



THE LOUISVILLE
REVIEW

SPRING 2011 **69**

The Louisville Review

Volume 69
Spring 2011

The Louisville Review

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This issue: \$8 ppd
Sample copy: \$5 ppd
Subscriptions: One year, \$14; two years, \$27; three years, \$40
Student subscription: One year, \$12; two years, \$20
Foreign subscribers, please add \$4/year for shipping.

The text and the cover printed by Thomson Shore of Dexter, Michigan.
Cover design by Jonathan Weinert. Cover picture used with permission of The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

TLR gratefully acknowledges the support of the brief-residency Master of Fine Arts in Writing Program, Spalding University, 851 S. Fourth St., Louisville, KY 40203. Email mfa@spalding.edu for information about the MFA in Writing Program.

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Editor's Note

Last summer in Buenos Aires, during the Spalding University brief-residency Master of Fine Arts in Writing summer residency, I was so lucky as to read a short story by our student Drema Drudge, who was in the workshop I conducted. That story is the lead story for this issue of *The Louisville Review*, and our cover artwork features the painting referenced by the story. For summer 2011, the MFA residency will be in Italy (Rome, near Siena, and a day trip to Florence); for summer 2012, Paris; and in 2013, by popular request, we plan to convene in Ireland (Dublin and Galway).

The back cover of *TLR69* announces the publication of the short-story collection, *Surgeon Stories*, by Daly Walker, published by Fleur-de-Lis Press of *The Louisville Review*. Daly is a retired surgeon and Vietnam veteran who was my student at Indiana University and the University of Louisville. Check out the two great blurbs on *Surgeon Stories* by renowned fiction writer Tim O'Brien and former United States poet laureate Billy Collins.

The Spring 2011 MFA residency in Louisville is pleased to welcome back Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Claudia Emerson and to extend congratulations to our faculty member Maureen Morehead, who has recently been inaugurated as Kentucky's next poet laureate.

To the following guest editors for this issue of TLR, I extend a special thank you for your work:

DIANNE APRILE, nonfiction editor, is the author of four books of nonfiction, including *The Eye is Not Enough: On Seeing and Remembering*, a collaboration with visual artist Mary Lou Hess, printed by the letter press publisher, Larkspur Press. She was recently awarded a 2011 writer's residency at Hedgebrook on Whidbey Island, Washington, and has received three grants from the Kentucky Foundation for Women and two Kentucky Arts Council grants. She is currently at work on a book about the largest public parks project underway in the U.S. today, and a memoir, a portion of which was nominated for a Pushcart Prize. In 2008, she was the first writer in residence for Spalding University's BFA in Writing program. As a journalist, she was part of a team of writers who won a staff Pulitzer Prize for *The Courier-Journal*. Former owners of a jazz club in Louisville, Dianne and her husband Ken Shapero now live in Seattle.

ROBIN LIPPINCOTT's (fiction editor) latest novel is *In the Meantime*. He has published two other novels and a collection of short

stories. His fiction has received nominations for the IMPAC Dublin Literary Award, the Pushcart Prize, the American Library Association Roundtable Award, the Independent Book Award, and the Lambda Literary Award, and has appeared, along with his nonfiction, in over twenty journals, including *The Paris Review*, *Fence*, *Memorious*, *The Lumberyard*, *American Short Fiction*, and *The New York Times Book Review*, and has been anthologized in *M2M: New Literary Fiction*, *Rebel Yell* and *Rebel Yell 2*. The recipient of fellowships to Yaddo and The MacDowell Colony, he lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

MAUREEN MOREHEAD, poetry editor, is a poetry faculty member in Spalding University's brief residency program in Writing. Her most recent book is *The Melancholy Teacher* (Larkspur Press). She has been appointed 2011/2012 Poet Laureate of Kentucky.

CHARLIE SCHULMAN, drama editor, is the Producer and Book-Writer of *The Fartiste* (Outstanding Muscial FringeNYC) opening Off-Broadway in 2011. Check out www.Thefartiste.com to hear songs and find out more about the production.

BETSY WOODS, a Spalding MFA alum and guest editor for The Children's Corner, is a writer and editor for *NASA* and interns at the Covenant House in New Orleans. Her short stories have appeared in *The New Orleans Review*, *The Louisville Review*, *The Literary Trunk*, and *Alive Now*. She is a contributing writer for *Sophisticated Woman* magazine, served as assistant editor for the organic farming magazine, *Acres U.S.A.*, and was a columnist and feature writer for *The Times Picayune*. She teaches at The Writer's Loft of Middle Tennessee State University.

—Sena Jeter Naslund, Editor

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Drema Drudge

COLLIOURE SHALL ALWAYS BE COLLIOURE

The eye cannot see itself. It is at once a simple and yet wonderfully tangled notion, and I bite into the idea as I stare out the arched window, into Henri's Matisse-blue sky, above this town, Collioure, a name I will say with reverence even after. Even after.

I prefer contemplations that busy multiple floors of my mind so I cannot see that bowl of putrilaginous fruit behind Henri as he paints me.

"Henri, please throw the fruit out!" When he paints, he cannot hear. I should have confessed when he was painting. But no. What I confessed is the reason he is painting.

Collioure's sky has a hint of the same hue stealing into it as the blush that crawls across my face as Henri scrutinizes me with his part artist, part man, eyes. Every shiver of his soft sable-haired brush on the canvas transforms me into the safe, silent, Olga-of-the-Canvas. I have the relentless sensation of someone brushing my hair as he paints me, the feeling of delight that creeps upon one when someone with beautiful hands gestures; I have the uneasy feeling one gets when questioned too closely upon a topic one is reluctant to discuss. There are no uncomplicated emotions between us.

Collioure's French sky is and always will be Matisse blue.

I will not describe his studio, because he will not paint it, anyway. As he does with everything in his life, he paints what he wants it to be, which is a shade lighter than my dress; the floor he wants to be black, so it is. Actually, it is black.

Outside the window hundred-year-old umbrella pines, fig trees, and twisted olive trees emit their smells like costermongers determined to sell their goods, but I cannot leave. A church grazes the bottom of my sightline. I want to visit it; I would not be welcome.

Paint scents layer in the room with the aroma of the overripe fruit in the ivory bowl on the table behind him: oranges and a pineapple, bruised red raspberries, fragrance formed from them by the weight upon them, and freshly picked figs. They sweeten the scent of the pleasantly perspiring Henri; it is not their smell that is objectionable, not yet, but their appearance. Flies have found the fruit.

Henri's scent I breathe last, because I want it to show in the painting. I swallow it and send it through my eyes—*Henri. This is my Henri*. Still, life, I would call my painting, a mark of the hope I have for the future. No one would need to know that Henri, too, is dying; it is knowledge we have, the mortality of fruit, of one another. Henri will die. Not before he becomes an old man, not before I, the fruit behind him gives off its uneven scents.

This, 1911, will be my last happy year, though I don't know it yet. Today, I wear a dress Henri suggested. I do not know where it came from, and I will not ask, but it is beautiful: its colors are the greens and browns of Collioure's land as seen from the top of the Pyrenees. Pea green, moss green, overlays of roast browns and peach comingle as they do in real life, though we seldom acknowledge the interdependence of colors upon one another, that faces are not white or brown, but a continuum. He outlines me in dark black as if he can define me, but the movement of the lines shows his frustration in trying to do so.

He sighs once, leaning over as if to blot a mistake. He murmurs "Collioure shall always be Collioure;" it is the town's motto.

Later, my family will convince him I need hospitalizing; his wife will say I am using pills. I am not. I am nearly mad with love for him, but not quite. I can still use it in my art, *see, don't lock me up, Henri*. It isn't clear to me, when they do lock me up, exactly why they do so. If a famous artist says you must be kept locked up, you must. When I get out of the sanatorium at Bern, I do not go to Henri. Yes, 1911 is my last happy year, though I don't yet know it.

The day I applied to his school, I wore brown from head to toe. My hair was up. I wore no makeup. I feared he would think me too old at thirty-one for an artist, as if my being a woman was not enough for him to turn me away.

"This I did while studying with Kandinsky," I said, holding out a portrait of an old man sitting on a bench, waiting for a train.

"You support yourself with your work?" he asked.

"Yes. I get by." I appeared unconcerned, but inside, where the eye can see, I shook with fear that he would turn me away.

"You will do," he said, and throwing his cigar in the dirt outside his home, he turned and went indoors. I followed him. I have followed him since.

He is angry with me, again: "Olga! Sit still!"

He has no idea how the back aches while one is kneeling. My thighs have become one with my calves; this new sort of Pompeian limb has now become fused with the floor. I try not to shift, but my legs are asleep. It will mean minutes of agony when I do rise while the blood relearns to circulate in my limbs. My blood is not circulating at its best now, anyway, as it has betrayed me and begun its own incredible, disobedient journey to the darker places of my heart. Later, I will see my blood, much later, when I have realized that what I paint has not captured my vision, nor the public, as I have hoped, when I realize I will carry Henri with me for too, too long. Then, I will be glad to see my blood.

He is angry not because I need a break from sitting to go to the bathroom or that I desire a cigarette; it is because I have presumed to fall in love with him. No, that would have been fine—it is that I told him so. We are both angry about that.

Notre-dame-des Anges' safety beckons out the arched window. I long to open my heart to its tenets.

He frowns fiercely.

"I'm sorry," I murmur and I lift my chest as he indicates with his impatient hand.

"You act as if I can control my feelings," I mumble, but he does not hear. *Help me, Henri. Help me.* He cannot/will not hear me.

"No sky in all France is more blue than that of Collioure," he says to the plea I cannot keep from my eyes, as if he understands my desire to escape to that freedom of color. For a few minutes, we are silent, but my despair and discomfort soon cause me to fidget anew.

"I am trying to paint your soul—do you want me to only succeed in capturing your body?" he complains. He dabs to the left of the canvas as if correcting something; I hear the whisking of his brush and his breath as he opens his mouth. When he concentrates, he breathes heavily; I count the dabs: twenty-two. When I look at the painting, later, I assume that is when he added the green to the side of my head.

"Others have been more than pleased to capture my body," I can't resist saying. He ignores me. He is good at that; it irritates me.

He turns me into clumps of shapes and color upon the canvas. I hate the far-away look he insists upon, when with him I feel everything in the Universe at once, and nothing is far away. Nothing, except . . .

"At least let her eat something. I have made soupe de poissons, an anchovy salad. . . ." It is his wife; she is still pretty, but suspicion

is bad for the complexion, and she has squint lines around her eyes and across her forehead. This painting of me will prove to be one of Matisse's more famous works; my face will be remembered more than hers will, especially by Henri. That is a comfort.

The birds answer her with sounds that make more sense than what I am feeling. She lingers, squeezes a tube of vermilion paint (*Stop it! I want to say*), straightening a red and orange flowerless vase behind him, her fingertips accidentally setting it rocking, but she rights it before it tips over.

The wind from the open window breathes the scent of the fruit, ripening too fast in the sun, life and death together. It is hot; the flies still find their way in; Henri hates flies in his paint, but he is the one who insists on the fruit—he has begun a new still life. Still; life.

Amélie picks up the bowl of fruit as if to take it with her.

"Amélie, she is fine," he says impatiently. I straighten my back and maintain my distant gaze. I am only the model.

"No! Put it back!" He has spotted her with the bowl. Henri has no need to be polite, and so he is not. It is understood by us all that that is just the way of an artist.

When the door closes behind her, I slump forward upon my knees. This time, he does not scold me, though he smooths my hair back into place when I sit up. "That's better," he says.

I show no emotion at his touch. I fold everything I feel because he has told me it is wrong, wrong, Olga, and I shove it back into my heart. My heart is lumpy because tents never go back into their cases properly, but no one can see. It does not matter.

He says it is wrong, but I believe he really thinks *it's too messy; it's too complicated. My art cannot be interrupted by such chaos.*

"These flies!" Henri curses, moving his hand in that graceful way I have yet to see duplicated by anyone.

"You have to get rid of the fruit," I say while staring out at that blue, blue sky.

The sound of his brush beats my temples.

"Who assembled your fruit?" I ask.

He does not answer.

"Henri? The fruit?"

He does not answer.

"Henri?"

I still do not know who would put a pineapple alongside oranges

and delicate raspberries. Raspberries do not live as long as the other fruit and are infinitely more fragile.

I paint my image of him in my head as he paints me. I will touch him only in my art, so I memorize everything I can. I pretend to trace his ear with my tongue inside my mouth; I will show how vulnerable he is by that ear, will not show how his hair thins in front, only suggest it, for his soul has not thinned, nor will it fatten, as he does, after my death. I will reveal his intelligent brow, his long fingers and feet, because they are one. If only I can show the Henri I love, the man who adores nature and good meals, who sees beauty in shapes most of us would reject. If only I can reveal that, I will have earned my place in art.

On his *Olga*, he leaves my dress loose at my breasts, when in reality the jersey clings to them; he paints my hands draping my thighs, as if hiding that space from himself. When I paint him, I subconsciously do the same: his right leg is so advanced of his left that the space between them is buried in fabric. We who are used to painting nudes cannot bear to sexualize one another, though I do paint him on his bed, in his pajamas. I think this is when Amélie really begins to hate me; it is a bed they do not share with one another.

On our infrequent breaks, I gaze upon the painting while he stands behind me, watching my reaction as if he would paint that, too. I see the lines on it where he has changed his mind, has decided to move the painted me but has not. Hesitancy is not a trait I recognize in Henri.

On the right side of my painted neck and face, he paints blotches as if he could cover his mistakes; those spots I recognize as ones where he has touched me when he turned my head. In the painting, something dangles from my mouth, as if a cigarette hangs from my lips. Worse. He has torn my lips from me so I won't say what he doesn't want to hear again. He wishes to silence me. I must quiet my work as well, but is that not a betrayal of art? That is worse than a betrayal of love, because art lasts forever, unless you are the "lost" canvas I did of Henri.

Yes, I did two paintings. The first that I exhibited haunted me after I got it back. I slept with it on my bedroom wall, and finally, after I married (I did marry) after I had not seen Henri for years, I took it down. Still it mocked me. I had painted the artist because I could not paint art.

I found myself in the middle of the night alone with the canvas. A putty knife can inflict damage. When I awoke the next morning, the canvas was gone. But Collioure shall always . . .

Love is art; art is love. It is enough.

He paints my eyes as irresistible twin tigers. My painted hair echoes them, though the eyes have enough shadows surrounding them to belong to themselves. He sees my eyes in everything—my hair, my dress. I know even more, then, how much he . . . sometimes, at night, when I take it out to look at it, I am amazed that no one can see this blue diaphanous sky of love, and I don't know how it fits inside me. When it gets loose inside of me, it twists like a banner in the wind, and I am high as it expands within me, but then I remember and it deflates and I try to repack it, but he has taught me to unpack it and so my rebellious heart refuses to receive it.

In the painting, I hold my hands, as if the right is a wounded bird. He knows I love him, and that it is a burden. I need not have told him; he already knew. I wish I hadn't told him; he already knew. My art depends upon our connection, and I cannot imagine what my life will be like when . . .

He tells me after I finish my second painting of him. "I am sorry," he repeats often, shaking his head. "She says you must go."

"What do you say?" As if that will matter.

When I see *The Music Lesson*, I will agree with those who say the painting in the background is of me. I will know that I still inform his work, and I will take a secret pleasure in knowing I will always inform his work, as he will mine. My surviving portrait of him will be the only known one of him by anyone, which will mean my work is only important because of him. The rest of my work will be scattered, hard to gather. Right now, I don't care. When I am dead, I will. Then I will know and be known; I will realize I made art of him more so than he ever made art of me.

Later, much later, when I reveal my blood to myself, slashing my right wrist, daring to imagine I can rid myself of my love for him, only then will I know that I have always been someone more than "Olga Meerson by Henri Matisse." I will see my blood as red as his, Olga red, maybe redder. By then, it will be too late. I will wish, as I am dying, that I had asked him that one question: "Why the lines running off my body, in the painting, like ruined rain?" My last thought will be his imagined answer: "It symbolizes your uncontainable soul," and

I will know that is why he could not accept my love—because he, I, could not control it.

He will say nice things about me, when I am dead, expressing his grief and his knowledge of my love for him to colleagues, though he will never admit aloud that he loved me. He will say I killed myself because I was a Jew, because the Nazis came to power, that it had nothing to do with my lingering feelings for him. He will know he is lying.

Mary Clyde

CHARITY FALTERED

Battalions of adults had incessantly, smugly predicted to Erin and Jodi that going away to college would change everything. Erin vaguely recognized their implied criticism that who the sisters were before college needed changing. However, she also knew that with adults you had to choose what you paid attention to or you'd lose your mind and end up just like them, which was what all adults most wanted. Yet weirdly enough, going away to college had changed everything, including—impossibly—their hometown. Las Vegas seemed flatter and wider. It might be blanker? Anyway, just different and not right. Even the Ponderosa pine dotting the Desert Springs Hospital parking lot seemed bewilderingly exotic, as if the area had seceded from the Mojave Desert and been annexed by a forest. Las Vegas appeared to be wearing a disguise.

The sisters' beat-up Honda coughed to a stop in a parking space. It was bucking through its second hundred thousand miles. On its worn carpet, a prudent few cans of motor oil rolled combatively with a super tampon, amid drinking straw wrappers, heel-smudged college assignments, and reject lipstick shades.

Erin flipped down her visor. "This car sucks."

Jodi said, "Like an octopus. Let's leave the windows down. Maybe someone will steal it."

Erin left the keys in the ignition as if this were a new idea. She was the older sister by eleven months. According to an unspoken but irrefutable world order, she always drove. She had returned home with a 3.5 G.P.A., last semester's discovery of James Joyce in Introduction to Literature, and an ensuing dependency on the word epiphany. She had packed on 7.5 pounds from dorm food and Costco-size boxes of Cheez-Its. The extra weight caused friction between the sisters, as Erin goaded Jodi into mentioning the weight, after which Erin planned to scream at Jodi about her insensitivity, thereby redistributing some of the blame for the weight—if not the weight itself.

Jodi wouldn't speak about her G.P.A., but she was certainly intelligent enough not to rise to Erin's you-think-I'm-fat bait. College had provoked Jodi's acne, but she considered herself up to

its challenge, referring to the eruptions as “dermatological territorial disruptions.” (DTD) She claimed that flesh-colored Clearasil was her deputy. She dabbed some on her chin before she pulled and then pushed the glass hospital doors.

“*P-U-S-H*,” she read, slapping her forehead. “I’m starving. I’d give my right one for a taco.”

Erin said, “Look how fat I am. I can’t eat a taco. Can you believe how fat I am?”

Jodie said, “If we take the swimming class, are you going to wear your stupid nose plugs?”

“Excuse me,” Erin said. “Excuse me for not wanting to drown.”

Like a couple of Little Red Riding Hoods, the girls bore cookies for Grandma. In a basket, covered with Glad Wrap. No napkin. Grandma used to bake cookies hard with wheat germ and whole-wheat flour. The girls would eat several, gambling on the erratic pleasure of the sporadic chocolate-flavored carob chip.

Grandma was broken-hipped from an ignominious scuffle with her caregiver, occasioned by a difference of opinion about either 1) whether or not the phone was for Grandma or 2) whether or not carrot peels should be put in the garbage disposal. Even without the conflicting reports, being at college, and Las Vegas’s subsequent foreignness, the sisters had difficulty picturing the struggle, what with Grandma always wearing dresses and having, as she had termed it, the “robust physique” that she attributed to her Mormon pioneer heritage.

As they’d left the house for the hospital, their mother thrust a dusty Mormon hymnal at them. “Sing for Grandma,” she’d said, though her face was already clouding at their imminent refusal.

“We don’t know those songs.” Jodi’s tone was reasonable.

Erin said, “Do you want us to stand in a hospital and sing ‘Come, Come, Ye Saints’?”

Grandma always claimed that she had an operatic voice, but she’d be more likely to sing Barbra Streisand than church hymns—often, regrettably in the car. The bonfire of devotion to God that had motivated their ancestors to pull rickety handcarts across the plains had calmed to a harmless flicker in their mother and grandmother, who felt free to rummage through Mormon doctrine like a pile of last-season’s sweaters looking for character-building tidbits. In so doing, they discovered and embraced a fervent devotion to charitable works. “Charity never faileth,” they said, sometimes in an eerie unison. But

the girls accepted the motto, without cynicism, along with a desire for general good doing.

Ah, their hearts were in the right place—snug, intricately-veepled, flub-flubbing away behind Jodi’s B cup bra and Erin’s new DD. At school Jodi had collected twenty-five bottles of spaghetti sauce for Lebanese refugees. In later years, Erin would write her congressman about the need for mandatory immunization of school-age children. She would punctuate her letter with eight exclamation marks and one smiley face.

But that day in the Desert Springs Hospital their steps of charity faltered, though it was like a church inside—quiet and ominous—with the clatter of dinner trays replacing the pipe organ and even a priest on the elevator. Priests reminded Erin of Joyce, and she hoped for some illumination; Joyce wrote that epiphanies could be provoked by a gesture.

The priest only said excuse me as he passed them exiting the elevator.

Jodi whispered, “What if Grandma doesn’t know us?”

“She will. Mom says she’s just confused.” Erin blinked rapidly to demonstrate confusion.

A raspy voice paging the doctors was alarmingly nonchalant, as if the doctors were free to choose whether or not to respond.

“This way,” Erin said. “B-209.” She gestured to the door numbers with the cookie basket. As a child she’d imagined pain in the embodiment of the Sesame Street Count, a leering, pointy-toothed presence. Glancing into a hospital room, she felt how frightened she’d been of him and tried to recall the line from Joyce about snow falling on the living and the dead, though it seemed unlikely that remembering it would comfort her.

Jodi gripped the hymnal in both hands. She hummed something familiar. “Just a spoonful of sugar—” Jodi got dopey when nervous.

“Stop that,” Erin commanded. “We’re here.”

Grandma’s door was open, but they paused. They had to get their wits about them, as Grandma herself would have advised.

“Okay?” Erin said and Jodi nodded after a quick reapplication of Clearasil.

But when Erin held her breath and pulled back the curtain, a very old woman was perched on some kind of steel-legged chair. A generic grandma, not their grandma, even though the woman wore

Grandma's ancient, terry cloth slippers. This woman didn't have a robust physique. She could never have fought over the phone ringing. Her progenitors couldn't have walked to the next condo even if God had sent a prophet to issue the command. A hospital gown sagged on her sagging shoulders.

They stood.

She sat.

Erin glimpsed a multi-faceted, chain-reaction, timeless epiphany: Grandma was sitting on a portable toilet, and the odor was something Erin couldn't have previously imagined—maybe like childbirth pain, she thought. Maybe like a child's death. In fact, Grandma's stink would later flit through Erin's mind when her teenage son quit rehab, even though her nose would be too clogged with grief to smell at all.

"There are events, situations, and even odors that the mind, any mind can't fathom!" she would write the following January in Philosophy 112. "Those events will float like a cork on water. They will be unsinkable." The professor would type in red in the margin, "I don't understand your metaphor here."

And the other thing was, she thought as she stood engulfed by it, Grandma's smell was old. Not just old people old. Erin guessed it was linked to the beginning of the end of everything, a secret stench that adults had been too uncomfortable to mention to the sisters. But they'd discovered it on their own. Like sex.

Jodi gagged, and that seemed to catch Grandma's attention.

Grandma groaned. "Help me! Someone. Please."

Erin lowered the cookie basket. With her toe, Jodi nudged the basket in Grandma's direction. They backed out of the room, gently shut its steel door, and grabbed each other's hands. Then they ran as they'd run that time when they saw Dracula fly into a tree on Halloween, faster than Erin's daughter would ever run the 200 meter. They paused only to open and close every door they passed through. Skipped the elevator. Stairs, two at a time. A nurse in the lobby yelled, "Don't run!" By the entrance, a boy in a wheelchair applauded. Jodi tossed him the hymnal.

Down the sidewalk. The Honda. Sweet mercy. They'd lock it next time. Squatting behind it, peeking out like bandits, they panted. They rested their heads against the panel Jodi had dented on a fire hydrant when Erin was at the library. They waited, waited it out like a bad haircut, like a bad date, like dermatological territorial disputations.

Then without checking the Honda's oil, they drove toward home.

On Flamingo Road, Jodi finally spoke. "Hey, didn't there used to be a Winchell's Donuts there?"

Erin said, "How would I know?"

"Sorry," Jodi said. "*S-O-R-R-Y!*"

But Erin began to cry. Loudly, wetly, not just for attention. She pulled the Honda to the edge of the road and spoke the phrase that she would repeat when her Nissan sputtered to a stop on a California Delta drawbridge, when her toddler wandered away on a Washington D.C. metro platform, and when her husband slumped to a heart attack in their Nevada garden as he shoveled compost for her early girl tomatoes. As she would say seventy-nine times before her death sixty-two years in the future, Erin whimpered, "Help me! Someone. Please."

Erin Reid

THE RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE

When someone dies, you're supposed to write about them pretty. Those others are different than me—those writers who wrote their confessions in language coded to obscure. They had understanding folk, or the kind that didn't know what they were seeing. They were better at obfuscating. They did not betray.

If you confess your sins, He is faithful and just to forgive.

I betrayed. That is my confession. I am a deserter.

I don't stay because when I do the world falls apart anyway. When it happens enough, you get to where you trust it. It's reliable.

I never stay with people who love me. Lorna. My father. Julie Moore. That woman with the kids. I don't love well. It is ugly on me. I become a transformed, hideous creature of endless craving. My pit mouth sucking up the rest of me, whatever has been good before, eaten, and I stalk to my hole. No, it's better not to gobble, but rather to sip and then walk away, head high.

Do you think me a disloyal child? A philanderer? A breaker of hearts? A devastation artist? An asshole?

No, I do not even go so far. I just wait. And sometimes I wink. And sometimes they wink back, and I feel it in my heart's cavity. My breathing becomes true, and I see. And then I leave. Come near me, and I'll leave you too.

You want to know what's behind these words. You think me strange, bravado of unfeeling. Did you know that you can die from a bruise inside? Did you know that you can slowly drain it all away, whatever was vital and good in yourself?

I looked in the mirror this morning and for the first time I saw myself as I truly am. As a vision of John the Revelator whose eyes burned with the seraphim. I was made of metal, and I rang hollow. I had returned to the subterranean earth where the ore is, except, I'd been fashioned as a human. I spoke, and my words echoed with a clanging. And I knew myself. Dorothy saved her man of tin. When she comes along for me, I won't look her in the eye.

When I get out of my place, things fall apart. Better to do what I'm good at. Better to leave.

*

These are lies. I want to admit this to you. I want you to trust me. The truth: I know that not staying is a way of staying, staying the way I was when they loved me best. Before it falls apart, and their new picture is pathetic, pitiable, ugly.

I am in waiting. I move slowly. Can you evolve in a way where the change is so gradual it appears not to even happen? It takes millennia. Most people don't wait around that long. (Would I?) If I loved you, I would move toward you so slowly, you'd never know it was happening, or you might guess and love me back. You might say, "I love you." And slump when I do not return the words. But I would have loved you—I just would not have evolved yet into a linguistic species. I would not have said it because it was so strong in me, and you'd go away, and I'd still be growing toward you, invisibly.

I looked in the mirror this morning, and next to me I saw the silver image of Christ. His holographic eyes closed under a shiny crown of thorns. I shifted my feet and watched the eyes open with a gray sadness. There was no life in them. And I moved again so they would close.

Prone to wander. Prone to leave the ones I love. You can already tell that I tell a long story. I've been told often I digress. I've tried to learn conciseness, directness—the twin skills of the articulate tongue. But you'll wait, won't you? Through the whole thing? See, I've already even told you what to look for. See if you can see it.

The first time I told her I loved her, I couldn't even say it—and Lorna couldn't either. We could say, and did, "It's hard to say I love you." And the indirect admission led us, without words, to devise a sign for each other, and it just happened, and we knew what it meant. We touched each other's eyes. We faced each other, stared at each other's noses, and held out our hands.

We were sweet, her and I, fighting like grown-ups, or naïve children (it seems), against the first war. Oh, no, not the first. It is the same that continues now. On our bus with the others dressed in buttons and peace signs from Mississippi to D.C., singing all the way. *Gonna lay down my sword and shield.* Me singing. *Gonna lay down my long white robe.* Her smiling, amused. I had found friends who knew my repertoire. My father's songs. *Gonna lay down my burden.* *Gonna take up my starry crown.* It seems another life—we did this

before the war started—when it was just Afghanistan that they spoke about in the news.

Mama Jane said, “We’re going to stop it, y’all.” We believed her gray hair, her bright eyes, blue with conviction. Mama Jane was there back in the day with her braids. She could’ve known my father then. He was a hippie for Jesus, and they were both against the war. “We’re going to stop it before they take my Danny,” she said. Her grandson who had been called up for service, right at the beginning, was going to Biloxi for the training. He made it out, by the way. But not as the same boy. After, he met his girl and married her. So simple, so easy. And moved back to his fishing life, his hunting life, his road-paving life, a sweet boy-man, sweet back from the war, except for the poisoning.

“Did you know that something happens to them and they cannot seed babies?” Mama Jane said. Tears. “Well, they can, but they aren’t born whole or right. And you give it to the mother too. No, they don’t know what it is, but it’s a poison. Uranium. Depleted. Does that sound right? The doctor said they have to wait years, see what happens. Did you know that fine boy and his country wife can’t wait to make a baby? Did you know they have to wait till they know if it’s safe? Poisoned in his seed. The sins of the fathers. But he is loyal—to her—to the country. I never heard him complain, wish he hadn’t gone. Wants to go back when he hears how it still is.”

They make it easy for you to get married if you’re a boy soldier and if you have a girl bride. But they can’t make you not sick.

They don’t make it easy if you’re a girl soldier and if you have a girl bride. My Lorna had been there too, in the first war. They found out about her, some of those sweet boys from the South, in her own unit, and they did her, all of them. Took turns. And spat. “Think what you need’s a dick! You ever had one, She-Ra?” They laughed at that name. It stuck. In mess, “Hey, She-Ra!” he held his fork in the air vertical, brought it down, bottom of it sitting on the bench, a crisp metal tree. “Come sit over here.” Laughter. Get it? Get it?

“I have the power!” He shouted it, called it like He-Man. Raised his metal fork. Flexed his little, stringy muscles and probably saw them swell, vein bursting. Did you know that She-Ra never got to say, “I have the power”? She got to acknowledge the power was there, but she never got to claim it for herself. She was blond and barely clothed. She wore a tiara. She awesomely defeated Grayskull’s forces of evil,

but she didn't get to claim it in her cartoon hands.

