NORTHWEST REVIEW

a literary journal for all points on the compass
From the artist: Many of these pastel paintings depict work spaces, often my own studio space or the work space of another artist. Thus they speak about the tools of the craft, and the best of these paintings are infused with the energy that makes this art possible. I want these pastels to have the character of drawings, with all the immediacy, energy, and personal feeling that can characterize this medium. I also want them to be majestic, but at the same time so accessible and welcoming that one easily finds oneself virtually walking into them, and then around inside of them.
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FICTION
MEGAN STAFFEL, Leaving the Meadows ——— 21
RON CARLSON, Girl in a Car ——— 40
GINA OCHSNER, In the Fire That Burns Me ——— 61
ROSELLEN BROWN, The Threshold ——— 95
KATHRYN MA, The Scottish Play ——— 145
LESLEE BECKER, Chicken Lake ——— 167

ESSAYS AND CREATIVE NONFICTION
THEODORE KITAIF, Seurat Measured ——— 10
NANCE VAN WINCKEL, I Will ——— 82
W. SCOTT OLSEN, The Long Cross-Country ——— 118

POETRY
BRENDA HILLMAN, Anthem for Aquifers ——— 3
ROBERT WRIGLEY, County ——— 6
EAMON GRENNAN, Jan van de Cappelle's Winter Scene:
   An Inventory ——— 8
DON BOGEN, The Ice Rink ——— 34
MICHAEL COLLIER, The Singer; “What’s That?” ——— 36
LESLEY ADRIENNE MILLER, Inchworm; Bees ——— 38
MICHAEL PETTIT, Day of the Dead; The Last River ——— 48
PATRICIA CLARK, She Walks into the Sea; Burial Underwear ——— 53
SUSAN WOOD, *The Magic Hour; My Father Looks Down on Me* —— 57
NICHOLAS CHRISTOPHER, *The Governor of Fates Will Strike Your Name from the Book of Death* ———— 84
ELIZABETH SPIRES, *Elegy for Alex* ———— 86
STUART DISCHELL, *Okay to Others; What Begins in Eros Ends in Elegy* ———— 88
COLLEEN J. MCELROY, *On with the Dance* ———— 90
VERN RUTSALA, *Coming to the End; Negotiating Curves* ———— 92
JEFFREY SCHULTZ, *These Arms of Mine* ———— 111
YUSEF KOMUNYAKAA, *Surrender; Ode to the Chameleon* ———— 113
RICHARD TILLINGHAST, *Two Blues* ———— 115
GARY SOTO, *The Fountain Pen* ———— 136
CAMPBELL MCGRATH, *Sparrows: For Gerald Stern; Elizabeth Bishop: Departure from Santos* ———— 138
BRUCE SMITH, *Devotion: Hörlust; Devotion: October* ———— 141
GREG PAPE, *Etheridge; Cemetery in Kentucky* ———— 163
BRIAN TURNER, *In Sweden’s Sodertalje, Little Baghdad, 2008; Mohammed Trains for the Beijing Olympics, 2008* ———— 180
ROSANNA WARREN, *Oranges; Fire* ———— 183

ABOUT OUR WRITERS ———— 187
The waters flow over the people of California
They flow over bodies in distressed desire
Pocks & knots & fixed muscles
With names hooked to their types
Women who left snacks in white boxes
With metal handles in fuel-efficient cars
Where the first oak on the right side turns down
Tatter peril stressform fear
West of where serpentine peeks ragged from the years
West of vertical ice paradox parhelia
& pines smelling of vanilla
Where they lay in their mineral calm

We asked the glitter in the vineyard
You still there?
Tatter peril stressform matter
Under the vineyard how shall we live
With nouns for seasons & chthonic patter
Where everything happens as itself

Steam rose from the geyser it rose & fell
Into vernal pools from vertical ice
Ragged from the years
Rose with a mildly worried look on its face
With specks of rivers & nouns can't you tell
From being so long in the seasons so well
Steam from the geyser it rose & fell
With dried up crying from the sea can't you tell
& the flavor of the dream
Was the flavor of death
You can probably hear it as the crow’s wing crrr crr
Where the pine on the right side dips down

Ash ash we lower ourselves into you
With the help of little Eve
We lower our hearts & our chromosomes
& ex-wives & Spanish clouds
Sisters & brothers of the unkillied dream
Where we lay in our mineral calm

Stressform fear carbon & tatter
Minerals pushed up from the sea floor so well
Calcium boron sulfur
Fluoride silicates & salts
Do you hate your body did you ever oh hell
You need to stop that right now said water
It flowed over bodies with tattoos
Of prime time & bridges
Tendrils of grapes & lilies & Spanish clouds
Tattoos of lovers’ names & flexible worlds
It flowed over each woman disordered in the west
Where the fern on the left side drips down

You searched for water but you were one of it o well
Minor streams said goodbye they rose & fell
The Y of water like wishbones & still
A fluke a creek sound breaks through up north
Till the body of a woman is the body of a world
Where you live in your mineral calm

You have arrived with great effort
You lived at the edge of the field like a wasp gall
With knots & pocks & fixed muscles by the well
Brenda Hillman

With burls & girls & Spanish clouds
So if death had visited you what would it have said
Where the vine on the hillside winds down
Days of dried-up crying by split-apart oaks
Sea joined by your son for a season
& if life had visited you
What would it have said
Peril stressform carbon joy
Where you slept for a time beyond reason
County of innumerable nowheres, half its dogs underfed and of indeterminate breed. County of the deep fryer, staples in glass against mice, county of horned gods and billed hats. Sweat county, shiver county. County of the hallowed outhouse upholstered in wooly carpet, sack of lime county, time out of time county, country music county.

County of insufficient snowplows, county of the blasted doe all winter in a drift, dust sift county, feather duster county, county of the quo all status is attached to. County of batches and bitchdogs howling. County of rowels and boots, of soot wash, county of the chimney sweep's red beard, of the songless radio preaching to no one in the shed.

County of the deadly road, of the shoat pig cooked in a pit. County of molasses and hobo coffee, sugarless soft-drink county, county of the methamphetamine picture window, county of the padlock and massive hasp. County of tools and dewormers. Curry comb and salt block, black pepper gravy, red-eye venison, blood sausage, county of Bud Light girl posters.

Treblehook county, chum county, bear bait and dead wolf county. County of the coyote pelt nailed to the barn door. Bruised woman county, county of the men missing one or more fingers, single-finger
wave county. Pistol alongside the cash register county.
Pitch-dense firewood county, county of the fearful and fearless, county of the distant mysterious school.

Target-poor county, distant Walmart holyland county, county of the malodorous pulp mill, paper plate county.
County of the hundred-yard drive to the post office, oddly familiar faces among the wanted posters county, four-hour drive from the county seat county, unadopted highway county, county of no return.
County of the August always somewhere burning.

Beercan bejeweled barrow pit county, hardly one bullet-unpunctuated road sign county.
County of the ATV and ancient Indian trail into the high mountains. Get your bull or buck county. On-the-way-to-somewhere-else county, doe-see-doe county, hundred frozen casseroles after the funeral county, go to heaven county,

blister and blister rust county, Jahweh trailerhouse county, unassisted living county, county of the Gospels, county of the Penthouse under the bed.
County of tenderness and terror. County of almost universal skepticism, Jesus country county.
County of the cell tower stipend, everywhere and nowhere county, boneyard county, county a day's drive from the end of the open road.
Softshell Baptist county. Pentecostal pancake county.
County of illusions, county of hard facts. Rock and broken shock county, rock and roll aught-six save your shell casing county. County of not quite beautiful vistas, county of the for sale sign, county of timothy and brome, spring and autumn slaughter county, meat county, home.
Mostly cloud: a heavy-bundled leaden grey
  brightening to talcum white or near white
  so you know snow is coming.
People, then, bodies withstanding a wind that whittles
  everything in its path:
  flayed trees, broken fence-posts,
  a few splintered bridge-pilings,
  one rowing-boat sunk to its gunnels in ice,
  the stems of straw-colored tall dead grass.
Six or seven figures: one trudges the slope of the bridge
  towards a low-slung house,
  a rag of smoke wind-raveling from its chimney;
  a bent man shoves a sled across ice;
  a woman in a long, burnt-umber tweed skirt
  tucks her youngster in close.
Out where the river widens, two men have stopped to talk
  as if frozen water were their village street
  some spring or summer or mild autumn evening,
  and not this storm-pit of a winter’s day
through which a solitary skater leans and breezes past them—
  intent as any sea-bird
  on some hungry errand upstream,
  his whole unfolding body
  rapt and wrapped in it,
unseeing the blockish church-tower in its flat sandstone colours,
  or the thatched roofs
  coated with famished snowlight,
  or even the trees in their leaf-lorn
  purity of shape, wind-stricken.
You see all this and think that's all, till a fraction
in the upper left catches your eye
with a cleaner shade of cloud
or maybe sky, a translucent albumen grey
with faint trace-specks of blue inside it—
as if the painter couldn't leave the scene
without some tiny touch of hope in it,
so your eyes keep sliding down from there
to the sailing-boat
ice-moored beside a shaded gable,
whose mast and boom are
ramrod straight, still stiff-buckled
into winter, on which
you can see a streak or two of brighter light ignite
their vertical and horizontal lines
of hardihood, almost softening
the tough wood they're carved in.
The craft faces towards the open stream and seems
though hasped in the solid grasp of ice
ready for anything—for the wind
to shift and the anchoring ice
to relent and melt and flow away
the way that woman gazing at the mast has seen it happen,
as will happen when this hard season
turns to spring, a lit and flickering
forecast of which you might
see in those cottony blobs
the painter has coaxed to the tips of a few nude trees,
that force your eyes and your
desiring mind to hover at last
between the fact of packed snow and the fact of blossom.
The Seurat family did have money, enough of it anyway so that Mother and the children could live in an apartment in Paris, and Father, taciturn, plodding, secretive, officious, formerly holding a legal position of some sort who had made lucrative investments and thus was full of himself, Father could live the solitary existence he preferred in a house a few miles outside the city, joining the family for dinner once a week or so, money it is said by many, though few believe it in their hearts, money isn't worth anything if you don't spend it. But the Seurats were willing to spend it, Mother more than Father, one supposes, as hers was an old Paris family that had produced several sculptors in the previous century, they spent money on their son's living expenses, his art classes, his art supplies, his models, his various apartments and studios, his summer holidays in Normandy or farther up along the Channel coast, that is to say Georges Seurat was fortunate to have been born to parents who did not demand he work at a job and confine his drawing and his oil painting to his spare time, when a lifetime even without a job taking up a third of it is too spare, as would prove especially true, sadly, in his case, much too spare, a mere sliver of time was allotted him, a duration which, if it were drawn on the calendar of his era, would be a line so thin as to be barely perceptible, but it went deep, this brief life, and out of it light flooded his time and long afterward, even to today, and certain to continue.

Not long ago, during the month of June, if you went to see La Parade de Cirque in the Metropolitan Museum of Art between three and four in the afternoon on a weekday, you would have noticed a man of about fifty studying this painting with great intensity. Usually he stood directly before it, ten feet away, or four feet, or just a few inches. Sometimes he studied it from an angle of forty-five degrees,
other times he would come almost to the wall where it hung as if trying to see into the painting from the side. Now and then he would sit on the bench placed fifteen or twenty feet from the canvas and look at it from there, leaning forward with his hands on the sides of his head, but he never sat for long, and would soon get to his feet and step closer to this object of his seemingly tireless interest. Although intent upon this work he remained aware of others around him, and if he felt he were blocking someone's chosen viewpoint he would smile, say *Sorry*, and step out of the other's line of sight. He usually wore jeans and a sweatshirt and always held in his hands a fountain pen and a small red notebook whose stiff covers were decorated with black letter Os of various sizes, some interlaced, others floating alone on the red surface. When he wrote in this notebook he stepped away from others here, but this was because he did not wish to distract them and not because his jottings were secret, since anyone who spoke with him about the painting found that he shared his ideas freely. Most who came into the gallery, almost all of them, did not speak to him, though of course this is hardly unusual behavior in a museum. In fact, he was clearly grateful for the opportunity to have a conversation about the work, though he never initiated it. This is one of the most enigmatic paintings in the museum's collection, he would say, and then he would quickly add, as if he wanted to be perfectly fair on this point, that every painting that deserved a place in a great museum had something enigmatic about it, but this one, he'd say, this one is especially enigmatic. I used to think I was drawn to it, he would continue, because of its mysterious qualities. Not so, I was wrong. I am often wrong about my own motivations, which if nothing else, and in this instance there is nothing else, does make life that much more interesting, *n'est-ce pas*? I was drawn to it, I now know, because somewhere in the back of my mind lurked the conviction that I was capable of deciphering this thing. There is a decidedly deceptive quality about *La Parade de Cirque*, or if that is too strong let us say there is a mysterious character to it. The subject is the circus, known far and wide not only to children but to men and women in every corner of the world whose hearts, as the advertisements say, have not abandoned the wonder of childhood,
known far and wide for garishness, noise, and perpetual action, and yet in this painting the tone is soft, the artist had stayed his hand from throwing onto the canvas any jarring slashes or bursts of cobalt blue or scarlet or chrome yellow. In fact, the picture is essentially stagnant, a tableau, the figures may as well be displayed on an ancient frieze. Yes, it is true that musicians are playing, supposedly to draw in the crowd, but their tunes are absorbed and swallowed up, as it were, by the countless dots applied by the artist, and in our imagination we do not hear a thing. Less obvious than the lack of noise and brightness and excitement is the geometric calm of the painting. What is geometric calm, you never heard of such a thing? Let us look carefully. The back wall of the scene is composed entirely of rectangles, wider ones on the left, narrower ones on the right. To the right of the trombonist, who stands on a rectangular platform, is a white rectangle. Behind the boy, about whom there is much to say, is a tall, slender rectangle. The bodies of the musicians on the left are essentially rectangular, and the railing at which they stand is the top of a rectangle whose opposite side runs across their knees. Now rectangles, I would suggest, are restful shapes to look at, indeed they border on the soporific, the opposite of what one thinks of when he thinks of a circus. Nor does the geometry of the painting end there. Look at the vertical line formed by the tube of the trombone from the mouthpiece down to where it curves upward. If you measure it, as I did, you will discover that from this vertical line to the left edge of the canvas the distance is exactly the same as the distance to the right edge, or in other words, this vertical line comes down in the exact center of the canvas, and this, we may be sure, was not the result of happenstance but of the artist’s intent. To any doubters I would point out that the woman with the red parasol stands in the exact center of the same painter’s Grande Jatte, and the bollard is in the exact center of his Gravelines painting. Nor would it have happened by chance that the distance from the back of the boy’s head to the trombonist is exactly the same as from the tip of the boy’s nose to the tip of the wand tucked under the ringmaster’s arm, or that it is precisely as far from the boy’s right elbow to the trombonist as it is from his left elbow to the ringmaster. Still measuring, and you are probably growing
increasingly enthusiastic about the task now that you are discovering one of the small secrets of the artist's sense of composition, you will find that in the case of the trumpeter, the middle one of the three musicians standing together, it is precisely the same distance from his right elbow to the half-concealed fourth musician on the far left as it is from the trumpeter's left elbow to the trombonist. The height of the trombonist from the top of his hat to the visible base of his leg is equal to the distance from the base of the ringmaster's coattail to the gas line along the top, and this is also the very same as the distance from the trombonist's waist, measuring from under his right elbow, out to the left edge of the canvas. Now concentrate on the bare tree, if you please, the high significance of which we will ignore, but just for the moment, and you will notice that from where the lowest branch on the right emerges from the trunk it is just as far down to the top of the railing as it is up to the horizontal tubing that supplies gas for the lamps. That distance, moreover, is also the same distance from the railing down to the base of the tree, and, if you do not find this a little thrilling then you should not be bothering yourself with this, it isn't worth it, it won't do you the least bit of good, and, I say, this length we are talking about is the very length of the ringmaster's wand. I could add still more to these geometrical analyses but let me point out only that if you exclude the gaslights along the top the proportion of width to length constitutes the famous golden rectangle, a proportion that architects and artists have been making use of since the building of the Parthenon, if not earlier. As another example of Seurat's awareness of what he was so painstakingly putting down on his canvases you can take the gaslights just mentioned and notice that the three or four points at the top of their petal shape conform to the theory of Superville and others that such a shape conveys the idea of gaiety and optimism. With this idea we know that Seurat agreed, because in a letter he drew three or four lines rising from a horizontal as an example of exactly that. After *La Parade de Cirque* the same shape, that is the very same shape, turns up in *Le Chahut* in the lamps on the left, on the shoes and shoulders of the women dancers and the flying coattails of the male dancer, and in *Cirque* there it is again on the hat, collar, and cuffs of the clown in the
foreground, on the horse’s mane and tail, in the hands of the tumbling clowns, and on the shoulders and in the very skirt itself of the bareback rider. What should all this mean to us? Well, at the very least, that the artist thought about what he was doing, and so we ought to, too.

In the course of perfecting his art Seurat looked to other artists, especially the great ones of the past, as do almost all young artists, but unlike most of them he applied himself also to the science of color and of composition, studying and putting into practice the lessons of books bearing such titles as Une esthétique scientifique, Grammaire des arts du dessin, Essai sur les signes inconditionnels de l’art, and in its French translation, Modern Chromatics, this last one of the first works devoted to optical mixing, and this especially appealed to Seurat as eminently worth trying on many of his canvases, though the result did not always justify the theory, which is often the way with theories, and in other texts there were theories establishing that a face with a downturned mouth is sad and one with an upturned mouth is happy, which one would think is already known even to kindergartners, and that a line moving upwards left to right conveys optimism, and a line moving the opposite conveys the opposite, and that a horizontal line bespeaks serenity, and so on, there is no end of theories of which a thoughtful and energetic artist may avail himself, and though many are incontrovertibly true, and may be helpful, and even crucial in certain respects, not a trunkful of the best theories can replace the feelings in an artist’s brain and the intelligence in his hands.

One day while sitting on the bench in this gallery, said the man who haunted the place during that month of June, my gaze constantly interrupted by people walking across my line of vision, some of whom, understandably, paused directly in front of La Parade de Cirque for a good long look at it, a thought occurred to me, a startling thought. This picture isn’t about a circus at all, it is about death. The figures along the bottom and curving up on the right are not in line to buy a ticket for a couple of hours of thrills and fun. They are dead, and they are waiting their turn to pay their obol to
cross the Styx, and the musicians are there to entertain them and to hurry them along. Having been immediately persuaded of the truth of my insight I then faced the task of proving it to myself. This is not necessarily a simple matter, for as you may have experienced yourself, our inspirations sometimes possess a wisdom that we, their fathers, lack. Now the trombonist, as I have said, stands in the center of the painting, exactly in the center, thereby dividing the scene in two. I would be stating the obvious if I said that in this life as we know it, or pretend to ourselves that we do, there are few clear divisions of any kind. Night and day? We speak as if they represent a clear division, but who can record the instant on one side of which is day and the other night? The dividing line between sea and dry land may seem obvious, until you remember the tides that ceaselessly push against the supposed boundary. Health and sickness, like and dislike, peace and war, happiness and sadness—none of these are absolutely divisible either. Life and death, however, to state the obvious again, are assuredly divisible, and I think it is at least possible that Seurat was nodding toward this fact when he placed his main figure where he did. Now, I will agree that it would be laughable to say that this alone makes my case, but it may point to a path worth following. If you stand before the painting you will, I think, sense that there is a vaguely purplish haze over some areas of the canvas and a greenish haze over others. And what are these colors, I mean to say where will you encounter purples and greens in the natural world? Well, in many places no doubt, but one of them, if you will excuse me, is if you should come upon rotting flesh, as my wife and I did one spring afternoon when we saw a lamb that had been swept away by a flood and now lay decaying in the elbow of the limb of a downed tree along a river bank. This was up in the country a hundred and twenty miles northwest of our city apartment. So we have here the colors of death. Now look at the boy. What is that pointy shape at the top of his forehead? Is it nothing but his hair combed into a little spike, or could it not be one of two horns, the other unseen behind it from this angle? Or in other words could he not be a pint-sized Mephistophelean figure whose function is to assure that things are running smoothly here? As for the tree on the left side, I suppose you
could say it was bare because of the season, but to my eye it is not only bare but desiccated, brittle, dead. If you like religious interpretations, to which I am not partial myself, nor am I aware of Seurat’s religious beliefs, if any, you might say that the dead tree represents the Tree of Life whose leaves shriveled and whose sap dried after Adam and Eve disobeyed the divine edict. I know I may be stretching a point, and I will not insist upon my interpretation, which no doubt some would call fanciful in the extreme. Let them, it’s a free country. But even if the subject of the painting is no more and no less than what the artist’s title says it is, there still remains the undeniable connection between the circus and death that, in my view, remains implicitly in the work whether or not the artist chooses to acknowledge it. Incidentally, I am sure I am not alone in finding the circus to be one of the saddest places on Earth. Here an animal’s will is broken so that it can be taught to perform antics for our primitive amusement. Here the deformed sit and look at us looking at them—or have they finally closed down their freak shows, so called? Here gifted and courageous athletes must display their skill to the bawling claptrap of a ringmaster and to the blarings of music so melodramatic as almost to overwhelm the true drama of an astonishing somersault fifty feet above the ground. The circus is a veritable minefield of threats to life and limb: animals by whose clawed weapon a single blow could kill in an instant, trapeze artists forever a fraction of an inch from falling to their deaths, racing horses that might stumble and crush a nearby clown performing one of his stunts. To attend a circus is to have the reality of death brought up right under one’s nose. Yes, we hold our breath as the tightrope walker teeters, teeters—oh, no, she’s going to fall, this is the end, I can’t look—but she waves her arms a bit, and then thrills us by regaining her balance and skipping quickly along the rope and onto the safety of the platform. But isn’t there a side of us that almost wants to witness her teetering to end in that fall? Do we not, secretly, want to be there on the day the lion’s forbearance comes to an end and with a roar he pounces open-jawed onto his tamer’s chest? These unfortunate events do happen every now and then, and in part the possibility that they might happen today must bring at least some of the audience to the ticket window, for as long as
it must happen sometime, not because of us but because of the law of averages, why should it not happen on the day we’re there? We know it would be a sight that we would, literally, never forget, it would change our lives—for the better, of course. And then, too, to witness such an event positively insures that we will never lack for stories to tell our friends, our seatmates on the commuter train, our great-grandchildren. The great truth of this painting is another expression of that which wise men, or some of them, have been teaching for millennia, not that that in itself makes them right, though I think they are. As you climb out of the cradle and move through life you may pause now and then to enjoy lighted spectacles and to tap your feet to music, but never forget that this is a deception, your movement carries you to a single destination only, there is one denouement to everyone’s story, and even those who entertain you on your journey have been entertained by others, briefly, who were themselves briefly entertained by others yet, not that there is anything wrong with it, diversions are good, even necessary, they relieve the boredom, and the fear, too, the two killers of the spirit these are, boredom and fear, but ultimately all the entertainers will join you there, where your journey ends. But this, you see, oddly enough brings me back to the beginning, to the calmness of this picture, the calmness it bestows upon the astute viewer. This blessed calmness comes not only from the techniques employed by the painter, and which I consider significant, but also from the truth about the nature of our existence that is to be found there, namely, that a good part of our lives may be given over to distracting ourselves with circuses of one sort or another but that it must not be confused with the reality awaiting us behind the box office where we pay over our obol. It is, perhaps strangely, the inevitability of it that is calming. That must be what I am getting at. That’s what I see there. Now it may well be that no one in the world, including its creator himself, sees any of this in La Parade de Cirque, fine, that’s fine, but it doesn’t stop me from seeing it. Seurat would not deny me my right to that.

For those who care about such things it may easily be learned that Georges Seurat lacked the warmth, the openness, the spirit of
camaraderie of, for example, his friend Camille Pissarro, who wrote to his son Lucien that he wished he could have it directly asked of Seurat why in Grande Jatte he had disregarded certain of his own principles regarding the use of color, but that this would be out of the question because of Seurat's secretiveness (a trait inherited from his father, but far from the worst that might have been passed on), and aware of Seurat's extreme touchiness on the matter of his discoveries Pissarro told someone else that he would adopt Seurat's technique of painting the borders of his pictures, a wonderful idea that was, but that he would refrain from showing one of these paintings until it became widely known that Seurat had thought of it first, lest he be accused of trying to steal the credit for it, and a writer friend said that Seurat never considered any of his colleagues to be as good a painter as he was, but Seurat is hardly the only artist to have harbored such a conviction, which is not uncommon among writers, nor among academics or businessmen, either, and if Seurat was secretive about his discoveries and defensive about receiving credit for them surely this is his own business, it in no way harms the lives nor the work of his colleagues, and in any event none of this is relevant to the more important point, which is that our grandchildren, those who are artists themselves and those who are merely thrilled by a well-made painting, will still find his work worth walking a few miles to see.

You may be curious to know how I came to be obsessed with this painting. Do you imagine a man could produce a La Parade de Cirque without being obsessed? So why should not a viewer feel the same? And then there is his Grande Jatte, for which he prepared by making more than fifty sketches that are known of, either in color or in black and white, and at least three full-size canvases. Anyway, the answer is that I do not know why I keep coming back to look at this work. Sometimes I laugh at myself, but I still come back. But if you will go a few galleries away, over to the Goyas, you may see the man who almost every day, shortly after noon, on his lunch hour, one would guess, will stand for fifteen minutes or more before the portrait of Don Manuel Osorio. I doubt that he can explain his inexhaustible interest in that painting any more than I can mine in
this. The mystery of why certain works of art touch this one and that but not a third is by no means among the most trivial mysteries we encounter in our lifetimes. I have brought friends of mine to see La Parade de Cirque. One found it interesting, another admirable, the last instructive. From this you would be correct in concluding that none of them cared to stand for thirty or forty minutes looking at it and then to return the next day to do the same. Yet these are friends with whom I otherwise have a great deal in common. So just what is the nature of the harmony that may exist between certain works of art and certain people? Between me and this painting. Between you and, say, a Bach prelude that you can happily listen to seven times over and I can manage to listen to once and that's enough. One can only assume that a certain work of art may touch something deep beneath our consciousness, but does not necessarily touch others in the same way. Or for all we know it touches, in a peculiar way, specific optic nerves of specific people. I study this painting for hours. I take actual measurements of its components. I read books devoted to the artist and to this one work of his. I think at length about it all. And yet understanding its pull on me is no less hopeless than my understanding the nature of the universe. It is taken as truth, I believe, that man has been making art since the day he found he had more than one day's supply of food stored in a cool corner of the cave and so could turn his hands and his brain to something else. Some of his tribe must have crowded around and urged him to make more and more of those evocative scratches of his on the stone walls. Others, meanwhile, finding themselves bored, had wandered off to skip stones on the lake. As for myself, tomorrow or the next day, something, I know not what, will tell me that this painting has given me all I am capable of taking from it and I will leave this gallery and walk into another. Something there, or in the next one, will have the effect upon me that this Seurat now has. I am beginning to feel curious about which work it will be. It is a beguiling puzzle, no?

Seurat died at thirty-one, meaning that his life was one-half or less than one-half as long as many other artists who had lived at about the same time as he, such as Monet, Manet, Renoir, Redon, Signac,
Cézanne, Matisse, Degas, Dufy, Derain, Rouault, Vlaminck, Picasso, Pissarro père et fils, and Braque, but what he had died of at that
early age is not certain, one identifies it as infectious angina, a second
as malignant diphtheria, a third as meningitis, and although he
fathered a son, his friends would only have two weeks to indulge the
hope that his son had inherited something of his father’s genius, as
Lucien Pissarro had, as Filippino Lippi had, because Pierre Georges,
aged one year, on April 13, 1891, died of whatever infection it was
that had killed his father on March 29, nor, to answer our curiosity
about what Seurat’s last days and hours may have been like, and
whether he knew he would not survive them, and if so the words
he might have spoken as death overtook him, nor could the child’s
mother, Madeleine Knobloch, the model for Seurat’s portrait of the
woman powdering herself, offer any help, for having lost her lover
and her son in the space of a couple of weeks, she soon quarreled
with Seurat’s family, and with his friends, it would not be surprising
if she had also quarreled with her God, and she walked, alone, across
and then off the wide white margin of Seurat’s biography and into
a deeply shadowed oblivion, though she must have wondered, as do
we, what he might have painted had he been given another thirty
or forty years, and in Seurat’s case this is more than speculation, as
he had moved swiftly through many different ways of depicting his
subjects in the fifteen or so years he had worked at his art, and he
almost certainly would have continued to find ever new means of
rendering his vision.
Two people came through the double glass doors of a twelve-story brick building and walked along the chain-link fence to the parking lot. The tall, grey-haired man and the short, white-haired woman were mother and son. This was obvious from the way that their small, eager heads were canted forward at the same ready, anticipating thrust. The son was a beefy six feet, not fat, but forceful. His tailored suit and well-made, expensive shoes suggested success in the world, and his singleness of focus, while the never-slowing lanes of traffic whizzed by the fence, suggested deadlines and engagements. Poor men looked at their environment; wealthy men passed through it on their way to somewhere else.

Once, the old woman might have had the same large body as her son, but now it was frail and shrunk. Yet her face still had a vigor of opposition, evident in the stubborn, demanding chin. Hobbling beside her son, leaning on her cane, she argued loudly, "I told you we can't go yet. I didn't say goodbye to my friend."

"Gloria?"

"I have to say goodbye to her. She won't know where I've gone."

"Mom. You've said goodbye to her five or six times already. Okay? You're done with saying goodbye to Gloria."

"I'm not done." She took a few more steps and then she said, "And what if I don't like this new place?"

"What's there not to like? It's very nice," John answered, although he had never actually seen it. "They have chickens and goats. It's in the country."

"But the people. Are they friendly?"

"Very friendly."

"What are they like?"

"They're like you. They're old."
“But I have to be back at five thirty. For dinner.”
“No, we’re leaving. Remember? This is your last day in Cleveland, your last day at the Meadows. And here’s your last goodbye.”

They had reached the car. He turned her around to get a final look at the enormous structure on one of the city’s busiest highways. The Meadows was a brick building built in the seventies that blighted the entire block with its tall, institutional façade and apron of black parking lots. “Goodbye Meadows,” he said.
“Goodbye Meadows,” she repeated after him.

Sylvia Fleming hadn’t been in a car in many years. Within the fortress, a resident’s every need had been taken care of, and the few times it had been necessary to venture into the outside world, the Meadows provided a van which picked up and delivered residents to the garage in the basement so their feet never touched the earth and their lungs never breathed anything but interior air. Like many other people who lived there, Sylvia hadn’t worn anything but slippers since the day she entered. She didn’t own a pair of shoes anymore and earlier that morning, John’s brief glance at her bony feet with their thick, raptorlike toenails had been enough to dissuade him from any attempt to take her to a store and purchase more ground-appropriate footwear.

Once they got on the interstate, he waited for her to fall asleep, but she stayed awake the entire time, making conversation.
“How’s Mary?”
“I don’t know, Mom. Mary moved to California. She and I are separated. A year ago, remember?”
“Right. I’m so mixed up I don’t know if I’m coming or going. By the way, no one asked me if I wanted to move.”
“You can’t stay there any longer. The Meadows has already rented your apartment to someone else.”
“But I happen to live there. Who told them they could do that?”
“You did live there and now you’re moving away.”
“Really.”

He could see her staring at the complicated structure of bridges and ramps, the pillars that held up the massive swaths of concrete.
that loomed over the flat, industrial landscape of eastern Ohio, moving millions of cars in an infinite combination of directions. “It cost a lot, didn’t it? I was running out of money.”

“You’re right. This new place is cheaper. By half.”

“How’s your friend?”

“What friend?”

“Your friend from work who came with you once.”

“Burdett? That was a long time ago. But actually, he’s the one who discovered this new place. It’s called Flora and Fauna.”

“That’s nice. Like the Meadows.”

“Not really. This place is out in the country. It’s much smaller. They have chickens and goats and vegetables and I think the food will be better.”

“So how’s Mary? Why didn’t she come with you?”

