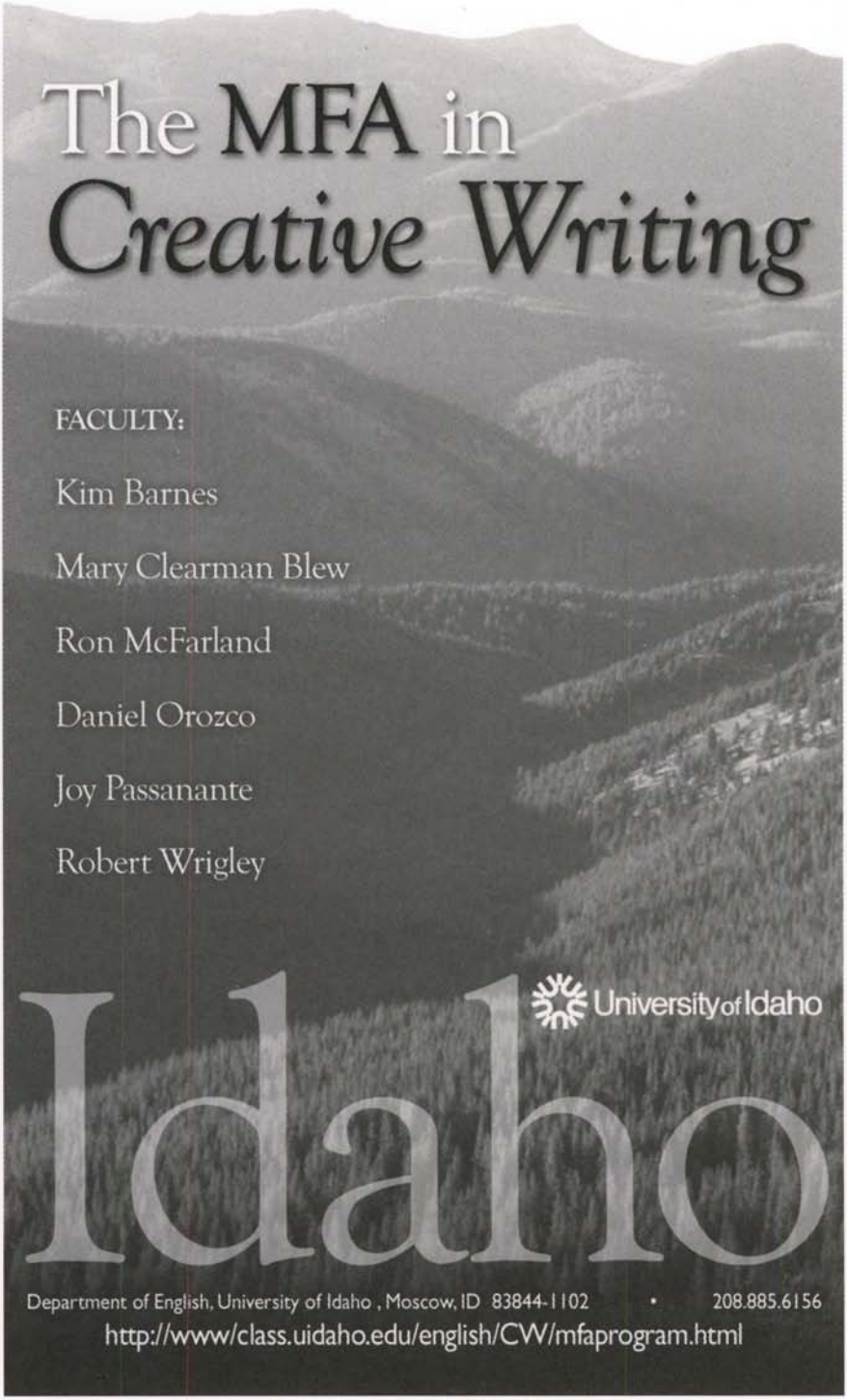
No. 27

Summer 2004
Contest Issue

FUGUE

Featuring:

Peter Ho Davies
Floyd Skloot
Padgett Powell
Maura Stanton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The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and science.

ALBERT EINSTEIN

Summer 2004

FUGUE

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FUGUE

Summer 2004, Vol. 27

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Submissions are accepted September 1 through May 1 (postmark dates). All material received outside this period will be returned unread. Please address submission to the appropriate editor and send with SASE to *Fugue*, English Department, 200 Brink Hall, University of Idaho, Moscow, ID 83844-1102. Prose up to 6,000 words pays $10 and a one-year subscription. Poetry, all forms, pays $10 and a one-year subscription. Please send no more than four poems, two short-shorts, one story, or one essay at a time. Submissions in more than one genre should be mailed separately, each containing an individual SASE. We will consider simultaneous submissions (submissions that have been sent concurrently to another journal), but we will not consider multiple submissions. All multiple submissions will be returned unread. Once you have submitted a piece to us, wait for a response to this piece before submitting again.

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From the Editor

With this, our third contest issue, we were able to offer, for the first time, an award of $1,000 each to the first-prize winners in our short story and poetry categories. We're very pleased to be able to honor these deserving pieces, and we extend our gratitude to the University of Idaho's Creative Writing Program for this ability. Their generous contribution has made this contest possible. We also need to thank our judges, Ehud Havazelet and Ellen Bryant Voigt, again (and again) for the kindness with their time and the keen perception they showed in reading through this year's finalists and selecting the winners.

Ehud Havazelet, who was a Distinguished Visiting Writer in fiction at the University of Idaho this spring, teaches in the Program in Creative Writing at the University of Oregon. His stories have appeared in many well-respected magazines, including *The Southern Review* and *Double Take*, and have earned him a Guggenheim Fellowship, a Whiting Writer's Award, and numerous other honors. He is the author of two collections of stories, *What Is It Then Between Us?* and *Like Never Before*. For this year's contest, Havazelet has awarded first prize to a story by Anna Shearer entitled "Limbus Patrum," which he calls "a pitch-perfect, moving story about a woman widowed suddenly," who discovers that "the bulwarks we expect to defend us—marriage, family, a kind fate—often fail, leaving us vulnerable in ways we never would have anticipated." Second prize goes to "Swahili" by Emma Wunsch, a "terrific evocation of the warring, scrambled mind of an adolescent," and third prize to "Freedom Rider, circa 1993" by Faith S. Holsaert, a "nuanced study" of its narrator.

Ellen Bryant Voigt, who was a Distinguished Visiting Writer in poetry at the University of Idaho last fall, pioneered the first low-residency writing program in the country at Goddard College and later helped move the program to Warren Wilson, where she has taught for more than twenty years now. She is the author of six books of poetry, including *Kyrie*, *The Lotus Flowers*, and *Shadow of Heaven*, as well as a collection of essays entitled *The Flexible Lyric*, and has been a finalist for both the National Book Award and the National Book Critics Circle Award. Her poems have been reprinted in many anthologies, including the *Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*, and she was recently named a Chancellor of The Academy of American Poets. Out of what Voigt called "a very strong batch" of finalist poems that we sent her, she has awarded first prize to "The Birdcage-Maker" by Luisa A. Igloria, second to "Forms of Punctuation" by Ander Monson, and third to "Shut-In" by Alison Stine.

In addition to the judges, I also want to thank *Fugue*'s devoted readers and editorial staff, especially Monica Mankin, our poetry editor, and Marcia Kmetz, our fiction editor. Organizing the readers and plowing through the many exemplary manuscripts we received for this year's contest—to say nothing of our regular submissions—was no small task, and they're to be commended for their extensive efforts in this matter and even more for the daily circumstance of working with me. The closer an issue gets to completion, the more (how shall I put this?) "focused" I become. I tend to stalk the hallway to my office with a kind of radioactive intensity, often forgetting the seemingly rote salutation of *how are you?*, greeting my fellow editors instead with a question about whether this thing or that thing has been accomplished yet. So, hail to all the readers and editors who put up with me and worked together to make this issue what it is.

