

## GEORGE HITCHCOCK

*Entering the Forest*, 1997  
Acrylic on Canvas, 16 x 22 in



## KAREN JOY FOWLER

### Primate Study

In this first memory, we are three years old. Mother is sitting in the big loveseat in the library so that Fern can squeeze in on one side and me on the other. It's raining, been raining for days, and I am sick of being inside, sick of using my inside voice. Fern loves being read to. She's sleepy and quiet, pressing in as close to our mother as possible, her hands playing with the belt loops on Mom's corduroy pants, smoothing the nap on Mom's thighs. I, on the other hand, am flinging myself about, unable to get comfortable, kicking across Mom's lap at Fern's feet, trying to make her do something that will get her in trouble. Mom tells me to hold still in a voice that could pickle fish.

The book is *Mary Poppins* and the chapter is the one in which an old woman breaks off her own fingers, which then become *sugar* sticks for the children to suck on. I have a queasy feeling about this, but Fern hears the word *sugar* and her mouth begins to work in a sleepy, dreamy way. I don't understand that Fern doesn't understand about the fingers. I don't understand that Fern doesn't follow the story.

I interrupt constantly, because I wish to understand everything. What is a perambulator? What is rheumatism? Will I get rheumatism someday? What are elastic-sided boots? Can I have some? Are Michael and Jane mad when Mary Poppins takes their stars? What if there were no stars in the sky? Could that happen? "For God's sake," Mom says finally. "Can you just let me read the damn story?" and because she used the words *God* and *damn*, which she hardly ever does, Mary has to be sacrificed. It's Mary wants to know, I tell her. "Mary is getting on my last nerve," our mother says. "Mary should be nice and quiet like our little Fern here."

Just as I sacrificed Mary, Fern has sacrificed me. She didn't know what rheumatism was, either, but because I was the one who asked, now she does. She gets to know about rheumatism, *and* she gets praised for not talking when *she can't even talk*. I think that Fern has gotten praised for nothing and that I never get praised for nothing. It's clear that Mom loves Fern best. I can see half of Fern's face. She is almost asleep, one eyelid fluttering, one ear blooming like a poppy from her black fur, one big toe plugging her mouth so I can hear her sucking on it. She looks at me sleepily from over her own leg, from around