A month ago, when the report came that Mrs. Fleming’s mental and physical deterioration required a greater level of care than the Meadows could offer, they recommended the Orchards, their sister institution where each resident had a room rather than an apartment, and access to nursing and hygiene staff twenty-four hours a day. John had been tempted to say yes. It would have meant the Meadows movers and the Meadows van would have done the relocation and his only job would have been to sign a check. But something had made him pause. He wanted to do right for his mother, a person he had once loved, or at least, looking at the childhood photographs, it appeared he must have. Now he felt a mixture of guilt and duty, so he assigned the matter to Burdett. Two days later, Burdett put him on the phone with a woman named Rose Curtin. She was a registered nurse and she operated a home in western New York State that provided just the level of care his mother needed. When he asked about vacancies, Ms. Curtin had said, “We’re not a large place. We never have more than three, and last week, well, our dear ninety-eight-year-old Arnie climbed the hill and his beautiful, south-facing room is available.”

“Arnie climbed the hill?”

“Yes, the hill at the back of the property. Arnie’s room looked out on it and this past month he’d been telling me, Rose, I’m going to
climb that hill out there.""

But nothing was firmed up. A problem in packaging required John's immediate attention, and he had allowed the matter to slide. Or that's what he told himself, but really it was the metaphor. Nature might be useful in advertising, but in real life, in the arrangements and negotiations with a dependent parent, it gave him unease.

The Meadows phoned again and requested that Mrs. Fleming be removed by the end of the month. "Deteriorating hygiene is the first sign the resident needs more extensive oversight."

"So who is Rose Curtin?" It was Thursday morning, Burdett stepping into his office for the daily check-in.

"Rose? Well, very reliable. Very dependable. You would be satisfied, and I think your mother would be happy."

"But who is she? How do you know about her place?"

Before answering, Burdett looked at the carpet. Then he looked up and if John had hoped to see anything but the usual expression, he was disappointed. Burdett was never combative, or arrogant, or even mildly self-assured. His manner was apologetic, as though by his mere presence he might intrude. If John were given to wondering, which he wasn't, he might have wondered if the many hours Burdett sat at his desk absorbing the shadowless blue of the computer screen had sucked all that was robust out of his body. His skin was the color of an egg. His hair was never anything but unwashed, and the mole on his neck sprouted a whisker. Though he had solid brown eyes, they were so unquestioning as to be without depth. But Burdett was a quiet sufferer, just as he was a quiet accomplisher, and he had, over the years, earned John's admiration. Lucky Cow, the company John had bought as a young man out of business school and grown from a small cheese-making business into a corporation with national distribution and universal name recognition, reflected not only the economic aggressiveness of John Fleming, but the inventive genius of Burdett.

Burdett knew cows. He knew cheese. That was his world. But when John saw that the business would not grow as he had envisioned unless it had broader appeal, he developed a new division. Lucky Cow moved into the processed line and that line grew steadily while
the line of natural products stayed flat. There was nothing to do but drop it, and from that point on let demand dictate the direction the company took. As it turned out, Burdett, the farm boy, was willing to accept these changes and soon had learned his way around the world of food science. He hired the people who knew how to make a commodity that tasted like cheese, looked like cheese, smelled like cheese, but was made entirely out of soybeans. And now, pressured by the demands of the stockholders, a noisy crowd who had no patience with the volatility of a major ingredient that was dependent on weather and soil and other variables, Burdett had found the people who could create a commodity with the same CRA, cheese recognition attributes, but none of the unpredictability of actual food. They were considering inert materials. Still being tested were sterilized straw dust and wood pulp. But could you get the public to eat a food that wasn’t a food at all?

It was Burdett who finessed that question. One ounce of Lucky Cow cheese product would satisfy the daily adult requirements of seven essential vitamins and minerals.

"Which ones?" John asked. "Because calcium, these days, is very popular."

There was a mystery at the center of Lucky Cow. Mary had identified it one night in the midst of an argument and her succinct, biting description stayed with him long after she had left. Why do I think you don’t care? Because the guy you put all of your trust in, the guy you depend on, you haven’t even bothered to get to know. I know him better than you do. Because you’re incurious. People don’t interest you, John Fleming, only things. Accumulated things.

Some of that was not true. They had worked together thirty years, and John actually did know something about Burdett. He was not married. He did not have a girlfriend. Two facts. Both were understandable, given his behavior. Burdett was not a sexual being. There: a third fact. And yet, he was always sympathetic to John’s ongoing problems with Mary and his children and the various women he’d been involved with since she left. Maybe he was willing to listen because he didn’t have a personal life of his own. Maybe he
was a closet something or other. If so, matter closed. John did not need to know any more about it, but now, watching him figure out how to answer the question about Rose, it came to him that perhaps Burdett was simply a virgin.

He’d gained a spot in the middle of the carpet, and as he stood there with his hands in his pockets, a blush moved up his neck. “We went to school together. My family’s dairy farm was next to her family’s dairy farm. Although now she raises goats. When her parents died, I guess she got rid of the cows.”

“She was your girlfriend?”

John saw the blush move up his employee’s cheeks and fill his face with a startlingly healthy-looking glow. He tucked his chin in, glanced down at the carpet, and then up at John. He was wearing the same tan pants and tan jacket he always wore and the redness of his face with the worn and wrinkled outfit made him appear even odder. Several years ago, John had tucked a hefty Christmas bonus into a card with a note, *Go treat yourself*. He’d scribbled the name of “his man” at the only decent gentleman’s clothiers in Erie, where the corporate headquarters of Lucky Cow, because of financial advantages in the state of Pennsylvania, had relocated eleven years ago. But it didn’t change. The same jacket and slacks.

“In high school,” Burdett said. “But her father surprised us in the hayloft and she was sent away to a boarding school.”

“How awful,” John said, seeing everything a little too clearly. Burdett, in his awkward, forthright manner, attempting to ravage the girl next door, and all the little rustles and squeals that come with private acts alerting the murderous father. The pulling out, the terror, the slinking away. It would have wounded him for life. Or maybe there hadn’t been the chance for coitus. That was even worse. To be surprised just when they were working up to it, to have the farmer stop it so violently that the shrunken, guilty prick stayed shrunken and guilty forever. Either way it was sad.

“On your recommendation we’ll try it out. I’ll pick my mother up on Saturday. Any of your family still in the area?”

“All gone.” Burdett’s voice was without emotion, his skin back to its normal whitish tone. That was how a man who grew up milking
the herd in the dark winter mornings before school could ease Lucky Cow away from the dairy to the bean field, and now gently guide it into a territory entirely unconnected to food. His feelings, his morals, his identity, even, were still locked up with the night his first lovemaking had been interrupted.

Having no more to say, Burdett turned and went out the door, the worn heels of his shoes, the baggy backside of his pants making John feel an unwelcome sympathy. He saw how the horror of that night in his friend’s adolescence could explain everything. It would have so paralyzed his body it stayed back there, leaving his mind free to go forward alone, unencumbered by the usual human constraints. But insights of this nature, revealing private things, made John uncomfortable. He placed his fingers on the keyboard. Toneless clicks filled the room and hundreds of exquisitely neutral numbers crossed the computer’s face.

The road was so empty, and the odor of urine rising from his mother’s seat so sharp, that his foot had pressed the accelerator to the floor. The black Mercedes shot through the lush, green landscape like a stone fired with a boy’s sure aim from his slingshot. The sign for Flora and Fauna was tiny, but he saw it just in time and made the turn. Sylvia sat in the car, waiting until John came around to open her door. Then she unbuckled her seatbelt, set her cane on the ground, and very slowly placed one slippered foot next to it. The other followed, whereupon John leaned in and hoisted his mother onto her feet. Real ground. True air. She sniffed it. “I remember this,” she said.

They stood in front of a large farmhouse. The clapboard needed painting; the porch needed repair. There was an old barn and a field next to it with goats.

“What’s that?” Sylvia asked when a shrill birdlike sound startled them both.

“I believe it’s a chicken, they cackle.”

A small, white dog ran towards them, its tail wagging.

“But John, we forgot to get my things.”

“No Mom, everything’s been taken care of. The movers came after we left and packed it all up. I’ve seen to everything.”
“No one asked me. Not once. Do you realize that? And I have to go to the bathroom. Fast.”

But after five hours, Sylvia’s bathroom announcements no longer created the urgency they had at first. “Not a problem. I’m sure someone here can help you.” John took his mother’s arm and pulled her across the rough, uneven surface of the lawn. The screen door was closed, the cool breath of an empty hallway coming through it. John rapped on the doorframe and called, “Hello?”

“You’re here already!” a voice sang from deep in the interior. “Just a second! I’ll be right there!”

“I don’t have those pads or those disposable . . . ,” his mother remarked in a loud voice.

“You’re fine.” At each of the four rest areas, he’d guided her as far as the door of the Women’s and then dutifully waited outside to guide her back. Beyond that, he had no wish for information. “I’m sure she’ll have them.”

Color splashed across the door and a woman with a mass of red hair and a wide, unrehearsed smile pushed it open and stepped onto the porch.

“You’ve arrived, Sylvia Fleming! How very good of you to come on such a beautiful day!” She pulled his mother into her body for a hug. “And John Fleming.”

She let go of Sylvia and was about to put her arms around John when he held out his hand.

“I’ve seen you before,” Sylvia said.

“My name is Rose. I bet you’re tired and thirsty. I bet you’d like to see your room.”

“What we need, I believe, is a bathroom,” John whispered.

“But first, I’ll show you the bathroom and help you get settled.”

“I’ve been here before,” Sylvia announced as Rose, holding her hand, led her down the hallway, moving at the old woman’s pace so patiently there might not have been such things as time or other places to get to.

The floors glimmered and on a shelf he saw a vase of garden flowers.

“I know you.”
"Yes, you do. I'm Rose."
"I was so rushed I didn't bring any pads or any of those disposable . . ."
"Don't you worry. I have everything you need. This is the bathroom. Let me show you."
When the door shut behind them, John found himself alone in the hallway, eavesdropping as they chattered comfortably. "Exactly," Rose was saying. "They go in here."
"I remember. John brought me to your house before, because I remember that they go in here."
"I'm glad it feels familiar. Then you won't have to be nervous about moving in with us."
"Oh no, I'm not nervous. I know you and I know this place. But the Meadows is where I live and I want to get back there because they're going to wonder where I am." She added in a polite tone, "I certainly appreciate all of your trouble and you've been very kind to let me use the bathroom."
Sylvia came out first and pronounced it a very nice place. "I would come here if I didn't already have an apartment somewhere else."
"Good, let me show you the bedroom."
Rose took them to the end of the hallway and when she opened a door, a blaze of yellow light fell across the floorboards. "It gets the afternoon sun so this is where I keep my plants."
"Sammy! Sammy!" a green and red parrot shrieked from its cage.
His mother hobbled up to it and said, "I'm Sylvia. Can you say Sylvia?"
"That's Maurice. He loves Sammy and he's always hoping that when the door opens it's going to be her."
"You'll have to learn to say Sylvia," his mother chided, clucking at Maurice as though she were familiar with the ways one made friends with parrots. "He knows me. See, we've been roommates before."
The bed was covered with a soft blue quilt. There was a closet and a bureau and a comfortable chair with a reading light. Tiers of houseplants were arranged in front of the windows. It would be like sleeping in a terrarium, John thought.
"Dinner's at five thirty. I really must get back."
“Mom, we’ve been through this. You’re done with the Meadows. They kicked you out.”

“What do you mean? They didn’t kick me out. I am a resident.”

“You need more care. And you’ll get more care here. And that’s final. You have to get it into your head that you’ve moved. This is your new place.” He couldn’t help it. Even though he knew very well that she wasn’t being dense on purpose, it had been a long day and all he really wanted was to have everything settled.

“There’s Sammy,” Rose said, slipping her hand into his mother’s.

“Can you see her over there? She comes every afternoon to help me.”

Rose pointed out the window, and in the distance behind the barn, John saw something moving. But it wasn’t a person.

“She’s a senior in high school. She lives nearby and it’s faster coming over the hill,” Rose said.

As they watched, the movement took on definition and though he found it hard to believe at first, he realized as the object approached that it was indeed what it had seemed: a girl with long hair whipping around her was galloping towards them on a brown horse.

“I know I’ve been here before,” Sylvia said in a soft and amazed voice. “I’ve seen that hill. I’ve seen that rider.”

They watched her dismount and lead the horse into the barn.

“Sam does the evening rounds, although right now you’re our only resident.”

“This room is very pretty,” Sylvia said. “I like it. I like all the views. There’s so much to look at.”

John consulted his watch. They’d been there an hour and it was clear that the place would be fine. He clasped his mother’s hand and said, “I have to go now,” his voice thick with a sorrow that had nothing to do with this leave taking.

“Drive carefully.” She was practiced in the routine of goodbye. She waited for the touch of his lips to her forehead and then made the remembered motherly remarks. “Don’t worry about me. And next time, bring Mary.”

The lake was north of the highway. Puffy clouds gathered above it, their undersides illuminated by the evening sun as it lowered itself
over the mirror of water he couldn't see. His mind was empty of the usual “to do” list as the beautiful, black machine that could almost function driverless took him home. He was thinking instead that he might enjoy visiting his mother. He would see Rose and Sammy. Maybe Burdett would come with him and they could look at the goats.

Goat’s milk might bring her back. *You’re nothing but a robot,* she had said to him in the early hours of the day they decided to separate. *You don’t take anything into consideration except money. Money’s the ultimate goal. What about doing good . . . ? What about . . . well, why go on, I won’t waste my breath.*

*Go ahead,* he’d said sarcastically. *Don’t hold back. Now that you’re telling me what you really think, why not unburden yourself?* *Okay, John. Then what about considering the fact that you’ve spent your entire life making a piece of shit and then figuring out a way to fool people so they’ll buy that piece of shit, which is called cheese and really isn’t cheese at all and contains nothing that ever originated in an animal that gives milk. What about that? And now it’s not even going to have any food substance at all. Oh yes, I know. Burdett told me.*

*It has nothing to do with money,* he'd replied with exaggerated patience. *It's follow-through. Follow-through means growth and growth, for your information, happens to be the thing I'm good at.* He'd finished with the brand of humility he'd learned at the therapist’s. *I'm not good at other things.*

Some of that was not true. Follow-through was not simply growth. Growth was aggression and the kind of growth he had created changed the entire cheese landscape. Lucky Cow was not just a company any longer, but a force. Each time he altered the product, it received national attention without even a full-scale advertising campaign, and instead of TMS, targeted market saturation, they had BMS, bulk saturation. Now BMS drove them. Lucky Cow altered packaging or ingredients continuously, simply to gain attention.

The therapist suggested they spend one Saturday a month together and for awhile it seemed to be working. On the Saturday in June, Mary had wanted to explore the lake. They’d found a hidden path that took them to a small cove with a protected beach. The water
was cold, invigorating. “Isn’t it wonderful?” she cried, dancing about with the simple pleasure of nakedness. He got out quickly, found a rock to sit on, and watched her splash in the waves while he rubbed himself dry with his shirt. When she came out, rinsed and glistening, it seemed each wanted the other equally. He called to her. There was a stink of something on the wind, from another cove, probably. He put it out of his mind and together, following the lead of their bodies, they dropped down to the sand. But then he felt insects biting his legs, tiny pinpricks of pain, over and over. Sand fleas. He slapped them away, ignored their repeated assaults, until he couldn’t. When he stopped, it was too abrupt, but how could he help it?

Back in the car, they followed the curve of the lake. Mary’s eyes were wet, her nose was watering, and he couldn’t think of the right thing to say.

The road ended in front of an old hotel. It was three stories high with a gingerbread porch cantilevered over the rocks, painted in old-fashioned colors. The tables were filled with noisy diners. They were dressed as though it were Sunday, the women in jewelry and dresses, the men in jackets and ties. Waitresses walked among them, balancing platters heaped with some kind of sea creature. They ordered it too. Smelt. The breaded, crispy, tiny fish came with a dipping sauce. Everyone else ate with forks, but Mary was famished. She picked them up with her fingers, dozens disappearing into her mouth, while he nibbled carefully, preferring the beer and the celery to creatures that had been dragged from the oily bottom of a polluted lake.

He knew exactly what his mistakes were. Hadn’t they talked about it forever? But no amount of counseling could alter the fact that an army of small, stinging insects had attacked his legs and not hers.

The phone rang. “How’d it go?” the familiar voice asked.

John was tempted to hedge a bit just out of habit. But why? Burdett was his friend. “It’s a nice place. I think she’ll get good care.”

“Great.” Burdett paused, taking a moment before revealing the real reason for the call. “What did you think of Rose?”

“Rose is remarkable. She’s everything you said. It’ll be a nice change from the Meadows. My God, now I realize what a horror that place was.”
“Do you think . . . ,” but Burdett hesitated and John could see him casting his eyes downwards. “Well, would it be all right, John, if I go there once to visit your mother? Do you think she’ll remember me?”

“Absolutely. She’ll be happy to see you. I guarantee it.”

“Good. I think I’d like to do that. It would give me a chance to say hello to Rose.”

“I’m getting into traffic,” John said, understanding as soon as the opportunity had passed that he should have suggested they go there together.

But Burdett, who was used to nonengagement, simply went on. “Okay, just listen. The tests are done. We know what to use. It’s not straw dust; it’s not wood pulp. Too much texture. Get this. It’s water. Plain, ordinary water. With seven essential vitamins and minerals, plus the oils and coagulants and stabilizers and flavorings. You know, the list.”

Water, John thought, coming into the city, weaving the Mercedes through the ribbons of traffic and then braking suddenly when the line slowed. On a beautiful summer day when he had, with actual eyes, seen a girl galloping her horse across an actual field, water, that plain and forthright, almost spiritual substance, seemed exactly right.
They dazzle me still, those teenagers of the fifties slow-skating arm in arm
Under the high lights that made the rest of the park look darker
The speakers on the wired poles sing to them
They are in love with the wordless *ahs* and *oohs*
The earnest falsetto, the bass man's pledge over the bridge
Their blade strokes slight and silent, their feet barely move
Scarves dangle from their shoulders, there are pom-poms above her ears
Their unimaginable secrets make white puffs near their faces
Brief as the glances when their eyes meet
They circle the rink slowly as the record circles its hole
And glide for a while still after it's over

At home they mope: slumped, awkward, half-rebellious
Retreating to their narrow rooms and radios
They hear Little Richard, or Pat Boone covering Little Richard, on WTMJ
And take heart in the nonsense shouts, the drum set and yipping sax
Surely something will happen to them, this life in the bland debris of midcentury can't last
Cars, graduation, a first job at Kresge's or the canning plant
Maybe college, or eighteen months in Okinawa by a lonely sea
There will be room in the latest expansions when he gets back
Someone is planning a tract house for them on the edge of town
Schools multiply, the two-tone sedans they will want are already growing fins
But for now they have letter sweaters and pink change purses, and
the hits keep coming

Winters are long here, the rink stays open from Thanksgiving
through Easter
Its scratched glassy circle is a slow clock
Night after night they flicker between boredom and exquisite desire
Everyone says they’re the start of something, but they aren’t enough
They have no brothers and sisters, or have forgotten them
He enters into the project of his jalopy, dreaming of summer
There will be drives to the little towns nearby, evenings along the
lake
They know they can get out of it all but why would they want to
Under her wool coat she is wearing a small pin shaped like a wood
chip with his name on it
They will cling to each other because the song is ending and there
are still good jobs in the factory
They will marry because love, oh love, swept them into the dark
Soaped, dripping from ears to ankles, 
scarred from throat to sternum, 
like a seam fusing the earth’s plates, 
he stands in the locker room of the YMCA 
and proclaims the weather in expletives, 
scorns the bosomy widows in their flowery caps.

Dried, shaved and talc’d, he grooms 
his scalp, shakes out socks and underwear, 
and then like the thing he most isn’t 
begins to sing: not songs, not tunes, 
but the here and now fragments of fragments, 
the siss and sizz of dentures, the chaff

and pifflle of lips that almost whistle, 
his arms flapping and flicking, throat 
a wattle, feet claws. And what joy 
in his strut, what angry magnificence 
in his cherry-headed pud, red 
as a thermometer’s bulb in his briary groin.
Not a wad or pearly spurt, not a sprinkling
of milky seed or a filmy glaze,

but something like a shard of astral matter
suspended in outer space, a speck dividing

emptiness from emptiness, wedge-headed,
streaking through the sky, its tail shedding

chunks of icy gas too small to see—,
and if I hadn't asked how would I have known

that framed above her desk was a photo,
of her former boyfriend's sperm,

magnified by an electron microscope,
a single furious specimen escaped from its ejaculate.
INCHWORM

Leslie Adrienne Miller

Such a trouble, Desire. Hers, freighted with disconsolate wish and waft of firsts, frog, dark puddings, Endust, years ago clover, wet clutch of the church nursery, and the fat scallops of wool carpets dragging their burn behind her elbows, mother cool and orthodox as dining room wainscoting. Then His, bike oil stripes, garage metals and must, gold seams of strap sweat, brother’s strange creaminess, and the shining vinyl of the sisters’ stack of 45s warming under needle drag, gauze of their leaked eggs, father’s hard blue, and mother’s need clapped like bare legs around them all.

Finally this Child in the viscous light of summer seed drift, hot boy breath closing in on the tiny worm arcing green in the palm of the girl who found it. He watching her watch the arc and inch, arc and inch. So he’ll want tomorrow to try with his own spine and upending, to know not only the worm, but the hand of the girl and what it was like to be in it ever and enter, to mash, wear and eat, to inhabit, unravel, inhibit and so delicately, very greenly and fragrantly unlimit.
Yes, worry the word hard, the phrase, the color,  
the semantic family's breaks and fissures,  
know that every bride to thought is doomed  
to less than hope demanded. Not the Word,  
only one letter short of All, but the little one  
that wore its bravado even in utero, from a time  
less in love with future as a cause, when utterance  
was barely dressed and smelled of grass,  
when there were fewer paths behind,  
or so it seemed to a girl with one thin shelf  
of books, none of them leading backwards yet,  
down sturdy canonical cobble that had brought us  
so far we forgot there was ever a way.  
Through enormous catalogues of toils, lost  
to a reliable grunt and root against the rich mire  
of surface. Lost registers of local fish and rodents,  
tools, vehicles and skiffs, a quantity of sunlights,  
meadows, myths, weapons, kinds of wound,  
lost before we ever got them to the tongue's  
small unfastening of a sound we'll never learn  
to hear. Like a girl, wild for the right silence,  
who clamps the fiddle under her chin,  
and fills her jaw with bees, countless,  
precise, every one a perfect possibility  
turning in its airy grave.
Dee's cheeseburgers were the best. Deeburgers they were called. Old man Dee stood in the back of the vast drive-in restaurant kitchen smashing them in his hands and frying them up and his crew squirted on the mustard and ketchup and somebody dealt on three dill pickle chips and wrapped it in yellow paper and slid it across the window counter to you for only twenty-four cents, total, which was good reason to eat four or five after every home game, which I did, believe me, which I did. After you ate each one, you got the great pleasure of crumpling that crisp greasy paper into a ball in your fist, and there were guys on our team who could squeeze it into a pill.

I was standing at the take-out window with our left tackle, Liam Polad, taking delivery on my white paper bag of Deeburgers along with the gorgeous giant vanilla shake, when Eddie Tooner did his Coke walk which always stopped the whole crowd on the chilly terrace in front of Dee's, everyone looking up from the red picnic tables, all these kids gathered after the game, and they'd watch Eddie start across the parking lot with the six large Cokes in the paper tray and he would start to wander and say Oh oh oh oh, like that and lose his balance, rushing this way and then over by somebody's car and at the last minute when he saved the whole thing, he would suddenly stumble, something so good he must have gone to school for it, and he lurched, throwing the whole tray, and six twenty-cent Cokes, up into the October night in a wild arc, and when it all splashed and crashed to the pavement, he turned his face to all of us, and you'd swear, he was about to cry. It was always funny and it was very funny the night I'm talking about, the night I got a girl in my car.

I heard Jake Danforth call out to Eddie, “It's okay, buddy. I'll buy you a Coke.” He was across the parking lot with Egster and Roman
sitting on the front of Roman’s Buick like kings the way they did after every home game, smoking cigarettes. It was odd to look over at them, our entire backfield smoked. Kids at the edge of town, at the edge of the dark, smoking. Every time I looked over at those three giants in their beautiful letter jackets, it felt like they were saying, It doesn’t last long. Any of this. It’ll be gone soon.

But it felt very good, and completely righteous to have my warm, soft bag of five cheeseburgers and my shake in my hand, and I could feel the water in my hair freezing. We had beaten Hillcrest twenty-one to nothing and showered and driven over to Dee’s with wet hair, as always; and it’s like a badge of honor or something, especially when Laurie Davis or June Balfour tests it with her fingers to see if your hair is frozen yet. Nobody had put their hands in my hair, I mean, but I’d seen it.

There was an open table, so Liam and I hauled our food and set up to eat. Dee’s was always the first stop after games, everybody feeding and finding out where the party would be, what the options were, what was happening.

“Your leg okay?” Liam asked me. In the fourth quarter, their defensive end got pissed and kicked me when we got up from the pile, driving his foot in behind my knee where I could feel it glowing now.

“Yeah,” I said, rubbing the place. “It’s okay.”

“Coach Grimmel said to check if it’s bleeding. See if your leg is blue.”

“It’s not bleeding.” The truth was my leg hurt, ached a little. I hadn’t felt it until I sat down and now it burned a little.

“Let me see.”

“Polad. I’m not pulling my pants down right here.”

He stood up, a big tackle, two hundred sixty pounds. He’d picked me up before. He’d picked everybody up. That’s who he was: the guy in high school who at one time or another lifts every other person in the school off the earth.

“Don’t, Liam.” I said. And then I said: “Please.” And then I said, “Please, Liam.”

“Grimmel said to make sure it’s not bleeding.”
The trainer had said that. He'd thumbed the soft part behind my knee hard and we'd watched the growing blue bruise disappear for a minute. It's one thing to stand there in a towel with the trainer in the locker room, and it's another to be hoisted aloft in front of your classmates after the game and have him threaten to show everybody at Dee's your rear end.

"Okay, okay," I told him, standing up quickly before he could lift me up, tip me upside down and take my pants off. "Come on."

I led him over between my car and Jake's Jeep and I quickly dropped my khakis and turned so my backside was in the light. Liam Polad was examining my leg.

"Well?"

"It's blue. There's a lot of blue."

I had my pants back up and was at the buckle when I heard the one voice in the school I knew by heart, and that is the right way to say how I knew her voice, because everything about Shirley Bonner registered in my heart, and though I'll admit that here, I had spent a year, maybe two, okay three really, keeping my real feelings for Shirley Bonner repressed, suppressed, depressed and unexpressed, because she was the known girlfriend and sidekick of Jake Danforth, the smoking quarterback, a guy who was not to be messed with, messed with or messed with.

He was a good quarterback, but he was also the fastest runner in the school, and he ran like a cat, and he was the toughest guy any of us knew. I'd seen him in a fistfight the day school started, a fight over a curse word. Jim Ayton had called him a name because of some kind of parking dispute, and they'd fought bare fisted in the parking lot until Ayton was bloody to his belt. Jake had gotten blood on the cuffs of his shirt and he still wore that shirt sometimes to school and would hold the sleeves up with their unmistakable stains, and he'd grin to go with it, and so we all fell in line.

"Mickey Jensen, what are you doing over here?" she laughed and took the leather sleeve of my letter jacket.

"Yeah, dude," Liam said. "Put your pants on, you perve."

"Nothing," I started to explain. I was actually going to explain about being kicked, the bruise, what trainer Grimmel had said, but
Ron Carlson

she just interrupted me.

“You are taking me to the Hot Shoppes,” Shirley Bonner said. “I am in your custody.”

Liam said, “Your leg is blue.” He held out his huge hand. “This big. You’re bleeding in there. Check it in a while. I’m going back to my cheeseburgers.”

I looked him in the face and knew I hadn’t heard what he had said. I wanted to say to him, “Shirley Bonner is talking to me. Did you hear that? She said my name and is talking to me.” But I turned and she was still there and I said to her, “Isn’t Jake going?”

“Jake who?” she said. “You can forget that athlete. I’m with you. Can you take me to the Hot Shoppes?”

It was tough standing there and I knew I was in trouble because I’d forgotten all about my cheeseburgers and my vanilla shake. My heart was totally overloaded. I had stared at her every day in the two classes we shared, American History and Algebra II, and I had thought about her and about carrying her books, carrying her books anywhere, carrying her books with Lewis and Clark or on the Santa Fe Trail, or talking to her waiting in the line in the cafeteria, and now there was no line and she still had a hold of my letter jacket and I felt something else which might as well have been fifty thousand volts entering my forehead as she put her fingers up in my cold hair and said, “You’re about froze. It’s cold out here. Let’s get going.”

I wouldn’t have been able to walk across the parking lot if she hadn’t touched my head. Now I was as fearless and crazy as a person gets, and with her arm still on mine, I led her across Dee’s parking lot and I opened the passenger door of my old Chevrolet and watched her get in and as I closed the door I looked over the frosty top of the car at Jake and his buddies, and they were all turned and witnessing every move I made so that I could pay for everything later. As I walked around the car, I wondered, when the time came, how much of my blood would be on Jake’s shirt.

But. I started the car and drove out of that place, and as I did I saw Liam wave his hand and reach with the other for my bag of cheeseburgers. He was going to have a bona fide feast.

“Burrr,” Shirley Bonner said. “Turn on the heater, Mickey, or we’ll
perish." She used this moment to slide into the middle of the old seat and her arm came up and I don't know whether her hand was on my shoulder or not, and I didn't know how to look.

"The hospital girls are going to be at the Hot Shoppes," she said. "The girls from Viewmont and East who are candy stripers with me at Good Samaritan. You'll like them," she said.

Now, we pulled off of Congress Street onto North Minton Way and the night was just a cold city night, no longer Friday after the game with the gang. I could feel the gravity shift. We were on our own now, out of orbit, headed somewhere. Shirley sat knees up on the seat in her Spirit Skirt, the green and gray plaid all the girl boosters wear. They were longer skirts than the cheerleaders', and to a guy like me, they looked wonderful and intimidating.

"Good," she said, though her voice was a little funny, like an actress. "Now we're okay. Now we're going."

I realized I would have to say something next. I was looking as hard as I could at all the joints on North Minton Way, places I'd seen twenty thousand times, but I stared at them now as if they were playing a big role in my important thinking, a panorama of ideas. The truth was that I'd never been alone with a girl in my car. I'd had three girls early in the fall, when one of the band vans broke down and I took Cherise Dayman and Clare and Donna Li and their clarinets across town to River Memorial for a concert they were having, and right now I was astonished at how much difference there was between having three girls and their musical instruments in the car and one girl in her booster skirt, at night, going who knows where.

I was about to say something, or groan or just start saying Yep yep yep, but I didn't have to. Shirley spoke again. I could feel her fingers on the cap of my shoulder as she talked, little touches which emphasized each word: "Did you ever just want to do something wild?"

"Oh yeah," I said. I said it instantly. I heard myself say "Oh yeah," as if I was just as sure as I could be that I had so many times wanted to do something wild, when in fact I had not. But I forgave myself the remark, because I immediately considered what it would have been like to tell the truth. I could not have said, *Oh no, I really*
haven’t wanted to do anything wild, ever. Sometimes at night I’ll want ice cream, and I’ve biked to the store sometimes after nine p.m. along the dark streets to get a little carton of chocolate or the cherry chocolate, but as for something wild or untamed or feral or like that, no not really, not ever . . .

Now I was saying, “Yep yep yep.”

And I found out it was a good thing to say, because she said, “I know.” Out of my peripheral vision I could see her nodding.

Then Shirley began jumping around on her knees on the seat, this way and that, scaring me and suddenly she rolled down her window and the cold night air gushed into the car and she put her face out there like a dog and she was making some noises, like moaning or yelling, not words, and I guess this is what she meant by something wild. When I had the three musicians and their clarinets, we hadn’t rolled the windows down at all, even though it had been a little warm that afternoon. I hadn’t expected them to be wild. I’d known the Li sisters since grade school and wildness was not going to be the way for them.

