

My sister and I began our walk to school on a deer path that ran through a thicket of crabapple trees behind our house and brought us to the graveyard of the church where our parents were married. It was a small white church with a crumbling slate roof and siding warped by years of snow and rain, hidden behind a line of pine trees as high as the steeple and surrounded by a low, rusted iron fence, whole sections of which had been toppled over the years by older kids swarming the graveyard at night looking for a place to drink.

The fog that rose from the river hung in the undergrowth along the path and enfolded the headstones in white billowing arms. Coming into the clearing, I would pass among them reading the names while Cyd skirted the fence line, fearful of Pastor Merrill, who slept in the church office at night in wait for vandals he was too old to hear. When he did manage to catch someone, he called their parents instead of the police. But I never worried. Pastor Merrill hadn't spoken to our mother since the divorce.

Stopping at the front gate I waited for my sister, who always took her time going anywhere. Our mother tended bar at Alice's Tavern on Juniper Street from three in the afternoon until after midnight, when she would sit at the bar and sometimes drink until daybreak. It fell to me to make sure Cyd got to school on time and home safely, that dinner was made and homework done and her violin practiced. I pushed her across the road and together we crossed the bridge into town.

The square always moved in slow motion. Kids on their way to school, shopkeepers sweeping sidewalks with dangling cigarettes and thermoses of coffee on the stoops. Everyone talked low and quiet through missing teeth and dusty hair. Through the distant grind of the sawmill north of town we passed the hardware and state store and drug store, crossed the lot of Haines Amoco where a half dozen trucks stood propped on

cinder blocks, then turned left onto Juniper past the bars, Dean's and Alice's and the Morning Dew, before turning up the hill toward school. Cyd loved coming into town. She smiled and bid everyone good morning and dipped her head as you would a passing car.

Though most people felt as Pastor Merrill did about Momma, they responded pleasantly to Cyd. She was beautiful, one of those girls, like our mother, who were born too clean, too broadly energetic and thoughtful, for a small mill-and-mining town. Even at eleven years old you could see that. The way she carried herself made people look at me suspiciously. Everyone knew what Momma was up to when she should have been home tending us. What possible good could a fatherless boy raising her be?

I was twelve when our father moved away. Cyd was nine. He was from the south—Louisiana I think, though we were never told for sure—and since the town's loyalty fell mostly to locals during times of economic hardship, Daddy was among the first to lose his shifts when Tinkerton closed the mines in seventy-one. What little money he made doing odd jobs around town he gambled or drank away at the Fireside on three twenty-two, which is where, hitchhiking his way to Canada in sixty-four to avoid the coming draft, he and our mother had met.

She'd grown up in Milton, the daughter of the town postman. It might have surprised her that so many people turned against her after the divorce, but she never let on as much. Standing in line at the grocery store on Saturday mornings with our government-issued cheese and the food stamps everyone depended on, I sensed their resentment in silent stares, turned shoulders, set jaws. There wasn't a man in town who didn't gamble or drink, and many went much farther than Daddy in taking it out on their wives and children.

But black eyes, bruises on the head, arms, back, legs, wasn't a surprise and wasn't discussed. That Momma had divorced our father, had driven him out of town under the security of being local—and the threat of exposing him, though few in town knew he had come north for the reason he did—incensed both men and women to open cruelty. He'd

never raised a hand against her. He never even raised his voice.

Her only real support was Alice, whose husband Bill owned the tavern where she worked, and John Grady, Milton's lone police officer, who grew up with her and would have married her if she had let him. John spent his mornings outside the gate to the school, watching over traffic, wishing all the kids a good day as they passed. Few returned his greetings except for Cyd.

The school sat on the rise of land overlooking the point where the Somerfield river split into the Sequonota and Little Palm runs. The Somerfield ran north out of Garrett County, Maryland and entered Garrett County, Pennsylvania at a place called Hallard's ridge. From there it turned east and ran through the town of Somerfield—the county capital—before disappearing into the eight-mile long reservoir of the Law-Garrett dam, below which hid the town of Milton.

From the school you could see the dam's overflow channels create a river again, but it was muddy and slow and lifeless like Milton itself. In class I always fell into tracking the south-running split, the Little Palm, from its genesis below the school, down the valley along Beck's Hollow road, past our house and into Maryland again, beyond which I didn't care. Those days I could think of little else but what life might be like away from my mother and sister.

I was small for my age and had few friends; I blamed this on Momma and took it out on Cyd. I didn't have time for football games or fishing. I didn't have a father. I was indifferent and hostile, and as such was bullied by both older kids and their younger brothers and sisters in my class. Teachers didn't like me. When I wasn't ignoring them, I asked too many questions without purpose. I didn't easily accept answers. Too often I got in trouble, but mostly Momma didn't know about it. The only times I got in trouble at home for something I did at school was when Cyd heard about it.

Within a year after Daddy left, she'd begun to blackmail me when she wanted to get out of things—cleaning her room, for example, which was always cluttered with makeshift

toll houses and make-up displays and her collections of stray river rocks or dried flowers. More often it was violin practice. Cyd hated the violin. It had belonged to our mother and was too big for her; it stained her neck and hands an angry, rusted brown because the varnish was cheap. But Momma thought the violin was civilized. I remember her chastising our father for calling it a “fiddle,” which he did solely to irritate her.

I enjoyed watching Cyd struggle through the hymns Mister Hanson, the elementary music teacher who gave lessons after school, had tried to get her to learn. Her brow would curl under her blond bangs and begin to sweat, her face turning dark red with strain. Her lips silently counted time, lost rhythm, began to count again. Once she began to blackmail me out of making her practice, she lost even the ability to hold the violin correctly, and I enjoyed this more. She kept losing her grip on the neck, dropping it with a muted, satisfying twang. The only reason Cyd ever gave for missing Daddy was that he didn't make her play.

Wednesdays were her lesson days. I was supposed to wait for her in the elementary-side playground, where the strained, butchered notes of the simple hymns she was supposed to learn floated through the open windows and drowned out the faraway sound of kids laughing from the square. I spent the time throwing rocks in the river and scanning the base of God's Haven — the rise in land that caused the Somerfield to diverge. Sometimes I could see deer making their way down to the water to drink, the sharp brown horizontal lines of their backs looking foreign to the tangles of brush and stone and tree.

Our father used to take us over to God's Haven to hunt for ginseng, carrying us on his back—our pants tucked into the tops of our boots in case of snakes—a .38 revolver hung on his belt. I suspected the reason we didn't hear from him after the divorce was because our mother hid his letters. I knew for a fact that she changed our phone number. I watched the deer and the water and the profiled shadows of blackbirds dip and fight for control of the pines and wondered if he would ever come back for us. ☉

Wait a minute. This can't be happening now. Wait. The fuse is already lit, little sparks flickering forward in a deadly dance toward catastrophe. The steel hands on the big clock tick-tick-tick relentlessly onward as the world spins further and further out of control. My whole life is about to blow up.

In a minute I'll be staggering down a dusty stretch of road alone, wobbling out of the night, everything torn to pieces, but I don't know it yet, not yet. The hints and the clues, the doubts, the fears, have been trampled down and banished to the far edges of my mind, and so I simply sit here looking dumbly toward this deserted little telephone booth, wondering for the third night in a row in the gathering dusk if the damn thing is ever going to ring. Everything will collapse in a minute. But not yet. Sixty seconds to chaos.

The faded blue sign invites neither scrutiny nor confidence: "PUBLIC" it announces uneasily. "TELEPHONE." The phone works—I've checked and then re-checked a hundred times—but the red paint along its borders has bleached to pink, the dull fluorescent light flutters frantically, and the black wire slouches uncertainly toward the main line. Any sensible traveler, even the most desperate, will, I hope, push on to a more promising spot; here there's no food, no gas, no toilet, nothing but a solitary smudgy telephone booth and a broken down picnic table. It's my own private line by now, just as I want it.

I'd nick-named this place the Spider's Palace from a children's book I'd known long ago, and it's true, the black spiders are living large, collecting luminous flies in frail-looking but intractable cobwebs. Diana and the others all have my number—I'll be at the Spider's Palace at eight, I'd said as we synchronized our watches and split up days ago—and here I've been since eight o'clock exactly, waiting.

The phone booth reeks of ancient piss baked daily, I imagine, in this accidental solar oven. Who would pee here? I wonder aloud, looking away toward the horizon, wide as a church door. Maybe the sight of an abandoned phone booth is like the bells of Pavlov's dogs. My mind is wandering now. Where is everybody? I groan into the night, into myself. Five minutes after eight. I'll wait till quarter past, I think, no longer.

I slide off the table then and walk a few steps away, scooping up a handful of stones, pitching them one by one at a godforsaken wooden gate across the road.

Two nights, no call. What if there's nothing again tonight? I'll be back at the Spider's Palace at eight tomorrow night, I think, eight the next night, and the next, and the next, forever I guess. I've felt my courage flicker in recent months, and my confidence choke, but I hold tight to this one small hard thing: discipline. I was supposed to be right here starting Saturday, and here I am. It's like a death grip—this phone and me; I can't let go. The chilly air is turning bitter, and I shiver slightly. Come on, I break the silence again, feeling cold and forlorn. Call me. Please call me.

A dark sedan appears as a dot in the distance making tracks down the road, accelerating thunderously past me toward the far horizon, and is, like a mirage, quickly gone, and my phone roars suddenly to life, erupts like a shotgun. Two loud rings, both barrels. I leap to snatch it as at a life jacket before going over the side of a sinking ship. Hey, Babe, a friend's voice, but not Diana's. Something's wrong—the closeness, her urgency, the intimate embrace, I think, of the desperate. Are you OK? she asks. Are you alone?

What's up? I say, my frustration pushed roughly aside by simple fear, larger and more imposing. What is it? I could picture her then, standing at her own isolated phone booth, tough and sure, not like me at all. But she hesitates; there's an unexpected catch in her breath, the sound of suppressed sobs, perhaps, and a surprising sadness tempering her steely will. Alarms are starting up in my head.

You've got to leave now, she says firmly. Tomorrow at the latest. We'll meet up in a week at the shore. There's been a terrible accident.

What the hell? I think. An accident? What the hell is she talking about?

Dadadada... She sounds weirdly incoherent now, chattering like a monkey, and I can't make any of it out.

Wait a minute, I say. This can't be happening now. Wait.

Diana is dead, she says again, the sound of breaking glass rising up in her throat. And some of the others...dead as well.

My mind stutters.

Diana is dead, she repeats slowly, and then I'm running wildly, the abandoned phone swinging side to side. Diana is dead—those three shrill words rebounding off the wall of my skull in a continuous loop—Diana is dead. Stumbling, I drop down, bob back up, scratched and covered with gravel, running again. Where do I think I'm going?

A voice, not one I recognize, comes ripping from afar, rising and gathering into a long scream propelled from some unknown place inside me—NO! And then, a deathly quiet, just the rushing of air and the pumping of blood, the echo of escape. I can hear the drum beating in my ears, my heart hammering through my chest, and I feel my muscles flexing from a distance, working automatically now. I am running for my life, but I don't know where I'm going.

In a minute I'll be making lists—ditch the cars, they'll say, hide the evidence. In a minute I'll be panting to repair, struggling to understand where things went so awfully wrong. But not yet. Now my mind is exploding and I'm running all alone, virtually on empty.

That was March, 1970, and the American war in Viet Nam was half done, though we didn't know it yet. The woman on the other end of the phone would save me soon, and soon after that we would plunge together into a subterranean river, the strong, swift brown god of life pulling us forward for decades to come, but we didn't know that yet either. All that was certain was this: Diana was suddenly dead and I was—in a flash-unhinged and going under. ☉



ONIONS | GEETA JENSEN

Much has been written about the September 11 terrorist attacks, this writer being one of the contributors to the glut. Too much, perhaps, yet never enough, and never from the absolute right point of view—and that is why we continue to write. I think that we who write are searching for one clear voice, the voice that tells us what this means, but I do not believe that we will find it. In the backs of our minds we know, rightly or wrongly, that to truly understand we should have been on one of the planes that crashed. We need to have seen the hijackers and their conviction, their hatred, we need to have experienced that flight and its ultimate end. We need to know how people were as they died. That is, I do, and I think that I am not the only one. I do not believe this is a morbid fantasy but a manifestation of my reluctance to take as my starting point a moment of time so horrific that I cannot possibly comprehend its magnitude. I may write about myself and my family, about the ways our lives have changed; I may write about politics and foreign policy or grapple with the meaning of life in this, our brave new world. But as I am now, I can never understand the moments before death. When I do, I know I will want to write it, but I will not have time.

When I say that Billy Joel made me recognize my own desperate need to understand, I fully appreciate the contrivance and shallowness of the statement. I would like to say that I had been reading St. Augustine or CS Lewis, but I wasn't. I was watching a live Billy Joel concert on A&E as I washed dishes one Friday night in October, weeks after the terrorist attacks. Toward the end of the concert a woman in the audience asked him to play "Lullaby," a song Joel wrote for his daughter to help her understand what happens when we die. The singer responded to the request by saying that he didn't think that, given our place in time, he could make it through the song, but he sat at the piano anyway and played. I had forgotten what a beautiful song it was, but it was not the music that got my

attention. After two verses Joel stopped singing and simply played, then, abruptly, stood and walked away from the piano, shaking his head. Had he drawn the moment out I would have thought it a staged “spontaneous” emotion, but he did not linger. He introduced another artist, they talked, he played, and the events of September 11 were not mentioned.

One of the planes flown into a Trade Center tower carried a family of three, a mother and father and their two-month-old daughter. I have often wondered since what those parents did when they realized they were going to die. My imagination goes only as far as the moment of realization, then draws back, unable to fathom. How does one come to terms with one’s own imminent and violent death, much less with the anguish of knowing that you must witness the deaths of the people you love most, of the child to whom you gave life? Would not nature be kinder to spare the knowledge, to simply allow the mind to go mad and blank in those last minutes of life? But if it were my family, would I want to give up the end of their lives to avoid the pain?

When the woman asked him to play “Lullaby,” Billy Joel told the audience how he had come to write the song, how his seven-year-old daughter had asked him the big question: What happens when we die? It was, he said, more than death she was worried about, because he and his wife were divorcing. His daughter was looking for reassurance of his permanence. Parents have to have the right answer to that one, he said; it’s the one time in a parent’s life that the right answer is critical, when there is no room for error. Thinking about that after the dishes were clean and the television turned off, I wondered. What would my answer be? I tried out the answer I had learned in Sunday School, about heaven and streets of gold and happiness forever, and I knew it was not good enough. It had not been good enough for me as an eleven-year-old, standing at the foot of my grandmother’s hospital bed, watching her die as the machines stopped breathing. There were no angels, no gold streets, in that room; only the scary-looking grandma who was not the grandma that I knew, and this one was dying, not going to heaven. I did not understand and could not ask.

Joel said that he believes what he told his daughter, that when people die they go into the hearts of people they knew, and that those people carry their spirits forever. It is a nice thought, and one that I could talk myself into believing, for I desperately need to believe in an afterlife. But it does not answer my need to understand death itself; the singer's words, my childhood beliefs, pick up after the void of death. What I want to know is this: How do you come to the point of releasing someone you love, come to the actual moment—not the long goodbyes born of terminal illness or even the goodbye that begins at birth, but to the actual moment, the final inhaling, the last synapse firing and the last image implanted on a physical retina? How do you explain that moment? Could I hold my husband or my infant son and look into their eyes as they died? Could I bear to be the last thing they saw? Or would I want to run away, run until my chest hurt and I was screaming, as I did deep inside myself when I walked calmly out of my grandmother's hospital room?

