The way it’s told now, some kids found her. Boys found her, always boys. We women argue if those boys were from the Baptist overnight camp or Boy Scouts though.

When the boys found her, she’d two years laid in the dump off War Ridge toward Damascus, the deer parts pit where men with difficult wives gut their kills. It had been the beginning of the season. The gully was close to clean, but dry orange and brown leaves, drifted like snow or duned like sand with a mite more than a smattering of deer parts buried her up to her empty eyes. There’d been that awful flood in the summer, too, which wore the gully deeper. These are all excuses, and bad ones. We should have seen her.

The woman didn’t smile like dead folks are supposed to, no macabre relaxation on her face, corners of the mouth tilted up. Or at least thats how she looked, in the papers. Her lips were long gone, her teeth sitting in her head at disapproving angles. These are all excuses, and bad ones. We should have seen her.

The police came in from Charleston. A little crowd of us watched in our slipper feet, our husbands’ work jackets consuming us down to the knee. We’d seen their van down the road in the gray light before morning and didn’t waste time. Our houses glowed orange up the steep gravel road, like rows of jack o’ lanterns against the valley, where the Mennonite farms would stay darkened for about another hour. The bone woman was revealed to us in flashes, swinging flashlights of the state police, intermittent headlights of our men driving into their morning shifts. In the dim blue lights of our dens, we’d seen how these things were done, the delicate process of collecting unspoken-for bones. From their shapeless uniforms we could not tell whether her handlers were women or men, but either way, they showed none of the mercy of their television counterparts. Pulled from the mire, every one of us swears we heard the sucking sound of the earth releasing the woman’s skeleton, the investigators rolling a black bag around her. The rags left on her were light and cottony, the impression of a dress, red. She was not a hiker.

“She is a traveler,” we said, and everyone agreed with grim nods. There was no telling, right off, how old she was. Could’ve been a gypsy from back in the ’70s, or some cocaine dealer’s girlfriend from last fall. She deserved it, probably; such a mess, by herself, way back in the woods in a dress like that. At any rate, we all knew better than red dresses.

Not on purpose, but not on accident, either, she was everywhere. Little girls on Zenith Lower and Middle played “Lady of Glass,” each girl taking her turn on an alternating day as the unfortunate bone woman. Some tellings she’d be killed by a mean step-sister and thrown down the gully, sometimes she’d been shot in a hunting accident and never found, her lover left looking for her. Whatever tale, all ended the same. In the deep, dark, way of little girls they became consumed. A month of recesses found them standing in solemn rings around and burying a chosen victim under their own brittle leaves falling off Zenith Lower Middle School’s maples “...And here you'll lay,” their leader
would snarl with her best approximation of evil “here, you’ll stay.”

The mythos growing in those girls’ Polly Pocket trapper keeper was second only to ours, as every one of us came out with their own vague recollection of a woman, always beautiful, always glowing with dewy youth and sometimes speaking like a Yankee, sometimes like southern gentriness, and in a few, like a Frenchwoman, down by the road from Damascus. A traveler, to be sure, and a traveler to have killed her. There was no other way. A quick roll call at the Methodist Center, a knock on cousins’ doors; none of us was missing. They had been traveling through, he had left her here. Some of our men would raise their hands to us, of course, but not the worst among them could take a woman’s life and leave it to rot. An outsider affair entirely.

Some sculptor, a forensic artist, they said, got hired by the state to rebuild her face in case somebody would recognize it. The idea was so graceful and savage. We couldn’t close our eyes in those days without that artist’s image pushing careful thumbs, etching finicky knives into the woman’s imagined clay skin. He’d have kept the clay wet with a damp handkerchief, red paisley like our husbands and their fathers’, we dreamt, in visions we couldn’t tell each other about. When his hands left her face for good and the Watchman ran the photograph we all knew. Maybe the sculptor pitied her, maybe he loved her a little. When he shaped her sagging eyelids, her thin lips, gaunt cheeks, he left her looking almost pretty, pretty and tired. But his kind artifice couldn’t hide her, not from us. Our very own faces looked back from the gray photograph the Watchman ran. Genetics is a funny thing, and we all look alike enough for kin, all of us descended from the same few clans two hundred years or so dead. Her sparse widow’s peak and high forehead, thick jawline, chin winnowed to sharp point, nose prominent but not hooked separating wide-set eyes. Our eyes closed, we could feel that sculptor’s hands on our own faces.