“Ooosh!” Shirley said, coming back into the car fully and rolling up the window. “That’s better. That’s living!” Her face was striped red and white from the cold. “I wonder if Jake is driving around with his face in the wind. What do you think, Mickey, is Jake out being wild?”

“I don’t think Jake is riding around with his head out the window,” I said. I knew for a high-school fact that if Jake was driving around it would be to make other kids put their heads out the window. One time he drove with Larry Newman on the front fender of his Jeep all the way down Capler Hill and about froze him good. I think some of Larry’s fingers turned white.

“It’s okay if you want to go back and find Jake,” I said. This was the turning point in my relationship with girls. I heard it and I knew that I wanted her to land on her feet someways away from me. I went on, “He’s probably gone up to Fendall’s with everybody.” Fendall had open house on game nights. His parents were home, but it was always a good time, and they had more big dishes of salted nuts than I’d ever seen. I was hungry from leaving my cheeseburgers.
“Jake!” she said. “Been there. Done that,” she said. “Right,” she said. “Right, Mickey?”

“I don’t know,” I said. This was a long time ago and people didn’t say, Been there, done that. She was the first person I’d heard say it and it sounded crude.

“Jake’s on his total own. We have been there. We have had enough of Jake Danforth. Jake Jake Jake.”

I turned into Temple Conoco and did a slow U-turn under the lights back onto North Minton. I turned the car around. Shirley was still going. “Mr. Jake has his own life to live, I say. And I have my life to live; that is so obvious that it hurts to say it. And my life is so wide open and unbelievably interesting that I can’t even tell you. I’ll probably be captain of volleyball next season and that is a demanding role for anybody, but it’s what I do, you know, Mickey. I mean I have plans.”

I just drove. I was young and stupid but I could feel the sadness. Any animal can feel sadness. Now all of North Minton looked different, normal again, but I knew this girl in my car was not going to stop talking at all. She’d gone on from Jake to Mr. Gary’s Algebra II class where she was about to earn the first chair, the only girl this year, and then she started in telling me about her research paper for Mrs. Tollstrup and how much she loved the great Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore, who could embellish any small moment with a light and beauty far beyond typical sensitivities. Tagore was spiritual and the essence of the artist. Did I know that the butterfly only lived a few short hours, but that it was enough?

Seriously, when she said that, she cried it out: “The butterfly only lives a few short hours but it is enough. Enough. Enough. Enough!” She was on her knees pounding the back of the car seat, nothing the three clarinetists did, and I think she was crying a little. Evidently, this butterfly was in one of the great poet’s poems.

I didn’t know about her behavior. I didn’t know if the butterfly only lives a few hours and it is enough. It didn’t sound like enough. But I drove all the way back up North Minton to Dee’s and then past Dee’s once, long enough to see that there was still a few guys there. I saw Jake’s Jeep and I saw him and Roman sitting with Liam.
Polad. I pulled in and parked where Eddie Tooner had thrown the Cokes.

Shirley had stopped talking and had been pulling threads out of her spirit skirt for a few blocks, and now she looked up and said, “Thanks, Mickey. I’ll see you in school.”

She got out and wrapped her jacket up around her. It had a sash and she took a long time securing it and then walking over to where Jake was. I got out and pointed at Liam. My burgers were long gone, but I still had four bucks in my pocket, and that would just have to be enough.
The year no one was here and no one came
I had candy left over—Baby Ruths,
Peanut Butter Cups, Blow Pops—more candy
than one soul could consume. My own error
of judgment of course, my last-minute run
to the store so no child come to my door
would be turned away, empty-handed witch
or devil, werewolf or fairy princess.
I had, I believed, treats and tricks enough.
I had screwed in the red bulbs and blue bulbs,
hung up the phosphorescent skeleton,
set my fright mask by the door, planned the moan
they would never forget, not years later
after Halloween seemed child’s play, candy
and costumes, nothing more . . . except perhaps
that house with weird lights and music. How sad
the early hours passed without one spook
standing on my stoop, mother right behind
with a flashlight, a frown, her suspicions.
How terrified I grew that this night too
might pass into the vast endless night, ghost
of a ghost, one more lost soul wandering
beyond my reach. Had not souls enough gone
off on their own journeys? Day of the Dead—
I was prepared to feed each one, but none
bothered until I was almost past hope,
ready to turn out the lights and turn in,
when a faint knock opened my door upon
four little children: two clowns, a rabbit,
an Asian ballerina I frightened
with all my heart, with some memorable
terrifying gesture that I followed
with sweets, in the way life deals us our dreams.
THE LAST RIVER

Michael Pettit

Why did it come at dawn, dream so haunting
it won’t fade for days now it’s here inside?

The last river should come at dusk, ablaze
with shreds of sunlight, aquifers spilling

upward from deep lightless layers of earth
toward riffles, pools, willows, birdsong, sky.

Back some rough mountain road lost in timber,
down a canyon trail, final miles trackless,

the last river should call me with distant
suspirations, indecipherable

but audible long before I arrive
at its banks, out of breath, my heart pounding

in love and fear for what I might find there,
that last river left to me, filled with light.

I should stand watching, long and patiently,
as water spills along the freestone bed,

pooling at the bends, surface slick and calm,
threaded with white foam, mayflies, small caddis
lifting from lambent red, gold, and blue film, 
tROUT rising, all things, it seems, ascending.

I should hear an owl hoot, and mourning doves, 
a woodpecker hammering a dead tree.

I should hear, above, a river of wind 
in the high pines and blue spruce, rushing—where?

I should not ask. I should forget the sea, 
rivER slow then lost in vast salt waters.

I should abide here, silent, listening, 
breathing the crisp rich air, its sharp sweet sap.

No one here. I should reach the last river 
alone, without promise, without litter.

I should find fiddlehead ferns unfurling, 
tracks in soft black mud, small white bones, nothing.

I should expect the night to come to pass 
slow, cold, fitful, attended by strange dreams,
sounds of animals visiting the stream, 
touching their soft lips to the quick current,
splashing off fast when they first catch my scent, 
odd funk stinging their dark frightened bright eyes.

I should light a fire by the last river, 
my mate for the night, an ember at dawn,

which should come blue and gold, so beautiful 
I know no better day will break for me.
Yet the last river will not make me sad.
The last river will last me forever,

and I will welcome it, it will welcome me
as I strip and step in, slowly, and sure.
I dream my mother alive again after the photograph,  
half sky, half water, her figure walking away,  
and further out to sea a striped speedboat  
with its single occupant flinging its wake, white, past.

After the photograph, I dream my mother here, back.  
Half sky, half sea, and the memories of so many rivers  
that names pile up—Satsop, Puyallup, Rogue—like surf.

A boat veered long ago at Lake Chelan, hitting her.  
The lawyers sued, a settlement looked for on a wave.  
Always she preferred saltwater—its buoyant, curative state.  
Why in the photograph does a speedboat kick past?

It goes cutting through deeper water—see the drop-off falling away?  
It poses no danger to the woman standing waist deep in water.  
The boat is striped, water lies in stripes, shallow, deep.

I dream my mother alive again after the photograph.  
Struck by the boat, she lay bleeding in water. No danger now.  
If a settlement came, there would be money, money deep  
as water. In the photograph, she walks into the sea.

When I dream her back, still she goes stepping into water.  
I want to keep her from my fears at horizon’s edge,  
the speedboat, an injured woman down, bleeding in water.
I dream my mother alive again after the photograph, saying whatever words I can to lure her from the sea, vowing to love her better next time, this time, to accept settlement or money, water, the speedboat tearing past.

And if the money never flooded in, the lawyer’s bills all due in cash, if the boat’s driver was just a boy, never found at fault, did a woman still lie down, bleeding in water?

If I had known how long she would be gone, whether she joined the ones she loved, or not—but the water lay in stripes, muddy not clear, if a long time meant forever. After the photograph I could not catch my breath,

a secret now coming true that had lain buried in the sea, something about a woman stepping in time into water, the one watching from shore tasting salt on her lips.
Saying the words *My father died*
for the first time, I felt my face
cremple like a creek bed undermined
by rushing water, the giving way
almost causing a sob to escape
in front of strangers at the airport
ticket counter where gray carpet
matched January skies. I wanted
to reach Seattle to hold him one
last time but had missed, by twelve hours,
my chance. Later, the funeral director's face
contorted when I asked if could I see my father
before the embalming, the makeup
and clothes. *You don't want to see him
like that,* she said. Mother and I stood
together at the closet of his beautiful suits—
not expensive cashmere jackets but frayed
elbows and cuffs, neat slacks, none
recently worn but still fragrant
with his skin, underarms, hair.
Together we picked out a pale yellow
Oxford shirt, jacket and pants the rich
brown of his hair long ago, forgetting socks,
derwear. Leaning over the casket
to kiss him goodbye, I felt the chilly
metal box pillowed inside with silk—
thinking how he lay so distinguished
there either with no underwear
or wearing some other man's garment
into the grave. My father once wore handsome boxers, paisley, a small print—tan, an olive green, and as a young girl I would fold them, pet them almost, dreaming of days ahead when I would know all the great and profound mysteries.
In cinematography it’s called *the magic hour*, last full hour of the day, hour before night swallows everything in its ravenous mouth, hour when the light is warm, golden, like bells pealing from St. Paul’s, and the director has maybe twenty minutes to send cameramen and grips scurrying to set up the shot, to call the beautiful actors from their trailers, where maybe they are watching soaps or napping or maybe making love, having fallen into their roles that completely, so he can shoot the scene where the former lovers meet by chance in the little park along the Thames, he, walking his dog, she, hurrying head down from an exhibition at the Tate, and when they see each other after all these years, their fate is irrevocable. Do you think there was only one magic hour like that in your life, one time you could have chosen happiness and failed? Don’t kid yourself.

There were many, the way if the scene’s not right this time, the director knows there will surely be other days, other magic hours when the light lets down its curtain of gauze over the stones, pink-streaked, blue. But you, you seemed to miss them all.

Think of the thousands, no, millions of choices in your life, all your sins of omission and commission, the way you hoarded pieces of yourself, little tarnished silver trinkets, as though
they were irreplaceable gold coins, the handsome Japanese man you first saw at just such an hour sitting on the mansion's terrace and the light spread its wings and both of you were lifted up, a man who loved you so devotedly his devotion came to seem too much and not enough, so that you sent him away forever. Think of the husband you betrayed, the children, the forgiveness you neither sought nor gave, the regret that follows you, relentlessly, to your grave.
MY FATHER LOOKS DOWN ON ME
Susan Wood

He says he's up there on the ledge and points toward the ceiling where the television is soldered to the wall, but the TV's on the floor, he says, and the table pulled across his hospital bed tilts like the Alps so that everything—pitcher, glass, box of Kleenex—will slide off if I don't catch it. Of course, he wants me to catch him, too, but I don't understand and keep insisting he's not on the ledge, the TV's not on the floor, etc., and he just gets madder and madder, the sound of anger from my childhood, wasps buzzing and whirring, a sound that builds and builds until they're outside the nest swirling around my head like a fierce, black cloud and I have nowhere to run, not like the anger that hides inside, a naughty child afraid to come out and be punished. "I'm not stupid!" my father shouts—he always says that, he thinks I think that. I keep telling him I don't.

He's ninety now, and looks it, finally—chicken neck, mouth open when he sleeps so that he looks dead and I have to stare hard every time I come into the room to see if he's breathing. Sometimes I think he'll never die, that maybe he's immortal. It's true that all his life he's played by the rules, such a good boy
he wouldn't even change seats with me
on the airplane, even though he wanted to
sit on the aisle because—as he'll tell anyone—
he has a "prostrate" problem—he couldn't move,
he said, because the airline had him
on the list as 8B so he had to stay there.
I tried to tell him no one cared, that people change
all the time, but he just looked at me
with that stubborn, no-point-arguing face
like there's a frozen tundra inside him. I think
he's just furious because he's played by these rules
and what is he supposed to do now, when there's only
one rule and that's death? He's scared of dying.
Sometimes he weeps and says he's had a good life,
that God will take care of him—personally,
he means, like the time he said God made his car
break down in front of a gas station
rather than late at night on some lonely road.
It seems like if you believed that, you wouldn't
be afraid of dying. And then I remember
what the nurse said. "It's the anesthesia,"
I tell him. "That's what's making you see things
like that, making you think you're up there
on the ledge." But he just looks at me,
a sullen, swelled-up glare, like I'm the parent,
his parent, about to send him out again
to find his father's whiskey bottles
hidden in the barn. All my life
I've known that look, it's even tucked away
in the family Bible, in sepia, circa 1919.
It must've been a special occasion,
his birthday, maybe. Against a backdrop of palms,
he's six, dressed as a WWI doughboy, small arms
closed like a barricade across the mine field of his body.
His eyes are flinty slits, his lower lip's
a precipice. He should just jump.
The year Uncle Maris died and Father had to bury him went on record as the rainiest we'd ever had. Through that autumn and into winter, rain fell in biblical proportions and the Aiviekste rose steadily, covering the rocky shoals and flooding the marshy banks. Widow Snoskovkis ran out of her antidepressants and dyed her hair lavender and three of Mr. Arijisnikov's goats went barking mad, all of which is now a matter of public record. We chalked it up to the swollen skies which drove the men to drink and attendance at the International Women's Temperance Society to swell. Mother, acting president of the Society for three years running, couldn't help feeling that at last all of her efforts were paying off: the ladies in town were finally taking the matter of drinking, or at least her, seriously. But her sense of satisfaction was short lived as that winter Father set out to make himself chief of the town drunks. I knew it was on account of Uncle dying and because of what the rain and the river were doing to Father's cemetery: huge patches of ground had washed into the river mere meters behind the final resting place of the most famous horse in Latvia—decorated twice for acts of heroism during the First Great War. Mercifully, Father had the incredible foresight to not bury anybody else back there, but still, the idea that the river might slowly carry off our dead was unsettling.

And we had other problems. Winter was in the thick and what luck we'd had with mushrooming and rabbit hunting had run out. Even though Mother took an extra cleaning job in Rezekne, spending even longer hours on her hands and knees, and Father dug fresh holes like mad to accommodate a sudden spate of ill-timed deaths, we still felt the pinch. I had not done as well as I had hoped to on the placement tests at school and now going to university was out of the question. After graduation, I would go to technical school. But until
then my job after school and on weekends was to catch as many fish as I could and preserve them any way I knew how.

One Saturday I lugged our plastic washtub down the back steps. Inside the tub I'd put Rudy's pole and my own bottle lines, strings with hooks wound around empty bottles. Mother had dropped hints night and day that since it was January she wanted to start the new year off right, that is, she wanted to eat the meat of an eel, the bigger the better because for one day in her life she wanted abundance. And because it was for Mother whose aspirations in life and complaints were few, and because I wanted to prove I was a dutiful daughter, on this day when the sky and the road were a single muddy wash, I set off for the river.

As I neared it I stepped carefully through the tall grass. Not so very long ago the Soviets had controlled this river and no one was allowed to fish without a special pass, and sometimes not even then, because Game Warden Shukin never knew if the top brass from Moscow might decide to drop in for a sudden fishing expedition. In those days, Game Warden Shukin patrolled the river with Schnell, a deep-chested Alsatian with very healthy teeth. If Shukin saw a poacher he issued one warning from the whistle and after that, Schnell was let loose.

Almost all the men in town had suffered the attentions of Schnell, who had been trained to attack ethnic Latvians with particular vigor. Father, too, had been bitten, even limped a little on cold days now because of it. Only Mr. Ilmyen, our neighbor from across the road, had escaped Schnell. It was a cause of some bitterness between Father and Mr. Ilmyen, as Father and Mr. Ilmyen had been poaching partners. If either of them spotted Shukin, they were to caw like a crow. But one night Shukin surprised Mr. Ilmyen, who trembled and shook and forgot to sing out. Then Shukin spotted Father with a pole in his hand and a pile of bream at his feet. Even though Father was caught and knew it, he ran. The whistle shrieked and Schnell tore through the bushes and into Father.

Later, after Shukin pried Schnell off of Father's leg, Father spent a long night in our old town hall, which doubled in those days as a movie theater and, when the situation called for it, a part-time jail. For years Mr. Ilmyen tried to make up for this small betrayal, seeing
to it that Father got enough apple brandy ("How cheap!" Mother proclaimed) on the weekends and also seeing to it that Father got home safely afterwards. For all this, there was still something of a taint associated with Mr. Ilmyen and whenever his name was mentioned Father rubbed at his shin and muttered: "That dog!" in such a way that it wasn’t entirely clear to whom Father referred: Schnell or Mr. Ilmyen.

But two years had passed since Father dug the hole that held Schnell and a full four years since the Soviet Union had fallen—collapsed beneath the weight of its many internal contradictions, Rudy explained the last time he visited on holiday. What it meant to me was that I didn’t have fear of a game warden or a dog. But I knew that it was best not to broadcast where you were hunting or fishing, because even now the wrong people could hear about it and make trouble in a dozen different ways. For this reason, on the river it was every angler for him- or herself, staking claims to prize fishing spots, quietly baiting lines and trap nets in a bid to make up for lost time and reclaim what had, for so long, been kept from us.

As I crept through the rushes I spied Mr. Arijisnikov and Mr. Lee exchanging obscene hand signals, silently taunting each other. Downriver from them was Stanka, wearing a straw duck on her head and cooing softly at a wad of rushes. I turned upriver for the quieter glides and for the snag made of two fallen birches—Mr. Ilmyen’s favorite place to fish for tired eel. As it was late Saturday afternoon, technically still the Sabbath, I didn’t think he’d mind.

I baited both lines with chicken innards. The one I cast midstream where the carp and bream and the occasional zander lurked. I buried the pole’s end into the mud, then set the tiny bell. The other line I cast from my bottle and watched how it sliced into the water and glided a bit toward the snag. And then I waited. Few people realize how very thoughtful and discerning eel are and how much time it takes to catch them. But I never minded long waits. Anything worthwhile in this life, Father said many times to Rudy and me, required a glacial patience. And I loved this river. I told myself that it spoke to me in a language only I could hear. I told myself that because I understood the river, it understood me.
And then the line on the bottle went tight. I peered at the water and twisted the bottle, slowly bringing up line until I saw the bright and angry yellow eyes of the largest eel I'd ever hooked. I brought up a little more line until the eel was at the shallows, churning the water with his strong body. That's when I recognized this eel as the magical eel whose meat brings wisdom and chancy luck, depending on who catches and eats him. We'd gone head to hand once before, this eel and I, but he'd gotten the better of me that day and the way he thrashed in the muddy shallows convinced me that he was sure he could outmuscle and outsmart me this time as well.

I bent and scooped him to my chest. Before he had a chance to curl and whip me in the face or bite my hand, familiar tactics each, I pitched the eel to the ground and held him on his back. Some people think it's cruel to handle such a magnificent creature with brute force, but as some creatures understand force much quicker than kindness, I felt only a little sorry. And when the eel went limp I placed him in Mother's washtub full of rainwater, where I knew he'd eventually revive.

Just then Rudy's pole bell sang out. Another fish—and in such a short time! I picked up the pole and jerked on the line hard to set the hook. A large fish, I thought, because it bucked and fought, nearly yanking the pole from my hands. I stepped on a rock to get better leverage and that was my mistake. My feet slid from under me and I fell into the river. I splashed and flailed, trying to gain my footing, but my boots were filling up fast and I could feel the water pulling me down. Even worse, Rudy's pole spiraled away from me, carried off by the fish who was hooked, but free. I made one last desperate reach for the pole and that's when I felt myself going under.

"Here!" A man's voice called. "Grab this!" The end of a long birch pole nudged my elbow and I hung on tight. As I kicked and chuffed, I kept my eyes fixed on the pair of hands hauling me in. At the shallows one hand gripped my elbow while the other hooked my ribs and then I was on the bank, coughing up river water and taking stock of my rescuer. Not Mr. Lee. Not Mr. Arijisnikov, but a stranger, taller than our Rudy and almost as broad in the shoulder. He had gotten wet past the waist, and all on my account. But with the way
he calmly stamped his feet and wrung the water from his sleeves, he acted as if he were at home on the river and hauling out girls was the most natural thing in the world for him to do.

He turned to me and grimaced. “You know what they say about a river,” he said, taking off his coat and draping it around my shoulders.

“No, what?” I studied his eyes trying to decide if they were bluish gray, or perhaps grayish blue.

“Never believe, never trust, never ask.”

It was a very Russian expression, but whoever he was, this fellow didn’t look Russian. For one thing he had incredible ears, built of the most marvelous construction. That is, they were enormous and jutted from the side of his head, a little like the fins of a fish. A beautiful sight, those ears, and I could not stop staring.

“I’ve never seen you on the river before,” I managed at last.

“No, you wouldn’t. I’m out from Riga, visiting for the weekend.”


“I’m David.” He tipped his finger to his forelock, a very gallant gesture, and then he set off through the grass.

“Your coat!” I shouted.

“Just keep it,” David called over his shoulder. “It’s a small town. I’m sure we’ll see each other again—sometime.” With a quick wave of his hand, he disappeared behind the scrim of trees. I stood there shivering beneath David’s coat and tallying the evening’s swift reversals. I’d lost the fish I’d hooked. I’d lost Rudy’s pole. I’d gotten soaked to the bone. But if I hadn’t fallen into the river in the first place, I could not have met David. And none of these things, good or bad, could have happened if I’d not first landed the magic eel.

The eel!

I scrambled through the brush back to the tub where my lucky eel lay, his belly tight from eating all my bait, snoring—lulled to sleep by the falling rain. It was an effort, but I dragged the tub through the cemetery, through our yard, and then up the back steps, into our kitchen, where Mother bustled from the sink to the oven, muttering to herself. This oven was serious business for Mother, who had installed it herself and therefore knew, understood, and adored every
bolts and coils. The only thing about the oven she didn't like was
the autoclean function, which Father and I were never, under any
circumstances, to use.

I stowed the tub under the table. Mother took one look at me
and the puddle of water at my feet. "Get changed," she said. "We've
got to go clean the hall from top to bottom." Mother hooked her
chin toward the Ilmyen's house. "Jutta's getting married. And what
with all their relatives coming in from Lithuania and even one from
America, there's no other building big enough to hold them all."

Jutta. Getting married. Impossible: she was only two months older
than me. I sat down in the chair. "No. No." Mother pulled at my sleeve. "No sitting. Not now. We've
got work to do."

Even though the hall belonged to everyone and had been used for
a variety of purposes—weddings, funerals, chess tournaments, the
International Women's Temperance Society meetings, and once for
a clandestine encounter between an unknown lady and Mr. Cosic
before he died—our family felt very proprietarily toward it. After all,
Mother's Grandmother Velta and Grandfather Ferdinand had laid
the cornerstone and now, just as with the cemetery—we tended to
think of the hall as ours. Mother in particular loved the hall. It had
electricity, running water, toilets, and best of all, a state-of-the-art
double oven she'd installed herself with only minimal consultation
of the operator's manual. This explained why Mother did her level
best to make sure that, just as at our home, she was the only one who
cooked with it. Sometimes I thought Mother cared more for that
oven than she did for me, because it never failed or disappointed
her, continually cooking with even, reliable heat so that her pirag
browned at the seams and her cakes rose and her carp cooked to
perfection, bubbling in their own fat and tasting of warmer, wiser
waters. And I knew she loved this oven because it baked softly, taking
hours to reach temperature and cooling with grace and patience that
reminded her just what kind of person she wanted to be: slow to
warm up but equally slow to lose her flame.

For this reason, the oven was the only thing in the hall that
Mother did not scrub thoroughly after each use. Each subsequent meal carried the traces of every grand dish that had come before it. I suspected that where some people kept journals of their days on paper, this oven was Mother's diary, an olfactory witness of every wedding, wake, chess tournament, and society meeting that she had attended and no sooner did Mother turn the dial than a flood of smells jogged her memory to better days.

Mother unlocked the back door and stood for a moment on the threshold with a stillness that bordered on reverence. "OK," she said at last, clapping her hands. "Let's get busy." Mother grabbed a stiff-brush broom and hummed the song she always hummed when she was tired but still had work to do.

I grabbed a mop and a bucket. I'd cleaned this hall with Mother so many times I knew exactly what she wanted done and how to do it. While Mother swept the carpet on the raised platform, I stacked chairs and mopped the main sitting area. As the floor dried, I scrubbed the commodes and tiles in the bathrooms and Mother set to work on the kitchen, sanitizing the surfaces, and rewashing all the pots, pans, and utensils on the off-chance that somebody might have touched them in passing.

We'd been working for nearly two hours when I noticed that Mother had stopped humming. I pulled off the rubber gloves and found her, head thrust inside the open oven, her hands running along the inside panels. Mother withdrew her head, sat on her heels, and examined her hand. "Good Lord!" Her face was blanched. "Someone's scoured the panels of the top oven! They're as spotless as the day I installed it!" Mother's shoulders sagged and I knew that she was taking quick inventory of her lost culinary calendar. "Well, we'll just have to come back early tomorrow," Mother said at last, wiping her hands on her skirt.

"Why would we come back?" I asked.

"To mind the oven, of course!" Mother charged out the kitchen door and into the rain. I trudged behind her, listening to the sound of the greasy mud wrestling with our boots and taking note of each house we passed: the Lee house, which always smelled of fry oil; the Arijisnikov house; Stanka's falling-down shack; and then the
Ilmyens' house, where each window pane threw squares of light into their yard. Even though Mother and Mrs. Ilmyen still held Temperance Society meetings together, I could not imagine that Mrs. Ilmyen would want us anywhere near the hall on the day of such a big event.

And this made me unbearably sad, this recognition that Jutta and I had once been like sisters, inseparable allies, the two of us together against the madness of a small town. And there was a time when I believed that I could be like her, capable and smart, able to navigate out of this town and into a larger, better life. University or marriage was the only way out for a girl like me, and Jutta had tried to help, showing me how to balance chemistry equations, teaching me how to think two and three moves ahead in chess. But where she could perceive endless possibilities within the fixed frame, I could only see how small the squares, how limited the moves, how short the time on the playing clock. I could not imagine how an exercise on a squared board might translate to mobility out of this mudbound village. Nor did I have a head for numbers or the knack for writing clever compositions. When we all took the entrance exams, I knew before the results were posted on the school doors of #2 that Jutta would go and I would stay. And ever since then I tried not to notice Mother's keen disappointment or how with each passing day I was becoming less and less like the girl she had hoped I would be and more and more like her.

That night I stayed in the kitchen. Mother—shell shocked over the hall oven—went straight to bed, where she found Father, touched by drink and aspiring to grand notions. That is, he wanted romance, and not just with a vodka botde. But Mother had had all the excitement she could handle in one day and personally escorted him to the tool shed where she instructed him to sleep it off. This, I told myself, was the reason she had failed to notice—again—my magical eel, quietly slumbering in her wash tub under the table. Thick as a Dachshund and twice as long, marinated or smoked, pickled or baked, he would feed twenty people, maybe more. And then I knew why the river had sent this eel to me in the first place: so that I could give it to Jutta and
her family. They would eat the meat and have all of the blessing, all of the wisdom. And if by chance there was a bit left over for us, then all the better. I split the eel down the middle and took out the innards and placed the fish in a stock pot. I poured vinegar into the pot, some of Mother’s special occasion wine, and crushed coriander and fennel seed. Then I sat at the table in the dark where I cradled my head in my arms and fell almost at once into an unshakable sleep of exhaustion.

At dawn the dogs down the lane cleared their throats and outside the window a thick fog swelled from the river and held to the lane the way it did when the air was heavy and the light weak. I poked the eel with a fork and when it wept vinegar, I washed the meat and dredged it in flour. The rest of the ingredients for the sauce—shelled walnuts, hardboiled eggs, raisins, honey, parsley, and mint—I’d take with me and assemble at the hall. I had just turned on the oven, thinking I’d precook the eel, when Mother came into the kitchen, her hair pinned up in preparation for a full day. She pointed her nose toward the oven and squinted at the murky glass door.

“You’re not cleaning that oven, are you?”

“No,” I said. I knew she’d not fully recovered from her previous night’s shock. “I’m cooking something for Jutta.”

“Oh,” Mother sighed. “Well, whatever it is, cover it and bring it with you. We’ve got to get going before someone makes a mess of that kitchen.”

We set off. Rolling over the back of the fog came the distinct smell of chicken. As we approached the lighted hall we could see the silhouettes of women working in the kitchen. Mother held the door open for me and together we stood on the threshold surveying the scene: Mrs. Ilmyen and the twin aunts whom Jutta had once told me about—Reka and Lida—chopping almonds, dicing boiled chicken, and slicing mountains of leeks. Clearly Mother had underestimated the energy of the Ilmyen women.

Mother coughed and after a long moment Mrs. Ilmyen looked up. She smiled. “Oh, Mrs. Kalnins! Everything looks so wonderful. I can’t tell you how much we appreciate your thorough cleaning.”
Mother grimaced, her gaze taking in the stock pot simmering on the ring. “I thought we’d help out where we could—with the soups maybe.”

“Well,” Mrs. Ilmyen straightened a pin in her hair. “That’s generous of you, but we couldn’t ask you to do that. You’ve done so much already.”

“Nonsense! What are good neighbors for? I won’t get in the way,” Mother added, as if reading Mrs. Ilmyen’s thoughts. “I’ll just watch over the oven; it can be tricky.”

Mrs. Ilmyen glanced at her sisters, who were still chopping, but much more quietly. Mrs. Ilmyen reset the pin in her hair. With that single gesture she acknowledged that in all the years she lived across the road from Mother, she’d weathered much worse: she’d get through this, too.

“All right, then,” Mrs. Ilmyen said. “We’ll leave the oven to you.”

Mother wiped her hands on the sides of her skirt and affixed a smile of blistering benevolence on her face. I knew that her stubborn insistence regarding the soup wasn’t merely out of spite: Mother sincerely believed that soup making was sacred work because the bad spirits of the air didn’t like it when they smelled onions and beets weeping together in the bowl. They would seize you by the bones and try to make you too tired to finish, which was why Mother sometimes needed to sit on a stool and why sometimes she started a soup and I finished it. Had Mother and Mrs. Ilmyen been closer friends Mother certainly would have reminded Mrs. Ilmyen of these things. Instead Mother stationed herself on a stool in front of the oven and set the dial to temperature.

I kept my back to them and my nose lowered over my sauce—walnuts and raisins swelling with spiced wine—and waited for the oven to heat. And I listened carefully for the little morsels women drop when they work together in kitchens: how many people were coming (sixty, at least); who the big eaters were (the groom’s father, who ate half a salmon at a wedding two towns away); where Simeon, the groom, and Jutta would live (in a small room Mr. Ilmyen planned to attach to their kitchen); how Mrs. Ilmyen was handling the stress (well—only one gray hair this morning and so far not a single tear
shed from the bride). Through all this talk the hands of the Ilmyen sisters never stopped moving; the three Ilmyens—Solomina, Reka, and Lida—were a veritable whirlwind of chopping and rolling and flouring, mixing, blanching, and boiling. I marveled at their quick and steady industry: latke upon latke appearing on the trays in endless ranks and files, ropes of braided challah dough quietly rising under a towel. After three hours, the Ilmyen sisters decided to temporarily relinquish the kitchen to Mother; Jutta had arrived and ensconced herself in the women’s bathroom, where she now needed their help with her makeup and hair.

Before she left the kitchen Mrs. Ilmyen fixed a stern gaze on Mother. “Promise me, Inara Kalnins, you will not tamper with our food or try to cook anything else while we are gone.”

Mother adjusted the heating dial then crossed her arms over her chest. “I will only open and close the oven door—and only then to make sure nothing burns.”

I could read in Mrs. Ilmyen’s eyes utter doubt, but the lift of her jaw indicated the resigned optimism of a woman choosing to believe. “OK,” Mrs. Ilmyen said, clutching her purse under her arm. “OK.” And she retreated for the bathroom.

Mother hadn’t known an idle moment in her life. Expecting her to sit on a stool and merely observe was like asking a lung not to breathe. For the next hour Mother and I worked in silence, Mother assembling her famous pirag, small pasties she usually filled with meat—smoked ham and bacon and onions. I passed my sauce through a sieve, and into the belly of the eel. Then I wrapped the fish with a towel, one of Mother’s very best, and slid the entire bundle into the top oven.

