DREAM CLOSET

EDITED BY

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For my parents
“Every theory is a fragment of an autobiography.” — Paul Valery

I bid in closets, behind doors, and under tables. I crawled into the cabinet under the sink in my parents’ bathroom—adjusting my limbs until I fit—and I climbed trees to find hidden perches with bird’s-eye views of the neighborhood. My nickname was Bird. I made forts with blankets and couch cushions and I brought things inside: books, snacks, a desktop lamp, the extension cord snaking to the outlet. I craved the privacy of these spaces, the way they drew a temporary (if ineffective) boundary against intruders, and I sensed their mysterious power: at any moment, they could become genie bottles, spaceships, and magic carpets. The books I read were also filled with small spaces that doubled as portals to other worlds. Alice tumbles into the rabbit hole and discovers a vast subterranean realm. We enter Narnia through a passage in the back of a wardrobe, and James inhabits his flying peach.

In fifth grade, Mrs. England invited us to submit dioramas for extra credit on book reports, and I never missed an opportunity to turn a shoebox into a scene. I built a cemetery from a Nancy Drew mystery with real dirt from the yard and a cardboard headstone. When we learned about Joseph Cornell, the artist who became famous for his shadow boxes, I was fascinated—and jealous. It seemed like the perfect job. “Later, in high school, I discovered poetry. My oldest sister Michele describe another “cave game” that he played as a four year-old boy: 

The emergence from the dark tunnel into the bright room, and the dreamy hallucination inside the bed sheets: is the four year-old boy engaged in his own birth, or is he reenacting the birth of man? 

In the opening pages of Virginia Woolf’s autobiographical essay, “A Sketch of the Past,” she describes one of her earliest memories: “It is of lying half asleep, half awake, in bed at the nursery at St. Ives.” Woolf gives a rapturous account of listening to the waves and hearing the “acorn of the blind” moving back and forth across the floor, and in an attempt to capture the intensity of the feeling (“which is even at this moment very strong in me”), she employs a surprising metaphor:

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"[T]he feeling, as I describe it sometimes to myself, of lying in a grape and seeing through a film of semi-transparent yellow.” To miniaturize and suspended inside a grape is a fetal image; Woolf is not shirking a Freudian reading. In a later passage, she recounts another scene of enclosure that resembles Nabokov’s tunnel of furniture: “How large for instance was the space beneath the nursery table! I see it still as a great black space with the table-cloth hanging down in folds on the outskirts in the distance; and myself roaming about there, and meeting Nessa... Then we roamed off again into that vast space.” For Woolf, to be englobed inside a grape is to feel ecstatically released into sight and sound, and the vast dark space under the table is limitless. Is the small space, I continued to wonder, cave or womb? Neither interpretation satisfied my sense that more was happening in these scenes: “as I gathered textual examples, my question became twofold: what do small spaces signify for the child, and what do they mean for the autobiographer recollecting the past? Some children find or fashion small spaces in order to create a smaller world—over which they exert a certain control—within the large one.