But what is this issue, exactly? To me, it's a testament to the vibrancy of this country's literature. When all is said and done—after the countless hours spent poring over manuscripts, discussing stories or poems or essays with readers, corresponding with writers and coaxing revisions—I sit back and look at the material we've culled, and my chest feels taut, full to bursting with gratitude for the writers and the work we've been able to gather in these pages, the community we've been able to form. But there's little notoriety to be had from publishing one's work in a literary magazine. The writing you'll find here was created out of love for writing itself; it sprang from the desire to make something beautiful, to order some human experience into language and therefore imbue that experience with meaning. "Beauty," said D. H. Lawrence, "is a mystery. You can neither eat it, nor make flannel out of it." His statement is no less powerful for its humor. The use of the word "soul" without irony was probably outlawed in American Letters somewhere around thirty years ago, but I propose that all great literature traffics in the heart, that it has no true commerce but with the soul.

What is it, after all, that we're looking for when we come to literature? There are probably as many different answers to this question as there are readers. But it seems to me that one reason many of us love literature is that literature, like life, is abundant with mystery. This isn't to say that literature isn't revelatory, because it is. When it's good, it's full of those delightful shocks of recognition. But while great literature is revelatory, it doesn't reveal mystery. It might (and should) reveal some truth, offer us something we hadn't known before—or hadn't known in that way, at least. But it doesn't reveal mystery. Literature, when it's at its best, takes us *deeper* into mystery. As Milan Kundera reminds us, "The wisdom of the novel comes from

having a question for everything." Great writing revels in mystery rather than revealing it. Great writing doesn't provide answers, only more worthy questions. If there's anything I feel the selections in this issue of *Fugue* have in common, it's that they all celebrate the mystery and wonder of this venture we call life.

Happy reading.

Ben George

Matthew Vollmer

Second Home

When Eva Gladstone reached the house where she lived, she accelerated past the end of the driveway, past the overgrown lawn, and past the yellow trees, upon which tiny, strangulated plastic ghosts swayed in the breeze. She slowed down only for corners, stop signs, and traffic lights. Eventually, the houses of the suburbs disappeared, and there were only trees and hills, then mountains.

She turned on the radio. In a far away country, war had been announced. Fires were consuming the West. Hurricanes were storming the tropics. People were drowning in flames and fumes and water and earth. And she was driving a 1984 Mercedes—immaculate, polished, and freshly vacuumed, as her husband Arthur had liked to keep it—into the Land of the North.

Eva had not prepared for a journey. She had no toothbrush and no soap—no change of underwear. She had a purse with a few pens, a wallet, some faded, slightly wrinkled pictures of her estranged son and late husband, a checkbook, some credit cards, a tube of lipstick. There was a hammer-slash-hatchet in the trunk, and underneath the groceries purchased at Trader Joe's, some jumper cables. In the glovebox: a pack of crackers, some peppermints, a few maps. That was all.

*

It was mid afternoon when Eva arrived at Lake Sunapee. It was cold. For a minute, blue clouds rained snow. The vents blasted heat. Her hands cramped, her back ached. She coasted over hills, then turned off the highway and shot down a long unmarked road, going down, down, down very fast. She had not driven a car dangerously for a long time, and it felt good. She administered the brake, turned off onto gravel, then pavement again: a driveway. She parked the car in front of the freestanding red garage at the top of the hill, got out, unlatched the great wooden door, swung it open, got back into the car, and drove it inside.

The green door of the cabin was unlocked, as it always had been. There was wood stacked on the porch. A stick had toppled off the pile. She replaced it.

Inside, the kitchen smelled faintly of mold. The overhead light—a yellow glass bowl at whose bottom insect shells lay—had been left

on. A light burning in an empty room. For how long? She turned it off.

From the living room she could see the lake, choppy with whitecaps. The cabin was as they'd left it two, ten summers ago. Board games stacked in one corner; a Phillip Roth novel on the coffee table; black and white pictures in wooden frames on the wall. Here, in the living room, something like relief. Clarity. Tranquility.

She sat on the dusty sofa. The springs creaked. On the coffee table, into which her son had carved his name with a pocketknife years ago—*ETHAN*—lay a photograph book. She picked it up. Inside: Ethan in water wings. Artie slicing a crescent into the lake on a slalom ski. Eva—dark and slender—in a bathing suit and swimmer's cap, poised to dive.

Eva walked across the room and turned on a portable radio. A Bach toccata was just ending. A man with a deep voice announced the time, then predicted the weather: wind. After midnight, a fifty percent chance of snow. She turned off the radio.

The number three blinked on the answering machine, but she didn't press play. She picked up the receiver on the big black rotary telephone and dialed her home number. Arthur's voice, not yet erased, repeated the number she'd dialed. The beep was so loud and alarming that she left a message. "Uh, I'm at the cabin," she said, imagining the still life of the house: lamps, couches, hutch, end table, the reflections of these things in the glass of the blank television. The sound of her voice going through the machine. She hung up.

Upstairs, everything was clean. Someone had left a snorkel and mask on the dresser. Everything else had been put away. The beds had been stripped. Then she noticed the suitcases—a red one duct-taped shut, another fairly new black one. There was a Bible on the nightstand. The front cover said, "John Montgomery, Jr."

When she unsnapped one of the latches of the suitcases, she heard a car outside. She frowned, walked out of the bedroom, across the hall. She peeked out the window.

Outside, a black Corrolla. The doors opened. The driver—a man, about fifty, robust, with salt and pepper hair, a moustache and a big chin. The other door opened. The passenger wore a tattered red baseball cap, and a U.S. Postal Service jacket: her son.

Eva covered her mouth with her hands.

*

Eva had not lived the life of the rich and weary. She and her husband, who'd had some success in the heating and cooling busi-

ness, had enjoyed their wealth. They were happy. They gave money away. They luxuriated.

Then they had a son.

They named the son Ethan. For the first twelve years of his life, he was almost perfect. Obedient. Sweet. Selfless. Then, at thirteen, he came home wearing lipstick and eyeliner, and Artie whipped him with a belt.

Eva had not seen her son since he left for California two years ago. He hadn't returned for his father's funeral last spring. He had not called. And now, here he was, at the family cabin, with an older man, presumably John Montgomery, Jr.

Eva slipped behind a curtain, into a closet where, on rainy days, Ethan had lit a lantern and drawn pictures of cowboys and astronauts on the walls with crayons. The drawings were invisible in the dark, and she heard the scuffle of tiny claws on wood: mice. She held her breath. She listened. Voices. The rustle of thick paper bags: groceries. The front door opened and closed. The voices were gone.

*

John Montgomery, Jr. and Ethan were down on the dock. The lake, like the sky, was dark. Eva could see them from the living room window. John Montgomery, Jr. checked his watch and motioned towards the cabin with his thumb.

The house creaked in the wind. Outside, airborne leaves. Trees bent back and forth wildly. Ethan's cap blew off, but he caught it. The men turned towards the house.

The back door squeaked loudly when Eva opened it. She winced.

Rather than take the peastone path that curved up to the garage, she chose a shortcut through rhododendron bushes. She slipped and fell, her knees gouging holes into the soft earth. She stood up, peeled off a few wet leaves. She could hear their voices. She hid, for a moment, behind a white pine. Then she continued up the hill.

Inside the garage, inside the car, she inserted the key into the ignition. She pulled it out. She inserted it again. "What the hell," she said. Then she popped the trunk, got out of the car, and carried two grocery bags down the path.

*

She peeked through the glass in the door. Inside, John Montgomery, Jr. tilted a Coke bottle back and took a long drink. He placed his arm around Ethan, who had discarded his cap. Ethan's hair was a

mess. He stirred a steaming pot on the stove.