I saw a girl once who claimed it.

I remember, I was at that Bible school in Tennessee when I was still on the inside, when I didn't know any better. I was a real believer, you know. But this is about Julie Moore, when she opened her drawing book in the cafeteria.

"Marla, come over here," she called across orange-topped tables to me. "Come look at this. What do you think of this?"

I made my way there. I had to squeeze between chairs, students reclined, not making way. I looked. There were two other girls. The drawing was light and delicately done, a fork clutching a fried egg, sagging, nipple for a yolk. An amputated breast, caught. "Oh," I said. It made me shiver. "Oh. Like women are like food you could devour, devoured by men, and displayed. It's about violence, right? And beauty too, I think. No, no, just the parts. You just have to have the parts."

Julie Moore smiling at me with those eyes that were so smart and so bold. You know, she used to go flashing with the girl from the islands, in little trench coats, on the curve of road that entered the open highway. She never got caught.

Here was a girl who flashed and then drew this. It was incomprehensible, wonderful. I loved her after that. I think she saw it in my eyes after I talked about her drawing. Saw her nod at the others, who were looking shocked. Not about my love—they couldn't see that. But that I'd said, unrehearsed or clued, exactly, nearly to the word, what Julie herself had just told them of her work: "Women are cut into parts and consumed by men." Julie said, "See? See?"

And they looked at me, the Jesus girl. I was the Jesus girl at the Bible school. I was that deep in it. They looked mystified.

Julie said, "They said it didn't mean anything, in my class. They said it was just a boob on a fork and I was trying to be shocking."

They *would* see her as a shock artist, a girl who flashes.

I just thought, *Here is an artist! Marla, here is a real artist! And one your age, just older than you. And she called you over. Thought you'd get it.*

It wasn't just smartness I felt. I'll tell you that right now. That would be too simple, too generic, a boob on a fork. It was—where's the word?—glory. A vision. I could see. Do you get the miracle? I had been blind but now I see! Had I always seen? I wanted to be alone

then, go to my room, lay there and re-see everything I'd ever seen, done. See what I saw. What it was then. What it is now. My father's golden eye. My father's golden tongue. *Walk ye in the light, even as I am in the light. Little children, love not the things of the world. Little children, do not be blinded by the wicked one.*

Julie Moore called me "Marley" after that, like Bob Marley. "Marla's such a good-sweetie-sweetie name," she said. She didn't think I was a good-sweetie-sweet Jesus girl.

When she passed me in the hall of the heritage house, she whispered, "Hey, Marley-mon. No woman no cry. Everyting gonna be all right now." Her bad attempt at an accent made me laugh. She'd known I needed to. She'd seen—my face then—how I had been looking at those black-and-whites on the wall of all the farmer boys who'd gone there before and the girls in their starchy white junior nurse uniforms. Something about their faces made me sad. They were skinny-chubby, all of them, slim with fleshy cheeks. I could see almost a pink flush through the gray. Their eyes were wide open and serious—as long as they had to stand there waiting for the camera box to capture them. I stood there waiting with them, wanting to cry. And that's when Julie Moore came. "No woman no cry. Everyting gonna be alright. Now." It seemed so bold for a small white girl to speak in this language. And she'd seen. I smiled at her. Did I look grateful? She smiled back. She kept going. I stayed there in the hall looking and seeing again.

Do you want to hear the time I told Julie Moore that I loved her? I did. If she could be so bold, so could I.

Another chance meeting. On the stairs in the library lower level. But I'd been looking for her. "Marley-mon," she said. "What's wrong?"

And then my confession of love. I said—three words—"I am dead." She just looked at me. She squeezed my arm and went on up the stairs. I think it scared her, not because it was something dark, or unexpected. She would've loved that part of it. She thought everything different was good. She, just, she didn't know what I meant. She didn't see the meaning. I didn't blame her. It was a bizarre confession of love.

When I see it again—now—I see, maybe she did know what I meant, and she just couldn't go there.

She loved this mean boy, you see. Casper. Pretty and pale, but

not really friendly. He wasn't nice to her, and she wouldn't sleep with him, but she loved him. She told me that. She sang, "I'm all alone when I lower my lamp. That's why the lady is a tramp." She went to bed alone. She was traditional in that way. She was waiting. She was loyal. She squeezed my arm. She walked away.

That was the first time I spoke love out loud. What felt like the romantic sort of love, that makes you crazy. I spoke love out loud, and she walked away. Do you see how ridiculous? Am I making my case?

Another time a grown woman told me she loved me. Oh, it was spontaneous, a surprise, in the middle of a play war with her sons. We built forts and defended them with mud balls and garden hoses. Tucked behind our wall, she looked at me and said, "I just love you." I thought, felt, *I am dead, I am dead, I am dead, I am dead.*

I said, "Likewise."

She turned away. I never saw her face. Did it fall? Did it smile? I just know she never said it again, and I never got the chance to say, "TOO! I love you too!" But I heard her say it to her husband a lot. Jim. "Love you, babe," she said it so easily. And to her friends. I guessed what she said to me was the same. She just loved and loved everybody. I am dead. I am dead. I am dead.

The thing about being dead when you're really alive is that a part of you knows you're just playing dead. And you could play a different game. But that's a small part, and most feels like shame at your own cowardice, and the rest of you really thinks you're dead, and you'd better just get used to it.

The thing about having a body and not using it for love is that there are still parts of you that know they are a body, they are skin. They like to be touched, smelled even. Seen. But these parts are not to be trusted. When they aren't longing loudly in their selfish way, they're mostly quiet, and they sound like a hum of despair, like the suck and drone of a vacuum cleaner on a dirt pile. You forget it's there. And it does not end. Can you hear it? It mostly sounds like shame. You could do better. But the rest of your body is massive—a mountain of death. A blanket of snow cover. When did it fall? And your mountain-body gets used to its hibernation. Or maybe its death. What do you believe about the state of the dead?

The hands are persistent. It's in the hands. What parts did you think I meant before? The crudeness of the organs themselves? Or their openings? Maybe. But not them first, not them most.

The hands, in their palms, are the largest vacuum. The hands are relentless in their craving to hold. What is it they want?

In Tennessee, my hands first started their thirsting. I had this pain in them. I pressed into them. It only made it more intense. They felt hollow. Empty. How can hands feel empty? They are born that way, aren't they? I could see, if they were born holding tiny globes, or other hands, or themselves, and you took that away, yes, they'd feel robbed. Still, I wanted to fill them. And they felt for the right fit, hugged the tops of fence posts and door knobs, a figurine of Bambi, a bouncy ball. Did they ever find their fit? Maybe. But I'd never be able to explain it.

It was invisible. No object, not even other hands. Something more like fluid in the air—an amniotic fluid?—a moment the air became thick all around, and my hands drank it as water and cried, "Finally!" It was on a hike. There had been fog. There was a cliff. I held my hands over the edge. And there! The thickness, the drinking!

I always wondered if hands could do this for each other. I've always suspected it would be marvelous to hold a hand like a cliff. Feel the bigness of space thicken and pass through you both. Is it? Can I ask you that question? Now that we are friends, and you're in the middle, and I've told you some things. Can you tell me? Is it? Did you ever hold hands that way? Did I make it up? A fantasy in the absence? "How do we know there is a God?" my theologian father asked. "Because we long for Him." Is awareness of absence a proof? Proof of the possibility of presence?

Let me tell you about my father. But first let me say—about the absence—that's where you have to look. My art teacher said: "If you want to draw something true, don't look at it. Look at the space around it." My father. John. My father who knew everything about the Apostle John. John the Beloved. Did you know that when you know everything about the Apostle John, they call you a Johannine scholar? Did I tell you that my father was a theologian? Self-trained. One semester of seminary. A lay leader. Did I tell you that he knew everything about John? Did you know that John never wrote of romantic love? Did you know that John never got married? Did you know he loved Jesus? Did you know that my father died six years ago? Did you know he died yesterday? Did you know that if he read this he would die again? Have you ever crucified your own father? Did you know that blood on your hands—thick though it is—does not

fill an absence? Did you know—before you left—that you’d rather have him alive? Did you know whether you’d be alive if he were still living? Did you know that death is just a sleep? Did you know that people die and are resurrected all the time? Did you know this is a lie? Did you know that we can kill and raise ourselves, and we just mostly don’t? Did you know that it’s easier for us to slaughter than to heal? Did you know that some poisons are slow, and they kill the part of you that longs to reproduce? Did you know that some people die because you never spoke them into existence?

Do you believe in the resurrection? I do. I believe in the resurrection and the life. It is what sustains, you know, under those words—the melodrama of them. The clanging. *I am dead. I don’t have a body. People don’t see. People don’t wait. People don’t look. People don’t believe.*

Let me tell you about the time that Julie Moore came back from the dead. Did you know she died after I told her I was dead? I had her funeral and everything. I wore a black armband under my long-sleeved shirt, a suitable mourning period. Was it seven years? Twelve? A biblical number. Did you know I mourned her twelve years, and then she came back? She showed up in Mississippi. Can you believe it? Mississippi goddamn! She showed up and she straight-way kissed me, and she said, “Marley, you normal.”

Do you believe in the resurrection? Do you believe in miracles? I do. She came back. She said I was normal. That night I lay in bed next to her—my bed—seeing everything again. I saw it all again. And I rested my hand on her small belly. And, do you mind if I tell you, she died again the next day. In the morning with sunshine in her marvelous eyes, she said, “I love you!”

I said, I said, I said, I said, “The feeling is mutual.”

If you were there, would you have noticed the veil that covered her then? Would you have blamed her? She didn’t know to wait. She didn’t know to wait. Not evolved into words. An evolutionary leap, it would take. An immediate and transgressive origin of a species through natural selection. And I always was weak. Weak lips, and a weak tongue, a weak throat and weak lungs. I’ve always been a straggler in the herd of love. (Oh, did I just write that? Oh, that was a new pathetic, an achievement in it!) Well, you know, if you’re the straggler—just to beat this into the ground—if you’re the straggler and you have a weak voice, well, you just fucking can’t fucking tell

them to fucking slow down! Did you know that I loved her? Did I tell you that my father had a crooked ear that could hear into the souls of words? Did I tell you he had a fine slanted mouth that spoke them as well? Did you know that the only words he never understood were the ones that killed him? And the ones most important for me to say?

When my dad was fifty-five he got the Bell's palsy, and half his face fell. Half a fine beard sunk below his jaw, one eye, one side of his mouth. His fine slanted mouth now exaggerated. His black beard turned white, still thick. He had been a pretty man. He had a drop of gold put in his eye. In the lid, so it would hang down right. And he left it in there after his face came back to itself. A golden eye, he had one. If I had it I would close my eyes and face the sun to see what gold looked like that close, maybe just a speck of shadow surrounded by red light and spidery blue clouds. It seemed like a hardship for a pretty man to have his beauty fallen. Like God had touched him where it would hurt or help most. I always wondered at his fineness, my father, and his gently meticulous hands that could fix anything. He had long fingers, hard from his work, not the hands of a scholar, but they moved gracefully. I want to use the right word to describe them. Royal. Articulate. Cultured. Elegant. My father's hands moved with elegance whether turning a page, or sanding down a baby cradle he made for my dolls. He could weave and braid macramé. He fashioned a hanging holder for me, with a ceramic bowl for a plant, with tiny ceramic angels on each of the four strands to watch over my bed and me as I slept. He cross-stitched cardinals, red in a snowy nest. He built the house we lived in all those years. He designed it and built it. He took apart the underside of his truck and added an extra tank so he could drive twice as far without stopping for gas. He invented a way to fill both tanks from one side of the truck, a branching pipe, convenient. He could drive for a thousand miles without rest. He never got a ticket.

I rode with him once in his truck up through the Texas desert. Where were we going? It was after midnight. We'd been driving straight on a desert road for hours. I'd gone to sleep, but woke when the truck stopped and its rumble quieted. Dad said, "Get out. I want to show you something." He had pulled off the highway some ways. He switched off the lights. It was purely dark and silent. We felt our way around opposite sides of the truck till we met. "Look up," he said. I

could hear the smile in his way of speaking, even though I couldn't see his face well. The stars! Such an inadequate description, stars. Billows and waves of them, a brilliance like a celestial city skyline. There must be worlds and galaxies and universes of urban angels who inhabited the invisible buildings of the night sky. I seemed to see their shapes moving in spirals around their streets. I imagined them in their midnight parks jumping from bench to bench with their angel dogs and their lovers. Did they know of me standing in a barren empty land staring at their city? Did I look like a great emptiness?

What I loved about my dad at that moment was that he didn't say anything. If he'd said, "Isn't it beautiful?" it would not have been enough. Even if he let out a gasping sigh of air, it wouldn't be enough. We held our breath together. We wanted to be silent; we couldn't help it. We were silenced, our vocal chords dissolved by the stillness. Gradually, I felt the ground beneath my feet, gravel. I rolled my shoes over it. We got back in the truck and drove on.

My dad made me a mystic then. I knew then the source of his words, and his journeying into scripture, the unrelenting usefulness of his hands, his purposeful hands. He couldn't get up there, but he could bring it down into his body and shine it out his eyes and move it around his fingers and speak it. Most people didn't see this about him. They thought him brilliant. "What a brilliant man!" And, yes, he wore that well, with the appropriate arrogance. But I'd felt him out there in the desert tiny and humbled before creation, and I knew it was there underneath everything that was his easy masculinity and inborn confidence. It's what could make me fall in love with him over and over. Awe. Awe gave him deep purpose. His morning orange juice had a golden thread that reached to the heavens, his choice of finely woolen suit, his meticulous bibliography. All infused with deep purpose. I was so jealous of him, and still am. My mystical awakenings have always been followed by sinking, saddening emptiness. A heavy floating, like an iron tanker adrift with no cargo, no passengers, no destination. The work of my life: to figure out how to make purpose come through my fingertips and into my eyes, to make me that alive.

When I killed my dad, I knew I was doing it. It was premeditated. I hoped, I hoped he could withstand the blow. I left. I walked out of his world. "I want to be authentic," I said. "I don't believe," I said. "I need to love who I love," I said. "I need to be myself," I said. "Who is *yourself*?" He asked. "Who is any of our selves?" And like that I was

disappeared. And he was right. But I still left.

You know, he'd worked up a life for me in Bible work. I was going to be a minister. A woman minister. I was going to do the progressive work of God in the city. But the city wooed me. Did the city do it? Was it Lorna? I was wooed away.

Now, my bravado of self-proclamation: authenticity. It seems like an illusion. I am just the same as I always was, connected as I always was, to him. Belief. Why did the words of belief matter so much? That I couldn't say "I accept Jesus as my personal Lord and Savior." Or believe the communion acted as his body and blood. Or see him coming through clouds of glory. But I could feel the divinity of the universe whisk around my ankles, and I could see it in my dad. And couldn't that have been enough? Now that I could go back to him, be there without the itching of rebellion, it is too late.

I must think that a person with his brilliance and truth could have let me come back from the dead.

I told him, "I love someone. A girl." I told him, but I never told her. And I don't know if I loved her. Lorna died, too, you know. And when she died, Julie Moore came back. And then Julie died. And when Julie died, Dad came back. And then he died.

I believe in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting. I believe in one God, holy, indivisible in three persons: Father, Daughter, and Holy Ghost. I believe the children are the future. Give them hope and let them lead the way.

I am an irreverent. Whitney Houston does as much for me as the Apostles' Creed.

But I have one more story to tell.

My father called me last week and asked me for grammatical advice. "Marla, what do you get when you cross a noun and a verb?" This was his joke.

"I don't know, Dad." But I smiled.

"A gerund," he said. "You know, a gerund?"

I did. The strange hybrid of the English language where the parts of speech blend and merge and act like each other. The seeing is the doing. The doing is the being. The being is. Fumbling toward my father in conversation was like being kissed by the queen of the angels' night city.

My father died yesterday. He didn't tell me he was sick. He just talked grammar. And grandmother called to tell me. And, I'm

the writer, they say. Not that I've published anything. I'm the writer, would I write something about my father? Yes. I wrote this.

Not that I'll really show it to them. The rest of the family. Oh, it would be a betrayal. I know that. I didn't even mention any of them. But I said enough.

I'll write something that starts, "I am the resurrection and the life." I'll write it that way, and maybe it will be true.

Billy Thompson

SIX EGGS IN EACH HAND

“Take a second,” your third-grade teacher used to say, “and think about it.”

Your class was diagramming sentences, and you always got tripped up by the ‘you understood’ rule, where the subject of the sentence isn’t stated but is understood to be the second person pronoun, you; it occurs in commands, like the sentence you were trying to diagram at the chalkboard: *Pick a flower for your mother.* To help you and your classmates remember, your teacher, Ms. Williams, prompted you to “take a second,” itself being a sentence whose subject was you understood, “and think about it.” Who is she telling to take a second, and to think about it? You. It always got you back on track, and after she said it you wrote, before the line between subject and predicate, you in parentheses.

Only later, after high school, did you see on another level how great a learning tool that prompt from Ms. Williams was, that it not only had ‘you understood’ as its own subject, but it also offered a second reminder, by the very word second, that you were dealing with a second person subject. Ms. Williams was why you went on to major in English in college and why you then became an English teacher yourself. You were so young when you were in her class and so you couldn’t yet feel the depth of gratitude you would eventually come to feel for the knowledge she was giving you, knowledge that would set the foundation for the life you would come to want for yourself. Ms. Williams gave you literacy, words that opened up not only the world but parts of yourself that you might never have known without language as your key. Take a second, and think about it: it became your mantra, words to live by, words that showed how fun and layered and substantial mere words could be.

As you got older, you realized that words were often afterthoughts in your house, where you and your sister Tess grew up with your mom and your dad. You didn’t discuss things at home, not with any nuance. Your dad said little after work. Your family said little around the dinner table. The TV was always on. Which is too bad really, because now you know your mom especially had a whole personality

you didn't know about. Now you realize your mom is what people call earthy. For instance, she uses every swear word in the book (she never said anything of the kind when you girls were younger), and she is wont to repeat, with a hearty laugh, any dirty joke she hears. She's like your students in that regard, especially the boys, who are fascinated by every euphemism for your genitalia and theirs. It is your challenge to break them of that, to expand their vocabularies, to give them better words to use. It's kind of funny to think of your mom that way, though.

You remember your dad calling your mom Ms. Malaprop when you were a kid. You didn't know what it meant, but he laughed when he said it, and your mom did too, and it seemed a great thing to be, a Ms. Malaprop. You wanted to be that yourself until you asked Ms. Williams what it meant, and she laughed, not quite like your father did, and explained to you that a malapropism is a confusion of words. You no longer thought it was such a neat thing to be. You didn't tell Ms. Williams why you wanted to know. You didn't want her to know that about your mom.

Your mom always gave good advice. When you were little, she taught you that when you see something becoming a problem, to "nip it in the butt." Fix it before it becomes a bigger problem. She used to pinch your own little butt when she said it, and you hopped away, giggling, understanding the message to be to get moving.

She didn't let you feel sorry for yourself. Happiness is a choice, she believed. When you were seventeen and your first boyfriend broke up with you, she rubbed your back and said she knew it hurt, and she let you cry for a few days. But, after a few days, she said, "You can sit here and be sad the rest of your life or you can go out and have fun and maybe meet another great guy. Either way Chuck is gone. As far as Chuck cares, it's six eggs in each hand." It was what you needed to hear, was what finally helped you realize that if Chuck didn't care, then you shouldn't either.

You didn't know these were malapropisms.

When you got to college, English Literature opened up worlds to you, past worlds and future worlds. It helped you understand the world as it is. Your professors knew so much, and so many of the other kids did, too. They thought so deeply. Spoke so eloquently. They used clichés properly. Although oftentimes they spoke only half of the famous phrase, sparing any wasted breath on words the rest of

the class surely already knew. For a week you tried to make sense of “A rose by any other name . . . ,” until you finally came across the second half of the Shakespearean phrase. When your classmates used these sayings, they did so with what seemed a little wink, making sure the professor, and the rest of the class, understood that the speaker himself or herself understood it was a cliché. Cliché, the word itself, was used in class pejoratively. As if they were all worn, beaten. But, they were new to you. And they were brilliant, some of them. It’s an ill wind that doesn’t blow somebody good. Don’t be penny wise and pound foolish. They got to the heart of matters, had staying power for a reason. You wanted to know them all, to own them, and be able to use them, in halves, and eventually with a wink.

You blamed your insecurity on your mom. How many times had you gotten over a hump of indecision by finally telling yourself in the end it was really just six eggs in each hand? A kid in class one day, while discussing the use of irony in postmodernism, said it eventually belittled sincerity and meaning and left every decision to feel like a “six in one hand, half dozen in the other” situation. From dozen, your mom got eggs in her head, put eggs in yours, and now you had to be so careful not to slip and say “six eggs in each hand” out loud.

You developed a habit of telling stories about yourself using the second person pronoun as your subject. You didn’t realize you did this, speak of yourself in the second person, until you were telling a boyfriend a story in your apartment about a time you heard two college-aged kids talking about meta-fiction at the park and you said, “You sit there listening to them ramble on, you know, and you’re thinking, they think they know everything, yet really they don’t know *anything*,” and your boyfriend interrupted you and said, “No, *you’re* thinking that.”

You like being an English teacher. You like knowing the things you do, words and phrases, clichés at the ready. You like having consumed books, classics and otherwise, and the more you’ve read the less you’ve felt like an imposter in your own life. And that is what you’ve felt like occasionally, like you are fraudulently posing as someone who knows what you don’t, as someone who has all the words you need already in your head, as someone whose mother didn’t tell you to nip your problems in the butt. More and more, though, the words in the books you read have started to feel like your own. The more you read the more the words seem to match the words in your

head, to the point they start to even feel like they've come from your head, or at least like they are yours to give. And that's what you do as an English teacher, give the gift of these words, all these beautiful ways to see yourself and the world—yourself in the world—clearer. You want your students to have a confidence you didn't have and access to a deeper understanding, and appreciation, of the world and its ways. Of human nature. Of art and why it matters. Of meaning.

Because it all seems pointless without that, doesn't it? You feel sorry for those who don't have that access, who don't see the point of art, who don't wonder what it all means, who aren't thusly engaged. You want to save your students from such a life. Although you know such a life has its own pains. In fact, maybe when all your problems can be nipped in the butt, you've got it good. Those people don't feel the pain like you do, you who sometimes can't seem to get to the core of your issues, can't find the reason why any of this matters. And it hurts. But, the payoff, when it comes, is worth it. The great books and the right words and the 'aha' moments of your students counterweigh the pain, feel so good, and engage you in your life.

Your sister is four years older than you, but not nearly as engaged. She is happy in her own way, though: engaged. She's getting married and that's all she needs to be happy. That's all she's wanted for as long as you can remember. Tess' fiancé is a lawyer from the city, and you can't help but envy him, not so much for his way with words, but for his allotment of them. Words, as you know, are a means to belonging to the world. And he not only belongs to it, he frames it, says, with authority, what is right and what is wrong with it. And people listen.

The first time Tess brought him, as her boyfriend then, to meet your parents, it was to a cookout at a leafy park in your hometown. He was nice, if reserved. He seemed to smile easily. Your mom engaged him, wanted him to feel comfortable with the family.

"I guess growing up in the city, you couldn't see the forest or the trees," your mother said to him. "I never knew what that saying meant, but I always wanted to use it. Did I use it right?"

Your breath caught when she said it. You've felt protective of your mother as you have gotten older and have accumulated your language, because your mom doesn't have a lot of words and because you know, better than others could know, how great she is, how much knowledge she has that can't be spoken but can only be understood and shared with a hug, a smile, a casserole, with time with her. You wondered to

yourself in silent horror why she didn't ask you first if that was the correct saying. Your sister's boyfriend smiled and shrugged and said, "Umm, you could use it that way. I know what you mean." You hated him for getting to be so gracious in that condescending way. And you just knew it was condescending, you could see it in his eyes. You wanted to tell him that you weren't impressed with his education and occupation, that you knew that lawyers just beat the beauty out of any prose anyway with their anal exactness. You wanted to say that but you knew you couldn't; you knew it said more about you than him that you even wanted to.

Your sister has asked you to be her maid of honor, and you are, truly, honored. You will give a toast. You will speak to the 200 or so invited guests, on behalf of the bride. In your mind, though, you know you are really speaking to his family on behalf of your own. You are representing them, they who produced an English teacher, a word person, and you will use as many as you can in a reasonable amount of time to make your family proud. You will tell stories and teach lessons; you will be impressive.

You practice the opening paragraph on your mom the night before the wedding. In it are two four-syllable words and a quote from a poem. Your mom just smiles where there was supposed to be a laugh. There are words she is not speaking as she looks at you, and you wonder if she is withholding or actually can't find the words for what she is feeling. You know that has to be hard and is what you've always worked so hard to avoid, to overcome, not being able to access the words that express your feelings. Such an inability makes you feel like a person with no shadow. Socrates told you, via a classmate in college, that the unexamined life is not worth living. Said classmate actually just said, "As you know, the unexamined life . . .," with raised eyebrows, and you nodded along knowingly then looked up the complete phrase. And you liked it; it made sense and became another mantra. You thought about your mom and others like her, your sister for one, and wondered what it must be like to not be able to examine your life, to not be able to dwell sometimes in the shadows, to not even be aware of them. Our linguistic capability separates us from animals, and it's become how we evolve, really, as a culture. To not be cultured, as you see it, is to be left behind. To be less alive. Our linguistic capability creates our shadows, our dark sides, the parts we try to hide. And hide from. It makes us, and this life, interesting. You think.

“Honey,” your mom says after you’ve read the first paragraph of your toast for the wedding reception, “don’t steal your sister’s parade.”

Another malapropism. You want to tell her it’s steal her thunder or rain on her parade, but how can you? Storms factor into each of these clichés, which must be how she confused them in her head, but she somehow took the storms out altogether and told you not to steal your sister’s parade, which makes no sense. How does her mind work like that? How does she not even know what she doesn’t know?

Yet still, what she says hits you hard. You know what she means, but that’s not what you are trying to do at all. Is it? In the opening paragraph alone you speak of atavism and fatalism and Alexander Pope. It makes sense, introduces the story you want to tell about your sister and about Love, the enduring kind. You tell your mother this, and she nods, but you can tell it’s really just a vertical shake. You are wrong, she is telling you; your story is wrong.

You are smart, she tells you. Very. You can’t help but smile. Who can at a compliment from your mother? But your intelligence, she continues, is something for you to have and to use for your journey through this life. It is not for you to hold over the rest of us. You are special, she tells you, and again you smile, but not special because you’re smart, just special because you’re you. Your sister is special, too, and this is her special day, and the smartest thing you can do is let her have it all to herself. Let her choose to share it, and she will. Don’t try to take it, your mom tells you.

There are layers upon layers of meaning in all that, you know, even though all the words are simple and unquoted. Your professors and your classmates never told you about toasting your sister at her wedding. Your mom, Ms. Malaprop, had to teach you that. About clear-eyed understanding of yourself and where you come from.

You see then that knowledge isn’t something you own, but really just something you rent. For your short time here, in the body you’re given to traverse the earth with, whatever your genitalia (and whatever you call it). It’s just words. Your feelings, though, are something else, come from somewhere else, the same place that family comes from. They aren’t conjured, aren’t right or wrong—they just are. We can control how we react to our feelings, and our family, and how we react is closely tied to what we know. But, in the end, what we know is just another thing we can’t take with us. In the end, it shares the

same space as what we don't know. It is, in the end, like the saying goes, just six eggs... So your charge in this life is just to get by, to be happy, whatever that means to you. And to be good to your family and the people around you. Because they're you. Take a second, and think about it. We're all you. It's something you have to understand if your goal, in the end, is to have even a little bit of you understood.

Kirstin Allio

ANNOUNCEMENTS

The idea for a baby is an inner light. Never before has Elena sensed her spirit—as if the white mist/fire of it were—cloned? divided?

She gets a little queasy when she thinks about that speckled ovum, like a red-checked tablecloth, waiting to be laid with a picnic.

Tim says, Whoa. Elena.

The conversation drops off a cliff and they can hear its tiny ring-ping-ping when it hits the metal bottom. What kind of cliff is like a sink, stainless steel?

But she can't help herself. Since when has life offered such perfect resourcefulness? Since when has life collected all its lost buttons and suggested: two eyes, a nose, a mouth . . .

They've joked before about women friends who quit their jobs. When the babies come, their faces look like pansies and their fists like fleshy clubs. Both the babies and the mothers.

It's not that, says Tim, determined.

I'll stay home and pair socks! Make authentic pita between feedings!

She hears herself say “feedings,” and it gives her courage and a kind of musical machismo, like dancing drunk used to.

Or I'll go back to work and drop—him? her?—off at a daycare that keeps the babies in pens till they soak through their pants like a Romanian orphanage.

Rumanian, Tim corrects her.

At work she tells Sheri and Anita. They take her out to lunch and insist she order a virgin margarita. Sheri insists; it's what she wishes someone had done for her, she says, dangerously plaintive.

Anita says: In other countries, where they don't have, for instance, a certain family-values-recovering-alcoholic president, tequila does not impact the future neuro-psych test scores of your baby, Elena.

Anita, of the amazingly slender flanks, like a greyhound, has three children. Elena realizes with some shock that she has never thought of Anita as a mother until this moment. In fact, she's never thought of

women in general as mothers, and she takes a quick glance around the restaurant. It makes her woozy to imagine all of these dowdy office types in poly shells and rusky skirts—well—having the same inner light as she does.

The margarita is a slushy bowl of fruit punch. The corn chips in the basket are oily, seemingly unsalted, and Elena already feels like a cow craving a salt lick.

Anita: So, are you going to find out?

Elena says she doesn't think there's anything surprising about being surprised by the gender.

I used to think it took nine months for the baby to decide for itself, says Sheri.

Do you have names yet? Sheri is like an eager little calico. Ready to knead your leg if you let her jump in your lap. But it's not kneading—of course!—it's nursing, thinks Elena.

We're scaring her, brays Anita. Elena pushes the salad in a deep-fried shell toward the center of the table.

Then Sheri says: I had to give up my first.

All three women are silent. Sheri says: Baby.

Is this some kind of initiation? For ten years now, Sheri and Anita have been her best friends at work. Elena is suddenly furious. Why has Sheri kept her dirty secret?

Then Sheri says, genuinely embarrassed, I don't know why I just told you.

Elena doesn't think the ball should be in her court. After all, it wasn't her idea to have lunch at a Mexican restaurant.