The whole situation was hypothetical, painful, too much reality for a Friday night. But when I looked in on my sleeping son before bed, the curve of his fist, his father's miniature echoed profile, the hair that curled around my finger, all demanded an answer. *What would you tell me, Mama? What would you say if I wanted to die looking into your eyes?* I don't know. God help me, but I don't know what I would say. Probably nothing. Probably I would just soothe and cuddle, maybe I would sing and, if I were very strong, I might smile. I am afraid my tears would frighten and confuse him, so I hope that I wouldn't cry. I wouldn't want him to go frightened into a new and unknown place, into his first time without me to protect him. The last thing I could do for him would be to lie, to say, *I know everything will be OK*, when no, I don't know, not at all. Faith is one thing when it's about you: you're willing to take a few risks, to make a few gambles. But not with your children. Not with the people you love enough to lie to when it really matters. ☉

Flying into Las Vegas from the east is dramatic: First, the neatly sectioned off land of the midwest slowly fades into rocky, mountainous terrain, and that soon gives way to the abyss of the Grand Canyon. Then, a dusty, gray valley emerges, bordered by low, featureless mountains. This is the desert, where hapless souls in clichéd movies see pools of water and where cactuses are the only visible living things. But as the plane slowly sinks toward earth, signs of civilization become obvious. Roads emerge in the rock, then intersections of multiple paved highways, then interstates. A building or two turns into a handful of clustered houses, and then massive, sprawling subdivisions appear. Underneath the plane as it descends a thriving community emerges. Where the landscape suggests nothing should exist, there's a city, here in the middle of the desert. That alone would be remarkable.

But when the houses and cars below get close enough to no longer look like scale HO models from a train set, and as the plane's tires reach for the ground below, something completely absurd appears through the rounded, double-paned window of the plane. There's the Eiffel Tower. To its left, New York's majestic skyline stands tall. Nearby, The Sphinx guards a colossal pyramid. And there's a medieval castle.

These, of course, are not the real things: The Eiffel Tower is exactly the same one that's in Paris, France, down to every individual rivet—except the one at Paris, the casino, is half the size of Gustave Eiffel's 1889 construction. The skyline at the New York, New York resort would look genuine if it wasn't so compressed and geographically incorrect, with the Statue of Liberty standing way too close to the Empire State Building, both out of proportion. And the pyramid that is the Luxor Hotel and Casino is covered in reflective black glass, not sandy bricks like the real pyramids in Egypt, never mind the fact that the Sphinx is more than twice the size of the one it's modeled after. This is Las Vegas, and this is its reality.

As I walk down Las Vegas Boulevard, 105-degree air presses against my bare skin, the sun bakes my clothes to my body. Between the casinos are tiny strip malls full of, well, crap. Inside the casinos are the same slot machines, mostly the same table games. The buildings are massive, yet obviously fake. Up close the medieval castle of Excalibur is too bright and clean to be authentic, and the two rather hotel-looking buildings flanking it make sure you don't confuse this with a real castle, because real castles don't have Air Conditioning and Hair Dryers, never mind an All-You-Can-Eat Shrimp & Prime Rib buffet. New York, New York's skyline, which even from across the street, which is where I stand to take a picture of it, looks like a movie set at best. There's no space at all between the buildings and the Empire State Building is barely taller than the plain rectangular building that touches it. A roller coaster's twisting and looping red track stands in front of the buildings' façade, climbing almost as high as the Statue of Liberty's outstretched hand.

Yet I am still filled with complete, fulfilling awe. This is my first trip here but I feel like I've been here before, and I know that I don't want to leave. The soundtrack for this scene plays on my headphones, pumping the beat's energy into my already energized body, and I just want to jump up and down and be absorbed into this hyperreal landscape forever.

I always thought nostalgia was something reserved for 85-year-olds rocking in chairs on the front porches of nursing homes in northwestern Rhode Island. The first time I experienced nostalgia, although I didn't know to call it that, was shortly after my family returned from a vacation. I have this clear picture in my mind of the four of us on our trip. Think about it for a moment: It's the perfect warm afternoon, airy cirrus clouds drifting through the flawlessly blue sky. Mann's Chinese Theatre sits at the end of a street lined with classic Hollywood-style buildings and thin palm trees that stretch high above the buildings. There's me, my sister, my parents walking toward the camera, which frames all of this perfectly and tracks backwards as we walk toward it. We're smiling, laughing, and I think we're all even holding hands, maybe even skipping. The soundtrack swells and so does my heart.

Watching this in my mind again and again and again, I feel deep inside me a choking desire to be back in that moment. There are other moments in my life like this, ones that I am deeply connected to, feeling a similar breathless urgency to recapture that exact moment. My grandmother and cousin and I in Kenya together, sitting just outside our tent in the middle of a game reserve, laughing so hard we couldn't breathe. The few hours I spent atop the Eiffel Tower close to midnight, cool breeze blowing through the protective screen, the lights of the city below me, everything on earth possible from up there.

But I've mislead you, although you probably caught on. Because my family and I weren't really walking down Hollywood Boulevard in, well, Hollywood, but instead we were on a recently paved street in the middle of a Central Florida theme park. Behind us was a full-sized copy of Mann's Chinese Theatre, one housing a ride through recreations of famous film scenes. In Africa, my grandmother and cousin and I laughed while sitting on cushioned chairs, our feet resting in freshly mowed grass. We were just a few feet away from our accommodations, a tent that featured a solid floor, four-poster beds, and a full-sized bathroom. All of this was surrounded by a moat and an electric fence and deeply isolated from the Kenya of political unrest and lions that will tear your arm off. And I've never been to France; the Eiffel Tower was the reproduction that overlooked The Strip in Las Vegas.

Something about these forms of reality is intoxicating to me, because although my collective memories hold plenty of strong, nostalgia-inducing moments, none seem to be as strong, as singularly captivating as those that occurred inside what essentially are artificial contexts. The obvious reason seems to be that these tightly packaged versions of reality are easier to digest. They're cleaner, safer, more sterile, don't have all sorts of baggage. Yet what makes them really all that different? The Las Vegas of yesterday was a cesspool of crime and prostitution, a place that attracted the underclass to gamble their miserable lives away. Despite the towering, pristine hotels and family-friendly mantra, what lies along The Strip isn't all that different at its core from what existed a few decades ago. Nearly every building is a casino or has flashing slot machines ready to consume

every \$20 bill that people can feed into it. On the corners of the streets in the most densely trafficked areas, workers stand and thrust out newsprint catalogs full of photographs of naked women and men who will come to any hotel room to “dance” for a nominal fee. And the wedding chapels that offer every style of ceremony imaginable, from drive-thru to Elvis-as-preacher, are still wedged in wherever they fit. So if the background is the same, why construct these facades? Why imitate reality when there’s no real need to?

I’m not sure; I just love it. ☉

Their dreams are few.

Sometimes hands get hungry,
or cry or talk
though they have no mouths—
a pinky for an “I,”
a forefinger pointing for “you,”
crossed between breasts for “love.”

If no one is looking,
they turn down a sheet,
fluff up a pillow,
dream of soft armpits,
a bumpy spine,
hair on a lip.

All they ask is an occasional
fistful of flesh. Palms
of skin. Normally
quite patient, hands

wait politely before reaching
for a shaven head.
Until no one is looking,
as not to offend.

ONE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE EDUCATION OF SOME WOMEN AND MEN

How lovely to build thought
upon uninterrupted thought,
loose gestated ideas
into a welcoming world,
birth and run,
birth again.
But birth is only the beginning.
Breasts change forever,
sustenance complicates pleasure,
ears tune to a perennial whimper,
sleep only comes when a child's needs are met.
At 40, a mother of two catches up to the reading
of well-rested 28 year-old men,
her breasts still letting down
at every infant's cry.

For **k**ed
Tongue Of
The She-Devil :

She turns,
returns,
by turn
increasing,
decreasing
by turn,
shedding
diamond
skin -
what
made
Saint
Patrick
so
afraid?
She leaves
a trace.
Carries
the eggs.
She is the
roads.
Look!
She
holds
them
in
her
. . .
ton-
gu
e
.

BIRTH OF A POET

for Drew

*Your children are not your children.
They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself.
- Kahlil Gibran*

At nine, he wrote a poem, Kiak:
...the boat glides round the buoy,
the wind, the current!
but what burns my heart red
is the bow flying in the air,
and sinking to the bottom
of the next wave.

I never did that—
Strong arms paddling
life across a page,
heart ablaze.

I only pushed, pushed, opened
enough to make room for God.
I only shook, how I shake still
as I set the cereal box on the table,
the bowl, spoon, the milk,
hoping he will come down and eat. ☉

On the door to this room
some wings hang from the coat hook
tied together—apologetically
like that pair of running-shoes

I once let a friend borrow
—by their laces.

*My friend came in last
and we have since parted ways*
I can smell them, the wings, they smell
like something soon to be stored,
—a trace of coffinwood.

Still, my convalescent face is turned
away from this empty room on earth
from this table where I, wholly ordinary, lean,
on which a heart's two grayish halves lay—
having been dissected, halfheartedly, through
the night of lost identity
and company—(by my hands)

After the company, and before
I dragged out this prescribed box
of pins and specimen tags: unwritten on
blank fortune strips—useful only because they seem
to say so much more is answerable outside
of this—they promise nothing. A great deal.

Someone somewhere thought this would be funny.
Isn't it? That sky inside the window is
only blue. Here, this empty second-chair, and I
am one again without reliable reflection:
All this while I daydream on the wings,
and of blinds I might hang, though
the source of light is not from here.

THE LISTING POSITION

Iron work clothes
Hang in circular file, *dis*
Organize (a)nimal: heart *then* giblets
Gift-wrap door signifying it is about to
Translate general audience's symphonic yawn
[4/4 time with no beats (b)etween]
Make (c)orrections to forestalled blessings
Folded in the creases of the handkerchief
Remove (d) from earlier premise:
That brings that to all things this; now
Separate cradle from building
Replace with
With without, regardless of
World wide webbed said *nec's*
Match median mean, mix and
Deviate from I pretend I am [etc.] to
Arrive at finally (e)mptyhanded
And to bow, like a blue-greenish branch
Shed sleeves and cuffs, coat and tie
Now (f)ix stripped breath to stream
Exhale breathing in, death coming, drop
Your bones where your muscle
Memory backs away from them, and
Hold it like this, in, now position to
Remember to (g)o to sea—with head
naked of (old) hat, *list toward sky*
and hold it, hold and
Release.

WIFE OF THE WATERHOLE IN WEEDS

Glass is the Irony & the said God
G has become nothing, but negative
said blue, where the roadside dogs go
personae on us in their doltish vehicle
of amnesiac extremes. I hear
the crossroads cough up their hollow echoes
of lost potential, know the sorriest Dreams stride alone
by moon-paled light, and they go on, deeply
counter-pining for a clearer vision.
And I know, their disputed ghosts, blow by blow,
say *uncle*, under their hour-fastened breath:
counting on a character of flaw, of a precious bad weather,
beginning with O, and say so; have you seen
the mad wanderers, off, undermining the heavy
tree within, much too bright to see
beyond the always-question,
as they try unbecoming the world's wife
quick before the sun repeats over the hills, because
being disappointed in her
underheard poetics of space, vice, reverie,
or truth against the world, they might
not meaning to, but they might, broad scrub
this residence on earth, with their completely see-through tears
right down to a feeble exponential of a plain
old waterhole: a simpleton's round shape of grayish glass
with edges blurred by a scruff wreath of dying weeds,
and become a slave that reflects only the mute activity

of the noncommittal cloud-
masses, blindly haunted by the coming of the next
word on the street, whose source is heard
but never seen or determined, a word, any word
which could free or free up, the stubborn zero of dirt
from the ground, and might finally release
these restricted ways of seeing, from the shallow
of this darkened history of architecture,
this wrong weather of words, this broken-down
story of our lives, and who will leave
no mean streak unannounced
and will let the lost lives of the heart, finally
be deemed to Eros the bittersweet, cry out
for the sorrow of architecture, dance on
from the book of the dead, all break
down like the glass of the waterhole
shatter and let everyone see
the same thing all at once:
what's really in there, other than
the familiar episode
of a single floating reflection:
more than a mere wave. ☉

They were in a car. Jonathan was driving Leah back into the city from the where they'd been, an hour north of the city. They had talked all day long and now her voice rasped. "I went home with this guy once," she said, surprising herself. Jonathan lowered the volume on the radio. "It was over there." She pointed to some high-rise apartments. "That's what made me think of it." She had sat in the window on the eighteenth floor of one of those high-rises and her bare legs had dangled over the side of the building as she watched the sea and the moon, thinking, maybe, about jumping.

"The ocean is just beyond the apartments," Leah said.

"I know that," Jonathan answered.

It occurred to Leah that maybe Jonathan didn't want to hear this story. She smoothed out her pale blue skirt. She was prepared to tell it, however, and for the first time. "He had all these tattoos." Leah ran one hand along the length of her other arm to show how the guy had been covered. "It was at this bar. He was writing furiously in a notebook. A friend sat beside him, looking around."

"You liked him because of the tattoos?"

She slouched into the leather interior of Jonathan's car. She put her feet up, over the airbag release, tucking her skirt in between her legs. Jonathan looked at her feet and she put them back down.

"You can put them there," he said. "So, was it the tattoos?"

"It was my last year in college. I was with high school friends. We hadn't seen each other in a long, long time. We got dressed up and I wore their makeup."

"You don't wear makeup," Jonathan stated, though this was only the second time he'd ever seen her.

"No," Leah said. "This was fun, though. Putting on the makeup, the three of us huddling around a mirror. We were going out to meet guys. It was our unspoken primary objective." She'd seen a photograph from that night, the three high school friends barely of legal drinking age, and she'd burnt the picture because she was so ugly in it. The brown boy's sweater and her short brown hair and the glasses that were all wrong for her. "Maybe tattoos had something to do with it," she added, considering the tattoos.

“Tattoos aren’t always attractive,” Jonathan said “I’m pretty sick of some.”

She had remembered Jonathan as being better looking. He was also shorter than she remembered—his nose larger, his face older. Although they were both twenty-nine, she thought he looked older than she did. She’d remembered him as better looking but there was something more intriguing about his face now, the lines around his eyes, his crooked nose. She liked his face more now.

They came to a tunnel and waited in line to pay the toll.

“The tattoos,” Jonathan said, “probably made him seem like a bad-ass.”

“A thug,” Leah announced, feeling oddly proud.

“It used to be scary to ride in this tunnel,” Jonathan said. “Before they fixed it up.”

She looked at the shiny white plastic walls and brilliant lights.

“It used to be really dark,” he explained. “Underneath the plastic on the walls, there’s just darkness.” When he smiled at her this time—their day together had been repeated moments of smiling at each other—his eyes lingered and she blushed.

“What did he say?” Jonathan asked. “To pick you up?”

“No one ever used to hit on me,” Leah said.

“That surprises me,” Jonathan said. “Maybe you’re lying.”