The lady of glass was our sisters, our mothers, our daughters. She was no traveler. Science crueler than art and laughed the gaps showed, and when she scowled her canines would be sharp and stern like a mother’s teeth need to be. The teeth the scientists couldn’t suss out, there were no dental records that came close. How many of us bothers with the dentist, all the way over in Brekenridge? No telling whether they broke before or after. No telling.

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“In the dim blue lights of our dens, we’d seen how these things were done, the delicate process of collecting unspoken-for bones.”

If she lived, her legs would be hairless and a color like deerskin jackets, and she would sit with them spread long, crossed at the ankle, in the truck bed of a man (her husband?) down by Shanklin’s Ferry. She wouldn’t fish, of course, but maybe the kid would have. Would she wave when she saw us, parked with our own men, our hands empty too, while our men and our kids fished? Would we wave back? Yes, please, the most pious and uptight of us would not ignore a neighbor woman like that. Some of us would be jealous, of her face tanning and not burning, great big movie-star sunglasses perched on the high cheekbones of her delicate head. Her hair would be high and out of fashion, teased up at the crown of her skull and dyed a color like fox fur.

The skull, the leg, the scientists weren’t sure about when those happened either. Whether she was woman or bone when those broke. Two years, the scientists figured, she’d wasted out there, and our men had thrown deer guts and beer bottles over her, the woods had shed on her, the barn cats had gnawed at her, and now the cold wind froze
her bones glazed like glass.

The scientists’ projections were all alchemy to us and we took the Watchman at its word.

Our speculations made us idle and our husbands nervous. The way men are, they were quiet about it... But we could tell.

“Her nose, her nose is Gunnoe, all the way, maybe a cousin from out of state,” and we could see them chewing the insides of their mouths.

“Had to be young, had to be quiet...”

And we could hear the volume of the evening news cranked up, from dens across the county. We women leaned back in our kitchen chairs, our stoves cold and clean hours after dinner, our smiles satisfied and strange.

So nobody would argue or feel ashamed, the Mennonites paid for her burial. It was the cheapest, if they did it, a thirty-dollar permit from the state to dig a hole in a field out of crop rotation, out of the groundwater. Like Mennonites do, their men built her a sturdy pine box with their own strong hands. Their women had laid careful the pieces of her the state sent back into it, stretching a shroud embroidered for somebody’s son who was supposed to die and then didn’t. Standing in a quiet circle, stitching her up into rough linen, those women would look more like each other than we look like each other. Those women, their hair pulled tight and smooth under mesh bonnets look like a ring of sisters, while we are a loose conglomeration of cousins.

A few of us followed them out into field scrubby with winter, walking a respectable pace behind the women in their darkest dresses, bonnets untied, white ribbons dancing on an imploring wind. Theirs is the lowest valley, and we all felt a little claustrophobic and cold in the shadow of Angel’s Rest and Endor. Early, early in the morning the ground was still icy and late in the fall the steady whispering swish of high grass was broken as thistles caught the hems of our good skirts. The Mennonites sang some songs we didn’t know, their women’s voices lilting over the deep growl of old elders while we hummed convincingly, like teenagers at a revival. Their leader, that purported miracle-woman, spoke spirited but soft over the grave, her head inclined as if to pray though we couldn’t hear, so that the youngest of us watched her with a surreptitious eye, nudging their mothers when the congregation agreed, “Amen.”

And it was over. Two boys with shadows of beards took to filling in her hole, still in their church clothes, just their jackets tossed away.

We nodded to them, polite enough, and the Mennonites back to us, turning to our opposite paths home. The only sound for miles as we two congregations parted ways the rustle of grass against our legs, as each of us pushed our own path straight out from that woman to our own places.

When we tell it, we say manners kept us behind the other church people; after all, it was their ceremony. But when only a few of us are together, when the men and the younger women are out of hearing, we can tell each other the truth of why no one wanted to look in that hole, at that shroud.

“A Gunnoe nose.”

“Our nose.”