The Louisville Review

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The Louisville Review

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TLR publishes two volumes each year: spring and fall. Submissions of previously unpublished manuscripts are invited. Please submit online through our submissions manager: www.louisvillereview.org/submissions. Prose submissions should be double-spaced and page numbered. Poetry (up to 5 poems) need not be double-spaced; multiple poems should be submitted in one document. Drama should appear in standard format. Please include your name on every page. If you are submitting in more than one genre, please submit documents separately. We encourage you to include a cover letter in the comments section. Our editorial staff reads year around. Simultaneous submissions accepted. Payment is in copies. Email address: louisvillereview@spalding.edu. Children/teen (K-12) poetry and fiction must be accompanied by parental permission to publish if accepted. Reply time is 4-6 months.

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The cover photo of this issue of *The Louisville Review* by University of Alabama-Huntsville Professor José Betancourt pictures the columns of the Vatican. Now an independent, innovative, nonprofit, private institution, Spalding University, home of this magazine, has its roots in the educational ministry of the Sisters of Nazareth. In the summer of 2011 the brief-residency Master of Fine Arts in Writing Program will convene first in Rome for several days and for the remaining week in Tuscany, on an organic farm close to Siena. A day trip to Florence completes the residency period which includes not only workshops on student writing, faculty and student lectures, panel discussions, and readings but also features the interrelatedness of all the arts. Both new students and current students who wish to participate in the Spalding brief-residency MFA summer residency in Italy 2011 should contact the MFA office at mfa@spalding.edu.

The summer residency in 2012 will be in Paris; the one in 2010 was in Buenos Aires. The tuition is the same, whether students commence or continue study in Louisville, in our fall and spring sessions, or wish to earn the MFA entirely through summer study including abroad residencies, or would like to mix and mingle the time of year, duration, and location of their studies. While travel and lodging abroad are somewhat more expensive, we offer a few travel scholarships. In Louisville, as well as abroad, the residency curriculum includes focus on one’s own area of concentration, cross-genre work, and the interrelatedness of the arts. The bulk of the semester is spent at home, writing and corresponding regularly with a mentor, one on one.

Speaking of travel on a personal level, I will be visiting many parts of the United States this fall, winter, and spring to promote my new novel, *Adam & Eve*. Please note the ampersand in the title; this is a contemporary take on a traditional story. I hope it broadens what we mean by a sacred text: one that can include science, art, and our own life choices. To better understand our origins, our place in nature, and the mysteries of existence, I believe we need to read the starry sky (it holds extraterrestrial life out there), the prehistoric cave paintings (what do they tell us about violence, lust, and beauty), and how to revise our own life stories. My travels, terrestrially speaking,
take me north to Minneapolis, west to Los Angeles, and south to St. Petersburg with many points between; as I write this note I’m just back from New York City and Maine, where I worked on my next novel, to be titled *The Fountain of St. James Court*, which happens to be what I see out my library window at home.

_The Louisville Review_ was founded in 1976 by myself and two undergraduate students, Bonnie Cherry and Tom Willett, at the University of Louisville. The magazine has been in continuous publication since then, due to the efforts of myself and countless other people, but in particular those of Karen Mann, who is the Administrative Director of the brief-residency MFA in Writing at Spalding University. I wish especially to thank Karen and also the guest editors for this issue:

Philip F. Deaver, guest fiction editor, is the 13th winner of the Flannery O’Connor Award for Short Fiction and his book is *Silent Retreats*. His poems have appeared in magazines such as _The Reaper, Poetry Miscellany_, and the _Florida Review_ and are collected in a volume entitled _How Men Pray_. Philip Deaver is Professor of English and Writer in Residence at Rollins College, Winter Park, Florida, and teaches in the Spalding brief-residency MFA in Writing Program.

Nancy McCabe, guest creative nonfiction editor, has two books: _Meeting Sophie: A Memoir of Adoption_ and _After the Flashlight Man: A Memoir of Awakening_. Her work has appeared in _Prairie Schooner, Newsweek, Fourth Genre, Massachusetts Review_, and many others, won a Pushcart, and made the notable list in _Best American Essays_ four times. She directs the writing program for the Bradford campus of the University of Pittsburgh and teaches in Spalding’s brief-residency MFA program in creative writing.

Kelly Moffett, guest poetry editor and an Assistant Professor of English at Northern Kentucky University, has published one book of poetry and several poems in various journals, including _Tar River Poetry, Rattle, The Laurel Review, Phoebe_, and so on. She also directs Kentucky’s Retreat for Women Writers.

Charlie Schulman, drama editor, is the 2010 Walton Fellow at The Arena Stage for his play _The Great Man_. His play _Character Assassins_ received its world premier at NJ Rep this fall. He teaches in the brief-residency Spalding MFA in Writing Program.

–Sena Jeter Naslund, Editor
TABLE OF CONTENTS

POETRY

Stephen Dunn  Upon Learning That Poseidon Was Dead  9
Eleanor Wilner  Of a Word  10
Mary Ann Samyn  Some Kind of Lifetime  11
  Again With the Honeysuckle  12
Peter Cooley  Watcher and the Watched  13
James Harms  Condition Blue  14
  The Building  16
Michael T. Young  Honeybees  18
Alan Michael Parker  Epithalamion Upon a Third Marriage  19
  Twenty-three Secrets Kept in a Box  21
Tom C. Hunley  Permanent  23
Heller Landecker  Bill  25
Jill Koren  Hanging Laundry While Hoping for Heaven  27
Jack Ridl  Morning Rounds  29
Sarah Gorham  Soakaway  30
Cate Whetzel  King Harvest  31
Doug Ramspeck  Contours  33
Ed Madden  Nest  34
Russell Evatt  Hunger  35
Janet McNally  Can You Hear Me?  36
Joey Connelly  A New Thinking  37
Líber Falco  (translated from the Spanish by Laura Chalar)
  Drama  38
  Wish  39
Frederick Smock  The Snow Leopard  40
Jenny Molberg  Pomegranate  41
Christine Rikkers  Marta and the Monk  42
A.J. Naslund  Our Sample  44
Carol Levin  Planet Earth Spins, Night Follows Day, And So Forth,
  And So On  45
Marci Rae Johnson  Surgery  46
  Strange Attractors  48
Gail Carson Levine  And Even Two  49
  Take the Bait  51
Lucy Frank  After College  52
Stan Sanvel Rubin  Tornado  53
  For an Instant  55
FICTION

Kristina Gorcheva-Newberry  Every Angel is Terrifying  56
Larry S. Williams  Denying the Enemy Ground  66
Glen Pourciau  Brother  68
Linda L. Dunlap  The Tackle Box Files  70
Brooke Bullman  Patron Saints  83

NONFICTION

Kate Flaherty  The Integrity Test  92
Jim Krosschell  Berries  103
John Frank  Euthanizing Butterflies  109
Loretta Brock Clark  A Kentucky Vignette: Danville and Irvine, 1942  114
Patty Houston  The View from My Pew  119

DRAMA

Danny Thompson  Happy Happy Bunny Visits Sad Sad Owl  129
Jeffery Dorchen  Ubu Papa  133
David Isaacson  Havel/Bickle  139
Mickle Maher  Delivery  147

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS  150

CHILDREN’S CORNER

Caroline Kenworthy  Bucolic: Sheep’s Milk  159
Actaeon’s Hounds  160
Artemis and Actaeon  161
Actaeon (After Transformation)  162
Hila Shooter  Guilt  163
Alex Bertsche  When Saucers from the Old Family Dishware Look Like the Moon  164
Michael Duell  Rome’s Crumble  165
James Bianco  Rebellion  166
Andrew R. Neylon  On Meeting My Masters  167
Finale  169
Alien  171
Anna Yates  The Vapour  174

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS TO THE CHILDREN’S CORNER  175
Stephen Dunn

UPON LEARNING THAT POSEIDON WAS DEAD

What shall we do now? said the passengers.

You’re free now
to use your head, said one of the crew:

If there’s no wind, row.

If a storm comes, try to understand
you were always on your own.
Eleanor Wilner

OF A WORD

English asks: What does it mean?
Italian asks: How does it want to be said?

I ask in the way of Italian, which gives to words desire, how gray matter wants to be said. It lumbers up from drowse, makes its way to water, fills its trunk, then swings it, making of water a wide arc, in which the sunlight is caught. Meanwhile, in the poetry class, the instructor asks of the image: “What does it mean?” and the elephant, which by now is a tonnage that wants to get out of the range of reduction, is making its way up the steep trail of the mountain to where sky invades the peaks, where it wraps itself in cloud, the kind of obscurity that a wary elephant is willing to indulge in when tracked back toward its lair.

And up there, on the cliffside, near where the clouds are drifting in and out of the boulders, far above the tree line, a large word, elegy, with a nine foot wing span, wants to be said as a condor, one saved from extinction and recently released to the wild. It settles down on a bluff next to the gray cloud which it understands as an elephant, however obscure it appears. The condor, who is a vulture of sorts, has dirty pink wrinkled skin, and a cold eye, but is sensitive and quite warm-hearted, and is pleased to consort with the elephant in this safe aerie, where words are said as they wish to be said—weighty or winged as they please: heavy but light as clouds are, or soaring in search of the dead.
Mary Ann Samyn

SOME KIND OF LIFETIME

Love the regret too, said the beachy debris, a photo of way back when.

When I did, a little inward OK happened, and I sighed into the space.

Sighed, too, at that other opening caused by even your sleepy hand on me.

Believing is always the beginning; every great tradition says so.

By way of example, the icicles formed and fell out of necessity.

And it’s not too soon either to say I’m loving also your secret heart.

So negotiate with yourself. As for me, I knew it when I wrote it.
Mary Ann Samyn

AGAIN WITH THE HONEYSUCKLE

Birds in the background when I press record and I’m used to the sound of my own voice now.

Try as I might, I can’t shake this feeling.

The peonies offer their usual suggestions, but I don’t want that kind of love.

Instead, finally, I know what I know.

Someone wondered if it was suffering, but it wasn’t.

When I stopped asking for stories, you told them better and more easily.

I’d rather be happy with you than without you. That’s all.

Now I’m making a bow around the gift. When I look up, the sky is blue and the pines are green.
Peter Cooley

WATCHER AND THE WATCHED

Despite the certain cover of the rain
assured by New Orleans summer in June
the sun makes its appearance as it should
tentative, wounded by our human acts,
failures which separate us from that face,
the manufacture of the centuries—
an air divided against itself, layered,
separated by such impurities
millennia may never bring back whole.

This is the only sky that I can know—
Shifting above the gulf stream, imperfect
As the polluted ruins it reflects
It tells me I have my place here with you,
God of the hurricanes—Who may not come.
James Harms

CONDITION BLUE

For years I tried
to make a blue building
in words. I tried to place it
on the corner of Sunset
and Los Liones, as near
the sea as it can be.
I thought about the clash
of terra cotta tiles beneath
a sky the color of my building.
On such a day the sea
is never green. And so
I see the folly of blue
buildings on perfect
afternoons in Los Angeles,
when the canyons fill with
spilled ocean water and sky
like an idea so true
the wonder of it distracts
a driver watching the curb
for the right address:
the corner of Sunset
and Los Liones, empty of
buildings beneath a bowl
of blue and the blue Pacific
echoing in the west.
Was it here he saw
the edge of time lift
like a page of newspaper
turned by the breeze?
If he could, he would rub
the shadows deep
into his skin, a bruise
in reverse, how day
ages blue into purple.
He watches the building
shiver into view, the evening
air. The sadness of blue,
he thinks, is how it
tires into night, an idea
so true he can’t move,
his hands asleep
on the steering wheel,
phone singing in his pocket.
Where is he, his friend
wants to know. She is
speaking inside the phone
in his pocket, though
she is sitting inside
a blue building beside
the sea beneath a sky
that even now is falling
from blue to black.
“Where are you,” she says,
as he watches the torn edge
of day flutter and turn.
If only she would turn
and face her window,
through which the sea
beyond his blue car has
turned green in the late
afternoon light, leaving
all and everything for once
as clear to sight as a word
typed on white paper.
James Harms

THE BUILDING

“On the rim of a skyscraper’s forehead
I looked down and saw: hats: fifty thousand hats . . .”
–Carl Sandburg

They couldn’t talk her in
and they wouldn’t say down, “We’re not
trying to talk her down.”
Like everyone, she had hoped
to feel the wind tangle her hair.
Like everyone, she felt her stomach sink
as the elevator rose straight up
through the dark night of the building.
Like some, she knew the names
of the family of brothers who died
in a single morning constructing the 77th floor.
She did not buy an eraser shaped like the building.
She did not buy a placemat with a holograph of the building.
She did not buy the rock candy version of the building,
or the books, or the videos, or the t-shirts, the belt buckle.
“There’s no gate high enough, wire sharp enough,
guard strong enough to stop them
if they really want it.”
That’s what the fireman said.
And the other firemen nodded.
And when the mother arrived
to talk her daughter off the ledge,
there was no way of knowing she would say
how dumb it was to jump
from a building when the gas worked fine
in the stove, when her husband’s
pistol was loaded in the drawer,
when the kitchen cabinets were full
of toxins and solvents. No one
could know she would call her daughter
stupid and trashy and pitiful,
or reach out to snatch the hat from her head,
or toss it high into the wind, watch it
sail out into the night, or say
“Let’s go get it, sweetie, that’s your favorite.”
She helped her daughter back onto the platform,
“Chloe bought you that hat,” she said. “Remember?”
She walked her slowly to the stairs,
“Chloe’s her sister,” she said to the firemen.
“She moved to Scotland.” She said it to
no fireman in particular. She said Scotland
sotto voce, as if the word might stain the air
at the edge of her voice.
She held her daughter’s hand down the eighty-six flights,
a cop trailing politely behind with a ticket ready,
a two hundred and sixty-five dollar ticket ready to give her
once they were all safely down.
Michael T. Young

HONEYBEES

I’ve felt myself changed simply walking into shade along a street; I’ve come suddenly upon the scent of snapdragon or heard a distant car crash and found my every thought stalled at the gate. And when I read that honeybees are dying in thousands, an epidemic no one can explain, I wondered, Have I forgotten something? Who am I now? There are theories, there are whole histories passing away, but I can’t describe them. So, from the next table, bits of conversation break into my soliloquy or my neighbor’s phone rings through the walls and I join a dialogue with a stranger. To call any of it a change of scenery or costume is to misunderstand. The world is not a stage and the honeybee is not the soul it once symbolized. This is why I’m fascinated by bricked-in windows, old tenement buildings throughout Jersey City with their view closed up, so I daydream about who, on a hot summer day, leaned on that sill breathing in the confusion of car fumes and flowers, himself daydreaming until his elbows ached and he remembered there was a clogged drain in the bathroom and he turned back, pausing for his eyes to adjust to the dark room.
EPITHALAMION UPON A THIRD MARRIAGE

We have loved others, we confess:

two dogs and a cat and the occasional politician,
fresh snapper and guacamole and lime, oh, lime,
red tulips and an open window banging,

e-mail, mail, the telephone set to vibrate,
the hum of the printer warming up,

bread rising in the oven while the snow falls slowly,

the right kind of past,

drumming on the steering wheel,
the first green shock of Spring, the plumage,
the full-throated river,

the splurge of spurge, wild grasses and all that flying.

When the light came on, the filament sizzled
and then the light went out, and even this we loved.

Everything has been a test, or maybe a lesson—
if we believed in the God of our Fathers.

Once there was an idea spun in the mind like sugar,

and it was love, how to love
one person, and how to undress the world each day
to find one person. Everything has been

buttons and zippers and sashes and strings,
all to undo to find you. Everything
has been practicing. Once the new, tiny

buds on the maple (seen through
a high window, a little bit from above)
nubbed into the air, and there the cardinals made a nest.

On television every weekend
the cars raced counter-clockwise—
were they unwinding death?

We have loved others, we confess

over toast and jam, in notes not sent,
when finally alone, our hearts banked in the hearth.

We look to the sky and see the clouds fraying,
and we look back and see ourselves

round-faced in a window
in every childhood home,
in the ship of the house and the porthole
of our lives, what did we know.

How far away that is, regret the only passage.

We confess, we have loved others,
our jobs too tight, our whispered hopes unraveling

as every night we tried again,
rehearsed ourselves for you.
Alan Michael Parker

TWENTY-THREE SECRETS KEPT IN A BOX

1. Ah, love, I’m sorry. I promised that I wouldn’t keep a box.
2. My box is roughly hewn, wrapped with golden thread so thin it can’t be seen. My box is like a thing imagined by Yeats and built by Stevens. And yes, you’re right: when frightened, I resort to art.
3. You leave for the studio, and I take down my box. Some days, it’s empty; other days, there’s lightning.
4. Okay, I confess: once there was lightning. May 19, 1996.
5. In my box, there are no flowers. Flowers aren’t secrets.
6. People struck by lightning change.
7. If I lie on the floor, the dogs will come to me: I keel onto my side and the three of us pretend we’re sleeping, as though laid there by some enormous child playing FARM. We each roll an eye at the room, kind of madly.
8. Struck by lightning, people have been known to de-magnetize. They can’t say the letter “R” or wear wristwatches. Weally.
9. No matter how we peck or tap, nothing comes out of the keyboard.
10. This is crazy, but sometimes I think that drinking coffee is like drinking my own blood, and that I need to top up every morning. There, I’ve said it.
11. I love to watch you walk, because I think you have a hot ass. L.H.O.O.Q., and all that. The problem is as follows: to see your hot ass, I have to watch you walk away from me. Come back!
12. Wind for you, lightning for me. Get your own box.
13. Think of all the imposters: the computer, the car, the house, the desk, the coffin. All of those box-like things, but none the box.
14. In my box lies some kind of stone hung on a rough strand of string, a necklace. The secret: I can’t remember where it’s from.
15. Talking with you is better than screwing anyone else.
16. People struck by lightning have been known to twitch and shake. I mean, survivors. Some say they have seen the face of
God, others claim it’s merely neurological. And what about all those people in churches, twitching and shaking?

17. A secret: economics isn’t boring. I’m reading Roger B. Myerson on Leo Hurwicz: as the theory goes, political officials should be asked to post a bond to secure their turpitude. The notion comes from moral-hazard reasoning, the judgment of the leader judged: “To deter hidden misbehavior, any crisis in the province must cause the governor’s credit to decrease.” Today, I’ve made a payment on these lines of verse, secured nothing against the nothingness. A box.

18. There’s room for you in my box, with me.

19. All those apologia. All those poet-teacher types who whine, “A poem’s a box,” or “A stanza is a room in a house which is a box—stanza means room, you know.” None of this is a secret! A secret? I knocked down Nancy Harsenfeld, to rub my face in the fur of her fake rabbit jacket. She wanted me to; she was eight and I was seven. This was my first orgasm.

20. Lies are in my box. It’s no secret that I’m a liar, but the lies themselves—they’re still secrets.

21. I kind of want to be struck by lightning.

22. I e-mail to you from Nigeria, with anxious. I’m trouble getting everything back into the box.

23. Ah, love. Secrets aren’t promises, lies aren’t secrets, promises aren’t lies. I get so turned around, in all your lightning.
Tom C. Hunley

PERMANENT

Hey, your tattoo fell off, I said, and picked it up, but she thought I was trying to pick her up, so she rushed away, her legs long and tan except for a balloon-shaped vacancy on her ankle where the tattoo had rented space. She was beautiful with curly hair and probably men had been hitting on her for as long as she could remember and maybe she assumed that fending off their attentions would be a permanent part of her life. Listen, my parents died last year. They were always there, hovering, when I was small. First the air went out of their marriage and then Pop was gone and after that, Mom was gone and a little while after that, I made up that preposterous story about the woman whose tattoo fell off, I guess to illustrate something about impermanence. I should have just said that in Seattle, circa 1991, I saw a Blood or maybe a Crip with a tattoo of a tear under his eye. Since then, the Bloods and Crips have gone legit. They own their own record labels, plus a nightclub or two in Rainier Valley, and a majority share in Tully’s Coffee. A work crew dynamited the Kingdome in 2000, and Mt. Rainier is an active volcano, so even it won’t stand forever, and I haven’t lived in my home town for fifteen years, but that woman I started to tell you about, she poured her whole self into an embrace with this scuzzball of my acquaintance. Good woman finds bad man and gets lost. That theme is a fixture on Oxygen and Lifetime. I shouldn’t have made that up about my parents dying or about the gangs trafficking in coffee. I wanted, I guess, to show you something about impermanence. I wanted, ironically, to make a lasting impression.
on the subject. I should have just led with the fact that the old Rainier Brewery is now the headquarters for Tully’s Coffee. If a landmark like that can’t last, maybe no one’s marriage has a chance, maybe all of us should tattoo tears beneath our eyes or fill our hearts with helium and reckless love and let them fly untethered and brightly-colored across the sky.
Heller Landecker

BILL

We let Bill go the other day. No, not let him go, really, just opened up the jar with the blue slotted lid, that came complete with caterpillar and milkweed that day we went to the State Fair, the day you found your way through the monkey house all by yourself; you were terrified at first, but then you begged to do it again. No, not begged, really, insisted, in that way you acquired rather suddenly over the summer, as somehow it struck you that you have a separate life. Like Bill, who sat for hours on the lip of his uncapped jar, every now and then flapping his new wings once, twice, three times, testing their breadth, their veracity. We ended up having to leave; I took you to Harry’s to play while I got groceries, and when we returned Bill had flown away. No, not away, really, more like into; into the next piece of the life he was genetically pre-ordained to lead, the one that would take him, despite all odds, to the Transvolcanic Plateau in Mexico,
to winter there, then begin the trip
home in the spring, the trip he won’t
finish, but somewhere along the
way he’ll lay an egg (thus raising
the issue of whether Bill
was appropriately named)
and the whole thing begins
again. No, not begins, really,

continues, like the line we stood in
that day for the giant slide
that seemed like it would
go on forever but they had it down,
those State Fair workers; take your two bucks,
point you to the piles of burlap and
there you go, clutching your burlap and
your caterpillar and each other’s hands
as you climb those wide metal steps
with the rest of humanity, your burlap
shedding bits of itself that collect
in the corners of the stairs with other
like-minded bits, all the while the
recorded voice of the giant slide intoning
instructions about sitting feet-forward
and holding tight to your belongings
and never, never putting out a foot
or a hand to stop yourself once you
get going “irregardless,” the voice says,
of your terror, “irregardless” of your
certainty that you’re going to die
as you make that first vertical
drop and soar toward the crest of the
next one, “irregardless,” as you realize—
no, not realize—accept,
no, not accept—laugh out loud
at your utter reluctance
to ever let go.
HANGING LAUNDRY WHILE HOPING FOR HEAVEN

—for Melinda

There we were at Kentucky Lake, pinning tiny diapers to an improvised laundry line.

Sun dove through leaves warming patches of concrete beneath our bare feet

as we talked of The Hereafter, discussing Updike’s bleak-but-hopeful poems, hanging his lines out before us like so many wet shirts,

wringing them for a clue of what might come next.

But in that moment, at that house that has come to represent every good summer memory, even though some years the murky dark beneath that lemon yellow sunset lake bade me slip below,

all the years are layered, each suffusing the others with the potent charm—silver-fish-jump-fly-skim-bent-tree-star—
and I find I don’t so much care
what comes next.

The moment holds us.
We are the people we know,
here, in our time and in our place,
stretched to catch
what we can of the sun.
Jack Ridl

MORNING ROUNDS

He gets up first, makes the coffee while she lets her dreams come to no end. He feeds the dogs, two cups for the big one, one cup for the pup. She likes coffee with cream. He is retired. She goes to work, brings home the endless stress of colleagues convinced that family and the next door neighbors keep them from seeing the evening stars or the weekend’s clear air. He will deadhead the flowers, carry out the dead mole the cats fought over during the night, make the bed, choose between washing the windows, the clothes, the car. Now the coffee’s perked and he carries it to her in her favorite cup. She sits up, smiles. He says he hopes her meeting goes well. She says she hopes his day is nice. The dogs and cats sleep. He tunes the radio to the classical station. She holds the coffee between her hands.
Sarah Gorham

SOAKAWAY

Reverse well, a hole in the ground
that seeps rather than contains.
Spell of pain that permeates
the heaviest clay. For caution,
surround it with crime tape.
We know how well that holds;
nothing draws us in like yellow.
So—why not savor the drain,
the “S” sound of sinking waste.
Imagine a sunset, lavender and red
as battered morals, the underworld
eager to drink.
Cate Whetzel

**KING HARVEST**

The wind blows across the water and our field, shorn as a sheep in springtime. The corn has come down wearing the ghosts of tractors and the combine; the shapes of wounded soldiers move among broken stalks, struggling upward briefly into whole men before the eye returns them to chaff. Smoke warms us as it drifts from the fire where our neighbors ignore the law and burn their trash, mostly paper, to fill the wind with artificial flavors damp and rich. Credit card offers and old bank statements become exploding sweet tart, flame caramel, the lake breath of the gar that snaps fishing line and hides under the weeds in the mill pond. They burn and blend into a breeze familiar and wild. It comes at us like a gang of crows chasing one of their own down the sky road. This year it seems the grass has a different texture, flattened into detail like a parquet floor, and the light remains a permanent dove gray. Even the mail is thinner. Our money sleeps beneath us now, under mattresses beside check books and pieces of the emergency credit card. After dinner I play the records my parents collected until the 80s, and sometimes when they’re asleep I’ll dance alone to King Harvest and Ophelia, because it sounds, no matter what, like the Band is having a party I’d like to go to, in the daisy print sundress from high school, or the severe black sheath acquired at college, worn exclusively for funerals,
first dates, and with cat ears at Halloween,
watching children parade their new homemade
costumes into the house, these queens and farmers
on loan from the wind blowing on the water,
from the harvest and the empty field.
Doug Ramspeck

CONTOURS

And so this small brown creature fluttering
at the porch window like a moth. Its drapery of wings:
part rodent, part gargoyle, part wraith.
          Tapping its weightless body
again and again against the illuminated glass:
          to want like that. Like the moon
listing and foundering in its shoal of stars.
          Or to recall our bats, insectivores,
at twilight, skimming low over the tall grass, their hinged
wings and erratic flight representing the self-consciousness
that is itself desire, as Hegel wrote.
          To covet the contours
of the land, the dips and ridges that carry us
into the runnel of our own bones.
          Like the story of the man who cut out
his heart and replaced it with the moon: there was a stillness
inside him, then, a motionless ache exiled in the chest’s sky,
disembodied,
          like looking up from your desk at night to see
a small, fragile bat battering without hope at your window.
Ed Madden

NEST

Green pecans litter the walk—squirrel scatter, pungent smell of crushed nuts on the hot lawn. A hatchling, just a puff of gray down, shrieks in the grass, somewhere a nest, and in the west a promise of storm, the sky gone black. A shrike eyes the tiny bird, its song monotonous, it won’t shut up—dollop of feather, all beak and eyes. The shrike is quiet. The pasture fence is a twist of wire, here and there barbs beaded with impaled things.
Russell Evatt

HUNGER

The rabbit lay intact. From above it looked this way. It looked resting. Peaceful. As if it had stretched out for a nap, as rabbits often do. But it was not stretching. As I approached I saw the other rabbits huddled away and I thought this one must be sick. I thought perhaps it had died from this sickness. And this was half true. It had died. But it had not been sick. I knelt and saw the belly was missing. Probably raccoon. Probably the body wouldn’t pull through the wire of the cage. I wish I had not been left this gift. A body is meant to be devoured, if touched at all. But here it was. Left neatly stretched out as if sleeping. And I with no gun—as a boy I found the snake that bit my dog under a pile of sticks. I fired a pellet into its body. And again. I was only a boy and so didn’t have a strong enough gun to kill with the first shot. And so I shot again. And again. But here there was no boy with a gun. No way to track the raccoon into the undergrowth. And what good would that do? Could it calm the terror this rabbit faced? What I face? What an error to trade deaths. A raccoon ate the belly of a newborn. And so left hungry. There is so little we can take from the world.
Janet McNally

CAN YOU HEAR ME?