Eva waited for them to turn around, to see her through the window, but they never did. Her breath fogged the glass. Then she turned and walked through the woods to the cabin next door.

*

The cabin belonged to the Danielsons. Eva knocked. There was no answer—not at this time of year. She peeled back the *WELCOME* mat for the key, and let herself in.

The last time she'd come to the Danielsons' was with Artie. It was a very hot day in the summer. They'd spent the day on the Danielsons' boat, then returned to the house for sandwiches and beer on the Danielsons' porch. Rita and Jim had gotten into an argument. Artie had laughed. Rita had tossed water in his face. The next time they all saw each other, Artie—following a brain aneurysm while atop his riding mower—was dead.

*

It had been six months since Arthur's death. Two weeks ago, he had appeared to Eva, not in a dream, and not at night, but in the middle of the day, after lunch. She'd been carrying a bag of trash to the garbage bin, when she heard him calling her name. She turned around and saw him standing at the door of the shed. He had his work clothes on. "Eva!" he called. "Have you seen my shovel?" She dropped the bag and stared at him. She went back inside and locked the door.

Since then she had started and given up on five books. She had abandoned her baking and the garden. She had refused three invitations for dinner and two lunch dates. She stayed indoors. She cleaned. She emptied Artie's Scotch. She left the TV on but did not watch it. She tried to call her son, whom she had not seen in over a year—the son who had not come back for his father's funeral—but she got only his machine. She had left no messages.

*

The Danielsons had split up. Eva thought Rita had gotten the cabin, but she wasn't sure. Like the Gladstones', this cabin offered familiar comforts—dry foods, pots, silverware, lifejackets, games, quilts, sleeping bags, and pillows despondently collecting dust during the off season, waiting patiently for vacationers to make use of them. Eva

walked into the living room. She sat down at the Danielsons' air organ. She pumped the pedals with her feet, and placed her hands on the keys, but played no notes.

She opened cabinets in the kitchen. Under the sink she found an unopened bottle of scotch. She unscrewed the top. She poured herself half a mug-full, took a sip, and exhaled. In the master bedroom, she opened drawers, found a scarf, a pair of sunglasses. She tied the scarf around her head, donned the sunglasses, and slipped into one of Mr. Danielson's London Fog trench coats.

*

From the picnic table on the Danielsons' porch, she could see the dock of her own cabin. The man who she knew must be John Montgomery, Jr. stood on the edge with a fishing pole. He cast lines into the water. In a few minutes, Ethan, wearing one of Artie's old Army jackets, joined him. John Montgomery, Jr. gave him the pole, and Ethan reeled in a fish. John Montgomery, Jr. patted him on the back, unhooked the fish, and tossed it back into the lake. The wind twisted the fishing line.

Whenever Arthur had tried to teach Ethan how to fish, Ethan ended up crying. He didn't want to touch the fish. When Arthur refused to worm his hooks, Ethan stabbed his finger, and let the wilting worm drop into the water.

John Montgomery, Jr. stood with his hands on his hips. When he turned around and saw Eva, he waved. Eva lifted a hand into the air, turned around, and went inside.

*

A knock at the door. Eva replaced the sunglasses. She expected Ethan. Instead she got John Montgomery, Jr.

"Can I help you?" she asked. He tilted his head.

"We thought we were the only ones here. John," he said, smiling and extending a hand. Up close, he was even bigger. Sturdier. Despite the fact that she did not prefer moustaches, especially the ones like his that partially eclipsed his lips, and despite the tuft of hair sticking up in the back of his head, she had to admit he was handsome. Carved and clean, as though sculpted from hard soap.

"Rita." She wiped her hand on her pants before taking his. "Please. Come in."

"Just you in here?" he said, ducking his head as he walked under the doorway.

"For now," she said, smoothing the scarf on her head.

"I saw you when we were down on the dock. My friend and I are just next door. We're cooking a big dinner. You're welcome to join us."

"I'd love to," she said, glancing at a watch-less wrist. "But I have plans."

"Well, if you change your mind, you know where we are."

"Yes."

He sat down on the organ bench. "Nice place," he said, tapping one of the keys.

"Thank you."

"Boy, it's great up here, isn't it?"

"Are you a friend of the Gladstones?" Eva asked, smiling.

"Of Ethan's."

"Where are you from?"

"California."

"You picked a strange time for a vacation."

"Ethan said it's better in the fall. The solitude and all. And the leaves."

"Just taking it easy, then?"

John Montgomery, Jr. shrugged. "Yeah. Easy. Maybe do some fishing."

"How do you know Ethan?"

"We actually work together."

"At Kinko's?" Eva bit her lip.

"How'd you know?"

"Eva and I... we talk."

"Ethan's mom."

"Yes. Have you met her?"

"No," John Montgomery, Jr. said, rubbing his chin. It made a sound like sandpaper. "I—I 'd like to. I hear great things about her."

"I'm surprised."

"Why?" John Montgomery, Jr. frowned.

"Well," Eva sighed, "to tell you the truth, I didn't think she and Ethan were all that close."

"I don't think they are, really. But Ethan," John Montgomery, Jr. paused. "I think he misses her."

Eva stared out the window. Whitecaps, like teeth, on the lake.

"Would you like a drink? Water? Juice? Scotch?"

"Oh, no, I'm fine," he said. "Do you play?" He nodded at the organ.

"A little."

"I love the organ."

"Are you married?" she asked, glancing at his left hand.

"Divorced. And you?"

"My husband recently left me."

"I'm sorry to hear that. I guess you know about Ethan's dad."

"I did. I attended the funeral. I didn't see Ethan there."

"Yeah," he said, nodding. "I think he might... well... I don't know."

"Yes?"

"It's complicated."

"Is it?" She unbuttoned the top button of her shirt. She smiled. "It's warm in here."

"That stove puts out the heat," he observed. The stove was not lit.

"Sure you wouldn't like a drink?"

"No thank you."

"Are you lovers, then?" Eva asked.

The man laughed—a great, hearty laugh—and slapped his hands against his substantial thighs. But he did not answer the question. "I should probably be getting back." He smiled, politely, then he was off.

Eva sipped her drink as she watched him go. He followed the trail she'd made through the brush, pushing aside the same broken limbs.

*

Eva went to the window when she heard the yelling.

It was Ethan. He walked down to the dock, his hands in his pockets. John Montgomery, Jr. followed him, his head tilted, his hands held out as if quietly pleading.

John Montgomery, Jr. placed his hands on Ethan's shoulders. Ethan shrugged them away. John Montgomery, Jr. ran a hand through his hair. The wind was blowing. The leaves were almost gone. John Montgomery, Jr. turned him around, and gripped his arms firmly, and shook him as he spoke. They hugged. Then they went back inside.

*

Eva thought it was too cold to eat on the deck, but apparently they were dead set on it. Ethan set the table. John Montgomery, Jr. delivered a steaming bowl of pasta. They held hands and bowed their heads and closed their eyes. John Montgomery, Jr.'s lips moved for what seemed like a very long time. The steam on the pasta blew wildly away. The wind lifted a napkin into the trees, and John Mont-

gomery, Jr. followed it.

There was no wine or beer. Only water. The two men did not light up afterwards. They sat and talked. Then they cleared the table. Ethan brought sticks of wood from the porch into the cabin. The wind never stopped blowing.

After a while, the lights went out, then it was dark. The Danielson's cabin creaked in the wind, and Eva poured the last of the bottle into her mug.

*

Eva woke, in the middle of the night, to a light dusting of snow on the ground. The clouds were gone and the moon was out. The wind had stopped. Everything was bright. She could feel her heartbeat in her throat.

If she was going to do it, it had to be now, while she was not fully awake. She saw herself winding through the trees, entering the cabin, creeping quietly up the stairs, and entering the room where Ethan slept. She would touch his hair and his face. He would wake up and stare at her, rubbing his eyes. She would embrace him. He would want to know why and how. She would say she didn't know. And, in the few minutes before he fully woke up, it wouldn't matter.