“Wait.” Mother opened the door of the upper oven and smelled the heat. “What with half this oven not what it used to be, I can’t quite judge. My nose is off entirely.” Mother thrust her head farther in. It was important, Mother had taught me, to never rush an oven heating. And you should never bake anything without first dancing the requisite twenty drops of oil on the bottom plate of the oven. How the oil beaded, she’d told me, and how it danced told you how hot it was and which dish to bake first and for how long.
“I just don’t know,” Mother said, pulling her torso out. “I’d better test the heat.” From her apron Mother withdrew Uncle’s old stethoscope and inserted the ear pieces into her ears. Then she reached for her backup jar of pork lard and dropped a thick white crescent from the spoon onto the racks. We watched the lard drip to the bottom panel. Mother held the scope near the panel and listened to the lard sizzling. It was better to use olive oil to dance the twenty drops, but we didn’t have oil and Mother had always maintained that anything could be substituted for something else if the situation were dire enough.

When Mother, satisfied at last, returned the stethoscope to her apron, I slid my eel, now “Fish in a Cloak,” into the upper oven. Mother then turned her attention to all the Ilmyens’ pastries on the trays awaiting their turn in the oven and the two oversized bowls of dough for Reka’s latkes and Lida’s challah. “What do you think of this?” Mother tasted each batch. Then she thrust her fingers into the dough. “Look—it flakes apart. Too much flour and not enough fat. Fat is flavor, after all.” Mother spooned a little lard from her jar into Reka’s dough and folded it in with muscular jabs of the spoon. Then she uncapped a tin of Crème of Tartar and added several pinches to each bowl.

“Mother,” I gasped. “What are you doing?”

“I’m just seasoning the dough. It’s so bland smelling. This is a small repair, not an alteration,” Mother said, but I feared very much that the distinction would be lost on Mrs. Ilmyen.

“You know, some women are a strange mixture of pride and humility. Forward and bashful at the same time. Wanting help, but uncertain if they should ask for it,” Mother said. “A wedding—now this is a big event, so big it overwhelms. And I know what it feels like to be cowed by circumstances. But I’ve always believed people should help each other out, wherever and whenever they can.”

Fortunately, it was at this time that the musicians converged at the back door: a cellist, two violinists, and an oboist, a man with a white yarmulke stapled to a red toupee. He annoyed Mother greatly by repeatedly addressing her as the Mother of the Beautiful Bride and asking if the ensemble could be paid in advance for their services.
A little after sundown, more of the Ilmyen family arrived, notably Jutta's Uncle Keres, who expressed loud opinions about the holly swags resting on the window sills and who could not stop adjusting the stanchions of the chuppah, a shawl tied to four poles that the Ilmyens had erected on the platform.

At last, when all trace of light leached from the sky, the groom and his family arrived. And with them was the rabbi, a tiny man in a black suit shiny at the elbows and supported on both sides by the groomsmen, in this case two younger versions of the venerable teacher. The entourage shuffled to the platform, where they all took their places beneath the chuppah. This canopy, bowed in the middle like a long-winded prayer, didn't look like much to me: but back in the days when I thought I could become a Jew, Jutta had explained to me that the canopy was God sheltering and protecting the bride and groom. No doubt they'd need it, I thought, so near to the river where rain and stork crap fell from the sky in a far too predictable manner.

And then in a billow of white came Jutta, her hair dark as soil and all bound up with beads. Her cheeks flushed (with a little help from Mrs. I's flat of rouge) and her eyes bright as May marigolds, Jutta glided past me, her gaze fixed on Simeon. She joined Simeon under the chuppah and bent over a low table where they signed a piece of paper. Then the rabbi read a bit from a musty-looking book.

After the reading, Simeon peered intently into Jutta's face before lowering her veil. Happiness, I knew. He was divining in the face of his bride where his happiness lay. But even from my distance, on the threshold between the kitchen and the hall, I could see the love between them, apparent and apparently ample, and I felt again that bite of ancient envy. I wanted that kind of love. Not the flimsy kind I'd read about in books, but the sturdy sort of love that would not disappoint with every change in weather. I wanted that boy who didn't notice my hips or my hands, but looked steadily into my eyes and was so kind as to act as if he liked what he saw.

A groomsman placed a glass on the platform and Simeon smashed it under his right heel, a reminder of the fragility of human joy in this lifetime. Everyone clapped and shouted Mazel Tov. Mother rushed for her whisk broom and dustpan, but not before clicking...
her tongue, having calculated the cost of such an elegant piece of
glassware utterly destroyed.

The wedding ceremony officially over, the festivities began. The
men pushed to the walls all but two of the chairs, one of which Mr.
Ilmyen climbed on, a glass of wine raised in his hand. For ten minutes
he extolled the elegance of certain opening chess moves, which was
his way of commenting on the many changes in the political and
economic clime. His remarks roamed rudderlessly until Mrs. Ilmyen
was besieged by a paroxysm of coughing and Mr. Ilmyen finally
turned his observations from the universal to the particular.

“As you know, we named Jutta after the famous chess prodigy Jutta
Hempel, who gave simultaneous chess tournaments on TV when
she was only six years old. Just like that Jutta, our Jutta has always
known the right move in life. And why should it be any different
in love?” Mr. Ilmyen nodded at Simeon’s parents. “So a toast to the
parents of the groom for having the imagination and foresight to
orchestrate their first meeting. At a chess tournament no less!”

“A brilliant move!” Simeon’s father called out. And then he climbed
onto the other chair and put an arm around Mr. Ilmyen. “You can’t
have the sweet without the salt. Every fisherman knows this. Sweet
water rushes headlong to the sea where it runs to salt. Both kinds
of water are good, both waters nourish life. But let us not forget the
inherent risks of living. Let us not forget that joy and sorrow are
shadows cast by the same tree and this tree we also call life.”

“To life!” Mr. Ilmyen cried and the shout went up: “To life!”

Outside the windows Mrs. Arijsnikov, the two Mrs. Lees, and
Stanka, had their noses pressed to the panes. I went to the kitchen
entrance and opened the door for them.

“I’m sorry.” Jutta’s Uncle Keres materialized behind me. “This is a
private party.”

It was just the kind of thing our Uncle Maris would have said.

“What’s private around here?” Stanka elbowed past him.

“We’re friends of the bride,” Mrs. Arijsnikov said.

“I taught her how to tie her shoes,” Mrs. Lee said, heading straight
for the punch bowl.
I followed them over the threshold into the hall that had been transformed now by laughter and music and movement. Jutta and Simeon each clutched separate ends of a hankie for dear life while they were carried aloft in their chairs and twirled about. Jutta had never looked happier and where I had just moments before felt envy, a knot between my shoulders, I now felt a simple undivided happiness for her. The music worked on me, and before I knew it, I was tapping my feet and clapping my hands. How could I not? This music was nothing at all like the staunch hymns the early morning Lutherans and Baptists sang on Sundays. This music flew and skipped as if the musicians had never heard of the sturdy four-four time signature tied to the open chords of the major keys. Tipping from joy to sorrow in a half measure, I thought that the music was like each one of us there in the room and at the windows: intricate and sometimes discordant motifs brought together to make a song that every now and then clarified into unified melody.

I watched as Reka set a raw egg before Jutta, so that she might bear as easily as a hen lays eggs.

Stanka nudged me with her elbow. “I know, Ada, you like this Jewish tradition and dance stuff and you have a thing about suffering, but seriously, a Gadje girl like you should have been born a Roma. Nobody knows how to suffer like the Romani. Nobody knows how to bear down on all that is bitter, turning it into a hard beautiful thing. Want to know how they do this?”

“Sure,” I shrugged.

“In dances.” Stanka waved her hand at the crush of bodies moving through the hall. “And I don’t mean this kind of kid stuff. I’ll teach you sometime.”

I smiled. Stanka always knew when I needed cheering up and she could see how out of place I felt, outside the circles, me with my red hands and big hips.

Stanka moved closer and tried again.

“A girl like that! Spending all that time with chess and books. I’ll bet she doesn’t even know how to take out her own eyes.” It was the Roma expression for orgasm. Clearly Stanka didn’t think Jutta, smart as she was, would have enough sense to know how to please
her new husband in the bedroom, let alone experience the ecstatic state for herself. Stanka held her hand to her mouth and whispered: “They do it with a sheet between them, for God’s sake!”

“Why?”

Stanka furrowed her brow. “I suppose they have to do it that way. After all, a young woman’s body is the source of all kinds of shameful and unclean things. It’s this way for the Roma women, too. Everything below the waist is untouchably dirty. It’s why we wear the long skirts. And then, of course, there’s our hands,” Stanka splayed her fingers and took a quick survey. Clearly, she’d been picking mushrooms; crescents of dirt were packed under her fingernails.

“Psst! Ada!” Mother called from the kitchen. “Stand around like a monument and a pigeon might crap on you!” Mother pointed to her trays of pirag cooling on the sideboard. “Carry these out.”

“What about all Reka’s latkes?”

“Oh—she’s busy dancing. Let’s put our food out first.” This I did, but I couldn’t help but notice that only Stanka and one of the Mrs. Lees touched Mother’s meat pies. Not a single guest of the bride or groom even approached the table.

During a break between numbers, Mrs. Ilmyen took Mother aside by the elbow.

“About your hors d’oeuvres, Mrs. Kalnins. We cannot eat them.”

“What?” Mother blinked. “What’s wrong with them?”

“It’s not part of our tradition.”

“What tradition?”

Mrs. Ilmyen sighed. “The meat in your pirag is ham. Ham is not kosher, and, therefore, forbidden to us.” Mrs. Ilmyen spoke with the same overly patient tones she used when I’d visit Jutta and ask impossible questions.

“Can’t the rabbi just bless it?” Mother asked. She hated to see anything go to waste.

“No,” Mrs. Ilmyen said. The weight in her voice pulled her words to a place beyond any suggestion of emotion—to the physical state of pure exhaustion: Solomina Ilmyen was not angry. Mother had simply worn her out.

Crestfallen, Mother returned to the kitchen where a great clanging
Gina Ochsner

of pots and lids commenced. Taking it as a cue, the musicians started another song, but not before Jutta caught my eye and raised her hankie. Jutta knew me and she knew my mother. No one had to tell Jutta what was going on and the simple fact was, on this day, she was so happy she didn’t care, instead she wound her way through the moving bodies until she stood before me.


Stanka coughed and rolled her eyes.

“I don’t dance,” I said.

“Nonsense. Everybody dances at a wedding. It’s easy—just follow the person next to you.”

I looked at Jutta, so happy now, and determined to share her happiness with me. And I wanted to feel it, too—real happiness. I had a few doses of sorrow and for one hour I wanted to trade them for joy. Which is why I allowed myself to be pulled into the current of bodies, turning in a ring first clockwise and then counterclockwise. And I was surprised to feel how lightly my feet could move to this kind of music.

And that’s when I saw, above the swirling ring of women, a pair of ears, ears of such grand proportion that they were unmistakably the same set belonging to David. The circles moved and when he and I were opposite each other he clutched my hands and pulled me out of the circle. David had blue eyes to the bottom of a river and back. So blue, it was as if they’d taken a clear summer sky and wrung the color out of it.

“Why it’s the girl from the river—I almost didn’t recognize you in those dry clothes!” David stepped back and examined my appearance.

I couldn’t help noticing his gaze seemed stuck at my hips. “What are you looking at?”

“You have, er, elbows of enormous construction.”

My cheeks burned. “I was thinking the same thing about your ears. They’re really quite marvelous.”

It was David’s turn to blush. “For the longest time, I thought I’d grow into them, but every year they seem to get bigger.”
Northwest Review

I looked at my hips. "I know what you mean."
David laughed. And that's when I knew I was looking at the boy I would marry—he just didn't know it yet.
David pulled me closer and maneuvered us away from the too-enthusiastic oboist.
"So, Ada, do you have a last name?"
"It's Kalnins."
David stopped midstep, then caught up. "Kalnins? As in the Kalnins who narrowly escaped indictment for trademark fraud?"
"Yes, the same."
"As in the Kalnins who salted the birch trees belonging to that Alpine yodeler until all the trees died?"
I nodded. "Yes."
"And claimed to have invented the cadmium loop as well as a life-extending vitality drink?"
"OK. So OK—you've heard of my uncle."
"It's just that your uncle is legendary—for many reasons."
My face burned. I recalled that moment when Uncle hurled his crutch at Jutta's father, and the horrible things Uncle said. He was dead and buried but still causing trouble.
"Hey—I'm only teasing." David touched my chin with his knuckles.
"Let's just dance."
"I think you should know, I sleep with your coat under my pillow. I suppose I should give it back to you."
"How about at the river—for old times' sake?"
In our town to say to someone of the opposite sex that you wanted to meet at the river was just like saying you wanted to look for the magic fern that blooms at midnight. That is, it was an invitation to grope madly. But possibly as David was from a big city he did not know this, and I was only too happy to educate him on the matter. Later. "OK," I said. "What time?" But before he could answer a scream pierced the air. The orchestra fell silent. I pointed my nose toward the kitchen, toward the source of the noise and also an unmistakable odor.
The Ilmyen sisters raced to the kitchen and I followed and found Mother standing stock still in front of the open oven doors. Dark
clouds of smoke billowed and purled up the walls and across the ceiling. Apparently we’d used too much lard, so much that it had dripped from the back of the top oven into the bottom and both ovens, top and bottom, had caught fire. Now it was every cook for herself.

Stanka lobbed a tureen of coffee grounds at the fire. And still the flames raged.

Though I could see it killed her to do it, Reka hurled an open sack of flour into the ovens. Mrs. Ilmyen scrambled to cover the trays of latkes, lest the flour contaminate them, but there was no help for it. The flour hit the flames in a big white cloud that traveled from inside the ovens and dusted every surface in the kitchen—animate and inanimate. “My challah!” Lida shrieked even as the flour settled in her hair and on her skin. And still the top oven flamed.

“My eel!” I cried. I wrapped a dish towel around my hand and pulled at the rack and the baking pan. I could not have held that pan more than three seconds, but it burned through that dish towel all the same. The smell of burning flesh revived Mother: she hurried me to the sink and my hand under the faucet. Mother, too, was covered head to toe in white flour and my throbbing hand, blaring red, was the only thing not grainy white. I smelled coffee grounds in her hair and I knew she was ashamed, like me.

Mrs. Ilmyen sat on a stool and buried her face in her hands. “Everything is ruined!” she sobbed.

“What are you talking about? There’s plenty of food here.” Mother nodded at her many trays of pork-filled pirag, my eel, blackened and smoldering in the sink.

Through the open doorway I could see the guests whispering nervously. The two Mrs. Lees exited the back door as Mr. Ilmyen climbed atop a chair to better assess the catastrophe.

Mrs. Ilmyen took a big breath and held it. “Mrs. Kalnins—Inara,” Mrs. Ilmyen attempted a smile. “If you’d kept the oven clean like any decent cook—none of this,” Mrs. Ilmyen swept her arm toward the oven, her flour-dusted sisters, the chalk-white challah, my burnt hand, “would ever have happened.”
Mother drew herself to her full height. “Please, do not besmirch these ovens. They are absolutely faultless in the matter.”

Mother was ready for a fight, but Mrs. Ilmyen, drooping on the stool, had had enough. “Please take your trays of food and that,” here Mrs. Ilmyen swallowed hard, “baking pan and go. Just go.”

Mother sniffed mightily. The flour had gotten into her nose. And then Mother sneezed. This, too, on Lida’s challah.

At this Mr. Ilmyen, still perched on the chair, raised his glass: “To life!” he shouted.

“To life!” everyone in the hall cried.

The orchestra struck a new number—a lively reel—and I knew this scene in the kitchen was only a small pause in the celebration—the Ilmyens and Simeon’s family would dance and forget any of the rest of us had ever been there. I stood on tiptoe and caught sight of David moving away in the mix of bodies. I knew I would not get another chance to talk to him about the river and even if I had, he would not want to meet me there. Not now.

All the way home Mother and I didn’t speak a word. Music poured out of the hall, now a box of sound and light shrinking behind us. In my arm the pan cooled to a leaden weight and I was never so glad to see our laundry still flapping on the line, our dingy back steps. Mother paused at the rose bush to compose herself, but I forged ahead.

Inside the kitchen I snapped on the light. Father sat at the table, blinking. With a loud thunk, I set the fish, the saddest-looking meal of the many I had ruined, onto the table.

“What’s that?” Father peered at the pan.

“I call it Fish in a Cloak. But you can call it dinner,” I said. I pulled my hand back, but not before Father saw the angry welt still rising in the middle of my palm.

“You’re hurt.”

I shrugged. “Not badly,” I said, but I kept my hand under the table where nobody had to see it.

Father poked at the smoldering lump with a knife. “Carp?”

“Eel.”
“I love eel,” he said, sawing at the charred mess until the meat yielded.
Mother came in at last—still covered in flour and white as a ghost. She sat across from Father who studied her and chewed for a long moment. At last he cleared his throat. “I like what you’ve done with your hair. You look very dignified.”
Mother made a savage pass at her eyes with her sleeve. But then she managed a wobbly smile. “That’s why I married you—you don’t talk much, but when you do, you always say just the right thing.”
Father considered this carefully. Then he sliced another chunk of meat from the pan and put it on a plate for Mother and me. Together, the three of us, we ate that entire eel, every charred little bit. And then we went to bed, so that in the morning when we woke, we would be wiser.
I WILL
Nance Van Winckel

The first time I was a bride, my new husband hadn't wanted any part of the ceremonial kiss. The way he stared at me held off the violins of the future. But just for a bit. Ditto the chances about to be handed to us like nickels and dimes.

Barry? Benny? Billy?
I kissed him anyway. A path into all we would become opened. I took the first step. I was six. So was he. Brave souls, we traipsed into the woods.

We must keep our heads, I thought. Even then. Already other marriages hung from the trees—pods the winds worried. I was a two-legged story in my mother's pumps. Later, as it turned out, I'd wear her veil for real.

I can still hear my girl-voice saying, Show me, show me. Silver leaf, gold leaf, I wanted it all. The green pastures lay down. Poor Bobby, poor groom, hadn't he tried to stand his ground? I'll show you, he said. I'll show you.

The sweet taste of a kiss remained a long way off. Marriage was all about duty. We got this. Everyone we loved in our world was married, but no one was in love.

My big anvil. His small hammer. How could we stand so much shade? Or so much shimmer there—just there—in the distance?

My next husband doesn't like the woods. But he allows the kiss. The kiss is right here. The task of it. Daily we bend to it.

Pushing past sixty now, this husband says he's willing to stay around only another twenty years. And that's it. No more. Let's not have any tears over it. The way age has hurt the ones we love has hurt him. The trembling, the falling, the not recalling. Who are we? Diapers and angers. You can have it, one of the aunties said, and lay down to let her hundred-yard stare become the trillion-yard stare.
Being husband, being wife, the institution of marriage—inventions all. Made up. Like the Boy (or Girl) Scouts of America. You take the oaths. You do the deeds and get the badges. And later, if you want, you can change your mind. Take it all back: I don't; I won't.

I haven't changed my mind. Even as the woods of my life are ticking. I must keep my head screwed on tight. This is what I say to myself but not to my husband. We are not supposed to want to die. This I get. More than anything, this I get. The pulse is strong. One gets used to hearing it. One thinks, All will be too silent without you, Mr. Blood.

This is how I think my own staying alive will feel without my groom.

At our wedding, after our cake slid off the table, we picked it up and ate it. Two figurines lay askew in the frothy white frosting. And whose toddler cousin was it who came along and tried to eat the head of that bride? Tried to bite me off at the neck? Bless him. He must be thirty now. He must have had his day in the woods.

I will take the twenty years. The instructions my husband gives about the end are simple. And private. The one I will mention has to do with fire. You know what I mean. If I don't go first, I will be seventy-seven and in charge of the proceedings.

Once there was a groom-boy candle on a cake. Sturdy thick brown hair. Not even a hint of silver. I close my eyes to kiss who he's become. I do. A little wick pokes up from his fontanel. My hand trembles, but I strike the match. I will. The flames of gold leaves flicker. The woods tick. I kiss. I light. I enter.
This promise appears in the fourth chapter of Ko Hung's *Nei P'ien*, addressed not to those who follow his mundane suggestions for good health and longevity (proper breathing, calisthenics, meditation), but the man who emulates the Yellow Emperor, seeking immortality in the darker realms, hoping to elude Death by slipping into his palace and mingling with the shades and demons.

Only after you have journeyed through the land of dragons, its mountains so high the rising moon can rest on them one by one, and swum in a sea of fear alongside creatures from your nightmares, and abandoned your intricate deceptions—of yourself and others—will you be worthy of consideration by the Governor of Fates.

He cannot be petitioned or cajoled.
He understands no language you might speak.
He has no affinity for your follies or griefs.
There is no argument you can make, no prayer you can invoke, no plea you can register, no praise you can offer or strategy you can conceive that will influence his decision.
What he knows, you must learn:
that only by negotiating the unmarked road,
the uncharted sea, losing yourself at last,
can you be stricken from the Book of Death.
ELEGY FOR ALEX
Elizabeth Spires

We'll never know whether there really was a mind in there—
slogging its way from the absence of a cork-nut to the absence
of Alex, grasping at the zeroness of death.


Grasping at the zeroness of death, Alex the parrot
has died. His last words to Dr. Irene?
“You be good. See you tomorrow. I love you.”

Parsing his words, will we ever know what
good and tomorrow and love meant to him?
What future did he see for himself there in the lab

where, each night for thirty years, Dr. Irene draped his cage
with a sheet, as one might put a child gently to bed, saying
always the same thing: “See you tomorrow, Alex. I love you.”

Did the future exist for Alex when no one was there? Or did he live
in the deep wide moment of now, until morning when the drape
disappeared, and there stood Dr. Irene, like the dead come back?

His last night was not gentle. Alex beginning to feel
as the seconds ticked, ticked, ticked, that something was terribly
wrong,
his tiny heart beating too fast, and then kaboom!, he understood

for the first time, there would be no tomorrow, no, not for him,
his life, like a cliché, rushing past in little scenes: Alex, an innocent
hatchling, on the day Dr. Irene brought him home from the pet
store.
Alex on the day he learned what zero meant, his walnut-size brain expanding, as if on LSD, as he took in the concept. And Alex, berserk on the day Dr. Irene tricked him in a shell game (no nut under any of the shells).

*Calm down!* he remembered her saying, but gaining control, he looked her in the eye and said, in a steely tone, *I'm going away now,* coldly turning his back.

(After that, no more stupid games, and no *I love you* unless the nut was there.)

Grasping at death's zero, Alex has died. A few will mourn him while most of us, struggling, will carry on, pondering what goodness and *love* and *tomorrow* hold. Knowing as much as Alex. But no more.
It is dangerous to make such requests of madmen,
But I will tell you my day since you asked. I rose early
And walked the dog while the children were sleeping
And tried to keep them safe in my thoughts even
Though I was only going around the block, not back
To Paris or New York or coming to Atlanta. And while
I walked I tried not to think of her, the person you said
Not to fall for again but did. And I was talking
To myself again out loud but since the dog was with me
I looked okay to others. I tried to think of my work and what
I would do later when the children went back to their mother.
And already it was like four in the afternoon when
You texted how annoying lovers can be,
Meaning yours and knowing how it was going with mine.
You should be afraid that I am older and have not learned
Not to drive through the night for a kiss.
WHAT BEGINS IN EROS ENDS IN ELEGY
Stuart Dischell

Waiting for the phone to ring like a held-back orgasm, I hesitate in position between the clock and the show

On television where a man sleeps in the carcass Of a camel to keep warm on the desert at night—

I try to write and my dead teacher’s words come back. Say distance, he told me, when you mean silence.
ON WITH THE DANCE
Colleen J. McElroy

the sheets on the bed are green
you drape one limb, white

over my leg, black
we talk about the war where

headlines scream of collateral
damage, all American casualties

the world has not ended yet
in this our world of warm

sheets green as cut grass where our
casualties are counted by the age

of sons too old to join the fight
we have our own battle to wage

how in the mirror skin is muted
by light and we can believe

for a moment that differences
don’t matter in a world of shadows

we wonder if the war will ever end
we wonder if we can dare love each other
in a world where differences so easily mean death: black or white, Christian or not

and sometimes in the dead of night we forget which war we’re fighting

we remember only that every day of our lives wars have raged somewhere

the inconstancy of peace as elusive as everlasting joy or hope or love

and what happens happens every day a litany of distress calls from war zones

at a cafe we hear tv news blaring the latest statistics and the waiter nearly loses

his grip on the coffee when you look into the distance past my face

your brow wrinkled, eyes sad and you say let’s go home and play zebra in the grass

later in those twilight hours as our limbs go on with their instinctive dance

we are grateful for the respite a fragile detente of flesh against flesh

a place where we fall asleep easily the only casualties in sight
Coming to the End

Vern Rutsala

By now our last best hope
is a broken muffler
scrapping its brains out
along the road, giving

our anthem new music.
We know the frontier
is out to lunch for good
and we stand in its

stale propwash, our
streets of gold become
buckling tar. There's
no way back—experts

at amnesia have paved
the trails with souvenirs
from Hong Kong
and rubber checks.

It's just as well.
Going back would
only stir up that old
arthritis in our souls

and rattle tin cups for
those lost cellars where
even the potatoes
have gone blind.
I look for this one in daylight,
following Sunnyside Road
along its old green way
toward home, but like so
many American roads it
has lost its way, now
vague as the Oregon Trail
chewing grass somewhere
off to the east. Even the corner
I always turned is gone,
a severe new curb tells my
tires so with a thudding No.
And that thud’s message
is clear: America has done
with nibbling, another mall
swallowed my old street
whole—every house and tree,
every little gravel memory
gulped down, those twilights
of guitar music, every sigh
and sound of love edited out
by a bulldozer’s blue pencil.
I sense all those years scraped
flat and remaindered under

asphalt, everything coming
down to this country’s final
either/or—Sale/No Sale.
The Threshold
Rosellen Brown

She had never had any difficulty admitting her desperation to marry. Possibly it was the disparity between her immaterial profession—she was a philosopher, a full professor, whose daily work involved defining reality, challenging it, asking it impertinent questions like “How do I know what I know?” and “Are we born good?”—and her ordinary, recognizable need to be loved that made her friends feel helpless about “fixing her up with” someone. That phrase trivialized the matter, and everyone they knew seemed equally trivial. Did she really need what they needed? Would their plebian lives satisfy someone who asked such rarified questions? Anyway, they insisted, there were no even mildly passable men—read exceptionally intelligent men not on the prowl for youth and/or beauty—who were not spoken for.

Della herself appeared all too material, a paradox that might also have been an impediment to meeting likely suitors. She was large—not fat, her mother had always stipulated back when her point of view counted. Rather, she was high-waisted, solid, even her face a large, flat, uninflected surface no matter what surged behind it, like a Kabuki mask. This gave her an altogether inaccurate look of self-sufficiency that some might have found off-putting. One of her early suitors told her he could never relax with a woman who looked like she could lift him more easily than he could lift her.

There wasn't much she could do about any of that but she did try. She curled her thick dark hair to soften the way it lay against her full cheeks, although there was always something a bit incongruous about the girlishness of the effect. She forced herself, when she remembered, to look animated, and in mixed company cultivated a voice far more ethereal than, with her broad shoulders and size ten shoes, she seemed likely to possess. Occasionally she faced the
disconnect between internal and external, but what could she do but
the best she could?

To make matters worse, lately all the new hires in her department
had been women: they were closing the female professorial gap, and
at her expense. The younger women, all of them, had everything:
not only the job that had defined her for thirty years, behind whose
demands and intricacies she could hide, but, cheerful and stylish,
they had husbands, children, houses, second houses! They had in-
laws about whom they complained, and shared with each other
the arcane problems of city families, like the dearth of preschool
openings and the escalating cost of household help. They claimed
to be harried but at the dinner table, on their pillows, they were not
alone with their challenges. All that without distracting them from
the rigors of the tenure track and the rewards that lay beyond. They
pretended sympathy for Della’s singleness, or perhaps they even felt
it, but no one lifted a finger, no one made a move to help.

When the boundless horizon of Internet dating first spread itself
before her, Della sprinted toward it gratefully. But after a dozen
or so frustrating encounters that left her more discouraged than
ever—a waste of time, an insult to her standards and her dignity,
all those leftovers and nonreaders who ignored every salient thing
she'd confided about the things she liked and the things she couldn't
abide—I do not like sports, she had written, only to be invited to a
day of skiing. I am a lifelong Democrat, she had written, only to find
herself recruited to help spatter the world with reactionary mud—the
sprint became a trudge. Each Sunday evening, after a day of lonely
museum going or a movie with one of her married friends to which
she had to invite herself and then see a film chosen by a six-year-
old, she sat down to her computer grim as a test-taker to assess the
current pickings and submit to being passed over by a multitude.

By now she had learned to translate: “inventory associate” meant
stockroom clerk. Para anything was an underachiever who didn’t
dare to be the thing itself. “Entrepreneur” could mean anything or
she applied any of the philosophical categories in which she routinely
dwelled, she could reduce them all to rubble, the reality enhancers to
liars, the euphemism mongers to pathetic losers.

She hated the snob she became as soon as she began this riffle through the bottomless catalog of impossible partners. How dreadful to dismiss them, one by one by one, for good cause or bad. It was an affront to any human being, herself included, to be reduced to these petty descriptors and to that little photograph that begged to be admired. She had had her picture taken three times before she approved one—barely approved it since, in her own sinking heart of hearts, she thought it gave the impression that she was an Eskimo in an Anglo wig.

And then she fell in love—fell the operative word—with a man she had often seen drinking alone (tea, as it turned out) in her favorite coffee shop, where he always sat at a window facing on Broadway, behind a raised *New York Times*. Was the newspaper a barrier, a protection from the clamor and chat around him? If it was, she understood the impulse. But she would never have given him a thought if one afternoon after her *Phaedo* class, in need of a strong clap of energy, she had not made her way to her usual spot where once a week she indulged her wanton love for custard and whipped cream scored by a stripe of hardened chocolate by ordering a Napoleon. Bitterly, she justified such excess by thinking of it as consolation for everything that was not awaiting her at home. While her colleagues rushed off to retrieve their children from day care, or to send their nannies home—their nannies!—here she was, about to open *The Journal of Philosophic Inquiry* in aggrieved silence.

On this particular November afternoon, a gloomy, shadowy day that warned of approaching winter, as she made her way between the booths and Formica tables where half the Upper West Side seemed to be chattering, the hostess greeted her, menus upright against her chest, to say with an apologetic smile, “Oh, dear, we’ve had a giant spill back there, it’s very slippery. You don’t even want to put your foot down.”

Della looked around for a vacant seat and, amidst this late afternoon huddle of her neighbors and their spirit-lifting snacks, saw there was none to be had. She was appalled at how disappointed
this made her—were those tears she felt and suppressed? Low blood sugar time but still, how juvenile! A good thing her students couldn’t see her.

“Here,” the hostess was saying brightly, touching her shoulder, which made her flinch with surprise. “Would you mind—perhaps you could just share here for a few minutes while we clean it up?” She gestured at the lone man, who grudgingly lowered the Arts section, which he’d folded back into a neat oblong, and peered at her without smiling. “Could I trouble you, sir, just for a tiny while?” Only a boor could refuse such a sweet advance.

So, making as accommodating a face as she could manage, Della pushed her briefcase across the plump red leather seat of the booth and took her place opposite John M. Cauley, professor emeritus of medieval European history, and forced a smile halfway between apology and ingratiating.

“Sometimes,” John Cauley offered firmly, “I wonder how I survived my children when they were little. That mess was the fault of a little boy whose mother let him run around like an unleashed puppy, so of course he crashed directly into a waitress with one of those huge trays up over her head. Disaster!”

