NORTHWEST REVIEW

a literary journal for all points on the compass
COVER ARTWORK:

Battlefield #3, Chlorophyll print and resin, Binh Danh, 2005

Binh Danh's recent work involves found photographs of battle, which—through a unique chlorophyll process he invented—he transfers directly onto tree and palm leaves. "In this piece, I am interested in the landscape of war," he writes. "The thick veins of this leaf are like fingers, feeling the landscape and remembering the past."
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DEAR READERS—, *A Letter of Welcome* ——— vii

**FICTION**

MICHELLE LATIOLAIS, *Caduceus*  ——— 3

JEAN THOMPSON, *Soldiers of Spiritos* ——— 73

TRACY DAUGHERTY, *Shopping with Girls*  ——— 99

JOAN SILBER, *Fools*  ——— 118

PETER HO DAVIES, *The Name of the Great Detective* ——— 150

CORRINA WYCOFF, *Background Noise* ——— 160

**ESSAYS AND CREATIVE NONFICTION**

LYNNE SHARON SCHWARTZ, *Harmony* ——— 15

STEVE DAVENPORT, *No Apology for Happiness* ——— 36

MELISSA FRATERRIGO, *The Facts of Life* ——— 52

**POEMS**

DAVE SMITH, *Fig Tree; Dissection* ——— 8

BARBARA RAS, *Floating Islands, Lake Titicaca* ——— 10

BRIAN TURNER, *Among the Guests in Jordan; Stopping the American Infantry Patrol Near the Prophet Yunnis Mosque in Mosul, Yusef abu Ali Shows Them the Cloth in His Pocket and Explains Its Meaning* ——— 11

YUSEF KOMUNYAKAA, *Aubade at Hotel Copernicus* ——— 13

MAJOR JACKSON, *Rose Colored City* ——— 23

MARK JARMAN, *The Wee Spider; Last Walk at Home* ——— 25
Dear Readers—

April finds *Northwest Review* in a second new home. In August the journal moved from its longstanding premises in Prince Lucien Campbell Hall—where it bloomed under the gentle hand of chief editor John Witte—to Columbia Hall, home of the Creative Writing Program. When the Program was offered residence in the splendid Alder House on the University of Oregon campus, the *Review* came along.

Now twice transplanted and ready for spring, *Northwest Review* nevertheless seems more wildflower than cultivar—at least from the vantage of this harried new editor. By design, the journal will be unpredictable, its beauties the discoveries of genre editors working independently and reaching outward for the best new work to be found. Chance and transformation will govern the journal’s future, too—all editorial positions will rotate among the Creative Writing faculty here. Our vision will be manifold and often-changing—the better to surprise those beauties into our pages.

For myself, I will say that it’s a fearsome and lovely task—and however often I calm myself with a gardener’s metaphor, the stir of finding new writers and work, the intimidations of a production schedule that doesn’t relent, and the responsibilities we owe as editors to both our faithful and newly converted readers all percolate through. For fifty-one years *Northwest Review* has seen near-continuous publication; for twenty-nine of those, it was guided by the same steady hand.

So I would like to offer my appreciation to John Witte, whom many of you know, who first published you or sent a kind word on a poem, or simply presented the sort of writing you wished to read. We salute his gracious presence over the years. We salute his dedication to publishing both the writers of the Northwest and writing from
beyond our regional and national borders, often through work being translated for the first time. And we salute the poet in the editor, whose voice we turn to now in his luminous new collection, Second Nature.

Along with my co-editors Ehud Havazelet and Garrett Hongo, I welcome you to this new era of Northwest Review and to our first issue. You'll find tales of fracture and recollection, politics enraged and subdued, writing from the interior and reaching into the hinterlands, the pulse of jazz, thrum of girls shopping in the local mall, one baby unborn—sheer precipices in language, along which we gladly fall. You'll find Yusef Komunyakaa, Joan Silber, Nicholas Christopher, Lynne Sharon Schwartz alongside emerging writers Brian Turner, Melissa Fraterrigo, Corrina Wycoff, and many others. Wildflowers all.

—Geri Doran
Eugene, 2009
It was too early to call to set an appointment, too early to deal with that office’s feckless secretaries, too early to be in a bad mood, and now the kettle’s harmonica whistle began to hum, giving the harpsichord picking out the beautiful Couperin some competition. Soon the kettle whistle would insist that she turn and walk to the stove and turn the gas off: “Okay then,” she said to herself, “do this—you can do this,” but she didn’t.

She eyed the doctor’s card propped at midnight against the coffee grinder so that she could not miss it as she made coffee in the morning—and now she was making coffee, or starting to, and it was bright out and the kettle mounted its pitch. She stood before the kitchen window holding the handset and did not turn to the stove.

She wished it were evening now, wished for the great relief of the calendar inking itself out, of day done and night coming, of ice cubes knocking about in a glass beneath the whiskey spilling in, that fine brown affirmation of need.

Instead, across the street the crape myrtle shone livid in the sunlight, and the woman with her prodigious bosom walking her jouncy French bulldog with a similar chest failed to amuse her . . . when always in the past, always . . . Some mornings she called her sister in New York, “it’s like they’re both wearing torpedo bras—it’s just the funniest sight.”

Her heart was racing and she felt odd, jangly, chemical, everything in overdrive because of this radical thyroid she possessed. The doctor wanted to radiate it, but no, she didn’t think she’d agree to that, or to drinking the radioactive isotope—that wowey-dowey cocktail she’d take a powder on, too. “You’ll stress your heart,” he kept saying to her; “there will be damage.”

She had tried not to laugh in his face, damage! How clever and
heart-stoppingly witless they were, these tenders of the body, how poised for perception that they’d never tumble to, and she had tried to check herself, tried to talk herself down off the jagged precipice of her anger. “He doesn’t know,” she’d say, “he didn’t kill him—it was other doctors; this doctor is doing his best by you,” but the rigid honesty of the precipice was better than the complicated emptiness of home, of trying to get on with one’s life, of the pack of lies one told oneself in order to do so . . .

She listened to the stark, clear soprano voice singing *Leçon de Ténèbres*, listened to the lamentations being sung, and envisioned the one candle in church on Maundy Thursdays being extinguished, and then another and another until the snuffer came down on the fifteenth candle and there was just the cool somber enormity of the stone church and the fine, fine, libidinal darkness . . .

. . . and she felt drawn to the darkness, drawn to how surprising and delicious darkness could be, coming from a movie onto the sidewalk, elation in her voice: “oh, it’s dark out,” or sitting for a time in the garden, drinking wine, her fork stirring every now and then, some bite brought to her mouth, and then the sudden realization, “oh, it’s gotten dark,” and it could be so lovely, and seem so very precious, the palm trees perfectly blacked in across the sky.

She thought about her hand invisible as it reached into his dark closet and moved his shirts along the rod, his shirts still fresh from the laundry in their clear plastic sheathes—that darkness—that darkness, too, was lovely, as was his smell in the dark closet, his smell still there after so many years, that darkness, his death, and the solace she still took in his clothes, or his signature in his books, the black ink in darkness, too, closed between book covers, or the many birthday cards he had written her that lived beneath her folded lingerie, sliding their infinitesimal distances each morning as she pulled open the dresser drawers, “baby,” they said, or “sweetheart,” “my lover, my friend,” all the sentiments kept in the sweet cool darkness called intimacy, and sure, sometimes she slid them from their tiny envelopes and lifted them into the dim light of their bedroom sconces, and the words were as alive to her as they had
been opening them that first time, his happy face smiling at her—he loved giving her gifts...

Their last moments had been in darkness, too, midnight, his body in hers, and the long precious ingot of darkness that stretched between their bodies laid against each other—that dark—that dark, too... but now her body was surrounded by light.

She set the phone down awkwardly on the tile counter and thought that was another reason to distrust plastic, its insipid little clatterings, and so then she did turn and move to the stove. She reached for the screeching kettle, but caught herself, and took up a hotpad instead and now lifted the kettle from the burner. She tapped her finger down against the small lever on the kettle's spout and the whistle stopped. She hadn't even warmed a mug yet, nor put coffee grounds in a filter; she hadn't touched that goddamn card with its insignia of twisted snakes, nor had she turned the flame off beneath the spider, and she watched the gas burn blue and coral and without purpose, without anything on top of it to boil. The flame might as well have been cold, but it wasn't, and she knew that if she set her hand down over it her skin would crisp and burn, would become a kind of steak with too many bones. Could she eat it, she wondered, the thumb and four digits, a little sauce, some potatoes mashed with olive oil and garlic to mound up beneath the charred palm?

All the bright white things she was to trust and love, doctors doctoring during daylight hours, the hearty bleached fabric of their lab coats, their bright practiced smiles under the bright white fluorescent lights, and the bright white prescription pads, and all the bright white pages the drug studies had been printed on, and not one of these bright white knights had ever contacted her to ask her what she thought had happened to her husband. No, instead, one of the brightest in their field, a Beverly Hills cardiologist, had derided her for having medical coverage from Kaiser, an HMO, this doctor she had paid sixteen hundred and seventy-five dollars to for a consultation on her husband's death—he had derided her, had said in one breath, "What quality of care did you expect from an HMO?" and "No, the care your husband received at Kaiser was just fine."
But the care her husband had received was not “just fine.” In fact, he had really not had any care, just one prescription drug put on top of another and no doctor paying any attention. Nine months on a drug at its highest dosage, a drug to keep him well, a prophylactic, and no doctor bothered a checkup, a monitor! Only a coroner in his windowless lab had been honest. “I see deaths from prescription drugs all of the time,” he affirmed, “but usually anti-depressants.”

She turned the knob on the stove slowly and the high flames guttered and shrank and disappeared and then fire took up again in the center ring, a small simmer of a flame and then no flame at all, just the black iron spider against the white enamel stove.

She walked across the kitchen to the cupboard and reached down one of their mugs, always a set they bought, two, their summer mugs, or the Christmas mugs, or the two beautiful majolica mugs garnered on a trip to San Francisco, all there in the cupboard like old couples, their handles arm in arm. She had tried to buy just one mug for herself, a special mug just for her and not one of a set, but that mug had leapt from her hands and shattered so joyously into the sink the second morning she’d had it . . .

. . . and she was not a dense woman, not impervious to omen or implication, and my god, the sink seemed besotted with its blue shards! “Okay,” she had said to this, too, “okay,” because how else could she read this obvious archaeology, how else? The shards said, You will be alone now, but never alone again from the company of loss.

She listened to the Couperin, listened to Jeremiah’s lament, “How lonely sits Jerusalem, that was full of people! She has become like a widow.” How singular this sounded being sung in Latin, the harpsichord beneath, and she thought that somehow the contemporary world forbade lamentation, forbade the rending of clothing and the gnashing of teeth, and it was something she had never allowed herself either, any public display of grief, and yet one man had written on a blog that she had “sobbed” at the funeral in front of six hundred people, but he was writing out his own fictions; the most she had allowed herself was a word choked on here and there. What she had allowed to show was her anger, which, of course, was so much less
acceptable . . . Only God was allowed His anger, only God.

Now, she ran the faucet until hot water came and she placed a mug beneath the stream, one of a pair they’d bought in a small shop in Tahoe City, Italian, and painted with white flowers against a lattice of yellow and green briars. Its mate sat on the shelf in the cupboard, sat there as though it looked down with propriety upon the coffee making. Okay, she thought, you get the card, and she picked the doctor’s card up from its place before the coffee grinder, her thumb atop the twisted snakes, and pulled open the glass-fronted cupboard and dropped it into the mug. Stay there for a while, she murmured, and then she took down a brown paper filter and a filter cone.

In the grinder, there was ground coffee already and a powder snowed darkly down upon her hand as she lifted the lid and emptied the coffee as dark as glacial soil into the filter. Sometimes ground coffee smelled like tuna, one of the odd truths of the world, but this morning it smelled like the rich Italian roast that it was. Why go, she thought, why go to a doctor at all? She knew a woman named Catherine who hadn’t been to one for almost fifty years and Catherine’s own father had been a doctor, but there was a bit of the “mortification of the flesh” about Catherine, too. And unlike Catherine, she wasn’t exactly ready to hang herself upside down like a flower to dry, her head full of blood, her body friable. Desiccation would come whether she exalted it or not.

She emptied the hot water from the mug and then fitted the filter to its lip and passed across the kitchen to the stove. How beautiful the hot water made the coffee grounds as she bloomed them, first a small amount of water, just to moisten, just to plump, and then she swamped the cone with water and stood, waiting, the kettle held aloft, and then she swamped the filter again.

How much damage to the heart, she wondered, and then she knew what for, the doctor, knew why she’d make an appointment and go. Information. She was going to the doctor for information, and then she laughed thinking that was precisely what Eve had been up against with that serpent, too: “You surely shall not die.” Hadn’t that been what that snake had promised, also?
FIG TREE

Dave Smith

Maybe it’s grown back, enigma, blossomer,  
shrouding the fence I helped them build,  
as a boy does, watching, asking all but  
unanswerable questions, its age like mine,  
visible in the limbs, thickened flesh, nicked  
body no one hears groaning its statement,  
its broken smell of green buds all at once  
all opened, the way the mind can be, too,  
when a song strikes, or a book goes flat,  
or a girl’s legs, that hissing of skin,  
make a heartbreaking sign if she moves.  
My future’s revealed. I know the force  
that longed to see it fall, damp Spring’s  
rot, but why split its flesh willingly,  
its skins lie, each little torso raw, pink,  
alive to merciless sun that blisters? I saw  
my grandmother’s thinned hair, the black  
roots as she bent, lifting the unwanted.  
Staves, teeth like a rat’s, ran in rows  
where I banged my stick to knock away  
fruit’s white, drying, eternal message.
I found an essay in the reading room of Jiffy Lube, a memoir, a medical student walking us through the steps. It meant discovery as old oil was getting flushed, pages readers soiled and tore like personal history. Gaps required a leaping mind, maybe the kind the body had, I thought. No news of what sex started things, its failed poetry, if different parts decoded fear or pride, or football's broken shoulder and chronic ankles, not even the rheumatoid arthritis that bends a lady's fingers like those hooked ones sitting quiet beside me. I thought how I loved a woman's long, slender, fingers, and remembered the blunt, fat stubs my daddy wrapped around screwdrivers. Go get me one, he'd scream, whatever it was one of, and I wouldn't see which screw, bolt, washer meant something, so I tried to keep the hole in mind, if there was one, and looked in the usual drawers like he told me to, pushing aside this or that wrapper laid over spark wires, plugs, torn envelopes, and dug into stashed car mags, rods rehabbed, welding tips, tech talk, chrome's lingo, paint layered like desire, then way deeper than imagined, still hoping only to find what I was sent to bear back, I saw the hand, the body coiled, naked, sun running on it like gasoline. I could feel her suddenness, like match or spark. Stunned, I stayed long, the long scream the least of what I would remember, and keep, still, like prose.
The lake is so big, mountains
in the country on the far shore are no bigger
than the teeth of a saw, and it is big enough for many islands,
Aymara here, Quechua there, and Uro, who make
their islands out of reeds. For twenty-five days,
they carry out tortora grass to throw down on the water,
until the mass becomes a wide nest dense enough to hold
houses, a museum, a church, all made out of the same stuff,
monochromatic villages of straw, odd at first, but then look
at the houses on the shores of the lake that rise
out of the dark chocolate earth, unpainted exterior walls
more bitter than sweet, so that you see
an entire town made unmistakably of dirt.
But on the floating islands, they’ve built a ten-foot flamingo
out of reeds so tourists like us can rise above the often squishy mat
that we know is rotting from the bottom but have no idea
how often more grass has to be thrown down to make up for decay,
and you wonder whether that means they have to move the
museum
of dead birds and the church, with its unexpected candles,
and the flamingo, where up here we’re waving now for the camera,
oblivious to the equation of how much grass will support
how much weight, or which straw will be the last.
Kaashif sits on the stone wall surrounding the tents, his one leg dangling. Stray dogs skulk in the shadows as the old women gossip over the cooking fires at dusk. He thinks of his crippled Uncle, the dead one from the bombing four years back, how before that he bent over a crutch fashioned from the limb of a tree, his right foot canted sideways, twisted outward, the story of how he was hobbled under Saddam an unspoken part of the family history, a mystery still; Kaashif wonders if this is to be his fate, too, to be the unsaid, the boy with one leg and a tree limb in place of the other, the boy with missing pieces.
Do you see this, this weathered strip of cloth, the golden threads of its embroidery—how inconsequential it must appear to you, only a strip of cloth, but my young friends, this silk and cotton dyed black was once draped over the Black Stone; it is from the *Kiswa*, and it is only with me now because my father made the long journey to the *Kaaba*, to *The House of God*, and walked the circles as the angels once circled God’s throne, and he kissed that Black Stone, and ran between the hills, as you must, long before any of you were even born; my father traveled so very far as part of our religion, something I have not yet done, this war of no help to me in that, believe me.

When you speak to me, do not call me *Hajji*, I have not been so fortunate—and you? You do not understand the words you speak.
I can still see your white blouse & black Gypsy skirt with veins of pepper-red running through it in Warsaw, turning a corner in the eye an hour before our fingers trace an inscription on the house where Chopin’s piano tumbled from a window. As you speak I see a city gutted by war & torn down to stone clouds, then rising in an Italian painter’s drawings. Did the shuffled blueprints recast the sky? Next morning, exiled between the eighth & ninth circles, the train outruns the rakish yellow fields uncoiling. Did we talk about how California light melted the crystal rib of earth in Milosz’s poetry, & did we wish for his translations of the spirituals as a bridge back to the true man? Upturned soil shines among naked roots. Each question is an eye begging for its hook. I slowly turn away from you. Running trees & windowpanes flash quickly as a dead man’s deck of cards. But when I open my eyes, another beauty pierces my heart. A medieval light falls on the buildings. How many lamentations bounced off these walls & kept traveling beyond? I know this is how place & time own humans. Copernicus’s heavenly bodies guide us along cobblestones up to the castle & down to the river, into the dragon’s cave, through Krakow’s baroque cul-de-sacs where
blue begins. How many ghosts followed us into the basement to Muniak's bebop gig to hear the saxophone argue with the piano? A blade of grass in a bottle made me sing & count footsteps to the hotel. Of course, we knew we'd face the heavy wooden doors guarding other tales. We knock till the clerk spies through a peep & uncouples the latch, & hand-in-hand, we enter to be strummed till mercy unfolds torn wings in the dark, till the forsaken heals. We have no vows or oaths to mend the tongue, but something says this isn't the time to remember Galileo's trial. A sparrow or a lark seeks refuge in the rafters, promising us the night's thirsty rapture. If there's blood in a stone, we shall find it. If there's sugar in fruit, an ant trail will cross our threshold. The waning moon is Sagittarius. The arrow is out of its quiver, & we know the sun will bring bees at dawn to work the poppies.
When I was eleven I began a novel about twin girls. It was a crime novel: a body, a hotel room. I was fascinated by hotels though I had never stayed in one. To stay in a hotel seemed the pinnacle of glamour and sophistication. At that age, indeed well into adulthood, until I actually stayed in one, I dreamed of hotels. I longed to stay in a real hotel with a front desk and a lobby with armchairs and carpets and potted plants and uniformed bellhops.

Since it was not from experience, it was probably from the movies that I got the idea of what a hotel, a four- or five-star hotel, and its lobby should look like. The management would be visible and haughty and uniformed and the lobby active with guests yet serenely dignified, the kind of hotel a character in a 1940s movie would check into, where the bellboy would follow in the elevator with the bags and lead the guest to a suite, fling open the windows and unobtrusively accept a tip. Then the guest would hurriedly make an important phone call or receive a visit from a mysterious stranger, or alternatively from some thugs sent to threaten him or beat him up, and if the latter he would awaken, dazed, send for Room Service and soon a wheeled tray would arrive with a bottle of champagne and a huge silver dome covering the meal; or if he never awakened from the beating, a maid in a white ruffled apron and cap would discover his body when she came in with a pile of towels and would start to scream. My novel would take place in a hotel like that.

I worked on the novel in the most dismal and unhotel-like of places, in school, in the seventh grade. The last class on Friday afternoon was reserved for Creative Arts. The week was almost over, so I suppose the authorities thought there was no harm in spending a smidgen of time on something as harmless as the arts—an afterthought, a dessert after the meat-and-potatoes subjects. Most of the class drew
or did clay modeling but a few of us were permitted to sit at our desks and write. For forty-five minutes I would cover sheet after sheet of a yellow legal pad, flipping each one over in haste.

The plot turned on the girls being identical. One of them would die and the other would be left bereft, either to carry on her sister’s life or to solve the mystery—I never figured out exactly where the story would go after the initial murder. The notion of twins, like that of hotels, was another of my secret fantasies. I never imagined I was adopted, or a changeling, as so many children do, but I did suspect I might be a twin. My thoughts would often unreel in dialogue, as if I were speaking to someone, a double, who would receive my words with perfect understanding. I had friends, but they knew me piecemeal; only this double could receive and thoroughly grasp everything about me. My thoughts and feelings, my doings, needed to be put into words and offered to this double for validation. Until then, they felt less than real, less than achieved. Only words—formulated and offered—could give my life the definitive stamp of reality.

So I spoke to her, my imagined twin, but it was I who contributed her half of the dialogue. This left me puzzled and uneasy. Where was she? I overheard that my mother had had several miscarriages and that one of those pregnancies was twins. It wasn’t out of the question, then, that I too could be a twin and my double had died at birth. I imagined that my family had conspired to keep this secret from me, thinking it would distress me, but the uncertainty and puzzlement were even more distressing. The vanished twin would explain why I felt vaguely lonely and kept trying to talk to someone exactly like myself who would understand me effortlessly, and why she didn’t answer. Later on I learned that some fetuses start out as twins but one embryo fails to develop; perhaps it emerges with the placenta or just melts away somehow. I cultivated the notion that I’d been half of such a pregnancy—this notion exonerated my family from being unduly secretive—and that it was my undeveloped, unborn double whom I kept trying to talk to. That must be why my early novel had twins as its main characters, and why one of them had to die.

I didn’t finish that novel in the seventh grade. Either the term was over, or Creative Arts was abandoned, or I lost interest or didn’t know
how to proceed with the plot. From that effort, though, I grasped instinctively that writing was a place to indulge one's fantasies and try on costumes, to mask and multiply the self.

After I grew up, the story about the twins kept nagging at me. I moved around a lot and carried the idea with me, but was never able to make any headway. In the early years of my married life my husband got a Fulbright grant to study in Rome. While I was there I tried to concentrate on writing, but I was not successful. All I could come up with were the beginnings of novels filled with violence and mayhem that led nowhere. It frightened me to think that I could harbor such violent fantasies, and so I would abandon them. Not a very professional attitude, but I was far, then, from taking myself seriously as a writer, and from accepting my lurid fantasies with the equanimity I later acquired. Sometimes in desperation I thought of reviving that old mystery story about the twins and the hotel room that I'd started in the seventh grade, but I never got beyond thinking about it.

Years later, when I was teaching in Southern California and after I had written several other books, again I attempted that unfulfilled mystery begun in the seventh grade. Again it was about identical twins, and rather melodramatic. As before, one would die and the other live on, forever missing her sister. And again I found myself yearning for a double—a gifted writer—who perhaps could help out by providing a first draft. First drafts are always the most difficult part of writing, and I have always wished someone could do them for me. Afterwards, I'd be more than happy to rewrite as much as necessary.

This time, even without an accommodating double, I did manage to write a good bit, but again never finished. I couldn't work out the plot, but even more, I couldn't work out what it all meant, what it was for. The story was a series of calamities befalling a family, but it had no underlying purpose. I think I simply enjoyed heaping tragedy at the doorstep of this unfortunate family, out of a masochistic anger that I had agreed to teach in Southern California, alone and alienated. Evenings I would eat dinner in front of the TV news. It was 1991. I watched the Gulf War—missiles exploding in air like a fireworks display, the commentators insanely gleeful about the new
technology—and I watched the Los Angeles police beating Rodney King with their clubs, a scene shown every evening for weeks. After dinner and the war and the beating, I read. My stint in Southern California was ten weeks, so I was reading the longest novel I could find, Alessandro Manzoni’s *The Betrothed*, which vividly depicted the fourteenth-century plague. Decaying, pustulating bodies lay crammed together in smelly shelters, while two forcibly separated lovers searched for each other. No wonder I took out my frustration on that poor family I invented.

For a long time after that, I carried those melodramatic pages with me—one twin doomed in adolescence, the other doomed to live bereft—wherever I went, but couldn’t make anything coherent out of them. Meanwhile I kept writing other books.

Very soon after the September 11 attacks on the twin towers of the World Trade Center, I enrolled in an evening course in Harmony. I’d started picking out tunes on the piano when I was four or five years old, and at six I began taking lessons. Even though I took piano lessons for thirteen years and became a fairly decent amateur pianist, and even though I went diligently through all the scales, chords and arpeggios, I never achieved a coherent understanding of theory and harmony. For years I mused on and off about remedying this lack and even tried on my own with books, but had little success.

The attack itself was so arresting and unanticipated that I could barely think about anything else. Writing felt impossible. The event was a boulder in my mind that I couldn’t get past. That entire autumn, the downtown site was all everyone in New York thought about and talked about. A half mile north, you could see thin curls of smoke still rising, slow and reluctant. When I closed my eyes the iconic images of the debris lined the insides of my lids. The newspapers were filled with stories of the dead, new and unforgettable gory details coming to light daily, alongside the dense, specious language of political and military maneuvering.
One night, as I was leafing through a brochure of concerts and courses offered by a local music school, my eye caught a description of the Harmony course. The next minute I was filling out a form in the back of the brochure. I suppose I wanted to focus my attention, if only for two hours a week, on a subject as far as possible from downtown Manhattan. That must have been why I chose that moment, of all the moments since I stopped taking piano lessons, to become a student of Harmony.

The class was held in a building near Lincoln Center that in the daytime served as a public elementary school for children gifted in music. Our room was a first-grade classroom, not too different from the seventh-grade classroom in which I had begun my mystery novel about the twins, but everything was on a smaller scale, befitting younger children. The walls were lined with the letters of the alphabet in capitals and lower case, as well as with pictures of animals, their names printed below in that clear typeface used for small children. There were children's drawings hanging on the walls, too. In the midst of the mourning outside those walls, the downtown air thick with the smell of smoke bearing the traces of charred flesh, it was soothing to gaze at crayoned pictures of A-frame houses with curling smoke—innocent smoke—wafting from squat chimneys, of daisies and horses and tricycles, trucks and dogs and oceans made of parallel wavy lines.

We didn't sit in the tiny first-grade chairs—they were stacked up against a wall while we used metal folding chairs—yet there was a sense of miniaturization about the class. Everything, including the room itself, was small and enclosed and manageable. At the front, to one side, was an old upright piano. Facing us was an old-fashioned blackboard. Three horizontal rows of chairs were set up, six chairs in each row, but they were not filled. The class had about eight or ten students, but some nights only five or six attended. I never missed a class. It was the happiest time of my week; I looked forward to it.

The teacher was a very animated, slight, good-looking mustached man named Victor, around forty or so. On the first night Victor instructed us to go out and buy a small music notebook, which I duly did, and I took it to class each week, along with pencils with
good erasers, feeling that I was back in elementary school, though I enjoyed the Harmony class more than I had ever enjoyed elementary or any other school, far more than I had enjoyed the seventh grade, despite the bonus of Creative Arts.

Victor was an ideal teacher. He always arrived promptly. He shimmered with energy and taught with enthusiasm. He moved swiftly and wrote swiftly on the blackboard, his rendering of the notes possessing a dashing grace quite different from my clumsy, childish efforts. He began the course with the most fundamental aspects of theory, the major and minor scales, the chords, the intervals, all of which was familiar to me, but I didn't mind the repetition. I had learned it piecemeal, not in any orderly fashion. Now I loved the order, the diagrams, the mathematical underpinnings, the way everything fit into a stable and superbly logical whole. Victor progressed weekly from the simple to the more complex, making everything clear and manageable. He taught us about the circle of fifths—the major and minor scales arranged in a perfect circle, a rational, balanced miniature universe—and he made it so clear that I thought I could never forget it. But I have forgotten it, mostly.

Along with the technical material, Victor regaled the class with savory anecdotes about music, musicians, and amusing moments and milestones in the history and development of harmony, and I took copious notes in my little notebook. As he spoke, in his witty and animated way, about the intricacies and subtleties and private jokes of harmony, it seemed there was nothing else of importance in the world except this subject, Harmony, which was of surpassing, crucial importance. For those two hours, my attention was heartfelt and thorough. Everything outside was forgotten; it was as if the attacks had never happened. Only harmony existed.

In school I had never been one of those students who crowd around the teacher after class, yet here I often stayed a few extra minutes to ask Victor questions. These were not merely pretexts to prolong the respite, however. I had serious and pressing questions about harmony and felt I could not go home unless my curiosity was satisfied. Today I remember none of these questions nor their answers.

Each week he gave us homework. We had to devise simple
harmonies—eight or so bars of music—for four voices, bass, tenor, alto and soprano, which meant making up four little tunes that fit together according to the principles of harmony. I enjoyed doing my homework—not least the very idea of homework—and would usually do it as soon as I got home after class, so I wouldn’t forget the points in the lesson that needed to be incorporated in the homework. Each week Victor would put one person’s homework assignment on the blackboard and we would analyze it to see how well it conformed to the principles of harmony. The night he asked for my assignment I was quite excited. I tore it out of my notebook and handed it to him with a flourish, which made him laugh. He dissected my homework, and though it contained a few small infelicities, overall it was fairly successful, and I was as proud as if I were in first grade and had read aloud, to near-perfection, a passage from a Dick and Jane primer.

As the term drew to a close, he suggested that we might want to take the next course in the series on harmony, in which the homework would no doubt be more complicated. I considered taking this course but never did.

