

There was a room at McMaster Hospital with fiber-optic lights. I'm not sure if it's still there but I don't think I'd like to see it if it were. I think it might make me afraid. The lights were set in the ceiling, just the ends sticking out. They were cast against black paint to highlight the soft colours throbbing slowly and gently and continuously; I think they were put there to calm me. And I suppose they did their job. I liked looking at these lights, at the dim colours, at the rhythm of their hypnotic pulse. They were like a thousand colourful stars in that room and if I let myself drift away from where I was I could let myself float with them. I could let them become everything, as big as the sky, never ending and engulfing us, my sister and I, as we sat in that dark little room. They could be the size of anything if I just lost a little perspective. And I did find that calming. Also just a little bit terrifying. But then fear has always kind of made me feel at peace. There's a very fine line between the two sometimes; sometimes you can be falling so fast that it seems as though you are perfectly still. Calm is right on the other side of fear, you just have to be willing to truly feel the fear, to let it surround you and trickle through you, to listen to your heart beating faster and your breaths coming quicker and let it make you smile, let it make you laugh, let it just be. And then you can get to the other side; the tranquility, the calm. That's probably why they brought us to this room, to look at the lights and to see the universe in them, to get lost in the magnificence of that and how everything could be so blissfully simple yet terrifyingly complex and that it really didn't matter because both were incredibly beautiful just the same. And that is mostly what I remember about this strange, small room. That and how sometimes they would give us a doll, a small fleshy coloured doll, a doll with no face. These dolls always scared me a bit but it was a different type of fear. The type that gets caught in the back of your throat; an uneasiness, a chill down your spine or on the back of your neck. The kind of fear that is more difficult to turn into serenity. We had markers in there too; thick markers in bright juvenile colours with *washable* printed in bubbly letters down the sides. The lady would always give us these along with the small and faceless dolls. The lady whose name was Beth, I think. And Beth is the kind of name that you would expect the owner of this room to have. It's airy and light, it floats off of your tongue like a feather; it sounds like the word *breath*, something that you take to calm down. This room was all about calming down, finding peace, getting lost, forgetting what was in the rooms around us; the real reason why we were there. Or maybe it was about not forgetting, about being okay with the fact that some things were eventually going to be washed away. I never could figure out what the dolls were there for but maybe it was that; maybe they were supposed to give us something to remember. What Beth made us do was draw on these dolls. We would hold the markers with small fists and give the dolls their faces. The ink of the markers would fade into the pinkness of the fabric, the bright happy colours muted into something a little more dark, a little less happy. The faces we drew were shaky and childlike, big round circles for eyes, noses shaped like L's, a short line curving into a smile. Sometimes we would add eyebrows, teeth, eyelashes, pupils, Irises coloured in blue, little wisps of hair on the head. As I drew I liked to watch the ink soak into the cloth faces, the marker hitting the doll and the colour bleeding out from the point. It would crawl out in thin tendrils like small rivers growing away from the ocean and then find its way through the weave of the fabric that was its terrain. I sometimes liked to imagine that they were just that; that the face I was drawing was really some sort of great valley full of tiny and colourful rivers. But there was only an instant for the ink to come to life before it would dry into the

wobbly line of a nose or a mouth or an eye. And then these lines would grow and connect and overlap until the doll was grinning or laughing or crying or staring blankly across the room. But they never got to grin or laugh or stare for very long. Eventually they would all begin to cry. We were given syringes filled with water, the big kind of syringes that were a little bit cumbersome in the hands of a child. We would take these syringes and shoot the water at the dolls, at the faces we had just created. I sometimes felt sad for the dolls; it seemed so cruel to give them these smiles only to watch them be destroyed. The water would hit the marker and in an instant everything would begin to melt away. The lines became soft and fuzzy, the features beginning to blur, the colours mixing and fading and dripping down the cheeks. It was a little bit beautiful and a little bit terrifying. The happy faces became evil, the grins warped into something more like pain or insanity, like a smile cut into the face by a blade or held into position with stitches. And then they would become nothing more than a blur; a dark, muddled mass of colour, all of their features swirling together and dripping, like blood, onto the floor. And that was all. Once we had reduced them to nothing more than watery, ink-stained lumps of cloth, we would leave them lying on the floor, whatever shadow of a face they had left staring upwards at the ceiling. I would look at these dolls sometimes and imagine what it would be like to exist as one of them. Sometimes I would feel as though I already was just like they were; faceless, empty, a blur of thoughts and feelings, a mass of gray, drowning and bleeding and dripping away. Then sometimes I would envy them, how peaceful and still they looked, how eerily calm their blurred faces became. Sometimes I longed for someone to shoot me with a syringe and melt everything into itself, to just wash it all away, everything in my mind and on my face and in my life. I wished they could just leave me floating, floating as a puddle on the ground, peaceful and calm and staring up at the ceiling and at the universe, at nothing and at everything, at the slowly pulsing colours in the fiber-optic lights.