But Anita is fluent: Was it your parents?

Sheri sort of breathes, Yes, and adds, Another lifetime. There's a flare of recognition between the two coworkers. Elena is left out of it.

Most days she takes the MBTA to its last stop: Providence. A couple of times a month, when her timing is off, she takes Amtrak. It's twice as quiet and five times as expensive.

There's the canyon of Colonial houses, the tall white point of the oldest Baptist church in America, the golden dome of the Old Stone Bank. The train station is right against the statehouse, which she used to call the Taj Mahal when she first moved here for grad school. It

strikes her that every day she makes these same tired observations.

She says: I broke the news at work. Anita and Sheri.

And? Tim says guardedly.

They approve, I guess, says Elena.

Tim's already told a few people. He hasn't told anyone that Elena had been insistent in sex, not exactly aggressive, but as if she were at some sport. Perhaps rowing. But he has said that they were sure about the due date. And he's told his brother how Elena had wanted the lights out, a first, as if she were going to be able to actually see a conceptual spark in the darkness. And then he'd been embarrassed, sensing his brother's embarrassment.

When Elena is six months pregnant she hangs a rainbow-shedding prism in the clerestory window above the bassinet of the future infant.

It's a Saturday in September and she calls her mother. Whimsically she says, What's it going to be like?

And her mother replies, If you can find the joy, it increases.

What? cries Elena, laughing incredulously. It's not the first time her mother has issued warning. Elena understands it's mitigating, almost superstitious.

But Elena's mother calls her unborn grandchild her "love-already."

Since when has Elena become ridiculously, heartbreakingly, optimistic?

Little pixels of color will twinkle over her baby's skin like non-denominational haloes.

The baby's room is on the fourth floor of a typical triple-decker on the East Side of Providence. Quadra-decker, Tim calls it, the attic converted to make a duplex apartment, a small study under the eaves for Tim, and an alcove for the baby. Elena and Tim have lived here for eight years. Unmarried; except for the last three months. Tim's colleague married them, and the Oriental rug in his living room shows up in all the "wedding" pictures. Tim and Elena trading rings, raising modest glasses of apple cider. They had walked home along the brick sidewalks, up and down over tree roots, holding hands, wondering separately at love's sudden practicality.

In the ninth month, December, Elena gives her notice. Not three weeks of paid maternity leave, but goodbye forever to the deliberate clatter of her high heels bisecting the commuter rail platform. She doesn't tell Tim for a full week afterward. Not because she's being devious, nor does she dread it, although he will be shocked and he will have to hurry up and finish his eighth year dissertation so that he can earn their keep, their quadra-decker.

No, Elena doesn't tell him out of that same superstition she saw in her mother.

When the day comes, Anita and Sheri watch her pack up her desk from a respectful distance. They make a show of being strictly professional about it. Sheri has since apologized for her outburst over lunch: For stealing your thunder, Elena. She was sixteen and she was sent to a home for wayward adolescents. Sheri lets her starched blonde hair sheath in front of her face as she—bravely? pitifully?—finishes. Elena thinks maybe Sheri hasn't told enough people this secret. It seems as if there's a threshold for secrets.

Then Sheri says: I live for that day I hear a knock, though.

And the light inside Elena gyrates like the beacon of a lighthouse.

Anita says, Is it all the propaganda about breast milk?

Elena shakes her head, mute, as she passes under the office mistletoe. It's plastic, and the berries look like tiny egg sacs.

Because you can pump, one; and two, some babies just don't take to it.

Again she says to Tim: I broke the news at work.

And? Tim says, to cover for himself, he's not sure what news she's talking about.

She waits for him to make sense of it.

He bends down and cradles her belly that is not a belly anymore it's so freakishly distended. When he stands up his face is glowing from the contact. You're not a Mayzie, Elena, he says in all seriousness.

She laughs uncertainly to hold the place where laughter could be inserted.

No nanny/elephant sitting on your nest.

Producing a kid who's half kid and half nanny, Tim pronounces.

They've always had a sense of being together because they're different from other people. But maybe it's no more than a biological trick to get them to couple, thinks Elena.

Tim is tall and fair, verging on redheaded. He bicycles to his university office. He will always harbor a little disappointment he can't wear black turtlenecks: he looks like a corpse; but he consoles himself with a real tweed jacket he bought in Scotland. People like to think he's Scottish.

Elena has been described as gorgeous. Because she's dark and dramatic, with first-class, movie star eyebrows, and as Tim said once, Eyes that talk. Her mother says: Isn't it wonderful. People are comfortable these days with ethnic.

Elena's mother would never dare call a daughter of hers gorgeous.

The linden tree in front of their triple-decker is skuzzy with pollen and the metal stair rail is sticky with sap. There are young flies all over it. Even the sky seems yellow-green.

The baby is three months old, and the baby is three hundred years old, and baby could care less about arithmetic. There is only—as in, in this world only—the bassinet in the converted attic. Because now that Elena knows the searing hypnosis of pain, the slick catapult of a full-sized dolphin shooting through her entrails, (stomach is the least of it), the kinetic energy of the bare wet worm on her blood-spattered chest, she would never leave this baby alone for an instant. Not to mention the panic she felt when they brought the baby home and the entire triple-decker—not just their apartment, but the apartment of the urology resident, and the apartment of the down-sized retirees from Maine with their vanity plates (NVR2LT)—was cast in utter darkness. So she sleeps in the gliding rocker by his bassinet, watches the linden tree outside the three-quarter-sized attic windows, reads through his naps in the same rocker with her varicose lower half propped up on the changing table.

The baby is three months old and Elena has the sense that Time itself has a three-month-old's consciousness. Time cannot, for example, roll over, and Time's blue eyes are still bleary, even flat, marked by a previous universe. She supposes Time can hear—her baby passed the hearing tests—but can't or won't pick out the words of her specific pleas, spells, sentences. It seems irrelevant to say Time is going slow,

or Time is going fast. Time, like her baby, moves spastically, with a startle reflex.

Anita visits. She takes one look around the overheated apartment: Elena. As if staying home were a still-life; and going back to work? Some kind of action adventure movie?

Just ask people to touch his feet, says Anita. Anita herself squeezes the baby's tiny white tube sock.

It takes Elena an hour to get ready to leave the apartment. Anita pretends to be very patient. Elena tries to do everything with the baby strapped to her chest. Finally Anita says, Here. Let me hold him while you brush your teeth.

Reluctantly, Elena unstraps. Anita says, We'll just walk up to the park.

Anita says, You can't let this take over your life. He's his own guy. Really. Anita snorts. Elena has never heard Anita snort. The bright yellow forsythia is overflowing the wrought iron fence, and the ground looks tender, like a new scar. The park is a box of sunlight. The baby tries to blink and squinches his eyes shut.

You're lucky you dropped the weight so quickly, says Anita.

Anita leaves from the park. She admits she has to do something with her own kids—sports event? Birthday party?—and Elena slowly gathers herself and makes her way back to her apartment.

Later, she feels prurient gazing at the pinched bud of his face, picking the yellow, beeswax scabs called, as in a fairy story, cradle cap. Even saying his name out loud seems intrusive.

Around five months, new-found energy. She can hear her mother call her spunky. She compares her baby's life to the life of a Third World orphan. Not that she has firsthand experience, but there's a general consciousness, dispatches from courtrooms and orphanages in China, Ethiopia, in the women's magazines at the OB where she'd been stationed weekly by the end to hear the baby's prenatal heartbeat. Or, she wonders, how many babies out of a nursery crop, (she thinks of the twenty or thirty infants swaddled in their shiny little basins, along with her baby, all of them lighter, wetter versions of their parents), would be abandoned to daycare from the get-go? Or witness the beating, maiming of an animal?

Her baby bunches himself around his crib like an inchworm. Now he can push up on his little arms to take a look. His eyes are clear and kind. His hair is coming in, fine and dark and surprisingly stiff, so that it looks like he has a buzz cut.

Oddly, it seems there is no time to follow the instructions to knit a “bonnet with chin strap.” It’s as if just to be a mother takes up all the time in the world.

She looks out of the fourth floor window past the State House, toward parts of the city she has never visited. Beyond the city are the purplish hills of—Massachusetts? That she doesn’t know what goes on in the square office buildings decorated each by a necklace of cars glinting and signaling in the sun seems to be an indulgence. It’s not because she worked in Boston. Where are the big gassy city buses going? Dirty seagulls fly over a yellowing park that was supposed to provide low-income kids with—an alternative.

She thinks she’ll take her son there, to that defunct park, when he is one or two and toddling beside her. An ice cream cone will once again mean what it meant when she was a kid, at the pop-down window, hopping impatiently on one foot, she will buy ice creams from the singing truck for all the low-income children.

When Alexis is six months, they go to an island for a long weekend.

Look at that, says Tim, the Bed and Breakfast has porta-cribs.

It does seem amazing. That anyone would know what they needed.

It’s difficult to pack. Tim stands in the doorway.

Diapers, diapers, and tiny undershirts.

They park near the ferry dock in one of the dirt lots where a chowderhead kid in an oversize t-shirt and flip-flops waves them in as if he’s been waving cars in for eternity. Tim carries everything on board while Elena bears Alexis. Her heart is in her throat. He’s not going to drop, she tells herself.

She watches Tim leaning over the railing out on the deck. What does he see? The diving gulls, three brothers with identical hollow eyes throwing potato chips, the deep fur of white water the ferry churns behind it.

Or, with eyes on the back of his head, his wife and baby?

It seems miraculous that Alexis goes down in the porta-crib. Elena sits on the edge of the four-poster watching him. She is almost stunned, actually, that all this—the baby—still exists when they transplant it. She wears her damp nursing bra to bed, goodbye sexual dignity, her eyes are too dry since pregnancy to wear her contacts.

She closes her eyes and feels the subtle rollick of the ferry.

She is a ferryboat leaving a white trail, flat as a cake, holding steady.

In the morning she watches the sea from the porch of the Bed and Breakfast. The pitch of the ferry, (another one making the crossing), is almost imperceptible from this distance. But the knowledge of capsizing is in the body of the boat, thinks Elena.

She has hardly allowed anyone to visit. Tim's mother has been held off, Tell her I have postpartum.

Her own parents have made the drive from Queens only once, when Alexis was two weeks. She hasn't encouraged them, and they've sort of settled back into the fact that they already have ten, local grandkids. Her offering seems minute. Her mother cleaned and cooked for forty-eight hours and her father folded newspapers that Tim left butterflied on the kitchen table.

Tim suggested having one of his grad students and the grad student's lonely British wife over—Just drinks, he promised. Elena scanned her kitchen through the eyes of a female stranger and saw ridges of black dust on her high cabinets, a tacky film on the range hood.

Listen, Elena said. I am not a yogurt-eating housewife who whisks away dust instead of reading contemporary fiction or the—the op-ed pages. And I am not a career-chasing feminist who hires a Guatemalan housecleaner and then doesn't even notice her own spanking clean range hood.

Tim looked utterly defeated by the logic.

She knows she's privileged to be a housewife looking down (from above) on a housewife.

When Alexis is nine months, Elena decides to send out announcements. Friends from college with whom she's fallen out of touch, Tim's department, a high school boyfriend she hasn't seen since she was twenty-one but suddenly, inexplicably, misses.

Well, yes; now that she thinks about it, that's who she wants to tell: Ryan. She is a gummy-faced adolescent, her dark mane of hair un-styled like a peasant's, her slender, grooved neck, and she and Ryan are eating her mother's spinach pie and having a staring contest.

She doesn't think they had a lot to talk about, but there was unmistakable—kinship.

She chooses a snapshot in which Alexis bears a striking resemblance to her, to his Greek side, as Tim says, Telemachus.

But Alexis is not exactly Homeric—or bronzy. If his skin has a color, it is chalk. Elena thinks of science class—is white a color?—the color wheel, the periodic table, the Bunsen burner, the rainbow. Ryan sitting directly behind her so that she felt she had extra-sensory nodes budding out of her shoulder blades.

Alexis, in the picture, has morello cherry lips, dark lashes. His eyes are big and tragic. What would Ryan think?

Of course Elena Theodoro had a boy who looks like a girl. That's what Ryan would make of it.

And why of course? And why can she read Ryan's mind in memory?

Actually, Tim thinks Alexis looks more Indian. A maharaja, (she cringes, Tim with his complexion like strawberry shortcake), a princeling from Arabian Nights. Other babies are stuffed animals compared to Alexis.

She has intended to put a crayon in his right hand, from the start. She admits her bias: the lefties in grade school were bad spellers and when they wielded scissors it looked as though they were cutting backward, into themselves. She puts her dry, chalk-purple hand over Alexis's underwater grip.

He already knows the scope of the apartment. The table legs and chair legs and clatter of his own fork when he lets it go on purpose. He stops to watch Elena at work on his birth announcements.

She has never done anything like this in front of Alexis. Never shaved her legs either, or mixed a drink: how can a set amount of alcohol make two people drunk? And yet she has not dared to drink a drop for fear it will spike her breast milk. She feels this project as a risk.

She must be able to clean up fast, hide the evidence. If she is needed by Alexis.

The Crayola colors are paler with paraffin than she remembers from her childhood. She had imagined a more primary rainbow. She's going to glue the snapshot on card stock, and draw a crayon frame around it. Now that she's started she feels a tremendous rush. Not to finish, she wonders, but never to stop. Drawing and gluing.

In warning, Alexis starts to huff and puff on the floor below her. Why have I been deprived—for ten whole minutes—of body contact?

Oh, says Elena. She feels her color rising. Her double life, these birth announcements. He keeps huffing. His mouth wobbles but he remains bravely upright.

She never feels really free. In fact, not even as free as she used to feel on her lunch break. She has made an analysis of the verb phrase, “to put a child to bed,” and decided it is not an action, or a series of actions. It's a presence. As in, the presence of the mother. Tonight, however, after Alexis is down for his first shift of sleep, she anticipates getting back to her little art project. She edges away from Tim, who is slightly flushed from wine and standing across the sink from her.

She says, I'm making announcements. Tim clears his throat. She says, You know, Alexis John Gamble. Seven pounds five ounces.

Now Alexis is twenty-eight months. This is absurd, says Tim. Do we count in months until he moves out of the house for college?

The birth announcements have just come back from the printer. There were several false starts, so that in the end, Elena had them printed.

Should she include a more recent picture of Alexis? He has long dark curls. She can tell that Tim feels conflicted about a haircut: the problem of baby and man in the same little body. The problem of mortality, already. She finishes up the dinner dishes. She takes the printer's box—several hundred announcements, actually—and places it carefully at the back of her closet.

She puts some shoes she will never wear again on top of it.

ERIC MULDER

CONTRA DANCE

The stars loomed high and cold above him. William contemplated their distance through the haze of his breath. The moon had yet to rise, leaving an oppressive dark pushing him into the dirt. Frosted strawberry plants covered his arms and legs while his head rested in the valley between rows. He waited for a welcomed numbness to replace the fire in his chest.

“Where are you?” she called, casting a long shadow over the field. He strained to look back, seeing only the single streetlight through the canopy of strawberries. “William?”

He was too cold and tired to sit up or shout back. Another couple of minutes and he’d be chilled and ready to return to the grange hall.

Feet trampled the icy dirt. Her shadow grew larger, wider, swallowing William whole. Presently, her head blocked the stars. Without a word she went two rows over and eased herself down. Their hands shared the same clump of plants—warmth only inches away. He moved his hand to his side, preferring to be alone by himself rather than alone with somebody else.

“You’re really good at this,” she said, voice low and enthused.

“I keep getting lost.” It was the only truth he could share.

“It’s your first time. Most people don’t pick it up so fast.”

When he closed his fist he could feel the rough hands of strangers guiding him across the floor. There must be a hundred people in the hall: meaty men with their arms raised high, women’s skirts flaring out as they twirled around and around. The constant motion made such a heat and clamor that they threw open all the windows and doors and still kept a fever. They’d defeated winter and its icy calm. If he listened he could hear the fiddles and dozens of feet stamping in time, turning the floor into a drum.

“Still dizzy?” She asked.

“A little. I just need a sec to cool off.”

Inside they were making lines, boys on one side and girls on the other. That’s what made it ‘contra’ dancing. All the girls wore wrinkled prairie skirts that sailed when they twirled. The guys, the rough, tough farmers wore jeans so tight they made William squirm.

After the tumult of finding partners and lining up, they all held hands to start the dance. The men had taken his as naturally as leading a baby brother down the street.

A rustle came from the strawberries. Her hand snuck through the dense growth, small and quivering like a mouse. William struggled up, moving much too quick. Vertigo nearly knocked him back over. He waited until the world settled, then rolled onto his knees, the cold earth hard against them. Through the distant door he saw colors flash by: greens, browns, oranges—earth tones popular with the dancers.

The next dance was a little different. Instead of staying in their own lines, half the boys and girls switched over so that the genders would alternate down the line. Boys found themselves with girls in every direction, and the girls, with their bright flirtatious eyes, found themselves surrounded by boys. Moving up and down the line, William got a turn with each guy's girl. They slipped his hand to the proper place on their shoulder blades, pulled him close to make the swing tight and fast, and told him 'look deep into my eyes or you'll get dizzy and fall into my arms . . .'

He trudged across the field back towards the hall. Kim struggled to catch up. He stopped, letting her shoot past and become a silhouette against the streetlight. William had to admire her: her long face and mousy hair were not pretty, but Kim was bold and confident. She'd taken him under her wing since his very first day at the University. She taught him how to get along. He wanted her to teach him more—the things high school hadn't, the things puberty hadn't. She tried so very hard.

With a sigh, he pitied her wasted efforts.

Just moment ago he was in that hall dashing up and down the lines. Fiddles pushed his feet, inviting hands led him this way and that. He swung his partner, but her piercing eyes and flirtatious smile elicited nothing. He couldn't hold her gaze. The moment he looked away the room swam around him. Bare plywood walls, rough ceiling beams, the dusty smooth floor—he couldn't tell if he was up, down, or sideways. Falling out of the line, some strong hand pulled him back in—on the wrong side. He'd somehow switched places with his partner and instead of girls greeting him for a swing he found the hard, laughing eyes of men.

As he struggled to find his step, the old men took delight in giving him an extra twirl. These men had been dancing together most of

their lives. William was new, and they made a grand joke out of him dancing the girl's part. They whistled admiration for the way he held himself with his weight on the balls of his feet, spinning like a top. Strong, lusty arms pulled him close. Long beards tickled his cheeks as the men wound him up for another spin. Faces flashed passed and the music grew louder. It set his face, heart, and soul on fire. He went tumbling out of the grange on legs of rubber, running off to the field to let the cold and the dark douse him.

Kim came to him, standing too close to ignore. Her tiny hand found his. It felt bony and cold, the firm grip meaningless. "Ready to go back in?"

He lifted his gaze, relieved to find hers lost in shadow. He couldn't face those bright, beady eyes. She'd never know how much she'd taught him tonight: a truth he could no longer ignore.

A firm tug pulled him toward the open door and William followed.

Daly Walker

IF THE TASTE IS BITTER

On the beach in front of my house, I waded barefooted in the shallows, watching two big snook feeding on a school of silver sardines. The early sun was bright and sparkled on motionless turquoise water. The scent of baked salt was in the air, and the chirping of shore birds came from every direction. I loved being there alone. It was these cool quiet mornings on the beach and the orange and lavender sunsets over the Gulf of Mexico that enticed me to buy the property twenty-five years ago, vowing to never again live without a view of water.

The snook darted off to some other prey. I turned to look at my seaside haven, a contemporary wooden structure with a wall of windows that offered a panoramic view of the Gulf of Mexico. Just this morning, in accordance with my divorce settlement, I had signed the papers to sell the house. Now my heart dropped in my chest seeing it perched precariously on stilt-like concrete pilings. I felt as one must feel watching his home vanish in a hurricane.

The divorce from my wife, Ceci, had been bitter, filled with anger and blame. The sale of the house, forced on me by her and her attorney, was her final act of revenge. I walked from the beach through ever-shifting dunes where sea oats clung by their roots. Burning sand caked my wet feet. The air, heavy and hard to breathe, pressed down on me. It seemed to pin me to the ground.

“God damn you, Ceci,” I thought.

I hosed off the sand from my ankles and toes and slipped into a pair of docksiders. In the side yard, I spotted Vinh, a Vietnamese refugee I had hired a couple of years ago as a part-time gardener and handyman. With a broom, he swept up the leaves from under a banyan tree. The roots hung from its limbs like tangled hair. Vinh was taller than the Vietnamese I knew in 1967 when I was a green beret corpsman in the Mekong Delta. His skin was the color of cashews. He wore the coarse cotton shirt and tire-tread sandals of a peasant. A length of clothes line rope held up his baggy dark pants. I couldn't look at him without remembering my year in his country during the war. Cold-sweat fear in a chopper waiting to be dropped into the jungle. Body bags and the stink of napalm. The war marked the end of any innocence that

remained of my youth. It seemed that ever since, my life had been spent in a combat zone of one sort or another. I considered myself peace loving and non-confrontational; I never understood why I ever let myself go to war. And then kept doing so.

At Vinh's feet today an old portable cassette player broadcasted a scratchy rendition of Debussy's "La mer." Vinh believed music made the plants happy and enhanced their growth. His melodious fertilizer worked. The blossoms of the gardenias and bougainvillea he tended were always fresh and fragrant, the ferns and calla lilies exceptionally green. As I walked through the gardens, the hair on the back of my neck bristled. Not only was I being evicted from my dream house, I was being expelled from Eden.

For a moment, I watched Vinh work. His broom swung slowly in rhythm with the waves that lapped the shore. A mysterious smile shown on his face as if he knew something I didn't know. I am a retired orthopedic surgeon. In the operating room, reconstructing a knee or pinning a hip, I was fast and efficient, decisive, impatient when I needed to be. Vinh's pace frustrated me. But even though he was slow and contrary, I liked him. Opposites do attract. I had been an accomplice in the atrocities committed against his people during the war. No doubt, there was something about supporting a refugee from Nam that eased my conscience. I regretted having to tell him that his days in the garden here were finished.

As I approached the tree where he worked, he nodded and kept on swinging the broom evenly, a human metronome.

"There's a leaf blower in the garage that might work better," I said.

"Broom is fine," he said.

"Leaf blower is faster," I said. "I'm paying you by the hour."

I meant it as a joke.

"Broom fast enough. Do better job. No noise."

He stopped sweeping and looked up at me with a broad smile. A gold tooth gleamed.

"What's the matter, Bacsi?" Vinh said. "You look upset today."

"You're damn straight I'm upset," I said. "I've been forced to sell this beautiful house. I just accepted a low-ball offer."

"Why you sell, if you like house?"

"The divorce, old friend. I can't afford it since the pie got cut in two. Taxes. Hurricane insurance. The carrying costs of owning the

place are just too much for me to handle.”

“Don’t be upset, Bacsi,” Vinh said. “These things happen.”

“Easy to say,” I said.

Vinh grew up in a thatched roof hut and now lived in a rented trailer off island. What would he know about my feelings or the pride of ownership of prime oceanfront property?

“Not only did I have to sell the house,” I said, “my ex knew the bind I was in. She wouldn’t agree to the sale unless I gave her a hundred grand more than I got.” For a moment, I pictured men that looked like Vinh coming toward me out of the smoke and mist. Why was I telling him this? “It was pure extortion. Grand larceny. She might as well have put a gun to my head.”

I watched Vinh’s face for a reaction. His expression was noncommittal.

“I loved this goddamn house,” I said, shaking my head in disbelief. It seemed impossible that the property was no longer mine. “I would have left it to my daughter, Sally. It was my dream.”

“Dreams,” he scoffed. “All fantasy and doubt. Not worth clinging to, Bacsi.”

“Come on. Without dreams you might as well be dead.” For an instant, I panicked realizing I was dreamless. “You believe in the American dream? That’s why you came here for God’s sake?”

“American dream is looking for something that isn’t there. I came here to find a job. That’s all.”

Then why don’t you go back to the goddamn rice paddies, I wanted to say.

What I did say was: “Listen, Vinh, the closing is in a month. I’m sorry but you’re going to be out of a job. The people who bought the house are going to tear out all of these plantings and put in a swimming pool and pool house. They won’t need a gardener. At least for a while.”

There. That shook his complacency. And satisfied me in the bargain.

“Maybe they need life guard,” Vinh said. “Or maybe cabana boy.” He thought a moment. “Why the hell they want swimming pool?” He pointed toward the Gulf of Mexico where sunlight wove a silver tapestry on the waves of the blue-green water. “They have whole ocean to swim in.”

“Who knows” I said. “They’re Wall Streeters with more money

than sense. Maybe they're afraid of sharks."

"Ah," Vinh said, flashing his gold-toothed smile again. "I see. Pirañas afraid of sharks. Don't worry about my job. I find something else to do."

"Like what?"

"My wife has nail salon. Maybe I become specialist like you. A cuticle specialist."

A dragon fly landed on the fly of my khaki shorts and clung to the cloth. I looked down at it and for the first time today smiled.

"She likes you," Vinh said. "I think it's an omen. Your luck with women will change. Things get better for you."

"Yeah, right," I said as the blue insect flew away on transparent wings. "Fat chance."

Two weeks after the contract for the sale of the house had been signed, I walked from room to room with a yellow notepad, a ballpoint pen, and digital camera. It was time for Ceci and me to divide up the furnishings as mandated by the court. I made a meticulous inventory of the contents of my "dream" and took a picture of each relic of our thirty-five years of marriage. If there was an equation between happiness and possessions, our life together should have been euphoric. Everywhere I looked there was something attractive and tasteful to see—expensive furniture we had picked out on a trip with an interior decorator to the furniture mart in Chicago, family heirlooms, art by artists we had known. On the wall of the entryway was a terra-cotta sculpture of a man and woman joined by an arch formed by two trees that grew from their heads like flames from a fire.

When the inventory was complete, I sat on a bar stool at a granite-top counter in the kitchen. For a moment, I looked out the window at two gulls on the beach squabbling over the carcass of a mackerel. They flew at each other pecking and scolding, playing tug-of-war with the dead fish in their beaks. In front of me was my Macintosh laptop computer and the yellow notepad. Since it was impossible for Ceci to talk with me without getting angry, I had decided it was best to carry out the division of the furnishings by email. Although I was eager to break marital bonds and get on with my life, the finality of the process gave me pause. Everything in the house had been purchased with money earned by me bending over an operating table for hours or setting a fracture in the middle of the night. But somehow, I knew

Ceci would come out of this with more than I would. She always managed to. I took a deep breath, booted up my iBook, and opened “Mail.”

I selected “new” and wrote: “Ceci, we both have plenty of stuff. I think we should let Sally take what she wants, then we can split the rest by alternate choices.”

I hit send, pleased with my largesse. I am a generous man. My words whooshed away into cyberspace like an invisible bird.

Ceci responded immediately.

“If you want to give Sally things from your list that’s up to you. I’m planning to use mine to furnish Dan’s and my new condo in Naples.”

I felt the blood leave my face. Ceci had recently remarried a man with a 64 foot Sunchaser yacht and his own quail-hunting preserve. He was nearly eighty. Seventeen years older than she was. Before he retired, Dan ran his family’s savings and loan banks. If they needed things, he could buy them.

“I’ll go first,” she concluded. “I want the shell stone table.”

Oh right, I thought. Of course you’ll go first. It was so Ceci. I clicked on “reply” and typed, “I’m not sure why you should go first. Usually a coin is flipped and the person who gets the second choice is allowed the second and third choices. Then the alternate choice proceeds with the number one chooser getting the fourth choice and so on. If you agree to my having the next two choices then you can have the first choice. Otherwise we’ll flip a coin or something.”

I centered the arrow over send and punched the mouse hard. Within seconds the email bell on my MAC dinged.

“What’s the deal?” she fired back. “When we set this up, you said I could go first. I went. Is there anything that says if I choose first you get the next two choices? First time I’ve heard that one. Little hard to flip a coin when we’re NOT IN THE SAME AREA. Obviously, you wanted that table, too. We don’t always get what we want, do we?”

I laughed when I read the part about it being hard to flip a coin when you weren’t in the same area. I wondered if she was being serious or just ridiculous. She did have a sense of humor, usually at my expense or Sally’s. So maybe she was just being a wise guy? I knew she hated me. Something about her hatred made me feel good.

I thought for a moment. Although it was the most expensive piece of furniture in the house, I really didn’t want the shell stone table. It

weighed a ton and would be an expensive pain in the ass to move and there was no room for it in the apartment I was renting. So if I let her have it, in effect, I would be getting my first choice.

I typed, "Oh, Princess. Go first. It's just stuff." I thought a moment. Too strong. Too confrontational. Rise above the fray. I changed "Princess" to "Ceci." "Oh, Ceci, go first. It's just stuff. The shell stone table is yours. I'll take the blue and rust Indian rug from Santa Fe. Let's do ten picks today and then take a break, and do some more tomorrow."

I knew she loved the rug and would want it. I sent the message boldly with a sense of triumph.

While I waited, I looked at the rug spread under a teak coffee table with its beautiful pattern of hexagons and parallelograms in shades of blue, rust, and beige. I remembered the summer vacation in New Mexico when we bought the Navaho carpet. We stayed at Rancho Encatada, where celebrities like Henry Fonda, Fran Tarkington, and Princess Ann had stayed. The wrangler taught Sally how to ride a horse. Ceci and I took a set off the tennis pro, a fellow Vietnam veteran, and his girl friend. We went to the open-air opera and saw a wonderful performance of "Der Rosencavalier." I recalled how bright the stars over the desert were that night. For an instant my chest felt empty.

Ceci's response flashed onto the computer screen: "Fine! Take the rug. I'll take the Travertine marble coffee table in the living room."

Another heavy monstrosity I didn't want. A smile came to my lips.

For a while, we went back and forth swapping choices: the teak coffee table for a walnut sideboard, a sofa for a king-sized bed and head board, a signed Calder print for a Robert Indiana lithograph, a Cheret poster for Kuba cloth acquired on a camera safari in Kenya. When I took the steamer chest that had been my grandmother's, Ceci responded that she was glad I had taken it because it was from my grandmother whom she knew I adored. Her uncharacteristic display of compassion rocked me back a bit. This was easier to do when she was contentious. But the interlude of kindness was brief. When I selected a wicker couch and matching chair, she returned to form and wrote: "I'm very upset by the way you chose both the chair and the couch at the same time. This is deteriorating into something unpleasant. If it continues that way, I'll stop and dust off old Marvin."