I no longer remember any of the other students, yet I think of them, vague warm bodies in the seats around me, as my companions during that awful time when, outside of Tuesday night’s Harmony class, the city was grieving and awash in confusion. I still have my little notebook with all my homework assignments and class notes—the one assignment I ripped out to hand to Victor sticking out with its jagged edge. I look at it sometimes, without opening it, and am reminded of that oasis of harmony, Tuesday nights at six-fifteen, moving from the luminous blue-skied shocked autumn into the cold winter of resignation, through the various kinds of intervals, through consonance and dissonance and inversions, and always the perfect foundation of the circle of fifths, while outside the little room came anthrax and Afghanistan and the daily funerals and the recovery of body parts.

When the course was over the world outside still remained, and what was I to do about it? I thought maybe it was time to write something again. If I stop writing even for a couple of weeks I worry that I’m not really a writer anymore, and that feeling returned in
force. I would have to write something about what had just happened in New York City, because it was still a boulder in my mind and nothing else could get past it. But where to begin? Once again I remembered those old pages in my desk drawer about the doomed twins from the family on whom, in my loneliness and frustration in Southern California, I had heaped tragedy, a tragedy that hadn't added up to anything useful in a literary sense.

I took out those old pages, and in this new context of the terrorist attacks, they made sense. At least I saw a way they could begin to cohere. As before, one twin would die early on, and the remaining twin's grief would be evoked later on as a memory. But the story of her life would have to be redesigned, for along with the private tragedy would be added the greater, public tragedy, the two permeating each other. The narrative would no longer be an assemblage of pointless mayhem, but could take a useful place in the larger world, as an attempt to make a pattern out of what had happened. It would have the context and the purpose it had lacked before. Instead of creeping around the boulder in my mind I would drill my way through it.

So at last I was able to finish my story about the twins. It was as if my story had been waiting all along for its meaning. I jettisoned the hotel setting. By that time I had stayed in many hotels and was no longer awed by their glamour. But more important, in this new context, hotels no longer mattered. They were like the crumpled up newspaper that you use to set a good log fire and that disappears in the blaze of its own making. Far more significant than hotels were communal grief and shock and their aftermath, the need to undergo and assimilate them. Those would be the core of the story I began at eleven years old in the seventh grade on Friday afternoons at two-fifteen in Creative Arts, decades before anyone ever dreamed that the World Trade Center would be built, still less that it would be destroyed one sunny autumn morning.
When Jennifer and I
near the Ross Island
Bridge pass the two

young men in matching
black combat boots
& white t-shirts

beneath suspenders
that blaze an X on
their backs,

I see them first as partners
taking a late evening walk,
like us, locked arm
to arm, charmed by park
lamps & floral pathways,
then well up with pride,

glorying in the picture
our generation makes,
& think what passes

between us, lust
holier than war
& lovelooks tinged
with righteousness,  
could fertilize a new  
& supreme race,  

but then, one says  
*Wassup sister? White Power,*  
& I snap out  
of my reverie  
& remember the sound  
of History & blood,  

& look over my shoulder  
& sneer my long, teasing dark  
smile & say, *Right*  

*On! Black Power,*  
to which they spill  
out of each other’s  
arms & stomp Nazi-like,  
cursing, Aryan heads bald  
as trophies in gold  

streetlight, & we set off  
to crossing the avenue,  
a soft jog of hand-  

holding that breaks  
in a sprint, back  
to our segregated lives.
The Wee Spider

Mark Jarman

No moment is ever isolated with history elsewhere, drilling its stitches. Still, we arrived at Glasgow, the mouth of the Clyde, through autumn gales, and a steward’s death. “How young they start them,” my mother wrote about our steward, not the drowned boy (we assumed he was a boy, as the ship turned in the storm, bucking the waves to find nobody). The world works and works its machines, but most lives make it and memory breeds its combs and catacombs, part by part. A huddle of us was piped ashore, the ship was a white iceberg on green ice-water, and a piper in his kilt skirled on the launch. Then, a man in camel-hair hunter’s costume opened his case and put his pipes together, and asked him, “D’ye ken ‘The Wee Spider’?” The two played together as the dockside roofs, wet slate like coal, shifted and shone, and their music went reeling across to shore and a pastor’s family from California began its sojourn. Mid-century Scotland. Ah, the twentieth century, the last century now, yet still attached, still holding on. Years later, when I returned to our town—a failing linoleum factory capital that looked across the firth at the real capital as if it were purgatory gazing at paradise—and attended the small dying church my father served,
with the old who were old when I was a child,
I was told the reason it was dying. “Your father left,”
said a stout man who had been a slim teenager,
a boy who babysat me one night
and brought me water in a china tea cup.
Against the large events of the time, the great shifting
and shining of leaders and nations, this small remembrance,
“Your father left,” from a roughneck on a North Sea oil rig.
So I went down to the beach at dusk, 
and while I walked along the tide line 
below the beach-crowding summer homes 
in a stretch where I did not belong, 
the migrating whale lifted its head 
above the shore break and looked around. 
I swear I think it looked right at me 
with its hieroglyphic eye and asked— 
No, not for help, though it was too close. 
I turned to the decks of drink parties 
and shouted, surf-drowned, across the sand, 
turned back and the whale was gone, all gone, 
back to deep water, back to the tricks 
of twilight, departure, and desire. 
And yet the gray oblong eloquence 
of the whale's head, raised above the surf, 
remains with me, like a held-fast dream. 
And when I look in memory's eye, 
the whale's eye, in its ring of muscle, 
lives again and assures me again 
that no matter how many leavetakings 
there will be other homecomings.
gathers into a towering question
mark of spume
and courses beyond oceans

leaving a wake of debris,
weed, shells, coconut skulls,
a bewitched forest

of driftwood, splintered
oar blades folded like hands
of the dispossessed

whose prayer is an unclenched fist,
the horizon’s tarnished brass band
marking high tide on the sand—

what’s yet to be, strewn
among what’s surfaced
of water’s cryptic history—

and the wave, suspended, scrolls
inward without breaking,
continues, released from continuity,

undulates through sleep,
dunes, dreams, snowdrifts,
duration, wheat . . .
Above a foamy field,  
where the flattened girth  
of distance

smells less of freedom,  
than of earth, crows  
translate the foreign bray

of seabirds. Those  
born inland  
remember the sea.
The pond came complete
with rowboat,
moon, tides, the undertow

of a water rat,
the blinded lighthouse
of a silo,

the bleached hull
of a washed up ark
that served as a barn,

and driftwood
configured into fences
too fractured

to keep out the overgrown
crab apple orchard,
let alone keep in horses.

There must have been
horses. Rain remembered
the scent of manure.

Trampled trails parted
the weeds on days
when wind combed
their daughter's hair
into the patterns
it drew across water.

Sometimes, at night,
the wave that carried
them here, then left

them behind, returned.
He'd wake to the purr
of the battle-scarred tom

they'd found waiting
for them to arrive.
(The daughter was sure

the cat she'd named
Herm was a spirit guide
that would lead them.

Where? the man asked.
Back to ourselves.)
Lying flat in the dark,

he'd hear the wave crest
over the breaths of his wife
and daughter, both deep

in REM sleep, a steady
surge like surf awash
in the cattails and reeds.

Come dawn, the man
was alone on the pond,
faceing away from their
past, the way a rower
turns his back on where
he’s trying to go.
TIMETABLE  
*Charles Wright*

It is the hour of transmutation.
The great blue heron flaps up the creek
   like a skeletal, excommunicated nun.
Similes sift through my hands.

Bone-dusted coffins drift downriver.
The smell of something store-sweet comes in through the open
   window.
Darkness, the great enveloper, envelops nothing.
AUTUMN IS VISIONARY, SUMMER'S THE SAME OLD STUFF

Half-moon rising, thin as a contact lens.

The sun going down

As effortlessly as a body through deep water,

Both at the same time, simple pleasures

As autumn begins to rustle and rinse,

as autumn begins to prink.

And now the clouds come on,

the same clouds that Turner saw.

Half of the moon sees them, half does not.
Autumn Thoughts on the East Fork

Daytime is boredom after awhile, I’ve come to find, and nighttime too.
But in between,
   when the evening starts to drain the seen world into the unseen,
And the mare’s tail clouds swish slowly across the mountains,

Contentment embraces me
With its spidery arms and its spade-tipped, engendering tail.
There must be a Chinese character for this, a simple one,
   but we’ve never seen it up here.
NO APOLOGY FOR HAPPINESS
Steve Davenport

I know this guy. It was thirteen years ago when he first set some words and gunpowder next to metal casings with the intent of being a truth-teller, a dangerous artist, a maker of things that do harm where harm needs doing. If you had asked him back then, he wouldn’t have been able to name specific targets. He had no enemies. He woke up happy; he went to sleep happy. Not the bubbles of giddy nor the flatness of smiley faces, each day the same. His happy was deeper than those, more contoured, and he knew it. Still, he also knew its rep, that happiness gets in the way, that it’s bad for art, that it doesn’t do enough harm to do any good.

Tonight the word is Art.
Tonight the word is Happy.
Tonight the word is Harm.

So there he was, every few days crowbarring the side of his head open and shaking the awful content out onto the table. Bricks, nails, some gasoline-soaked topsoil, a whiskey bottle, a barrel of crude oil, a Molotov cocktail, a handsaw, shards of glass, barbed wire, another broken marriage, prison bars, a tavern, a switchblade outside a tavern. Over the next few years he packed casings with the words and the gunpowder, tamped in the awful content, crimped the casings tighter than drums, and loaded them into small rockets made for a bazooka he then built and calibrated so finely it would bruise his initials on the night air when fired. One night, not too many years ago, it did just that when he carried it to the roof and lit up the sky with himself.

Tonight the word is Self.
Himself, myself, same self.
Tonight the word is Bomb.
The word tonight is Me.

As in I. As in I drive in rectangles above a lake of gasoline carrying news about a friend’s cancer. Overpass Girl’s cancer. As in I drive and drive and I have this friend from childhood who has this cancer and I am making myself angry, layering it on top of my hard-wired happiness. I, I, I, I as in the straight lines of road and railroad track and refinery fence and levee, all of it forcing a script of right angles I trace and retrace with the wheels of this beater van because I have no choice, the engine clicking like synapses firing tiny holes in my brain pan. As in I drive at the end of a hard rain and feel the water table lifting the lake and smell the fumes rising out of the ground, through cracks in foundations. As in I do nothing but bear witness, locked here in my consistent state of good cheer, turning left through the old neighborhood, one block east to west, up and over a set of tracks, turning left at the town’s one tavern onto the main drag, turning left at the next stop sign, left again just over the tracks, and back down the few blocks to the old neighborhood. As in trace and retrace, turn and return until I pull over in the gravel behind a building, turn off the engine, slump down in my seat, sip mash from a flask, scribble ink in a journal, word, word, me, me as in I, as in I sit there and talk to myself about damage and sketch a happy guy in a beater van sketching an angry guy in a beater van, all of it cupped in my navel, wrinkled palm of Narcissus, the innie into which I turn as I crimp more casings. Happiness and Cancer, the likely targets.

I as in homonym of Eye, as in antonym to outward-turning Eye.

Omphaloskepsis. Navel-gazing. If that’s what I’m doing, so be it. I carry news I can’t shake, and it’s turning me inward at the risk of turning me away from what I’ve come to focus on. Overpass Girl. I sit and I sketch and I sip. I’m a hand drawing itself. I’m a hand writing the C word, under which I print its mantra in capital letters. AGGRESSIVE. INVASIVE. METASTATIC. I am trying to stay on task. In my journal I ink the initials like tattoos or bruises.

A.I.M.
Cancer aims to bruise its initials all over my friend. All over. In. My friend. Cancer aims to take Overpass Girl one piece at a time. All I can do about it is write. So I take a sip and I write the word “Dickel.” As in George. As in Tennessee Sour Mash. As in Old No. 8. Got to be the black label or it’s not No. 8. And it’s got to be 8 or it ain’t right. A working man’s whiskey, though Dickel has always used the Scottish spelling, the e-less whisky, to make its boast that Dickel’s as good as Scotch.

Yes, Scotch. Pantalooned connoisseurs, bounce lively off my liquor truck. I wear the black label like a uniform, like a union card. When Old No. 8 began disappearing from liquor stores a couple of years ago, Overpass Girl used a family connection and a gal pal driving her metallic-purple semi to smuggle three or four tax-free cases from Pennsylvania. When that supply dwindled, Overpass Girl found some cases in Florida and Tennessee while on vacation. Thanks to the trunk of her car and a delivery to my door, my liquor cabinet is once again a black-label beauty. Eight bottles wide, four deep. There’s beauty in sameness. Fidel Castro’s wardrobe. Johnny Cash touring in black. My address is Whisky Eden.

Now the word is Paradise.
Now the word is Shame

for what I’m feeling here in my van. My happy up-and-over to Overpass Girl’s getting drug under. Up-and-over’s my natural chemistry, the way I move through good and bad. I don’t take my father’s advice—a ain’t no hill for a high-stepper, son—because I think it good advice. I take it because I have no choice. My blood runs happy. With or without Dickel. I start the engine, tear a poem from my journal, wad it into a little ball, put it in my mouth, and pull back onto the road running along the tracks. I feel good. I have no choice. I suspect I’m lined with dozens of tiny slow-release, self-replenishing endorphin bombs that keep me this way, that keep knocking me from one thing to another.

A few days ago Overpass Girl, minus one breast already, was sedated for a biopsy. The night before the procedure, she sent me
an email with a subject line borrowed from her favorite novel, *Holy Book of the Beard*. "Spit in the face of cancer" is Helga's advice to her daughter, advice that her daughter shares at her mother's wake. In that email Overpass Girl told me there's a letter in a trunk. For me. Heat-seeking with my name on it.

Tonight the word is Trunk.
Is No-Escaping.

A letter for me, to be opened one day, right in there with letters to her grown children, her husband. A letter to be sent if and when. Another bomb. If and when. The letter in the trunk, the letter with my name on it, insignificant in comparison, yes. Nothing like the If and When. The C-Bomb. I understand that. Still.

Tonight I drive. I break the pattern of straight lines and right angles over Gasoline Lake and head up the Great River Road. I stop occasionally to look at the dark, choppy water and write. I don't think the Mississippi River can do anything Gasoline Lake can't in the way of miracles, but I sit here in this van, scribble lines for poems in the shape of bullets and bombs, rip the pages out, tear them in twos and fours, make spitballs of them. I carry a print-out of an email she sent me.

Doctor called me just ten minutes ago. . . . He wanted me to know that the lesion on my lung was not cancer. . . . He figured I stayed awake all night worrying. I didn't. I slept like a baby. (Drugs are great.)

I will be losing another body part at some point. A decision I've been putting off. The one remaining breast. Sort of sickens me, but who was it that said it's not the parts that matter? I guess they served their purpose, nursing children and nursing men.

I will do something that spits in the face of cancer. I will write things
that spit-bomb it. I will crimp more casings and light up the sky with myself at the Hyde Park Arts Center later this week.

I make that wild claim in a blog entry. An ex-student who works in Chicago writes to tell me she can’t make the reading. She writes also to talk about Gregory Corso’s “BOMB.”

You remind me of the time we read Corso’s poem in your class, one line per person. I did a version of that when I started teaching, and the kid whose job it was to say “BOOM” brought in a giant drum just for the occasion. He would say BOOM and hit the drum, or just hit the drum really hard instead of saying BOOM, but either way it was very powerful. Powerful enough to spit-bomb death? I don’t know. Good luck.

She means it, but good luck with that is what she’s really saying. Uh huh, sure, if you say so. I do. I say so. I will spit-bomb death. And I will fail because words fail. Writers tell us that over and over. I will also fail because death’s as hard-wired to life as happiness is to me. I look at the river and I’m swept downstream, all the way to Louisiana and a summer job in 1979. I’m punching my timecard and leaving the chemical plant in Geismar for the twenty-minute drive to my parents’ home in Baton Rouge. I’m falling into the backyard pool, a jug of iced tea at water’s edge. I catch myself. I’m sitting here at the confluence of the Illinois and the Mississippi, and I’m derailed once again by this happiness I can’t escape long enough to stay on task. That doesn’t mean I wouldn’t bang a drum if I had one. It does mean I might not bang that drum as long as I should. And how long would that be?

One thing I know: Overpass Girl is lonely. Even when she’s feeling good, her parts cooperating or the drugs making temporary miracles, she’s there with that body of hers, in it, looking for those initial-bombs carved into her tissue, her organs, A.I.M., some days seeing those initials everywhere, mets to the liver, mets to the brain. No way out of the loneliness BOOM except a total cure and enough
time afterwards to believe it’s real. A miracle. Back to that bomb. Miracle-bomb. Failing that, a stay. Five more years. Ten.

The word tonight is Time-Bomb.


I periodically crowbar the side of my head open and pour awful content out onto the table. Natural-born happiness doesn’t negate a real life. I can pour my awful content into casings, crimp them shut, and make a bomb as small as a spitball or as big as the sky at midnight, lit. I can explain what I’m doing, how I’m failing. I can blame it on the happiness that keeps me from staying on task, from doing the kind of harm someone less happy might do. A dangerous artist, a truth-teller, a maker of things that have an effect. I can aim my spit-bombs at Cancer, do my best to blow away Overpass Girl’s bad tissue, erase all those ugly initials carved inside her, the ones that are there and the ones that will be. I can also sit here in my beater van, hide from that trunk and the letter with my name on it, drift with the water to the gulf, sip Old No. 8 from my flask, pour some self-pity on my good cheer, watch the two separate, my happiness rise.

Or I can address you directly, load my bazooka with a letter of my own. Put your name on it. An apology not for my happiness, but for the failure of words, anyone’s, to scrape flesh clean. Maybe you’ll walk out of work one night, a long shift of helping others with cancer, and the sky over the hospital’s tallest point will light up with poems about pills that lift and drop you, about pain, release and return, about the dirt we come from, the bottom land and the terracing up to fields and creeks going the way of steel rods, mesh, and concrete walls for highways that keep people moving over us and past. Maybe the sky will stay quiet that night, you’ll slide into your car, and there on the passenger seat will be a small package, a sheaf of pages tied together with twine and marked with your name. For Overpass Girl.

Maybe your nose or your ears will draw you to it, the smell of a fuse burning slowly or a tick tick tick. Something. You’ll know what
to do. You'll drive in the old direction. You'll head for the overpass, yours because they put it where your ground used to be, yours because it's waiting for a couple of cans of spray paint and your initials, O. G., writ large across it. You'll drive under that overpass, all that concrete, and continue for a couple of miles to the Nest, that place you go for bacon and coffee. There you'll untie or cut the twine and see the inscription.

These words tonight BOOM are Spit-Bombs.

That stuff I said about our hearts making morphine? I am, as you said, in need of none, floating, happy. No apology.
SNOWY
Maura Stanton

No, I'm not sitting around the dining-room table
With my four brothers and four sisters, three sisters-in-law,
My mother and one cat, but I'm there in spirit,
My spirit having crossed six hundred miles
Of snowy Midwest to reach home on the twentieth
Anniversary of my father's death. He didn't drink,
But everyone's lifting glasses of Irish whiskey
And telling funny stories to make him real again.

Hamlet saw his father walking along the ramparts,
But tonight I'm a spirit, too, restless and roaming,
Wandering familiar rooms, peering out windows,
So I'm not surprised when my father pulls in
Down the street (the driveway already full of cars)
And comes slowly up the walk, where the snow's
Piling up, getting deeper. He sees that old shovel
Leaning next to the door, and from inside they hear
Rasping and scraping. But they don't look out
At the shifting banks, assuming it's the snow service
At work, doing the job they were paid well to do.

But since I'm disembodied, I can flit anywhere,
And I slip through the closed front door to admire
The special way Dad lifts each scoop of snow.
Hello, I yell! He looks up, puzzled—did he hear something?
Is someone there inside that swirl of snowflakes?
Yes, it's me! But though he comes closer, peering
Over the tops of his wet glasses, he still can't see me.
He thinks I'm just a gust, a flutter of wind,
And though I know he’s right, I'm only nothing,
I put my ghostly arm on his parka sleeve,
And wave, and shout, and jump up and down,
And blow at the snow with a mouthful of hot words.
I've kept your card some thirty years
that said you'd watch my future
with confidence and care,
that told me I'd come close—
a card that buoyed a young man
drifting some distance beyond
the parameters of grace.

We never met,
yet avuncular clouds followed me
at a discriminating pace, where
without boat, raft, or old log,
I thought I might somehow cross
the metaphorical seas . . .
Those days, just two prizes
for beginning books—and finishing
second best, I had little appreciation
for the good gift I'd got.
Doggedness alone suggested
I might eventually turn up
a bone—then, I had no idea
how long you'd worked,
how late into the empty night
you'd thought before anything
came, how deep those hours were,
way past sleep, which was the lonely point—
to stay alive as the work was all
there was. You could well have edited
the stars . . .

You sent that
postcard, a consolation prize,
a spare chart to prepare me
for the heart I’d need
to handle the recurring matter
of my fate. No pity, just that
my work had strength, structure,
and dignity, and, undeserved
as it now surely seems, that
kept my head above the waves
with most of my half-formed dreams.
How you knew the amount
of mercy to portion out
that would not wreck me,
divert my course with praise,
the precise measure that would
work its prescription in my
bull-headed blood, and keep me
going regardless of success—
the customary lies—is beyond me
as the metaphysical, earth-bound
skies.

If there’s another life,
it is, by definition, a reward, but one
gift here on earth was you—
and now one more good name
on our list of loss. No one’s father,
here or anywhere, ever saved them
from the usual despairs? Mine lived
into his 70s but showed no interest
in my affairs.

No, it was your note
on that university card that kept me
rowing across my dark
young years, kept me dog-true
and on the job in spite of contests,
crap shoots, handshakes in hotel rooms,
the half truths that abandoned me
for decades to committee meetings
at East Jesus State, where,
despite it all, I'd go up faithfully
on the roof at night with you
and bring my class—one who
recently wrote that all elegies
are really about "me,"
and I see of course he's right.

Yet
when I wake at night, as I often do,
I sometimes hear, like you, the deep
blue music of the spheres, and something
like a motor, as you said not long ago,
a cosmic whirligig and gears
let go somewhere in the universe—
I turn then toward the unmatched
markings of the stars—steady
against the dark, clear as your verse.
Afternoons, Grandma sent us inside, but we could never nap. Below the hot bedroom, stairs sank to a dirt cellar, crumbling walls that made us wonder if the house would fall in. Twisted onions under us, beet-jars, mud-smell dark of a grave, scratch of mice we’d been told might crawl up inside our dresses. Hours dreaming without any rest, sticky in our thin cottons, till she’d call Linda—Debbie—Lois—through the hazy curtain, wanting us to come out again, pick beans or lettuce from the garden, or carry pails down to the chokecherry bushes by the stock dam.

We’d follow cattle-paths below the bluff and back up, then sneak right past her at the clothesline, climb to the loft where we could look out beyond the windbreak, across
Debra Nystrom

the fields, watch for truck or tractor, cloud
of dust disturbing the air, sign of the men.
She never said *I’m going to die.* I was with her nearly every minute that week, reading, sleeping on the cot beside the high-tech bed that kept shifting her slight weight while the window shadowed over, then grew brighter,

and she drifted or got changed or was given another shot. None of us said it, though finally when she was barely talking anymore, I asked something like *Mom, are you ready? — I just want Brad to be ok* was what she replied. I told her he would be, as if her wish or mine could preside at his sentencing hearing.

After that she was almost entirely silent, but when Dad came the last afternoon, edgy without a cigarette,

checking over the monitors, Mom said she wanted to see him for a while alone, and he was startled. *Pull the door closed,* I heard her tell him, and he did. Out in the hall, staring at the pattern of alternating tiles, I thought of Saturday mornings when Brad and I were little, and Dad and Mom’s room would be not just shut for a time, but locked. Secretly
I tried the knob once. In that house nobody was allowed to lock a door but Dad. Grandma would shoo us to the TV with cinnamon toast to watch cartoons, one fool panic after the next—bolted dungeons, lies and threats, a saw-blade inching toward the tied-up body. Then real people like us, finally: Roy Rogers saving them with his amazing calm.
I learned about sex in the fifth grade. Only they didn’t call it that. It was a course titled Growth and Development and, before class began, each of us took home a photocopied consent form for our parents to sign.

Mrs. Jaros divided our class into boys and girls and in one week’s time, five successive days beginning after lunch, I knew the textbook purpose of fallopian tubes, vas deferens, sperm, egg, blastocyte, embryo, and menstruation, but the sex act itself remained foggy. I imagined my own parents sitting beside one another in bed, deciding to make me. They already had a little boy, so why not try for a girl?

In my mind, I saw them steal inside the powder room with its bare toilet and blue ruffled curtains, hips turned to the side so they could both fit in the tiny room. They faced one another. The fluorescent light above the sink flickered. There was a new bar of Ivory in the soap dish, a box of Kleenex on the tank behind the toilet. A mirror hung from its plastic handle on the wall. They weren’t wearing clothes, but their individual body parts remained unclear, blurred. “Let’s make Melissa,” they said in unison, and then smashed their bodies together, minds twined around the idea of creating a daughter.

By the time Dad flicked off the light and they slid beneath the covers, my life inside Mom had begun.

My own pregnancy started with a digital thermometer. When my alarm went off in the morning, I stuck the thermometer beneath my tongue and remained still, waited for it to beep. I jotted the temperature on a pad of paper at my bedside. Twelve days after my last period, my temperature dipped—the textbook symptom of an egg’s impending release. We tried that night, two nights later and the evening after that, and on the last night, when I imagined the
egg in the process of descending, making its way down the fallopian tubes, I held my knees to my chest like they do in the movies. Pete asked me what I was doing.

“I’m helping your guys with a little gravity.”

“My guys? They love swimming.”

I laughed at the absurdity of this. When we went to the pool, Pete could barely float.

We settled into one another. Pete put his arm around me, and I imagined his swimmers making their way in one great wave, tails flickering, heads steely and intent, lured by an unexplainable force. Surrounding the egg’s luminous shape, two and three deep, their heads poked and prodded her, wanted her, loved her until it happened—the head of one of the swimmers slipped into the side of the ovum; his tail fluttered for a moment, and then he disappeared altogether. The other swimmers saw him and knew that their time was short; the transformation from one cell into two had begun.

I notice a brown spot in my underwear during a routine trip to the bathroom early Monday evening. I am oddly calm when I call the doctor’s office, as if I’m caught in some wind current and must simply stay the course. During the past two months there have been countless bathroom breaks, insatiable hunger, and tiredness that forces me to climb into bed at eight in the evening.

This is just another symptom of pregnancy.

The nurse tells me that brown spotting is okay—safe. She instructs me to put my feet up and relax. “Call us back if there are any changes or if you begin cramping.”

I go upstairs and drop on the bed. Pete startles awake from a nap. He sits up straight, puts a hand on my arm and says, “What?”

Even in the dark I can see the wild, crazy panning of his eyes back and forth across my face. It makes me giggle nervously. And then I tell him about the spotting.

“Are you okay?” he asks.

“I’m fine. The nurse said it’s normal. There’s nothing to worry about unless I start to cramp or it changes to bright red. We’re safe.” I tell him to go back to sleep and position myself on the couch, feet up on
a pillow, book in hand. I replay the conversation with the nurse. Try and relax. I get up every half-hour and check my underpants. There's no change. We're safe.

The following day, I wake in the darkness, stare out the window. The snow falls sideways, it seems, as if this angle helps it plummet faster. We've gotten six inches of snow overnight and they are predicting six more before noon. I make myself a cup of herbal tea, move right past the coffeepot that used to begin my morning routine. Everything changes in an instant. I wrap the teabag around a spoon, toss it in the garbage, and leave the cup on the counter.

In the bathroom I check my underwear. The same brown spotting. I am still not cramping. All the books say women frequently spot. That's what I'm doing. Spotting. As long as it's not bright red. As long as there's no cramping involved. My underwear is clean; but as I sit, four clumps of blood drop soundlessly out of me into the toilet—one, two, three, four. Maroon. Dark red. Reddish brown? The color. It has changed.

I call the doctor, take notes on the back of yesterday's Tribune, and then I call Pete. It isn't until his voice emerges on the other end of the line that mine falters.

When my grandma, a self-described live wire, discovered blood in her underpants at the age of twelve, she was certain she was dying. How would she break the news to her parents? She was the apple of her father's eye. Unlike her two sisters, both of whom couldn't leave the house without fixing their hair or re-ironing their skirts, my grandma was more interested in playing basketball and bowling with her girlfriends, renting a rowboat for fifty cents and spending an entire Saturday on Wolf Lake.

The day that she noticed the blood, she had hopped several fences to get to Iggy's house (it was so much quicker than taking all the side streets), and on this same trip back, one of her legs slipped as she bounded over the ratty wire, piercing her inner thigh with a long, flaming gash.

The blood on the inside of her underpants could have dribbled
from her leg, she reasoned, and I imagine her hunched over a wash basin, scrubbing the soiled pants until the stain faded, the skin on her fingers shrinking into folds.

“Your grandma had to use rags for sanitary pads,” Mom mentioned around the time that our Growth and Development class had begun. “She had to wash them every night. Her mother didn’t even tell her about her period.” For my sake, she said this with incredulity. “Grandma thought she was dying. That’s what little information she had. No one told her anything.”

Dr. M’s nurse tells me to undress from the waist down. She hands me a folded paper sheet and tells me to drape myself with it. I take my place on the examining table and keep my socks on. They are black with grey stripes. Pete flips through a magazine. The TV in the corner of the office plays All My Children and for the first time I see a high-school boyfriend prance across the screen. “I dated that guy,” I point to the TV. “He broke up with me because I wouldn’t sleep with him.”

Pete cranes his neck. “He looks like Chachi,” and changes the channel. This makes me smile.

When Dr. M arrives, the jokes end. She squirts warm gel on my abdomen, runs the smooth head of the Doppler over my now sticky skin. Dr. M can’t find a heartbeat. “It might take a few minutes,” she says as she repositions the wand.