Earlier in the week, Jonathan had hit on her. At the art supplies store. He’d said, “I’d like to call you,” which he’d done twice, but she wasn’t sure about him—some guy she met at the art store. So she waited it out. A few days later, because the weather was unusually warm, she called in sick to work, then called Jonathan. He came and picked her up.

“Anyway,” Leah said to Jonathan, “I think I picked him up.”

“Really?”

The tattoo-man was coming back from the bathroom, walking by the table where her friends sat talking to other guys, and she’d grabbed his arm. “Let me see these,” she had said, referring to the tattoos. Next thing she knew he was taking off his shirt. Tattoos covered his chest and back. After that, she’d joined him and his friend at their table.

“I should have known about him though. He was reading Bukowski’s *Women*.”

“I haven’t read it,” Jonathan said.

“I browsed it there, that night, and I remember feeling like maybe I shouldn’t be here talking to these guys, but then also I was impressed by it.”

“Because he was reading in a bar,” Jonathan said.

“On a Saturday night.”

“You thought that it was attractive, to be reading in a bar?”

“It was the notebook,” she said.

“Did you read it?”

Jonathan drove towards her part of town. He had taken the right exit from the highway to get to her neighborhood.

“I asked him about it. He was writing about this girlfriend he’d had. He’d just found out that she’d been fucking some other guy. He was pretty upset about that.”

“Sure,” Jonathan said.

“I talked to him and his friend. They bought me beers. I was away from my friends. Then one of my friends asked if I wanted to go dancing at a club down the street. A club I didn’t like. So I said I didn’t want to go.”

“They left you there?”

“They thought I was doing okay for myself.”

“Considering your unspoken primary objective.”

“Exactly.” They drove along past the Portuguese bakeries and restaurants of her neighborhood.

“So I went home with him.”

“Just like that?” Jonathan asked.

“No.” Whenever she thought about that night, she’d thought about sticking her arm out to grab the tattooed arm. She thought about being up there in that windowsill, legs dangling.

“This guy, his friend and I watched a movie. They got stoned. The guy with the tattoos brings out his knife collection, kitchen knives, showing them to me, but there’s something weird about it, his fascination with knives. Then I ask him. Oh, for cooking? And he says yes.”

“So these guys weren’t dangerous? They were just into cooking?” Jonathan said.

“Then the other guy starts moving really close to me on the couch. Starts massaging my feet. I look at my feet, then him, and then at the tattoo guy who’s in the chair next to us. He’s laughing. He thinks it’s really funny.”

“So, they both?”

“Yes.”

“What did you do?”

“I moved my foot.” Then Leah said, “Tattoo guy had a photograph of his ex-girlfriend beside the bed.”

“Sure,” Jonathan said, nearing her house. “A photograph beside the bed. But the whole thing was bad.”

“It was violent,” Leah said. He’d tied her up in the bathroom, to the shower curtain rod. Then he tied her wrists in front of her to the towel rack. She couldn’t remember feeling anything but his purpose. He’d gone to bed, leaving her there. The other guy came in, saw her and said, “Aw, fuck.” He untied her. He pissed in the toilet and she watched.

She’d gone to the window and saw there wasn’t a screen. She had climbed on the sill and let her legs hang over the side. There was a round moon and a blue ocean.

That’s what she’d always thought about when she thought about that night. She thought about grabbing that arm in the bar, and she thought about the round moon and the blue ocean.

Talking about it, she realized now that she hadn’t fought. She let that guy do what he wanted with her and she hadn’t put up a fight.

She no longer felt like talking about it. What was she doing anyway, talking about this with Jonathan? After all, she had called him. He had driven over. They’d gone to the pond and walked around with cups of warm coffee in their hands. Talking came so easily, while sitting on the beach, and here in the car.

“We went out for a late night breakfast. That’s what we did first. It was very chatty.”

“Chatty,” Jonathan repeated.

“I might be lying about that because I don’t remember. We were at the bar, then we were at the diner, then we were in a cab. We were going farther and farther away. Maybe I didn’t think about anything. We were at an apartment. This guy and his friend and me.”

Looking over at Jonathan, Leah thought of saying, this was wrong to talk about. “Have you ever done anything like that?” she asked instead.

“Like what?” There was no reason to answer that. “I never did anything like that,” he said with a gentle sigh.

“It’s probably different for women,” Jonathan added. “I mean, usually it is different for women. So you took a bus? To get to the subway?”

“The sun was coming up.”

“It sounds beautiful, in a weird way.”

“I don’t know,” Leah said.

They pulled up in front of her apartment. “And scary, really fucking scary,” Jonathan added. There wasn’t any parking on the street. If Jonathan had turned around, he could have parked on the opposite side. Leah grabbed her bag.

“Thanks for lunch,” she said, getting out. A bus pulled up behind the car. The road was too narrow for it to pass. Jonathan glanced in his rearview mirror, then pulled away. ☉

Men on ladders
climbing up my braids

dusty painted men
look into my eyes

men mostly yellow
the new paint color

none too soon the rescue

the toilet is boiling over
the rubber plant is stinking
my clothing is wilting

there is a hole in my bed
where I lay alone hot

we could lie in the deep
bathtub

it would be a crew event
with players and voyeurs

in an urban eclogue
above streets that run with sweat
and people recline by them with picnics

and flowering advertisements

we would be high up above the streets
our sweat evaporating into a little cloud
that would float
and position itself
over a car that
could be a sheep
it looks so lovely there

paint flakes like flower petals

the unpainted body parts
would please and please

totally in love

THE ASSUMPTION

Your breast of medals

detonates

ah but you must earn your destructions

they were only summaries
of your actions

trinkets that pierced you
superficially

now smoking over a hole
in your body

I try to fill it

with travel and naked ladies

you just tuck your shirt
around it
tell me off

one hare

jumps out

through the sheen of

villages

yea though I walk

crow claws clack in the dust

in the heat

I am aroused

sitting in a chair

in front of

the front door

where your front

will walk through

consider *Mariahimmelfahrt*

not a fart

but the day of "Mary's drive to heaven"

in German

out of the strivings

a day for

road trips of consequence

and I fold back the scene of departure

to advance
your molecules

to collide with mine

still wearing shoes

I pet the evidence

boys on the edge of the lawn
in the dark breathe

smiling opinions
your survival
has made you a hero

perhaps no strangers

were so handsome
as once thought in this stanza ☉



JENNY GRASSL

The unit I decided on was a *Girl-19*, self-cleaning. There are younger models available in the back-street shops, but I'm not into that sort of weirdness. Life is strange enough without adding perversion to the mix. The reason I even went that young was because nineteen was the age of my first real girlfriend, the one I finally went all the way with, as we used to say.

I held the little cantaloupe-shaped unit in my hands for quite a while before pressing the button. I thought the device was just going to be a physical thing, particular sensations and release. I wasn't prepared for how emotional it all would be. They don't call these things *The Evocation Series* for nothing.

It definitely takes some getting used to: the sudden flood of intimacy radiating up from the groin soon after the unit secures itself to you. I already felt nervous—not a little because of what I'd read from the *Times'* technology critic. I know this guy is a professional worrier. He never met a psychotronic device he didn't hate. But with *The Evocation Series* he had particular worries about "permanent neural atrophy," which could be caused by the intracellular polymer microfilaments that the devices grow (painlessly) into a user's groin and right into the nerve clusters at the base of the spinal cord. He agonized that the devices might very possibly over time "permanently disable users for normal sexual relationships with humans." But I'd already made up my mind when I read this stuff. If the unit caused problems, I would get rid of it.

Given all it promised, I was surprised at how low-profile the device was. It snuggled up to my groin and fit itself to me smooth and comfy. In fact, I've read that people are wearing them to work now, which may account for the return of baggy fashions.

No sooner had my *Girl-19* attached itself than I was suffused with the novelty of first sex-

ual feeling—not only the sweet new pleasures but also all the fears and quivering uncertainties, the lost-in-it, eaten up feeling I'd all but forgotten. I was quickly back in that first night with Katy: hours of kissing, hugging, stroking, and rubbing. Ten minutes to get a bra undone, twenty minutes of caresses afterward to explore the new situation. God knows how long to begin and then finish sliding the panties off. And finally, after all that stimulation, mere seconds to enter and finish. Even then, I knew this was not quite adequate for intercourse. Hard to believe, but the real truth is that Katy and I de-virgined ourselves on Bastille Day night in a little hotel on the Left Bank of Paris, with fireworks over the city echoing colors and booms off the walls of our tiny room.

With all the preliminaries of that night (and the many long nights leading up to it), sex seemed to be a vast, heroic activity, a contest I might not be able to succeed in. And somehow the *Girl-19* brought back all those feelings, too.

Not only that, but after just a few short weeks, something seemed to be missing. There was some limit to my ability to achieve happiness with my *Girl-19*, just as there had been with my first girlfriend—as though we could only go so far together. And with limits came a certain irritation. I wanted to argue with the unit, explain her shortcomings, help her to become a better, more congenial unit. Disturb her smugness; make her discontented with herself.

Which was of course absurd. The *19* was just a *device*. She was what she was, and that was that.

So I bought myself a *Woman-24*. I got a little discount for turning in the *19* in good condition. Twenty-four happened to be the age of my first wife at the time of our prime together. In the end, though, there was as much sorrow as joy with this model (like the marriage).

I'd forgotten how my first wife used to berate me—carrying on with tears and cruelties—if I came too quickly. She'd give me no peace until I could get it up again for her twenty or thirty minutes later. Strangely, the machine seemed to offer the same remonstrance—silently, of course. It always seemed to be waiting, not patiently, for me to become

aroused again. So once more I had to remember how to restrain myself for a half hour, forty minutes, an hour, for God's sake.

It was ferocious, furious rutting with my first wife. That's the only way to describe it. At any moment of our day or night we might lock into it, rocking and plunging to a rugged tempo, murmuring and crying I-love-you's and other hypnotic endearments. Sometimes she rode me until my groin rubbed raw. Was part of the fury of our passion a way to overpower the simple fact that we didn't like each other very much, thought poorly of each other in certain respects? I didn't always move through the world then with easy manly confidence, quite the contrary, and she held me in some contempt for this. And I secretly thought she was slutty, an impression from freshman year, when the boys in my dorm were hounds full of dreams of her heat. Still though, for a while we made love two and three times a day until the baby came.

Perhaps by dint of vigorous sex my wife and I thought we could transform one another into someone more congenial: break them down with passion and build them up again with love. Of course, my *Woman-24* was superior to me in this project. She could take anything I could give and double it. I considered trading up to a *Wife-35*, the age of my second wife. But Lord, I was glad when that marriage ended.

So I deferred a new purchase and began to do a little research. I joined a users' group and even got curious about the women's models: The *Elvis-26* is a popular unit, but apparently it's not for everyone. Some women prefer *Gigolo Seniors*; more leisurely and subtle. Women can get breast and mouth attachments. (In fact, you can buy satellite attachments for just about anywhere on or in the body.)

The specs for the *Elvis* were designed after extensive interviews with as many of the King's former consorts as could still be found and verified—many of them octogenarians. The units were even beta tested with some of these women to fine-tune the action for verisimilitude.

The *Elvis*, though, is not a particularly sensitive unit. He likes a lot of it, but on his sched-

ule and without much in the way of preliminaries. Also the unit can produce in the user—as the King did in his fans—a certain intense, nearly ultrasonic shrieking that may alarm neighbors and cause dogs to howl.

The manufacturers are supposedly working on a model that would allow the user to slowly tame the *Elvis* and teach it—not without some difficulty—to be sensitive to her body and proclivities; in brief, to transform it from King to servant. Some old fans consider this to be a travesty and heresy.

I met Marilyn at the first users' group meeting I attended. We've been together ever since. She's about the smartest, kindest soul a man could ever run across. And with all that black hair and those bright blue eyes, she's not hard to look at, either. I really feel I finally got it right this time. We've settled into a real nice bedtime routine.

When the lights go out, I watch the orange and red LED's winking softly on the sides of her satin-finish ebony unit rising and falling at her center. And sometimes late in the night, when I hear Marilyn beside me sighing and sweetly whimpering, it gives me comfort, too; a secure feeling to know she's in the good hands of her Don Juan 33. This model whispers to her the most beautiful things in Spanish: *Te quiero muchissimo* (*I love you so much*). *Amor de mi vida* (*Love of my life*). *Mi sola amor verdad*. (*My one true love*). *My soul's bright flame*. *Passion undying to the end of time*. The *Don* murmurs these things and more, unceasingly, as he ministers to her in all the ways she loves. Who would not be moved by such devotion, such fixed attention to the object of desire?

The lovely sea scent of her liquefaction wafts my way. Hands behind my head, I smile beside her and the *Don* in the night and ponder what I've read about the new *3000 Series*. The *Aphrodite*, *Hera*, and *Artemis* models sound intriguing, each in its own way. But I think for me, at my age, the *Athena* will be the one. I'm ready for some wisdom entwined with my delight. Goddesses have very high standards, I know, but I'm ready, now, to give this one my best. And *Athena*, from all I've read, watches out for her own. ☺

to Sienna

A ceiling light baked down on hundreds of gold tubes dying in the summer heat at FW Woolworth's. Beth picked up one of the lipsticks from the display table. Many of them had been cranked up and down and jammed back into their clear plastic tops, badly smeared, some broken and left uncapped.

Beth said: Watch this.

She pushed a white lipstick into the front pocket of her tight shorts. I looked at the small bulge it made against her abdomen. I considered the checker who stood by her register and fanned herself with a blue and white Chinese paper fan. The store was burning hot. The only other shoppers: two women fidgeting with thread and fabric in the notions isle.

You do it, she said and drew a magazine from a rack. She hid her face behind its open pages. On the back cover Marlon Brando salivated over my reluctance from the seat of his motorcycle. I looked at Beth's chubby knees, the black shoes her mother had purchased for her to attend church in, the patent-leather surface scraped off at the toes.

I had met Beth the summer before, when we moved into Lincoln Court. She lived on the other side of the alley. The distinguishing feature of her townhouse was her sister Laurie who stayed in a crib in the dining room, wedged in between the china hutch and the planter stand. She was eight years old, had an oversized head and twig limbs. She was surrounded by renderings of Jesus and a collection of lambs. When she grinned there was something that made me think of an illustration in an L. Frank Baum book. The grandmother, who slept in a recliner next to the crib, turned Laurie's body throughout the day, kissed her waxy cheeks, changed her giant diapers and showed her off to anyone who came to visit.

One time Beth invited me up to her bedroom so I could tell her if a new dress showed

off her bottom in a flattering way. She turned in her full-length mirror but couldn't see the white organza bunched in the back. I said I was certain it was just right. She landed on her bed and took a handful of coins from her money jar. She dropped them one at a time onto an airy target on her wood floor over Laurie's crib.

While the pennies and nickels and dimes tapped and flew under her desk, into her nearly shoeless closet, and caught in the gardenia dust-ruffle of her bed, Beth told me about boys. She described the ways they looked in jeans and out of them, how they moved their hands in acceleration, and then she said, love was a joke. The house was quiet except for the slow metal rain. The grandmother's voice reached us: What are you doing up there? Beth opened her bedroom door, pictures of Vogue models taped to her walls fluttered in the draft. She shouted: Nothing.

Downstairs, Laurie began to mewl. Eventually I would learn that when she made this sound her grandmother would push the damp hair from her forehead and kiss her on the lips.

