

No. 26

Winter 2003-04

FUGUE



Featuring:

Ellen Bryant Voigt

Denise Duhamel

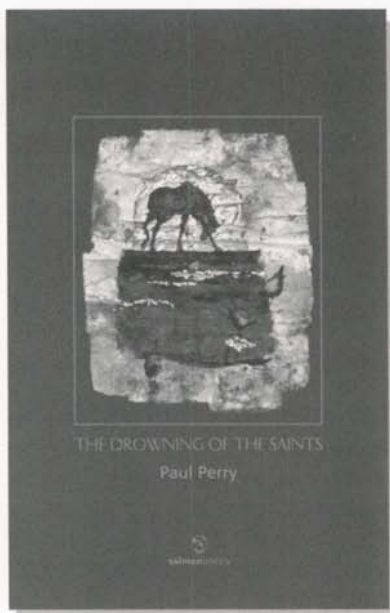
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PAUL PERRY was born in Dublin, Ireland, in 1972. He won the Hennessy New Irish Writer of the Year Award in 1998. He received a B.A. in Comparative Literature from Brown University and has been a James Michener Fellow of Creative Writing at The University of Miami, and a C. Glenn Cambor Fellow of Poetry at The University of Houston. His work has appeared in numerous publications, including Poetry Ireland Review, Cyphers, TLS and The Best American Poetry 2000. In 2002, he won the Listowel Prize for Poetry. Currently, he is Writer in Residence for the University of Ulster.

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The beginnings of all things are small.

CICERO

This issue is dedicated to the memory
of
George Plimpton
(1927-2003)

Winter 2003-04

FUGUE

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Moscow, Idaho 83844-1102

FUGUE

Winter 2003-04, Vol. 26

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From the Editors

This past summer, *Fugue* went out into the world for the twenty-fifth time, and with this issue, we embark on what we hope will be the first of twenty-five more terrific issues to come. The magazine would not be possible, of course, without the efforts of a great many people, and we'd like to express our gratitude here to the English Department and the Creative Writing Program at the University of Idaho for their financial support and to our editors, those right-hand men and women—Jen Hirt, Jordan Hartt, and Monica Mankin—without whose labors *Fugue* would collapse, as well as to all the smart, diligent readers on our staff.

We've always made it our goal to present our readers with an array of diverse, worthy voices, and we think you'll find this issue reflects that goal. The fiction here relies on storytelling methods that run the gamut from a traditional narrative to metafiction to magic realism to voice-driven prose. The poems have been ambitious enough to blend the sacred with the profane, to tackle the Holocaust, and to enter a conversation with Sylvia Plath. The essays, while they reveal varied experiences, have each done the thing that all good essays do: they've invited the reader along on the writer's voyage of discovery. And in our interview, Ellen Bryant Voigt—a poet who has been making poems and making them quite well for upwards of thirty years—offers us some insight into the art. We trust that the pages here will resonate for you, that you'll locate something true.

Bob Dylan once said, "I always thought one man, the lone balladeer with the guitar, could blow an entire army off the stage if he knew what he was doing." We couldn't agree more. It's become a cliché to refer to writing as dark, lonely work, but it doesn't alter the fact that writing is a task you toil at alone, one that doesn't become communal until it finds a forum—those readers it was desiring to reach all along. So here's to all our writers, those lone balladeers. For every time you desperately wanted to leave your desk, for every time you felt your bones resisting the empty page in front of you, for every time you wanted to give up but stayed instead at your post until the work was done, we salute you. It was worth it. As Rilke reminded us, "Almost everything serious is difficult; and everything is serious."

We hope this issue brings you some light and warmth in these cold winter months.

Ben George and Jeff P. Jones

Vines

Their house sat on the beach, behind three palm trees, in a shade that came and went with the winds. Ronald flew an airplane and his wife Haley, who grew tomatoes, could look up and see the shadow of his plane flying over her garden. It wasn't easy growing a tomato garden right on the beach, but she had read a lot of books and taken some gardening classes at the community college, so she knew what she was doing. She used a very rare and special dirt that she made herself, and the winds blew enough that the palm trees provided just the right amount of shade.

Every day, Ronald got in his plane and scoured the seas for anyone who might be drowning, or for ships that were in trouble. It wasn't a job he got paid for—he had enough money from his late father's baked bean emporium—but it was one he took very seriously. Just last month, a cruise ship full of chefs sank, and if Ronald hadn't been flying his plane right then, they all would have drowned. The ocean was strewn with herbs and vegetables and chefs, bobbing frantically and screaming, waving spatulas and corkscrews. Ronald called the Coast Guard on his radio and flew around in circles until they arrived in boats to scoop up the chefs.

When he told his wife what he'd done, she insisted he invite the chefs over for dinner. The chefs used up every last tomato on her vines for their sauces and soups. They baked bread and made hors d'oeuvres with cheese sauces and tiny fish, and clapped each other on their backs and stuck their fingers in the pots while they cooked.

Ronald drove across the beach to the liquor store and bought wine, and Haley pulled out the folding chairs, and they all sat late into the night, talking—some of the chefs could speak English—and enjoying the food, most of which was tomato-based. Later, inside the house, Haley and Ronald made love, while the chefs slept on the beach, rolled in blankets. The next morning they got in their van and drove away, tooting their horn, leaving behind their dirty pots and pans, and a garden full of empty vines.

*

Haley and Ronald met four years ago, in a dating class. He was there because even though he was rich, he wasn't very attractive—he was downright ugly—and women dumped him after he'd bought them presents. They told him he didn't have enough personality to make up for his ugliness, so he was hoping this class would help him have more personality, at least on dates. At least on a first date.

Haley was there because even though she was very beautiful, she had a terrible, terrible secret: for three days every year, everything she touched turned to dirt. This had, of course, created problems in all of her relationships; as a child she had ruined her mother's necklaces, her father's shoes, her sister's prom dress. She'd been trying it on, six years old, and it turned to dirt right on her, crumbling away and leaving her standing naked in front of the mirror. Her sister had threatened to throw her out the window, then screamed nonstop until their mother took her to J.C. Penny's for another, even more expensive, dress. It was kept locked in the armoire, along with the other things Haley was not allowed to touch: fruits and vegetables, shoes, pillowcases, the VCR. The one thing that didn't turn to dirt at her touch was human flesh. But only *human* flesh; she'd reduced five cats and two dogs to mulch by the time she was two.

For three days every year, Haley's mother and father kept her home from school, put her in a tent in the backyard where she couldn't do any damage. In the winter, they set up a heater for her. In the summer, she was instructed to play in the dirt that was already there, and they used it on their garden.

There was, unfortunately, never any way of predicting when the three dirt days would happen.

When she was sixteen, she let a neighbor boy take her to McDonald's, and was just getting over her nervousness when her Big Mac crumbled into soil. The boy tried to ignore it—he was very polite—but she was afraid to touch his car so she walked home, and he thought that was rude.

She hadn't been on a date since, and she was twenty-five years old. She hoped to learn some skills in this class about how to meet men she could communicate with, men who would accept her for who she was and not think her rude when she refused to touch their cars.

In the first class, the instructor paired up the students and made them interview each other. She ended up with the ugliest man she'd ever seen, who told her he wanted to meet a woman who saw him for who he was on the inside; she told him about her Terrible Secret, and he took hold of her hands and kissed them. They didn't go to any of the other classes. They got married and moved to the beach, and Ronald bought an airplane with his late father's fortune, and Haley grew tomatoes, and for a while they were perfectly happy.

*

Two months after the chefs left, Haley realized she was pregnant. When she told her husband, they cried for happiness and for despair,

because what if their baby had to suffer as they'd suffered? What if she turned her crib to dirt, what if no one liked her, what if she grew up ugly and afraid? Then they vowed that they would never keep her outside in a tent, and they would tell her she was beautiful even if she was not, even if it meant hiding mirrors from her.

But then the baby was born, a girl, and she *was* beautiful. They named her Stacy. A year passed, and she grew hair and teeth and learned how to say words, and nothing turned to dirt in her grasp. And better still, nothing turned to dirt in Haley's grasp, either. She thought maybe, somehow, she might have missed those three days, but the next year again nothing happened, and then the next, until she realized she was cured.

Stacy loved tomatoes; she'd crawl around outside and eat them off the vines, her little knees covered in dirt. And when she was older, Haley told her the story of the chefs who came to their house the night she was conceived, and how they made tomato soup and tomato sauce and tomato and cheese dips, and fish with tomatoes. Stacy wanted to hear that story over and over. She listened rapt, her face and mouth covered with seeds and juice, her eyes as wild as the bobbing, soupy sea.

*

As the years went by, Ronald continued to fly his plane, and the beach became more and more crowded with tourists, some of whom came from far away to buy Haley's sauces. Stacy went to school, and when she was 18 she told her parents she wanted to move to Paris and become a chef.

Ronald and Haley were not happy. "Can't you go to the community college?" Haley asked her, knowing she was asking the impossible. Because Stacy needed to know more than Haley or the noncredit cooking classes could teach her, she needed to use spices Haley had never heard of, oils from exotic lands, leaves from trees that grew far away. She needed to learn about puddings and cakes, things that went beyond tomatoes, things tomatoes had no use for.

So she went. Her parents stood on the beach and watched the sliver of her jumbo jet vanish over the water, and five days later they got a postcard of the Eiffel Tower.

Condos were going up all over the beach, and sometimes camera crews filmed TV shows there. Haley and Ronald were asked to sell their house, and they said no, so a construction crew cut down their palm trees instead, and built a Sno-Cone stand and parking lot. Next to that was a kiosk where you could get your picture made into a keychain.

With Stacy gone, the tomatoes didn't grow as well, and when the palm trees came down they didn't grow at all. Haley bought Miracle Grow, but that didn't work.

Stacy called rarely, and her voice was sounding different, foreign and staticky and annoyed. She told her parents she couldn't see them anymore because they made her feel strange and unwell, and why couldn't they be like other parents? Why couldn't they go out to movies with friends? Why didn't they move to New York or someplace exciting?

Sometimes she sent them canned tomatoes, but they weren't the same, and they weren't enough.

*

There was something wrong with Haley. She felt old and tired and sad. Ronald asked, "What can I get for you?" But she couldn't think of anything she wanted except her daughter and tomatoes, and since Stacy would not come home, Ronald flew over the countryside looking for the best tomatoes he could find. He'd bring them to her in her bed, on a plate. She'd take one weary bite and then shake her head and fall back against her pillows.

But Ronald had noticed something: when he flew his plane across their garden, the tomatoes grew a little. He told this to Haley, and she struggled out of bed with a look on her face that made him want to weep. "Would you?" she asked, and he would.

He flew and he flew, over the garden, back and forth, and because he loved her so much, cruise ships sank and children floated out to sea in their blow-up rafts. And finally Haley couldn't remember his face at all, and it was as if all she'd ever loved was the angel-shaped shadow that cast itself across her garden, and made it grow.

Ghost Hallway

I live in a ghost hallway. They come and go whenever they want, like the transparent, blow-away wings of bees. Their spirits hover inside this house on Mechanic Street like a twilight hue filling a wine glass. I live more or less inside their moods, which they carry behind them in traces of light that flood the panes one window at a time and the creaky flutes of rusty hinges. The ghosts don't say "boo" and they don't swing chains. They're good ghosts as far as I can tell, calm as a cup of tea, considerate and watchful and able to pay attention to the least thing for many hours. I like how they watch me read without telling me what to think; I like how they touch my mind with ghost memories, laughing and smoking on the porch with their neighbors. I like how they stared out these same windows serious and alone in their own thoughts, unable to share with each other the deepest parts of themselves because the inner commotion was too great to put into words. I see how after a fight or death in the family they sat by themselves in the living room, wanting things to be good again, wanting to be healed but not being able to do anything but wait.

What they have left behind is shorn of all eventfulness, as if what happened here long ago in this quasi-dilapidated shotgun house still lingers on as after-tone slowly turning into something else, the echo of their memories which I navigate now with a cup of coffee and a three-day beard. I'm doing a soft-shoe in my slippers through their long recollections, the fog that hangs in the trees between dreams. They heard the same front door whine and clatter and the soft thudding of footfalls on the sidewalk: they heard the wind in the trees and the wash of rain tearing through them on its way to another season carrying a hundred small deaths in its wake. Their senses are alive in mine, just as mine are remade in the memory of theirs. It's a mysterious transference that I do not understand. I don't necessarily like to feel the pangs of sorrow the woman felt that beetled up and down her spine like a slug of mercury, finding her defenseless in her own house at different times in her life, like a painful sickness that keeps coming back. I don't know why she was sad, but her sadness cleaned out the closets and touched the spider webs weaving themselves out of the corners.

I think her sadness gave way to something else, something precious and loving whose slender and tender roots are planted in the long-lived acceptance of a silent struggle. Now I think this accep-

tance is her legacy to me and anyone else who happens to live here, a gift she blows like a kiss from the other side. She is here and not here, a mid-Michigan wife who did her duty and loved her children though they left her anyway and her difficult husband, who died before her. It's her house or no one's, though she never worked outside the home. Her husband is a different story, downstairs in the basement with his tools and the dark anger that never left him, his lust seething into the glue between two-by-fours, into the hammer and the clay pipe that he sucked on obsessively. His hard gray beard was peppered with roots of black hair and he liked off-color jokes. But he loved his wife, he did, and he made sure there was food on the table, and every two or three years or so they rented a cabin on a lake in Northern Michigan and then he was wise and gentle, at least for a few days. And what more could you ask for, then or now? What more could you expect without education or much money? That was their life together, he downstairs working his frustration into wood and she upstairs, mending and cooking and walking lightly though he couldn't hear her anyway with all that hammering, sawing, and moving about. He never really knew her, that much is clear; he never really knew her and how do I know this?

Some days I look out the same window together, and I sense her next to me or looking over my shoulder. She wraps her ghost fingers around mine, like a saintly dead aunt. Everything is okay. Everything is fine. I am supposed to believe her somehow. I say the Okays to myself, breathe them through my teeth, and she fills the air with the shapes of those words. How do you know? I want to ask her, but she won't say anything. The question comes later, when the okay has gone the way of falling leaves and I feel a bit haggard around the edges. I thought I was a blank slate, starting over here in this depressed Michigan town. I thought the cost of loving was equal somehow, that whomever and whatever I loved would come back to me in equal measure, quid pro quo, but now I think I was wrong, dead wrong, that I've been living in blind ignorance with a thread of this love leading me from one place to another without my even knowing it, a kid pulled by a string while he's preoccupied with a hundred other things, ranting and raving, crying and praying, laughing and sighing the whole way in the endless, appalling chant, I want this, I want that, while the thread of this love keeps pulling him along no matter what he does. It's not quid pro quo but pro bono, free for the loving, free for the asking because that's the way it is if only I would sit down and let it flood my whole being. She knows that already, Betty, Agnes, or Sue; she's been waiting for me all my life, my kindly, ghostly bene-

factor, the woman who had shoulders like mounds of softly shaped dough.

I realize how odd this all sounds, to admit to anyone, even to myself, that I live in a ghost hallway, moving from room to room, but nonetheless it's true; I hear them in the leaky faucet and see their faces in the paneled walls where the tawny grains of wood stare back at me like the mirrors of trees. I see him as pot-bellied and drawing contentedly at his pipe while she is in the kitchen washing dishes. There was nothing PC about them, nothing to suggest she would ever do anything else but what he wanted. He stares out the window, counting his chickens before they're hatched. He had a hard life, but a good one, too. Mostly hard. The real issue now is how the light comes in at certain crucial intervals filling the house, the windows that need cleaning and lead out to the sun going down over the tops of trees; the real issue is those who lived here and how I feel their presence like a calm benediction blessing this house in the tone where I now live, how we can feel our silent and invisible messengers and what they have given us like a sealed envelope that we will someday pass on to others. If I feel their presence in strange and subtle things the least I can do is admit it; the least I can do is to say that these things are true, that we do live among ghosts and that they shape the tones of our lives like the chimes of far away bells.

But this is the first time I have admitted to myself that I live among ghosts. I have fought the impulse for months, for years, thinking to myself that such an admission bordered on the crazy, the fantastic, the frankly absurd; but now I want to hunker down and swap silences, want to let them know I know that they are there. And that is all. Because some day I will slip into ghosthood myself; I will pass out of my body like a wisp of smoke and look back at it and feel nothing, leaving a husk or shell behind. I will be the ghost for someone else, someone with his or her fair share of joy and anguish, slowly growing into another form. Maybe then I'll be able to thank the people on Mechanic Street in a way befitting their calm acceptance firsthand, the tone they provided for me to live inside like a bell. I realize that I live inside the tone of this love that they prepared for me, that it cradles me each day whether I notice it or not; that nothing gentle is ever lost but transmuted into light filling the windows, the peace of a place, its soft and rough fabrics, its darkly hues. I like how they hang in the wind chimes and play their own version of Silent Night, how the woman has to keep herself from humming out loud. I like how they notice the drift of the notes that fill their seeing with eternity, that carry what they used to be and what they are now beyond the

boundaries of promise. We respect each other but they have the upper hand in wisdom and almost all-knowing, in the fact that they are no longer weighted down by arthritic bones or the heaviness of sagging skin. Especially the woman, especially she who is my mentor in the interior life, who shows me how to appreciate the simple things.

My sad and beautiful precursors whose lives gave way to an incomprehensible peace, my weebegone and overworked friends: how am I to thank you now for delivering me the private hush of this realization? How can I give back to you a shred of this peace that you dole out to me one precious sample at a time, like teaspoons of honey? Each time I come home you are here and you are not here; I see you suddenly in brief glimpses how you used to be, and who and what you are now, guiding me with the thread of this peace that connects the living and the dead. Forgive me if I misread you, if the flashes that I see of you are inaccurate. But clearly you were here and your presence still abides. The mystery is in the rooms of your knowing, the tone you've left behind for others to come home to. The mystery is that your ghosthood is real, that I see you and sense you in the patched-up roof, the ceiling that sags, the way the bloom of the lamp-light softens the living room where I sit as you watch over me in the keen attention of bird watchers that never fades.

Therése Halscheid

From Brother Melvin
posthumously...

I then felt
that I had returned to you
 once I became my second self,
 sent to the sky

and saw
what my eyes had not noticed —

 your long
 years of brain damage

and watched then

my own absence
 during all the damaged years
 of you, strange.

Little did I know
 what was not loved on earth
 comes after life
 repeating itself
 into exhaustion

that even the smallest moments become us
 exactly as we had
 believed.

Today, it seems
 like weeks now
 that I am forever
 bound

to that
imagined generosity

 of my wife and I
 sitting at our old sunlit table.

How sad! we keep saying,
like we would always say of you,
such a pity!

Still —
as we once were

when the mere mention,
was enough helping.

Nightjars

*Strange god who creates such wonders,
then tries so hard to conceal them*

Chuck-Will's-Widow

Like in a Picasso, where an ear might be an elbow,
an elbow a breast, a breast a locket,
a locket a blue guitar—
that's how well the chuck-will's-widow hides—
its body in leaves, its legs in bits of straw,
its tail a ringer for stones. Day people
who know birds by colored feathers, shape of beaks,
and whether or not their ping-pong heads have crests
must smother dogma, turn insomniac, arm themselves
with flashes and roam the sarsaparilla
if they want to light the *tapetum lucidum*, the mirror retina
that turns nightjar eyes to opals, molten lava,
or the fleeing tail-lights of a hit and run.

Poor-Will, Calling

The poor-will's call is not the crack of the whip-poor-will,
but a liebestram, *sleep-well-sleep-long*. When cold or danger nears,
this smallest nightjar's heart will slow to barely beating,
like a meditating swami. The legend goes
that she who breaks the poor-will's trance
before its hard times pass
will fall under its spell like Van Winkle,
and her hair will grow past her waist
to camouflage her shape, her uncut nails
will curl like talons, and when she wakes,
her youngest grandchild will be old—
sleep-well-sleep-long.
One good place to do this is Kansas.

The Common Pauraque
(*pronounced pah-raw-kee*)

That story about it being an aberrant goatsucker
is pure myth. The only things the pauraque eats
are moths, insects
(and the occasional smaller bird, but let's not
dwell on that). Groups of young males
will bob and sputter like fans at a football game
in a display of *lek* for the opposite sex,
and the female, when nesting,
will stalk and hiss like a cat to defend her young,
so we're not all that different, except
most of us don't live in southern Texas,
or hide in plain sight, like faith, or call our love
where-where-where-are-you.

The Other World

I. Preservations

Even the earth loses its kettled, brown-fur scent,
and the dark, unyielding, harbors no remorse.
Roots scale the valleys far beyond lotus flowers
drawing lazy, pink breaths. Down here a dead quiet,
the quiet of bedrock and heirloom drapes.
The windings of beetles blur between wood and linen
with the bingeing, insomniac earthworms, misguided
somehow to this bitter sand. *What light means, the call
of the ibis, wading.* On an ivory table boxed shawabti,
carved in wood and armed with hoes and baskets stir;
these workers exist to serve the dead. (I am one
who answers). *Green has a shadow:
it is April: don't ask too much of morning.*

II. The Tomb

I dine from a clay dinner bowl
on loaves of bread wrapped in cloth,
cut into legs of beef with a flint knife
and unseal jars of wine to fill my chalice.
Another sunset. The curve of my lover's back.
The quail stew is cold but flavorful
as I light a terracotta lamp (even the dead
like to see). The head and foreleg
of a bull, set aside, vessels of alabaster
and glass, and then the tiny cakes.
Honey melts to remind me
of summer, the labyrinth flights of bees.

I arrange stone vases, marsh flowers
spilling from their silent mouths
and decorate myself with bone hairpins,
my hair still willful and wiry.
A bracelet of amethyst, a chair
built for a child. Behind my body,

canopic jars hold my innards.
My organs look ahead to the next life
from beneath lids of carved calcite.
The wind in the trees and the stillness.
The falcon-headed Qebehsenut
guards the intestines, and Tuamutef,
the jackal, faithfully stands sentry
over my stomach. Liver and lungs are ready
to be necessary. Missing: the brain: removed first,
in pieces, through my nose. (Who needs to think
in the afterlife?) I wait and wait
for the ending to begin.

III. The Afterlife

My ka is too little with me; perhaps
she harbors some grudge from our life on earth.
Underground we are more divided, less like twins.
Our winged soul flies into the sun and returns
to us each evening. In the swelter of good house linen
my soul will know its own body. Night frets
and without a sound, the soul appears, its human face
like rain. The terracotta lamp burns
its own morning, yet my ka won't help me translate
the scroll of sacred writings; the book falls dead
to us both. I fear we will miss the afterlife
together. On Anubis' scale, my heart weighs so much
less than a feather, this earth, all I have.

The Dryad Conjured

(after Sylvia Plath's "On the Difficulty of Conjuring Up a Dryad")

Suffering through insomnia's disorder
Of wadded dreams, salt-knotted sheets,
Wrenched pillow, and body hot and cold by shifts,
Mind slips on a drowsy blow of curtains—

 The usual scrupulous pupil
 Entangles in ethereal
 And focuses—I swear—
 On Sylvia's blonde hair.

*With sound reason I know, begs brain,
This is but chalk figure, moon drawn—
A trick of wicked-eye—beguilement
Of light hood-winking honest sight.*

 Yes, bold madness—
 Observe: motionless:
 True ghoul would flit
 True poet write!

Yet, no argument of bold reason, nor logicked
Art rids rocking chair of her page-boy-blond;
*My trouble doctor . . . I think as I stare,
Is Sylvia's visage won't leave my chair—*

*Nor will it thump meter,
 Rhyme or talk either—
 But plagiarizes dull life
 Playing possum-wife.*

However I squint, wink, rub-eye, or blink
Chair-dryad remains intractably fixed
In place; no lids trick will erase petrified
Specter nor conjure dormant to kinetic.

 Beggared brain
 Beguiled, but not insane
 Entreats, insists:
 Nymph vanish!

One fresh gust and the closed door swings,
Exposing dull clothes that stir on their line
Like the limp limbs of condemned ghosts—
I shudder; she sits unyielding as a gravestone

Till at last I perceive:
Just like that damned tree—
And she smiles, that fey wraith
Without moving a breath.

Lap Dance

Dear Jack,

Mr. Clippy the paperclip guy just popped up on the side of the word screen. It looks like you're writing a letter, he says. Would you like help?

Oh Mr. Clippy I need all the help I can get!

Can you believe they're finally letting me out of here Jack? Can you believe your Lucinda is going to be 18?

The social worker tried to get me to go to the Phoenix house but I said no way. He kind of implied that I had to go there as a condition of release and he had a form for me to sign but I told him the only form I was interested in was Adult Emancipation.

With no skills or connections, he said, where will you go? He asked it like I was such a dumbass I hadn't asked myself the same question a million times.

I was on my way to Ventura Beach when I got busted, I said. Maybe I'll make it this time.

The social worker shook his head. Do you have any idea how far that is? he said.

I guess you didn't hear me Sherlock. I made the trip once before. Almost.

Mind if I give you some advice? he asked.

Knock yourself out.

Change your name. Go by a middle name. Or initials. But don't tell anyone you're Lucinda West.

I'll consider it, I said. He didn't know I was already writing under a pseudonym.

Anyway. I can't *wait* to get out of here. I've been jogging around the inside of a chain link fence for over two years now. Figure it out. 83 laps to the mile. 776 days. Whatever the number is it has to be depressing.

I work my body hard. Sit-ups. Push-ups. It's the only way to burn off all that stuff so I can focus enough to write. You remember that stuff Jack. All across America you burned it out of me on morning runs and mid-night swims and hiking trails and mountain climbs. Gotta burn that stuff off somehow right? Else Lucinda is just a mean little bitch. So while other girls lay in their beanbags growing their asses I'm up moving.

What's you gettin so sweaty an nassy for? Belva wants to know. She works here.

Watch and you'll see, I say. Belva mails my stories and checks my post office box and I owe her a bunch for postage.

There're some badass girls in Juvenile Detention but most don't mess with me anymore. I spend most of my day away from the others in this corner of the dayroom either exercising or writing on this crappy computer. It's a TRS-80 and before someone from Belva's church donated it I had to share the Gateway with girls who wanted to play games or research really important topics like their whoroscopes. So the TRASH-80 is great. It can't be connected to the Internet and can't run games so it's *all mine!*

So here I am trying to get in my thousand words. You said you averaged a thousand words a day and that's been my goal since the TRASH-80 arrived. But I just can't do it today. Not on the day before I get out. I'm scared Jack and somehow I don't think they're really going to let me go. Not after all the trouble they went to to get me. So it's hard to focus. Besides they only let us shower every other day so here I am. Smelling myself.

They say your diary is on the Internet. It's supposed to be locked in an evidence room in Lexington but there was an article in the paper about some site that has your diary. Someone showed it to Belva and she cut it out and brought it to me. I tried to get the site on the Gateway but the NetNanny stomped it.

We promised we would never give up. Well I intend to keep my end of the deal and once I'm out of here I'm sending for you. I understand that's all there is to it.

680 words. All powered by my own butt smell.

I don't know how you did it Jack.

*

Dear Jack,

Belva was waiting for me when they opened the gate. I ran and hugged her and I was so excited! She had my prize money from *Yemassee* and copies of the other literary journals that published my stories plus the floppy disk with all the other stuff.

Wheres you goin? Whats you gonna do?

God Belva. I just got out. Give it a rest.

Well? Wheres you goin? Right now?

Watch and you'll see, I said. I suddenly didn't feel like standing in the worst part of Newport Kentucky talking to a 200 pound Negro woman dressed in the ugliest coat I have ever seen in my life. Especially since all I had on was the scrubs and the Converse high tops we wore in Juvy and it was cold.

Look I'd better go, I said. If I hang around too long they might find a reason to lock me up again.

Here, Belva said. She took off that ugly coat and put it around my shoulders.

Oh I can't take your coat, I said. It was purple with a raccoon for a collar. Head and all.

I brought it for you, Belva said. It was my mamma's but she dead. The coat was warm from Belva's body and smelled of old perfume. I put the copies and prize money in the pocket.

Belva I love it! It's the nicest thing anyone ever gave me!

I hugged her and kissed her again. It was about a million sizes too big.

My number's wrote on the lining, she said. Reverend Howard's too. You can always gets one of us or another.

So I kissed her again and listened to her bullshit and hugged her some more and promised I'd come and see her and thanked her for all she'd done for me for the millionth time and finally got away.

I hadn't smoked in two years so I was ready to start up again. I finally bummed one from a guy standing in the doorway of Richie's Pawnshop. That's when I saw the AMS Roadster. It didn't have the auxilliary battery pack and the little door that covered the serial ports was missing but otherwise it was just like ours. I don't know why I was so surprised. There must be thousands of AMS Roadsters out there. The sign said it cost \$450.

Well the guy with the cigarettes turned out to be Richie himself so we went in and he poured me a cup of coffee and got the Roadster out of the window and plugged it in and it seemed to work fine. My prize money from *Yemassee* was only \$300 and I still needed a place to stay but I figured I needed a birthday present too.

\$200, I said.

I don't know if you are aware of the many features of this computer, Richie said lighting my next cigarette.

Do you mind if I see if it will save to disk? I asked.

It saved just fine but I saw that the D drive was broken and I started acting like I didn't want it anymore.

350, Richie said. You don't even use the D drive. You got that floppy thing.

Thanks for the coffee, I said.

Okay okay, he said. 300.

Out the door? I asked.

He threw in a carrying case so I left the pawnshop carrying the Roadster in what looked like a big black ugly purse.

It was cold and dark so I pulled the raccoon up around my neck and walked toward the lights. On one corner was a Check 'N Go

and on the other a place called Gentleman Jim's Gentlemen's Club (dancers needed).

I asked the girl at the door to speak to Gentleman Jim and I could tell she had been crying recently.

There ain't no Gentleman Jim! she said. There's only that filthy motherfucker Cruz!

Cruz was sitting at the stage under the worst hairpiece I'd ever seen watching a naked black girl spin around the pole. Another naked girl with fake tits was sitting beside him and she got the giggles as soon as I came up. Because of the coat you know. Cruz thought it was pretty funny too but I just hung in there awhile batting around the conversation. Laughing it off whenever he made a crack at my expense. Completely ignoring Boob Job whenever she tried to get one off.

Watch Raven and you'll see what we do here, Cruz said, nodding to the black chick. She was sticking her ass in the face of some shiny bald guy. Do you think you can do that? Cruz asked. And I was wondering the same thing when all of a sudden Raven rolled down the stage until she was right in front of me. On her back. In my face. Her spike heels churning the smoky air so close I felt the wind on my eyes.

Wanna see somethin pretty? she said. Then pulled her thong aside and opened herself for me. She opened herself and I looked. She watched me look and smiled.

Why don't you give it a try? Cruz said. Just like that.

I was pretty sure I could handle the dancing. All we did at Juvy was dance. There was always a bunch of black girls there and all they wanted to listen to was that bootylicious shake-yer-groove-thang stuff so I had that shit down cold. It was the naked part that had me stalled. But there were only a few old farts in the place anyway so I said what the hell and climbed up on the runway. As soon as I was up there it hit me. It was like I was on Mt. Whitney again and the air was different. Better. Fresher. I was free! Free at last! I kicked off my high tops and dropped my scrub bottoms. I slipped my panties over the bald guy's head and he sat there smiling just wearing those dirty pants like they were the crown jewels of fucking France. I pulled off my scrub tops and swung them around my head a few times then let em fly! I just couldn't believe I was finally out of Juvy after all that time. I climbed that pole to the rafters and swung around it by my knees! "Brown Sugar" was the song.

Brown sugar, how come you taste so good?

Brown sugar, just like a young girl should!

When I finished Cruz was on the phone acting like he missed the whole thing.

Cruz is a shitbag, Raven whispered as I came off the stage. He'll act like he's doing you a big fucking favor by letting you stay at his place then he'll invite some of his greaser friends over and they'll get you so high you won't be able to walk. I got a room at the El Dorado. Tell that fat little prick you're crashing with me.