"Okay," she whispered, and flung back the covers. In the closet: another, thicker coat. It smelled of mothballs. She couldn't find her shoes. She told herself she didn't need any.

Eva walked through the woods, following the path that had been trampled. The snow melted on her feet. Leaves stuck to her ankles. Twigs poked her toes.

By the time she reached the cabin, she felt as though pins were pricking her feet. The back door was locked. She tried the front. Deadbolted. She tried the windows. Nothing. The cold was waking her up. She panicked. She knocked on the door, quietly at first. Then she began to pound. She pounded until Ethan, in boxers and a sweatshirt, carrying a Louisville Slugger, appeared behind the glass of the door.

Ethan flipped on the outside light. He opened the door. Eva's knuckles were burning. Were they red? She was afraid to look. Her breath poured like smoke from her nose.

"Mom?"

Ethan frowned, tilting his head at his mother in a man's coat in the snow with no shoes. He squinted, wobbled. *Good*, she thought. He was still in the daze she'd expected. *Hurry*, she told herself. *Catch your breath*. She tried. She wheezed. Her numb feet squeaked in the

snow. Ethan, standing in the doorway, clutched the bat in his fist like a boy waiting for a story he wanted to believe. Eva parted her lips to speak her son's name, as though, for the first time in his life, she might have the right words to explain.

Grace Butcher

Ghost Stories

In the backyard
the heavy frost lies
exactly in the shape of
the shadow of the house,
minute by minute disappearing
as the earth spins.

Who would live in such a
frosted house of shadows?
Ghosts turned silver with age.
They come and go with
the rising of the sun,
the turning of the seasons.

In summer I think they
live in the dew at the edge
of deep woods where the
last pasture touches
the first trees.

Sometimes they slip in among
the hickories and beech,
darkening into silhouettes.
It is hard to walk in the woods
without stepping on them:
what you think is the spongy floor
of the forest is their dark bodies
lying all in one direction,
circling the trees they cling to,
always rooted somehow
wherever they choose to lie down.

All the stories are true.

Summer of '89

After the summer of drought
comes the summer of rain.
Some of those who've built by rivers
swim away and are never seen again,
leaving behind refrigerators full of food,
favorite chairs with the waterline knee high.

In the farmers' fields,
tractors are mired
like beasts at La Brea.
Even the loyal horses balk
as if at the edge of quicksand,
dance nervously sideways
against the traces, eyes rolling.

The tall green hayfields
lie down under the rain;
no blade can lift them.
The cows eat the pale grass;
their milk turns to water.
The wheat swims in rows
like rice paddies and rots
above its own reflection.

There are jokes about building arks
and paddling to town for groceries,
but with an edge in the voice
and the eyes above the smile
not smiling. The townsfolk complain
about flooded streets, basements awash,
but the farmers are silent
about their flooded lives,
remembering last year's drought,
all the dust—mud now—
the letters from the bank
in a pile on the desk.
How can one part of this round world
go so out of balance this way?

The familiar prayers have not helped.
They begin to ponder pagan rituals,
wonder what god or goddess
they can appease
to make things right again,
to drain the fields and dry the crops,
smooth and shine the feathers
of the bedraggled hens.

After two years
of everything gone wrong,
they would do anything.
By day they eye the best calf,
at night dream ancient images
of blood dripping over
a stone altar, Apollo driving
the chariot of the sun
a little closer to smell the sweet smoke,
dry the earth, and send the corn
crackling into its golden ears.

Early morning at the sink
in the old farmhouse,
rain on the roof
drumming like impatient fingers
on a table top,
the man shaving
cuts himself.

Slowly he walks outside,
shirtless into the liquid dawn,
raises his bleeding face in hopes
the rain will drink his blood,
be satisfied. He has little left
to offer. Tears are no different
from what is already falling,
and would be invisible to anyone
in the sky, looking down.

Ginny Grimsley

The Wreck

I see my father standing in Alaska.
He broad jumps over Canada
into North Dakota,
sits down on Wyoming
and shakes the earth
out of his boots.

He flattens the Heartland
and stumbles into Texas,
the eye of Hurricane Alicia.
He yells out, *Isn't there a feminist*
who can bring me a clean towel!?
while patting his armpits
with a thunder cloud,
shaving with a bolt
of lightning.

One day, he just walked out
into the Gulf of Mexico—
his coat pockets stuffed
with hardbacks of Louis L'Amour—
and we never saw him again.

A beach comber reported
that he was mumbling something
like *The correct pronunciation*
is 'Nee-chah' not 'Nee-chee!'

There was a search and rescue
ordered, and Carl Jung
in a red, rubber suit,
Plato, casting his huge shadow
over the boat, and Max Weber
volunteered for the job.
Max thought he was sure to find him
since he is a sociologist, too.

I watched for their return
on a pier off Galveston Island,
and when they came, dripping wet
and salt, they said they found the wreck
of his shoe where the blue
of the Gulf met the green sea
three miles off Cuba.

They made up fabulous stories
about their searches through the eyelets,
how they braved the fan of the tongue
and used their flashlights under the heel.

But the only evidence they were able to produce
was a Busch tall boy full of sand,
an unpaid utility bill from 1978
and lies, lies, lies.

Terry Savoie

Resurrection & New Life

That mangy, rat-tailed squirrel three boys cornered behind
a firehouse dumpster a block from the schoolhouse hissed

her falsetto cry for help until they managed to crack open
her skull, allowing the contents to empty like a spent party

balloon leaking its last breath of stale air. Triumphantly,
they tossed their morning's trophy onto a Formica-topped

lab table that had been covered with the day-old *Times*,
& then snapped open three dissection kits for scalpels

so they might unglove her fur casing before dropping her
skull into a porcelain pot of boiling salt water to loosen

the useless meat. Later, they stuffed her with cotton
balls before zipping her up neatly with needle & thread.

The rest of the day she rode just out of range of surveillance
cameras, inside the tongue-studded, orangey-haired kid's

backpack from where she popped out during lunch hour
when she became their bona fide Jack-in-the-box to scare

the underwear off any foxy sophomore girl who sidled by.
Now each time out the squirrel's cottony eyes snatch one

last glance back at this, America's wide & contented world.

Luisa A. Igloria

—First Place Poem—

The Birdcage-Maker

He comes up the walk to her door, whistling
and swinging his cartful of birdcages. They hang
from a pole in bare light, fingers of soft wood
whittled thin for holding in what could flutter
any moment from the field, through an open
window: brown sparrow, starling, plain house
finch drawn to the sill by a handful
of sunflower seeds. Kindness is the lure, a homing in.
Or perhaps it is the hunger—but is the one who waits
and watches, hungrier than the one who comes
to meet what's offered? In a faraway country
the maya's tongue is shaved so it can mimic
human speech. There are markets where you'll find
hawkers of small marsh birds, trapped and sold
in reed baskets. What follows after? A thimbleful
of water every morning, an oilcloth cover. They pine
away, think the cry of a train in the night's the loneliest
they've ever heard. When he pushes the gate open
and holds her hands, strokes her hair, she thinks she hears
the passing echo. What remembrance of himself
does he bring to harvest song from his new captive?
She wants to say: bring teak and rosewood, balsa,
orphaned twigs, pieces of driftwood found on the forest
floor or on a beach; here's a house big enough for both
of us, with arms that can catch. Could we be
each other's phoenix, at first all fiery feather, next
dressed in ashes; then lay down, cradling
the door of the soul, unhinged and flapping—
the only passageway through which
any winged thing, when it comes, might be born?