It was an inauspicious introduction to a man—a widower who came here afternoons when the silence got too thick—whose sweetness ran deep, hidden beneath strata of defenses and masculine assertion. Since the first of her defenses was decorum, Della responded by assuring him that his children must certainly have been better brought up than that loose puppy, and somehow their conversation, at first a modest accidental cinder, caught a gust of oxygen, flared and ignited. Later, Della would tell her mother that she had always been mildly bemused when she came across the accounts of lovers who, explaining how they knew they were entering the strange and promising territory that would lead eventually to marriage, testified that they had found themselves talking for hours. All night. Nonstop, unaccountably spilling secrets, dreams, fears. That compulsive conversation must simply, she thought, signal hunger, signal thirst, and the act of slaking it with a rank stranger must be a token of relief, like finding an oasis in the desert and dropping to one’s knees to drink and drink.
Which is what Della and John began at the unstrewn coffee shop table that held nothing but a thick white diner cup of oolong tea, another of light coffee, and nothing else: she was too embarrassed to order her outrageous sweet in anyone’s company. It was her secret indulgence, meant to quench the unassuageable pangs of desire, and here she was discovering a far, far better means for filling that void.

He was clever, he was informed and, best of all, he was, from the first, curious about her, a woman in a man’s field, a delicate hand on recalcitrant matter: Phaedo. Locke. Levinas. That judgment was so old-fashioned it was almost quaint. You’d think, she did not whisper, I was a brain surgeon or an astrophysicist. It’s only philosophy. He had some theories about the relationship between structuralism and ethics; he had even considered a book, his own or possibly a collection of others’ essays. Perhaps she might think of contributing one. On that pretext, he scribbled her phone number and her e-mail on his still-clean napkin and folded it into the pocket of his suit jacket. “I’ve been a bit—quiescent—lately. Possibly this will be a challenge to reawaken.”

He looked tired, might have been looking tired for years, but behind his tortoiseshell glasses his eyes amidst their runnels of skin were keen and he did not hesitate to look straight into her face as if he trusted he would find something there worth looking at. His own was unremarkable: a modest, uncommanding nose, a carefully tended pepper-and-salt beard that followed what looked to be a decent jawline, graying hair that hinted of the retreat of a widow’s peak that must once have been appealing—nothing, in other words, that would have arrested her in a ludicrously foreshortened online instant.

But—quiescent. A nice word for a man, not a stream or a national border separating warring troops. Was he speaking of his work or his—was “self” the opposite of work? Whatever the word and the idea behind it—they were, after all, indissoluble—she took a deep breath and, walking home with an energy she too had not felt for years, smiled out loud. That was the way it felt: an exclamation. A rude unquiescent cheer.

So began the astonishing, intricate conversation that he, a
widower, and she, a not quite virginal postmenopausal woman who had never stopped hoping, happened into and sustained and, daringly but with the approval of his grown daughters and the shakily offered blessing of her mother, made formal with a discreet justice of the peace wedding and a joyous party at which Della half laughed and half wept and, in an off-white dress that she thought perfectly represented her state, fresh but not pure, danced like a girl all afternoon, into the snowy evening.

A philosopher, of all people, ought to have known that nothing was simple, not love, not hope, not even good intentions.

Most of their brief courtship had taken place over a variety of tables, as if in commemoration of their meeting. They shared lunches, and when she was not at school, what John, having spent a good deal of time in Italy, liked to call the mirenda—she called it high tea—at around five, and of course, long, slow, folded-hands-over-the-belly dinners, a new place each time, ethnicities flowing one into the next, Indian, Korean, just plain yellow-mustard deli.

One such evening, she brought him home with her to her rudimentary one bedroom and study apartment on the second floor of a divided brownstone. There was a garden to which she had access, but it was getting on toward winter and there was no attraction to the idea of sitting outside bundled up. In any event, both of them were eager to move this acquaintanceship from talk to action. So it was her bed, not his, in which, after too large a Greek dinner, they achieved the apotheosis of their togetherness and failed at it. A whole bottle of ouzo. Skordalia on the breath. Crème caramel that didn't even belong on the menu of a place that called itself the Acropolis. "No matter," Della consoled John, though it was stubborn, unyielding matter that had undone them. "We're not in any hurry, are we?"

No, they were not, he assented, and she was relieved that he saw some future for them, to be inched toward slowly, unhysterically, gratefully. But that "no hurry" described the short run. The long run, given their ages—John, nine years older than she, was seventy-two—was a bit too terrifying to dwell on. And when they did approach
each other late one afternoon, the light entirely kind, a sort of sherry color that pressed through the shades she had discreetly lowered, their hunger for dinner disappeared before their starved pleasure at each other's hands and mouths.

Her last lover, so many years ago, had still been smooth-skinned and scarless both literally and figuratively. John had all the protuberances, pits and skin flags one might expect of someone called emeritus but, tall though she was, she fit so comfortably against him that his imperfections might as well have been invisible. One saw what one wanted and believed what one needed. He was a skillful lover, agile of fingers and generous of heart. He was not, he told her almost shyly, accustomed to flesh as lush as hers. His hands had never been so full. From this she gathered that his wife had been a small, or at least a thin, woman. But they did not speak of her often.

It was perilous to be this happy, but she dared.

The first time John brought Della to his apartment, one of those rent-controlled wonders that looked out on Riverside Drive and the Hudson, she stopped at the threshold and stared. "I'd lift you over it if my back were more reliable," he laughed from behind her, where thank God he could not see her mouth open in astonishment. Possibly her own simple apartment and her tendency to winnow her possessions to a serviceable minimum rendered the scene more extreme than others might find it; this was something she would have to take home to think about. But it looked to her like nothing but an antique shop only lacking a sign over the door. An indoor yard sale. A thrift shop in violation of zoning. A museum.

The living room was dark—he hurried past her to clatter up the blinds with the glee of someone unveiling a gift—but it was light enough to see layers—levels, even—of porcelain figures, of Victorian fringe, of lions' feet curled upon intricate carpet, and the kind of glass-fronted bookcases she remembered seeing at Freud's house in Maresfield Gardens. Pillows, mushroom-colored, seemed to bloom from the earth-colored bed of the sofa. Della had seen such gardens of pillows fighting for space at B&Bs she had stayed in and hotels if someone else was paying the bill. Apparently they were meant to
betoken luxury and comfort of a kind she could do without. Weighed
down like that it always took fifteen minutes to get the bed ready.

“How—what an interesting—” she ventured. “I hope you had
someone—I mean paid someone—to dust all this.”

He was smiling, proudly, she could only suppose. “Herta was the
most devoted collector I’ve ever known. She was—she took it as a
challenge, an aesthetic dare, you could almost say, to find complete
sets of anything she liked. Come, look.”

Della advanced across a busy Oriental, inhaling dust.

“You see, this chess set lacked—oh, perhaps six or seven men. It’s
a rare malachite, impossible to find in any store. But she researched
it, where it originated, how it migrated—I think it was German,
though I could be incorrect there—and then, truly, she’d have gone
without groceries sooner than pass up a chance to complete the board.
Aren’t they something?” He held up a stony little king, hard-edged,
severe, chiseled out of a bluish rock that refracted light. A metaphor,
all of it, for the missing wife, Della understood: for her memory,
which persisted, and well it should. The beauty of her devotion, her
character, of course, of course. But oh dear, her taste . . .

Della had agreed to move with John to his apartment sight unseen.
He must have worried about the encounter because he had put it off
so long, but he had insisted that he would never be comfortable
far from his “things,” his “habits.” She had so few of those—had
habits but not things—so it had seemed a simple request to honor.
And now, was it the gift horse into whose mouth she had better
not stare too hard or the goose whose golden egg had better be left
untouched? Some such cliché, some warning by those fabled wise
village elders who counseled women into gratitude and self-control.

She wished, absurdly, that she could ask her mother what to do.
Her poor, ancient, wasted mother had been a bookkeeper for forty
years: would she have warned her daughter that every love had its
costs, a balance of red and black, or would she have provoked her
into casting out this clutter and demanding the start of a fresh page,
a new accounting system? A woman more at ease with numbers
than life lessons, she had never been an oracle, even when she had
her wits. Now Della was happy that she had lived long enough to
come to the wedding in her wheelchair, and to remember what a wedding was.

It was nonnegotiable. Tenderly she had broached the idea of storage—certainly there was no need to unburden himself permanently of all this. Just—to clear some space. Herta's memory would still linger, if it was her memory he was serving. He had spoken of an awakening, not a wake.

"No, no," he assured her. "This is not about her, it's about me." She didn't believe him. "My dear, I know she's gone. I'm realistic. You see how I've put away her photographs." So it seemed he was a literalist, not a realist: He did not appreciate the potency of objects. He thought they were only themselves.

"But where," she asked, "is there room for me?" She was embarrassed at the obviousness of the question.

"Here," he had responded, smiling, opening his arms to take her in. "Here's room for you."

She had told herself it would be an adventure, the apartment like a new city in a familiar country. Looking out the window she was delighted at the view: West End out front, with its slight hill, and its river of traffic; she had lived on an east-west, not a north-south, street. Even the shopping would be different here, though she was not happy to give up her all-purpose Fairway for a smaller supermarket. But—losses, compensations everywhere—she would have neighbors. After so many years on the upper floor of the brownstone, whose owners were distant either out of discretion or because she did not interest them, she anticipated the camaraderie of the doorman with excitement. A distinguished-looking man with a goatee and a West Indian accent, he did favors routinely: kept packages, relayed messages, helped shoppers carry their bags to the elevator. When John introduced Della as his new wife, Jacques (who was not the least bit French) actually removed his rather military-looking hat and placed it over his heart. "He's wonderful, Del, but he costs us a lot at Christmas," John whispered on their way up. "He's been here so long I think they built the place around him."
When she crossed the room she had to navigate between two chairs she called Scylla and Charybdis, though only to herself. But she let it go; eventually she was certain she'd prevail. John had given a few things to his elder daughter, Bonnie, who lived with her husband and baby in New Jersey, but they were inconsequential—a Moroccan hassock, a few palm-sized netsukes and a terra cotta wall fountain whose absence left its ghostly outline on the wall, a few shades lighter than the paint. As for Melody, the younger of the two, she was out west somewhere, living with a pile of friends in a green and purple bus—her father always said this with his eyes cast to heaven—looking for herself. She surely could not lessen the load.

The trouble at hand started, instead, in the kitchen. Bad enough that it was the typical narrow, unappealing Upper West Side galley at the end of the hall—everybody suffered with those; it was remarkable that so many good cooks survived them. And she was no one to complain: her old apartment's stove and small refrigerator had hung right out into her all-purpose living room, one busy wall meant to be inconspicuous. It was only that the counter was cluttered with appliances and a good deal of space was monopolized by a huge, ghastly cookie jar, its round haunches pastel ceramic—pink, blue, buttercup yellow—shaped like a bear. There were no cookies inside, not even crumbs. It had become a statue.

There was no place to move it, but she found a space in the pantry—oh, bliss, a whole little closet nearly the size of the kitchen! Maybe she would finally learn to cook!—and there she stashed it on a bottom shelf between a jar of flour and another of ancient, caked-up sugar.

How could he have noticed its absence—he even gave a little cry of dismay—when men were said not to pay much attention to their surroundings? Without a word he surveyed the shelves, discovered the ceramic bear in the pantry flanked by those jars, retrieved it and set it back in its original spot. Della watched from the doorway.

"The girls bought us this for one of our anniversaries. It's—" He didn't finish the sentence but she supplied the word and knew that, though it was not the first time he would think it, it would not be the last: precious. She was touched by the sentiment and by the way
he would not inhibit his emotions; she had had enough, over the years, of the male propensity for sheltering, even forbidding, their tenderest feelings.

She put her arms around him from behind and rested her head against his firm, warm back. This is what it meant that he had had a life before she’d found her way into it. All honor to those years, and to Herta, whose reputation made her seem entirely admirable and worthy to be grieved for. What did he see, what did he feel, when he stood, canted forward slightly under her weight, studying the fat shiny paunch of the cookie jar like something on a pedestal in the Uffizi? She couldn’t imagine. But she knew what she felt—like an intruder.

Looks aside, Della was no material girl. The necessity of unburdening herself of her modest possessions had wrung no tears from her. She had left some of them, her bed, her wobbly old dresser with its sticky drawers, and had given a few lamps and her kitchen things to Goodwill. No memories attached to any of that. She planned to argue for her desk because it was familiar but, far more vigorously, for her favorite chair. Why did she not deserve one non-negotiable? Let it be her wide, accommodating, deep-pillowed nest, dark blue velour, light, almost gray, where it was worn, in which she had read a thousand books and written, on her lap, dozens of widely respected papers.

“It’s coming with us,” she had said, rather peremptorily, before she’d even been challenged. She had imposed on the husband of a friend to force it into his van and to take it up to the twelfth floor on the service elevator—John’s back again exempted him from heavy lifting.

But once it was in the study where she hoped to settle it, the whole unyielding weight of John’s old life came down upon her and crushed her into tears. There was no room for it—literally, figuratively, any way you looked at it. Bad enough that she’d given her desk to Goodwill; she’d tried to convince herself that its drawers had always been too shallow, its scarred surface too bumpy. That had been a sacrifice but she had made it in the spirit of compromise. Where did he expect her to work? At the dining room table? His study—
there was only one of them, though there was a guest room that he
kept for his visiting children—was as crammed as the other rooms:
the mahogany wall unit with its freighted shelves, the desk, the file
cabinets, the ornate gray tapestried chaise, which had apparently
served as the one place Herta had been passably comfortable during
her long illness. Della’s blue chair, tamped and cropped in all the
right places, stood now in the center of the room like some uninvited
animal. A buffalo, she thought. A baby elephant without a stall.

John did not appear to understand, which had to be willful. “It
won’t do,” he said casually and smiled at her.

“It has to do.” She pressed fists against her thighs. He had not seen
her tears beginning.

“But Della. Just look. Where would you suggest putting it? You
can’t clutter—”

“Clutter?! She had hoped to undo the living room’s riot of wood
and fabric and fringe so gradually that she would never have to
employ that word, but now there was no escaping it. “John, please.
Some of this will simply have to—you’re retired, you may have
noticed, so of the two of us . . .” She trailed off. “Any reasonable
person—”

He was looking at her with a disdain she had never seen. His eyes
actually narrowed. “I hate people who don’t finish their sentences.
Herta always completed her thoughts.”

All the things she would not, could not say collided in her mind,
a vast rear-end pile-up, with injuries. Could she possibly utter the
ultimatum that was shouldering its way forward—“It’s me or the
chair”? He would probably tell her he hated people who didn’t know
the difference between “me” and “I.”

She tried a desperate softness. “John, we have a problem here, we
really do.”

“I don’t have a problem.”

She pushed the tears back hard, bidding her eyes to suck them
in again. So this was what marital misery felt like—something you
wished you were dreaming, that you could wake up from, but that was
as shocking and real and irrevocable as an accident. Could this really
be what threatened to separate them, porcelain shepherds, initialed
towels, all this—tangibility? She had given up, reluctantly, so many rituals: the sweet, secret snacking; the tendency to leave her bed unmade and crawl back into a muddle of sheets without caring; her addiction to a few nonsensical TV series that peopled her evenings with the clamor of beautiful women addicted to dangerous passions. She had thrown away that comfort blanket, her raggedy beige robe that had accompanied her through decades. Not without sadness, she had assessed the needs of her new life and cut them off cold.

“We need an arbitrator, then,” she said. “Do we have to take this to a marriage counselor?” It was an appalling idea, that she might have to come clean with her repulsion by the horror vacui that made the apartment feel so foreign she walked through it like a visitor most of the time. So she ploughed ahead herself, trying not to provoke him to sarcasm. “I thought I heard the judge who married us say something about sharing our lives. About honoring each other’s needs. Was I hearing right or did I dream that?” Her voice sounded lofty, like someone else’s.

“That was boilerplate, dear. That’s the script that comes with the job. The question, of course, is how one determines whose needs must be paramount at any given moment. There are no abstract ‘needs,’ and you of all people ought to understand that.”

She could feel her heart pounding harder than it did when she climbed the three flights to her classroom. “I of all people? Why I of all people?”

“Your profession is a discipline that is comfortable with categories. I would imagine that you’d be adept at telling the general from the concrete and—”

“Yes, dear, the genus is sophistry and the species is—” She looked around for something light enough to lift and found a ceramic box with what looked like a pound of colorless fruit clotted on its lid. “The species is horse-shit,” she said—a word she had never used before—and threw it, aimed at the wall, not at her husband but, like her marriage, headed for destruction no matter what it hit.

The rage she took with her, out the door, into the elevator, all the way down the street to the park, circled around one question:
Where was the tender man, the thoughtful, considerate, kindly man she had trusted with her mind and her body? Could she in her inexperience, her desperation, have been so wrong in her assessment of him? If so, she was not to be trusted with an opinion about anything. Was he really this monster of selfishness, so cold, so unsympathetic? Even if they resolved this absurd problem, she had seen something terrifying in him. She didn't, she reflected, huddled on a bench, know him at all. It was as if he had struck her, and her body would remember its recoil, no matter how he might dissemble an apology.

But she went back, of course she went back. Jacques greeted her cheerfully when she came into the lobby and she found herself somehow smiling back at him, hoping that if her eyes were red, the January wind might take the blame.

She found John at his desk, staring at nothing. She'd been remembering, coming up in the elevator, the wedding of an instructor in her department, Neepa. The Hindu ceremony that took more than an hour, symbol upon symbol, crimson cloths wound around the hands of the young couple, rice mixed with something—or-other thrown at them by their parents, wreaths of flowers flung over their heads, on and on, had included one comic moment amidst the solemnity: Bride and groom stood with their backs to the audience—the congregation, whatever the onlookers were called—and raced to their thronelike chairs. The winner, the priest announced gaily, would have the upper hand in the marriage. The gallant groom held back, that was clear, and Neepa prevailed. So who, in fact, knew what their real balance of power would be? The only certainty was that, lovely though the moment might be, everyone acknowledged that there would always be contention ahead.

Della felt a pang of regret that she could not tell this story to John, this or any other story. Did she want him to be abject, she asked herself. Did she want him to grovel or only to give in? It isn't a competition, she lectured herself, and wondered if she meant that. It isn't about winning, though if he didn't renege and apologize, she was ready to pack her belongings, few as they were, and leave.

She sat herself stonily in her big blue chair and waited. Having
drawn her indelible line, she had nothing else to lose. She too looked
at nothing.

The late afternoon light was shifting; there was so little of it
anyway, there in the chasm of buildings, that it got dark here earlier
than it had in her old place. Depressing, this early pall. She listened
to the silence. John Cage was right: It was never silent, not even
close. If you meditated, would these sounds break through to you?
The acceleration of motors in their slight climb, a child’s voice calling
what must be a dog, some distant, barely audible construction noise,
a regular pounding. You could close your eyes and blot out what you
chose not to see but the ear is an involuntary recipient of anything,

Then what she realized she had begun to hear, just a few feet away,
was her husband weeping. It was more like gasping, more ex- than
inhalation. He seemed to be passive too, just sat and let himself weep
without moving, without covering his face, as if his tears were not
his but were being done to him. How odd, she thought, not to know
how to cry.

She went to him, there was no way not to, and knelt and put her
arms around him. “I’m sorry,” he was whispering, “I’m sorry, I’m
sorry. Della.”

She rocked him and murmured soothing syllables. “Don’t,” she
said to him. “Ah, love, don’t.” She did not want to prevail. The bride
and groom ought to have reached their seats together.

“I just may not be ready for this. It isn’t—I’m not the man who did
that to you, I don’t want to have that man inside me.” He capsized
again and she wiped his face with the tail of her blouse. “I never—I
feel like I’m burying her again is all, I thought that was over but
it’s—this time it’s so final. So final.”

“I know, I know,” she said, and knew that she didn’t know. To be
loved like that, for so long, what would that have been like? And
then to have to leave him. Him and her children and all those things
she’d nurtured as if they were alive. Those tangibles.

And to be left. No, her aloneness had been nothing like his. She
could not imagine.

“It isn’t about you, Dell.” He was recovering, smiling wanly, his
dignity returning fast. “Or your chair. Your damn ugly chair.”
“*You don’t have to say it, love. I know it’s not about me.*” Would that it had been. He’d had all those years of sheltering so many solid things—things that cast shadows—while she had had her empty tabletops, her half-filled closets. Now maybe they could begin to gather, one possession at a time, what might someday be theirs.
These Arms of Mine
Jeffrey Schultz

after Otis Redding

The recent past a ring of empty tall boys and the near future
summer's sweet evening music—hedge clippers and go-carts,
Cicada-buzz and children's distant squeals—, I twisted,
on the far end of our long walk home, my ankle landing
A short and joyous leap from the bar's garden ledge
to the sidewalk. Honey, you took my arm over your shoulder
And helped me, cursing, the rest of the way. Anymore,
it takes fresh injury to take my mind off the regular
Pains. I'd like to tell you something sweet, that the smoldering
ache that's taken up in my knee, in my lower back,

Burns off entirely when I hold you, but I'm trying to lie
less these days. And does that mean I ought to offer up
The uglier truths, the fact, for instance, that more and more
any given wince or writhe in bed may not be pleasure, but
strands
Of muscle pulled over-taut and snapped like guitar strings?

On the stereo, Isaac Brock's just managing to get the words out:
The good times are killing me. Everyone I love sings
with the strain of the defeated, and Otis is their king.
Leg elevated, reading liner notes on the living room couch,
I can't help but notice these arms of mine. Already, the skin's
Falling away from the muscle underneath, and I can't keep track which of the past's idiocies are marked by which scars. A rough descent from some chain-link or slivered glass? Dog's tooth or the hard crash on cold gravel after leaping from a train? It's a wonder I'm alive, but let's face it, I'm a mess. And in the far-off future, light angles, lemon, through someday's window And spreads across the bedsheets. Outside, the sky's pale blue and thin as a robin's egg, and the bees work on the last Of the hydrangea, petals pale blue and cool as the skin draped over what's left of this flesh. You're either beside me,

Still sleeping and about to wake, or you're not. I don't know, and I don't want to. For now, Otis and Isaac, Lou and a fragile Soprano keep my sad company, but you'll be home soon. I'll drag my ass into the kitchen, fix us something to eat, and then all evening, All through the evening, I'll hold you hard to everything that hurts.
SURRENDER
Yusef Komunyakaa

No, not again. I have to call Son House, Ma Rainey, Leadbelly, Robert Johnson's hellhounds to remind me of hairpin turns in the false labyrinth. The twelve doors of consolation have been flung wide open before a thorny field of blood-red blossoms. Somebody, some naked Ishtar of fusion & war, please tell me I am addle-headed as Caliban's sleepwalking apprentice.

Let me listen to Bud's B-flat Blues to see if the day can win back itself, to see if I can endure this chink in the breastplate, if this black clock still knows anything about the busted old knuckles of love & desire. The brain's manifold mutates till good is soaked with shit & blood, born with a claw in its mouth.

I have stood up for the beautiful hours of unreason & heartache, but it was an old Sam Cooke tune, Darling, you send me, that wedded me to perchance. Now I am on my stupid knees before the love-rumpled bed, begging a wing-footed goddess to untie my hands & enter a simple plea on my behalf.
Little shape shifter, lingering there on your quotidian twig of indifference, you are a glimpse of a rainbow, your eyes an iota of amber. If nature is mind, it knows you are always true, daring the human eye to see deeper. You are envy & solace approaching green, no more than an eye blink in a corner of the Old World. You are a tilt of the head & vantage point, neither this nor that, clearly prehistoric & futuristic, & then you are gone. In your little theater of osmosis, you're almost a piece of tropical work woven from the alchemist's skin habit. Called into the hanging garden, you sit there, almost unseen as dusky shadows climb the blooming Judas tree.
Two blues—one called serenity,
one looks like the gathering storm.
I had a tube of each in my paintbox in art school
back in the days when colors spoke.

Two blues,
the bland and the profound.
The ho-hum of a sky over Southern California—
you could call it bleu celeste or Egyptian blue.
Canaletto ground it out of lapis lazuli
for his Venetian skies.

That other blue might be used
to paint the scary ocean depths
off the Cape of Storms—
the color of the sea in Winslow Homer's "Gulf Stream,"
the terror in the black castaway's eyes
almost blanked out with titanium white—

perhaps the same pigment
Homer daubed on as turbulence
atop the cobalt blue waves
running battleship grey through the comfortless Gulf Stream.
Sharks circle, knowing they will eat red meat
when night falls.
Those two colors tutor us in disaster,
at first as we have no hint of anything gone amiss,
anything to threaten our obliviousness,
our sense that life sparkles,
that there is such a thing as a career,
goals to be set and achieved.

Sometimes existence becomes a substance so depleted
one says to oneself:
If I can just make it across while the green walking light
stays illuminated,
then I'll walk halfway down the block
one step at a time,
watch the footing,
then back to the apartment,
make tea and, grasping the tray firmly with both hands,
inch back upstairs.

Though surely existence is limitless—
the spirit's measureless reach,
all the mind does,
memory's scope and inside-outness.
All that one understands now
which one previously had not.

To look out at traffic,
hear a taxi honk its horn on Highgate Hill,
and not have to venture out into otherness.

Recovering from an accident where one is obliged to
get both feet onto a step before moving
down to the next,
how enlivening it is on such a morning
to sit by the radiator and read sentences like these:
Drake had him beheaded alongside the gibbet from which Magellan hung his mutineers, Quesada and Mendoza, fifty-eight winters before. Wood preserves well in Patagonia. The coopers of the Pelican sawed the post and made tankards as souvenirs for the crew.

Two blues open the world. I'm almost glad I fell. How else would I be made aware of desperation, of those realities the staff in the emergency room see daily and nightly and gladly try to hide behind their talk of weekend plans and Valentine's Day?

And these bruises on my face— purple of the two black eyes rainbowing to the mood indigo Duke Ellington wrote about. Next an unsavory yellow like the rind of a gone-off Persian melon scattered among coffee grounds and empty raki bottles outside a waterside restaurant in Istanbul on the last day of August.

Burgundy blooms under my eyes like the velvet of a sultan's caftan, and then they glow with that red in the morning where sailors take warning.
DESIRE

Like everything good, it begins with a mystery. A wondering. A need to discover.
You find yourself listening to weather reports about places you’ve never been and imagining your talent in that particular air. Or you find yourself dreaming over maps, looking at the small blue circles, the shortest and most distant places that will welcome you safely out of the sky. The voice in the back of your head whispers, “I want to go there.” And you nod. Someday, you think. Someday soon.

In my office, looking at the Raven Map of the whole of North America, my eyes cannot pass Lake Manicouagan, in Quebec, a lake that looks like a circular river, narrow but round, like an Escher print or a Möbius strip, with an island in the middle. It’s the fifth largest impact crater on Earth, one of the thousand places where something from heaven crashed into the soil. The island is called René-Levasseur. Its highest point is Mount Babel. And on the north side, outside the circle, in a place called Gagnon, an abandoned runway that could welcome a spaceship. What would it be like, I wonder, to fly that circle? Each time a little lower, each time a little faster. The evergreens and granite rushing by. Each time the smile on my face a little larger. Then the hard climb to see it all again. The Eye of Quebec, it’s been called. An easy landing.

And if not there, perhaps then what is called The Northwest Angle of Minnesota, the little bit of land on the north side of the Lake of the Woods. At the end of the Revolutionary War, at the Treaty of Paris, the Americans wanted all of the Mississippi River, and a bad map said it went much farther north than it really does. So a line was drawn, and some ground on the north side of the lake became a part
of what later became Minnesota. You can’t get there by car without entering Canada first. But you can ride in a boat. Or you can fly. There is an airfield—the most northern one in the lower 48—but it’s a private strip. Turf. You have to have permission to land, unless it’s winter, when the turf is buried in snow and you have to land on the ice-road plowed in the lake. Of course, I have no good reason to go there. And that is the perfect reason to go. To find a corner, an edge, a border of any sort, and nudge it just a little.

Or somewhere, anywhere really, in the desert. The long, open red-brown land. Mesas and plateaus. Vistas over canyons and arroyos. The blue gleam of water in the distance. The way the ground can suddenly open below you and fall a thousand feet to some stream carving the rock. The Grand Canyon has its own sectional map and I’ve always wanted to place my hand on the Great Unconformity. At the Grand Canyon West field, the earth falls away from the south end of the runway into a canyon so fast I cannot imagine any pilot immune to the question.

In truth, I do not fly to go anywhere. I fly to be flying. So when I imagine a trip what I imagine most is long distance. Fargo to Bismarck, for example, then on to Dickinson, the Badlands of North Dakota. Then on to Miles City, Montana, then Billings and my friends at the tanker base, where they refuel and reload the airplanes that drop slurry on wildfires. Then even farther to Livingston, where in my imagination I spend a night and the next morning rise over the last bit of flatland before crossing into the Paradise Valley and following the Yellowstone River south, a hard turn east through the high hard walls of Yankee Jim Canyon, past the slick chute mountain face called the Devil’s Slide, until the airplane slows and descends and finally lands in Gardiner, at the north end of Yellowstone National Park, a mountain airfield graced by a river on one side. Six hundred and nineteen point seven miles from here to there. Six hundred and nineteen point seven miles from there back home.

The solo long cross-country is a rite of passage, a part of every student pilot’s training. Can you get there, wherever there might be? Can you draw a line on your chart, mark the waypoints on the ground, calculate your time and fuel and what heading you need to fly to compensate
for the wind? Once you take off, and once you leave the familiar sites of your town, can you find a place to land? Every pilot does this. No shorter than 150 nautical miles. No fewer than three landings. And when every pilot lands and ties down the airplane, what they have is a new story. An adventure. A success. And once you have the full ticket in your hand, once you are no longer a student but a real pilot, you begin to dream the larger dreams. Where can I go, you wonder?

Every place I see on the map has a call for me, an urging to come visit. But there has always been one place to go first. My father was a private pilot, though he hasn’t flown in probably forty-five years. My mother was a flight attendant for Trans World Airlines. Because I made the mistake of being reasonable, I did not learn to fly when I was young. But now, more than anything else, I want to land an airplane and see them smile. I want to bring an airplane home.

Fargo to Jackson, Minnesota. Jackson to Creston, Iowa. Creston to Camdenton, Missouri. Five hundred and sixty-nine point five miles from home to home. Five hundred and sixty-nine point five miles back. One day down and one day back, when the hard cold and storms of a prairie winter break and I can get into the air.

**ART**

On the ground, there is no way to imagine the world is this pretty. Sure, there are photographs from airplanes and from outer space. We’ve seen the mountain flybys in the movies and the rush of water toward some beachfront on television. We have calendars in our offices and homes that show us what the pilot, the astronaut, the skydiver sees. But each of these is static and cold. It’s one thing to see the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in a book, worried that your coffee might spill, listening to the radio or to children or traffic, and it’s quite another thing to be standing, looking up at the thing itself, feeling your soul rise toward that promise. Art is not only representation. Art is experience. Your gut has to be there as well as your eyes or your ears. There is a feeling to art, a way the insides of your knees can know Mozart or Le Cordon Bleu, the way your shoulders can know a poem.

Three thousand feet above sea level, two thousand feet above this
bit of ground, what I see this morning is how every little farmstead rests just off center on the border of the section of land. Every section a square. Every section carved out of the ice and snow like the sheets of a wedding cake, surrounded by the browns of country roads. Shelterbelts look like a Charles Beck print.

When I pass a small tree farm, young evergreens surrounded by a shelterbelt of much older oaks and maples—Beautiful country, I say to myself. I pass a small, lonely looking, weathered barn sitting unprotected in the middle of a frozen and ice-covered section of land. That would not have been fun, I think. Whatever home would have been next to it is gone.

I am sure there are stories. You look at these farms, the falling down and abandoned and gray barns and houses and shacks, the tracks on the land, the trees sticking out of the snow in some unlikely spot, like the single tree in the frozen lake at the lowest circle of hell. You look at the curve of a frozen stream running through a field and there is no way not to wonder what the first people here thought of winter. Blizzards and sun dogs. Hard, hard cold.

The ground passes beneath me, section after section of land goes by, and I remember my friend Daryl Ritchison, a meteorologist, telling me that winter is subtle. Twenty thousand shades of white and gray, I think. Twenty thousand just to begin to talk about how sunlight reflects off farmland snowfields, and how that reflection changes with the angle of the sun rising into the sky, the sun dogs diminishing. And how to describe, how to include the hint of very cold air I get on my face and hands, despite the cabin heat being turned on full? How do I include the sound of the engine, the radio calls, the small lifts and bumps of the air? How do I say the way my finger rests on the trim wheel is a part of the beauty of this land? There are horses at the farmstead to my right. There is a field of corn left standing off to my left.