So Cruz took me to his office and explained the way we divided the money. Then we filled out the papers and I signed with my first and middle initial instead of my name. He saw my whole name on my social security card but it evidently didn't ring a bell. He's one of those morons you see in man-on-the-street interviews where the poor dumb bastard doesn't even know who the vice president is.

Baby you need a shower and a warm bed, Cruz said.

I'm crashing with Raven, I said.

And that's where I'm writing this now. At the El Dorado on my new AMS Roadster! Wish me Happy Birthday baby!

*

Dear Jack,

Raven took me to Tan Lines even though she doesn't tan being about as black as a brickette. She even cut my hair and streaked it.

Cruz givin you your laps after a hundred? she asked. She was giving me a pedicure at the time. I didn't know what she was talking about.

See I get my lap dances after I book a hundred to the house, she said. You tell that slimy son of a bitch you want the same deal. Tell him Teddy at Bristol's Nude Revue wants you. Teddy beat the shit out Cruz last summer.

Hey Cruz, I said that night. What's about you giving Raven her laps after \$100?

That's not true, he said. He had gin in one hand and a Newport in the other. He had matching cat's eye pinkie rings on each pinkie.

You're a goddamn liar, Raven said.

Well listen Cruz, I said. I'm not interested in supporting your bad habits. If you don't give me the same deal I'm going to Eddie at that other naked place.

But baby, Cruz said, the Raven is *nationally* known. She was in a film for Christ's sake! and he gave her this sick little smirk.

Fuck you, Raven said. No one can tell that's me so fuck you up your fat little spick ass. *Comprendo* cocksucker? Look at im baby. Just look at the goofy-ass expression on his fucked up face! This stupid motherfucker is about to watch 200 bucks a night, *plus* his cover charge, *plus* his bar receipts, walk right out the *door!* Look at im! Study his greasy pig face. *Learn* from it. It's the face of an utter shithead. *Pride goeth before a fall* motherfucker! Didn't anyone ever teach you

that? C'mon baby. Let's get the hell out of this pisshole. Let's go down to Teddy at the *Nude Revue*!

Wait! Cruz said. Don't go to that bastard!

So Raven and I got this deal where we got everything from private dancing once we pay the house 70. We always paid the 70 upfront so we didn't feel like we're working for Cruz. Anyway. Raven and Lolita (that's me!) are really setting old Gentlemen Jim's on fire! Different types of people are starting to come in. Guys with *dates*. We play by the rules most of the time. No touching initiated by the customer. No kissing or licking. \$35 a dance, tips accepted. We're pulling in the bucks let-me-tell-you.

I went to the library today and found that thing on the net that's supposed to be your diary. It's not. The way you wrote was never anything but poetry to me. Even when they read those certain earthy parts in court I wasn't embarrassed. I was proud that someone would love me like that and I held my head up just like I said I would. I looked around the room and I could tell everyone was jealous. They knew such passion would never come their way. Ever.

*

Dear Jack,

I was afraid someone would recognize me and now someone has.

The first couple of times he came to Gentleman Jim's I didn't even notice him. Raven did though. She hustled him for a dance but he wasn't interested. He asked her what my name was and she told him Lolita.

Really, he said.

Really it's Betty Crocker, she said.

Then Belva told me some man had called *her* and asked questions about how he might reach me but she didn't tell him nothing.

Watch him, Cruz said. He's nervous and he drives rental cars from the airport.

Check it out! Raven said. Cruz is a fucking detective now! He's a regular Colombian Columbo! *He drives rental cars from the airport!* You're killing me Cruz!

Cruz scowled. All I'm saying is an airplane ride is a hell of a trip just to sniff a shaved snatch.

Why Cruz, I said. What a poetic turn of phrase. I just love the alliteration.

I'm looking out for you is all, he said. So you'll be ready if the guy gets funny.

Hey everybody! Cruz is sweet on Lolita! Raven said. He's turning red so it's gotta be true!

A week later the guy was back.

He had gray hair and gray eyes but he wasn't as old as Raven led me to believe and he was dressed well enough to be totally out of place at Gentleman Jim's.

An ironic choice of stage persona, he said when I went over in my school girl outfit. His smile couldn't decide if it was going to stay or not. He was so nervous I wouldn't have been surprised if he ran for the door.

What do you want? I said.

Look I'm not going to tell anyone who you are, he said, and what I've got to say won't take long. Here. Look.

He opened his briefcase and pulled out a copy of *Yemassee*.

Wow, I said. I never thought I'd see another copy of that. I think the circulation is about 300.

It's a good story, he said. I thought it was by you. Then I read your other stories and I was certain. They're all good stories but they're just the bits and pieces aren't they? They just nibble at the edges? They all hold something back. There's some interest in the whole story, Lucinda. There's some real interest.

He gave me his card. On the back is a figure, he said. It's an advance against royalties.

The card said his name was Drake Taylor. I looked at the number on back.

More, I said tossing the card back. I have to have enough so I can quit dancing.

Well it's not up to me, he said.

Then forget it. I'm not going to sacrifice anymore for this, I said. I've already sacrificed too much. I stared off into space a while then said, Look I got bills to pay so I gotta find someone who wants me to drop my pants and dance. It's been nice talking to you whatever-your-name-is.

He took out a spiral bound manuscript from his briefcase and laid it on the table. He pushed it toward me with his card on top.

Copies of Jack's diary were made for each of his jurors, he said. When . . . the copies were no longer needed they were supposed to be shredded. This one wasn't. It's yours if you want it.

I took your diary in my hands and turned to a dog-eared page and read about Kansas. About me and Kansas. About graham crackers and chocolate for two days and about the earth going in and the earth going out. About land so flat and empty that there was no one to see what we did under that dark night.

Work with me Lucinda, Drake Taylor said, and I'll get you whatever you want.

*

Dear Jack,

So I found this bigass basement apartment that was furnished and one side of it was out of the ground and opened up on to this old terraced garden with its walls all falling down so I told Drake I wanted it and I didn't want it rented from month to month but leased for at least six months so I didn't have to worry about pissing him off.

He said he'd have to think about that.

Show me something you've written, he said. Show me something I haven't seen yet.

We were sitting on the unmade bed in Raven's room at the El Dorado. She was taking a shower and the mirrors were steaming up.

I slid the door opened and stepped out on the balcony. The pool was drained.

My laptop has something new on it, I said. Knock yourself out.

He read awhile then joined me on the balcony.

So that's the punctuation you're going with?

I ignored him.

Can we go to this apartment? he asked. Can I see it?

He walked through the apartment then out to the garden where he just stood for awhile. The walls of the garden terraces were not so much collapsing and they were melting. They were pouring down the hill in undetectable slow-mo.

I will give you the money to lease this apartment for a year, he said, if you give me complete access.

Access?

Yes, he said. To you. This place. Your writing. Everything.

You're married, I said. He fluttered his hands around my shoulders like he wanted to touch me but didn't have the juice.

What Jack wrote, he said. In Kansas. Did he really love you that much? Because, if he didn't, I think I could.

We were like interlocking pieces to the same obscure puzzle weren't we Jack? It's a wonder we found each other.

*

Dear Jack,

Drake had a video archive service put this DVD together of all the stories that were on TV about us but I couldn't watch it once I saw you.

I walked out to the garden and Drake came after me.

We didn't watch TV, I said. We had an idea what was going on but we usually weren't in the position to watch TV.

Later that night when Drake was asleep I watched the DVD. It started with the local news reports and then on to the networks and cable chan-

nels. But during the whole thing it seemed like they were talking about two other people. Not us.

Why this girl? Jessee Sharpton asked on *Hannity and Colmes*. Why not Latisha Jones or Shondra Johnson?

And for a while, those other missing girls were featured as well. Then the coverage crept back to *me*. Slowly at first like a cheating lover begging forgiveness. Then with complete devotion. Forget Sharpton and his Latishas and Shondras. It was going to be all Lucinda all the time.

There was video of Lucinda in pigtails and painted freckles being chased across a stage by a boy in a wolf suit. Lucinda clearing hurdles and sprinting around the turn. Lucinda doing a cartwheel on a balance beam. And always—like a benediction—Lucinda emerging from some Appalachian lake. Arms and legs slick like the water had just birthed her. American Venus in a two-piece.

Then she was seen kicking and biting—her hair cut short and dyed—being carried from a Bakersfield motel by her baffled FBI saviors. Screaming back at her struggling lover. Both of them making and demanding promises.

*

Dear Jack,

I started writing in the corner of my apartment next to the furnace. There were bookshelves full of *National Geographic*s so I turned the shelves around so they made another wall and I had a little room. I hung a map of America and found those places we visited bouncing around the country like a pinball. Hiding in the herd of tourists. Staying a couple of campgrounds ahead of Geraldo Rivera. I thought of how you made it a game for me. How you kept me interested in where we were going next. How we were on our way to the ocean because I had never seen it.

But here's a secret I think you knew: I read your diary while we were on the run. I read it while you were asleep or when you were gathering firewood or when you drove into some Lewisburg or Clarksville to get supplies. I think you wanted me to read it. That's why you left the laptop on so much. I think you wanted me to read it so I would know what you wanted. So you wouldn't be alone in that.

Then Drake flew in and bought weather stripping and caulk and a new filter for the furnace. He said he was going to winterize the place. And when he was changing the filter he saw my little writing room. You were the centerpiece by then.

What's this about? he asked. This morbid shrine you have in the corner. This cell. It's the same dimensions as Jack's cell isn't it?

Fuck you, I said. Get the hell out and never come back.

That night Drake took me to this really nice restaurant on the river. He talked about this and that for awhile, drinking Manhattan's and whatnot until he got up the nerve to bring it up again.

Please Lucinda, he said. Don't make this about death. Make it about life. I really couldn't take it if... And he left the sentence unfinished.

I looked at him and I saw you Jack. Just for a minute. But you were there.

Just let me work in my own way, I said. I can do it. I know I can.

*

Dear Jack,

The Pacific is vast.

I've been watching the waves, trying to think of a word and vast is what I've come up with. I can feel it like an electrical charge, like the presence of an overwhelming being. I remember you tried to explain that feeling to me and now I understand. I know now what you were talking about, and not just about the ocean.

I've finished my book and Drake says it's the best thing he's ever read. But he would say that. I have the galley proofs here with me and I'm supposed to be going over them, but I can't. Not now. Not with the ocean filling my every sense. Instead I write a poem of all things, forming the words in the sand with my finger only to have the water wash up and wipe the words away. The tide is coming in.

I remember how you read me to sleep with *Huck Finn*. How your words would float me away to a place where happy endings were sure to come. But I'm stuck here with my little poem.

Where silver waves wash golden sand
I still your heart, let go your hand
Turn the page, the story's told
I kept my promise, now let me go.

You had a pulse when they cut you down, but you slipped away just like we'd done so many times before.

The ocean licks at my feet and laps my bottom. Dirt to dirt. Ash to ashes. Maybe in a million centuries every molecule that was you and every molecule that was me will reconnect and we'll be together again.

You never know.
It happened before.

Ellen Bryant Voigt on the Making of Poems

“I do fervently believe that poetry is greater than any of us who try to make it.”

Ellen Bryant Voigt was born in 1943. She grew up on a Virginia farm, and by the age of four was a student of piano. She earned degrees from Converse College and the University of Iowa. Voigt went on to pioneer the first low-residency writing program at Goddard College. She then helped move the program to Warren Wilson, where she has taught for over twenty years. She has published six books of poetry, including *Claiming Kin*, *Forces of Plenty*, *Two Trees*, *Kyrie*, *The Lotus Flowers*, and *Shadow of Heaven*, as well as a collection of essays about poetry entitled *The*



Ellen Bryant Voigt
W. W. Norton & Company
Photo credit: Nancy Crampton

Flexible Lyric. Her most recent book of poems, *Shadow of Heaven*, was a National Book Award finalist, and *Kyrie* was a National Book Critic's Circle Award finalist. Voigt has been granted fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Guggenheim Foundation, and the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund. In 2002, she was awarded the Merrill Fellowship from the Academy of American Poets and the O.B. Hardison Prize from the Folger Shakespeare Library. She recently concluded a term as Vermont State Poet and was named a Chancellor of The Academy of American Poets.

Voigt, who will serve as judge for *Fugue's* poetry contest this spring, spent the (unseasonably cold) first week of November leading a graduate workshop for several MFA poetry students at the University of Idaho in Moscow. On Thursday, November 6, after conferencing with many of the students from workshop, she sat down with *Fugue's* poetry editor, Monica Mankin, to talk about her experiences as both a student and teacher of poetry. In front of a warming fire, Voigt sipped her tea, smoked her cigarettes, and spoke candidly about the struggles and the gifts that come with writing poetry.

Monica Mankin: What was your first experience with poetry?

Ellen Bryant Voigt: Any poetry? Well, I guess in high school there were classes that led me to equate poetry with “The highway man came riding, riding, riding, up to the old inn door,” and that sort of thing. It’s fairly recent that any kind of contemporary or even modern work was included in textbooks, so my first experience with poetry was not really good at all. Quite frankly, it was boring. I think “The highwayman came riding, riding, riding up to the old inn door” is boring.

But that’s probably not what is behind your question. Do you mean when I came to love poetry?

MM: Well, that’s the second question I have. Which poets inspire you? Who were your favorite poets when you first got started writing, and who are your favorites now? And what do you think has influenced the change in that if there has been a change?

EBV: Well, the first ones... When I was nineteen, I was working at a summer resort with singing waiters and waitresses (I was the piano player), and one of the tenors who was there loved poetry and showed me some poems. Poems by Rilke, and e.e. cummings. Two violently different poets. I thought they were really cool. And that’s what got me interested. And Yeats—I also loved Yeats early on. And since the Rilke translation, the only one that was available then—this is 1962, ‘63, somewhere in there—the only one available was the Norton translation, which is full of high rhetoric. I think it was the rhetoric in both Rilke and Yeats that I was really drawn to. I still love Rilke and Yeats, but I love them for different reasons now. And also, since I don’t read German, I have better access to Rilke through the new translations. So, I still like them.

Who else can I add to that list? I had to get much older to really appreciate Elizabeth Bishop because I thought, at first, that her poems were flat. They struck me as flat because they completely... well, they’re devoid of rhetoric, you know. It took me a while before I could really hear them. But I think that her work has been an influence. And then I think one is always influenced by the poets of one’s own, whatever the generation is, because you see their work develop and unfold. You get the books when they’re first out, which is very different from going back to somebody’s collected work. So, the work of C.K. Williams, Steven Dobyns, Louise Glück, Robert Haas. I would say that those have all been influences of some sort, in ways that I probably couldn’t trace.

MM: How does being a teacher of poetry affect the writing of your own poems? And if you experience any negative effects, how do you overcome them?

EBV: Well, it makes me think harder than I would on my own. It keeps me from being lazy. I have to think harder about, and especially to think through, other aesthetic positions that I have decided against. You can say, "I myself am not ever going to write *that* kind of poem," and when you decide that, you are no longer a careful reader of that kind of poem unless you have to be. But if you're responsible as a teacher, then you have to be a careful reader. A responsible teacher tries not to impose. I mean, you don't want clones; you don't want people writing the way you write. You have to undertake, or try to enter sympathetically, what seems to be alien or rejected aesthetic ground for the sake of the student's work. Also, you have to articulate useful principles of craft. There again I think if I had never taught I'd be lazy about those too. You can just say, "Well, I'm not sure what that means but close enough," or something like that, but if you're concerned about articulating those principles of craft then you will think about them harder and longer. All of that activity, taking up aesthetics that are alien to one, having to articulate and apply principles of craft, all those, I think, will make you a better poet, will make your own poems stronger.

Now the down side is (chuckling) that there is less time for your own poems and also a siphoning off of imaginative energy, and by that I don't mean dreaming up things to write about, but I mean in terms of formal solutions—if it's an aesthetic that you have eschewed, then the formal imagination expended on the solution for that problem is not going to come back into your own poems. You're going to solve it over there, out there, rather than solving something closer to your own poems. That's the downside.

MM: Given your involvement in the development of the low-residency writing program, your years of teaching experience, and your experiences at writers' conferences, what major successes have you witnessed in regard to the workshop, and what drawbacks have you encountered?

EBV: Workshop as a model, as a classroom, as a way of teaching writing?

MM: Yes.

EBV: I think what is implicit in your question is why come up with another model unless you think there are some limitations to the prominent one, the default position, which I did think, and do think. First of all, the workshop concept, invented by Paul Engel at Iowa, really didn't have in it much active teaching, curiously enough. It was a way to bring poetry into the academy, as music had already been brought in, as visual art had already been brought in. It is a studio model and the idea behind it involves a kind of mentor who is doing his own work. I mean, in the Renaissance studios you'd apprentice yourself to some painter and help do the scut work and finish up his paintings in his style. The whole idea was to paint the way he paints, and then you're able to go out and do your own painting and move away from his style and aesthetic. The workshop has elements of that. You have somebody there as a model, not necessarily to actively teach. Many people do actively teach anyway, but the workshop as a model does not require it. It only requires the master be there and say "erase that line and put in this line instead," that kind of training, which I think is a huge limitation. There's one reservation.

The other big problem is inherent in the notion of bringing people together to make a kind of salon. To be among one's peers has very salient effects. To know that there are other people who are at the same place in progress toward their art is very reinforcing, and that's a wonderful thing about workshops. It's also a limitation to the workshops because everyone is at the same point of articulation and knowledge while creative talents develop at different speeds. And the student in the workshop who has figured it out, or figured out enough, "this is my territory, this is my aesthetic," is going to be writing poems of greater finish, more realized poems. And there is no way that won't influence the other poets who are sitting in there, who are maybe going to write a very different kind of poem, but the poem that is particularly theirs hasn't announced itself yet. You know, it just hasn't. Their poems are still inchoate. And you can't blame the other students if they don't know what to say about that poem because the poet doesn't know either, and this makes him or her vulnerable to conventional wisdom and expectation. It just seemed to me there are some people who are not well served by a workshop and there ought to be another way of doing it. And one other way of doing it is with a level of individual attention not possible in the pragmatic world with the workshop. I mean, you've got too many students. You've just got too many students to see everything that they write and supervise their reading and monitor their responses to what they read. You can't do it for fifteen. You can only do it with just a few. So that's the trade off. With the low-residency model you really trade that

notion of salon, that notion of a fixed classroom structure—you've got that workshop next week and you've got to write that poem—both of which can be very helpful for young writers. I think with older writers there is another possibility. A little bit older writer might have enough self-motivation and self-discipline without that group meeting and could make use of more individual attention instead.

MM: How has your writing process changed since you first began writing poetry?

EBV: Oh man. Hugely. It's changed so much over the years; it's hard to recall all the different ways that I used to do it. I remember the most dramatic changes, which were forced by circumstance. I write very slowly. I've always written very slowly, with little exception. For the first ten years of making poems, eight years maybe, it seemed to me that I needed a very large block of time to work. It would just take me a long time to get enough language on the page that was fresh and suggestive. I would have to sit at one place for a long time to push past clichés of perception, never mind clichés of expression. But when my first child was born I didn't have huge blocks of time. I didn't have eight hours in a stretch. And I'd always worked that way. I'd also always worked with one poem at a time until that poem was finished before I moved on to another. Isn't this Taurus for you—head down, one foot after another, plod along down the path. It was the way I'd always worked and I couldn't work that way any more. It took me awhile, but I suddenly realized one day that that was superstition. That I didn't really have to have eight hours, nor did I have to finish a poem before I moved on to something else. The brain is good at multitasking. So I started writing what I really thought of as notes for poems. They were more narrative, much more narrative, because that really anchors it on the page. If you've only got an hour and you've got to get something down, anything that has any narrative values in it will anchor it to the page and you can easily come back to it. The poems got shorter; they got more narrative, or pushing toward that side of the lyric scale... What else? Well, the work will change when your method changes. Later I discovered that when I wanted the work to change I could change the method.

MM: To follow up, I guess I want to know how your writing and revision processes were different for each of the books you've written. Mainly *Kyrie* compared to the other books, since that one is altogether a different kind of book of poems.

EBV: Yes, it is a very different kind of book. And that was the only time I ever had anything that could approximate fluency. I wrote that book faster than any of the others, largely because the form and subject did not substantially change. I tried to make the use of the form varied, but I knew going to the desk every morning that I was to write a sonnet, some kind of sonnet. Either a loose sonnet or a strict sonnet. That was a decision I didn't have to make each time—I didn't have to cast around for the form. I also knew what my given subject was, or at least the dramatic situation for each persona. So I wasn't really going to a clean piece of paper, it wasn't that terror of the white page at all. It was much more workman-like, I guess. It was closer to what the novelists describe. Once they have a world, and once they have some characters, not only can they go back to it and pick up right where they were, but they can also carry that world around all the time and obsess over it.

MM: How long does it take you to realize you have a book when you're writing the other kind of book, when you don't have the subject or the form in place for you already?

EBV: Well... The first book... I thought I had a book after about seven years. And I probably did have a book. I don't think it was a very good book. So, then I had to deconstruct it. But I only discovered that by thinking that I had a finished book I could put aside for new work. Basically, I think a volume is also a form, and it's a question of what can be contained. My students at MIT, when I was teaching there, the mathematicians especially (those in pure math, not applied math), would refer to formulas as elegant. And by elegant they meant the amount of information that it could contain. Even if their formula got overthrown and proved not true, there was elegance in the formula. Poetic form is something like that. A book is not an anthology of whatever you wrote over a certain number of years; it too needs a structure, and the pieces have to be arranged in a meaningful way so that the whole is greater than just the sum of the parts. That's how you know it's a volume—whatever the aesthetic territory, whatever the range of thematic concerns, you can see sufficient pattern, sufficient unity, enough poems from a recognizable sensibility, and yet also sufficient variation so that they are pushing outward into other territory—you have a sense of that the same way you do with a poem. You understand that from here on any changes you make are just kind of washing its face. You're changing a comma; you're changing not that adjective but this adjective. You're not discovering anything else—I think that's the signal.

Anyway, I thought the first book was finished after about seven years, and then I went on to write a different kind of poem, more narrative, shorter. I thought it was vastly different from the poems I had made before. Turned out, it wasn't vastly different. It was enough different that it enriched the earlier kind of poem. So, then I had to dismantle the first book and get rid of about one third of the poems and put in this other kind of poem.

You said for each book?

MM: Well, you don't have to talk about each one, but which book of yours is your favorite and why?

EBV: The next one I'm going to write. When it is nascent, promising, it doesn't disappoint.

MM: Okay. Do you ever look back at your early work and feel sorry for it, or do you appreciate it for what it is? Are you okay with it being out in the world even though you have changed as a writer?

EBV: Yeah, I'm okay with it because I write so slowly and with so many drafts. Just about every poem I've ever published went through anywhere from fifty to one hundred drafts. So I know that was all I could do at that time. You look back and you say, "Oh gee, I wish I had known then what I know now," whatever it is. For my third book I set myself the task to learn how to write a narrative, and it has proven useful to be able to manage that structure. So I look back at some of those early poems and I think, "Oh, if I had had that understanding, that skill, that tool in my tool kit then, I could have made bigger, better, stronger, more memorable poems." But I didn't. And the little mannerisms that you notice—we've been talking in class about line breaks. And I look back at earlier poems and think, "Oh my gosh, I didn't know what I was doing half the time." Would I like to have those changed? Yep. But I'm no longer the person who wrote those poems, and to change the rhythm of the line would unravel them, so they are just what they are.

MM: Yesterday before your reading I asked if you still get nervous, and you said no but that you feel a sense of dread. Can you talk a little bit about that dread, maybe where it comes from?

EBV: Yeah... Well, I was saying in class... though I can't track the source of the quotation, but whoever it was, somebody famous, said, "We are not one self; we are a collection of selves," a committee of

selves and there is a chair of the committee, which is what we present to the outside world. And then there is another self who makes poems, who has always seemed to me intense and private. Not that I'm not that person, I am, but I'm other people too. I'm the person who teaches. I'm the person who has two grown children. You know, you're just lots of people. But the one who makes the poems I have always thought of as deeply private and giving a reading is a public event, so this is a conflict within the committee. The poems are done. The poems are what they are; they are made things. So it's not like performance. In musical performance, or a dramatic production, you've got to make the art on the spot, in that moment. You don't have to do that with poems, they already are what they are, and reading them aloud isn't going to change them. But there you are somehow, with this little private self up there at the public podium in front of all these people you don't know. And that, I think, is deeply confusing (chuckling). And then there are just the normal human things—you hope that people will find the poems moving, you hope they will find them well-made, you hope that people will not think that you're an idiot for doing this, you know. You hope that they will be engaged for that hour of their time they have given up to hear you read. So you have these human wishes that are quite craven—you want to be admired and liked or whatever. Or, rather, you want the poems to be admired and liked, but you're the one standing up there presenting the poems, the conduit for the poems. So it gets kind of fuzzy in there.

For me, the best times are when I sense the gift of the attention from these people I don't know. And they are there not because of me but because of poetry, because they love poems. I do fervently believe that poetry is greater than any of us who try to make it. Much greater than any of us who try to make it. And if I can reenter the poems with them, not perform them but actually hear them, intensely and precisely, then it's okay—audience and reader are entering poetry together. That dread ahead of time is "maybe I won't feel that attention." And I can tell you that it's happened. You go to the reading and, I don't know, seven people show up and two are doing homework, or something like that. Then it's really bizarre. You think, "Why exactly am I doing this?" Now, all of that said, it's also the only occasion that you have to be reminded of what finally happens to the poems. They only complete themselves when they get into the hands of readers. And it's good, I think, to have any sort of reminder about readers. That's what drives you to clarity. Otherwise, why bother if it's never going to be read? You can just be indulgent or whatever you want to be. So to be reminded from time to

time of readers is good. I think it's healthy. And also, I'm a hermit creature and so I think it's good that I have to go out into the world.

MM: If I understood you correctly yesterday, you said that the reading of a poem aloud does not change the poem in that it does not make the poem better or worse. But what of how your audience receives a poem? I mean, there is a difference between reading a poem and hearing a poem read aloud. Do you think that difference has the power to alter a poem for the one who is receiving it? And if so, in what ways?

EBV: Yeah, but it's kind of out of one's control, I think. Is that what I think? Wait I have to think about this. You phrased that in a tricky way (laughing).

Well, I think the best way to respond to that is to respond out of one's experience as a listener. The first time I heard Elizabeth Bishop read I wanted to plug my ears. By that time, I had already discovered her work and I was old enough to find things in it that I really appreciated. But she read in an extremely flat voice, without any inflection whatsoever, as though she were reading the newspaper. I was appalled because I had found her poems to be very musical. So I couldn't hear them when she read them. Partly because *Geography Three* had just come out and she was reading the poems from that—"In the Waiting Room" and "The Moose" and "Crusoe in England"—and they were not poems I knew. After I got the book and was able to read them on the page, I began to understand what she was doing. She really had shifted her work away from meter and from the rhythms of song into the rhythms of speech, which can be as complicated and as interesting as the more charged music of song. That was my failing as a listener—it didn't really have anything to do with her. And if I could bring her back down from heaven and tell her she had to read in some different way, I wouldn't. Because it was instructive to hear what she heard. I mean, what she was breeding out of something that she heard, which was a kind of flatness. A deliberate flatness. That's how she was sly. That's how, ultimately, she catches you. Because there seems to be not a whole lot going on there, but there is a whole lot going on there.

MM: In what direction(s) do you see poetry moving? Is there a particular direction in which you would like it to move?

EBV: I don't think that it's any one direction. And I think that's great, a wonderful time for American poetry. It's completely democratized. Robert Lowell was probably the last American poet who would have won a contest—if you'd taken a poll in the Seventies and asked

“Who is the best living poet writing today?” I think he’d have won. If you took a poll now, you’d have a hundred answers. I mean, there would be some names that would recur, but we’re way out from under the shadow of the Modernists. You know, if you have Eliot around, and Wallace Stevens and William Carlos Williams, those huge figures, everyone else is writing under their shadow. To not have those monoliths makes possible a lot of different poetics, different aesthetics, different notions of what a poem is or could be, different voices and practitioners. Not that those poets didn’t have a voice before, but man, it was really hard to raise it. Now publishing has opened up so much, even as we’ve created a much more sophisticated audience. With poetry in the schools, and the way curriculum has moved to incorporate contemporary poetry—that’s created an audience for all sorts of different people. And I think that’s great. I don’t think there is a single direction that I can see, and bravo. Bravo.

MM: What are you currently reading?

EBV: Well, I’ve been reading a lot of research on the brain because I’m working on this prose book about syntax. The use of syntax in poems. And so I’ve been reading a lot of stuff done by the neurolinguists, what the MRIs show, the parts of the brain that light up when you think. They are really mapping the brain, and mapping the areas of syntax, language, and music, and all the other modules. It’s very exciting. But I have a feeling that’s not what you meant. You meant what books of poems?

MM: Well, books of poems. But I heard that you had this new project and I planned to ask you about it. So are you reading any poetry right now?

EBV: I just finished judging the National Poetry Series and so I read sixty manuscripts of poems that were still in manuscript in order to choose the winner. And then I have a big stack of various people’s new books that I’m intrigued by and just haven’t gotten to yet. I brought them with me on this trip. I have Tony Hoagland’s new book, Heather McHugh’s new book. So I have plenty there to engage me. But I’ve been distracted by the contest and also the prose book.

MM: Can you talk a little more about the book you’re working on now?

EBV: Well, it's just a careful examination of syntax. We make meaning through syntax, the order of the words in the sentence. Most poets write in sentences. Syntax is built into the language. It's how the brain deciphers, translates, whatever is being said. I think as poets we have been, over the past fifty years, we have been very concerned about the line as we have moved from a canon of accentual syllabic verse into open verse. Open verse, free verse, is now the default position. So we've been really concerned about the line, and if you're not writing iambic pentameter, how do you make your line? What is the controlling principle behind it? We've been very absorbed in that, and I think we tend to forget that we are also writing in sentences. Sometimes the sentences are boring, or sometimes they are not efficient. It seemed to me, in my teaching anyway, I found myself thinking more and more about that or noticing more and more in student poems a lack of attention to syntax, and in my own work too. I also was not paying enough attention to syntax. So that was what prompted this study, and I've been trying to learn what the neurolinguists know, as well as what are the basic elements of style. You know, clarity. And there is not an existing text out there. If there were, I'd probably just go read that and learn a lot. But there really isn't, only the well-known book by Donald Davie called *Articulate Energy*, which seems written from a critic's point of view rather than a poet's point of view. So I didn't find it all that helpful to the making of poems. And I also disagree with him on one very large matter. He takes up these different possible considerations for what syntax might be. One of them is music, which he dismisses. And I think that's totally wrong. Syntax is a rhythmic system, according to what is now known about the brain. We process syntax in chunks, in rhythmic phrases.

MM: What is the most important piece of advice that you give to beginning writers? Why do you feel it is important? And, what is the best advice that you have ever received and who was it from?

EBV: Well, as I told you the other night, I think that the main piece of advice that I would give is to read as widely and as voraciously as possible. In a ratio to writing, something like one hundred to one. I think you just have to see many examples because otherwise you fall prey to notions that are prescriptive, and usually reflect the conventions of the times—this and only this can be a poem. It's much better to be descriptive—these are what poems are. You know, if you're going to build a chair, look at hundreds of chairs. A rocking chair, a highchair, a bar stool, a Barcolounger. There are all sorts of different possibilities. Only by exposing oneself to all of those possibilities do

you have a sense of what can be done, what has already been done, what would be really hard to do. You get that by reading widely. And don't worry about whether you're reading the things that you "should" read. Look for somebody who will save you some time, look for a model, look for aesthetic territory—and when you find those people who seem to be from your tribe, then you stick with them, and read those deeply. You make your own bookshelf, the ones that you care about. It doesn't matter whether everyone thinks these are the greatest poets ever; these are the ones that you know you can learn from. And once you've found them by reading broadly, then read those poets deeply, over and over, attentively. One of the best ways to read deeply is to memorize. If you memorize a poem—take a favorite poem, learn it by heart—you will see how it was made to an extent not possible when you were still on the surface of it. That's what they say about musicians. If you're playing from a score, you're tied to the score. It's only when you memorize the piece that you can actually play it.