Karl Harshbarger

The Fox King

Every day that spring and summer when he and his friends weren't eating or sleeping or standing on the sidelines watching the older boys play pick-up softball on the vacant lot, Danny Morrison and his friends were at war, glorious war. Their battles ranged over the whole neighborhood, from the railroad trestle and the rock quarry on the far side of the orchard all the way to the Methodist Church and Masser's Grocery on the other side of Hancher Avenue, along hedges, across back yards, over fences, inside and outside of the construction of new houses, even between cars on the street.

Back then their weapons weren't very technologically advanced—just single shot water pistols. To compensate, Danny and his friends carried six or seven pistols in bandoleers of one kind or another their mothers had sewn for them. (Danny's best friend, Bobby Grettelman, carried a bandoleer that held fifteen pistols.) So the boys had to be careful not to get carried away in the heat of battle and shoot too soon or too often because when the inevitable happened and one of them ran out of water, he would have to leave all his buddies up on the front line and high-tail it way back to one of the buckets to refill.

As that summer progressed and Danny returned home in the late afternoon after running patrols, he found more and more cardboard boxes piled on top of each other in the living room and dining room and more and more empty spaces in the other rooms in the house. One morning, just as his parents had been telling him all summer it would happen, a huge yellow truck with "Allied" written across its side loomed up in front of their house, its air brakes hissing. Danny's mother stood in the middle of the front yard with a notepad while men in green overalls carried all those boxes from inside the house out into the truck. Danny's father came to the front porch where Danny and his little sister were watching and lifted Danny up and kissed him and then lifted his sister up and kissed her and explained again that he was taking the train on ahead to West Virginia to get things ready, but that he'd see them soon at their new home when they arrived with their mother in the car.

"Danny, you'll be the man of the family for a few days. You take care of your mother and sister."

"He's a real little man," said Danny's mother coming up onto the porch.

"He's a big boy," said his father.

A lot of the neighbors came over to watch. Bobby Grettelman came running up and gave Danny his very best squirt gun, the black one with the red fox head on the handle.

"You'll need it where you're going," he said.

Danny told him that he and his family would be back soon, maybe in three or four weeks.

"I thought you were really going away."

Bobby motioned over to the big moving truck.

"Maybe for a while," said Danny.

That afternoon Danny, his mother, and his sister took his father to the downtown Omaha train station. That night Danny and his sister had to sleep in sleeping bags in a bare bedroom in their house and then get up early for the car trip. Danny's sister sat in the front seat of the Packard beside her mother and Danny sat next to the window in the back seat beside all the boxes. He couldn't see past the boxes to the window on the other side of the car, but he spent a lot of time shooting out of the window next to him at passing motorists and cows and horses with Bobby Grettelman's squirt gun.

"I hope that thing's not loaded," said his mother.

"It is," said his sister from the front seat. "He's got water in it."

"Do not," said Danny.

"You just be careful now," said Danny's mother.

Danny had it figured this way. They were going out west. (He knew they were really going east—but that didn't matter.) They were like the pioneers. Out to the wilderness. And wilderness meant Indians. A wild and ferocious tribe. This tribe was known as the Fox Tribe and they dressed in fox skins and their chief was called the Fox King and they danced around bonfires and killed and scalped all the white men who dared to enter their forests. Only one man had a chance, thought Danny. And this man was himself—since he had the pistol with the secret red fox head on the handle.

At first, thought Danny, the Indians would try to kill him, too. But Danny would hold them off, firing away, killing lots of Indians. And then, towards the end of the battle, the Fox King would see the red fox head on the handle of the pistol and understand. All the fighting would stop and the king would come forward and dress Danny in fox skins, too. Then all of them, the king at Danny's side, would dance deep into the night around the huge fire to the accompaniment of drums.

The trip to West Virginia took three days. They stopped at two different motel courts on the way. Each time they had a cabin of their own. That last morning, once they had left the motel court, they seemed to go through endless valleys with trees going up on both

sides of the hills. There weren't any farms, at least not the kind Danny was used to with white houses and big barns clustered around silos, just what looked like shacks alongside the road and then woods. Danny kept a sharp watch for Indians.

Somewhere Danny's mother stopped at a deserted gas station and got out a white piece of paper his father had given her and studied it. Then she turned up a smaller road past the gas station, then an even smaller road, and then stopped at a lane going back into the woods. Danny saw a mailbox with "Claggen" written on the side of it, its door hanging open. His mother got out of the car and closed the door of the mailbox.

Danny had been looking for Indians because this looked like the home of the Fox Tribe to him.

His mother started the car up the lane and the car bounced and rocked along for what seemed like a long time with the woods on both sides until it came around a corner and Danny saw a white house with a pump in the front yard and off to one side a red barn and several sheds.

"Well, children, this is our new home," said Danny's mother.

"Where are the other houses?" said Danny's sister.

"There aren't any other houses."

"There have to be."

"Well, there aren't."

Danny's mother turned off the motor and they all got out of the car. Danny held Bobby Grettelman's water pistol in his right hand. His sister cradled her teddy bear in her arms. Just in back of the house a pasture led down to a stream and the stream curved into the woods and trees in the woods went up on both sides into the hills.

Danny's mother walked up to the door of the house and pulled a note from the crack of the door.

"It's from your father," she said and read it to Danny and his sister.

"'Welcome to the Claggen place. I'll be back around six o'clock. There's food in the fridge. Love to the children.'"

"When do we go home?" said Danny's sister.

"This *is* home," said his mother.

Danny's sister began to cry.

*

"All right, it's play time, you two," said Danny's mother after Danny and his sister had helped her carry in some of the things from the car. "Lunch in an hour. Out of my way now."

Danny slung his bandoleer of squirt guns around his shoulder, kept

Bobby Grettelman's pistol in his right hand, and started down toward the stream.

"Where you going?" said his sister, following him. She was still carrying her teddy bear.

"Exploring," Danny said.

"Can I go?"

"No!"

At the stream, Danny looked around for Indians to make sure it was safe and then got down on his hands and knees and filled up each of his squirt guns. His bandoleer carried seven pistols. That, plus Bobby Grettelman's pistol, made eight. Eight pistols would probably be enough for entering the forest.

He stood up and looked over at the woods. They seemed very big and different from the orchard back home near the railroad trestle and the quarry. And, for all he knew, besides ferocious Indians, there might also be bears and wolves in there.

Standing next to the stream in the sun, Danny was thinking maybe it wasn't so necessary to go into the woods, and he was also just beginning to wonder what his mother might be cooking for lunch when he saw his little sister walking down from the house into the pasture.

"Go away!" he yelled.

Danny knew she wouldn't follow him into the woods, so he started down the stream until it curved into the trees. The last time he looked back she was still standing there just at the beginning of the pasture holding her teddy bear.

The Indians were sure to have scouts up on the hills—perhaps young men his own age. He walked very carefully so as not to step on any twigs. Indians could hear anything, everyone knew that, and twigs were the most important things not to step on.

Suddenly Danny heard a noise above him. He stopped. Then, very slowly, so that Indian scouts watching from a far ridge wouldn't see any movement, he brought his gaze up. He saw two squirrels in the branches. They seemed to be playing a game with each other, scampering around and around the trunk of a tree, making little squealing noises. Then one of them made a series of small jumps and got itself up on one of the higher branches and ran out on a limb, the limb dipping with the squirrel's weight. The squirrel paused, gathered itself, then leaped. The branch of the next tree bent down where the squirrel landed, and the squirrel scuttled on down the limb toward the main trunk of the tree.

And Danny hadn't fired a single shot.

He took Bobby Grettelman's pistol out of the bandoleer and raised it up until the other squirrel scurrying out to the end of the branch

appeared over the barrel. Just as the squirrel jumped Danny pulled the trigger. He watched the squirt of water arch up, curve over and fall to the ground not four feet away from him. The squirrel ran down the branch of the tree towards the trunk and the other squirrel.

Well, he'd almost gotten that squirrel, Danny thought.