Every movement inside me is amplified. There are gurgles and dribbles, ticks and clunking, but no smooth, rapid-fire thrumming of an infant’s heart. “This isn’t unusual. Sometimes it’s difficult to hear the heart at ten weeks.” Was that it? Every noise sounds like a heartbeat, and I have to hold myself back from asking, Was that the baby?

I’m edgy, but not grim. Dr. M orders blood work and an ultrasound in another office in a nearby town. Pete is quiet. I hate needles and dislike blood, yet in the past few months I have learned to give myself over to those in white coats. This time a different nurse enters the exam room, knots the rubber band, and inserts the needle in my arm. As long as I don’t see the blood eek out, I’m fine.
I look out the window at the piles of snow, flakes the size of popcorn, cars are—I jolt, look down at my extended arm. The syringe feels deeper than ever before and I worry that the needle may pop out the other side of the vein. The tube fills with dark blood. By the time we leave the office for the ultrasound, my forearm has blossomed into the green hillside of some faraway place.

The roads are slick with slush. The plows seem unable to keep up. They push sheets of wet snow, and just as quickly, the cleared paths fill and the heaps on the roadside tower. The dour sky has tinged the snow a pearly blue—an old woman’s badly dyed hair, the high-heel shoes my mother wore as a bridesmaid in her best friend’s wedding, the powder room in the home where I grew up.

Pete turns on the radio. I turn down the volume. It takes ten minutes to travel a mile. The back tires spin, salt pebbles pling underneath the car. Slush and ice accumulate on the windows. Pete rolls down his window, grabs the wiper and lets it beat against the glass. Little chunks of ice skate across the windshield.

Tucked behind a row of overgrown, brick homes in the same shade of beige brick, the turnoff to Maternal Fetal Specialists is nearly concealed; there are two cars in the parking lot. A snowdrift climbs up against the office door. Pete steps in front of me, swings the door back and forth, making a path for me to step through. Inside, the walls are painted egg-yolk yellow, and one wall is lined with framed ultrasounds. I’m surprised by the clarity of these black-and-white images. Any ultrasound I’ve seen is grainy, blurred. Labels etched along the bottom list the age of each fetus.

“Hey, here’s a ten-week one.” I point to an image and both of us take a step forward. I can see the face with its crunched eyelids, arms extending from shoulders, a glimpse of neck. I grab Pete around the waist, hug him. I suddenly realize we’re going to see our baby!

The youngest fetus on the wall is seven weeks old with an oblong head and tail. The doctors here can help me. That’s what I think.

We take our seats and watch a very pregnant woman and her mother make their way down the hallway. I root through the stack of magazines but there are only multiple copies of the same issue—a magazine for mothers-to-be ages thirty-five and older. I try to
maintain the excitement I felt while looking at the pictures on the wall, although something else has arrived. The tiniest twinge of a cramp.

The room the technician ushers us into is no larger than a walk-in closet. The lights are off. It reminds me of the planetarium with the glossy screen tipped near the ceiling at the front of the room. The technician asks why we’re here. It seems like such an odd question. Surely the orders Dr. M sent over explained why we are here. But this question is another test that I must pass. I explain to her that I experienced some spotting the previous day and that earlier today Dr. M had been unable to find a heartbeat. “How far along are you?” she asks.

“I’ll be eleven weeks this Thursday.” When she asks me about cramping, I look her in the eye and say I don’t have any.

She instructs me to lie down on the table, to unbutton my jeans. I pull my shirt up and she pours warm gel onto my stomach. She turns on the computer in front of her, clicks a few buttons, and the screen hums to life.

She waves the wand over the lower part of my abdomen; its cool wetness reminds me of the roll-on deodorant my parents used to share. An image appears on the screen. I hold on to the ends of my shirt, wait for the technician to talk. She shifts the wand, taps a few keys on her computer, clicks the mouse, and freezes the image. I stare intently. Squint. I’m not sure what I see.

“What’s that?”

“I’m not the one who does the talking,” she says. “I just take the pictures.”

She tells me that she’d like to take another ultrasound now, one that will allow us to see inside me from a different angle. I’m instructed to take off my jeans and underwear and return to the table. The technician tells me to bend my knees, and I watch her squirt K-Y on a phallic-looking rod that she inserts inside me. She drapes a sheet over my knees and returns to her computer. The room is eerily quiet except for her tapping on the keyboard.

There’s a new image on the screen. A circle with rippled edges. The technician who doesn’t want to answer my questions puts her hands
between my legs and shifts the rod inside me, clicks the mouse. Tap tap, click. The images that she takes line up, until the black-and-white boxes fill the screen.

Something lodges in my throat, obstructs my breathing, and I can’t take in all the air that I need. I tremble from the waist up.

A man in a white coat enters the room. I startle. I’m not wearing any pants and the sheet has crept up to my thighs. But the man in the white coat doesn’t seem interested in me. He looks at the computer screen, barks orders at the technician.

I wonder what his name is.

Under his direction, the technician begins to click on some of the boxes on the screen. “I don’t see anything,” says the man in the white coat. He is animated. He waves both hands in front of him like he might gesture that he is finished with his dinner, ready for the bill. “I’m sorry.”

I look from him to the screen. Something in these boxes has excited him. The fact that we are here, waiting for him to speak, seems to anger him. He keeps waving his arms, and if I were closer, he might hit me.

He tells the technician to turn something on and a rainbow of colors ripples over the screen, a wave of friendly brightness in this dark, hushed room. And then the man in the white coat speaks again. “It’s not even a nice, smooth shape. I’m sorry.” He walks out, shuts the door behind him. I still don’t know his name.

I count. Sixteen images in all. The technician pulls the rod out from between my legs and the black-and-white photos remain lined up on the screen. “So you understand everything the doctor said.” This is a statement, not a fact.

“I don’t know.” My knees are still bent; Pete puts a hand on my shoulder. “I guess,” but I don’t. I don’t know what he said, why he waved his hands like that. Where’s the baby?

“So this will be considered a miscarriage.”

Fingers—the five on each hand—press into my eyelids. A door shuts and Pete puts his arms around me, tries to hold me, but my knees are bent. They will not straighten. This is the position for an ultrasound; this is how you see the fetus.
Please. Please look at me, he says. I shake my head, no.

I was a seventh grader when I finally got my period. My best friend, Tricia, and I had read *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret; Deenie*; and pilfered a copy of *Forever* from someone’s older sister in hopes of gleaning information from Judy Blume that we were sure our Catholic mothers refused to disclose. Both of us kept Kotex pads sealed in envelopes in our lockers. We were determined to be ready. When I finally got mine, a month before Tricia, I was shocked by the sight of menstrual blood. It wasn't anything like what oozed from my shin the summer before, when I stole one of Mom's razors and accidentally sliced off a layer of skin.

Period blood is muddy brown like something long dead; nothing that looked like it could nourish life. After handing me a box of her pads, Mom instructed me to keep clean. While she told me how frequently to change my pads, I thought about my stomach growing to the size of a watermelon, my non-existent breasts finally making an appearance. She didn’t say anything about sperm, eggs, or fallopian tubes. “You might even want to take a second shower—one before and one after school. It's really important to keep clean.” It's just dirty blood, I thought. Mom gave me a gold-colored bracelet that I admired at a neighbor’s garage sale. I twisted the bracelet up and down my wrist, fingered the place where finish curled off the rectangle beads.

I could have a baby. If a man's sperm went inside me, I could make a baby. I felt older.

The day before the D&C, I am wrapped in an afghan on the couch. I’m trying to figure out why my body rebelled. Was it the x-ray machine at the D.C./Reagan airport? Did I swim too hard, not take my pulse accurately? Never a milk drinker, I drank a glass every night before bed. But maybe I shouldn’t have veered from my milkless diet. I stopped using the cream for the rash on my wrist as soon as I realized I was pregnant, but the medicine could have still been in my system. I banged my head on the trunk of the car while loading my carry-on after the trip to Washington, D.C.—did the
trauma of that bruise somehow end this pregnancy?

Mom is spending the day battling the snow—we've gotten a foot in less than eight hours and she is determined to keep her driveway clear. Between shoveling, she calls me on the phone, reminds me to trust in the Lord. Yet I fear this, too. Despite twelve years of Catholic schooling, I am far from religious. Did God take this baby from us?

The bloody clumps are hot and slick. They arrive in thick, irregularly shaped masses and are accompanied by stomach pains unlike any I've ever experienced. When they seize me I double over, drop to the floor, and curl up onto my side. Breathing takes work. I take in short, stumpy breaths, exhale through my mouth.

The pain comes in waves every few minutes. I make fists. Tears and snot drop off. There is a war waging within and I am only a bystander. I position Pete's shaving mirror between my legs so that I can catch the blobs, bring them to the hospital tomorrow. I've already filled three Ziplock bags when I see her: a one-inch tall nub of flesh with four buds—two arms, two legs. In our black-and-white tiled bathroom with the yellow painted walls, I hold her in my palm.

A few weeks after the conclusion of sex education, Mom gave me and my brother a book. She said she wanted us to read it and then ask her any questions we might have. My brother was in eighth grade; I figured at his age he already knew everything about sex. Instead, Mom seemed to think that a fifth-grade girl and an eighth-grade boy required comparable information.

The book, titled Where Did I Come From?, included colored illustrations, larger-print font, and I was sure it was a picture book for a preschooler until I opened it. Inside was a google-eyed caricature of a boy standing on a high dive with an erection, a pool of girls waving at him from below. Another page illustrated a gaggle of girls with oddly sized breasts; the accompanying text explained that breast shapes are as unique as people. One page showed a group of salmon-colored sperm grinning at an egg with blue eyes and eyelashes, one hand on her hip. The sperm and egg appeared both friend and foe. I liked the idea that this new unfolding within my preteen body had
a personality. It reminded me of Bugs Bunny and Garfield and the Chipmunks—Saturday morning cartoons that I hadn’t watched in years. The facts of life seemed harmless and familiar—nothing that broke hearts.

My nurse’s name is Sheryl. Her fizzy brown hair hangs below her shoulders and her earrings are loops made of turquoise beads. She probably vacations in Arizona or New Mexico, I am thinking, when she says in her lily-soft voice how sorry she is for my loss.

In the operating room, Sheryl helps me onto a long table. As I stretch out, the cramps spread and lengthen until the ache extends from end to end. She pulls the cotton gown from underneath me so that my bare backside presses against the table. Once they give me the anesthesia they’ll strip off this thin gown, and I won’t even know it. Sheryl stands at my right, taps my hand, tells me I’m going to be just fine. The anesthesiologist is behind my head. He tells me he likes my socks—they’re black with brown, red, and blue flecks. I look down at them and wiggle my toes. What begins as a thought in my head becomes true through my body. I am surprised at the innocence of this tiny motion. “Thanks,” I tell him. “I was just thinking I need to buy more socks.”

This makes them laugh, and it holds on a second too long. Later I realize this laughter is their condolence.

I wake in a quick instant. The cramps, the ache—all of it gone. I’m back in my hospital room. Pete is here. Dr. M tells me everything went well, that she’ll give me a prescription for an antibiotic. She says she wants to see me in her office next week, tells Pete to keep an eye on me, pats my leg, and turns to leave. But the idea of her leaving the room makes me panic. “The doctor at the ultrasound—

She turns back around and the tears begin to run hot and fast. I try and mimic the way he tossed his arm in front of him to gesture nothing—no viable fetus, no life, but my arm is weighed by the IV, grogginess. “I deserve to know the truth. Miscarriage. He didn’t use the word and that’s what it was.”

“I deserve the truth.”
Dr. M tells Sheryl to get me a Kleenex, and Sheryl dries my cheeks.

"You're the second person this week to complain about him." Dr. M rests a hand on my leg, promises to speak with him, and then leaves.

"Shh, it's okay," says Pete, wiping my tears with his fingers. Something inside me loosens. I close my eyes for a minute and open them again. Someone's opened the curtains. There's sunlight streaming in the room and in it I notice the slow descent of dust. The snow is out there, only I can't see it. There is a postage-sized stamp of sky, a vivid blue, the color of a summer day well in the future, a time when anything seems possible. Pete spoons a chip of ice into my mouth. Nothing has ever tasted so good.

**Well, there was obviously something wrong. Wouldn't you rather it happens now than when the baby is born? Don't worry, you'll get pregnant again.** When I tell a relative about the miscarriage and mention my fear that I might not be able to have a child, she asks, "**Well, can you?**"

People are well meaning. They don't know what to say and feel they must say something. I know that they want to carry the burden in some way, offer words that will make things better. Yet grief is an entirely personal experience.

Now four weeks later, when Pete returns from work to find me on the couch, sitting, he reaches for my hand, takes a seat beside me. "How are you?" he asks, looking into my face as if the answer is written there. I shrug my shoulders. Pete has told me he doesn't think about the pregnancy. He has worked through his grief.

We sit in the stillness. Finally, I find the words. "I'm feeling sad today." There are no signs or directions to explain how to get from this sadness to who and what was before. That path is unnavigable. I can only move forward from this unfamiliar place. The time before now is over.
For me, the lilacs' outburst—once it's here—
always multiplies itself by four
the faithful scent and starriness and color
a self-perpetuating souvenir

of my spring as a self-styled gypsy/pilgrim
when my wanderings quadrupled their perfume.
I cheered-on their mad dash from bud to bloom

in Florence, London, Philadelphia, Boston,
catch Giotto's campanile, then Big Ben,
the Liberty Bell, the USS Constitution
swooning once the lilacs stooped to open,

their purple scepters angling to confer
knighthood on the kneeling, humid air,
sovereignty suspended in each flower

until it seemed to rust and shrivered up.
That year, spring came early to Europe
but in North America an arctic cold snap
brought spring's arrival to a total stop

with bout after bout of April snow,
the hemispheres in league to let me know
that earth could be counted on to show
somewhere on itself an ardent face,
those lilacs just another gung-ho voice
in 1983's collective chorus
of scope and possibility and purpose.

Not an unmitigated lie
(the earth was ripe with possibility,
favors seemed to fling themselves at me)

but it did leave quite a few things out
and all that promise made me profligate
with chance after chance. A bit too late
I realized I'd let go of the habit

of giddy and productive expectation.
Who says experience is education?
It doesn't so much teach as wear you down

though it does train you to sniff out solace
in even the most unpropitious place,
to satisfy yourself with less and less.
I'm working on it; the snow's my witness.

The snow's, in fact, my constant intimate
since here it's almost always within sight.
The mountains look ill-at-ease without it

and even in the valley, we get snowfall
routinely from October straight through April,
our golden leaves and tulips philosophical
about becoming suddenly invisible

precisely when their beauty's at its peak.
Once the snow melts, they bounce right back.
There's no such resilience in a lilac;
at the first touch of snow, its blossoms die. 
I’ve seen it; sometimes, we get snow in May. 
I consider it a payment of indemnity 
for my lilac binge in 1983;

earth has a way of getting even. 
You’d think by now the debt would be forgiven 
and yet my lilac’s still budding in vain.

This year, it’s three weeks ahead of schedule 
and since there’s always snow here in late April 
it’s pretty much guaranteed to fail. 
So I’m both giddy and inconsolable

when the first blossom offers its first star. 
I have to press my face to it, since here 
the scent’s kept secret by the arid air . . .

but soon enough, the sky turns leaden; 
white’s the world’s brief master. Then it’s gone 
and afterward, I don’t know which to mourn: 
this spring’s lilacs or the deft oblivion

that briefly fended off the world I know. 
But it’s hard to stay loyal to the snow, 
when you see each lilac’s bent-over torso,

its unbloomed flowers nearly at the ground 
in the posture of an overburdened field-hand 
or, perhaps, more like a sinner who’s atoned. 
My lilacs stay like this for days on end.

In truth, I’m amazed that they’re still here; 
They’ve never hung on after snow before. 
Maybe plants are tempered by the local air
to tolerate the cold after awhile . . .
Fiesole's olives trees, for example,
undamaged in the '85 snowfall,
since it always snows a little on their hill.

My lilacs may have settled in at last
or maybe it's timing: snow that melted fast;
early buds that hadn't bloomed in earnest . . .

Whatever the reason, they're making progress:
the stunted blossoms sag a little less,
look less bedraggled, if not quite gorgeous,
have managed to possess a sort of grace

for all the world like that of lilacs in bloom.
No one passing would suspect a snowstorm
or even that they've suffered any harm.

I wonder if the same is true of me.
Who knows what a passerby would see
if he paid attention? Maybe I
need to take to heart this dark-horse victory,

the lilacs' frank, if muted, splendor.
Surely it's not nothing to endure.
And I get to multiply by four.
Walk Spirit, Talk Spirit: McCoy Tyner

Michael S. Harper

When you were “Traveling” with Michael Brecker at the Iridium (it was New Year’s: the MLA was in session: I was staying at the Ritz)

dinner was late even with filet mignon and no drinks on the house (Michael was on his last legs, but playing, and sweet, his coffee from nowhere)

You had not recorded in some time: “Traveling” a ditto from elsewhere and sweet (already they were counting the dark days of decline at Yoshi’s in Oakland)

Yet your whole scenario from your teens was up tempo: Lee Morgan in place (Blakey to come: the Jazz Messengers a download from Benny Golson & Trane)

Somehow, in SF, I caught you off-minor from Blue Note; you were with Rashon’s (rhythm section, and I had the keys to a grand piano in San Pablo, on an off day)

Black History was, in 1966, an auditorium of a 120 seats and a locked piano (militance was getting the key: and even with ACLU and union wages it was full)
Decades later I got a call from Atlanta: it was a student who'd heard your orchestrals
(and wintry poems I'd written about the Negro Leagues, Hank Aaron, Josh & Satchel)

What could I tell you about the “Hill” and the Heath Brothers: and you with speed galore
(August Wilson was dead: So was Tatum: arpeggios from elsewhere filled the hall)

I could tell you about our losses: on the Brown campus you had found lightness as filaments (and you got paid despite the signatures of random Alumnae Hall overrides)

To make is to live: you had played my mother's midget grand piano in Los Angeles
(“Naima” solo was a whole afternoon: then we went downtown for the keys to West L.A.

Aisha’s brother was part-time in a pawnshop off Figueroa in a boarded alley approach: when we had the keys rushes to my folks’ house on Orange Drive: parental homelands)

What is the story of the solo on a piano bought for my father who hated piano didn’t play (the scheme of the post office partitioned, even in the registry where Mingus’s sister sang

and so the Watts Local became history: Dexter and Wardell enroute to Union Station) this music was the best even Eric Dolphy could play ahead of me Billy Higgins awake
So we are outside the Jazz Workshop on Broadway in SF: we are both underage
("Little Benny" Harris has written "Ornithology" and left the reservation strung out)

We are on reservation: sachems have already blessed us: Trane's sanctity shines
(while Elvin coaxed to Lexington, Jimmy broken, the sound of "Alabama" somehow lost)

I do not mean it is over: music so divine in our youth nothing else can sustain us
(I filled up a Black History class in San Pablo/Richmond among shipyards to say so)

The keys to the grand piano were pocketed in the soundbank of another generation:
(you fed your children on Blue Note gigs waiting for Wayne Shorter to lead NJ maroons)

We did not wait for miracles: the Reverend King had already framed intentional suffering
(Rosa Parks had already sung in the choir, and sat down: the people walked/talked)

We have carried the nation over centuries: the bill paid: because this is America a copy is
(I remember Ralph J. Gleason at his program in 1964 recording "Afro Blue" + "Alabama")

Elvin was away from the 'reservation' part time: hostesses called waitresses gave succor
("Little Benny" Harris sat at the bar: he said to me, soundlessly, let's move to 'the apple')
He was asking for energy nowhere else than the Bay Area: we should leave Paradise (nobody thrives off the reservation where the people live: Pipestone lives within us)

And so the miracle of new music left the bandstand and the parlor shades at vespers (sacrifice and Sam Hose left the sanctuary of grandstand & work deluxe without pay)

_Trané chanted into and out of "A Love Supreme" as salutation to the Godhead (and so we sold the music in the marketplace where we could not live)_

Our women told us so our children waited to see if it was true afloat in sound (and so we came to see _a um ni pad me um_ as Buddhist prayer without a road to play)

_The ancestors waited: proverbs attested to the sanctum: we left home: traveling_ (in that set space of visualization the tunes thrived: killing us along the way: sanctities: "live")
NELSON MANDELA'S 90TH BIRTHDAY
["LIVE IN THE BODY, LONG AS YOU WILL"]

Qunu, South Africa: “one of the greatest figures
of the 20th century.”

I would dictate this to you by keeping my hands off the secretary
(no piece of furniture is a “secretary” in the British manor: she
would be alive)

I know only a little about imprisonment: 1962 at Pico Station:
11 11 '62
("Paradise Lost" by John Milton with me; Book IV the devil's
kingdom, mine)

I gave up on the self at that interval; my brother in another cage—
same crime
(so little faith in self I thought three Indiana gangsters [white]
were worth insult)

I tried to put them in hell all-together
(meanwhile you sought justice for the whole world)

I tell you this in privacy of my own hell-hole
(trying to break out to repair & restore my soul in body)

I have met the solution: she is kind and smart: and can smell evil
(she tells me about “Alaska” and the Inuit: all in island-camps
shrinking)
You know the 'Snow Lamp' I speak of written by master-poet Robert Hayden
(the discipline of life after death imprisoned in bad gov't: our prophets of space in song)

Somehow I will celebrate what you have earned in discipline
(she who somehow walks beside me will save all I have to give in your world-view)

This is the praise poem in your Xhosa tradition
(she who will save me praises you as well)
The heat in Penrose's office had not worked properly all fall. By December his nose and ears were pink with cold, his fingers too thick and numb for typing. He wore a heavy, ugly wool sweater and fortified himself with thermoses of tea. He looked and felt ridiculous. Suffering had made him ineffectual. Outside his window the campus trees went from vivid color to rags of leaves to bare branches filled with ice. Students hurried along the sidewalks, intent on their own urgencies. The air in his lungs felt frosted. "This place will be the death of me," he said aloud, since there was no one there to hear him.

The cheerful young Department secretary said she would call Building Maintenance again if he wished, and Penrose said yes, would you please. When nothing had come of that he called them himself, sifting through the confusing listings in the directory. Did he want Operations? Routing? Environmental Hazards? He finally found the right office and called three times and each time they asked him to spell his name. "P as in Peter, E as in Edward, N as in Nancy . . ." Pen plus rose, he wanted to say, how hard is that? How hard is it to send out a repairman?

Then on this morning near the end of the term, he found his office door open and a workman on a ladder with his head and upper body engulfed by a hole in the ceiling tile. Penrose, relieved but annoyed, contemplated saying something snappish about the long delay. He would have been within his rights. But there was always the fear of alienating the man and never getting his heat fixed. Besides, there was never any one person to blame for such things; that was the nature of the behemoth bureaucracy.

The ladder took up most of the small room. Penrose stood in the doorway. "Hello, are you here to fix my heat?"
“Gonna try,” said the man, still hidden in the ceiling. His voice was muffled. A bit of a drawl, a countrified voice.

“It’s been a problem for months,” Penrose said, irritated by try.

There was a series of hollow metallic bangings. Words came out in the intervals between them. “Yep . . . hydraulics in . . . these old buildings . . . can’t seem to get their systems squared away.”

“Ah,” said Penrose, as if he knew anything about hydraulics and was agreeing wisely. As usual it was nobody’s fault; it was the system. He reached for the stack of Modern Drama I papers on his desk. “I guess I’ll go sit in the coffee room and stay out of your way.” He wanted to tell the man to make sure he locked up when he left, but that was pointless, the maintenance people had keys to everything, they came and went as they pleased.

Penrose retraced his steps downstairs and along the main corridor, walking as he always did, with his head canted downward and a half-smile tucked into one corner of his mouth. That way if anyone greeted him he would be ready to respond, and if they chose to ignore him, as was often the case, he could pretend to be absorbed in his own ruminations. He imagined that the new generation of faculty, if they thought about him at all, wondered why he had not already died or retired or both. But he couldn’t afford to retire yet, and the health benefits being what they were, he could barely afford to die.

The coffee room was empty, he was pleased to see. He pulled one of the plastic chairs over to a side table, draped his coat on its back, and got out the notes for his upcoming class. A piece of paper lay face up on the table.

New Course, Please Announce!

English 405, Indigenous Critical Theory: Oriented towards imagining far-reaching social change through knowledge production as sites of indigenous activism and political thought, the course develops analytical frames at intellectual crossroads where epistomologies that gather under the “indigenous” sign meet democratic inquiry (and its concerns with recognition) and a trans-hemispheric critical theory.
There was more, but this was enough to unman him. The first time Penrose had encountered this new and hideous jargon, he'd thought it was a joke, a parody of all that was pompous and inflated, purest gobbledygook. He still felt that way, but it was a joke no one seemed to get except him. Scholarly papers, conferences, entire careers were now built on it, this language that was a fraud of language, meant to obscure, mystify, bully. All the new, bright young hires wrote of hegemony and late-capitalist strategies of empire and proto-feminists and psychomorphology and colonialism and elitist reification. It was an evil code he was unable to crack. Although this new generation now in ascendancy seemed to be against many things, racism and sexism and other isms, Penrose had not been able to discern what, if anything, they approved of. No matter; they had the wind in their sails. If any one of them had complained about the heat in their office, a fleet of maintenance trucks would have been dispatched immediately.

He was a dinosaur, a relic. They gave him the Intro to Literature courses to teach, the basic survey usually left to graduate assistants. He'd only held on to his drama courses because no one else wanted them. The knowledge of this beat him down day by day, curdled his disposition. He would have liked to point out to the smart, preening young scholars, so caught up in their third-world literatures and hermeneutics, whatever that was, that some day they too would be dead white men, just the thing they so disparaged. Most of them. There was of course the occasional woman, the occasional minority hire, full of nervous self-importance.

Penrose’s wife had long since tired of hearing about all this. “Why are you so obsessed with these people? Who cares what they do? You need to get on with your own work, whatever makes you happy.” Of course she was right—there was something cowardly about how eloquent he became in complaint, it shamed him—but the truth was, his own work had ceased to interest him. Even if there had been any demand for the kind of careful, stately reviews or papers he’d once produced, or a sequel to the book on nineteenth-century stagecraft that had won him tenure so long ago, he had no heart for it. It was finished, over, rusted shut. He’d said everything he’d wished to say,
then resaid it in as many ways as possible. It had been discouraging to realize that great, timeless literature, even that portion of it for which he had professed his special affinity and critical passion, was not an endlessly refilling well. He understood, in spite of himself, the appeal of the new order: at least it was new.

So these days, when he shut himself away in his study at home to do his “research,” he had a secret project. It was a science fiction novel which recast a number of his Departmental colleagues as grotesque and menacing aliens, androids, and intergalactic creeps. The title was *Soldiers of Spiritos*, the Spiritans being a cultured but vigorous and warlike race, menaced by various dark and degraded forces. The meanest and most arrogant of the critical theorists became Commander Gorza, a lizard-like creature deep in treacherous schemes, with a habit of spitting when agitated. The weak and craven Polypis, hereditary ruler of Spiritos, bore a striking resemblance to the Department Chair. There was also a pop-eyed robot modeled after the Department’s serial sexual harasser, and Farella, a leather-clad shape-shifting demoness who called to mind the new assistant professor, brought in to head up the Lesbians in the Gothic Paradigm course. It was all great, trashy fun to write. Penrose thought he might someday publish it under a pseudonym—Penrose’s pen name!—amaze himself and everybody else by earning some actual money. Meanwhile it gave him no end of pleasure to write lines like, “Curse the Spiritans and their doomed resistance! Soon their planet will be the latest outpost in the Devorkian Empire!”

One of the graduate students came in and began opening and closing cupboards in an annoying way. Penrose gathered his things. It was almost time for class.

But he wasn’t quick enough to avoid Herm Sonegaard, blocking the door, a heavy figure in a parka and galoshes. “Dick! Long time no see!” Sonegaard wore a striped ski cap with a tassel and exuded rosy winter warmth.

With other colleagues, Penrose could exchange polite greetings in mutual indifference. Herm demanded full engagement. “How’ve you been, Herm?”

“Never better,” said Herm, delighted at his own wit, something
wry, precious, and British in his robust American mouth. Herm said it often enough that you imagined him ascending, rung by rung, into beatitude. “Just a sprint to the finish line, then Jessica and I are off to Puerto Vallarta.”

Penrose made appropriate envious noises. Herm had the poetry franchise in the Department. His poems were widely published in journals Penrose had never heard of, then regularly bundled into collections by the University Press. Penrose had not yet found a space for Herm in his novel. It was hard to parody someone who already seemed to be a walking parody.

Now Herm said, “You and Ellen should head south some year, stop in and see us. The place’ll get your blood flowing again. Sun on your skin. Sea air in your lungs. We hardly even wear shoes down there.”

“That sounds great, Herm.” As usual, Penrose had to increase his wattage to match Herm’s enthusiasm. “Maybe some year when the kids aren’t coming back for Christmas, you know how that is.”

“Quickie trip. Get on a plane in a snowstorm, get off and it’s 80 degrees. Daiquiris. Hibiscus. Waterskiing.”

Penrose promised to consider it. He wondered, with some distaste, what going native with Herm and his newest, youngest wife might involve. Herm angled his body towards Penrose, an attempt at confidential communication. “You get to our age, Dick, you have to keep the batteries charged. No better place than south of the border.”

“Ah,” said Penrose, alarmed now. He nodded. “Lure of the tropics, that sort of thing.” Pictures came unwillingly to his imagination, the little drugstore selling Coca-Cola and potions made of cactus and bull urine, Herm counting out pesos . . . Herm dug a sheaf of papers out of his briefcase. “Diatribe’s going to take the new essay. I just found out.”

The passing bell rang and Penrose was able to dodge the essay, which Herm seemed to want to gift him with. People attempted to squeeze around Herm, who still stood in the doorway. One of the junior faculty, a mop-haired young man in a velvet jacket, gave Herm a poisonous look. Herm, oblivious, began peeling off layers of outer
garments and piling them in a collapsing heap.  
“I’m off to class,” said Penrose. “Have a great time in Mexico, if I don’t see you.”

