

A Winter Gift

by Susannah Felts

As we follow the trail and things snap beneath our feet, I tell myself that the snapped things take pleasure, find purpose even, in the sounds they make with my soles. This

is the way I walk through the woods. Sometimes it's the only way I'm able to move at all.

But you are something else. You touch everything, leaving your humanness on surfaces bumpy and silken and brittle—sometimes you even rip loose a leaf and hold it to your nose, then drop it.

One time I asked you about it: You said, I think about not doing it but

before I know it I'm reaching out again... I put my hand under your shirt, briefly and too cold.

I realized too late the pleasure that touching things brought you. Taking and dropping specimens gave shape to the journey for you. The rest of that day you just bent awkwardly and sniffed things, your arms stiffly crossed. But the next time we entered the woods, you were back at it again. I was so glad I even tried it myself: I took hold of a twig with bright winter berries, wiggled it between my fingers. I heard it whisper: it wanted to be broken. I believed this, but farther down the path the berries shriveled like fingers too long in the tub, and I worried the twig with my fingernails inside my jacket pocket until it bore tiny scrapes and bends. When I forced myself at last to let it go, I dropped it strategically on a furry patch of moss. But I felt I'd abandoned it too far from home.

Today the late afternoon light shoots at eye-level through the bare branches. Crows quarrel above us. You notice something off the path

and call me over to check it out. We bend down—our denimed knees bump, and I touch the ground to regain my balance. What's there is a furling, shimmering loop of ice, whorled loosely like a bundle of ribbon, not neatly wound — instead hastily stuffed in a brown paper bag by a clerk. It seems to have a weave, even, the densely packed lines. It is water masquerading as fiber, as satin ribbon or maybe grosgrain (I always loved that word, the silent s, the hard gs forming a bridge over the silence of the most ribbonish letter).

Look, there's another. And there, too. We're in a patch of ice ribbons, turning bare winter earth into gifts. Your hand reaches out and hovers, tentatively. I want to tell you it's okay to touch, but something keeps me from it.

It breaks free with a silence, a cottony click that I take as a sigh of relief. It is terribly weightless. I hold it in my palm, its striations and thinnest transparent patches aglow in the dim light, and I say,

hold out your hand.