Late winter, the world is sepia.
Its edges curl like old photographs,
fill the space between the houses and the sky.
Birds quarrel in bushes
dead for months and when
the wind moves through the yard,
the branches sound like reeds
or paper
rustling.

Sparrows, they puff their feathers
like tiny down jackets,
hop from branch to branch
and shake the dead leaves,
ghosts of botany.
Sometimes the birds talk
to no one,

all answers and no questions,
like a party when you realize that you
and everyone else
are shouting.
Joey Connelly

A NEW THINKING

Over lunch at Rock Bottom, my friend said, “Enough,” so we were off our chairs, wandering the restaurant, pretending to be employees. To each table, “Hey, folks; how’s it going today?” and “You look like you need more water.” Up and down the city street stood autumnal ginkgos, small and clinging to sun colored leaves, but in the warmth of the restaurant, we leapt like the Brothers Karamazov on an unseen trapeze. Oh, so many contingencies. Mystery not for the sake of mystery but a search for a resolution, happiness only the fulfillment of our sure desires. Almost. But over lunch, a new thinking, like my old, only this time I may be right. Companionship to dull the shine, to soften the rough edges. Later in the theater she turned to me and asked, “Does everyone die?” Not sure how to answer, I said, “Just watch.”
Drama

In the already-distant
sky-surrounded town,
he looked towards the evening
at the day slowly fading.
And a possible angel he was,
approaching dusk.

Days went by. Time and time.
With mineral arms he sought to clasp the night
and be lost among the winds.

Now, who is it that moans along
the tenth-floor corridors?

O the unborn angel
and sky and dream already distant.
On the edge of giddiness he stands;
someone push him backwards,
because I can’t bear—no, not now—
to hear the clatter of his teeth against the floor.
Líber Falco
(translated from the Spanish by Laura Chalar)

WISH

—for M. M.

Sometimes one would wish
—free of days that call one’s name—
to lose oneself towards oblivion.
Because what is daylight for—
when so many human grimaces,
like a map of anguish
and indecipherable signs
of dead butterflies,
are spinning endlessly.

And one would also wish
after such and so much
love of air
that a tree would bend forward
to drink from our foreheads.
Frederick Smock

The Snow Leopard

You could go your whole life without ever seeing a snow leopard. Does it matter that I saw mine in a zoo? It was not easy to bear the fleeting dismissive regard of his eyes, gray in the morning light, deigning even to consider me worthy prey. His head massive: pagan statuary. The thick rope of his tail. He roamed a cage. No snow. No prayer flags. No cairn of stones. (Yes, I have read Matthiessen’s book.) He can leap sixty feet through the air. He can go without food for a month. Yet, slowly he is disappearing. Even from his cage—my attention drawn away by the screaming of monkeys across the way, I turned back and couldn’t find him. He had vanished from the scene: this animal I would choose as my daimon in a daimon-less world.
Before I crack open the fruit,
the seeds swell in their white caves, clatter
and hum—red voices
muffled by pulp. A song of berries.
The fruit swings on a branch
and the seeds clink together and ring out, one
of the seven fruits of Israel.
613 berries—distended arils—
the Torah’s 613 commandments.

Or, I am Persephone
and for four months I will pull apart
the flesh, and it will be winter. Can you
hear the voices? Winter
is the pomegranate’s season, when everything
is dead. My hands are stained.

As I pick the seeds apart, the only sound
is a soft click: one last note as they fall.
With each tiny death, I am fed.
Christine Rikkers

MARTA AND THE MONK

(in memory of Jørgen Lauersen Vig)

But I must tell her
this building of my body
is not a holy building.

Could we not have two houses
for the body she says,
brown skirts trailing behind, eyes
trained on the frozen mud.

She pities me. But feelings
are not my business.
I tried to kiss my mother once.
It was not a successful kiss.
It flew away, laughing.

Once there is a church,
there is a church forever.

The only person I ever was
fond of was my father.
He died, and for a month
I drank only black tea
and ate only radishes.

But I am just an old man now.
I am tired. This summer
the flowers will again
throw open their purple coats
and offer themselves
to the hungry sun.
A metal bowl of rice has more manners.

And I am still the only member
of this monastery.
A.J. Naslund

OUR SAMPLE

From the other world but made in the best of this, a sample was given to us, for examination, for a time, for our good understanding. Do you remember when you put on a suit of clothing, complete, for the first time? Whether you bought it and took it home or not, whether you felt you could afford it or not, were you feeling ennobled, privileged, free? Has fine clothing become customary with you? Or is that a rarity, still special? But our sample was more thoroughgoing. Do you understand? Can I convince you? That other world shone through our sample, permeated it. As it was making, we did not know its power, like wine maturing, like bread still shy of rising in the baker’s pan. But in its age our sample astonished us, scattered our coin, dumbfounded our wise ones. When we came near, our palsies, with our crimes, disappeared, and we walked in health again. Perhaps to prove to us the sample was torn during the ecstasy of its power—top to bottom, ripped. And our part in the sample seemed to wane, only that other world echoing. Yet, suddenly the sample is whole again, going from us but where we are free to follow, appearing in the heights, adorning the deep of our being.
PLANET EARTH SPINS, NIGHT FollowS DAY, AND SO FORTH, AND SO ON

When the phenomenal Monarch Sunflower’s big heads got so big they tilted, off balance. Only one lifted her face full to the sun inflating petals at the end of the day. Seven others flopped at this and that angle wrenching their necks. One twisted a bit left and looked me right in the eye. Then eye to seedy eye I say I can’t help. I’m headed over myself.
Marci Rae Johnson

SURGERY

I sit in front,
my mother’s seat,

stare out the window,
watch the plows clear snow
from last night’s storm.

In the hospital
I stand in a corner,
press my face against
the white cold wall.

Back home,
some aunt has come to stay.
No one will say why,
but I know

they are cutting her.
They are taking her breast.
Maybe she will die.

There are whispers and phone calls.
I am sent out to play.

My breasts are small.
I press them to the pine tree
and think about the boy at church
with the crooked smile.

What is my mother thinking
in her bed
in the hospital?
At the top of the tree
I am not cold,
though the sky is the color of snow.

I am the blood of the tree.
The sound of the wind.

The bird’s cry.
The winter sky.
Marci Rae Johnson

Strange Attractors

From the Latin *fractus* meaning irregular or fragmented

as in, appears to be a pattern, but.

Like, how the city is silent
if you’re far enough away,
the skyline perfectly aligned

and above,
the stars making pictures.

Follow the lines between them—
*but one does not know exactly where on the attractor the system will be.*

This makes a sort of sense. As in,
you are always walking away from/toward me

we are either near,
or arbitrarily far apart—

a complex, non-repeating pattern.

One star may burn out.
Another, may appear.

One word may be exchanged for another, to no obvious effect.

*The motion we are describing is what we mean by chaotic behavior.*
Gail Carson Levine

AND EVEN TWO

—after Claudia Emerson’s “House-Sitting” in Late Wife

The first summer I was alone, caution kept me to a single room

and the bathroom. I set up a cot in the kitchen between the bridge table and the cold iron radiator that rang when I knocked it

with my ring. I never turned off the light or the ceiling fan,

thirty spins a minute. I counted. Or the tv, clicking through the channels, stopping only when someone was killing someone else or mountains exploded, moving on after the carnage was complete.

I ate mostly pizza, shaking down the red pepper flakes so they fell like radioactive ticker tape. Once in a while, I hung my head out the window to see the ordinariness of the garment district below,
the men pushing racks of designer dresses, people on their lunch

breaks in groups of three, four, and even two. In August I dragged

my suitcase into the bedroom and folded clothes into the waiting bureau. In September I turned everything off, made up the big bed,

and stretched myself out on it, my body made of the stillness.
Gail Carson Levine

TAKE THE BAIT

Nedda! Last Friday the word on Wordsmith.org was *callipygian*, means *having well-shaped buttocks*. Heroes in Hosiery, South China Morning Post, used it in a sentence three months before you died. If you return, Jack will embroider matching pillowcases with *callipygian* and your beloved *steatopygous*. Crown your bed with them. If *callipygian* is not enough, take *brummagem*. You’ll love the sound, means cheap and showy, both noun and adjective. It’s a toponym! I know you like that, a word from a place, Birmingham, UK, where they forged counterfeit groats in the 17th century. One more lure: *tench*. You may have eaten this fish, which can survive extraordinarily long out of water, tenacious of life, they say. The golden tench is ornamental, as you were. Let me reel you back to me.
Lucy Frank

AFTER COLLEGE

–after Claudia Emerson’s “House-Sitting” in Late Wife

The first summer I was alone
in an apartment on an airshaft where light
found its way down only
when I wasn’t home,
I ate canned frosting for dinner
and listened to Otis Redding sing
“I’ve Been Loving You Too Long To Stop Now.”

Midnight, the dogs in the vet’s at the
bottom of the airshaft would start to howl,
and a parrot shrieked, “Help! Get me out!”
until from somewhere up above,
a man screamed “Shut the fuck up!”
and someone else would holler
“You shut up, mothafucka!”

A boy I didn’t know gave me a bony
Burmese cat supposed to fetch
a rolled up pair of socks. For me,
she wouldn’t fetch or purr, but after
the dogs had gone to sleep and the fuck you chorus
ceased, she’d curl into the hollow
my body made of the stillness.
Stan Sanvel Rubin

TORNADO

This morning nothing
is organized, not even sky.

Out there, something is gathering slowly
into its own occurrence,

like a thread of thought
becoming a storm

of emotions you can’t control
as it rolls over the fields

and flattens the fences
erected all along the wilderness
to protect it from us.
Someone needs to do a better job

keeping the barriers up,
keeping the perimeter posted

so that nothing gets through
that isn’t supposed to get through,

no instance of even momentary
confusion, no symptoms

we cannot name, as in this
instance, a horse, a stranger
loose as a bear, coming
from nowhere, hungry.

I feed him from my palm,
apples and grain, he can’t get enough.

I see you watching
from the kitchen window,

the glass still smoky
with the fog of our argument.

Is this all I need to know,
this way of feeding lost animals?

Haven’t I always been waiting
for something like this to arrive?
Stan Sanvel Rubin

FOR AN INSTANT

Rain like a sweet thought
clouds the windows
and shuttles me away
so that without sleeping or waking
I’m in the world I wanted,

the one without news
but full of meaning
you don’t have to interpret
because the things you love
are everywhere you look

and you don’t need other things.
Kristina Gorcheva-Newberry

**EVERY ANGEL IS TERRIFYING**

She recognizes that expression on her husband’s face—of a rejected puppy or a misunderstood, underappreciated artist whose work has gone unnoticed for too long. Something must’ve happened between him and the girl who’d been his last infatuation, his farewell to words. She’s seen him mope around the house, desperate for a call or a message that won’t come. She wants to tell him that it’s over, the girl has had her fun and wants no more, that she’s young and adamant—an urchin, a cute kitten grown into a sly cat—but she walks over and sets his tea on the coffee table while he pretends to watch football, languishing against the couch pillows. Somehow the pillows remind her of herself—just as limp and frayed, as though the lining has been pulled out and then forced back, in all the wrong spaces. Some are ruffled and bulging, some have gone flat.

They’ve been married for three decades: slept, eaten, and showered together, and paraded naked afterward. Over the years, she’s learned to understand his moods and smiles, his sighs and coughs. At times she thinks she knows him better than herself or that through struggling to read and appreciate his poetry, she’s discovered things about her own nature, her own passions or rather the lack of such. Everything she does, she compares to the way he would’ve done it, and somehow finds it unsatisfactory, becomes displeased. It is as if he makes her feel incompetent without actually intending to. She’s never once seen reproach in his eyes, neither when she burnt his steak nor peppered his toast. Not even when she accidentally backed over their dog, and they took the bloody, panting animal to the vet, where they watched a doctor put the mutt to sleep, the dog’s eyes getting droopier with each pentobarbital drop.

Back in the kitchen, empty beer bottles line up along the counter littered with twist-off caps and crumpled post-it notes. She pauses, picking one up and smoothing it with her fingers.

*Scupper:*

1. *Kill, esp. in an ambush*
2. Defeat, ruin, thwart, put an end to
3. Sink (a ship) deliberately, scuttle.

She’s come to regard his affairs as inextricable from what he is and has always been—an artist, a man of words. When they first got married, they used to fight, and she used to cuss at him and cry for hours. Once, she slept with the family dentist, just to prove to herself that she could, that she could be like the man she was married to. It didn’t work. She was not a man, and she was not an artist. She didn’t possess the urge, didn’t know how it felt to be devoured by inspiration that kept her words flowing and her fingers caressing the keyboard in lustful whispers as though undressing a lover—a muse—unhooking her godly bra or burrowing into the heavenly silk of her underskirts. Neither did she know what it felt like to have the words elude her, to have her eyes staring into the impervious darkness of a night window or at the blinding whiteness of a clean page, to have her hands stiff and paralyzed, obeying no orders, idle on her knees or at her sides.

She pulls the trash can out and scoops the caps and notes off the counter, watching them fall and bury the tea bag, and then reaches for the bottles. After his first affair, she left and stayed with her parents, at their cramped apartment in Brooklyn, sharing the bedroom with a parrot and a dwarf hamster and a three-legged cat her mother had rescued from the streets. The parrot insisted on asking her name and reiterating his, the hamster stank, and the cat made peculiar noise, hobbling on her three legs from the bathroom to the bedroom. She drew no comparison between herself and the cat but kept thinking that she, too, had lost a limb that could not be reattached or grown back. She had to bury the remains and go on with her life, which she did. But only after her husband arrived at her parents’ with a cream-colored puppy shivering inside his jacket, dripping rain on their antique rugs.

Her mother often reminds her of their Russian heritage, of the way Russian women have been worshipped by their male counterparts in their fabulous novels that are as long and tragic as life itself. When she moved back with her husband, she tried to read War and Peace but couldn’t bring herself to finish the book—it was too thick and heavy, a dead weight in her arms. She would at first become sad for not having the chance to live then and there, but soon fall asleep, relieved that she didn’t have to marry the man her parents had once
chosen for her. The man was and is a dentist who fills, extracts, and crowns her parents’ teeth, gradually replacing them with partials and dentures. She would’ve never gone hungry with such a husband, as her parents pointed out so many times. But she considered it strange and miserable to willingly pry in other people’s orifices, excavating traces of yesterday’s supper from their deteriorating teeth. It could be worse, she supposes. There are other professions, other orifices. But she loved the man who made love to words and craved no other.

She places the beer bottles in the trash can one by one, first standing them up and then stowing them one atop another. Some are completely empty; some have remains of beer, and she pours those into the sink over pieces of crumbled toast that her husband didn’t finish that morning. She flips the switch of the garbage disposal and lets it run for a few seconds, for as long as she can bear the noise. On the couch, her husband doesn’t move; his hands still, aligned with his body, his Argyle socks pulled up to his knobby knees.

Years passed between his first affair and the second one. She had a miscarriage, lost one of her fallopian tubes, and inserted an IUD. She neither wanted children nor didn’t want them. And her husband didn’t insist, enthralled by his poetic outpourings. On a gloomy fall afternoon, when she was making lasagna, layering soggy, overcooked pasta with ricotta cheese and fried broken hamburger, her husband brought his affair home—a poor student in need of shelter and soul food. The girl smiled and set her coffee mug on their kitchen table, next to an open jar of marinara sauce. She didn’t say anything but continued to examine the girl’s face drained of teenage naiveté. The girl dipped her finger inside the jar and brought it to her mouth, pushing it between her lips. She stayed with them the entire winter until the snow melted in their driveway and the cypress thrummed with new tender-green foliage. After the girl left, her husband went to his study and didn’t come out for days, his pen scribbling against paper. When she brought him food, she glanced over his shoulders, skimming a page of words, some blackened out, some rewritten over in bold ink. She read *incongruity of things* and *bedraggled feelings*, which of course made perfect sense to her.

She lifts the heavy trash can and tries to push it in its place, under the sink. It doesn’t fit, sliding reluctantly, like a devout person being
pressed or coerced into doing something roguish. Bending down, she discovers an old shopping bag stuffed behind the pipe with a picture of a globe and Martin Travel imprinted in fading green. She’s been working at the travel agency for ten years, although she herself doesn’t like to take trips, neither in the States nor abroad, not even to Paris—the city of love. She thinks one doesn’t have to travel that far to find love. It’s ridiculous to dream about people you’ve never met as opposed to the ones you’ve known all your life. Because whatever it is that makes her sad and giddy at once can’t be found any place foreign, where people don’t speak her tongue, but at home, in her own house, in her own heart.

He’s often told her that he needs her, that she cannot leave. He can’t write without knowing that she cares, without being able to divulge his new ideas, his work in gestation. She isn’t a muse but a womb within a womb. His poems grow out of her, and she grows out of his poems. He calls it reciprocal assimilation, like art and life, life and death. She owes it to the world, which would be orphaned without art, without his poetry, without his words made flesh. He’s always washed her underwear—even when she still had her periods—because he insists on mortal chores, something that he can do just for her. He chops onions for salads and cleans the bathrooms when she’s at work. He doesn’t ask about the clients she meets or places she sends them to, tours she books or little gifts she accepts upon her clients’ return. He scorns other people’s lives void of imagination—compartmentalized chaos, he calls it, a plaintive bustle intercepted by frenetic peregrinations.

They have not taken any trips together since their honeymoon, when they drove to Gatlinburg and leisured in a small inn overlooking the Smokey Mountains. It rained the entire week they stayed there, so they ordered their meals in and didn’t leave the room except to buy more wine. They made love incessantly, and he recited his beloved Rilke to her—naked—a towel slung across his shoulder:

| And even if one of them pressed me  
| Suddenly to his heart: I’d be consumed  
| In his stronger existence. For beauty is nothing  
| But the beginning of terror, which we can just |
barely endure,
and we stand in awe of it as it coolly disdains
to destroy us. Every angel is terrifying.

At the end of their honeymoon week, he read to her his own clum-
sy poems, and she laughed, dripping wine into the hollow of his navel
and sucking it out. When he ran out of paper, he wrote on her midriff
and breasts, teasing her soft areolas with his finger. She flopped on her
belly, and he scribbled stanzas on her back and buttocks and thighs.
The pen tickled her as he pressed its sharp tip against her bare skin.
He forbade her to shower until they returned home and he transferred
his poetry onto paper.

He has published seven collections of poetry since and received
prizes, and each book has been dedicated to her—her intelligence,
her guidance, her fortitude, her love. She pauses again, with a musty
grocery bag in her hands, then opens one of the drawers and gathers
the knives together—sharp, blunt, serrated, with bent tips and water
stains—and places them inside the bag. The artists are the tragic lot,
their family doctor has warned her, the sublimity verging on suicide.

Her husband’s third affair was tall and proud—a girl of virtue,
he used to say. She didn’t walk but sailed into their house and made
everything look small, like a great ocean liner moored on a private
lake. The girl was disconcertingly lovely and didn’t arouse her jeal-
ousy but brought her happiness in an odd way. They drank and cooked
together and jabbered about face-lifts and tummy-tucks they would
get when they grew old, although the girl was years behind, her hair
long and shiny. They swapped clothes and jewelry, experimented with
hair styles and food while discussing movies and books and even her
husband’s poems, which the girl adored but didn’t quite understand.
They argued about their meaning and thumbed through his heavy
dictionaries in search of unfamiliar words, words that her husband
was in the habit of writing down on post-it notes, adhering them to
a first available surface. Everywhere they looked, they found words,
and more words, stuck to the kitchen cabinets and tables and sinks
and bed posts and dressers and wardrobes. Words coated the walls
and chairs and mirrors and even the doors and lamp shades. Summer
came, and the sun seeped through the semi-veiled windows, and some
of the words faded, and some of the post-it notes curled and began to fall on the floor. One day the girl called and said that she was going to Africa on a charity mission, and they never heard from her again. Her husband bought a computer and began to peck away. In the kitchen or in the living room, she could hear him tearing into the keys, like a stubborn thrush into a tree bark.

Hoisting the shopping bag on her shoulder, she walks out of the kitchen through a small foyer, where the dog used to stay. She looks at the old trundle bed, its scarred frame exhibiting traces of fangs and claws. She remembers the fight they had, bickering about her prosaic expectations of their marriage, before she stomped out of the house and got in her car and backed out of the driveway. She can still hear that distant sound—a thud—like that of a snowball hitting the bumper.

After his third affair, she started looking forward to a fourth. Somehow, she got attached to the girls and craved their company, the way they listened to her speak, as though entranced by the sound of her voice, engrossed in everything she had to say. They cared for her opinion and seldom contradicted. There was liveliness in their manners and conversations. They didn’t brood about life’s ever-elusive meaning nor try to capture the essence of one’s being or his belonging to the world of false beauty and superannuated dreams. They expressed themselves freely, with larkspur and abandon as though picking flowers in her garden or plucking cherries from her single tree. They kept her company while her husband erected shrines of poetry out of august, emphatic words.

She hasn’t caught him in the act, but he doesn’t deny the obvious—he needs his affairs just like he needs her—something new to dilute the familiar, something erratic to spice up the ordinarily, raw emotion to bear life’s habitual flow. When the fourth and the last girl entered their house, her husband was caught off guard. He didn’t invite her, she did. She found the girl standing in front of the travel agency, attempting to light a cigarette in the wind. Each time the girl brought the lighter to the tip of her cigarette, the flame became extinguished, and she shook her head in disbelief and tried again. She walked out and stood close to the girl—a waif puppy in her gray hat and jacket, with darting, inquisitive eyes and a white scarf like a flea collar tightened around her neck. She cupped her hands over the ciga-
rette balancing between the girl’s lips. The girl smiled and flipped her lighter once again. An hour later, at a local bar, the girl confessed that she planned to travel some place but didn’t know where and needed someone to help her decide. She also had a little money saved from her college graduation party and was wondering if that was enough—she didn’t want to borrow any from her parents—didn’t care for them to know where she was or intended to be. They urged her to get married and have children or find a job because they were tired of supporting a hopeless dreamer possessed by idleness and seeking self-expression. Her husband frowned when the two of them showed up late, drunk and giggly, piling him with their coats and scarves and gloves and purses. In the dark, she noticed how much he’d aged, his hair thinning and gray, his skin drab and wrinkled like the shirt he wore.

The girl did not stay but a week, which floated by from one cozy evening to another. There were candles, wine, plans to travel to Paris in the spring. They made Christmas garlands from popcorn and fresh cranberries—the old-fashioned way—threading them on a yarn of bluish-gray left over from the days when she’d regarded knitting as akin to art. Her husband seemed mellow and jocose, unraveling a long, twisted thread from the skein in the girl’s hands, and she knew it was only a matter of time before the girl would purr her way into his poetry, his bed of words.

The girl disappeared late one night, when they were sleeping. They discovered money missing and a few sweaters, her husband’s wedding ring and the watch he didn’t put back on after showering. Like two of her predecessors, the girl did not offer an explanation or a polite, repenting note. Like them, she left no trace or scent, just a whiff of memories, obscure and disjointed, as though after a prolonged, drunken binge. Her husband kicked the dog’s bed that they still kept in the foyer even though it had been five years since the dog died. He locked himself in his study, seeking refuge at his computer, flipping through the dictionaries—the sepulchers of knowledge—but the words did not come. The computer keys remained silent day after day. A week later, he still loitered around the house, tearing post-it notes from the walls and windows, tables and doors, revealing stains and scratches, the trail of someone’s tiny fingerprints on their bedroom mirror.
In her long trench coat, she’s back in the kitchen, scouring the counter for the car keys. Her husband is asleep now, subdued by the football game on TV. His feet are propped on the coffee table, next to the tea he hasn’t touched. His chin dabs at his bony, concave chest, where his faded jean shirt is unbuttoned, revealing coils of gray hair and a pale patch of skin. The TV hums and flickers, and she watches the battle of shadows on his emaciated face. It has been six weeks since the girl left, but he hasn’t written a word. The house stays quiet most of the time as though all the sound has fallen away, as though they’ve climbed the highest mountain and are afraid to look down or take another step.

The Christmas tree has dried up in the corner, the floor covered with shed needles. Strings of popcorn and shriveled cranberries droop over the bald, brittle limbs. Last night she experienced death in her dream. They were driving from Gatlinburg back to Sicklerville, the suburbs of Philadelphia, speeding, passing a Home Depot truck. Neither anticipated a sharp turn, and her husband stomped on the brakes, the tires screeched, the car skidding, sliding and careening to one side. She was in the back seat, reading his latest poems, when he told her it was over, and she wanted to ask what, but something inside her snapped, breaking her spine, folding her in half. And then nothingness, her mind being sucked into a black funnel. She gagged and opened her eyes and saw her husband sitting on the bed, his hunched back to her. He had a notebook open on his lap, a pencil—dormant—dividing the two blank halves.

She has to buy some groceries even though it’s almost eight. There are no eggs in the house, and the milk has curdled. She’ll also pick up a French loaf for breakfast. She’s forgotten to call her mother, who has rescued yet another animal—a pet snake. Her father has moved out because there was no room for anyone else in that apartment, and because he’s afraid of the snake coiling around his neck and choking him in his sleep. Her mother says he’s been doing it for years—seeking a way out, camouflaging his self-induced misery and blaming the animals for his own craven desire to flee their home, to escape the responsibility of getting old.

She opens the door with as little noise as possible and slips out and nearly falls down the steps glazed with ice. The knives in the
bag bounce and clatter as she steadies herself, holding to the railing, then minces toward her car. Icicles dangle from the cherry tree under which the dog is buried. The flowerbeds have wilted, pansies and marigolds rotted to the roots. The neighborhood is deserted. In the yards, swings creak and sway. Everywhere around, the windows are lit, and she catches glimpses of other lives kindling behind the glass.

She drives slowly, one foot on the floor, the other tapping on and off the gas pedal. Swerving left on Cross Hill and another left on Meetinghouse Circle, she takes right on New Freedom Road, where she parks on the curb, in front of Bruce’s Market. As she emerges from the car, but before she locks it, she sees a man and woman arguing next to a shop window. The man slaps the woman, and she slaps him right back. He cusses, then pinches the woman’s chin, pulling her closer, baring his teeth just as the dog did when her husband tried to coax it into entering the house after a long walk. The woman pricks the man’s fingers from her face, turns around, and attempts to walk away, her dirndl fluttering around her ankles. The man catches her coat sleeve and drags her backward. The woman shouts something in a foreign language, freeing her arm, and then swings her purse at him and traipses up the street.

She has little time to decide, so she gets back in the car and turns on the engine, watching the man retrieving something from his pocket, something small that almost fits inside his fist. The passenger’s window is rolled down, and she blows her horn, which startles the man. He halts, turning his head, and fastens his small, hard eyes on her face. Drawing the shopping bag on her knees and wrapping its cloth handles around the bundle of knives, she leans over the seat and hurtles the bag out the window as hard as she can. It hits the man in the chest and lands on his foot, and he falters, dropping a petite revolver—or something that looks like one—on the ground. She stomps on the gas, and the car lurches forward. Now, she’s ahead of the woman, screaming: Get in! Get in!

The woman takes a few quick leaps, jerks the door open, and dives inside, the contents of her purse spilled out and crushed under the wheels. She breathes heavily, pushing her fiery-red hair away from her face. She’s young and affable, with pale skin and small pointy nose. Her hands tremble, and she slips them between her thighs.
–Drive, drive! the woman commands with a thick Eastern–European accent.
–Where?
–Anywhere. Away from here.
The woman coughs and sucks on her bleeding lip.
–Did he hit you?
–No. He kissed me. What do you think?! Fucking bastard. Thinks he owns me. Thinks he can fuck me over, fuck my mother, fuck my friends.
She doesn’t reply but turns left at Cross Keys Road, climbing the ramp in the direction of Philadelphia, E-Z-passing through a toll and merging onto Atlantic City Expressway.
The woman gathers her hair into a loose knot and clips it higher at the back of her head, then asks: You married?
–Married? she repeats as though hearing the word for the first time.
–Yeah. Husband? Children?
–No, she answers after a pause. No husband. No children.
–That’s smart. No one to worry about. No shit to wipe.
She gives her a quick look, lips forging a smile.
They continue to drive, the woman gaping out the window, at trees and bridges and road signs, reading the names of towns and highways out loud, with the same distinctive accent. Her face is smooth and rosy now and somehow Russian, fraught with innate dignity extolled by Tolstoy. And yet she resembles none of his nineteenth-century heroines—fragile and delicate—bequeathed into marriages, along with linens and china and family jewels.
It begins to rain and snow at the same time, and the windshield glistens with beads of water caught reflection from the head lights. She doesn’t turn the wipers on or roll up the windows, but allows the cool wintry mix to dapple her face and neck. The road unfurls in front of them like a black, wet tongue. She winces, recalling the multitudes of words she’s learned over the years—pithy, hyphenated, trite, or abstruse—and yet she can’t single out any to describe what she feels just now.
DENYING THE ENEMY GROUND

On that particular morning I crept along and kept my eyes darting left to right, then up and down the way I’d been trained to do it. This quasi-evacuated, Vietnamese village had plenty of good places to hide in and we’d had trouble here before. So the whole patrol was acting skittish.