Best piece of advice that I ever got... Well, I've gotten a lot of good advice about particular poems. I guess the best piece of advice I got started as specific but ended up as general, and I write about this in one of the essays in *The Flexible Lyric*. I showed a poem once to Steven Dobyns, and his criticism was that it seemed okay, but that it would be a stronger poem if it had more narrative in it. He was very specific about where that should come. It was too late to change that poem. I didn't know how to do narrative, and I didn't really care about it. And so the suggestion he made—in the poem there's a bat inside a woodstove, and the people who hear it think it's a bird. They open the door to the woodstove to let it out, find out it's a bat, so they kill it. The criticism of the poem was "You don't say how they kill the bat." And that was true. So I went back and did about another fifty drafts, trying to say how they killed the bat. And I couldn't do it because I didn't care how they killed the bat. In that particular poem I couldn't make use of the advice. But it made me think that I should learn how to care. I should find out how to write a narrative. So that's what I did. I gave myself that assignment. So that was probably the best piece of advice. It started out small, but had broad implications.

MM: What books do you think every beginning poet should read and why?

EBV: I don't have such a list. Begin with anthologies. Begin with something that has a range of different people, different voices, different aesthetic styles. Read through it and ask which one grabs you, which ones excite you. When you find an engaging poem, in the anthology or journal

or wherever you come across it, then go get a book by that poet. Read the whole book. If you still feel excited then go get the other books by that poet. I don't really think there is a "should" other than to follow your own predilection. That's the main thing. At some point in your writing life there are major figures whose work is monumental, and who shaped the course of what came after them. It's good, when you're ready to do it, to investigate those people. They may not be your favorites, but study them when you're ready to learn from them nevertheless. At some point in time an American poet who's serious about poetry has got to read Whitman and Dickinson. Should you read them as a beginner? It wouldn't hurt you, but should every beginner start there? I don't think so. Rather, along the way, those figures need to be confronted. Certainly Eliot is another one. Frost is another one. William Carlos Williams is another. They changed the way we think about poetry, and added to the number of possibilities out there. I think the best poets ultimately become the shoulds, but the shoulds to read before you die or something. If you have the opportunity to study them now, then good, but I think that the main thing, in terms of the writing, is to make your own bookshelf. Find those people who are most important to you, and that bookshelf is just going to grow and sag (laughing). You add to it as your tastes enlarge.

MM: Are there any books about poetry that you recommend to your students?

EBV: Yes. Books about poetry by poets—there's a great lot of them that I think are terrific. They aren't going to give you answers, but they give you a way of thinking about poems. Particularly, to my mind, the ones that are concerned about craft and are analytical in their approach. Seamus Heaney has two terrific books of essays. One called *Preoccupations*, the other one called *The Government of the Tongue*. Wonderful. Robert Haas, *Twentieth Century Pleasures*. Louise Glück, *Proofs and Theories*. Steven Dobyns, *Best Words, Best Order*. Carl Dennis, *Poetry as Persuasion*. Michael Ryan, *A Difficult Grace*. These are all practicing poets, not much older than the person who would be reading the book, who've been there and try to talk in a way that is very concrete about how to put poems together. Their books, like my own (*The Flexible Lyric*), are written from the perspective of a practicing, active poet. They're not concerned with literary history; they're not concerned with criticism or critical theory. It's fine to read that too, but I think it is not necessarily useful because it does not emerge directly from an analogous experience.

MM: That prompts one last question, which is how important do you think it is that poets/writers be aware of the literary theories that are out there?

EBV: I don't think it's important at all. I think it's of zero importance. Right now we are in an age of criticism, but it displaces the writer. Essentially, much of the current theory displaces the writer. Is it going to help you write your poems? I don't think so. Because by the time you write your poems it's already old. By the time it's out there where you can get a hold of it, it's old. So I don't find it of any importance. If you're going to go be a literature professor, then you need to attend to it. But in terms of making poems, I think, in fact, it sometimes has a detrimental effect. Somebody falls in love with a particular theory, a theoretical notion about poetry, and they try to produce that in a poem. And I think the result is often mechanical, or forced, or willful—which is to say, not good.

Fellowship of the Bereaved

*Pain comes from the darkness
And we call it wisdom. It is pain.*
Randall Jarrell, "90 North"

Jared Reasoner flew into Denver from Boston five days before Christmas that year. His father said he'd pick him up at the airport, which in their family never meant just pulling up at the curb and waiting in the car; they would always park and go in. When Jared didn't see his father that night, he picked up his duffel bag from the claim area and went outside. There were no cars to be seen—just vans, buses, and taxis. To get to the passenger pickup area in the Denver International Airport, you have to take an elevator up a floor, something he always forgot. When it dawned on him that he was on the wrong level, Jared went back inside and noticed his father slumped in a chair by the sliding doors he had just walked through. He was fast asleep.

Jared shook him gently by the shoulder. When his father opened his eyes, he started in his seat. His eyes were bloodshot. "Hi, bubba," he mumbled, standing up. They performed an awkward hug, his father kissing Jared on the cheek, which surprised his son. That sort of intimate gesture had rarely been a part of their relationship. Standing straight, Glenn Reasoner was barely five-foot-nine, but he usually slouched and that night was no different. Jared was a little taller but seemed more so because he was so thin. His bangs hung in front of his eyes and he needed to shave. "You look like crap," his father said to him. Jared didn't say anything in response. He felt right then, just as he had for the last six weeks, ever since his older sister, Ann, had unexpectedly died of an aneurysm in her sleep: awake, even agitated, but very tired at the same time. He knew nothing about physiology but Jared was convinced that his brain had released some survival chemical that was propelling his body along, preventing him from relaxing out of fear that if he lowered his guard he too would die without warning.

They walked slowly to the car. There was a chill in the air but it had been much colder in Boston earlier in the day, the East Coast air biting and humid in a way it never was in Denver. Jared had lived in Boston for six years, the whole time working toward a Ph.D. in English Literature. Typically he had come home to Denver only for Christmas Break, and

then occasionally in the summer for a week or two, but he had been back three times recently: for Ann's funeral, then—two weeks later—Thanksgiving, and now Christmas.

The lights of the city were just visible on the horizon. Denver would never feel the same again, Jared knew that. Growing up, the city had been benign and boring, but now it held in its pockets so many memories and reminders it couldn't be trusted entirely. It was liable, he knew, to trip him up, to break him down over and over again.

Driving out of the parking garage, Mr. Reasoner fumbled with the dashboard lighter before taking a puff on a half-smoked cigar that had been smoldering in the ashtray. He asked his son about the meal served on his flight. He asked if they gave out peanuts or pretzels with the complimentary beverage. Jared's dad had a thing about food. His parents had died when he was thirteen and as a result he was shuffled between different family members for years thereafter and never knew for certain where he was going to eat next, or when. Food was about having a home for Mr. Reasoner; it was about his dead parents.

Jared didn't bother answering his questions. Owing to his father's fixation, he hated discussing food and disliked eating with his parents, since his father had a way of steering the conversation toward considering what they should eat for their next meal. In the past, faced with silence, Glenn Reasoner would keep right on talking, but that night he became quiet, and Jared assumed his father was thinking of Ann.

They drove into town, first through the drab prairie east of Denver, then the warehouse and industrial part of town. Jared asked how his mom was doing. Mr. Reasoner said not well, but that they hadn't been fighting more than usual. "Most marriages," he added, "they get consumed by fighting after something like this, but not ours." It had only been a month and a half, Jared was tempted to say, but didn't. They rambled along, Jared's father indiscriminately cutting off cars, clearing his throat again and again as he always did, balling the mucus up in his mouth before rolling down the window and expectorating loudly. "If we can make it through the holidays," he said, with the telltale slur in his speech confirming that he had been sipping out of the flask he kept in his glove compartment, "it will be a miracle."

*

Jared expected to see his mother in the kitchen, sitting at the counter on one of the wooden stools that only she found comfortable, reading a magazine, but when they came in from the garage she was nowhere

to be found. In the center of the countertop was a framed picture of Ann that he had never seen before. She was sitting outside somewhere, smiling, her mouth tautly drawn, her eyes looking out past the camera lens. The photograph was slightly blurry and Jared assumed that his mother had gotten it enlarged. He wondered if that was a healthy or normal thing to do. He wasn't sure, although when tempted the weekend before to cover his dresser in Boston with pictures of himself and his sister, Jared had decided against it: a little showy, he thought, and over-determined, as if a dresser could represent how cluttered his mind was with remembrances. He deposited his duffel bag and backpack at the foot of the backstairs alongside a pile of newspapers and unopened letters.

"Will you join me for a martini?" His father took his shaker out of the freezer and wrapped a dishtowel around it so that the cold metallic surface wouldn't sting his hands.

"Sure."

Jared followed him into the pantry. Mr. Reasoner mixed the drinks expertly and then handed one of them to his son. Jared took a long sip. The back corners of his jaw tightened involuntarily, but he still thought—in spite of the toxicity—that it was a very smooth drink, and cold. They walked into the living room and sat down.

"So is everyone back yet?" Mr. Reasoner asked Jared, meaning his friends.

"I think so. I'm going to call Dave in a little bit."

Mr. Reasoner nodded. "What about Walter?" He did another one of his throat clears. "Are you going to call Walter?"

"Tonight I think I'm just going to see Dave."

"Walter's been a good friend too."

"Yeah, I'll call Walter tomorrow."

Jared heard footsteps on the staircase. A moment later Meredith Reasoner appeared. She had on gray slacks and a black Emporio Armani sweater that Jared recognized because he had given it to her for Christmas the year before. Her hair was wet and she held a wineglass in her hand. He went over and gave her a hug. She asked her son how the flight had been and he said okay and told her that he hoped she had been eating. She looked even thinner than usual; her collarbones and the points of her shoulders pressed up against her skin and her neck looked tense and elongated.

"I tell her to eat," Mr. Reasoner jumped in, "but she never listens."

"You know what they say, 'if you're a woman, you can't be too thin or too rich.' At least they used to say that." She walked over to the couch and sat down. "Glenn, get me another glass of wine."

Mr. Reasoner took the glass from her hand and walked into the kitchen. "Your son isn't planning on calling Walter," he hollered from the other room.

"Walter's been a good friend to you, Jared."

"I'll call Walter tomorrow. I have plans with Dave tonight." Less had been expected of Walter than pretty much any of Jared's contemporaries; he had barely made it through high school in five years and slept through his college entrance exams not once but twice, so when he straightened himself out—suddenly becoming some sort of extreme athlete—he received high praise from everyone in the Reasoners' social set. Dave, on the other hand, had always been so good-looking and charming—in a "bad boy" sort of way—that everyone assumed he'd end up being successful. Then, barely out of high school, he ended up in a rehab center and only now did he seem to have his life back together. He had moved to California the year before, found work as a technical assistant on TV commercial shoots, and was trying to finish his first screenplay.

"I'm not even sure Dave's home," Mrs. Reasoner said ominously.

"He got home yesterday."

"I thought he might have to work this week. I thought their shoot was going to go over; that's what Nancy said." Nancy was Dave's mom and one of Mrs. Reasoner's closest friends.

"He's home. I talked to him last night."

"From Boston? You called him all the way from Boston?"

Jared didn't bother saying anything. His parents were always doing this kind of thing when he came home: fixating on an issue and then picking it apart endlessly. Half the time, when he saw them, Mr. Reasoner would call Walter Dave and vice versa, but he had never been able to keep anyone's name straight. Mrs. Reasoner was more on top of such things, but she was also fairly indifferent to Jared's friends; he could recall, more than once, her asking one of them a question and then wandering out of the room before an answer had been given. Jared couldn't imagine, with all that they had just been through, that either one of his parents really gave a damn if he had dinner alone with Dave, but neither Mr. nor Mrs. Reasoner was ever inclined just to drop an issue, regardless of how much time had passed. Jared and Ann had once hypothesized that it was because both their parents had grown up as only children; neither one of them had ever had to let anything go.

"Walter wasn't at the funeral, I know that." Mrs. Reasoner avoided her son's eyes, worried he would interrupt her. "But that doesn't mean he's not a good friend. Some friends just don't know how to handle

death. They're worried they'll say the wrong thing, so they say and do nothing, but they still care."

Walter lived eight blocks from the Reasoner's house and still couldn't make the reception they had after Ann's funeral. Dave, on the other hand, flew in from Los Angeles and had to give up a job on a Toyota commercial to make it. Walter had been Ann's favorite of his friends, largely because Ann always gravitated toward people who were self-conscious and a little awkward, like she was, and yet, following her death, Walter hadn't expressed any condolences whatsoever—hadn't written Jared a note, much less called. Jared thought about Walter's silence a lot. It angered him. Actually, a lot of things angered him in the wake of Ann's death; he had been surprised to find general irritability to be such a key component of grief.

Mr. Reasoner came in from the pantry holding a glass of wine, which he handed to his wife.

"I was telling Jared"—Mrs. Reasoner spoke to her husband but continued to look at her son—"that you can't expect all of your friends to handle death with the same . . . what's the word I'm looking for?"

"Maturity?" Jared offered.

"Yes, *maturity*." She stumbled slightly over the word. "You can't ask for that. If you do you'll go crazy."

While still standing, Mr. Reasoner abruptly downed his drink, which had been sitting on the side table next to the couch, and then shook the half-melted ice cubes at his son. "Want another one?" he asked.

Jared shook his head, and Mr. Reasoner gave him a confused glance.

"If he doesn't want to get drunk," Mrs. Reasoner said, "he doesn't want to get drunk."

"You're drunk," he mumbled.

"I most certainly am not. And don't talk to me like that. Don't ever talk to me like that."

"I'll have one more," Jared said abruptly.

"See! He did want another one." Mr. Reasoner picked up his glass and went into the pantry.

"He drinks all the time. What am I supposed to do, watch him like a prison guard?" She sighed. "I don't care anymore." She turned her head to the side. "Glenn, have you heard a weather report?"

"What?"

"DO YOU KNOW WHAT THE WEATHER IS GOING TO BE TOMORROW?"

"No! The paper's in the recycling bin outside."

She looked at Jared, filled with indignation. "He has to put the paper in the recycling bin the minute he's done reading it. It can't

wait until the evening. If I want to read the paper I have to go out into the alley.”

Jared sat still. Whenever he was home, even before Ann died, he had constantly been called upon to referee between his parents in one ludicrous dispute after another, but with her death, having to listen to them bicker seemed like an acutely unfair punishment.

“If it snows while you’re home” Mrs. Reasoner touched the white knuckles on her hand very softly. Ann loved snow. The last time she had been home for Christmas it had been dry the whole time, even in the mountains. She said that all she wanted for Christmas was snow but it never came. That was two years before; she was twenty-nine at the time.

“I’ll kill someone if it snows.” Mrs. Reasoner looked around the room with simmering irritation. “One snowflake and I’ll go on a rampage.”

Jared checked his watch. He wanted it to snow, he realized. Tons of snow. He imagined Denver buried, the monuments of his childhood erased, and the thought comforted him.

“Did your father tell you about the tree?” Mrs. Reasoner asked.

“What tree?”

“You didn’t tell him?”

Mr. Reasoner walked into the room with two fresh martinis, and placed one in front of Jared on the coffee table.

“Tell me what?”

“They’re going to plant a tree in the Botanic Gardens for Ann. A red jade.”

“I told him in the car.”

“No you didn’t.”

“Didn’t I?” When no one answered him, Mr. Reasoner looked down at his shoes.

“Who are *they*?” Jared asked.

Mrs. Reasoner began to cry softly. “Our friends,” she said, before putting her hands up to her eyes.

Mr. Reasoner watched his wife cry, then looked over at his son. “We’re going to be okay,” he said to him. “We’ll get through it.”

Jared looked down at the floor. “Do we have a choice?”

“No,” his father said, “no we don’t.”

“I should call Dave.” He stood up.

“Where are you going? Use the phone down here.”

Jared walked up the stairs, skipping every step. Both his parents called after him but he ignored them. This is going to be, he realized for the hundredth time, the worst week of my life.

When Jared walked into the Chop House in Lower Downtown, Dave was at the bar, drinking a beer and speaking to a couple of women in denim miniskirts with frizzy hair. The two men hugged each other and then did a poor imitation of their handshake from high school, a portion of which involved interlocking their thumbs, flapping their fingers and doing bird-chirp noises. The women standing on either side of Dave laughed when they made the chirping noise. They were both staring at Dave in that desperate way that a certain kind of woman in a bar had always stared at him.

Jared ordered a beer and after he paid for it Dave said goodbye to the women and the two of them walked over to the hostess and asked for a booth. She said there weren't any available and Dave sidled up to her with mock flirtation and said he was willing to do anything to get a good table. He was very tall and stocky and had a way of hovering over women that wasn't menacing but somehow endearing, or at least effective in helping him to get what he wanted. The hostess laughed at Dave while Jared rolled his eyes at her. Then she led them to a window booth on the far side of the restaurant. When she handed them their menus, Dave slipped her a ten, which she took, giggling some more. It wasn't Dave's money, Jared was certain, but his mother's. She always gave him cash when he came home and he'd spend it all in a night or two.

"How you doing, brother?" Dave asked him.

Jared sighed. "I'm fucked up. I'm having these nightmares about Ann that are awful. I would think maybe my unconscious would disguise what they're about, but they're so literal." The one that came to mind had appeared to him the week before: he was at his sister's gravesite and was trying to dig out her body, but the shovel he was using was small and plastic—a child's toy—and he couldn't drive it into the ground. In another dream, Jared was at Christmas Eve Mass, sitting in the pew next to Ann, and she asked him why he hadn't wanted to sit with their mother, who was a few rows ahead of them. "She's been hard to be around," Jared said to her, "since you died."

"Your brain is probably overloaded," Dave said. "You know, your unconscious or whatever has too much material to do a bunch of rewrites."

The waitress dropped by to tell them about the specials and Dave chatted her up and then ordered some mozzarella sticks. She asked if they wanted two more beers and they both nodded and Dave said she could drop off a wine list too and she pointed at the table, where the

wine list was sitting right in front of him, and he said, "Or we could look at this one," and she laughed. After she walked away, Dave said he had to go to the bathroom and left Jared there, looking out at the other tables, mostly filled with couples he assumed were on dates. Denver seemed to be bursting at the seams with young people. In high school, Dave, Walter, and Jared would drive around downtown at night and there wouldn't be a car in sight. They would steal stop signs to put in their bedrooms, pay vagrants to buy them beer that they'd drink in one of the deserted parking lots on the West side of Speer Boulevard, or up at Red Rocks when the amphitheater wasn't in use. Occasionally, Dave would blow off Walter and Jared for a girl, but most of the time it was the three of them, trying to find something to do, even some way of getting into trouble, and failing over and over again.

The mozzarella sticks and new beers arrived at the table just as Dave got back from the bathroom. The two began to gobble them up. It feels good, Jared thought, to be able just to shovel food into my mouth. It wasn't really possible to act as much like a slob with the friends he had made in Boston; it was different with people you hadn't known during adolescence.

"Did you ever meet with that guy at Paramount?" Jared asked.

"He blew me off," Dave said.

"Sorry."

Dave had been working on the same script—a Western set in the future that he described as *Reservoir Dogs* meets *Blade Runner* and *Blazing Saddles*—about as long as Jared had been writing his dissertation on pastoral motifs in the poetry of John Milton.

"Ah, it's just as well." Dave wiped a string of cheese off his chin. "I've still got the suspended license—you know, from my DUI?—so getting over to the studio would have been a pain in the ass." He chuckled to himself. "Hell, my mom dropped me off tonight. I felt like I was fourteen again."

The two of them drank their beers. Jared hadn't recalled hearing about Dave's DUI but that was often how his friend related bad news; he'd act as if they had already discussed something so that Jared wouldn't have the chance to ask him any questions and put him on the spot.

"We both had crushes on your mom, Walter and me," Jared said. "We'd try to drop by when she was leaving for her workout class, to see her in her leg warmers." He wanted his recollection to sound comical but his tone remained serious, in spite of his intentions, so the comment had a slightly creepy ring to it.

They were both quiet for a little bit.

"Brother," Dave said, breaking the silence, "I just bust up when I think about what you've gone through, what you're going through. You know I'd do anything for you."

"I'd do anything for you, Dave. Thanks for flying back for the funeral. And for calling to check in on me."

"Don't ever thank me for that stuff. Are you kidding?"

The waitress picked up the empty appetizer plate and asked if they knew what they wanted for their main courses. They both ordered New York strips with mashed potatoes. Dave asked her to pick out a nice bottle of wine for them, didn't even specify a price range, and she went off. He mentioned a party that a high school acquaintance, Mike Stans, was having and asked if Jared wanted to drop by.

"People will be cool," Dave said. "They care about you."

"I don't think I'm up for a party."

"Don't think about it. Let yourself go a little bit tonight."

Jared nodded. Dave was always telling him not to think so much, and in typical fashion he found himself thinking about whether or not he thought too much. "I was going to kill myself," he said suddenly, surprising even himself. "Last week, I found a first edition of John Donne's *Biathanatos* on sale for \$1,500 at Devon Gray, this book store in Cambridge. *Biathanatos* is the first defense of suicide in the English language. Anyway, I considered stealing the book and using it as a suicide note, then sealing myself in a laundry bag and rolling into the Charles."

"Kind of a performance art thing?"

"Yeah." He didn't really think he would have done it, but at the same time, Jared found himself looking at his life frequently from the outside, in a way he never had before, and it made his existence seem flimsy and slight. Dave had attempted suicide in high school, hacking at one of his wrists with a pair of scissors—the real thing, or so it had seemed back then.

"That'd make a good scene in a movie," Dave said, "only the guy would have to decide once he was in the bag and underwater that he didn't want to die after all. Then he'd kick and struggle and finally break free and end up on shore, where a Juliet Binoche type would pull him onto the bank and nurse him back to health. The title would have to be something like *A Second Chance* or *Back to Life*. Then at the end of the flick he'd be diagnosed with cancer and die anyway, but see, then it'd be a tearjerker because the Juliet Binoche type would be bawling and the audience would have grown to like him."

"So I guess I need to find a Juliet Binoche type."

"We all need to find a Juliet Binoche type." Dave smiled.

Their steaks and potatoes came, along with a bottle of wine.

"They're going to plant a tree for Ann," Jared said as he chewed his food. The steak was delicious and for a moment he wondered if he should continue to eat it. Ann will never eat again, he reminded himself. She's rotting in the ground and you're eating steak. He set his fork down, then picked it up again. What was he supposed to do? How was he supposed to grieve? Should every act, every gesture on his part, be made in deference to Ann's death? Was that even possible?

"What do you mean?"

Jared looked blankly at his friend, having forgotten what he said.

"A tree?" Dave asked.

"Yeah, in the Botanic Gardens. A red jade. Isn't that weird? She'll have a tree dedicated to her." Jared wondered why he thought that was so weird, and decided that it was because it seemed like such a definitive gesture. In a literary work, a person could be buried and then the reader could learn that in fact bodies had been switched, like in Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, in which Jared vaguely recalled a swap occurring between Isabella's living brother and an already executed prisoner. But Jared couldn't imagine a tree being planted for someone and then everyone learning that the person in question wasn't actually dead. What would they do in that case, cut the tree down? And he wondered, as he had many times in the last few weeks, if asking himself this kind of question was perhaps a sign that he was losing his mind.

"That kind of thing makes our parents feel better," Dave said. "I don't know why, but it does. Let them have their tree."

"I don't have a problem with the tree itself," Jared explained. "It's just so sad." He was worried he might cry. "I don't want Ann to have anything dedicated to her. I don't want her to be dead."

Dave didn't say anything right away, and Jared felt bad about almost losing his composure. He started to apologize but Dave waved him silent. "Don't be crazy, bro," he said, smiling at him.

As they fed themselves intently, the sparks of conversation became fewer and fewer. They didn't really have that much to talk about. They never had.

*

The first person Jared saw at Mike Stans's party was Walter, standing by the keg on the front porch by himself. "You assholes!" he cried when he saw him and Dave. "Thanks for the call."

“We just had some catch-up time, bro,” Dave said. “Isn’t it a little chilly to be outside?”

Walter just grunted and poured them a couple of beers. Jared knew that Walter had been waiting on the porch in the hopes that Dave might show up, that he would rather stand alone and drink outside in December than enter a party by himself if the slightest chance existed that he might be able to arrive with Dave. Walter had followed Dave’s lead since they first met on the playground of Dora Moore Elementary School. And in response to his friend’s hero-worship, Dave had always treated Walter like crap: making fun of him to his face, telling him to shut up, and in general ordering him around.

It wasn’t much of a party. Mike was sitting on his couch with a girl Jared recognized but whose name he couldn’t remember. When Mike saw him he just nodded. He must not have heard, Jared assumed. There were more people in the kitchen, some on the back porch smoking cigarettes and weed. A Grateful Dead song was playing in the background. It could have been a scene lifted straight out of high school only everyone, by Jared’s account, looked a little thick in the face and gut. He glanced over the weird assortment of books on Mike’s shelf: stuff by Nathaniel Hawthorne and Stephen Crane and Edith Wharton, all things assigned in high school, plus a bunch of Star Trek volumes and automotive magazines. When he looked up, Dave and Walter had drifted away. Jared went to look for them in the kitchen and ran into Hugh Emerson, a ski bum who had been in Ann’s high school class.

“Jared! What’s up?” Hugh slapped him on the shoulder energetically. The best Jared could do was ask about ski conditions—which Hugh reported as lame, except for Telluride—and then wait for the inevitable. When Hugh finally asked about Ann, Jared looked at him dumbly, then turned and walked downstairs into the basement without a word. Dave and Walter were watching four guys Jared didn’t recognize play beer-pong. He told them he was leaving.

“We’ll go too.” Dave was already speaking for Walter again, just like old times.

“Don’t bother. I’m just going home.”

“No you’re not.” Dave shook his head.

“Hugh Emerson asked me how Ann was doing,” Jared explained.

“That fucking idiot.” Dave hit his palm with his fist. “We’ll kick his ass.”

“He didn’t mean anything by it.”

“We’ll kick his ass anyway.”

Walter nodded in agreement, flexing his neck, the muscles of which suddenly poked up sharply underneath his skin. "We'll kick his ass, dude, then trash his car." He spoke without making eye contact. Eight blocks he had to cover to make the funeral reception, Jared thought, and he didn't do it.

"Let's go over to the Cricket," Dave suggested, "look at the booty, then come back here and kick Hugh Emerson's ass."

"I don't want to go to the Cricket." That was the local hangout where everyone their age drank, especially during the holidays. It was the last place in the world Jared wanted to be.

"You're thinking, bro. Stop thinking. You have no choice. You are in need of booty."

"Booty," Walter mumbled.

"Please guys," Jared squinted his eyes, worried he might begin to cry, "please just let me go."

Jared began to walk up the steps and heard the two of them on his heels. He weaved quickly through the living room, relieved not to see Hugh, and out the front door. It had begun to snow. Walter and Dave followed him halfway to his car, at which point Jared turned around and held up his hands. "Guys, come on. I need to be alone."

Jared felt Dave's eyes on him, trying to gauge if his mind could be changed by sheer force of will, but it couldn't, Jared knew that, and when Dave realized it he acquiesced and gave him a hug goodbye. Walter tried to do the same, but when he stepped forward Jared suddenly realized he couldn't embrace him—that he was too angry—and just the fact that Walter had no idea made him angry.

"Hey, you know something," he said to Walter, who was staring at him blankly, "Ann fucking loved you, and you didn't even show up at her funeral. You didn't even make the reception! What kind of bullshit is that?"

Walter stepped back. He wiped his nose with his palm and sniffled. His lower lip jutted out from his face. "Oh shit, Jared." He sniffled some more. "I don't know what to say. I just don't know what to say."

"Say you're an asshole." Dave pushed Walter in the back. "Say you're a stupid fuck."

Walter fell forward, his knees crunching into the fresh snow. "I really loved her, Jared," he said softly. "I loved Ann with all my heart."

Jared looked down at him as he sniffled and gasped for breath. "I know you did, Walter. I'm sorry." He helped him to his feet. It didn't help to call people out on their behavior. Nothing helped. He thought of Satan's line in *Paradise Lost*—"Which way I fly is hell; myself am hell"—and got into the car. Before he pulled away, Dave walked over and tapped the window.

“Call me tomorrow,” he said.

“I will.” Jared smiled thinly. In some ways it felt like a night he would never forget, but in other ways it was nothing out of the ordinary.

*

Jared drove home cautiously, through the familiar streets of his childhood. He didn't have a car in Boston and figured he hadn't driven in the snow since high school. He checked his watch. It was barely eleven o'clock.

He pictured Walter kneeling in the snow, his shoulders shaking. His mother was right; some people didn't know how to handle death, but those were the people who were just distanced enough to be able to decide whether or not to participate in the awful rituals that accompanied dying: the church services, the parties. Other people closer to the epicenter of loss had no choice; they had to face it.

Having someone in your family die prematurely ushered you into the fellowship of the bereaved, Jared thought. People who had not similarly suffered stayed away from this fellowship as best they could because they didn't know what to say to a person grieving. But in fact, the horrible truth was that the people within this fellowship didn't know what to say to one another either; each mourner was consumed by his or her own grief, so the group of sufferers that wandered through the social world like emotional lepers wasn't a group at all; it was just made up of crippled people, none of whom could help anyone else.

After Ann died, Jared filled his apartment in Boston with plants: Ficuses, Ferns, Hoyas, Bromeliads, and other houseplants that he couldn't even identify. He bought the plants at Bread and Circus, the upscale grocery store two blocks from his apartment, and carried them back one at a time. He didn't know how to care for plants and systematically over-watered every one of them, but that didn't stop him; he kept on buying them, stubbornly waiting for the little greenery they briefly provided to make him feel better.

After Ann died, Jared also began to stockpile non-perishables: detergent, trash bags, canned foods. He had never cared for beans but he bought dozens of different kinds. He filled the once empty cupboards of his kitchen with boxes of coffee filters, family sized packs of paper towels, liters of olive oil. He didn't know what he was doing. He wasn't aware that he was afraid to go outside, where people died.

He became accident phobic. He worried about slipping in the shower, or electrocuting himself somehow—by mishandling the coffee maker, for example, or the toaster. At the same time, he felt so

cautious and paranoid, he also wanted to die, or at least he thought he did, so he came up with complicated suicide plans, like the one involving his laundry bag and a first edition of *Biathanatos*.

Stopped at a light, Jared watched a man carefully cross in front of him, balancing a pie tin in his arms. Living, breathing, keeping our hearts beating, our fingernails growing: we'll do anything to stay alive, Jared thought. We'll say goodbye to our favorite people and go on with our mundane routines because we want so fiercely to fill our lungs with air. In the face of death, we become greedy for life: selfish and hoarding. When he considered how tightly he had held on since Ann died, he was filled with self-disgust and considered for a moment steering his father's car sharply to the right, into a storefront on Downing Street. But I'll never do that, he said to himself, and that's pathetic. To hold onto life like this . . . it isn't right. I should be dead. I want to be dead, but I'm too weak to do anything about it.

His eyes filled with tears. At the corner of Seventh Avenue, just a few blocks from home, he thought of the time—during a snowstorm—when Ann had taken him out in the old Buick and they had done donuts in the Safeway parking lot. It was unlike her to be so reckless, but it was like her too, to be silly and fun. I'll never be able to describe her to people who didn't know her, he realized. To them, she will never seem real. To them, she will always be my dead sister.

