I got a great supplemental job house-sitting for the month of August ’89 at a beautiful place in Riverdale, right on the Hudson. It was the first time Mars and I ever saw a moonset.

I’d talked Mars into staying with me at the Dominicks’, and one morning at about four o’clock I woke up to find her pinning me down on the bed, practically breaking my wrist. This had never happened before, but I knew intuitively that she was in the middle of a nightmare and yelled, *It’s me!* several times before she let go.

*I thought someone was going to hurt my mother,* she said, bursting into tears. *I mean, not you, some white guy.*

The full moon was setting into the Hudson. *I didn’t know the moon even set, did you?* I asked Mars later.

*Not a clue,* she said.

We were sitting up in bed in the room that seemed to float among the trees, and we watched the river swallow the moon and turn dark again.
I’m sorry about your wrist, Moll, Mars said. Someone was trying to kill Belle. Jesus.

The Dominicks’ was where Mars first started to carve wood. She found a small scrap block in the basement, took out her utility knife, and carved a face into the grain. It was stunning. I’d looked at it unbelieving that Mars had had this talent for thirty-five years and was just now discovering it.

*You’re a sculptor,* I said.

She didn’t want to be a sculptor.

*A wood carver then.*

She didn’t want to be anything that had the connotation of artist. She thought I was nuts for writing poetry, and often told me so.

*How do you expect to make a living writing poems?* she’d asked me for years. She sounded like my father, my ex-husband, but with an undercurrent of begrudging admiration. She loved my poems, especially the ones about her, of course, but she just didn’t get, or wouldn’t admit to getting, that it was my life’s work.

*What about your kids?*

*What about buying a house?*

*What about your old age?*

We’d had this same conversation dozens of times, and now here Mars was, knife in one hand (she eventually used chisels) and any piece of wood she could find in the other—carving through the whole month at the Dominicks’. She was uncannily adept at it. Add this to her list of extraordinary musical abilities, and I had to laugh whenever she got on my case about being an *artiste*.

I wrote a poem about the morning Mars almost broke my wrist, and it came out in my first book two years later. A well-known (well-loved by me) white writer who reviewed the publication singled out that poem to remark that, in her opinion, I hadn’t mined my privilege enough. At the time of the review, Mars and I had had a commitment ceremony and crossed half the country together. We’d been spat on as an interracial lesbian couple. We’d loved each other’s kids
and we’d taught each other lessons about gangster/nun, organized/messy, morning person/night person, turkey legs/blackened salmon, Rambo/Babette’s Feast. The normal stuff of relationships.

Mars was furious with the review. I got sad for a while then snapped out of it.

I’ve rewritten that poem a hundred times in my head. The final image rests on me, not Mars, which is what, I assume, the reviewer found so disturbing—that I would claim pain in a relationship that was culturally skewed—as if I were somehow unaware of the impact of what I was saying or insensitive to Mars’s life.

Before Mars had her nightmare at the Dominicks’, before she almost broke my wrist and we sat together watching the moon set into the Hudson, she’d eased two fingers inside me and held me, rocking me until I came. Then she drank every drop of me she could find. Beside us on the night table was the sculpture of a woman’s face she had finished that day. An African face. I’d cried when I’d found it as a surprise under my pillow. I may not have earned it, I may not even have deserved it, yet there it was—and it was mine.