After he checked a strange-looking rock over to the right and that funny-looking tree stump to the left, he decided it was probably safe to move on. Except one problem: the stream went through a kind of narrow place with rocks on both sides. Everyone knew that was just the kind of place Indians used for ambushes.

Very slowly Danny went down the bank next to the stream, keeping a look-out all the time, squeezed past some rocks, and as he came up on the other side saw a blur of movement up on the hillside. An Indian.

Only it wasn't. It was a dog, zigzagging, nose to the ground, making sudden stops, and then a flurry of digging. Danny was just wondering whose dog it might be when a rabbit sprang out in front of the dog and bounded down the hill towards Danny, the dog exploding behind the rabbit. Both of them passed within fifteen feet of him, the dog yelping and rounding off the rabbit's quick corners, then both of them disappearing around the foot of the hill. Danny ran ahead, the bandoleer of water pistols slapping against his back.

He stopped. There in front of him, not seventy-five feet away and next to the stream, he saw a boy, a white boy, not an Indian at all, wearing long rubber boots, an old jeans jacket and a baseball cap. The boy reached down into a burlap sack and pulled a dark object out of it and bent down over the stream.

One thought crowded out the next inside Danny's head. First, Bobby Grettelman's water pistol didn't have any water in it. Next, this was wilderness, home to a ferocious tribe of Indians, fox dancers—Danny's father's woods, his woods, too, not this boy's.

But what to do? Tell him to get out?

Danny wasn't sure he could do that.

No matter what, Danny realized he needed to reload his pistol. As he slipped the bandoleer off his shoulder, the dog that had been chasing the rabbit trotted back along the stream and saw Danny.

The dog charged, ears down, fangs bared, stopping about ten feet away, snarling, edging closer.

"Shush that!" the boy said.

The dog cringed to the ground. The boy at the stream walked—not ran—up the stream bank, reached down, jerked the dog up by the scruff of the neck, hit him across the face, then again and again across the face, the dog now howling and whining, the boy kicking

him in the belly, the dog howling louder.

At last the boy stopped hitting and kicking the dog.

"That dog don't learn." The boy only glanced at Danny and went back to the stream and his burlap bag.

Danny had never seen a dog beaten like that. He had never seen anything beaten like that.

The dog started to crawl on its belly, or almost on its belly, over toward Danny, whining, its tail tucked back under its body.

"Go away!" Danny raised his fist at the dog.

The dog cowered away.

"Pay him no never-mind," said the boy from over at the stream.

When he was sure the boy wasn't looking, Danny threw Bobby Grettelman's pistol on top of the bandoleer of pistols already lying on the ground.

Then he walked over to the stream.

"What are you doing?" Danny said.

"Looking for them holes," said the boy.

He picked up his burlap bag and climbed out of the bank of the stream. Danny followed him along the stream until the boy stopped, put down his bag, and went over the stream bank again. The dog had started running up on the side of the hill.

"What kind of holes?" asked Danny.

"Rats."

"Rats?"

"Muskrats."

Danny leaned over the stream bank and saw a sort of hole about eight inches in diameter half-submerged under the water. The boy reached up to his burlap bag, pulled out a dark steel trap with a chain hanging from it, strained with his arms to pry the jaws of the trap open, pushed the trap half under the water next to the hole, pulled the chain away from the trap, and tied the chain around a root of a tree.

"Half a chance and them suckers'll drag the whole trap away."

The boy climbed up onto the bank, pulled a piece of white cloth out of the burlap bag, tied the cloth to a stick he found on the ground, and shoved the stick into the ground.

Danny followed the boy along the stream as he set his traps and marked each one with a piece of white cloth on a stick. The dog ran down the hill and across the stream.

The boy pulled out his last trap and held it in front of him. "Hold her this way, she'll git you. You want to open her that way."

He turned the trap around and pried the jaws apart, again straining with his arms.

"Now hit her one with that stick."

"There?" Danny said, looking at the round tongue at the center of the trap.

"Give her one."

Danny took a stick from the ground and hit at the trap and the trap snapped shut with a crack that shattered the stick.

The boy held out his hands to show he wasn't hurt. "Them's dangerous things."

Danny looked at the shattered stick.

"Got a fox once and that sucker chews his paw right off."

"His paw?"

"That ol' boy's gone."

The boy slung the burlap sack over his shoulder and started walking up the hill away from the stream. Danny followed along beside him. They were on some kind of trail, not a real trail, but maybe an animal trail. The trail didn't go straight but in and out of the trees.

"You on Old Dan Claggen's place?" the boy asked.

Danny remembered the mailbox at the beginning of the lane.

"Yes," he said. "But it's not the Claggen place now. It's our place. We bought it. My father bought it."

They were getting up toward the top of the hill. The dog ran ahead of them.

"Ol' Dan shot hisself two summers ago," said the boy. "Used that ol' four-ten."

They reached a fence alongside a dirt road. The boy threw his burlap sack over the barbed wire and climbed up and over the fence, right over the bag.

"My father's in advertising," said Danny. "He's the new president of a big firm in Charleston."

The boy reached down and pulled two strands of barbed wire apart until they were taut.

"You coming?" he said.

Danny wasn't sure, but it looked to him as if there was probably enough space between the wires.

"Coming," he said.

*

They walked along the dirt road with that dog jumping in and out of ditches on either side of the road. All the time Danny was thinking that in just a moment he would turn around and go back because soon his mother would call him for lunch and she would have no idea where he was, especially not that he was walking along

some dirt road with this boy.

Suddenly a whole pack of dogs, maybe seven or eight, came bounding around the corner of a lane coming out from an old house and sheds. The dogs jumped all over the boy and sniffed around Danny. At the entrance of the lane Danny saw a mailbox with the name "Claggen" on it.

"Is your name Claggen, too?" he asked.

"Most of us around is Claggens," said the boy, letting the burlap bag fall to the ground. "Git!" he said, kicking at the dogs trying to sniff at the sack.

The house had a kind of screen porch and the boy opened the door to the porch and sat down on a milk can and began to take off his rubber boots. Danny came inside, too, and closed the screen door. But it didn't make any difference because there were so many rips in the screen that the dogs came in anyway.

"Git!" The boy struck out and hit one of the dogs.

Danny had never seen so many discarded things in one place: an old washing machine, sprockets from a gear box, the innards of what looked like a radio set, several old red gas cans, a box of jar lids, ears of corn over in the corner, a pitchfork, an old horse saddle, car chains, kitchen stools, a pile of clothing on a work bench, and a big wooden wardrobe against the wall. Inside the house he could hear a radio playing, and looking through the door frame he saw several children, one without any bottoms on, and a fat woman sitting in a big easy chair.

"You know what this ol' thing is?" The boy held up a key between his fingers.

For the first time Danny saw the boy had a missing front tooth. Now that he had taken off his baseball cap Danny also saw he had red hair.

"No," said Danny, although he saw it was a key.

"Shhhhh," the boy said and jerked his head towards the inside of the house and put the key in the wardrobe door and opened it.

"Look at her."

Danny saw a rifle with a long barrel and a telescopic scope lying across a stand at the back of the wardrobe.

"My brother's," said the boy. "Remington. Thirty-thirty."

Danny couldn't take his eyes off the rifle. He had never seen such a beautiful one before.

"Wanna get some crows?"

"Crows?"

"Shhhhh."

The boy jerked his head towards the inside of the house again.

"She don't know nothing." The boy winked at Danny and leaned in closer. "We'll get ourselves some crow."

He lifted the rifle off its stand in the back of the wardrobe and—Danny couldn't believe it—handed it over to Danny. "Keep her down," the boy said.

Danny took the barrel of the rifle with one hand and the wooden stock with the other. The rifle was far heavier than he had expected. But he liked the smooth feel of the wooden stock and could smell the faint odor of gun oil. The bolt of the rifle was silver and curved down and the scope ran along the top of the rifle barrel.