*

The next morning, when Jared came downstairs, Mrs. Reasoner was sitting at the kitchen counter, flipping through a home decorating magazine and drinking a cup of coffee. She asked about the night before and he said it went okay—that they had run into Walter and the three of them had hung out together like old times. Mrs. Reasoner had no response. He asked her where his father was and she motioned toward the garage.

“He's doing something with the recyclables,” she said. “Is it the twenty-first?” Jared nodded. “The Shauhnesseys' Christmas party is tonight. Sarah decided to invite everyone this time around, not just close friends. There'll be a hundred people there.”

He pulled a carton of orange juice out of the refrigerator, checked the expiration date and put it back. There didn't seem to be anything to drink or eat in the house; he wondered what they were doing for meals.

“I ended up at a party last night, Mom,” he said, “and I don't want to go to another one.”

"I don't either." She pushed her magazine aside. "I don't want to see a Christmas tree or open a present. I don't want to drink eggnog."

Jared sat down next to her and placed his hand gently on her shoulder.

She eyed him for a moment with the corners of her mouth clenched.

"What is it, Mom?"

"Nothing." She was silent for a moment, then gestured toward the window. "Of course, it snowed last night." Her mouth contorted briefly out of bitter sadness. "We don't deserve this."

Jared didn't know what to say.

"You know, your father's drunk. He drinks in the mornings now, out on the back porch. He keeps a flask out there."

Jared took in the information silently.

"I don't know how he's keeping his clients," she continued. "I really don't. Annabel"—Annabel was Mr. Reasoner's longtime secretary—"calls all the time to tell him of meetings he's missed, or to ask where he's placed important files. I worry they're going to fire him, Jared, I really do."

"They aren't going to fire him, Mom. He's been there for five-hundred years."

"The old brokers are the ones they want to get rid of. They're the ones who don't know about biotech stocks, or how to check their e-mail."

"You don't know how to check e-mail."

"That's not the point." She squeezed her hands together. "I'm just worried. I won't be able to make it if we lose our house. I would die if that happened."

"You're not going to lose your house."

"We could. We've borrowed against it so much. All of the funeral expenses were so unexpected . . ."

"Come on, Mom." Jared had heard this kind of thing before, normally about his father losing money in bad investments, or not paying the bills on time, and yet the Reasoners' lifestyle never seemed to change.

"Just the other day he got called in by his manager and reprimanded. Apparently he screamed at one of the receptionists after he got back from a two-hour lunch. Even though he's been through hell, they can't allow him to make other people uncomfortable. That's what his manager told Annabel."

In the past, when the issue of his father's drinking came up, Jared always rallied to his mother's side, but that morning he felt pity for his father; he was the one who at least had to try to go to work during all

this insanity. Besides, with the way things were going, why not drink? A part of Jared identified with, and even admired, his father's unfailing desire to avoid reality. But it was also sad to think of how much Ann had tried to get their father to confront his alcoholism—putting him in touch with counselors, sending him books—and how, with her gone, all attempts at self-restraint appeared to have been abandoned.

The back door opened as if on cue and Mr. Reasoner walked in, a little-boy grin plastered on his face: his tipsy smile.

"What's going on in here? Having a little breakfast?"

"There's nothing to eat," Jared said.

"Well, then, let's go out for breakfast. Let's go to a hotel downtown and get big omelets and pancakes. Grapefruit juice, doesn't that sound good? Maybe some home fries."

"I'm in my bathrobe, Glenn."

"You can change, honey; we'll wait for you. We'll go to the Brown Palace. I bet they've got a good breakfast."

Jared was silent.

"Just so long as we don't get one of those buffets," Mr. Reasoner added. "You know, I hate buffets: big feeding troughs—"

"I'M NOT HUNGRY, GLENN!" Mrs. Reasoner slammed her magazine on the counter and stormed out of the room.

"I guess she's not hungry." Mr. Reasoner winked at his son.

"She's worried you're going to lose your job," Jared said.

"She's always worried about something." He opened the refrigerator. "You're right, there isn't anything to eat."

Jared wondered whether or not to broach the subject and decided he owed it to his mother. "She's worried about your drinking too."

Mr. Reasoner walked out onto the back porch without saying anything.

*

Jared went home again three months later for spring break. Both his parents picked him up at the airport this time. Mrs. Reasoner had to drive because her husband had gotten a DUI the month before. He had not, however, lost his job, although Mrs. Reasoner was still convinced it was going to happen. "They'll give him a year from when Ann died," she had said to her son on the phone. "Then they'll let him go." On the way into town from the airport, Jared was tempted to point out to his father that he now had something in common with Dave, a suspended license, but he restrained himself.

The day after he got back, Jared and his parents had lunch and went over to the Botanic Gardens. The tree had been planted two weeks before in a small ceremony organized by one of Mrs. Reasoner's friends. The three of them had difficulty finding it. In the southwest corner of the gardens there were a number of benches and flowers and trees, all planted or built in memory of people. They wandered around until Mrs. Reasoner picked out the rectangular plaque that marked Ann's tree. She bent down, wiped away the thin film of snow that had settled on the raised letters, and waved the two of them over.

Behind the plaque slumped the red jade. It looked like a small bush, really; Jared wondered if his mother was right to call it a tree in the first place. He was tempted to ask his parents why it had been planted before the winter ended but didn't.

Mrs. Reasoner sensed his disappointment. "It'll get really big eventually," she said to him.

They looked down at the red jade. Jared had taught Milton's *Lycidas* the week before, for the first time since Ann had died, and he recalled his bungled attempt at explaining the Venus and Adonis myth. Students never got that story and now he understood why. Are we really supposed to believe, he asked himself, that after changing him into a flower so that he wouldn't die, Venus would still be happy loving Adonis? Isn't that pathetic compensation, to love a flower instead of a person?

"What are we doing for dinner tonight?" Mr. Reasoner asked suddenly.

"I bought a capon." Mrs. Reasoner stared at the tree. "We discussed it, remember? I'm serving it with rice and mushrooms."

"We eat so much chicken. I'm going to grow wings, on account of all the chicken we eat." Mr. Reasoner jostled Jared, who managed a weak smile.

Before leaving the garden to go home, they held hands and stood for several minutes in front of the red jade.

*

Whenever he went back to Denver, Jared thought of himself and his sister as little children. Ann's death was in these memories too but not in the foreground; it saturated the memories but it was itself not remembered. He thought of them holding hands as they crossed Sixth Avenue, or riding their bikes on the Fourth of July, streamers tied to their seats, sparklers held in their hands. He thought of the small moments in the summers when they would have all the time in the world to themselves: time to finger-paint and play board games and

snooze on the couch in the living room and pretend their parents' bed was a ship in rough seas and the basement laundry room was a dungeon. Time to feel joyous and irritable and bored. He remembered the two of them performing the complicated math required to calculate how old they would be in the year 2000, the year 2020, the year 2030. Their grandmother was already in her late seventies by then; surely they would both live just as long—get married, have children, grandchildren, their very own dogs. They did their cold, assured calculations in tandem, adding years to their lives as if they were jellybeans to be piled up indiscriminately and devoured at will. Outside, the elms' green leaves heaved in the breeze while other children played in the shade and pets slept on porches. All around them was life, lazy and languid: to be taken for granted and held loosely in their small hands.

Ghazal #2

Listen, moon. When the stars come echoing, it is your grip
that has released them, set them hunting for the shore's grip.

Singing across the horizon, love rides the last good morning.
The sun is dying. Nightfall unhinges its shadow-sore grip.

Hold me by the edges of my body, and I will ache the tides
out like lightning, doubling the strike and fire of your grip.

At last, the angry bell—through the town, a shudder. The men
gather in the square, preparing their one collective and bare grip.

On the fossil of a kiss, the history of touch. Archaeologist
of aging light, where is the fossil-evidence of the soul's grip?

At his fingertips, you ring. The ding hangs in your ear
like dust—the tuning fork's holy clang and sure grip.

Like the Devil

He holds on to life with his teeth,
dangles it by the nape.
Tastes with the fury of cayenne
and says hush-hush-hush
with his hands as he drinks
wine from me like an open spoon.
He can tell magenta from maroon.
He grins like the devil,
all jump-start and red bell
pepper. Stitches me together
as if my cunt is a wound,
his tongue, copacetic.
I mend, sprout wings,
and scream things.
A firebird possessed
of the power to fly,
he shuts his eyes,
and wills it so.
Off he goes.
Grunt and scruff, this
spitfire. This hellcat.
A scrapper who turns the screws
of my truss rod, straightens
my back. Names the stars
of my knees with one eye
closed, opens my gates,
faces the bull.
Olé! He's muy caliente.
Itch, bitch, and boil,
he celebrates supine
and sublime. Pins
the tail on the donkey
every time, this toreador.
A necromantic lynx who
swallows whole but plays
legato, in tune.

He follows me out of rooms.
Hush-hush-hush.
It will be all right.
He who holds on to life with his teeth
will never go hungry.
Faster, pussycat.
Kill! Kill!

James Doyle

Home Sweet Home

The television set in the corner of the room
snaps and crackles until the wallpaper wrinkles

with excitement. The dog can't keep himself
from yelping to epiphany. The nerves of the easy

chair stand on end like adolescent bristles. Hair
arranges itself in semaphore across the coffee table.

I have been sitting here since television
was invented. My DNA has discovered synapses

is a synonym for channels. The wallpaper
has been mellowing its red roses with parchment

yellow for fifty years. Even the upholstery
is flowering with optimism and the magenta

deer that grazes the mantel is as authentic
as acrylic. The family photographs hold

the wall up and at bay. I have trained
the dog for the long run. He is eighty-six

and lives to beat his head against available
parts of the human body. He is good

company. I think TV trays are inferior
to laps. Anything the world can dial up,

this house can rebut. I hope to die here
flecking the cushions with homemade samplers

from Grandma and a terminal cough.
I am teaching the rug to sit up and beg.

If I Succeed

I will be the first
to swim non-stop
through Nebraska
from the shores of Iowa
to Colorado's sandy beaches.

This is the toughest
route, winds whipping
west to east like semi's
and the state tilted
downstream from the dusk.

I am coated with grease
against ice floes calved
from the Dakotas, and friction
on the interstate. Rest stops
ebb and flow with the tides.

I swim in a cage
to protect me from sharks
and roadkill. The bars slice
schools of bobbing farms
into algae cud's for the romantic.

I roll over
in the backstroke to catch
the spew of sky that pins
hawk, gull, all the moving
surfaces to rusted anchors.

If the day ever comes
when the sea thickens into prairie
and the rift closes
over me, chalk cliffs will rise
from the salt in my veins.

Great River Road

*Back out of all this now too much for us
Back in a time made simple by the loss
Of detail, burned, dissolved, and broken off*
Robert Frost, "Directive"

"I've been on the road too much," I say to my younger brother Ron.

It's late August, and I've just taken a leisurely drive down Great River Road, which snakes along the Mississippi River from Minneapolis, where I've lived for close on to thirty years, to St. Louis where Ron and I grew up. I've been telling him about the number of business trips I've taken in the last year. Being a reluctant traveler, I'm surprised to discover that I've been out of town at least once a month.

"I only realized how often I'd been away from home," I say, "when I sat down and made a list. I can't believe I've done this—especially after 9/11."

"I don't like to leave home," my brother says. "I never have."

We're sitting in a bar at a restaurant called "The Feasting Fox," where my parents used to go in their early married days. Back then, it had a different name—"Al Smith's"—the old name still inscribed under the more recent, English pub type one on the sign outside. Not much else seems to have changed between then and now. The bar is paneled in dark wood; there's a moth-eaten stag head mounted on one wall, and the booths have plush leather seats, which create an indefinable sense of privacy and feel good to sink into. Though the restaurant doesn't seem to be doing much business, the bar scene is lively, and I suspect this is what keeps the establishment going. It's a comfortable place, where my brother and I seem to gravitate by unspoken agreement whenever I come to town.

"I'm afraid something bad will happen on a trip," Ron adds.

I'm not that surprised by my brother's pronouncement—he has often said as much—but this time I hear him in a new way. It isn't just 9/11 that is on my mind, but our family history. Something bad *did* happen on a trip when we were children. We watched our father drown on a boat excursion up the Mississippi River in the summer of 1951. Though I've spent years in therapy probing the far-reaching effects of this single moment in time, I've never before considered it

in regard to my uneasiness about travel, which is something I feel ashamed of and don't like to admit.

I have trouble reading maps. As a child I was completely mystified by them. A map looked like a field of confusion, so busy with small print and squiggly lines that I couldn't bear to look at one for long—much less figure out how to use it to go someplace I wanted to go.

As an adult, I hated driving anywhere by myself. I wasn't even eager to learn this simple mechanical skill, which most teenagers dream about long before the magical "learner's permit" age of fifteen. For me, such an opportunity held only dread. Not only was I afraid of having to find my way on my own to some puzzling destination, but I was also convinced that I was too physically uncoordinated to manage a brake and a clutch. True to my expectation, I failed my first driver's test. While I had no difficulty memorizing the regulations and passing the written exam, I was a miserable failure on the road.

I was so flustered that I missed a stop sign, made a left turn into the wrong lane of a one way street, and did so badly on parallel parking that my examiner finally told me to stop. "You would have had an accident for sure," he reprimanded me sharply. "I should issue you a ticket. Don't come back until you've had more practice. And for godssake learn how to drive."

It was all so complex—how to adjust the movements of my feet with my eyes and hands, not to mention how to sense the delicate interaction between the gas pedal and the clutch. I concentrated on learning how to deal with an automatic transmission instead. Eventually I succeeded well enough to pass the test—though not well enough to feel at ease behind the wheel.

Driving—and travel in general—made me feel anxious.

It wasn't always this way.

When I was very small (maybe four to six years old), I remember loving the car trips that we took as a family into the country. Every weekend, it seemed, we got into our bulbous Chevy, with front seats that stretched all the way across, and took a drive out of town to an open field, where we would get out of the car, walk around and take pictures and then drive home again, stopping on the way at the "Velvet Cream" ice cream parlor with the sign in the shape of a giant vanilla cone. I was happiest when I would ride home in the front seat, softly cushioned between the bodies of my mother and father. If I was really lucky, my dad would carry me from the back alley garage

into the house, snuggled warmly against his chest and shoulder. Travel, in this way, felt both exciting and safe.

It wasn't until I was well into middle age that I understood the actual purpose of these trips.

"Your father was looking for a farm to buy," my mother says in response to my reminiscing about those days, releasing a piece of information she has hoarded for nearly half a century. "That was how we wound up spending a summer in Kimmswick. He considered buying that house, but thought it was too far to commute to work. And then he decided to get a boat instead."

As if startled by where her memories are taking her, my mother falls silent. She has crossed an invisible line in her mind. Even such an oblique reference to my dad's death puts an end to her willingness to talk.

It's as if my mother has a literal roadblock in her brain, one with flashing red lights and dire warnings about the consequences of proceeding further. This roadblock has created a virtual schism between her memories of my dad and everything that came after.

I seem to have internalized the same roadblock in the process of growing up. Intuitively, I shy away from subjects that might cause my mother distress. As a result, I, too, am largely unable to focus on memories from my early childhood—the period before my dad died. Being cut off from my past, however, makes it difficult for me to imagine a future. Not being able to go back in time makes it equally hard to go forward—though I do inch along, of course, day by day and year by year. Now, suddenly, in my mid-fifties, I begin to see this problem in a new light. Perhaps it has something to do with my trouble reading maps?

Eventually, I learned how to drive a stick-shift—less from choice than necessity. When I got married at age twenty-four, my husband's family gave us a car as a wedding present. Not having consulted me, he asked for a five-speed transmission. As long as we were going somewhere together, he could drive, but if I wanted to use the car by myself I'd literally have to shift gears. Still feeling humiliated by my first failed effort, I delayed confronting this task until the inconvenience of being stuck at home overcame my resistance. With my husband as patient instructor, I careened around a succession of empty parking lots until I felt confident that I could manage our car on the road.

By this time, I had acquired a host of other anxieties. I avoided two-lane roads out of fear of passing in the opposing lane. If I had to

pass, I would wait until the road ahead was clear as far as I could see. Only in this way would I feel sure of averting a head-on collision. I was equally frightened of the on-ramps to freeways, where the cars whizzed by so fast I couldn't believe that they would actually let me in. In this case, I was anxious about being rammed from behind. Once safely entered into the stream of traffic, I would carefully monitor the distance between me and the car in front. What if the traffic suddenly stopped? I had grisly images of multiple-car accidents. Even exiting my own driveway, I would worry over a child dashing across my path just out of my rear-view line of sight.

I didn't trust cars and trusted myself even less.

If I had to drive, I preferred taking a familiar route. I didn't like going someplace new or out of my usual circuit. If I couldn't get my husband to drive under these circumstances, I'd ask for very specific directions, which I'd carry with me in written form, in preference to consulting a map—though I would resort to one if I got completely lost.

Maps tended only to make matters worse. It would take me several minutes to orient myself in terms of north, south, east and west, then several more to locate my point of departure. By this time, I would begin to feel a mild panic. Referring to the street guide for my destination rarely helped. Once I'd located the proper coordinates, I still had trouble finding the street in question. Even if I did, I would have to figure out how to get there from the place where I'd gotten lost. Often, I'd fold up the map in despair and go looking for a gas station attendant for assistance. I'd find my way at last, but by the time I arrived I'd be late, apologetic, and tense.

It was much easier staying home.

My dad liked to go places. In addition to our Sunday drives into the country, he would take us on canoe trips on the Meramec River—before buying the cabin cruiser we used to explore the wider, swifter and deeper Mississippi. For business reasons, he also traveled by plane—in an era when passenger flight was still something of a novelty—to Maine, Florida, Seattle and California. Later, he was thrilled to cross the Equator on his most extended trip—to Australia and New Zealand. For this accomplishment, he received a mock certificate from Pan American Airlines—with the figure of Jupiter seated on a cloud, holding an airplane in one outstretched hand. My dad, like Jupiter, seemed to command the space through which he moved.

Yet he died in the midst of a trip, departing from a harbor to which he never returned.

“There were stop and go lights at the entrance of that harbor,” my brother muses, as our conversation dips further into the past. “Because the entrance was narrow and you couldn’t see around the bend. There was room for only one boat at a time.”

“Funny, I’d completely forgotten that,” I say, wondering how I could have obliterated such a vivid image. But, as we continue talking, I begin to feel that I do remember what Ron is telling me, as if some fragment of his reminiscence has resuscitated mine. Either that or his memory seems so real to me that I embrace it as my own. Do I truly recall this feature of the harbor, or have I cloned it from my brother? In either case, I’m sure it’s true. Though only a fragment, it fits an empty space in the mental picture I am trying to assemble.

“Do you remember the first harbor where we used to dock our boat?” I ask. “I think it was called North Shore. Didn’t we leave it because dad had some kind of quarrel with the owner?”

“Yeah, and dad was afraid he’d do something to sabotage him—like put sugar in his gas tank, so he pulled anchor and went up river to Venetian Harbor, which was run by a guy in our neighborhood.”

“Larry Wickett.”

“Who died a couple of years after dad. His wife was really broken up. She never got over it. She used to get drunk and want to cry on mom’s shoulder. Do you remember the time she came to the front door, soused out of her mind, and you and I had to get rid of her?”

Once again, I draw a blank. Why can’t I remember this?

“Her name was Jean, wasn’t it?” Something is beginning to come back. Am I plagiarizing from my brother again? Or truly remembering?

When we left Venetian Harbor on August 28, 1951—no doubt waiting for the green light that signaled us to pass into the wide channel of the river—we had no idea that we would never come back.

We cruised up river, as usual, stopping at small towns on the Illinois side for the night. After two days, we began our leisurely descent to St. Louis. On the morning of the 30th, dad was annoyed with my brothers and me for waking him up with our chatter. He kept a mysterious “black book,” where he recorded our childish transgressions.

The boat, a forty-two foot Richardson, was small for a family like ours. There was hardly enough space below for two bunks—for my older brother Bob and me, with a canvas stretched between them for our younger brother Ron. My parents slept above us on benches where we ate meals during the day, which folded out at night into cots. Our accommodations were lean and tight.

Having waked up in a bad mood, Dad was out of sorts all morning. He didn't like the first sandbar where we stopped for lunch and insisted that we move to another site. Once we had settled again, his spirits seemed to improve. We chose a picnic spot on the beach and laid out our sandwiches and pop. While we were waiting the prescribed two hours before going into the water—so we wouldn't get stomach cramps—my brothers and I played in the sand. At one point Dad asked me to wash his back with soap, which I did, using buckets of river water to sluice it off. I was having fun; I remember that he laughed.

At this point there's a break in the little movie I am playing in my head, as my memory sputters and then goes blank. It picks up again when my mother, two brothers and I get back on the boat to seek help for Dad, who is nowhere to be seen in the fast moving, dirt brown waters of the Mississippi. The river, like a giant fish, seems to have opened its maw and swallowed my father whole.

"We tried to get help at a house on the river," Ron says. "But they refused, so we went on."

Once again, I am surprised by the clarity of my brother's reminiscence. Though I remember stopping at a marina up river and waiting what seemed like hours in a trailer for someone to come from St. Louis to take us home, I have no recollection of the incident Ron describes. Did it really happen? He was only seven years old at the time. How accurate could his memory be? And why, at age nine, did I not register the same details?

I know, by now, that memory is both variable and malleable—rather than the immutable image or narrative I once thought it to be. Not only do we remember the same things differently, as if viewing them from various camera angles, but we also form memories through the filter of our wishes and desires, inventing details that seem appropriate. We do not consciously lie to ourselves, yet the result is a composite or an approximation of our experience, rather than a true account. To make matters worse, every time we retrieve a memory from its deep storage bank, we alter it somewhat by the mere process of calling it into conscious awareness. We are in dialogue with our own memories, reshaping them as we muse over them.

There is no way to recover the past, like some ancient scroll preserved for centuries in a desert climate. Nor can we make it emerge, like a desiccated bloom miraculously returned to flower, from a little cake dipped into a cup of tea.

Proust, of course, makes us believe otherwise. The loving detail with which he recreates the textures and sensations of his early life makes us trust him when he says that the piece of *madeleine* soaked in his aunt's infusion of lime-blossom tea causes the old grey house where she lived to rise up "like a stage set to attach itself to the little pavilion opening on to the garden," resurrecting with it "the house, the town, from morning to night and in all weathers, the Square where I used to be sent before lunch, the streets along which I used to run errands, the country roads we took when it was fine." So much of Proust's quest for lost time reads like an intensive journal or memoir that it's easy to forget its status as a novel. More than anyone, Proust attests to the fictionalizing aspect of memory, even as his first-person narrator convinces us that he is merely telling us what happened.

But I'm no Proust. My memory is full of holes, especially when it comes to the circumstances of my dad's death. And no amount of prompting—in terms of sight, sound or smell—seems to remedy this loss. So I hang on my brother's words, not entirely believing, but not disbelieving either. He, at least, claims to remember.

"I was used to noticing things," he says. "I was so little that no one paid attention to me. I remember how Al Hunt would bring us bags of groceries after Dad died, because Mom didn't have any cash. Then one day, he stood in the kitchen and told her that he couldn't bring any more. Mom was really upset. Dad's will was in probate, and everything was in his name, including his bank account."

This story is new to me. I know that Al was the one who sold our boat for us, but I haven't the dimmest recollection of his supplying us with groceries.

"Was it Al who came to bring us home from the river?" I ask. "I remember flying back to St. Louis in somebody's private plane and then eating coffee cake in the kitchen with other friends of Mom and Dad's."

"I don't recall that," says Ron. There are gaps in his memory as well, it seems.

The year that my mother began her slow descent to death, I tried to talk with my older brother Bob. I'd contacted him by phone to tell him what my mother's doctor had said on her most recent release from the hospital. She advised us to consider a nursing home, which I knew Mom would never accept. My brother agreed, but didn't have any other ideas to propose. I suppose it was the imminence of our mother's death that led us into conversation about Dad, whom—observing the code of silence in our family—we rarely ever talked about.

"What was the name of that place where we stopped to get help?" I ask, hoping to resolve a question that has been nagging at me for years.

"Keithsburg. On the Illinois side." My brother's voice is sounding rough, as if he may be trying not to cry.

"How do you spell that?" I say, cradling the phone against my ear and reaching for a pencil and a piece of paper.

"Are you taking this down? Are you going to write about this? Because if you are, I'm not going to talk to you."

"I thought it might be Davenport. I keep forgetting. I just want to remember."

"Why do you want to go over all of this again?" My brother now sounds angry. "Why can't you let it be? Get on with your life. Enjoy yourself. None of this does any good."

"I'm sorry," I say. "I didn't mean to upset you. I just never knew the name of the town, that's all."

After I hang up, it occurs to me that Bob may be impatient with me because I've asked him this before—an altogether likely possibility. I have a tendency to erase any information—such as the exact day of my dad's death—which causes me distress. Now, however, I am trying to fit the pieces of my spotty internal narrative into some semblance of a coherent story. As a part of this effort, I decide on one of my trips to St. Louis to seek out Venetian Harbor—assuming that it still exists.

A remarkably simple idea occurs to me; I can look it up in the phone book. Sure enough, there is a Venetian Harbor listed—in the town of Portage-des-Sioux, a name that rings a bell. A harbor has to be on the river, I tell myself, and it can't be too far out of town. If I can make my way to Portage-des-Sioux, I should be able to get to Venetian Harbor. This time, I am grateful for the assistance of a map.

I set out from my mother's house in my rental car on a mild spring day in March—not telling her where I'm going, as I don't want to upset her. The trip is remarkably easy, so much so that I am pained to think how many years I've avoided making this simple pilgrimage. I head west and then north on the network of interstates that direct traffic through and around the city until I exit onto the highway that leads to Portage-des-Sioux. It isn't long before this highway narrows to two lanes, turning into a country road that stretches for several miles across open fields. As I near the town, I even see a sign for Venetian Harbor, as if someone had anticipated my wishes, offering me a personal guide. Making a series of turns down dirt and gravel

roads, I find myself facing the scene I have carried since childhood in my imagination.

It is nothing like what I remember.

The marina before me consists of a single row of dingy-looking vessels, most of which are speedboats. Where are the extensive waterways, elaborate docks and stately cabin cruisers I have pictured? The water is murky and stagnant, the grounds are scruffy, and the boat house little more than a shack. The harbor's name is a cruel misnomer. Could it really have been so seedy, so paltry when dad was alive? Or has it simply fallen on hard times? I close my eyes and try to reconstruct the harbor in my mind, but it's no good. My shining vision, like one of Prospero's cloud-capped towers, wavers, then disperses, leaving me standing in the gritty present.

Frost's meandering journey in his poem "Directive" takes him back to an old farm site, strewn with mementos of the life that was once lived there. His goal is not the house itself but the cold spring that supplied its water. Here, he discovers "a broken drinking goblet like the Grail" that is under a spell so "the wrong ones can't find it,/ So can't get saved." His poem ends with a clear imperative: "Here are your waters and your watering place. Drink and be whole again beyond confusion." This tone is so different from the rest of the poem that I'm not sure who is speaking. Is it the poet himself, who has suddenly discovered strength and purpose or a voice from somewhere outside the poem, tendering an offer of consolation? Yet another possibility occurs to me. Maybe it is just Frost trying to cheer himself up.

Whatever the case may be, I can see my own wish expressed in these lines. I've come to Venetian Harbor hoping for some kind of redemption. What I find instead is a landscape so featureless that it resembles boredom. Now that I am actually here I can't think of anything to do. Finally, I decide to walk to a spot from which I can view the entrance.

The scene is just as ordinary as before, but suddenly I see it differently—not in contrast to my childhood memories, but in the context of our family's broken narrative. This is the point from which my dad set forth, confidently expecting to return just a few days later. But he drowned instead. In a delayed and devious fashion, I am the one to complete his trip. There is some satisfaction in that.

When was it that I became less afraid of the road? Was it the year that I drove halfway across the country by myself—hugging the beau-

tiful horizontal lines of the western interstates? I-80 guided me, in the spring of 1993, all the way from San Francisco to Des Moines, where I took a simple turn north onto I-35 to find my way home. Along the way, I played tapes of Bob Dylan, Boz Scaggs, Linda Ronstadt, and Maria Callas singing "La Boheme," to keep me company and hold at bay my darker fantasies—of breakdown in the desert, or rape and murder in some isolated motel.

Driving, I discovered on this trip, can be a pleasure—even a form of meditation. I'd wake up in some small town in Nevada or Utah, head for the breakfast shop for scrambled eggs, bitter coffee and toast, then to the nearest gas station to fill my tank for the first leg of my journey. For the next seven or eight hours, I'd be my own company on the incomparably straight and smooth interstate until I arrived, several hundred miles later, at yet another western town just big enough to offer me more than one option for a night's lodging.

The landscapes that flowed past my window, day after day, until I was well into the Midwest, had a dreamlike quality in the fine, clear air. There were mountains, then desert, then badlands, then salt flats—an ever-varying scene. The colors were also a marvel—muted shades of peach, ochre, saffron, and blue-violet. In the presence of such visual beauty, I could not feel any of my usual anxieties.

Even my thoughts seemed to untangle and smooth themselves out—into long, looping narratives, linking my past and present lives. Mile by mile, I seemed to be creating a multi-stranded plot, in which no detail was so jagged or anomalous that it had to be left out.

The interstates, with their wide lanes and rectangular green signs were so clearly marked that even someone as map-challenged as I couldn't get lost. I was alone but never lonely. Trucks were my steady companions, as single-minded and goal-oriented as I. I'd pass them on upgrades only to see them whiz by me later. When I hit a stretch of bad weather—as I did in Wyoming in a patch of sleet turning to snow—I'd be grateful to ride behind them, letting them scout the territory ahead. They were like bodyguards, shielding me from the worst effects of the storm.

For the first time, I understood why Americans are so much in love with the automobile. By this time, as well, I had my own stick-shift car. After I'd finally learned to drive one, I took some pride in the feeling of control it gave me. Automatic transmissions were for sissies, I thought. But the most important thing about this solo trip across country was the simple fact of my doing it—with no wrong turns, no accidents, no encounters with sexual harassers, much less serial killers. I had covered 2000 miles without incident.

My notions of travel were shaped, I now understand, by the circumstances of my father's death—by the simple, yet overwhelming reality of his having died on a trip. My brother Ron had hit the nail on the head when he said "Something bad will happen." But I had other images of travel-induced disaster to feed my anxieties. Due to my lengthy graduate studies, I was familiar with Homer's *Odyssey*, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, Wordsworth's *Prelude* and Joyce's *Ulysses*, all of which feature journeys that deviate from the straight path yet come to a satisfactory conclusion. I was also familiar with ones that don't. For every quest that approaches or reaches its goal in literature, there is one that only goes from bad to worse. I encountered this shadow tradition in the disjointed narrative form known as "picaresque."

"Picaresque" as a term derives from the Spanish "pícaro," meaning roguish or knavish, perhaps related to the Italian "piccaro," meaning rascal or beggar. The mid-sixteenth century Spanish precursor of the novel, *Lazarillo de Tormes*, features just such a rascal as its protagonist. Long before Jack Kerouac took (by bus, freight car and automobile) to the two-lane highways of the American West, Lazarillo had taken himself (mostly on foot) to the Iberian road. Hence the *Oxford English Dictionary* concludes that the word "picaro" means vagabond, that is to say, someone who wanders around.

My first acquaintance with an author in English who deals with such a character was Thomas Nashe, who led a furiously polemic life as a writer of anti-Puritan pamphlets in the late sixteenth century before dying at the unconscionably early age of thirty-four. His story—or picaresque narrative, or whatever you may call it—is titled *The Unfortunate Traveller*.

Nashe's protagonist, a late teenager named Jack Wilton, apprentices himself as a page to an English nobleman who is trying his fortunes at war in France, Jack's main purpose being to keep one step ahead of his creditors at home. In military camp, he continues his merry pranks, barely escaping whipping. It isn't long before he tires of army life and takes off for Italy on his own.