“Margaritas!” Herm called after him, stepping out into the corridor. “Cerveza! Y más Cerveza!”
Penrose gave him a backwards wave. You had to give Herm credit, he was untroubled by the new, supercilious regime in the Department. They couldn’t lay a glove on his cast-iron ego.
Penrose’s classroom was ominously silent as he approached. It was always better when there was some sort of chatter or social noise. It meant they were less likely to sit in a sullen, unresponsive mass while he tried to jolly them into a discussion. There were days, too many days, when he felt like a television screen tuned to a channel they didn’t want to watch.

“Good morning,” Penrose said, bustling in and making a busy show of unpacking his notes and books. A few drear and mumbling voices responded. There were twenty-five of them and only one of him. It was never a fair fight.

“Jason,” said Penrose, addressing a boy in a stocking cap, with his feet propped up on the desk in front of him. “I’m going to ask you to put your laptop away.”

“Aww, Professor Penrose.” He was wearing a black sweatshirt with a picture of a cartoon man being dismembered by a cartoon explosion. “I’m a multitasker. My brain works better when I do two or three things at once.”

Penrose held his ground until Jason sighed and shut the machine off. Penrose had only recently and reluctantly been introduced to all things computer. It was one more plague, students who wanted to send him their papers via attached files, who pestered him to put class material on an interactive website, and so on. And of course they all walked around plugged into headsets and cell phones, grooving and chattering away, while the knowledge and wisdom of the ages swept over a precipice.

“I have your papers to return to you,” Penrose announced, to a general groaning. “Yes, well you might groan. I was not as impressed as I had hoped to be.” He distributed the papers and waited as they
flipped through the pages, past his careful, handwritten comments, to the circled grade at the end. They were aggrieved, most of them, he could tell. After all, hadn’t they gone to the trouble of typing and printing and handing in an actual paper, when they could have been doing something much more enjoyable? Their lot was cruel.

“Professor Penrose?” One of the girls, a sophomore majoring in Wardrobe, made complaint. “Why do we have to put down the acts and scenes?”

“So I can tell if you’re citing the play correctly.”

“But you know the play already, you know exactly where stuff is.”

“No, Alexa, I don’t know what ‘the part where Hedda Gabblor goes all mental’ refers to. You need to be more precise and to follow the standard format. If you have other questions about your papers, please come see me during office hours after class. Let’s get started on today’s material.”

They sagged in their seats. Make us, their body language announced. Like, we care.

Patiently, he began to woo them. It was the last play on the syllabus, O’Neill’s *Long Day’s Journey Into Night*. It still kindled something in him, this great family drama, the four damaged souls in their slowly darkening cage. He’d seen the Broadway production with Jason Robards Jr. as James Tyrone and Colleen Dewhurst as Mary, and he remembered it with near holy emotion. How could he make them feel any portion of that? How to make them love the thing he loved? So much of teaching came down to just that. He needed to strike a spark in them. He needed not to stand in front of one more bored, tolerant class and have them drain the joy out of him.

He began with talking about families, how everybody’s family had the potential for tragedy, as well as love and comfort. How none of us in real life had the opportunity to stage or to express our fears and feelings as eloquently as a playwright did. “This play of old sorrow, written in tears and blood,” O’Neill had called it. And yet the play begins on a fine summer morning, breakfast just over, the day full of promise. When do the tears and blood start showing through?

The class stared down at their textbooks, the only safe place in the room to look. Penrose measured out the silence. There had been
times, in this class and others, when he had been tempted to let a silence extend itself, Zen-like, all the way to the bell at the end of the hour. But always he dutifully picked up the thread, inserted himself, asked the follow-up question or called on one of them. Today he was saved, as he so often had been, by his best student raising his hand. "Yes, Roger."

"It's right there at the start. With James talking about how young he feels. His saying so implies the opposite. Later, when he's coming down on his sons and saying what a disappointment they are, that's all about himself, him feeling threatened and bitter because life hasn't turned out the way he wanted it to."

Bless the boy. "Yes, I would agree," said Penrose. "It's a conflict that gets developed later. What else is a conflict in the family?"

A few more hands ventured upwards, struggling against gravity, and the discussion lurched ahead. Roger inclined his big, pallid, serious face towards each speaker, listening. He had crimped, dark red hair and wore glasses with black plastic frames, like those sold in joke shops attached to false noses. Penrose worried about Roger, worried equally about his awkwardness and his intelligence. One didn't want to see him head off to grad school as the path of least resistance; besides, he was too genuine and inquisitive to be a good fit in the new, glib order. He might make a good lawyer, or even a politician, if he could find himself a girl, someone to polish his geeky edges, give him a man's confidence. Of course the girl would have to do all the work. Where was such a girl, brainy but unafraid, who would make a project out of him?

All this passed fleetingly through Penrose's mind as he directed the class discussion, which was finally starting to jell. All of them had families of one sort or another and no matter how loving or well-intentioned, there had been times that family life had felt as confined and boxlike as a stage set. There was the usual fascination with Mary's opium addiction—to think, even a century ago, moms were getting high!—then they started in on the grandiose father and profligate brother, then Edmund himself, who was never quite the hero they wanted him to be. Because of course they wanted to be the ones who picked the scab, who revealed the flaws and hypocrisies of
the others while making an attractive display of their own suffering. It was Penrose’s job, or part of it, to convince them that self-loathing was not especially attractive or desirable.

“The mother is just gross,” complained Alexa, flipping her hair from one shoulder to another. “She’s like, shooting up!”

“Like, eww,” said one of the boys, and Penrose gave him a sharp look, but it seemed he was only making fun of Alexa, and that was allowed, even tacitly encouraged.

Another student said that the drug use was all offstage, and that Mary was never unseemly or unladylike. “She’s just lost in a fog, like she wanted to be.”

Penrose got them started on the fog, the foghorn, and then the other physical artifacts—the lamps, the whiskey bottle—and then on to how character flaws were revealed by drama. James’ stinginess, Jamie’s failure, Edmund’s weakness. And how there were also traits that softened our judgment and gave complexity to the portraits. The hour glided past. Penrose felt it was going well. He picked two of the boys to read Jamie and Edmund’s parts in the last scene, Jamie’s best:

Never wanted you to succeed and make me look even worse by comparison. Wanted you to fail. Always jealous of you. Mama’s baby, Papa’s pet! And it was you being born that started Mama on dope. I know that’s not your fault, but all the same, God damn you, I can’t help hating your guts—

The boys read well, thank god, and some of the wounding and passion came through, enough to turn the motley class into an actual audience, caught up in the play. Penrose himself picked up James Tyrone’s part:

A sweet spectacle for me! My first-born, who I hoped would bear my name in honor and dignity! Who showed such brilliant promise!
Penrose was enjoying himself. He had a touch of ham in him, though teaching was as close as he'd ever come to acting. Edmund answered, then Tyrone had another line, but just as Penrose was hearing the sound of it in his head, anticipating it, they were all startled by a low, grunting noise from the back of the room. It dropped into the lull between speeches, loud and unseemly, an ugly, honking noise. It took Penrose a moment to identify it as sobbing.

"Sarah?" Penrose took a step forward, peering at the girl in the last row. "Are you all right?"

She shook her head, meaning, Never Mind. She was red-faced, either from embarrassment or her mysterious grief. She waved her hands, waving him off. Never Mind.

Penrose hesitated, then, not wanting to make things worse for her, went back to the play. But the air had gone out of it, the class now unsettled and distracted. Penrose stopped the reading. It was almost time for the bell. He began to wrap things up, reminding them of the date their final papers were due, of the review session for the exam. All the while trying not to stare at Sarah Snyder in the back row. Who was she anyway? Emitter of moans, unremarkable B student, unremarkable presence bundled into a chubby parka, rimless glasses, straw-blonde hair pulled back in a wad. She wasn't doing anything alarming now, just staring at the desk in front of her, the inflamed color of her cheeks fading.

The bell rang. Penrose dismissed them. He thought of trying to intercept Sarah Snyder—offer some word of concern or inquiry—but she was heading for the door on a bullet course, and besides, Roger was approaching with his usual intelligent questions.

Penrose spoke with him for a few moments, then they parted, and Penrose gathered up his books and went out into the hall. There was no sign of Sarah Snyder, which in some ways was a relief, but left him feeling bad, guilty, inadequate. There had to be a better way to handle such moments, something intuitive and wise, involving human skills he did not possess. What did girls cry about these days, anyway? Was she pregnant? Bad boyfriend? He wouldn't know. He could not now recall a single thing Sarah Snyder had ever said in his class.

He reached his office. The door was shut and locked. He went
inside and put his hand to the heating vent. It was the cold of cold metal. So far it had not been a good day for the Spiritans.

If there was an easy way to kill herself she'd do it this instant. She was crying again, snotty tears, disgusting, and the cold air made them sting. Could she be any more fcked up? What was wrong with her, anyway? She was just a big stupid mess.

Sarah Snyder had escaped the English Building and now she hurried across the quad, head down, hunched and shivering inside her big coat. She reached the end of the campus buildings without seeing anybody she knew, or anyone from her stupid class. God! How could she ever go back there? They probably thought her mom was a heroin addict or something.

She slowed her pace, blew her nose on a nasty piece of Kleenex she found in her coat pocket. Here was a coffee shop she sometimes went to, a place she liked for its deliberate shabbiness and the oddball music they played. But she might run into somebody there and she didn't want to have to act normal, or explain why she wasn't. There was nobody in the world she could explain it to, because there was no real reason for any of it.

So she crossed the street that marked the boundary of campus and kept walking. She had it in mind to get herself good and cold, though she guessed she wouldn't freeze to death or get consumption, like Edmund. It probably had to be dark for that.

The neighborhood was one of apartment buildings, hutches for students, mixed with small wood farmhouses, one or two stories, which she liked for much the same reasons she did the coffee shop, because they were old, eccentric, mysterious. There was a romance about their porch steps and shade trees, their gravel drives and tumbledown garages. At night their lighted windows were squares and rectangles of tender gold, as if the lives within them gave off a radiance. And there was always the chance that someone might open a door, start down their bricked path at just the time she was passing by, speak to her, ask her name, anything might happen . . .

A stab of remembering, her total spastic idiocy in class, Christ. Poor old Professor Penrose. He'd looked stricken, like he was the
one who'd written the piece on purpose to make people miserable. Now she bet he thought she had some tragic family she was boo-hooing about, when she had a perfectly normal one—mom, dad, sister, brother—who only drove her crazy in expected ways. She didn't suppose anyone would believe her, because it was too simple-minded, but it had only been general, goopy sadness, the unfocussed sadness of her whole life, that the play had called forth. So that crying for the people in the play had been like crying for herself, but in a nobler way, as if some of the tragedy had rubbed off on her.

There were people whose lives were worth ending up in poems or plays, but she wasn't one of them. She was just an ordinary head case. So suck it up, Snyder! If her life was a play, she'd probably still be unhappy, but it would make sense, with stage directions and speeches. Why couldn't she be weird in some interesting way? The occasional car passed, overtaking her without effort as she stumped along. Why didn't she have a car? She could blast up and down the highway, smash into something.

Eventually she circled a block and doubled back, giving up on the idea of an adventure. She didn't want to go home just yet; her roommate had a new boyfriend, and while Sarah told herself they weren't trying to exclude her, sometimes she believed exactly the opposite, that part of the fun of couplehood was the exclusion of other people. It was all very ick-producing, the giggling and the furtive love-chats, the hours spent behind the roommate's closed bedroom door with the music playing, the sounds the music didn't mask, the neurotic sight of the boyfriend's bare ass slipping out of its towel wrap as he visited the bathroom, not to mention the residue of those visits. Still, she was envious. She'd never had a real boyfriend, only an ocean's worth of hopeless crushes, plus the occasional guy you'd hang out with, and sometimes the two of you would hook up. But sex hadn't lived up to its billing, at least not so far, one more thing that she guessed worked better as literature.

When she was feeling low and ugly and hopeless, as she was now, she hated everybody: people in commercials made ecstatic by their purchases, politicians screwing up the entire world, anyone who hurt an animal, celebrities, the Walgreen's clerk who always told her
to have a blessed day, people who looked into mirrors and smiled, anyone on MTV, anyone who thought MTV was cool, anyone who used the word cool, anyone self-satisfied or loud or rude or whose cell phone ringer was a Justin Timberlake song, that being basically everyone in the whole school.

If she wanted to she could drop out, move to Seattle or San Francisco or New York and get a real job. It was a big world out there and things were bound to happen to her as they never would here in the Land of Children. College, what was that for most people except a place to kill time before they went on to lead equally shallow adult lives.

She didn’t want to be one of them and of course she was, the whole time she was hating on them.

Without thinking about it, Sarah had retraced her steps across the quad and was standing once more in front of the English Building. She hesitated before climbing the stairs and going inside, telling herself it was more than an hour since the end of class, it was unlikely anyone was still around. More than that, she was afraid if she didn’t make herself go in now, face the scene of the crime, she might put it off forever. And that would be sad because she loved the old building, as she loved anything old and curious and worn, loved its white pillars and dormers and the curving twin staircases on the first floor with their railings rubbed down to the wood grain in places. She loved the stained wood flooring underfoot, as well as the odd cubbyholes, cloakrooms, dim passages, the classrooms with the old-fashioned maps mounted on rollers above the blackboard, so that you could pull them down and behold, on crackling antique paper, charts of The Ancient World, or The Voyages of Magellan.

It was the lunch hour and the hallways were uncrowded. Sarah’s nerve failed her at the door of the Drama classroom, empty now, and she turned quickly away. With nothing in mind, as before, she took the stairs to the second floor. Radiators hissed and clanked. Light from the colorless, high overcast sky came in through the stairwell windows. Some kids said the building was haunted, and while Sarah didn’t believe that, she wouldn’t have minded being a ghost there.

Because she loved reading, she loved everything she’d ever read, *Alice In Wonderland* and *A Little Princess* and every sappy girl book
that had come her way from the third grade on, and *Dune* and Kurt Vonnegut and *Lord of the Rings* and Shakespeare (at least the ones she'd seen as movies), and Emily Dickinson and *Wuthering Heights* and Hemingway and Willa Cather and *Even Cowgirls Get The Blues*. But it wasn't anything you could impress people with. "I love to read." Try telling that to a guy at a party, watch how fast he decides he needs to go get another beer.

She was only going to make a circuit of the building and leave—it would be safe to go home soon, her roommate would have to detach herself from the boyfriend and go to work—but she'd pushed her luck too far, and *oh crap*, here was Professor Penrose, heading straight for her.

At first Sarah thought he hadn't seen her, since he was walking in that peculiar way he had, as if watching his shoelaces untie. Then, just as she thought she might escape, he raised his head. "Oh, Sarah. Were you looking for me?"

She said yes because no would have been rude, and besides she might have been expected to come looking for him, after her performance in class. And so she had to follow him as he turned around and led the way back to his office. He'd probably been on his way to the bathroom or something. He hadn't looked all that happy to see her, no surprise there.

He unlocked the office door and went in first, so that Sarah had a moment to look around, get her bearings. She'd only been in here once before, at the very start of the semester, and she hadn't remembered how beat up the place was. Even for someone like herself, tolerant of, enamored of, the second-hand and faded, the room was depressing. Its walls were a peculiar putty color, blotted and freckled like elderly skin. The books in the bookcases looked as if no one had opened them during her lifetime; the old-fashioned blinds at the window were cockeyed. It was cold in here, too. It felt like a cell in the Bastille, really, all it needed was some straw on the floor and a few rats, but that was silly, she was the prisoner, the one called to account, and her stomach clenched as Professor Penrose, with his pained, antic smile, invited her to take a seat.
In teaching, as in anything else, there were sins of commission and sins of omission. Penrose had a store of wincing memories, all the times over the years when he’d said the wrong, the clumsy, the hurtful, the fatuous thing. But there had also been the missed opportunities. He had the foreboding that in sitting down with Sarah Snyder he was about to trade one sin for another. There was likely to be more weeping. Right now she looked sullen rather than teary, but that could turn on a dime, and anyway there was nothing to do now but see it through. “I was worried about you,” he said, after an interval of waiting in vain for her to say whatever it was she’d come to say.

Still she kept silent, a hopeless, obstinate silence, staring straight ahead of her, hands jammed in the pockets of her coat. She was not a pretty girl, which she no doubt knew very well. But surely she could have made a little more effort, or any effort at all, hair, makeup, something other than these hobo shoes, jeans, and an upper garment that could have served as a pajama top. Then, aware that he was not being the supportive, sympathetic elder he aspired to be, he checked himself and asked, “Did you want to talk about your paper?”

She bent over to rummage in her backpack, another unlovely posture, he was forced to notice, retrieved it and handed it over. Penrose studied it, as if to refamiliarize himself with it. There was no need. It was the same as all her other papers. Dogged, mechanical, neither very good nor notably awful. The B had been a coward’s grade. A C-plus would have been more honest. “Characterization in A Doll's House.” Oh, boredom. Penrose said, “I’m not sure you were all that interested in your topic.”

“I wasn’t.”

Penrose waited but nothing more came of this unpromising beginning. “Well then, my next question would be, why choose a topic that didn’t interest you?” Why read the play, take the class, go to college in the first place?

The puffy coat wriggled, evidence of some bodily movement underneath. Shoulders shrugging? “I don’t know, I guess I couldn’t think of anything else.”

The passing bell rang then, and there was a scattering of noise, distant doors opening, feet on the stairs, voices. The intrusion only
emphasized the peculiar intimacy of the small room, and the two of them within it. Although times being what they were, Penrose was always careful to leave his door wide open, so that no hint of impropriety was conveyed, even by such an unlikely Lothario as himself. He began again. “Now you can do better than that. You have to. If you didn’t care for this particular play—”

“I like it a lot,” the girl said with heavy vehemence.

Once more Penrose waited. “All right. What did you like about it?”

“When Nora leaves at the end . . . when she realizes that Torvald isn’t worth it, that she has to go out into the world and be her own person . . .”

She broke off, and resumed her sullen silence. “Well,” Penrose said, “I’m glad you can relate to the character.” He was of course biologically disqualified from participating in feminist grievances, although that did not spare him from having to hear all about them. “But your enthusiasm doesn’t really come through in the paper.”

Another convulsion of the coat. “Writing, papers I mean, is really hard for me.”

“Then you need to try and work on that.” She looked unconvinced. “There’s nothing grammatically or organizationally wrong with what you wrote. You just didn’t come up with a strong enough—”

“I don’t know how! I never know how to say I like stuff!”

“But you had reasons you liked the play. You need to start with those.”

“Papers aren’t about liking things! They’re about showing how smart you are!”

And here were the tears again, or their angry cousins, though she was not, technically, crying. Her eyes were red and her cheeks mottled. “I really like Long Day’s Journey too, I mean I love it, when you guys were reading it out loud it was like, the most beautiful, awful thing—”

She stopped for breath and Penrose, helpless, waited for whatever would come next. “Why does everything have to be about reasons, and making everything into ideas, I don’t think that’s why you’re supposed to read anything, that’s not why people write plays, so
somebody else can come along and turn it inside out and find all
different ways to show how important they are . . .”

She stopped, and tried to inhale the tears. “I guess I’m just not a
very good English major.”

“Maybe not,” Penrose said, he could tell from her abrupt, startled
expression that she had not expected him to agree with her. “But
that doesn’t mean you’re wrong.”

“What should I do then, quit?”

“If there’s something else you’d enjoy more. I wouldn’t want you or
anybody else to keep suffering through these classes. If that’s what
you’re doing, suffering.”

He let a silence settle. The Zen of silence. The pure space of empty
air. And this time he was rewarded. “I like the class,” Sarah Snyder
said, in a normal, deflated tone. “I guess I like all kinds of things that
don’t like me back.”

“That’s more common than you know. So I wouldn’t—”

There was more to say, but he stopped himself, and the girl was
no doubt suspicious of him, thinking him melodramatic or senile or
both, but he was listening to the sound of water trickling through the
ancient pipes behind the walls. Hydraulics! As faint as perfume, as a
chink in the rampart of cold, he felt a wafting current of warm air.

Penrose turned back to her. “Do you have your copy of O’Neill
with you? Why don’t you get it out.”

Another struggle with the backpack. “Good. Turn to the end of
Act I, where Mary and Edmund are talking. Start here, where Mary
says, ‘I’ve never felt it was my home.’”

She looked perplexed. “What for?”

“For fun.”

She pondered this. The concept of fun. “But I’m not a very good
Mary. I’m not old enough.”

“Do I look like your son Edmund?”

A shake of the head. She would have liked to giggle. “Right here,”
said Penrose, tapping the page.

A slow start, the girl still uncertain, of him now as well as herself.
By the end of the first long speech she had her wheels underneath
her and was hitting some of the right inflection—exasperation,
resentment. Penrose's irritable Edmund chimed in. Then Mary again, then Edmund, back and forth, guilt, denial, bitterness, all the paces of the addict's dance. It was the most beautiful, awful thing. An ember flaring up as they breathed on it. Old sorrow made new again. Sarah Snyder's free hand, Penrose noted, had begun to drum and twitch like Mary's. She had the right instincts, underneath all that self-inflicted misery. He liked her, although she probably would not have believed it, that anyone would like or admire her for her own contrary self. She would not be happy, at least not anytime soon. She was too stubborn and full of grievance, her anger not yet a weapon she could wield. Penrose thought he should find a place for her in his book. He would make her a young acolyte or warrior, a footsoldier in the army of the righteous.
When I want to, I can still wrench the years back to 1978, and visit myself standing outside the Times Square peep show. I'm wearing that hip-length, bias-cut, gray tweed overcoat I used to love. It's swirling in a flare above my straight-leg jeans and lace-up, flat-heeled boots that were all the rage that fall. There's still a decade to go before the mayor will clear the streets of cheap sex and poverty. So I'm standing on pavement clotted with dried-up discs of hawked-out phlegm and chewing gum, and the air is redolent with the odor of pot and filthy, unwashed hair, and curbed pools of human waste glistening in the gutter. Behind me, blacked-out windows crawl with crudely painted purple script. Some untutored hand has filled the pane's dark glass with wormlike curlicues: LIVE! NUDE! GIRLS!, the window screams, are inside, dancing . . .

I must have forced my mind to curve itself acceptingly around the fact of living girls dancing nude a few feet past those painted windows I leant upon. But what about their price? Surely, the calm, dispassionate expression on my face belies the shocking fact that a forty-second, glassed-in glimpse of a young girl's cunt grinding in the bony basket of her adolescent hips cost nothing but a quarter. Nothing more than that. A grimy satin G-string has unraveled from the fraying of her fingers where she's shoved aside, again and again, all shift long, the triangular remains of her violated privacy.
A plastic speaker rattles out the Rolling Stones. Woozily, she strains and totters on platform heels to keep the beat. Inside, the brand-new husband of my youth stands before a metal slot, feeding quarters from the hoarded stash I've saved for laundry till the window drops, and the girl's revealed. He leans towards the mike's black mouth and states his wish, standing there alone in the small tight space of sticky musk and wadded Kleenex, piling snow-like in the corners, as he'll tell me later.

I said: he was standing there alone in the small tight space . . . But really, wasn't I there, too, a kind of same-sex ghost pimp of that dancing, drugged-up girl incarcerated in her slimy, sexless spot? For without my husband, without my quarters, without desire redirected from my bridal bed, the scene would not exist. But there it is, as indelible as an early chapter in a long novel. This is where we look to find the early life events that explicate the later complications of the story's central plot. But thumbing back through the murky chapters of my distant past, the text perplexes. I wonder now what I was thinking then? I, who called myself a feminist, and demonstrated for women's lib and civil rights. What would my heroines have thought if they'd seen me leaning there against the painted sign advertising the girls for sale inside, my in-laws' ancient diamond solitaire weighting down my clean left hand, sparkling in its brand new setting?

Now, it's like another life I lived back then. Another planet. Times Square's urgent commerce, its quick thrills and cheap bodies of bought sex are all gone. As are the early months of failed marriage, and the craving lustful appetites of youth. As are the mysteries of sex, and the hardy, virile bodies of the years of procreation. Now the past unrolls like fragile scrolls of text, almost illegible with overlapping lines
of script. I can't make out the words that might remind me who that woman was, or what, leaning there, she might have thought.

Married just one month, perhaps, she was uncertain what the bonds of matrimony in that brand-new age required, and so she stood there on the sidewalk waiting for the man inside as if he were a prince, as if he were her one true love from an earlier era she'd read about when she was young. Like the heroines of ancient stories, she just stood there. Waiting. And now she is stuck there in perpetuity.

That girl who looks like I once looked. She goes on standing on the filthy sidewalk as if she were anywhere but where she is: waiting and waiting for something that will never come.
THE [IN]VISIBLE ARCHITECTURE OF EXISTENCE
Susan Rich

Does the television console me? What about the microwave’s moon plate imprisoned in its cave, creating popcorn tarts that ring a house-mix popping rhythm to the old cats singing?

Does the Bosnian clock eulogize the nightly cocktail hour ~ a Blue Hawaiian by the beach, the bedroom mourn father’s lost fedora, misplaced with the rabbi ~ *a person of interest* to Oregon police? Or perhaps, *Ye shall know us by* our bathtub faucets, gooseneck silver spouts, sputtering forth a cryptogram of birds against the patchworked enamel ~

What might they think, if indeed they could think ~ the basement staircase kneeling in supplication to the rain boots, bric-a-brac, squirrels? Surely, the crack in the linoleum might show enlightenment ~ the imprint of our mass? And when this season’s aging model enters ~ uninvited ~ with gammy skin and tiny beard ~ will she guild new narratives?

I listen to her step moving along the hyacinth stairs. Is hers a wiser touch in the morning laundry air, the teacup lunch?
Soma cells divide, replace the body every year, but not
the water jug and window sashes ~ the oven-safe plastic ware.
The ghost-self I will become turns fifty-one,
then seventy-four. Let her explore my world above
the bird’s eye desk, Ptolemy’s map, the book-lined mess ~
court it with the passion of a paramour.

Instinctively, may she attend this anthem ~
this trick of bricks and glass, these gutters ~
a covered heartland for our small claims rearranged.
When the house lights come on, always suddenly,
we blink in stunned surprise
not to be the ones
making out on a wide banquette

but returning to our lives, altogether the same
although a little hungrier, and sweatier, and tired.
Or maybe not the same: the long night is spent
as the servers gather spinning empties

from the sticky floor, and the bouncers
prop open the double doors.
We look for our feather boas and our fedoras,
tug lightly on an ear that's lost

an earring, button up again. We aim
ourselves for the all-night taquería
down the street, now that walking
feels like aiming. From the club lot

a sky-blue pimped-out Honda
waits for the light,
all vibration, tinted windows shimmying
with the pounding bass
of a custom audio system, BOSE
speakers mounted in a rack, and a subwoofer
pneumatic, adamant, and deep.
Music from a passing car:

a mix of sex and vanity driving away too slowly;
and camaraderie, and embarrassment,
and the need to distort
the body into thunder.
The role of the soap will be played by my mother,
the role of the towel will be played by my father,
the role of the mirror will be played by my brother
dressed in a shirt of fog.

My students will play the role of the shower—
they arrive together and pour over me
only to drain away.
My lover will play the role of the flowers, oh.

The role of the floor will be played by history:
here we are, and here we go.
The role of the door will be played by Samuel Beckett
in a cameo, the in-between door, the patient door.

Shall we work from the script, or make this up?
The camera tracks us from far away.
Where shall I put my hands?
Wardrobe! I call to Death.

The role of my face will be played by the clock.
The role of my chest will be played
by the bottles of pills, the salves and bandages.
When the doorbell rings, the mice will flee
to their secret roles.
The role of my eyes will be played by twin pennies.
The moon will have a walk-on,
lumbering through the curtains.
The trees and the fountain, along with the tinted glass and marbled granite of the storefronts, formed a small town beneath the transparent green roof of Westgate Mall. An idealized Main Street. Sitting in the regulated air (a constant sixty-eight degrees, Howard guessed), listening to water slap fake stones, he was happy to discover he could still feel desire.

If this was Main Street, it sure as hell belonged back east, Howard thought. The glitzy signs and the faceless mannequins in the displays were like nothing else he had seen in southwest Texas. He had courted Mindy on a typical West Texas street, twenty-three years ago. Walking home from the high-school gym one October afternoon following a football pep rally, he had waited on the sidewalk while she ducked into Beasley's Shoes. Had he held her books? Probably, though he didn't remember. Junior year, 1975: chemistry, calculus, *The Red Pony*?

Every few minutes, she would tap the window inside the store to get his attention, lift slippers, pumps, or outrageously risqué red high heels, and seek his approval with her head cocked to the side, charmingly (she had built up to the high-heel moment, she confessed to him later). In that brief ritual of the shoes, on that mild afternoon, he knew their future together. They would marry. Always, she would reach for the next dazzling thing. And he would wait on her and approve.

So how had he missed the fundamental fact: that one day she'd reach for the sky? He was an oil man. His world was prescribed, not in the clever way of the mall, with sales displays set in your path, bold colors used to inspire impulsive behavior... no, Howard's world was defined by rotted organisms and the moraines in which they had died. Oil country was precisely circumscribed for a man.
with his rudimentary skills. In West Texas, he understood what to look for so detritus could be coaxed to the earth’s surface for refining, packaging, and selling.

Outside this region he knew he’d be lost. So he kept his head down and paced the same old ground.

Petroleum’s thick, jellied stink never did dazzle Mindy, except to repulse her. Finally, one year, dissatisfied with Howard and his desert world (it had been her world, too!), she snagged a man from the clouds: a Boeing engineer. He whisked her off to Seattle, whose surfaces glistened with rainwater and looked twice as bright as they really were.

That October afternoon, twenty-three years ago, as Howard waited outside the shoe store, he looked up the street and spied in nearby windows transistor radios, portable hi-fi sets, chewing tobacco, saddle soap—none of which could be located today in the mall, just as none of the mall’s treasures would be offered, much less understood, on old Main Street. And back in the day, there were no unaccompanied women on the sidewalks.

