Autobiography of My Hungers
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trash

We didn’t have a washing machine at our house, so at week’s end my task was to take the laundry down the street to my aunt’s. My mother would walk over later in the afternoon to do the wash.

The clothes were packed tightly into a trash bag, which I balanced on the handle bars of my bike. Usually I didn’t complain about the chore. I was ten, and the ride was an escape from our crowded little house with its squeaky stairs and broken refrigerator door. One time I made the trip reluctantly because of what I’d overheard the week before: “Every time there’s less for that woman to wash,” my aunt had said to her neighbor, “because their rags have more holes.”

En route, I was distracted by the echo of the insult and by the truth that ours was the poorest branch of the family tree. So when I came upon a Dumpster, it seemed quite logical, mechanical even, that I drop the lumpy trash bag into its huge, square mouth. Dissatisfied with the quickness of the gesture, I rolled back around to empty the contents over the spoils of fly-infested waste.

How pleasantly surprised I was when I thought that my mother had decided finally to toss out our old clothing with all its embarrassments—tears, snags, and stains that never
came off. And a second later, how devastated I was that I had deliberately thrown away the clothing we were going to have to wear next week. I stood on my toes at the edge of the Dumpster as I pulled at my shirts, my mother’s bra, my father’s pants, all the while dreading what else my aunt would have to say about our rotten smell, our additional layer of filth.