As if to anticipate my brother's view of travel, Jack encounters a series of misfortunes. He barely escapes a mysterious plague called "the sweating sickness," which carries off its victims in the space of an evening. He witnesses the massacre of a scarecrow army of religious nonconformists, falls into the hands of a doctor who wants to use his body as the subject of a public dissection, and attends the execution of a notorious criminal, graphically describing the fate he himself has narrowly escaped.

At one point on this bumpy road, he stops to reflect on the nature of travel, concluding that “The first traveler was Cain, and he was called a vagabond runagate on the face of the earth. Travel... is good for nothing but to tame and bring men under.” Jack’s sober advice is to stay home.

When Jack refers to travel as travail, he isn’t just being clever, as the two words were once interchangeable. The first meaning for “travel” is suffering, hardship, or labor. Only secondarily does it refer to the action of undertaking a journey. At a time (such as the 16th century in England) when taking to the road was more arduous than it is today, travel was not distinguished from work—including the work of giving birth.

As the evening deepens in the bar of the “Feasting Fox,” so does my conversation with my brother Ron. We’re both on our third round of drinks and oblivious to the bustle around us—this being the first time we’ve shared our memories of the day of our father’s death.

“I can’t remember anything about the accident,” I say. “I really don’t understand what happened.”

“Well, Bob was boasting about how far he could swim,” Ron begins. “And Dad told him to swim out to a stick that was floating by in the water. So he did. But the current was fast, and the stick was also moving fast. Bob went too far and panicked. He kept raising his hand for help—because you remember how Dad used to warn us about ‘crying wolf.’ Finally, Mom realized what was going on and told Dad to get out there and do something.”

I’m mesmerized by Ron’s story. Not just the details of it, but its continuity—and the confidence he has in the telling. How can his memory be so much better than mine?

“Mom and Dad got into an argument about who was at fault. Then she said “He’s *your* son, you go rescue him.”

Can this be true? Did my parents actually quarrel over the fate of their son? If so, how much time did they lose in this way? I’m so shocked by my brother’s revelation that I can’t think of anything to say.

“Dad went after him and pushed him toward shore. Mom waded in to pull him out.”

My older brother has told me about Dad’s rescuing him, but not about the stick in the water or the unseemly fight on the beach. In his account, Dad is a hero, risking (and losing) his own life to save that of his son. In a letter to Bob not long afterwards, one of my dad’s Jesuit friends even compares his sacrifice to that of Christ. “There is

no greater love," he says, without qualification. Ron offers another set of possible motivations. What about anger, fear, shame?

"He did a foolish thing," I say at last, "telling Bob to swim after a stick." Suddenly, I am feeling very tired. "Let's go home," I say, signaling our waiter for the check.

The father I have loved and idealized for my entire adult life now appears to me in another light. At first, I feel furious with him—for giving Bob such a stupid instruction, as if he were a dog ordered to "go fetch." And then for not being strong or clever enough to resist the terrible current of the river, the very thing he had warned us kids about. So he was human, after all, not the god-like figure I had enshrined in my memory. Yet he did save my brother's life, and paid for this selfless act with his own. For a while, I hold two views of him in my mind, unable to choose between them. I even begin to doubt Ron's story. Perhaps he is splicing two reminiscences together?

My parents were both rather hot-tempered and had lots of arguments, many of which I witnessed as a child. Maybe Ron's way of coping with the intolerable nature of what happened on the beach is to "create" a story that explains it? On the other hand, he may have been so riveted to the drama playing itself out in front of him that he recorded it—as he has other things I don't recall—more or less verbatim. Finally, I give up trying to resolve this question. Ron sticks to his version of the story, Bob won't talk and I can't remember. Our mother, the person most likely to be able to shed some light on this mystery, never once breaks her silence about it. Since I am too scared to ask, she carries her forbidden knowledge to the grave.

Gradually, in mid-life I make my peace with roads. But I keep a respectful distance from rivers. Lakes don't frighten me—I view them as large bodies of standing water and hence benign. A river, on the other hand, may appear calm on the surface, but is treacherous underneath—a truth that Mark Twain, in his training as a riverboat captain intimately understood. In *Life on the Mississippi*, he writes about one particularly dangerous stretch:

To realize fully the marvelous precision required in laying the great steamer in her marks in that murky waste of water, one should know that not only must she pick her intricate way through snags and blind reefs, and then shave the head of the island so closely as to brush the overhanging foliage with her stern, but at one place she must pass almost within arm's reach of a sunken and invisible wreck that would snatch the hull timbers from under her if she should strike it, and destroy a quarter of a million dollars' worth of steamboat and cargo in

five minutes, and maybe a hundred and fifty human lives into the bargain.

For Twain, the face of the water was a “wonderful book,” one that yielded its “most cherished secrets,” in an occult language he learned to decipher.

The semiotics of water, with its seductive play of light and shadow, eludes me. I prefer to stick to the obvious, to what I can see right in front of my eyes. So it is that in August of 2002, I decide to take a driving trip to St. Louis—this time forsaking the comforting interstates (I-35 south to Kansas City and I-70 across Missouri) to follow a patchwork of interconnecting roads, coinciding for the most part with Highway 61, which hug the shoreline of the Mississippi River. You can drive this sinuous route, officially designated as the Great River Road and marked by signs in the shape of a steamboat steering wheel, all the way from Minnesota to Louisiana if you choose. Though I have driven this way once before, it was with a companion who navigated our course. This time I try it on my own.

At first I’m as frightened as I used to be about losing my way and take several wrong turns—crossing a bridge into Wisconsin before I realize that I’m following a sign that points east instead of west. I pull over, consult my map and realize that I can cross back into Iowa further downstream at Prairie du Chien. I take this slight deviation as an opportunity to relax and explore, taking the first of a series of tourist stops at Villa Louis, a nineteenth century mansion and estate on the Wisconsin side of the river.

Back in Iowa, I encounter a dreamscape of rolling hills, grasses and fields high above the river. Driving the crest of the river bluffs gives me a timeless feeling, as if I could follow this road indefinitely into a space that exists nowhere and belongs to no one. It is as close to my imagination of heaven as I have ever come.

Towards dusk, I leave this beautiful section of the road and descend into industrial Clinton, where (once again) I get lost. Cities of any size confuse me. Whereas the interstates will speed you through or around them, the local highways are indistinguishable from ordinary city streets. In Clinton, I try to follow the signs for the Great River Road but find myself in a maze instead. Tired and discouraged, I pull over to a gas station and open my map. A truck pulls in next to me, and a black man in a silver Dodge caravan looks over to ask if I need help. A woman sits by his side, and both look sympathetic. I tell them that I am trying to find a motel for the night, and he says that they are “a long way out.” “Follow me,” he says, and “we’ll guide you there.” Gratefully, I do, until they pull over near a strip of motel lodgings. I thank them, as they make a quick U turn and depart. I

take the first motel in sight, which looks pretty good on the outside but which is dirty and tattered within. There are cigarette butts on the worn carpet leading to my room, and the curtains that shield me from the fluorescent light along the corridor are torn, but I'm too tired to go back to the main office and make a change.

In the morning when I step outside, I am aware of a rotten smell so nauseating that I want to hold my breath. In the gas station, I ask the cashier if she knows what this is about. "Oh," she says, "that would be the corn processing. There's a plant down the road a ways, on the river."

Unlike the interstates, which won't allow you to experience a city with any degree of intimacy, the Great River Road will take you to its heart. You will first moderate your speed from 55 to 45, then 35 mph, and suddenly you will find yourself on Main Street, braking for every stoplight. Some towns, like Bellevue, Iowa, which features a park that runs the length of the highway and the river, are a visual delight, while others, such as Clinton, make you want to escape. Not only does the road fail to direct you in a straight line to your destination, but it also offers a hodge-podge of impressions. Given an option, I'd choose Bellevue, but Clinton is also a part of the deal I've made by taking this route.

On my way home from St. Louis, I decide to follow the east side of the river to see the parts of Illinois and Wisconsin that I missed on the way down. By now, I feel more confident about getting where I want to go—regardless of wrong turns. I also want to find Keithsburg, the place where my mother, two brothers and I left our boat—along with our lives as we had known them until August 30, 1951.

This trip takes me two days, Keithsburg being farther north than I had imagined and not even on the Great River Road, though I get close enough this way to find a network of smaller roads, like tiny capillaries, hardly even discernible on my map, which take me there. More than once, I get out of my car at some lonely crossroads with a single café cum gas station to ask directions. Each time, I wind my way closer to the water—until finally I drive onto a gravel road that descends slowly to a boat landing at the river's edge.

By now, it's mid-afternoon on a hot summer's day—not much activity at this hour. Yet I can see from the few boats offshore that small craft enter the water here—mostly speedboats, though there is also a houseboat swaying at anchor. Swiftly I scan the area. To the south, there is some kind of inlet, formed by a woody outcropping of land that looks vaguely familiar. Directly in front of me lies the wide and glittering expanse of the Mississippi.

Have I been here before, as Bob tells me? I believe that I have, feeling as if I'm immersed in a recurring dream. I seem to recognize the configuration of beach, land spit, water and cottonwood trees before my eyes. Even the sign reading "Public Boat Launch" looks familiar—though its lettering and iconography must be recent. I feel mesmerized by this scene. Like Nauvoo and Fort Madison, it is charged with historic meaning—but one that is unique to my family.

To the north (upriver), I notice a trailer campsite, looking as if it had been preserved in amber since the 1950s. Can my childhood memory of waiting in someone's trailer on the day of my dad's death possibly be accurate? A single road runs through this camp, which I follow, as if guided by an insistent memory trace. "Maybe," I think, "just maybe." On the other side, I enter another uncanny scene—as if some divine hand had magically conjured it from my long-ago, girlhood experience.

A simple rectangular sign, painted white with block lettering reads "KEITHSBURG BOAT CLUB." This "club" consists of a single story wood frame building with two rooms, one of which contains a bar that overlooks the water. Outside, there is a newer-looking open shelter, painted barn red, with picnic tables underneath.

It's as if I have walked onto a movie set designed specifically for me. Though the picnic area looks contemporary, it has the feel of an earlier era. The Boat Club itself is vintage. Nothing has been spiffed up, as in Nauvoo, or obsessively recreated down to the tiniest nail hole, as in Fort Madison. The Keithsburg Boat Club is like an aging but beloved relative whose wrinkles, rheumatic hands and silver hair are tokens of a life fully lived. So what if it looks a little rickety, lacks paint or slouches down towards the water. Anything built near the Mississippi is married to it, so to speak. In this case, successive floods have clearly taken their toll—the most recent of which is documented by a sign halfway up one side of the building, marking the place where the river crested in the spring of 1993.

If I listen carefully, I can almost hear my dad striking up a conversation in this bar over a beer or two, while I stand by his side, shyly ordering a cream soda for myself. I can imagine our family having barbecued ribs and French fries at one of the formica tables in the middle of the room. Could we have stopped here for the night before moving down river? And returned to the nearest place where we hoped to find help? The Keithsburg Boat Club makes this wisp of a memory feel real.

I want to investigate further. So I open the screen door to a room that looks like a kitchen and proceed into the bar area, which is populated on this lazy Saturday afternoon by a few men. As the sole woman

in the room, I feel conspicuous but am determined to pursue my mission. I walk up to the bar and pose my question: "I'm sorry to bother you, but I'm looking for someone who knows when this club was established. My family used to have a boat, and I think we may have stopped here once."

"Well, little lady," the bartender says, with exaggerated courtesy, "I don't know myself. I'm a newcomer to this area. But there's some in this room who might be able to help you. Herb here, for instance, is a real old-timer." He nods and points to a man in a button-down, short-sleeved shirt, who is sitting at the far end of the bar and who catches my eye as I turn to face him. Other eyes are trained on me also, I realize, as I thank the bartender and approach the man he has designated. Not much going on today, other than a baseball game on TV. A woman in this male preserve—even one who is obviously middle-aged—stirs interest.

Herb scrapes his chair aside to make room for me to sit. I take the place next to him.

"Everything looks so familiar. I was wondering if this club goes back to the '50s."

"Don't believe so," Herb says, looking at me appraisingly. "I'm 65—prob'ly the oldest one here. These young'uns"—he catches the eye of the bartender and winks—"don't go back far enough to remember."

"Have you lived here long?"

"Used to live on the other side of the river but the wife and me—she passed away some ten years ago—moved over to this side after Jackie—that's our daughter—was born. My wife wanted to be closer to her family was the reason."

"I'm sorry. I mean about your wife. But when did you move?"

"Sometime in the early '60s. Don't know that it made such a difference—in terms of family. They wasn't that close to begin with."

"Oh, too bad." I'm disappointed for Herb—but also for myself. "Well, I could be wrong. We used to stop on both sides of the river. Maybe I'm thinking of someplace else. You've been really kind, though, to talk with me. I appreciate your help."

I stand up and hold out my hand, not knowing how else to say goodbye.

"My pleasure." A big hand takes mine and holds it warmly. "Not ever' day I get a chance to talk to a pretty woman like you."

Herb and I are close enough in age for his comment to make me blush. To cover my embarrassment, I smile and thank him again, as I turn and walk out.

I was so sure. How could I experience such a rush of pure bodily sensation if I were wrong? Yet the only form of evidence I have tells me just that. This perfect, movie-set, vintage club did not exist in the summer of 1951. Or did it? None of the men in the bar was there at that time. How could they know? As I drive through town, I decide to find the local historical society, signs for which I've noticed in passing, on my way to the river.

When I get there, I find the building locked. It's Saturday, of course, and no one is in sight. I knock on the door and peer in through the windows, hoping that someone (even a maintenance person) might be lurking within. No such luck. I can't imagine staying around for another two nights until business hours are resumed on Monday. This particular mystery will remain unresolved.

But then, who cares? It matters only to me. And I'm not sure how *much* it matters that I've found the actual place where my family anchored our boat for a night, where my dad had a few beers in the bar and where we all ate barbecued ribs and French fries at a formica table as a family—before we became something else.

Maybe the important thing is that I feel so at home here—in this border-river town, neglected by time and virtually all traffic routes, including the Great River Road. I've discovered a place where what happened, what might have happened and what I am experiencing in the present somehow coincide. In Keithsburg, the deep past feels as real as the simmering August day when I revisit it. Both are present for me simultaneously, conversing for the first time, in my life, with each other.

Can all time be connected in this way? Perhaps we live in temporal dimensions more interfused and various than we know or understand?

The way back may be the only way forward, as T.S. Eliot intimated in his late-life poem "The Four Quartets," where he writes: "the end of all our exploring/ Will be to arrive where we started/ And know the place for the first time." Eliot, of course, grew up in St. Louis, as fascinated as I by the natural force of the Mississippi.

Being on the road, for me, is the same as being on the river. There is no other way, no other choice.

Sweetwater

When Emily holds herself still enough, she can see the moisture suspended in the air, like bubbles—she imagines—are carried in the wake of a whale. Droplets of water spotlight thin strands of spider webs in the hedge bordering the garden, and slugs litter the path to the shed. Fog grips trees and the second stories of houses, paints dark hulls of ships at anchor with cloud drifts, patches of sheep's hide, the spinning of silkworms.

Walking along the water's edge behind the house is like living in a winter room with all the curtains drawn, insulating the sounds of trawlers putting out and pilot boats cutting the bay. She can see them moving like shadows on the water. Somewhere beyond the trees ahead she can hear the repeated whistle of a train. She listens and wonders who else listens. Do others stop over their coffee or while resting in bed? She can hear the bump of boxcars and timber cars coupling. But the fog swallows the sound and suddenly she can think only of the dead baby who on Monday was still growing in her stomach before the long ache began.

On Tuesday the doctor performed an ultrasound. The baby was gone, disappeared, and he said he was sorry, sometimes it happens this way, and he told her if she didn't bleed out the sac by Friday they would perform a D & C. He gave her a pat on her shoulder as he left her in the examination room. She thought it would be proper to cry. She still was sitting with one shoe off when a nurse came in. She put her shoe on and prepared for the waiting room because she hadn't been able to get off work and brought the children she baby-sat with her. Liz came along to watch them.

How did she feel, Liz asked again this morning on the phone. How did she feel? Empty. Lonely. Relieved too. She knew Alex would be relieved, though he would never say so. And she knew she was not ready to have a child in the house twenty-four hours a day. She spent ten hours a day with children as it was, and she loved them but loved them more easily knowing when 6:00 came she could go home.

She comes to Market Street where sand, rock, and sea grass cross pavement, where the whole world descends to the harbor. She turns down Market and walks until she comes to the Harbor captain's shed and hears the voices of men gathered inside around the wood stove. A figure emerges from the weathered doorway. "Mornin, Miss Emily."

“Good morning, Frank.”

“Missed you last night.”

“Yeah, well, it was one of those nights where work never ended.”

“Nothin worth walkin down for. Nothin to plan a meal around. My rod’s been right there where you see it since yesterday morning. Had one of them bullfighters in here keeping my dinner cold while he complained about not being able to take a goddamn tanker out in this weather.”

A man in rubber boots squeezes behind Frank’s back through the doorway. “Headed out?” Frank asks, interrupting himself.

“Gotta see if she’ll start first.” The man smiles, teeth missing.

The sun has not yet clipped the hump of the Coast Range. When the sun rises, Emily knows, even if she sees sky, the fog will hug the water’s edge and today she will not see the other side of the bay where the big houses rise from steep slopes, their roofs joining the canopy of treetops, no more than she will see—looking from the opulent living room window of the house where she baby-sits children—the old town laid low at the water and the squat blue house she and Alex own.

Frank turns back to Emily. She studies his face. She can see the moist Oregon air pooling in deep pockmarks which form buttes and cairns in his skin. “So what’s new, Emily?”

Emily thinks for a moment, knowing everything and nothing is, her hand moving instinctively to her abdomen. “Well,” she tries, “the Pink Panther talks now.”

“What’s that?”

“The Pink Panther, the cartoon character. You know, fiberglass insulation commercials. He never used to talk. They just played Henry Mancini scores. Now he talks.”

“Oh.”

“I liked him better the other way.”

It is the sun-dried end of summer and the high Wyoming badlands wrinkle under wind and heat. Emily stays at home, playing alone or doing chores while her father sleeps. He is a sheriff’s deputy for Sweetwater County and he works nights. Many days, when he wakes in the early afternoon, he takes Emily and her friend Kim out one of the dirt county roads he patrols to a slow bend in the Green River where they swim. While they swim or sun themselves on towels laid in the dirt, her father drives downriver to fish or some days he parks high on a butte above them and naps in his pick-up.

Where they swim the water really is green. The river is wide and flat, and it reminds her of the tinted plate-glass at the City Market.

Emily likes to float on her back, her hands trailing below her scalloping the water. She floats on the slow current, and she imagines what it would be like to live underwater. She pictures forests of kelp with fish moving through the waving stalks and mystic, deep places where whales live, their long shadows like the underside of ships crawling across the sea floor.

As she drifts on the crawl of the Green, sometimes she closes her eyes, and, lifting one hand, allowing the film of water to drain from her fingers to her stomach, she trails the other hand, which becomes a rudder, turning her until she is etching slow circles. She can feel her long hair flow beneath her like a keel and the water move on her back. The movement of water, the slow spinning, the dark of eyelids pressed closed with only a filter of sun penetrating: she is suddenly dizzy. She can't tell which way the shores are or which direction the current moves. Her stomach turns. She holds it flat and tight, presses her eyes more tightly closed. Circles of light spring forward before closed lids like stars exploding in a night sky. She holds a picture of her dense underwater world far down. A fish, big, a channel cat or a carp, rubs its spine on hers and she shoots from the water, eyes blinking in the rush of sunlight. She has drifted nearly around the bend where the current becomes stronger. She can't swim a straight line until the river and the confused calm of closed-eyed floating releases her, and then she swims upstream around the bend where Kim laughs at her.

It is quiet in the Risers' big kitchen. Janice Riser calls it "French Country," but Emily thinks *light* when she hears country, and this kitchen is all dark wood like the inside of an old church. Janice, the children's mother, clatters into the kitchen, high heels striking the wood floor. The baby is in the high chair, chasing pieces of dry cereal across the tray with his fat, uncoordinated fingers. His sister, Jackie, is watching cartoons at the breakfast bar. Emily sits at the kitchen table, trying to decide what to fix for the children's breakfast. She stares at the refrigerator door, as if the collage of year-old crayon pictures, school-work, dry cleaning claim tickets, phone numbers and forgotten grocery lists will spring forward, right itself into order and form a picture of her life. Then she remembers it is not her life but someone else's.

She opens the refrigerator door, but somewhere in mid-reach she forgets what she is reaching for and stares, stooped, at the contents on the shelves. She notes how the open refrigerator door makes a geometry of light on the floor, like sunshine would, angling through a window.

Emily sees a red pump invade the outline of light, and she smells the wave of perfume that will linger long after Janice has left for work. Emily reverts her attention to the refrigerator. It is a maze of Tupperware. The refrigerator is huge, like everything else in the house, and she feels as if it could swallow her, as if she could step inside the light, into the white, clear world and shut the door.

“Do something creative for dinner, won’t you dear,” Janice says. “Something that will hold. I’ve got a late closing and Ted has meetings. You’ll probably have to run to the market.”

Emily remains stooped in the open door. She can hear Janice cooing at the baby in the high chair, hears the rattle of bracelets as she blows goodbye kisses to the children. “Don’t forget Justin has soccer after school today, Emily. He’s moping around upstairs somewhere. He’ll need breakfast,” and then Emily hears the sharp clap of her heels cross the floor. She is fixed at the refrigerator. Soon she hears the garage door open and the car start. She slumps into a kitchen chair. The baby grins, showing Emily his sticky fingers. The only light in the kitchen comes from the glow of the TV and the open refrigerator door. She swings the heavy door closed, and as it shuts with a thud, magnets and papers clatter to the floor in a heap.

Emily’s father has bought a boat after saving for years. It is used, but the small cabin cruiser is far removed from the dinghy he has fished from for as long as Emily can remember. She knows how happy he is though he acts shy and embarrassed when her mother talks about “Jack’s toys.” She knows, from the summer days she has passed sitting opposite him on the metal seat of the dinghy, that he dreams of owning a sailing yacht, a big double master he would anchor in Puget Sound. He talks of sailing the San Juans and the Inner Passage. He tells Emily he will sail her to Alaska where she can see whales, something she has dreamed about since the first grade. When her father talks about the trips he will take, she pictures whales breaching near ice floes, their smooth, wet backs breaking the water before her, and the mist from their blowholes raining on her face. She will reach out and feel their hunched backs and she imagines the touch.

Both she and her father know he will never own such a vessel on a policeman’s salary, but knowing does not alter their conversations any more than their daydreams. The truth is her father rarely leaves Sweetwater County except for driving to Cheyenne to testify or Salt Lake for Christmas shopping. Once he and her mother flew to Houston for a law enforcement conference where Jack went deep-sea fishing. The swordfish he caught is mounted and hangs on the wall in

their family room. Emily looks at it with revulsion. She cannot believe her father would hang a dead fish on their wall.

On weekends they will take the new cabin cruiser to Flaming Gorge. He has promised he will buy water skis and take her friends to the reservoir. She looks forward to these days but will miss the days of late spring and the quiet of her father fishing. Secretly she will miss the dinghy, the time alone with him listening to his stories. She will miss the quiet they share and the Mountain Dew he keeps in the small cooler with the beer and the bait. With the bigger boat Emily and her father will talk less and she will tan more and the silences between them will seem to fill more space. Soon Emily will not want to come to the reservoir with him. Already he has put away her fishing pole in a corner of the garage where the spiders have claimed it, and he will turn away more frequently when he sees her tanning in a bikini, looking embarrassed if their eyes meet.

Until the weather warms, Emily's father spends most of his time off working on the new boat. He has removed the motor and much of it is dismantled on this workbench. He wears a stocking cap and heavy coat and works with trouble-lights hanging above the bench.

Emily doesn't like to be around her father when he works on things. Today Emily has news to tell her father. She has made the junior varsity swim team, one of two freshmen to do so. That, and something else she will not tell her father: After practice, she and Kim stayed on for open swim along with some of the boys on the team. They changed from their practice suits, combed out their long hair and put on bikinis. Some of the boys would run outside and roll in the snow, then run back and jump in the pool, steam clouds rising from their cold bodies. They were playing keep-away with a solid ball of snow. Emily caught the ball and Matt Hennessey was wrestling with her when his hand shot up her bikini top. She dropped the snow and it landed in the water, floating, momentarily like a miniature iceberg, and she imagined she saw a ring of white water melting into the blue-green. Matt looked embarrassed and swam away. She could feel a small scratch his fingernail made. She knew her face was red. She looked down at herself and noticed, for the first time, how distinct her nipples were, standing out against the thin fabric of her top, and she sank down into the water before anyone else saw.

She will not tell her father this. She will, however, tell him about making the team and about how her coach told her she was going to be a good swimmer, but just as she is about to open the door from the kitchen to the garage, a wrench flies from the bench. She hears the sound it makes skittering along the concrete, and she hears her father cursing.

Emily gets the stroller and they all walk Justin to the bus stop. The fog remains dense. They must descend a steep hill, the street switch-backing its flank. She knows large homes are set back deep in the trees on the uphill side of each switch-back, but the fog is so thick today she cannot see them and the trees press close, overhanging the road edge. There are no sidewalks, so they must walk on the edge of the asphalt. Emily listens closely for cars. Moisture condenses on their faces, and she stops once and wipes the wetness from the baby's cheeks.

After the bus comes, they start back up the hill. She feels as if she could walk forever today, but Jackie is tired and they stop and sit on a felled tree by the roadside. Across the street someone is building a house.

A week ago they watched them clear the lot. The men ripped the trees out of the ground with a bulldozer and piled them at the back of the lot. Struggling against the bigger trees, the bulldozer's treads spun deep channels in the earth. The trees stood rigid against its blade. Then the earth exploded and roots sprang out with showers of dirt. She could hear the strain and break of the roots over the roar of the bulldozer. Sometimes the trunk gave way before the roots released their grip, and the tree broke with a loud crack, toppling in a drunk faint.

She remembers helping her father dig holes in the hard, dry earth to plant a windbreak around their home. Her father struggled to grow trees, staking them against the continual wind, wrapping their trunks, fertilizing and spraying and watering them by hand, and still they died. Occasionally one would flirt with living, survive blizzard and drought for a few years to grow bent and cankered but alive, only to turn suddenly brown and die.

Today, no one is working. The basement is dug but it is too wet to pour concrete. She thinks of Alex, gone for nearly a month now on the other side of the Cascades framing summer homes. He used to come home every Sunday, then at least once a month, now at something like six week intervals. He hardly feels present when he's home. With Alex away, this year she has had to till and plant the garden alone. She is nearly done, though the evenings after work are short, and too often it is raining. She is becoming used to the emptiness of the house at night and to working alone in the garden.

When they reach the house, Emily puts the baby down for his morning nap and colors with Jackie. When Jackie loses interest in coloring and begins playing babies, Emily crosses the room and looks

out the living room window. Often, when the fog remains close to the water, she can look down into it like a bird peering into clouds. Today the fog rises nearly against the glass like cloudy water. All she can see is its slow, rolling movement and the shadows of tall trees. Emily embraces herself, her arms crossed at her breasts, her elbows pressed tight to her stomach. She feels as if she is inside of something.

She holds her father's big hand. The other two men have shiny guns on their hips too. Their belts have bullets lined up in neat rows, and they wear cowboy hats.

"She's a real cutie, Jack," one of the men says.

"Full of the devil too, I bet," says the other, "like her old man."

"She'd give him a run for his money, I expect," her father says, squeezing her hand.

"With them big brown eyes and all that hair, she'll be a real looker," says the second man. "Gonna have your hands full, Jack."

"I better not catch anybody lookin'," Jack says, pretending like he is drawing his gun.

The men laugh. "Better hop back up in the truck," her father tells Emily. "Daddy's got a little work to take care of." He lifts her up to the running board of the pick-up, and she scampers into the cab. "Don't play with anything. Daddy will be just a minute."

The morning sunshine is warm in the truck. She stares at the river a quarter mile away—the shimmering life of the cottonwoods along the banks and the green of the irrigated field, the brown fields across the river and the red-sided butte that rises from them. The water looks as if it moves in great sheets.

The men are standing around a dead horse, a small chestnut mare. A blue pick-up has driven up from the ranch buildings at the river's edge, and its driver, a man in a plaid shirt and brown cowboy hat, has joined the deputies. The four men shake their heads as they talk.

"Gut shot," one of the deputies tells Jack. "I followed the spoor all the way down by the river. Took her a long while to die. We found some shell casings way up yonder along the road." The men follow the direction of his finger with their eyes.

Jack turns to the man in the plaid shirt. "This is the third one we've found in two weeks. Henry Springer lost another mare and Jake McComb had a stallion shot right there in his corral."

"Don't make no sense," the man says.

The men talk for a while longer. Then they struggle to load the big animal in the back of Jack's pick-up. Emily watches through the rear window. The truck shakes when they heave the horse into the bed. Her father and one of the deputies climb into the bed and slide

the animal forward. The four men rub their hands in the tall, wet grass, and then wipe them on their jeans. They shake hands.

Emily stares at the animal. There is dew on its brown skin. Its eyes are open and the huge tongue trails from the side of its mouth. Blood still leaks from somewhere under the animal and pools in the pick-up bed. Emily turns away and stares off towards the river until the door opens and her father climbs up beside her in the cab.

Jackie has just awakened from her nap, and Emily has turned on cartoons for her while she cooks. Emily is making the children an afternoon snack when she feels the warm wetness on her thighs. She snatches the baby from where he sits playing on the hardwood floor and takes him with her to the bathroom. By the time she reaches the toilet, already the blood has drenched her panties and stained her jeans. She feels the blood rush from her, but staring at it in the toilet this blood is not a part of her.

The baby sits on the floor in front of her. He plays peek-a-boo with a washcloth. She hears Henry Mancini on the television. Her fingers are interlocked on her lap. They look like someone else's hands. Nearly time to pick up Justin from school. Then soccer. Snack isn't ready and the children will be hungry. She has no clean clothes to change into. Still the blood comes.

Emily is driven home from the Salt Lake airport by their minister's wife. Mrs. Henderson reminds Emily of her mother, so quiet she appears formal. Her face has deep creases, mimicking the Southwestern Wyoming landscape they cross. Early February. The sky is more white than blue, snow impending. The landscape seems a reverse image of itself, like a photo negative—the alkali flats and ridge-lines a rusty brown, ravines and fences stacked white with wind-crusting snow.

It took nearly two days for Emily's mother to contact her with the news that her father died of a heart attack. He was alone, patrolling the distant roads in the north reaches of the county. Neither Emily nor her roommate were home to get the phone call, for just as Emily practically lives with Alex, her roommate, Carol, has a boyfriend as well. After the first day, Emily's mother tried to reach her through the university, but Emily has long since abandoned her classes for bars, camping trips with Alex into the Cascades, and a part-time job at a garden shop.

It was Carol who was finally home to receive the call. So it was Carol who had to track Emily down at Alex's basement apartment to tell her that her father was dead.

Emily appreciates Mrs. Henderson's silence. She sees Mrs. Henderson look at her every few miles as if she wants to say something. Emily looks out the window to avoid her. Even though her mother didn't ask anything when Emily spoke with her on the phone, Emily could hear the avoidance in her voice. She is building excuses and explanations in her mind, but even as she does so, she wonders if her father isn't inside her thoughts, and she feels all the more guilty for their falseness. Thinking her father might know her thoughts is like having to admit to him that she is not a virgin. She tries to picture such a conversation with him, perhaps while driving or over a hamburger at the A & W.

