

Severance  
by Natalie McNabb

**cut** *v.* To penetrate or strike an opening in. To separate into parts with a sharp device. *n.* A wound made by a sharp edge. A part cut from a main body.

I slip the lower jaw of your scissors through the first loop of fabric holding the ivory curtains to the rod, and I cut. The curtains sag. I cut the next loop; they sag some more. Most of the furniture and dishes will go to Sheila and Laurie, who will also divide the keepsakes and photos amongst us, but no one wants these curtains, Mother. No, not even the new owner wants them. So, I cut loops along the rod, and your curtains slump around my stepladder, forming pale hills across the green carpet that shrug their dust off in puffs.

I wipe my brow with the heel of my hand before cutting the final loop, and the curtains drop completely to the floor. A cloud wafts upward and outward, its particles glittering in the sunshine streaming through the front window. I sneeze, but am unsure if it's the dust or because I always sneeze in bright sun. You explained it to me once, Mother, and for a moment, I contemplate this reflex, this relic of evolution inextricably knit into the pathways of my brain.

The dust has settled on the window glass and wooden sill, even on the flies littering the aluminum track. The dust clings to the gauzy webs pressed up against the glass as if they have been trying to get outside from in since spun. How many spinners has this windowsill seen?

How many have come and gone? Spun out lives only to leave their webs billowing in the draft of this heating vent?

**mother** *v.* To birth or produce. To create. *n.* The biological female parent of offspring. An origin.

I climb down from my stepladder and sit cross-legged, facing the window, on the floor. Behind me is proof you existed, that we all did here together. It's a monument of sorts, but one that must be pulled down for the new owner. I can't consider the things in the cupboards, closets, and drawers yet. So, I sit here with my back to it all, grieving every spider that has ever spun a web in this sunlight.

I push my fingertips through the carpet, standing the twisted tufts on end, settling the dust into it. *This green—it's all the rage*, you said. I couldn't believe you—not carpet the color of the mashed garden peas you fed Sheila one tiny spoonful at a time. It's the color of canned peas now, Mother. What do you think of that?

A fine layer of dust coats the backs of my hands and the hairs scattered down my arms. If I were to lie down here long enough, unmoving, let the dust settle on me, I bet I could disappear. Yes, Mother. I know. No one can really disappear. I block the sun with my hand and, for a moment, it appears to be your own.

This hasn't been easy on any of us. Sheila and Laurie are sorry they couldn't make it. Sheila had too much going on at work, and Laurie said, *Not with the kids' soccer and softball—not today*. Not this week. Not ever, I think. So, here I sit, your eldest, cross-legged on canned

pea-colored carpet with your scissors and dust, trying to swallow this one tiny spoonful at a time.

**cut** *v.* To shape. To pass through. *n.* A passage made by digging or probing. A transition from one scene to another.

I pull the curtains toward me and cut a pillowcase-size swatch from them. Show me how, Mother. Once more. *First, fold your paper, just so, into an accordion.* I fold my swatch into an accordion, just so. *Then, cut out the heads, necks, and shoulders. But, don't forget to leave the hands connected at the folds.* I cut out our heads, necks, and shoulders, leaving our hands connected at the folds. *Now, cut out the torsos, skirts, and legs. Don't forget to leave the feet connected at the folds too.* I cut out our torsos, skirts, and legs, leaving our feet connected at the folds. I put your scissors down, get up from the floor, and open the fabric against the sunlight. *Et voila! You have a string of dolls.* From left to right: Laurie, Sheila, you, and me.

I lower my string of dolls and lean closer to the window where an orb weaver spider, not inside but out, extends long copper forelegs to gather a section of golden web back to itself. *The golden web—it's not a trick of the sun, you explained. Not magic either. Chemicals in this spider's silk make it that color.* The spider moves about, gathering and ingesting the old web, extending its forelegs again and again, until it has pulled down all proof that its golden web ever existed. Then, the spider climbs up the window and drops from new thread. I imagine the untold former webs present in this web, the chemicals coloring it, the ghosts dwelling there, the old intertwined with the new. A breeze wafts the spider sideways toward the aluminum

window casing. It catches the casing, affixes the new thread, and climbs back up to drop and affix another.

I'll get to the cupboards, closets, and drawers soon. For now though, I pick up your scissors, slip the lower jaw beneath the fabric where Sheila's hand meets yours, and I cut. Then, I cut the fabric where your foot meets hers, and Sheila and Laurie, still connected at their fabric hands and feet, drop to the carpet. I slip the lower jaw of your scissors beneath the fabric where my foot meets yours, and I cut. I cut the fabric where our hands meet too. My doll drops to the carpet with Sheila and Laurie's. And, this is how I hold you, Mother, just so.

*This version of "Severance" has been revised for future publication and various contests. To read "Severance" as it appeared in Eclectic Flash, Vol. II, September 2011, go to: <http://nataliemcnabb.files.wordpress.com/2011/10/severance-903.pdf>.*