The threat of Ceci involving her divorce attorney, a pit bull of a man in an Armani suit and jewelry, reminded me of the mediation Ceci had walked out on. The court appointed mediator, a young female lawyer who had tried unsuccessfully to bring us to compromise, said: “Doctor, she will torture you with the house.” How right she had been. Why had I married someone so vindictive and selfish, someone obsessed with land and money? How could I have been so stupid?

“Okay then,” I keyboarded. “If you want it that badly, you can have the damn chair. I’ll keep the couch. For my next choice, I’ll take the Brown Jordan porch furniture. You should take the Steuben glass apple. An apple a day keeps the doctor away.”

While I waited for her answer, I looked out the window and watched Vinh trimming the sea grapes by the garage. He had tied a white handkerchief around his forehead as a sweatband so that he looked like a Viet Cong. He put down his hedge clippers and walked to an orange tree laden with ripe fruit that grew by the driveway. The sun was at his back, and the shadow of his thin body moved in front of him at an angle. For a moment, I saw him through the cross hairs of a sniper’s gunsight. Ever since the war, there were times when I felt like a claymore mine about to be detonated.

For what seemed like a long while, Vinh studied the oranges and then he picked one. He carried it to the banyan tree and sat cross-legged on the ground at its base as he did when he drank the chrysanthemum tea and cracked the pumpkin seeds he often brought to work. For a while, he stared at the orange in his hands, breathing and smiling, his lips moving in what must have been some sort of prayer. I kept glancing from him to the computer screen, looking for a reply from Ceci. Finally, Vinh pulled a folding knife from his pocket. He opened it and skillfully peeled the orange, handling the blade as if it were scalpel and the fruit was a spinal cord tumor. When he was finished, he arranged the pieces of rind in a pattern in the sand beside him. He broke off a segment and chewed it slowly. Jesus, I thought, hurry up before it rots.

The computer bell dinged. I opened Ceci’s latest hate mail.

“I’ll take the four paintings by Vito Tori above the bed,” she wrote. “Goddamn it,” I said aloud.

The brightly colored acrylics were magically realistic landscapes done by an Italian artist from whom we rented a villa in Umbria one summer not too long ago. During our stay, I had become a good

friend of Vito's. We went to local soccer games, walked his German shepherd up the mountain in the morning, and drank Chianti together at a neighborhood trattoria in the afternoon. I was quite fond of him and his work. Ceci thought him loud and self-centered, and she didn't care for his paintings. I had been certain they wouldn't appear on her list. I knew she was taking them just to spite me. If I had suspected she was going to do that, I would have chosen them first.

Seething, I punched the "Quit" command. The computer sighed and went to sleep.

I walked outside to where Vinh was now squatting on his heels, still eating the orange. I always marveled at the way Vietnamese hunkered on their haunches over a pot of rice or a basket they were weaving. If I had tried to assume that position, I would have ruptured tendons and torn ligaments

"How's it going, Bacsi?" he asked.

"I'm in a battle royal," I said. I looked at the circular pattern Vinh had created in the sand with the fragments of the orange rind, something a child may have done.

"What are you doing with the orange, playing Truyen-Truyen?" I said, remembering the game Vietnamese children played in the dirt with sticks and a round fruit.

"Making sort of a mandala I guess." With the back of his hand, he brushed the fragments of orange peel away. "You say you in battle. How you in battle?"

"My ex and I are splitting up the furnishings of the house. It's war. It's like the Tet Offensive."

"Tet very bad. Many Vietnamese get killed. Dividing possessions not like Tet." He looked up at me with his head tilted in a quizzical way. "What you afraid of, Bacsi?"

"Why nothing. Why did you ask that?"

"You say you in war. Root of all wars is fear."

I thought for a moment.

"I don't buy that. Wars can be fought for the sake of justice. Defending what's right against an evil enemy."

"War itself is the enemy," Vinh said. "It can't be poverty you afraid of. You have plenty money. Must be something else."

From the driveway of the house next door, my neighbor's golden retriever appeared. The big dog trotted down the sand road to Vinh and began licking the orange juice from his fingers. Vinh scratched

the dog's head.

"Yellow dog taste better than black dog," he said with an impish smile.

The golden must have understood what Vinh said because he barked at Vinh and fled.

"My ex-wife is one vindictive woman," I said. "Do you know why divorces cost so much, Vinh?"

"Don't know."

"Because they're worth it," I said.

Vinh smiled but didn't laugh.

"Why you think she that way, so vindictive?" he said.

"Who knows and who cares. If I did know, it wouldn't change her."

"Might change you, Bacsi." Vinh spit out a seed and wiped his lips. "Make you calm instead of mad."

I needed sympathy and confirmation, not a Sunday school lesson.

"She's greedy," I said. "The only thing she wouldn't do for money is work. She just married some rich old sugar daddy twice her age. What's that make her? What else is there to understand about her?"

Vinh shrugged his shoulders. He broke off a segment of the orange he had been eating and handed it to me.

"Here," he said. "Enjoy this."

I took a bite. The fruit was pithy, the pulp dry.

"Orange delicious," Vinh said. "Don't you agree?"

I was too angry at Ceci to taste anything but the acid that boiled up in my esophagus.

"Its okay," I said. "A little sour."

He held up the last remaining segment of the orange.

"If the taste is bitter," he said, "don't blame the orange."

Back in the kitchen, I booted the computer. Nervously, I opened the e-mail from Ceci that awaited me. What did she want from me now? The Zuni pottery bowl with my testicles in it.

"I just asked for the Tori quadripictic and haven't heard back. What's the deal? I thought you wanted to wrap this up. What's your next choice?"

I wrote back: "Quadripictic? I'm not familiar with that term, but I suppose it means four pictures." Like a wily boxer, I didn't want her to know she had hurt me with her blow. "I wanted to donate them

to MOMA for a big tax write-off, but they're yours in all their glory. I'll take the dining room table and chairs and give them to Sally. She needs them more than we do."

I leaned back against the wall and waited, picturing Ceci the last time I saw her. It was nearly a year ago and soon after her return from rehabilitation at Betty Ford. We met accidentally and awkwardly on Sally's front porch: Ceci was leaving; I was arriving. I was startled by the metamorphosis my wife had undergone. It was as if she were a character in Kafka's story. Ceci's body had taken on a new slimmer shape. The pouches under her eyes and her crow's feet were gone. The loose skin of her neck appeared to have been surgically tightened, the spider veins on her calves lasered. She was dressed in a nearly punk rock style with a leather miniskirt to show her long but aging legs and a tight turtleneck that displayed her ample breasts. Her hair was shoulder length and straight like a sorority girl's. It struck me as sad, Ceci trying to be someone she wasn't. Or perhaps I was seeing who she really was.

"You look good," I said, although I didn't think she did.

"So do you," Ceci answered in a quavering voice. I sensed there was a longing bottled up in her that she wanted to let out, but she turned and hurried away to her car.

The computer bell dinged. I placed a finger on the mouse and clicked it.

"Hello. Are you there? You have chosen the dining room table and chairs. You assumed they go together. So the big TV and Bose sound system would go together, too. If the speakers can be moved, that would be my next choice."

The speakers were built into a cabinet that would have to be totally dismantled.

"Choices aren't conditional," I responded. "As Mother used to say, a card laid is a card played. You asked for them so you've got them." I glanced out the gulf-side windows at what had become a turbulent and hostile ocean. The sun was strange and muted by the dense humidity in the atmosphere. "It's a beautiful day down here and snook are biting. I'm calling it a day and going fishing."

In a few seconds, the email bell on the Mac dinged. I started to reach for the mouse, but I thought better of it and put the computer to sleep. For a while, I worked on the inventory list, initialing the items that had been chosen. In the order of desirability, I numbered the

possessions that remained. The Lenox Christmas china I gave a high ranking because I liked it, the sterling silver candelabra because I knew it would be valuable when sold at a consignment shop. As I pondered the value of tablecloths and bed linens, a feeling of weariness came over me. The selection process revolted me. How had my life come to this? I sat chewing on the tortoise shell earpiece of my glasses while staring off into space, yearning for something deeper and truer. Just who are you, doctor? I wondered. What are you afraid of? Vinh was right, I had all the money I needed. Could it be letting a woman get the better of me? And what was Ceci's fear that made her angry and drove her to drink? The bickering with her had exhausted me. I moved to the living room and settled onto the couch. I closed my eyes, hoping to sleep. But in a few seconds a knock sounded on the door. I drug myself to the entry where Vinh stood. Sweat streamed down his face. His shirt was damp and clung to him. I invited him in and offered him a cold beer. He declined and asked for water. With a tall beaded glass in his hand, he sat at the bar stool beside me and drank slowly.

"What do I owe you?" I asked.

"Don't worry. We can settle up later. How's battle going?"

"Back and forth," I said. "There's no clear winner at this point."

"Wars never have clear winners. Both sides loose."

He downed what remained of his water and set the glass on the counter.

"I've been thinking of your situation, Bacsi. It remind me of story my father tell me when I teenage boy. We on boat in South China Sea leaving Vietnam when war was lost. Everything was lost for us. House. Family. Animals. Even my mother not with us. She stay behind with my sister, Phuong, to take care of her old mother."

As Vinh talked, he drew a circle with his finger in the wet ring the water glass had left on the counter. Then he wiped it away as he had done the orange peel pattern in the sand.

"Before the war, my father a farmer in Mekong Delta. It very beautiful there like here. He raise ducks and chickens. He sell their feathers and eggs, not their meat. But this story not about birds. It about cows."

"Good," I said, remembering the neighbor's dog licking Vinh's fingers. "I was afraid it was going to be about eating old Fido." I looked at my watch. "Go ahead. Get to the story. I've got some calls to make."

“One day long ago, an old monk dressed in a saffron robe sit on log under shady tree, talking with young monks. Old farmer came, walking slowly, looking unhappy and angry.

“Monks,’ farmer say. ‘Have you seen my cows?’

“No, man,’ say old monk. ‘No cows have come by here.’

“My cows ran away,’ the farmer said. ‘The bugs eat my crops. I have no crops. No cows. I have nothing. I think I kill myself.’

“Very sorry, sir,’ old monk say. ‘No cows here. Look somewhere else for your cows.’

“Farmer leave with his head down very sad. When he out of sight old monk smile and say to young monks, ‘You very lucky. You very happy. You have no cows to lose.’”

I thought for a moment. Then I raised my eyes from the floor and looked at Vinh. Vinh looked back at me. The gaze of his bright almond eyes seemed to penetrate through the pupils of my eyes into the depths of my brain. I nodded my head.

The day the movers were to come empty the house, the wind shifted and there was a cooling sea breeze out of the West. The tide was low, the sand the color of polished ivory. When I took my last morning walk on the wide crescent beach, there were no tourists, only shells and me. The previous night a Loggerhead turtle had dragged herself up onto the dunes and laid her eggs among the sea oats. Her flipper tracks formed a “V” in the sand. Vinh would call her trail from the water to the dune and back a symbol of the cyclic nature of life. I realized that my leaving the house and the new owner moving in were part of that infinite coming and going. I removed my shoes and continued down the beach. The scent of salt and seaweed filled the air. I waded knee-deep into the surf. For a long time, I stood, staring at tranquil, jade-green water, letting the sea sooth me.

In the early afternoon, Honeymoon Haulers, a fly-by-night moving company from Miami, came in an old eighteen-wheeler to collect Ceci’s loot and the furniture I had given Sally. I thought “Divorce Distributors” would have been a more appropriate moniker. The driver of the truck, a bearded man in a turban, backed the trailer into the banyan tree and tore off a big limb that now blocked the driveway. I shook my head in disbelief and managed to laugh. Then I helped his crew drag the limb off the road.

When the moving truck pulled away, I surveyed what remained of the furnishings and household items. The Kuba cloth wall-hanging seemed shoddy, the Japanese hibachi worthless. I decided to only keep the Indian rug from Santa Fe. I called Vinh and offered him everything else. He said his sister, Phuong, had immigrated from Vietnam and was moving into an apartment near his trailer park. She would be grateful for anything I might give her.

In a little while, Vinh and Phuong appeared in a blue pickup truck. Phuong was a beautiful woman, slim in toreador slacks, her long black hair luxuriant and streaked with gray. Her eyebrows were high and arched. She told me she had taught French in a school in Vung Tau, a city on the South China Sea, where I had taken an in-country R and R during the war. I thought she was someone I would like to know better.

When we finished loading Phuong's things into the truck, Phuong and Vinh helped me clean the house. We worked until dusk. We vacuumed carpets, scrubbed out tubs and toilets, carried out bags of trash. When Vinh wiped down the shelf of a closet in the den, he found a family photo album that I had missed.

He handed it to me and said, "War over, Bacsì."

"Yeah. Like you said there was no winner."

"Takes time but wounds heal. It comes with understanding and forgiveness." Vinh patted me on the shoulder. "Here's the good thing, Bacsì. When you leave house tonight, you no have to lock door."

"Empty barn. No cows," I said.

After Vinh and Phuong were gone, I toured the house to make sure everything was ready for the realtor's final inspection. In the mirror over a bathroom sink, I read my age in the sagging spotted parchment of my face. I thought how I and everything else had changed from the day I bought the house. Moving through vacant spaces over bare floors, I knew these were rooms I would never enter again. It was vital for me to remember them and the way the life of a small family had played out in them—the hurt, anger and alienation, the laughter and love. I swept up a dead cockroach that Vinh had missed when he vacuumed the carpets. The big bug's exoskeleton was crisp and dry. His antennas were long enough to pull in the Voice of America. I thought again of Kafka. It saddened me to think the insect was alone when he died. I set the air conditioner on 80 degrees and unplugged the water heater, turned off the sprinkling system. In the light of a

dying day, the immense silence of the walls announced that I was alone and that the voice of my past had been muted. I paused in front of a window to drink in the ocean view. Close the drapes, I thought. It's too beautiful. Then I said to myself, what a wonderful place to have lived. Why did you let it slip away? For a moment, my eyes glistened.

Satisfied that everything was in order, I went to the refrigerator and retrieved a bottle of champagne that I had chilled for the occasion. I spread the Indian rug in front of the window in the living room and sat on the floor crossed legged, Vinh style. My muscles were fatigued. My arthritic shoulder and the tendinitis in my elbow ached from lifting and carrying. I felt as Sisyphus must have felt at the foot of the mountain, except I had champagne. I uncorked the bottle and poured a glass.

For a while, I sipped the sparkling wine and took my time paging through the photo album. There was a black-and-white picture of Ceci and me taken twenty-five years ago at a birthday party given for a friend in New York at the French consulate. Ceci wore a black sheath dress and I a tuxedo and black tie. We had been high spirited that night, both a little tipsy. The photo showed us smiling and holding hands on the way up a wide marble stairway. Quite a couple. Many of the pictures were of Sally: an unspoiled girl of four in a swim suit and sun bonnet, digging with a wooden spoon in the sand; there in the turn of a page, she was a long-legged teenager in a bikini sailing my Sun Fish: on another page, she appeared as a college student with a beer and a boyfriend with big ears. It saddened me that the house wouldn't be hers someday. But there would be other places for her. You must believe that about your children. I closed the album and set it aside.

I stared at the gulf so calm and blue, breathing, remembering. The only noise I heard was the sound of palm fronds outside the windows clacking in the evening breeze. Soon the sun dropped below the horizon. The sky glowed with streaks of orange and lavender. A flock of pipers rose from the shore and flew away. They darted and wove in the wind. Before long darkness descended, deep and violet. I sat as still as Vinh might have sat, until the moon appeared between two clouds. It shown very pale at first, then turned bright. A lightness came over me. I felt as if I weighed no more than the moon's reflection on the water.

K. L. Cook

LOVE SONG FOR THE QUARANTINED

At dinner our youngest boy said he hoped it snowed because he wanted to sleep in the next morning. He was so tired. Blue circles shadowed his eyes. The following day, while his older brother and two younger sisters readied themselves for school, he lay in bed and refused to get up, so we let him stay home. He slept late the next morning as well, but then woke suddenly, gasping and coughing uncontrollably. My wife propped him up, stroked his back, calmed him until he caught his breath. She made a pallet in the living room and let him watch cartoons. By lunchtime he was hungry, a good sign, and he ate macaroni and cheese and some applesauce, gulped down a big glass of milk. When his brother and sisters returned from school, he was happy to see them, and that night they played several games of Slap Jack. He seemed better the next morning, more rested, but the cough continued, so we kept him home just to be safe.

The pattern continued, though. The third night was the worst. He couldn't catch his breath, and sometimes he coughed so hard his face darkened and he began to dry-heave.

"We've got to take him to the doctor," my wife said. "This is not good."

"Probably pertussis," our doctor told us. "Whooping cough."

"Wasn't he vaccinated for that?" my wife asked. She knew about these things.

"Sometimes the vaccination doesn't completely protect against it. We better get him on something and have him tested. Are your other kids showing symptoms?"

"No coughing, if that's what you mean."

We started him that night on the antibiotic. The next morning, I called the Health Department to set up an appointment for the test.

"He can't be tested once he's begun antibiotics. Your doctor should know that," the nurse said. She was agitated, a tinge of panic in her gravelly voice. "You're all going to have to go on antibiotics. If your other children or you or your wife show any symptoms, you

must stay home. We had an outbreak in the county just last year, and it took us forever to get it under control.”

“But only my son is sick,” I said. “The rest of us are fine.”

“For now,” the nurse said ominously. “You have to start the medication. Immediately. We must be vigilant. I’m sorry to tell you this, but your family is now officially considered a community health risk. I will fax your kids’ schools and your employers.” And then she added, as if she were a parole officer, “We will call to check on you.”

Our doctor wouldn’t send the prescriptions to the pharmacist without seeing each of us separately, an expense that we couldn’t afford. I called the Health Department and asked that they fax in the prescription for the antibiotics, but the pharmacist said he was out of that particular antibiotic. He could get it in by the next afternoon.

“That’s fine,” I said.

That night, the house convulsed with coughing. Both my sons, my youngest daughter, and then me. Our lungs seemed to explode. Our daughter vomited once, twice, three times. My wife gave everybody a handkerchief and instructed us to cough into it and fold it over to keep the germs contained, but it was no use. I imagined the house glowing with the expectorated germs. My wife propped us up with pillows, applied cool cloths to our foreheads and the backs of our necks, cranked up the vaporizers, and administered cough syrup, which the children promptly threw up. She worried, I could tell, that it would be only a matter of time before she and our oldest daughter caught it.

By dawn, everyone looked shell-shocked. At eight, I called the Health Department and the doctor and told them what happened.

“Did you start the antibiotics?” asked the nurse.

“The pharmacist said the prescription wouldn’t be ready until this afternoon.”

“I’m sorry then,” she said, “but your family is now officially under quarantine.”

We understood sickness. Every winter or spring, sometimes both, a virus snaked through our home. No family our size could avoid it. We charted the years by our infections. Bronchitis Christmas, the St. Valentine’s Day Strep Throat Massacre, the Easter Bunny Flu that wiped us out for a month. Winter ushers in a season of colds, and spring unleashes the ragweed and juniper allergies. And we catch it all.

However, we had been, we believed, through the worst. Not quite the worst, I know. But that's how we, my wife and I, liked to talk about it—through the worst—as if to ward off the worst by refusing to name it. Five years ago, our oldest son developed cancer of the spleen, rare among children. The cancer nearly destroyed us. We took him to pediatric oncologists in Houston and Phoenix. He had three surgeries followed by harrowing months of experimental chemotherapy and radiation. He should be, by all odds, dead.

At the direst moments during that time, I could not sleep. Besieged by migraines, sometimes two a day, I was lucky if I got ten hours of sleep a week. I'd be giving a lecture about proprietary rights in contract law at the university where I teach, and my nose would start to bleed. At night, I'd roam the streets of our neighborhood, or walk down to the all-night diner and read *Oncology*, the latest *New England Journal of Medicine*, or the articles I'd downloaded and printed from the internet.

My wife's hair turned a silvery blonde during the middle months of that period, even though she was only thirty-two. She and I and our other kids shaved our heads in solidarity with my son—an ultimately comical tribute that cheered him immensely. We bought wigs and party hats and threw a "bald party." You had to shave your head to attend, which surprisingly four of our friends and my wife's two brothers and father did, even my son's Phoenix oncologist, who had taken a special liking to our boy and had written an article for a medical journal about the radically aggressive treatment for pediatric cancer of the spleen.

We had come through to the other side, and nothing could ever be quite as bad, we thought. No setback could really touch us with the same horror.

"At least it's not the spleen," we would say, a comic mantra, determined to treat our near-tragedy lightly.

But I must admit there are still times, when illnesses descend on the whole family, like this bout of whooping cough, that we are reminded of the gloomiest days of what we call our Spleen Year.

The antibiotics didn't seem to help much. Of course, we understood that only infants or people with suppressed immune systems are truly endangered by this illness. But the cough was wicked, and we lost, collectively, twenty-three pounds over the course of the week. The house smelled bad. My wife was exhausted and couldn't keep up.

Meals were too much of a chore, and for a stretch of thirty-five hours we ate nothing but applesauce and saltines. We drank ginger ale mixed with electrolyte-enriched water. Bored, we lay together in the living room—the couches and chairs and floors covered with old sheets, plastic-bagged trashcans by everyone’s side—and watched television for hours on end, movie after movie. The Marx Brothers, Abbott and Costello, Martin and Lewis, our library of Disney and Pixar films, *I Love Lucy* and *Dick Van Dyke* marathons on Nickelodeon—slapstick stuff that delighted, though laughter was dangerous because it sometimes triggered a coughing fit in one of us, which inevitably spread to the rest, so that the house seemed to tremble, which made me think of patients in a tubercular ward spastically coughing blood into their bleached hankies.

After four days of antibiotics, the children slept through the night. The Health Department finally lifted the quarantine. Two days later, after the children were put to bed, my wife broke down and cried.

“At least it wasn’t the spleen,” I said, to cheer her.

During the Spleen Year, my wife and I didn’t make love for eight months. Every moment not spent in worry or poring over medical research or care for our son and younger children had been devoted to sleep or upkeep or, somehow, work, though we did precious little of that, exhausting our sick leave and retirement accounts, mortgaging our house twice, selling both our cars and relying on a used one her mother lent us. Sex seemed then like a foreign, impossible act, something we remembered having done before but not with any clarity or sense of yearning. Bodies seemed to me—and I think to my wife, though we didn’t speak of it—angry, insolent saboteurs. Yet during that year we were as intimate as we had ever been or, I imagine, ever will be. We moved through the long months connected by frail but palpable spiritual threads, which I remember as a rare gift.

The night after the Whooping Cough Winter, as we dubbed it, was officially over, my wife and I made love with a rapturous, starved intensity that I couldn’t remember experiencing in our many years together. Afterward, stunned and a little embarrassed, we held each other tightly and stroked each other’s backs.

My wife nodded off, but I felt restless and awake. I remember thinking that we’d never really given ourselves over to the violent

wonder of this kind of pleasure, the essential glorious urgency of sex. We'd been deprived—deprived ourselves—of this experience. Or maybe we had experienced this before, and I'd just forgotten, the way a woman forgets the labors of childbirth. Or perhaps it only seemed this way because we'd just emerged ourselves from the trauma of this family sickness, and the juxtaposition of our vulnerability against the vitality of sex was what stunned and surprised.

I tried to close my eyes and meditate, hoping that by concentrating on nothingness, which I learned in a transcendental meditation class I'd taken during the Spleen Year, I would be carried off into sleep. But I only felt more restless. The anxiety that had temporarily dissipated seemed to come back, redoubled. I worried that perhaps this was the onset again of the insomnia that had knitted up the raveled sleeve of care, as my wife liked to say, for all those months during the Spleen Year—the insomnia that induced my migraines and sent me wandering the dispiriting streets of our small mountain town night after night.

It's not that bad, I told myself. It's over. But I couldn't will myself to sleep, even though the house was amazingly quiet, not a single cough or rustle. I marveled at the silence, and then rose, panicked, from the sheets, put on my robe, and checked the children to make sure they were breathing. I recognized in myself the same panic that seized me during the worst days of the Spleen Year. The panic that kept me awake, I know, the fear that my children would die in their sleep, that fear prompting me obsessively to their rooms, not just to the sick one but to the well ones too, each hour, on the hour, to watch their chests rise and fall, rise and fall, until I was absolutely sure they would be fine, that they wouldn't stop breathing while I slept.

I went to the kitchen and scooped chocolate mint ice cream into a bowl and watched *Sports Center*; but it bored me. I surfed the channels as I ate until the senseless chatter of the talk shows and the infomercials and the late-night sitcom reruns in the silent house sounded to me like an obscenity. I had exams to grade for my first-year law students, and they sat neglected in a rubber-banded folder on my desk in the corner of the living room, but I didn't have the energy for that either.

I opened the front door, stepped out onto the porch, and sat in the swing. A warm night for March, and surprisingly dark with no moon, no clouds covering the stars, essentially no breeze. Without really thinking clearly about it, I stood up, unbelted my robe and let it fall.

Naked, I walked out to the end of the dark driveway, where I stood for several minutes just to feel the stillness of the night. It was a foolish act; I know that and knew it then. Even now I'm not sure why I did it. A wild hair, I suppose. But it felt good, I must admit, and eased some of my anxiety. It re-channeled the irritation.

I heard a coyote howl in the distance, and another one respond. The coyotes sometimes roam our neighborhood, and on occasion I'll hear them chasing some smaller animal, the mad yapping followed by a squeal of a rabbit, a cat, or perhaps a small dog.

The coyotes killed our dog, a dachshund-miniature collie mix. Another victim of the Spleen Year. My oldest son and my wife and I were scheduled to fly to Houston the next afternoon for the third, and what the surgeon warned us would be the most dangerous, of my son's three surgeries. On that particular night, we'd heard the yelping of the dog and then the frantic yapping of the coyotes. I went out with a flashlight and a baseball bat, and then shouted at them until, snarling, they ran away. I wore only my pajama bottoms and slippers, and clutching the smooth handle of the bat, I shined the light on the ground where the coyotes had been. The sight of the dog's chest and stomach turned inside out repulsed and fascinated me. I put the dog in a black plastic garbage bag (a detail that still makes me wince with shame) and buried him in the backyard before the kids awoke.

The next morning was one of the grimmest days in our family's history. My wife and the children and I sobbed for hours, something that had not happened with this kind of intensity through all the consultations and surgeries and chemo and radiation and incessant hand-wringing. I knew then that what we were crying for was not our dog but for our oldest son and all the worst fears that we had previously refused to voice—afraid that by voicing those fears, we'd be transported to a reality that none of us wanted to imagine, as if talking about the worst might invoke it.

The killing of the dog seemed to us all, though we didn't speak of it, like a bad omen. We had become superstitious people. My wife talked weekly on the phone with a psychic in San Francisco. I don't know if she ever spoke of this event to that woman, though I imagine she did. Even now, I don't know if my wife still talks to that woman. Her resorting to the psychic seemed like a desperate act, something that I understood and tried to be respectful of, though it sometimes made me unaccountably angry and made me think less of my wife, though

I knew that wasn't fair. Hadn't I talked to doctors and read medical journals and searched the internet for the most radical treatments and controversial procedures with the same desperation myself, and hadn't most of what I read only temporarily soothed my nightmares? We clutch for hope where we can, where our temperaments lead us. And none of us should have that yearning held against us.

Our son's tests were clear for three months, then six months, then a year, and gradually we felt safer, as if we were swimmers who'd gone too far out to sea in the middle of a storm, and after exhausted, seemingly futile efforts to swim back to shore, we could finally see the water foaming on the thin line of white beach.

I must admit that I sometimes find myself missing that time in our lives. I miss the realm of precariousness in which we lived. I would never tell my wife this. Even to write it here, though it is the truth, frightens me, makes my hand tremble, as if I might be inviting trouble.

There I was, outside at the end of my driveway, alone, without my clothes. I started walking down the street. Only after I was blocks away did I acknowledge to myself that, if someone spotted me, naked like this, I might very well be arrested. But at that moment I didn't care, and on some level perhaps I wanted to be caught.

When I was a young lawyer, working as a public defender in Tucson, I never ceased to be amazed at the stupidity of my clients, the stunned and sometimes placid look on their faces when I would visit them in their cells, as if they didn't know how this happened to them, or they did know how it happened but still seemed unwilling to admit that they'd brought the calamity upon themselves. After three years of those faces, I knew that practical law was not for me and leapt at the first opportunity I could to teach, even if it meant a radical pay cut and teaching students whose faces sometimes reveal those same looks of imbecility and complicity.

At any rate, this naked walk in the dark was something new and strange for me. Not even during the Spleen Year, when I walked incessantly through town in the hours before sunrise (wearing out three pairs of expensive running shoes in six months), had I ever done something like this. Maybe, I wondered, I'd gone nuts. A side-effect of the medicine or the whooping cough itself. Or a delayed reaction—this relatively minor family illness the last straw, the one that would

tip me into madness. I continued walking the neighborhood.

For a while, I felt invulnerable on those dark, silent streets, until a woman opened a door and shouted, with the unmistakable viciousness provoked by too much alcohol, “Who’s there?”

I darted into the shadows behind a hedge. I didn’t answer, but I could hear my own panting breath.

“Gary? Wallace?” she called. “That you? You stay away from here, I mean it. I’m calling the police, you bastards!”

The door slammed shut, and after a moment I hoisted myself up and ran, avoiding the streetlamps, toward home. A car approached. The headlights forced me to dive flat on a lawn, bare ass to the moon, until it passed.

At my house, I robed myself and sat on the porch swing until my breathing returned to normal and the sweat cooled on my body. I was surprised that I hadn’t begun coughing again.

Inside, I listened to the house. Except for the humming of the refrigerator, it was so quiet. I walked down the hall and checked on the girls, pulled the covers up over their skinny bodies, felt their foreheads to make sure they weren’t feverish, kissed their cheeks. Then I checked the boys. My youngest son curled tightly under his blankets, his pillow covering half his face. I tucked the pillow under his head.

Then I turned to my oldest son. He lay on his back, arms outstretched, head tilted up with his mouth open. His pajama top had crept up his chest, and I could see, in the glow of the Spiderman nightlight, the raised ridges of his surgery scars. I ran my fingers lightly along the edges, to feel their shape and texture. He shifted to his side, and I draped the sheet and blanket over him and kissed his cheek.

In my bedroom, my wife still slept. I ran my hand along the covers and then leaned over and kissed her lips, though she did not wake.

