Mrs. Ramsay's Knee

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LILIES

On the new-scrubbed, wet-black chalkboard, Mrs. Altman printed First Memory. Stories, she instructed, we must turn up in our minds like stones, like lizards, like treasures in a pirate’s cove.

Go back, she said, earlier and earlier. Find it. Can you? Commands. Soft questions. This assignment like hypnosis. The mind’s a dark place, a tumbled up closet. I did what she told me and kept my eyes shut. The taste of thumb.

But Eddie Middleton was giggling and kneeing my desk, and Lindy Riley wore too much, too-sweet, like gardenias, perfume I had to keep breathing. She was letting her head drop all the way back, her long hair fell on my hands like a whisper from a traveler, a rabbit in a long dark hole. The mind’s so fast falling and tumbling.

I’m trying to see over a shoulder, maybe Dad’s or Uncle Homer’s. Whoever it is is patting my back to hush me, but I am hushed, and I don’t like the bouncing.

A blur of window with trees, a table, the picture over the mantle in my grandmother’s parlor. A picture of lilies. White and green paints on pink-brown paper. The leaves. Stiff, artificial. Flowers flat on the wall. They’re not real, I’m knowing, the beginning of seeing the world.

In second grade, I made several sentences on lilies. I was careful not to erase holes in the wide-lined paper. That, to my teacher, was important. It wasn’t easy. I wanted to write hard and dark and permanent.