He had felt fortunate, then, to stand near a girl who’d taken an interest, so much so that she adorned her feet to please him. That day, his approval of Mindy’s footwear was his claim on her. Were he a high-school junior now, he wouldn’t dote on just one person (these kids and their freedoms!): he’d wallow in possibilities, the dreamy display of available beauties, alone or in small groups, all of whom wore tennis shoes or flimsy sandals: I can—and I will—fly away from you and back again into your arms!

O girls! O heart, O brain! I am still alive!

Moving toward him, toting a stark white Abercrombie and Fitch bag was a stunning young woman in a jeans skirt and black semi-sheer stockings, a beige sweater and a red silk scarf. She caught his eye and smiled. Young woman? No, a child, about his daughter’s age. Twelve. Thirteen, at the most. Astonishing, the power of camouflage: lipstick, eyeliner, rouge.

And in fact, here was Alina now, with Meagan, her friend from Seattle. Howard hadn’t paid attention earlier, but watching Alina in the cool light slanting through the leaves of the fat, potted trees,
he understood that she wore make-up, too: a moderate blush in the cheeks, a hint of blue on her eyelids (of course, she refused to wear her glasses in public). The more she tried to distinguish herself, the more she resembled every other girl in the mall—jazzed by the bills in her purse.

Howard chastised himself for lusting after girls his daughter's age, children testing their power, practicing sexy smiles, being adults. He stopped staring after Abercrombie and Fitch.

Meagan grinned at him and he made a solid effort to return her greeting. He'd had trouble warming to her, though it wasn't her fault: somehow, he linked her to Mindy. A slight resemblance? The same distracted air? Each time he had phoned the old girl, planning to get Alina home for a visit, she was on her cell, rushing around a fabric store or a furniture outlet, bargaining with salespeople. "Alina could bring a friend," Howard suggested to Mindy one afternoon. "She wouldn't have to fly by herself. Mindy, what if—"

"Yes, yes, the leather recliner," she said. "That red one in the corner . . ."

In the world of her accumulated objects, there was little room for him now. "You're lucky she's moved away," Gary, a friend from work, assured Howard one morning in the coffee room, before they set out together to inspect a series of wells. "There's nothing worse than the Ex-Wife Dinner, those awkward meetings to plan for the kids or to split the medical bills . . . and always, afterwards, out of guilt or whatever, you feel obligated to buy her an after-dinner drink or an ice cream or a little something for her bedroom dresser, which used to be your bedroom dresser, too, so the two of you go to a shopping center and you sit there in the Baskin-Robbins or you walk around the jewelry store and things get friendly again, like the old days, warm and flirty, and you think, 'What the hell am I doing?' and you see she's thinking the same damn thing, and so pronto, you agree to call it a night and, I swear, run away from each other in the parking lot . . ."

In the abstract, an Ex-Wife Dinner sounded oddly fun to Howard. Maybe with a different ex-wife. Better than finding in his mailbox monthly Xeroxes of Mindy's charge card bills with half the purchases circled in red. In her light scrawl, which he remembered
from afternoons he'd copied her high-school homework, the words "Alina's Expenses"—meaning, You pay, pal.

So: best to relax with Alina and her friend, and try to stifle his desires, as he had after Mindy's flight, when he'd paced more fiercely than ever the porous rock that cradled oil! Oil, which made it possible to build a mall on this site, this bright hormonal incubator . . .

"Can I have five more dollars?" Alina said, skipping up to his bench. Meagan stood behind her, still grinning, shy—distantly fetching, the way Mindy used to be.

"Why? What did you do with the money I gave you this morning?" he asked.

"We had sodas and a hot dog." Howard smelled perfume in the folds of her wool sweater: a bubble gum scent, faintly salty. "I want to look around some more, and I want to call Leann to meet us," Alina said.

Leann, short, pudgy, studious and polite, had been Alina's best friend before Alina moved away. Howard had always liked her. He wondered if Alina's desire to phone her now signaled boredom with the mall—its boxy simplicity must pale next to Seattle's rainy wonders—or if it meant trouble with her new friend, Meagan. Maybe Meagan bitched about Texas, the crappy merchandise, Alina's grumpy dad . . . but he hadn't been so bad, had he? He'd sat patiently, letting them wander at will, and laugh and flirt with the laggard boys hauling skateboards around the fountain.

"You don't know what you want," he said, reaching into his back pocket for his wallet. "You just want to buy something."

Meagan giggled.

Alina snatched the bill from his hand. She pulled a cell phone from her purse. He'd bet the gadget matched her mother's (part of their "sisterly" pact since the family's split), sleek and blue, with a ring like dying crickets. "Thanks, Daddy," Alina said. She turned away and punched a button on the phone. "Leann?" she said. "Leann, it's Alina! Yes, yes! Here! In Texas, in the mall! Come meet us!" Meagan followed her, glancing at Howard with a tilt of her head, an unmistakably coquettish gesture. Half-closed eyes under wild, blond bangs. He was startled by a splash from the fountain, a wet little kiss on his cheek.
The girls headed toward faceless figures draped in sweaters in the windows of Buffalo Exchange, with Meagan chattering to Alina about “guerilla sewing—you know, like, cutting the sleeves out of my dresses and stuff. Really cool.” Howard was saddened to see in Alina’s skitter her mother’s reckless movements, a dangerous approach warning others, I can’t or I won’t slow down, get ready. Or maybe it was just her shoes: tight, pink platforms that pitched her forward and quickened her pace.

Shoes—squeaking, sticking to gummy floors . . . Howard had a vivid early memory of shopping with girls: women, really, his mother and her sister. But they referred to each other as girls. “Girl, I don’t know what to do with Howard,” his mother sighed to his aunt on the phone. “He’s outgrown all his shirts and his shorts are in tatters. I swear, he’s a weed! We’re going out on Saturday. Want to come?” And so the three of them marched up the same street where, years later, he’d wait in front of Beasley’s. No shoe store then. He was six or seven. Near the spot where Beasley’s would open was an Arapaho Indian Trading Post. Howard figured the Indians behind the counter (there were two of them) weren’t really Indians, though now he wondered what made him think that. What did he know about Indians? Maybe they were Arapahos, and he couldn’t face these disconsolate men in their white shirts and khakis, forced to wait on people as silly as his mother and her sister. The women traipsed up the aisles picking through fringed leather jackets and beaded moccasins: “Girl, this will slim you down!” or, “No, your face looks swollen in that hat, girl, put it back!” Maybe the men weren’t “authentic,” but they seemed crushingly sad, stuck with all this stuff. Even a kid could see how rotten the merchandise was, rubber tomahawks and plastic headdresses with fake, dyed feathers.

One Saturday, after trying on shirts for two and a half hours, he followed the girls to the trading post—a “treat” for him after being so good in the clothing stores, his mother said. In fact, the place always depressed him. It was they who loved the gaudy trinkets. He desperately needed to pee and a piece of paper taped to the men’s room said “Out of Order.” The girls forced him into the Ladies’ to “do his little business.” They said they’d stand inside the door,
barring others from barging in. (Why not outside the door? What were they thinking? Were they thinking?) They'd turn their backs so he wouldn't be embarrassed. Fat chance! He stood above the toilet bowl, straining. Nothing happened. His bladder burned. "Hurry up, son," his mother said gently, her voice muffled and echoey in the tiled room. It didn't smell like a place where a man would do his business: sickly sweet, like a field of dampened flowers. His mother lighted a cigarette and offered one to his aunt. He looked up and saw on the wall, in delicate purple handwriting, the word "Fuck."

"What's 'fuck'?” he said, his own voice impossibly loud. His mother rushed up behind him, digging her hands into his shoulders. "Howard, don't you ever use that word!” she said.

The surprise pressure of her fingers released the tension in his bladder, and he sprayed the room. "Howard, Howard!” his mother screamed.

"Girl, you're going to need new shoes,” his aunt said.

His shoes, a pair of red, high-topped Keds, squeaked and stuck to the warped brown floor. The men behind the counter watched him quietly. He looked at his feet, avoiding their eyes, pacing the aisles. What lay beneath this waxy, cracked linoleum, Howard wondered. An Indian burial ground, bones and knives and arrowheads?

The clock at the mall's far end, above the J. C. Penney sign, struck noon, a recorded series of chimes replicating, flatly, the sound of the courthouse bell that once stood about four blocks from here. The courthouse had a giant clock the color of cheesecake, with big, chocolate hands. It faced Main Street from a turret atop the baroque brick building trimmed with wood. The bell swayed in a small, square belfry behind the clock. At twelve or thirteen, Howard saw Vertigo at the two-dollar movie house downtown, next to the Indian Trading Post, and afterwards, he could never walk past the courthouse without imagining beautiful blond girls in terrible peril in the belfry.

Ten years ago, state officials had declared the courthouse unsafe in the event of an earthquake. It was torn down to make room for a one-story, strip shopping center. County offices were moved into
a steel and glass storefront next to a new Japanese restaurant. Raw fish. Another eastern import.

Howard rose from the bench, his right sleeve and pants spattered with water from the fountain. He folded his hands over his lap. Where were Alina and Meagan? He'd give them another half-hour. He was hungry, but he didn't want to eat the pre-packaged food here in the mall. He passed a bar/café called Derrick's. A cardboard oil well stood in the window gushing crepe-paper streamers—as though it were a condiment bottle neatly dispensing its contents. Cardboard men in paper hard hats stood smiling around the well.

If Dad could have made it home each night from the fields, wearing fresh shirts, would Mama have been happier, Howard wondered, less inclined to spend the family's money? If I'd gotten home in the evenings, dapper and clean, would Mindy have chased her flying man?

Behind the Hard Hats, couples sat at small, round tables eating salads. Ground pepper, ma'am? Vinegar? A rubber tomahawk, to slice your tomato?

Stop it, Howard thought. Jesus, you're slipping, old fellow.

Most days, in the last six months—all right, five (four?)—he'd controlled these random bitter surges, the dregs of his sorrows with Mindy. He'd rid himself of regrets. He told himself he was ready for a visit from his daughter. Alina's presence would settle him again.

But from the moment she'd stepped off the plane (losing one of her flip-flops on the exit ramp), he'd noticed Mindy in Alina's every gesture. Her plans for shopping with Meagan and Leann showed him how little space she'd left for Daddy in her brand-name boxes and bags.

His stomach growled. Maybe he should eat something. He glanced inside the café. At a table near the window, a man and a woman, probably in their thirties, appeared to be arguing. An Ex-Wife Lunch? The woman stared at him, her eyes on his wet pants. He turned away, feeling the burn on his face. In that brief glimpse, she had looked just like his mother that day in the Trading Post, and in the family's old Polaroids: squinting in the smoke from her cigarette, impatient with the world—especially with his father, out wildcatting on some rig.
Howard saw his face reflected in a toy shop window: sullen, comic in its seriousness, superimposed over the blue, furry head of the Cookie Monster. He laughed aloud. A young mom, leaving the store, steered her little girl away from him.

It was true, wasn't it: shuffling behind Mindy in the bargain aisles always reminded him of his mother's tedious sprees with his aunt.

And—oh hell—was this the toy store? It had to be. It appeared to be the only one in the mall. He walked on, past a loud group of teenaged boys with purple highlights in their hair.

Another somber truth settled in his gut: his resistance to bartering had hardened in adolescence, when his sister Judy, two years older than Howard, took him shopping with her friends. She didn't want him tagging along any more than he wanted to, but his mother insisted that she "get him out of the house, get him a shirt or two, he's a weed, an absolute weed!"

One autumn, in the early 1970s, after a revival meeting in the high-school football stadium, Judy joined a Pentecostal church in town, a development that badly frightened their Methodist mother, who admitted that Hell-talk "spooked" her. For her, church was fellowship, arts and crafts . . . socials with other women whose husbands worked late in the oil fields.

But Judy ate Hell up. One night, Howard heard her gargling marbles behind her bedroom door. Later, she told him she had been "speaking in tongues, discoursing in the holy language of the Lord."

On Saturdays, Judy and her Jesus pals looked for dresses and shoes at a used clothing store called Second Coming, out by the cemetery and the abandoned railroad station. The place had a few boys' things, mostly mothballed suits, but Howard spent most of his time there spying on Shannon and Roni, Judy's friends. They were "good girls"; this added a pinch of glory to their tanned shoulders and muscled calves.

Once, when Roni caught him staring at her legs from behind a rack of scarves, she smiled at him knowingly (the same smile Meagan had given him a while ago) and told him, "Our bodies are God's temples. Our beauty is His praise."

"Praise the Lord," Howard mumbled, and she laughed at him—a
moment as dreadful as the Arapaho Ladies’ Room Incident. He never wanted to shop with Judy and her cohort again, but his mother made him. He’d stand in the store with his eyes on the floor so he wouldn’t be tempted by the good girls’ flesh.

In her first year out of high school, Judy got a job at Second Coming. The long hours kept her from her friends; they moved apart. Eventually, shopping lost its allure for her. She no longer went to church. She spent her evenings, exhausted, on their mother’s front porch swing, then with boys in the back seats of cars, on cheap wooden couches in one-room rentals, and finally on the old spring bed where her daughter was born. By then, the father, a young roughneck from Midland, had migrated to Kansas. Or Nebraska. Some other wind-scorched plain.

Now Judy lived in Abilene with Howard’s niece, Ava, a twelfth-grader. Judy worked in a florist’s shop where, she said, the customers were either “deliriously happy or devastated by grief. Nothing in-between. Makes buying simple.” In the past, whenever Howard asked her what happened to God, she laughed and said, “He needs a better road crew. Left a lot of damn dead-ends.”

Implicit in her bitterness was an indictment of the oil fields. Like their mother, like Mindy, she resented the late nights on rigs, the sweat and the stink, the dust and the mud, the unrelieved flatness of the bedrock. But God Almighty, Howard thought, staring at the stores—where do they think these fancy baubles come from?

He spotted Alina with Meagan and Leann, huddled together in a place called The Sleep Shop, sifting through a pile of yellow cotton nightgowns on a bargain table. The girls laughed, pressing the gowns against their bodies . . . patterns of candy-cane stripes on the sleeves . . .

They hadn’t noticed him through the window, and he stood there . . . enchanted? Strangely flushed . . .

He turned and walked to the other end of the mall, past a statue of a pony. The pony appeared to be smiling—surely not the artist’s intention. Or perhaps it was. Everything about the mall seemed designed to turn everyone into a grinning idiot, Howard thought. He came to a store front offering “Bibles, Inspirational Calendars,
Christian Gifts.” Three for the price of one—Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. A poster taped to the window announced Sunday services in the Faith Complex, a mega-church (one stop shopping!) on Highway 20 by the Happy Pals Bowling Lanes and the old Arco oil tanks.

Mindy. Naturally, that's what had rattled him just now: seeing Alina and her friends—kids!—casually miming the sexy gestures, and remembering the old girl in a Victoria's Secret up in Dallas, on the last trip they had taken together. Trying on and modeling lingerie for Howard.

His legs went slack. He found his bench again by the fountain. Water stung his cheek. He held his hands on his lap, a gesture that felt like shame. That day in Dallas, he had been aware how far he and Mindy had come from the afternoon at Beasley's, when high heels seemed the summit of erotic life.

Had she been trying to save their marriage (their sagging sexual history) with her little nightie-show in the mall?

Sadness. Anger. What did he feel now? Humiliation, betrayal... but where did the betrayal lie? In Mindy? In him? The come-ons of the New and Improved?

That afternoon, he had walked through the mall thinking, “Morning in America”: the era's patriotic catch-phrase. The lush display windows mimicked the national gaiety. In those days, the President appeared often on television, denying American chicanery around the world.

Not that anyone cared. The malls had been full of bright, shiny Apples, VCRs, microwave ovens... who gave a damn about Russia, Iran, Eastern Europe, about wasting more oil than the country produced?

Stop it, Howard said to himself. Asshole, just quit.

Because, goddammit, those weren't the worst betrayals, were they? Nor was it the loss of Main Street, the destruction of the courthouse, the control of the Permian Basin by eastern giants... not even Mindy. He thought: let's forget it, old girl...

The worst was his mother's request. Yes, surely that was it. He glanced at the toy store. “Take me out,” she had ordered Howard, a near-whisper. “I want to buy something for Ava.”
By then—1985? '86?—she had outlived her sister, her husband. She had thrown away her sister’s unworn moccasins (at least half a dozen boxes of the silly things, tucked in a closet) her husband’s sweat-and-oil-stained work shirts. And she had stopped smoking because she was dying of emphysema. “I bought one too many packs of cigarettes,” she admitted.

She had come one Saturday to visit Howard in his cheap apartment east of town. This bland monstrosity—the super new Westgate Mall—had just been built. Howard had graduated from college and gotten his first menial job in Oil and Gas. He was saving to buy an engagement ring. As soon as she finished her marketing degree down in Alpine, Mindy would join him and they’d find a place together.

In the meantime, Howard’s place was tiny. His mother had decided to stay the night, though she didn’t live far away. These days the smallest bit of travel wore her out. She had no place to sleep, so she insisted he go to the mall and buy her an inflatable mattress, the kind of thing Oil Kings floated on in their backyard swimming pools. She’d put it in the bathroom, the only space available; if he needed to pee in the night, come on in, she said, it won’t bother me.

Her appearance shocked him: withered and tight, like the apple dolls in the old Indian Trading Post. The dolls had been stacked like Auschwitz bodies in a wooden bin in the middle of the sales floor (he’d thought this even as a child, having studied holocausts—like that of the Native Americans—in school). Her bare feet were as twisted as turnips, her features pinched and soft. A bare suggestion of who she had been.

“I want to buy a doll or something for Ava,” she said. “Take me to the toy store.” The mattress sighed beneath her.

“Later, Mother. Rest now.” He tried to touch her shoulder, lost beneath the creases of her camisole. He patted her sleeves, feeling for anything he could recognize as the woman he knew.

Her eyes glazed. She smiled and drifted, wheezing. “Remember?” she said. Howard answered, “Yes,” and waited. He was used to waiting for girls.

“It was like . . . they called your name.”

“What, Mother? What called your name?”
“Things, girl.” Did she think she was speaking to her sister? “All those marvelous things we could buy.”

“Yes,” Howard said. “I’ll go to the mall again, Mother. This afternoon. You rest. I’ll get something for Ava. From the two of us, okay?”

When he returned, she lay unconscious in the bathroom. Whatever he bought that day, hoping she’d admire it . . . some stupid trinket. He didn’t even remember.

Yes. Best not to stir up desires, even a desire for memory, Howard thought, staring at a mannequin’s faceless head.

I don’t care, he thought. I don’t want. Don’t want. There is nothing here that I want.

All I ever wanted has flown away from me.

A man and a woman passed him, the couple he’d seen eating lunch—still arguing, but at least they were engaged with each other. Watching them, Howard wondered, What am I so angry about? Mindy’s happy. Why can’t I let her have that?

Leann approached his bench. She wore a white cotton sweater with a homely collar, and a hem that bunched around her waist. Her skirt was the color of mud.

“Hi,” Howard said. He kept his hands in his lap.

Leann blinked rapidly. “Hi.”

“Where are the girls?”

“Shopping.”

“Something wrong?”

“I’m not so into fashion,” said Leann. “I’m sort of . . . you know. Not made for the stuff they sell here. Like . . . my weight, I mean.”

“I see.”

“It’s okay,” Leann said, slumping like a forty-year-old, a young woman in a rummage-sale body.


Leann pretended to ignore her.

“Leann, I’m sorry,” Alina said. “I forgot what it’s like for you here.”

“It’s okay,” Leann answered.
“Can we go somewhere else now, Daddy?”

“Where’s Meagan?”

“I’ll get her.”

“Sure,” Howard said.

“Thanks. Can I have more money later?”

Fake bells rang at the mall’s far end. A child, laughing, hugged the base of a tree.

“We’ll see,” Howard said. “Find your friend.” Just then, he looked up and saw Meagan on the floor above them, by the escalators. A happy, attractive young lady. She waved at them and Howard waved back.

Alina reached for Leann’s fuzzy sleeve. “I’m sorry,” she said again. Howard glimpsed tears in his daughter’s eyes. Desire leaped in his chest. Unspecific, unquenchable desire. The faceless is a lie, he thought before he knew it as a thought (well—isn’t that the nature of desire?). “I’ve missed you,” Alina said to her friend. “I just forgot. Will you forgive me?”

Howard stared at his daughter’s pretty, made-up face—at the worry that had started to change it. What a surprise! he mused. What a delight! The sharp particularities of girls!
When I aimed my derringer at the imposter
Seated where a bullet would find him
And tear him from the frail arms of his wife,
Giving him a life eternal,
I did not think my own, become infernal
Would hurl me like a thunderbolt
Into Charon's ferry.
I did not think his life would be so celebrated,
While mine would be relegated to infamy.
Did I perhaps in my wild haste
To prove my loyalty to the states he murdered
Become unhinged?
Revenge was all to me,
"absent doubt, avaunt thee," I cried out
While Lincoln rose from the dark sea
Of my sleep like some Leviathan
Whose very breath fouled the air I breathed
And from which I now receive only a burning
In my throat and eyes,
As all who once supported me
In my crazed conspiracy against plain injustice,
Turn aside and flee,
But I will not, I cannot be less than I am,
A man who demanded his place
Upon the stage of nationhood
But could not wrest it from the hands
Of those who could have saved it from destruction,
Yet chose to follow that butcher down to hell,
Where I am bound instead.
They say when I performed,
Flames shot from my eyes.
If only they had.
I could have burned the Confederacy to victory.
Now defeated,
Must we concede our sovereignty to tyranny?
Say “never” and be brave sons of the South.
Do not give in to doubt,
But cling more steadfastly to your dream of freedom
And I who have kissed death full upon the mouth,
Will leave you and make way for some other patriot
To prove his mettle,
While like the king in the poem,
I, “... Silent, upon a peak in Darien ...,”
Gaze upon what might have been
When slavery was not a sin
For men to judge, but God alone
And what I owned was mine.
Now all I was dissolves in death’s quicklime
And futility’s metronome keeps time
As if it matters anymore.
I am only a poor, wretched assassin now
Taking my final bow without applause.
“The cause, the cause was just,” I whisper
As near the same place where I shot him,
A bullet pierced my skull too
And strangely joined in death,
Abe Lincoln and John Wilkes Booth
Let the bloody truth wash over them.
“... useless, useless ...”
To imagine that by doing what you think is right,
You won’t incur the wrath of gods and men.
You enter a house and it looks like any other—a plastic hairbrush on the bureau, earrings, perfume bottles, a cheap fairground bracelet. A photo or two of people grinning as they're supposed to when they're supposed to be happy. Or having their picture taken. But your flesh can't touch any of this. Only the plastic gloves. And you're breathing through a mask and everything feels a little blurry as if you're swimming far beneath the surface, the breezy salt air an element you'll return to when your job is finished. But of course it's never finished. I don't know how we're going to clean this shit up. Kids, mothers, babies. Not just your hardcore Johnny's. Maybe I'm just too old for this. Awhile back I knew every troublemaker in this county and the next. Buzzards mostly. Just a few hawks among those scavengers. Now every bird you pass on the highway—crows, pigeons, wrens and sparrows, blue jays, hummingbirds—any one of them could have that death ray in their eyes, floating inside a cloud of pestilence, concocted all on their own, no help from the cartels or some pipeline from Mexico. Home grown as moonshine. But this stuff ain't like moonshine. No sir. I still tell myself, Frank, these people are paying your salary. But it's more than that.
I never said this to anyone but Gretchen—
I guess I thought of them as my flock,
though lord knows I'm no kind of preacher.
No, it's more like there are God's laws
and man's laws, and I've gotta keep track
of the latter. Sometimes I think if they
still respected me this wouldn't happen here,
but that's just vainglory. It's happenin'
all over the country, and you could say
no one's doing a thing but that would be a lie.
I know I am. So's Jake over the next county
and somewhere down near Tucson
there's some good old boy just like me
wondering what the hell happened to his people
and looking at these kids with teeth
that look worse than corpses a month in the ground
and the flesh gone from their bodies
like they had just walked out of some death camp,
not to mention so many burn victims
they're thinking of closing up the burn ward
at Vanderbilt. Can't afford all those non-paying grafts.
You'd think some of this would scare the shit out of others,
but they keep on coming, like moths to a flame,
only each moth has got their own sad story to tell
and some left little cocoons back in the woods
just waiting to grow up and find their own fires.
I enter the kitchen where someone's flesh
dripped off their face like some dummy
from a wax museum and the black walls
won't speak a damned word to me
and sure, it's useless to ask any more questions
like, Who's going to clean up this mess?
It's as if some nuclear reactor melted down here.
Brewing a wasteland one trailer, one farmhouse, at a time.
Just go declare it off limits for generations.
Yeah, I'm a praying man. But I'm no preacher
and I stopped believing in Satan long ago.
He was like Santa Claus or the tooth fairy.
But now I wonder. They ain't the same, are they?
SELF-PORTRAIT
Suji Kwock Kim

for, and after, So Chongju (1915–2000)

Father was a peasant:
he never came home, even late at night.
The only things he left behind
were grandmother, withered and blanched as the roots of a leek,
and a lone-flowering date tree.
For nine months, mother longed for green apricots, just one.
Under an oil-lamp dug into a dirt wall
I was born, a boy with black nails.
People said I looked like her father,
with the same shock of dark hair and star-far eyes,
the father who ran off to sea, the story goes, in the Year of Revolt,
and never returned.

Life has become more and more a humiliation.
It is the wind who has raised almost all of me.
Some see a criminal in my eyes,
others an idiot in my mouth,
but I regret nothing.
For I have sunk my teeth into life, into light and shadow, gristle
and bone,
 gnawing like a starved dog.
A lot of people always thought anarchists were fools. I graduated from high school in 1924, and even during my childhood, when the fiercest wing of anarchists still believed in propaganda of the deed and threw bombs and shot at world leaders, people thought they did it out of a bloody kind of sappiness, a laughable naivete. All this laughing, I came to think, ignored the number of things a person could be a fool for in this life—a fool for love, a fool for Christ, a fool for admiration. I had friends who were all of these, as it turned out. But I took my own route.

I wasn’t born an anarchist. I read myself into it. And they were qualified beliefs anyway, tempered and limited and curved into my own angles. But what I loved in anarchism, from the first, was the obvious truth in it: people had gotten it all wrong to expect justice from any state. Power never protected the weak, it only protected itself. Tyranny was built into the system. The clarity of this argument was pretty stunning, I thought, and so was its insistence that this didn’t have to continue, despite its long human history.

I came from a family with its own sort of principles. I was born in India, in the city of Madras in the state of Tamil Nadu, when my father was a missionary for the Reformed Church. We went home to Philadelphia when I was five, so I had only a few memories. My father left the mission in a state of great disillusion, embittered by ecclesiastical in-fighting in a country so filled with mortal suffering. In my adult life, when my friends heard I came from a missionary family, they would say, “Vera. Oh, no. That’s pretty dreadful.” Only my friend Dorothy teased me about how I came from a long line of zealots, didn’t I, which was how I liked to view it. Actually, the zealotry had drained by the time I was growing up. My father was
just another bald, tired minister who mumbled through the services and didn't really want to look anyone in the eye. My mother was more ardent, more desperate.

I hated the unbearable Ladies' Aid meetings in our living room and the tedious Sunday school with my poor mother teaching improbable platitudes. I was infamous in my high school for making cynical jokes about the Virgin Mary. Only my cousin Joe was worse. He wrote me notes parodying the psalm read in assembly (“he that hath clean hands and a pure heart and always washes with Boraxo”). He was my third cousin and I was a girl he'd always known. It hadn't occurred to him to be attracted in a non-cousinly way until he saw me in the park listening to speakers for Sacco and Vanzetti. I wasn't supposed to be there either.

All our excited feelings for each other were mixed up with ideas, with anger and visions, but what was wrong with that? Our meandering conversations, full of half-remembered reading and sudden bold bits of clarity, felt majestic. Together we picketed a textile mill with the Industrial Workers of the World—we took a streetcar and then we lined up with a big group of men and women and children and carried a sign that said Workers Are Dying of Consumption While Their Exploiters Are Rolling in Luxury and we chanted with the others, Help Us Win Our Fight, You're Next. Joe was a fast walker and we were up in the front with the yelling schoolboys.

Joe was older than I was, by a year. Once he was done with high school, he got a job in a printing office. He liked being out in the world, and all the mechanical processes of rotary presses and dry offset were interesting to him, but he put in very long hours. And I had a baby brother I took care of. So we were busy with other things besides politics. On Saturdays I'd take my fat little Robert to the park in his carriage, and Joe would walk the paths with us, wheeling the carriage for me, so I could take his arm.

My mother spoke of us as courting, but this was a misunderstanding on her part. We didn't mean to marry at all. We both assumed we would be together for life, no papers needed. I really loved that idea—the purity of our bond, without the government having anything to say about it or any religious body presuming it could sanctify us. The
whole notion of a legal wedding seemed profoundly disrespectful to us, us of all people. I was so insulted when my sister said, “What’s to keep Joe from taking off? He could go any time. You want that?” No one believed how unfair that was to Joe or how belittling to me.

We were still at home with our families, and we didn’t hide our plans; we were nothing if not straightforward. My parents were not backwards or strict, as clerical families went. They didn’t send me away to a distant relative or lock me in my bedroom. But they wouldn’t let Joe in our house again. No matter how many times he came to the door. My mother told me, “You think we could ever get over it if you did this? We never would.” My father said, “There’s a reason for the commandments. Don’t you feel God all around you? You think you’re above God?”

Outrage might just have hardened us, if there hadn’t also been tears. I heard my father weeping! My tired, desiccated father. It was a choked, unnatural, gasping sound through the wall. What were we doing, Joe and I? I began to think we were sticking too blindly to a technical point. Like my friend Mary Elizabeth from grade school, who thought eating a raisin before going to Communion was a shameful deed—that sort of literalism was something I always held against Catholics. Who cared, what did it matter, if we said a few words in a semi-public ceremony? Was cruelty better? Even Joe agreed, though his face had a terrible half-smile of embarrassment. It hurt us to have me see him. So, in the end, we were hypocrites for kindness. Both of us. Standing with my bouquet of orange blossoms, I thought: I’m happy but I’m in disguise. But probably many people feel that at their weddings.