First the Red River, and then the Buffalo River, and now just the small streams—they all are frozen. You wouldn't even know they are there. But the trees that border them make a line, curving and twisting, a line that contradicts and perhaps betrays the order of the section roads.
Coming up on a little wetland here, some ponds and some reeds, the color of the earth changes from the shock of white snow to the mottled brown of plants and water. Even though this is ice today, you can tell that this is habitat, wetland, a place where water pools.

The town of Morris goes by. The town of Montevideo goes by. On the radio, I listen to airplanes self-announce their arrivals and departures. There's a helicopter landing in Milbank, and I have to look at my chart because I didn't think South Dakota was so close, but it is.

I cannot explain the beauty of shelterbelts and section roads. Just squares cut into the snowcap of a prairie winter. But then it hits me. It's like looking at a painting by Piet Mondrian. The white canvas, the straight black lines, the boxes of color. Hard black lines. Primary colors. The red box here. The blue box there. The yellow box too. The right angles and high contrast. "The absolute harmony of straight lines and pure colors underlying the visible world," he said. Neoplasticism replacing Cubism. Eleven paintings completely redone after he fled Europe and World War Two, to give them more "boogie-woogie."

Off to the right I can see Big Stone Lake and the Traverse Gap. This, I think, is the place where everything changes, although you can't see it from the ground. This was the southern end of Lake Agassiz, the continent's largest inland sea ever, at its best in the Pleistocene. There are shark's teeth in the bedrock here. Water on the north side of the gap flows to Hudson Bay and then into the Arctic. Water on the south side flows to the Gulf of Mexico. A continental divide on the prairie. The water on the north side becomes the Red River of the North, which flows past my home. The water on the south side becomes the Minnesota River, which flows into the Mississippi. Once upon a real time, the books say the drainage was sudden, catastrophic, gouging a valley to the south that the river would never fill. Glacial River Warren, long since gone, was one of the three main drains for the retreating lake. Today, though, the lake is long and narrow. Small islands named Goose and Manhattan and Skeleton and Mud and Kite and Pancake and Frying Pan. Cottonwoods, ash, silver maple trees define the frozen shoreline.
Two Nine Bravo flies along and I am wondering what Thomas Jefferson, the great surveyor, the president who commanded that the country be measured and marked, the man responsible for the unfailing lines that have become the Midwestern section roads, would think about redoing it all for more boogie-woogie. Then—and who knows why these thoughts come when they do—I get another image. The frozen sections and weathered gray farmsteads look exactly like the old World War Two photographs, taken by pilots in airplanes, of convoys of ships at sea.

WHY I LOVE 3,000 FEET

I remember a winter's night a great many years ago. I was lucky enough to be in a private jet, flying from somewhere east to somewhere west, and we had just passed 40,000 feet. I knelt in the small space between and behind the crew. The pilot showed me the lights of St. Louis and the lights of Chicago at the same time. I could see the curve of the Earth. It was all very pretty and all very quiet. Disconnected, too. I remember thinking that we had somehow moved from the world of body and blood to the world of math.

In every pilot's flight-bag there is a book called the FAR/AIM. It comes out every year. The Federal Aviation Regulations/Aeronautical Information Manual. It's the rule book for flying. It's a fat book, government and legal-speak, and also the voice of experience. You think you're alone in the sky, for example, because airplanes, even very big airplanes, are hard to see unless there is some high-contrast background—or if they are very close. Even an airplane at your altitude and flying directly at you remains a pinprick in the sky until you're screaming and pushing the yoke hard down and hoping to God that there's time and enough space in the air.

So there are rules to keep the airplanes apart. And some of those rules say how high.

- **91.159 VFR cruising altitude or flight level.**
  Except while holding in a holding pattern of 2 minutes or
less, or while turning, each person operating an aircraft under VFR in level cruising flight more than 3,000 feet above the surface shall maintain the appropriate altitude or flight level prescribed below, unless otherwise authorized by ATC:

(a) When operating below 18,000 feet MSL and—

(1) On a magnetic course of zero degrees through 179 degrees, any odd thousand foot MSL altitude +500 feet (such as 3,500, 5,500, or 7,500); or

(2) On a magnetic course of 180 degrees through 359 degrees, any even thousand foot MSL altitude +500 feet (such as 4,500, 6,500, or 8,500).

(b) When operating above 18,000 feet MSL, maintain the altitude or flight level assigned by ATC.

But notice the exception: “... more than 3,000 feet above the surface ...”. Of course, below 3,000 feet there are rules as well.

- 91.119 Minimum safe altitudes: General

Except when necessary for takeoff and landing, no person may operate an aircraft below the following altitudes:

(a) Anywhere. An altitude allowing, if a power unit fails, an emergency landing without undue hazard to persons or property on the surface.

(b) Over congested areas: Over any congested area of a city, town, or settlement, or over any open air assembly of persons, an altitude of 1,000 feet above the highest obstacle within a horizontal radius of 2,000 feet of the aircraft.

(c) Over other than congested areas: An altitude of 500 feet above the surface, except over open water or sparsely populated areas. In those cases, the aircraft may not be operated closer than 500 feet to any person, vessel, vehicle, or structure.
Passing from southern Minnesota into Iowa, my airspeed is 93 knots. 2,200 rpm. My ground speed is only 73.5 knots. The altimeter in Two Nine Bravo says 3,000 feet. But that would be true only if I were flying over the ocean on what is called a standard day. The prairie beneath me is roughly 1,200 feet above sea level, so my real altitude is 1,800 feet. At this altitude, I can tell you the color of your mittens. I can even tell you if they match. I can tell you if the car is rusted and if the window is open. At 1,800 feet I get everything. Distance and intimacy. The clouds that won't be here for hours. Snow angels in the farmstead's backyard.

A short distance away from Jackson, south of a town called Pocahontas and east of a town called Storm Lake, a wind farm passes below me. Far too many to count, the white piers and elegant blades turn slowly. It has all the order of a well-planned English garden. In the midst of the wind farm, however, there are farmsteads. Yellow outbuildings. Quonset huts. Shelterbelts. The weathered gray hulk, listing heavily to starboard, of a very old barn.

I wonder, as I pass over the blades, what it must be like to live here. Humbling, each daybreak, to see the rotation of the Earth brought down those towers and turned into power? Or something larger, more encouraging, each spin of the blades sending off into infinity a type of hope, like a Tibetan prayer flag, each snap sending a prayer to heaven?

“Infinity for the human eye is thirty-six inches.”

I am on the telephone with Dr. Gary Renier, an optometrist in Fargo and a fine photographer. I am asking about the way a person sees distance, about how the human eye, the pilot's eye, can scan an instrument panel and then the ground. And I am wondering if there is distance where the distance no longer matters, like the infinity setting on a camera lens.

“That's all?” I ask.

“That's it,” he says. “But you need to remember there's a lot of other things going on that affect your sight from the airplane.”
He runs me through the familiar stuff about the rods and cones in the back of the eye—cones pick up color, rods pick up black and white; cones are more sensitive, rods are more peripheral—but then we start to talk about limits. “Even if your vision is 20/20 in the macular,” he says, “that’s only in one part of your eye. And that good part can be only two degrees of the eye. Your vision in the periphery can be 20/100. So you have to scan. We all scan, all the time.

And especially now, with the snow, we have to filter the monochromatic landscape to see the waves of snow, the way a snow skier would use an amber lens. At 2,000 feet above the ground you can still pick up colors. At higher altitude, there is a lot less oxygen and lots more ultraviolet radiation between you and ground. Both of these make what you’re seeing more difficult. And there’s a lot more UV coming off the North Dakota snow than there is off, say, the Texas desert.”

“What about the UV filter for a camera lens?” I ask. “What about the UV rating on my sunglasses and in the windshield of the airplane?”

“They’re great, aren’t they?” he asks. “But remember that they are filters. They are removing wavelengths from what you see. If you had polarized gray lenses in your glasses, you would have a very hard time seeing a green light on your dash. The wavelengths are too close. Ever notice that a stop sign isn’t really red? It has a little bit of orange in it. And ever notice that green lights are sort of a lime green with a little yellow in it? Those are both because of how we see, and how we age. Men especially have a color deficit as they get older.”

“What about just the brightness of the snow?”

“There’s a trade-off,” he says. “The smaller the pupil, the better your depth perception, the better your depth of field.”

Pilots talk about five types of altitude: Indicated altitude is what the altimeter says when it’s set to the current air pressure. True altitude is the distance above sea level. Absolute altitude is the distance above the ground. Pressure altitude is what the altimeter would say if the
pressure scale were set to 29.92, a theoretical standard. Density altitude is the pressure altitude corrected for temperature.

Each type of altitude has its purpose. Indicated altitude is a way to say where you are compared to other airplanes. Absolute altitude is a number to keep you alive. Density altitude tells you how the airplane will behave. But perhaps there should be a sixth type of altitude. The altitude of appreciation, perhaps. Or the altitude of participation. Between the Rockies and the Appalachians, between the Gulf of Mexico and the Beaufort Sea, 3,000 feet means you can see the people outside the house, standing next to a car, at a farmstead underneath a wind tower, and when two of them wave at you, and you rock your wings in reply, you can see the other two will wave as well.

**CRASHING IN IOWA**

The snow on the ground is going away. Every mile south there seems to be just a little less. It's a bit like watching a movie with the seasons set to fast forward. South of Jackson, crossing the Iowa border, the snow looks more like splats of white paint thrown against the brown earth. Wind splats, I think. I can tell the direction of the wind in the storm that made these marks. It was from the northwest. And where there is no snow I can see the marks left by tractors and plows in the earth. They seem to be the same in every field. But then I realize that every mark is an individual history. A mark made by one farmer driving one tractor with one hope in mind, that the earth would remember this mark and turn it to something good.

Every single one of them wanted to get here fast. The schedule was full and hard and speed was important. The bus wasn't working. But a plane was nearby, a Beechcraft Bonanza. And there was a pilot who was willing. They checked the weather more than once. There was bad weather coming. But they felt they could get under it and speed along just fine. Some of the guys on the bus flipped a coin to see who would go.
On February 3, 1959, Buddy Holly, Ritchie Valens, and Jiles P. Richardson—the Big Bopper—died in an Iowa plane crash. They took off late from Mason City, just after 1:00 a.m., in light snow, and crashed almost immediately, about five miles north of the airport. Witnesses say they could see the red tail light go down. The reports say the pilot was in a plane he didn’t really know, in weather conditions he did not anticipate, with a different type of attitude indicator or artificial horizon than he was familiar with. The instrument in the Bonanza would read exactly the opposite of what he was used to. He was a commercial pilot but not an instrument pilot. In fact, he had failed an instrument checkride. Weather briefers did not tell him about the incoming weather because he did not ask.

Only the pilot’s body was found inside the airplane. The others had been hurled away by the force of the crash. Holly was twenty-two years old. Richardson was twenty-eight. Valens was seventeen. The pilot, Roger Peterson, was only twenty-one. They were on their way to Moorhead, landing at Hector Field in Fargo.

Leaving Jackson, Mason City is only minutes to the east.

And then there was the other crash everyone knows. United Airlines Flight 232 from Denver to Chicago. July 19, 1989. A DC-10. Two hundred and eighty-five passengers; eleven crew members. A perfectly normal flight in clear daylight weather. Little packages of peanuts. A choice of soda or coffee. Wine in First Class. But then a fan disk in the engine in the tail came apart, exploded really, and shrapnel cut through all three hydraulic systems. The pilot, a man named Alfred Haynes, had no flight controls. No elevators. No rudder. No ailerons. Nothing to steer or control the airplane. First Officer William Records and Flight Engineer Dudley Dvorak knew this was not going to end well. In the back, a DC-10 instructor also knew the play had gone off script. He offered to help, and when he got up front he learned all they had were the engines under the wings. Power the right one a bit more and they could turn to the left. Power the left one for a turn to the right. Reduce power on both and they could descend. So he kneeled on the cockpit floor and put both hands on the thrust controls.

Later investigations would discover the fan had a crack, and the
crack should have been seen during inspections, and the crack was
due to a problem with the way the blade was made. But for now
all that mattered was getting the plane to the ground. At Sioux
City, they rolled the fire trucks and alerted the hospitals. The plane
dumped fuel and turned to reduce altitude, then tried to line up with
the shorter runway, where the fire trucks were waiting, having been
told the long runway would be used. Everyone scrambled.

They almost made it. Going too fast, descending too quickly, they
almost made it. But a wing clipped the ground, the airplane broke
apart, everything caught on fire and all hell came to visit. One hundred
and eleven people died. One hundred and eighty-five people survived,
though one hundred and seventy-two of those were injured.

Leaving Jackson, Sioux City is only minutes to the west.

Pilots carry crash stories. When the machine breaks, your heart
breaks with it, imagining the fight on the way down, the checklists
and the imagination trying to find a way to avoid gravity. When the
pilot makes a bad decision, though, you feel something different.
You feel bad for the people in back, and for their families, but you
shake your head at the pilot. Flying does not forgive the unprepared
or the foolish. It’s a shame, you think. He should have known better.
We imagine ourselves in the left seat, and add that story to the list
of what not to do.

Some things you do in the back of your head. You do them always,
but not with any real effort. It’s a part of the training. Make something
so common, so usual, so part of the routine that you fail to notice
anymore that it’s what you’re doing. Picking out emergency landing
places is one of these for a pilot. And for a pilot like me, Midwestern,
flatland, rural, mostly daytime flying, it’s easy. Section roads are the
best. A level field could do. The interstate highways would provide
some interesting stories back home. If the machine breaks, there is a
very large difference between an emergency landing and a crash.

Central Iowa, the snow giving way to brown earth, though the
lakes are still frozen, and Two Nine Bravo is humming along. The
headwind remains, but otherwise this is a perfect flight. No bad weather. No turbulence. No problems with the navigation or the machine. But I still see a road and think, "I could land there." Then I forget it. A few minutes later, I think, "I could land there." And then I forget it.

The headwind remains. My airspeed is 90 knots. My ground speed is 67.5 knots. That's a little more than 75 miles an hour, the speed limit on I-29 in the Dakotas. This is going to be a long flight.

Still an hour north of Creston, I pick out an emergency landing site but then wonder about my choice. What I see looks like a serpent, an old-school etching of a sea monster. No, I think, it's Nessie! The Loch Ness Monster. Black humps rising out of a white sea. When I get a bit closer, I see it's a country road cutting across a small bundle of hills, though hill is too strong of a word. Rises? Wrinkles? Something like that. When the road crests each small elevation, the wind has scraped the snow and ice away and left it brown. In each depression, the snow remains.

"Can't land there," I think. And then I start laughing, because I can imagine trying. Each rise throwing me and Two Nine Bravo back into the air like a Motocross racer on a motorcycle. Or, to be more exact, me and Two Nine Bravo riding the hills like that claymation figure riding the hills on an electric razor in the old Christmas special television commercials.

Getting out of trouble is serious business. Imagining trouble, even when your imagination is a bit off center, is one way to never get there in the first place.

GOODBYE T-REX

I admit I am looking for a crash site, another mark on the earth. Even from 3,000 feet I should be able to see it. It should be huge. I know it's invisible from the ground now, but my hope says there should be something, some echo, some mark only those people looking for it will be able to see from altitude. This is something important. This is something I want to see.

In the history of crashes, this is one of the big ones, though
very few people know about it. A gigantic, earth-cracking, sky-blackening, thunder-whomping crash. Straight out of the heavens. Literally. And it's been all swept away, covered up, hidden from anyone without the expertise and the special equipment you need to see it.

Imagine a lush, subtropical sea. Imagine an Earth much warmer than now. It's 74 million years ago, give or take a few. Iowa doesn't look much like Iowa. It has a coastline. In the water there are Mosasaurs, Pterosaurs, and Plesiosaurs (Nessie!). On ground there are Hadrosaurs, Alamosaurus, Torosaurus, Paprasaurolophus, Troodons and Triceratops, Tyrannosaurs.

It's a typical day, whatever a typical day may have been like, and then a whoosh before the wham. And then everything is gone. A stoney meteorite two kilometers across falls out of the sky and the resulting crater is twenty-five miles across. Everything in Iowa is dead. So is everything in Nebraska, Missouri, Illinois, Wisconsin, and Minnesota. The early research on this site proposed that this was the hit that took out everything—all the dinosaurs, nearly everything on Earth. No one knew this crater was here until core samples from wells revealed a pattern. But the big one, the hit that took out everything, the K-T boundary extinction event, happened 65 million years ago. Manson, they discovered, was just the warm up act. It's 10 million years older, give or take a few.

So, I think, blast a chunk out of Iowa and I should be able to see it. I should be able to see some part of it. Some hill. Some ridge. Some something! This is the largest crater in the United States. But I already know why I cannot. The glaciers came. The ice sheets and the grinding cold. The land was scraped. The crater was filled in. And when the glaciers retreated, the land was smoothed and leveled. According to the surveys, there are between 70 and 300 feet of glacial till on top of the hole.

Flying along, I pass just west of Manson and certainly over some part of the crater. All I can see are flatland sections, farmsteads, country roads. Cows where there used to be dinosaurs.

Multiple windmills.
FINAL APPROACH

There is no snow in Missouri. The rivers have ice in the slow spots, and some farm ponds have a thin covering too, but the earth is brown and black and open. When I cross the winding and chocolate-colored Missouri River, I smile. Even though I have not lived here for a very long time, this is home ground. I was born in Kansas City. I went to college and the first bit of graduate school in Columbia. This is the state where I fell in love. This is where I got married. This is where I got a great many speeding tickets. This is where my parents and my sister live. This is where my wife’s sister and my father’s sister live. I have friends, good friends, on both sides of the state as well as in the middle. This is where people know the old stories. Nearly every road has seen my tires. But this is the first time I’ve come in from the sky.

When I cross the Missouri, my GPS tells me there is military airspace in front of me. Whiteman Air Force Base is ahead and off to the west. Home of the B-2 bomber. I wonder what they must think of little planes like Two Nine Bravo. Every single pilot there began his or her training in a plane like this one. Every single pilot there, though, has moved on. Someone there is watching me on a radar screen. We will not talk to each other. But that person will watch.

I cross I-70. I pass Sedalia, too. Every sight is familiar, though from altitude they come to me as fresh and wonder-giving as if they were new.

When the lake shows up, the long Gravois arm of the Lake of the Ozarks, I feel like I could coast in on the memories alone. Farmland gives way to forest first. And the gunmetal gray of winter water in twilight.

LANDING


I do not expect an answer, but suddenly there is one.

“Cessna Two Nine Bravo, Camdenton. Winds One Seventy at Ten.”
I look for the airport. I've been here before, or at least next to it on the ground, and I know where it sits. It's not a big runway—75 feet by 4,000 feet—but it's the biggest I've landed on today. This should be easy.

"Cessna Two Nine Bravo, Camdenton. Just want to let you know your parents are here."

"Oh great," I say. "No pressure there. Two Nine Bravo."

"They just want to see how many landings you can get in."

I cross the Osage River branch of the lake, and then the Niangua River branch. Lin Creek is off to the left. So many stories here. So many hours on boats. So many hours in the water, on skis, swimming, goofing off, racing.

I descend to pattern altitude. And then I can see it—the runway in front of me. There are PAPI lights to tell me if I'm on the right glide path and I see four white lights, which means I'm too high, so I point the nose down and go through the routine.

"Camdenton, Cessna Two Nine Bravo on final for One Five, Camdenton."

Carb heat. Flaps. Speed down to seventy knots.

I'm dead-on the glide-path, two white lights and two red. Then I see the telephone wires. They have those little red balls attached so there's no way I can miss them. I look at the PAPI lights. I'm exactly where I should be, but I don't like the look of those wires. I've never landed here before and I don't know how close the glide path will bring me. The sun is setting and I don't know if one sudden wind could hang me upside down and sparking. So I stay a bit high. Four white lights again.

This is Two Nine Bravo, I think. This is the most wonderful little airplane in the sky. And in the back of my mind I remember a video I saw of a C-130 coming in for what they called a tactical landing. Staying high until the last moment, the plane suddenly pointed its nose toward the ground and dove fast and hard. Leveling off at the last moment, it touched down right on the numbers.

I'm not about to try something like that, I think, but I stay a bit high until I cross the telephone wires then I push the yoke forward and dive toward the numbers. I level off, flare, and touch down
easily. Although I don't see him, my father is standing in the grass between the runway and the terminal, arms raised, two thumbs up. My mother, standing outside the terminal building, is beaming.

THE RIDE

It takes a moment to get into Two Nine Bravo, but my father can't wait. Once he's in the right seat and the seat belts are connected, I hand him the extra headset. He scans the instruments, though from his side many are difficult to see.

"Ready?" I ask.

"Let's go!" he says.

We taxi back onto the runway, turn to the south, and I push in the throttle. Two Nine Bravo rolls down the centerline and when we have enough speed I pull back on the yoke. Elegantly we climb over the runway and then back to the right.

We do not have much time. But as soon as we are level and looking at the home ground, I ask if he wants to take the controls.

His hands come up immediately. I know my mother is listening, so I key the microphone.

"Camdenton, Two Nine Bravo. Just want to let you know that Fred is flying the airplane."

I can imagine what my mother must think.

We fly over the cut for the new interstate highway. We fly over shopping centers and neighborhoods. We fly over the center of town. We bank gently left and gently right. Forty-five years, give or take, since he last held the controls of an airplane and every move is as smooth as if he flew yesterday. Forty-five years, give or take, and he still carries his pilot's license in his wallet.

We turn back toward the airport and I take over the controls. On final approach, I point out the telephone wires and we do another little dive at the end. The landing is perfect. As we taxi to the spot where I will shut down the airplane, tie her down, and cover the engine with the thermal blanket, I tell my father that he was my very first passenger.
“Really?” he asks.
Really.
My mom comes out to the plane and we get everything put away and secure. There are a thousand stories to tell from just this last little tour, and a thousand more to tell from the flight to get here. Even though we leave the airport and Two Nine Bravo is quiet, we are 3,000 feet over the middle of the country and, at least until we fall asleep, we will never land.

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Neruda's fountain pen was a tree limb,  
Large even in his hands, the vein of ink dark as earth.  
When he wrote, wind stirred his journal,  
Rain slapped gutters,  
    sunlight blazed on his poems,  
Fruit dropped from a dozen different trees,  
And the sea rolled its knuckles repeatedly  
Against the shore.  
    And we could speak of lightning,  
Of a crab dragging its claws like wrenches,  
Of Lorca's shivering shadow held against a wall.  
Over coffee mellowed by milk, we could speak of sugar  
On a worker's back, of an onion with its buried tears,  
Of a composer's need for the mood  
To retrieve him from sleep.

Neruda scratched out poems in the shape of Chile,  
His head lit with sweat,  
For it took mighty strength to move earth and sea.  
The fountain pen was a log,  
His fingers the fingers of a man  
Who pounded leather for a living,  
Who rose before morning to spank dough into bread,  
Who carted oranges, who scooped peanuts into sacks,  
Who rubbed oils into hairlines  
Receding like the sea.
The earth turns, and we turn with it,
Poets gripping chalk, pencils, pens,
Or sticks with which to write love’s name in sand—
So what if a wave eats away what we’ve written?
When Neruda dotted the end of a sentence,
When he stood up at his desk
And capped his gold-tipped nib,
Others quickly dipped their own pens
Into the still dark but eternally wet ink.
Mexican sparrows picking at seeds
is it, seeds of some black-thorned grass?
Or do they eat the dust itself,
white grit blown off the desert to scrub the cobbles
copper-blue underfoot? Cactus hedges,
some yellow vine I don’t know the word for
in this town, this tongue, stone walls
overgrown with purple bougainvillaea
like a college of prelates
wearing strange, multi-pointed hats,
or tiny box kites above some miniscule town
where even smaller kids play
hooky and baseball in abandoned fields
and crash their kites in scrubby trees
and do not feel regret. Gratitude
for that, for not storing a world of loss
in their small hearts.
Gratitude for the past which rolls like smoke
from the old river-front mills and gratitude
that it is the past, that it is gone
and I am warm in the shade of this grape arbor,
snapped from my revery like an aloe stem.
For stones and petals, gratitude, for tongues,
for thorny grass beloved of goats,
for industrial rivers,
for baseballs, for bunches of grapes,
for the balm of the aloe,
for the vigilant sparrows and the dust
they live on.
Awful to blame the climate for all this
blissful misery, to call the fetid, fretful tropics
Cupid and pin the rap on scissor-tailed frigate birds
dicing equatorial sunsets into unescorted paper dolls.

Enter, stage left, the fateful cashew,
fruit of Eros' insubordinate womb: wave a warm
goodbye to all those frigid Nova Scotian taboos,
hauling off on Labrador's icy current to Greenland's fjords or
Iceland's odor of herring and sulphur,
jury-rigged dories bound for sub-Arctic islets.

*Kah-zhu. Like a sneeze in Chinese,
like a summer home for Kublai Khan as Coleridge
might have had it, had not he lost it,
narcotically enrapt, at a knock upon the door.

O, where is my very own
Person of Porlock to stem this lugubrious tide!

Quayside, no doubt, booking her passage,
readying to reboard that trusty steed,
*S.S. Abandonment.*

Thus ends my sojourn on Crusoe's cloud-dump.
Uneternally yours, my dearliest Friday,
very warmest regards, et cetera. It appears we are under way already, or it is under us. Xanadu is no place for such ladies or downfallen Yankees as we, eh, Miss Breen? And she: *Zanzibar? Now there is an enchanting island!*
Hörlust, roughly “hearing passion,” pleasure in sound, but also pain as the child Tchaikovsky weeping in his bed screams, “This music. It’s here in my head. Save me from it.” His mother’s voice peals like a bell. His father’s chair squeals as he rises from his meal in E above C . . . Save me from the run of octaves in my skull subtle as an owl’s. Save me from the door slam and the plain song of the mosquito, the pandemonium of car alarms, the Donald Duck of the mall, and the twelve-tone row of the adored. It’s here in my head, the tunings of the world sitar, the phrasings of the sax, the heave ’ e’ yo of stevedores, what Whitman had in his head with the blab of the pave and the voice of a streetcar conductor he loved.

When it’s quiet, but it’s never quiet, I hear the hum or hiss, that mammal or reptile, in the ark somewhere and the caterwaul of the pulse and the god thud. It’s in here. It’s nowhere. When we wanted Manuel Noriega out of his asylum in the diplomatic mission of the Vatican we played Van Halen’s “Pan-neh-mah-ab-ab, whoo, until the Vatican complained. They have some mortally boring nerve. Listen, it’s the clamor or the aura of the subdued you hear. A sob, a rasp, a drone. Sound the thrill, sound the tempered clavier. A voice makes a sound tearing the air, the veil rent, the entrails spilled. Cold is a sound you feel in your back teeth where they stuck the needle. Still you must listen for the racket of the cricket’s front knees or the electric locks of the jail. Click in E above C. Still, but it’s never still, you must pet the cat until the cat can’t stand it, the feedback of nervous static and the self made by the loop of sensation becomes the poet praising a god aroused to anger by the ugly and put to sleep by the beauty
of the mallet and anvil in the inner ear. There’s a photo of Thelonius Monk under the lid of a piano at Minton’s, New York 1949, like a snapshot of Hörlust. You can see he’s making the sounds in his head come out all over the staves. Offsetting the harmonies. He’s leaning over the soundboard on top of the hammers. The smoke from his cigarette makes a long stem of a note, then something like a bass clef. He smoked in quarter notes and rests. His stylish attack and swell. Man, piano, smoke—half killed by it, half wanting to kill.
Then the crisis call comes in—problems with the heart and the head and the rest, often, problems with manliness, money, problems with what love is what with the windfall, what with the wind, October in the moment you don’t know, can’t know until then the tenderness from the short fall, the sentiment from the sore, what with your thumb on a button, your fingers in some danger. What? Wait. Are you in some danger? What with memory a feckless, sexy librarian, who takes off the dust jackets, mis-shelves the books: art in politics, politics in art, whispers the call numbers. Remember books? The terrible leaves of the 20 lb paper shed for you. You don’t remember, do you? Although October is familiar, the reds and yellows, you don’t remember when now became the interval, when the interval became the bardo of wrathful and peaceful moments with wind, beautiful enraged moments you misremember as crickets, dusk. Was that your thumb and forefinger around the nipple? The voice on the other end says, but I love him. You don’t remember the fell, the buck, the skid, the limb, the quarter, the stacks, what with the glut of summer. Remember the sap giving way to the stump of now, what with the apples smelling like the chemical warnings of animals: snakes and vixen and the gall of wasps. It’s human to ignore the call: the kid held over the scalding water. What? I put the phone down and I was armless, of course, what with the alarm, what with the harm I could not hear, what with the buzz, what with the ghosts. The problem was the rest. And the kid already tender, blue in places, already nibbled on by the soul. Remember the soul? It’s the black, white, sallow, olive, red, black kids I’m afraid for. Encultured like pearls, although they don’t know, can’t know until then. They know wind shears and squalls. They know October shoves you two-armed into the street where you are tender, and don’t know it in the moment, the brain being scalded by sex
and forgetful. The kids are a vector for violence living as they do in the wind,
and why should they get roughed up by the articulation of someone’s heart-head problem since they have (countable nouns here) stuff spun from straw as in a fairy tale. The call comes through the corded phone, remember those? And I’m tethered. And it’s unforgiveable. It’s later now I’m afraid for Raekwon, Ariana, and for the boy named Infinite. I’m afraid I don’t recall the fuckery that was all, that was summer, spring, fall. The gnats and the midges ghost around the ginkgos, the city’s musk. And swallows sputter in the intervals, the crickets find the last warm. The (countable noun) is put into a bag to drown. And you remember the water as warm and your father as loving and your mother as home.
I am making straight for my table by the window to eat when whom should I see in line behind me but Mrs. Liang, the other Chinese lady, who never used to come on Thursdays but now here she is. "Good afternoon, Mrs. Liang," I say very nicely, "would you like to join me for lunch?" She nods, also nicely, and I point out my table which is still completely empty since most of the others who come for lunch on Thursdays know that I am always the first one to sit at the table by the window. Ronnie sits there too, and Gloria, who is ridiculously deaf so you don't have to bother trying to include her in the conversation. Mr. Murphy sits there once in a while; he's an Irishman but I don't think he drinks because his nose looks very young though he's eighty-two years old and the rest of him is spotted. There's another man in a wheelchair; the helpers at Little House put him at my table because they know I will wave them over if he spills too much food on himself. He can't say much but it doesn't matter because I can speak for him which some of the others don't do, maybe they are too embarrassed or think it's none of their business, the well-being of others. I took care of my husband for fifty years before he passed last year. The helpers at Little House remember Cecil well. "He was a nice man," they tell me often, when I ask them for a second dessert because the Little House chocolate pudding was Cecil's favorite. "You have to wait until everyone has been served," the young ones tell me, but the older workers bring me the second dessert when they come to pour our water. Cecil would want me to invite Mrs. Liang to join me, which I don't mind doing so long as she doesn't mention her grandson.

Mrs. Liang sets down her tray and I see right away that she's put on weight around the middle. She's wearing a crocheted sweater that bulges like a money belt under its lumpy surface, this lady who
used to dress like she was too good for the rest of us. Her husband Joe is gone so maybe she reaches for any old thing in her closet though back when we had husbands, her old things were always nicer than my best. Joe had money from a Hong Kong connection; Cecil said it wasn't gangster money and that I should curb my wild imagination, though truth be told, I always made him laugh because I showed him exactly what I meant whenever I told him a story: a cold-blooded gangster crouching in a doorway, a drunken cook who was chasing a squawky chicken, a rich lady, head down, hurrying to the abortionist because her lover's wife had gotten reports in America and was coming back home to check up on her husband. Everything Cecil had he earned by hard work and investments. He never asked his family for anything he didn't deserve. When I played the rich lady, I put my nose straight up in the air and didn't look to my left or my right. Ha ha, Cecil said, for a plain good woman, you know how the other half lives. Once we got to America, we didn't have servants anymore.