I still wasn’t sleepy, not in the least. I could smell the pungency of my body, the grassy smell from my plunge onto the lawn, and underneath it all the odor of sex from earlier. I needed a shower. In the bathroom, I turned on the lights and was surprised by the sight of myself, my face gaunt and flushed, my hair, flecked with silver, shooting out in a comic way. I hung my robe on the hook and examined myself—a middle-aged body, my skin too white, almost translucent,

blue veins like tendrils beneath, my neck mottled, my torso thinned out by this week of illness. My ribs like splayed fingers beneath my skin.

I started the water, and only when I reached below the sink to get a washcloth and a towel did I notice the blood. All over the bathroom floor. The adrenaline kicked in, thrilling and scaring me, and threatening, if I wasn't careful, to tip me into a migraine. This is how they always started. *Where did the blood come from where did it come from where did it come from?* jangled my body like an alarm.

I opened the bathroom door so that the light spilled into the bedroom. The hardwood was tracked with blood, as well as the rug by the end of the bed. I had kissed my wife, but did not think to look under the sheets or to check her breathing as I had checked my children's.

I looked down and saw that I was standing in it, the blood. I was confused and irritated then. Only when I stepped back did I realize that the blood was coming from me. From my feet.

I shut the door and sat on the closed toilet lid and lifted one foot and then the other to inspect my soles. The pads were scraped, a jagged cut on my left instep and over my toes, tiny pebbles embedded in the flesh. I felt no pain whatsoever. My feet looked like those of a stranger's. *Am I in shock? I wondered. Must be.* Or perhaps it was simply the adrenaline, which had been pumping all along. Maybe that's why I didn't feel the pain when I was out running through the neighborhood. Still, I was perplexed by this moment, divorced from the obvious pain, as if some switch had been turned off in my nerve endings, sparing me.

I unspooled toilet paper and gently swabbed the blood. I put the washcloth under the warm water, wrung it out, and then began to clean my right foot and then my left. I reached in the drawer for tweezers and removed the small pebbles and grains of dirt lodged in the cuts, and then dabbed again. I sat on the side of the tub and placed my feet in the warm water to soak, watched the water turn red, the swirls quickly brightening into a beautiful pattern. It astonished me that this had happened, and that I had not really felt it. There wasn't even a dull ache. It seemed miraculous really, but I didn't know whether or not this was a good thing. Pain, I understood, was the way the body protected you, made you aware that you were indeed alive. I wondered if my body was protecting or betraying me.

Finally my feet began to throb, which gave me some modicum of relief, though I still felt vulnerable, amazed that this much damage could have happened unnoticed, or ignored, by me. I knew that the real pain would creep in soon enough. I knew that I'd be nursing these wounds for days or weeks, and that it would hurt to walk for some time to come. *Ridiculous*, I thought, *that I have—or had—such baby feet.*

I looked forward to telling my wife about it, making a joke, though I could already imagine her confusion, worry, and then her annoyance, her left eyebrow arched in skepticism, the small, exasperated shake of her head. She'd already been tending to us and was exhausted by it; she didn't need any more invalids.

What I mainly felt, at that moment, was a sense of amusement, a sense of pleasure at my own foolishness. I decided to dub this the Night of the Bloody Soles. It made me laugh, and it was the first time that I could remember feeling this particular kind of absurd gaiety in some time. It's not a bad thing to recognize your own foolishness and to be able to laugh at it. It proves, I believe, that you are fundamentally sane.

I pulled my feet from the water and dried them, staining the towel in the process. I knew I should get some alcohol, antibiotic ointment, and gauze from the hall closet. I also knew that I should clean up the floors before my children and wife awoke. I didn't want them to be alarmed or worried, seeing the bloody tracks by the sides of their beds.

But how to get from the bathroom to the hallway without making more of a mess?

It seemed like it should be an easy enough process to negotiate, but I felt strangely disoriented. I stared down at my footprints on the bathroom floor. They were just a jumble, as if the man who did this was confused about where he was going or trying to learn a dance he didn't understand. That thought also pleased me, made me smile. I wiped away the footprints with the towel.

Then suddenly I felt very sleepy, as if I'd been injected with a tranquilizer—a droopy, narcotic wooziness. I could go to sleep right here in the bathroom. Just take a little nap, clear my head before dealing with the mess I'd made. I pulled another clean towel from beneath the sink and propped it under my head like a pillow. I reached up and turned off the light. It wasn't completely dark. I wanted to just

lie there—in self-quarantine, I told myself—and watch the way the bluish pre-dawn light filtered through the opaque bubble glass of the bathroom window. It was really quite beautiful. My feet throbbed, but it wasn't painful yet, so I let myself enjoy that sweet territory between sleep and consciousness—the coolness of the wood, the soft, clean towel against my cheek, that blue light just on the other side of my eyelids—the heightened sensitivity to the world that happens after sickness or before the onset of expected suffering.

Jack Ridl

SUITE FOR THE TURNING YEAR

I

Sometimes when the dogs are asleep,
and the whole world seems quietly
poised between green and brown,
when everything is lascivious with
leaves—the ground, the porch floor,
the holly bushes, even a few last trees—
you can see a glimpse of the way
the clapboard house was set within
this woods, almost see them nailing
the sills under the windows and
carrying in the kindling. The air
sifts across your forehead, and you
look up, hearing the chill jabber
of the chickadees, the quick
scattering of chipmunks, and
in the anonymous distance,
the disappearance of the sound
of children or was it a car? There
is no need for a letter in the mail,
no thought of putting away
the pots of yellowed impatiens.
Just this little time and
perhaps, a little more.

II

Feeling this way in the afternoon.
Not because it's November. The burnished
landscape lends an invitation to sit,
a blanket across the knees that once bent
and knelt to plant a hundred bulbs,
pull a thousand weeds. This month's
brown cold is welcome. Within the calm,
there is no guilty need to do, no frantic

thought that one had better take advantage
of the long day's light. Oh, the dogs still
need their walk. And there are dishes. But
we can listen to the radio, can watch the slow
breathing of the cats, look for this year's
yearlings as they cross the hill behind the house.
Still the world must make space for us
to sit, walk, sleep, give up itself to give us
room. Later this afternoon, after I build
a fire, we'll pull down our book of maps,
imagine our breath is giving something back,
alchemizing oxygen into gratitude even though
we are an inconvenience in the world.

III

The sun beats down
somewhere else
and the moon is lower
than the tops of the trees.
The cats come back from
their prowl and curl up
in front of the back door.
Coming up the street,
the headlights on the night
shift worker's car turn
into his driveway. We
can hear the refrigerator,
the pump in the basement,
the fan in the bedroom
upstairs. If there are
ghosts, they have only
our silence and the last
of the moon's borrowed light.

IV

Light lies on the oriole's nest,
fallen empty in the euonymus.
Strands of lobelia hang over the edges

of the chipped terra cotta pots
on the back step. There's an old
novel on the kitchen table, one cat
asleep under the hanging basket.
On the porch a watering can
is giving in to rust. The cracked pink
flamingo stands bent on its iron legs.

V

Two days of soft snow lie
under the moon's stolen light.
It's my early winter. Now a quiet

accumulation of cold comes
in its slow way. I wait
for stillness, its stay. Why

think of winter in winter?

Maybe to follow my father
through the old grass into
the deer's long walk across the snow.

VI

Sometimes when the snow
is nearly deep enough
to keep us home, we stay
in anyway, carry in kindling,
build a fire, unfold blankets,
and stack the books we open
now and then. Next to us
we set a pot of coffee, add
a log when we must. Wind
passes, whirling little lifts
of snow against the window.
The dogs sleep as if we're gone.
Others have to leave. We know.
The mail will arrive at noon,

the newspaper by evening.
It won't matter as much.
After sleep, there will be ashes
under the grate, a little less
wood to burn, more or not
as much snow. We may
play some Lester Young
and Etta James, let his sax and
her voice smolder in the coals.

VII

How good it is to be in here,
on the couch, the dogs asleep
against the pillows at the ends
as if we are safe in the great
Kingdom of Rain. Death
with its lispng end rhymes
stands under an umbrella.
The rain against the windows
is a language, its assonance
an uninvited solace. Cold
will come again. We can't
move south. We have sweaters.
We depend on a shovel
and the neighbor's plow.
We depend on music, on
knowing we no longer
need to say we love one
another. Love is Emanuel.
This rain. The leaves.
This music on the radio
is music on the radio.
The dogs sleep with
their names. These leaves,
this music, this rain.

Joe Survant

ELEGY

*for Jeannie
October 6, 2010*

This fall comes early and hard.
Ears of uncut corn
drop in the dry fields
and redbuds wither
silently in the yard.
Already, in the heart
of our hackberry tree
five chosen leaves
turn red as blood,
and the light takes
on a fearful intensity.
In the evening
I walk through dry grass
down to where I hear
the ripened walnuts
fall upon the ground.

She is
wherever I look,
in the yard
in the house
and on my eyes
like a light-fed image
that will not fade.
What does nature know
of those who've entered her,
or of us who still work
and walk about the world?
Perhaps those who die
do not drop out of the world.
They remain.
The world takes them,
and they are changed.

Stacy Kidd

THE MYTH OF WATER

A woman standing in a doorway,
the woman in a red dress, the red sun dress,
the man with black hair.

If she should stay a moment longer, but look
how she mumbles. Inside,
to do work. Lighter and lighter.

Look how his hair turns light as the rain.
If only she should laugh.
The man feeling light as the river.

His fingers pointing toward heaven. Figure.

Gold god of the river,
god of fissure. Nerve endings

and endings. Like Mars before its faces
were known. The earth's
surface, the only source of water.

Judy Bebelaar

FALLEN LEAF LAKE

I make coffee, put biscuits in a sack
Crackers for the minnow trap
While Alan goes to get the tackle box, the poles
The lake, smooth gray
Floating silver spoons of light

We climb down the hillside to the dock
Step into the borrowed aluminum boat
And head out, a knife
Cutting the morning silence

Toward Cathedral Peak,
Gleaming necks like feathered arrows
Sleek green Mergansers slice into water for prey
Alan casts the other way

But from afar
One duck catches the glitter of the wriggling bait
And in a terrible flash
Its feathered beauty is caught on the hook

He reels the bird in, carefully
Pulls the flapping struggling wild thing
Into the boat, cradling it in one arm and
Reaches needle-nosed pliers down the long throat

I hold my breath
Can't pull the hook out without doing more damage
His voice full of gravel or tears
He cuts the line as close to the hook as he can
And releases the terrified creature

Which dives, then rises up
And flies toward Mt. Tallac
The quiet of the morning
In his wake

Barbara Sabol

AFTER ONE OF THOSE SUMMER RAINS

quick and hard odors of the district dogs
lift from blades of grass like scented
braille chronicles of dominance
rolled newspaper rabbits chased
nearly caught juicy reports
my dogs read rapt slender
muzzles pressed deep
in a curb-side patch
though they've breathed in
many variations on these themes
one never tires of one's own
history sensitive brutes I imagine
the part they linger over longest
is of a fellow lost a cautionary saga
about the follies of freedom here
I don't tug saying *c'mon c'mon*
each chapter matters so
they learn by heart which corner
leads home except now noses lift
to a wet breeze streaming over hedge
and hoods of passing cars a fresh
account that holds us even
longer out in the ordinary evening air

Melissa Morpew

QUICKENING

Impromptu birds trapped
inside the cage of her heart,

this feathered-whispering, gentle as the back and forth
of a lady's Sunday fan;

the day lapsed into beauty, the way
the girl who came to be baptized in the silt-brown

river, slipped from the preacher's hands, floated briefly,
her white linen sleeves billowing out like wings

before she disappeared, carried away by undertow—
the river's hungry subtext—a girl

given over to grace, a pain
too exquisite, a storm-edged blue—

if pain could be a color, a sky.

Priscilla Atkins

SKY IN A JAR

Accept the gift of lavender milk.
Your best friend won't mind. He's dead now.
Though, if he were in the next room
it would make him happy to hear the extravagant wha-sh
as you tip the entire contents of the pewter jar
into the roiling bath,
the dappled oval of his claw-foot tub.

Step in. Sit down. Lie back.
Let the water swallow your neck.
Dream the little Chapel of the Rosary in Venice
where Matisse convalesced.
Huge yellow-lobed leaves floating up
a Mediterranean sky.

Sit forward: observe how ankles and wrists
separate from the rest, take on a new life.
They remind you of goldfish.
And the child in Mary Cassatt's painting
studying her feet in the bowl of water,
the mother wrapping the towel
around the child's waist.

Now, soak the Egyptian cotton cloth. Wring it once.
Wash your feet, your face, your hands.
Wash the dark, the tenuous.
Wash the place that does not cease to exist
even when the body drifts.

Watch water transpose in the lamp's glow.
Clouds merge, split apart. Decades
pass. The water, the milk,
the measuring spoons.
Two children running through summer.
Dream lavender. Milk in a bottle. Blue in a jar.
Clouds, water, sky; the taste of that color.

Priscilla Atkins

THE SUICIDE TREES

What if Dante's seventh circle middle ring stood on its head: the souls of those who hastened their own deaths turned to trees, sweet, not brambly and grabby; gentle, generous.

All of them: Vincent, Judy, Sylvia, Hart, Vachel, Marilyn—Nero, Marc Antony, Socrates.

Even the less visible: dentist with a paragraph tucked on the back page of the Times alive again as an Aspen,

overwhelmed mother curled in the shade-drawn house, that I unknowingly pedaled my little green bicycle past, become a Tupelo tree,

Vincent, you would be Almond, waking after the long night of white blossoms spilling into grass.

And tall, moonlit Sylvia, a Yew, of course.

The Romans, I think Walnut, tree of passion— or Ash for ambition.

Judy—Tulip Poplar.

Marilyn, modest Birch.

and dear Michael, late-night boy who rose at seven for months of Saturdays to earn a Chicago Botanical Gardens Master of Trees degree; though you loved dogwoods, lindens, for you, the Elm.

How you mourned the passing of the beauty that hugged the brick facade of your century-old home. "Maybe one more season," the tree surgeon had said—but you knew the ending would not be

pretty and spared it a long, unseemly demise.
 (Before your body was cremated, we did
not “go in back.” Now,
 I wish I would have touched your foot.)

Diane LeBlanc

PICASSO'S COYOTE

The prairie in southern Minnesota is never blue. Its seasons are salamander, turmeric, oatmeal, and snow.

I came full of blue from Wyoming where clouds rise like meringue from prairie crust. Before a storm, peaks rage blue against blue.

Here I look for the blue of bluestem and blue aster. For bluebirds in nesting boxes. For a wink of beetle blue and frozen lip.

I look for the coyote framed on the front page of the local newspaper. A coyote cast in bluish light by winter's beveled ice.

I'm no stranger to coyotes. On a prairie in Laramie, my dog and I once came over a rise and surprised a coyote snout deep in antelope ribs. It looked up, took one step back, and began to pace behind the carcass. That coyote never turned its bloody face from us. It waited until we backed down the hill, then lowered its head back into its bowl of antelope.

Before Picasso's blue period, he visited Spain and filled himself with the blue-black landscape of home. Back in Paris, his adopted home, he painted his subjects blue until he flushed Spain from his system. Gertrude Stein assures us, *This was always the way he lived his life*. Filling. Emptying. Filling. Emptying.

Filling is elementary science. Squeeze a few drops of food coloring into a white carnation's vase of water, and the carnation ruffles blue.

Emptying is not science. No measures. Only bodies moving through shadow and shifting light.

Connie Abston

ABOUT DOUBT

Consider the noun “acnestis,” defined as
“on an animal, the point that lies
between the shoulders and the lower back

that cannot be reached or scratched.” How fine
to hear it named, the familiar mound down the spine
that bristles in canine encounter, the mouthful

a careful mother seizes to carry her pups, or,
indelicately, the locked arch looming highest
during the male’s mount.

As part of the animal kingdom, I’ve scratched
my head looking for *our* “acnestis,” and that
is where I found it. Yes, here in the head

where feeds the flea of doubt,
breeding its colony of what-ifs,
that human itch, our certain uncertainty.

Jason Harmon

a shape to a feather

a motion that cannot
be possessed, Audubon
you asshole
I hop on out

after smothering with fumes
jabbed a
wire through eagle's
heart

then put it in a pose
wrote eloquently of
courage
I hop

& give way
I can fly
so creaks my black beak
(and I do)

the mistake that leaks
reason's sieve
there are places men
can't walk

(and I do)
I hop & hope
I am not too
much like you

Richard Taylor

SEMIOTICS

I found a dead cardinal
on the porch this morning,
legs scrunched to its red bosom.
Maybe the dogs.

Mowing in the afternoon,
I heard a spate of gunshots
through the scrim of trees,
loud and somewhere very close,

making me wonder
whether I should duck or rush
onto the side porch
to cower with the dogs.

Later, as I was trimming
by the bee boxes in the upper field,
the drones seemed hostile,
protective, humming menacingly
around their sugar water.

Have I been treating you right?

Richard Taylor

GRAND DESIGN

The oldest narratives have no name.
They come down to us in patterns
as natural and variable as rain,

needing little to thread them into sense.
Picture a farmer in the wide bottom
near Peaks Mill on Sunday mowing hay,

his engine droning along a stand
of waist-high fescue, sickling it down
in diminishing grids. A stricken doe

nearby, her tail aloft in white alarm,
a clutch of five or six turkey vultures
huddled and bent among the cuttings,

neither I nor my friend acknowledging
as we pass a formula so ancient, pat,
we do not need to see or verify to say
the word we not need say: fawn.

Barry George

FIVE PORTRAITS IN TANKA

the grocer
in his deli apron
eats a peach . . .
proclaims it
sweet as sugar

reunion—
that's
Old Mr. Hager's
son
Old Mr. Hager

something
in their faces
as the bus rolled
past on Chestnut
said *adrift*

an aging lineman
sits up in the night
with winter
in his ribs and legs
and knuckles

the beautiful
dark-haired woman
in my yoga class—
her bunion
on the same foot as mine

Romayne Rubinas

ALEXANDER & GRAYSUIT

*after Larry Levis
for Sasha D.*

The will of a man in that moment when
The man is thinking *bite* so intently over a deal
He seems to chomp at the bit, is profane.

Let me explain.

When the man moved on, the ink on the deal,
All through the silent winter,

Went on erasing beauty & tradition.

The man filling a briefcase with crisp shirts,
And the numbers crunched on his spreadsheet, are more real
Than his child lost & vacant back home.

Or the speculation hidden in the child, for that matter.

Members of the Subcommittee on the Absurd,
Let me illustrate this with a story, & ask you all
To stand on your heads in the corner, leaning
If you wish, on the wall, &, if you must
Buffered by a handful of aspirin
To ease the pounding, as it once did, long ago,
When there was only an agenda for one,
When the Future of Sons wasn't even a distant drumming.

In Palekh, before perestroika, a player convinced
The lacquer artists to break ground for a luxury hotel.
"Your sons will be entrepreneurs," he said, shading
His eyes toward the horizon. "Can't you see the tourists
Arriving in their Mercedes, ready to spend hard currency?"

Three generations of myopic eyes squinted down the road
But saw nothing like the West. On the horizon
There was only the dung smoke of village tradition.
And the artists handed over their sons who oversaw
The shallow cash flow, and the lone cornerstone
That sinks there now represents
The loss to the future of the skill in one lacquer box—

On which even an eyelash would stroke a bloated line—
Like the purified numbers of accountants
That lie in stock portfolios, & slowly
What had value in principle began to be replaced
By what had market value, by the foreseeable trend.
“Well, in principle, but . . .” became the standard
Speculative phrasing so that the artist
Standing with a frayed brush in hand would not guess
That the shirking of a few principles had already chipped
The gold leaf from his daily labors. “Those boxes I made,
They were more valuable than any tourists,
The skills, when I had an apprentice, were valuable, too,”
Is what the artist thought.
Yet it wasn’t more than a few years
Before the artist began to wonder, aloud
to himself before the others,
“Were the boxes real? Was my son real?”
Speculation could not be made to create
Or pounded into filigree to become part
Of the boxes’ delicate gold edging,
It therefore could not acquire artistry,
And resembled in significance nothing more
Than a tangle of brushstrokes when inspiration’s gone.

The artist survived because, eventually,
He stopped looking up.

The player had a deep understanding of artists
Their ignorance of markets & need for recognition;

That is how he bilked them all.

Members of the Committee on Platitudes, consider
Our own impoverishment & the diminishing of that art
From which, now, it is becoming impossible
To conceive anything when we imagine the irretrievable
Loss, in one generation, of centuries of knowledge.

That was not passé, that did not represent
An untenable lack of tradition, an absence in each
Of us, even in some child saying *Graysuit*

To the winter sky. Consider
The wealth of the player & the slow, erupting
Evolution of the artist, the legacy nothing,
Not even money, could diminish, almost as if
What could not be bought was something
Noble in the act of making, something

Incapable of calculation.

Then imagine, in your investment portfolios,
The exact moment in the future when speculation
Might rise & creep like a child into a heated garage
And then, intentionally, into the cab of a car,
And imagine further that speculation in the car
In this garage is, for the man toting a laptop
On the train, something like a write-off,
The man thinks, when opportunities are scarce,
Something that will not carry the weight
Of its own security
In a briefcase, the child decides & so demonstrates
This by switching on the ignition, and continuing
To breathe as sleep comes on & less so until he is gone.

Old fiduciaries, bottom-liners, walking tax shelters,
Book-cookers frustrated with the discrepancies

Between numbers, where Our Lady of Grain tastes just
Like the tin she is made of,
Let's burn the ledger books & sweep them from
The stove's hearth.
Let's do it right now before common sense returns
Like the ticker tape litter of a closed trading floor.
Because what's the point?
I keep going to the mall where no one's content,
And contributing to the economy;
And besides, behind speculation choking on exhaust
Is a door that only leads into another blind corner,
Another erected & poorly insulated trap, where
A man named Graysuit & a man named Alexander
Imagined they'd stand tall and wave to their heirs.

Barbara Rockman

LETTER FROM GEORGIA O'KEEFFE TO ALFRED STIEGLITZ UPON SEEING HIS PHOTOGRAPH OF HER HANDS

Be calm, Alfred. No,
I am a plain woman. I rinse dishes,
pull weeds and unleash the dogs on dirt trails.
I sleep in a narrow bed. I rise early.
These are hands that mix paint,
decipher sky. With these hands
I scratch my head at the improbable.
I twist them under my breasts in sleep.
Fisted against my stomach, they fly
from my body in dream. Hands
at the tips of wings, Alfred.
How you splayed my fingers,
insisted I caress the absent forelock,
empty sockets, each stone molar,
imagining the horse's rough tongue.
I want nothing of death, Alfred, nothing
of absence. These elegant hands cup seeds,
cut back echinacea, snip herbs for the sauce.
They tug knotted shirts from a basket, shake them
into light, clamp them to the line with bleached pins.
What can a man know of a woman's hands?

Sue Terry Driskell

THROWING POTS IN MY DREAMS

I place a lump of wedged clay on the wheel,
push my thumbs into the center, open it.

I raise thick walls into a cylinder,
press clay between fingers on each hand.

But somehow in my dream the walls don't thin,
they slump below or collapse to the center.

Again I try, but throwing rings fail to spin up the pot.
It was to be beautiful. But it's not.

Were it porcelain I could understand—
too much water, clay turns to slurry.

It was, instead, rich dark stoneware full of grog
stinging my palms, my fingertips.

Tonight maybe I'll return to the studio.

Perhaps I'll be pouring glaze over crocks,
stack the kiln, fire it up.

How hot will I burn in my sleep?
In my dream?

Will I be throwing off the quilt,
reaching for a glass of water?

Gail Carson Levine

I RAISE MY CUP

I breathe in the scent of mint tea, brewed
in my well water, which tastes the way New York City
water used to. Pewter sleet is slanting down here,
sixty miles north. The crow on its branch doesn't know
the seasons. I wish a wish for spring internal,
and the copper teakettle says, Let it be so.

Next year at this time I'll go to Amsterdam to visit
Rembrandt's self-portrait when he was old and broken,
his face a flickering lantern, his eyebrows arched
in shock. What did Rembrandt see?

I raise my cup, sample, sip, and swallow.
I used to be a city person, but I could be anything now.
I was once a coffee drinker too and a striver;
a moth flutters above my fingers.

Gail Carson Levine

THE RIVER LETHE

The fourth graders crowd around
Cassandra's fortune-telling tent
at the state fair. A slender hand
opens the flap.
"Come in, children."

They file inside.
The tent's a fire hazard, lit by a dozen
candles, but Cassandra knows
it will never catch. Incense
smolders. Only Fletcher,
son of an acupuncturist,
recognizes the smell.

Cassandra sits behind a rickety table
that holds a crystal ball and a deck
of tarot cards. She's weeping.
They're so young.
"Who's first?" she asks.

"Me. Sara Allen."
Their teacher said to go alphabetically.
Sara is tall for her age, with a gap
between her two front teeth.
Cassandra keeps herself
from brushing the girl's long bangs away
from her eyes. "Don't marry the boy
with the pony tail. Remember."

"Will I have children?" Sara asks.
"Will I be a scientist?"

"If you remember. Next."

Grinning, Max Barshansky steps forward.
This is a game.

“July 20, ten years from now, stay inside.
Lock your door. Remember.”

The children come to her, one by one.
She tells them how to avoid tragedy,
ordinary misfortune, dissatisfaction,
disappointment, self-recrimination.

“Never go to Oklahoma.”

“Everything does not depend on you.”

“Eat your vegetables.”

Gradually, her tears, her dolorous
Remember seeps into them.

They repeat her words. Murmurs
fill the tent.

The last child, Tyrone Williams, comes to her.
How straight he stands.

“Pick the navy if you must, not the army.”

He nods. The navy. The navy.

The children leave
and blink in the bright sunlight.

A woman in overalls is spraying a bed of poppies.
The water runs in front of the tent
in a sparkling stream too wide to jump over.

The children step in somberly,
but by the middle they’re stamping their feet
and laughing. Max shouts, “Look!
The roller coaster.” They run toward it.

Shelley Puhak

TELL

You say, *Tell it to me.*
Tell me a Once Upon a Time.

So: Once upon a time the sky was falling.
Once upon a time there was a baby who lived
and one who didn't.

Let me tell you: there is so much
we are asked to carry.

Once upon a time the sky was shifting stone. A woman
carried water uphill, bucket by bucketful, on marble mornings,
heavily veined, through the slate of evening.

Let me tell you: that is sky enough.

Once upon a time there was a house that was very,
very crooked. Once upon a time there were dishes.
And a tide. There were dead stars who still sent light.

Let me tell you: filaments stretch between voids.
Every fairy tale requires a bridge.

Once upon a time we lived under this bridge, under a robin's egg
cotton coverlet, squeezing light out of rock, squinting
into storybooks, your body seamless against mine.

Let me tell you: of all I carry, you are
the lightest, snapped to my hip.

Shelley Puhak

WHY SUBTERRANEAN ANIMALS EVOLVE EYELESS

1. G.O. 42 (Tagansky Command Point), 1956

They enter and leave in darkness, commuting
to the complex on secret metro trains. Two hundred

feet below a Moscow apartment the coffee is served bland
and watery; to keep awake, they finger-drum pop songs

on the reinforced steel walls, hunch summer away
stacking cases of vodka and tinned sardines,

roll drums of distilled water, enough
to keep the Kremlin alive for 90 days.

Albino rats in the next sewer-tunnel pause,
sightless eyes narrowing to slits.

2. Dunloskin Wood, Argyll, 3250 BC

Still making use of wisdom teeth and
appendix, bewildered by his vestigial tail
he lives in wattle-and-daub,
thatched roof and cobbled floor.

His woman spends whole days in
the heather and straw bed, warming
their newborn, scratching at
parasites we cannot yet see.

The infant: his corneas are gummy,
and the aperture of his iris
sticks. He sees what's in front of his face:
the bulb of his mother's nose or
the constant blossom of her breast.
Only this.

3. Day Room in the Foster Clinic, 1920

Four neckties, two bowties, and one ascot
between them, seven ex-airmen crowd
the billiards table. The light is ceaseless.
They have stopped seeing it.

One is still stuck in a graveyard spin.
Another hefts a cue, sets up his shot in the dark
of memory. His precision is terrifying.

Cole A. Bellamy

ALLIGATOR

Behind a gas station off I-75
They claim to have the largest
Alligator in the world
This is a lie

But they do have a very big alligator
Living in a ditch
Surrounded by
A short chain-link fence

For five dollars they'll
Let you feed it a piece
Of rotten chicken
And for another dollar

You can take a picture so
You can tell the people back home
About how you fed rotten chicken
To the largest alligator on earth

It is still a lie
The largest gator
The real one
Lives in a cave under the everglades

It is bigger
Than a whale
That can swallow
Other whales

It has lungs so strong
And a heart so slow
It only comes up to breathe
Every six-hundred years

The last time it poked nostrils

Through the black water
Was just before
Columbus set sail

The gator exhaled
A great breath
That blew into the gulf
And became a hurricane

Then it inhaled and made
A long slow wind
That pulled Spanish ships
Across the ocean

It has not eaten
Since before
The first tribes of Neanderthals
Were exiled from Africa

That is the largest alligator in the world
It ate the dinosaurs
It saw the continents break
It is older than God

It sleeps now
But when it wakes
It will snap up our cities
And shake this land to pieces

Kimberly Long Cockroft

JUNIPER TREE

1.

The holiday I fell down the well
at the Juniper Tree resort in Hua Hin
I learned to love leeches fruit
eyeballs in red hairy shells
piled high on the communal table
Adults spoke of leprosy
floods and malnutrition
and Beatrice and I whispered plans
as we sipped soup

2.

At the Juniper Tree
Thai sisters in habits like black
and white hermit crabs crawled the beach
but we put on pink suits

Beatrice's suit had a little ruffle
She was English and said
Jolly good when we covered
the first jellyfish with sand
No longer a bloated belly
but a little domed house
we decorated with shells

All up the strip
Beatrice and I buried jellyfish
We giggled on the way
to dress for dinner
Who would step on them
Who would be stung
Would their faces look like this
We pulled out our tongues
rolled our eyes and grimaced

My sister said Beatrice got spanked
jolly hard but nobody struck me
since I'd stepped in the well

3.

The brimming well was covered in moss
They believed I thought it was grass
and that's why I stepped in it
But I knew it was water
The surface pricked with tiny fish

I didn't know
how far I'd fall
how the water would be so silent
like a hand closing
the bottom so far away

Adam Houle

THE BESIEGED ARE OFTEN SAVED BY WATER

After he hand jacks the pump
the spigot groans and cold water fills
his cupped hands. Then overruns them,
splashes off finely ground gravel.
Misty spray rises. It's a good well
he has, a deep line that doesn't freeze
or lend the bitter tang of metal
to the pool leaking from his pooled
hands. At the tree line, elms picket
his clearing, their roots reach
for the cistern's steady walls
to breach then drain its contents.
When he draws the cupped water
upward, the cuffs of his shirt darken,
and he drinks too the dirt washed
from the palms' grooves. From the side,
it looks like prayer. From behind,
like his chest hitches, like he's sobbing.