Our mission was simple: Give Battalion its body count and deny the enemy ground. The platoon sergeant had ordered us outside the wire in the cool, predawn shadows with his finger pointed, his teeth gritted. “I want results. I want numbers today, Marines.”

All I wanted was to get this search done and get out alive. No heroics.

Now, with the sun high and sizzling, my M-16 was on safe, but I thumbed the selector switch and held my sweaty finger on the trigger. I had a full twenty round magazine and could go automatic in a flick.

To my right flank something moved in a blur and tripped out of a hootch, kicking some flat baskets over and spilling rice onto the deck. Behind me a new guy let off a three-round burst. BUTTA-DOW!

I spun around ready to rock and roll.

A white-haired man dropped face down and thumped on the hard-packed earth. A sort of two count movement; knees, face. Three blood splotches expanded across the back of his cotton shirt the way a pool ripples when you toss in a stone.

The new guy stood over the body, shifting his weight from one foot to the other, licking his lips and breathing heavily. Smoke swirled from his rifle barrel.


“Ain’t supposed to be here,” the new guy said. “Fuckin slope couldda been doin anything. Whatta you expect?”

The new guy leaned forward and prodded the body with his
weapon. No movement. He was dead alright. Life is short around new guys.

The squad leader barked forward, “We’re all clear back here.” Then he said to the new guy, “I don’t see no weapon, neither. Now you’ll have to give a report, you shit-bird.”

“So what, man? We got a kill. So what?”

The squad leader hustled up the column shouting for the radio-man. He’d have to get on the horn and explain this right away.

“You’d better search him,” I said to the new guy.

“Search him?”

“You gotta,” I said.

The new guy looked like I’d asked him to stick his hands in a shit barrel. His chest still heaved. He licked his lips the way nervous people wring their hands.

“Take a drink of water,” I said, “and search that fucker.”

The new guy guzzled from his canteen. His hands trembled like he’d been lifting weights or something. Over stimulated, I guessed.

“It’s okay you shot him,” I said, lowering my voice. I stared him in the eye. “We’ll likely get an extra beer ration for it. Thanks for covering my ass.”

I don’t know why I said that. Maybe because he’d patrol behind me the rest of the day and I didn’t want him acting too goofy.

My Cajun buddy, Duchamp, rushed up then from the rear to see what all the commotion was. He hollered at me as he approached. “Hey, Will! Who killed that gook?” His voice trailed off and his gait slowed when he saw the body heaped in the dirt, the new guy patting it down.

I turned away, rubbing sweat off my forehead with the back of my hand. The stench of cordite lingered in the air, and gun smoke. There was no way I could answer his question, not even if I’d known the new guy’s name.
At the hospital this afternoon, my brother and I sat in a doctor’s office listening to the prognosis on our father. My brother asked all the questions, the doctor answered only him. I couldn’t hit the end of an answer quick enough to get in before my brother’s next question. The doctor acted as if he couldn’t see me. I wanted to tell him that I, too, was a son of the patient and that I was sitting right in front of his fat ass. My brother is older than I am, but so what? Was the doctor using a ranking system? If that pear-shaped man had looked at me he’d have seen I was not happy to be ignored, but he didn’t give me a glance and didn’t care. A perfect match for my brother, who never turned and asked me if I had any questions for the doctor. Those two had such a rapport that I felt like an intruder. I’d had enough of listening to them and I got up and left. I heard their voices carry on without a pause as I walked down the hall and through a doorway. I reached an area near the elevators where there was seating and sunlight coming through some long windows. I took a seat and in a couple of minutes, before I’d had a chance to settle down, my brother appeared and stopped in front of me. He gave me a recap of what the doctor had said, all of which I’d heard when I was still in the room. When he finally stopped I told him that I felt as if they’d both ignored me and that was why I’d left. He didn’t have enough curiosity to ask so I just came out with it. He said he was sorry I was angry but he saw nothing to be angry about. No one but me had kept me from talking, he said, and all I had to do was open my mouth and say anything I wanted to say. He asked if there was something I wanted to know that hadn’t been asked. We could go back and see if the doctor was still in his office and try to get some answers. I replied that I wasn’t going back there to be indulged by a person who had no interest in listening to me. I didn’t need to be humored by him or the doctor, I told my brother, who tried not to roll his eyes but did roll them slightly. He saw me sneer at his eyes as they rolled and then tried not to shake his head in his condescending way. But he couldn’t stop himself from shaking his head and deep down
probably didn’t want to stop himself. My brother writes stories, and I told him that if he wrote a story or a scene in a story about the talk with the doctor that if I was in the story at all I’d be written as a stick figure spinning around his axis. I said I was tired of being shown as a stick figure in his stories or of being left out of them altogether, even in cases when I’d been there when whatever it was had happened. You’re only showing your side of things, I said, and then I told him that before he could cut me out of this story I’d write it myself. He seemed surprised, and I saw a faint smile that he tried to suppress appear in the corner of his mouth. I had an idea what he could be thinking, but I didn’t want to tell him because if he wasn’t thinking what I thought he was thinking then I’d be putting the idea in his head. His smile made me wonder if he planned to write the story from my point of view, though of course it would be his idea of my point of view. I imagined him leaning back in his desk chair, cooking up juicy details about what had been running through my mind before and after I stomped out of the doctor’s office. I saw a trace of resentment in his face then, a touch of impatience, a hint of pity. Be careful how you tell your story, my big brother said, because it will take you with it. Wouldn’t that go for you too? I asked him.
Her husband, Albert, is cranky today. He always is when his feet are swollen. He sits with them propped on a hassock, shoes untied, laces loose and dangling around his puffy ankles. Laura Lee, who is digging about in the extra refrigerator outside in the carport, doesn’t know if the crankiness is from the swelling or vice versa. All she knows is that they come in twos and she’s leaving today.

“Close the door, for Christ’s sake. Were you raised in a barn?” he yells over the hum of the window unit in the family room.

“I can’t,” she yells back. “My hands are full.” They aren’t, but she says they are anyway. He knows where she was raised—five miles down the road on the Ridley Place.

“Then use your foot. Slam it closed.”

“Would you calm down?”

“Not as long as you intend to air condition all of Crumb County.”

“I’m coming inside right now.”

“You always have to have the last word, don’t you?”

“Not necessarily.” With a jar of midget dills in one hand, a head of red cabbage in the other, she backs into the room. She winds up slamming the door with the tip of her toe after all.

Albert punches the remote and a fat lady in black tights pops onto the television screen. Groaning, she bends across a pendulous belly and bulging thighs to touch her toes. “Would you look at that?” he crows. “And I thought you had big legs.”

Laura Lee reaches for the grater under the kitchen counter and acts as if she hasn’t heard. She knows he’s getting even, lets it pass. Instead she watches the shredded cabbage fall like confetti into the mixing bowl and thinks of Starling. At this minute, he’s in town at Sports Unlimited buying a motorcycle helmet for her.

“You’ll pick up an extra one of those,” she’d said this morning as he pulled on his helmet and mounted the Harley. In her mind’s eye she pictures the two of them winding down the blacktop together, their helmets bobbing like party balloons. When he looked up at her and smiled, Laura Lee knew he was taking her with him.
Two weeks earlier, Starling’s bike had careened off the road in front of the house and shuddered to a stop astride their deep well pump. With his eyes squinted against the white hot sky, he’d picked himself up, unhurt. Behind him, the Harley lay bent like a crippled animal.

When Albert saw the damage, he said he felt responsible. Laura Lee didn’t understand why. Since he’s been sick, the way he looks at things sometimes makes no sense to her. At first she wondered if he was confused. The doctor had said this could happen, but she’s decided it’s more a matter of flawed logic.

“After all, it is our pump,” he explained, which, as far as she was concerned, didn’t explain taking a complete stranger into their home.

So Starling wound up installed in the spare bedroom to wait for parts while Laura Lee stood in the doorway holding in her stomach as hard as she could.

Albert flips off the television set now. “Do I get something to eat today?”

He’s seen the pickles and cabbage so he doesn’t need to ask. Not a day goes by that he’s not fed—and well, too. In fact, she loves to cook. Chopping settles her down better than a Xanax. The comforting feel of the knife handle seated in her palm, the crisp snap of the blade, the repetitive back and forth dissolves the tight knots of resentment that flare up and frighten her. Cooking takes the place of the words she needs to say and can’t.

“We’ll eat as soon as I finish the coleslaw,” she says.

“You expect me to live on nothing but air and water like a tree.” He munches the words, spits them out like breadcrumbs. Then his lips cave in. His teeth are out. He’s probably left them in the bathroom again.

“When you depend on someone else to do things for you, you sometimes have to settle for less than perfect,” she says, then reminds herself if she wanted a husband who wasn’t prickly and full of complaints, she needed to be married to someone else.

She dries her hands on a dishtowel and thinks of Albert as a tree. His plump arms cross his sturdy drum chest and he sits immovable. His gray hair is pushed up on one side of his head where he’s slept on it wrong. Matted curls climb in tangles down his neck along with the oxygen tube that tethers him like a leash. He could use a haircut.
In the bathroom, his teeth sit balanced on the edge of the sink. She cups them in a Kleenex and lifts them gingerly. Lots of things she does without thinking—sorting laundry, defrosting the freezer—but handling Albert’s dentures with a naked hand isn’t one of them.

She inches quietly up to his chair with the teeth behind her. He eyes her for a second, his Adam’s apple bobbing up and down, then says, “Okay, fork ‘em over.”

Laura Lee cradles them in the Kleenex and serves them to him like a highball on a drink tray. He pops them into his mouth, then smacks his lips and grins. He knows how she detests touching them; he forgets them on purpose.

At the sink, she eyes the Love is Blind sign centered in a red Valentine heart on the refrigerator door, a cereal box prize. She remembers a time when this was true, when she and Albert fit together perfectly. Like a jigsaw puzzle, he filled in her missing parts and she did the same for him. But this was before she found the pictures, before she began to run away, before Starling. She reaches over and tilts the heart upright. Now it still adds a nice splash of color to the spartan white.

When she slides the cabbage against the grater, her finger inadvertently scrapes against a rough strip of metal along its bottom. Before she can staunch the blood, it wells from the cut and drips into the bowl mixing with the red cabbage. She glances at Albert. He dozes with his head lolling against the back of the chair. She tosses the shredded cabbage about in the bowl and blends the reds together. Honest to God, if it’s anything she hates, it’s keeping track of his teeth.

The cut on her finger has almost stopped bleeding. She band-aids it, then struggles to open the lid on the pickle jar. In addition to the cut finger, her hands ache and their joints are stiff today. Once her fingers were so nimble, she’d taught little Sammie Stringer, who couldn’t find his way home alone in a rainstorm, to debone a chicken so skillfully the skin fit taut as a rubber glove over the meat. Now she has trouble unscrewing the lid from a jar of midget dills.

Laura Lee wonders if Starling is bothered by arthritis. She’s heard everybody is who’s over forty. He’s forty-one, nine years younger than she is. At sixty-five, Albert suffers terribly from it. “Some mornings I creak like the tin man,” he tells her.
Starling is tiny, smaller than Albert, so maybe he’s less affected by arthritis. She smiles, thinking of his thin mustache that quivers when he talks—which isn’t much. He tries to be unobtrusive, but she feels Starling behind her watching her from a doorway even when he doesn’t speak.

She rests the pickle jar on its side in the sink, then taps it with a knife handle. The jar breaks, cracking open like an eggshell.

“What’s going on over there?” Albert asks.

“I’m opening a jar of dills.”

Laura Lee rinses a pickle under the faucet, then leans across the lazy susan on the counter and dangles the pickle in a silly pickle jig. Albert laughs first, then she chuckles. With her hips swaying, she spins across the kitchen toward him, the pickle twirling like a castanet over her head.

When Albert coughs, choking on his laughter, she stops and reaches for his pill bottle on the windowsill. As she does, her eyes are drawn to the two weeping willows outside. Their branches sweep in circles like hoop skirts caught in the wind. Albert had planted them the first year they were married after they’d caught her fancy at White Rose. She remembers standing at this window and watching him at work, the handsome knot of muscles rippling across his back, his skin slick with sweat. When they were set firmly in the ground, he’d turned and saluted her with a grin.

Rushing outside, she’d smothered him in kisses. “Stand still,” she’d ordered while he squirmed. “I’ll be done in a jiffy.”

He tried to hide his smile, but Laura Lee knew he loved that she didn’t hold back. He was the one with few words and she, the loudmouth, who never waited for him to say I love you. But he adored her chatter and the silly things she said to make him laugh. “They’re what made me fall in love with you,” he said.

One day when he was so quiet she wanted to shake him, he asked, “I don’t say it much but you do believe I love you, don’t you?”

Studying him for a moment she replied, “As much as you’re capable of loving anyone.”

“My capacity for loving you amazes even me.”

And that’s when she fell in love with him.

Glancing down at the bowl of cabbage now, the red streaked with
the darker burgundy, she hesitates. She pictures Albert’s broad smile
that brimmed with hope. How proud and manly he looked standing
beside the weeping willows while dandelions cartwheeled around
him. She dumps the cabbage into the disposal.

For a second she’d forgotten Albert’s pills. Now his hacking
cough brings her back to the moment. She shakes a pill from the bottle
into her palm, adding an extra one for the swelling in his ankles. If
he takes it now, he won’t be back and forth all night to the bathroom.

As he swallows the pills, she runs her hands down the side of her
legs and over the creases in her new jeans. The hands might be a little
stiff, but the rest of her is in splendid shape. Her thighs are firm, a tad
heavy, she admits, and there’s a slight thickening at her waist. In fact,
she’s worn a girdle since Starling showed up. She tries to hold in her
stomach but has a tendency to forget. The jeans are for the Harley, of
course. She bought them on sale yesterday at The Gap.

“Did they go down?”

Albert nods. He never uses water for the pills anymore. He’s taken
so many, he’s learned to collect saliva on the back of his tongue
and washes them down with that.

She hears a sound outside and looks up to see if it’s Claude, Al-
bert’s brother. He lives in the farmhouse next door and drops by every
morning to check on Albert. The two of them are close. Albert will be
fine whether she’s here or not.

The sound she’d heard was a pickup rattling past. As she turns
back, her eyes linger for a moment on the ivy crowding the porch
rail. She hates how this spring the vine has choked out the morning
glories; not a speck of blue is to be seen.

Since Albert wouldn’t let Starling pay to stay with them, he looked
for things to do to help out. The barbequed chicken he cooked on the
grill turned out dry and oversweet and he couldn’t tell a weed from a
carrot in her garden. Finally she sat him on a stool at the kitchen coun-
ter, poured him a cup of coffee and said, “Talk to me while I work.
Tell me about yourself.”

She learned he’d once taught American history at a Blue Ridge
high school, he’d worked on a tree farm in Blackshear, and he’d spent
a summer in Jordan tutoring a sheik’s son, a little boy with a lisp who
sprayed Starling consistently with spit. She laughed then and he did
too, setting his thin black mustache aquiver.

Yesterday after two weeks of waiting, the part for the Harley arrived. When the bike was fixed, Starling took her for a ride. In the driveway, he revved the motor until the bike trembled beneath them like something alive. Then he whipped onto the two-lane. She sat in the seat behind him with her hands clasped around his waist. He kept glancing around as if checking to make sure she was still there behind him.

Resting her cheek against his back, Laura Lee listened to insects pop against the windshield. She’d never been on a motorcycle before. She was amazed at how close she was to the glittering mica stretched in front of them. When the wind tugged at her short hair, she suddenly wished she hadn’t listened to Maude at the beauty parlor. “Nobody over forty should wear long hair,” she’d said. What did Maude know? Recklessly, Laura Lee tossed her head and imagined her hair whipping out behind her.

“You’d like my cabin in North Carolina,” he said after the bike ride. “It’s on a ridge overlooking the Parkway, so high up not a power line is in sight. In the evening, the sinking sun lights on the wild azaleas, setting the whole side of the mountain on fire.”

From the look he gave her, Laura Lee knew she was there with him in his mind.

Eleven years ago last Spring, she and Albert spent a week in the mountains. It rained the entire time. Fierce wind and rain swept against the thin cabin walls, sealing them inside like clams in a shell. Restless and sullen at the rain and the desolate cabin, Albert cursed, “I’ll shave when I see the goddamn sun again and not before.” He’d spent the week fiddling with his new camera, one which had a tripod and timer.

They saw the sun again in Macon on the drive home. By that time his face was covered in hair as stiff and wiry as a Brillo pad.

“Oh, hon, I like your beard.” She leaned against him remembering the crack of the thunder and the hot ozone smell of lightning that flashed and lit up the cabin. Her blood, which felt sluggish in the humid low country, raced bold and energetic in the mountains. “It’s like being married to Long John Silver,” she said.
He shaved off his beard anyway.
Two weeks later, she found the pictures.

When Sol Flick at the post office said redbreasts were biting at the millpond, Laura Lee thought of her yellow-speckled lure. Redbreasts would strike at it when they’d swim past anything else. She’d taken it with her to the mountains, but couldn’t find it in her toolbox. Albert rarely borrowed her lures, mine catch more fish than yours any day, he claimed, but maybe it had wound up in his box by mistake.

Yes, there it was beneath his extra spools of line, and under it, the file folder with the pictures. Puzzled, she pulled out the first photo and held it up, confused at what she saw. The disembodied figures, the stark bare flesh. Witness to a bank robbery once, she remembers this element of surprise and the moments of free-fall confusion while she grasped what was happening. Later she thought often of that moment, how her stunned mind had grappled for meaning.

Finally when she recognized the two people in the picture, the significance of the bare back and naked leg, her own legs folded like an accordion beneath her. She slumped to the floor, the folder clutched to her chest. In the distance, the putt-putt of a tractor broke the quiet and mingled with the smell of newly tilled earth. Someone had bought the old Samson place and was plowing the meadow for planting. Overhead a mourning dove fluttered, busy building a nest in a basket of wandering Jew. The plant’s purple leaves were so dark, they looked black against the white-shingled wall. She marveled at the sounds, the smells, the rich contrast of colors while a low moan that started at the tips of her toes worked itself up through her body.

The folder contained eight pictures scattered about behind the letters of the alphabet. Behind the letter A was a picture of Albert and Ann Smithers. Even with her face half hidden, Laura Lee recognized the bobbed haircut and Albert’s hand spread like an opened fan across her stomach. His father’s signet ring looked thick and heavy against Anne’s delicate bare skin.

Filed behind the letter B was a picture of Albert and Barbara Lester, one of the twins, who worked at the Twilight Boutique where Laura Lee had discovered the iced tea pitcher with butterflies etched in the glass.
She held her breath and sped through the early letters of the alphabet. Finding no more photos, she skipped ahead hopefully, but her hope died at the shocking snapshot behind the letter T. Laura Lee thinks of how scared she was in first grade and how Maggie Harris, the woman in the photo who was a year older and in second, had taken her hand. “I’ll go with you,” she said and they’d climbed the schoolhouse steps together. The week before, Maggie had sat at Laura Lee’s kitchen table with her bra strap showing and sobbed about how if she didn’t catch a man soon, she’d surely wind up an old maid. Distraught by a weird-sounding recipe in the new Southern Living that mixed watermelon together with bleu cheese, Laura Lee said dismissively, “Honestly, Maggie, you and your drama. Have another piece of sponge cake.”

In the picture, Maggie lay beside Albert, her freckled skin naked and conspicuous against the lap robe stretched beneath them. Behind them Laura Lee made out a tumbled-down fence similar to the one at the Pinkney Place on Millcreek Road. A single huge sunflower tilted against Maggie’s leg, its face turned to the sun. Maggie was a sight without clothes. Laura Lee could see why she hadn’t had any takers.

Suddenly she was seized by an outrageous need to laugh out loud. She covered her mouth with her hand, capturing the bizarre sound before it could escape. Did being someone’s mistress knock Maggie out of the old maid category? Laura Lee certainly hoped not. The spiteful thought left her light-headed and giddy with a grainy taste on her tongue.

The last photo behind the letter Z was mostly shadow. Even in the dim light, she recognized Albert’s leg, she’d know it anyplace, but the other parts of the picture were deep in shadow. Was that the head of a bed? Perhaps an open window? Someone’s arm? She could make out long hair fanned against a pillow with a face just out of the frame.

Laura Lee turned the picture back and forth in the light, searching. Finally, she gave up. She returned it to the tackle box along with the other photos and closed the lid. The heat of the day had faded and a moist chill crept through her, numbing her fingertips, her feet. Cold seeped from the damp concrete through her jeans and into the backs of her legs and a heavy lump lay like a bruise in her chest.

In the family room, she wrapped an afghan around her stiff knees.
Closing her eyes, she relived over and over again the moment she’d looked at the first photo. What she hated most about knowing was that once she knew, she could never not know again.

In bed at night, she’d practiced what to say to Albert, but the words she came up with never seemed quite right.

Laura Lee stretches on tiptoe now to replace the pill bottle in the windowsill. Albert watches her and the snug fit of the jeans, the soft bulge at her waist. She knows what he’s going to say before he says it.

“You know something, Laura Lee? Some people shouldn’t wear jeans.”

“Oh?”

“You are one of those people.” He points his finger at her. Then he runs his hand down his pants leg, mocking her.

Last night while she turned down their bed, he’d shuffled to the bedroom door. “I’m supposed to be dead now, you know.”

“Albert, please! I hate when you talk like that.”

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you?” he said, leering at her from the doorway. “For me to be gone?”

Last Spring during a bad time, Dr. Deak told them Albert wouldn’t last through Christmas. She thinks of his life, a life spent being in control. Now he needs help getting out the front door. How that must feel, she can’t imagine. She swears he’s staying alive now for spite, to prove the doctor wrong. Who says being stubborn and determined isn’t a good thing?

“Doctors don’t know everything,” she said. Before Starling arrived, she often wondered what Albert would say if she replied, “You’re right. I can’t wait until you’re gone.” Now most often his baiting seems petty and insignificant.

Today the wait for Starling to come from town has left her edgy. She finds it hard to resist taking Albert’s bait.

Six months after she found the pictures, Laura Lee ran away for the first time with a cotton farmer from Cordele. He’d stopped to ask for directions one July morning while Albert was in Metter at an all-day meeting on soil conservation. What broad shoulders he had for someone so short; his handsome fingers she found remarkably provoc-
ative. She imagined him playing the piano, his slender fingers, long and tapered, moving across the keys. She noticed his limp, but only later when he removed his trousers, did she see his twisted clubfoot.

They parked on Broughton in Savannah and traipsed hand in hand down the riddle of cobblestones to River Street. Laura Lee’s blue silk dress, the one that brought out the color of her eyes, whispered against her thighs as she tripped along, her feet as dainty as a ballerina’s, he said. With his hand guiding her firmly by the elbow, Laura Lee felt courageous and beautiful.

A crowd of people was gathered at the river where the bank sloped toward the water. Laura Lee and the farmer moved closer to see two black men drag a huge fishing net in the deep water slightly off shore.

“The baby’s down on the bottom somewhere,” muttered an old lady with smoky black skin. “Right there’s where the woman pitched him in. Hauled off and slung him in like he was a bag of Dixie Crystal.”

Suddenly the hand that had guided Laura Lee with such assurance was gone. The spot on her arm felt bare and cool as though she’d thrown back the covers on a hot summer night and the breeze had chilled her skin.

Then a roar exploded behind them. The net had caught. Slowly the body of the dead baby emerged. Its arms were flung wide and marsh grass clung like soft putty to the mottled fingers. Dazed, she watched a solid mass of women hurtle toward her. At first she thought they were after her, but they were going for the dripping body of the baby.

“Take me home!” Laura Lee screamed at the cotton farmer.

In September, when the cloying heat of summer ended and the brisk days of fall began, she realized she was pregnant. Her nights became a kaleidoscope of flashing scenes—a baby dripping with marsh grass, huge grasping hands pulling her toward dark water, the memory of the man and an empty spot on her elbow.

The baby arrived in April when crape myrtle blossoms hung from their branches like clusters of purple grapes. She was perfectly formed with Albert’s dimple etched like a thin curved sickle in her chin and the umbilical cord wrapped so tightly around her neck, she never gasped once for air. They named her Virginia after Albert’s mother and buried her in the family cemetery at the top of the hill. Laura Lee
planted moss roses at the headstone and dusty miller at the foot of the grave. Then, like matting on a splendid painting, she framed it with row upon row of blazing salvia. Many mornings before dawn, she stood at the graveside pondering the notion of whether one’s life is lived in separate compartments or if the events meld into one.

Five years later she ran away again. This time she took off with an auto mechanic from Baxley who wore a belt buckle shaped like a tow truck. After a week, she came home. Perched on the hood of a car while the mechanic replaced brake shoes on a Chrysler Imperial wasn’t exactly what she’d had in mind. It was her mistake, of course. She should have checked him out more carefully. Actually, all she’d done was make sure both his feet matched.

Albert had looked at her gravely when she hustled through the front door lugging her suitcase. She’d explained before she left that she’d be in Atlanta with Mary Dell Thompson, picking out flocked wallpaper for the living room.

Albert pushes the hassock away now. He rises stiffly on his first trip to the bathroom—the pills at work. In the past year, he’s lost weight and his cheeks have sunken. The wrinkled skin drapes in layers down his face. She watches him move sluggishly across the room. When his feet swell, his lungs fill, too. His breathing becomes raspy and cumbersome in his chest. It’s a sound she’s come to hate. Sometimes when it wakes her in the night, she pines to take Albert in her arms and whisper, “I am so afraid.” If she did, would he bristle and pull away from her? Or would he relax and curl his body into hers? Before she can move, the picture of his hand on Ann’s naked stomach pops into her head, so Laura Lee lies stone-still in the dark and listens to him struggle to breathe.

Have more pictures been added to the file folder? Perhaps there’s one behind every letter of the alphabet now, like notches on a gun belt. She never opened the folder again. Instead she closed herself in silence and became as mute as he.

Laura Lee has no trouble opening the jar of mayonnaise. Whoever used it last didn’t tighten the lid.