Tina lowered Marlon's face so she could glare at me.

-Well?

While she flipped through the pages of the magazine, I discovered that there were only five different shades of lipstick in the whole lot, all too light and glaring for my mouth. I had hoped Beth would have gotten impatient or distracted by now. She liked to hang out in the underwear section and hold up a bra and say something rude, loud enough for the cashier to hear. Only then could we get ice cream cones and walk the fifteen blocks back to the courtyard.

Our families went to the same church over on Wells and I said something about venial

sin, in that way I had of opening myself up.

-Take one of the white ones, she said.

I grabbed a faint pink and she rolled her eyes. I had to get the cones because she said she was thinking about a porcelain lamb for Laurie. We met outside.

Three blocks from the courtyard I felt the sting of a blister on one of my heels. Beth told me to take my loafers off and go barefoot but the sidewalk was too hot.

-You know, she said, I bought my lipstick.

She smiled as she worked her hand into her pocket. She showed me the receipt and said: You'll have to go to confession.

But instead, I walked all the way back.

I returned to the display table at Woolworth's and I released the lipstick like a goldfish into a lake. ☉

When my father died in 1981, he gave me a gift. He took my fear of dying with him. I arrived in Bradenton, Florida, where he had had a massive stroke. My mother said she found him crawling around on the floor in the middle of the night looking for help. The doctors told us my father sustained massive brain damage and encouraged my brothers and me to help my mother prepare for his death and the decisions that would follow. She refused to talk about his dying. Until he finally passed away, she believed, as she had always believed, that he could get better. I stayed in the hospital around the clock and urged my brothers to spend the night at a friend's home. My mother was at the nurses' desk when the end came.

My father's last breaths were different from the hard labored breaths he took as he lay in a coma. Those breaths reminded me of the way he breathed through his mouth and snored when he fell asleep involuntarily in the theatre or in a restaurant or in his favorite chair after staying up all day and all night during one of his manic episodes. His last breaths were slower, not as labored as the ones before. Then they just stopped. His death was simple; so easy and peaceful. It was not like anything I had imagined death to be like. He just slipped away, quietly, and I thanked him for showing me it would be like that.

The day before he died, I was sitting at his bedside and he squeezed my hand as I held his. There was just one squeeze. Did he really do it voluntarily, willfully? Was it a reflex action? I will never know. I will just remember that it felt as if he was trying to reassure me.

When I was growing up, my mother complained a lot about my father. "Your father is driving me crazy," she would say after an overdue notice arrived for a bill she thought he paid, or when she discovered he had made purchases—crazy, unnecessary

purchases—without discussing them with her. The money had to come from somewhere and usually it came from my mother taking on extra work to cover their debts. Sometimes he kept late hours—out all night, where she did not know, and doing what? She feared to think. At the same time, she was devoted to him, always taking care of him, covering for him, making sure that she protected him from himself. When he died, she fell apart. She could not seem to function or focus for at least a year. She was beside herself with grief and felt more than just the loss of a spouse. She had been his caretaker for years. His death left an enormous void in her life and it took a long time for her to adjust. I realized that she needed him as much as he needed her and that care taking was part of the way she loved him. He loved her in return by allowing it to be that way. After years of caring for him, I do not think my mother knew how to live without my father's need for her. As I sat in the attic, their letters stored safely in my jeans, I knew it had not always been that way.

We found boxes of old mail and bills dating back to the 1950s stored in random places. They were an easy toss. This was just the kind of stuff that accumulated around the house when I was a kid. It sat on the dining room table for months, then, when company was coming, we swept it up in a hurry, stuffed it in a box, and put it somewhere until there was time to sort through it, but there was never time. Things accumulated in closets and cupboards and finally in the attic. Now I carried the boxes to the attic window and flung the old papers to the Dumpster below. It felt good. I wanted to do that for years—make tidy, make room. “Make room for what,” I asked myself? My mother was not going to replace anything.

We agreed to keep the old photographs, sort through them later, and divide them among ourselves. Not satisfied, I poked through the albums for a while. There were pictures of my parents, before they were married—going to dances, as attendants at weddings—and finally the album from their own wedding on November 25, 1937. They had waited through the Great Depression to get married, saving whatever money they could—the few pennies she could scrape from her job teaching second grade at St. Lucy's, the

prizes from the golf tournaments he managed to win while working nights and going to school days. I was not born until 1944 so most of my early memories originate after we moved to this house, after my father got sick and began cycling between his highs and lows. There are no cycles in the photographs. There are just happy moments and expectant faces looking forward to a lifetime together.

A few years earlier, squirrels had found their way into the attic. I looked around, not ready to leave. There were still a few telltale nests of shredded paper, fabric, and string. We scooped them up, along with remnants of our childhood. Nothing valuable or collectible was left now. Over the years tenants, housekeepers, workers, and scavenging antique dealers had reduced the clutter to mostly useless things, like the projects I tackled as a child and never finished. We set aside the few decent things in the attic and wrapped up our work. There was space now, but it did not give me the satisfaction I thought it would. The house in which I had grown up, the space in which I had played, hidden, run away to, would eventually be sold.

Finally, I turned to the room at the front end of the attic. When I was a child, that little room served me well, with its warm wood paneling and walk-in closet, located so far away from the house below. It was my refuge during an indoor game of hide-and-seek and my secret place to run to when I needed to escape the reality of my father's illness. I used it as a clubhouse, pretended to teach school in it, and held parties for stuffed animals on the threadbare red and yellow oriental carpet.

I walked back for a final moment and stood in the middle of the room. I resisted the temptation to sit on the ancient, dirty carpet the way I used to sit, legs spread, talking to the toys in front of me. I had none of the tools of my childhood with me—no diary, no journal or notebook for writing poetry. How many times had I come here as I grew up? How many times had I shared my feelings with pretend friends, in my imagination, or as I wrote? How many feelings I had then. I remember trying—as a child tries—to understand what was going on around me, yet I was unable to understand our family life when I was a child. I was only able to experience it and to feel disappointment or shame

or anger—emotions I understood even less than I understood what was happening as my father’s illness took on a pattern and our family moved through the cycles with him.

Memory is all about experience and though my earliest memories are about my father. My mother is the parent I came to experience intensely as time went on and she took over orchestrating the house and the family and embarked on keeping up a façade—pretending everything was normal.

My mother died before we finished cleaning out the house. As I prepared to leave for home after the funeral, I went up to the attic one more time and stood in the little room where I had learned to turn inward and escape by developing visions of my own. As I stood there, knowing it might be the last time, I realized how much we had discarded. We threw out things, I told myself. There were other parts of my family and my childhood that I would never throw away; they were part of me.

The space looked too clean, too tidy, and I felt almost guilty. Then I realized, as I stood there, in the house where my life had taken shape, that now, as an adult, I could fill the space we created, at least metaphorically, with something else. I could bring understanding and perspective to all those childhood experiences. As I walked away I looked back at the little room one last time, then walked away, carrying my memories—wrapped in my newfound compassion. ☉

In the Balkans

Ia woman breastfeeds in low tunes, combs her hair,
tries to find the laments hanging on village trees,
tries to forget the rapes the refugee camps the slit throats
of Srebrenica, tries to remember the blink of her own past passing,
remember days dancing the *Kolo*,
tries to remember each torture unsung in that violet swaying.

Unsung, the slow movements of a foreign language
on the lips of an émigré, the sailing of cruel memory in water drops
drying on the cover of a book with Cyrillic letters.

Unsung the swallowing of sentences by soldiers after they have killed...
She tries to imagine those who have left, if they search for lost relics
and silverware in ordinary antique stores in Paris London Chicago
looking for anything they can find
even when exile leaves them with little
except a song unsung beneath the tongue of the sea wind...a *kolo*.

A woman breastfeeds and cooks and hums
and the crosses fall sideways, the birds pass by without a sound,
the past slips beneath her raised arms
to hide, the *kolo* whirls on.

Kolo: a round dance, an important aspect of Balkan folklore.

CARIBE IN NUEVA YORK

Un Caribeño tells me:
we are spoiled here
we eat burgers, fries
arroz y habichuelas negras, plantanos
for two dollars and ninety-nine cents
others starve, looking for a few bits—
We forget hunger...
I love America
but dream of mangoes
café Santo Domingo, merengue,
salsa, bachata, son
I can't forget the sun on my back
in my eyes
but this is Nueva York in winter
and I can't see the beautiful brown legs
of Las Mulatas
can't see their curves as they move
in the streets of Brooklyn, Bronx,
in the Upper West
Washington Heights...
Now I eat at Lenny's Bagel along with Gray's Papaya
I look at the Hudson
instead of the Caribbean waters, los malecones.
Proud of Gloria, Shakira, Mark, J.Lo
Juan Luís Guerra, Celsa Cruz...
I dream of la tierra
where we were born,
I walk Central Park
with our islands in my pockets
and my gloves on.

THE HANGING HOURS

When I leave the windows will be shut
the air in the room will be moist
the city loud and everything will continue as usual—
the telephone will not stop ringing, the electricity will
go on and off, the coffee will be brewing

When I leave the sky will dress in light blue
before wearing black, the people I know will have tears
descending from their eyes to their hands
before they wipe them off and continue their tasks

The bed I leave will be warm
the other body will not know I am missing
until the very next day when the hours hang
in his heart as he finds himself in a mild season
a wild place where breaths crowd the bedroom

UNE SEULE NUIT A MARAKECH

The air has lost the scent of jasmine
only the scent of darkened tea fills the sky
tonight in Marakech, only white butterflies
fly by, leaving stains on shadows.
I watch young women brush their hair,
braid their wedding days, watch old men
by the lemon trees, listening to Andalusian tunes
repeating to each other, *Hel'lou, quelle belle musique*
and watch handsome gentlemen drink coffee
from small cups, an aroma mapping their homeland,
homeland of stones and ceramics,
dark blue, light blue, turquoise...
It is springtime but I return to my hotel room,
turn on my lantern, have mint tea,
honey pastry, *Kab El Ghzal*, later *arak*,
watch the dim lights against my bare feet,
feel the quivers of the Haouz plain,
start to count and lose count
of the years, the wild shapes of darkness,
the marionettes and war games,
the tiles hiding the shadows of footsteps
of those I no longer want to see,
and the *abayas* piling by my bedside. ☉

Hel'lou means beautiful in Arabic; *quelle belle musique* means what a beautiful song in French

Kab El Ghzal is a honey and nuts pastry, otherwise known Baklava

Arak: an alcoholic drink

Marakech is situated in the center of the Haouz plain

Abayas: Long robes, typical in Morocco

Rosemary had passed the Arcade on several occasions without realizing what it was—the largest used bookstore in the city. She wasn't familiar with the store or its reputation for housing lost things—books either once possessed and missed or never possessed and longed for—but found herself staring through the darkened windows on a bright afternoon, her second week in the city. She was irresistibly drawn inside.

The ceiling rose in an enormous curve from the entrance, arching toward the rear of the store, and its dramatic sweep caused Rosemary's face to upturn upon entering. She was reminded of a great train station or even a cathedral; places she had visited as a child on buying trips to Sydney with her mother, but the Arcade's size was grand even by comparison with the few grand places she'd seen. It was quiet. Customers kept their voices low. There was reverence, deliberation. She stood to one side of the entry door, staring.

The interior was startling in its randomness, in its specialized chaos, in the small areas of order within that chaos, in its filth, and the precariousness of its book stacks. The stacks seemed to lean (without regard to gravity) toward a center not apparent from the entry door—an unseen hub, a hidden heart. The sight of thousands of books raked through daily by hundreds of people searching for volumes could freshly startle even regular customers; it astonished Rosemary.

Here was a bookstore like a village, a town. In fact, the implicit sense of an acquaintance with knowledge, with mystery, that the Arcade exuded, made Rosemary aware, not only of her own extreme youth, but that of her country's. Here was population, mass. Here was the accomplishment of a city, the books stacked and piled like the teeming New Yorkers, invisible inside their buildings, but sensed and felt as bees in a hive. And just as she'd experienced the hum of life that issued from the crowds that filled New York, so Rosemary felt another kind of life rising from the piles of volumes heaped on tables in front of her.

She moved towards the center of the store and paused, perceiving an opening in her life to remember. She placed her hand upon the closest stack of books, and stood still, as if listening, or waiting. The moment held, seeming to slow the activity inside the Arcade, and to thicken the air, along with the soft, faded light. She looked around. Dust filtered the faint sunlight that made its way through the dirty windows, casting a yellow haze that itself seemed nostalgic, and hardly strong enough to read by. Huge dim lights hung by chains above customers' heads, all bowed in concentration, reading. Searching. Rosemary turned, breaking the brief suspension of time, to face the entrance doors she'd passed through. She needed to check that, yes, it was a sunny afternoon outside on the avenue, but here inside the Arcade—she turned back now and began moving forward, deeper—here, inside the bookstore, was darkly timeless.

Rosemary edged along goat-track passages winding between stacks that could only be navigated foot-in-front-of-foot, a few inches at a time, trying to avoid piles of titles stacked and leaning against the spine-out-only shelves. She stopped before a raised wooden platform, an oasis of space amidst the clutter. A small man stood behind the oak railing, placing him at a vantage higher than even the tallest customer. He was a pocket-sized man standing in the oak pocket of the vast store, silently performing the task of pricing old books. Rosemary fixed upon his confined, compelling gestures; he was solemn as a priest at the lectern. An angled brass plate facing the store read: Fred Pike, Proprietor.

The platform was largely taken up by an oak table. A stack of volumes sat to Pike's left. As Rosemary watched, he took a book from the top of the pile and, frowning, ran his eyes over the binding checking for rips or nicks. Then quickly and elegantly, he flipped to the title page, his eyes scanning the copyright, his thumb fanning rapidly along the edges of the entire book. Reaching the end, Pike closed the volume only to reopen it at the first page. He took a pencil from behind his ear and lightly scribbled in the upper right-hand corner, tracing a looping filigree. He returned the pencil above his ear, and ran his index finger beneath his nose. He then unfrowned his forehead, placed the volume to his right and having priced the book, immediately reached for another at his left.

He repeated these actions as a single gesture, without variation.

Pike's measured yet theatrical process of judging book prices in seconds struck Rosemary as more akin to magic than skill. Pike himself was the constant, he alone the arbiter of value. She decided then that she wanted to work in the Arcade, wanted to seize at such certainty, at Pike's mastery, like a buoy, a life-preserver.

Fred Pike's appearance was made to match the store's anachronism. His striped waistcoat, shirt bunched above his elbows by arm bands, his small-knotted tie—all suggested a man who hadn't altered his style of dress in decades. His face was unremarkable, defined by a small, waxy mustache a darker shade of gray than his whitish-grey hair. As Rosemary counted the fourteenth book priced in his rhythmic repetition, she tried to imagine what the Arcade looked like from atop his crows'-nest.

She calculated that the elevated platform where he worked sat fully twenty-four inches above the floor. It was designed to meet the floor at an angle, masking its height and disguising its purpose. It was a stage. Rosemary then estimated just how short a man Pike really was, she guessed a full head shorter than her own five foot ten, and the recognition of this elaborate illusion emboldened Rosemary. She waited for the moment when Pike ran his finger beneath his nose but had yet to pick up the next book.