We lived for a year in an apartment overlooking a box factory, and then, as soon as we could, we moved from the Philadelphia of our families to the freer, more unknown spaces of New York. First we were in a very cramped and desolate room in a boarding house, and then, after we started going to meetings and had more of a social life, we shared a place in the Village with a couple named Betsy and Norman and a single man named Richard and his dog, Bakunin. Sometimes other people too. I liked this arrangement very well.
We didn’t drink as much as the others, but we didn’t seem to need to—we got into the arguing and the clowning and the repudiating of theories at just as high a volume without it. Richard was the most dogged in posing questions. “Joe,” he would say, “what would you do if you caught a man stealing Vera’s purse? Would you call a cop to arrest him?”

“Will he repent forever and stop grabbing purses if I do that?” Joe said.

“I don’t think so. The cop will beat him up and he’ll get worse.”

“Poor Vera,” Betsy said. “Purseless in Gotham.”

I brought up Tolstoy’s hero in *Resurrection*, deciding that prison did utterly no good and never had. “Listen to her,” Joe said. “Are you listening?” Everyone knew I was smarter than Betsy.

“Well, if Tolstoy’s your authority on everything,” Norman said.

“No!” I said. “I never decide anything just because of what someone famous said. I don’t. Really.”

“Don’t brag,” Richard said. “No one believes bragging.” This embarrassed me and I really did stop bragging after that.

Dorothy, a friend of Richard’s who liked to drink with us, said, “I’ve been in jail. It didn’t reform me.” She was in her late twenties, older than we were, and she’d once been arrested in a march for women’s suffrage. And now she never voted, because she’d come to believe that voting was colluding. I enjoyed these ironies.

I liked watching Joe when he waited to speak, his dark brow, his sleepy eyes. My mother had told me that the first year of her marriage was the hardest year, but the shock of cohabitation went fine for us, mostly. We had the fire and puzzle of ideas, a goad to keep our better selves showing. And we had all those other people around.

None of us slept enough. The others went out after midnight to drink at a speakeasy a few blocks away. They had less-regular jobs, looser hours—they wrote articles for magazines, they sketched ladies’ fashions for department store ads, and I thought Betsy had money from her family. Joe had found work in a print shop uptown, and I had a job painting lettering for a sign and banner place in the neighborhood. I had always liked to draw and sketch and used to do all the decorating in the church.
This was a very good time for us. Joe was a great talker, but at the end of any evening, once we were in our room, he would say, "I am so tired," and make a big joke of collapsing against me, where lust took over whatever fatigue either of us had. How luxuriant those nights were, our secret lives of surfeit and delight.

We'd come to the city in the thick heat of late summer, but within a month we were in an autumn of clear days, of mornings with light in every molecule. I made a vow to walk to my job, to get more time in the sudden freshness outside, but this excellent habit lasted two days. I envied our friend Dorothy, who owned a tiny, unheated bungalow by the beach in Staten Island. A very nice man named Forster stayed with her there on weekends, when he wasn't working in the city. They claimed to live on bootleg wine and the fish he caught. Once they brought us a basket of shells that smelled like drying seaweed and I put the shells all around our room, big white whelks and nacreous jingle shells, thin as paper, and blue cockles striped with yellow, on the mantel and the night table. "Think of this as your island hideaway," I said to Joe, as I flipped down the covers. "Where the roaring surf echoes the passion of mortals."

"I hear it, I hear it," Joe said.

Joe had never been to the ocean, but I had. My mother walked with me along the Jersey shore when she was trying to talk me into giving up Joe. I was busy thinking at that moment how the rhythm of the surf sounded like a great animal breathing, sounded like the pulse of sex. I knew what sex was, or thought I did—my mind was entirely colored by the few chances Joe and I had taken—and in his absence I was a dour lump of constant longing. I sat with my mother on a bench along the sands, watching the curling froth of the waves, and I had remembrances that made me feel smug in her company. I was sorry for my mother, when she wasn't being harsh to me.

"We can take the ferry to Coney Island some time," Joe said. "We live on an island, don't we?"

"This is our island," I said to Joe, setting my palm on the bed.

Joe liked this sort of beckoning frankness (he was reaching for
me now, while he turned down the lamp with his other hand). As long as it wasn’t too frank. If my praise of his body ran to candid exactness, if I was moved to use blunt and stumbling language to exalt something we’d done, he would laugh and say, “Yes, yes,” but not happily. So I stopped doing that. Everyone thought Joe was the bolder of us, but no one knows how a couple fits together. The twists in that knot. For his part, Joe had learned not to talk so much when we were already lying in bed at night, not to squander this time to reflect on his day until we were too sleepy for love. The quarrels we had turned each of us huffy but caused useful corrections.

Dorothy had said that their beach was glorious at night, with tall, skinny pines against the sky and lights in the houses along the shore and the rolling surf invisible and tremendous in the dark, and I was thinking of that now, while Joe and I entered our own night, our own sea. This can never be explained, I thought in the midst of it, no wonder pornography fails. You think you know things but you don’t. We stayed awake so long we could hear the clop of the horse’s hooves outside when the milk truck went by in the very early morning.

In the morning, when Joe and I got up, only the dog—a big mongrel with some Police Dog in him—was awake and pacing the kitchen. The others always slept late. But I sort of liked being someone who went to work, and I didn’t mind my job. Nothing fascinating, but I could lose myself in it.

I spent a perfectly pleasant afternoon painting—in mahogany brown with pale-green shadow—a sign that suggested to every passersby

ADAMS CHICLETS
“Genuinely and Truly Delightful to All”

with a spearmint leaf below. The leaf was simple and I took pride in adding nice touches, serrated edges, tiny veins, a jaunty stem.

It was true that chewing gum was a worthless product, a clever vendor’s dream of packaged nothing. Betsy refused to buy it. My father had banned chewing gum to all his daughters, who were
not to be seen masticating like cows. My poor father. In India the people used to chew beeda after a meal, to freshen the mouth and aid digestion—a leaf with sweet spices rolled into it. My mother was in anguish, close to tears, when men spit its red juice in the street.

My unhappy mother. What an effort she always strove to make. Sometimes now she wrote me letters. *Kindest regards to my dearest son-in-law. I hope that he is enjoying your cooking!* She would never really like Joe, never forgive him for wanting to dishonor me. Was it better that there was no candor between us? I made fun of her letters to my friends, as if I was the sort of person who wanted a bluffer, franker mother. That was my lie, wasn’t it?

When I finished the sign, my boss, Mr. Frances, said, “The leaf looks like a caterpillar somebody stepped on.”

“It’s mint,” I said. “We used to grow it in our yard.”

“Do I pay you to be an idiot?” Mr. Frances said. “I’m the idiot then, aren’t I?”

Sometimes he docked our pay when he didn’t like the way the signs turned out. Ten cents, or even twenty cents, enough for a meal. He called it fining us for errors of art. Or he’d have us stay late into the night to paint a sign over again. “Right is right,” he’d say. The small power he had rotted and elated him. A few times I’d passed out union literature to try to organize our little group of workers. That was as far as my courage went. Not far enough, but somewhere.

“You’re one of the biggest numbskulls of all the sign-painters I’ve had the misfortune to be around,” Mr. Frances said, “and anyone can see it. Isn’t that true?”

That was the worst, his wanting you to agree. He always wanted that.

“I don’t know,” I said.

“Yes, you do,” Mr. Frances said.

I took my brushes to the sink to soak them in a jar of turpentine. “You do know,” he said.

I had the water running, and I kept my back to him. I needed the money. But people always needed money. Didn’t I have integrity? What did I live for then? To walk around afraid of the Mr. Franceses of this world?
“You do know,” he said.

The others had stopped talking. I wiped my hands on the towel. I should have turned around but I didn’t. The room was waiting.

“I know,” I said. What if he fired me anyway? They were looking at me, the others, but they all would have done the same thing.

“Go home to your husband who has to put up with you,” Mr. Frances said.

I put on my jacket and got out of there. I thought about Joe the whole walk home. In my head I was explaining, trying to make myself sound better. Most of my days were not as bad as this one, but the sweetness and the one true thing at the end of all of them was Joe.

I didn’t stop to say anything to anyone when I came in the door. I went down the hall at once to change out of the clothes that smelled of turpentine. I waited, sitting on the bed, and when Joe came in, tired and inky himself, he had to hear my day.

“It’s not even for profit that the man has to humiliate us,” I said. “It’s just for the joy of pushing us around. He can’t resist. Do you think that’s a human instinct?”

“Maybe,” Joe said. “But we overcome other instincts. We’re housebroken, we don’t go around mounting each other’s wives.”

Joe had his hand on my knee as we spoke. I leaned against him, against the hard span of his chest. Why is beauty so difficult? I thought.

“I don’t think fairness is such an advanced idea. Children have it. How come it’s never caught on? “ I said. “Don’t tell me. I know why. No one wants to give anything up.”

“Their little two-bits of dominance,” he said.

It was my own fault, when we went down to supper, that I had to tell everyone the story of Mr. Frances all over again.

“I can’t believe,” Betsy said, “that you let him do that.”

“I need the job,” I said.

“Oh! It’s Miss Starving Masses herself,” Richard said. “Excuse me.”

Joe said, “I’ll go in tomorrow and set the place on fire.” This was a
joke, but Joe was the only one I liked at that moment.

But only two nights later I was singing “Beautiful Dreamer” with Betsy in a bar we all liked. She had a better voice than I did but I could keep on key even after drinking. “Out on the sea,” I sang. “Mermaids are chanting the wild lorelie.” Joe was busy explaining to Forster why ink was basic to civilization, and Forster was going on about why Goya was the best draftsman that ever lived. “No! Rembrandt!” I said. Alcohol makes you very certain about things. I didn’t really want to fight with Forster either, as he knew. “I really like Rembrandt,” I said, more quietly and dumbly.

“He’s deep, I’ll say that,” Forster said. “You would like him.”

Dorothy said, “Nobody ever gets over those Goya war etchings. It’s Goya.”

“What about the leper?” I said. “What about what Rembrandt does with Christ healing the leper?”

“You people,” Betsy said, “have such grim ideas of beauty.”

We had just been to a meeting of the Anti-Imperialist League, a nice enough communist group. I had once taken fire from meetings, but I had been to too many, and I was glad to be in the bar instead. I wanted workers not to be starved for someone else’s profits, I wanted Sacco and Vanzetti to live and not be executed, but I saw the attractions of being a person with opinions who refused to belong to anything, like Forster. Without Joe I might have slipped into that. Joe had an appetite for meetings. He followed them like sporting events and tallied points afterward.

“Beautiful dreamers,” Joe said. “What queens of song you are.”

“I bet you can sing,” Betsy said. “Can you sing?”

“Like a half-dead frog.”

“Frogs have outstanding voices,” Dorothy said. “As good as crickets.”

I thought they all liked Joe better than me. I liked Joe better than me. He was more fun, more showy and funny, and also more uniformly nice. Now he was twanging a frog’s version of “Beautiful Dreamer” and then “Swanee River.” Did Dorothy fancy him? Probably not. She could sometimes flirt but she loved Forster.
“Some frogs can inflate their throats to the size of their heads,” Forster said.
“Only you would know that,” I said.

After Christmas, when the weather turned bitter cold, I was the one who ended up walking the dog when Richard didn’t want to bother going out, and I often ran into Forster in Washington Square. He had a favorite bench by the ginkgo trees on the south side. Like the dog, he liked to be outside.
“You're not cold sitting there?” I said. Bakunin was investigating Forster’s shoes. It was a Sunday morning and not very many humans were out.
“I don’t mind,” he said. “Dorothy says I just don’t notice.”
“In Tibet there are lamas who sit out naked in winter,” I said. “They slow themselves down, I think.”
“I’m afraid I’m not a lama,” he said.
“Fine with me,” I said. “I’m not disappointed.”
Forster smiled faintly at this. He was quieter than the others; you had to work to talk to him. “I’ve had enough clergy in my life,” I said.
“Dorothy has quite a religious side,” he said. “I have to say, it’s superstition to me.”
Bakunin barked at a squirrel, and I let him off the leash. He never caught any but it made him feel important to chase. We watched him leap at a sycamore, outraged that he couldn’t get up the tree by jumping. He consoled himself by sniffing at a man sleeping on bench nearby. “Bakunin!” I said. “Don’t bother that person.”
The dog was whining. “No,” I said. “He’s not waking up to play with you.” A howling wail came out of the dog, a sound I had not heard him make before—a siren with a long quaver. Or was it the man howling? It wasn’t the man. He wasn’t moving. He was probably too cold to move.
“I’ll get Bakunin,” Forster said.
I went with him. The man on the bench had rolled himself in a filthy overcoat and pulled the top of it over his head. He was lying sideways on the bench, with his feet jutting off the edge—bare feet,
grayed with dirt. What kind of city lets a man go shoeless in ten-degree weather? Even the cracked skin on the ankles looked like stone, not skin. Forster touched the man's shoulder (very kindly, I thought) and said, "Sorry, sorry."

I almost said, "What an argument against alcohol!" but it was a joke I didn't want the man to hear. Forster was bent over him, peering at whatever bit of the face showed from under the coat.

"Will you stay here," Forster said, "while I try to find a policeman?"

"He's not all right?" I said.

"No," Forster said. "He can't hurt you, don't worry."

I looked at the face myself. The helpless mouth, the empty eyes. When you grow up in the parish house of a church, you know what dead people look like. I gave a small, useless shriek, and then I said, "Go now."

Once Forster was gone, I started to be appalled that he hadn't checked the man over more closely. What if the man was only sick and frozen, and there was something I should be doing? I started to rub his bare feet, to chafe them into warming. They were stiff under my gloves, but feet are always stiff. It was horrible to think I was bothering a dead man with my touch, but I kept it up. I thought of Dorothy, who'd trained as a nurse during the War and might've known what to do.

I said, "It's all right, it's all right," to the body. The head had lank hair and a broken tooth showing from under the lip. I had to stay where Forster had left me, but I was afraid of the man as a corpse and afraid of him as a live human who might wake up dangerous. And then I was ashamed to be so interested in my own feelings when I was standing over a man at the border of life.

And the feet. I wouldn't let the dog sniff them, I pushed his muzzle away. I knew perfectly well that they were Christ's feet, even though I no longer took any of that literally. How could I not know? I was still chanting, "It's all right," and rubbing the shoeless feet, when Forster got there with a policeman.

"Please hold the dog, Miss," the cop said. Then he did all the things Forster and I should have done. He cupped his palm under
the nostrils to feel for warm breath, he clasped the wrist where the pulse would be, he reached under the man’s shirt to find his heart. “It’s bad?” Forster said. “Bad as it gets,” he said. “You can go. Thank you. Thank you very much.”

I was going to say, *rest his soul*, but I didn’t, because I didn’t want Forster to think I was a ninny. The colossal vanity of that hit me a second later. I was not exactly myself anyway. “Doesn’t it seem very noisy outside, all of a sudden?” I said. “We’ve been elsewhere.” “Yes,” Forster said. “I’m not quite back yet.”

We were at the edge of the park, in the cold. Everything was too vivid, after our time spent guessing how far the man was from anything we knew. The bare quiet was still in our heads. We walked without speaking—I was glad of that. How tinny and insubstantial everything in the shop windows was, how childish. What did anyone need a feather-topped hat for? In front of my building, Forster said, “Go sit by yourself somewhere, if you can.” “I wish we’d been there sooner, for the man,” I said. “That part makes me angry,” Forster said. He put his hand on my shoulder. I was afraid to touch him, with my gloves that had touched the dead man’s feet, but I leaned my head slightly.

A few days later, Dorothy told me she’d been saying prayers for the man’s soul. “What kind of prayers?” I said. We were in the corner of a loud and pleasantly crowded living room where a party was going on. Dorothy had a cigarette in her hand. “To beg that he’s taken into heaven. What else can be asked for? And I gave something to the priest at St. Guadeloupe to have him included in their prayers.” Dorothy, poor as a church-mouse, was giving coins for this? “We all had lots of training young, didn’t we?” I said. “Actually, I didn’t,” she said. “I just like to go into churches, I have for years. Mostly Catholic ones. Especially late at night, after I’ve
been out, I like to go in and see the lit candles. But not only then. And I notice that I tend to pray in my head. Don’t ask me Who’s listening. I don’t have a final opinion.”

All this was a surprise. I wasn’t one of those who thought that praying was demented—my family prayed pretty constantly—but I thought of myself as done with such things. In Philadelphia I’d gone to meetings (and marched too) with workers whose pamphlets said, “Jesus Saves the Slave,” not to mention “Trust in the Lord and Sleep in the Street.” Dorothy must’ve known those lines. She made a living of sorts as a writer and she’d done reporting for radical magazines for years.

“People are at their best when they’re in devotion,” Dorothy said. “Sometimes I just walk from the beach into town with my rosary beads in my pocket. I don’t think it matters if I don’t say the words completely right.”

Is she unbalanced? I thought. And I saw that I wanted her to be. I had an oddly happy feeling at the thought that she might be not right at all for Forster. I knew what this thought meant. (And didn’t I have a husband I loved? I did.) It was my own business what I thought. Not every involuntary wish had to be acted on. Thoughts are free, I thought. This was the refrain of a German song they sang at meetings—No man can deny, Die Gedanken sind frei.

Dorothy was fishing a piece of fruit out of her empty glass of rum punch. It was the made-up, improvised nature of Dorothy’s praying that gave it a nutty taint. And then I was embarrassed to think that. I, of all people. Dorothy was a sensible and highly original person. If she wanted to walk around mentally intoning addresses to pure space, that was her own business, her own liberty.

At the party, someone put on a record of “My Baby Just Cares for Me” and Joe came to claim me for a light, not too bouncy fox trot. Forster wasn’t around (he didn’t like parties) and Dorothy found Richard to dance with. She talked while she danced, in that smoky room, with her shining cropped hair showing wispy in the light, and she looked like any of us, nicely in rhythm, set on what she was doing, pretty enough.
Could someone who loved freedom above all believe in a fat, overconstructed, historically corrupt institution like the Catholic Church? Joe and I had several talks about this. Dorothy wasn’t even born a Catholic, but if it was truly in her own individual nature to love the Church, what then? A conundrum. “It’s the illusion in it that gives me the creeps,” Joe said. He meant divinity. Christ’s or Anybody’s. Couldn’t you be opposed to submission—I didn’t expect to ever again kneel to pray—but receptive to what Dorothy liked to call the Unseen? “Not possible, I don’t think,” Joe said. “Name me a religion where people don’t bow their heads.”

I wasn’t keen to think about it, now that I was away from my father’s house. I didn’t need to have an opinion, in the life I had. But I saw how lit up Dorothy was, how charged with bits of liturgy, how stirred and driven, how thirsty. She would start to find us all shallow, if she kept on this way. But we had our own beliefs, our hopes for knocking down the stupidities of the past, our faith in the people and their resourcefulness (at least Joe and I had this last one). “She thinks we’re nothing,” Joe said.

“Don’t be vain about it,” I said. “That is not the problem.” But I was hurt too, that Dorothy could think of leaving us.

Joe and I kept meaning to visit Dorothy’s little house in Staten Island, but we didn’t get there till the height of summer, when Manhattan was an oven and the beach was fresh and astounding. We all ran around in the surf in our bathing costumes, shrieking when the waves hit us. Forster was out fishing when we got there, but Dorothy’s twelve-year-old brother John, who was staying with them, dove fearlessly under the waves and kept teasing his sister by popping up right under where she was. Joe pretended to rescue her by dragging her off. “All the Day family are good swimmers,” she said, kicking and escaping. I didn’t know then that that Dorothy was pregnant.

She was perfectly slender in her sleeveless tunic and narrow swimsuit. I was shorter and rounder and felt more exposed and fleshy, though I forgot myself from the ease everyone else had. We dried ourselves sitting on the porch, eating blackberries from the garden.
The house itself was a mess of specimens that Forster had dragged in—horseshoe crabs, skate egg cases, the skulls of small animals, bird’s nests, the shell of a huge turtle—and the kitchen table was piled with pages of a serial romance Dorothy was writing for a newspaper. I envied their lives in that little house.

Forster showed up in time for supper, tanned and wild-haired from the boat and quiet as ever. He had caught a dogfish, which looked like a small shark—Dorothy said no one around there ate them but an Italian neighbor had said Italians thought they were delicious. So Dorothy fried up pieces in butter and we had potatoes and cabbage salad with them. The fish was strong-tasting but not bad. “Oh,” Forster said, “you just have to cut away from the venomous part.” I thought he was kidding but he wasn’t.

“Vera, honey bun, don’t be nervous,” Joe said, so I decided not to be. Everyone thought Forster knew what he was doing, and I probably thought so too. They lived on nothing, he and Dorothy, and looked better and healthier than the rest of us.

Dorothy told me the news when we were cleaning up in the kitchen. “Don’t you notice how magnificent I am?” she said. “It’s the end of the second month already. Every morning I give thanks.”

I knew she’d had an abortion when she was younger and had suffered for it. And the man had left her afterward. It wasn’t much of a secret—a novel she’d written about it had actually been published, and movie rights had paid for the beach shack (though no one made any such movie). Dorothy was so earnest she didn’t bother to have what would be secrets for anyone else.

“I thought Forster was looking very tickled,” I said. “Now I get it.”

“Forster will get used to the idea,” she said. “He thinks it’s a terrible world and we shouldn’t add to its numbers.”

“It is a terrible world,” I said, “but he’ll be fine.”

I meant that he would stick by her. Dorothy didn’t appear to doubt this either.

“He’ll teach the baby how to fish,” I said. “You’ll have the only infant who knows how to surf-cast.”

I didn’t say it, but I was ever so slightly sorry for Forster, who’d been outmaneuvered, caught off guard. Nature’s dupe. He really did
only want a few simple things—a life with lots of empty space in it—and now he was getting more than he'd bargained for.

But you always did, in a couple. That was what I thought when I lay next to Joe in the tiny bedroom at the end of the hall. Joe was talking on about how fishermen never had to punch a time-clock, no wonder Forster liked it. They came and went as they wished. That was how come Vanzetti had no proof he was at work the night of the Braintree robbery, he was out selling fish. Could he get a lobster to testify he never fired a shot? An eel to swear for him?

It was okay. I might've had a husband who talked about things I cared far less about. “It's so quiet here at night,” Joe said. “At home our streets are teeming, aren't they?”

“Most streets,” I said.

“And heartless. We're as bad as India,” Joe said. “Only they have more people.”

“We could have just as many, before very long,” I said. “In about a minute, we could. Margaret Sanger's mother lived through eighteen pregnancies and eleven births, did you know that? Nobody cares whether poor people have birth control.”

We were practitioners of birth control ourselves. I hated nothing more than having to buy feminine hygiene products like jellies and foaming tablets—I'd wait till a woman clerk was on duty in the drugstore and whisper the words. They were too graphic, those products, like artificial versions of private natural processes. I was sure it was wrong that such items should be made for profit and sold in stores for cash.

I was thinking about the capitalist system having this intimate contact with my own tissues, as I took the tube out of our suitcase and padded down the hall to the bathroom to slip the manufactured gel inside me. I tried to be fast, so Joe didn't wait too long, but a kind of modesty always kept me from doing this in his sight.

“It's ridiculous we have to do things with chemicals just to make love freely,” I said to Joe, when I was getting back into bed. “It makes me hate nature.”

“Don't tell nature you said that,” Joe said.
“I hate it that procreation has anything to do with sex,” I said. “Who thought that up? What sense does that make? It’s so stupid.”
“Our opinions were not consulted,” Joe said.
“There are too many babies,” I said, “born every day and they don’t get cared for and nobody does anything about it.”
“I wouldn’t say nobody,” he said.
“You haven’t been to India,” I said. “You haven’t seen all the babies in India.”
I hadn’t seen all the babies in India either, as Joe well knew. I did have a memory of a row of mothers and little children (littler than I was) sleeping along a narrow street, curled on blankets in a settled way, as if they were camping at a relative’s. My father shuttled us past them very swiftly.
And why was I going on about this now? Dorothy had been so radiantly emphatic about how happy she was, and here I was having a fit about excess infants. I was in a house with a garden full of nasturtiums and green squash, the clean smell of salt all around, the frogs and crickets thrumming out the window, and I was mad at nature.
“Manhattan in August is every bit as hot as India,” I said, a fact I made up, but I reached for Joe just then, so he didn’t need to answer.

The next day we all took a walk along the beach with Forster. He pointed to a horseshoe crab, which looked like an iron helmet with a bayonet attached. “They’re living fossils,” he said. “Haven’t changed for three hundred million years.”
I thought the thing was dead, but Dorothy’s brother John poked it with a piece of driftwood and it moved very slightly in the sand.
“Will it bite?” I said.
“Oh, no, never,” Dorothy said.
“Its mouth is in the middle of its underside,” Forster said, “so it can’t bite you unless you pick it up.”
“It doesn’t seem like an animal,” Joe said. “More like a moving ash tray.”
“Forster said they can live to be thirty,” John said. “But they don’t
Joan Silber

have babies till they’re eleven.”

“He knows a lot, that Forster,” I said.

“I see hundreds of things on the shore much more clearly,” Dorothy
said, “because of Forster.”

“He’s the man to have by the sea, I can tell,” I said.

Forster looked away. “He is,” Dorothy said.

“Forster has extremely good eyes,” Forster said. It was the fondest
thing I’d heard him say.

“How did you learn it all?” I said. “It’s kind of amazing.”

Forster shrugged.

“He went to shell college,” Joe said. “They give you a wet mackerel
for a diploma. Leaves a lasting impression.”

When we were back home again in New York, Joe would some-
times imitate Forster, picking up a crab or piece of kelp. “It’s very,
very antique,” he would say. “Its smell is older than mankind.”

Throughout that autumn, I was aware of the months passing for
Dorothy. I knew she believed that she was moving into a larger
truth, growing herself into a fuller vessel. And the child would have
the sweet, slightly neglected freedom the offspring of some of our
friends had. If you did your best not to get in nature’s way, would
nature reward you? Our most theoretical friends liked to say the
institut of the state was unnatural, as if no insult could be more
utter.

Forster went out to Staten Island every weekend, even as the weather
got colder. Betsy said Dorothy was looking wonderful. But Richard
reported that Forster and Dorothy were having fights, because she’d
started walking to town to go to Mass in the mornings. She mostly
did this when he wasn’t there, but he was horrified anyway.

“She isn’t even a Catholic!” Betsy said. “If I were her, I’d maybe
just not bother to tell him about this little secret church habit. I’d
keep my mouth shut, if I were her. At a time like this. Where is her
brain?”

“He’ll never agree with her,” Richard said. “Forster of all people.
She knows that.”

Dorothy had no cagey feminine practicality. She was more like a
Northwest Review

prophet, helpless to resist telling what she saw. Or like a swooning fan. Of what? Of Jesus, of the Unseen under the mess of the seen, of a holier way of passing the day? My father, when he was a young man, had wanted to preach in India because (my mother told us) he couldn't bear not explaining what he knew.

We all thought Dorothy Day was moving backward, and yet it was a poetic motion. "She's becoming medieval," Norman said.

Dorothy's religious eccentricity had an interesting effect on me, it pushed me into a different stubbornness. I stuck closer to my husband, very close indeed (where would I be without such a husband? how would I live?), and this meant going to more meetings. They had their bits of beauty, those meetings, especially the ones for Sacco and Vanzetti, where the rhetoric was already a wail of grief, though the two men, in prison, waiting, were certainly still alive.

In December Dorothy moved back to the city with Forster, and with her younger sister, Della. I liked Della, who was staunch like Dorothy but milder and girlier. It was Della who went with Dorothy to Bellevue Hospital, when the labor pains came. Where was Forster? No one seemed to think he had planned to go anywhere near the yowl and blood of delivery. But everyone said he was entirely enchanted once the baby—a healthy girl—was actually born. Well, who didn't like babies?

When Joe and I visited Dorothy at her apartment, Della was holding the baby—a creature so tiny she could rest along Della's forearm—and walking her around the living room. Dorothy was lying on a couch and Forster hovered in a doorway. It was a small room, with all of us in it. "Who thought I'd have such a pretty baby?" Dorothy said. "I thought I'd have some gnarled little thing only I could love. You don't think she's too pretty, do you?"

"Definitely overdone," Joe said. "See if you can feed her something to make her homelier."

Della put her in my arms, as a great favor, but I was less eager to hold her than they thought. She was chubby and damp, sweet as my own baby brother had been, but I didn't want her curling too close to me. I knew perfectly well how babies were made, but I seemed to be
afraid they were contagious. Joe said, “Look how she settles in.”

“Hello, hello, hello, Tamar Teresa Day, hello, my fatso girly girl,” Della said.

I asked Forster how they’d decided on the names and he looked surprised. “Dorothy’s work,” he said.

Joe said, “How calm the baby is.”

The baby took that as her cue to begin fussing, and Dorothy got up to take her out of my arms. “You little fat thing, you want more to eat,” she said.

Dorothy swiveled and turned her back to us when she bared herself to nurse the child. Dorothy a mother! Forster led us into the kitchen and poured us shots of brandy. Joe said, “To the future that’s just arrived,” and we drank the stuff down.

Joe said, when we were out the door, “I think he really looks very happy.”

“In his way,” I said.

“He likes seeing Dorothy so glad.”

“Richard thinks love is making a fool of him,” I said.

We were all upset when we heard that Dorothy had made friends with a nun on Staten Island and had the baby baptized at a church there. Neighbors came to the beach house afterwards for a celebratory lunch of boiled lobsters and salad, but Forster, who had caught the lobsters, left before people got there.

“He didn’t have to rain on her parade,” Betsy said. “What does it matter to him if she likes Jesus?”

“She’s the one who won’t stop talking about it,” I said. “And it’s his baby.”