“What are we having with the coleslaw?” Albert asks.
“Chicken of the Sea.”
“Again? Didn’t we just have that?”
“Not since day before yesterday.”
“It seems like that’s all we have. Tuna! Tuna! Tuna!”
“In case you haven’t noticed, Albert. This is not a restaurant.”
“No, Laura Lee, I hadn’t, but now that you’ve pointed it out to me . . .”
“Take it or leave it.”
“Starling’s gone and he’s not coming back.”
The mayonnaise jar slips. She catches it before it crashes to the floor. From the corner of her eye, she watches Albert. Finally, she says, “Oh, he’ll be back.”
“His shaving stuff is gone.”
Laura Lee feels his eyes on her.
“I checked.”
Behind her, the refrigerator makes a noise, two sharp brittle squeaks close together that sound like a mouse. The noise started yesterday. Laura Lee figures if the mouse squeaks three times in a row, the refrigerator’s gone. They’ll need a new one.
She waits until Albert is absorbed in his television program. Then she edges toward the spare bedroom and slides open the closet door. A single wire hanger tilts at an angle on the clothes rack in the empty closet. She leans her head against the doorframe. The mountains must be breathtaking this time of year, the wild azaleas like flaming bouquets in the sinking sun. She can almost smell the fresh air, the intoxicating surge of energy that fills her when she leaves the low country. Shivering, she crosses her arms over her chest and hugs herself as the emptiness takes her. It spreads through her body like spilled water soaking into a carpet.
Suddenly she yearns for Ginny, born without the twisted clubfoot that would’ve been awkward for a little girl. She yearns for Starling, who was not deceived by the girdle after all. She yearns to be the woman in the photo behind the Z, the one with the long wavy hair.
Life is not a series of separate compartments, she’s found, but one spilling over into the other like a nuclear waste leak. Did she really believe Starling would come back for her? Would she have gone with him if he had? Or does the fantasy of feeling she has a choice make staying easier?
She crosses the family room into the kitchen.
“Didn’t I tell you he’s not coming back?” Albert jeers.
Laura Lee stops. One, two, three, four, five. . . Suddenly she spins. Flinging out her arms, she sweeps everything off the kitchen counter. The coffee maker goes flying. The lazy susan bounces against the refrigerator door, then crashes to the floor. If anything was left on the counter to throw, she’d have it sailing across the room at Albert’s head. With her hands on her hips, she turns and faces him. “I know about your nice little file folder of women, Albert. I found them a long time ago. So rather than complain about having tuna again, be thankful every sandwich I’ve made for you since then hasn’t had poison planted in it.”

Moving faster than she’s seen him move in years, Albert jerks himself straight up in his chair, his mouth gaping. He looks so goofy with his mouth dropped open, she’d laugh—if she wasn’t so furious. Instead Laura Lee, who is normally not a crier, bursts into tears.

When Albert slides to the edge of his chair and tries to stand, she puts out her hand to stop him. Her words are strangled by sobs. “Those pictures just about killed me. My mistake was keeping them secret. Rather than fan them out like a deck of cards on the supper table and deal with them, I kept quiet and did shameful things to get back at you.” Then as quickly as her anger came, it leaves her. With the back of her hand, she swipes at her tears and says with a weary sigh, “Frankly, I’m sick to death of both of us.”

Albert watches her silently.

“No prop your feet on this stool to keep that swelling down. As soon as I take off this girdle, I’ll fix us something to eat.”

Lifting his feet, he places them on the hassock. Then he sinks back into the chair and studies her with an unfaltering gaze as if he’s seeing her for the first time.
The winter that Stefan was eighteen, Saint Roch came to him in a dream and urged him to depart with haste to the home of his girlfriend Bella, warning him that another man would be courting her love that very night. He awoke and left at once, taking his motorcycle to the curving mountain roads. His wife Amy often imagined what that night might have been like, for Stefan had never described it to her in detail; sometimes she pictured it as bright and starry, like the backdrop for a midnight lovers picnic, and other times she saw it with a low canopy of pillowed winter clouds, encircling the mountain roads like bed curtains. She did know that the streets were scabbed with ice, and that Stefan wrecked before arriving at Bella’s bedroom window.

With his left leg crushed under the motorcycle, Stefan waited. Amy could see him there, pinned as the chill wind mocked him and tossed his scarf about his fine face. A passerby happened upon him and brought him to the hospital. (Who was this good Samaritan, out on the mountain pass so late at night? Amy often wondered, for Stefan had never told her. A gypsy? A rock band? A family of four returning from vacation?) A full recovery was expected until Stefan received word that Bella had eloped with Giovini; then the healing blood in his leg chilled and the fractured bones never fully reunited.

When they were first married, Amy rarely thought of Bella. After all, she and Stefan had met in their thirties, and she herself had a past. She was only bothered by an occasional gnat of jealousy, a quiet wish that her husband’s passion for her might provoke him to rash decisions or outbursts of longing. Stefan loved her, she was sure of that, but over time her certainty crumbled into hope and longing. Hungry, her envy grew, clawing its way up to the top of her heart until the Italian teenager her husband had loved forty years before was often on her mind.

He had once been pleased with her, too, Amy knew, though those days seemed sunk further below his cerebral ice than his memories of Bella. Shortly after he left Italy, Amy and Stefan had dated on the
beaches by the Atlantic. Perhaps he had forgotten, but Amy could still see it: laying one cheek on her crossed forearms, back to the sun, the young Amy would look towards then-handsome Stefan. Cupping white sand and pouring it on the back of her calves, he would say how much he liked watching the grit blend into her sand-colored skin. Did you know, she might return, that there are more galaxies in all of space than grains of sand on the earth? And he might answer, No, tell me. And she would, detailing both the breadth of the universe and her own depths. Here on the shores they contracted to have a daughter together, and they would name her Amelia, after Amy herself.

Some two decades later, Amy had not lost her charm. She retained her slim legs, blonde bob and clear eyes; her lips had thinned but still she smiled wide. An easy elegance masked her disappointment, and few would have guessed that she did not have everything she’d ever wanted. Stefan, now corpulent and morose, skinned in a souring olive complexion, was the only one impervious to her charm.

The couple owned an Italian restaurant in South Florida. Bella’s Bistro was tucked in a shopping center on Broward Boulevard, fifteen miles from the public beach in Fort Lauderdale—twenty-five minutes of driving in the summer but forty-five minutes in the winter, when the snowbirds from New England alighted in their retirement resorts for the season. During the high season the traffic thickened like water and flour, and all the restaurants were full; that is, except Bella’s. The bistro was an outlier, outside the profitable intersect of the beach, casinos, and downtown dining on Las Olas Boulevard.

Or, if the location were not to blame, perhaps it was the menu. Bella’s was the kind of place that did not set the table with salt and pepper. Chef Stefan took pride in serving authentic food from his homeland, not the bastardized American versions of Italian fare. Customers always took too long reviewing the menu, full of dishes they had never heard of; “It all just looks so good; I can’t decide,” they would say, smiling, but their eyes were blank.

“Try the finocchi!” Amy would exclaim. It was the first item on the menu, Stefan’s signature. “People tell me they dream about it; who knows if that’s true but you should try it and find out,” she asserted, followed with a sunny laugh that covered, she hoped, her desperation. When the menus needed reprinting, she added a few dishes their cus-
tomers would find traditional—spaghetti, lasagna, and chicken marsala—but Stefan reacted dramatically. “These hands are not spaghetti hands!” he had said in an artificially deep voice, gesticulating with those hands as they talked in the kitchen.

Stefan was unbending on all things. Every idea squeezed from his brain passed immediately into a principle that could not be challenged. A swaggering intellectual, he called himself a recovering Catholic, having given up all forms of mysticism, save one: his devotion to Saint Roch. He had brought a statue of the wounded saint with him to the United States, and Roch alone occupied an oak shelf above the marble countertop where every night the couple rolled out fresh pasta dough to make the finocci.

To make the finocci filling, Stefan shaved four kinds of cheese, reduced pears in balsamic vinegar, and stirred in a fragrant garlic butter. He wrapped up the concoction, twisting the bundle shut with a flute of pasta dough fanning out beyond the lump of imprisoned cheese. The finocci pieces looked like purses or satchels, Stefan said. An omen of prosperity. Amy said she agreed, but to herself she thought they looked more like a jellyfish, or a heart outside its body.

Stefan loved the finocci; indeed Finocci’s was to be the name of the restaurant until he changed his mind, much to Amy’s relief (for who could pronounce Finocci’s?). On the day the Stefan’s Place sign was to be hung over the restaurant’s front door, three days before their second wedding anniversary, he dispatched Amy to the hardware store to buy interior paint for the dining room. “Buy whatever you want;” she would always remember that was what he’d said. It was a rare act of trust. Amy binged on designer paint swatches before selecting an arty scheme of teal, pale aqua and the softest dove gray; her confidence swelling, she also picked up eight sets of black toile curtains. While she shopped, he had hung the Judas sign.

When Amy returned, rushing to him with paint cans in her arms, she saw it there, the sign, a looming ugly sore. “Do you hate me,” she had said, not asked, with a tight voice void of any air. From a paint can she had dropped, a robin’s egg blue ooze of pigment trickled on the pavement and pooled. Stefan had paid cash for the sign out of their dwindling funds, and so their restaurant became Bella’s. After a long cry, Amy washed her face in the newly installed kitchen sink and determined to endure for the sake of Amelia, Amelia yet unborn.
Tomorrow was opening day. That night, while husband and wife made the first batch of finocci, Stefan comforted her. He had somehow disengaged from his sole culpability in hanging the sign, now treating it as an external event; unpreventable, however terrible it was, and now they must move on. Together. Hugging her, he stuck gooey pasta to her cheek and teased out her smile. She sifted flour on his hand and pretended it was an accident, but she broke her cover with a giggle. Together they affixed raw finocci to the backsplash over the stove, in the shape of a heart with S + A inside. And they laughed.

Many finocci nights in the early years passed in such blissful togetherness, a time for the couple to rekindle their friendship after the restaurant was abed. But as the years strung on, Stefan seemed to wish Amy was not with him in the kitchen; he did not talk to her and, as he leaned forward to fashion the finocci sacks, he maneuvered his meaty shoulders to block her view of the pasta counter as if he thought she was cheating off his paper in school. Amy feigned blindness to his hints. Around this time Stefan began the habit of disfiguring the last finocci bundle and depositing the sticky uncooked noodle on the shelf next to Roch. He then touched Roch’s wounded leg, leaving a flour residue over the saint’s mutilated flesh. Amy did not want to leave Stefan alone with Roch and the finocci.

During his life in the fourteenth century, Saint Roch was among the throngs infected with the black plague. He is now always depicted with an open sore on his left leg, bodily wounds that reflect Stefan’s own eternal scars from the night he lost Bella. According to legend, the dying Roch had been sustained by a faithful terrier that brought him bread scavenged from a neighboring castle, or perhaps it was manna from heaven; the saint is now the patron of the sick. The ceramic statue in the restaurant kitchen depicted the saint in a blue robe, hiked up nearly to his hip to display the plague’s mark, and the faithful dog at his ankles.

To Amy it was only religious kitsch, yet she suffered under the statue’s judgment stare. She frequently felt naked, exposed and weary, while working in the kitchen near Roch. Was it a transfiguration of Bella that looked down on her, or was it Stefan himself? Her husband applauded the saint’s flaw, for he did not believe in sanctification, nor a heaven with glorified bodies. “Thanks be to Roch,” Stefan would
say, having built his own miniature religion around his conception of the saint; he declared the couple must honor the restaurant Saint Roch had given them, these methods of honor being whatever Stefan devised in his own mind.

In actuality it wasn’t Roch that had provided for them; it was Amy’s own savings that birthed the restaurant, money she had saved with Amelia in mind. Certainly Bella’s would pay them back in dividends, once on her feet, and then there would be time for Amelia. At first Amy had not worried. The restaurant was young; their hopes were full and bubbled within them like the water that boiled in the pasta pots every night in the kitchen. But now they were on the other side of time. Her fertile years slipped away as she watched, but Stefan seemed not to notice, occupied in raising the restaurant. Amy wanted to scream that now, now, was the time: they must try at once or be passed over forever, but words always miscarried in her throat.

The only women at Bella’s that were ever pregnant were the birds, the dirty urban sparrows that built their nests in the orifices of the ‘B’, ‘e’, ‘a’ and ‘o’ in the bistro’s sign. Their children skittered around in the parking lot, grasping crumbs in their beaks. One spring a mother bird nested in the ladle of the ‘s’, and before long Amy found a hatchling’s dead body on the pavement by the front door, its feathers stiff, and its family’s nest empty. The tale of loss must have made its way into bird lore, as a warning, and the nest in the ‘s’ lived only as a decaying shrine.

To the north side of the dining room, the couple installed an outdoor patio in a nook edged with black olive trees. Amy had not known how terrible a tree could be. Cones and leaves dropped on the tables at every hour, and in the morning the cream table cloths would be covered with tree sap, black and sticky as tar. Spiders housed there, too. One evening a large arachnid lowered herself from an olive tree branch and alighted gracefully into a customer’s bowl of finocci. They had to comp the entire bill. The patio had failed, Stefan said, inert in his misery. So Amy cleaned the tar lines and had the trees cut down. And when the city cited them for violating the native plants protection ordinance, she convinced the agricultural office to lift the fine in exchange for the planting of three Christmas palms. The palms she wrapped in white twinkle lights, and the patio was better than before.
In these ways she toiled for her husband’s happiness, smoothing life’s wrinkles and tucking in the corners. It was never enough. Stefan called the palms ugly Florida weeds and refused to seat guests on the balcony. From inside, Amy would watch the lights sparkling on the palm leaves and empty chairs, and daydream about Amelia. Perhaps this spring she would have been a senior, maybe tonight she would be going to prom. What kind of dress would she have picked, full and ornate or streamlined and flowing? Would she have let Amy do her hair? Amy thought so.

These days the pain in Stefan’s leg intensified and began to wrap his leg and climb his body like poisonous vine. Losing mobility, he grew even more corpulent, so much so that his wide face and crimson cheeks seemed to bulge aggressively under his paper chef’s cap. On nights when the customers were sparse and the kitchen was slow, which seemed to be most nights now, Stefan would emerge to chat with the clientele. At one time he would have delighted customers with tales of his native Italy, mostly untrue, but now even strangers could smell his discontent. In her secret heart Amy wished with intensity that he would refrain from these visits now, but he still hauled his stiff body out to their tables. She watched the customers force out laughs and patronize him; she knew they wanted to finish up their dinners at this strange place and get the check.

Did he now, Amy asked, wish for a heaven that made one’s corporeal body whole, without flaw? No; he preferred the authenticity of earthly thorns. Amy thought him grotesque and stupid. Her palms burned with shame as she thought she hoped not to see her husband in heaven, if there were such a place.

One night while rolling out the dough for the finocci, Amy noticed Stefan’s unsteady stance and ragged, labored breaths. His movements were so protracted that he now let her help. Pained by his pain, a reproach sprung up behind her teeth. She tried to crush the words on the roof of her mouth with her tongue but they escaped.

“Stefan, my dear, I wish you would rest, or at least sit on a stool while you prepare the finocci,” she said. She looked down at her hands on the dough, matte and milky white. The chalky flour on her skin made her want to shudder, but she held her body still.

“Amy, my dear,” he said, “I wish you would not give me orders.”
His words bit into her face.

Amy conjured a smile and threw a puff of flour at her husband. She meant it to be a playful gesture, something she might have done in happier days to tease him, and he would have returned it with a kiss. But tonight Stefan dodged her affections, heaving his massive frame outside her trajectory. His heavy hip crashed into the cold marble countertop, sending a current of inertia up the wall and to the shelf where Saint Roch stared down at them with displeasure. Roch rocked off his tower and shattered when he met the countertop below. The pieces of his broken body scattered, pricking into the dough.

Cut open by a saintly ceramic fragment, Amy sucked her bleeding fingertip. Stefan bent his lips to kiss the fallen saint, he loosed a few salty tears; the tears were lost in the rolls of his cheeks and lips and did not drop into the dough. Wordlessly he continued preparing the supper, adding cheese, butter and bits of pear to the mosaic. Amy helped him bury the contents in finocci. The saint’s remains pushed against the pasta’s translucent skin like broken bones.

The couple cooked the finocci. Holding hands, they watched the pasta dance and drown in the boiling water until it was done. Dressed with a basil sprig, they left the bowl of finocci on the shelf where Saint Roch once stood. Amy placed a burning votive and glass of Merlot next to the bowl. When she turned out the light in the kitchen, Amy looked back and saw the candle’s glow reflected in the bloodred wine, but the finocci bowl was shadowed and dark. Would she be as unlucky as Lot’s wife, forever damned for the sake of one backwards glance?

While the couple readied for bed that night, Amy spoke. She was clearing butter yellow throw pillows from the bed as Stefan sat on the edge, massaging his injuries. For the second time that day, she released the words that rested on her tongue; words that typically she would have chewed up and swallowed, leaving a hard knot in her stomach.

“Perhaps Saint Roch will accept our finocci offering and bless us. Perhaps things will pick up at the restaurant,” she said.

“No,” Stefan said. “No, the finocci will still be there in the morning. Nothing will change.”

Amy lay awake for long while, leaning into Stefan’s body, with
her fingertips tracing the rivets of scars in his leg. Would Roch come to her in a dream if she asked him to? Wasn’t she now, at fifty-six, in much more need of Roch’s advice than Stefan at eighteen, when all the world’s roads were yet open? But Roch had only brought a plague on Stefan’s life, and hers, and she was not so much a fool to invite him in now.

In the morning, with the rays of bright sun pricking at his eyes, Stefan felt gloomy and announced that he didn’t feel well and didn’t want to go to the restaurant today. Amy would cajole him into a more productive mood, he knew. She would kiss both cheeks, and tug on his arm like a child might, and convince him that she must have him there at Bella’s. At first he would resist, and she would stroke his ego until he was ready. She always did this.

But today she didn’t. She said only, “Fine,” and left the bed. He listened to her shower, and to the quiet space as she put on her make-up, thinking he could hear the sound of powders and creams smeared on her skin. Then the mighty engine of the hair dryer filled his ears; he thought she might be singing beneath that drowning sound, which would be quite unusual if it were true. When she emerged from the bathroom, he closed his eyes; he heard her get dressed, then he heard the front door close with a snap, and then he heard nothing.

A faded blue puddle of paint still showed on the sidewalk as Amy approached the front door. Turning her key, she exited from the streaming sun into the cool cloak of the dark restaurant. Amy had passed under “Bella’s Bistro” for the last time. Already she had called a crew to the restaurant; today, before Stefan emerged from bed, the sign would be dismantled, the birds’ nests pulled out, the remnants hauled away. On the glass door front, she used pink window paint to write “Amelia’s Café” in curling script.

She sought the kitchen. The votive had burned out, wax congealed into gullies. Amy retrieved a gleaming fork. Sitting on the marble countertop, uninhibited by the flour residue that remained there, she held the finocchi bowl in her lap. She pulled the wine through her throat, draining the glass. With the fork she captured a finocchi heart and put it between her lips. Slowly she chewed, isolating the ceramic dwelling of Saint Roch with her tongue. Amy spit him into the wine glass like she were spitting out broken teeth. The whole bowl of cold
finocchi was eaten, and the whole of Saint Roch’s body discharged into the glass. The effect, the stemware’s grave filled with broken pottery, pleased Amy. She set the relic on the oak shelf above the marble countertop where every night the couple rolled out fresh pasta dough to make the finocchi.
Even though I’d lied about my age when I applied for the job at Mr. Grocer—already proving some moral flexibility on my part—I still was surprised to discover I’d flunked the Integrity Assessment Test, especially since they hired me anyway. Anyone wanting to work at Mr. Grocer in Laconia, New Hampshire was supposed to pass, but somehow I hadn’t. I’d never cheated at school, and with one exception I’d never really stolen. In fourth grade, I shoplifted barrettes from J.J. Newberry’s, and while I didn’t get caught the guilt was debilitating. I threw them away, went to Confession, and the lingering remorse was enough to prevent recurrence for years.

But that was kind of what Confession was for, if I correctly remembered Father Boisvert’s explanation at my First Reconciliation when I was seven. The slate only got wiped clean if you really felt remorse—if you were going to change and not just go out and do the same thing. I’d discovered plenty of gray areas since then where I wasn’t really sure I was sinning or not, or where I suspected I might have been talking myself into believing I had no need to feel guilty—but after a long year of studying for my Confirmation and dwelling on sinning a bit too much, I’d worked at putting all that guilt behind me.

I’d put the Integrity Test behind me too so it was funny when Andy, Mr. Grocer’s eighteen-year-old night manager, told me I’d failed. We were sitting in the break room together where I usually tried to read a book, but Andy, who I suspect had a crush on me, kept trying to make conversation. I’d been working there almost a year, so he must have been treasuring this tidbit for quite some time, waiting until just the right moment to spring it on me when he couldn’t think of anything else to say to hold my interest. It worked.

“I failed?” I said. I’d never failed anything, not even Chemistry, which I probably should have failed but somehow managed to squeak through with a demoralizing D the year before.

“Yeah,” Andy said. “But you seemed so nice, Mr. George hired you anyway.”
“I seemed nice?” I said, just as mystified by that answer as what Andy had said before. “You’re serious, right? I really failed?”

“The questions can be tricky Katie,” Andy said. “They try to trip you up.”

I liked to believe I’d never been tripped up either, but so much for that. “You didn’t fail, though,” I said.

“No,” Andy said. “But it’s not a big deal right?” Andy was beginning to look a little nervous, like he was sorry he’d brought it up.

“I guess not,” I said, “but I did lie on my application.”

“What?” Andy looked so shocked that I briefly considered telling him it was a joke, but the truth slipped out instead.

“Yeah. I was fifteen when I applied last summer. I’m only sixteen now.” I smiled and shrugged as Andy’s eyes got wide and he started laughing.

“You lied so you could work here?” Andy said.

“Yeah,” I said, “pathetic isn’t it?”

When I applied, I’d been a few months shy of sixteen and ineligible for any job that wasn’t food service, housekeeping, or babysitting, all of which I’d already suffered through, so I took the risk, figuring my lie would be short-lived. I thought Mr. Grocer—a sad, little store that had already changed hands and names a few times thanks to prior failures—was the place least likely to check up on me, least likely to care. I was right, as they hired me without a license, a social security card, or, apparently, even a passing score on the Integrity Assessment Test I took the day I applied.

Mr. Grocer was one of those dismal double-coupon places, too dingy on most days for the upscale shopper unless there was some crazy low price on ground beef or Campbell’s Cream of Mushroom Soup. The clientele came mostly from the apartments further down Union Avenue that surrounded the shuttered shoe factory, plus the nicer neighborhoods behind the Sacred Heart Catholic Church across the street, where shoppers came more from convenience than choice. Another income source was Laconia High School next door; students stormed the store every weekday at lunchtime, though the sales to shoplifting ratio was always a thorny question according to Mr. Grocer’s store manager, Mr. George.
The thornier questions were on the Integrity Assessment Test. For an hour I sat in the break room, puzzling over all the pages covering the vast variety of workplace scenarios. The test asked the same question over and over, coming at you from a different direction each time. Thinking about all the options became exhausting and then a little stupid—I just wanted to get a part-time job as a cashier for $3.50 an hour, for crying out loud. I wasn’t going to be running the place. But I couldn’t keep myself from agonizing over all the angles of each and every question.

Would you steal?
No. Unless it’s like that philosophical conundrum that Mr. Ives talked about in eighth grade English, where you have to decide whether or not to steal to pay the doctor who will save your dying baby. Or maybe it was that you had to steal to get medicine for your dying wife or something. Anyway. Of course I’d steal then.

Would you let your friends steal?
No. Unless it involved the dying baby/doctor situation previously described. In which case my best friends Holly and Nancy wouldn’t have to steal—I’d steal for them. But my friends wouldn’t steal. And I wouldn’t steal where they worked either. I was even a little insulted when Holly told Nancy and me that even though she was working at Dairy Queen now it didn’t mean we’d be able to get free Buster Bars. I knew her boss Mr. Perley told her she had to tell us that, but still.

Would you let your friends buy alcohol if they were underage?
Ha! Just thinking of Holly or Nancy having the guts to walk into any store to buy beer and me having the guts to sell it to them was a fantasy so outrageous I almost laughed out loud. I couldn’t imagine any friend expecting that of me. Like the Buster Bar scenario at Dairy Queen, I thought it wasn’t even worth bringing up.

Would you let a customer steal?
No. Or maybe. What if the shoplifter guy looked scary, like he might punch me if I said something? What if the thief was really fast? Am I supposed to run after her? I can’t say for sure, but in those cases, yes, I absolutely would let them get away with it.

Would you report an employee who stole?
No. Or maybe. It depends. How would I know what I’d do until it happened?
All through elementary school I’d gotten in trouble for tattling, or what I’d considered “helping out the teacher with her tough job of keeping those kids in line.” I’d learned that telling on kids was unwelcome when I ended up being the one who got in trouble (this also had something to do with the manner in which I meted out justice—the iron fist thing doesn’t fly too well in elementary school). By junior high I’d learned to keep my mouth shut and my hands to myself. I was not in charge. I soon discovered I did not want to be in charge. It was hard enough just sticking up for myself. And now I was supposed to change all that? No thanks. I’d do my best, but I wasn’t making any promises.

Maybe that’s what the manager figured when he hired me anyway, and at first I proved him right. I was efficient and accurate and my till was rarely off by more than a penny or two. By the end of the summer, when I really was sixteen and no longer living a lie, I’d been trained to work in the courtesy booth, answering the phone and making refunds, closing the safe and spinning the dial on the combination before Andy let us out the door and locked up for the night. I even did the bookkeeping on alternate Sundays, the old-fashioned way with a pencil and an adding machine, and I hardly ever needed the eraser.

After I’d worked there awhile I no longer thought, as I had in the beginning of summer, that maybe I’d have been better off working at the outlet mall with Nancy or trying to get a job at Dairy Queen where Holly was. I guess it was a little silly that Nancy and Holly and I hadn’t tried to get jobs together, but it seemed anymore all we had in common was our common history and that was more than enough.

Plus our jobs added to the lives we lived independently of each other and they gave us plenty more to talk about—what we did and who we worked with, what new friends we might be making.

I told Nancy and Holly about the girls I worked with at Mr. Grocer, none of whom I knew before starting. Most of the night cashiers went to Laconia High, the same as Andy our night manager, and they seemed older and prettier and definitely more wild—especially Nicki and Sharon, who wore pre-engagement rings and had boyfriends with five o’clock shadows and leather jackets who worked as mechanics at a local garage. Nicki and Sharon complained about their hangovers when they worked on weekend mornings, they complained about
their periods, they complained about their nails, and they complained about their classes, all of which you’d think they were failing.

Nicki and Sharon were just biding their time at high school, waiting to go to Empire Beauty School the following year so they could be cosmetologists and open their own shop. I was impressed they knew exactly what they wanted to do, because I had no idea.

All I had done when thinking about my future was ask my drama teacher, Mrs. Rupert, what I’d have to do to become an actress after I’d played Helen Keller in our school’s production of The Miracle Worker. I thought she might talk about the Yale School of Drama—which I’d heard of because Jodie Foster went there—or help me unravel the mystery of getting an Equity card and breaking into theater in New York, but all I really remember her saying was that I’d have to lose weight. I’d already obsessed over my weight enough—along with my mom and gram, both of whom habitually told me that I only needed to lose ten pounds—so while I knew Mrs. Rupert meant well and I knew if she hadn’t told me someone else would have and probably not as gently, it still kind of threw me. I’d gone on stage to forget my body, forget who I was, and now it would follow me up there.

But I was beginning to realize that everything I did in school—not just acting—was no different than the playing I’d done in kindergarten. All of it was make-believe, only instead of dressing up like a nurse or a fireman or coloring some picture of What I Want to Be When I Grow Up, I’d kept myself busy pretending to be a newspaper editor, a scholar, an actor. Depending on the class, on the activity, on the day of the week, everyone in school was like that—we were jocks or intellectuals or stoners or straight arrows, or usually some strange combination of all of these things—but still it was just a game. It was why we talked about school then talked about “real life” as if it were a completely separate existence. In real life, as evidenced by Mrs. Rupert, there was a good chance you’d find out you’d been kidding yourself.

I suppose Mr. Grocer was real life, at least for the fulltime employees, although everyone I worked with had a pretty wry attitude about working at a store on its last, shaky leg. “This is where you end up when you marry for love, not money.” said Carol, the daytime courtesy booth cashier, and I was never really sure if she meant
her job or her husband or both. The customers were real life too—a little too real sometimes. Some liked to throw their money at you, slamming their change on the counter once you gave them the final tally, and others slammed the half-empty gallon of milk or dripping package of hamburger down on your checkstand, raving about how it’d gone bad and it was the umpteenth time it had happened and they were never coming to Mr. Grocer again. “I wish,” Nicki or Shaon would say after the customer left with her two dollars and thirty-two cents. “I wish you’d never come back.”