"Excuse me, sir. I am looking for work. My name is Rosemary Savage," she said, her voice clear and accented, her face tilted upward toward the preoccupied Pike. "I have worked in a bookstore before and I would like to work here."

Fred Pike was not accustomed to being interrupted. He looked up from his task to scan her face, hesitated, then continued, retrieving the next book from his left, as if his absorption had not been broken by something uncommon. His gaze returned to the book in his hand, and he told Rosemary in his odd, thin voice (as if addressing the very book he held) that if she wanted work she must look for the poetry section and begin shelving alphabetically.

"By poet, mind you. Only by poet. I don't give a damn about editors and translators. You

will shelve by poet, or you will not be employed, at least not by Fred Pike. Go and find the section and my manager will assess your competency shortly.”

Rosemary discovered the poetry section halfway down a tower that leaned dangerously toward the public toilet, in the far right corner of the store. Quickly, she began the doomed task of rearranging books that had apparently never been shelved in alphabetical order. The section started at eye level. To reach the shelf, she had to lean across a tall pile of books on the floor, awkwardly moving volumes around, her arms stiffly extended. After ten minutes she decided to take sections off the shelf and sort them while sitting on the floor. This too proved pointless as she had to constantly reorder each smaller section, accomplishing only what amounted to tidying up. Rosemary wondered if this was a test of her patience, of her real interest, an example of the overwhelming nature of bringing even the slightest amount of order to the Arcade.

She'd barely managed to complete a single shelf after half an hour, and was standing with her back to the aisle, wrestling down another few volumes, when a voice murmured at her elbow. She heard only a sibilant whisper. Turning to its source, Rosemary involuntarily sucked in her breath, and was immediately sorry she'd done so.

The man speaking to her was an albino. Pinned on his breast pocket was a brass tag that read: Manager, Herman Geist. Stooped and uncanny, Geist peered at her through thick pince-nez glasses; his face lined, weary. He took in her surprise with tired unsurprise. To Rosemary, he looked the personification of affliction.

“Please follow me, young woman,” he repeated, turning.

As she trailed behind his quaint form through the labyrinth of stacks, Rosemary had the fleeting fantasy that this man was what someone would look like if they'd been born in the basement of the Arcade, never having left its dim confines. Pigment would disappear and eyesight would be ruined by reading under the weak lights. She stared hard at the manager's tiny white ears; they were delicate, nude, like vulnerable sea creatures suddenly exposed to light. She was fascinated and repulsed in equal measure. ☉

The Ganges looks olive-green sometimes, camel-colored or gray-blue at other times as it flows sluggishly past Benares, licking the city steps and buildings on its way to the Bay of Bengal. In the early winter mornings, dense mists rise and drift over its bleached surface and, seen from the water, the ancient city seems to float and disappear and reappear as if in a dream. The river is silent then, except for the gentle splash and drip of an oar perhaps, or the soft plop of a fish. It is this silent, foggy Ganges and the temples floating in the mist that I always remember when I think of our time in Benares. A city like a mirage.

It took Uncle Vinnie, Aunt Shobha and me an entire day and part of the night in a clacking, swaying train to get to the old city. At dawn, we hired a boatman and rowed out creakily into the middle of the river. The crumbling steps of the ghats were almost deserted when we pushed away. A few men lay on the flagstones, wrapped in blankets. Some were sprinkling sacred river water on their faces from brass pots. A flock of birds rose darkly into the mist, flickered momentarily, and scattered.

Benares itself is—well, Benares. Everyone knows what it's like. Almost nothing surprised me. In the warmth of the day, the old city was exactly as they say—the streets narrow and teeming, the streaked buildings mated to each other, the riverfront alive with food and flower sellers, unkempt sadhus in ash and vermilion, painted statues of Shiva and lines of people changing on the tiered slope or standing waist-deep in the river with their heads bowed and their palms together. On the ghats, the funeral pyres burned all day and smoked into the night, and the temple bells rang endlessly. What enthralled me — what enchants me even today — were the full tones of the conch shells blown during prayers and the flickering flames of diyas the pilgrims floated out onto the scummy, petal-strewn river. I don't really know why these things appealed to me, for I'm a Hindu

in name only.

“Bloody Brahmin hypocrite,” J.P. would have said. “Or perhaps you fancy yourself a Keats or something?”

Aunt Shobha stretched an arm towards the soft-edged figures praying on the misty shore.

“Oh, Vinnie, we shouldn’t have waited this long to come here,” she sighed.

She was sitting on the plank in the widest section of the boat, facing Uncle Vinnie and me, her painted fingers curling around a paper cone of rose petals we’d bought at a waterfront stall the evening before. She looked out of place in her Benarasi silk sari and a Jamavari wool shawl, as if she were about to attend one of her New Delhi teas. Her pearl-drop earrings jiggled slightly with each forward motion of the oarsman and I saw her bracing—with a distasteful look—to keep from falling into the pundit we’d hired at a temple on shore.

“We should have done this long ago,” she said again.

“Never mind. We are here now,” Uncle Vinnie said, opening and closing his beefy hands around the clay pot containing Mataji’s ashes. “Stop the boat here, bhai.”

The creaking of the oars stopped. The boat began to drift. The misty ghats slipped by slowly in the pink-tinged dawn as the pundit, a thick wool shawl loose around him, lit incense and started intoning Sanskrit mantras. When the priest began the Gayatri Mantra, Uncle Vinnie and Aunt Shobha joined in, and their murmurings reached me in waves of recognizable but meaningless sounds. I fidgeted on the rough plank, uncertain what to say. I wanted desperately to join them in some way, recite something, but since neither my father nor Uncle Vinnie had been religious, I was uneducated in this department and cast around unsuccessfully for words. I knew the first line of a Sanskrit prayer, so I recited that. Om bhur bhawa swa-ha. Then I remembered the lines I’d heard my mother whisper, long ago, in a vast arched hall lit by tall slender candles, a church in which floated robed figures, a place that smelled headily of lilies and my mother’s famil-

iar perfume. So I whispered the prayer that was hers. Our father who art in heaven, our father who art in heaven, our father who art in heaven. And all the while, the pundit chanted in Sanskrit, Aunt Shobha tossed rose petals into the water and Uncle Vinnie leaned over the side of the boat, scattering handfuls of his mother's ashes in cloudy puffs.

All at once, Aunt Shobha burst out, "Vinnie, can you put that damn cigarette away, for god's sake!" Uncle Vinnie didn't look up. He continued solemnly with his duty, his face drawn, a lit Charminar dangling from his lips. Tubes of ash began to curl and fall from his cigarette into the water, mingling with those of Mataji. Her ashes remained clotted on the surface for a while and then the river swallowed them, as it must have my father's and would mine one day. "Our father who art in heaven," I mumbled again and again, and realized I was repeating the phrase now not only for Mataji but also for my dead father, for my dead mother.

I gazed at the swirling trail of rose petals and ashes and cigarette butts in our wake and thought of the timelessness of the broad river and felt a softness in my chest. And if I cried at last, I wasn't then, and am not now, foolish enough to tell anyone. I was just a boy in a rowboat, connected by the ancient river to those who had gone before and those who were to come. That morning on the Ganges, there was no need for me to be brave.

Back at the temple, we recorded Mataji's name in a thick book listing her forbears. The ledger of the dead swelled with family names. I looked for ours, and at the end of a two-page list, all ending with the last name Chand, I found my disowned father's. Papaji had never mentioned my father's name again after he ran away and married my Anglo-Indian mother. But here was his name—listed forever with the family. They could disinherit a body, but there was no way they could disinherit the blood, I thought.

"I suppose I'll be on this list right here one day," I said, tapping the page. Uncle Vinnie put a heavy arm on my shoulder.

"Me, too, old chap. Me, too," he said—and I felt his breath warm on my forehead. ☉



MUG ON MY DESK | GEETA JENSEN

We do not name the bees'
addiction, yet we all know

the way they crawl into whatever
will hold them when the flowers disappear.

Then they are glad for winter
because the cold in their bodies

is the only way to survive the yellow,
the pink, the red disappearance of a time

when tongues were sweet enough to ache
and bodies tight enough to fly.

As the last flowers close, the gardener says
"Let's pick the long ones tonight,"

hoping they will bring grace to a table
where there are so many ways

to hurt someone you love.
Where saying goodbye

can sometimes be the only way
to live.

AT THE TRAIL

Of saliva
left behind
on my wrist

where she said
Woof!
and licked me,

my daughter stares
as if there is something
of her in me

and not
the other way
around.

Telling me
how to behave—
pat my head

walk me now—
she auditions
for my life

and I don't know
if it makes me sad
or glad

she fits
the part
so well.

THE BUSH BEAST

I swear
in front of all these clowns
and fat-faced children that if you walk away

I will wear black
underwear

the kind men wish they could wear
(or did when their mothers weren't looking)

the kind that you know
make my hips scream *Circus Extraordinaire!*

and

Bazaar!

because you like that
don't you.

Even though you know it's time
to say goodbye

you want to ride me one more time
like the Corkscrew
or Bush Beast

holding your breath
my hand

while everything rises

the pull up up oh yes up

s

c

r

e

a

m

i

n

g

when I decide

the only fuck

is you. ☉

WAYS TO GET THERE FROM HERE

Drop the final log on the bonfire pile,
and light another match for me this time.
Be sure to cup your hands to save
the flickers from the winds; pull out
your coat's corners, if you have to.
Grow wings. Disguise yourself
as Batman in afternoons. Take
the flame to kindling below
the canoe staking a combustion
potential, riding and keelless on
choppy wood. My GI mug's filled.
The cider's pressed, and here's
a 1-800-DIVORCE pack of matches.
Light the sucker already. Pull away
the can of lighter fluid. A throwaway
chair waits on termite-eaten benches:
a thanksgiving seat we'd fold away
once the house emptied. A band plays.
Day tunes out early. Dogs show up
as if called for; they warm by the flames,
and ash collects on the periphery. Birch
skin burns; canoe shows its ribs. No light
in the sky. A boy runs over the bridge
and does not stop. Thorax of fire falls.
The boy sinks into ignition: gone,
caged somewhere in the caning.

Embers hiss. Ash scatters. A pigskin
crackles and flies in the clear. Teller's
transparent window bifurcates commerce:
a Plexiglas, bulletproof, laboratory hood
to divide and abut transactions of paper
and coin, bronze and other alloys. Mites
and silverfish devour pages of bank code.
Paper sold. Money divided. Outside
the first treasury, an early winter wind.
Molecules shared. Hydrogen of air attacks
or the helium of inflation, both usefully
offensive. Anticipate pedestrians. Bacon
in the morning and cups of coffee steam
on the cool backdrop; brass must be cold
to lip. An elephantine tuba's ear opens
to funnel a ciphered logic: half notes,
quarter notes, sixteenths and full stops.
At midfield. Parabolic and serpentine,
a message travels from you to apogee
to me—the prism of things.

Is it cold, the water? Tepid. Step in.
Tell me yourself. What do you see?
Yell from the beach. Guess the temperature.
Mark it on the maps of meteorologists.
Advise them of emergency evacuation
routes. Gather samples in cups. Elucidate
hypotheses on barometric fluctuations
to validate a god-like tinkering to the weather.
Tell me the truth, and come out of your oven.

What is it you think? Don't look over
my shoulder. Do not be shy. The cameras
carry no film. The commissar prohibits
photos of his look-alikes anyway. DNA
plays no role in air currents. Thermometers
lack accuracy. Cut the deck; deal five cards.
The first flush wins the national forecast.
Willard Scott hasn't birthdays to announce.
Days lack. Birth plays a two-card throw
away. Nothing's wild. The game's straight.
The L of the pressure system articulates in
the lowest circumlocution. Red or black?

Monadnock over evergreens: balding above
the tree-line grays without a wither or age.
Between the pine needles and granite lies
a ragged circumferential coastline; its radius
burrows through a lake of the clouds, beaver
dams, and lean-to's. Pay the meager toll
to cross, and drive through granite. Asphalt
contains more than the charcoal of bituminous
compound. Glass splinters notch light on
the boulevard and replace hydrocarbons:
constellations on I-95 project AAA's zodiac.
A DMV worker's muse sings the lyric
of a coal miner's daughter. White's not a color.
Water tables stand below the hard crust; this land
cultivates the struggle. Corn sure is hearty.
All in a row the stalks grow. My grandfather
hand-picked the old stones of the wall.

Our blue stone fireplace fell the first time;
the keystone would not hold. Sandbags buttress
the curtain and the props. The slate blackboard
relates other stories. Graffiti at the top of
the Presidential range, an aerosol's can
of color is not much to carry for a name. ☉

She'd come undone. An intriguing snippet of silver had peered out from the hem of her slinky new skirt. Curiosity had gotten the better of her; she'd given it a tug, and three-quarters of the hem had come down, just minutes before her friend Eva was coming to pick her up. "Oh great! Haven't these people heard of a Gordian Knot?" she screamed. She stood in the living room in her pink panties, silver halter top, and shocking pink hair. Of course, things always go wrong when you least expect it, and at the worst possible time, Tiffany thought. And she was a living example. Unraveled. Undone by a thread. Her mom was staying late at the office where she worked advertising the Chantay brand of cosmetics, so Tiffany had called Catherine to help with the hem.

"I'll bleed to death trying to stitch this thing if you don't come," she said. "Or I'll have to go to the party naked because I have nothing else to wear."

Now Catherine knelt on the floor next to a box of pins, placing them at intervals around the skirt, easing the fabric between the pins with her fingers. She was taking her pretty time about it too, and Tiffany was impatient for her to be done. Catherine didn't say anything about the pink hair, but every now and then she muttered and shook her head.

"Why a young woman can't sew!" she complained, adding, "My, my, Tiffany. So much leg. So little skirt." And she'd tug on the hem.

"The pink washes out," Tiffany said.

"It's what's inside your head that counts." Catherine took a second look at the pink color, shrugged and made a "hmm" sound like a horse does when it tosses its mane. Catherine told Tiffany the world was full of sharp operators, and some dumb ones too, who worked in pairs. She said to be on the look-out for Drink Dopers. She said two nice-looking young boys, maybe even boys she'd seen roaming around the halls at school, would

come up to her at a party. One of them might ask her to dance. After one dance, she'd sit down, joining his friend at a table. The boys would order a soda, or a coffee for her, and they'd laugh and tell her jokes and say how pretty she was, and she, silly goose, would believe every word. Then she'd get up to dance again. She'd leave her drink on the table. While she was busy shaking her booty on the dance floor, the other boy would be drugging her drink. And when she came back to the table the second time, and finished off her drink, that would be her last recollection for the evening. The boys, oh, the sweet boys, with their smiles, and their fast cars, and their middle-class orthodontia, would spirit her out of the party. "We'd better take you back to your friends," one of the boys would say in a loud voice because of the noise of the party and for the benefit of any onlookers. And the other boy would just shrug his shoulders and say, "Ya, sure." And they'd drag her limp little body out of the night spot and into their car. To all the world she'd be just another young lady, lost in the bubbly, the worst for drink. And while it was happening all she'd be able to do was laugh and giggle until she passed out like a fool. And the next day she wouldn't remember a minute of it.