"You look very nice today," I say to Mrs. Liang. I am speaking in English, which I speak very well because I learned it young, the way you're supposed to, at Miss Allingham's School in Shanghai. Mrs. Liang speaks it too, almost as well as I do, but her Chinese is full of peculiar expressions that only those people from the countryside say. Anyway, both of us are so used to English by now. We never had to ask our children to translate.

"Thank you," she replies, smoothing that lumpy sweater when any other lady would protest and joke that she has gotten fat. This is always the way with this particular lady. I won't say she brags about her money like Mrs. Chow's sister—what a hotshot she thinks she is, making a big show after dinner of taking her toothpicks out of a gold-plated case; you'd think they were made of ivory the way she holds them daintily with the tips of her fingers as though they weren't used for digging pork shreds from her teeth—but Mrs. Liang has little ways of setting herself apart. Joe wasn't like that. Cecil liked Joe; they used to go to the racetrack together, and Joe said Cecil brought him good luck though Joe lost money while most of the time Cecil was winning. So that's what I mean by Cecil's investments. He bought
Janny’s bedroom set with his winnings one year, white canopy bed with hearts and flowers.

“T’m surprised to see you here,” I say. On Thursdays, lunch at Little House is only three seventy-five. The Sigal Foundation gave a two-year grant to subsidize Thursdays, and that’s a very nice way to spend your money, not wasted on dusty museums or lazy heirs but given straight to the people who count their pennies every week. On Mondays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays, they charge the full six dollars. “Don’t you usually come on Mondays, Tuesdays, or Wednesdays?” Mrs. Liang nods. “I don’t like the food they serve on Thursdays,” she says.

Well, that takes the cake, because her tray is piled high with macaroni pasta and two pieces of bread and two pats of dairy spread.

“Really?” I say, staring at her plate. “Cecil and I always liked Thursdays the best. The other days, the menu never changes, but on Thursdays the chef always makes a nice surprise.” There is no Friday, so Thursdays, it’s true, they use what’s left over.

“Joe always said Cecil was a natural born gambler.” Mrs. Liang sticks her fork into her mound of pasta and carries a load to her mouth. My mouth drops open just like hers. What have I done to deserve such rudeness other than invite this lonely lady to share my table by the window? She’s acting like a peasant who will trample her neighbor to grab the sweetest melon.

“It’s too bad that your husband didn’t have my husband’s good fortune,” I say. “It wasn’t Joe’s fault that he lost so often; he was a smart man, everybody knows. Probably the ancestors are restless spirits, not buried well or burdened by family shame.”

“Oh, in America we don’t worry about such things as ghosts and evil spirits and all that old-fashioned nonsense.” A lie, I know it, because Joe is buried in the best section of Mesa Verde where all the Chinese want to go because the feng shui is ideal. I tried to buy a plot there for Cecil and me; all full, they told me, and then six months later Joe Liang went right in.

“Ha ha,” I say. “I don’t have the nerve to offend the ancestors like you. I may be American but I am still Chinese.”
“America doesn’t want you if you don’t want to be like them. Look what’s happening to immigrants these days. All those fences they’re building at the borders. Joe always told Norman: you have to join in and beat the other fellow, that’s how you find out what good you are for this life. Now, Norman”—that’s her son, a well-mannered boy; he takes after his father—“he never felt that he was at any kind of disadvantage. He didn’t complain that the world didn’t treat him right. Did I tell you that his son, the one who went to Stanford, is now a Navy SEAL? That’s the most elite kind of American soldier.”

Here we go, the grandson, and I’m not even through with my soup.

“That’s very nice for you, having a grandson who will get the chance to travel. He can send you postcards from deserts all over the world. My granddaughter, Amy, she might go to Canada this summer. Have you ever been to Canada? Cecil and I saw the Rockies there one year.” I have the good taste not to mention that Amy will soon be the lead in her high school play.

Mrs. Liang sets down her fork for the first time since we started. She puts the corner of her napkin to her eye. “Joe always wanted to see the Canadian Rockies. He loved to ride the train. He said it would be nice to go by train in the summer.”

We finish our soup and the macaroni pasta.

“You and Joe got to go back to China.”

“Six times,” says Mrs. Liang. “And now there’s a scholarship at Joe’s old high school.”

“I hear that Shanghai looks nothing like it used to.”

“It looks like Star Wars. All tall buildings with tops like rockets.”

I know what she’s talking about. Amy and I watched the DVDs together. Amy would make a good Chinese Princess Leia. “Miss Allingham’s School is probably not there anymore,” I say.

Mrs. Liang nods. “Old things have to make way for the new.”

Suddenly I give a little chuckle. Mrs. Liang looks at me, laughing a little too. “We’re hot now,” I tell her. “All the young people want to go to China!”

“Under globalization, it’s cool to be Chinese!”

“So you’re Chinese?” says Ronnie, the other lady who sits at the window table. She sits down and takes everything off her tray, the
way she does, first the soup, then the plate of pasta, the bread, the fruit cup, the plastic glass for water. She pushes her tray into the middle of the table where there isn’t enough room, and Mrs. Liang and I have to pull our trays closer. “I thought you were Korean! Isn’t it silly, I didn’t want to ask, because my late husband’s brother fought in the war against the Koreans, not that it matters, it was all so long ago. He came home changed but the family kept quiet. Anyway, all these Thursday lunches, and here I was, thinking you were Korean, when in fact, you’re Chinese, and the Chinese were on our side in one of the wars, weren’t they? Besides, things change, countries do too, and you speak such good English that it’s easy to talk to you. I don’t understand these people who won’t learn English, like the girls at the nail parlor who do my manicures. Why bother to come here at all?”

I glance at Mrs. Liang. She is staring at Ronnie’s hands; then she looks up at me and raises her eyebrows. Yes, she is right; I never noticed before what ugly hands Ronnie has, the skin so dry it looks like her knuckles have dandruff, and with red painted nails that look foolish on such an old witch.

“This is my good friend, Mrs. Liang,” I tell Ronnie. “I’m very happy to see her. Our husbands were old friends who shared many of the same interests. From now on, if she comes on a Thursday, I’ll be saving a seat for Mrs. Liang by the window.”

“What about Gloria?” Ronnie cranes her neck, looking for her friend Gloria, who isn’t here today, or maybe she’s figured out that Ronnie isn’t worth her time, not that it matters to Gloria, who’s so deaf that that’s probably the reason she puts up with Ronnie; she can’t hear a word of what Ronnie has to say.

“She’s at another table,” I say, and I watch Ronnie twitch her woodpecker head in all directions looking for Gloria. A lady her age shouldn’t pile her hair like that.

“Well, I’m not giving up my seat at this table,” Ronnie says. “I like the window and it’s been my seat forever.”

“I’ve been thinking about switching to Mondays anyway,” I say. “I hear the food’s better on Mondays. Fresher food is nicer, don’t you think?”

“They do a nice navy bean soup on Mondays,” Mrs. Liang says.
We make a plan to come for lunch on Monday next week.

It doesn’t last very long, this warm and friendly feeling between Mrs. Liang and me. Before the navy bean soup has left the ladle, she starts telling me about how she’s remodeling her kitchen. “I want to update the condo in case my son has to sell it.” It’s bad luck to worry aloud about when you might pass over. They live at the top of the hill near the duck pond. Mrs. Chow told me that they overpaid for the condo, yet here is Mrs. Liang putting in granite countertops and a stacked washer and dryer. Cecil and I used to own a house but now I live with my daughter, Janny. Not a day goes by that I don’t dream that I still have the house. I wouldn’t change a thing about it, no new countertops, no stacked washer and dryer, just live in it like before with my old pots and pans and the doorbell that sounded like a church chime.

“But you’re so lucky,” Mrs. Liang interrupts my dreaming, “that you have a daughter who is willing to take you in. My daughter-in-law said that I could have their spare bedroom, but I said no. I’d have to give up so much of my independence.”

“Oh,” I say innocently, “Mrs. Liang, did you finally learn how to drive?”

“Drive, who needs to drive? The Rediwheels bus picks me up right at my front door and takes me wherever I need to go—the doctor’s, the store, the public library. Right here to Little House for navy bean soup.” She slurps a big spoonful with too much enthusiasm, and smashed navy bean drops onto her blouse, so now I can see how come her clothes don’t look like they used to. Where is her son, that he isn’t looking after his mother? A new washer and dryer won’t do the laundry for you.

“In China, we always had a driver.” I’m not a bad driver, only one fender bender in the past six months, not my fault: he was talking on his cell phone and stopped very fast when he should have kept moving.

“My grandson, Michael, he likes to drive me too. ‘Where shall we go today?’ he asks me. He took me to see the Stanford campus before he became a Navy SEAL.”
“I don’t take every meal with my daughter and her husband.” What’s a seal? Her grandson belongs in a zoo, not the army. “Most of the time, I eat an earlier supper, and on Thursdays I drive myself here.” Janny and her husband both work at their kitchen table. Freelance, they call it, but they pay all their taxes just as if they had a boss. I don’t want to live with you, I told Janny directly, but she’s very pious and she and her husband insisted and I had to sell the house to pay taxes of my own.

“Which part of the house is yours?” Mrs. Liang asks me just when one of the young ones comes over to clear away our trays. As her tray sails off, Mrs. Liang leans over to grab at a roll but she misses. The young one frowns and gives her mine, which I only nibbled.

“I live downstairs, not anywhere near my daughter. It’s a three-bedroom house. Very big, lots of sliders.” Mrs. Liang made sure to tell me that she was replacing her back door with sliders.

Mrs. Liang nods knowingly. “It’s not so good to sleep near your married daughter.” She’s taking aim at me the way she swiped at her hard roll. She has her grandson but Janny has only a daughter.

“That Mrs. Liang!” I fume to my daughter, Janny. “If Joe hadn’t been such a good friend to Cecil, I wouldn’t give her the time of day!” Two or three times, Joe loaned Cecil money when some of Cecil’s investments didn’t turn out the way he expected. Cecil offered to pay him interest, but Joe wouldn’t take it. I’ll bring them my orange cake, I promised Cecil, though it pained me to think of standing at their front door with my head bowed down and a cake heavy in my hands, and then I didn’t do it because Joe told me his wife wouldn’t eat it, she was always watching her weight. Cecil was mad at me, but I said, Joe told me not to, and then he stopped fretting and went back to his job at the restaurant. He always intended to repay Joe one day.

“All brand-new granite counters,” I say, puffing out my cheeks and sticking out my stomach to look like the new Mrs. Liang. I show Janny how she slurps when she’s eating navy bean soup. I can capture Mrs. Liang’s exact expression because my nose has grown wider now that my hair is so thin.

Janny peers up from the kitchen table. All day long she hunches
at her laptop computer. Why couldn't she be a pretty girl like I was? When I was Janny's age and even after I was married, there were men who liked to look me over. Joe Liang, he looked at me more than once, though Mrs. Liang pretended not to notice. Janny's voice is soft and uncertain; she makes me think of a factory worker drowned out by the noise of machinery. I worked as a seamstress, just for a little while, and then Joe loaned Cecil a few extra dollars so I could quit and take proper care of my daughter.

"She's lonely," says Janny. "Uncle Joe's only been gone since October."

"She's always going on about making changes and you better keep up with the times but she's the one who is so old-fashioned! She thinks having a grandson is better than Amy! Amy, Amy!" I call to my granddaughter.

"Don't," begs Janny. "I just got her to sit down and finally do her homework."

"Just five minutes, how is that any bother?"

Amy runs into the kitchen to give me a hug. She's eighteen years old, as beautiful a girl as you would see in the movies. I can't believe it, she's almost six feet tall; it must be her father, the tallest Chinese in his class. He was good at basketball and then he married Janny. Joe gave his approval the first time they were introduced. He'd make a good son-in-law, he told Cecil, and that was enough to make Cecil give his consent. Why is she even asking? I said to Cecil, disgusted. A modern girl doesn't need her father's permission! Amy takes after me. She's not anything like her mother. She looks you right in the eye and laughs out loud when she wants to.

"Granny, guess what? I got a callback for the lead in the play!"

"That's wonderful!" I grab my girl by her slender waist, and we skip around the kitchen, knocking the back of Janny's chair.

"Be careful with Granny! She can't afford a fall!"

I ignore Janny and skip a little harder.

"I mean, a fall might break her hip," explains Janny weakly.

"Money, money, money, money," sings Amy. It's from a pop song, I think. Amy, like me, gets tired of such talk. "I like being with you, Granny," she says to me, squeezing. "You never worry like my
mom does all the time.” And then she hunches and shivers in exact imitation of Janny, so I do it too until we both are screeching.

“Out damned spot! Out, I say!” I lift my hand to examine it in the kitchen and turn to chide Janny. “You said she wouldn’t get it. You said the teacher wouldn’t choose a Chinese for the best part.”

“Mom doesn’t want me to be in the play,” says Janny, tossing her long black hair. The front is cut with a razor so there are strands that cup her face, like an artist has outlined her, the central figure in the palace courtyard, the one you’re supposed to notice enjoying her riches. You’d never see that in a real Chinese painting. It’s never a woman who’s got that kind of money. But Cecil’s happy on the other side so I know he’ll pave Amy’s path with gold.

“You schoolwork suffers when you don’t pay attention,” says Janny, but the way her eyes slide you can tell she knows that it’s too late to forbid it, and when has she ever said no to Amy? Amy and I have been practicing the part for weeks, memorizing the lines and studying up on the story. We know it’s bad luck to say the name of the play out loud; it’s an old acting tradition because saying the name brings you bad fortune. I’m sure that the teacher is going to pick Amy. “All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand. Oh, oh, oh!” I know the play well; we did a production at Miss Allingham’s School my last year there, before the war began, and even though I didn’t get to play the Lady, I played the Gentlewoman who tells exactly what she has seen—her boss, the Lady, reliving murder in her sleep. I’ve been showing Amy how to wash her hands in the air before her, and we stride the upstairs hallway, “Fie, my lord, fie!” Amy makes a magnificent Lady with her hair swinging wildly down by her face and her black eyes gleaming. “What hath quenched them hath given me fire!” she growls. I will sew her a red gown with bell sleeves and lace. Wait till I tell Mrs. Liang that my granddaughter Amy is going to play the lead.

But Mrs. Liang won’t let me tell her about Amy. All she wants to talk about is her grandson, Michael.

“SEAL,” she explains, “that stands for Sea, Air, Land. They get sent on the most important missions.” She uses the word elite again,
though she doesn’t know how to pronounce it. Ee-light. Her son would be embarrassed to hear her get it wrong. I never embarrass Janny, because when I make a mistake my confidence always saves me. I want Amy to learn that from me.

“What did Joe have to say? When his only grandson volunteered to become a soldier?” Joe and Cecil were soldiers in China until they got away one night like all the smart ones did. That’s how they met, going under the wire. Another one was shot but not Joe or Cecil, and after they got away, nobody came looking. They went back home to school until they got to this country. Joe knew exactly how bad the army is.

Mrs. Liang doesn’t have an answer. She looks away and pretends she didn’t hear me. Her spoon doesn’t dive down into her rice pudding. Ah ha, I think, so Joe wasn’t happy. Love your new country but no need to sign up to be killed.

“All wars are bad,” I say. “The government always lies to the people. You and I know that. But young people, they don’t listen to us. Joe knew it was better to take care of your family first.”

Mrs. Liang looks down at her soup bowl. I see her hands disappear under the table. “I guess he leaves the country tomorrow. My son called to tell me. I sent my grandson a letter. I should have mailed it sooner. I don’t think he’s gotten it yet.” She blows her nose into a shredded tissue. We are quiet together. She’s thinking, as I am, about what we remember. So many countries put their boots on China—the Japanese, British, Americans, French, and Germans, and then the Communists, who took everything left over. I should be used to losing houses. Mrs. Liang sighs and puts her hands back on the table. She doesn’t want to talk about her grandson anymore.

“How is your granddaughter, Amy?” she asks. So I tell her about how Amy got the callback for the lead. “I won’t say the name of the play out loud; that’s bad luck, all actors know it. It’s by William Shakespeare, about a man who murders the king so he can take over the throne.”

She shrugs, unimpressed. “Most of the plays fit that description.”

Maybe she thinks she knows more Shakespeare than I do, but she didn’t go to Miss Allingham’s School in Shanghai.
"There are three witches." I hold my spoon in my fist, stick it straight down into the navy bean soup, and start chanting with a cackle.

"Oh, you mean *Macbeth*," says Mrs. Liang.

I glare at her. "Don't say the name! It brings ill fortune!"

Mrs. Liang laughs. "I don't remember that Cecil was superstitious. In fact, Joe told me that Cecil was a very smart gambler. If he had chosen to go into business, he could have done well for himself. He played the odds, not the omens."

She's very clever. I can hardly argue that Cecil wasn't smart.

"Besides," says Mrs. Liang, "the curse of *Macbeth* only happens if you say the name of the play inside the theater. That's when actors call it 'The Scottish Play.' Otherwise, it's perfectly all right to say it."

She's wrong, of course, but I'm too polite to correct her. I tell her not to worry because I'm sure that the teacher will give Amy the part.

She shakes her head, such a difficult lady. "I don't choose to worry about that nonsense. If you walk around afraid, naturally bad things will happen. There's enough real trouble in the world without looking for it around every corner. 'Self-fulfilling prophecy.' Maybe you don't know the English."

Self-fulfilling prophecy! "Flirting with disaster," I answer in record time. When I clatter my spoon on my plate, it bounces once and falls from the table; she looks at me darkly so I know I've made my point. People look over, even the deaf old ladies. Maybe I'm talking a little louder than I should. She can't be right that I have no power, that I'm inviting bad luck to my door, but Mrs. Liang sits so straight, wiping her lips calmly, that for just one second, she almost has me worried. "If you weren't so proud," I tell her, "you could have good luck. Otherwise, who knows?"

She doesn't say a word to me, just keeps rubbing away at her mouth.

Mrs. Liang doesn't come for lunch the next Monday. I think about going to Little House on Thursday, but I walk to the park instead and eat my sandwich on a bench in the sun. Ronnie and Gloria will have filled up the table by now, and I don't want to go if I can't sit
by the window. Vitamin D makes your fingernails stronger, or is that E—I get the two mixed up. A mother sits down with a little boy in a stroller. I tug the boy’s hat down more firmly over his ears, and the mother jumps up like I’ve rubbed against his privates. “I guess it is kind of windy,” she says when I give her my look, and I point out how the boy’s nose is already dripping. Then I’m sorry I’ve done it because she hurries him into the car, and I finish my lunch with only the birds to talk to. My own nose is dripping so I swipe it with my handkerchief which I squeeze into a ball, thinking about Amy and how I must look. Does Amy see me the same way that mother did? I probably looked old to her, being all bundled up in my padded blue jacket and wearing a knit cap like her son’s pulled over my head, but Amy knows how well I skip in the kitchen and knows I can memorize as much and as fast as she can. She’s learned all of her lines and I’ve learned some of the man’s part so I can cue her, though I’d rather be the Lady than the King. He needs to be pushed to get anything accomplished, but his wife was strong until she went crazy. I had to push Cecil to go to Joe for the money. He didn’t want to; he was ashamed, he said. You saved him from the army, I had to remind my husband, and it was true, he showed Joe how to roll down the hill after dark and where the two of them could dive under the wire. Joe was happy to help Cecil whenever he asked. I’m sure Joe never mentioned anything to his wife; he knew she wasn’t happy when he looked me over, so why bring up the fact that he had loaned Cecil and me money? They had so much extra, there was no point in telling. Sometimes when I’m talking to Mrs. Liang, I feel like she’s staring at me and thinking about the money, but then we go on and the subject isn’t mentioned. She’s putting in granite countertops; she’s stacking her washer and dryer, and even after that, Mrs. Chow assures me, Mrs. Liang will have a lot left over. He wasn’t very good at the racetrack, but I guess Joe Liang was lucky enough where it counted.

“You better let me take you to the doctor,” says Janny, bringing me a cup of boiling hot water.

“I’m not sick!” My head aches and my chest is hurting but I won’t go unless they drag me. I’ve had words with that man at the Urgent
Care window. Say “Medi-Cal” to him and his brown face blackens.
“You should have stayed home for lunch, not sat in the park all alone.”
I glare at Janny but for once she doesn’t back down.
“You have no office! You work at the kitchen table! I don’t want to bother you when you are tap-tapping.”
“You said you were going to Little House,” says Janny. “I thought Aunt Heidi was meeting you there today.”
“Everybody else, when we got to America, we chose American names,” I call to Amy out in the hallway. “Your grandfather chose Cecil. I picked Mildred. That foolish old lady thinks she’s from the Swiss Alps. Don’t come in to hug me! Keep away so you don’t catch my cold.”
Amy ignores me and bounds into the room outstretched.
“Stop!” I command her. She drops on the bed, laughing, and hugs my feet instead.
“Your feet feel like corn husks,” she says, lifting them lightly.
“I’ll bring bad luck,” I tell her, frowning. “Go light the incense while we wait.” She brings me the telephone and sets it on my bed. If she got the part, the teacher will call her.
“You talk to her, Granny. I want it too badly.”
I beam at her mother and lie back like a queen on my pillow. When did Janny ever want something so much?
“If you’re not better tomorrow, I’m taking you to the doctor,” says Janny.
I try to sit up to answer but my head doesn’t raise itself quickly. I don’t like this Janny who’s speaking like that to her mother. She’s out the door before I can chide her. Mrs. Chow warned me about this very problem: how the children get bossy when they think we are dying. Or if we’re not dying, we’re sick or getting older. She has a daughter who always did what she told her; then Mr. Chow passed, and the daughter took control. Mrs. Chow will have to move to Philadelphia where the daughter is a teacher and the house is very small. Is Janny going to change like that and try to take over? I sink my head back into the worn-out pillow.
“Aunt Heidi is right, you know,” says Amy. “You only say ‘The
Scottish Play' when you're inside the theater.”

"Why make a bad bet when it's just as easy not to?" Michael Liang, for instance. He didn't have to put up his hand and go.

The telephone rings. I snatch it to my ear.

"Amy!" I am calling. "You got the part! You got the part of the Lady!" I clap my hands as my girl dances. She will have to go mad and that might tempt the spirits, but before that happens she'll wear a crown on her head.

I call Mrs. Chow. Where is Mrs. Liang? She's not showing up for lunch on Mondays. I went four times and didn't see her. I called her house but she didn't answer. It's not good news, Mrs. Chow tells me. Mrs. Liang isn't so happy. She misses Joe and worries about her grandson. From the day he left the country, she hasn't been able to sleep. Her son, Norman, has had to hire a lady to go over twice a week to cook food and make sure that Mrs. Liang washes.

"Are you sure?" I ask Mrs. Chow. "The last time I saw her, Mrs. Liang was eating. She told me that Rediwhels does all her driving for her."

"Norman wants her friends to go over to cheer her up."

I don't make any promise. After all, I told Mrs. Liang that Amy was going to get the lead part, and now look, Mrs. Liang won't leave her condo. She's jealous of me having such a beautiful granddaughter. She doesn't deserve to see Amy up on stage.

But tonight the play opens, and I have an extra ticket and I think of Mrs. Liang. It's been two months since we last had lunch together; wouldn't it be good of me to be nice to an old friend? Cecil would want me to treat Joe's wife well. Watching Amy would make anybody happy; she's so good in the part—her teacher has said so—and even Janny is excited, fussing over Amy's costumes and going early to sell refreshments. Mrs. Liang shouldn't miss such a special occasion. There's no need to call her; I'll make a nice surprise.

"Mrs. Liang!" I call as I knock on the front door, hard. She doesn't have a bell that sounds like a church chime. "It's me, Mildred, come to take you out!"
Mrs. Liang opens the door, and I have to peer in to see her. It’s a sunny spring day but her entryway is dark, and the drapes in the living room are closed tight over the windows. Mrs. Liang is a strange powdery color, as though she’s been standing under a forsythia and the yellow dust has drifted down and settled all over her face. She’s no longer fat but thin and wasted, and she’s wearing a shirt that looks like one of Joe’s. The sleeves are rolled up so I see her wrists and her cramped fingers, like little scrubbing brushes stuck on the ends of a stick. There is an undersmell in the house of nasty garbage and over that, the fresh cooking of a meat dish or two.

“Mrs. Liang!” I exclaim. I don’t want to touch her. “I came by to see you. How are you doing?”

A figure appears behind her, and I almost back away because I think that it’s Joe, returned to haunt his wife.

“Auntie Mildred!” says Norman. The expression on his face is so full of relief that I remember him as a boy, always glad to see Cecil, who took him to the racetrack and let him bet on ponies. “Mom,” says Norman. “Here is Mildred; say hello, say hello!”

Mrs. Liang does as he asks and then shuffles to the living room and sits down in Joe’s leather chair. There are dishes scattered on the floor near her feet and shredded Kleenex and a sanitary napkin, curled on its side like a fish.

“How are you, Auntie Mildred? I’m sorry I haven’t called you for a while. I’ve been a little busy.” Norman looks at me helplessly and wraps the dish towel he’s been holding around his right hand tightly.

“I came over to see if your mother would come out with me. I have an extra ticket to Amy’s play this evening.”

“Amy’s play, Mother,” says Norman. He leans over to touch her shoulder. “How nice of Auntie Mildred! Let’s help you get dressed.” He hurries into the kitchen to leave the towel, then shepherds his mother into her bedroom. I think he’ll call me in to dress her, but he doesn’t; instead, I wait for the longest time while I hear him persuading her to put on other clothes and brush her hair and use the toilet. When they come out of the bedroom, Mrs. Liang looks better. She says hello and meets my smile though she hasn’t let go of Norman.
“Here we go, Mother.” Norman unpeels her and hands her off while he drapes a sweater over her shoulders. “Thank you, Auntie Mildred,” he whispers into my ear. I lead Mrs. Liang down the sidewalk to my car and look back once to see Norman go inside. He has four hours to clean his mother’s condo, and I know he’ll get it spotless because he doesn’t know what else to do.

I park the car and take Mrs. Liang into the auditorium. She says she’s okay and manages a smile. Other than that, she doesn’t speak, and I think I better not ask about the condo or lunch dates or her grandson. I hope she’s not going to try anything funny like stand up in the middle and run out, crying. Shakespeare can have that effect on people. I once saw a grown man sob with his head in his hands. I’m a little bit sorry I brought her tonight, but then I remember the relief on Norman’s face and think, he’s right, Amy will do her good.

Trumpets blare, and the play begins. The witches stir and plot and huddle. They give their warnings along with their predictions but the gods never want us to heed what we already know. My girl walks on alone to read her husband’s letter and scorns the milk of human kindness. I almost can’t watch her, so fine she looks up onstage. I have to hold my breath like I’m swimming underwater because I know every line as well as she does and might forget myself and speak them out for her. At intermission, Mrs. Liang doesn’t have a word of praise for Amy but complains that the seat is awfully hard and she can’t see well and can’t hear much either. She asks me to take her to the bathroom. I crane to look for Janny but she’s already outside, selling Coca-Colas. It’s going to be crowded; we might not make it back to our seats in time, and I’m afraid to get up and disturb the way things are going, everything perfect, and Amy flawless. I tell Mrs. Liang to go find it herself, and she gets up and goes, good riddance.

Mrs. Liang doesn’t return. She doesn’t see Amy wash her hands in the air or the King cut down after the soldiers’ final battle. I don’t budge from my seat when the theater empties; I’m imagining what it feels like to stand on the stage and bow.
“Take me home,” says a voice, angry and tired. Mrs. Liang is blocking the aisle. Her hair is messed and her sweater is missing. “I want to see my granddaughter. Then we can go.” “I couldn’t get back in. They closed the doors and I didn’t know what to do. I sat outside waiting for you to come get me.” I hear people clapping outside the doors; the actors must be meeting their parents and friends in the hallway. I stand up to go to Amy. Mrs. Liang pokes me with the edge of her pocketbook. “I want to go home. You’ve got to take me. You’ll see her later. You get to see her every day.” “Yes, that’s right. I live with my daughter. I don’t have money like you do. But you have to wait until I talk to Amy.” “Take me home, now.” “In ten minutes.” I wish I’d brought flowers like some of the other parents. “You owe us money,” says Mrs. Liang. “You and your husband. Joe and I want our money back.” She might be yelling at me from the front of the stage, so loud are the words she’s shouting. But she’s the one who always talks about putting the past behind us. “Joe is dead. He doesn’t need the money. Cecil offered to pay it back many times, and Joe always told him that friends don’t keep track.” “Liar,” Mrs. Liang says. Her dull eyes have taken on life again. “Scrooge,” I say. She thinks she knows Shakespeare, does she know Dickens? “Macbeth,” says Mrs. Liang. “Macbeth, Macbeth, Macbeth.” “Shut up. You’re not allowed to say it. Get out of here if you’re going to talk like that.” “Macbeth, Macbeth, Macbeth.” Each time she says it, she jabs me hard with her pocketbook until I’m twisting it out of her hand, and we’re both shoving and shouting. “Granny!” screams Amy. “Granny, what are you doing?” She’s rushing downstage, coming to my rescue, and I turn just in time to see my girl topple. She doesn’t call out to me but looks up, surprised, her long fine limbs in a heap below the stage. “You did this!” My voice sounds crazy, and my fist is shaking. Then
Amy starts wailing, and I rush to go help her but first I promise Mrs. Liang with a look as fierce as a tiger’s that as sure as the gods are watching, someday we’ll finish our fight.

I don’t see her anymore for lunch on Mondays. She never apologized for Amy’s broken ankle, and I never wrote her after Michael was killed. I wrote to Norman but not to his mother. I read in the newspaper about the Medal of Honor. He threw himself on a grenade to protect his comrades. I tried to write her a letter but I couldn’t do it. The gods that I know, she doesn’t believe in. If I can’t explain what happened, what would I have to say?

I still live at Janny’s, but Amy is always busy. She was mad for a long time and then we stopped talking about it. I want to go with her when she goes away in September. I could cook for her and clean; she laughs a little. Oh, Granny, she says with a smile, you really are old-fashioned. It’s like a slap, the punishment in her pity.

I mean to go back to Little House on Thursdays. When the weather gets cold again and I can’t take my lunch to the park. Maybe she’ll come if her condo gets too lonely. If I go back to Little House, Ronnie and Gloria will make room for me at the table. What will we talk about? What do they know of war?
In his tiger-tooth necklace, his striped shirt, and black-rimmed glasses, he sits in the judge’s chair. He tells us how he died in Korea from a shrapnel wound and was resurrected by dope, how he died again in prison and was brought back to life by the poem. He tells us how the faces of his family helped him see through stone, how, even though the voice may be strident or angry, the poem comes from love. He tells us about feeling fucked up. He laughs. He makes the sound of the drum, kah doom/kah doom-doom kah doom/kah doom-doom-doom . . . He sings *Willow, Weep for Me*, for us.

He throws his head back, closes his eyes and sings. When he bends down into a poem in this courtroom where the murder trial has been postponed, he closes his eyes and we can hear frogs and crickets.
along a Mississippi roadside
and look up through the dark
at stars blinking in hell.
Cemetery in Kentucky
Greg Pape

The hours part us
But they bring us
Together again

Old stones with names we know,
plastic flowers faded by the sun,
blown by the wind, this little graveyard
on a hill where moss grows thick
as shag over the buried stories.
Who was Rebecca Soulerette?
Why does the mule standing back
in the trees in dusk hold so still?
Lichen grow among wool curls
on the lamb asleep in stone.
Ice and wind have pitted the cheeks
of the boy cherub kneeling over
the small grave of Freddie Peters.
Under the oak, shadows sway,
a cluster of black umbrellas.
There is some singing in the trees
that comes and goes. Hard truths
the haints rehearse, roots tugging
at their coal dark hearts, lifting
sighs and mumbled hymns through long
seasons of mud and snow to leaf out
green in sun along the limbs.
A scarlet tanager haunts these leaves
with fleeting joy, and a bobcat
slinks along the dirt track below
the power lines down the hill
sniffing for scent of its lost mate.
Roots of the oak form a seat
where one can sit and read
the stone words at the angel’s feet:
*Mothers plant the seeds of love
That bloom forever.* Fathers help some.
Budd Ball’s stone says he fought
and died in the Spanish-American War.
The angel cast in concrete cradles
a bird’s nest like an infant
in her arms, hope’s best tableau,
and her long hair and long dress
flow in a perpetual light breeze.
Her great, feathered wings look
as though they could lift her.
Sweet mother, forgive the fire,
we brought your ashes home.
Carrie didn't want to be the first one at the hotel, so she took her time driving north, enjoying the thought of Frances waiting for her. The popular foliage season had passed, and the Adirondack peaks were bundled in fog, but just outside Chicken Lake, the fog began to lift, and she saw skirts of evergreens emerging, and then, on a hill, the Second Wind Hotel. It had a tilted, furtive look, and seemed to be leaning forward, as if it wanted a closer view of the lake.