I tried to model Nicki’s and Sharon’s matter-of-fact natures and cavalier attitudes with customers, and I wanted to model how they managed boys too—they flirted with guys who came in to buy beer, asking them where the party was, and they laughed every single time an old man said not to worry about the weather because in New Hampshire all you had to do was wait five minutes and it would change, pretending they’d never heard that one before. And when their boyfriends showed up in the late evenings before we closed, Nicki and Sharon took charge of them too.

“Nine o’clock,” Sharon would say to her boyfriend Pete. “I get out at nine o’clock. How hard is that to remember? Now if you’re not going to buy something, go away.”

Sharon and Nicki were firm and cheerful and just a little sarcastic, and it seemed they always got their way. I knew part of it was because they were beautiful, and part of it had to do with sex, but it seemed more than that—it was this amazing don’t-give-a shit confidence that I wanted to try on for size, hoping I could get the same results.

I had been full of myself in the past, I had once been loud and bold, but little by little I’d lost that ability, or maybe I’d given it away. There were still pockets of my life where I thrived—when I wrote or I spoke in class—but everywhere else I was getting more unsure of myself. It was getting harder to stand up on stage and convince myself I was somebody else, harder to conduct interviews for the school paper, and exhausting to spend a three-hour shift at work talk, talk, talking to all of the people who came through my line. I preferred those quiet Sundays at Mr. Grocer instead, where I got to hide away in the office and puzzle over the numbers, just listening from a distance to the post-Mass rush of customers coming across the street from Sacred
Heart Church for their newspapers and milk and Entemann's pastries.

And it seemed I'd lost any ability to manage boys as well—what little I may have had to begin with. I was often embarrassed, always blushing, not just with boys I thought I might like, but even with boys who I just wanted as friends—like Andy, who flustered me whenever he spoke to me because I was afraid he'd ask me out and I'd hate to have to say no. And I couldn't understand why I was more ill at ease with boys I didn't like at all—which made absolutely no sense—like when Ted Raymond unexpectedly came through my line on the day before Christmas Eve.

I knew Ted from Gilford because he'd just graduated and he'd played on the tennis team with Scott, my boyfriend from that summer. Ted was good-looking and he had a nice car and a tiny, blonde girlfriend who never seemed to wear the same outfit twice, and I didn't like him much. I wasn't jealous of what he had—I was in the throes of Thoreau at school and I only understood the desire for possessions from people who really had nothing, like the kids with their crumpled food stamps who used the change to buy toys from the machines past the registers, or the people I saw when I worked Bingo at my church, whose clothes and rolled-over worn-out shoes told me they could really use any kind of a jackpot.

And like most of my old boyfriend Scott's friends, Ted had hardly ever spoken to me so there was little I could point to when considering why I disliked him. I think it was just this air he had I couldn't put a name to, and it was an air Scott seemed anxious to acquire. When Scott left for college, after blowing most of his summer savings on a sports car that seemed a little too Ted-like to me, a sports car he then used to go out on the dates he'd confessed to going out on about halfway through his first semester, he and all his friends kind of faded from my life.

So when I saw Ted in my checkstand line I was surprised. It was the day before Christmas Eve—one of the only times during the year that all of Mr. Grocer's checkstands were open—Ted had seven other options and could easily have avoided me. I never would have known he was there.

Though he was a few people back in line, I could see how impeccably he was dressed. He had on a gray overcoat, a suit and a tie,
and his arm was around a different tiny blonde girlfriend who was wearing an actual full-length fur coat. Even though it was the holiday season where plenty of our customers dressed a little more dapper than usual, this was still a bit much for Mr. Grocer in Laconia, New Hampshire. As I stood there in my linty red smock and my nametag with the blue Dymo “Katie” stuck on it and looked at them all Barbie-and-Ken-like in my line, I just thought You’ve got to be kidding me. With my boyfriend long gone, I wasn’t important enough for Ted’s condescension so it made no sense that he’d want to see me or show off his new girlfriend in her finery. Then I saw two bottles of champagne on the belt, moving up my way.

It was the most expensive kind we sold—Korbel—which only seems laughable until you consider Mr. Grocer was more a “Champagne of Beers” kind of place. My face got hot. There was no way he was twenty-one—but what if he was? But he wasn’t. For God’s sake he’d only just graduated—if he was twenty-one it would have meant he’d been held back at least two years, which I knew wasn’t the case. When I looked at him he gave me one of those half-smiles—like a smirk—as if he knew I would sell him the champagne because I was his friend’s loser ex-girlfriend and I worked in a loser store and had to wear a polyester smock with a plastic nametag that said Hello! My Name is LOSER on it in blue Dymo tape.

In the few short seconds that champagne moved closer toward me I thought of what to do. I could put the bottles beneath my checkstand and smirk back at him myself, a smirk that said, Get lost and take your fur-coated girlfriend with you. But then he would go to his cool party—because of course he was going to a party—and would Scott be there? I wondered. And he’d tell his story, so not only would I be a loser, I’d also be a bitch. I thought of what I’d do if it were someone other than Ted—Holly or Nancy maybe, or even Scott—someone I actually liked and still considered to be a friend. But Scott, despite the sports car and the girl at college, would never do that to me, and neither would Holly or Nancy, any more than I’d walk up to the Dairy Queen and demand a free Buster Bar.

But the time was up, the champagne was there, and I didn’t say anything as I rang up the order. I took Ted’s money, gave him his change, and pushed the paper bag toward him without a single word.
passing between us.

The rest of my shift sped by, and one by one the other cashiers left, leaving just Nicki and Sharon and me. I tried to feed off the holiday energy and cheer that most of my customers brought through the line, and that Nicki and Sharon had as well, but I was still in a quiet funk when Andy finally locked the doors a few minutes after nine, ignoring the headlights of cars pulling into the parking lot. “It’s too late!” Andy shouted to no one in particular. “Go to the Spa! Go to Cumberland Farms! Go home!”

Then Andy went back to turn off the Muzak, close up the break room and grocery office, and make sure the loading dock was secured. Sharon called out after him, “Punch us out, Andy!” and he waved his hand and said “Yep!” as he walked away.

The three of us popped out our drawers and Sharon stacked them up to put in the courtesy booth safe. Then Nicki began straightening the bags on the checkstands, as I walked from register to register, beginning the end-of-night printouts.

When I walked back to the courtesy booth to get my bag and coat, Nicki was at the Ten or Less checkstand, dumping packages of D-sized batteries into her purse. Nicki groaned and stuck out her tongue at me. “Stocking stuffers,” she said. “Ritchie’s boom box takes these and they hardly last an hour or two. It’s such a rip-off, don’t you think?”

“Yeah,” I said and watched as she went around and picked up M&M’s and Marlboro Reds from the displays between the aisles, adding to her cache. I had been working there since May and I’d never seen her do this before; a cold rush of adrenaline sped through me as I stood there and said nothing.

“Jesus, Nicki, take it easy!” Sharon squealed when she came out from the booth. “What else does she have in there?” Sharon said to me as she grabbed Nicki’s purse. Sharon looked into the purse, then up at me, and she laughed. “Holy shit, Nicki, you’ve got half the front end in here.”

“It’s my Christmas bonus,” Nicki said, shrugging.

Sharon laughed again and went back into the courtesy booth, coming back out with her bag and mine, plus our coats, which she dumped on the checkstand.
“I need a Christmas bonus,” Sharon said, handing me my bag and heading for the candy aisle. “I’m going to get some Andes Candies.”

“Hurry up,” Nicki said, “you know Andy gets mad. You too Katie—make it quick.” Nicki looked at me and smiled, lifting her purse with one hand, now heavy and bulging with treasures. I smiled back and walked away from the checkstands down to the cold cases, wondering how much I cared about what she’d just done.

I felt angry, but who was I mad at? Ted? Nicki? Myself for what I hadn’t done? Myself for what I was about to do? I wasn’t exactly sure.

I could see through the glass how picked over the beer and wine on the cold case shelves had become. Andy had been the only one on grocery that night and he hadn’t been able to restock because he’d spent most of the night at the checkstands helping bag. The champagne was in the far corner, and as I opened the door I could see the empty space where the bottles of Korbel had been. There was still one left in the back, tucked away and waiting. I’d never had Korbel before, though my family had champagne every Christmas and New Year’s. Mom and Dad always bought André, the cheapest kind there was, even after they could afford better. It was a tradition I guess, a way to celebrate how far they’d come, or a reminder of how broke they used to be.

So it was two bottles of André I put into my bag, slipping my scarf between them to keep them from clinking as if I’d done this a million times. Then I turned to hightail it back to the booth, and my heart stopped when I thought I saw Andy standing silently at the end of the aisle, watching what I’d done. But it was just a life-sized Bartles & Jaymes display poking out from a half-empty pallet of Budweiser suitcases; the cardboard cutouts of the two old guys holding four-packs of wine coolers usually looked benevolent, but in the semi-darkness of the store that night they made me uneasy.

I slung my bag onto my shoulder, now heavy with what it held, and I pressed my hands to my burning cheeks. Nicki and Sharon were waiting with their coats on, ready to go, and I could see Nicki’s eyes drawn to the tell-tale poke of the bottles into the canvas of my bag, but I hitched it up, carefully readjusting it under my arm. The three of us walked to the door in semi-darkness, all the lights off except for a dim fluorescent strip above the windows in front, plus the string of
Christmas lights we’d left plugged in at the courtesy booth.

Andy came running down the produce aisle, coat flapping, to let us out and lock up. We said our goodbyes and ran to our cars in the cold, one by one turning them on and scraping the frost off the windshields before driving away. As I looked back I could see Andy waiting, hunched over his steering wheel and peering through the small defrosted half-circle on his windshield, making sure the girls and I left first, as he always did. My heart sank at his kindness.

I’d like to say I was wracked by guilt like I’d been back in fourth grade—that I poured the champagne down the drain, went to Confession, and never did it again—but despite my moral flexibility, I’m still not a very good liar. I was disappointed in myself, certainly, but that disappointment was easy to add to the laundry list of everything else I knew that was wrong with me too, and it seemed no more or less significant than all of my other faults. I would never be like Nicki or Sharon—sure of myself and the power of my sex, indifferent to any rules I’d decide didn’t apply to me—but still I shared the bottles with Nancy and Holly and other friends on New Year’s, huddled at a parking lot by the frigid town beach because we were unable to find a party. When one of the boys took a slug of the André and instantly spat it out, saying “What is this crap?” all I thought was that next time I’d take something better, and the next time I did. And the time after that and the time after that.

I can’t even remember when exactly I last lingered by those cold cases, my bag slung over my arm, deciding what I would take so I’d be able to pull the gauze over my eyes at a party and forget the pathetic person I’d become. I don’t know when I finally was able to tell myself You know what? This is wrong. There’s no two ways about it. I just know that when Mr. Grocer finally did close its doors for good, a few years after I left, how much I disliked driving by the empty store. I hated seeing the windows filled with the torn and peeling posters from the last sale they’d had—Iceberg Lettuce 2/$1, Ground Beef 99 Cents/lb, Double Coupons Every Day—and I hated seeing the vacant parking lot, cracked and full of weeds, and the sign that stood in front of the store, unreadable now that the glass was almost entirely broken. It took so little time for it to go bad so completely, to look as if it had never been new, never been clean, and never would be again.
Jim Krosschell

Berries

Not quite teenagers, the children were noncommittal when I sat on the grass next to the deck and picked weeds: no sidelong glances, no eye-rolling, no sliding into fast French as they would do later. There was no particular reason to weed—the lawn was hopeless—but they knew that time was precious on vacation, and adults did what they had to do, and the girls weren’t going to interfere.

They didn’t know it was therapeutic to sit in the sun in the middle of the day and tame a few square feet of world, to marvel at the proliferation of plantain and fleabane, to pull at a root and see its young runner wiggle six inches away and comb through the grasses to pluck it out. For a few weeks that patch of lawn would be satisfyingly bare, a few tufts of grass looking not much better than weeds, to be honest, but free of interference and liberated for growth; next year the patch would be exactly as weedy as before, and that would be comforting too, as if at least something hadn’t changed while the children had. In the sleepy period right after lunch, while they lounged on the deck above me and decided on the outing for the day, their rosy cheeks and blonde hair shining in the sun, like precious fruits ripening, weeding was the perfect thing to do. In the morning we read our novels and tried to forget about competitor analyses and five-year plans and deadlines, the girls sleeping late, watching videos, tolerating lunch so quickly on the heels of breakfast, until the decision for the afternoon was made and suddenly they had to move: “C’mon, Daddy! Let’s go!”

“I’m coming,” I’d say, torn between their going and my staying, and when at last we tumbled into the van, menacingly I waved my fingers stained with dandelion juice and they stuck their bare feet into the space between the front seats and I pretended (hoped) to mark them for life.

After the beach or the hike, we gathered in the Adirondack chairs down by the shore. The same weeds grew here except there were also the red wandering stems of wild strawberries, stunted by the ocean winds, never bearing any fruit, or if they did, we attended school and
furthered careers in June and were prevented from seeing them. It didn’t matter; strawberries were a grown-up fruit, to be bought at supermarkets, or picked at giant farms from orderly rows. They came from our other life, just another purchase in or out of season, flown from Israel for Christmas waffles and birthday shortcake, not for our carefree family time, drinking Kool-Aid in milky plastic bottles and Sea Dog beer and eating chips we bought only in Maine. The weeding of wild berries was nothing about conquering them, it was about tracing the tentative routes of their tiny vines, cultivating their miniature habitats, taking in the prattle of children in love with their lives.

The raspberry patch at the top of Bay View Terrace was wild and overgrown, belonging to someone and everyone. Tender skin required long pants and bug dope. Tradition required that we use the same red-stained green berry boxes from years past. Children disappeared in the brambles, following the paths already trampled by the invisible community of pickers and complaining about thorns and mosquitoes. Parents worried about snakes and Eastern equine encephalitis, and after an hour or so, when each girl emerged with a dainty half-quart, there was bilateral pride and relief. The adults, more hardened, produced full boxes and all together we had enough for one large luscious spoonful each at lunch and then, the highlight of the week, a freshly baked pie that night, glazy-red, sweet, with a touch of worldly sour, that we drooled over until it was cool enough, usually at the end of the first round of Wizard, to eat. We sat around the table in the protective glow of the stained-glass overhead lamp, as the night fell so wonderfully slowly in the northern summer, and the sound of the surf through the open French door was like a kiss on the ear. The older daughter, having watched its preparation, ate pie quickly, smacking her lips, and the younger daughter, having helped with the crust, ate slowly and neatly, and the parents sat in waking dreamland, with the saucy taste on our tongues and the suspension of disbelief in our hearts.

We cut the pie in sixthths. This is something parents do, moderating, planning, trying to extend the perfect day. At lunch the next day, those two leftover pieces reminded me of my parents. Raspberries must have been some unconscious symbol of everything my father missed in his disciplined and orderly life, so he planted canes behind
the shed at our summer cabin in Michigan. The experiment lasted only a year or two before he gave up. At the slightest hint of redness, the deer or the robins got breakfast, and he did not want to get up early enough, or build costly fences—it was summer, he was a struggling school principal—to prevent it. The canes were left to go wild, and eventually disappeared. They provided no memorable family pie.

There had been perfect days at that cabin, uncreated, spontaneous. But they were too divorced from reality, or I could say, the reality they were divorced from was all too powerful. We were not prepared to return from heaven at the end of the summer.

I hope for my daughters that raspberries are the symbol of spontaneity. Do not buy them in supermarkets, do not order them from dessert menus in January, naked in winter air and cold. Let them stay tender and fragile and fleeting. Left out in the old green boxes, they grow mold after a day or two. Stashed in the refrigerator, they lose all their taste. Let them grow and ripen without the heavy hand of moderation. Eat the whole pie at once.

Having gone back to our duty-bound lives in the late summer and early fall, we would miss the second crop of raspberries that grew on the edges of the meadow halfway up Bay View. I pick them now when I walk the dog. They are small, more sour than sweet, not hiding under leaves anymore but straining for the last of the sun’s rays, a metaphor striving to become a memory, all grown up in the shrunked, adult kind of way.

We also picked blueberries, the kids and I, down Ash Point Road towards the airport. The field was open, pricker-free, no shade for mosquitoes and snakes, exposed to hawks, tourists, jet-fuel exhaust. By this time of the summer, the sun was hot, and hats, not long pants, were required. Backs, young and old, hurt from bending. Life is harder in the open and the wild blueberry is a tougher species, not so precious or fleeting. But it is profligate, and we filled our green boxes quickly.

The objective was the same, spoonfuls for cereal and snacking, quarts for pie. The result was nearly the same, under the lamp a blue swooning instead of red, an intensity of feeling lessened only by the knowledge that it could be repeated at will for the rest of the summer. Blueberries are ubiquitous in August. The roads are thick with stands.
advertising “Blueberrys.” They preserve well. They prop up much of the economy Down East. They are harvested by mechanized rakes. They have big tasteless cousins from New Jersey and Michigan.

The blueberry field on Ash Point has moved on. It was plowed and leveled and is now a cemetery. The daughters have moved on also, are in college, working summer jobs, and their parents re-create serendipity elsewhere, in the little patches of blue at the end of the hike up Bald Rock, or sneaking a couple of handfuls from the organic fields of Beech Hill Preserve. Our memories of fawn limbs in the sun, “No Fear” hats, mock-complaining little voices, lips blue with pie all fade with the seasons.

Most of the way down Bay View sits a curious little tableau. On one side of the road there’s a small hut maybe ten feet by eight, leaning a little, door barely attached and splintered, a playhouse neglected. Vines and overgrowing shrubs threaten to make it irrelevant. Yet it has three large windows with screens that look to be in good shape, it has dignity and style, with a peaked roof and weathered cedar shakes. With a little love and kindness it could be restored to someone’s artistic or childhood vision of happy fantasy.

Across the road on the south side is a rectangular patch of open grass, too small for croquet, about right for badminton. Someone takes the trouble to keep it clear, mowing the grass in summer. Except for a narrow opening, it is lined most of the way around by blackberry bushes.

It’s not clear whether the point of the fantasist on this side of the road was the grass or the blackberries. I picture children from a big house on the shore finger-painting or assigning roles in make-believe in the house, then lunching on PB&J and Kool-Aid on the grass. I imagine an artist seizing the slate-blue of the ocean in gesso or glaze, then stretching out in the August sun with a book and a bowl of blackberries and a love of the ordinary. Their ghosts take turns mowing.

There’s nothing so ordinary as blackberries. They’re hard to get right. My daughters tried them, but unless conditions are perfect, the berries are bland, or sour, and full of seeds. The girls seldom walked with us then, and don’t at all anymore, and thus have missed the true blackberry beauty. We take the dog to Lucia Beach, and along the
road, haphazardly, commonly, a stray bush leans towards us from its place at the edge of the woods, almost every berry black. It’s the moment unanticipated, and I pick handfuls and we taste the surprising sweetness and spit seeds playfully and think about our daughters growing up shielded by love and memory from a world of terror.

Bay View Terrace is a lovely little road, maybe a quarter mile long, almost perfect in its ordinariness. Between Cann’s Beach Road to the north and Granite Point Road to the south lie some 100 acres of woods, broken only by the houses of our neighbors the McIntoshes—parents’ and daughter’s—and their driveways and woodpiles and swing sets plopped in the middle. It’s a normal woods, cut by deer paths, not very dense, and quite open now in winter, the trees are brown-black deciduous and green evergreen and white birch, and it’s an owlish kind of place although I’ve seen but one here. There’s a meadow halfway down, made flatter and more obvious by the snow, which in summer is overgrown with scrub and fireweed and late blooming raspberries. Besides the McIntoshes’, barely glimpsed even in winter, there are only two other houses, both near the end, both small, unprepossessing, one with a playhouse nearby.

I stop dead, for no particular reason. The dog also freezes, expecting a menace to confront. In the crunching of boots against ice and snow, I’ve failed to hear the thrilling silence of a woods in winter, so cold that wind is not allowed. Everything in sight is preternaturally clear: flaking birch bark, wisps of sea smoke on the bay, the cliffs of Vinalhaven which I can just barely see through the tree branches. And close: the cold is intimate, in your face and toes and lungs, heightening all sensation.

They’re hardly the luscious raspberries of July, but the winterberries lining the roads in December taste as good in the eye as raspberries do in the mouth. They relieve the browns and grays of the winter woods; our red sweaters and yellow caps and the little orange collar for the dog that we put on for our walks display against hunters, not depression. We thirst for every bit of color.

It’s a hard season coming up. At the solstice only a third of the day is lit. People who make their living from the land and the sea and the tourists can’t now. Many will fall short of food, medical care,
clothing, heating oil. Many will lose their jobs in the aftermath of the greed-fest of the last years. Cold is enjoyable when you know you can escape it. Ice is beautiful on lakes, in cocktails, under hockey teams, not on driveways and walkways and steps and lying heavy on poor frozen hearts.

But for those fortunate enough, late fall and winter are also invigorating. Berries splash red and orange in the wetlands, triumphing against pettiness. A snowfall makes you feel ten years old again, and snowshoes prolong the illusion. The fir trees carry ermine stoles on their arms. On a really cold morning, smoke rises off the ocean as if the water were breathing in cozy hibernation.

The daughters are away. The feeling of their absence is what I imagine the winterberry to be: bittersweet.
I sat on the grass in my family’s back yard, tracing its path in the sky with my finger. The orange panes of its wings vibrated in their black frames. Clouds inched along in the summer sky as it flew low, toward me, growing large and vividly detailed. I reached up to grab its wing, surprised to find that I could. Butterflies weren’t as fast as moths or as wary as roaches.

I let go, expecting it to fly back to the magic that was its life. Instead it dropped to the cement patio next to me and began walking.

“Oh,” my mother said, the patio door swishing closed behind her. “You touched it—didn’t you? It won’t be able to fly now.” I stood up fast, a lump in my throat. I had maimed innocence itself, sent it hiking on a cold slab toward death. I faced a guilty-looking reflection of myself in the patio door, the green grass behind me sloping down into blackness by the sewer in the corner of our yard. That was where I was headed, that was where I belonged.

Mom placed her hand on her hip to signify that she was thinking. “We’ll just have to bring him inside and nurse him back to health,” she said. I exhaled. Her mother was a nurse, which had always made our family feel like none of us were very far from being medical experts ourselves. The butterfly’s wings touched and then parted, as if applauding the idea. I smiled a wide, innocent smile too cloying for an eleven-year-old boy to use on anyone other than his own mother.

“What? I wondered. He was fine? He’d been walking by choice? “He needs a name,” she said.

I thought for a second. Names whizzed in and out of my mind, cute ones lighting one spot and pathetic ones, another. Finally one lit both.

“Wilbur,” I said. Mom smiled.

The first step was getting Wilbur a place to live. I’d just gotten a new pair of school shoes, so I bounded up and down the stairs and
produced the box. Mom gently placed Wilbur inside, and I put the lid on to save him from being harmed by our cat. I grabbed a knife to poke air holes in the lid.

“Wait,” my mom said, “We should take him back out before you make the air holes.”

Next it was time to figure out what he should eat.

“What about peanut butter?” I suggested.

“Something sweet might be better. Let’s try maple syrup,” Mom said, grabbing a bottle of Aunt Jemima out of the fridge.

“I guess this isn’t real maple syrup, but it should do,” she said. We filled a tea saucer with the syrup and put it next to Wilbur in his box. He shook his wings in vain, trying to fly. He didn’t seem to notice the syrup.

That night I mentioned Wilbur at the end of my lengthy bedtime prayers. It was an add-on, like at church, when everyone thinks the service is over and the priest says a special prayer for a member of the congregation who’s sick or injured. I’d always admired how such last minute surprise appeals seemed to catch everyone guiltily thinking about themselves. I wondered if one would help cut through some of the clutter God was receiving.

The next morning, I asked Mom what else we could do for him. She said that we just had to wait. And not touch him. She looked through a pile of papers on the kitchen counter as she spoke.

After lunch, she disappeared to the mall. My father slept on the couch in the front room. A slice of light split the curtains and landed mid-floor, then evaporated to a small pool by the wall, then vanished. I watched an old western on TV with the volume low. I looked in on Wilbur periodically.

On one visit I found him standing in the middle of the syrup, unable to move. We’d put too much of it in there, it seemed. Wilbur’s wings twitched hopelessly as he stood in the tea-saucer full of syrup.

I walked into the front room to wake my dad. He wasn’t going to be happy about this. I knelt down and examined his face smashed into the arm of the couch.

I placed my hand on his shoulder and his eyes opened halfway. I mentioned Wilbur.
“A wha? Where?” he asked.
“A butterfly. I named him Wilbur. I’m nursing him back to health.”

Dad frowned. I knew he thought that a boy my age should be out in the back yard maiming small animals with a BB gun, not nursing some bug back to health. But he agreed to a take a look at Wilbur. After some coffee.

I sat at the kitchen table as the coffee pot grumbled and dripped. Dad stood in the middle of the kitchen, staring at nothing, his hair messy from sleeping. His pajama pants were pulled up too high in the back and his t-shirt hung too low in the front, making him look like a stuffed bear dressed by small children. His eyes opened wide, suddenly, as if an event had begun in the air in front of him. I saw nothing. Dad was an engineer, his mind a fog of advanced math and the third-shift factories it set in motion. I always wondered if he saw the numbers behind things rather than the things themselves. His eyes went back to normal. The coffee was ready.

We sat at the table and I took the lid of the box off. My hope was that Wilbur had freed himself, but he hadn’t. Instead, he’d gotten one of his wings stuck too.

“What can we do?” I asked.
“Nothing,” Dad said.
Silence. The sound of a lawnmower starting up a few doors down.
“He needs to be put out of his misery.”

I said nothing, trying to escape the fact that I knew what he was talking about. I looked down into the box at Wilbur’s one free wing twitching.

We took some time thinking of the best way to do him in, agreeing that he shouldn’t suffer. Dad suggested suffocation. I deferred to him, having never killed anything before.

Dad took the plastic wrap out from underneath the kitchen sink and tore off a piece. I lifted the saucer with poor Wilbur stuck in it out of the box. Carefully, dad wrapped the plastic over Wilbur and underneath the saucer. We looked at the finished product.

Questions hung in the air. How long would it take? How would we know when he was dead? Wasn’t slowly running out of air, in fact, a terrible way to die?
“Dad,” I said, “I think it’s going to hurt him.”

Dad frowned. We sat down again at the table and reconsidered our options. Obviously, smashing him was fastest. We both knew it. But my dad wouldn’t say it because he was afraid I’d cry, and I wouldn’t say it because I knew he would do it.

“I know,” my dad finally said. He picked Wilbur’s tea saucer up and walked over to the microwave.

“The microwave?” I said.

“Sure, c’mon,” he said, a sudden and uncommon light in his eyes.

I stood behind him at the microwave and watched him place Wilbur inside. He punched in two minutes, high temperature. Both seemed excessive, but I didn’t say anything. It wasn’t like there was a setting for butterflies. The light went on, the whirring noise began, and Wilbur spun around in circles.

At 15 seconds, the plastic wrap inflated like a balloon. I looked at my dad. His brow furrowed.

At 30 seconds, the syrup bubbled vigorously.

Once again, questions hung in the air. How were we going to know when he was dead? What would the actual cause of death be? Excessive heat? Exposure to boiling pancake syrup? Shock?

I looked at my dad again. He hadn’t thought any of this through. Was Wilbur’s tiny brain burning? Wasn’t it conceivable that since microwave ovens were a relatively recent invention that Wilbur was experiencing more pain than any living creature in the history of all living things?

“All right, all right . . .” Dad said, popping the microwave door open.

Dad set the tea saucer down on the table. The plastic wrap collapsed into a wad around Wilbur. The syrup hardened, darkening. Wilbur was still.

“There,” my dad said. He smiled. A laugh shot straight from my belly and out of my mouth, echoing in the kitchen. The sound of it was odd, like hearing my voice on tape.

“Don’t tell your mother,” he said.