Tiffany thought things like that only happened in movies, or in the minds of the seriously paranoid. The worst that could happen to a girl in her crowd was not be asked to dance at all, to spend the entire evening as a wallflower standing beside a potted plant. Catherine said there was evil in the world. She said if she was lucky, she'd wake up like some poor girls did, in the bushes in a brisk October wind, shivering outside an apartment building she'd never seen before, on the wrong side of the city, with no panties on and maybe only a bra covering her body. Catherine felt it was very unseemly for a young lady to be discovered amid the shrubbery minus her panties. Catherine said sometimes a girl would wake up in a hotel room and wouldn't know where she was or how she'd gotten there, that is, if she was lucky and woke up at all. The unlucky ones died from an overdose, or an allergic reaction to the drugs, or choked, or just went into a coma and never came out of it. Catherine said there were hard-working men in the world with cameras, waiting to take pictures of you when you woke up in the bushes with maybe only a bra on. She said these men would hold on to those pictures, sometimes for years

maybe, until you were running for Parliament some day, or were being nominated for Businesswoman of the Year. She said sometimes the men were not at all patient, and just put the pictures on a web site on the Internet for anyone to see. Catherine said, "I wouldn't want any pictures like that to be floating around about me."

Catherine Hailley was a staunch old woman, as thin as a bobby pin, with gray hair twisted on her head in a bun, and cheap canvas runners on her feet. Catherine lived alone, even though she was well past the age of seventy, in the house next door to Tiffany and her mom. She always wore a hat whenever she went out of her house, even if it was only to go next door. She kept an enormous pearl-tipped pin in the hat, partly to secure it in case of wind, but mostly 'for protection.' Her husband was dead and her six children all lived in different parts of the world. Catherine spoke slowly because she wore dentures that she glued into her mouth every morning. Sometimes Catherine's teeth came loose of their glue and wiggled in her mouth. She said her natural teeth had been ground down to the nub with worry raising her children, four girls and two boys.

"I told my daughters when they were little bitty things like you to watch out for bad boys," she said, brandishing her hat pin. "And I'm telling you the same. Party in pairs, and promise to look out for each other. Never leave your drink unattended. If you even dream your drink has been tampered with, use your God-given brains and knock it over with your hand. Then you can say, 'Oh, silly me, my drink fell over.'"

"Always keep five dollars in your shoe. A girl should always have taxi money," she said. "Cell phone, or no cell phone."

"Five dollars won't get you very far nowadays," Tiffany said.

"Twenty will get you as far as you need to go."

"Wouldn't your money get all sweaty and smelly?" Tiffany asked.

Catherine gave her a look that said she was wasting her time trying to knock some brains into her.

“Don’t worry about me,” Tiffany said. “I’m going with friends.”

“Friends, friends,” Catherine said. “They meet other friends and forget about you.”

She did more talking than pinning, and Tiffany wished she’d hurry up with her work and get done. Tiffany didn’t believe half of what Catherine told her. If she listened to everything her neighbor said, Tiffany figured she pretty well couldn’t trust a single living soul. Catherine said, “Especially not boys with vans.” She’d heard about them.

Tiffany asked Catherine if she had ever met a girl who had lost her panties in the shrubbery, and Catherine said she did not cotton to such persons, but she had seen news shows where girls told their stories as a warning to others, and the girls looked just like any other girls you’d meet on the street. Tiffany twisted back and forth to see if the hem was straight and if her legs looked okay in her sling-back, silver heels. Her mother hadn’t seen the halter top she was wearing yet, and Tiffany hoped to keep it hidden from her until maybe next year. It had a built-in bra, more or less, and Tiffany was a little worried about the less. Maybe I should change, she thought. But no, Eva would be dressed in a similar skirt and top, in gold. They’d purchased their outfits together, and planned to be silver and gold when they stood side-by-side at the party. It was Tiffany’s first big bash on turning sixteen. Tiffany was standing in the living room in her halter top and her white half slip. Catherine had Tiffany’s skirt in her hand, having finished with the pinning. She plied her needle swiftly in and out of the fabric.

Catherine Hailley had been the first woman in the province to earn her chartered accountant’s designation, that’s how old she was, and Tiffany felt her age made her overly cautious and a bit of a fanatic. She didn’t wear any make-up, even though Tiffany’s mom sent her tons of stuff for free from the Chantay collection she wrote ads for at work. Catherine passed it all on to her daughters and daughters-in-law, who she said still had the whiles to doll themselves up. Tiffany thought Catherine’s face looked as weathered as wrinkled cotton when it just comes out of the wash and dries without pressing. ☉

SWEET JESUS

“Sweet Jesus, take me home.” That’s what he said. There were witnesses there in his hospital room, the nurse, the physical therapist, the orderly. One said he didn’t say “sweet,” another said he said “I’m coming home,” but the sentiment was the same and the effect, followed by his collapse on the bed, was startling.

He’d come into the hospital at the end of one of those deadly pathological domino games that afflict many 90-year-olds, the crippling arthritis which wobbled his walk which led to the fall which caused the hip fracture which resulted in the dehydration which tipped his kidneys further toward failure which dulled his usually lighthearted, bright mind. Yet most of it seemed fixable on first evaluation. Just a little watering would at least partially restore the kidneys and wake him up, get him back on the physical therapy track. At least until he came up with that “take me home” line.

For 40 years he had led a Lutheran flock, sermonizing and praying. He still led Bible studies in his senior high-rise apartment. He arrived in the office dressed in his dark suit and clip-on tie, looking like he was ready to greet you at the church door as you left. At Christmas he brought one-page tracts, typed on his home Smith-Corona, about the miracle of Christmas, the love of God, and the beauty of the baby Jesus. For 61 years he had been married to his wife, quiet, loving, deferential—a minister’s wife. When they spoke to each other, there was a sparkle, even when they had to shout because the hearing aid batteries were low.

So he should have known what he was talking about, known what was ahead of him, known to whom he was talking when he sat up in that hospital bed and cried “Sweet Jesus, take me home” and promptly fell back in full cardiac arrest. The physician who answered the “Dr. Blue” wondered aloud if that meant we should let him go home, but

he had never really talked about that. So technology took over and did what it knows how to do. He got drugs, he got electricity, and he got a ventilator—for 24 hours.

Two days later he was sitting up in bed, eating voraciously, asking when he could get back to physical therapy. He didn't go home. I guess Jesus wasn't ready for him.

EYES WIDE OPEN

She had made the decision long ago, but would she stick to it when the time came? For years, she had known that her aorta was growing. She knew it might burst and if it did, it would kill her. She knew it could be fixed with a big, painful operation. And she said no.

Widowed, eighty-five, slowed by muscles weakened by inflammation and joints stiffened by arthritis, M. would arrive at the office with walker, daughter, and her own wooden platform to scale what seemed to her a Himalayan exam table. She spoke with a quavery, almost apologetic voice that fronted for clear thinking and definite opinions. Witty, bordering on caustic, her husband's opinions had ruled when he was alive, yet she had quietly placed her vote even in his presence. After he was gone, her physical ailments mandated a sedentary existence but she knew where she was headed, what she wanted at the end, and had good reasons for it.

Modern medicine sees death at arm's length. I talk with patients about death when they come in with their living will, asking questions about feeding tubes and resuscitation or when they encounter life-ending disease. But this is like planning for retirement, a mythical event, light-years away, that never will come. I do see people dying but frequently through the traffic of ventilators and monitors used to support the critically ill or through the haze of narcotics given to ease the pain of terminal disease. I do see people who are dead, but frequently just to "pronounce" them, checking the pupils, breathing, and pulse to certify that death has happened. The transition from life to death is mostly muted, almost surreptitious, an oozing from health through illness to the last breath. None of this was like M's last day.

The admission to the hospital seemed almost mundane, a kidney infection with a fever.

When I saw her the first morning, she was tired but her temperature was down and we were plotting her discharge in a day or two. Later that day, however, the nurse called to say that M. was having excruciating abdominal pain. A CT scan confirmed the feared, her aneurysm had ruptured and was pouring blood into her abdomen. M. was seen by a vascular surgeon who told her she would surely die without emergency surgery. Faced with their mom's imminent demise, her family urged her to reconsider her previous choice. She stuck to her decision.

I visited her that afternoon, expecting an unconscious patient gasping her last breaths. I planned to talk to the family, answer questions, and see if I could help them accept the inevitable. She was on the regular medical floor, no ventilators, no feeding tubes. As I walked into the room, her daughter, son, and son-in-law were huddled around her bed, tears streaming down their faces. M. was turned away from me so I wasn't sure she was even still alive. As I said hello to her daughter, M. turned toward me and with alert eyes and a broad smile, she said, quavery but clear, "Hello Dr. Meyer." Her blood pressure was low and dropping and she was hours if not minutes away from the end. Her daughter said, "We were just talking about how good it's been." "It's been"—quite a way to describe a life. M. looked at me and said, "Thank you for being so good to me over the years." "Good to me"—quite a way to capture our time together. "Thank you"—it was the wrong person saying thanks.

LAZARUS

No trumpet sounded; no lights came aglow.

My soul returned, and I, unfit to touch,

Decayed, stood up, because my Friend said: Live.

David Berman, from A Song for Lazarus

"Live, you've got to live!" The ICU nurse grasping the defibrillator paddles had a wild look in her eyes. Normally proper and professional, though slightly nervous, she was showing the press of the day as she feverishly worked on the man in bed six of the intensive care unit. The tracing on the heart monitor above the man's bed erupted into jagged chaos, he lost consciousness and the nurse plunged the paddles to his chest, pressed the red buttons, and the man's body jumped. The green blips on the monitor

became regular and, once again, the man opened his eyes.

Earlier in the day, heralded by excruciating chest pain, he had been transformed from a vigorous, 42-year-old construction worker into a “heart patient,” hovering between life and death. In those days before angioplasties and emergency bypasses, heart attack patients were given oxygen and morphine, placed on monitors, and moved from the emergency room to the intensive care unit where nurses watching for the life-threatening heart irregularities like ventricular fibrillation could swoop into the patient’s room with medications and electricity. The man’s first episode of ventricular fibrillation had happened in the emergency room. After brief CPR and his first defibrillation, he revived, slightly dazed and complaining of a sore chest. Lazarus the First.

The scene recurred with monotonous, then nauseating, regularity once he arrived in the ICU—fibrillation, unconscious, defibrillation, normal heart rhythm, reawakening. Each time more, and then different, medication was tried to stop the recurrences. Each time as he opened his eyes, the man seemed more perplexed, asking why his chest hurt so much, why all these people were standing around his bed, and then it would happen again and he would disappear into dark of the almost dead. Ten, fifteen, twenty times.

“When do we stop this?” we doctors and nurses asked. We questioned whether this was treatment or torture, especially when he woke up just from the pumping action of CPR and said, “Stop hitting me!” But he kept coming back, not just a little, but enough to talk, to make sense, to ask questions. By the twenty-fifth shock, a cart-full of medications, eight physically and emotionally draining hours, and no sign that anything was changing, most of us were ready to call a halt—except for that nervous ICU nurse. She commanded him to live.

And live he did. A long-shot use of a balloon pump stabilized his rhythm and the paddles were wheeled out of his room. He had visited places few return from, rose from his bed and walked out of the hospital with a burned chest but an intact soul, to draw in a few more draughts of a life restored to him by a nervous friend who said, “Live.” ☉

2. FIRST SIGHT OF ETIENNE

People were laughing the way they drink
when someone else is paying.
 Bradamante twisted,
looked at Bartoldo's rump. There, in a pigment
commonly reserved for fresh water, ribbons and God
 swirled a portrait:

 Mother and child—
same fortuitous face and restful torso as any Madonna,
 all shaved manna, fatless milk and honey;
 except for the gleaming skin layered in chestnut

 and the holy blue breast
bloomed wider even than Jesus himself, its bright flowering
 capping the lazy
hillock of the horse's hip. And that easy child—
 nestled like a kit in the hollow behind the saddle,
 one fat finger
 stretched in glee, backward toward the nipple,
 one foot dangling
—Bradamante had to lean way over to see this—
 one bitty foot
kicking her horse in the crotch. She flung down her reins. What rodent
 had done this?

 Last she remembered, the old count,
known to leap, nights, plowed and raving in Basque, from the south
 ridge, naked as a candle, catty-
corner into the Dourdou (Bradamante hated not having
 thought of this herself) was chirping
amiably on about the glory of France

and rats in the granary—how the whole populace need be
vigilant as virgins,
how every dozen rats collected would entail
a small reward—and, yes,
tails would do,
no need for rats *entiers* in the audience chamber...

When the fanfare blew
the consumptive trumpeter lost his lip but never
-theless, the signal was: Time To Parade. If Bradamante
ever panicked
she would have now—she felt Jesus' head: how tacky.
Oily. Without thinking,
she wiped her fingers on the saddlecloth her second
cousin had needled her.
A fantasia
in salmon and gold: eggs, ferrets, geese.

Strange
how people gave her things.
Nothing to do now
but brazen it out. She gathered the reins and reached
for a hug from Bartoldo. She fondled his ears.
He folded his neck like a fish to kiss her boot, which was when
she noticed
foam around his mouth—smeary orange—his bit
(polished that morning
and the gods only knew
how she loved to rise and shine, much as the blessed babe
was soon to cherish weaning) coated in gook.

Carrots,
day before a tournament! Monstrous Mother of God!

She dug her heels in hard.
 Bartoldo, ripped from root-driven dreams, leapt to the left.
 On the outswing
 —she nearly lost her grip— Bradamante glimpsed
 a blue-streaked boy
 peeping like a lizard from the underbelly of the Ladies' Tent.
 But Bartoldo skittered off like a boar,
 spiked; this was not the time to think. Still,
 one idea
 wriggled behind her eyes: wasn't that a face
 she'd seen before.

31. PILGRIMS

Her favorites are the flaxen flatlanders
 enquiring toward their waywardest desire: The Church
 at Compostela. Near swooning—

all have badly under-guessed the distance; and leaving
 at least as far behind as is mete, chaperones hand-picked
 for blindness and senility;

these housewives, young or so, appeal, keys to chastity
 peeking from between moist breasts—it *is* hot—
 to the handiest knight for help.

So Bradamante rides with them over these roads
 best known for footpads, brigands and worse
 and listens to their odd-inflected prattle

about the relics. Some say there are two caskets:
 one with the clavicle, one with the nail bed of Christ. The travellers
 pass time speculating as to what

a clavicle is, and how a whole bed can be got into a casket
though one man, very bony, riding on a very bony donkey,
and much obliged for the pink saddle pad Bradamante has given him,

disagrees. He feels, perhaps, the above-said nailbed
is only a fingertip— some *other* district having made off
with the actual nail.

“No, no, no,” says a woman with warts, better informed than most.
Christ, she argues, *rose*; *none* of his body ever
turned into relics. Which leads back to the question

of *clavicle*. A midwife hastening in the opposite direction
stops to chat and says she thinks it might be that bone
that breaks in babies sometimes when they’re born— at which point

a stoop-shouldered spinster mutters, *well if that’s what they mean,*
why not say it? and everyone’s chattering at once
since clearly from what the warty woman has said the whole show

is a hoax. Still, they’ve come so far..
And by the time Bradamante doffs her helm to say goodbye (wives now
sheepish on account of that hair-tossing,) all are friends *forever*. ☺

A few raindrops pinpricked the surface of the sex-club hot tub, as a tepid drizzle misted Matt's face and shoulders. He rested his head back on the rough flagstone, gazing up into the droopy fronds of some kind of palm tree. Stars were beginning to come out as the sky purpled, the night air was warm and mild. Matt felt so relaxed after his adventure in the steam cavern. How long had it been since he'd let himself go with anyone? He knew nothing about the man who'd helped him out except for the "Kiss Me I'm Positive" t-shirt he'd seductively peeled off in the locker room, and yet now Matt felt he had rejoined humanity. The man in the steam cavern had filled him with the milk of human kindness.