"Here," said the boy. He had been reaching back into the corner of the wardrobe and now held out a green box with "Remington" printed across the top of it. He slid the lid back and Danny saw all the shells lined up, copper casings with lead tips.

"Big guys," said the boy.

He dug about ten of the shells out of the box, stuck them into the breast pocket of his jeans jacket, and put the box back into the corner of the wardrobe.

"Come on," he said, taking the rifle back from Danny.

As soon as they were outside the screen porch and the dogs saw the rifle, they went mad jumping and barking, some of them running off ahead into the trees and bushes, then lurching back.

"Git, git." The boy kicked at them, but they didn't pay any attention, even little puppies following along after.

"You hold her," said the boy, thrusting the rifle at Danny.

Again Danny took it. Again it was far heavier than he expected. Again he felt the smooth wood of the stock and the cool metal of the barrel. He wanted to tuck the stock of the rifle up against his cheek and look through the scope, but he didn't know if he should. Off to one side the boy had picked up a branch and was whipping one of the dogs. The dog had rolled over on his back whining and yelping. Danny thought the whipping would stop, but it didn't.

"You shush!" the boy said at the dog's yelping, but kept swinging the branch down on its stomach—all the time with Danny holding the rifle.

"Git."

The boy kicked the dog and the dog ran toward the other dogs and the boy ran at the other dogs waving his branch, managing to hit one or two and kicking a puppy that wouldn't get out of the way.

"Can't get no crows with dogs around," said the boy coming back.

He took the rifle back from Danny, shouted "Git!" one more time, and said to Danny, "We'll get some now."

First they walked past two junk cars and then along a fence past

some old hog pens toward the beginning of the woods.

"Down," said the boy to Danny.

They started crawling along the ground.

"There," said the boy.

Danny eased up beside him and looked up to where he was pointing. Sure enough, he saw some large black birds up in the top of a tree in front of them. They were hopping from branch to branch and one of them started cawing, making a lot of noise.

"Shhhhh," the boy whispered to Danny.

Danny watched him do it, the bolt pulled back, the copper shell with the lead tip pushed down into the chamber, the bolt thrown forward and locked down, then the butt of the rifle back in against the shoulder, the left arm supporting the barrel of the rifle, the cheek in against the rifle and the eye at the scope.

Lying beside him Danny also watched the big black birds hop from branch to branch. One of them flew to the very top of the tree and began to preen itself under the wing.

There was a terrible ringing in his ears, a stinging, and the bird, the one at the very top of the tree, exploded into a black smoke of feathers.

The boy pulled the bolt back, the copper casing popping out, and pushed another shell in and threw the bolt forward.

"Here, you!" said a man behind them.

The boy tried to cover his face with his arms, but a man stood over him pulling him up by the collar of his jacket and hitting him again and again through his arms until a stream of blood poured out of the boy's nose.

"Git," said the man, and the boy half-tumbled, half-ran along the fence row, the dogs following.

"That boy don't learn," said the man.

He reached down, picked the rifle up off the ground, pulled open the bolt, and ejected the shell. He was a large man with a puffy red face and red hair sticking out from under his green John Deere cap. One of the fingers from his right hand was missing.

"You on Claggen's place?"

Danny nodded.

"Git," he said.

Danny ran down the lane past the junk cars, around the corner of the lane, the dogs following, and heard a whistle and a "Hey!" He just kept running, thinking, now it will happen, like the stinging in my ears, and I won't even know it.

But he made it to the fence down the road, pushed through the barbed wire, and ran down the hill and ran and ran until he was at

the stream and saw the white pieces of cloth the boy had put on the sticks to mark his traps. Danny kept running until he saw his bandoleer with Bobby Grettelman's pistol on top. He fell to his knees and was picking up Bobby Grettelman's pistol when he saw the blood, a red mass, all over the back of his right hand. The fence, he thought. He had torn the back of his hand coming through the barbed-wire fence.

Danny held out his hand, looking at it as if it weren't really a part of him, when something moved. Indians! He looked, his bloodied hand out in front of him. Up the hill next to a rock, an animal stared back at him. A fox. It had red fur and a pointed nose and bright eyes with ears cocked forward.

The Fox King.

Slowly, ever so slowly, Danny lowered his hand until it touched Bobby Grettelman's pistol, brought the pistol up out of the bandoleer, and when the sights cut the fox's face in two, fired.

The pistol hissed and a few drops of water dribbled out.

Floyd Skloot

A Stable State

After breakfast, I place my mug of leftover coffee in the breadbox, shut the door and turn its knob. Then I walk over to the living room windows.

As always, these next ninety seconds, while my coffee reheats, are a splendid time to watch birds at the feeder. An evening grosbeak! No, too small; it's a goldfinch. Then there's a wren-sparrow-robin. It's chased off by a Stellar's Jay, the big blue loudmouth with a pointy crest that I never have trouble identifying. I'm from Brooklyn, New York, and though I've lived in these woods for eleven years now, am slow to learn my birds.

Five minutes pass before I realize I must have missed the microwave's signal. I walk back and open its door. The coffee is gone. Did I press the wrong button and vaporize the mug? I remember putting it somewhere that had a door. It's not in the refrigerator. Not in the oven or pantry. It's not in the garbage. By the time I locate my mug inside the breadbox, I've lost all desire for reheated coffee.

Since morning is my best time, mistaking the breadbox for the microwave before 9:00 a.m. alarms me a little. I've been doing fairly well for the past few months and the last thing I need is a relapse of my neurological symptoms. Nearly fifteen years after a viral attack damaged my brain, causing lesions that have left me totally disabled, I've learned how to maintain my health at a modest level of equilibrium. But it's a volatile equilibrium. As long as I don't get overtired, as long I don't contract some kind of infection or other challenge to my already-compromised immune system, eat right and control my expectations for walking or writing, I can function well for an hour or two every morning. I can say "out the window" instead of "at the elbow" when describing where I watch birds. I can use my key rather than a pen when trying to lock the front door of the house, can pick up a spoon rather than a glass of water when I intend to stir the simmering kale, find the way to my writing room without forgetting why I'm going there, track the movement of clouds without falling over. Minor achievements, I know. But each one is a triumph of homeostasis, and taken together they permit the illusion of sound health. A stable state.

But I know that the stable state is as shatterable as glass. Brain damage has cut across most of my body's systems: overheating can

lead to a week in bed, a cold can trigger months of neurological static, watching a tense movie can produce protracted fevers. When things are in balance, as they have been for months now, I feel graced by memory and by thought as they function with greater cohesion. Just last week, I was able to figure out how to operate the ratcheting clasp of a nylon cargo strap, a task requiring greater powers of abstract reasoning, memory, and physical dexterity than I can routinely command. The achievement left me giddy with pleasure.

When I'm in a stable state, I feel full of clarity in a way that I no longer take for granted because I have felt the emptiness of a blank mind, sometimes for months at a time. I have sprayed wasp-killer in my face, tried to cut my desk instead of the newspaper with my blue-handled scissors, said "crash the floor" when I meant to say "close the door." Intending to find a pair of jeans in my closet, I've folded back the sheets on our bed and felt baffled that my clothes were missing. I've wandered the woods around our house, utterly lost as soon as the rooftop vanished from sight, though I've walked those woods for more than a decade.

When memory and reason fail, when thoughts cannot cohere and time falls apart, I become trapped in a blizzard of fragmented images. A crazed, whirling storm of confusion, a kaleidoscopic cognitive white-out. Like a blind person who has lost all sense of visual cohesion, I forget what it's like to remember.

I want to avoid feeling that way again. This episode with the missing coffee mug could be an early sign of trouble; I might be slipping. But I don't perceive that clearly, which could be another sign. I blame the August heat.