Mary Makofske

THREE ELEGIES FOR THE WHITE MARE

Buried in the far pasture, the white mare
I used to pass as I walked.
No matter how I called or whistled,
she seldom looked up.

The snow melts and the grass grows long
in the field where the mare grazed.
After the birds and leaves have gone,
my neighbor finds a nest
lined with a riddle in its hollow
of fine, dark twigs:

white coil of hair
from her mare's tail.

The woman carries the nest
inside, sets it near her drawings,
sculptures of shells, wings, bones.

For weeks she lives with the nest
that recalls the tail flicking flies,
twitch of flesh beneath the curry brush.
And on her palm, the inquiring lips.

One day with pencil and paper
twig by twig she weaves a nest.
Strand by strand she braids the hair.
She props the nest she has made
beside the other.

I carry the images home:
coil of white hair, artist, drawing, nest,
mare I never rode, or even touched.

How long inside its shell

the poem stirs and changes,
then taps its way out.

Still, the absence we pass in the field
will not look up.

Mary Makofske

&

It used to be cicadas
swarming through poems.
Now ampersands.

Tools to ratchet up
the language. Symbols
that never made

the musical cut.
Talisman to ward off critics.
Tattoo of a secret cult.

Burrs stuck in the lines,
braided magnets, fish hooks
snaring my gaze.

Cracks draining the vase
of nouns and verbs.
I imagine a workshop

training poets to turn
them out, as prisoners
turn out license plates.

Oh, *cicadas*, at least
we heard your buzz-saw,
could touch your brittle wings.

Shy *and*, scorned as weak,
hunted almost to extinction,
will ampersand replace

your useful blind stitch?
At each crow of that coxcomb,
I miss your silence.

Kathleen Flenniken

HANFORD: THE SECRET LIVES OF SECRETS

. . . But he found it too much for his discretion to keep such a secret; so he went out into the meadow, dug a hole in the ground, and stooping down, whispered the story, and covered it up. Before long a thick bed of reeds sprang up in the meadow and as soon as it had gained its growth, began whispering the story, and has continued to do so, from that day to this, every time a breeze passes over the place.

—The barber from the story of Midas (*Bulfinch's Mythology*)

Richland dads had one trait in common—they never talked about work. They stepped off the blue buses that carried them 40 miles out to “the Area” and back, or pulled up with the carpool, dropped the badge and dosimeter on the counter, or on the back of a dining chair, and didn’t talk about work. They whistled a tune, tousled a daughter’s hair, kissed the wife, checked the tomato plants or watered the grass, or poured a beer, and didn’t talk about work.

Ms. Taylor: I should probably apologize. I have listened to all these stories, and mine is just another one of those, but I have waited thirty-six years to be up here, and so I am going to have my peace, thank you.

Dr. Michaels: Take your time.

Ms. Taylor: Okay. My father brought my mother and my oldest brother out here in 1944 from Tennessee, and I’m not sure if he worked at Oak Ridge. I don’t even know if it was there then. But I know he worked for DuPont back there. And he came out here looking for a new way of life, and was real excited about it, and he was very proud to work [here].

When war broke out in Europe in 1939, the field of nuclear physics, which had flourished in a culture of shared information, suddenly moved underground. American scientists recognized that the Germans and perhaps the Japanese were working toward a nuclear weapon, and reasoned that the U.S. must build it first or be terrorized by it. The nuclear physics community approached Franklin Roosevelt. In 1942, the Manhattan Project was signed off by the President. The billion-dollar program was so secret, not even Vice President Truman

knew it existed. Enrico Fermi achieved a nuclear chain reaction inside a small pile at the University of Chicago in the fall of 1942, and the race was on.

General Lesley Groves found the perfect location for plutonium production on the Columbia River in the remote high-desert shrub-steppe near Hanford in southeastern Washington State. Groves strong-armed DuPont into undertaking design and construction. After a quick eviction of the few orchardists and townspeople, they broke ground. Every night more men, and women too, stepped off the trains in Pasco from all over the country. At the height of construction in 1944, fifty thousand lived and worked on site at Hanford. They built giant mess halls and men's and women's dormitories, stores, theaters, and a beer hall with windows at ground level so tear gas could be lobbed easily to quell any mayhem. They built the adjacent town of Richland. All to keep their workers housed and happy, despite frequent dust storms so fierce they were nicknamed *termination winds*: employees quit in droves and blew out of town.

Only a small fraction of them knew what any of it was. Beyond the fact that their work supported the war effort, laborers and administrators and clerks and tradesmen remained ignorant. No one was permitted to speak about the job offsite. Construction crews on one face of a reactor knew nothing about the other parts. And an unidentifiable creation emerged: hundreds of buildings spread across hundreds of square miles; concrete walls five feet thick; miles of pipes and ductwork; remote operating cranes; periscopes and the first use of industrial closed-circuit television in the world; the highest level of construction techniques. Workers handled radioactive materials unaware, but strict operating procedures minimized contamination. Engineers bandied code words like "base metal" and "product." What was going on out there? "They're building toilet paper factories," went the old Hanford joke. "Dad sneaks it home from work."

On July 16, 1945, in White Sands, New Mexico, the world's first atomic blast was detonated in secret. The fuel for that bomb was Hanford plutonium. On August 6, 1945, an atomic bomb fueled with enriched uranium from Oak Ridge was dropped on Hiroshima, Japan, by order of President Truman. On August 9, an atomic bomb fueled with Hanford plutonium destroyed most of Nagasaki. Japan surrendered on August 15, ending the war. Hanford workers recognized immediately after the Hiroshima blast what it was they

had created in their Washington desert outpost. The world descended on this secret place.

This is the history passed down from Hanford that I learned, unquestioned. It all happened well before I was born, even before my parents moved to Richland. The story of the Manhattan Project became a kind of creation myth to me. Like the Biblical creation story, it involved awesome power and a miracle, long, long ago. Loss of innocence. Terrible consequence. It explained why we were here and who we were.

But the story did not stop at Nagasaki. The arms race was on, after the Soviets (with stolen secrets) detonated their first atomic bomb in August, 1949. Hanford experienced another growth spurt, this time under the guidance of General Electric. More reactors at Hanford—nine by 1963—and more processing plants were rushed into service to produce more and more plutonium. The how and the how much were secret. The habit of secrecy was now second nature to the citizens of Richland, self-dubbed “the Atom Bustin’ Village of the West.”

Ms. Taylor: And when I was a little girl and I said, what do you do at work, Dad? He said, “I can’t tell you what I do.” It was very secret out there. So we never talked about it. We never talked about his work. Just every day when he drove off to work I waved good-bye and he came home at night.

The culture of secrecy had grown beyond the obvious need to keep the atom bomb out of enemies’ hands. It had become something more even than the Atomic Energy Commission demanded. By 1946, the Atomic Energy Act recognized that, “The dissemination of scientific and technical information relating to atomic energy should be permitted and encouraged so as to provide that free interchange of ideas and criticism which is essential to scientific progress.” But Hanford management did not believe in free interchange of information. Secrecy became a tool for controlling its workforce during the day and a cultural crutch for evenings and weekends at home.

Meanwhile, Hanford scientists noted an alarming trend in radiation levels in all Hanford’s environmental pathways, including air, surface water, the soil column, groundwater, flora, game, fowl, river sediments, fish. With the dawn of above-ground nuclear testing, radiation levels only went up, but beyond that, Hanford activities

produced visible radioruthenium in the air, unacceptable levels of beta and radiophosphorus in Columbia River bottom fish. Mosquitoes and tumbleweeds carried radiation. By the early 1950s, Hanford researchers had discovered radioiodine concentrated in local cows' milk. And yet Herbert Parker, chief of the Health Physics program at Hanford, made a decision not to inform the public, not to close the river to fishing, not to ban drinking local milk.

It was most likely the fear of fear itself that drove Hanford officials to secrecy. It was easy to justify secrecy on the grounds of national defense, and privately, to reassure themselves that the public was not educated enough to make environmental decisions, that leaving decisions to the scientists was the safe and intelligent thing to do.

And those other exposures, the industrial exposures that came of human error and the everyday hazards of working in a complex and dangerous plant, those were secret too.

Ms. Taylor: Well, in 1963 my father's co-worker became very ill with pancreatic cancer and died. And my father was very upset about that. I was thirteen at the time. That happened in August of '63. In December he came down with what he thought was the flu. He was never sick. I don't ever remember the man even having a cold. My mother has later told me that she thought he was depressed about his friend Del passing away. In March, the end of March of '64, my father experienced some severe pains. He went to the doctor, and they put him in the hospital. This was the beginning of April. And they ran some tests. And said they couldn't figure out what was wrong. And he probably just, you know, he was sick. And it turned out he had pancreatic cancer. He ended up going to Kadlec Hospital, and he was in the hospital for thirty-three days, and he passed away at the age of forty-six.

Household hints in the manner of "Hints from Heloise" began appearing in the local newspaper, with sturdy, avuncular advice from Hanford such as, "The Medical Department recommends use of iodized salt" and "Trucked-in milk is pasteurized and preferred." It's impossible to know who planted these nuggets, but in hindsight they seem to correspond with contamination discoveries by Herb Parker's Health Physics group. They had determined in secret that "the administration of inert iodine prior to the giving of carrier-free radioiodine very significantly reduced the uptake of the latter by the thyroid." Parker then encouraged "promotion of the use of iodized salt

though public education.” I clearly remember my mother advising me that salt with iodine was so much better for me than salt without. And those mosquito trucks that flooded our neighborhoods with clouds of DDT? They were extra vigilant, perhaps because Hanford field research proved that mosquitoes could carry radiation.

When a community is successfully conditioned to keep secrets, secrecy no longer requires effort. Secrets become the easiest thing in the world to keep. And why would we question the hidden workings of “the Area” anyway? No one would disagree that nuclear scientists know more about nuclear science than the average gym teacher. And didn’t our scientists live among us? Weren’t they our dads and our neighbors and our best friends’ dads? This was their home too. They would never have fouled their own nests.

J. Robert Oppenheimer wrote in 1947, “To keep completely secret the design of the Hanford piles I think has never been a controversial thing. To keep secret the fact that we don’t know how to do some things may . . . be a very serious hindrance to getting the insight, the bright ideas and the progress which would come if a much wider group of people could be interested.” In 1948, the Atomic Energy Commission seemed to have Herbert Parker himself in mind when they warned, “As the industrial and public applications of AEC’s future operations will be increasingly a public and not a secret matter, the sooner the present clumsy secrecy of Health Physics techniques is modified the better.” And yet the culture of secrecy at Hanford did not change.

Ms. Taylor: I remember at one point, and I don’t know how long before that it was, I remember him being sent home from work for several days, and in the bathroom there was a little box that he had to send every day a sample off to work, whatever work was. And that I think they did for three days. I don’t know whether it was stool samples or urine samples. And he used to wear his badge, and I used to ask him about his badge, and he said it measured radiation. And I thought it was like a thermometer. And he said no, it was inside. They kept his badge because, I remember him saying it had been, he had gotten too much of something. I’m assuming it was radiation.

We knew we were in good hands. The plants had an excellent safety record. While Los Alamos suffered fatalities due to radiation incidents, Hanford had a clean slate. No radiation casualties. Our scientists testified that the river was safe, air and sediment were within

conservative limits, and Richland was a wonderful, friendly, affordable place to raise a family, with good schools and safe, pleasant streets.

Ms. Taylor: Anyway, he did die May 1 of 1964, and it was very traumatic, of course, because he didn't come home from work anymore, and I was very upset about that. The GE newsletters stopped coming. Everything from GE . . . [I still have] his safety awards and [. . .] his five-, ten-, fifteen-year pin. [. . .] He didn't get his twenty-year pin because he died on that twentieth year . . .

We sometimes felt like easy targets to an outside world that feared the bomb and blamed us for it. Anti-nuke activist types collected river water in their mason jars in the 1970s and 80s, trying to catch us in some ugly secret wrong-doing with their amateurish methods. That was possibly the ultimate insult—that our adversaries were taken seriously by the media and the general public. Sometimes a documentary crew would appear, nosing around at the high school reunions in August. They couldn't resist a photo of our mascot, a white mushroom cloud roiling up out of a gold letter R, or some forty-year-old drunk alumnus singing the Bomber fight song. There were compromising photos of pretty cheerleaders dancing in the formation of a bomb, posing in front of a depiction of a mushroom cloud. In *National Geographic*. In *The New York Times*. But what did outsiders know of our patriotism and dedication to a supremely difficult (and life-threatening) task—protecting a nation?

Ms. Taylor: But in 1977 my mother received a letter from a doctor Thomas Mancuso . . . representing the University of Pittsburgh, and his title was research professor . . . He wrote . . . in reference to a research study being conducted by the University of Pittsburgh, Graduate School of Public Health, relative to prior employees of atomic energy facilities.

In Richland, there was an “us” and “them” mentality that grew stronger as the nation—through the era of the Vietnam War and Watergate—grew less willing to swallow “official” truth. Even the accepted version of the atomic victory over Japan was ripe for revisiting. All the questioning and reevaluation may have been purgative for the country, but turned Hanford (and the rest of the nuclear community) more conservative, more reactive. In the old days we didn't question Hanford because we had strong faith in the government, in science, and in our neighbors; now we didn't question

Hanford because it was taboo.

Ms. Taylor: And they asked if my mother would take the time to report what happened to my father, as much as she could remember. Now, this is thirteen years after-the-fact. And she's kept all these letters, and her response, as well. So I have that. She said, she told me recently, she suffers a little bit from dementia, and I didn't want her to come tonight because I didn't want her to hear me say that, but she has a lot of trouble with the here and the now, but she can certainly remember 1964 and all of that, and she never skips a beat when she thinks about it. It affected my family severely. She said that she was afraid to send this information because back then you didn't talk about work, and it was scary.

It's reassuring to tie one's identity to a community. I am, and I think this is irreversible, an American. I am a Westerner who has always had a chip on my shoulder about the East Coast, where they want their national defense but they don't want the whiff of its waste anywhere near. I am even now, God help me, a Richland Bomber. I am the girl who grew up on Cottonwood Drive, who felt a swell of pride whenever she thought of our town that wasn't like any other town. We were smarter. We were doing more important work. We were built from the ground up by pure and uncompromising and verifiable Principles of Science.

But some of my convictions were built on fundamental truths that weren't truths. And now, this late in life, part of my identity is vulnerable, shifting.

Ms. Taylor: You know, I guess they knew that it was something going on for [World War II and later the cold] war but they didn't know what they were doing, and that's something I wanted to say. It seems like some things have changed and some things haven't. Some people are still afraid. And I don't understand that. I mean, I have something to say, and I don't care. I will say it.

Since 1986, under public pressure from sources outside the Hanford community, the Department of Energy has released 400,000 pages of previously-classified documents from Hanford. These documents contain revelations about environmental contamination that reject decades of Hanford reassurances and rhetoric. They reveal ethical missteps of sometimes breathtaking scale. And they demonstrate that everywhere, and from the beginning, information was a commodity

guarded as zealously as plutonium. Information, whenever possible, was broken into smaller, safer-to-handle chunks. The control of information certainly limited the potential for breaches of national security and public relations damage, but it also compromised the purest product on site—good science.

Ms. Taylor: Anyway, the second letter came after she responded, and it thanked her for responding and appreciated her time, and they said they would check into the medical aspect of what she said. And then it says we are attempting to evaluate every former worker carefully, and it is help from folks like you that keeps us going. And that is in April 1977. And we have heard nothing. I don't know. Maybe that was just for their own benefit. But nobody ever talked about it. You know, to have an important person in your life just disappear and it was like we didn't know why.

All those years—decades—that we honored and guarded Hanford's secrets, we did not recognize the true costs of keeping them: good science; the safety of workers and their families and citizens downwind; the dignity that comes of aligning belief with truth. And—no less important—the right to know our story, the good and the bad; to own our story.

Ms. Taylor: I started to leave earlier because I saw all your cards and I thought, you know, nobody's going to want to hear what I have to say. But I looked at this form that I was going to fill out, and it seems to be for people who are suffering from things now. This doesn't seem to apply to me. I don't work at Hanford and I don't want to work out there. But, I don't know, how do we get compensated for the loss of a family member? I know that gentleman that spoke and you said, he's talking about his brother-in-law, I think, I guess I need some answers. I'm not looking for money. I'm looking for some kind of peace of mind. How do we get compensated?

Dr. Michaels: First, ma'am . . . one of the questions you raised was around the letter your mother received in 1977, how she put her heart into that response and never heard anything. In fact I would like you to tell her from me that in fact her response was very useful. Dr. Thomas Mancuso was a researcher at the University of Pittsburgh, did a series of very important studies on the health of workers at nuclear weapons facilities. And at least one very, very important study here at Hanford. And that study is one of the pieces of evidence that we have sent to the White House to support this effort. So, in fact, your

mother's contribution, you know, is appreciated and very important.

Ms. Taylor: I mean, she hasn't been lost in the shuffle of papers?

Dr. Michaels: No. The information she sent was important. It's a shame no one got back to her to tell her that. But that was helpful, and hopefully out of this will come a process and a program that we will be able to bring back to you next year or the year after, whenever it does pass, to address these issues. I can't tell you what the details will be. We are far from there.

Ms. Taylor: That's good.

Dr. Michaels: But thank your mother for us, for helping.

Ms. Taylor: I will. Thank you.

And now that many of those secrets have been revealed, and we've had twenty-five years to weigh and measure them and test their persistence and our own responses; now that some of us have accepted them as truth and others have turned away or rejected them outright; now that we must learn a new, darker story about our part in history and in the future; we have also been forced to let go of that Hanford that fed us and spoke for us and defined us for more than 40 years. All of the production facilities are now closed and scheduled for decommission. Now we must act on our new knowledge. The largest environmental cleanup in the world is dragging forward at Hanford, and falling prey to setback after setback: political, technical, scientific, regulatory. The image of Hanford is irreparably tarnished. Most painful of all, Hanford is being forgotten. I meet Americans, even Westerners, who've never heard of the place. Isn't the act of forgetting a kind of involuntary secret-keeping?

Our secrets are undone by human weakness; if not by indiscretion, then ignorance, or hubris, or misplaced loyalty. Sometimes the secrets themselves cannot be contained. Either way, the reeds whisper from that day to this. Or, as in this story—the story of Hanford—sagebrush and blowing dust whisper. Tumbleweeds. Our Columbia River. Our neighbors' graves.

NOTES

Ms. Lynn Taylor's testimony (in italics) appeared first in a transcript of a public meeting called by Dr. David Michaels of the Department of Energy at the Federal Building in Richland, Washington, on February 3, 2000 (p. 128–134). This meeting was the first opportunity for active and former Hanford employees and their

families to speak publicly about health concerns.

Dr. Thomas Mancuso's landmark research, referred to in Ms. Taylor's testimony, is a controversial study of mortality rates among Hanford workers: Mancuso TF, Stewart A, Kneale G. "Radiation exposures of Hanford workers dying from cancer and other causes." *Health Physics*. 1977 Nov; 33:369–385.

The quotations from the Atomic Energy Commission and J. Robert Oppenheimer, as well as specifics about environmental contamination in the vicinity of Hanford and the appearance of helpful hints in the local news, are documented in Michele Stenehjem Gerber's book, *On the Home Front: The Cold War Legacy of the Hanford Nuclear Site* (University of Nebraska Press: 1992, 1997, 2007). It is the bible of Hanford environmental history and organizes the information contained in tens of thousands of declassified Hanford documents into a narrative that is exhaustive, meticulous, readable, and neutral. Ms. Gerber is my hero.

Jennifer Ronsman

LAST WORDS

If I had died on that plane, I would have weighed twenty pounds less than I do now, but whoever found my backpack might not have thought so if they found it somewhere on the crash site, away from my body, and in it nothing but a copy of *Will Shortz's Favorite Crossword Puzzles* and an enormous, half-empty bag of assorted Lindor truffles. I would have been wearing the necklace I bought in Kilkenny one year prior. And the white, useless sandals with heels virtually worn as thin as onion skins—the ones that the airport security made me remove even though I protested that there was logically no room for a bomb or anything else to be implanted in the rubber. I would have been wearing a loose tank top and a pair of cheap sunglasses. I would not have washed my hair that morning because we woke up late and left Todd's sister's apartment in a rush. No mascara, no light layer of foundation. My fingers would have been as clean as the day I was born, bare of the rings I had worn every day since I turned 18. Rings that had been left on the counter in the airport back in Cincinnati. A fistful of snotty Kleenexes would have been balled in my pocket—remnants of the angry discussion we had had at the Charlottesville airport before boarding.

I can picture Todd, too. He would have been carrying comic books and copies of *Rolling Stone* or *Spin*. He would have been wearing khaki cargo shorts, frayed and ripped around the bottom edges. And the Weezer t-shirt I had given him when we had just started dating. His blonde hair would have been too short to be messy. But he would have had a thin carpet of stubble across his face and a hint of sunburn coloring his fair skin. Our luggage would have caught up to us days later from its place on the plane headed for Pittsburgh, but at the crash site, it would have been difficult to identify us by any personal effects if our identification was somehow displaced from our bodies.

We would have died a pair of unattractive, anonymous tourists. We'd both have died tired. Exhausted. We would have died dirty, unprepared and unpacked—a perfectly unfinished mess.

The news about the problems with our plane came as suddenly and

surprisingly as a hiccup. It was as normal a plane ride as I had ever had, except for the fact that Todd and I had been a few minutes shy of missing takeoff. I was busy counting the reasons why I hated him; why it was ridiculous that I even came with his family—including his Dad, who refused to eat anywhere but Ponderosa, and if not Ponderosa, then heat lamps, sneeze guards, and nine different starch-based entrees must be available wherever we decided to dine—to visit a sister in Virginia whom I had never met and knew nothing about except she worked at a salon and collected Coca-Cola memorabilia; why it was imperative that when the plane's wheels connected with the ground in Madison we call a complete and permanent end to our relationship.

We had no one sitting next to us. There was no conversation between us. I tore the foil from the truffles and stuffed chocolates in my mouth two at a time. I chewed loudly and obnoxiously, and threw the wrappers somewhere in the vicinity of his feet. I pulled the crossword book from my bag and drew a devilish moustache on Will Shortz's face. I clicked the pen top incessantly. Todd ignored me. Wispy clouds zoomed by the window, harmless and silent. Low conversation buzzed under the rush of the plane engines. I flipped through the booklet and landed on a crossword I had done already and traced over the letters. I was tired of thinking.

Then came the voice of the pilot.

Ladies and gentlemen, there's a little bit of a problem with our hydraulic system.

My hand paused at the top joint of an *A*. Todd looked up from his magazine.

The conversation behind us, a nagging, ridiculous argument about attending a mother-in-law's birthday party, halted.

Passengers paused with Coke cans half-lifted to their mouths; paused in mid-turn of pages in the *Sky Mall* catalogue; turned away, mouths agape, from the picturesque swirl of sky outside their windows.

Someone had suddenly lifted the needle on a record that had been predictably winding around a tired old turntable.

No need to worry yet, but please be aware this is a potentially life-threatening situation. We'll have more information in a minute or two.

Then, suddenly, the needle was placed on a different record—something much higher energy, much more frantic. An eruption of small panic behind us—people calling for the stewardess in shrill,

urgent voices, mothers quieting their children, seats being kicked, bags being packed for some undisclosed destination.

I turned to Todd. Our mouths hung ajar just slightly, our books lay still and open on our laps like hymnals. *Hydraulic problem*. I thought of this guy I went to high school with who had a complicated Norwegian last name that started with a W. When pronounced correctly it kind of rhymed with *hydraulic*. My best friend had a crush on that guy. He wore converse sneakers and hung out in the art room and later in life became a minister, or something. My dad, a structural engineer, had once had a conversation with a bunch of his work friends about hydraulic systems while we were at a father-daughter campout when I was sixteen—I remember specifically, because I was annoyed that he would spend time on such a stupid thing when we were supposed to be having fun: *my name is Gary and I like to talk about boring things like hydrawwwwlic systems* I had said, drawing out the W.

What did this tell me about the plane problem? Nothing. Nothing. I knew nothing.

What do we do? I asked Todd, finally.

I don't know.

What is a hydraulic system?

I don't know.

What do you mean you don't know?

Why should I know what to do? The pilot doesn't know what to do. I'm not piloting the plane. Why should I know what to do?

You're not taking this seriously. Stop being an idiot. This is serious.

I know it's fucking serious.

You're not acting like it's fucking serious.

What do you expect me to do, exactly?

Act like you're scared.

I'm not scared.

We might die.

Shut up.

And then there was a bump in the atmosphere. A scattering of small yelps. A small spot of turbulence, unrelated, probably, to the potential hydraulic problem. The flight attendant fluttered up and down the aisle, pressing her hands in the direction of the floor to indicate that we should all relax and not panic. Earlier in the flight, I had commented to Todd that she looked like the secretary from

Ferris Bueller's Day Off. She had the same round, fleshy face, the same puffy orange hair, the same plastic smile and high-pitched, nasal Midwestern voice. When she moved about the cabin she kept a permanent, eerie smile on her face. She appeared unruffled in the face of this potential disaster, as if this were something planned—yet her eyes were wide, urgent circles darting around the cabin and unable to focus on anything. She spoke in fragments: *fine. Yes. Okay, uhuh, yes we'll be okay, uhuh*. She hurriedly collected cans and beverages. I couldn't finish my cranberry juice in time. Maybe I could. Maybe I'd have to. I'd been having problems with Urinary Tract Infections recently anyway. Would they know that if I died? How embarrassing. I chugged the juice, and it whirled around in angry circles somewhere in the caverns of my stomach. I thought of a skit I'd seen once on *Mad TV*: a guy in an insane asylum pleading with an orderly for cranberry juice, and the orderly says *yeah, we got cranberry juice. Ya think your diaper can handle it?*

I unzipped my backpack and shoved the candy and the crossword book back inside, and then began to nervously paw through the items again.

What are you doing?

Nothing.

What are you looking for?

Nothing. Just leave me alone. I'm just. Just. I don't know.

The loudspeaker came to life again. Ferris Bueller lady: *Ladies and gentleman, we seem to be unable to fix the problem in our hydraulic system. We'll have to come up with a safety plan for the rest of the flight. Please make sure all sharp objects are stowed away in your carry-on luggage—this means all pens, pencils, glasses with lenses that may shatter; or anything else that might fly out and hit someone in the eye or something like that. Please do this quickly and efficiently, and we'll follow with further instructions.*

We were being instructed on what to do in order to prevent lost lives. Maybe our own.

Pictures flooded my mind: anonymous people floating on hard plastic life rings; yellow rubber slides dangling like tongues out the sides of a cartoon airplane; a newscaster standing in a vacant field pointing vaguely to a dead plane engulfed in a hedge of flames.

Why would we need to put away sharp objects? What am I doing? What are we doing?

Just do it. Just follow directions.

Okay. Directions. But what's going to happen?

I don't know. Just. I don't know.

I looked down at my lap, expecting to see a pile of sharp objects that needed putting away. There was nothing. I picked up my backpack and made sure my pen was inside, point retracted, and patted myself down to make sure nothing else was ready to puncture eye or muscle or skin. A picture flashed in my mind: someone's tongue being pierced by a pen and ink spilling over the muscle, like the juice from blueberries.

The cabin was a flurry of noise. Kids wailed against their mother's chests; zippers zipped; plastic bags rustled and cell phones were powered on for whatever reason. In an ironic disregard for safety, seatbelts clicked open and fell to the sides of the seats as passengers struggled to get information from each other, the plane, the flight attendant. People struggled to stand, to pop open the overhead compartments and then slam them shut again. Todd and I stayed seated. Our luggage was in Pittsburgh. Others stayed seated too; looked over each other's laps to the windows. Tried to discern a visible problem with our aircraft. Out the window the clouds were still pale and thin; bunching here and there in enough density to obscure the wing of the plane from view. They craned their necks to locate the emergency exits and looked at the laminated instructions on how to work the oxygen masks should they come dangling from the ceiling. My view became nothing but mid-sections and necks: the pleats of khaki pants, the civilized fold of leather belts, the thick jugular veins of people in distress. And there were the small hairs on Todd's forearm against mine: impersonal, like fine carpet, like an animal, like nothing.

The intercom again. It was the flight attendant. *Ladies and gentleman, she said, I'm afraid we're going to have to have an emergency landing due to the problems with our hydraulic system. If you follow my directions and stay calm, everyone will be fine. What we need you to do is, on my command, assume the BRACE BRACE position. Let's practice now. Spread your legs apart, and put your head between your knees.*

It came out like that—one long, distressing spew of instructions. The color had drained from Todd's face. His comic book had fallen from his lap. He looked around us, looked at me, swallowed hard. As the stewardess moved up and down the aisle repeating the instructions,

we did what we were told. We spread our legs apart, put our heads between our knees, and stared at the floor. The blood rushed to my head and pounded in my ears so that everything around me sounded fuzzy, as if being filtered through a megaphone or played back over a tape recorder.

Then, cover your head with your hands. There you go. Everything will be fine. Please listen to me. When I give the command—in about two minutes—please assume the BRACE BRACE position, and we will head into our landing. Everything will be fine if you just follow directions. Please.

We returned to a sitting position. The blood had rushed to the top of my head, and I sat up too fast. The cabin spun around me. The stewardess flew up and down the aisle—touching hands, nodding her head, speaking too fast. I looked at Todd.

We might die.

His eyes followed the stewardess up and down the aisle, and he pulled his hand over his face. He didn't argue.

In books and in movies, at this very moment, something magical always happens. In our case, we could have done a number of magical things at the second we realized our lives were in jeopardy. We could have realized—in the face of death—how much we loved each other. We could have confessed this undying love as the panic mounted around us, and fell into a flurry of passionate kisses, and declared that we would meet again in heaven, hand in hand, and stroll along the pearly-white shores of some iridescent heavenly sea. We could have realized we didn't love each other and apologized for all the hurtful things we had done to each other over the course of our three years together. I could have said I was sorry for trying to make him be more like me—a pseudo-intellectual, a wannabe hipster, a, well, whatever. He could have apologized for asking me to move to the city where he lived without realizing he didn't really love me anymore. Or we could have laughed about all of it—the absurdity of my inclusion on the family vacation, of the two of us dying so romantically, side by side in a tragic plane crash after a vacation that neither of us wanted, and the unspoken realization that our relationship was a disaster.