Maybe Matt didn't deserve this happiness that spread up from his very center of gravity, calming his every nerve. His mother and father, his boss and coworkers, his sister with her husband and two kids, even his friends would all expect him to be contrite. But life was delicious. Life was a mess but Matt was doing the best with what he had to work with. He could not recall another time in his twenty-three years when he'd felt this sweet. The feeling rose from the knowledge that he was doing the right thing, returning to Boston in the morning to tell everyone about his situation; he was making the tough choice. It was how he'd always imagined the passage into manhood would feel like, except that he hadn't gone off into the woods and returned to the village with spoils from the hunt; hadn't fathered a child and chosen to stick around to raise the wild thing; hadn't enlisted and fought in any war; never scored the winning shot back on his high-school basketball team. Matt had AIDS. It made no sense that he should feel this good, this empowered. Nevertheless and all the same, there he was. Time stopped under the fronds, and his muscles and bones, laved by warm water, relaxed his mind, quieted his soul.

It was almost midnight before he returned to the Pelican Sands. His hotel room was bathed in pink neon from the strip below. Squeals of laughter, gunning engines, and Latin music trickled up from the clubs along the sidewalk, drowning out the lapping waves that he'd so anticipated. He closed the window and flipped on the air-conditioner before undressing and pushing toothpaste through his teeth. He spit and rinsed, hit the switch, then crawled into bed.

After bathing in the outdoor whirlpool, the sun rash from his walk on the beach had grown more irritating. Maybe it was the chemicals that made it worse. They used strong disinfectants in sex-club hot tubs. When he'd put on his jeans and t-shirt in the locker room after his soak, the rash felt like an army of tiny beetles marching across his flesh. It eased up a little on the long walk back to the hotel but a moment ago at the bathroom mirror he'd seen purplish blotches developing across his shoulders and neck, his chest and belly. He'd taken a couple aspirin when he rinsed his teeth. Other than that he was just too tired to deal with it. At least his chest no longer felt heavy, his breathing no longer a chore. Finally, the Bactrim kicked in.

Against his bare skin, the starched sheets pricked in a pleasing way. The steady whoosh of cool air turned out to be a viable substitute for surf, and Matt began to drift off. His mother used to say to him and his sister when they were little, "Get in bed and pull the covers up to your chin. Now. Are you ready? Are you sure you're ready? Are you absolutely sure you're ready? Okay. Now. Wiggle your toes!" A delicious chill shot up from the tips of his feet, sending goose-pimples racing all over his body.

He was already packed to fly back to Boston. The special ticket would be waiting for him at the counter. It was exciting, in a way like starting a new life. Anything could happen. Playing the AIDS card was like shooting the moon in a game of hearts. He could win big if everyone or anyone rallied around him, or he could lose everything. His father might disown him. His mother would not stop loving him, but how would she feel about this virus inside her own boy? He guessed he'd find out who his friends were. His boss might justifiably fire him for taking off without asking permission, in which case he would lose

his health insurance, become unable to afford the expensive treatment and drugs, and alone in the world, sleep on the streets, rot away and die. Matt had read real-life accounts of extreme poverty, persecution, the brutality and sickness in World War II concentration camps, the contemporary genocide that flared up like lesions all over the world. These things happened to people and he was a person, therefore, it could happen to him, too. It was the most basic of syllogisms, and yet in the cushy hotel bed it all seemed ridiculously hypothetical.

Still, Matt figured he should prepare himself. He rolled himself over on his side, drawing his legs up to his chest and pressing his forehead against his knees. He considered the possible outcomes, did his best to conjure up the loneliness, the physical pain that he knew he could not yet even imagine, the hopelessness of ever making something out of his life after the shortness of breath, the fevers, the cancers set in. Putting himself as squarely in this position as he could, he understood, for the first time since that bleary day last March when he got his lab results and thought that his life was over, that it just didn't matter. He would still be Matt Woods no matter what happened, no matter how terrible being Matt Woods might become. He scratched the rash, then nestled deeper into the sheets. As long as he had a thread of life to hang onto that would be enough, and when that thread was cut, well then it really wouldn't matter. In his lazy half-sleep, he pictured palm fronds drooping over the sex-club hot tub against a backdrop of stars in a darkening sky. He sloshed around in that warm water, wiggling his toes. ☉

ALLYSON
SALAZAR
POETRY

ARRIVING HOME
ALONE, DIGGING
IN PURSE FOR
HOUSE KEY

A key
lost among
pens
gum
other indiscernible
objects whose
edges feel
like a key

Afraid of
the night
dogs barking
the clouds
slipping over
the moon
so quickly

ELVIS NEVER MADE IT TO THE BUILDING

That morning we ate eggs at the Star Diner and for the next three days we ate smoke and so much ash I remembered that was the way I used to taste pepper that day we drove around a little crazy with the radio on crying behind our hands when we'd pass construction sites we thought Elvis was dead he was supposed to play his guitar at the top of the first tower but he had stopped to shower and watched everything dripping go down the drain first down the block then on TV.

PLANTING IN VERMONT IN MARCH AT THE DAISY PATCH ON MAPLE STREET IN MORRISVILLE

In the morning, I sat in my pajamas watching
the snow send panels of light
into the dull living room, lifting flecks of dust.
I knew if I went into the laundry room
where my father's clothes lay in a crumpled pile of fabric
I would smell the leather from his boots
seeped into the cuffs of his jeans,
the salt of fertilizer and mulch on the thighs,
traces of the coffee laced with milk and brandy
he'd drunk while transplanting our next season's stock
under purple bulbs that had burned his neck and arms
the whole night as snow collected on the glass roof overhead.

COUPLING

Watching the operation channel
from our bed
a *replacement of movement* procedure
flickers out of the black box
creating a sense of motion
between us.
A surgeon scrapes a scalpel
between layers of white muscle
and bone
to restore movement
in a drugged man's
rigid, scarred arm.
Between each sequence and commercial,
darkness briefly overtakes
the room, the laundry,
our grungy bedspread,
and you disappear.
Later, unable to sleep
I watch you breathe
imagine your lungs
their branches of bronchi
stretched over the hollow trellis of your chest.
I raise my arm pale as butter
twist it just above your lips
to feel your breath. ☉

The snow crunched loudly under Julie's boots as she made her way down to the chicken coop that night. She carried a pitcher of water and a flashlight to find the tamped path in the dark. It was the first real cold with the winter solstice past, and the foot-deep snow shimmered phosphorescent in single-digit temperatures moving down from Canada.

It wasn't any warmer in the shed, where the cold hung like in a walk-in refrigerator. Julie lit her way past the rotor tiller and hanging shovels, rakes and hoes to the coop door. She slid it open, half expecting to find the chicken a frozen fold of feathers. But in the light of the 100-watt bulb, the heat of which hardly had made a dent against the frigid air, the chicken twitched its head to the right to eye her from its usual hunkered down position on the top roost. It clucked softly as Julie stepped in and stroked its breast feathers.

"Hey, old girl, how you doing? You hanging in there? Bet you're cold," Julie cooed.

It had been different when the coop was at full capacity; the hanging light bulb and body heat of a dozen or more hens took the edge off the winter chill. Now there was only one, and she stayed as close as she could to the ceiling and what little heat emanated from the light. Besides the dog Elsie and a female cat named Fido, the hen was all that remained of the chickens, three culled sheep and four rabbits that Julie believed entitled her to call the house and 10 acres Willow Bend Farm. She started phasing out the chickens a year ago, when Tom decided he didn't like them anymore. She stopped ordering chicks from Agway, and, letting attrition take its course, the dozen dwindled down to nine. Then six were claimed by foxes who dug under a rotted post last spring. Two, she found dead on the nest. The other animals Julie gave away three months ago after Tom left her, and she knew she would be in no condition to take care of much other than herself. No one would take the hen.

Unlike Tom, there was no chance of the chicken seeking greener pastures by wandering away or flying off. Julie read once that three things made birds masters of flight: First, their wings are shaped like an eyebrow so the air flow can make the bird glide upward. Second, they have hollow bones and oxygen-filled body sacs, making them lightweight. Third, their feathers lie flat against each other, creating a even, gentle contour that air can flow smoothly over. Flight, Julie had read in *The Life of Birds*, enabled them to overcome physical obstacles. Unlike other animals, birds are able to travel anywhere to find the conditions that best suit them at any particular time.

Chickens can fly, Julie knew, but not very far. The wild ones and the lighter ones can sail up to a limb of a tree, but the rest, bred so long for egg and meat production, are bound to the earth. They run along the ground flapping their wings, some tiny cell in their small brain transmitting an instinct their bodies long abandoned. Besides, she chortled, even if chickens could fly they are too stupid to find their way back.

Julie tapped the ice out of the metal bowl and filled it with water. She filled the trough with feed. The chicken watched with spastic movements of her head.

Outside, Julie didn't need the flashlight to find her way back. Light slanting out from the windows illuminated the fifty yards or so back to the house. The windows presented a fragmentary view, like a collage. She could see a small triangle of stenciled ivy on a cream wall, a square of brick, the curve of the copper shade of the lamp, a few folded leaves from the Wandering Jew that had rooted in a jar of water on the window sill and was never planted. It was like a mirror where the reversal of the view makes the familiar startlingly unfamiliar. It reminded her of when she was a child and she would lie on the living room floor and look up at the ceiling pretending it was the floor and everything was backward and upside down. Just like now, with Julie on the other side of how things used to be.

The heat from the kitchen wood stove was a warm relief from the cold. Elsie bounded from her bed, her tail wagging, her nose nudging Julie's hand, and teasing for her

supper. She'd had to fight to keep Elsie when she couldn't even give away the chicken. Elsie was a springer spaniel she and Tom had gotten as a pup three years ago, and he'd wanted to take her with him when they split up. But Julie said no. If she was going to be left alone in a house at the end of a dirt road, she needed a dog that would bark if someone drove up. Tom eventually gave in, forgetting that she'd been living there alone and dog-less before he came along. He wanted out too bad to hassle her. If he had challenged her, she would have told him that it was one thing to choose to live alone and another to be left.

No one would take the chicken. No one wanted a lone hen that might carry disease and didn't lay eggs anymore.

"Just chop its head off," Tom had said.

"Sure," Julie said. "Just kill something when you don't want it anymore. Just kill it. Chop off its head. Toss it aside."

"All right. All right," he said, walking off with an armload of his clothes.

Julie was left with one four-year-old chicken that hadn't laid an egg in a year and that wouldn't survive the winter alone in the coop. One chicken that she didn't want but had no choice but to keep. One chicken that would have her walking out in the dark at night when all she wanted was to come home, slip into bed, and pull the warm covers over her head. ☹



JENNY GRASSL

Since I usually slept until eleven, the first person I saw when I got up in the morning was often my father, who was at that hour back upstairs for his first break of the day. My father had grudgingly accepted my return home, never referring to my dramatic departure that previous summer. A year into ownership of the store, the newness of his purchase had worn off and the grinding nature of the grocery business was starting to get to him.

Just as I feared, he had largely indentured my brothers, Michael and Mark, into working at the store most weekends and after school as well. They did all the ordering of canned goods, restocked the shelves and washed the old green linoleum floor every Sunday night. My mother worked the cash register every day of the week, from nine in the morning until closing time, at seven in the evening, without a day off.

My father had his own exhausting amount of work to do—all the butchering, the book-keeping, the maintenance—and he began to deal with this stress the way that he had always dealt with stress in his life: He drank. In pursuit of this pastime, he had befriended an out-of-work trucker, Ollie LaFrance, who would stop by around 11, during my father's break. Instead of coffee, he and Ollie would break out the Manichevitz wine.

"I'll tell ya, Ollie, they are killing us," my father began one morning. You could tell by his voice that he had already fortified himself with a few glasses; there was a kind of sing-song quality to his rant. "The damn government is giving it all away to the goddam colored people on welfare. And what do the rest of us, the ones breaking our asses get? We get zip, we get zero after taxes, buddy."

My father, as usual, wasn't happy with the amount of money the store was making. In fact, the store was doing quite well. Not only was my father unable to appreciate this fact, he could not bring himself to hire more help, so that he and my mother and brothers could relax and take some time off.

Ollie was a moon-faced man with seven kids and a ramshackle house by the side of the lake that lacked central heating. Unlike my father, Ollie didn't seem to worry about money. When he worked, he did long cross-country hauls with his rig and made bucks. But he would often let time go by between these jobs; it didn't seem to bother him that these respites from employment often left his family running on the fumes of income from his last job.

That summer, he was officially looking for work, but his search for employment never seemed to preclude his daily meanderings through the town's various watering holes, the store being one of them. Ollie liked to talk probably even more than he liked to drink. Generally cheerful, he often came by to play straight man to my father's Sicilian strum and drang about life. The only thing that really bothered Ollie was what he saw as the diminishing power of unions, particularly his union, the Teamsters. On this particular morning, I awoke to my father and Ollie's dueling monologues on the declining state of affairs for the working man.

"You know, Russ, it's not the goddam welfare that's killing this country. It's what the government is doing to the unions. Used to be, they'd go to bat for you no matter what. Now it's a different story. The government's got them coming and going. The day will come when, I kid you not..." Ollie paused for dramatic effect, his eyes wide, the jelly jar glass of Manichevitz poised in his hand. "...there might be no Teamster's, at least not in the way that we know it. Hell, there might be no unions. Now that will be one dark day, my friend. I'll have to sell my rig—that's what I'll have to do. That's something to worry about. You're making money here, Russ. What do you have to complain about?"

Blearily, I took in the Ollie and Russ show, as I made my hunch-backed way to the bathroom wrapped in a ratty bathrobe. My nighttime cocoon was gone; I was the creeping caterpillar, afraid of the day. Well into their wine, perhaps they would pay no attention to me.

But on this morning, such anonymity would not be possible. I turned out to be a wel-

come interruption into Ollie's rant about the Teamsters. I think I sometimes appeared to be something exotic to Ollie—a representative of the youth culture he saw on TV—these young poops who were doing crazy things like protesting and sleeping with everybody and singing about “The Age of Aquarius.” Ollie really liked that song, because he was an Aquarius himself, he told me. He thought I knew about astrology.

“You know, sometimes I look up into the stars and I get a feeling. Is that because I'm an Aquarius? I figured you would know...” he asked, ambushing me before I could disappear into the bathroom. I looked at them both as they sat catty-corner from each other, around a leaf of our pine dining room table, a leaf that was beginning to sag from the weight of too many elbows propped up on it over the years. Here was Ollie, in his mid-forties, who seemed so remarkably naïve, so blissfully child-like as he guzzled wine, oblivious, and here was my father, dark and drunk before noon, his unhappiness a deep well I would never really fathom, a well that went back to his Old World family and to things that happened that I, the New World daughter who no longer had the language, the context, to penetrate.