As Mrs. Henderson turns the big LTD off I-80 and onto the familiar county road that leads home, Emily looks into the barren landscape and realizes she will never have such a conversation with her father. A few miles from home, Mrs. Henderson again tries to make polite conversation. Emily's replies are more curt than she intends.

When they turn off the paved county road onto the long dirt trail towards the house, Emily concentrates on the drifts piled against the snow fence. Blowing snow swirls up their flanks like serpents racing. It leaps from the drift tops in small clouds that sail out over the dirt road and the car hood. The lee sides of the drifts are tall walls where dry grass is exposed. Emily remembers running down these paths formed by the snow-fences as a child, like playing in a giant alien labyrinth.

They drive through a small cut in the earth. Both sides of the road are choked with snow. The road emerges and turns south to the house. The bend is flanked with three sets of snow fence staggered like army divisions. Emily can see the house now, squatting against the snow and wind like a vagrant. Trees, seldom more than sticks, form an "L" to the north and west of the house. The tallest tree in the line is a splintery Russian olive. Several pines, staked in torn burlap enclosures, stand nearly as tall as her father, their tops broken or brown with disease.

Emily and Mrs. Henderson are greeted at the front door by a neighbor she hasn't seen since before high school. Standing in her own entryway seems strange, for Emily has entered the house through the garage all her life. Several other near-strangers are in the kitchen, and each in turn gives her a hug or a pat on the shoulder. Her mother has gone to town with Pastor Henderson to order a gravestone. Emily finds quiet in the rec-room downstairs. There is only a faint light above the bar. Voices filter downstairs through the heating vents. Emily sits on the couch fingering the ribbing of its faded material.

The fish her father caught off the Texas coast stares at her with unblinking glass eyes.

*

A cargo ship has come in during the afternoon once the fog releases its grip on the coast. It anchors just below her house. The black and rusty hull looms from the water. She can hear men on the ship conversing in strange languages. She wonders what foreign places they are from, tries to picture the home waters they have left—Manila, Lisbon, Buenos Aires. Have they left lovers behind? Wives? Daughters? She leaves her yard through the back garden gate and walks down to the shore on a narrow trail lined densely with ferns and moss-covered firs. Her pants are wet from the water dripping off the plants bordering the path. It is raining lightly, indistinguishable from the drip of trees.

When she reaches the water, she pulls up the hood on her rain jacket. The marina is quiet, fishing boats moored to old wooden docks off the wharf, sail boats and other pleasure craft rocking in their slips off the new covered promenade which curves along the town's edge. She walks its length, then back in the street past empty canning factories to where the woods have returned.

She slips through the gap in a chain fence, the opening rusted in place for years. The trees here are sparse again as the forest slowly reclaims an old cut, and there is more open sand and sea grass. Upslope, towards the big trees, an old timber mill crumples on itself, its iron remains inky black with rust and age. Pieces of machinery litter the site, green threading through skeletons.

Emily finds Frank on a sandy point where an inlet turns towards the old mill. The end of his rod is dug into the sand. One hand rests on it, the other grips a thermos cup of steaming coffee.

"Good evenin, Miss Emily."

"Evening, Frank. Catch anything?"

"Nothin worth keepin. I swear somebody took all the fish out of this bay and didn't tell me."

Emily sits down next to Frank and watches rain drip off his billed cap. They talk for a while about the weather and about her garden plans, the subjects by which they gauge their lives.

Frank's rod bends. He puts his coffee down and places both hands on it. When the line tightens again, he sets the hook. The rod bows nearly double. Frank dips it towards the sea, line racing out, and he stands. Emily watches him work the fish in silence.

"Here, Emily," he says, "give me your hand." He takes her hand and places it on the rod. She can feel the tremor of something large

on the line. "Take the rod," Frank says, and the thing is alive in her hands before she can say no. "Let him take some line. Reel when he rests." He watches Emily approvingly for several minutes, then picks up his coffee again. "You've done this before."

The rain is steady now, coming in on their faces. Emily can feel it stinging her eyes on the wind, then running off her face. It drips from her hood, and she has a hard time seeing where the line enters the water. She can feel the life straining at the end of the line. She is aware of her muscles shaking. They have walked thirty yards down the beach where the shore becomes rockier. Emily gradually works the fish closer to shore. She can hear the rasp of her breathing. Suddenly the line goes limp. Emily nearly falls backwards. The rod feels light in her hands.

"I'm sorry, Frank."

Frank follows her gaze into an imagined point in the water, shakes his head. "Don't be silly. Hell, I've lost fish after I've landed them and took the hook out. We'd have to call it something other than fishing if we could hold onto everything we wanted."

Emily watches the rain blow in on the water and stares at the tide and at the spray of breakers on the rocks, squinting against the driving rain. She is fighting back tears but she does not know why. She wipes them away and hopes Frank does not notice.

Frank takes the rod from Emily and begins to reel in. They walk back to Frank's thermos and tackle box. He pours himself another cup of coffee. He offers Emily some, but she smiles, shakes her head no, and stands to leave.

Emily walks back the same way she has come, along the wharf and up the trail through the trees to her house. The rain is steady around her. It is dark among the tall trees.

Once in the house she slips out of her wet clothes in the mud room. There are two messages from Liz on her machine. No one else has called and somehow she knows no one will. She understands that a part of her life has ended and yet she was never notified.

Emily draws herself a bath, cranking open the window above the old claw-footed tub to let the sound and the mist of the rain in. She stands in the tub looking out the open window, which faces into the garden. She surveys the beds she has worked. All the beds have been turned and raked; two are already planted with early season vegetables. The raised beds Alex started two years ago line up in neat grids. She knows she has planted too close for his standards and that the rows will not be neat and she will fail to thin them as much as she should. There are new beds this year too, another raised bed that curves with the bend of the walk. And she has planted the perimeter of the yard

against the forest with flower beds which Alex would find frivolous. In the middle of the yard, over the winter she has begun digging up sod for an herb garden. She looks on the rain-softened shapes of the new gardens with a feeling of satisfaction.

The tub continues to fill. The cold air is brisk on her skin, raising goose-flesh though the warm bath water swirls at her ankles. She finds herself dreaming more gardens, new beds of flowers coursing through the yard like rivers.

When she turns away from the window, she sees herself in the mirror, which is beginning to fog. Her breasts are firm and full, fuller than normal she notes, and she recalls their tenderness a month ago when Alex was home and they made love. She recalls now that it was the soreness of her breasts, not the missed period or the tests that confirmed her pregnancy. She had said as much to Alex the next morning and she had seen a flash of panic in his eyes.

She stands looking at herself and remembers how she used to lock herself in her parents' bathroom, the one with the mirrored medicine cabinet that hinged so she could see from the sides. She would stand before the mirror shirtless and look for change. Once there was something to see, she remembers how she was afraid to touch them. She wondered if it were someone else she saw in the reflection. She touches them now, feeling the heavy firmness of the milk she has begun to produce. She cups her breasts in her hands.

It is raining harder outside. Wind gusts occasionally spray rain through the open window and onto her face and neck. The rain water drips down into her cupped hands. The mirror fogs from the outer edges. All she can see now is her flat stomach and the long, irregular scar which angles from two inches below her navel, across her hip bone, curling inward when it reaches her thigh, curving like a stream following the contours of her flesh. She touches the familiar ridges of the scar, and she is in Wyoming again, riding the horse her father bought for her 12th birthday. The horse is a big roan mare, so wide Emily's stirrups point straight out, but the mare is gentle and fast. She has named her Alice. It is spring and the world flirts with green. Sunshine warming winter skin. The smell of animals. Then there is the prairie dog hole, the falling, the fence post reaching out for her, the rip of clothes and skin on barbed wire, the sound of flesh and organs impacting wood. Then her father's face looming. His hands pressing on her stomach, sticky with blood. The sound of his voice, repeating, "You're all right. You're fine. You'll be all right," and the whimper of a horse in the background. And then, after a long, thick stretch of nothingness, the sounds and smells of the hospital, her father's big hands, steady, his arms, his walking. His voice. She re-

members the hospital corridors as an impressionist's blend of images, the only focus her father's steady arms holding her weight.

And of course it is her father's face that awaits her in the fog after surgery. Her father anchored by her hospital bed for two days. His big hand holding her small one. She remembers his face—he seemed so tired—hovering above her own. "You're all right," he repeats.

"Alice?" she asks. "Is she O.K.?"

"She's fine."

"You didn't have to . . . to—"

Her father looks at her quizzically a moment, then something on his face registers. "No. Oh, no, babe, she's fine. Embarrassed, I suppose. You'll have to make her know it wasn't her fault. Can you do that?"

"Of course. I love her, Daddy."

"As soon as you can, you'll have to get back on her to show you trust her. You can't show her you're scared."

The mirror is completely fogged now and the bathtub nearly full. She turns off the faucet and sinks into the warm water, feeling it rinse in and over her. Her breasts and stomach are all that rise from the water. The scar glistens with droplets, and she follows its course where it disappears.

She lowers herself deeper into the tub and lies looking up at the window high in the wall where the steam from the hot water mixes with the rain's mist and scent. She leans back in the water, floating on its buoyancy. Rain beats steadily. She closes her eyes and dreams she is a whale, navigating the deep, silent gardens where life blooms in sensuous coral curves, this oceanic world within her.

This Bread, 1943

This rye grew in our fields, next to balding pines,
where wild boars play at night.
This flour was made from our rye,

pure and light as snow in January,
when they came for you.
Zakwaska comes from my last bread;

this is the way my mother taught me.
You used to watch me bake, mix eggs, salt, flour, *zakwaska*,
hide the loaf under white linen.

This dough is good;
pebbles of air rise
and break.

At sixteen you came for me.
I didn't know you. My mother made me
wear my blue skirt, white blouse with blue roses, red *korale*.

My fingers toughen and rust. Kneading the dough.
Birch trees look at me through our window.
Flour spills on my hair, snow blisters.

I liked what I saw, Stasiu.
Your dark brow, wide forehead. You were
tall like an oak and shy like *osika*.

Sliding the bread into the stove's hot belly,
I think of blue and yellow flames underneath,
the burning in my throat, the tightness of my shoulder,

the shudder of my knee, the hardness of you and softness of me.
Ten years. Two daughters, two birches.
One shy, one daring.

Waiting for the hot breath to pierce the bread down to its core,
burn the surface with its crimson lips, to make it
rise. It comes, fresh and plump as an infant.

They came for you when you said they wouldn't.
Uniforms clean, ironed, chins shaved.
They looked for the servant you protected. *Kommen mit uns.*

Our neighbor lives.
Thirteen zloty bite
his hand.

Drying the bread on the white linen, I think of your arms,
your thighs, your knees, your elbows, your neck, your brows,
your curly hair, oh how curly, your feet, your forehead.

They said two kilos of bread per head.
It will be light, so light they won't even feel its weight.
I dried it on our coal stove for you.

Stutthoff.

Born on April
Twenty-Seven, Nineteen O Four.
Kozlowka.

Burned on November
Fifteen, Nineteen Forty-Three.
Stutthoff.

Stasiek.

With eyes like coals,
with brows like the inside of a cellar,
with the navel of a child.

At the interim camp, the prisoners were sometimes allowed to receive parcels that had to be hand-delivered. The weight of the package could not exceed two kilos.

Our Cherry Tree

Twisting reluctant branches of our
cherry tree, I welcome the cool touch
of juice-swollen, vibrant, sunset-
ridden fruit and the afternoon's sudden

shade over the barn's hump. Maybe
my arm, bare, speckled with red, belongs
to some ghost of a tree. Let's hang cherries
on ears, laugh to the ring of a bucket.

Quiet now, a dog barks far
away. Almost time for milking.
I've learned to be watchful, in spite
of myself. My two daughters can no

longer reach for the fruit, their eyes
glaze over today's offerings —
everything's full — the pots, the basket
and a tin bathtub, the one with creases

inside, like rivulets of water. This
morning I bathed my last born, watched
his slick body, tiny fingers curling up,
eyes half-closed like waning moons,

as if about to retreat to a previous world.
My daughter laughs, eats a cherry,
spits the stone at her husband. He growls,
half-angry. Then I can see my husband,

coming through the yard, the cloud just
crimson over his left ear. He says
he wants to help, gives random orders. I watch
his words' sharp edge and how his smile

vanishes and reappears. I already know
what will happen, as if it were a story
I've told and heard a hundred times. He snaps,
I answer him back, he curses me, then slaps

my face, shouts again, he holds me by the throat.
I've seen the horse, wild before
being led to the slaughter, I've tasted
the blood on my lip. I don't remember

anything else. Just cherries rolling toward me,
fat, crimson, mixed with sand
and grass. He grasped the bathtub with his full
hands and threw it all on the ground.

I will now go to the well, pull the bucket
full of water on the rusty chain. I long
for the musty smell of deep grounds, its
icy darkness on my tongue. I will cool

my face, throat, my arms. We will rinse
the fruit three times, before we can taste again
the sourness on our tongues. The tree shivers,
counts its losses; the sun licks its wounds.

Unfulfilled

In another life, my house is a slow boat,
darkening from the moisture, my dreams,
web of seaweed under my keel.

I don't wait for words in my other life—
I fight with the growing wing of a swan,
defending her young, her screech finds

the raw funnel of my throat;
I weave the long stem of a lily,
swollen over my thumb.

My lover is different. The same sort
as I, the darkness of being curled up
inside, under a tiny ripple.

He is the clear vessel of me.
I fill him up every day and he takes
to fill me back at night.

We sit on a deck, smoking fireflies in the dusk,
looking at the fading trunks of bare
trees, flooded up to the height of an axe.

In this life, I'm sipping my morning tea,
my pen is the nose of a fox, sniffing
through rough paper.

Entropy

Bill

Now the time has come, and I will know. One way or the other. Amy and I sit in silence, waiting, peering out the windshield of my car.

A brigade of heavy clouds in close-order drill threatened rain, but they have blown on to do battle elsewhere, leaving cold empty air in their wake. The night is crisp and clear with a bright wedge of moon already casting shadows through the power lines onto the street, and the sky is full of sparkling stars. Most of the cicadas have called it a day, but a few hardy ones rotate through a final series of harmonic choruses, before thinning out into duets and solos.

I am parked in the small paved area beside Amy's blue Honda, partly on the grass. A squirrel scampers up an oak in front of us. Twigs and acorns drop onto my car's roof, scraping like raccoon claws.

I stare at her car and remember seeing it in the parking lot at work, a neat little pile of clothes sitting impassively inside the hatchback window. A plaid skirt, shorts and other things for the beach. Intimate things. Catholic things. Philip Roth's shiksa outfits. The kind a girl would wear sitting on a couch with her legs tucked under her. All the mystery of my desire for her folded behind the glass.

At last we have spent a day together, an Indian summer afternoon lazing at the duck pond talking and reading, and then our first meal together, eating whole lobsters, our fingers slick with butter. Now I sit here in silence admiring her as she gazes out the window of my car towards the Honda.

It is wonderful taking in the vision of her, being with her, even if I still know so little about who she is, and every time I think I am starting to know, I find her seeming like she is trying not to be who I think she is, or maybe who I want her to be.

Amy

My apartment door closes behind Bill, and for a second or two I have an urge to reach for the knob. But when I do, it is only to latch the lock.

"Hmm," I say. "Well that's that."

I turn to face my apartment, my hands behind me, against the door.

"I like my little apartment," I say. "And it's all mine."

As I take stock of my world, I'm singing the first line of some popular song, over and over. "Love is like a mountain, my girl is like a fountain." I don't think that's really how it goes. So what? I'm not even sure what song it is. I hum some other melody, make up my own rhymes, whatever. It's more fun this way.

My apartment is the attic of an old farmhouse, and next to the bathroom door is a cast iron pipe, as fat around as a Quaker Oats box, that comes up through the floor from downstairs and disappears into the ceiling. It's alive with the plumbing rumblings of the family below me, but I don't mind. I've made it my friend.

I remember the Sunday afternoon I spent by myself painting the pipe. It was a spring afternoon, the forsythia and daffodils in bloom, but the maples and oaks still bare. The sky was a clear blue, and sunshine poured through the apartment's big windows, filling it with a cozy warmth.

I made a cup of tea and as I stirred in the milk, I contemplated the pipe, musing over its possibilities. I sat before it, cross-legged on the floor, flipping through my magazines, hunting for inspiration, finally fixing on a picture of some ancient urns and stylized paintings of leaves on vines flattened into two dimensions.

I remember painting the little green leaves that grow right out of the vine, without any stems, just like in the magazine picture. They twirl their way up and around the pipe, growing towards a sun on the ceiling. My pipe is the hub. The sun's rays are the spokes. I remember the peaceful solitude, watching the happy green leaves take form against the white background, a cup of tea on the floor beside me, a Bach concerto drifting from the radio in the corner, the warmth of the bright sunshine filling the apartment. I remember dripping green paint on my bare feet and stretching out my legs and wiggling my toes in the sunlight, watching the way the green spots moved. I remember getting hungry in the middle of the job and making a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and sitting on the floor slowly eating it, savoring every mouthful as I leaned back on one hand, regarding the half-painted pipe and admiring my work.

Now, I make myself a cup of tea and stir in a little milk. With a stack of magazines and mail beside me, I sit in front of the painted pipe in the same spot where I sat and ate the peanut butter and jelly sandwich the afternoon I painted the leaves.

Bill

So I look at Amy and at her little blue car beside us and try to figure it all out. I need to decide what I think she is really thinking and feeling and wanting and why she is being the way she is being and what I should do about it.

She wears a ring that looks like an engagement ring. That ring used to be such a mystery. How could I help but want to know who gave it to her and if he was the one the clothes in the back of her car were meant to be taken off for? Were they both statements to the world that she was taken—that I should forget about her? Or did the ring mean nothing and were the clothes nothing more than laundry from the cleaners? But then shouldn't they be in plastic? Or boxes? I analyzed and dissected and mulled over these questions as if they were worthy objects of Talmudic dissertations. They were all I had of her then—the ring and the car with the clothes—and I soaked them up for all they were worth.

And I had brief seconds in the hall. We would see each other, passing colleagues. Stop by my office and say hi, I would tell her.

Then one time she did. She stood in the doorway and said hi. I spun around in my chair and said hi back. I asked her how she was and what was new. Of course nothing was new, as we had never talked. It was awkward and awful and we had nothing to chat about and she left.

She stopped by again. It was always the same. She would stand there in the doorway of my office, and I would sit there in my big office chair, and it was as if we were waiting for something and then she was gone.

Now, as I gaze at the freckles on her shoulders, bare except for the thin red straps of her soft dress, and relive those bumbling courting sessions, I understand that I was already falling in love with her.

It's funny, you know, but all those times, all those horribly embarrassing minutes, I always felt sure that at least a little bit of it was mutual. How could I possibly think that, what with the ring and the clothes and all? How could I be so dumb, so naive? I was in love. And she smiled at me with her freckly pure face, her crystal blue eyes, her funny little nose, her harried hair, the little scar next to her right eye and her ring, a rock as big as the unpainted nail on her pinky. She was so young, sophisticated, pure and worldly, brisk and professional.

I'm humming and whistling that song again. You probably wouldn't recognize it. I'm not a great hummer or whistler, but I like the way it fills the apartment with cheerfulness. I flip through several magazines. I'm one of the world's greatest magazine flippers. I like glancing at the pictures, the ads, the headlines, the tips and secrets, the true confessions, the decorating ideas, the sales, anything. There's something about their other-worldliness, their fantasy, their best and worst of everything that makes them real, that makes me feel grounded and centered.

But tonight I can't focus. I close the last of the magazines and let it drop to the floor. The apartment feels different. I want it to feel like it did the afternoon I painted the pipe.

It must be Bill. He's gone now, but it feels different in here.

I inspect my face in the bathroom mirror. Most of my makeup has been rubbed off. My mascara is streaked like war paint. My skin is red and blotchy. All that kissing. The lighting in here is so bad, only a bare bulb with a chain hanging from the ceiling.

Why did Bill keep looking at me like that?

I walk back into the living room and take inventory. I'm quite happy here by myself. Why won't he just let me be here by myself?

I get undressed and stand in front of the full-length mirror in my bedroom.

He said I have a really nice body. You've got to love that.

I close the bathroom door and linger in the shower for a long time, letting the hot water run over me, until the whole bathroom fills up with steam. As I rub the soap over my body I think about Bill and the way he rubbed his hands over me and how it felt to have him on top of me and inside me and to kiss him and to feel our skin wet and touching all over. Already I trust him. Already I feel safe with him. The way he looks at me makes me feel pretty, special, loved. I turn off the shower and stand enshrouded in the steam, a towel wrapped around me.

But no. I'm doing very well by myself. Why won't he just leave me alone?

In my bedroom, I put on an old gray sweatshirt and sweatpants and a pair of wool socks. I pick up the sheets, blankets and pillows from the floor and throw them back onto the bed. I turn out the lights, get in bed, cover myself with the blankets, curl up on my side and try to go to sleep.

I flip over, pulling the blankets with me, like a papoose. I collect another pillow from the spot on the floor where he threw it and prop it under my head. I lie staring at the ceiling.

A car drives by up on the road, and its headlights move across the ceiling and then along the wall.

I can't sleep, so I go make myself another mug of hot tea and sit in the living room, holding the mug cupped between my palms.

I finish my tea and try again to sleep, but I'm tossing and turning like the night before exams when I studied too much. I'm sweating. I shove all the blankets onto the floor. I'm still roasting, so I get undressed. Now my feet are cold, so I put my socks back on. Okay, this should do it. I'll lie here naked—just the sheet and socks, flat on my back^{3/4}close my eyes and think of nothing.

Bill

"I could use a cigarette," she says. "Wait here."

She stands outside the car, smoking, deciding whether to let me in.

I am used to waiting. I waited so long for us to just somehow get to know each other and start talking more easily and be together. I waited for one thing to lead to another. But it didn't.

I didn't even know her name. After her visits to my office started, I still had no identity to label her with. It hardly mattered. Her smile and her eyes were plenty. I already thought that I would end up with her. There would be time for the details later.

So I waited for it to happen.

Then there was the company Christmas party at a country club where I felt like the Jew alarm went off as I walked through the door. I saw her over by the buffet table, and I wouldn't have cared if they had swastikas painted on the curtains. I strolled over as nonchalantly as if I were wearing snowshoes and picked up a carrot from the crudité's plate. I stood beside her and crunched. Harry Roland appeared and reloaded his dish with shrimp. His mouth dripping with cocktail sauce, he noticed me gaping at her. He swallowed and introduced us. We both mumbled that we already knew each other.

That's how I learned that her name was Amy O'Connel. Now that was progress.

I remember the months and months that followed, with me thinking we were thinking the same thing, that it was just a matter of time. She was always in a corner of my consciousness as I worked at my desk. When I walked down the hall to get coffee, I hoped that I would run into her. I was sure that if she happened to be in the

building she would make up an excuse to happen by my office and stick her head in and say hi and I'd stop what I was doing and try to talk to her and after a while we'd not just let time pass while I gawked at her and her eyes roamed vacantly over the walls, but we'd get to know each other and have things to talk about. I was in no particular hurry, because this was the kind of thing that it didn't matter how long it took or when it happened, because when it did, it would be for so long. So I never tried to rush it. In fact, I didn't do anything about it at all, except keep my ears open and when her name came up, listen to what people said.

Then I heard that she was engaged. I asked Harry. He laughed at me and went over and picked up the phone. When he hung up, he told me it wasn't true. She wasn't engaged.

Then I heard that she was sleeping with someone from the office. Again I went to Harry. Again it wasn't true.

But nothing happened. I hardly ever saw her. She rarely stuck her head in my office, and when she did, it was only for a minute. She wasn't thinking the same thing as me. In fact, she wasn't thinking anything about it at all. I meant nothing to her. All that time I was waiting for it to happen, she gave it no thought at all.

Finally, I talked to Harry about it one day. Harry was a lazy bear of a man who took things slow and always had time to stop and chat and laugh at any joke whether it was funny or not and share a story or two with no concern about their veracity. He had hired Amy, although she didn't work for him anymore. "I must have tripped over my dick the day I hired her," was the way he put it, and then laughing that big belly laugh of his, he reached his hand out to slap me on the back.

"Hey, why don't you ask her out?" he said to me.

Now there's an idea, I thought to myself after Harry left. Instead of just waiting, why don't I pick up the phone and move things along a bit?

Amy

Every time I move, I'm aware of the sheet against my skin. It makes me think about Bill and about him kissing me and feeling his skin against mine. Stop it, I tell myself. Stop thinking about him. Go to sleep. Think of nothing.

But instead of nothing, I'm thinking about Chris Haycock.

Stop it, I tell myself. Go to sleep.

God it's hot. I'm sweating. I pull the sheet down. The edge rubs against my nipples. My skin tingles.

My skin tingles when Bill touches me. When he kisses my face and licks my neck and then down onto my chest.

But as I picture him, I realize it's not him. It's Chris. I can see his face. I can feel his long hair on my shoulders. Chris's laugh taunts me. His hair and skin always smell of drugs, as do mine after we have been together.

Bill

I realized Harry was right. I would take action. I remember the day in my office, the door closed and locked. I had had a lock installed just for the occasion, telling some lie about office security and trade secrets. It was the only way to keep from being interrupted, from having someone knock lightly a few times, already opening the door, and sticking his head in, asking whatever he wanted to ask, mechanically apologizing for the intrusion but explaining how important it was.

I picked up the phone and checked the directory again to make sure that the four-digit extension I had memorized was still correct and dialed it and was about to hang up when a secretary answered. I quickly hung up without saying anything, feeling the sweat all over my body, aware of how ridiculously nervous I was, cold and my heart racing. I put the phone down and scolded myself.

I remember waiting the mandatory five minutes before I called again, so in case the same person answered, she wouldn't know that I was the one who had just called before and hung up. I held the phone again, looking at my watch to make sure the full five minutes had passed and then waited another thirty seconds so it wouldn't be exactly five minutes, knowing how ridiculous that was. Then I practiced making my voice talk, making sure I could still say my name and ask for her and sound very calm and normal and businesslike and not draw any more attention than I was sure it already would. A secretary answered on the first ring and told me Amy wasn't available and I left a message and put down the receiver with relief and wondered if she would call me back.

Amy

All the lights are out in the big house next door. Downstairs is quiet. Everyone but me is asleep. The big oak tree branches wave slowly in the moonlight.

I shut my eyes and try to empty my brain. It doesn't seem like that should be such a challenge.

But again, it is Chris Haycock that I see. We are in a phone booth on campus, in the basement of a building, where there is no one around. Chris asks me to do something for him and I want to make him happy. I am on my knees unbuckling his pants and pulling them down and taking him into my mouth.

My eyes are closed and I don't see the security guard. Chris doesn't tell me. I am on my knees, wiping my mouth, asking him if it was good, if it was okay. Then I see the guard standing there with one hand on his billy club, the other giving us the thumbs up, a sneering smile on his face. Chris laughs and returns the thumbs up.

Bill

Amy opens the car door and sticks her head in.

"Can we go inside?" she says.

"Sure," I say, but don't move.

"What are you thinking about so hard?" she asks.

"Oh nothing."

"It seems like an awful lot of nothing."

"About you. About trying to figure out about you."

"Hmm."

I get out of the car and follow her to the door. She hunts around in her purse and then shakes it to listen for the telltale jingle of her keys. I hold the screen door open and watch her face. Her mouth changes as she becomes frustrated by the contents of the purse, first just slightly open as she starts the hunt, then gradually tightening, then screwing up a little on one side as she shakes the purse and then smiling as she finds the keys. I want to tell her about that and kiss her, but I just hold the screen door open and then trail in behind her. She closes the door behind us, and I follow her up the steps to her apartment.

Amy

I throw the top sheet off altogether. My back is clinging to the sheet underneath.

I remember the way Bill's body stuck to mine, skin on skin, hands, mouths, legs, all locked together. I feel safe with Bill. Safe and secure. I remember his eyes ogling me.

But again, as soon as I close my eyes, Bill is gone. I'm in my old apartment, the one where Chris and I lived together. I'm sitting on the edge of my bed, our bed. My arms are crossed. I'm huddled for-

ward towards my knees, rocking slowly. Chris is standing there, his friend Keith beside him, both naked, waiting for me.

Bill

She moves around the living room turning on lights. I am standing inside the door, which is still a little ajar. She starts puttering around the apartment, straightening lampshades and picking things up and putting them down somewhere else. She sets down a stack of magazines and comes to me. We search each other's eyes as though there were some great truth to be learned, as if we could know what it would be like to make love without ever having to touch. But I learn nothing.

Her lips move as if she is starting to say something. I offer her a short soft kiss and then move my head away. Her face hasn't changed. I kiss her again, the same way, and again she doesn't respond. I kiss her a third time, but leave my lips on hers, not pressing against them and not trying to open hers, not even moving, just touching my lips to hers, softly.

I take her hands into mine and this time I feel her lips respond, touching mine as softly as mine touched hers, opening a tiny bit, more a starting to open than an actual movement, but enough to send a feeling of acceptance, and I sense her fingers tighten. As I open my eyes, she is smiling at me, her cheeks pushed up and I find myself studying the little scar by her right eye. She leads me to her bedroom.

When we kiss beside her bed, she rises up onto her toes, reaching her little fingers behind my neck. I feel them burrow under my collar. We undress each other slowly, ceremoniously, openly partaking of each other, each inch of skin unveiled and enshrined.

Amy

Chris mocks me and tells me I already agreed to it. He tells me to get undressed. It will be great, he says. It will feel good, twice as good. You have to try everything at least once, he says. My fingers are on the bottom of my sweater. They are there to pull it up, over my head. I want to do what he tells me. I want so badly to please him.

Chris and Keith stand there naked, expectantly, waiting for my fingers to pull the sweater up over my head. But my hands won't do it. They can't. Chris laughs at me. Then he goads me and yells at me and swears at me and then they stomp out the door and I sit on the bed crying.

I go turn down the heat. I open a window. I drink some water. I count backwards from a hundred.

The sheets are wet. They smell of sex. Sex with Bill. Why am I thinking of Chris? This has nothing to do with him. What is wrong with me? Bill would never be that way. I trust him. No I don't. What the hell? Who cares? Go to sleep. Worry about it tomorrow.

I close my eyes. Think of nothing. Good, good, that's it. Everything black, empty, imageless. Nothing.

Bill

Her bed is cluttered with clothes, like the back of her car in the parking lot. Neatly folded plaids, so proper and innocent. Knee socks. Penny loafers. A pink knit shirt with an alligator. She releases my hands and sweeps everything onto the floor. She strips the bed open to the bottom sheet. She kisses me and pulls me down onto her.

"You're very pretty," I say.

"Hmm," she says.

"And you have a really nice body."

"You can't even see it."

"I can feel it. And I could see it before."

"Hmm."

"You have a lot of spots."

"Spots?"

"Spots."

"You mean freckles."

"Spots."

"A lot?"

"Yes, a lot."

"How many?"

"I don't know. Maybe I'd better count them."

My mouth nibbles her shoulders, touching each freckle with my upper lip, working my way along her left shoulder to her neck, around her ear, and then very softly down her chest.

We clutch each other as if we thought a wind would blow us apart. The only sound is our breathing and licking. She doesn't moan.

Her head is past the edge of the bed, her arms backwards so her hands are almost to the floor. I lick her neck. It is arched, her Adam's apple extended like a mountain peak. I cup her head with my hand.

I want to mark this moment, photograph it and keep it, store it in memory forever. All of it. The embroidered lace trim of the pillow on the floor near her hands and how her little fingers clench beside it. I will remember the row of old windows beside the bed, the open cur-

tains, their lace kin to the pillow's, the oak outside, our cars together under it and the lights on in the house beyond the yard.

It is always different the first time with someone new. But this is more different. The difference here is qualitative, not just quantitative. The difference here is of type, category, experience, majesty, presence.

I wish I could somehow tell her.

I wish I could know what she is thinking.

I wish that eyes and skin could truly talk.

