

## Seventeen

We are not seeing ourselves here.

We are seeing ourselves in magazines with our jean buttons open, our hair long and straight. We are seeing ourselves looking up at the camera, lying back on steps that lead up to a building we are supposed to know about.

We are walking on cobblestones.

We are wearing geometry.

We are lying on our elbows with rippled hair that begins a rippled desert. We are on our tippy-toes, our knees; we are licking our fingers, popsicles. We need moisture.

We are seventeen.

For now we are working at Perry Rubber, at Burger King, at Sam's Steak house. For now we are needing a muffler, a box of Tide, to pay the hospital.

We are out on the stoop, thinking about the future, our future.

We are trying not to show.

Who we are are all women. We are all women in a warehouse room. We are wearing hair nets. We are wearing face masks. Covered in talc, we are a hundred, maybe more. Who we are are the inspectors. We are a roomful of inspectors. We are a roomful of inspectors under the fluorescent lights.

We are a room full of inspectors thump-pooshing our air buttons, blowing up our rubber gloves, looking for pinholes, defects. We are all women. We do not know why there are no men.

We are beginning to show.

Our water is supposed to break. We do not know what that means. Your water breaks, then you go to the hospital.

We are carrying trays of food through double doors. On one side everything is carpet, cool, candlelight, white tablecloths, red napkins, the clink of glasses,

the muffled sound of ice shaking. On the other, everything is dropping, clanging, steel surface, slippery tile, plates of steak bones, steam, comfort, warmth.

All things are full of labor, our mothers say. We are the girls that are beginning to show. Our mothers are at work. Our fathers we have not yet met. When the sun sets the boys will be snow under the streetlights, when the sun rises we will watch the fire hydrant water fall. We are the girls that you must see. We are on the outskirts of town, walking by the side of the road, standing in line. We are leaning on the porch with New York in our eyes, with Canton, Ohio, with Huntsville, Arkansas, San Pedro, Guatemala, Delhi there. We are the ones the men want to rock like a horse when we are a whirl of dust, when we are too young. We are in the cane with no way out, in the warehouse room, back there under the bed, hiding.

We will take our diaper bags out. It is necessary for us to crawl across the railroad tracks, to hit the top of our heads, to make a bigger graph, a longer curve. A hundred of us thump-pooshing our air buttons, with clouds above the fluorescent lights, with varicose veins to hide. Not for one moment are we not smiling, are we not polite, do we not commiserate.

Counting is not something that is done to us. We count the days until this, the hours until that. It is 11:49, 11:50, 3:24, 3:29, six months from a G.E.D., almost closing time.

We are not seeing ourselves here. If we are walking by the side of the road, pushing a stroller, it is just because the bus was late. We cannot get one more pink slip. If you see us in line it is because we are thinking ahead, past the end of the line, way up front. We are seeing ourselves in the future, wearing something different than what we have on just now, in a place of our own.

We are not seeing ourselves here at the end of the line, explaining that our heat has been turned off, that we might need some help. We are not seeing ourselves being told that we make too much, but that if we do not get our heat back on by next week, she is sorry, but she will have to put our children in foster care.

We are still seeing ourselves in magazines. We want to be discussing date rape in a circle of girls from the dorm. We want to be discussing the health care system, giving input. We want to have our picture taken in front of our paintings, we want to take our shirts off in the park, to read our poetry up there at the mike.

Every page is something we want to see ourselves being. We are turning page after page, looking back and forth. There are boots and flannel, leather and dresses with flowers. What we are really looking for is ourselves. We are turning pages, looking at the background for a teething ring, a box of Pampers, a child running up behind with arms outstretched, hungry. We are not seeing teenagers who are mothers. There are no mothers at all. There are none of us that are part of the collective, setting up installations, chipping in for the lights, the set. It is not us there getting the tattoo, having something pierced, walking with the man with the baggy pants and the crew cut, living in the loft with the

man who is also a sculptor , who is also in the band. We do not see any factory workers, no one with a hairnet on, a face mask. No one in a roomful of one hundred women thump-pooshing our air buttons, trying to make quota. No one with an apron, a tray of drinks, no one in a hat from Burger King. No one like we are. We are still looking front to back. We have to be honest, to face up. We are not seeing ourselves here.