“He left on principle,” Richard said. “I don’t blame him.”

I had plenty of occasion to think about principle. Joe and I stood with a group in Union Square, trying to get people to sign petitions to the governor of Massachusetts, begging him to stop the executions of Sacco and Vanzetti. In the light spring rain Joe and I took turns holding an umbrella over us. Some people signed and were very nice. Some boys threw clods of mud at us, which we tried (to everyone’s
amusement) to block with the umbrella. Joe believed in acting jolly about it.

I looked at our flyer with its portraits of Sacco and Vanzetti, the two of them cuffed together, staring ahead, deep-eyed, men fond of gardening and known to nurse sick kittens, men neighbors said were too gentle to have shot two other workers for payroll money. Probably. Plenty of people I knew were sure the most dearly held principles had to yield to larger principles, that sacrifice was necessary for any radical change, even the sacrifice of mercy to violence.

I was against ever giving up mercy, and I thought the old kind of anarchism was done for. The point about Sacco and Vanzetti—anyway—was the government’s unrelenting malice. I got wet and dreary standing out with our petition, and I did think about how the matter of pure principle could get complicated. Really, as I saw it, Forster might just as well have sucked around to eat a lobster or two for lunch. Melted butter, hot rolls, crisp lettuce from the cottage garden. I saw that he must have meant to stay for the meal, actually, but then he couldn’t do it: he had no polite lying in him, not even for love.

He kept leaving Dorothy and coming back. What did I want him to do? Terrible for a woman with an infant to have to put up with that. Didn’t I want Dorothy to have him? But hard too for him to put up with Jesus all the time. Did I want him to find solace with me? Even in my dreams I couldn’t bring myself to think of leaving Joe. In my fantasies I had a torrid, majestic affair with Forster, our dazzled bodies falling into one audacious discovery after another. But my mind got stuck on where we would go to act out these exquisite inventions—didn’t he still share the apartment with Della, when Dorothy wasn’t there? Or had they all given that up? Could he be living alone, on his crummy earnings? I could foresee so easily every step in our falling into bed together, the hesitations and overtures and bursts of truth. But I puzzled over what bed we would use. The practicality of my nature worried the problem.

I had no special reason to think Forster was drawn to me. I had sometimes had glimmers, but I didn’t think I was worldly enough to gauge them. The deepest question—which was not even a question
but a blot over thought—was what it would mean to deceive a person like Joe. Even if he never knew.

But still I might do it. It might not be past me to do such a thing. Who knows until the tests are given? My mother used to say that India had tested her faith. The place was hot and terrifying but Jesus still lived. Once I told Joe that India had given me my own faith. I meant the leper. I was in a horse-cart on the street with our maid when one came up to us, with his parched skin mottled light and dark, holding out a hand whose fingers were not all complete. I knew about lepers from the Bible. His begging bowl was on a cord around his neck, but the maid had the cart go faster, to get away. At home I wanted my mother to find him and give him all our coins. My poor mother. I had a crying fit when she wouldn’t. Joe said Emma Goldman told people she became an anarchist after she saw a peasant beaten with the knout, when she was a girl in Russia. Horror eats you, if you don’t have an idea: that was what I thought.

In August Sacco and Vanzetti were killed by the electric chair, and the person who took this the hardest, of all of us, was Forster. He was out in Staten Island with Dorothy, and he went for days without speaking or taking food. He sat out on the bay in his fishing boat, in a stupor of despair. Some nights he slept on the beach. We heard this from Norman, who heard it from their neighbor, Jane. Jane said he did still like to play with the baby.

But how could it have been news to Forster, what human beings were? Where had he been all his life?

“If he’d grown up in India,” I said, “nothing would surprise him.”

Joe said, “He has a good heart but he needs to toughen up.”

“He’s not weak,” I said. “Why do you think he’s weak?”

“He should be infuriated instead,” Joe said. “That’s the whole point of what we go around telling people.”

“Well, don’t call him weak,” I said. “That’s all I’m saying.”

“Is it?” Joe said. “You can stop saying it then.”

Joe had his own troubles, which I’d hardly paid attention to. His older brother had lost his job in an insurance office because he drank
too much, and now he and his wife and two small children were staying with Joe’s parents. The children were unruly, the wife was sullen, Joe’s mother was kindly but a little hysterical, and the brother had become a morose drunk. I was sorry for all of them, but it was a drama I had little patience for, reported in letters from the brother himself. Joe sent bits of money to help pay his brother’s debts, he went home on visits, he made funny cards for the children: Hail, Brave Warriors. I painted a picture of our street in New York to send to them—the dog on the steps, the tobacconist, the fruit-and-vegetable stand, the milk cart—I could do that, at least. I had the dog saying, Woof, O Warriors.

We were carrying a package for them (a Parcheesi game) to the post office when we ran into Forster on the street. It was October by this time and he looked all right—thin, but he was always thin—and he said, “This is the best season in New York, isn’t it?” I thought it was a cheerful thing to say, and the sky was indeed a rare deep blue. “It must be still beautiful out at the beach,” Joe said.

“It would be, if we could be simple again, but we can’t be,” Forster said. “When I go out to fish, Dorothy has the nun come to visit her. The woman runs off if she happens to come when I’m there.” “The Sister comes to teach Dorothy?” I said. “Oh, yes, she does,” he said. “Often.” “How’s the baby?” Joe said. “She’s all right?” “Tamar is excellent,” he said. “She’s taught herself to crow at the gulls.” “The gulls probably know what she’s saying,” Joe said. “I bet you can talk to the gulls,” I said to Forster. “You of all people.” “Who’d want to?” Joe said. “Bunch of complainers, those gulls.” “At least they’re not bowing and cooing to idols and statues,” I said. “Gulls don’t strike me as Roman Catholic types.” “What a thing to say,” Joe said. “You think I insulted the gulls by comparing them?” I said. “Oh, Vera,” Joe said. “Stop pandering.”

It was very true I didn’t sound like myself, I was helplessly overshooting to let Forster know I was on his side. And it wasn’t the
kind of tone Forster liked either.

"It's the pigeons that are more papish," I said. "Bobbing up and down like that."

"She still prays when she visits her family," Joe said, about me.

"Just sometimes," I said. What saps Forster must have thought women were.

And I prayed when I was alone too, a fact Joe didn't know. Not to any deity—I was done with kowtowing to whatever ran the universe—but sometimes I pled for help or for mercy. And in moments of great sweetness I would think, thank you for this. After Joe and I were married, when we were alone, after the reception, in a hotel room with a ceiling of looping plaster garlands, I thought that.

Dorothy would have to be married in the Church, if she was really going to join the Church. No more cozy common-law in the beach shack. Betsy said Dorothy was painting herself into a corner, tying herself into an obedience she didn't even believe in. I barely knew any Catholics, not as close friends, and I didn't think Dorothy did either. We all knew that Sacco and Vanzetti had been raised in the Church and neither of them would see a priest at the end. Right before they were electrocuted, Sacco said, "Viva l'anarchia!" and farewell to his family, and Vanzetti said he wished to forgive "some people" for what they were doing to him, a line Joe always said he got from Jesus.

I tried a new secret discipline with myself. For each time I thought of Forster, I set aside two cents to give to Joe, to send to Philadelphia for his brother's debts. I thought Joe would be glad if I took more of an interest in his brother's sorrow, and I could do without saving for silk stockings. But there were too many illicit thoughts to keep track of, and it was too depressing to tally them when I did. So I underestimated and lumped the sums together in a dollar I gave to Joe at the end of the week. "What's this?" he said, surprised. "You don't have to." But he took it.

In November Dorothy and Forster had another serious fight about where her beliefs were taking her, and he walked out on her again. I
could hardly believe he spent the night on the beach in the middle of November. When he came back, Dorothy wouldn't let him in the house. She locked the door against him. It was hard to imagine the two of them in such a drama. People who never shouted in ordinary life, reduced to hostile idiocy in a religious war. The next day she took the train into Manhattan and left the baby with her sister, and then she went out again to the church in Staten Island and was baptized. She went through all of it alone, with only her friend the nun to be her godmother. We heard all this from Norman, who had a friend who was tight with Della.

“I hope she’s happy,” Richard said, not nicely.

“I feel sorry for him,” Norman said. “Cuckolded by Jesus.”

“Bet she finds someone else,” Richard said.

“How could she find someone better than Forster?” I said.

“She just did,” Norman said.

“She has his baby,” Betsy said. “It’s very cruel.”

“Oh, the man will land on his feet,” Joe said.

And I saw Dorothy not long after, pushing a carriage in Washington Square. It was winter again, with the park bleak and windy, and the baby was almost invisible under the wool blankets and knit cap. A soft pink face with closed eyes and a double chin. “She looks warm,” I said.

“That’s why we’re here, it’s too cold out by the beach,” Dorothy said. “Forster used to chop all the wood for the stove but I can’t manage all that.”

“No. How could you?”

“Forster was a great wood-chopper. He’d hack up a big pile of driftwood for me to use all week.”

“He must miss you and the baby,” I said.

“How do you know?” she said. “Have you spoken to him?”

“No, but Richard has. I think he’s fine.”

“He’s always fine, he’s very healthy. Did he ask about me? Forget I asked that.”

“Richard didn’t say. Forster always keeps his cards close to his chest anyway. You know. Never one for loose talk.”
“He thinks everyone else talks too much.”
“Maybe we do.”
The wind was blowing her hair from under her hat. “I think you love him yourself.”
“What?” I said. “No, I don’t. Not that way. I don’t.”
Everyone knows, I thought. There are fewer secrets in the world than people think. I felt ridiculous.
“I probably don’t really want to know,” Dorothy said. “I’m just forcing you to lie. It’s pointless of me.”
“You have this wrong. Believe me.”
“And then it will hurt our friendship,” she said, “that you’ve lied to me. I’m making a mess, I’m sorry.”
“No, no,” I said.
“Never mind,” Dorothy said. “It doesn’t matter.”
We stood there, in our awkwardness. How much she must want Jesus, I thought, to have let Forster go like that. Our Forster. I couldn’t think of anything to say that wasn’t more lies.
Beneath us Tamar made a little snorting noise—she had her face screwed up in distaste at finding herself awake. “Are you thinking of crying?” Dorothy said, bending down to her. “Think again.”
“How big the baby’s getting,” I said. “She’s so pretty.”
“Bigger every day,” Dorothy said. “I can hardly keep up.”

All through the holidays, when Joe and I went out to parties, I’d look for Forster—I’d spot him hunched in a chair in a corner or hovering in a hallway, and a flush would come over me, but then it was never him. When did he ever like parties? He only went to them because of Dorothy. Who wasn’t there any more either.
All winter, I was much admired for my willingness to take the dog out to the park in any weather. Bakunin didn’t care how many times we walked past the bench under the gingko trees, looking to see if Forster was the person sitting there. Dogs liked repetition, it didn’t feel futile to them.
Dorothy no longer lived near the park. So there was no one along the paths that I knew, on those early morning walks. On the bleakest, coldest days a tinge of dread would come over me, and I’d realize I
was waiting for the dog to find another dead man wrapped in his coat on a bench. I didn't want to be alone and come upon such a body. Who would? I wasn't proud to be fearful, when the most profound aloneness would be the dead man's. And I saw how used to having Joe I was. What a protected, lucky life I led. I felt very sorry then for Dorothy. It would take time for her ever to find someone else.

Joe's nephew in Philadelphia, who was seven, sent us a letter with a message he had dictated to his mother. Thank you for the very, very nice Parcheesi game. My sister is not as good at it as I am. I won three times in a row. I beat my father too. I'm not making this up. Love XXXX Arthur.

"I don't know if I like his being so competitive," Joe said. We were in the kitchen, drinking cocoa to stay warm.

"You were worse," I said. "You stole a whole batch of marbles from Reggie Medgepath after he won some from you. But you grew up to be very peaceable. People improve. Forster told me he used to love to bury his sisters' dolls. And now he marches against the death penalty."

"A doll burier, that sounds like him. And he never marches," Joe said. "He thinks it's enough to have an opinion. He's one of those."

"How do you know he's never marched?"

"Maybe you know more."

"Well, I don't," I said.

This conversation was not going anywhere I wanted. "Will your brother stay with your parents on and on, do you think?" I said. "The children are getting used to it there."

"It's a big shame those two kids have my brother for a father. It's as if they have no one. Like Dorothy's baby."

I didn't say, Forster is finer than anyone in your family. I didn't say, Forster is not a drunk and a sponge. I didn't want to have Joe mixed up with all that I was thinking. I said, "Would your niece like paper dolls, do you think?"

"You should sew her something. She likes to dress up. She was a ballerina for Halloween."

"Everybody likes to dress up for Halloween," I said. "Even us."
The year before, one of Betsy's friends had taken it into her head to hold what she called a Masked Ball in her apartment. Joe and I had appeared as a dog and cat, with socks pinned on for ears and silk ties for tails.

"Everyone likes it but Forster," Joe said.

It was true he was one of the few who'd come to the costume party in street clothes. Well, who expected him to be in some antic outfit?

"You probably thought he looked more dignified in his regular old jacket. That beat-up thing he wears," Joe said.

I had thought that.

"Oh, he always thinks he's too good for everything," I said. "That expression of disdain Forster gets. I think he has to get over that."

"Do you?"


"You think so?"

"Oh, yes, I did. Absolutely.

"Poor fellow," Joe said, as if he believed me, as if he'd been reassured. Maybe he had been. For a second. He wanted that very badly—why else would he keep asking? He sipped his cooling cocoa. And what was I? Who wouldn't I betray? What wouldn't I say?

In the kitchen the light of a Sunday afternoon was fading. No one had held a knife to me and made me repudiate Forster, to recant like someone changing political parties, but I'd leapt to do it, to speak against him. No matter how dear he was in my heart. I'd placated my worthy husband with lies. I looked at the kitchen and thought that the scene of it would always be with me. The cupboard half-open, with a canister of Swee-touch-nee tea inside, the oiled black gas stove with its red-and-white box of Diamond matches. Already I hated all of it, and I would see it again, tomorrow and the next day.

"Come walk outside before it's dark," Joe said. "We need to walk."

And he reached to hug me as I stood up. We leaned against each other like that, in a long, silent marital embrace, as if we understood one another very well. It was not a soothing moment for me.
I couldn't stop thinking of Forster, with his handsome squint, leaning against a wall in his old gray worsted jacket. Well, goodbye to that. Dorothy was in my mind, too, as I'd last seen her, walking through the park, her wool scarf blowing in the wind, rising to the occasion of what she had wrought, rising to her renunciation. I'd done my own renouncing, too, if a person wanted to think in those terms, but it was my own business, it was now and always my own.

Later on, when I had children, I used to tell them: well, you've done your best, that's the main thing. I was repeating what I always said to myself. I didn't give myself any special credit for sticking by my husband, but quite a few of the marriages of our youth didn't last. The boldness of our ideas gave people too much faith in their impulses. Betsy made a very noisy exit from her life with Norman and ran off with the man who owned our favorite speakeasy. He was older and not all that good-looking, one of the sillier passions someone like Betsy could have. We still saw her in the neighborhood, and she always referred to Norman as "the little genius of the masses," as if mocking him made her case. I thought she was willful and shortsighted, but she did remain with her new husband, to everyone's surprise. Later they owned a hotel in Palm Beach that was supposed to be very famous.

Joe and I stayed anarchists, during years when people we knew found communism more and more interesting. We tried to keep our old friendships but there were hard times, during the Moscow trials, when we were very vocal against Stalin, and during the War, which we opposed. Richard, who was Jewish, would not talk to us for several years. Our two daughters had to face jeers and bags of dog excrement thrown at them and bullies who waited for them after school. It cut me very badly to see that. But we stood by what we'd always thought, when plenty of people didn't. Joe said, "They say we just dream about the future and can't see things around us, but we see them all too well," which was from Kropotkin, and I didn't even mind hearing him say this over and over.

Norman, of all people, wrote a book about his lost youth in the radical years of the Village. In it he refers to me as "a shy young thing
who blossomed under attention from any males of the species,” and I told everyone I’d been called worse. Many pages were devoted to Dorothy, though I didn’t remember that Norman was an especially close friend of hers. But when you know someone who becomes famous, those memories take on more detail.

No one could have predicted that the person most visited by fame would be Dorothy. In the early days, she seemed to want just the reverse—she stopped showing up at picket-lines, she stopped going out to drink with us. We were no longer very fascinating. But at the height of the Depression, when certain streets in New York looked more and more like India, she and a friend started printing up a newspaper called *The Catholic Worker*, dedicated to the untapped theory that the Church had more to say about the poor than it was saying. Their tabloid sold for a penny and was full of Dorothy’s reflections and odd little essays in free-verse about what Jesus really taught by the ramshackle visionary who was her friend, an older man with great plans. (They were not lovers either.) The paper was a runaway success, and within a few years they had launched their next project, Houses of Hospitality, where the poor were fed homemade vegetable soup and the homeless were given beds at night, and anyone who walked through the door was greeted as Christ. People showed up to volunteer, and followers set up more and more of these houses, in cities throughout the country. Dorothy Day was a famous spokesperson, traveling all over, a propagandist for Works of Mercy.

But I didn’t exactly believe in mercy. I thought it begged the question of why people were being given what should have been theirs. I thought it tended the wounds of a violent system and helped keep it going, in years when such systems might’ve gone under and risen as far better things. I thought all the glory over giving away soup was myopic and misguided and ignored what really needed doing.

I did know—and even Joe said—there were worse things than people getting a few free meals while they waited for the revolution. Which (we knew by then) was going to be a very long wait. The great future was tarrying, like the Messiah, and in this we were like Dorothy. In our patience. I had my old jealousy of Dorothy, but I revered (what a word) the way in which she had thrown herself
into the fire of her ideas. She was burned down to Idea, all work and messy effort and silvery dedication. People thought she was saintlike, though being called that always made her say something scrappy and blunt.

And there was no man after Forster. She had probably expected another marriage—she liked men—but she became more and more a Sister in her own order. We saw Forster on the street once, taking a pretty little girl of maybe eleven to a street fair, and I knew at once she was Tamar. I'd heard he took her for outings. She had fine, soft hair, clipped back from her forehead, and she looked skinny and quiet. I had my own girls with me, who were little then, dressed in nice summer rompers. Forster said, "Vera! There you are," when he saw us. He did not look all that different—lean, rumpled, with his high forehead and squinting eyes. "Long time no see," I said, with extreme stupidity. We kept asking how each of us was—fine, fine—while the girls eyed each other.

"It's very hot today," he said to the girls. "You don't like ices, do you? Probably not."

They roared their protests to this notion, and he bought us all paper squeeze-cups of fruit ices, pale lemon and deep-red cherry, which Judy, my youngest, got all over her. Barbara, who was almost seven, dared Judy to put her front teeth into the ices for the count of a hundred. "Don't," I said. "Do not."

"Did you ever do it?" Barbara said.

Ices had not been a feature of my youth, but I confessed to sticking my tongue to a frozen iron banister in winter, on a dare from Mary Elizabeth next door. I didn't know why I had to tell them, except that I was always eager not to lie. We sent them to a school run by anarchists, where they were always told to be truthful.

Forster had taken a napkin and was busy trying to clean up Judy's cherry-stained face, without much success. The sight of this was so sweet it unnerved me entirely, and I had to drag the girls away before I acted peculiar in front of everyone.

Later my girls entirely forgot that they had met Forster, though they had liked him fine, but they always remembered the story of
my licking a frozen banister on a dare. They teased me about it for years. Joe joined them. And I couldn't help liking being admired for any sort of courage, which it turned out we would all need, over and over.
The name of the Great Detective remains, of necessity, an abiding mystery.

This is not to imply that the Great Detective has a mild-mannered alter-ego, as of a Bruce Wayne or a Clark Kent. The Great Detective’s unswerving commitment to truth and justice eschews such disguises, since for the Great Detective to be anything other than the Great Detective would be to fall into deceit, or duplicity, antithetical to his purpose. No masked man, he; rather an unmasker of men. It is axiomatic, therefore, that the Great Detective never assume another identity and, in consequence of such honesty, his name is held in utmost secrecy.

Most understand this anonymity to be for the sake of security. If the Great Detective’s name were known he might be vulnerable to attack, might become the subject of criminal activity, instead of its uncoverer. He would in this regard be the cause of crimes, rather than their solution, or even, unthinkably, their victim, requiring another greater detective’s investigation. Since the Great Detective is the greatest detective (modesty, and a certain sensitivity to tradition, deter him from taking this as his title, though it is said he did for a time toy with ‘Chief Inspector’) this would, of course, be a logical impossibility.

Anxious citizens, to be sure, have periodically voiced a concern that the Great Detective’s name being so shrouded, his very being might be doubted, despite his manifest works and 100% clearance record. It has even been whispered that the Great Detective is, in this respect, failing in his civic duty. If his existence were proven, after all, there would be no more crime, since whosoever knowing of the Great Detective and believing in him would be foolish enough to commit criminal acts? Sophists among us, the criminal masterminds
especially, have pursued this argument so far as to actually deny the existence of the Great Detective. If the Great Detective truly wanted to stop crime, they contend, he would surely reveal himself. Since he does not, he cannot exist. Such reasoning is facile, however. If the Great Detective were a great deterrent, there would be no crime and therefore no criminals to detect: then and only then, in fact, would he cease to be. Were he to prove his existence, as demanded, he would in essence be simultaneously disproving it. By these lights, the Great Detective’s secrecy regarding his identity may be seen as one more example of his piercing brilliance.

More recently, however, certain subversive elements have raised a radical, new objection, accusing the Great Detective, himself, of being above the law. After all, they point out, what if the Great Detective decided to commit a crime—could he be caught? Indeed, these scurrilous critics contend, he might already be responsible for countless unsolved murders. The Great Detective, they assert, is thus both the world’s greatest detective and its greatest crime lord.

While this is clearly the latest self-interested attempt by the lawless to undermine the authority of the Great Detective and, indeed, of the entire criminal justice system, the charge must be refuted. To this end, scholars at the Police Academy, in concert with the Great Detective himself, have arrived at a definition of the perfect crime and concluded that the Great Detective is incapable of performing it.

The perfect crime, according to their theoretical research, would be an undetectable murder—murder being the most heinous of all crimes (as well as a traditional and popular classic). The scenario for this perfect or infallible murder runs as follows: Victim A is found; Suspect B is sought. Victim A is male, discovered in a heavily trafficked location, say a busy park in the center of town, with no identification: a John Doe. There are, however, several clues about Suspect B. Shoe prints are left at the scene. Wounds to the victim’s body suggest that the assailant is of a certain size, and right-handed. These clues, however, lead only to the following conclusions. Suspect B is of average height (determined from the angle of the blows), average weight (determined by the depth of his shoe-prints) and average strength (judging from the harm to the victim’s body).
Furthermore, he is, as mentioned, right-handed like the majority of the population; male (from the force of the blows) like the majority of murderers; and wears the best-selling shoe size and style.

Already the alert reader will observe the nature of perfection in the perfect murder. All deductive detective work, from the very first demonstrations of the method by such luminaries as M. Auguste Dupin, proceeds from the assumption that anyone, in theory (with the exception of the detective who can rule himself out, unless he is a Bad Cop), could have committed the crime. As clues are gathered, however, evidence eliminates possible suspects, all the time focusing more and more narrowly on a solitary individual, who must, logically, be the criminal. What the thought experiment of the perfect crime envisages, however, is that rather than narrowing the field, the evidence collected about Suspect B ensures it remains as wide as possible.

Crime aficionados will note that while this is an intriguing scenario, it should still be possible to detect the killer's identity through his choice of victim. But here the theoretical case constructed by the Great Detective and his colleagues takes a singularly logical and devilish turn. It is further determined that Victim A is also of average height and build, that his shoes and clothes are also of the most common sizes and styles. The park he is found in is a regular haunt of all our citizens, regardless of age, and social class. Victim A, therefore, is to all known degrees also an average man.

Thus, the report concludes, the perfect crime would be the murder of one statistically average citizen, by another statistically average citizen. Hence the Great Detective—an individual entirely exceptional—could not possibly have committed such a crime. It is incidentally to be noted that such a killing need not be random. The motive for such a murder on the part of Suspect B might well be to find some means of distinguishing himself, of making himself less average. The sole distinguishing and individual feature of this criminal, therefore, would be that he was a criminal, but this one trait alone, of course, would not be sufficient to detect him.

While these researches, and their subsequent approval by Internal Affairs, have cleared the Great Detective of any possible, or even
hypothetical, wrongdoing, the conclusions of the report have had additional unforeseen consequences that have failed to fully restore public confidence. Sadly, and worryingly, as commentators have pointed out, one corollary of the thought experiment is that while the Great Detective could never commit this crime, neither could he solve it, suggesting the sobering and disturbing possibility that crime is ultimately a stronger force than detection. (Previously, popular opinion had held that detection would always triumph over crime, and even more sophisticated thinkers among us had considered crime and detection to be in perfect balance, neither able to exist without the other).

In response to these concerns the Great Detective himself has, in an unprecedented move, issued a statement through his attorneys to the effect that even though the perfect murder of one actuarially ordinary individual by another resists detection this need not be any cause for alarm. As the Great Detective goes on to explain, the peculiar horror of murder lies in the extinguishing of individuality. But if one thoroughly average man kills another, what, in truth, is lost? Can such a killing even be called murder? So theoretically perfect a crime, the Great Detective continues, remains ultimately undetectable because it is indefinable, insignificant, indeed, almost immaterial.

It remains to be seen whether this latest statement from One Police Plaza will allay public concern...
EARLY SUNDAY MORNING
Edward Hirsch

I used to mock my father and his chums
for getting up early on Sunday morning
and drinking coffee at a local spot
but now I'm one of those chumps.

No one cares about my old humiliations
but they go on dragging through my sleep
like a string of empty tin cans rattling
behind an abandoned car.

It's like this: just when you think
you have forgotten that red-haired girl
who left you stranded in a parking lot
forty years ago, you wake up

early enough to see her disappearing
around the corner of your dream
on someone else's motorcycle
roaring onto the highway at sunrise.

And so now I'm sitting in a dimly lit
café full of early morning risers
where the windows are covered with soot
and the coffee is warm and bitter.
The woman who had lost her way placed the jar on the table. The lid was sealed with green wax. A lightning bolt was painted on the jar. She cut the seal and pried open the lid. Wind rushed through the house. Thunder rumbled in the cellar.

Someone uncorked a bottle in the kitchen down the hall. Oil sizzled in a skillet, and the smoke of onions and sweetmeats filled the air. The woman grew drowsy, overcome with dread. She closed the jar and the thunder faded.

On the road that wound past the house, cattle were bellowing, jostling, on their way to slaughter. Whips cracked over their backs. The lights in the house went out. The woman put on her coat. She wanted to leave, but she was afraid, and she curled up on the floor, covering her ears.

Out in the world, across oceans and deserts, a cry went up. Cities caught fire. Rivers rose. Entire populations embraced sleep, knowing they would not awaken. The tongues of rulers and beggars alike fell silent, and the prophets became as children, busying themselves in corners, hearing nothing, saying nothing, their toys clinking in the darkness.
An acrobat tiptoed along the horizon as if it were a tightrope. Emblems from the tarot were sewn on his shirt: crossed swords, a cup brimming with fire, a noose. He clutched the map of a mountainous island covered by dense forests. His shadow was composed of thousands of black moths, hovering in formation, inches off the ground. The shadow held his shape and never wavered.

The acrobat’s heart floated in a cloud of vapor. He heard it murmuring, the valves opening and closing, behind the harder music of his bones. At times he felt a part of himself—an ear, a leg, his temple—erased. When the part reappeared, it would be cold at first and colorless. He could not talk about this with anyone, even the woman who awaited him at the end of his journey.

Her dress was embroidered with shells. They tinkled like bells when she extended her arms to him, her hair blowing out green and blue. They were on a long beach, and as he approached her, she began to disappear, one limb, one feature, at a time.

Finally she was gone, and in her place a hangman materialized with a drawn sword. Beside him, fire leapt from a pit in the sand. A noose swung from a tree coated with salt.

To escape the hangman, the acrobat’s shadow rose into the air, maintaining its shape for an instant before the moths dispersed and swarmed the hangman. He fell backward, as if he had been drawn into a deep hole, for when the moths flew away, he was gone.

Naked, alone, the acrobat dropped his map into the fire and watched as the forests began to burn.
The contralto in the back row sprouted wings through her burgundy robe. She was an orphan. A silver barrette shone in her hair.

She scanned the statues of angels that lined the mezzanine. Their marble robes were translucent, thin as silk. Their haloes were silver.

Mist hung in the rafters. Snowflakes stuck to the windows. A fat man in the first row mopped his brow. A woman in green taffeta crumpled her program.

The concluding chorus was sung allegro spiritoso. The audience shivered as the second violins veered off on their own, the oboes followed, then the cembalo, played with flying fingers by a red-haired boy.

When the final note sounded, the contralto extended her wings. All eyes turned upward as she flew through the skylight, into the clouds, emanating brilliant rays. Only when the cathedral had emptied did she return and take her place in the mezzanine, her barrette a halo now and a smile on her lips.
Let's paint the town  
taupe,
let's wear our  
dental dams
and dance on  
eggshells
slick side down.

We'll scrub our  
cherry
pinks off, we'll scrape
the porcelain  
back to its clay. Let's
break  
the day, shuck
my bodice,  
watch it husk
away.

Give it to me  
drily.
Dawn's tumbling  
in, her
lips frosted  
the nacre
of breast milk, dead  
tooth,
sea glass, an old
of your eye.

might call

cadaver.

corner

You

the color
"Pardon," the man said. "I hope this won't sound off-key."

Erica hadn't seen him approach; now he walked alongside them, smiling at her, her mother, her four-year-old son, and at Amber, her neighbor’s oversized seven-year-old daughter. The man had short hair, a nice overcoat. He looked to be about sixty. "Pardon?" he repeated.

They'd just left the grocery store and were heading across the parking lot to the car. Erica ignored the man and walked faster. The cart, filled with groceries and the beer she'd asked her mother not to buy, rattled against the asphalt.