Amy

Chris and Keith are standing there, staring at me. There is a naked woman next to me. I raise my arms when Chris tells me to, and he pulls my sweater over my head. I turn around when he tells me to, and he unsnaps my bra. He takes off my shoes and socks. I let him. I lie back when he tells me to, and he shimmies off my jeans and my panties. The naked woman leans on one elbow and smiles at me. Chris and Keith clap and cheer.

The woman kisses me on my shoulder. She starts licking me. She touches my breast and kisses me on the cheek. I am lying flat on my back, motionless, not resisting. The woman kneels over me and kisses me on my mouth. I pull away, curl myself into a ball and cry. The woman touches my shoulder gently, but I just cry harder.

I remember Chris's taunting laugh. I remember lying there naked on the bed by myself, crying after the three of them left.

I remember lying there, just as I am lying here now.

But that was Chris, and this is Bill. That was then, and this is now.

If only I could sleep. I feel the cold air streaming in the open window. I reach to the floor, grab the sheet and cover myself with it, pull it up to my neck, hold it firmly under my chin.

Bill

I am smiling. I saturate my senses with her bedroom—bottles and a hairbrush on the dresser, a toy bunny in the corner watching us, a flowery quilt on a straight-backed chair. The freckles on her chest, a thin fold in her skin.

We lie together until it becomes uncomfortable and I pry myself loose from her. We are too intertwined to come apart easily. Sweat seals our skins.

My head is on the pillow, my arm draped across her chest. I let my eyes close. I feel her beside me. I feel her neck against my lips as I breathe. I feel her hair on my face. It should tickle, but it doesn't. I smell baby powder on her skin. Everything is soft, wet, peaceful, sleepy. Time drifts.

"What are you doing?" she says. There is an urgency in her voice.

"Huh?" I mumble.

"Don't go to sleep," she says.

"What?"

"Don't go to sleep."

"I'm not."

"Yes you are. Don't go to sleep."

"Why not?"

"Because you have to go."

"What?"

"You have to go."

Then we are sitting side by side and her face has changed. She is not smiling, and there is no sparkle left in her eyes.

She gets up from the bed and puts on a long heavy bathrobe.

"I think you should go," she says, her hands buried in the pockets of the robe.

"You're not serious?" I say.

"I am," she says, pulling her hands out of her pockets and crossing her arms. She looks distracted and removed.

"You really want me to leave? Now?"

"Yes."

I go stand beside her. I'm naked. She's hidden in the bathrobe. I kiss her on the cheek. I kiss her on the lips. She turns her head and strides away.

"I don't think this is a very fun fight," I say.

"I'm sorry," she says.

"Sure."

"I am. I told you before that this wasn't going to work. Now you see."

"It seemed to work pretty well to me."

"It's just not going to work. I think I'd like to be alone now."

Amy

I am in bed with Chris Haycock. My bed. Our bed, in our apartment. It used to be my apartment, just me and my roommate Cheryl. Now it's our apartment. We lie together in the aftermath of sex, drifting off. I fall asleep. I always fall asleep after sex.

He fucked me until I came and came, until my body was drained, until I was worn out. He knew how. He knew how to play my body like a concert violin. That's what he would say. Like a concert violin. And then I slept. I slept.

I awake, and I am alone. I yawn and stretch like a cat. I still feel wonderful. I want to tell him how wonderful he makes me feel. Freshly fucked and wonderful. I stroll down the hall. On my way to the kitchen, I see that Cheryl's door is closed. That's strange in the middle of the afternoon. I hear his taunting laugh. I open the door. Chris and Cheryl are in bed together, naked.

Bill

I dress quickly, in silence, watching her. She is gazing out the window.

She follows me to the door of the apartment. I turn and face her. She's staring at her feet. I raise her chin and kiss her. She opens her mouth, but there is no passion, only anatomy. I hug her. She lets me, but her arms are at her sides. I can't think of anything worth saying. I open the door, pause a second, still can't think of anything, and go.

Amy

I stand in disbelief, trying to suck in air, unable to breathe. And he says, hey babe what's the matter, what's the big deal, you were asleep anyway, what difference does it make, and hey as long as you're here, why don't you join in the fun. Yeah that would be really great, first one, then the other, then both. That would be really great. I don't think I've ever done that before. How about you Cheryl? Yeah babe see that. Cheryl thinks it would be a great idea too. She'd love it too. That would be the best. Now come on why don't you just hop right in here.

Back in my room, I stare at my bed. My bed where I slept just minutes ago, warm and comfortable and peaceful. Where I fell asleep in the arms of the man I love. Loved. The man I trusted. The man I tried so hard to please. The man for whom I changed my whole life, trying to fit the image I thought he wanted me to be.

He walks into my room. He stands there cajoling me in a quiet voice. Then he pleads with me in a way I've never heard before. I stare at his dick while he talks. I want to scream at him, but I can't. He comes to me and tries to touch me. I push him away, out of the room, slam the door shut and lock it.

I throw a suitcase onto the bed. I stuff some things into it, crushing everything. I turn around and take a last look at the room.

Next to the bed is an aquarium. It is Chris's most prized possession. I thought I was, but now I see that it is. He is very meticulous about caring for the fish and cleaning the tank. He likes to sit in bed and watch the fish and talk to them, calling each by name.

I remember staring at the bed. I remember understanding at last that I was nothing more than one of his toys that he played with when it amused him.

I remember thinking that the aquarium was the only thing that Chris really loved. I remember walking to the aquarium, picking it up, turning it upside down and dumping the contents on the bed. I remember knowing that all the fish would be dead by the time Chris got out of Cheryl's bed.

I try to sleep, but can't. I remember the derision in Chris's eyes and his taunting laugh. I lie drenched in my own sweat, clenching the sheet to my chin, and I cry. I cry the tears of that night of betrayal.

I can still feel Bill inside me.

Why does he keep looking at me that way? Why can't he leave me alone?

I wish I could sleep.

Fiddler's Green

By the time my twelve years of violin studies came to an end, the room I'd taken my lessons in had become a permanent space in my mind, a room I can now go to in my imagination anytime, at will. Inside, a short mannish woman sits at a cherry desk, smoking Marlboros while waiting for me. My mother and I drive up to the house, a small Cape Cod style much like the others on the block. A sign on a picket out front reads "The Music Workshop."

Your standard five-year-old aspirant violinist sports his father's bowtie and flees from the other boys, who throw stones. I'm a rock & roll child, only I don't know it yet. "Yellow Submarine" is my favorite song. Jimi Hendrix is out there cauterizing that beautiful wound we call music by "sacrificing" his guitar to the flames, but I've never heard of him. I know next to nothing about classical music. My mom listens to opera at astral volumes on Saturday afternoons. She might as well be blasting sand in my ears. But she's why I'm here. She's noticed I have a good sense of rhythm and that I can whistle and sing on key.

Miss Gross snubs out her cigarette, hikes up her trousers, and graciously ushers my mom and me in. I scrunch up my nose at the smell in her house, a blend of smoke, pets, and carpet cleaner, but I'm only pretending to be bothered. I'm actually on a big adventure. The studio's furnished with the desk, some old wooden chairs, and an upright piano. A violin, viola, cello, mandolin, and classical guitar complete the decor. On learning that she can play all of these, I understand for the first time that musicians sometimes play more than one instrument. A sepia photograph catches my eye—a picture of my teacher in her youth, I'm told. Traces of the owliness that characterize her now, at fifty-five, come through in the carefully framed portrait. Her command of the violin she cradles in her graceful arm gives her expression its silvery glow, but she's demure in her mastery.

While Mom and Miss Gross talk over the details of my lessons, I slip away toward the source of the piano music I heard on the way in. Standing before a bank of French doors, just off the vestibule, I peer in at an old professorial Fräulein towering over a uniformed Girl Scout on a wooden bench. Arpeggios canter across my eardrums, the same kind of music I seemed to hear every time I entered the house. Now the tall German lady sits down at the keyboard. Her music sounds alive and melodic, kind of like the boring stuff my mom plays on the

car radio; but live, it captivates me. I press my brow against the glass like a ghost child, fascinated. When she notices, I run.

I've never heard of the Third Reich or "political asylum," anymore than I've heard of a divertimento. War and unrest seem to have left our little pocket of affluence—a suburb thirty miles west of Philadelphia—untouched. I ask my new teacher "Who is that lady?" "Binz?" she says—the single syllable is the usual way she names her pianist friend. "That's Miss Binz, our piano teacher." Her eyes look satisfied. "I'm lucky to have her."

"She sounds wonderful," says Mom. Though anxious to start my lesson, I tune in to the adult conversation enough to answer my curiosity about the pianist. I hear that the woman gave concerts throughout Germany in the thirties, that her friends were mostly artists, actors, and fellow musicians. Many were Jews—"What's a Jew?"—some of whom she helped escape the country. In due course, she, too, had to flee, a champion of courage, a woman who served her conscience. I'm wholly at sea by now. To my final question, "What would have happened if she stayed?" Miss Gross replies, "I don't like to think about it. I'm just thankful she's here."

The Music Workshop opened its doors. The tall pianist's English poured thick, but her music said enough, and Miss Gross gave the pianist a place to live and teach and play duets with a musical peer. The women also had a common heritage. Miss Gross had German roots. She spoke the language and had studied abroad at a conservatory in Berlin, where she first met Binz.

Both ladies were extremely formal. In all the years my parents knew the stewards of The Music Workshop—one year they even came to our house for Christmas dinner—the ladies invariably addressed them as Mr. and Mrs. Huhn, which they pronounced "Hooohn," recalling the name's German origin, not "hewn"—the way we Americans say it.

I never suspected that anything more complex fostered their living arrangement, that it was the confection of lovers, but I was naïve. Miss Gross had devoted herself to music, of all the arts the one most evocative of feelings and passions. She had as great a capacity for love as anyone. She couldn't have been as unaffectionate, or as detached from Eros, as she seemed.

By seven I played competently enough to annoy her. I was closing in on how to properly execute a Bach minuet. She'd toss her head aside and glare out the window, letting me blunder on for ten more seconds, then she'd blurt out, "Aw, you sound like a sick cow!" She

would then backtrack and adopt a more compassionate tack. I sensed that she wanted me to like her.

Dad generally let Mom handle this business of music lessons. Since few errands could be completed in my forty-five-minute time-slot—and since Miss Gross didn't smoke during lessons—Mom's presence served as a shield from my teacher's flashes of irritability. But the most difficult test of patience came with the post-lesson chat between them. They conversed about Stephan Grapelli, Miss Binz's bad hip, baroque composers, recent concerts, or me. Miss Gross reminisced about her conservatory years, told how she and Binz faithfully corresponded for years before the pianist finally emigrated.

Mom talked about my grandmother, a Texas belle who was an accomplished pianist by the time the First World War broke out. Like Ms. Binz, she too could have had a career as a concert pianist. Instead she became "a musical mother."

I'm tugging at my mom's coat by now.

"Not an unlucky outcome," said Miss Gross, patting my head. "Now we have this little soldier."

Whenever they talked about my grandmother, I came away with an unsettling feeling that I owed it to her to be musical. Yet reminders that "music runs in the family" also boosted my morale.

"Did I have a good lesson today?"

Miss Gross would never say "yes" outright. "You need to listen to yourself more," she'd say. "And when you get it right, memorize that feeling. Every musical phrase has a feeling to it. Yes, you had a good lesson."

"But you said I sounded like 'a man down a well.'"—her favorite admonishment. Like this man I was endlessly compared to, I felt lonely in my playing. I hated having to practice everyday. If I popped a string—or once when I accidentally broke my bow by sitting on it—my regret flipped into relief the moment it dawned that I had an excuse to skip a day. I was often tempted to break a string on purpose just to get out of practicing, but I wasn't hell-bent enough. My instrument was imperiled only as much as any fragile object would be in the hands of any accident-prone child.

My first violin was a factory-made quarter-size—little more than a toy. While I practiced my scales, in another room the flow of images from the first televised war flickered by. Like my music lessons, the war seemed to have no real bearing on my happiness, except to slightly detract from it; and in comparison, the lessons constituted the bigger drag. By the time the US withdrew from Vietnam, I had upgraded to a three-quarter-size fiddle, but I hadn't yet developed much of a ca-

capacity to feel distressed about needless killing. I myself was guilty of numerous atrocities.

After discovering a colony of anthills along our front garden path, for example, I stirred them with a twig and dripped wax on the inhabitants as they tried to flee. I brought a big brass magnifying glass to school and made scads of friends at recess by igniting leaves. Then we moved on to living targets—potato bugs, worms, and—my favorites—ants. We liked watching the legs curl and wither in the first flash of heat; then we'd hit them again till their thoraxes sizzled and they became lumps of charcoal.

To my thinking, though, the only truly sadistic act was carried out by my teacher, Mrs. Hartman, when she confiscated my magnifying glass. The fourth grader felt as if she'd blinded his third eye. Her action seemed to me to be wholly unjustified in the same way that my music lessons seemed like a waste of time. I accepted the loss just as I accepted that I had to practice and take my lessons and keep sawing away at my exercises till I got them down. It was my teachers and parents who had a vision of what I could become. I was working away at it blindly.

My epiphany came in the form of a large Chilean kid whose family had recently escaped Pinochet's dictatorship, just after the General's sanguinary rise to power in 1974. By now I had a full-size violin. The kid's face materialized like a dusky moon in my Beginning Spanish class, taught by old Mrs. Higuera, our middle school's Spanish teacher. Administration had given her the task of teaching him English. Merv spent his entire schoolday in her classroom. Having never seen another like him in these parts, we might have bound him to an altar over a nice dry bundle of sticks, but his foreignness intrigued us.

Mrs. Higuera had had her own clash with a dictator, the result being that her fingers had all been chopped off halfway down, on both hands. Rumor attributed her amputations to Hitler's amigo, Francisco Franco. She never smiled, but her disfigurement inspired unending antics on the part of her students, slapstick routines she patiently thwarted—but seemed to understand as inevitable. We turned our textbook pages with bent fingers, mimicking her stumps. We held the chalk in these same mock stumps if "Mrs. Hag" made us write on the blackboard. The story circulated that she'd been tortured in order to extract intelligence from her late husband, a spy for the Spanish Republicans.

Merv refused to participate in our speculations about Mrs. Higuera's past or in our cruel antics, though from time to time we tugged his smile our way. His loyalty to his teacher couldn't be cracked.

At lunch if he heard someone vilify her, he'd say in a low tone, "Oh, no, she is very nice lady." And come to think of it, she did smile once—the day Merv stood in front of the class and demonstrated how to play a baby Venezuelan guitar called a cuatro.

I didn't know much Spanish, but unlike most of my classmates I knew music, the other language he'd brought from Chile. After school, in the basement of his row house, I learned Latin American folk melodies. He played along with me on his handcrafted instrument. I played Vivaldi and Bach at his request; and when Merv asked me about Miss Gross, I boasted of her talent and listed all the instruments she could play, while he nodded in reverence.

I also told him about the web of blood vessels surfacing on her nose and the fifth of Smirnoff that had become a fixture on her dining-room table. I was worried about Miss Gross and her partner. Miss Binz's arthritis of the hip had grown steadily worse. She couldn't walk without a walker anymore. The pain had become so persistent, so tormenting, that she could hardly concentrate on the piano. What little playing she could do she reserved for her lessons, whose frequency had had to be curtailed.

The evening duets that had been Miss Gross's staple pleasure had fallen off entirely, leaving her no one with whom she could share her musical gifts. The hours that her teaching ate up left her no time to do justice to her real talent, a notion I'd never considered until she complained of having fallen out of practice. Her own health problems—her difficulty breathing and her weak heart—weighed on her, and her growing frustration didn't soften her approach to teaching.

Merv said, "That very saddens me to hear about"—with unfaked emotion. Not only did he understand her pain more than I, but he also sympathized with my distress at having to deal with her. In his eyes Miss Gross wasn't a gnomish spinster—as my other friends would have had it—but a salt-of-the-earth heroine. His respect for her, from afar, got me thinking that maybe my violin lessons didn't consign me to a rarefied nerddom after all, but, rather, to a calling or, rather still, a call-to-arms. For once I felt lucky to take lessons. I even began to work at them, albeit sporadically.

Since Miss Gross had no children, imagine what it must have meant to her for me to shine, her student of eight years now. And imagine the hurt she felt when I didn't have a good lesson, when I let her down, as I often did. For her livelihood she relied solely on her pupils, yet she'd turn from me in a fury, mid-étude, and explode—"You're wasting your money, Mrs. Huhn!"—to a woman of oceanic patience, herself an able pianist. Neither woman doubted my innate ability.

Merv grew taller than his father and more courteous than his teachers. Thanks to his size, swarthy features, and facial hair, he could illegally buy beer as early as tenth grade. The expression "Merv gets served" lingered on the lips of a third of the student body. The same year Miss Binz's Steinway lay fallow for the first time, her painful hip making it impossible for her to play the piano at all, Merv's quarto went under his bed in favor of an acoustic guitar, and he began toting around a slip of paper in his wallet that read "Practice Makes Perfect." By cleaning houses after school, he eventually was able to purchase his dream guitar—a white Fender Stratocaster—the same model his hero, Jimi Hendrix, had once been accustomed to demolishing.

With money I'd earned from mowing lawns, I equipped my violin with a pick-up, fashioning it into an electric instrument. Merv and I began playing rock and electric blues together. A group of us—that called itself a band, "The Wastelanders"—commandeered Merv's basement for jam sessions whenever possible, and my first delvings into Old Time fiddle cut into my practice time. But I still pursued my classical training.

Meanwhile, Miss Binz was gearing up for hip-replacement surgery. Miss Gross kept giving lessons right up to the week before the procedure, as her need for income had become critical. She too had recently taken a step toward improving her health. The death of the father of her one viola student from lung cancer had prompted her to swear off cigarettes. Her attitude toward Binz's operation—"I think she'll have an easier time of it"—was forward-looking. Although The Music Workshop sign on the picket out front had fallen over—I had to prop it back up—the ladies seemed to be turning a corner together. The Saturday before the operation I wished Miss Binz luck.

My teacher was waiting for her friend to recover. She had no one to talk to at night after all of her pupils had gone home. She wasn't a TV watcher. Without cigarettes, all she had to fall back on was her fifth of gin. She drank alone. The gloom of her house must have been deepened by the fact that, during the day, no one ever went with her to the hospital, and deepened further when Miss Binz's hip became infected.

When the pain in her hip hit levels beyond the reach of morphine, Miss Gross grew more morose than I would have thought possible for such a feisty lady. Yet her financial needs forced her to keep up with her lessons, even when it became plain that the antibiotics weren't clearing up the infection, even when the pianist's agony took away her will to eat.

I was lying in bed with a summer flu, listening to our neighbor's lawnmower grinding away in the distance. He'd been at it for hours. I was scheming on how I could get him and all our other neighbors to let me cut their lawns. I'd just come up with the idea of having a flyer printed up on green paper when my sister came in with the news.

She might as well have told me Miss Gross died. My emotions whirled almost entirely around my teacher. The pianist's death had occurred long before the fact, long before my neighbor's mower blade started spinning that morning and didn't cease its work even after Miss Binz's heart did.

"I already knew." I'd pronounced her dead from the day I heard she'd stopped eating. The event itself was a kind of chill formality. "That's old news."

For the first time since I'd known her, Miss Gross cancelled her lessons—for two weeks. When standing to greet me on the morning of the third, she was like a fallen tree lugging itself back up. Unfortunately my mother had only briefly stopped in, before going off to the store, so I had to face Miss Gross alone. Miss Binz's music had died months before the pianist, but now the silence filled the house like oblivion. Before opening my music book, I gropingly asked, "Have you been getting along okay?" The girl in the aging photograph, buried alive under grief and folds of dry skin, said, "I'm well enough during the day. . . . It's the nights that get you." I said that I knew, but of course I couldn't know. My lesson plodded forward like a brief prison sentence.

The entire time I'd known Miss Binz, the past she'd escaped had followed her like a ghost that had never lived. That past was now like the ghost of a ghost. Once I'd had a nightmare in which a cheerful coven of Nazi doctors ordered Miss Binz—the "Jew-lover"—locked up as "mentally deficient"—with all her talent. I'm not sure if I was present in the room as a Gestapo agent, a fellow victim—awaiting interrogation—or both. Another scene in the nightmare involved an SS guard trying to get a little girl to play a game called "King of the Pit," which required her to stand on the edge of an as-yet-empty mass grave. I remember being the next in line and being glad that the girl didn't "want to play." Miss Gross didn't want to play, either, but when I took my leave after my lesson, I felt as if I were saying good-bye to the next in line.

The nightmare scene that fits in neatly as the next in this sequence didn't occur in my imagination, but in front of my eyes, with Merv in the role of the victim. The scene took place on a Wednesday, which in our high school was always a half day. Merv and the

other members of our rock band had gathered in Merv's basement shortly after noon to play music. By four o'clock beer cans, butts, spittoons, a bong, and fast-food cartons littered the coffee table, floor, washing machine, and concrete steps leading up to the "storm doors." The Wastelanders had finished jamming. Over the snarls of The Sex Pistols on the stereo, Earl, our bass player, thought he heard a car. Merv ordered me to "kill the tunes." We listened again. A car door slammed. With nervous giddiness, we emptied ashtrays, hid the bong, and gathered up cans. Merv, smiling, shoved us out the storm doors just as we heard the kitchen door open and his old man's boots clunking above our heads.

Outside, the side windows—in wells at our feet—gave us a clear view of the man's bellied approach. The father had Merv's same round face, but a hardened care-torn version. Merv remained calmly seated in an arm chair, as if absorbed in tuning his Stratocaster. The father leaned over him, shouting "impudent" and raging at the evidence of our delinquency. Merv swung his guitar aside, stood, and attempted to talk, but the old Chilean shoved him back down. Merv resumed tuning. The father grabbed the guitar neck, and in the fleeting tug-of-war Merv lost his hold on the instrument. The father slammed it to the floor without inflicting any visible damage, but the next series of slams broke open the body; pieces split off; white chips spun though the air. Down, and down again, and only a giant shard dangled from the strings. After he shook this loose, only the snapped-off neck remained. In the grip of his hairy hand, it became a club.

For us outside, with all the toxins in our bloodstreams, reality had taken on a daymarish quality; the air felt thick, the spring sunlight cool, as if we'd escaped into a white night. It was hard to believe that here we were watching this man beat our friend with the neck of his shattered guitar.

Merv avoided all of us at school the next day. He seemed to have become a loner overnight. Over time, his only musical outlet became singing out loud, everywhere—in the hall, in the middle of class. The other kids would look at him funny and not want to "be seen" with him. He seemed to be trying to do right by his father and thereby strangle his love of rock music.

What had been your standard crushes on select girls over-ripened into full-blown obsessions. His most infamous blunderbuss involved interrupting a trigonometry class to "have a word" with a girl—the most unattainable bombshell in four states. The big-headed, unshaven Chilean kid had never spoken to her before, but while the whole class looked on in amazement, he invited her "to take a drive over

lunch." From that day, the catchphrase "Merv gets served" was replaced with "Merv the Perv."

Nature rights itself. When Australian pianist Paul Wittgenstein lost his right arm in the First World War, he commissioned so much piano music for the left hand alone, from the composers of his day—the likes of Ravel and Prokofiev—that a whole new branch of musical repertory sprang forth, as if to replace the arm. Merv dropped out of school and was checked into a sanitarium. The empty place he left in our lives filled in as well, but I only saw him once more after he dropped out.

He drove by my house with a Frisbee the summer after his collapse. He was glassy-eyed. His English had regressed—"You must feel very prideful about your college future"—but since we wouldn't be talking much, just tossing the disc, I didn't see the harm in accompanying him to a local park.

He drove fine, if slow. We slid past Watch Children signs and split-level homes dug in atop steep lawns, the tall shadows of children unreeling across them. Around a bend, where the land flattened out, a box kite hung in a fierce blue sky above a stand of pines in a field. I saw a young collie about half a mile up, running toward the road. We had endless time, but I alerted Merv.

He seemed to make a point of not responding. We still had time, but less and less and less. I was shouting, "Merv! The dog! The dog!" Still he maintained his speed. A smile broke on his lips. The collie's fragile shoulder rose to meet our bumper. At impact her muzzle was deflected upward. I saw her eyes asking, *Why do July days go black?* The sound: a cardboard box filled with an assortment of boulders and sticks folding under the wheels and scraping the undercarriage.

"You sick fuck!" I screamed. "Why the fuck did you do that?" I half turned around to look, but it was pointless, so I gazed straight ahead into the sunlit abyss. Merv was laughing, and it wasn't even black laughter. He sped up, still laughing, his eyes laughing, blinking maniacally and laughing, not hearing me yelling at him to stop the fucking car.

It was back there in the road. No respectable neighborhood would ignore such carnage. The residents would bury the proof that the destroyer can be anyone, even an old friend whose heart seemed good. I wanted to get rid of the golden running creature, yank her out of time before she emerged from the high grass, before Merv got to her. And I wanted to yank the child away, at the other end of the kite string, so she'd never have to see the horror.

Merv finally braked midway across a restored covered bridge dating back to Revolutionary times. We had made it to the park—to Valley Forge National Park—a place that had once been Merv's and my and all our friends' favorite hangout.

Now I glared at Merv, hating him, as if he embodied all humanity. I wanted especially to get rid of him, so that there'd be no one left to kill. He watched me open my door, then stayed my arm and said, "Remember? Wait." Reluctantly I humored him while he unfolded from his wallet a yellowing square of paper that he waved at me like a peace banner. "Practice Makes Perfect"—were the last words I ever heard him say. I swung the door closed, slid down the bank, and started walking along the stream that ran under the bridge. Merv eventually called after me, but by then I was far away, and a wealth of greenery hid him from view, and I could barely hear him over the sound of the stream.

Nature rights itself. The living get torn up in the process. I keep forgetting that. I keep expecting things to return to equilibrium, to be again as they were. When a thousand phantom limbs hang from my soul, and not one's been regenerated, I'll still be feeling for signs that the replacements are coming in.

Miss Gross never quite recovered from Binz's death. Those nights just carried her off. Meantime, here I was waiting for her to get better. I tried not to notice the wall of animal stench I hit, as strong as Clorox fumes, when stepping inside the vestibule. I dismissed her quirky suspicion that her neighbors had poisoned her thirteen-year-old dachshund, Hans. But after Hans died, she became both sadder and scarier. All her neighbors—not just "the ones who killed Hans"—stopped talking to her. Pupils quit her. If she hadn't had so few left as it was, I too would have found another teacher. I had my learner's permit now and could do what I wanted. But I felt sorry for her. Besides, Mom let me practice my driving to and from The Music Workshop.

Then came that Saturday when I opened my case and found the top of my violin all caved in, a circumstance that shouldn't have halted anything, should have been a penny on the tracks. My violin was an inexpensive, make-do affair. Though my head lurched back at the sight of the wreck, a soothing plume spread within me when I realized I wouldn't have to go through with my dysfunctional lesson. And now I'd get to drive home. Miss Gross gingerly lifted my fiddle out, her paranoia pacing in its cage.

I knew right away what had happened. Within the belly of all violins there's a "sound post" that helps support, from beneath, the pressure the strings exert on the bridge. There must have been a

hairline crack in the wood around where the bridge's feet rest. And the sound post beneath must have "fallen"—a not uncommon occurrence in violins. Without that post support, nothing prevented the bridge from plunging through like a skate blade on thin ice.

Miss Gross resisted my explanation and accused me of deliberately destroying the violin to get out of my lesson. It took her a minute to admit that perhaps the damage wasn't my doing.

"Wait here," she said, and left the room.

She came back in a few minutes with a dusty violin case. The German violin inside hadn't seen daylight in so long that the strings had all gone slack. But as she tuned it up, and the violin's beautiful tone came into focus, I could already tell that it was an exceptional instrument.

"Here," she said, holding it out to me, "you can use this old fiddle." Before putting it up to my chin, I ran my palm over the smooth nut-brown wood. There was something true about this violin.

So I had to have my lesson anyway. When our time was up, she offered to sell me the instrument for what was clearly a fire-sale price—a scant one hundred dollars. She could tell how taken I was by its rich old sound. The spirit of commerce and generosity had the effect of dispelling any residual bad feelings from the earlier unpleasantness. Calling it my upcoming seventeenth birthday present, my mother wrote out a check.

I didn't have many more lessons after that. Mountain music was becoming my all-consuming interest as a fiddler. I'd always thought of Miss Gross as someone without any relatives anywhere, a woman who had never had any. But we gradually lost touch with her after she moved away to live with some second cousins or something in, of all places, Delaware.

Last I heard she'd moved on yet again. Funny that a woman who'd lived some forty-odd years in one house should all of a sudden become such a traveler—this time to Fiddler's Green, the mythic country of rum, women, and tobacco. All good sailors spend their afterlives in this Elysium. Along with everything else, Kathryn Gross's fiddle playing makes for blissful hospitality. She can play whatever she likes and go all night if she chooses to. The seafarers ask only that she do justice to her gift.

In time I got around to showing that German fiddle she unearthed for me to an appraiser. The thing turned out to be over a century old and worth at least a hundred times the song she let it go for. Just before she parted with the old violin, I'll never forget how she put it to her chin and played a long passage from a Mozart violin concerto.

I was impatient to leave with my new acquisition, but she played so beautifully I wanted her to go on.

“It’s amazing about Mozart,” she said, when finished. “You can tell he was a violinist, the way his concerti just fall into your hands.” She looked the violin over a last time, then handed it to me. I returned it to its case.

Metamorphosis

Firs clump at night in high boots.
Maples amble like spiders.
The aspens alternate positions
and cedars like wallflowers stand
abandoned in the crowded dance-hall.

They must think I'm a rabbit,
the way I freeze, ears cocked,
waiting for clarification,
or I could be a silver fox
with one foot raised, a shadow,
a movement of air among leaves.

But I was born of a snowberry,
roots among forebears and lovers,
trees with charred souls
and the rings of so many years
woodpeckers could gain a firm foothold.

Sometimes like the warriors at Dunsinane
I become an entire rain forest
moving inexorably against
the besieged in their stony shelters,
those moated to halt, to restrain
cedar, redwood, and ash.

Clarity

A clear thought
is almost like an object
with momentum, mass, and gravity.
Like a billiard ball
on a winning trajectory
an articulated idea
can neatly knock its opponents—
what's randomly placed, meaningless, and base—
into pockets.
The ousted objects know they just won't do.
Too red, too striped, too blue.

Clear thoughts just work,
which irks some people who want to protect
things less exact
as though unacknowledged potential lies
in what isn't fact.

But recognition must be given
to the power of superstition.
Which makes me wonder:
if clear thoughts are so obvious
then how are we so often duped?
The mind seems to contain a self-deceiving infinite loop,
though the purpose of such a trap
hardly brings sense
into the scheme of grander things.

Perhaps clear thoughts aren't so much clear as light-like
—photons, or better still, electrons—
blinding, brilliant things on highly charged hikes
up ladders, around the core of atoms,
bringing energy to matter.

Electrons are mercurial beings—
their existence theorized,
their impact realized,
their bodies never seen.

*

All that's left from the map
is this birdbath—you can't make out
the north, northeast or if the wind

is in the same place, skimming
lower and lower as shoreline
not sure you're still there

or did the water dry by itself
—you rely on it, need this landmark
to locate exactly where

and you make the sharp turn
deep into birdsong and the cries
that follow behind, end over end

with both hands and the ground
spills out its air, there's room
for you and in all directions.

Lee Gulyás

Midnight on Cherry Street

Sweat-soaked sheets and
an open window. Seals bark lustily.
With clock-like precision
Mr. Sigler scuffs out onto the sidewalk.
He coughs and turns his head
to no one in particular
and shouts:
Goddamn Sonofabitch.
Goddamn Sonofabitch.
Goddamn Post Office.
Goddamn Post Office.
Goddamn Bastards.
He gets this way sometimes
when it's hot
and the air is still.