Frances had chosen the hotel for their tryst. They hadn't seen each other in three weeks, and planned to arrive in separate cars on Friday, and leave Sunday. Frances would return to Maine and her husband, and Carrie would go back to Poughkeepsie.

She entered the lobby, her heart racing, but Frances wasn't there, just empty furniture arranged in front of a sooty hearth, above which loomed the sorrowful face of a moose. Old snowshoes and skis were displayed on the walls, along with photographs of people on crutches, as if the hotel wanted to show a history of folly.

The desk clerk was young and wore a badge that said, "Jason. Intern." He told Carrie she had come at a good time. Any earlier, she'd have had to fight for elbowroom.

"Any messages?" she asked him.

"Enjoy yourself," he said, and explained that it was custom at the hotel for guests to read journal entries left by previous occupants and to write their own parting words. "The journals are very edifying," he added and gave her a key to the Owl Room. "Every room is named for indigenous creatures and entirely unique in décor."

Carrie saw herself and Frances in the Owl Room, doing indecorous things to each other. She felt a giddy rush of color rise to her face. Jason handed her some brochures and began talking about hotel chains and how a person could be totally anonymous and clueless.
about who’d occupied the room previously.

“Bad vibes,” he said. “Maybe the former occupants were criminals or a miserable couple. Bad vibes.”

“I never thought much about it, but I will now.”

“Of course, there could be good vibes left in those rooms,” he hollered as Carrie went to the elevator.

The Chicken Lake brochure showed a bright autumn day and a blond couple in a canoe, coins of light glittering on the water. She read that there were many bodies of water in the Adirondacks—“One for every day of the year!”—and visitors came from every corner of the globe for the “quietude and opportunity to sample nature’s bounty.”

The elevator doors wheezed open, and she faced a mirror that confirmed she was tired and her beige outfit was a bad choice. She looked sallow, her hair too determinedly jaunty, as if she were wearing a wig. At the end of the hallway, an obese man appeared to be picking himself up from the floor. The man scuttled into a room. The room next to hers was called the Eagle, and two pairs of muddy hiking boots were in front of the door.

Her room looked rustic and smelled musty—exposed beams, braided rugs, and solemn wildlife prints. A book on owls and a stack of journals were on the nightstand. There was no phone, no TV, no ashtray, not even a clock. She opened a window and looked out at the lake, its surface dimpled by a light rain. From somewhere deep in the woods came the sound of a single shot, and from the agitated crowns of trees, she saw birds scatter into the sky.

She lay on the bed and stared at a cabbage-shaped water stain on the ceiling. Was Frances playing a trick on her? Some sort of delaying game? And why did she pick a down-on-its-luck hotel?

As if preparing for a quiz, Carrie read that the Second Wind earned its name and reputation decades ago as an exclusive hotel that catered to wealthy visitors who came to the Adirondacks to mingle with their own kind, enjoy a robust cuisine, and recuperate from tuberculosis. Photographs showed blanketeted people in chairs on the veranda, attentive nurses nearby, while on the lawn, people played croquet.

She wondered if Frances, as a girl, had come here with her parents.
Leslee Becker

She tried to picture Frances as a child and saw a frail thing, long black hair in braids, braces on her teeth. It had been one of the first things Carrie told her in Las Vegas—that she liked her teeth—and Frances blushed. “In my case,” she’d said, “the correction didn’t work. Braces for years, but the teeth came right back to their original shape.”

They protruded and gave her a slight lisp that made her seem less severe and formal. She was tall, pale, and wore tailored outfits, her black hair cut closely against the nape of her neck, the longer sides draping the tips of her ears. Carrie liked how the back of Frances’s neck felt and the way that Frances’s teeth pushed against hers the first time they kissed in Carrie’s Las Vegas hotel room. “Now, you’ve done it,” Carrie told herself, after making love to Frances in a hotel devoted to excess. Frances looked reduced on the king-sized bed, and so utterly still during the lovemaking that Carrie felt absurdly inept, and asked Frances what her husband, Paul, did to her that she liked.

Frances smiled. “I like what you did to me. What you do to me. I want to keep us in the present tense.”

Frances’s words thrilled through her, and when they made love again, Carrie imagined that she was Paul—one more significant detail that separated this affair from past ones—the desire to be someone else.

“I feel transformed,” she’d told Frances. She was fifty-two, and had been honest when she told Frances she’d never felt this way before. “It’s a first for me, too,” Frances said. “Cheating on your husband?” “Doing it with a woman.” “Trouble,” Carrie’s gay friends insisted when she returned home and told them about Frances. They reminded her that Frances was only in her thirties, and likely experimenting. “Vegas,” they said, as if that explained everything, the affair starting in a city famous for making people delirious.

Their reactions didn’t surprise her. The odd and jarring part was the curious substitution of faces. She’d place herself back in Las Vegas to conjure every step that led to her affair with Frances, but the face
that intruded was that of Anna Hubbard, the autistic woman who delivered mail to Carrie’s office at the college.

“Hello,” Anna would bellow. “How are you? You look fit as a fiddle.”

Anna would watch Carrie’s face for a reaction, and Carrie would look at Anna’s flamboyant getups—frilly blouses in citrus colors, kilts, bulbous brown shoes—and say, “I’m fine, and you’re looking splendid today.”

“Is it happy?” Anna would ask as Carrie read her mail. “Is it sad?”

And she’d ask again about the time Carrie went on vacation and her cat disappeared. Missing for three weeks, but on the very night Carrie returned home, there was Rusty.

“He was fatter!” Anna would exclaim. “And you never found out the key to the mystery. It was snowing when you came back to your condominium. Rusty was fat and dry. It happened two years ago, in December, exactly one week before Christmas. Rusty stayed fat, even though you put him on a science diet.”

“I’ve got something for you,” she imagined telling Anna now. “A love story, but it’s up to you to decide if it’s sad or happy.”

She’d begin with a description of Las Vegas, but in her mind the starting place was an illness that had been a kingdom unto itself. She’d felt light-headed and tired, plagued by headaches for weeks. Her doctor ordered a chest x-ray and blood tests. As she awaited the news of her malignancy, everything began to move her. She saw a homely colleague combing his hair before a meeting and she wanted to weep for him, and the sight of an elderly couple at the supermarket with a thick wad of coupons provoked the same reaction. She couldn’t say that the illness had an ennobling effect, just that everything had become reduced in a pleasant way. No need to eat right and get plenty of exercise, and certainly no need to attend the fall conference for college administrators in Las Vegas, and so she was bewildered when she received the test results. She was in good health. The doctor said that it might’ve been a virus.

Frances attended the same conference, but it was only after they’d become acquainted that Carrie realized Frances had been the person sniffling and coughing during the meetings. Carrie was outside
having a cigarette, when Frances plunged into the glaring sun and leaned her head back.

"The air-conditioning," Frances said, "affects my sinuses. The rooms are absolutely frigid. I'm thinking of checking out early, calling it quits."

She questioned why the arrangers picked Las Vegas for the conference and pompously added that it wasn't her kind of place. Carrie looked down at Frances's shoes—serious things, black, with a chunky heel—and to goad Frances and prove her own flexibility, she said, "I've never been here before. I didn't think I'd like it, but the sight of those mountains at night, and those lights, well, it's prettier than I expected."

"It's this nasty cold. I should've stayed home to let it run its course."

"But here you are in the city of twenty-four-hour excitement."

Frances looked hurt, but, like a brave soldier, had gone back into the hotel.

Carrie heard voices in the Eagle Room, and the frank sound of a couple making love. She closed her eyes, and heard "Ooh, Daddy," from next door.

She looked up at the distempered ceiling, and then at her watch. Not quite five o'clock, and already dark outside. Frances was two hours late.

"Don't panic. I'm not going to suddenly show up at your doorstep and renounce my marriage," Frances had said on the last day of the conference.

Carrie couldn't recall what she said back, only the convulsion of pleasure she felt, and she'd think of Frances saying, "renounce," and the voluptuous feeling would return.

She lit a cigarette now and used the soap dish for an ashtray as she skimmed the most recent journal.

"I am here alone with the residue of those who came before me," said one entry, dated in June.

Carrie laughed and wondered if the lovers next door heard her.
“Had trouble with my plumbing and didn’t see a single owl. Just mosquitoes and black flies,” the journal entry continued.

“I don’t see the attraction.” “Hee, hee, oh my. This hits the spot. Oh boy. That’s the ticket. Freezing cold.” It was a man’s voice this time, coming from outside the hotel.

Carrie got up and looked out the window. The fat man she’d seen earlier was in the lake. She couldn’t see anyone else, but the man was cavorting in the water, as if for an appreciative audience. “Shivered my timbers,” she heard him say.

She closed the window, returned to bed, and tried to summon the feeling of lightness she had had in Las Vegas. She and Frances explored the Venetian Hotel, saw glamorous fountain displays and strolling minstrels serenading women on balconies. On a gondola ride, Frances held her hand as they watched the domed sky assume the properties of sunset.

She wondered how Frances had described Las Vegas to Paul, and if he laughed at her account of the chilly conference rooms, the artificial cityscapes, and the poor, deluded people who were seduced by the garish attractions.

“Pathetic,” Carrie’s lesbian friends said, and called her a sap for falling for a straight woman. But why did Frances target her? Some obvious weakness and susceptibility to unattainable women?

“I was a different person there,” she recalled telling Anna, when Anna asked about the city and the casinos. “I got carried away.”

“You got fleeced, but you still had fun. You saw famous personalities, and went on amusement rides. Rusty was happy when you came back.”

“He didn’t recognize me.”

“Your weight has been fluctuating,” Anna said, always a martyr to facts.

She would give Anna a gift on Monday, she decided, the clock from Las Vegas, with dice marking the hours, that Frances had given her. Anna would appreciate the present and be happy that Carrie had gotten over her illness.

“You got sick again this past Friday, and you missed work,” Anna would say, “but you’re back on your feet now. Your hair got fatter.”
“Lady Luck guided me here,” said the next journal entry, dated in July, the writer praising the hotel and its restorative powers. “I’ve got something now that no one can take away. Self-esteem, self-confidence, and self-love. It’s a Thursday night, and there’s a full moon. I have to go home tomorrow, but no matter how bad it gets there, I know I can overcome it and pretend I’m back here in the Owl Room. Thank you, Second Wind, and best wishes to the next person in this room.”

Carrie shook her head. She shuddered to think about what might’ve happened to the person who wrote the entry.

From downstairs came a sharp aroma of fish and vegetables. She was hungry, despite snacking in the car. She’d gained weight since Las Vegas by yielding to an increased appetite, getting up in the night to raid cupboards, Rusty watching her accusatorially. But in Las Vegas, she’d been unable to eat, and had watched Frances, her cheeks full and pink, go at her food with gusto.

A door slammed next door, and she heard a woman urging her partner to shut up about the fishing rod, or call the store and ask them to hold it for him.

“At this hour?” the man said. “That store’s closed. Besides, someone else probably bought it.”

“Dennis, enough. Have you learned anything? Any single thing?”

Carrie waited for the man to answer, but then heard the rumble of the elevator. She got out of bed, determined to go downstairs to eat. She’d have that, at least, and she could tell friends back in Poughkeepsie that she had definitely learned something edifying on this trip. Oh, the story she could tell now, beginning with Frances’s urgent phone calls, the start of the scheme Frances concocted, and she could describe herself, frantically working yesterday, so that she could take today off. A sick day. She was owed sick days, and she had been curt with Anna and her pathological desire to go over everything. “I’m not feeling up to it today. I’m going home,” she had told Anna on Thursday.

She had felt self-conscious at the hair salon when a stylist looked closely at her and asked what she wanted. “Something different. I just want something different.”
“Good for you,” the stylist said, and applied a dark brown rinse, then teased and shaped the hair to “promote a softer, fuller look.”

A mistake. The color looked reddish. She should’ve demanded a black rinse, and the puffy hairdo didn’t suit her at all.

And this morning, Rusty was sitting on the suitcase in the bedroom, a disbelieving look on his face. She tried to hug him, but he stalked off.

She heard someone coming down the hallway. She opened her door, and saw the fat man getting into the elevator, wearing floppy slippers and carrying a shopping bag.

She grabbed her cigarettes and went downstairs. Not a soul in the lobby, but she felt furtive in the phone booth when she heard a man’s voice on Frances’s answering machine say, “We’re indisposed at the moment, but—”

The waitress wore a dirndl and looked exasperated, though there were only three people in the dining room—the couple Carrie assumed were the occupants of the Eagle Room, and at a nearby table, the fat man. He nodded at her and patted the chair next to him. “I’m expecting someone,” she told him.

Then Jason appeared, carrying a bottle of champagne to the couple’s table.

“Any calls?” she asked him.

Jason shook his head.

“Bravo,” the fat man said when Jason popped the champagne cork. “Unfortunately, the bubbly and I are no longer a couple. Gout. The pain is searing, positively searing.” The couple looked down at his feet as he talked about circulation problems and his earlier dip in the lake. “Riveting. Good for the blood.”

He asked Carrie to join him again, and as soon as she sat down, he said, “I have allergies.” He showed her bottles of vitamins in the shopping bag. “These damp places wreak havoc with my system.”

“I’m allergic to cigarette smoke,” said the man at the next table. “Our room reeks of it. Someone’s been puffing away up there.”

Carrie felt her face turn red.

“What brings you here?” the fat man asked her. “Your health?”

She nodded.
"Moi aussi," he said, and began to describe ailments that suddenly started a year ago. "Too many afflictions to name. I'm in the Loon Room. Five years ago, I was in that very room, but I wasn't alone. Good thing we can't see into the future, isn't it? I looked back at my old journal entry. A mistake."

He introduced himself as Ted Nash and the couple as Dennis and Judy LaFramboise.

"We're from Colorado," Judy said. "We wanted a change of pace. Terrible drought back home."

"It's rained every day we've been here," her husband said.

"I think it might snow," Ted said. "I can feel it in my joints."

I'm in the company of the walking wounded, Carrie thought. "I'm worried about the roads," she said, and repeated that she was expecting someone.

"I haven't seen a newspaper in a week, or a single television program," Judy said. "At home, it's all I do, but since I've been here, I've had no desire to know what's going on. I'd give anything to see a moose, but we have to leave—"

"Shh," Ted said. "Did anyone hear that?"

They all craned their heads to listen. Wind lashed the trees, and Carrie heard something pinging against the windowpane.

"Sleet," Dennis said. "That's all we need."

"I had a feeling today," Carrie said, and mentioned the dread she'd felt at the sight of her luggage. "I was convinced I'd never see my home or Rusty again."

"It happens to me constantly," Ted said. "Worse, though, this time because I was preparing to face my demons. The ghosts of my past."

He sounded like someone who relished competition in medical disorders and personal setbacks, someone who'd record every calibration of his day in the journal. "Congestion," he'd write, "made worse by contact with secondhand smoke and a sad sack at my table. Just my luck."

She described the queasiness she felt when she left her house today, and he assured her that it was common to people when they travel.

"For me," he said, "it's motion sickness in a big way, if you know what I mean. It was at its worst when I went to Morocco, but I could
be going to North Africa or just down the road, and the effect’s the same. I’m absolutely convinced that I’ll vanish. It’s terrifying, but one must move on. Agree?”

“Yes, definitely, but Rusty was trying to tell me something today.”
“Do you suppose they’ve forgotten about us?” Judy asked. “I wouldn’t mind a little bread.”

“Your companion,” Ted said to Carrie. “You were talking about your companion. Did you have a falling out?”

“Rusty’s my cat.”
Ted put his hand over his mouth, and the couple had the stricken look of people who discover they’ve been gypped, so she told the story of the time Rusty disappeared. She described his endearing habits, as if she’d suffered a grievous loss.

Dennis mentioned a collie he’d had. “Loyal and true, right up to the end.”

She glanced at the windows and something she hadn’t thought about in years came back to her. A trip to Atlantic City with her parents. Her father had coaxed her into the ocean, though the day was blustery. She rode on his freckled shoulders and smelled suntan lotion on his neck. It moved her to know that he’d hoped for a sunny weekend, when, without warning, he flipped her off his shoulders. When she came up for air, he was plunging his hands in the water, looking inconsolable. She didn’t shout, “I’m here. Over here.” She watched him dive into the water, and then she joined her mother on the shore. He’d lost his ring, and he stayed in the water until his lips turned blue, and she’d watched, knowing that he was a fool for thinking that he’d find the ring.

“Oh, goodie,” Ted said, and rubbed his hands, when the waitress finally returned with people’s dinners. “I’m going all out tonight, and throwing caution to the wind.”

Carrie was startled when the waitress touched her shoulder and told her she had a phone call. The others looked at her and shook their heads, as if to say, “We’re glad we’re not in your shoes. We don’t envy you one iota.”

Jason was behind the desk, holding the phone. “It’s a female.”
“Thank God,” she said, and saw Jason giving her a sly look. She
Leslee Becker

Leslee Becker forced a smile, but she was on the verge of tears. The sudden memory excursion moments ago and the sight of the lobby’s pleading furniture and old photographs made her feel cold and weak. Jason watched her closely, as if she were part of a training exercise in human vagary.

“Your’re crying,” Frances said. “Oh, darling, didn’t you get my messages? Every conceivable delay. My car’s fixed now. You must’ve been sick with worry.”

“Yes. Worried sick.”

“I’m in a phone booth in Saranac Lake. I’m chilled to the bone.”

“You better take care of yourself. It could turn into pneumonia.”

Frances laughed. “That’s the least of my worries right now. Tell me that you’ll be happy to see me.”

Carrie paused a moment. “You never doubted that I’d be here?”

“How could I?”

“Now you can relax, and enjoy yourself, right?” Jason said.

She couldn’t think of a response, and why give him anything anyhow?

“It’s snowing,” he announced, as if it were something the hotel provided as ambience.

She passed the dining room and headed upstairs. The others would be speculating about the phone call, maybe concocting stories about what must’ve happened, just as she was doing with Frances’s remark about pneumonia being the least of her worries.

Frances had done something rash. She’d left Paul.

Carrie rushed to her room, and replaced her things in her suitcase.

“She backed out,” she’d tell her lesbian friends. “You were right.”

She cleaned the dish she’d used as an ashtray, as if this decision and small courtesy mattered more than anything else. The cover of the owl book on the nightstand showed a stately white creature, a fierce look on its face. “Much of the aversion felt by people through the ages is undoubtedly rooted in the owl’s elusive lifestyle and eerie calls,” said the caption.

She opened the journal, wrote down the date, and then “Parting Words.” The rest came quickly. “I wanted to be different, but I realized that I’m hopelessly rooted to bad habits. I’m sorry to disappoint you.”

She tried to imagine Frances and other future occupants of the
Northwest Review

room reading her remarks, but when she couldn’t picture a living soul, or the timid hotel, even the woods and lake, she felt that something had been scraped out of her.

The elevator whooshed open, and she heard a tap at her door. It felt exquisite, the gentle tap, as if her heart were being sounded and probed.

“I saved your dinner,” said Ted Nash outside her door. “Any news goes down easier with food.”

The rustling noise and the shadow under her door convinced her that he was on his hands and knees, trying to peer into her room. The elevator ascended, the doors sucked open, and she heard a gasp.

“My God,” said Judy.

“This takes the cake,” Dennis said. “Leave the poor woman alone.”

“It’s not what you think,” Ted said. “Please, it’s not what you think.”

She heard him scurry down the hall to his room, followed by giggles from the LaFramboises as they entered their room, slamming the door for effect. They were laughing now, probably composing journal entries and coming up with fantastic accounts of their last evening. “A regular side show, like something out of Ripley’s Believe It or Not.”

“It’s not a joke,” Carrie whispered, as if addressing Anna and her perpetual confusion about jokes, but the person she saw was Frances, crying, as they said their farewells in Las Vegas. And then Frances, handing her a gift. A black clock with red dice for the hours.

“Just a silly present,” Frances said, “but I wanted to give you something for all that you’ve given me. For all that you give me.”

Frances was driving now on icy roads in the dark. Carrie looked out the window, but couldn’t arrive at a name for the shape of the moon. Not full or half, and not a harvest moon, just an incomplete shape obscured by clouds and snow, and on the lake the same picture reflected, as if the moon were trying to inspect itself. Then a car’s headlights emerged unevenly between the trees, the beams scalloping the steep road.

She felt she was watching a movie, the day’s scenes unraveling. She saw Rusty giving her a skeptical look and saw herself delaying her
arrival at the Second Wind for the counterfeit pleasure of making Frances worry. Then the enticing walk into the lobby and her heart’s constriction at the sight of the empty chairs, proof of the unreliability and frailty of her relationship with Frances.

She was astonished to hear herself laugh now. She’d seen a fat man on the floor! Just this afternoon, but it seemed like ages ago.

She opened her door and quickly retrieved the dinner tray Ted Nash had left. A disappointing entrée of boiled fish, soggy asparagus, and a shriveled baked potato, but she cleaned her plate and then stretched out on the bed. She felt surprisingly tall and lithe, and when she put her hand on the back of her neck, the new hairdo gave her a convincing and pleasurable shiver. She walked quickly to the table, picked up the open journal, and tore out the page she had written.

“I feel rejuvenated,” she wrote. “I’m so glad I picked this place. It’s like a fairytale setting. The moon is fat. A gorgeous, clear night. I’m unbelievably happy, but sad, too. Haven’t seen a single owl or any wildlife to speak of, and I have to return to my commitments and face the music, but this lucky place allows me to pretend I’m someone else. Only a fool would want it to end.”
Halogen lights flicker in the blue cold. Akhtar stares out over the boat locks as barges and container ships pass by, the snowflakes falling slow as cotton in a land where there is no sun.

Tomorrow is the first day at school. His father, Hakim, rests a hand on his shoulder, an unseen weight in his voice—

_In the old days, Iraqis hung lanterns high up in the date palms—as a guide for friends and strangers traveling at night._

Akhtar imagines those trees in the dark, trunks covered with leaf-sheaves, scars, crowns with pleated segments, swaying. _Akhtar, have I told you of the water-spirit, S'iluwa, the one who lives in the river? Or of the Ferij-aqr'a'a, how he has the tail of a fish, though he appears like an old man, his head bald and red as the dying coals, his beard green, as if grown from moss?_

His father says, *You must remember these things, Akhtar. Do not forget. We come from the land of the two rivers, Akhtar, and long after I am gone, when the world has grown dark and few remember where we come from—you will be the light in the distance.*
Mohammed Trains for the Beijing Olympics, 2008
Brian Turner

In the 69 kilogram weight class, the Bulgarian, Boevski, is the world record holder. He cannot be beaten. At least, not by Sawara Mohammed. Mohammed, at 26, has shoveled cement longer than he cares to remember. In Arbil, in Kurdish northern Iraq, he strains hard to lift the barbell with its heavy plates, round as the wheels of chariots—then, muscles give and the wheels bounce in dust before him. No, he cannot defeat the Bulgarian.

The problem is in lifting weight over distance. It isn't a matter of iron, or of will. In Beijing, Boevski's records will go unnoticed, because Mohammed is training now to lift the city of Arbil, with its people; his quadriceps and posterior chain straining, the muscles trembling to lift the Euphrates and Tigris both, mountains of the north, deserts of the west, Basra, Karbala, Ramadi, Tikrit, Mosul—three decades of war and the constant suffering of millions—this is what Sawara lifts, and no matter what effort he makes, he will fail completely, and the people will love him for it.
ORANGES
Rosanna Warren

Sleeping on the balcony floor
in Crete one night, I woke
to see the silhouette of the roof slide over
and mask the one glass-glint star.
The stone house shuddered, the balcony twitched
under my sleeping bag like a horse
gathering to buck its rider. But the roof
shimmied back into place and revealed the star.
A clay tile fell. Then quiet. Unlike the story
a prisoner told, once, about the hole in his poem—
“It was in a bar,
one minute he was standing there and the next,
he was on the floor, bleeding—“
which was everything his poem
hadn’t said. The other man died. That season in Crete
I was looking for the hole in everything I knew.
I’d rise at dawn, pack Augustine’s Confessions and oranges,
take the bus out of town to hike the high pastures and goat paths
and sleep on the ground to the tolling of sheep bells.
I thought the stars would tell me a truth.
The stones were hard under my back. A sheep tiptoed up
and breathed on my face. I had nothing, yet,
to confess. God was a large idea
and awfully far. By dawn the stars
had paled, and I woke stiff, hungry and elated
and hiked eight hours down the gorge into a story
I did not yet know.
FI RE

Rosanna Warren

It would take a voodoo skull, one eye darkened,
one candle-lit, to see

into these pictures. Who set that fire? Who piled
that cliff of smoke? The newsprint

is jaundiced, ripped at the edge.
I set that fire, I piled

that bombastic, mountaining smoke.
I mound it up every night and I don't haul anyone out.

The bodies are stiff, like little T-squares.
It's not clear what geometry problem they solve.

The ditch is a rampart.
The live ones, turbaned, stand on the upper rim.

Bombed trucks burn rectangularly.
The books on Mutanabi Street make a chunky oatmeal mush.

This world, the same for all, was shaped by no god or man
but always was and will be

an everlasting fire, said Heraclitus. And the child
in the charred room reaches out to touch the wall:
the furniture's burned, his father's shot, the mirror reflects only the camera flash.

We found fire in our souls before we stole it from heaven.

Now we are the lords of light and the darkroom is ours.
ABOUT OUR WRITERS

LESLEE BECKER’s story collection, *The Sincere Café*, won the Mid-List Press Fiction Award. Other awards include the *Nimrod* Katherine Anne Porter Prize and the Pirate’s Alley Faulkner Society Award. Her stories have appeared in *The Atlantic*, *Ploughshares*, *Kenyon Review*, *Iowa Review*, *EPOCH*, and elsewhere. She teaches at Colorado State University.

DON BOGEN’s fourth book of poetry, *An Algebra*, is just out from the University of Chicago Press. His recent publications include poems in *The Yale Review* and *Shenandoah* and translations from the Spanish poet Julio Martínez Mesanza in *Boston Review* and *Pleiades*. He teaches at the University of Cincinnati.

ROSELLLEN BROWN, who teaches at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, has published five novels, most recently *Before and After* and *Half a Heart*, and her stories have appeared in half a dozen *O. Henry, Best American Stories*, and *Pushcart Prize* collections. She hopes to include “The Threshold” in a sequence to be called *Late Loves*.

RON CARLSON’S most recent novel is *The Signal*. He teaches at the University of California, Irvine.

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PATRICIA CLARK is the author of three books of poetry, most recently *She Walks into the Sea* (Fall 2009 from Michigan State University Press). Her work has appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Slate*, *Gettysburg Review*, and elsewhere, and has been featured on *Poetry Daily* and *Verse Daily*. She teaches at Grand Valley State University, where she is also the poet-in-residence.

MICHAEL COLLIER is the author of five books of poems, including *Dark Wild Realm* (Houghton Mifflin, 2006), his most recent collection. In 2009, he received an Award in Literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

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**Colleen J. McElroy**'s poetry collections include *Sleeping with the Moon* (2007), *What Madness Brought Me Here: New and Selected Poems* (Wesleyan University Press, 1990), *Bone Flames* (1987), and *Queen of the Ebony Isles* (1984). McElroy has received a Before Columbus American Book Award, a Pushcart Prize for poetry, and a Washington State Governor's Distinguished Artist Award. She lives in Seattle.

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**Leslie Adrienne Miller**'s collections of poems include *The Resurrection Trade* and *Eat Quite Everything You See* from Graywolf Press. Professor of English at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minnesota, Miller holds an MFA in Poetry from the Iowa Writers'
About Our Writers

Workshop and a PhD from the University of Houston.


GREG PAPE is the author of nine books of poetry, including *American Flamingo* (Southern Illinois University Press), *Sunflower Facing the Sun* (University of Iowa Press), *Storm Pattern, Black Branches*, and *Border Crossings* (University of Pittsburgh Press). He has received two National Endowment for the Arts Fellowships, a Pushcart Prize, the Richard Hugo Memorial Award for Poetry, and others. He teaches in the University of Montana's Creative Writing program and in the brief residency writing program at Spalding University. He served as Montana Poet Laureate from 2007 to 2009.

MICHAEL PETTIT’s books include *The Writing Path 1, The Writing Path 2, American Light*, and *Cardinal Points*, which received the Iowa Poetry Prize. A nonfiction account of ranching in Texas and New Mexico, *Riding for the Brand*, was published by the University of Oklahoma Press in 2006 and won the New Mexico Book Award for Best Southwest History.

VERN RUTSALA’s twelve collections of poetry include *The Moment’s Equation*, 2005 National Book Award Finalist and winner of the 2003 Richard Snyder Publication Prize. Awards include a Guggenheim Fellowship, two National Endowment for the Arts Fellowships, the Juniper Prize, an Oregon Book Award, and a Pushcart Prize. He taught at Lewis and Clark College from 1961 to 2004 and lives in Portland, Oregon.

JEFFREY SCHULTZ’s poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Boston Review, Missouri Review, Poetry*, and elsewhere, and have been featured on the PBS News-Hour’s *Art Beat* blog and *Poetry Daily*. In 2009 he received the "Discovery"/Boston Review prize and a Ruth Lilly Fellowship from the Poetry Foundation. He lives in Los Angeles.
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Bruce Smith is the author of five books of poems, The Common Wages, Silver and Information, Mercy Seat, The Other Lover, which was a finalist for both the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize, and, most recently, Songs for Two Voices (The University of Chicago Press, 2005).


Elizabeth Spires is the author of six collections of poems, most recently The Wave-Maker (Norton, 2008). She has also written six books for children, including I Heard God Talking to Me: William Edmondson and His Stone Carvings (FSG, 2009). She lives in Baltimore and teaches at Goucher College.

Megan Staffel’s new collection of short fiction is called Lessons in Another Language and is forthcoming from Four Way Books in 2010. She is the author of two novels and a previous collection of stories and teaches in the Warren Wilson MFA Program for Writers.

Richard Tillinghast is the author of ten books of poetry, most recently The New Life (Copper Beech, 2008) and Selected Poems (Dedalus Press, Dublin, 2009). His book of essays, Finding Ireland: A Poet’s Explorations of Irish Literature and Culture, was published in 2008. With Julia Clare Tillinghast he is publishing Dirty August (2009), a book of translations of poems by Turkish poet Edip Cansever.

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. With the support of a Lannan Foundation fellowship, he has completed a second poetry collection, Phantom Noise (Alice James Books, 2010), and begun a third. He lives in California and is the 2009-2010 recipient of the Amy Lowell Travelling Poetry Scholarship.

Nance Van Winckel’s fifth collection of poems, No Starling, is recently out from University of Washington Press. The recipient of two NEA Fellowships, she is also the author of three collections of short fiction. She teaches in the MFA Programs at Eastern Washington University and Vermont College and served as the Stadler Poet-in-Residence at Bucknell in Spring 2009.

Rosanna Warren teaches Comparative Literature at Boston University. Her most recent book
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The craft faces towards the open stream and seems though hasped in the solid grasp of ice ready for anything—for the wind to shift and the anchoring ice to relent and melt and flow away the way that woman gazing at the mast has seen it happen, as will happen when this hard season turns to spring, a lit and flickering forecast of which you might see in those cottony blobs the painter has coaxed to the tips of a few nude trees, that force your eyes and your desiring mind to hover at last between the fact of packed snow and the fact of blossom.

—Eamon Grennan
from Jan van de Cappelle’s Winter Scene: An Inventor