Or I could have had an important thought. I could have been washed over with a slideshow of my good moments with Todd: my small, smooth fingers intertwined with his rough hands, worn by

years of work in construction; lying on our backs on the side of a hill in the country watching immobile stars blink and dim; a sense of exactly how it felt to be sharing the heat of one single bed, in the early morning, in the winter, when we had no place to be. I could have remembered my college graduation, my first kiss, my mother's face, laughing. I could have had the proverbial *life flashing before my eyes*: a moment of realization, an epiphany, a conclusion, a romantic, heroic, wonderfully tragic moment.

But that isn't what happened. What happened was nothing. No thoughts shuffled across my brain, no sixth sense told my limbs to cling to Todd for safety. No beeps of panic raced through my veins and pushed me to beg the stewardess for more information. There was nothing but absolute, silent, condemning disbelief. I didn't feel like I was in a plane anymore. I was in a mall, and I was sixteen. I was in my grandma's living room, and I was four. I was somewhere familiar, a place I had grown into being. A place I knew had existed, so therefore I knew I existed. And now I might cease to exist.

I looked at Todd. His hands were gripping the arm rests and he stared straight ahead at the seat in front of him. For one small second, he gave me a sideways glance. Almost as if someone somewhere had nudged him and asked about his manners, he moved his hand to rest on top of mine. It should have been a sweet gesture. It should have signaled our togetherness in these possibly last few tender moments. But his hand felt foreign, cold, useless. The motion was mechanical. I felt like it was expected by some anonymous person that we hold hands at this pivotal moment, so I did not move my hand away. We sat like that, and my heart boomed in my ears as the sweat gathered beneath my palms. There was nothing to do but wait. We were not in control.

As it turns out, the plane never made the emergency landing. Moments after instructing us on the BRACE BRACE position, the flight attendant came on the loudspeaker to announce that the problem with the hydraulic system had been miraculously fixed. We'd be landing, as planned, in 30 minutes at the Madison airport. The noise in the cabin quieted slightly but never quite ironed out, as people around us excitedly discussed how *we almost died* and how *we have to call mom immediately when we land*. As for us, we remained silent, not reading, not talking, not moving. I felt no urge to apologize to him

for the things we said in Charlottesville, and he made no indication of that either. All I felt was a need for a hamburger and a long, long, nap.

After we got off the plane, we watched the luggage carousel circle and circle and circle, and our bags were nowhere. We waited in line at the service desk, and the Ferris Bueller secretary look-alike approached us, trailing her small suitcase behind her.

You two were on my last flight, weren't you?

We nodded.

Let me ask you something. Did I sound panicked to you? Scared? Nervous?

We looked at each other, annoyed that this woman was perpetuating what had already been an inarguably bad flight.

I suppose. I said. Who cared? We were on the ground now. She smiled.

Well, I'm glad. But to tell you the truth, we would have been goners. I mean, no question about it. Dead.

She let go of her suitcase and raised and flattened her right hand in order to simulate the plane. *We would have done this*, she said, taking her hand-plane into a steep nose dive, and then back up again, and then down again, to simulate a series of deadly bumps across the invisible landscape.

DEAD. She said, for emphasis.

Then she laughed at herself, grabbed the handle of her suitcase, and walked through the automatic terminal doors to the parking lot.

I turned to Todd. *I'm still leaving Madison*, I said. *I still want to break up.*

He nodded. He looked around aimlessly at the airport activity—the luggage bumping around the carousel, bawling children being dragged by the hand to the restroom or terminal doors or wherever. I wondered if he was searching for something poignant to say. I wondered if I should be searching for something poignant to say.

Do you have any truffles left? He asked. I dug into my bag and handed him one. He unrolled the foil from the candy, popped it in his mouth, and stuck his hands in his pockets.

In the months after this incident, the plane crash story came to be somewhat of a comical anecdote for me to tell at parties and cookouts—I learned to imitate the stupid flight attendant's accent precisely, and to describe the panic of the soccer moms and old ladies

around me in a way that made everything seem blissfully fictional and comical. But in my head I always wanted to remember it as something more than just an anecdote—as something monumental and terrific, as a turning point in my life. For a long time, in my head I tried to believe that in the moment wherein I was told I might be in a life-threatening situation I became an instantaneously better person—I forgave Todd, I learned to love again, I became an adult, and on and on and on. But in the reality of those few minutes between when the first announcement came of danger and the moment when we were told we would be fine, there was not time or awareness for such clear thinking. There was time for one thing: unceremonious, blinding disbelief.

If I had died on the plane, it could be said that my last thoughts circled around cranberry juice, and *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, and chocolate, and Will Shortz, and hydraulic systems. If they came upon my body at the crash site, I imagine my face: cratered like the surface of the moon, eyes caught in the act of blinking, and my mouth, a gaping hole—as if I had been forced to stop speaking in the middle of one long, rambling sentence.

Ellen O'Connell

LEAR'S DAUGHTERS

I imagine my parents back home in Santa Barbara, the day after my sisters' fight in Vermont. My father awakes with King Lear on his lips.

"How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is to have a thankless child." I can see him with my mother in their large bedroom, with dark wooden walls and the back garden just outside. I imagine them darkly, as though peeping through a keyhole.

"Sweetheart," my mother calls him.

"I'm thinking of Goneril and Regan," he tells her. She, of course, already knows this. My mother has spent her life anticipating us, studying us as though she might find something fascinating on our faces.

"And then there's Cordelia," she says to him.

"Yes," my father says. "There's Cordelia, but all I can think of is Goneril and Regan."

The light of the California morning is behind the dark curtains. It is their first autumn alone, with none of us left in the house. Even Brendan has left for university by now, and I hate thinking of home without him in it. My two half-sisters, Kate and Meg, live in Ohio and Vermont, and I am in New York. The wooden house on Valerio Street must echo with emptiness, remembering how we each took one last look around us before saying goodbye.

When I was younger, my father used to quote from *King Lear* when we were thankless and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* before he turned off our lights at night. The house was always full of other people's lines, the things that characters have said to each other on the stage for hundreds of years. Cordelia is Lear's youngest daughter, who loves her father most, the beloved daughter who does not fight with her sisters. Perhaps unknowingly, my father set up a competition that was impossible for his daughters to win permanently. One day he forgot his lunch at home, and he called me to ask if I could bring it to him at his office. When I handed it to him, he told me I was his favorite child, but only until the end of the day. It was a joke, and it made me proud. Once you think something like that, you can never go

back to the time before you thought it.

“Kate and Meg have never gotten along,” my mother says to my father as they lie in bed the day after my sisters’ fight. “When I first met them and they were eight and nine years old, I remember them being so nasty to each other.”

“Well, they were children then.” He is lying still in the dark, thinking that my mother has been his constant ally for the twenty-six years of their marriage.

“Even for children they fought a lot. They were mean to each other in a way that Ellen and Brendan never were.”

“They were closer in age, and they were both girls,” my father says, tired of talking suddenly.

My mother will get up and watch the morning news, and my father will open the curtains all over the house before heading to the university where he teaches and I was a student, before I moved to New York.

As for my mother, she is the one who calls me on her way to work to tell me that at least for today, I am Cordelia, King Lear’s beloved daughter. It’s almost as good as hearing my father tell me so himself.

“He had trouble sleeping,” she says, “because he was so heart broken.”

Each time my mother will tell me his heart is broken, I will feel it in myself, like a great interconnected socket of sadness. *Look at me*, I will think. *Look at me. I’m still alright. I’m still glad to be here.* I imagine carrying my father’s sadness like guilt, and it will feel like the kind of secret you try to keep that just keeps threatening to come out. In the end, on the day after the argument, Kate stops by Meg’s house on her way out of Vermont, and although neither one exactly apologizes for the night before, at least they talk for fifteen minutes over breakfast, and hug goodbye. Kate gives one last kiss to Baby Charlotte, Meg’s newborn, on her way out. Brendan, having gotten wind of the fight from our mother, phones me from San Diego, to find out what happened, and then ends the call quickly once he knows, because all he wants are the facts. Kate had called me in tears the night before, and I had, in turn, called my mother. It was just a tiff but represented something larger from long ago. I tell Brendan that it is the sort of fight that is easy to apologize for, but just as easy to bring up years later in the midst of something bigger.

As I hang up with my brother, it occurs to me that perhaps I am

competing for a role that none of my siblings even want.

My mind is shaped like all the things in it, and all its memories that I try to summon as I write or speak, like a sorcerer making images out of the liquid of the past. Memories of being young are tenuous, and it's difficult to recall a single incident or conversation on command. There were people in a space. Kate remembers my lisp, and how I called her "Thithy." She remembers for me. Sometimes I believe I borrowed my memories from somewhere else, from the books I've read or stories I've heard. Do they even belong to me? Can I call them mine? They are feelings rather than words, propped up by my siblings.

The weekend after my sisters' fight and reconciliation, my parents fly to Vermont to visit Meg and Jason and the new baby, and I take the train there from New York, watching through the window as October whisks by, changing from gray concrete to brilliant red leaves. Though I've lived there only 18 months, leaving New York always feels as though something has been pulled out through my skin, and coming back does too. My parents pick me up from the cold train station on their way from the airport; my mother is driving the rental car because my father's wallet was stolen last week and he has no license. My mother hates driving as much as I do, but whether we get there or not is less important for now than whether I can make my parents laugh a little while longer. I know by weekend's end, I will show my father which daughter I am. I want him—not my mother—to say the words to me. I know it as I take the train, and as I sit in the backseat of the car, leaning forward to talk close. I know it as they laugh. Alone in the car with my mother and father, I almost remember how it feels to let them make all my decisions for me, and know they are the right ones.

A few nights ago, I asked my best friend, Lindsay, or perhaps she asked me, why children don't play orphans anymore. We asked each other why we ever played it to begin with. The romance of the orphan, like the romance of hobos, begins with a child's feigned self-sufficiency. "I cooked us some stolen beans. Here are two glasses of rain water for us to drink." How many childhood heroes are orphans who find their homes in other people, in new places, in love and lucky scrapes?

We lamented our lost childhood together, and the things of the 21st century, like play-dates and store-bought costumes. We missed the days when you found another child just your age, and played

orphans in a tree house.

Each day when we wake up in the morning, we ask each other, “What era is it today?” “The 1950s, and we’re at summer camp,” one of us might say, and at least for that one day we know who we are trying to be.

But I am getting ahead of myself. When my parents and I arrive in Vermont, Meg looks like she belongs there, like a parent, like a real person in a real setting to which she belongs.

Jason waits inside the house, a Victorian wooden white clapboard affair standing in the middle of nothing but trees.

“It’s been so long,” he says to me quietly. “I’ve missed you.”

“Here’s a care package Kate brought you last weekend,” Meg says. With a look in my eye, I stop her before she finds reason to complain about our sister.

“That’s so nice of her,” I say. There is homemade jam and marinara sauce and a bag of pancake mix with a note on it, *just add an egg and some milk!* I don’t want Meg to talk about Kate now, not tonight.

“When can I see the baby?” I ask. “I have urgent plans to become her favorite aunt.”

Meg and Jason take the three of us upstairs to their dark bedroom where a beautiful teardrop of a baby girl sleeps in a crib. She is swaddled in softness and her hands are lifted, as though she is conducting a silent orchestra or waiting for us to lift her. Her eyelids are pink-veined seashells, and I try to guess what is concealed within her. The house holds its breath as we all look at her.

“Should we keep her?” Jason asks.

I look at my father, who is staring at his granddaughter. The look on his face tells me his is turning, right now in this very room, from flesh to air to stars, and then to other things I can’t begin to guess.

Later that night I hold my niece as I do my schoolwork and read by the unlit wood stove, letting her sleep soundly against my chest, each keeping the other warm. I look down at the baby and try to pretend she is mine, but it is just one more role I am trying on to see how it feels to be someone else.

In Vermont we all go to the East Dover Clam Bake put on by the local volunteer fire fighters, an event where everyone knows everyone. With half-frozen fingers, we crack the stippled shells and dig out the sallow meat, and there is something grotesque about how the lobster

lies on its back with its claws in the air, as though surrendering, its belly bowed and defenseless. We bring the dismembered bodies home to make into stock, and the whole kitchen smells like home, like the Santa Barbara Harbor.

On one of the drives through town that just the three of us take, my father brings up the fight between Kate and Meg and wonders what incident from their childhood might have triggered the blow-up.

To me, it doesn't matter what my sisters fought about last weekend, because I am sure it played out exactly as it always has. I can hear Kate muttering something, and Meg overreacting. It's as continuous as a calendar, with each conversation leading to the next. All future conversations are lined up ahead of them, in all the days to come. There is nothing new about their fight; it is only the echo of an echo of an echo. That's how they are, those two wounded sisters, each raised by one parent, without each other to share laughter.

In the light of October, the red and yellow trees look like lit chandeliers hanging over the world. The light dapples the backs of my parents' heads, and the negative space beside me is shaped like my brother, who is so far away, on the other side of the continent, three hours behind us without any idea of the things we are seeing here without him.

My father talks about the day that Kate's and Meg's mother moved out of the house on Valerio Street, years before he even met my mother.

"All their mother's furniture was gone when they got home from school, but when I walked in the door, Kate looked at my face and ran over and hugged me, because she was only thinking about how hard it would be for me. She was eight at the time, but she was older, too."

There are a number of things I could say. I could tell him that I would have done the same, if I had been born yet. I could ask what Meg did. Instead, I say only that I understand, and his shoulders relax. My mother drives on through rural Vermont, and in her hair I notice sunlit shades of gold.

That night the power goes out, and the wooden house is wintry and vacant, even with us in its rooms. For the first time since they've moved to Vermont from New York City just before Baby Charlotte was born, Jason lights the wood stove, and Meg hovers over him.

All around the house we light candles and lanterns. I love the oil

lamps. They remind me of my favorite heroines from childhood, who wear long white nightgowns and carry candles to bed. It is an hour before we even check to see if the power is back on.

My last day in Vermont, my father and Jason go flying. We, the women, are alone together in the house. That afternoon, Meg hands me a rake and tells me to help her in the front yard.

She is quicker than I am, but I am more thorough, and there is more green grass where I have raked in long trails from the base of her new white wooden house to the stone wall in the front. I make quick flicking movements with my arms like a striking match.

She glances at the expanse of bright damp grass I am passing back over with my rake, and tells me, “You don’t have to get every leaf. It doesn’t have to be perfect, just good enough.”

But I can’t do a just good enough job, and so I rake a small area until all the leaves are in one pile. I want each green row to be equal, and straight, as though my work is a reflection of who I am.

I spread large white painters’ sheets flat on the grass and Meg rakes the leaves into the center of them, and they spread out like wet hair on a white pillow. When I have a full bundle, I take it across the road and shake it out, until there is no more ground, but only a new floor of decomposing leaves that I sink into with my rubber boots. I borrowed a pair I found in the hall closet, and a coat as well that hangs around me like a black woolen cloud. Meg cannot lift the sheet of damp leaves for another few weeks; her incision from her C-section is still raw and fragile.

The clouds are so low I want to reach up to see if I can lay my palms flat against them. The seasonal air infuses the small world with a smell and a chill, and leaves float heavily down. We are working together when the car comes up the driveway, with the men in it. Jason gets out first, and then my father.

“Jason, do you know King Lear?” My father asks him as they walk toward us.

“Sure,” he says.

I see my father point to Meg, down the driveway. “That’s Regan,” he says.

And then he points to me. “And that’s Cordelia.” I look quickly to Meg, who is smiling at this joke, and think how the best way to win is to win in private. She laughs, and although I’m sure the joke

is lost on Jason, subtle panic radiates from where I am to where I am not. I watch him as he laughs and walks from the car up the driveway toward the white house. Meg stops raking and wipes her bangs from her forehead with the back of her wrist while Jason gives her a quick kiss hello.

Perfection, like being the favorite daughter, is not something I reach for out of free will. It is a compulsion. I know what my father has said, and I know he knows what he has said. It has implications not only for me. To win here means someone else has to lose, and there is no satisfaction in that.

We can sometimes attain what we want most in the world, but by the time it is ours, what we now have, and the self that desires it, have changed into something new. It is no longer what we want. It is the very chase that changes us, and often changes what we want from something archetypal to something embarrassing.

The next morning I am already on the train on my way back to Manhattan, and the cold bright day drapes itself around us as we speed back to the city. Lindsay is waiting for me at the station, wearing penny loafers and my cable knit sweater.

We plan to play with the Ouija board she bought in an antique store on East 10th Street, to ask it who the sock I found in the laundromat belonged to, and whether certain boys will ever call us back, and where in the United States we will be next year. But we never get around to the Ouija board. The Hudson sparkles too much not to walk along it, and we read passages from paperbacks to each other. They are dog-eared pages that we point to and say, yes, this is what we want our life to be like, and what will become of the river and the trees and all of us? We scan the current for some indication of eternity, and we feel for a moment that we've found it there, winking back at us in the cool arms of autumn sunlight.

Rebecca Rine-Stone

SUNBATHING IN A BODY CAST

I wonder what the neighbors thought when they saw a scrawny teenage girl in a body cast being carried around on a mattress in our backyard. It was the beginning of June, and I was being carried around on that mattress because even though I was imprisoned in a shell of hardness I was still fourteen years old and it was still summer and I still craved the outdoors, which most days I only saw through a sliding glass door from my rented hospital bed in our living room. So my dad and brother carried the starfish-shaped mold of me outside as slowly as if they were moving a grand piano. *Ease her through the doorway, now. Easy. Easy. Okay, here come the stairs. One. Two. Three.* And finally, the sun on my face and arms.

They took me into the yard where I would spend many afternoons that summer parked under a tree, splayed on my back, squinting up at branches too skinny to block the sun. With my brother's boom box in the grass next to me, tuned to the Cleveland radio station Power 108, I turned my head and saw our next-door neighbors in their backyard performing typical Saturday rituals of trimming, pruning, cutting, mowing, and now peering. They politely tried to continue their work and pretend that a girl in a body cast being carried around on a Sealy Posturepedic was as much a part of the Ohio landscape as buckeyes or strip malls. We had only talked to them a handful of times; they were an older couple without kids. Yet, even their wiener dog seemed to do a double-take at this healthcare circus happening next door to them.

They must have thought my family strange. I liked imagining the drama of the stories that must have been rushing through their heads to explain my cast. *Did you get a load of the neighbors' kid? What do you think happened—a car accident? Fire? Who knows with those kids. How many of them are there any way?*

I was born with a dislocated hip, otherwise called congenital hip dysplasia. What that exotic-sounding term means is that my femur bone doesn't fit smoothly into the hip joint, as it should. At fourteen, I had just undergone my third surgery in an attempt to fix it. I wore my first body cast when I was six months old and then another when I was two years old.

My parents never let my disability slow the family down. I'm the last of four kids, so life had to go on. If my family went to the beach, I went with them in my body cast. Since I was very young when I wore these casts, I don't have memories of what it was like, but I'm told one of my favorite things to do at the beach was to shove sand by the fistful deep down into my cast. This is why I was given anesthesia every few weeks to prepare for a new cast to be molded back onto me—soon enough to get soiled again with sand, slobber and anything else that slipped past the lenient gate of a cloth diaper.

My mom said she used to take me to the grocery store, cast and all, when I was a baby and prop me up in the cart like a broken hood ornament, not to be silly or sick, but simply because she had to do the grocery shopping for a family of six and not many people were willing to take on the daunting responsibility of babysitting a six-month-old baby in a body cast—not even her own parents.

She has never cared that the things she does might be wrong or just plain socially weird. She does them because they make sense to her and they get the job done, like shoving food down the running garbage disposal with her hand or getting bread out of the toaster with a metal knife.

People asked her what happened to me so often in those days, she got tired of explaining the long sordid story and started telling the socially awkward lie that I had fallen off a horse. Apparently it left them speechless long enough for my mom to slip away from their gazes and return to the task at hand.

I grew up knowing another surgery was inevitable. The news of future surgeries was never sugar-coated; not much was. My parents raised us in a very non-coddling, *this-is-how-things-are-now-deal-with-it* sort of environment, the same environment in which they were raised. I started to make that familial connection when I saw my sister Missy try to hug my mom's dad once. *Once*. He stood with his hands in his back pockets staring straight ahead.

We were taught to always work hard, never take handouts and to understand that the world's not fair. We came home from school to find to-do lists that explained in detail how to bread the chicken for dinner or sort the laundry into categories before doing it. There were plenty of mistakes such as bleached clothes or food the consistency of balsa wood, but for the most part the house didn't fall apart in our latch-key care.

My parents loved us, as was evident by how hard they both worked at their full-time jobs, but the words *soft* or *doting* would never be used to describe them. When my friends' parents were showering them with, "Good job!" and "We're so proud of you!" my parents were scoffing at that, saying, "It's too bad some people spoil their kids." They raised us with a realistic view of the world, protective armor against the trials they knew were out there just waiting to get their hands on us.

At the age of fourteen, my hip was found to be gradually growing further out of its socket. I was sentenced to my third reconstructive hip surgery which called for a confinement of two months in a body cast. My memory of the experience this time would be more than just a collection of photos in a box accompanied by stories remembered by everyone but me. I only had the telephone-pole-shaped scar on my hip to prove I was that person about whom the childhood stories were told. Now with a third surgery arriving as I entered adolescence, I would surely create stories of my own about time spent in a body cast—stories that would reshape parts of me well beyond my flesh and bone.

Driving to the Cleveland Clinic the morning of the surgery, I sat up front in the passenger seat beside my dad. I remember only fleeting sounds and images. He turned on the oldies station. He asked if I was okay. I remember watching a commuter train go by and being envious that people were having routine days.

At the hospital, I was put on a gurney and wheeled off toward the operating room, down a hall where I saw other kids being delivered to and from surgery. When I was finally pushed into the operating room, I was struck by how much it looked like the interior of a spaceship with its overly bright, globe-shaped lights and shiny metal tables. It was a cold room, as if chiseled from a glacier. The voices of the doctors and nurses were muffled behind their masks. I saw only their eyebrows rising and falling as they spoke. The surgeons, like my dad, played an oldies radio station in the background, providing me with the comfort of the familiar. The surgery lasted nine hours.

Soon enough I was being loaded like cargo into the back of our station wagon for the trip home from the hospital. My dad was childlike with excitement and made up a song that he sang intermittently the whole ride home. The words were, "Becky's coming home today. . . .

Becky's coming home today." My sister Pam, lying down next to me, whispered, "He's been singing that all day."

A few months after my parents married, my dad was drafted into the Army to serve in Vietnam. He spent a year fighting a war he didn't believe in. He was twenty years old.

The Vietnam War was rarely addressed in our house. To this day, the only things I know about my dad's experience in Vietnam are what he lets out when he finds it's all too much to keep to himself or when he's pushed to anger, like the time a recruiter called for my brother when he was about to turn eighteen. My mom had answered the phone and as my dad overheard and realized who it was, he took the phone from her and told the recruiter he'd be damned if any son of his would have to go through what he went through in that "hellhole called Vietnam." He slammed down the receiver without waiting for a response. End of discussion.

There's a photo of him at twenty-one. He looks about 5'10," 140 pounds. He's told me that he actually gained weight after being in the Army because their food was better than his mom's cooking. In the photo, he looks like the type of man I'm typically attracted to. His dark hair is cut short with faint sideburns crawling down his face. He's smiling but not beaming, not showing any teeth. He's wearing Buddy Holly glasses, a white t-shirt with the short sleeves rolled up and olive drab fatigues. His dog tags hang just above his sternum. He's squinting at the camera through the Vietnam sun, his tent in the background, a cigarette tucked over his ear.

Growing up he'd be wrestling with us and joke, "You'd better watch it—I'm a trained killer." He's not proud of this fact in the least. My guess is that releasing dark truths into the open helps chip away at the weight they bear. We never begged for an explanation, but he told us he knew ways to kill a man with his bare hands. I only remember it had something to do with placing one's hands in just the "right" spot and pressing hard.

For probably the same reason that he admitted he's a trained killer, he insisted we rent the movie *Good Morning, Vietnam* when it came out. Maybe he thought enough time had passed for him to watch a recreation of the war he'd hated, but the movie catapulted him back to the minefield that was Vietnam. There was a scene in the movie where the men were being sent to a location that my dad remembered.

He started to cry, a guttural, trembling cry that a daughter never wants to hear come from her father. He yelled at the television that there was no way any of those men were going to make it back alive. We all cried along with him, not because we understood the source of his sorrow and anger, but because we felt helpless in the face of it. I wished that his memories were tangible objects like rocks or bricks so we could divide them by six, each member of our family sharing the weight of his burden.

My mom said when he first came home from the war, he had nightmares and couldn't get the smell of burning bodies out of his nose. There was no warm patriotic American greeting for him when he returned from the war. When he and other vets got off the plane, war protestors spat on them. I wonder how hard that was for him. He, too, was against the war and fought in it only because his number was called.

There was no Internet then. No cell phones. Even so, the images broadcast on the nightly news gave my mom an idea of what my father was going through. After my dad's release from the Army, my parents were eager to put the war behind them and make a family; forget the past. Before long, they had four kids.

I was born in January of 1976, about seven years after his return from Vietnam. People often tell me I have my father's eyes, but I have a feeling I have more than that; I have his war wounds inside me—wounds he wasn't even aware of at the time of my birth.

Agent Orange was a poisonous herbicide used by the U.S. military in Vietnam. It was a mixture of various chemicals, including the highly toxic dioxin, combined with kerosene or diesel, sprayed from planes for the purpose of defoliating vegetation that might conceal enemy forces. Its real name is *tetrachlorodibenzo-p-dioxin*, but the government chose to go with a less-threatening name, one that has always reminded me of a Baskin Robbins flavor. It was named Agent Orange after the orange stripe on the bin in which it was shipped. There were also Agents White, Purple, Pink, Green and Blue—a rainbow of cancerous chemicals!

A doctor in the 1980s proposed to my parents that my dislocated hip might be a birth defect resulting from Agent Orange. My mom also remembers a questionnaire the Army once sent her regarding Agent Orange-related birth defects. One question asked about miscarriages.

My mom had three, two of which were twins. Another question asked whether any children in the family had diabetes. My sister Missy developed it when she was only two. There was a question about chronic ear infections. My brother constantly had tubes in his ears. And then there was the question that asked if any of her children were born with a dislocated hip.

The government now admits to a list of diseases that occur more frequently in Vietnam vets who were exposed to Agent Orange. These diseases range from Hodgkin's disease to various cancers to diabetes. If a Vietnam vet can prove he served in an area sprayed with Agent Orange and he suffers from one of the above-mentioned diseases, he is promised free medical care. The child of a Vietnam vet, however, is a different story. There's no definitive answer about birth defects in children of vets exposed to Agent Orange. Although certain studies have linked some birth defects, including hip dislocation, to paternal Agent Orange exposure, the government has been reluctant to identify the chemical as a cause of congenital hip displacement and other birth defects in either Army veterans or Vietnamese citizens.

I'm no scientist, political or otherwise, so I find myself taking the easy way out of this debate: I leave it alone. Even if Agent Orange is to blame for my three hip surgeries and body casts, it wouldn't change anything.

My mom has admitted to me the guilt she's felt since answering the questionnaire that confirmed three out of her four surviving children are most likely affected by Agent Orange. She feels guilty she didn't know about Agent Orange's possible side effects before they started having kids. I assure her if she knew then what she knows now I hope she would have still made the same choices. Even when my mom does not blame Agent Orange for my birth defect, she still feels guilty. She worries that her uterus was too small for me to develop a normal hip joint. Her uterus that was, of course, plenty big for the three babies who came before me.

On the day my third body cast was removed, my dad brought his camera to record the event. In the background of the photo, my cast sticks out of a garbage can like a discarded mummy. In the foreground, my family is huddled around me. We're all laughing.

But the road to recovery was not easy. My muscles had atrophied

during my two months in the body cast, off my feet, immobile. My middle ear was so used to being horizontal, that when I sat upright, I immediately got dizzy and blacked out. I was tempted to scavenge my cast out of the garbage, crawl back into its protective embrace and be waited on for the rest of my life.

Yet, I knew I had to return to working hard once again and face the unfair world my pragmatic parents had warned me about. As I recall, my mom let me feel sorry for myself—once. I was lying face down on my bedroom carpet trying to do a leg lift as she watched. My body was not cooperating. I felt angry and helpless. Mom told me to go ahead and let it out, get mad, cry for a few minutes and then get back to work. I knew, as she did, that I had no choice but to face the next year of crutches and physical therapy.

Congenital hip dysplasia is found most often in first-born children. I'm the *last* of seven babies. Females are affected four to eight times more than males. I *am* female. The left leg is more often affected. It is my left leg. The incidence of congenital hip dysplasia is also higher in infants born in breech position births. I was breech; rear end first.

Thus, the studies point to two possible causes for my birth defect: Agent Orange exposure, or the luck of the draw.

My surgeon reminds me that I must work out diligently; if I slow down, my hip slows down. So I am careful never to slow down. Even when there are other things needing to be done, attention to my hip comes first—or else my joint tightens, making even a few steps forward feel like fighting my way through wet cement. My surgeon also predicts that as time passes, my hip will hurt to the point where I will be in constant pain. I am only in constant discomfort now, a discomfort that I'm thankfully used to. He says the pain will tell me when it's time to get my hip replaced. He estimates that time will come within a handful of years.

The older I get, the more I see my parents in me, in the way I save my money, work hard and judge others who don't save, don't work hard. People always say they'll do things differently than their parents, but blood is blood and it often carries secrets that are never wholly revealed. It courses through our bodies with a history that was formed long before we were.

Heather L. Jones

CHILLING DRAMA AND SPECIAL EFFECTS

Characters:

Pearl: *sixteen by day gives tours of the Charter Street Cemetery in Salem, Mass. By night she turns tricks there. She carries a flashlight shaped like a black cat.*

John: mid thirties or older, a tourist.

Gravestone of Ebenezer Bowditch, Jr.

Time: the present, night.

Place: Charter Street Cemetery, Salem Mass. Though it is always dark and spooky in the graveyard, the backdrop is a bright and shiny collage of Salem Tourist Attractions.

We can hear all the music on Pearl's iPod. Rights must be obtained to use the recordings in this play. Hymns are from compact disc *Goostly Psalmes: Anglo-American Psalmody 1550-1800: Harmonia Mundi, 1996.*

PEARL, hooked up to her iPod, listens to "Time to Pretend" by MGMT, dances on the GRAVE OF EBENEZER BOWDITCH JR.