Fiction Workshop

The story you have in your hands is like many works of fiction in that it contains references to the “real” world. But as you will see, I’m not writing about *any* real world, I’m writing about *your* world. This story is about you, the eleven students who have received this draft to review for our workshop next Tuesday, and your stories. Our class, ENGL 565 (Seminar in Short Fiction Writing), meets every Tuesday night at 7 PM in Franklin Hall, Room 401, Evergreen State University (ESU). ESU, sometimes pronounced Eee Soo, is located in Evergreen Terrace, an unremarkable municipality on the fringes of one of our nation’s principal conurbations. But why is it necessary to describe ESU or Evergreen Terrace given that we are all quite familiar with them? Do we tell a spouse or close friend, “I drove my beat-up blue car to work this morning?” No, we do not, because that person is well familiar with what kind of car we drive. My exposition here, however, is not gratuitous in this sense as this story is not only for your consumption, fellow students and Professor Gary Pilsner; ultimately I hope that it will travel beyond the bounds of ENGL 565 (a three-credit course offered in alternate semesters) where neither ESU nor Evergreen Terrace are familiar to the general reader.

I am the fifth person to distribute a story this semester. A woman in her early thirties with red hair, whose name I have forgotten, was the first. She brought her story, concealed in a blue binder with a whale on the front, to the first class. When Gary asked if there was anyone who would like to hand something out next week, she quickly raised her hand, “Actually, I have a piece with me tonight; I figured I’d bring it just in case.” At the break the woman went and photocopied the story. I think most of us were slightly annoyed; I know I was. Bringing a story to the first class! And then, cynically, I thought, oh you clever goose, you’re just recycling something you’ve done before: you’ll pass the story out, get comments the following week, and then do nothing the rest of the semester, all the while collecting brownie points for having been “brave” and gone first.

Gary, or perhaps I should say Professor Pilsner, at first seemed confused by this bold initiative on the part of the red-haired woman. He prefers “Professor Pilsner” to “Gary,” but believes calling him “Professor” might seem undemocratic or distant. This, of course, is just my impression; I don’t actually know what he is thinking. It does seem, however, that when you “Gary” him right off the bat he looks vaguely perturbed. What he really likes is when you call him “Professor Pilsner” and he can

then correct you and say "Gary," as if he is bestowing a great honor upon you. Regardless, when the red-haired woman took the story from the inside flap of the whale binder, he said, "Great, this is what I like to see." I'm sure he suspected she was trotting out something already workshopped in a previous class, but I don't think he cares. He's like a teacher I once had in high school who said cheating didn't bother him as at least it showed some initiative.

Classmates, you are, of course, entitled to comment on this manuscript; in fact, it is a course requirement that you not only submit your own writing, but also critique the work of others. As such, you may insert commas where they are missing (in fact such help would be welcomed) and can place a ? next to sentences that confuse you. If a paragraph seems awkward, or a part of the piece underdeveloped, I ask that you please let me know. I will take your comments under advisement and do appreciate them. I anticipate, however, that there will be criticisms that address more than matters of word choice, style or structure, and that some of you may take personal offense at what I have written, particularly given that this "story" mentions individuals in this class by name. What then? Well, let me provide this caveat: I am presenting this text as a work of fiction and you are duty-bound to treat it as such. You should ask yourself "How is this working as a story?" rather than, "How is this working as reality?" because it's not real. Naturally, I expect that some of you may respond, hold on a minute, how can you identify us (as you have already done with Professor Pilsner and the red-haired woman), make personal judgements about us, trash our writing (this is coming) and then say that we are allowed only to comment upon the story's effectiveness *qua* literature, as if this could be divorced from its content. Isn't the "hook" of the piece, after all, that you are writing about real people (us) in a very direct way that can't help but cause bad feelings? Given this gambit, isn't it a bit disingenuous to say, well, set all that personal stuff aside for the moment and just focus on the "story"? Well, yes, I admit this is a bit of sophistry on my part; regardless, I think you will get more out of this piece if you at least make the attempt to get beyond any immediate visceral reactions and consider this story as an exploration of that peculiar forum, the creative writing workshop, as well as an investigation into the nature of writing and the standards we employ to judge it.

That first class meeting was the last we saw of the red-haired woman with the binder that had a whale upon it. Where she came from, and where she vanished to, I have no idea; what our campus lacks in academic distinction, it compensates for in vast size. We learned of her disappearance at the beginning of our second meeting when Gary was telling

Lance that it was impossible to add anyone as the class was full. He was being a little nasty about it when Lance, too polite at first to interrupt, finally said that he had added the class through ETR (Evergreen Telephone Registration), which meant that someone had dropped. Since everyone else was present except for the woman with the red hair, it was obvious what had happened. Lance sat in the red-haired woman's chair at the end of the seminar table. Gary looked at him accusingly, as if it were somehow Lance's fault that the woman was gone, like Lance had had her killed so that he could have her spot. Lance truly occupies a seat; the sheer volume of the man is incredible. He is probably six feet six or seven and must weigh close to three hundred pounds. It's difficult to say exactly. It's like extremes in temperature: over one hundred or below zero and the numbers begin to seem less and less real. I do know that when I looked at his hand while he was getting a coffee from the machine downstairs, it resembled the paw of a bear that had tragically lost its fur. In fiction when someone is this big, one of two things follows: either the character will be menacing and threatening, or their size will in a sense be "ironic" and the character will be gentle, perhaps even like a "teddy bear." But Lance doesn't seem to be either of these. He is just too mild mannered to be menacing; on the other hand, I have never seen him crying, helping old women with their groceries or rescuing injured birds.

Since the red-haired woman, the author of the story, had literally disappeared, we shuffled our papers and made small talk for about ten minutes while trying to figure out what to do. I'm sure that Gary was tempted to dismiss us, but just as people were starting to get restless, he hit upon the idea that we discuss projects we were working on. I used to be intimidated by this type of talk as it always seems to me that everyone else is hyper-industrious, inspired and talented, forever churning out minor masterpieces, in contrast to my puny and pale literary offerings. You know how it is: one person is translating a collection of poetry she has written into Italian and plans further to adapt it into a one-act play, another claims he is working on a quartet of novels based on the letters and diaries of W.B. Yeats, a third is putting the finishing touches on a novel based on her experiences as a boat person in the Pacific (Part One), and opera singer in Boston (Part Two). Pronouncements such as these do tend to diminish one's own shallow efforts, cause one to think, *crap, I'm in big trouble, all I've got going is a story with a lousy ending about a lifeguard who is, ironically, a poor swimmer.* But this was before I learned that the gap between the real and the ideal is immense: the poems in the "collection" number no more than three, the quartet of novels consists so far of a three-page prologue, and the Boat Person doesn't much like writing, truth

be told. Furthermore, just because someone has completed a novel or a forty-page prose poem, doesn't mean that it is any good. And you really never know until you read the work: a person can be very sharp and an astute critic of other people's stuff, but be the most god awful writer him or herself.

A case in point is Alvin, who told us about his novel in progress involving Portugese sailors, the CIA, Federico Garcia Lorca, Nietzsche and skateboarding. I'm sure we're all supposed to think, How wild! How did he tie all those together? What an imagination! What talent! But knowing Alvin as I do, I'm willing to bet that *Friedrich's Half Pipe* (his working title) is a pretentious, self-important, boring enterprise of great interest to him but not the reader. And, naturally, if people don't like it, he will assume that they don't "get it" and can't warm to what he believes are his avant-garde stylings, but what I think more accurately are self-indulgent noodlings designed to demonstrate how cool and smart he is. Anyway, enough with Alvin. When it was my turn to share, I only half-lied and said I was working on a collection of short stories linked by their water imagery. You all seemed suitably impressed; perhaps I successfully pulled the wool. Fortunately, I wasn't asked to elaborate on how many of these stories had actually been completed (two, with a third in progress) or if any had been published (none, although I did receive one rejection that had handwritten words of encouragement on it).

During this second class Gary tried to be a good sport about the red-haired woman's defection, but he wasn't happy. He's pretty much fed up with ESU and believes that his talents are being wasted but realizes that at age sixty, struggle is useless. I think he's probably lucky to be picking up checks at ESU at all; a lot of people would kill for his position, despite the grousing he does about it. Students are fascinated by Gary, not because he is any kind of dynamo in the classroom, but because he is a writer of minor celebrity and has a young wife. He scored a modest critical and commercial hit with his 1978 novel *Illuminated Stones*, wrote a screenplay for it in the mid 1980s, and apparently has been coasting ever since. I doubt anybody in class has actually read *Illuminated Stones*, or his other novel (a 1994 flop entitled *Off the Rails*) but that doesn't stop them from talking about them. And predictably, there are rumors that he is something of a drunk; and while it seems as if he would be (the usual: aging writer, bitter, creatively blocked, and so on), I don't know if he actually is.

While I haven't read his fiction, I have looked at a few of Gary's essays, and find that in them he comes off as a much warmer and more sensitive guy than my experience with him has been in person. I'm not sure what to make of this. Is he basically an asshole, and his writing is nothing more than a mask, a pretense? He could be using the oldest trick

in the book, putting on like he is a sensitive pained artist type, when in reality he is just a jerk. Or does the writing represent the more true, real him, and for whatever reason, shyness, or insecurity maybe, in person he comes off as arrogant? Perhaps writing liberates Gary and allows for his generous and compassionate side to come to the fore. I suppose it need not be an either/or question: maybe the Gary blubbering about his retarded brother in his essay "Who's Chosen," and the impatient guy at the head of the seminar table not shy about letting us know who the "real" writer in the room is, are both aspects of Gary Pilsner. Now if that's true, that doesn't mean that the "Compassionate Literary Gary" cancels out the "Arrogant Gary"; just because you write with sensitivity about the retarded, doesn't mean that it's ok to cut non-retarded people off when they are speaking, or savagely criticize a colleague in front of a group of students, as Gary sometimes does.

Regardless of how one resolves the sensitive guy/asshole binary, Gary generates an intense amount of gossip. There is a core group of about five students who go out for drinks after class, and if the time I accompanied them to the Red Hammer is a proper indication, Gary is all they talk about. I also gathered during the course of that evening that some of the women in class don't like Gary. Why? Well, because a) his wife is young and pretty, and b) this wife is his second. Kara, in particular, seems particularly exercised over Gary's domestic arrangements. I suppose she assumes that Gary left his first wife for a younger woman and this bothers her. I don't know how Gary's first marriage ended, but I find it odd that Kara somehow thinks it is her business.

But let's return to the ostensible *raison d'être* of ENGL 565, the writing. In our third meeting of the semester we workshopped Samantha's story. It was brutal. It was about a girl who was molested by her stepfather. And, of course, I thought, is this person you, Samantha? And if so, what am I going to say, that I don't think your story about being molested by your stepfather is believable? Not that I don't believe it in the literal sense—that I don't think it happened—but that I don't find the story believable. Now try that on for paradox. Nobody was going to ask if the story was autobiographical; that would, of course, be very bad form. I tend to believe that it was. The details—the stain on the stepfather's gray dress pants after he made the girl put her hand in his pocket and rub his penis, the pair of tennis shoes (why tennis shoes?) he bought her for being a "good girl" and keeping quiet—seemed too creepy *not* to be drawn from experience. The problem with the story was the language: it was clichéd, full of facile generalizations, overwrought, and showed the influence of made-for-television movies. The molester looked like "your average businessman," but there was "something odd about him." The mother

was “a typical Mom,” the girl’s teenage brother was “in his own world,” and the girl’s biological father had “packed up and left” when the narrator was three.

Is good fiction supposed to be like “real life”? Maybe, maybe not. Is good fiction supposed to make you think? Probably yes. But what if bad fiction makes you think? I wondered what Samantha’s story would be like from the molester’s point of view. From the molesteer’s POV, we’ve heard this sad story before, and of course, our sympathies are with the girl. But what about the molester? How would one write this story through his eyes? What is going through his mind? Does he feel guilt? How does he rationalize imposing himself on an eight-year-old? Or does he rationalize it? Does he loathe himself? Isn’t he worried about getting caught? What does a perpetrator of sexual abuse think about his actions, himself, the world? Few writers would want to touch this material. Too much explanation of, say, the molester’s childhood and such could make him sympathetic in a sense, and that likely wouldn’t sit well with most people. Even worse, discussion of his actions could be leering and creepy, particularly if written by a man. But does this necessarily follow? Would a story written by a man from a molester’s POV be intrinsically, *automatically* creepy, or would one just perceive it as such?

To return to Samantha’s piece, the further difficulty with it was that she wasn’t content to let it end in childhood. There was an odd coda in which the narrator was now an adult and a member of a women’s group devoted to prosecuting sexual abusers. Everyone told her to remove this conclusion, but Samantha strongly disagreed. When Alvin started to get a little too insistent on this point, Samantha looked down at the table and began turning red. I have noticed that students in workshop settings are often reticent to criticize, yet sometimes once one person starts with a comment or suggestion, other class members will mercilessly pile on. And of course, this is painful for the writer as one tends to filter out generic positive comments, and hear only the “I thought the ending was clichéd,” or the “principal character was underdeveloped” assessments. And while I certainly don’t believe that there is much to be gained by having people sit around and provide each other insipid assurances about the magnificence of their stories, at a certain point criticism is no longer helpful. Perhaps in the workshop there should be some kind of sign to indicate a distressed student. It could be like in soccer, where the referee shows a red or yellow card to indicate a foul; instead, a notebook could be held aloft as signal: *student on the verge of tears, further comments unlikely to be helpful.*

Thankfully, we were spared Kara’s thoughts on Samantha’s story. Kara comments on the female characters in everyone’s stories, and there

is absolutely no pleasing her. Either the female characters are not developed enough (they are “absent” in her parlance), or if they are present, then they are too stereotyped, or are cartoonishly anti-stereotyped, or are portrayed as victims or bitches. I have no idea what female character would be acceptable to her, but can tell you that no one in our class has produced one so far, women included. Kara’s actually harder on the women than the men, although the men are in a particularly difficult spot because if they don’t write strong female characters, then they are branded as sexist, and if they do, then they are under suspicion for “appropriating” women’s voices. I suspect that the type of female characters that Kara actually likes closely resemble her and her friends, although we will see when she distributes a story of her own later this semester.

I give Kara points for not putting in her two cents about Samantha’s story; she must really have hated it. It can’t have been an easy story to write, or to have the class read, particularly if one assumes it was in fact drawn from real life. But should this enter into our evaluation of it? I don’t know, but my reading of the story is somewhat dependent on whether or not it is “true.” If the story was borrowed from TV movies of the week and expressed in their banal idiom, then it goes down in my estimation. But if it was autobiographical, yet clumsily expressed, then at least it has the sympathy and authenticity factors working in its favor. But how “authentic” is the story when I said that it didn’t seem believable? And ultimately it is still a story, regardless of its provenance. What are we awarding points for? The life or the story? It is true that the combination of the tragic and the “true” has a particular hold on the reader, so perhaps we go easy on stories about sexual abuse or being a prisoner of war. On the other hand, the subject of the writing does matter: can one say that a memoir about being a POW and living in a bamboo cage for two years, or being raped by your stepfather, is “bad” in the same way that a story about “the touchdown pass” or “the first time I got high” is?

It is hard to bracket out what we know about the author when reading a story. Just last week Judy distributed a story. I love Judy. True, I don’t really know her that well, but most weeks I talk to her both before class begins and during the break. When she mentions something in passing it goes right into my long-term memory: she likes potatoes, she thinks Star Trek is stupid, her cousin is an airline pilot. This will confirm my interest in her; I will not embarrass us all by recounting my erotic reveries. I almost didn’t want her to distribute a story. What if it was terrible? She would then go down in my estimation. When she handed out her piece (seven pages, neatly stapled, smelling slightly of moisturizer it seemed), I thought, “Please don’t let it be bad, please don’t let it be bad.” The story was about a zookeeper who reflects upon her family while tending to three

rhinos. It was not bad at all; in fact, it was insightful and beautifully written. But, of course, I can't be sure if my judgment is entirely objective; although if it was total crap, I think I would be able to spot that.

When it came time for comments, at first the class didn't say a great deal and usually that is not a good thing. I was hoping for Judy's sake that it would be well received. I weighed in first, "I think your choice of rhinos for an animal works well as their thick skin and unpleasant disposition are an interesting contrast to the openness and sensitivity of the narrator." I meant what I said, but the words sounded false and staged as they came from my mouth. Was I completely transparent? Did everyone know the feelings I held for Judy? Alvin, the know-it-all, said the use of zoo animals was "somewhat facile." Oh I see, Alvin, she lacks your gift for the sophomoric and pretentious (Nietzsche, Lorca, surfing) and is therefore facile. In the end, Judy's story got a mostly favorable response, particularly when it became apparent that Gary was quite keen on it. My thoughts while we discussed Judy's story in class were wildly irrational, absurd, really. First: "I have to say something," Second: "I just scored major points for praising her story," Third: "I hope she doesn't think I'm sucking up," and finally, "Oh no, her story is too good, she'll never be interested in a loser like me." The saga of the romantic crush: cunning strategy, followed by hope and exhilaration, culminating in doubt and self-loathing.

I was, of course, on edge during the class in which we reviewed Judy's story. I took the whole thing so personally; it all had such significance for me. I can't say that this was true the following week when Eve distributed her piece. I don't even know what to say about it. As soon as I saw that it was called "The Magic of the Cursed Encounter" (or was it "The Curse of the Magic Encounter?) and involved witches, gnomes, spells, talking trees and such, that was it for me. Was the story any good? I don't know. It's like being taken to a ball game if you're bored by baseball and don't know the rules. Even if it's a good game, you're unlikely to care. And would you even know what a good game was without someone telling you? I labored to fill up a page of comments—now that's creative writing—and said something about the story being both whimsical and sinister. And I corrected a bit of punctuation, which I think is helpful regardless. In fairness, Eve is trying to create a fictional universe, a magical take on "reality," and this is a worthwhile thing to attempt. I just don't want to know about gnomes, witches, or anything else having to do with the supernatural or magical. In general, the "fantasy" genre leaves me cold.

Bad writing seems pretty easy to identify, even specify. But what makes a story good? It's not subject matter, that's for sure. Some people

write hideously boring tracts about the most significant events, while others can turn waiting for a bus into a gripping narrative. Is good writing then a clever turn of phrase, an unusual metaphor, witty dialogue? Is that enough? What if these are overly self-conscious, or in the service of trivial, overused or blatantly racist or sexist subject matter? Very problematic, these aesthetic questions, and difficult to discuss abstractly. Ultimately, good writing is one of those elusive things that comes down to the old saw, "I know it when I see it."

I think I see it in Jeff's work. He is an exterminator by day and a creative writer by night. But he's not some intellectual slumming it, nor is his job as an exterminator a temporary one; he has been doing it for the last seven years. The story he distributed last week was, not surprisingly, about an exterminator. The narrator, "Mitch," traverses city and suburbs in a white van setting traps for rats, roaches and other pests. On one of his visits, he gets into a long conversation with a lonely woman. She keeps asking him back in spite of there being no more roaches in her apartment to kill. And he keeps going back even though they are both aware that all the bugs are dead, something which remains unspoken between them. The incidents in the back story, such as when Mitch clubs a rat over the head with a rake, or when he sweeps up an entire bucketful of roaches from a fancy restaurant, surely must have come from Jeff's own experience. The matter of fact tone in which they are related gives the story an immediate although understated quality. Maybe because the life of an exterminator has not been played out on the movie of the week, there is a vocabulary without cliché available to recount it. Jeff's piece, "The Roach Man," actually is "based on a true story," yet one which is rarely told and which seems much more "real" than Samantha's story about sexual abuse.

*

Is the preceding a story? Does a story require a plot? What is the plot here? Were you to summarize the piece, you could say that this is a first person account in which the narrator writes what seems to be a journal reviewing the stories and personalities of his fellow writing workshop participants, occasionally musing about other matters as he does so. This journal masquerading as a story (or story masquerading as a journal) is to be distributed to his real life classmates, although the piece ends before this happens. I think the tension in the writing comes from anticipating how the students will react. The story would probably be less effective if it included narrative and dialogue from the class in which it was actually distributed, although that would present definite possibilities for moments of high drama and hilarity.

The non-ENGL 565 reader doesn't know how accurate the descriptions of Gary and the students in the class are, nor does he or she have Samantha, Judy, Eve or Jeff's work available in order to judge the narrator's skill as a critic. An interesting addition to this piece might be the attachment of these stories as an appendix. But this is jumping the gun; at this stage the "readers" are not some unspecified mass, but rather are you, Professor Gary Pilsner, and the students enrolled in ENGL 565 at ESU. What reactions can I expect when we discuss this story on Tuesday? What will you have to say about the Judy "character" when she is sitting right next to you? What will Judy herself have to say to me when we chat before class? Perhaps we won't be chatting before class anymore. Will Lance comment on the physical description that I have provided of him? Will he say, "For your information, I weigh 278 pounds, not 300"? Will someone approach Samantha before class and tell her they really like her work and that she's very brave and that I'm an asshole? Will Alvin sit sullenly and glare at me? And what will Gary say? If I were him, I might take control right away and say, "Look, I don't know if this is some kind of joke, but if we are going to discuss this thing, we should talk about the structure and concept rather than the narrative details." Now that I have suggested that he do this, he probably won't, however.

Have I been fair here? I think so. I may be wrong on some counts, but I've tried to be even-handed and can honestly say I have no particular agenda I am trying to advance, nor do I hold a grudge against anyone. I may have made some of you uncomfortable and angry, yet who could possibly be more uncomfortable next Tuesday than me? You can choose how you wish to respond to this piece, but I have to deal with your hostility, hurt feelings or even indifference. Am I now seeking points for my courage in writing this story? Maybe. Or is it simple spin and PR that I'm engaging in: anticipating criticism and addressing it beforehand, thereby blunting and even preempting it? Perhaps.

I Dreamed I Was St. Francis in my Maidenform Bra

My earthly father told me that if I were giving up all my worldly possessions, I'd have to give my Maidenform Bra up as well. I reluctantly made a gesture to put it in the pile, then realized I could use my bra as a belt, instead of a rope, to close my robe. Not even the wolf sniffed my bra as he made peace by putting his paw in my palm. The birds listened to me preach in my Maidenform Bra, and if you look very closely at Giotto's fresco in the Upper Basilica, you may be able to make out my Maidenform sash. The Lord said, "Everything you have loved and desired in the flesh it is your duty to despise and hate, if you wish to know my will...." And though I loved my bra as a boy, I could not ever hate it as a man. I gave away my cloak to the destitute, but I could not part with my Maidenform Bra. I quenched the thirst of a poor man by making water gush from a rock in my Maidenform Bra. The Poor Clares knew about my Maidenform and said nothing, though sometimes at dinner they'd make little origami bras from the napkins on the table just to tease me. During the Fifth Crusade, I tried to convert the sultan of Egypt in my Maidenform Bra. When I freed a rabbit from a trap in my Maidenform Bra, it jumped on my lap. I was wearing my Maidenform Bra when I unhooked fish and threw them back in the water where they swam around the boat listening to me preach. The friars surrounded me as I levitated in prayer in my Maidenform Bra. I saw Christ in the form of a crucified seraph and received the stigmata in my Maidenform Bra. The sick prayed to me in my Maidenform Bra, and I often dispensed miraculous cures. Pope Gregory IX canonized me in my Maidenform Bra. And when I met the Lord in my Maidenform bra, He didn't even blink before giving me a spare set of keys to the Kingdom.

—Contributors' Notes—

L. N. Allen is a former fiction/science fiction writer (Lori Negrige Allen) who has recently returned to her first love, poetry. Behind her Cape Cod backyard are forty-one acres of land deeded in perpetuity to the Town of Nichols, Connecticut, on the condition they never be developed. Enough nightjars sing there to make her hungry for more.

Britta Ameel calls Salt Lake City home, although she recently graduated from the University of Oregon in Eugene, Oregon, and is currently teaching English in Paris, France. She plans to come back to The States soon to finish a year of "time-off" while applying to graduate MFA programs in Creative Writing for next year. Her poems have been published in *em literary asylum* and the *Manzanita Quarterly*.

E. G. Burrows is the author of ten books and chapbooks, including *Sailing As Before* (TDM Press). Current or recent appearances in: *Iowa Review*, *Malahat Review*, *South Dakota Review*, *California Quarterly*, *Texas Review*, *Hawaii Review*, *Poet Lore*, *Sulphur River Review*, and *Poetry East*.

James Doyle's manuscript, *Einstein Considers a Sand Dune*, won the 2003 Steel Toe Poetry Book Contest, judged by David Kirby. It will be published in 2004.

Denise Duhamel is the author of 13 books and chapbooks, the most recent of which is *Queen for a Day: Selected and New Poems* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2001). An assistant professor at Florida International University in Miami, she co-edited, with Nick Carbo, *Sweet Jesus: Poems about the Ultimate Icon* (The Anthology Press, 2002).

Lee Gulyás is currently an MFA candidate in Creative Writing at the University of British Columbia. Her work has appeared in *Jeopardy*, *Creative Nonfiction* and *The Malahat Review* and her interview with poet and MacArthur Fellow Lucia Perillo is forthcoming in *The Bellingham Review*.

Becky Hagenston's short stories have appeared in *TriQuarterly*, *Southern Review*, *Gettysburg Review*, and many other journals, as well as in the 1996 *O. Henry Prize Stories*. Her collection of stories, *A Gram of Mars*, won Sarabande Books' 1997 Mary McCarthy Prize. She is an assistant professor at Mississippi State University.

Therése Halscheid received a 2003 Fellowship for poetry from NJ State Council on the Arts. She has two poetry collections, *Powertalk* (1995) and *Without Home* (Kells 2001). Her writings, poetry and prose, have appeared in numerous magazines, among them *Faultline*, *New Millennium Writings*, *Sojourners*, *The Midwest Quarterly*, and *Lullwater Review*. She is a visiting writer in schools and teaches writing workshops in varied locations.

Brandi Homan really enjoys looking at other people's shoes on the El. She has been published in *DIAGRAM*, *CutBank*, *Yemassee*, *Inner Weather*, and *The Lyric* and as part of a chapbook, *Marble Bag*. She earned her MA in English from the University of Illinois at Chicago.

William Huhn is a graduate of Vassar College and an analytical chemist. "Fiddler's Green" is an excerpt from *Premature Memoir*, a book-length nonfiction work. Other excerpts have appeared in *Sport Literate* and *Animal Fair*, and a chapbook of his poetry has been published by Red Dancefloor Press. He lives in New York City.

Mark Hummel, originally from Wyoming, lives in Colorado with his wife and three daughters. His work has appeared in a number of literary publications, including *The Bloomsbury Review*, *A: Literary Arts Review*, *Poetry Motel*, and *Tucumcari Literary Review*. He teaches writing at the University of Northern Colorado.

Tim Lehnert is a gadfly and bon vivant originally from Montreal who now lives with his wife and daughter in Providence, Rhode Island. His fiction and criticism have appeared in the *Nassau Review*, *Xavier Review* and *Antigonish Review*.

Beth Martinelli teaches Literature and Creative Writing at Saint Vincent College in Latrobe, Pennsylvania. Her poems and reviews appear/will appear in *Mudfish*, *Pleiades*, *Madison Review*, *Shade*, *Third Coast* and *The Baltimore Review*.

Marie Mutsuki Mockett graduated from Columbia University in 1992 with a degree in East Asian Languages and Civilizations. She has worked as a freelance writer for the past six years. This is her first published poem. New work is forthcoming in *New Delta Review* and *North Dakota Quarterly*.

Simon Perchik is an attorney whose poetry has appeared in *Partisan Review*, *The New Yorker*, and elsewhere. Readers interested in learning more about him are invited to read *Magic, Illusion and Other Realities* at www.geocities.com/simonthepoet, which also includes a complete bibliography.

Lucyna Probstko is a recent graduate of the MFA program at New York University and a recipient of the New York Times Fellowship. Her poetry has appeared in *Olivetree Review*, *The Oak*, *The Bitter Oleander*, and *Frantic Egg*. Her poem "Meditation" is forthcoming in the anthology of September 11th poetry, *In Love United*.

E. G. Silverman's fiction has appeared in *Wisconsin Review*, *The Nassau Review*, *The Distillery*, *Sulphur River Literary Review*, *Eureka Literary Magazine* and others. He has written two novels and is at work on another. He divides his time between Skillman, NJ, and Dingmans Ferry, PA.

Madelon Sprengnether is a professor of English at the University of Minnesota, where she teaches Literature and Creative Writing. Her books of poetry and nonfiction include *The Normal Heart*; *Rivers, Stories, Houses, Dreams*; *La Belle et La Bete*; and the co-edited collection *The House on Via Gombito: Writing by North American Women Abroad*. Her book of poems, *The Normal Heart*, was a Minnesota Voices Competition winner. In addition, she has received awards from the Bush Foundation, the Loft Literary Center and the National Endowment for the Arts. Her recently published memoir, *Crying at the Movies*, was a Minnesota Book Award finalist.

Celia Stuart-Powles is a poet who lives in Oklahoma, where she works as a designer. She has had poems published in periodicals and anthologies which include *Chameleon*, *Carquinez Review*, and *The Red Moon Anthology of English Language Haiku*.

Doug Trevor is an assistant professor of English at the University of Iowa and associate editor of *The Iowa Review*. "Fellowship of the Bereaved" is part of a short story collection that he is currently completing, stories from which have appeared in *The Paris Review*, *Glimmer Train*, *The New England Review*, *The Ontario Review*, *The Madison Review*, *River City*, and *The Notre Dame Review*.

Robert Vivian teaches English and Creative Writing at Alma College. His first book of essays is *Cold Snap As Yearning*.

D. B. Wells, twenty-three, has published short stories in a number of literary journals. A collection of her stories will be published in the fall of 2004 by Livingston Press. To support herself, she dances.

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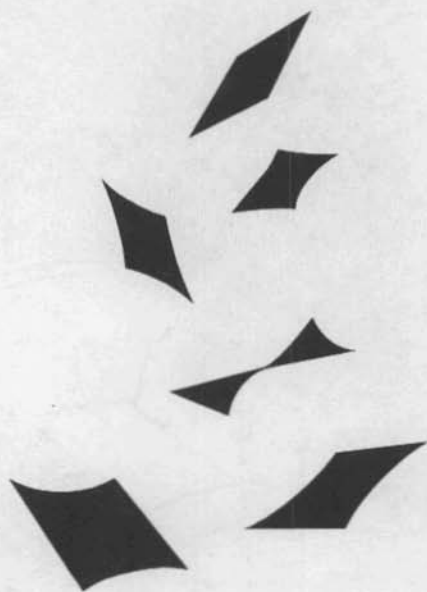
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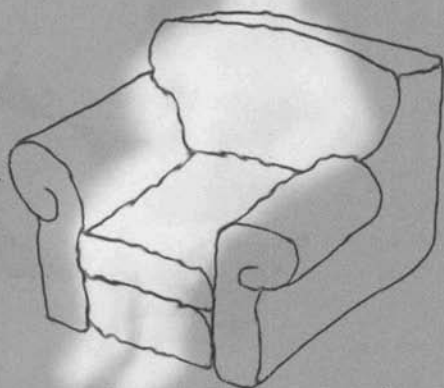
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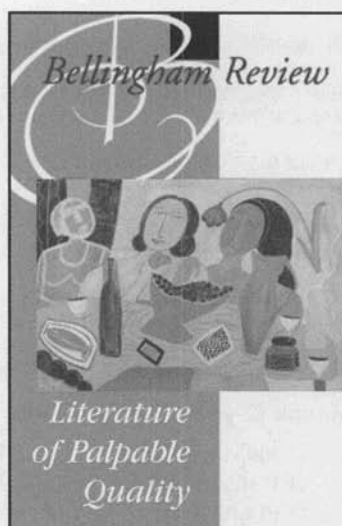
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