

Kisses

First kiss is Denis Honeychurch, at the party where Jennifer Miles is smooching her no-count boyfriend, C. B. “C. B.?” the girl asks, “Is that his real name?” “Jeez,” Jennifer groans, world-weary. “S-E-A-B-E-E. Don’t you know it’s like a sailor?” They’re up, down, up, down, in the clinch on the couch, and each time Jennifer comes up for air she tells the girl, “You’ve been Denis’s girlfriend for months, just *do* it.” The girl’s ducking this way and that, he’s trying to zone in, and finally she lets him and lets him and lets him till her braces are cutting his lips and Jennifer Miles is pulling them apart, bug-eyed, telling her, “Stop now. I won’t take *any* responsibility.”

Second kiss is Billy McKay at the bottom of the hill that’s her back yard. In the little pagoda by the cracked badminton court her father is reclaiming, Billy wraps his arms around her and barely brushes his lips on hers. Nights, she languishes on her balcony, gazes at his roof, imagines him adding her name to the list of the girls he’s kissed. She’s fourteen. She longs to elope with him to Alaska. The third, fourth, fifth kisses are Billy too. Karl Heimlich calls him no good, tells him to leave her alone, so Billy’s friends from St. Mary’s storm the school grounds one lunchtime to fight with Karl’s friends from Garfield Junior High. “So *this* is the face that launched a thousand fists,” Mr. Wigaman, Boys’ Dean and history teacher, comments after he breaks the fight up and comes to class.

No, Merrie Lu is earlier than Denis, even. They lie in her bed in the little stucco house upstairs from the shrunken father and bossy Christian Scientist mother who waves her arms around while reciting the Lord’s Prayer, and pretend they are grownups. Merrie Lu will take a lover while still in high school—the middle-aged hippie jeweller in the tiny store on Telegraph. She’ll vanish from the girl’s life, vanish from the circle of girlfriends or even the gossip at Berkeley High. Back then, they put Kleenex between their lips as they take turns lying on top, lowering their faces toward each other, but they do not touch each other’s skin—they’re saving their glistening flesh for boys.

Allan Hance is the taste of Chesterfields and boredom. Not boredom with her, just boredom, stretching out blond and lanky on the daybed in his sister’s house,

kissing hours, hours, as Alicia and her lover and their roommate discuss Nietzsche or béarnaise or their architecture projects in the Berkeley kitchen over *egri bikaver*, bull's-blood wine. In the warm still night, his boredom seems holy. It's not love that's missing between them, but the will to claim, to bind. They don't date, really, just kiss. Like hay ripening, or the stars that make their way across the window, or two corks bobbing on the water, they drift through the months. They'll write for a while, then seldom think of each other again—until he writes her nearly forty years later. There is no end, no end, of things in the heart. He and Alicia are kind to the girl all summer.

It's always easier not to start than to stop, once she parts her lips she's a goner. That consent of the teeth and tongue, the wet, the source of words. When she's small, she knows it makes a wet spot, so she sidles up to some beloved adult—her mother, say, or her mother's best friend Lureen—parts her lips, and touches just the tip of her tongue to the face. In college, she can never understand girls who set out to kiss—to kiss but *just* to kiss—like Kathy Nye in the freshman dorm, who plays the bases like a nun nymphomaniac. If the girl kisses someone she wants his body in hers, to hurl herself over all the steeplejack jumps. The *yes* is nearly infinite.

And when she is grown, kissing her children, she wants to bless them with her lips, to seal them forever in her love. Eskimo kisses where they rub noses, trading breath, “Nuggie nose, nuggie nose.” Butterfly kisses—eyelashes tickling the cheek, up and down, fluttering. Eating the toes and fingers kisses, smunching down on the belly kisses. Kisses on the eyes to magic away headaches, on the salty sweat-damp hair, the hollow under the ear, the plump pulse at the clavicle. Kisses like water sheeting down a mountainside. Kisses like birth fluid, floating them, surrounding them, until the day they die. No, confess. She wants her kiss-shaped burning seal still to be glowing at the end of eternity.