PEARL: Poor poor Ebenezer. First your name, right. E-Ben-EEZ-Er. Like a disease. Then Bow-ditch. Another disease. All you people.

She shines her flashlight around at the graves.

PEARL (CONT'D): (chants) Muckford, Mould, Millet, Mudge. Nutting. Hah! Cumbs! Goody Hephzibah Packer. And what do we know about her, good pilgrims? You Puritans Salemites. Pure. Purity. Puritan. But Ms. Hephzibah Packer, weren't you fined in 1683 for fornication with your husband before marriage? You dirty slut. (beat)

She turns to an imaginary tourist.

PEARL (CONT'D): What's that you say Mr. Socks with sandals and it's fucking October? We should still have those laws? Now why might you think that? You got a hot little daughter like me back home? She drinking your scotch and fucking her boyfriend right in front of your large flat panel digital cost you your bonus TV right now instead of out here learning history and looking at my tits like you?

The song changes to The White Stripes version of "Jolene."

PEARL: I love this song. Don't you love this music, Eb? It makes me feel so sexy.

She dances in front of the grave, turns her back on the audience, lifts up her shirt.

GRAVE OF EBENEZER: I love you, Pearl.

PEARL: Of course you do, baby.

GRAVE OF EBENEZER: You are reckless. Elfish. Your fantastical skipping and dancing. Perverse reverence, desperate . . .

PEARL kicks the stone.

PEARL: Not desperate. Never desperate. That's you, Ebenezer Bowditch committed suicide in the alms house. Desperate is you.

GRAVE OF EBENEZER: I love you, Pearl.

PEARL: Damn straight you do.

*The music on her ipod abruptly changes to Track 1 "Psalm 122."
PEARL snatches at her earphone.*

PEARL: Stop it. I told you not to do that. I hate that fucking ghostly music. God. Don't you think we hear enough of that around here.

GRAVE OF EBENEZER: It's reverence, Pearl. It's in your blood.

PEARL: There's nothing from this fucking place that's in my blood.

GRAVE OF EBENEZER: All of it. You think you are a creature with nothing in common with a bygone and buried generation, that you don't own yourself akin to it-[~]

PEARL: Stop talking like a book. I'll go dance somewhere else.

GRAVE OF EBENEZER: Don't leave me.

PEARL: Then change my music back.

GRAVE OF EBENEZER: Never leave me.

The music changes to: "Honey" by Bobby Goldsboro.

PEARL: Not that. God, you're sappy.

The music changes to: "In an Aeroplane Over the Sea" by Neutral Milk Hotel.

PEARL: That's better. Here comes my trick.

GRAVE OF EBENEZER: Hast thou no fear of sin?

PEARL: Hast thou no understanding of what kind of money I need?
Anyway, isn't suicide a sin?

Long pause.

PEARL (CONT'D): Silence from the grave, huh. Here he comes. You don't want to watch, I can go on over and do it on your father's grave. He was a captain wasn't he?

GRAVE OF EBENEZER: Never leave me.

PEARL: OK, Pervert. Your grave it is.

JOHN enters.

PEARL: Hello, Pilgrim. Have you come to dance with the devil?

JOHN: And I thought this vacation would be dull.

PEARL: Money's up front.

JOHN hesitates.

PEARL holds out her hand.

JOHN: Um.

PEARL: Shit.

JOHN: I don't have any money.

PEARL: What the fuck?

JOHN: It's all in traveler's checks, in American Express—they put it in this thing like a debit card now. It's a pain in the ass—

PEARL: Cash some of it out.

JOHN: I can't.

PEARL: What do you mean you can't?

JOHN: My wife would notice.

PEARL: You're shittin' me.

JOHN: I can't take the chance. She watches the money she...

PEARL: She doesn't watch you, though, huh? Where is she? Tucked up in the bed and breakfast all fast asleep in her warm jammies.

JOHN: No.

PEARL: Watching TV at the Days Inn with a six pack of Miller Lite?

JOHN: No.

PEARL: I give up.

JOHN: She . . . she . . . met someone.

GRAVE OF EBENEZER: Hah!

JOHN looks around, startled.

PEARL: Loons.

JOHN: It sounded like a laugh.

PEARL: Happy loons. (pause) So, Mr. You ain't got cash and your wife's run off with—with what—who?

JOHN: The tour guide from the pirate ship.

GRAVE OF EBENEZER: Hah!

JOHN startles.

PEARL: A pirate. Shit. Balls AND cash.

JOHN: I have pills.

PEARL: What kind of pills?

JOHN: I've got a lot. I've got bupropion. That's generic. Wellbutrin. That's to help me quit smoking. I have alprazolam. Generic xanax, helps with the anxiety attacks from the bupropion. I have fluoxetine. That's generic prozac, it—

PEARL: It's so you don't notice how much your life sucks, and it takes three weeks to kick in. You think I'm an idiot?

JOHN: Um. Right. I mean. No. I don't think you're an idiot. I've got flexeril, that's for muscles, you know, when I go to the gym, I uh, and I've got oxycontin. Pain.

PEARL: See, Eb. If you had lived now, you wouldn't of had to kill yourself. There's a pill for every pain. Even the pain of alms, I bet.

JOHN: Who are you talking to?

PEARL: My boyfriend Eb, here. He killed himself in an alms house.

JOHN: Jesus. Maybe we should go somewhere else.

PEARL: Give me the pills.

JOHN: Which ones?

PEARL: All of them.

JOHN: I don't think that's a good idea.

PEARL: Then why'd you bring them all?

JOHN: So you could have a choice.

PEARL: A choice? That's a good one, Tourist Guy.

JOHN: It's John.

PEARL: It sure is. Give me all your pills, John.

Pause

PEARL (CONT'D): It'll be worth your while.

Pause

PEARL (CONT'D): I promise.

JOHN pulls a handful of pills out of his pocket and pours them into PEARL's open palm.

PEARL: You know what, John. I feel generous tonight. I'm going to split these up with you.

JOHN: No, I really don't need...

PEARL: I say you do.

JOHN: It's just—my wife

PEARL: Your wife is fucking a phony pirate on a boat that hasn't sailed in 200 years. C'mon, John, one up her. You fuck a real witch in a real graveyard full of real fucking corpses.

She holds out half the pills. He takes them.

PEARL: On three. One. Two. Three.

They swallow the pills.

PEARL: All right then. I promised you a special tour, and you're gonna get one.

She takes off her shoes and heads for another gravestone. She turns up her ipod playing: "Romance is Dead" by Parkway Drive.

PEARL: Can you hear that?

JOHN: Yes.

PEARL: Does it rock you?

JOHN: Yes.

GRAVE OF EBENEZER: Don't leave me.

JOHN: What was that?

PEARL: The wind.

She stops at a grave, shines her flashlight.

PEARL: Here lies buried the body of Mrs. Mary Andrew wife to Mr. Nathaniel Andrew who died October ye third, 1747 in ye 39th year of her age. Isn't that a coincidence. Isn't today ye third of October? We'll have to celebrate that, won't we?

PEARL takes off her pants. She's wearing knee socks with pumpkins on them and Halloween underpants. She notices JOHN looking.

PEARL: It's always Halloween in Salem, Johnny.

He moves toward her. She moves away to a further gravestone.

PEARL: What's your hurry? You paid for the tour, let's do the tour.

GRAVE OF EBENEZER (on the wind): Come away, Pearl. Come away, or yonder Evil Man will catch you.

JOHN looks around.

JOHN: It is windy.

PEARL: Ever and always. Come along, Goodman John. Ah, look!

She points the flashlight at a gravestone.

PEARL: Captain Edward Russell. Now safe arrives the heavenly mariner/the battering storm the hurricane of life/ all this away in one eternal calm/with joy divine full glowing in his breast/ he gains the port of everlasting rest. Do you think that's how the pirate feels? The one who's fucking your wife?

JOHN: What?

PEARL: Your wife. Do you think her pussy is giving her captain full glowing in his breast? Do you think she's better than the rest? Do you think he'll pass her test? A pirate can be a captain, right?

JOHN: What test? What are you talking about?

PEARL: The test you must have failed. Listen to this.

She switches the music to "Good Night Moon" by Shivaree.

She dances, takes off her sweatshirt. She's wearing a red velvet bra.

JOHN takes her in his arms. The drug cocktail hits him hard. He slumps. Pearl lets him drop to the ground.

PEARL: The test you failed again.

She staggers and sits on the ground by another grave.

PEARL (CONT'D): Sally Millet. Hello Sally.

PEARL sits close to the grave, shining her flashlight and squinting at this gravestone, more worn than the others.

PEARL (CONT'D): She was happy in life and resin'd in death tho' flesh and heart dissolve in dust/and monuments shall waste away/ something something is the mem'ry of the just/their bitter life shall not decay. (beat) Bitter life will not decay? (beat) Who would want that?

GRAVE OF EBENEZER: Pearl. Come back to me.

PEARL: I'm resting here, Eb.

The music on her ipod changes to Track 2, "The Humble Suit of a Sinner."

PEARL: We'll never have the same taste in music.

She staggers over to Ebenezer's Grave.

GRAVE OF EBENEZER: I love you Pearl.

PEARL: Is that why you killed yourself, Eb? Because of love?

GRAVE OF EBENEZER: No, my darling Pearl. It was for money.
For lack of money.

PEARL: Shit. There's always a way to get money.

GRAVE OF EBENEZER: I love you Pearl. Stay with me.

PEARL: I'll never kill myself over money.

GRAVE OF EBENEZER: Stay

Dawn is coming.

PEARL: Damn. Work's in about three hours. Where's my clothes?

She goes around the graveyard collecting her clothes. She's too high to get them back on, so she carries them in a bunch. She notices JOHN lying on the ground.

PEARL: Poor slob. I hope he's not dead.

She goes to Eb's grave, rests her hand on it.

PEARL: See ya later, Eb.

GRAVE OF EBENEZER: Pearl! I love you. You must stay. Stay with me. . . .

PEARL: Don't be an ass, Eb. If you wanted people to hang with, you shouldn't of killed yourself. Jesus.

PEARL's music switches to "Barely Legal" by the Strokes.

She exits.

The wind blows.

End of play.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

CONNIE ABSTON is a fourth generation Memphian who has lived in England, recently graduated from Vermont College, and is an MFA candidate at Spalding University. She is currently at work on a word series poetry collection.

KIRSTIN ALLIO's novel, *Garner*, was a finalist for the *LA Times* Book Award for First Fiction. Her short stories have appeared in a variety of publications, including the 2010 PEN/O. Henry Prize Stories. She lives in Seattle with her husband and sons.

PRISCILLA ATKINS grew up in Illinois, traveled east to college, then to Los Angeles to teach and on to Hawaii. Some years ago, she moved back to the Midwest and eventually pursued her MFA at Spalding University. Her poems have appeared in *Poetry London*, *Shenandoah*, *Salmagundi*, and other journals.

JUDY BEBELAAR (Berkeley, California) taught English and creative writing in San Francisco public high schools for thirty-seven years. Her work has been published widely, most recently in *Pearl*, *Westview*, *The Old Red Kimono*, *Schuylkill Valley Journal*, *Willard and Maple*, *The Griffin*, *The Squaw Valley Review* and *Ship of Fools*. She recently won an honorable mention in the San Francisco Pen Women's poetry contest and was a finalist in Flyway's Writing the Wild chapbook contest. She hosts a reading series for the Bay Area Writing Project, *Writing Teachers Write*.

COLE BELLAMY was raised by his grandmother on a cattle ranch in Darby, Florida. He began writing poetry and incoherent short stories as a teenager. Since graduating from Saint Leo University in 2004, he has worked as a political organizer, a traffic reporter, a library assistant, a writer and photographer for a small town newspaper. He recently received his MFA in poetry from Spalding University. His poems have been published in *The Sandhill Review*, *Moonshot* and in the chapbook *The Mermaid Postcard*, available from Yellow Jacket Press. He teaches English and creative writing at MacDill Air Force Base. He lives in Tampa, Florida, with his cats Oskar and Sally.

MARY CLYDE's *Survival Rates* was awarded the Flannery O'Connor Award for Short Fiction. Her work has been published in various periodicals and anthologies, including *Georgia Review* and *Quarterly West*. An erstwhile instructor at Spalding University's MFA in Writing Program, she now teaches Creative Writing, Composition, and Literature at Grand Canyon University in Phoenix.

KIMBERLY LONG COCKROFT grew up in Bangladesh and Kenya. She's taught writing in high school and college, gardened and enjoyed her three daughters. She was awarded a 2009 Fellowship from the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *The MacGuffin*, *Cold Mountain Review*, *Apple Valley Review*, *Prick of the Spindle*, and *The Christian Century*, among others, and she was a finalist in *Glimmer Train's* Short Story Award for New Writers. Her poem "Geometry" was recently nominated for a Pushcart Prize. As a weekly newspaper columnist, she writes about rabid opossums and hot dog carts and can be found daily at wazoofarm.blogspot.com.

K. L. COOK is the author of two books of fiction: *Last Call*, a collection of linked stories that won the inaugural Prairie Schooner Book Prize in Fiction; and *The Girl from Charnelle*, a novel that won the 2007 WILLA Award for Contemporary Fiction and was named to several lists of best books of 2006. His newest collection of stories, *Love Songs for the Quarantined*, won the Spokane Prize for Short Fiction and will be published in early fall of 2011. He teaches at Prescott College in Arizona and in Spalding University's brief-residency MFA in Writing Program.

SUE TERRY DRISKELL lives in Louisville, is a member of The Chartreuse Table, and has published poems in *The American Voice*, *Arable*, *The Greensboro Review* and *The Louisville Review*. In 2009 her chapbook of poems, *Drawn Into Someone's Passion*, was published by Finishing Line Press.

DREMA DRUDGE is a student in the Spalding University brief-residency MFA in Writing Program and is currently writing a novel. She lives in North Manchester, Indiana, with her husband, and she teaches Adult Basic Education. Drema's other artistic pursuits are painting and singing.

KATHLEEN FLENNIKEN's first book of poems, *Famous* (University of Nebraska, 2006), was named a Notable Book by the American Library Association. Her second collection of poems, *Plume*, a reconsideration of the Hanford Nuclear Site and her lifelong ties to the place and culture, is forthcoming from University of Washington Press in Spring 2012.

BARRY GEORGE's poetry has been published in leading international English-language haiku and tanka journals, including *Modern Haiku*, *Haiku Canada Review*, *Modern English Tanka*, and *Ko* (Japan). His work has appeared in German, French, Romanian, and Japanese translations, and has been anthologized in *A New Resonance 2: Emerging Voices in English-Language Haiku*, *The New Haiku* (United Kingdom), and eight of the annual "Best Haiku of the Year" collections published by Red Moon Press. A 2009 AWP Intro Poets Award recipient, he has won international Japanese short-form

competitions, including First Prize in the 2009 Gerald R. Brady Contest (Haiku Society of America). His chapbook, *Wrecking Ball and Other Urban Haiku*, has been nominated for a 2011 Pushcart Prize. He lives and teaches in Philadelphia.

JASON HARMON has previously published in *Can We Have Our Ball Back?*, *Jacket*, *The Argotist Online*, *Yes, Poetry*, and *BlazeVox*. He attends the Spalding MFA program and works as a Systems Analyst.

Born in Green Bay, Wisconsin, **ADAM HOULE** currently studies at Texas Tech. His poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *Natural Bridge*, *The Southeast Review*, *AGNI online*, and *Best New Poets 2010*. He is an associate editor at *Iron Horse Literary Review* and an assistant to the editor for *32poems*.

HEATHER L. JONES has had work produced by American Theatre of Actors in New York, and by Green Light Theatrical Productions in Philadelphia, where her play, *Last Rites*, was one of six selections for the first presentation of GLO, their annual festival of one-acts by women. In 2009 Heather received a Regional Artists Project Grant from the Asheville Area Arts Council and the North Carolina Arts Council, and she has directed her own work at the BeBe Theatre in Asheville, and at the University of North Carolina at Asheville. She is Co-founding Artistic Director of Blue Scarf Collective, a theatre-making group in St. Petersburg, Florida, now in residence at freeFall Theatre.

STACY KIDD is completing a PhD in English at the University of Utah. Her poems have appeared in *Boston Review*, *Columbia*, *Eleven Eleven*, *The Iowa Review*, and *WITNESS*, among others. Her chapbooks *About Birds* and *A man in a boat in the summer* are forthcoming from Dancing Girl and Beard of Bees. She is founder and editor of the new online journal *intersection(s)*, which launches this spring and can be found at: intersectionsjournal.org.

DIANE LeBLANC is the author of two poetry chapbooks, *Dancer with Good Sow* (Finishing Line Press, 2008) and *Hope in Zone Four* (Talent House Press, 1998). Awards include literary fellowships from the Wyoming Arts Council, a Brenda Ueland Prose Prize, a Robert Penn Warren Award, and a Pushcart Prize nomination for poetry. Diane received the Bechtel Prize for her essay "Weaving Voices: Writing as a Working Class Daughter, Professor, and Poet" and was a 2010 finalist for the Annie Dillard Award for Creative Nonfiction. Her work appears in *Asheville Poetry Review*, *Bellingham Review*, *Natural Bridge*, *Rhino*, *Water~Stone*, and other journals. Diane directs the writing program and teaches at St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota.

GAIL CARSON LEVINE is the author of eighteen books for children and young adults. She and her husband David live in 221-year-old farmhouse in New York's Hudson Valley. Her debut poems for adults appeared in the Fall 2010 edition of *The Louisville Review*.

MARY MAKOFKSKE's manuscript *Traction* recently won the Richard Snyder Prize and will be published by Ashland Poetry Press in November, 2011. Previous publications are *The Disappearance of Gargoyles* (Thorntree) and *Eating Nasturtiums* (winner of a Flume Press chapbook competition). Her poems have appeared in *Poetry*, *Natural Bridge*, *Poetry East*, *Zone 3*, *Calyx*, and other journals.

MELISSA MORPHEW is the author of five poetry collections—the most recent, *Bluster*, was the winner of the 2010 Sacramento Poetry Center Press Book Award. Her work has appeared in *The Georgia Review*, *Shenandoah*, *Crab Orchard Review*, and *Prairie Schooner*. New poems can be found in the Winter 2011 issue of *Southern Humanities Review*. A native Tennessean, Morphey currently resides in Riverside, Texas.

ERIC MULDER was born and raised in rural Oregon. Learning to dance, however, did not happen until he moved to the “big city” of Salem, Oregon. He now lives in Boston where he works as a book designer and dances as often as possible.

ELLEN O'CONNELL, originally from California, just completed an MFA in nonfiction writing at Sarah Lawrence College. In addition to publication in several literary magazines, she is a contributing writer to the forthcoming in collection *The Moment* (Harper Perennial 2011). She was nominated for a Pushcart Prize in 2010. Ellen currently teaches literature and creative writing at UC Santa Barbara.

SHELLEY PUHAK lives in Baltimore, Maryland. Her first collection, *Stalin in Aruba* (Black Lawrence Press), won the 2010 Towson University Prize for Literature. Her poems have appeared in *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *New South*, *Third Coast*, and many other journals.

A west-coast native, **ERIN REID** has lived in Huntsville, Alabama, since 1998. She works as support staff in Sociology and Women's Studies at The University of Alabama in Huntsville and is the Director of Religious Education at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Huntsville. She is pursuing an MFA in Fiction from Spalding University and is completely in love with the program. She also takes great pleasure in making visual art, singing with the Huntsville Feminist Chorus, writing with the BWFF writers and Coweeta Poets, and playing with her mischievous pup, Alice.

JACK RIDL's latest books are *Broken Symmetry* (Wayne State) and *Losing Season* (CavanKerry). He loved his years in the classroom. More than 70 of his students are now publishing and nine are in the recent anthology *Time You Let Me In: 25 Poets Under 25* (Greenwillow). He is finishing up with Peter Schakel the third edition of *Approaching Literature* (Bedford/St. Martin's).

REBECCA RINE-STONE teaches English at Harper College in Palatine, Illinois. She resides in Chicago with her husband, toddler, and newborn where she squeezes in time to write in the wee hours of the morning when she can barely see straight. Her work has been aired on Chicago Public Radio, and she is currently looking for a publisher for her book of nonfiction essays called *I'd Like to Thank My Colon*. And, yes, that is her real last name.

BARBARA ROCKMAN teaches poetry at Santa Fe Community College and in private workshops in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Bellingham Review*, *Calyx*, *Cimarron Review*, *Spoon River Poetry Review* and *Terrain.org*. She is editor of the anthology *Women Becoming Poems* (Cinabar Press). She is the author of the collection *Sting and Nest* (Sunstone Press, 2011).

JENNIFER RONSMAN is an Associate Lecturer of English Composition at the University of Wisconsin in her hometown of Green Bay, where she lives with her husband Mark and her puppy Zelda. She is a graduate of the MFA program in Creative Writing at Minnesota State University, Mankato where she served on the staff of the *Blue Earth Review*. "Last Words" is her first piece of published Creative Nonfiction.

ROMAYNE RUBINAS lives and works in Bloomington, Indiana.

BARBARA SABOL's poetry has appeared in *Public-Republic*, *Blood Lotus*, *the Tupelo Press Poetry Project*, *Apparatus Magazine*, *Blast Furnace Press*, *The Monongahela Review*, *San Pedro River Review*, and elsewhere. She is the author of two chapbooks, *Original Ruse* (Accents Publishing) and *The Distance Between Blues*, forthcoming from Finishing Line Press. Barbara has an MFA from Spalding University.

JOE SURVANT has published four collections of poems, most recently *Rafting Rise* from the University Press of Florida. His "Anne & Alpheus, 1842-1882" won the Arkansas Poetry Prize from the University of Arkansas Press, and "We Will All Be Changed" won the State Street Press Poetry Award at SUNY- Brockport. His work has been published in the U.K., Canada, Malaysia, Singapore, China, and the U.S. He has just returned from giving a series of readings at the United International College in Zhuhai, China. He served as Kentucky's Poet Laureate in 2002-04.

RICHARD TAYLOR, author of six collections of poetry, lives in Frankfort, Kentucky, and is Kenan Visiting Writer at Transylvania University. A former poet laureate, his collection *Rare Bird: Sonnets on the Life of John James Audubon* will be published by Larkspur Press this fall.

BILLY THOMPSON lives in Media, Pennsylvania, with his wife Abby and their newborn son Joseph. His fiction has appeared in *Word Riot* and *Oak Bend Review*.

DALY WALKER is a retired surgeon. His stories have appeared in numerous literary publications, including *The Atlantic Monthly*, *The Sewanee Review*, *The Louisville Review*, *The Sycamore Review*, and *The Southampton Review*. His work been anthologized in *Faith Stories*, *Story Matters*, and the *Bedford Introduction to Literature*. His fiction has been short listed for Best American Short Stories and an O.Henry Award, and was a finalist in The Best American Magazine Writing. A native Hoosier, he divides his time between Bean Blossom, Indiana, and Boca Grande, Florida.

The
Children's
Corner

Jess Molasky

BUENOS AIRES

The night air is cold, temperatures
have reversed as I soared,
over the imaginary lines
break into latitudes, longitudes,
and past the equator.

The “New York” of South
America squirms beneath me
and my leather soles
separated always from touching.
Steel and carpet and 800 feet, above
the stars and buildings gleam on
La Plata while bridges try to stitch the
land whole again.

Touchdown, wheels skid and hum in tune
applause all around for the conductor.
My body and thoughts are still hazed by the
combination of Nyquil and the “Señor
stronger than café, maté” “Bienvenidos
a todos de Buenos Aires”

I gather my baggage from the
deep storage bins, I tried to leave most at home.
The hallway is white and smells like hospital
Mixed with paint. I do the hectic customs dance
and shimmy my way through arches, twirl
on carrousel and control doors with only
my Jedi presence.

The cement is cracked, tarred and
gummed nearly beyond recognition.
The sun struggles to change
the color of the sky, is in flux muddied

purple shifts to fiery red as if stabbed
with the lingering obsidian blades.

I take a deep gulp of air infused
with smog, and the tobacco
of the taxi men. My first of
breath of “Good Air”

Eli Perra

WANDER

God speed to his makers and all
Of the people who own him
Come see from your house in the sun
They need a voice they can lean on

I'm not going to say what you want to hear
She puts her hands on her ears
There' tears in her eyes
Can't say I blame her
I'm not mad at her at all
Just at the world
And the people I thought should care

So come down from your rusty cloud
It's obvious that it's been raining
Damp grass and the smell of the dirt
Rising up from the street makes me lonely

The angels that were born in your eyes
Make it hard to define
Just how beautiful
The sky would look if it drowned inside
And became your pupil

I've found myself in the dumps
But I'm getting back up
So won't you give me a hand
I'll kiss you and we'll roam the land
With no other plan
But to wander

Eli Perra

VALMORA NADA

I walk through water
The snow, the rain
The empty town
That'll chant my name
For singing songs
About the "before"
The stories that will come
To only bore you

My fame was once
Has never been
Your face was true
But your words were thin
You looked at me
From a soul's distance
I thought I could love
Love is cold and I was a prison

This song will be "before"
The empty words
The polished floor
The snow, the rain
The open door
The waking years
The final breathe
The moment I shake off these tears

"Before" we never missed
The few still clapping

Julia Zasso

WOMEN WEAR LIPSTICK

Momma keeps a shiny, silver tube on her vanity to use
When she goes “out on the town” with Daddy.
Wearing a skirt that hugs her hips,
Momma paints the red cream on her lips.
Momma says Red lipstick is classy;
It stands out unadorned.
Daddy holds Momma’s hand,
And they leave in love.

Big Sister picks up the slender stick,
Weighing it in her hand;
She doesn’t dress in knee-length anything,
But her skirts and shorts hug tighter than Momma’s.
She likes her lips to shine like rubies
Even though the color will be dulled in the night.
Big Sister throws a pack of mints in her handbag;
She leaves the house looking like a strawberry tart.

My chubby fingers fumble for the magic paste.
I think Momma smells like roses,
And Big Sister seems too sultry.
I smear the cranberry stain on my soft skin:
There’s something wrong with the mirror.
The lipstick is the same red,
But I don’t look like Momma
Or feel like Big Sister.
My lips leave a red blur
Where I’ve kissed the glass;
I leave the bathroom for a paper towel.

Jesse Scheaffer

IF YOU SIT ON THE PORCH DURING A THUNDERSTORM

If you sit on the porch
During
A thunderstorm
Hear the rain beating
Like a drum
Feel the slight breeze companioned
By joyful water sprits
Taste the
Tears
Smell the replenished Earth around
You
Remember everything cries
Even Earth

Megan Ellenberger

RAINING THOUGHTS

I am in bed sleeping
No, trying to sleep.
My thoughts keep
Running through
My head keeping me
Awake.
They fall like raindrops
First a thunderstorm and
Then a shower and
Last of all they become
A pensive drizzle.
They land in puddles
In my head, upon my
Consciousness.
Then they evaporate
Slowly and before
They can become
Rain again
I
Am
Asleep.

Sean Ahern

NIGHTCRAWLERS

i swear Life:
is blindly crawling)open sores
over cold cracked concrete making
faint Footprints, attempted mental
mapping of the height,length,width,cracks,
crevices—
the walls and the floors, but never fully sure.
just more stumbling reaching as
if there would be a light switch or a door-
just wind-swept Whispers from far corners,
and yelling in return, both parties trying to learn
if the other is real-but Death:
the eventual stumbling over the
edge of the room- forever
falling: unconscious (though never
fully aware) into sense-deprived
Nothingness;
shows his facetious face
and all is lost- except the
delicate, desperate Marks left by yearnful
years of dragging through the dark.

Sean Ahern

CULDESAC KING

it's the artist's post creation
—depression
that Plagues my generation:
with nowhere to go in the
Valleys
between corpulent
Cities
a balance between: excess and death
but out here,
they may reveal to be one in the
Same; Repetition of
Cold War Bomb Shelter trends
but where do we go from the end?
Or the top, the peak of a once distant goal.
 down,
 the other side, and we begin the Descent
Where are our defining marks?
when all we've known are highways lined
with trailer parks
and Boutique Stores blended with Discount Retailers
mocking us: even if we rise
)money wise
we'll just have streets with less trash
 stores that have sophisticated ads
 and a lower class to bash
we're stuck; so we walk
with no cash. no fashion.
but our hearts full of passion;
streamlining toward the First
source that offers any
hope, as an outlet for our
;energies
and the parents are never home
so we're always alone killing
Time
and the television (the boisterous babysitter)

has stagnated our minds
and we're left to rewind
years of unperfect reigned rhyme
there's a War in our
 sitcom homes
take-out every night
and another domestic fight
so we become

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS TO THE CHILDREN'S CORNER

All of **SEAN AHERN**'s passion belongs to his band, Featherweight, and his friends, who are the only family he has. At eighteen years old, he is from the suburbs North of Boston, and organizes his thoughtful expression through poetry. It is something substantial for which to live and work that no one can ever take from him or anyone else. Verse will live in the soul even although the body is bound and beaten.

MEGAN ELLENBERGER is fourteen years old and enjoys reading, writing, and acting in school plays. She attends Hinkletown Mennonite School where she is in the eighth grade. She lives with her parents and two siblings and their cat, Dasher, in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. She is a Christian and attends Akron Church of the Brethren.

JESS MOLASKY is a junior at The Meadows School in Las Vegas, Nevada. As well as reading and writing, Jess enjoys playing multiple instruments with his family and also performs professionally for charity events.

ELI PERRA is eighteen years old and was born and raised in New Orleans, Louisiana. He currently still resides in his hometown and will be attending the University of New Orleans in the fall of 2011. At age thirteen, Eli started making music and writing lyrical poetry. He hopes to make a career out of singing/songwriting. His influences include Elliott Smith, Conor Oberst, Tallest Man on Earth, Bob Dylan, Kurt Cobain, and the like.

JESSE SHEAFFER is a twelve-year-old girl who lives in Pennsylvania. She participates in sports such as basketball, field hockey and soccer. Jesse loves to read books by various authors. Sewing, scrapbooking and creating other crafts are other areas of interest for Jesse. She composed her poem for an assignment in her fifth grade reading class.

JULIA ZASSO is a high school junior from Illinois. This poem is her first published work. Recently she was named junior class poet. She has participated in her school's poetry slam team for three years and is taking part in Chicago's 2011 Louder than a Bomb slam competition. Last summer she attended the University of the South's youth writing conference for poetry. Julia hopes to continue growing as a young writer and poet.

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