Dad walked back to the couch and sat with his feet up on the coffee table. He tapped a cigarette out of his pack and pushed the curtains
of the window open. I stood in the kitchen thinking. Thoughts passed
in front of one another, never completely obscuring each other. The
sky above the rooftops was a darkening purple, with a halo of white
light from the interstate. Dad blew a cloud of smoke into the air, and
a car drove past our house at a high speed, its radio loud, the music
a blur of low-end noise. The sound of our garage door opening came
out of the noise and rumbled through the house, startling me, as if it
had been brought by the speeding car, deposited by it on its way to
where it was headed. I grabbed the saucer and pulled the plastic wrap
off Wilbur. A puff of heat and moisture escaped. A tiny piece of his
wing stuck to the plastic wrap, but Wilbur looked otherwise like a but-
terfly who’d just crawled into some syrup and died. I stuffed the ball
of plastic wrap into the garbage can and heard my mother’s purse land
on the bench in the hall.
How long I had lain there listening to the rain on the slate roof, to the soft scraping of the oak tree branch across the window was of no matter, for the alarm clock signaled four a.m. How I wished to ignore it! If only I had not lingered last night with the family, chatting about small town happenings—

Mr. Van Winkle, joint owner of the Danville Advocate Messenger, had died unexpectedly and Dad had conducted his funeral, a neighbor’s brother with some kind of handicap had come to live with her, the predicted colder weather, and other matters—I would be in Irvine now, blissfully asleep in a warm bed.

Yet, the choice was mine and I did not regret it. Even after the family circle broke last night, I had remained with my younger brother to watch the fire flicker to embers—the soft popping hypnotic against the storm outside. Finally, becoming drowsy, I rose from my chair to go to bed. “This awful war,” I barely uttered, then bit my lip. Only then did my brother break his silence. “Forget him,” he murmured, half audibly, still gazing into the dying embers. “Goodnight,” I whispered.

Awake now, the realization flitted though my head that I had for the last several weeks slept at home on weekends to catch the predawn bus on Mondays, delaying my arrival at school as long as possible. Not too late to greet my students, though. I liked to be at my desk before they arrived.

I looked again at the clock and noted that five minutes had passed since I shut off the alarm. Thirty-five minutes were left me to get to the bus station four blocks away. I quickly dressed, then realized I had done this wholly in the dark, and I knew I could manage perfectly in this room, even if I were blind. A few moments later, sure that I had awakened no one, I grabbed my coat, pulled the hood over my head, picked up my class record book from the hall table, stooped to pick up my eighty-eight dollar paycheck that fell from it, opened the door and walked out into the darkness and the rain—now a veritable deluge.
Had I ever seen such rain! No time for thought, I walked into it, down the porch steps and onto the sidewalk. The blinding downpour enshrouded me. The corner light in the distance was faint, seemed far away, and gave a strange, almost eerie look to the very familiar street. Yet, I was sure I knew every crack in the sidewalk and I moved on in confidence. Reassured by the sharp rhythmic beat of my leather heels on the sidewalk, I told myself everything was as it should be. Still, I squinted to bring into focus the silhouette of the old gnarled tree on the corner. I wanted to know, I somehow needed to know it was in place. But, the angry rain obscured all outlines. Too little light shone through to illuminate even the nearest objects, and I began to feel closed in by the darkness. I slowed to a more comfortable pace.

As I walked, sounds gradually intruded upon my consciousness, seeming at first to be overtones of the cold, wild rain. Soon, however, these sounds became distinguishable as footsteps. A moment later I was sure I could hear behind me a labored, gasping, uneven breathing, punctuated by a dull tapping on the sidewalk. I walked on. The sounds came closer. Unable to walk faster, as if locked in my present pace, I began to feel chilled and hobbled by the darkness and the rain. With each ponderous step forward the sounds drew nearer—the sounds of heavy breathing, marked by short gasps, shuffling feet, tapping—now growing more insistent and mixing with my own rapping heels—a hideous cacophony of sounds.

My bare breathing was not one of those sounds as I continued to the street corner, where I turned abruptly to the right, hoping to be free. In turning I glimpsed from the corner of my eye a hazy silhouette of the upper torso of a giant human form.

Instantly I realized that I had made a chilling decision. No street in town was less illumined than Walnut Street. The dim light at the end of the long block was barely visible through the darkness. Yet, I knew this street and knew I could walk it blind. When I turned onto it, however, no forms appeared. A street with no shadows, a ray-less cavern in which the pervasive darkness vanquished all forms. Into its depths I moved. I could not turn back, for the tapping and the shuffling were closing behind me. I gasped for breath; I could not move faster. Iron bracelets seemed to encircle my ankles.
Closer and closer the sounds came. Suddenly, a rough and thorny hand grabbed my face. I lurched forward to elude the grasp. As I did so, a stabbing pain underfoot penetrated my thin-soled shoes and shot upward through my body. I screamed a deathly, silent scream. The sharp agony propelled me upward. I leapt high. I leapt! I had leapt! My feet had left the ground! In that instant the spell that had cloistered me lifted. The rain tempered her anger. At once my body felt light, buoyant! I seemed to float on air—to levitate in time. With a surprising agility I came to earth again on both feet—free and easy. No iron bracelets encircled my ankles. No chains or locks hobbled me. Too exhilarated by my freedom to know shock or fear, I breathed deeply and, glancing neither to the left nor right, in a running walk I headed toward the faint light at the corner. I knew these streets and I had long ago made friends with the dark of pre-dawn. “How ridiculous of me to go catatonic,” I said, almost audibly, to myself.

As I turned into Third Street the genteel Hub Department Store stood solidly and protectively on the far corner. A wonderful calm possessed me. An old friend! We all shopped there. With the venerable building in view, my panic a few moments ago seemed irrational, even silly . . . stupid, in fact. I gradually realized I had walked into Miss Lucy’s overhanging prickly hedge which I had many times avoided by moving to the curb; as I lurched forward I, in my thin-soled shoes, had stepped on one of those needle-pointed rocks that spilled from her gravel driveway. How could I have made a monster of that!

The bright lights of Main Street shimmered through the slackening rain. As I rounded the corner onto the broad avenue, the shadows fell away and I walked briskly. Walking in the light encouraged expansive feelings, a welcome contrast to the constricting aura of the dark side streets. No bizarre imaginings of gargantuan phantoms dogging my footsteps on Main Street.

The foggy rain was beginning to clear. My thoughts wandered. It occurred to me that once again the family had not talked about the war. Perhaps their silence served as the cocoon in which their thoughts were being incubated, preparing them for the inevitable. Of course, my two brothers would go to war. My parents—who could fault them if they suspended talk for a while.
My mind ruminated over that brisk, sunny Sunday afternoon in December a few weeks ago when Coach Joe Ohr pulled his car beside me as I walked on the South Irvine Bridge, motioning frantically for me to get in. He turned up the radio as we listened to President Roosevelt’s startling announcement of the attack on Pearl Harbor. Coach Ohr and I looked at each other and in sotto voce, as if sharing a secret, uttered the word “war” as we parted.

The next day our barely audible word was heard ‘round the world, wherever radio would carry it. President Roosevelt in his richly timbered voice, familiar to us through his Fireside Chats, declared a “state of war” existed with Japan. Several teachers, including me, listened to the President’s speech in the cozy reading corner of our school library, empty of students who had departed the school grounds for lunch recess. Elna, the music teacher whose school choirs I accompanied, had brought her parent’s radio. As the President in measured tones proclaimed, “December 7, 1941, a date which will live in infamy” we huddled near the radio speaker in order to better hear. My eyes roamed over the neat rows of books that lined the library walls, the racks of them, the bare tables, with chairs, arranged in perfect parallel, the librarian’s neatly appointed desk at the far end of the room, the colorful world globe resting solidly on a pedestal in the corner—a quiet orderliness—my hearing and my seeing in antithesis—the word crashing our cozy corner.

At the close of lunch recess Superintendent Flege called the students and faculty to assemble in the gymnasium. Almost breathless in anticipation, we listened enrapt as Mr. Flege, tall, stately, now serious, recounted the horrific events of the past twenty-four hours. “Our country now exists in a state of war,” he said. “This war will affect all of us, take some of us, and change our world in ways we cannot yet imagine.” He admonished the students to learn history, to better understand the whys and wherefores of this awful conflict. “But, today at Irvine High,” Mr. Flege averred, “it is business as usual. Now, to your classes, concentrate on your lessons and do your good work.” Succinct words in mellow tones—tomorrow—time enough tomorrow to ponder them.

Irvine High. Today I would sense again its restlessness. Some of the senior boys in my Solid Geometry class were only two or three...
years younger than I. They talked about the war. I overheard their speculations about war service; would there be an advantage in enlisting, over waiting to be drafted? I knew Bob Bragg would enlist. He was a mathematics student who kept me on my toes. Bob was quick, an engaging youth of serious bent, with a twinkle in his eye. A promising future awaited him. But, Bob Bragg would go to war. The thought troubled me.

Yet, troubling me more was the dawning realization that the restlessness I saw around me at school was my restlessness. As I was about to turn into the bus station, in a flash of clarity I saw as I had not seen. Yes, I was restless and disturbed by it, but unlike those who would go to war, I looked into a dim cavern. The why, the wherefore of my distress of the mind could not be seen, nor described. But, as the students were becoming less and less focused, so was I. What was I to do?

“Forget him,” the words my brother muttered as we parted last night, darted through my brain. Doesn’t he know? I must tell him again that the one he fears I remember is not mine to forget.

At the station a lethargic Mr. Bentley stamped my ticket and told me the bus would be a few minutes late. No matter. The two-hour trip would still allow time for a quick breakfast in Mrs. Robert’s kitchen and a change of clothes in my closet size room upstairs before my eight o’clock class. My soggy shoes would have to go. I sauntered to the front of the station. The broad window opened onto Second Street, just off Main. I leaned against the frame to wait.

Darkness prevailed. Mists riding on little light winds gave movement and depth to the atmosphere. I turned toward lower Second Street where a fog, like frosted glass, blurred the lights and clouded my view. The murky scene held my gaze as a hazy parabola of light seemed to appear in the distance. My eyes fixed upon the blurry oval of light to observe it gradually disappear as the gauzy curtain of fog lifted, revealing a brightly lit, cordoned off area of crosswalk under repair. As I watched, a large shepherd dog carefully guided his giant master, cane in hand, around the danger zone.
THE VIEW FROM MY PEW

Halfway up the stairs, I stopped. Baby was in the hallway, sitting in her wheelchair, her back to me. I called my mother’s mother Baby because her medicine bloated her until she looked more moon-faced than a baby doll. With the help of her walker, she struggled to her feet, her fingers curled around the metal bar. After her long hospital stay, she wobbled on her old knees as if her legs were filled with water. A bathrobe belt looped around her waist; the other end was tied to her wheelchair. She was rigged like a horse and buggy. With every move she made, the safety net of her wheelchair rolled behind her. She took one last step on her watery legs, then sank back into her chair and bent her head forward to lower her face to her hands, her shoulders shaking as she cried. So I dropped her mail on the landing and stepped into the hallway. “Want some help?” I said, surprising myself I’d said it.

She lifted her old white head and turned her good ear toward me. “Who’s there?” she said, craning. “Stand over here where I can get a look.”

I moved to her side, and she cornered me between the wall and her chair. Squirreling a tissue out of her sleeve, she dabbed her runny eyes. “Hiding on the steps, making fun, huh?” she said.

“No,” I said.

Across the inches of air, blame floated between us. As I stared down at our feet, her crippled toes, pigeonéd-in, my scuffed gym shoes almost touching hers, an ache of regret rolled through me.

She clamped a bony hand onto my arm and pulled herself to a standing position, digging her fingernails into my skin. “Help me into the bathroom,” she said, taking me up on an offer it was too late to take back. I bit my lip and steadied her as she made her slow way.

I retrieved the mail from the landing where I’d dropped it and waited in Baby’s room for my turn to use the bathroom. It smelled of mint in there, of medicine. I sat in the only chair, a ladderback with a cane seat, and looked around at the martyrs on Baby’s blue walls. Before Baby moved in with us, we didn’t have holy water fonts in all the rooms or bloody crucifixes hanging or pictures of hearts with swords.
stuck in them, the blood spurting like a lawn sprinkler. It seemed like my mother was putting on a show for Baby until Baby could go back to her own house.

I began paging through her health magazine in case there’d been a breakthrough in diabetes. If a cure’d been discovered, I’d wheel Baby to the head of the line for the first dose.

I soon lost interest in her health though and began flipping through National Geographic when I saw some things I could not unsee: men and women in their birthday suits; it looked like they were dancing the samba in colorful shoes and hats, sashes and jewelry, but not a stitch where it counted. I ignored the words beneath the pictures and pinned my eyes to every back and front and butt until my heart began beating in triple time. Things were going along just fine until I heard Baby roll her chair out of the bathroom. I knew if I didn’t close the magazine she’d stretch her neck to see what I saw, but I was too stubborn, headstrong was my mother’s word, so I let Baby see me see the dancers, and when she got an eyeful of those men and women celebrating, she said, “For shame!” because while Baby was seeing the same naked dancers I saw, she wasn’t thinking how my neighbor friend Buck would laugh his bones loose if he saw them, too; no, those naked people made her one thing: mad. To her, a good time was falling on your knees and singing out the names of the saints. “For shame!” she repeated, sawing one finger with the other. The sting of her words, her sawing fingers, made me blush; I wanted to bite her finger off.

I slapped the magazine shut and placed it in Baby’s outstretched hand. I wanted to tell her there might be a good diabetes article, but she rubbed her shiny hands with the big veins on top and aimed her eyes at me, two guns, so I didn’t stare back out of fear my eyes would get trapped by hers and give away the X-rated dancers inside my head.

“Look at me!” Baby demanded.

But I wouldn’t, and instead began working my eyes over her room, her skinny bed and her spare pair of false teeth soaking in a glass of water, her portable TV set, her pet canary Dickie in his standup cage, piles of mending: shirts, pants, socks. There was such loneliness in there, in the medicine bottles lined up, pink for this, red for that, in the vinyl folding table for meals, in her enamel bedpan under the bed with the roach motels. It was as if her whole life had gotten whittled down
to fit into a room the size of my father’s snuffbox.

“Look at me,” Baby demanded again, the veins sticking out of her neck, but I continued holding out. She slapped the magazine against the side of her chair and wheeled herself to the top of the staircase. “Deloris, you better come up here.” Her loud voice set Dickie trilling, reminding me that Buck once told me Dickie was a nasty word. “It means a boy’s privates,” he’d said.

While I waited for my mother to come upstairs and save me, I rolled that dirty word around on my tongue like a piece of Hershey’s chocolate. “That Dickie’s a singer,” I said to Baby when she returned to her room. “You sure have a lively Dickie,” I said, wondering how many more ways I could work the word in before she caught on.

“Wipe that smile off your face,” Baby said.

I tried biting it back, but I couldn’t, and she said it again just as my mother arrived to find out what the commotion was about.

Baby opened the magazine and showed the page to my mother. “She thinks it’s funny,” Baby said.

My mother put her hands on her hips and bunched her lips into that look she got when you crossed her, that look she got that let you know she was a younger version of Baby.

“I’m sorry,” I said, but I wasn’t, and then I smiled again since the only other choice was laughing.

This was too much for Baby, who turned around as fast as an old lady in a wheelchair could, and reached for the board she kept handy to prop open her window. She slapped it across her palm. “She was studying those pictures, Deloris, so, you know what you have to do.” She handed the board to my mother, and right then the sin of wishing Baby dead took root in my heart.

My mother stepped toward me. I stepped back.

She gripped the board with her fingers. I flinched away.

“I’m sorry,” I said again, meaning it this time.

She whacked the board on top of Baby’s folding table and said, “If you ever do a thing like that again, that’s what you’ll get.” I wasn’t sure if she meant laughing or the pictures, but there was no doubt that her quiet voice was worse than her loud one.

The buzz of a green fly was the only sound, and as I stared into my mother’s eyes, I began to wonder if she was more afraid of Baby than I was. “Deloris, she looked at those pictures and committed a sin

The Louisville Review 121
and now she has to confess it.” My mother nodded her head, agreeing, and it came to me that holding her moods against us wasn’t the only thing Baby could do if we disobeyed her, in fact, her puny moods were nothing compared to knowing what our sins were and how to earn forgiveness, from God and from Baby.

I felt Baby’s eyes on me, but I walked past her and my mother, and I didn’t stop until I reached the backyard, where wash blew on clotheslines under the warm sun.

“Shame on you,” Baby called from a second-floor window when I stepped into the yard. She pressed her forehead against the screen so hard there must’ve been dent marks on her skin. “You get yourself to confession.”

I stood in the sun thinking, *Maybe the screen will rip and she’ll fall, splat, onto the blacktopped driveway below her window.*

Rows of bleached sheets twisted in the breeze; hardening towels were pinned to the last line. I walked in and out of the sheets and towels, breathing in the soothing clean smell of laundry soap and bleach; I sat in the tall grass between the rows, relieved that Baby was walled out.

I stayed in the backyard replaying a Father Morgan sermon inside my mind: “You can’t hide from God, not even in your head,” and thinking about sin. I’d been Catholic long enough to know the rules: after Baptism wiped away the Original Sin, it was up to me to commit the rest and get rid of them. I’d committed a venial sin by seeing those dancers, and tomorrow I’d tell Father Morgan and get rid of it. But the first picture I saw was an accident, the remaining five or six I saw on purpose, so had I committed five or more venial or mortal sins?

Later that evening, after slipping past Baby’s door and into the bathroom, the first thing I did was fumigate the toilet and sink of Baby’s cooties. I usually did this with my father’s Dial deodorant (venial), but today I would pay back my mother by purging the bathroom of Baby’s germs with Cristalle Chanel, my mother’s favorite and most expensive cologne (venial). I rooted through all the fancy soaps and lotions my mother used to keep on top, but now stored deep inside the cabinet, out of Baby’s sight, and when I found what I was looking for, I sprayed Cristalle until I almost poisoned myself (venial?).
That done, I hopped in the shower and soaped up. Under the warm water, Baby’s face when she saw me looking at those pictures, my mother’s grip on the board, both of them demanding I go to confession, Father Morgan’s words about “not hiding from God, not even inside your head,” and everything I was ever taught about the near occasion of sin started working on me, and before I finished shampooing my hair, I knew to the center of my Catholic heart the sins I committed when I saw the dancers were mortal ones against the Sixth Commandment, “Thou shalt not commit adultery,” smack between murder and stealing. And when I turned off the water and watched the suds swirl down the drain, I knew I was still dirty because only one thing washed away sin: confessions to Father Morgan, our big-nosed, weedy-mustached pastor who was half deaf.

The next morning was Sunday. “We’re leaving for mass early so there’s time for confession,” my mother said and gave me the eye to let me know she meant business. She turned on a TV mass for Baby at home, and we climbed into my father’s blue Nova, a beater.

At the rate I poked along from the parking lot to Saint Felix, I’d be going backward soon, which gave me time to ask myself the question I’d been fending off: Why was God a bean counter? What was in it for him? It seemed I’d learned about God and how to count before I was old enough to go to school, and it didn’t take long to figure out that God was a go-by-the-numbers guy: there was your first communion, second coming, three-in-one trinity, six holy days of obligation, seven sacraments, ten commandments, twelve apostles, tons of indulgences (you could hack hundreds of days off Purgatory by repeating, “Mother of Perpetual Grace, Have Mercy on My Soul” during TV commercials), and on and on.

Ahead I saw my father tugging hard on the heavy oak door, and my mother waving me to come along, and then we were slipping inside the Candlelit gloom of Saint Felix. As the door sucked shut behind us, we dabbed into the holy water and crossed ourselves. The sickly smell of incense drifted in the air. So early, it was quiet in there, only old ladies on their knees clicking their rosary beads against the wooden benches.

My mother led us up front and parked me in the short line outside.
Father Morgan’s confessional while she and my father headed straight for the pews near the Blessed Mother’s shrine. I comforted myself that my sins were about to be wiped out, but here was the trap: Last year a rich parishioner had offered to buy Father Morgan a hearing aid, but he refused the offer and had a microphone installed in his confessional instead. “There’s nothing wrong with me,” he’d said. “It’s you. You don’t speak up.”

When it was my turn, I entered and crossed myself forehead to heart. I slogged through my sins, rattling off the easy-come-easy-go venials without a hitch, crackly feedback from the microphone popping around me in the dark. “I thought about a bad word (dickie) three times, and wished for something bad (for Baby to die) one time, and I teased Baby about three times (about covered a lot of territory in confession), and I sprayed my mother’s good cologne all over the bathroom.” And that was just Saturday. Then I stalled.

“Well?” Father Morgan said. “Are you finished confessing?”

I took a breath. I cleared my throat. I said, “Yes.” Which was a lie, which could also be a mortal sin, I wasn’t sure. I said yes because I was more afraid of telling the truth than of hell, even though not telling the truth was a special kind of hell all its own, a hell that was like wearing shoes you like but they crushed your feet every time you wore them.

When I joined my parents, I had a new burden: whether or not to receive communion, since you had to go with everyone looking, but receiving the host with mortal sins on my soul would double my five, possibly seven sins, to twelve or more. I pictured my sins multiplying like cockroaches the second my tongue touched the bread. But did that stop me?

My mother nudged me toward the communion line forming in the aisle, but I wouldn’t budge until she gave me a wide-eyed look: Move. Afraid she’d know I hadn’t confessed to Father Morgan about the dancers, I entered the line. Father Morgan made his way to me, his furry head bobbing up and down in his brown vestments, as if he was a groundhog. His rhythmic bobbing distracted me from the sacrilegious act I was about to commit; and then I committed it. I received the host and began immediately factoring in another half dozen or more mortal sins.

Ever since I was old enough to receive communion, I imagined
the host as a shiny Jesus the size of a pencil-top eraser sliding down my throat and landing on my heart, where he stood, arms raised, directing my words and actions, and when the next shiny Jesus slid down my throat and began directing, the first one melted into my heart. Sometimes it felt funny having a man on my heart and in it, and I wished Blessed Mother hosts were an option.

On the drive home, I pictured Jesus on top of my heart, looking at the dancers, who were still there, and I wondered if they were inviting him to caper, to cavort about.

That night I dreamed about Jesus dancing in his birthday suit and by the time I woke, my sins had mushroomed into a jackpot of thirty, a low estimate, I knew, but still a number high enough to wear me out and make me long to confess the mother lode to Father Morgan, microphone or no microphone.

The next day was a school day, but I stopped in St. Felix to see if Father Morgan was hearing confessions, and he was. To my relief, I was last in line. “Bless me Father, for I have sinned,” I whispered, head down.

“Speak up,” Father Morgan’s voice buzzed across the microphone.

A drop of sweat rolled down my forehead as I strained to blurt out, “I committed about thirty sins against the Sixth Commandment.”

Father Morgan cut his yawn in half. “What’s that?” he said. “Exactly how did you commit thirty sins against the Sixth Commandment?”

I opened my mouth but no sound came out. I could hear Father Morgan drumming his fingers, so I tried again, this time sputtering, “I committed thirty adulteries.”

Father Morgan’s shoes scuffled over the marble floor. The wood bench he sat on creaked and his knees cracked as he shifted his weight. He pressed his conch-shell ear against the thin screen between us and hunched as close as possible to the speaker box. “What?” he said. “Adultery?” His voice was loud. “Thirty adulteries?” He was practically shouting. “Tell me what you did.”

After I told him, he let out a noisy breath. “For your penance say
three Hail Marys and three Our Fathers. Now go in peace to know and serve the Lord,” he said and shut the tiny confessional door.

I blinked and waited for his words to sink in. That was it? For thirty mortal sins? How could it be the same penance for thirty adulteries as it was for saying dickie and wasting cologne? Had I explained it wrong? Should I try again? I looked at the ceiling, the floor, the walls, anywhere but at the shut confessional door, and all I wanted to do was stay hidden in that closet and let my shame get the best of me.

It was way past time to get to school, but I only got as far as the last row of pews when I sat down and pushed my thoughts farther than Catholics were allowed to by admitting that when Father Morgan shut that door, I felt like I’d been tricked. At the time, I didn’t understand, but I did feel a dark disgrace splintering my heart, a fissure that would widen with time until all my faith had trickled out.

That evening at supper, I sat in my assigned seat, watching my mother dip out a pile of boiled wieners from a pot of greasy water and set the platter on the table beside a bowl of baked beans. “Baked beans,” my friend Buck called them. The wet sounds of chewing filled the air as I picked at the beans my mother spooned onto my plate. I fiddled with my fork, but confessing adultery to Father Morgan had dampened my appetite.

“Eat,” my mother said.

I ran my fingernail through a crack in the kitchen table and watched her clear away bowls and silverware, everything except my plate of wieners, stained brown with bean sauce. I heard Buck and the neighbor kids playing kickball in the street.

“No playing, no anything until your plate’s clean,” my mother said.

I’m too busy not eating beans and wieners to do anything else, I wanted to say. No dessert used to be the punishment for not cleaning my plate, but since Baby moved in, the new rule was I went to my room. So?

After a while the street sounds died down. I watched a pink gash in the sky and finally my mother said, “Collect the dinner tray from Grandma’s room, then go to bed.”

In my bedroom I pulled my pajamas from under a frayed pillowcase and flopped back on the sheets, so soft from being washed
a thousand times. I laced my hands together under the cool of my
pillow, elbows out, and let my mind tumble back. When I’d picked
up Baby’s tray earlier, I saw she’d colored in the naked dancers, chin
to ankle, in loopy swirls of blue ink. “Nobody else will see that,” she
muttered when she saw I saw.

Why hadn’t she just ripped the pictures out?

I pinched my pillow and shoved it under my chest, then folded
my arms around it and stared through the window at the edge of an
early moon. The creak of Baby’s wheelchair trailed down the hall-
way, barging into my thoughts. I remembered her strong legs and the
sturdy black tie-shoes she used to wear, before her craving for sweets
caused her diabetes to flare up and she ended up in a wheelchair. I felt
sad for her and for myself, and so I tried to say a perfect prayer, so
perfect it would cure her and erase all my doubts from this morning.
But, though I started off okay, aiming my mind for God’s front door,
my heart went in the back way, and I prayed, “God, either cure her
quick or call her home soon, very soon, to her just reward.”
Drama

Theater Oobleck Is: New Works.
No Director. Free if You’re Broke.

Over the past twenty-two years, Theater Oobleck has launched fifty-seven productions of new works in Chicago. Beyond its strong local, critical, and audience support, the ensemble’s work has been recognized nationally and internationally. Oobleck’s artists are directly engaged with all aspects of the art-creation process, and directly engaged with the concerns of the community at large. To this end, their works are all written by members of the ensemble; developed by the group, working in concert to create a collective vision without an overseeing director; presented in open rehearsals, allowing audience input before the work’s premiere; and “free if you’re broke,” fostering an unmediated engagement between performer and audience.

The following four plays were written for Theater Oobleck.
Danny Thompson

**HAPPY HAPPY BUNNY VISITS SAD SAD OWL**


Written by Samuel Beckett (presumably) and found by Greg Allen, Ben Schneider, and Danny Thompson in the aforementioned dustbin while they were in Paris (at some time or another).

[Happy Happy Bunny Visits Sad Sad Owl—in the form of a large folded yellow page scrawled with crayons by Beckett at the age of seven(?)—was brought to our attention by Danny Thompson who claims to have “found” this curious piece of Beckett juvenilia when left alone with the envelope. We doubt this claim and suggest that Mr. Thompson wrote the play himself. Or possibly hired a child with a better working knowledge of Beckett to write it for him.]

(Lights up on crude puppet stage complete with plywood cutouts of GRASS, a tree with leafy TREE TOP, and a SIGN reading “Sammy’s Play Hows.” An (underpaid) actor performs all the parts, giving each stuffed animal “puppet” an appropriate voice and animation, as well as manipulating all the props. He is visible throughout the play and makes no effort to disguise himself as puppeteer. Puppeteering skills should be limited to shaking each character a bit to indicate they are speaking, unless otherwise stated.)

(HAPPY HAPPY BUNNY enters, hopping along stage.)

BUNNY: (joyful and childlike) Yay! Yay! Happy, happy, happy! Happy, happy, happy! Yay! Yay! It’s springtime. There’s grass with flowers and trees with stuff on them. Yay! Yay! I think I’ll hop! Happy, happy, happy! Happy, happy, happy!

