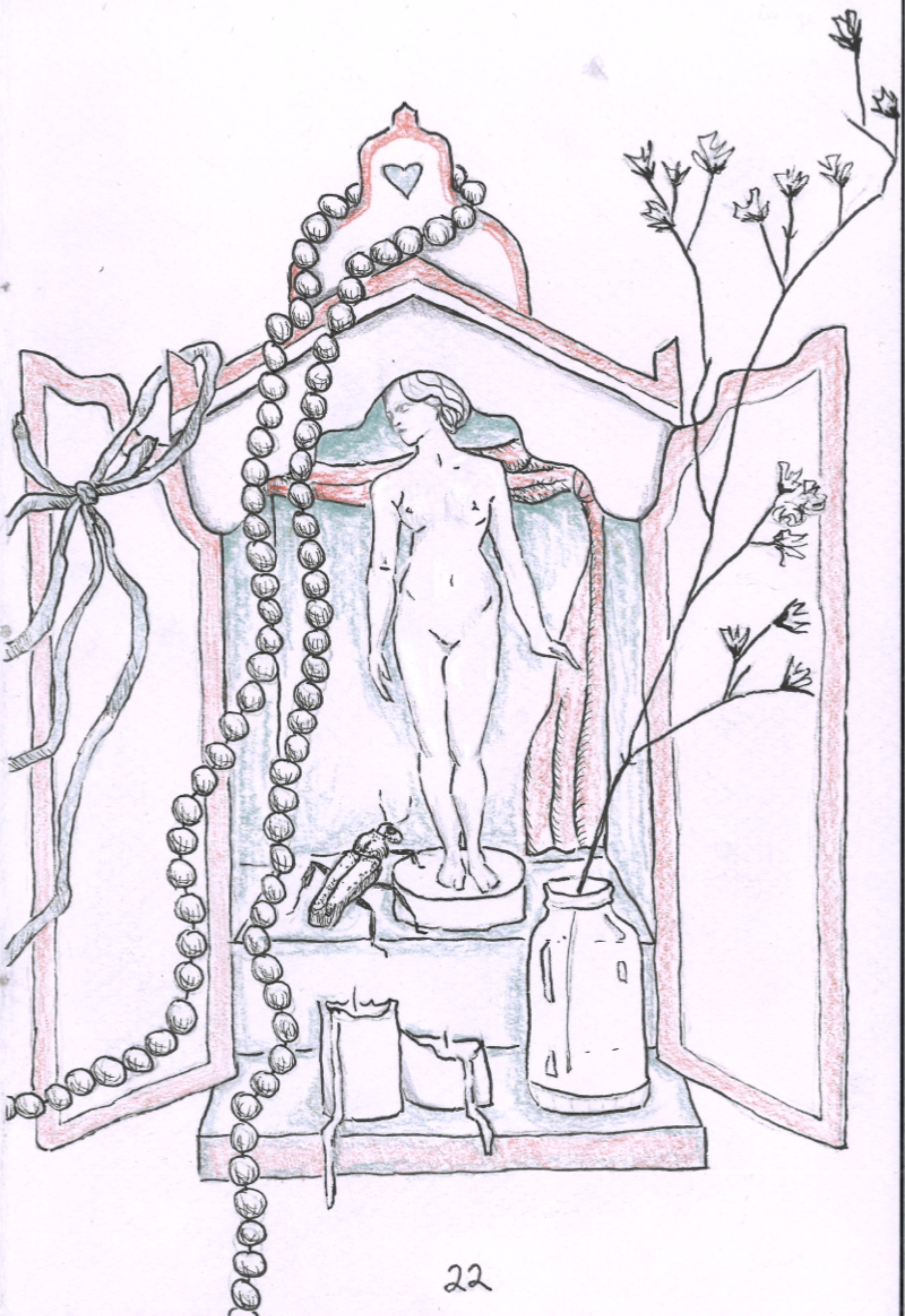
I spend my days and nights now hard at work. I pour all the money into a box under my bed. I read almanacs and pin maps to the walls. The other girls perch on my bed and look up at the shape of the world, tracing the twists of familiar coasts, rivers, mountains. They are much younger with their hair brushed out and small bare feet dangling above the floor. They speak of early years near and far from here, the crisp air of pine forests and peeling potatoes at kitchen tables, the hot clay of a patio and their cheeks pressed to wet laundry on the line. They tell me what fruits to eat, streets to avoid, addresses of widows with spare rooms, where to find people who will hold me with care. Their stories keep me up dreaming after the last man has shut the door behind him.

It is late. The wild cats are out howling in the streets. Do you hear them where you are? I can't recall how long it is since the end of our love. The grief is here still, but there's something else too.



There is a place on the wall I can touch and it becomes your face. There is a time of night when I can run my own hand over my breast, my stomach, my crotch, and the hand is yours. I suppose this is how it must be. I'm going to live, Berthe. It will be long, and agonizing. Certain doors will be shut to me forever. Hearts too. I will wander without settling and grow gnarled, pockmarked, rotten. No one will look at me with hunger. But I await the destruction of my perfect body. I want to be a monument to great love.





Written by Jennie Matheuron

Illustrated by Morgan Hutson