"Yes?" Diane, Erica's mother, stopped. She held a child's hand on either side. After a moment, Erica stopped too. She kept her back to her mother and the kids so she wouldn't have to watch Diane smile the way she always smiled at men.

"I'm sorry to bother you," the man continued, "but I locked my keys in my van. There's a window open, see, but I can't fit." He had a British accent. "A small child could. I hope this doesn't sound off-key, but I was wondering if your son could help."

"He's my grandson," Diane replied as if the man had made the most ordinary request imaginable. Then she asked, "How 'bout it, kids? Shall we help the man?" Her voice was now tinged with its own, embarrassingly fake British accent.

"No!" Benny, Erica's son, answered. "I want to go home."

"I'll do it," Amber said.

"I think you may be a smidge too big," the man replied. Then, to Benny, he said, "I'll give you a dollar."

"Erica," Diane called, American inflection back in place. "Why don't you take Amber and the groceries to the car?"

"Wait." Erica tried to find her voice. Are you crazy, Mother—she
Corrina Wycoff

wanted to say—my four-year-old is not getting into some strange man’s car. But instead she said, “Amber and I will come too.”

“I don’t want to!” Benny’s face reddened as it often did before tantrums.

“Behave, Benny,” Amber said, looking at Erica as though expecting praise.

“I want to go home!” Benny repeated.

“We will,” Erica answered. She lifted Benny and put him in the grocery cart. She wanted to sprint to their car and drive away without her mother or Amber or her mother’s beer. Instead, she said, “Relax,” and followed her mother, Amber, and the man.

The clean maroon minivan stood in the side parking lot, directly facing one wall of the store. He couldn’t drive forward without crashing into the bricks. Toilet paper and celery stalks poked from the brown bag on the pavement beside the driver’s side door. “It’s that window,” the man said, indicating a half-open tinted window at the rear of the van.

Tinted windows? It couldn’t be any more suspicious. Erica stuck her head through the opening. Inside, the clean, empty van smelled of air freshener. The keys sat in the ignition. Erica tried to open the window farther, but it was designed to stay half-closed. She tried to reach the door locks and couldn’t.

“Seems like he’d fit aw’right,” Diane told the man.

That’s not the point, Erica thought, but she only said, “Talk like an American, would you?” as Diane hoisted Benny to the window.

“I have to go in this way?” Benny wriggled in Diane’s arms. “I can’t!”

“Sure you can,” Diane cheered. Then, in a sprawling Wild West accent, she added, “G’wan you varmint, git!” and gave Benny a small shove into the van. “How’s that for talking like an American?” Then, swaggering cowgirl style toward the man, she twanged, “He likes it when I call him a varmint.”

“That’s very good.” The man smiled. “A regular John Wayne.”

“I prefer Mae West myself.” Diane winked.

Erica rammed the grocery cart into the back of the van, leaving a white scratch on the bumper.
"That's probably not a good idea," Amber said, a finger in her mouth. She paused a moment, then added, "Varmint." In the front seat of the van, Benny seemed very far away.

"Go ahead and unlock it, Benny," Erica called to him.

"Where?" Benny asked, completely red-faced now.

"He's never worked a power lock before!" Erica shouted. "He doesn't know how!"

"Calm down," Diane said. Then, to Benny, she called, "You can do it, Ben, you varmint! Just push that little button yonder!"

Calm down? Diane stood close to the British man, as if they were lovers, as if Benny weren't in any danger at all. She seemed not to notice the man's hand on the driver's side door handle. "Let go of the door!" Erica hollered. "Or he won't be able to unlock it!"

Diane shrugged and smiled. But Amber darted at the man, made a gun with her fingers and said, "Stick 'em up!"

The man grinned and lifted his hands.

Within seconds, Benny had pushed the correct button and there was a loud click. "Let him out! Now!" Erica failed to lower her pitch.

Amber stowed the finger gun in a pretend holster. "You heard the lady, varmint," she said.

"Right," the man said, lowering his arms.

Benny scrambled out of the van and Diane hugged him. "You did swell, pardner!"

"How about a dollar," the man asked, "for the ice cream man or something?" He handed Benny the crisp bill.

"Say thank you," Diane reminded Benny, but Benny had broken free from her. He ran at Erica, raised one small fist, and punched Erica's hip until Erica grabbed his thick, rubbery wrist. "Don't you ever hit me," she said, swatting his bottom. She had opposed spanking before having a child who hit.

"Let go," Benny cried. "You're hurting me!"

"That's what you get for hitting."

Erica lifted Benny into the cart. Her back wrenched as she held him out of kicking range. "You're too big for this," she said. She pushed the cart toward the car. Benny wailed.
“Oh, it was our pleasure,” Diane was saying to the man.

Benny had downshifted to whimpering by the time Erica had situated him in the backseat and had begun driving through the flat westside Chicago streets, autumn landscapes a blur in her peripheral vision. Her foot shook on the accelerator. “So, did he ask you out?”

“Who? The old man? Don’t be stupid. Drive slower.”

Benny continued whimpering.

“Be quiet, Benny!” Erica couldn’t drive slower. “How could you have done that, Mother? How?”

“How could I have done what? You were the one setting new records for hostility back there.”

“You just put him into a stranger’s van!”

“Of course,” Diane answered. “Yes, of course that’s how you’d interpret it.” She shook her head. “He was a perfectly nice gentleman who needed our help. It was obvious that he was all right.”

“You were the one being obvious.”

“You’re right,” her mother scoffed. “He was a hardened criminal. That’s why he approached us in broad daylight.”

Benny stopped whimpering long enough to spout, “I’m not going to share my ice cream with you, Mommy. I’m going to eat it all by myself!”

“The ice cream man hasn’t come in ages, Benny,” Amber, sitting beside Benny, reminded him. “Summer’s over. We just had Halloween.”

Erica cringed as Benny started crying again. “He could have been kidnapped, Mother. Don’t pretend that didn’t occur to you.”

“It didn’t!” Diane turned on the radio and whispered, “And don’t talk like that. The kids will hear you.”

“The kids have no idea what we’re talking about,” Erica replied. A radio announcer sleepily advertised an expensive car. “I hate this station.”

“Turn it off then.”

“It’s fine.”

“Oh, Erica.” Diane turned off the radio. “You have to admit he didn’t seem like the type of man who’d be up to something weird.”

“He did to me.”
Diane looked out the window. “It’s amazing. You’d think you were six years old with the way you carry on whenever a man pays attention to me.”

“Don’t start, Mother. Anyway, you said he was just an old man.”

“It doesn’t hurt to practice, for some other man. You know, see if I can still get someone to notice me.”

“Well maybe he was just practicing too, for some other little boy.”

“The kids will hear you,” Diane whispered again.

“They’re not listening.” Erica glanced back quickly. Amber, looking out the window, must have offered Benny her forearm, which he sucked on now for comfort. “See. That’s all this afternoon is going to be to them,” Erica said, “just a story of how Benny got a spanking. And for you it’s the story of how you can still pull off that stupid Mae West act. I’m the only one who doesn’t get to turn the whole thing into some anecdote.”

“Sure you do,” Diane said. “You get to turn it into the story of your big bad mother putting your baby in the lion’s mouth.”

“You make it sound idiotic.”

“It is idiotic. No, it’s transparent. I give some little old man a thrill and you get jealous.” Diane sighed. “You’ve never wanted to share me with anyone.”

It was an old argument and Erica took a shortcut to its crux. “Daddy has nothing to do with this, Mother.”

“Right to the bitter end.” Diane took the cue. “Every time we tried to work things out, you had to sabotage it.”

“I’m tired of this game, Mother.”

“Maybe it was a game to you,” Diane said, “but it was my marriage.”

Erica thought briefly of her father’s small, flushed face, the way he looked at her, during lunch, on those mandatory Sunday visits of her childhood. “It wasn’t you,” he always said. “There are some things that adults can’t agree on. You’ll understand later, but there are some things,” and his voice would stop. Erica would eat her sandwich and potato chips, dreading the remaining hours she’d spend in her father’s apartment, playing Scrabble or Monopoly on the red living room carpet, his black, shiny furniture surrounding her. “A regular
bachelor pad," her mother had said when Erica had described her father's decor.

"I'm not talking about your marriage, Mother," Erica said. "I'm talking about you never taking responsibility for anything. I'm tired of that game."

"God forbid I get a boyfriend someday," Diane continued. "You couldn't share me with your own father. I'd rather shoot myself in the head."

"Just stop!"

"I'll gladly stop. That's exactly what I'm talking about. Stopping."

Erica's anger surged. "Keep drinking then."

Benny spit Amber's arm from his mouth with a loud, wet smack and wailed, "The ice cream man is stupid!"

"Behave, Benny!" Amber scolded. "Your mother's trying to drive."

"Don't yell at me!"

"Well, don't act like an idiot, then," Erica said, looking gratefully back at Amber.

"You're hurting my feelings," Benny said, jamming Amber's arm into his mouth again.

"All right."

"You're hurting mine too," Diane added.

"All right."

The car felt hot from everyone's breath. She wished it wasn't such a long drive home. There would be grocery stores everywhere if she could afford to live in the city proper, instead of Chicago's flat, squashed westside.

"It's only a beer or a glass of wine every now and again, Erica. You can at least let me divide my attention between you and the occasional beer."

"I said all right, Mother."

"My grandma does drugs," Amber volunteered from the backseat.

"See," Diane said. "There's worse than the occasional beer."

On their street, tiny rental bungalows sat with only a few feet separating them from one another and the road. "I'll share my dollar with Amber," Benny said, "not you, Mom."

"Don't share it," Erica said. "It's yours. You risked your life."

"That's a nice idea, Benny," Diane interrupted. "You can buy treats
for the two of you once you finish your Halloween candy.”

“I'm surprised your British boyfriend didn't offer him candy,” Erica said. She mimicked Diane's fake British accent. “Do you want some candy, little boy? Get in the car, little boy and I'll give you some.” She pulled into the driveway of the house she and Diane rented.

“Look!” Diane gasped.

Someone had smashed the jack-o-lantern Erica and Benny carved the night before Halloween. Benny had designed its face. Erica hoped he wouldn't notice. She couldn't listen to him scream anymore today.

“Who would do that?” Diane asked.

“Some perfectly nice gentleman, probably,” Erica replied.

“Enough!” Diane left the car, stranding Erica with the groceries and the kids. Erica released Benny from his seatbelt and ordered, “Go play at Amber's.” The kids sprinted toward the house next door, the dollar bill clutched in Benny's hand. It seemed he hadn't noticed the pumpkin.

“Don't let Amber trick you into giving up your dollar,” Erica reminded him.

“I don't want his dollar,” Amber hollered back.

Grocery bags in hand, Erica navigated around chunks of slimy pumpkin rind. She left the beer in the car.

Her mother already lay on the living-room couch, a washcloth over her face. “He was a perfectly nice gentleman,” she said into the washcloth. “If you really thought he was dangerous, you would have tried to stop me.”

“I wanted to,” Erica said.

“Then why didn't you?”

“I don't know. I wanted to.” Something must have distracted her, she decided. Yes, she told herself. Her mother's beer.

As always, Erica had tried to restrict their shopping to aisles far from the liquor. And Diane had waited until they were at the checkout before lifting a roast from the cart, declaring it fatty and offering to fetch a different one. She'd returned with the old roast and a new six-pack.

“No,” Erica had whispered. “Put it back.”
“Don’t embarrass us, Erica.” With her chin, Diane indicated the cashier—one of the married mothers from Benny’s preschool. It was a good preschool, not far from the grocery store, in one of those neighborhoods to which people moved because they could afford to leave the city, not one, like Erica’s, where people moved because they couldn’t afford anything else. Diane had secured Benny’s spot, and his scholarship, through a nurse at the hospital where both Erica and Diane worked, Diane in billing and Erica in dietary.

Erica saw these women every day, before preschool and after, standing in a little coterie in the preschool foyer, arranging playdates and birthday parties and exchanging their husbands’ business cards which promised a variety of needed services. Who were these husbands, Erica sometimes wondered, who stuck around and paid bills? The mothers pushed extravagant strollers and not one of them, Erica was sure, ever cut her own hair. Erica, meanwhile, always waited silently among the nannies—girls her own age, or older, foreign women—wondering if anyone else took advantage of the preschool’s need-based scholarships.

“I didn’t know you worked here,” Erica said. She didn’t know that any of the married mothers worked anywhere.

“Oh, I get these little jobs every now and then,” the cashier replied, smiling. She raised an index finger to her lips and whispered, “Just to make pin money for our vacations. Scott pays for the trip, of course, but the kids always want more souvenirs than we think they will. Then when they don’t give me the time off, I quit.”

“Where to this time?” Diane asked, casually putting the beer into a paper bag.

“Disney. We try to go every year since the kids love it so much.” She winked at Benny and Amber and offered them stickers printed with the store logo.

“What’s hers, too?” the woman asked Erica.

“The neighbor’s.”

“Of course.” The woman studied Erica’s face. “You’re so young. There’d be no way.”

“Obviously, there’s a way,” Diane added brightly, indicating Benny. “Thank God it didn’t happen twice, though.”
“Mom,” Erica said.
“Well, it’s true,” Diane replied. Then smiling at the cashier, she added, “She was a wild teenager. And, you know, I was on my own.” The cashier returned the smile. “Well, it looks like it all worked out in the end,” she said.
Did it? Erica thought. But she nodded.
“Enjoy Disney!” said Diane.
As they’d walked across the parking lot, before the man approached, Erica had thought of Disneyland, its crowds and prices. She would hate it, she knew, but she hated a life without vacations even more. She hated those awful mothers at the preschool, her hospital job of pushing meal carts through hallways clotted by important people who yelled at her to move, coming home to fetch snacks and watch television while her son hollered and hit.
But most of all, she decided now, she hated when her mother drank.
“I honestly would have stopped you,” she continued. “If you hadn’t bought your stupid beer.”
“No,” Diane said. “That had nothing to do with it.”
“Right.” In the kitchen adjacent to the living room, Erica crammed groceries into cupboards, letting every cabinet door slam. “It never has anything to do with you, Mother. You put a four-year-old into a stranger’s van and that has nothing to do with you. You drank Daddy out the door, and that has nothing to do with you. Every time we get near to a catastrophe it has nothing to do with you.”
“I’m not the one who got you pregnant. That had nothing to do with me.” Diane walked to the sink, wrung out the washcloth and wet it with fresh water. “This water is always so cold,” she complained. “It takes forever to warm up and then it runs out in ten seconds.” She took a bagel from a bag.
“Maybe I wouldn’t have gotten pregnant if you hadn’t been drunk all the time.” This too was an old argument, as old as Erica’s memory of Benny’s father’s dark bedroom, his slightly smelly bed-sheets, his smooth chest. The argument, like the memory, had no power anymore. “And the water’s always fine for me.”
“Of course it is. You always take your showers first.” Diane bit into
her bagel. "And I was working all the time after your father left, not drinking."

"He left because of your drinking."

"If you say so." She sighed. "When's the last time you saw me drunk?"

"Your birthday." Erica had spent the afternoon making lasagna, but Diane guzzled down a six-pack and two glasses of wine before falling asleep at the table. Later that night, she'd taken Benny by the shoulders and said, "You're so cute, I just want to eat you up," before biting him on the upper arm, hard enough to leave a bruise.

"And what did you tell me?"

"That we would leave if your drinking ever threatened Benny again."

"And that was three months ago. You want half of this?" She held up the remains of her bagel.

Erica shook her head. "Your drinking still endangers him, Mother. It endangered him today."

"If you really thought that, you should have done something."

"I couldn't."

"Maybe not. But that wasn't because I bought some beer."

Erica started washing dishes. "See, it's plenty hot." The water scalded her hands red.

Benny stomped in with Amber, filling the tiny house with cold air and loud voices. They never played at Amber's long.

"You killed our jack-o-lantern!" Benny shouted at Erica.

"That's not true."

"I didn't say your mom did it," Amber corrected him. "I said it got killed."

"You said my mom killed it!"

"It did not get killed," Erica interrupted. "Jack-o-lanterns don't get killed."

"See?" Benny said. "Stupid idiot!"

"I should have said vandalized," said Amber.

Erica asked, "Who's thirsty?"

"Did you buy any punch?" Amber asked.

"Sorry," Erica said.
“There’s beer,” Diane said. “Would you like a beer?”

“Mother!”

“It was a joke, Erica.”

“Well, anyway, it’s still in the car.” She poured dry cereal into a bowl for the kids, set it between them on the floor, and found a cartoon for them to watch on television. Erica hated the chewed up cereal visible in the kids’ mouths when they laughed.

“I need a cigarette,” Diane said. “I’ll be outside.”

“The car’s locked.”

“I wasn’t planning on smoking in the car.”

“I mean you can’t get your beer.”

“Oh, Erica. I knew what you meant.” She opened the door and left.

Erica brought the kids cups of apple juice then moved outside to clean up the pumpkin debris. If she finished before Benny had another chance to see it, he might forget entirely. Diane stood on the porch, blowing smoke into the cold.

The pumpkin had started to rot. Black spots marred the rind. Bare-handed, Erica scooped the mess into a plastic bag.

With the toe of her shoe, Diane poked a splotch of stringy pumpkin innards Erica had missed. “Did I ever tell you about the guy who offered me five thousand dollars for you?” she asked.

“No.” Pumpkin shreds stuck to Erica’s fingers.

“In the airport, about six months after you were born. He said I looked too young to be a mom.”

“Was he serious?”

“About the money? I don’t know. It was a lot of money back then. But I thought about it for a second.”

“You would have sold me for five thousand dollars?” Erica wiped her fingers against the welcome mat, leaving slime on the bumpy plastic.

“It wasn’t that I wanted to get rid of you. It was more about freedom. Do you know what I mean?”

“No.”

“Come on,” Diane said, “didn’t you think about freedom, even for a second, when you let Ben get into that van?”
"I'm going in."

"I'm not saying it's what you would have wanted. I'm just saying a fleeting moment. Maybe it wasn't the beer that got you preoccupied?"

"No! I'd try for freedom in a heartbeat, but Benny's what I'd keep."

Diane followed her inside. "I suppose that means you'd get rid of me, huh?"

"Well you almost got rid of me," Erica said. "For five thousand dollars. Maybe you're the one who still wants freedom."

Diane grabbed Erica's wrist and pulled her into the kitchen. "We can't talk like this in front of him," she whispered.

"We fight all the time, Mother. It's background noise to him. He doesn't hear any of it."

"Look." Diane took a loud breath. "Maybe I didn't want you to have Benny. Before he was born. But it was only because I wasn't crazy about the idea of you having a baby so young."

"Because that's what you did?"

"It was different. I was married. It was a totally different time."

"Yes, so different that you almost sold me."

"But I didn't, did I?"

"Yes you did," Erica said, wondering whether it was true. "Every time you took a drink you sold me."

"That's absurd," Diane replied.

"And you're selling Benny too."

The cartoon voices disappeared. Benny's voice rose. "Switch it back on!"

"My mom was fifteen when I was born." Amber suddenly stood in the kitchen, looking at Diane and Erica. "Mom says I was conceived under tawdry circumstances."

"See?" Diane said. "They hear everything." She snatched the car keys from the counter.

"That's right," Erica hollered. "Go get your beer."

"My mother and grandmother have issues too," Amber continued. Now Benny joined them. "Switch—it—back—on!" he hollered, punctuating every word with a new blow to Amber's back.
“Stop it, Benny!” Erica restrained him. “Go home, Amber,” she ordered, and, freed from Benny’s fists, Amber moved slowly to the door. “Things are going to change soon, you know,” Amber said. “I’m old enough for my mom to start dating again.” She cast a sad look backward. “Don’t tell her I said so,” she added.

Benny didn’t seem to notice Amber leaving. His body remained rigid and tight in Erica’s grasp and his heart beat against her forearms. He struggled wildly. Then, apparently tired, he sank heavily, sobbing. Only a few years ago, when she’d lain in Benny’s father’s bed each afternoon after school, when they’d kissed in the high-school hallways before and after every class, she could have become anything. Even when she’d told him about the baby, he’d kissed her, promised her nothing would change. But by the time she was trapped inside this new, confusing life, he had left just as her father had, and only her mother remained.

Erica put her arm around Benny’s tiny chest and pulled him close. “Amber started it!” Benny sobbed. Her mother was right; she could have had freedom today—her son gone, her mother, squarely to blame, excised from her life. She could have been free, like her father, like Benny’s. But, no, she thought. It wouldn’t have been the same as before. There would have always been Benny. Difficult, hollering, violent Benny would have become Benny afraid, Benny speeding into a new, unknown, unknowable world, Erica’s face—what had it shown?—fading. Erica kissed the top of his head, his hair scratchy against her nose. Then his voice rose again. “You’re no fair!”

His accusation grated against her feelings, stopping them. “Benny, go to your room. I’m going out to talk to Grandma.”

“I don’t want to,” he whimpered.

“Oh, Benny. Be a big boy.”

Outside, Diane sat on the driveway, opening bottles of beer, pouring their contents onto the pavement. I know what you meant about freedom, she could say. I’ve wanted it too. I wanted it today. It wasn’t your beer. It was me. She thought of leaning her head against her mother’s shoulder, telling her she was sorry, thanking her for being the only one who stayed. But instead, she said, “Trying to cover up how many you drank?”

172
“You’re wrong,” Diane answered. “I want to do better. We have to do better with Ben.”
“Don’t put him in any more vans, then.”
“I mean the way we act around him. It’s rubbing off on him. He isn’t right.”
“This has nothing to do with Benny,” said Erica. “Benny’s fine.”
CAMOUFLAGE #1
Robert Schultz

I fight the war. Choppers painted in camouflage
Drop me at the map’s coordinates. I land
In jungle, in the deep shit. In Vietnam
Everything’s different—“the American war”
They say over here, and strange beauty hides
The danger where Charlie lurks. I wear leaves

On my helmet, put my faith in leaves
To keep me safe. I trim myself in camouflage
And dress in swirling shades of green to hide
In fractured light. I disappear in the land
And can’t be found, a casualty of war
Before I’m gone, a ghost that stalks Vietnam.

Though I may have vanished, in South Vietnam
I drift among trees, the grasses, leaves.
From village to village I carry war
With my radio and my camouflage,
An agent of the inscrutable West, land
Of the blunt instrument. No-one hides

From a B-52, and no-one hides
When I call down jets to burn Vietnam
To save it. I call down fire and the land
Receives my stroke. My boot-heel falls, leaves
Bomb craters. Only decades will camouflage
The wide gouges—rice paddies after the war.
What is the moral equivalent of war?
I can't remember. The rain comes and hides
The details. Here and now, in my camouflage,
I am the god of hell-fire, and Vietnam
Holds me tight. Its jungle of reasons leaves
Me blank. I follow orders. Where choppers land

I pitch my camp. Sometimes it seems the land
Itself is the foreign thing we fight. We war
Against the trees, hit strange, offending leaves
With Agent Orange and kerosene. When hides
Appear—canopied trails that wind Vietnam—
Night descends to spread its darker camouflage.

We fight the land where the enemy hides.
Somewhere there isn't war, but in Vietnam
It's dawn. The leaves put on their camouflage.
After the ship foundered, the hero, spared, entered the impossible mouth
of the Underworld, and there encountered the bewildered
Soul of his third mate, just drowned on the stony beach where ribs and rigging, oars and wineskins, were scattered side by side
With the bodies. Dripping with ectoplasmic brine, the translucent one
struggled to speak, his larynx ripped away by the cluster bombs
Of dying. There was a great mission, a quest, an indispensable question,
but the hero was struck down by sorrow—the bowl of goat’s blood
The gods had enjoined him to carry fell from his hands, and he turned back to forbidden daylight, where the bodies of his men,
Gull-pecked and slug-ridden now, he committed to flames and to proper prayers.
Only then did he go down again, now with a notebook and ballpoint pen,
Where the dead were properly arranged in an infinite row, waiting for him.
Let the gods do their own dirty work. This was a human duty.
From the third mate back to the monkey, the spider, the amoeba,
he gave them their proper place. He wrote them down.
How moonlight breaks against planes of granite is a question, 
but moonlight breaks against boulders, moonlight is broken. 
The black mirror makes plain the sublimity of its shards 
and bears over other scenes: the space where the blasted oak 
Leans out of the dreary wind-beaten cliff, the space where the spring 
seeps through a ruptured wall beside an abandoned factory. 
Hundreds of years ago the painter stood on a hillside overlooking 
a ruined little seaport in the south of France—a conundrum 
Of dry rot and mildew, where even the rats had nothing 
but composted rope and trashed manifestos to eat—
And began to destroy more than nature ever intended 
with his incendiary strokes. And now we hold 
The mirror as if it would shield us, as if the acidic light 
the painter deployed like napalm could be turned away 
From the bodies visible to us nowhere but in this defining glass— 
mined soldiers, shopkeepers, a child still clutching a perfect ball.
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by Bellevue Literary Press. She has published writing in three anthologies, *Absolute Disaster, Women on the Edge: Writing from Los Angeles* and *Woof*! *Writers on Dogs*. Her work has appeared in *Zyzzyva, The Antioch Review, Western Humanities Review* and *Santa Monica Review*.

**DAVID MURA** has published three books of poetry: *After We Lost Our Way, The Colors of Desire,* and *Angels for the Burning*. His two memoirs are *Turning Japanese* and *Where the Body Meets Memory*. He has recently published the novel *Famous Suicides of the Japanese Empire*.

**DEBRA NYSTROM**'s new book of poems, *Bad River Road*, will be out from Sarabande Books in April 2009. She has published two previous collections: *Torn Sky* (Sarabande Books, 2003) and *A Quarter Turn* (Sheep Meadow Press, 1991). She teaches in the Creative Writing Program at the University of Virginia.

**JACQUELINE OSHEROW**'s most recent book is *The Hoopoe's Crown* (BOA Editions, 2005).

**ALAN MICHAEL PARKER**'s most recent collection is *Elephants & Butterflies*. He teaches at Davidson College and in the Queens University low-residency MFA program.

**BARBARA RAS** is the author of *One Hidden Stuff* (Penguin, 2006) and *Bite Every Sorrow*, which won the Walt Whitman Award and the Kate Tufts Discovery Award. Her poems have appeared in *The New Yorker, Orion, Massachusetts Review, TriQuarterly,* and other literary magazines and anthologies. Her next collection of poems is due out from Penguin in spring of 2010.

**SUSAN RICH**'s recent poems can be found in *Alaska Quarterly Review, The Gettysburg Review,* and *New England Review*. Her books include *The Cartographer’s Tongue/ Poems of the World*, which won the PEN USA award, and *Cures Include Travel*. White Pine Press will publish her third collection, *The Alchemist’s Kitchen*, in 2010.

**ROBERT SCHULTZ**'s fourth book, *We Were Pirates: A Torpedoman’s View of the Pacific War*—a work of nonfiction—will be issued by the Naval Institute Press. His poem in this issue is from a series responding to the art of Binh Danh; the group will be collected in a work in progress called *Ancestral Altars*. Schultz is the John P. Fishwick Professor of English at Roanoke College.

**LYNNE SHARON SCHWARTZ**'s most recent book is a forthcoming memoir, *Not Now Voyager*, from which “Harmony” is taken. Her novels include *The Writing on the Wall, Disturbances in the Field,* and *Leaving Brooklyn*. She has also published short story collections, essays, poetry, and translations from Italian, and is on the faculty of the Bennington Writing Seminars.
JOAN SILBER's most recent novel is *The Size of the World*. She is the author of *Ideas of Heaven*, finalist for the National Book Award and The Story Prize, and four other works of fiction, including *Household Words*, winner of the Hemingway Foundation/PEN Award. *The Art of Time in Fiction* is forthcoming from Graywolf Press. She lives in New York City and teaches at Sarah Lawrence College.

DAVE SMITH's most recent books are *Little Boats, Unsalvaged* (poems, LSU Press, 2006) and *Hunting Men: Reflections on a Life in American Poetry* (essays, LSU Press, 2007). He is Elliot Coleman Professor of Poetry and Chairman of the Writing Seminars at The Johns Hopkins University.

MAURA STANTON's poems have appeared recently or are forthcoming in *Margie, The Atlantic, Poetry East, Ecotone, River Styx, American Literary Review, Barrow Street* and *POOL*. Her sixth book of poetry, *Immortal Sofa*, was published by the University of Illinois Press in 2008. She teaches at Indiana University in Bloomington.

JEAN THOMPSON's latest story collection, *Do Not Deny Me*, is forthcoming from Simon and Schuster. She is the author of several books, including the short story collection *Who Do You Love*, a 1999 National Book Award finalist for fiction, and the novel *Wide Blue Yonder*, a *New York Times* Notable Book and *Chicago Tribune* Best Fiction selection for 2002. She has received Guggenheim and NEA fellowships and taught creative writing at the University of Illinois—Champaign/Urbana, Reed College, and Northwestern University.

BRIAN TURNER is the author of *Here, Bullet* (Alice James Books, 2005). His work has appeared in *The Georgia Review, The Virginia Quarterly Review, Poetry Daily*, and the *Crab Orchard Review*, among other places. With the support of a fellowship from the Lannan Foundation, he has completed a second poetry collection, *Talk the Guns*, and has begun a third. He lives in California.

CHARLES WRIGHT teaches at the University of Virginia. The poems included in this issue are from *Sestets*, a collection forthcoming in April 2009.

CORRINA WYCOFF is the author of *O Street*. Her fiction and essays have also appeared in *New Letters, Other Voices, Coal City Review, The Oregon Quarterly*, and *Brainchild*. She holds an MFA from the University of Oregon (2001).
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The acrobat’s heart floated in a cloud of vapor. He heard it murmuring, the valves opening and closing, behind the harder music of his bones. At times he felt a part of himself—an ear, a leg, his temple—erased. When the part reappeared, it would be cold at first and colorless. He could not talk about this with anyone, even the woman who awaited him at the end of his journey.

—Nicholas Christopher,
from Three Stories the Blind Man Told