(OWL appears from behind tree.)
OWL: Whoo.
BUNNY: Happy, happy, happy.
OWL: Whoooo.
BUNNY: Happy, happy, happy.
BUNNY: Who?
OWL: Whoooo.
BUNNY: Who?
OWL: Whooooo.
BUNNY: I think it’s you. You’re going “who.”
OWL: Me? Oh! That explains a few things.
BUNNY: Well, Mr. Owl . . .
OWL: Oh, I’m not Mr. Owl. Mr. Owl died a long, long time ago.
I’m Sad Sad Owl. (sobs) Boo hoo hoo, boo hoo hoo, boo whooo whoooo.
BUNNY: Why are you so sad?
OWL: Someone . . . ate my cupcake.
BUNNY: Oh! Who?
OWL: Whoo.
BUNNY: (exasperated) WHO?
OWL: Whoo.
BUNNY: Yes, WHO!? Who ate your cupcake?
OWL: Oh, I . . . I ate my cupcake! (big sobs)
BUNNY: Yay! You had a cupcake! Happy, happy, happy. Happy, happy, happy! Yay!

(OWL still sobbing.)

BUNNY: Why? Why are you sad? Was it a bad cupcake?
OWL: Oh no. No, NO! It was wondrous. It was splendiferous. It was chocolaty, chocolaty chocolate covered with chocolaty, chocolaty chocolate frosting. (sobs)
BUNNY: Yay! You ate a chocolate cupcake! Yay! Happy, happy, HAPPY!

(OWL sobs.)
BUNNY: Don’t you like chocolate?

OWL: (sobs) My cupcake . . .

BUNNY: Why are you—(exasperated) What’s the matter?


BUNNY: Fleeting? What does fleeting mean? Ooh, it’s fun to say. (jumping for joy) Fleeting, fleeting, fleeting! Yay! Happy, happy, HAPPY! FLEETING, FLEETING, FLEETING! Yay!

OWL: Boo hoo. Boo hoo. (panics as his sawdust begins to pour out) Oh no! I’m crying so hard my stuffing’s coming out. Save me!

BUNNY: I’ll save you! (pulling up little trash can) Here! Here’s a bucket!

OWL: (now in the bucket) Thank you. Thank you, Happy Happy Bunny!

BUNNY: Yay! Problem solved! Yay! It’s a beautiful day! Let’s go hopping! Yay! Happy, happy, happy! Happy, happy, happy! Happy, happy, happy! Happy, happy, happy!

OWL: (tries to hop, but the trash can merely wobbles, feebly) I’m having some difficulty. Perhaps I’ll let you hop around a bit, and I’ll just stay here . . . momentarily.

BUNNY: Come on, come on! Let’s go hopping! Who’s gonna go hopping with me?

(BUNNY hops off stage left.)

OWL: Well, you see, I’m not—

GRASS: I’ll go hopping with you! (GRASS jumps up from the puppet stage and hops off stage left) Happy, happy, happy!

BUNNY: (offstage) Yay!

GRASS: (offstage) Yay!

TREE TOP: I’ll go hopping with you! (TREE TOP is plucked off of tree and hops stage left) Happy, happy, happy!

BUNNY: (offstage) Yay!

TREE TOP: (offstage) Yay!
SIGN: I’ll come hopping with you! *(SIGN “Sammy’s Play Hows” hops off stage left)* Happy, happy, happy!

BUNNY: *(from offstage)* Yay! Happy, happy, happy! Happy, happy, happy!

SIGN: *(offstage)* Yay!

*(The joyous party of BUNNY, GRASS, TREE TOP, and SIGN can be heard fading further and further away as OWL watches them. He is alone, left with only the barren tree on the empty dull, dark grey puppet stage.)*

OWL: *(to off left)* I’ll just, eh, I’ll stay here. I’ll just wait for you. Wait for you to come back. *(pause)* You . . . did say you were coming back . . . didn’t you? *(pause)* I’ll wait right here for you, Happy Happy Bunny.

*(Lights dim to dull blues. Puppeteer makes the noise of wind whistling through the tree. OWL shivers. Repeat. Long pause. Repeat. Longer pause. OWL sobs, then becomes tired of sobbing. Ludicrously long pause.)*

OWL: How much longer could this go on? *(pause)* And I’m only seven years old. *(sobs become wails)*

*(Lights begin to fade. OWL looks up to the lights and realizes the play is ending. His sobbing increases in a panicked desperation as the lights fall to black.)*

END *(Thank God.)*
Jeffrey Dorchen

UBU PAPA

LIGHTS UP. HERALD downstage; UBU, dressed in a papal gown, upstage.

HERALD: Will the congregation please rise for the entrance of His Holiness, Pope Ubu?
UBU: No, no, say it like this: Assholes! On your feet! Now on your knees! Now on your feet again! Now knees! Feet! Knees! Feet! (to Herald) That’ll get the wind moving out their asses.
HERALD: But Papa Ubu—
UBU: Did you just call me Aba Poopoo?
HERALD: No, Il Papa.
UBU: Oh, Papa Ubu. Like Papa, Italian for Pope, right? I thought you were addressing me as Father, Aba in Hebrew, and then calling me Poopoo. Like in that horrible anti-papist song: (sings, to the tune of the nonsense refrain of “Good Morning Star Shine” from the musical Hair)

“Aba Hebru Papa
Ubu Peepee Poopoo
Leelee lo lo

Poopoo Aba Papa
Peepee Aba Poopoo
Heeby Ho Ho

Ubi Ima Muumu
Heeby Ubu Mama
Early morning singin’ song!”

HERALD: The congregation are here, Your Holy Pshittiness.
UBU: Well, show them in, pshitt-for-brains.
HERALD: I mean they’re right here in front of us.
HERALD gestures, indicating the audience.

UBU: You mean all these oozing, festering Lepers and Leprechauns? *(to audience)* You call yourselves Catholics? You should be disgusted with yourselves! *(to Herald)* Exterminate them all immediately!

HERALD: We are not prepared for such an undertaking.
UBU: Well, find the Undertaker!
HERALD: Yes, Your Holy Nutsack.
UBU: Oh, and bring me a sack of nuts.
HERALD: What kind?
UBU: Academia. Academia nuts. From the Academy.
HERALD: The Academia della Nutsack?
UBU: Where else, you son of a cocker spaniel’s rectum?!

*Herald exits.*

UBU: Now we’ll see what’s what. Now we’ll get something going here. This is called Getting Going! The Tough do it! God, I’m holding in a pshitt the size of a cannon ball. Feels kind of nice. I think it’s going to be a boy!

*HERALD enters.*

HERALD: The Jews are here.
UBU: MOTHERFUCKER! Send them in.

*HERALD exits.*

UBU: I suppose this is about what I think it’s about. Whatever that is. God dammit! Where’s that nutsack I ordered? Where’s the Undertaker?

*Enter the JEW, A JEWISH HOLY OFFICIAL.*

UBU: Are you the Undertaker?
JEW: No, I’m the Jews.
UBU: Are you going to kneel? Kiss my ring? Lick the bottom of my foot? Bite my ass like a juice tomato?
JEW: I cannot. It’s against my firmly-held beliefs.
UBU: Your beliefs you’re holding firmly? You sure it’s not a huge pshitt?
JEW: I suppose I could be philosophical about it and say, “Maybe.”
UBU: Please don’t. (clenches teeth) I wish I had a small animal to strangle! Now what’s this all about?
JEW: The Pope has always been good to us, except for all the anti-Semitism.
UBU: We Popes love and respect you hooked-nose, grasping Godkillers.
JEW: And we appreciate that. But your newspaper, the *Civilta Cattolica*—
UBU: Gefilte? Gefilte? Vut’s mit de Gefilte?
JEW: No, the *Civilta Cattolica*, the Jesuit newspaper that’s been doing a series of feature articles about Jews torturing and killing Christians and draining their blood for matzo.
UBU: Oh, that Gefilte Fish Wrapper. We renamed it. It’s now called, “The Weekly Shopper.” Here, let me pull one out of my ass.

*He does. He hands it to the JEW.*

UBU: Look at all the colorful coupons. Your natural Jewish thirst to save money must be burning within you as you peruse that piece of pshitt.
JEW: *(peruses the newspaper)* Thirty-two ounce can of Mexican-style hominy for one hundred eighty-six thousand lire? Talk about a bargain!
UBU: I love jokes about the lire. One million lire for a candy bar. Twenty million lire for a gallon of milk. Ninety lire combat pay for a soldier who loses a limb during fellatio. Too bad the metric system and the Euro are going to put all that behind us one day.
JEW: Tragic. But look here: *(points out an article to Ubu)*
UBU: I must have misplaced my reading ability—I mean glasses. But to me it looks perfectly benign.

JEW: (reads) “The Jews are misled by their Talmud, which enjoins them to think of Christians as animals, to abuse, injure and destroy them at every opportunity. The use of Christian blood in Jewish rituals is well-known…” It goes on in this vein.

UBU: Blood? In a vein? How dare they!

JEW: Your Flatulent Holiness, the fate of the Jews of Polna is threatened by the very accusation—

UBU: Well, they should have thought of that before they subscribed to that cock-and-ball stew they call the Talmud! Am I right, or am I right?

JEW: It’s the year 1899! Soon will begin the twentieth century, destined to be a century of hope, liberty, equality, peace, enlightenment, and ecumenical tolerance. Surely the Pope does not believe the story of Jews drinking blood!

UBU: Well, I don’t know about this Shirley the Pope—she can believe whatever she wants to. But Ubu the Pope calls for the immediate and utter extermination of the Jewish people. And let’s get started right away, before this twentieth century starts and puts the kibosh on the whole thing.

JEW: Unholy pshitt!

UBU: Let them be sliced open and chopped up in a glorious frenzy, with viscera and guts and viscous humors splashing in the sun like water in a commercial for a sports drink. Unless of course you’d like to present me with a few bars of that gold you Jews are famous for.

JEW: That’s extortion! And a stereotype!

UBU: Well, the Vatican has hit hard times, I’m afraid. Do you know what it costs to get prostitutes to wrestle each other naked in caviar? Nuns will do it for free, but you can tell their hearts aren’t in it. They’re too gentle with each other. They’d rather be making out. Anyway, things have got so bad that last night I had to eat my own miter. And I’m not sure what that is. I’m on the verge of starvation! My stomach’s growling, do you hear it?

Sounds of squealing and belching echo through the theater.
JEW: Sounds like a humpback whale.
UBU: Oh, right, I forgot I ate one of those, too.

HERALD runs in.

HERALD: Your Grotesque Phlegmatism!
UBU: Yes, what is it?
HERALD: DNA evidence.
UBU: 21st century identification technology? Here in the latter years of the 19th century? It’s truly a miracle!
HERALD: I know!
UBU: Just think, Rabbi, or whatever your name is, the twentieth century bringing the peace and progress you say it will, the 21st will be even more wonderful, peaceful and full of delicious desserts. DNA evidence! Incontrovertible proof of things! Crime will be a thing of the past!
HERALD: DNA evidence proves you’re a Jew!
UBU: Of course he’s a Jew, it’s as plain and hooked as the nose on his face.
HERALD: No, Il Papa! You! You are a Jew, descended from the lost excommunicated tribe of Pupu. You are the sixteenth Aba Pupu.
JEW: Mazl tov!
UBU: Pshitt! I knew I’d heard that name before. Before I execute you for treachery, Herald, and then weigh your heart against a feather—or however our system of justice works—what am I, a lawyer?
JEW: Your mother would be so proud if you were.
UBU: It seems today will inaugurate an orgy of indiscriminate slaughter. I’m determined there’ll be an orgy of some kind, and slaughter sounds good too—but perhaps I’d better keep the proceedings organized, by discriminating. Herald!
HERALD: I just peed my pants.
UBU: Who asked you? Take a bull. “I, Ubu Papa, the Sixteenth Aba Pupu, and the first or maybe second or third Jewish pope, declare on behalf of the Jewish people a war against all Christendom. We Jews are sick of you people! With your bologna-and-mayonnaise
sandwiches and your individually wrapped cheese food slices. Not to mention your gaudy plumage. All your property shall be seized, your churches desecrated, and your women stripped naked and immersed in caviar and combat.”

HERALD: Will heads roll?
UBU: Heads will roll everywhere, down every grocery aisle and boulevard, even in the carpool lane!

HERALD: Will blood flow?
UBU: Blood will flow in torrents through the . . . bowling alleys and department stores—pushing the rolling heads along—why do you have to make this so complicated, Herald? Whose war is it anyway?

HERALD: Yours, Il Pupu.
UBU: Let the meshugass begin!

JEW: I don’t know whether to be proud or ill.
UBU: You rejoice or I’ll crush your nutsack in my powerful jaws!

JEW: Huzzah!
UBU: But don’t get too excited. I’m still the Vicar of Christ. Therefore: “Let the Christians attack the Jews as well! And each other! And the Muslims, the Hindus, the socialists, the narcissists and fashionistas! All against all! God is dead! And She thirsts for blood!”

HERALD: Jesus! I’m getting writer’s cramp. Anything else?
UBU: Pile the bodies high at Austerlitz and Waterloo! Pull down thy Vanity! Let my people go! Damn the torpedoes! Into the breaches! Bomb the suburbs! Death from above! Bring it on! The Russians are coming! Charlie don’t surf! Bring me the head of Alfre-do Garcia! (beat) Uh oh. Here comes my pshitt! Herald, unbutton my flap!

HERALD: Woe is me!

HERALD unbuttons a flap over Ubu’s ass, releasing a flood of gold coins.

UBU: (with sublime relief) Oh! Aaaaah! (closes his eyes and inhales deeply) The stench of war is sweet!

Lights down.
Two people in a taxi, a driver and passenger. The passenger addresses the audience.

PASSENGER: Before I tell you of my bad day, for that is why I am here, to tell you of this bad day, I must first tell you of a very good day I had, which was in New York City a number of years ago, and at this time I was very happy to be in New York City.

And what I noticed in New York City was a certain rhythm, a certain hum, and each person as they walked down the street seemed to be humming, even if they were not literally humming, and some were literally humming, but even if they were not, their bodies seemed to be humming, and to be moving in a rhythm. And all this was punctuated by tremendous shouts, people shouting, and sometimes they were angry shouts, and sometimes they were happy shouts, but always the shouts were alive.

And I was in a very good mood to be receptive to all this, because I was visiting New York from my own country, and in my country I had had the feeling for a very long time that things were not alive, that things were dead, that the people and the cities and the institutions were dead, that they had no hum and no rhythm. But now things were changing in my country and suddenly it seemed that everything might be redeemed.

And it seemed that all the little things I had done, during the time of deadness, all the little things I had done to try to make some change—not big things, it had seemed to me at the time, little things, inconsequential things, it has seemed to me... I would do little things to make some change, to try to help my country come alive, but all that time I would think, perhaps I am not doing enough, perhaps there is more that I could do, I know there is more that I could do and I am not doing it, why am I not doing it? This is nothing I am doing, perhaps it is so puny as to be utterly worthless, perhaps I and my country and its people and
institutions will always be dead, and perhaps I am responsible, as responsible as anyone else, because what I am doing so very, very puny.

But now things had changed in my country, indeed it was these very changes that had allowed me to come and have this good day in New York City, for we are still speaking of the good day, we have not spoken of the bad day, though it will not be forgotten that I am here to speak of the bad day. Things had changed in my country, as I said, and it seemed that all the things I had done, these little things, they all seemed to me now to be very big things, and other people considered them to be big things, each little thing, now perceived as a big thing, lined up and each leading to the next big thing.

So you can imagine, I was in a very good mood, and it was with this fullness of spirit that I hailed a taxi that was to take me to a dinner at which I would be able to discuss all these things with friends, old friends of mine who had emigrated from my country years before, to escape the deadness I have spoken of.

Sitting in the taxi, I was so excited that it was difficult to be still, to sit still in a taxi, and subordinate my own hum and rhythm that I was feeling, feeling in my body, to subordinate this hum and rhythm to the more regular hum and rhythm of the taxi itself. And though I was aware that the taxi driver, being a resident of New York City, and therefore used to New York City, that the taxi driver might have a different interpretation of this hum and the rhythm of New York City, with those punctuating shouts, that his interpretation of this New York City phenomena might not be as generous as mine, indeed that in general his mood probably was not as joyous as mine—certainly it was unlikely that he was feeling the joy and elation that I was feeling, coming from a country that I felt to be redeemed, and that I had had some small role in redeeming. So I knew that this taxi driver might not share my feelings about New York City, might not even be able to comprehend that anyone felt as I felt about New York City, and yet I could not keep still, I could not keep my mouth closed, I could not keep myself to myself, myself was pouring out of me.

I spoke to him of all these things I was feeling until I could
speak no more, I had emptied myself out—not that I had emptied out these feelings, merely that I had emptied myself of the words that I had available to speak of these feelings, the words were all used up, though the feelings, the wonderful feelings I had, were still intact inside me, my body still tingled with these feelings, and I noticed that my body was bathed in sweat, for as I had spoken all these words, these descriptive words to describe the way I was feeling, and the feelings I had about New York City, as these words had poured out of my mouth, so too had sweat poured out of my body, so that now I sat there, in the taxi, still feeling the regular hum and the rhythm of the taxi as it took me to my dinner, I sat there surrounded by my words and surrounded by my sweat, the sweat and the words both lay around me—in a puddle around me, as it were—as I waited for the taxi driver to reply.

And when he did reply, though I had spoken knowing full well that he might have a different outlook on New York City, I was not prepared for the force of his words.

DRIVER: This city here is like an open sewer, you know, it’s full of filth and scum. I can hardly take it, whoever’s the president should just—

PASSENGER: He beeped his horn.

DRIVER: —really clean it up, know what I mean, sometimes I go out and smell it, I get headaches it’s so bad, you know, they just never go away, you know, it seems that the President should just clean up this whole mess here, should just flush it right down the fucking toilet.

All the animals come out at night, whores, scum, pussy, buggers, queens, fairies, dopers, junkies . . . sick, venal. . . . Someday a real rain will come and wash all this scum off the streets.

PASSENGER: As I say, what he said took me by surprise, but I cannot say that it destroyed or even diminished my good mood, my private elation, because my situation was such that on this day nothing, not a thing could have destroyed or diminished the joy I felt. My only thought was “I can help this man.” He thinks that only a big thing can change his world, the things he sees wrong with his world, his country, his city, the city he drives through in his taxi, a big thing, a big flush, a big rain, that will wipe out all
the bad things he sees, all the bad days he has.

I said to him, “I come from a country that has recently seen an awakening that has recently shown promise of redemption following many long years of deadness. And during those years of deadness, I would look around me and think, what we need, the only thing that can save us, is some big thing, some big thing to come along and ignite the country, some flush, some rain, some smoldering centrifugal force, some tightly-packed snowball, not a snowball, but a gaseous light, a gaseous enlightenment that would . . . ”

And I told the taxi driver honestly that I could not exactly describe this thing, the big thing that I desired, and I never could describe it, because that thing does not exist, it never has existed except in the most terrible, violent and ugly forms, in forms that could never be desired, or if they were desired could only be repented later on, the big thing repented, and the desire for that thing repented.

I told the taxi driver all this, and then I admitted that even though I intuitively knew that this big thing could never come in the form that I desired, even though I knew that if it came in some terrible form that I would most certainly repent it, I told him, “Even though I knew this to be true, I still secretly desired that big thing, because I could not see how all the little things I was doing, the little seeds I was planting, how those little things could ever amount to anything, how those seeds could ever come to fruition.” And then I paused, in speaking to the taxi driver, to let all this sink in, the impossibility of my situation, which mirrored in so many ways the impossibility of his situation, his desire for a big thing . . . I paused to let all this sink in, and then I told him how all those little things I had done, how they had mattered after all, how they now seemed like big things. I said, “The little seeds I planted did grow.” I told him, in essence, to tend his own garden, to do the little possible things and forget about the big impossible things, and to have faith that the little things will eventually bear fruit.

But then, we were at the home of my friends and I did not want to keep him, the taxi driver, and I was eager to be reunited with my friends. . . . I paid the taxi driver, he did not say a word, I gave him a big tip, our eyes met, and I stepped from the taxi.
confident that I, on this very good day I was having, that I had helped this man with whom my eyes had met, that I had helped him in some way.

But now let me tell you that years have passed, the years passed before I came back to New York City, and when I came back, I was not as happy a man, not as elated, not in as receptive a mood to enjoy New York City, for things had changed in my country, that is to say things had not actually changed as rapidly as I had supposed that they would, and many of the changes had turned out to be dead ends, or they weren’t changes at all, or they were the type of change where one sighs and admits, “It is different, and yet it is the same.”

And often, in the intervening years between my visits to New York City I had often wished again for some big thing, some cathartic event, that would wipe away all the dead ends and the changes that weren’t really changes, and the residues of our long history of deadness, the deadness that had pervaded my country for so long and from which I had erroneously believed we were utterly redeemed. I desired this big thing though I knew that it was foolhardy to desire this big thing, but I could not help myself, because all the little things I had done to change my country, the little seeds I had sown, all the little things that had subsequently seemed like big things, now again seemed like little things, random shots, little puny efforts, little things.

And so it was with a heavy heart that I returned to New York City and tried to hail a taxi to take me to a dinner at the home of my friends, on this, as you might have guessed, on this my bad day, the bad day in New York City which I am here to tell you of, hailing a taxi to attend a dinner with the expatriates of my country, those who had escaped the deadness years before.

And I wanted to escape, escape into a taxi, escape the noise of the street, the rhythm and hum and shouts, escape the thoughts in my head so that I might just sit in a taxi and utterly subordinate myself to the more regular hum and rhythm of the taxi itself.

But as you might have guessed, the taxi driver who picked me up was the same taxi driver who had picked me up years earlier, on my good day, the taxi driver to whom I had given so much
advice, advice which seemed hollow to me now, so that when I entered his taxi and our eyes met, my eyes must have shown first surprise and then embarrassment, because that is what I felt. First I felt surprise that of all the taxi drivers in New York City, that once again this taxi driver should be the one to take me to the home of my friends, and then I felt shame, because of all the advice I had given and all the words I had said and all the joy I had felt. But his eyes, meeting mine, did not show shame. They showed surprise, first they showed the natural surprise that one would expect—of all the passengers in New York City—and then his eyes registered joy, he felt joy at seeing me, and his joy shocked me, and I had nothing to say, I just waited, I waited because now it had become the most important thing on earth for me to know, to understand his joy, his joy at seeing me, and hopefully, I hoped, to share in his joy.

He spoke.


PASSENGER: There, on the floor of the passenger seat, was—I could not believe my eyes—there was a garden, and not just a garden, but a remarkable collection of the most remarkable plants, beautiful leafy plants, the most remarkable variety I had ever seen. The taxi driver continued.

DRIVER: People would notice it when they came in the cab. And they wanted to help. Lots of rides gave me seeds—I had no idea how many people carry seeds with them, around, in their pockets, you know what I mean? And each seed has a story and each person who gave me a seed had a story to tell of that seed. “Tend your own garden.” I water them with this—

PASSENGER: He picked up a watering can from the passenger seat.

DRIVER: —and then, when the rain is hard, I open the window on that side and let the rain come in.

PASSENGER: Here was a man who had wanted a big thing, who had thought that only a big thing could save him and his city,
who wanted a big rain to come and wash away all the evil he saw around him, but who now welcomed that rain, any rain because it watered his little patch of beauty that he tended amidst all the evil, and that was his joy.

I was quite taken with one plant in particular—though they all looked marvelous—one spectacularly beautiful climbing lily. And I asked him, to make conversation, but also because this lily was so beautiful I really wanted to know, it climbed on a vine growing on and encircling the passenger seat itself, I asked him the name of this plant. He replied.

DRIVER: Gloriosa superba. From Hawaii. The leaves contain an acrid narcotic, superbine, as well as colchicine and choline. Three grains of colchicine are fatal.

PASSENGER: The irony of it struck me deeply, here the most beautiful of plants growing in a taxi, this an irony in itself, but beyond that, the irony that such a beautiful plant would be poison, even fatal. The taxi driver went on.

DRIVER: This one is the castor bean plant. The seeds are the source of castor oil, but they also contain the toxic principle ricin. It’s harmless if eaten, you know. But if it enters the circulation, through a scratch or an abrasion, it is fatal within seven to ten days. One-hundredth of a milligram can kill a 200 pound man. Loss of appetite, vomiting, delirium, collapse, and death. From South America.

PASSENGER: I began to get a sickly feeling because two, there were now two poisonous plants, deathly poisonous, in the garden in the front seat of this taxi, a taxi to which I had hoped to utterly subordinate my own personal hum and rhythm, and a garden for which I had provided the inspiration, the initial seed, as it were, for all the other seeds, the seeds that this taxi driver’s passengers had mysteriously provided him, carrying seeds in their pockets, and seeds of the most extraordinary kind, seeds of death, and so this sickly feeling grew in me, and I noticed my body was bathed in sweat, because the taxi driver was not stopping his monologue, he was describing other plants, the other plants of his passenger seat garden, he was pointing to a large shrub.
The Louisville Review

DRIVER: These white and blood colored flowers are from the Jamaica Dogwood. Loss of coordination and muscular movements; double vision; then sleep and deep coma. The Mexican tuber. You dig it up during the waning hours of the moon. Then if you store it for a week and eat it, you’ll die in a week. If you store it for a year, it’ll take a year after you eat it to kill you. You know what I mean? This is the Rosary Pea, from India. Grind the seeds into a paste with a little cold water, put the paste in a tiny pointed cylinder and insert the cylinder beneath the skin of a human or animal. You can insert it underneath the fingernail, you know? Death within four hours.

PASSENGER: He could have gone on, I am sure, but we were now at my destination, at the home of my friends, and as you can imagine, I was extremely eager to get out of this taxi and away from the taxi driver and his garden, a garden which I had urged him to sow, though I had only meant for him to sow a garden in the most metaphorical sense. I had meant of course that he should merely do the little things to make some change in his world, not that he should literally make a garden. I wanted to reply to him, the sweat lay about me, but more than that I wanted to escape, to escape from the lilies and tubers and shrubs. I paid the taxi driver, he did not say another word, I gave him a big tip, again, as big a tip as I had given him the previous time, because I felt somehow that to give him no tip or a small tip would be an attempt on my part to punish him, and somehow, though I despised him, I somehow thought it would be wrong to punish him, or silly to punish him, or weak, and so I gave him again the big tip, our eyes met, and I could see his eyes were saying thanks, there was gratitude in the eyes, and I stepped from the taxi on this, my very bad day that I have come to tell you about.

END

Author’s Note: Driver’s dialogue partially from—obviously—Paul Schrader’s screenplay for “Taxi Driver,” and his descriptions of poisons based on—less obviously—Ian Fleming’s “You Only Live Twice.”
Mickle Maher

DELIVERY

THE CARRIER is seen at a great distance, stumbling on his knees towards the stage, waving an envelope.

He reaches the stage and, still kneeling, addresses the audience.

CARRIER: I’ve traveled the most immense distance to deliver this message to you. An Immeasurable distance. Across mountains now eroded to prairies, across vast deltas now dried to deserts. There’s no conceiving of the distance I’ve come as it’s been so long I can’t remember when or from where I started. I remember that I was to deliver the message here, as this address was on the outside of the envelope at one time. Though it’s been erased by the winds and downpours and days of indelicate sun I’ve charged through, its disappearance was not quite so long ago for me to forget.

But there was never any return address.

I’ve journeyed on my knees because I believe I was originally instructed to do so. Although I don’t have any memory of receiving such orders, I don’t remember ever not being on my knees and cannot believe I myself would ever choose to deliver any message in such a way. It is painful and ridiculous and should make you mistrust the character of the sender.

At any rate, in most ways I have to say it’s been a good life, overall, a life of purpose. You seem like a good group; well dressed, attentive and obviously patient—waiting for this which has been so long in coming. Here, at the end, I’m happy to deliver it to you.

