

SHIRA ERLICHMAN

Stolen

We could have escaped but chose not to. The newest one of us, a scrawny boy about six or seven, wept for days while the rest of us just watched. The man would bring us Oreos and rented video games and while he took one of us the rest of us would stay and eat. We'd play games we'd invented and skin our knees on the carpet from running. Sometimes we'd talk, but mostly we said nothing. It was three years of that. After we ran away, everyone asked us why we waited so long to leave the man. When I got picked up, I was a lot like the scrawny boy. But I quickly learned that you can cry and you can cry and all you'll get is a room full of blinking eyes and crossed arms. I never really wanted to talk and the man wouldn't make me. I still don't really want to talk and everyone doesn't make me, though you can tell they want it. But sometimes I wish someone, anyone, would force me against a wall until my throat tightened like an umbrella snapping open and my skin would feel irregular, like it didn't fit again, and my voice would leap out, maybe like a tiger's voice leaps out. Sometimes I wish that I was stuck again because when you're stuck you can choose whether to escape or not. They say it was all the man. But. The boys and I would be left alone for hours while he was at the gas station or even the library and we didn't leave. You get used to things. Whether it's hours in front of a television or being stolen. I'm not saying I chose to be touched. I'm just saying. He was out. Running errands, checking the post. We had a thousand and one chances. Now that I'm out of there, I'm in a different kind of stuck. There's not one room with maroon carpeting and other boys like me. This time it's a bunch of rooms, and only one body, the kind of stuck where you can't escape, where you're just living.