They drank and they ranted about a world that they felt was leaving them behind. It occurred to me that they were outsiders too—that the sense of alienation I felt, that made me feel like a Martian most of the time, might not be my feeling alone. For a moment, I felt a strange solidarity with them and I could feel this monolith I had in my mind, of them and me, wobble. I stared at the bottle on the dining room table: the Manichevitz or the methedrine, we all wanted a way out of that feeling, didn't we?

Later, when I called my friends up, to tell them about the latest horrors of living at home, Ollie and my father would become caricatures again—stupid old guys who didn't get it, sitting around drinking wine in the morning. But I can now see that episodes like this one would eventually germinate into a loyalty and a kind of obsession that I have, with my working class roots. While I would never have an easy time with my father, some part of his struggle in life had called out to me and in the crucible of the overwhelming struggle I felt at eighteen, just to simply exist, I knew I would always be his daughter. ☉

A week earlier, at this edge of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, the river gouged the landscape, taking houses, trees, hills, rocks, and human victims. Reverend Peak, who had lived in the mountains all his life, said he had never heard the river speak that way. “Churning and thundering,” he said. “I thought it would heave itself up and cut a sopping path through the sky. It looked like it could do that. I heard the ground split wide open.”

What was left on the bank was pale and lifeless, spindly undergrowth, jutting barbs of broken trees barely hanging on by strained roots. Much of the lush, green forest was gone on both banks of the river, and, except for the voluble preacher, there was startling silence. There was no peace in the stillness, only stunned disbelief in the aftermath of the flood.

The thick, young preacher stood knee-deep in the turbid water of the Nantahala River. He faced the bank, arms extended toward the people clustered there. Under a slick, black awning of hair his eyebrows made a straight line across the low rectangle of his forehead. His jaw jutted out when he spoke.

“And Je-e-sus said, ‘He that believeth in me, as the scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water.’ Amen.”

Several flower-bedecked wooden crosses stood in the mire, like those positioned at highway accident sites. Small stuffed animals and toy cars encircled the base of one. Irregular letters on that cross spelled out the names Shane, Bertis, and Naomi, and John 7:38.

Grace Still and Jessie Rider watched the proceedings from a dry spot on the riverbank. They had been best friends for twenty years, since they met in Atlanta in the sales and

marketing department of Martin Packaging, then a leader in the manufacture of paper-board packaging for the soft drink and beer industries.

“He’s at it again,” Jessie said.

Grace watched her flick a roly-poly bug with a crimson nail. The insect caromed off the sole of one of Jessie’s stylish boots. Grace regarded her own feet, laced into a pair of her daughter Polly’s scuffed castoffs, and smiled.

“Do you think he’ll talk somebody into that filthy river?” Grace said.

“I’d put money on it.” Henry Rhodes sat beside them. “Yesterday he told me he wasn’t afraid of typhoid or cholera, and he refused to take the tablets the nurses were handing out. I’ve got some in my pocket, though, and I plan to ram them down his unctuous throat when he comes out of that snake-infested cesspool.”

Ten years their senior, Henry had been Grace and Jessie’s boss at Martin. A consummate bwana, he retired too early a year ago and became involved full-time in disaster relief. He was the reason Grace and Jessie had come.

The preacher leaned over and slapped the surface of the water, splattering his white dress shirt and the top of his gray slacks. His tinny voice rose above the sudden drone of bulldozers and the whine of chainsaws that floated downstream from a nearby cleanup area. The air smelled like fresh-cut wood and primordial dampness.

“Brothers and sisters,” he said, dark, unreadable eyes searching the crowd, “who will be first to be baptized in these living waters? We must celebrate, ye-es, celebrate the sacred souls of our children who’ve gone home to the Father!”

Grace counted at least fifty people knotted together on the steep bank. Some sobbed quietly, a few swayed and wailed, others stood still. They were all faded, light-washed. Many wore their own salvaged clothes, others were dressed in items purchased with Red Cross vouchers. No one stepped forward.

Henry picked up a handful of small rocks and shook them like dice in his closed fist. “That man’s likely to kill somebody. Floods cause mudslides. They cut deep chutes into the riverbank, and if one of those people steps into one, he could slip right into the river and drown.”

Grace looked at Henry. “Can’t you stop him?”

He nodded. “I’m waiting for reinforcements.”

The preacher continued. “This is not a killing river! It’s God’s river and a vehicle that transported some of our own straight to His Kingdom, for all eternity!”

He backed deeper into the water, spreading his legs apart to steady himself. Without warning he fell back, submerging himself, then tried to rise. He thrashed his arms and legs in rapid arcs, but the current turned him upside down. His dress shoes broke the surface, one at a time, slick and shiny black as his hair; when, alternately, his head appeared. Every time the water rolled him over his shirt ballooned, thin and sheer, a lost jellyfish.

The crowd surged forward. A young girl with colt’s legs raced to the edge of the river. She flapped her arms and called out, “Reverend Peak! Somebody help him!”

The preacher’s head appeared again, and he gasped for breath. The end of his red tie licked the surface of the river like a tongue, and his arms windmilled before the current claimed him again. Grace noticed that the cuffs of his shirt were still buttoned.

“Hold these.” Henry thrust his radio and hat at Jessie and started to pick his way through the moaning crowd.

Jessie grabbed his arm. “Wait! Those men are going in.”

“Hurry! Hurry!” The girl screamed as two men brushed past her, knees pumping, steps slowing as the water deepened. One of them fell but was able to get back up and push

the bloated carcass of a goat out of the way. The preacher jerked when he was rammed by a ragged piece of lumber, part of a wall of a structure that no longer existed. The collision slowed his drift, and the men were able to grab him and pull him to his feet.

“Hallelujah! Praise the Lord!” Reverend Daniel Peak, flanked by his rescuers, shouted from brown shallow water, legs together, arms stretched wide, face tilted to the sky. Blood leaked from a wound in his side. ☉

Hot is mission war
Date inverse am long vain blow serve in
Is God dormant one lied yes
Open with plan.

Vogue, gain dead act good sit in!

Hot is mission war
Date inroad persecute show zoo warden
Vain gropes sure kind errant
In rode man.

Vogue, soak de-walk not up hot water!

Hot is mission war
Date inverse am long vain war two lied yes
Heal moot to her wrecked camp
In blow serve in.

Vogue, demand heft pain and harm on!

Hot is mission war
Date in with plan mere room to be dead
Fervored wail into world
Down inroad persecute.

Vogue, likes favorite war!

RECIPE, OH MEAGER TO MAKE FOR NUNO JÚDICE

Bloom met deodand am
Die verdantly in garden,
Bloom met depreciation am
Die nigh and cannon thou den,
Bloom met deduit velites am
Die licked up enough and riotous,
Bloom met dejected am
Die vendor gon' drunk,
Bloom met donkey here am
Die shivering in hot center,
Bloom met dissection am
Die somewhere in straight up light,
Bloom met deny you we am
Die wacked up hair burnt,
Bloom met de-explosive am
Die in detail vanity ruled out,
Bloom met direct am
Die stuffed foreign in public,
Bloom met unguent perfume damn!

VAR CAN EAT MANDARIN

Hey, Var can eat ten mandarin.
Hey, Var can eat metal ganache
And near steak as mandarin,
We tend death, idiots bet again
In any ward he fit
Worried in, we tend
Death in mandarin eat
Her steak, metal ganache
All and eats curt end
Ward our high exploder. ☉



BOWL | GEETA JENSEN

Wartime makes it hard to love you.
Tissues turn to missiles
in your hands, fountain pens
bleed blood. You bear the brute
burden for all men,
though it's not your fault your father's
Y knocked up X and had to marry
in the shadow of a shotgun.
Our bed's a foxhole, no one's an atheist.
You curl around me like a shell
outside a trembling nucleus, while I dream
of babies falling from the sky
like bombs, children we name
Little Boy, Fat Man.

POETS' MARKET

Interested in narrative and lyrical poems in which cadence makes an important contribution to the work. No poems about pets, please. No poems involving the phrase “naked lightbulb” or beginning with “When.” None with a litany of *how this, how that*; none using concrete nouns followed by abstract verbs. We hate getting poems from people who have clearly never read the magazine and advise writers to buy a sample copy. Gay male poetry welcome; however we reject all poems containing the following: “God,” “Fire Island,” “ice cream,” and vicious putdowns of people in struggle. No racial slurs except in irony. Do not want to see religion, rhyme, silly stuff about butterflies or unnecessary sunsets. Childhood trauma a plus. Special interests: do not enjoy long poems, no profanity or sexual references disguised as flower imagery; romance o.k. Must—SASE, poetic insight whether free or structured. Manuscripts with excessive postage will be returned unread.

RETROSPECTIVE

She's backing through the door
Unpacking bags as if she meant
to stay. What looks like rage
has melted to mere irritation,
bitter arguments to minor spats.
As for that bottle smashed against
the wall, like it never happened
though she can't explain
the way it sailed into his hand,
dented wall a miracle of fusion.

Wrong words fly into his mouth
like bats. "Twenty years of hurt"
count down to 19, 18, 17...
The non-malignant facial growth
he'd refused to have removed
has dwindled to an age spot.
He's a more attentive lover now
and lasts longer than he did at forty.
Their children are no more

than vague ideas. He slips a ring
from her finger; their vows become "Do I"
and it's the night they haven't met,
at the party of a mutual friend they're
standing in a doorway, smoking.

POST-HIBERNAL

Near the end of the terrible winter,
N snowdrifts piled high outside your door,

you had become unrecognizable,
something dark and sick

curled in its den, grooming its wet fur.
Around you or within you,

the hum of distant whimpering, until
the balled roots of your body begin

slowly to unclench, fingers seeking
light like shoots unfurling.

Gaunt from your long sleep,
you wake to something stirring.

Woodsmoke, flapjacks, bacon burning:
you sniff the air and enter

this cool morning, dazed and blinking,
ravenous for spring. ☉

I was born in the year of the rat,
under the archer's constellation,
in a house on a hill, the river down below

and meadow full of horses, to which,
despite distance and time, I go tethered

my livelong days, fire-blessed,
metal-weakened, my temperament's curse—
once called the black bile—

fear death by drowning and life
by love, am at the age they call, oh....
my volume and density,

not a feather on the expanding galaxy's
latest exhale, this gender's called other,

my beloved's the answer, the children
are many, they are stars
of a winter night,

and as for religion—I'm a droplet
on the spider's wide-flung web,
in old Norse my name means

where we go hereafter, from the German,
she who lords over the same, but in old Greek,

it's the torch of flaming oil,
and rags on a stick, so you can see
your way there and back.

MEANWHILE THERE'S ANOTHER WAR

Sunday in the city, October light at work
Sresurfacing the bark of the bottlebrush tree.

On a held-breath day
put your house in order, say the saints,
but this day of no rest throbs like a frayed nerve.

I like to think about St. Jerome in his study,
a lion snoozing at his feet, a skull on his desk.
He of the wrinkled brow stares off, waiting
for God to send him better words.

This flimsy reverie breaks when the floorboards
creak and the elm creaks back in sympathy.
Cars outside grind their gears, their people
cursing the speed bumps and laughing
and speeding away, as if they'd pulled a fast one,

but on whom? Sometimes I wonder where it is
people drive off to,
and wonder what Rilke meant when he wrote,
more or less, that if you haven't a home
this autumn, you're out of luck.

Autumn in Oakland with the leaves still green.
There's waiting for what will happen
to tighten its skin in the falling light.

Something rustling at the fingertips,
the continual silk of what slips through.

WHY I HAVE SO MANY

Serpentine, sandstone, quartz, and granite
Remind me of nights with, nights without,
stone's throw, a thrown stone, an avalanche,
sand dune and sandstorm at Stovepipe Wells,
the rock that can't stop rolling,
the pebble in your shoe, and Jack

came tumbling with his Jill so quickly;
but a stone can be a shard, insoluble and quiet,
which has a human feel, is a made thing
that's chipped off sliver by—

chip off the old—his on the shoulder,
hers under the tongue, like ice;

and out of nowhere at night as when
a window shatters, or that lonely rock
with his only Sisyphus;
or the down-falling where riverrock
runs smooth, washes clean, rocks you
to sleep, 'a-bye-baby,

washes the mote from your eye;
for clear speaking, a mouthful; one for you,
one for me; in that fresh roadcut—
time's diary writ slow, a night-table
dreambook, a scribbled-in wishbook,
can you read it—the glacial to volcanic,

the slow stretch and outcrop
of basin to range, all that's hauled out
from under, hurled down from up;
let's end with the quarried and carted,
what's broken to bits,
so much dirt, so few rubies.

CHEERFUL DEFENSE OF THE REALM

Once I used to be and desperately wanted,
but in the beginning I wondered,
though once upon a time I secretly knew.
At first I declared; then I believed.
After awhile I noticed, but not enough.
In the end I still wanted. In the middle
I was lost, very lost. In the meantime
I complained. As a general rule I felt.

When it was over I gently explained
how I had guessed according to the stars.
Apropos of nothing I apologize.
With hindsight I throw up my hands in praise.
Under the circumstances I'd take another.
Given a second chance I'd choose the blue. ☺



CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES
THE CLASS OF JUNE 2002

MATTHEW ADAMS lives and works in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, with his wife Tausha, and daughters Maddie and Lilly. His work has appeared in countless Christmas and birthday packages to family and friends across the United States.

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ANDREA GRAHAM lives in Somerville, Massachusetts, with her bicycle.

JOHN GREEN worked at Stanford University, founding the Video Media Group. A science journalist, he authored *The New Age of Communications* (Holt, 1997) and recently won two awards for short fiction.

LISE HAINES's novel, *In My Sister's Country*, has recently been published by BlueHen/Penguin Putnam. She lives with her daughter, Sienna Haines, whose second hardbound book is titled *My Dog, Shadow*.

FRAN HALL is a mother of two, grandmother of three, author of several, and mentor of many. She is a professor at The University of New Hampshire and lives in Exeter, New Hampshire.

NATHALIE HANDAL is the author of the poetry book, *The NeverField*, the poetry CD, *Traveling Rooms*, and editor of *The Poetry of Arab Women: A Contemporary Anthology*, an Academy of American Poets bestseller.

GEETA SHARMA JENSEN is the books editor of the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*. She won first place in the 2001 *Atlantic Monthly* student fiction contest.

ABBY MILLAGER is a prematurely retired MD who spent her childhood in places like Bangkok, Addis Ababa, and Vienna. Her work has been known to appear in journals. She co-edits *Diner*.

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ROBERT PHELPS lives, writes and plays among artists, townies, and tourists in Provincetown, Massachusetts. He escapes the summer crowds by working at the local newspaper and sailing in the ocean.

ALLYSON SALAZAR occasionally wears glasses and throws pottery. She lives in a wooden house with a kind man and a dog. Weeping and handmade paper are a few of her favorite things.

MARIANNE SHAUGHNESSY comes from a long line of poets and storytellers. A journalist for twenty years in Vermont, she received an Editor's Award from The Peregrine Prize for her short story, *The Auction*.

DIANA SPERRAZZA has produced television for *CNN*, *CBS* and *National Geographic*.

LANE STEWART has won two Georgia Press Association awards. She lives in Athens, Georgia, with her precious daughter, Ansley. Her precious son, Will, lives and works in Greenville, South Carolina.

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ELIZABETH JOHNSTON, MARTHA KINNEY, REBECCA SPEARS, AND ADRIENNE CASSEL are all members of the graduating class of June 2002 whose work does not appear in these pages.



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