I only hesitate to open and read it out of fear that its contents may have dissolved in the expanse of time since they were sealed within. Or from fear that the message is in a language different from the one I speak, a language I knew once, but have forgotten with everything else.
Actually, neither of those are true. I only hesitate because it has become my nature. After living so long smothered by such a distance and weight of years, I’m unable to do things in their proper moment. The rhythms of delay have worked their way into my tired fibers. So please excuse this momentary pause.

Pause.

Thank you. The best moment to open and read—the moment your interest in these contents was at its utmost—that moment now being passed, I’m now able to open and read. Now that your interest has certainly waned or perhaps evaporated entirely. I only hope that what follows is still, after all these centuries, of some relevance to your lives.

Opens and reads:

To whom it may concern of my closest and dearest friends: When the first draft of this letter was written I can’t say, as it’s been in my desk drawer for longer than even the makers of that desk drawer can remember. They claim it was there when they set to constructing the drawer, and they had to nail up the entire desk around it.

This second draft I send to you from far away—a distance I can’t even begin to guess at. In fact, I’ve developed a sort of fear of the character of this awesome distance, imbuing it with the regal traits of inpride and conceit, imagining it would take offense at its being guessed at, and foil the guesser by puffing itself out to an even greater massiveness.

The one I’m trusting to deliver this I’ve only just met, but seems very capable. He’s waiting, standing in the doorway now, the fogs that come to these parts curling in at his ankles, the morning sun through the skin of his ears. He’s hungry for purpose, ready to give over his whole life to find you—although I’m not sure why. As I say, we’ve only just met. In a way, however, you might, by the time he reaches you, consider him and me old friends. Having been joined by this letter for so long.
At any rate, I’m just writing to say that today, looking through my desk and finding the first draft of this letter, I realized that I have completely forgotten just what day it was, or where it was, that my love and esteem for all of you, was born. A blank. Like the event never happened. Oh, I still have those feelings, and carry them along forward into my future, it’s only I don’t remember beginning to have them.

Is this important?

I’m writing to you today to say that it is not. In the first draft of this it seemed incredibly so. Now, recomposing, older and even further from the origins of love, knowing those origins seems of such lesser consequence than that our bond will somehow find its continuance through the brambles of years and uncountable miles. What matters is not when or where what is wild and thrills comes to life, only that that life is sustained.

So I thought I’d better send you this little note. And ask:

How are you doing?

What’s going on?

Do you wanna get together sometime? Do something? Maybe?

Please don’t worry about writing back right away. In fact, I don’t need a reply at all. Just the thought that you might send one.

With deepest affection, wishing on stars foreign to your heaven that you were here—

Your Good Friend.

*Puts letter back in envelope.*

And that’s all. Again, no return address. I wish you luck in any further correspondence, but regret that I cannot be its agent. My career as a messenger is now over. I will travel still, but on my feet, and only in meadows or on soft lawn, with no destination and no purpose but to leave my shoe prints in the earth.

Goodbye.

*Exits*
NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

Brooke Bullman is a writer and artist who lives in Huntsville, Alabama.

Laura Chalar (Montevidio, Uruguay, 1976) is a lawyer, writer, and translator whose work has been featured both in her country and internationally. From 2005 to 2010, she was contributing editor of Versal magazine, and she is co-coordinator of a Uruguayan poetry blog. Her published works are por así decirlo (so to speak), poetry, 2005; El discreto encanto de la abogacía (The Discreet Charm of Lawyering), stories, 2007; and El vuelo del pterodáctilo (The Pterodactyl’s Flight), stories, 2009. She divides her time between Montevideo and Buenos Aires, Argentina.

Loretta Brock Clark has lived most of her life in central Kentucky, the greater part of it in Lexington, where she now resides. In 1996, the Woman’s Club of Central Kentucky published her history of its first one hundred years. In 2009, she celebrated her ninetieth birthday at a surprise party given by her children.

Joey Connelly received his MFA from Ashland University and is visiting professor at Kentucky Wesleyan College.

Peter Cooley has published eight books of poetry, the most recent of which is Divine Margins, which Carnegie Mellon released in 2009. He has work forthcoming in Boulevard, Hotel Amerika, and other magazines. He teaches creative writing at Tulane and lives in New Orleans.

Jeffrey Dorchen is co-founder of Theater Oobleck, playwright, artist, songwriter, librettist, screenwriter, actor, essayist, and radio pundit. His dramatic work has been produced in New York, Chicago, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Grahamstown, South Africa. He has performed in his own plays at, among other venues, Chicago’s Goodman Theater, Prop Theater, Neo-futurarium, and Old Town School of Folk Music, and on the public radio program “This American Life.” In summer of 2009, his play Strauss at Midnight was staged by Theater Oobleck in association with the City of Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs. The script won the supremely coveted Orgie Award for original theater in Chicago. He is involved as co-writer and actor in a film in production, a romantic musical comedy about genetically modified rice.

Linda L. Dunlap is a native of the South whose short fiction and poetry have been published in many literary magazines, most recently Timber Creek Review and New Southerner Magazine. In 2009, her short story “Goldenrod” was nominated for a Pushcart Prize. Her work has been influenced by the writing of Eudora Welty and Welty’s strong sense of place and, although her short stories are set in the South, the problems with which her characters struggle are universal—sibling rivalry, racism, homosexuality. She and her husband live in Winter Park, Florida.
STEPHEN DUNN is the author of fourteen books of poetry, including the recent What Goes On: Selected and New Poems 1995-2009. His Different Hours was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 2001.

RUSSELL EVATT has an MFA from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. He recently lived in Krakow, Poland, where he studied the Polish language. His work has appeared in Iron Horse Literary Review, PANK, Specs Journal, and Blue Earth Review, among others.

LIBER FALCO was born in Montevideo, Uruguay, in 1906 and died in the same city in 1955. He lived all his life in relative poverty, working as a printer’s employee, hairdresser, baker, and newspaper proofreader. His slim body of work, compiled in the collection Tiempo y tiempo (Time and Time), is much loved in Uruguay, where his importance as a writer is now indisputable. The Spanish originals of most of his poems can be found online at liberfalco.blogspot.com, illustrated with pictures by Uruguayan photographer Iván Franco.

KATE FLAHERTY, an associate editor at Ploughshares, has published stories and essays in Creative Nonfiction, Brevity, Fourth Genre, Prairie Schooner, and elsewhere. “The Integrity Test” is part of her manuscript A Brief History of Sex Education, which is in circulation; her other writing and ranting can be found on her blog “Fact or Fiction” at kateflaherty.wordpress.com

LUCY FRANK is the author of seven novels for young people, including Lucky Stars and The Homeschool Liberation League. She is writing a novel in poems.

JOHN FRANK is from Chicago and lives in Ohio. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in The Sun, McSweeney’s Internet Tendency, Paddlefish, Yankee Pot Roast, and The Big Ugly Review, among others. He is at work on a collection of memoirs called Gone Feral that hopes to explain why, while growing up, his family’s pets were always attacking people.

KRISTINA GORCHEVA-NEWBERRY was born and raised in Moscow, Russia, by a mother who believed that unless you read every day, you did not deserve dinner. Kristina received an MA in English from Radford University and an MFA in Creative Writing from Hollins University. Her work has recently appeared in The Southern Review, Calyx, Nimrod, Arts & Letters, North Dakota Quarterly, Gulf Stream, Confrontation, and elsewhere. Her short fiction has been selected as a finalist for the Very Short Fiction Award, Fiction Open, and Family Matters Contest in Glimmer Train, as well as for the 2010 Katherine Anne Porter Prize for Fiction. She lives in the Appalachian mountains of Southwest Virginia with her husband and son.

JAMES HARMS is the author of six books of poetry including the forthcoming *Comet Scar* (Carnegie Mellon University Press 2011). A recipient of an NEA Fellowship and three Pushcart Prizes, he is professor of English at West Virginia University and directs the low-residency MFA Program in Poetry at New England College.

PATTY HOUSTON earned her MFA in Writing from Spalding University. She teaches English at the University of Cincinnati. Her fiction appears in recent issues of *Timber Creek Review, Parting Gifts, and Alimentum Journal*. Stories will soon appear in *descant* and *Lady Churchill’s Rosebud Wristlet*. Her essay “For the Love of Reading” appears in *The Journal of College Literacy and Learning*, 2010, Vol. 36. This year, she received an Ohio Arts Council Individual Excellence Award.

TOM C. HUNLEY is an associate professor of creative writing at Western Kentucky and the director of *Steel Toe Books*. He has published poems in *Triquarterly, New York Quarterly, Rosebud, Margie, and River Styx*. He has won two national contests, one for a full-length poetry manuscript (Logan House Press) and another for a chapbook (Pecan Grove Press). He is also the author of *Teaching Poetry Writing: A Five-Canon Approach* (Multilingual Matters LTD. 2007) and *Tom C. Hunley’s Greatest Hits* (Pudding House 2010).

DAVID ISAACSON is a founding member of Chicago’s Theater Oobleck. He has written fifteen plays for Oobleck, including *Letter Purloined, The Making of Freud, The Spy Threw His Voice*, and, most recently, *Casanova Takes a Bath*.

MARCI RAE JOHNSON holds an MFA in Poetry Writing from Spalding University. She currently works as the poetry editor for WordFarm press. Her poems appear in *Perihelion, Phoebe, The Christian Century, Minnetonka Review, Strange Horizons*, and *32 Poems*, among others.

JILL KOREN is a full-time mother and poet. She lives and works in Madison, Indiana, with her husband and their two children.

JIM KROSSCHELL worked in science publishing for thirty years, starting as a twenty-nine-year-old production assistant, avoiding the real world until then by grad school, Peace Corps, travel, and teaching. He has mostly retired now, writing essays and a blog, onemansmaine.blogspot.com, and dividing his time between Newton, Massachusetts, and Owls Head, Maine. His essays have been published, or are forthcoming, in *Saranc Review, North Dakota Review, Blueline, Eclectica*, and others.
HELLER LANDECKER is a mother and psychotherapist in Minneapolis, Minnesota. “Bill” is her first published poem.

CAROL LEVIN’s chapbook Red Rooms and Others was published 2009 by Pecan Grove Press, and Sea Lions Sing Scat, a semi-finalist in Finishing Line Press’ contest, was released in 2007. She has been widely published in journals, including The Massachusetts Review, Third Coast, and The Seattle Review. Poems were set as a choral work and have been performed by various choirs. She also collaborated in translating Anton Chekhov’s four major plays. She is an editorial assistant for the Crab Creek Review and teaches the Alexander Technique in Seattle.

GAIL CARSON LEVINE is the author of eighteen books for children and young adults. She and her husband, David, and their Airedale, Baxter, live in a 220-year-old farmhouse in New York’s Hudson valley. These are her debut poems for grownups.

ED MADDEN is an associate professor of English at the University of South Carolina and the writer-in-residence at Riverbanks Botanical Gardens in Columbia. He is the author of Signals, which won the 2007 South Carolina Poetry Book award. His work has appeared in many journals and in the Notre Dame anthology, The Book of Irish American Poetry from the Eighteenth Century to the Present. He was recently awarded the 2011 South Carolina Arts Commission fellowship for prose.

MICKLE MAHER is a co-founder of Theater Oobleck. Plays include An Apology for the Course and Outcome of Certain Events Delivered by Doctor John Faustus on This His Final Evening, The Hunchback Variations, The Strangerer, Spirits to Enforce, Cyrano (translator), Lady Madeline, and The Cabinet. His plays have appeared off-Broadway and in numerous theaters around the world and are published by Hope and Nonthings (hopeandnonthings.com). He has been the recipient of a Creative Capital grant (for The Strangerer) and, recently, an NEA grant to develop The Hunchback Variations into an opera. He teaches at the University of Chicago.

JANET MCNALLY has fiction published or forthcoming in Crab Orchard Review, New Madrid, Iron Horse Literary Review; and others, and has poetry forthcoming in magazines including Confrontation, Poet Lore and Bellingham Review. She is a graduate of the MFA program at the University of Notre Dame, and in 2008, she was awarded a fellowship in fiction by the New York Foundation for the Arts. She teaches creative writing and English at Canisius High School and Canisius College in Buffalo, New York.

JENNY MOLBERG earned her BA at Louisiana State University and her MFA at American University. During her time in Washington, D.C., she was named a Lannan Fellow and worked as the assistant editor for Poet Lore. Her poems have recently appeared or are forthcoming in Copper Nickel, Comstock Review, Smartish Pace, and Borderlands: Texas Poetry Review.
A. J. Naslund’s work has recently appeared in such journals as Lalitamba, Caesura, Upstreet 4, Abiko Annual (Japan), Seven Circle Press (online), and other places. His book of poems, Silk Weather (1999) was brought out by Fleur de-lis Press, Spalding University. A resident of Louisville, Kentucky, Naslund grew up on a farm in Montana in the forties and fifties. He has taught college and university courses in English in the U.S., Japan, and Korea in recent years. He has academic degrees in English from the University of Montana (Missoula, Montana—BA and MA) and the University of Louisville (PhD).

Alan Michael Parker is the author of five collections of poems, including Elephants & Butterflies, and two novels, including A Tale of a Whale (forthcoming from WordFarm, 2011), as well as the editor or co-editor of three scholarly volumes. His essays and reviews have appeared in The Believer, The New Yorker, The New York Times Book Review and elsewhere. He teaches at Davidson College, and in the Queens University low-residency MFA program.

Glen Pourciau’s short story collection Invite won the 2008 Iowa Short Fiction Award and was published by the University of Iowa Press. His stories have been published in the Antioch Review, failbetter, Mississippi Review, New England Review, New Orleans Review, Paris Review, TriQuarterly, and other magazines.

Doug Ramspeck’s poetry collection, Black Tupelo Country, was selected for the 2007 John Ciardi Prize for Poetry and is published by BkMk Press (University of Missouri-Kansas City). A new book, Possum Nocturne, is due out in 2010 by NorthShore Press. Several hundred of his poems have been accepted for publication by journals that include Epoch, The Kenyon Review, Prairie Schooner, Alaska Quarterly Review, The Massachusetts Review, and Northwest Review. He was awarded an Ohio Arts Council Individual Excellence Award for 2009. He directs the Writing Center and teaches creative writing at Ohio State University at Lima.

Jack Ridl’s newest collection is Losing Season (CavanKerry Press). Jack and the book were featured on public radio’s “The Story” with Dick Gordon and Bill Littlefield’s All in the Game. Littlefield of The Boston Globe named Losing Season one of the year’s ten best sports books. His previous collection, Broken Symmetry (Wayne State University Press) was co-recipient of the best poetry book award from The Society of Midland Authors. More than 65 of Ridl’s students have gone on to publish their work, and nine of his students are featured in 25 Under 25 recently edited by Naomi Shihab Nye.
CHRISTINE RIKKERS was the co-editor of Pacific Review’s 2008/09 issue, and editor of Poetry International’s New American Poets Chapbook Series. Previously, Christine spent four years in New York City working in publishing, and two years teaching English in Nanjing, China. A recent graduate of San Diego State University’s MFA Program in Creative Writing, she lives and works in Montreal, Quebec, with her husband, where she is a participant in the Quebec Writer’s Federation 2010 Mentorship Program. Recent work is published in Cold Mountain Review, Portland Review, Basilica Review, Tidal Basin Review, Web Del Sol Review of Books, and San Diego Poetry Review.


MARY ANN SAMYN is the author of six collections of poetry, most recently, Beauty Breaks In (New Issues, 2009) and The Boom of a Small Cannon, a chapbook (Dancing Girl Press, 2010). She teaches in the MFA program at West Virginia University.

FREDERICK SMOCK chairs the English department at Bellarmine University. His most recent book of poems is The Blue Hour (Larkspur Press).

DANNY THOMPSON is a founding member of Chicago’s Theater Oobleck, for which he has written too many plays, including Necessity (a bloody and historically inaccurate chronicle of Thomas Edison’s last year, from his murderous chain-gang escape to his hanging in the electric chair), Big Tooth High-Tech Megatron vs. the Sockpuppet of Procrastination, and VaudeVille WaRS: Kierkegaard On The Patio (a Robert Wilson / Philip Glass parody). He is a “co-discoverer” of the show, The Complete Lost Works of Samuel Beckett as Found in an Envelope (Partially Burned) in a Dustbin in Paris Labeled “Never to be Performed. Never. Ever. Ever. Or I’ll Sue! I’ll Sue from the Grave!!!,” which received both the Comedy Excellence Award (2000 New York Fringe Festival) and Top Ten of the Fest (2002 Edinburgh Fringe Festival) and extensively toured the United Kingdom. He lives in Worcester, Massachusetts, birthplace of Robert Benchley, Abbie Hoffman, the monkey wrench, the rickshaw, the steam calliope, the first perfect pitched game of Major League Baseball (1880), and the smiley face.
Cate Whetzel teaches poetry in the Chicago public and private schools through The Poetry Center of Chicago’s Hands on Stanzas program. Her poems have appeared in The National Poetry Review, New Plains Review, PHOEBE, Epiphany, storySouth, and Breakwater Review. New work is forthcoming in Salamander and Chiron Review. She lives in a third-floor walk-up with her husband, poet Ben Debus, and an unintentional collection of broken umbrellas.

Larry S. Williams, a former Sergeant of Marines, and a prize-winning writer, is a student in the Spalding University brief-residency MFA in Writing Program, concentrating in fiction. He is a recipient of the Kentucky Arts Council A1 Smith Artist Professional Assistance Award (FY 2001) and a Merit Scholarship from the MFA Program at Spalding University (Spring 2009). He has published in the Marine Corps Gazette and contributed to the United States Naval Institute’s Naval History. He lives in Oldham County, Kentucky, with his wife of thirty-five years, choreographer/dancer Susana B. Williams, director of the nonprofit Dance Forms Productions.

Eleanor Wilner’s most recent books of poetry are The Girl with Bees in Her Hair (Copper Canyon Press, 2004) and Tourist in Hell (University of Chicago Press, Fall, 2010).

Michael T. Young has published two collections of poetry: Because the Wind Has Questions and Transcriptions of Daylight. He received a 2007 Fellowship from the New Jersey State Council on the Arts and a 2008 William Stafford Award. He’s been twice nominated for a Pushcart Prize and received the Chaffin Poetry Award for 2005. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in The Barn Owl Review, Iodine Poetry Journal, The Same, Rattle, The Sow’s Ear Poetry Review, and many other journals. His work is also in the anthologies Phoenix Rising and Chance of a Ghost. He lives with his wife and children in Jersey City, New Jersey.
The
Children’s
Corner
Caroline Kenworthy

**BUCOLIC: SHEEP’S MILK**

I worry
of Your bones:
heavy
as milk, and sour
as curdle.
Your femur
in the crust
on the pail’s rim,
Your ribcage
in the skin.

I break it—must—
consume that milkiness
like a dead lamb’s eye:

How else can I
see You, steep
in Your figure,
in both Your whole
and your broken bones?
Caroline Kenworthy

ACTAEON’S HOUNDS

we know two ways:
with Master
and without—

(the hot salt of elk-bone
and pulp splinter of hare,
how easy they crack—)

like pets, waiting
like pursuit or hunger

then His whistle
and we go for him
what else to do

we went for the buck

but we have not seen him since
Caroline Kenworthy

**ARTEMIS & ACTAEON**

We shed light on Greek
as through fingers. Slivers. A word,
a story:

he, a rootless hunter, saw
the virgin goddess bathing. Livid, she
changed him into a stag, and whistled for his dogs.
(Or did he bellow? Afraid?)
They dismembered him.

We may imagine the instant,
the intimate twist
of ear to antler,
hunter to lover.
His underness to Artemis—
his staying.

But his own dogs baying?
How could he not run?
Caroline Kenworthy

**ACTAEON (AFTER TRANSFORMATION)**

He brayed—with dismay or devotion?
we are uncertain—

*O* lover; hunt goddess, your glaring skin.
The early moon reflected in the pond,
tucked in the breast of dusk.
*I* know you, moon,
and cannot unknow you.

So I am naked and blind,
my feet terribly
given to quick—this,
*O* Artemis this stillness
*I* know is grace.

None of the stories say he ran.
Hila Shooter

GUILT

Sometimes
I just don’t care
and leave the TV on all night

then in the morning
I guiltily wonder how many polar bears
I’ve killed

As if it happened like that
Alex Bertsche

WHEN SAUCERS FROM THE OLD FAMILY DISHWARE LOOK LIKE THE MOON

It is four in the morning under this worn roof, and my thoughts have been turning circles since midnight, chasing their shadowy tails through my mind.

No power lines or street lamps hum outside, no stray dog lifts his head and barks up at the sky, at the splinter of a moon that won’t answer back.

There is a fire truck somewhere in the distance. The growl of its engine stirs a thin film of dust from the rafters and rattles the bone china in the cupboards downstairs, its high, keening shriek wavering like the hot air above a bonfire.

And for a moment, the truck is a blur of sounds and motion, and light, framed against the dark in my window, howling past me in the night.
ROME’S CRUMBLE

Medals hang,  
impeccably spaced  
between dust  
and ebony photos,  
highlighted in an alabaster case.

Valiant they run,  
their only chariot,  
flattened soles. 
Over peaks,  
through brooks they pace.  
For only ebony forests,  
tower in their way.

Bystanders and travelers  
take heed where you step,  
for the path’s heights  
are brilliant.

Crossing the Rubicon,  
Leaping into the water’s  
tarnishing hues,  
irreversibly staining  
their soles.  
They could no longer glance  
over their shoulder,  
but stare to the future.

26 miles decimated by fatigue,  
they fell to their knees.
James Bianco

REBELLION

I refuse to fall in line with this world
I stand for rebellion, I reject conforming
If this is war, I’m standing for the light

I reinvent rebellion with my battle cries
Shouts run back, ordering me to cooperate
I still refuse to fall in line with this world

My enemy shoots down resistance before it can be formed
My ideas fly faster than any weapon
It’s evolving into war, still I’m standing for the light

My rebellion is not hidden skulking in shadows plotting
   some revenge
 Mine is open rebellion, screaming at the top of its lungs
        for its beliefs
I refuse to fall in line with this world

Why must the world’s goal be to have everyone act the same?
I am screaming truth over a world of lies
I now know this is warm, yet I’m still standing for the light

They shove their virtues in my face, expecting me to agree
As if forces are pushing toward something I cannot accept
I refuse to fall in line with this world
This is a war, but I’m fighting for the light
ON MEETING MY MASTERS

I’d make a perfect drunk  
I mean: my father flew through drink  
Like vulture wings  
Lustrous, dark, dead  
Moving mechanically  
They work like survival  
His hand touches exact instincts  
Fingering the bottle

And I, like some shadow hung upon  
A wall, spotting all of these  
Same flaws and making them  
My own  
Crafting bitter, poisonous liquids  
To fetid phrase  
And shifting praise  
My addiction: purely literary

Purely to get a fix  
Fitz’d like Gerald  
So I can waste away like Gatsby  
Or hem the ways  
Waves of needling pain  
Which stem  
Like the same rose grown  
From Prynne and her grave-stone

It’s the choice we all make  
Live to write  
Write to love  
Or burn both bridges  
In infamy.
Bronzed heads whisper
Telling me, too
Of self-same glory

Whisper, softer
Almost soothing of dark thoughts
Nightmares brooding
Your trade?
Faustus with pen in hand strips
Strips me human
Makes understanding
Contingent on suffering

And she, she Beatrice
Not for Dante, but mine
Makes me think words writ
Are more than just lines
But she…
She can’t save me
And if my own soul can’t
Infamy is the coffin of talent
Andrew R. Nelyon

FINALE

She levied the charge
Hard, the way it hit me
Dart pierced flesh
Fresh, it bled swiftly

She says:

You only write when you ache
And like cheap liquor
Stumble upon
Fumbling greatness…
See

Anthologies and volumes
Lightly perused
By most
Obsessively studied
By me

Means: our first kiss was writ
Merely as a prologue
An acted scene
Weaving strings
Destruction sings

Because some folks are broken
Badly, fiending perfection
Sadly, we play culprit
Documenting beauty to
Our own detriment

I love you
And it's obvious in every novel
My heroines: your model
My failures: our trial
Apology weds dull sorrow

Because for too many years
I’ve played nursemaid
To feeble page
Degrading love
To play sage
So my last work
Will be my greatest
Weaving magician hands
Over broken wedding bands
I’ll tell you

The love of today
Is Infinite
In a way
No eternal work
Matches
Andrew R. Neylon

ALIEN

If I were an extra-terrestrial being
I would beam down
And share this with you:

Silly Earthlings!
The heart cannot break
Apart, it’s a muscle
Not an organ!

And although you’d probably gawk
Lamely at this foreign mass of talk
I’d hope you’d take a moment
To look within

And find that although your
Fragile core may
Scratch, scuff, scrape
It won’t break.

You may revile
Such thumb-prints and scars
Don’t
For what use is a pristine heart?

Never having seen the
Tormented galaxy
Or sailed endlessly
Through space

You would be a fool
And a fake
Not to embrace
Heart-ache

The way your athletes run
And birds wing
Painfully, nearly-bursting
Blood pumping, spirit growing

Don’t you see?
And difficult it must be!
As the undeveloped heart
Harks cough and wheeze

For there will be times
Your mother hid beneath her bed
And armored her breast once
Softly showing

You must not!
For love like space
Craves knowing
And exploring

The cracks and dents
Which riddle your ship
Your vessel.
You must claim it!

And I, though elder, wiser
Was victim and champion the same
Would not trade a shred of it
Glorious or shame

No, take the spaceship
Locked within your chest
And let it sail through sparks and seas
To find light amongst blackness
And leaving, once dull eyes mesmerized
Humans, please do see!
A dead heart is broken
Where a wounded strives to breathe
Anna Yates

THE VAPOUR

The ticking clock reveals, warns
How swiftly life’s echoes ebb, death’s footsteps approach.

If but a mist, is life worthwhile,
Clouding the cold glass of time, then silently vanishing?

What will the flame be worth, then,
If darkness soon shrouds its meager sparks.

Should we not broaden, enhance the haze,
Warming the glass before the vapour fades?

Should we not direct the flame to shine on the Path,
Brightening the way to the Everlasting Light?

The ticking clock prompts, reminds:
Past the blackness, endure only deeds of light.
NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

ALEX BERTSCHE is (at the time of this printing) a rising high school senior, studying Writing in the Media Arts Department of the Chicago Academy for the Arts. She has been writing since first grade, when her teacher told her to “Stop writing stories about bunny rabbits! You need to expand your horizons!” She took the advice to heart and has since written poetry and fiction about such a wide variety of topics as lake monsters, children with tails, and yes, fire trucks and dishware.

JAMES BIANCO is a fifteen-year-old homeschooler who lives in Lakeland, Florida, with his parents, brother, and two sisters. Listening to Christian hip-hop, writing, and reading are some of his favorite hobbies. James hopes to work in journalism.

MICHAEL DUELL loves to write poetry and is known to write an occasional screenplay. Mike is an up incoming freshman at Le Moyne University. When Mike is not battling the winters of Central New York, he likes to spend his spare time geocaching and playing baseball. Mike’s favorite quote is “Impossible is nothing.”

CAROLINE KENWORTHY attends The Chicago Academy for the Arts, concentrating in Media Arts, with an emphasis in creative writing. She has won awards for poetry and fiction from the school’s competitions, judged by writers such as Snezana Zabic and Christina Pugh.

ANDREW R. NEYLON is a recently graduated senior from Fishers High School in Fishers, Indiana. He has been involved in speech team, theater, and choir at the school. He has been writing for several years but has just recently worked up the courage to begin submitting his works for publications. He will be attending Ball State University in Indiana in the fall.

HILA SHOOTER, a fifteen-year-old homeschool student, lives in rural Maine. She is the 2009-2010 Youth Poet Laureate of Waldo County.

ANNA YATES is fourteen years old and has been homeschooled by her college grad parents throughout her school years. She also attends a “Friday School” where she participates in drama, art, and choral classes. A love of writing motivated Anna to take a local Re-Writing Workshop, where she produced the poem “The Vapour.” After school, Anna hopes to attend college and become a film actress.
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