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A tomboy, everyone called you,
because you didn't throw like a girl,
and you'd rather play guns or catch
with me than dolls with our sisters.
You were older by a year,
and the leader. When we
weren't playing baseball,
you took me up trees
and down creeks and paths,
six shooters strapped to our thighs,
Winchesters or carbines
slung over our shoulders,
cowboy hats or army helmets
tied under our chins.
We flopped to the ground
and belly-crawled into position,
the musk of soil in our nostrils,
sneaking up on the enemy,
our sisters or mothers
at their female pursuits.
We took them out
with a spray of shots,
even if we caught a few
ourselves and had to drag
back to camp for Doc to wrap
our arms in ragged bandages.
We spent hours at these games,
whole days, from the sparkle
of morning to the charcoal of dusk,
stopping only for Kool-Aid
and peanut butter sandwiches
at the gnarled picnic table

that stood in for a tank,
pirate ship, dump truck, PT boat.

One rainy day
when we were eight or nine,
indoor games played out—
race cars, hide and seek,
trampoline—
we took our shirts off
in the closet. Maybe we saw
it in some cowboy movie,
sun-slicked, bare-chested men
working the fences or chopping wood,
or maybe we had real-life models,
workmen on the street,
our own fathers in the yard
(though yours had been
gone some years by then).
We weren't going to do
anything in particular,
just wanted to cool off, really,
but your mother pulled you
out of there faster
than she could say, *Girls*
don't take off their shirts!
Stunned by her thunderclap,
we asked no questions.
But we didn't understand,
not really, there being
not much difference
between us then
except the obvious one,
which we dismissed
as kids dismiss

all those mysteries adults
make such a fuss about.
We were watched more closely
after that, not left alone
quite so much, but they
didn't have to worry.
It wasn't like that.
When we played doctor,
we both wore
a stethoscope.

Was this the beginning of the
(what everyone came to call)
confusion that dogged
the rest of your life?
None of this is official now,
just guesswork and backfilling,
long after we had gone our ways.
Or maybe it was just
random chemicals in the brain:
your father left when you were
a child and died before college,
and nothing seemed right after that,
depression a good enough word for it,
though you still went to school,
got a job, an apartment,
lived a kind of a life—
but no boyfriends, everybody
pointed out. Girlfriends?
No one thought to ask,
this being then, and who's to say,
now that you're not talking?
My guess is no—
that you never were
able to put a name
to the hole in your heart,

let alone fill it,
and that after a while
you gave up. Not all at once.
If you couldn't keep a job,
you were always able to get one,
and the same with doctors,
though you never liked
the styrofoam the pills
packed your head in,
took them only sporadically,
then stopped altogether,
just as you finally stopped working,
left your apartment, and
squeezed life down to a room
in your mother's house,
cigarette after cigarette
in the dark, a GI too long on the lines,
cross-eyed from watching the red ring
crawl toward your fingers.
When your mother sold the house—
not even the house you grew up in,
but a safe shell nonetheless—
you bought a gun. For you or for her,
or simply for the familiar heft of the
days you thought yourself happy
and the wounded sprang from the
ground to invent an even better game,
your mother didn't wait to find out.
She called the police,
and it was lockdown for you,
ward of the court:
danger to self and others.