The next morning, again in connection with my coffee preparations, I pour a full carafe of water into the filter basket rather than the coffee maker's water container. I don't even stop when the water begins cascading over the counter top. After sopping up the mess, I put the wet cloth in the freezer instead of taking it downstairs to the laundry room. I find it stiff and crusted with ice later that day, while looking in the freezer for a copy of *The New Yorker*.

Early afternoon, when the phone rings, I slip on my headset and say *Hello*, but the phone just keeps ringing. I speak louder, enunciating clearly so the caller will hear me, but the ringing continues and no one answers me. So I remove the headset and turn it around, placing the earpiece on my right side this time. Still no one answers. With the headset on and the phone ringing away, I walk out of the house to see if the reception might improve. Only when the answering machine picks up the call does the ringing stop, but the caller doesn't leave a message. Typical prank. Then it occurs to me that I'd ne-

glected to press the headset's On button.

Evidence is beginning to mount. But when my symptoms flare, the powers of reason I might use to identify them have become compromised. I become too muzzy-headed to understand what's happening, to piece things together. Moment to moment experience remains vivid but fragmentary; I can't see its patterns.

That afternoon, when Beverly calls from her office and I actually manage to answer the phone, I explain what happened: "The prune was empty," I tell her. Even as I say that, instead of what I meant to say (something like *the phone rang, but no one was there*), I know it's wrong. But it is an intriguing way to describe the earlier phone fiasco, and I recognize it as one of my more memorable paraphasias. For good measure, I add, "Nothing there." *The prune was empty, all right.*

After eleven years together, Beverly is attuned to the flare-ups of my symptoms. She often knows what's happening to me before I do. Rather than ask what I meant by "the prune was empty," she says, "You must be tired."

I think *she's always so perceptive*. But instead of speaking, I shrug my shoulders.

"How do you feel?" she asks.

"Fine. Except for this fire on my inner elbow."

"Fire on your elbow?"

"I mean hive. I have a hive on my inner elbow." I look at it as I speak. Right there at the joint, winking at me. A little too blistery and full of fluid to be a typical hive, and an angrier red at the base than most hives, but it certainly itches like a hive. "Must've been something I ate."

"One hive?"

I nod. "On my kneebow."

By the time Beverly gets home that evening, I've noticed several more hives on my arms and neck, and can feel others across my back. But my breathing remains fine and there are no other signs of allergic reaction.

We sit at the dining room table together and she touches a few of them. "You know what that looks like?" she asks.

I nod, but say "no. No way."

She goes and gets the books. *The Merck Manual of Medical Information* talks about crops of blebs, which sounds like something made up by Mel Brooks. But *The American Medical Association Family Medical Guide* has a photograph. A very gruesome photograph. A bumper crop of blebs.

I glance at Beverly's eyes, back at my hives, back at her eyes. It's a hot August night, summer's molten heart. "Prickly heat?" I say in

the rising tones of false hope. I'm beginning to realize why I felt so strange all week.

Beverly raises her eyebrows. She turns the book around to show me the photograph. That sure is what I look like.

"Couldn't be," I say. "I'm fifty-five years old."

*

Chicken pox is a disease of childhood caused by the varicella zoster virus. It's spread by airborne droplets, and because chicken pox is so common among children and because one attack confers lifelong immunity, nine out of ten adults in the United States are immune to it. Not me. Measles at four, German measles and mumps just before turning seventeen, catching both in the same grim May of 1964, but not chicken pox.

Beverly and I study our medical books. Descriptions of chicken pox in adults are alarming. According to *The Merck Manual of Medical Information*, which is beginning to irritate me, "The infection may be severe or even fatal in adults and especially in people with an impaired immune system." I'm adult; I have an impaired immune system. Under "Complications," there is a final encouraging note: "brain infection (encephalitis), which may occur toward the end of the illness or 1 to 2 weeks after, affects less than 1 in 1,000 cases" and "although the encephalitis may be fatal, the chances for complete recovery are generally good."

My system has already shown a penchant for allowing viruses to reach the brain. I close the book and realize that I must not be thinking clearly. I've taken a few isolated facts about chicken pox, mixed them together with my medical history and pre-existing viral-induced brain damage, and concluded that it's time to get all my personal papers in order.

Then I think, "Hell, we don't even know if I have chicken pox." I must have said that out loud, because Beverly leans over and whispers, "we know you have chicken pox."

I look at her and nod. Then we call the clinic and tell them we're coming in.

For twelve hours, my case seems mild. A few itchy spots, no fever, none of that deeply rooted feeling of being sick to the core, a pocked apple that splits to reveal runaway rot. This is plausible. My doctor long ago described the state of my immune system as *erratic*. Parts of it fail to function, other parts fail to stop functioning. It's simultaneously stalled and in overdrive. I seldom catch colds, but when I do, the results are exaggerated and I'm sick for three months instead of three

days. So at the outset, we can believe that the hyperactive part of my immune system is subduing the varicella zoster virus.

I sleep through the night, and when I wake, a phrase keeps going through my mind: "a disease of childhood." Maybe catching chicken pox at fifty-five is actually a message: Grow up! Stop writing about your mother already! No, no, I know illness is not a metaphor. I have read my Susan Sontag. This has nothing to do with being haunted by the taints of childhood. This is a virus. But still, I can't help feeling somehow *responsible* for contracting this childhood sickness. What next, a passion for pabulum?

Immunologically speaking, diseases of childhood—provided we survive them—help the body construct a healthy system of defenses. As Nietzsche said, "That which does not kill us makes us stronger." The immune system builds its protection against specific disease-causing organisms only by encountering, identifying and defeating them. We are not born immune to infections; we acquire immunity as part of the process by which we survive infections.

Childhood infections such as diphtheria, whooping cough, or polio were routinely fatal until medical science learned to induce immunity by immunization. But the other ubiquitous infections, often mild when encountered in childhood, can be devastating in later life, perhaps because by adulthood the immune system's capacity has become overloaded by a lifetime of other challenges.

As the first day progresses, proliferating blisters begin colonizing my torso, arms and legs. I feel their spread as a flaming tautness across my face and back. A Crop of Blebs! A Storm of Vesicles! I get them in my mouth, ears, nose, throat. On my eyelids. My, um, organs of elimination and procreation. By mid-morning Saturday, the second day after onset, I am in the hospital emergency room, where the admissions specialist rattles off a sequence of horror stories about adults she has known who came down with chicken pox.

*

I am sick for two months. By mid-October, though my face and torso still show pox scars, I feel recovered. Actually, "recovered" doesn't do justice to what is happening. I feel terrific. Strong, clear in the head, capable of focusing. I write a check, correctly record the amount, subtract to get a new balance, and my calculator confirms that I've done it all correctly. A minor miracle. I open the refrigerator and, lo and behold, the newspaper is not in there, but the apple I'm looking for is! I feel better than I've felt in five or six years, which was the last time I'd been able to walk a mile, so I go out with Beverly to walk for

twenty minutes. I even try walking for short periods without a cane, something I haven't done since early 1989.

It's bizarre, as though the bout of chicken pox has somehow reset my immune system, re-organized my chemical poise, and stabilized me at a level higher than I'd been at in years. As though, jolted by the invasion of varicella zoster virus, my defenses became less scattered and erratic, pulled together by the challenge.

The healing process remains essentially mysterious. It is, to some, a kind of warfare in which invaders (viruses, bacteria, toxins) must be defeated by the combination of bodily defenses and medical reinforcements (drugs, surgery). To others, healing is the exact opposite of warfare, a re-establishment of harmony between body and spirit, or body and environment. It's about restoring the body's relationship to the vital energy of the universe. Some approach healing by seeking to suppress symptoms, attacking the apparent cause, while others approach it by working with the symptoms rather than against them, supplementing the body's effort to heal itself. Still others approach healing by trying to correct their attitudes or their way of life, or by prayer, by pilgrimage, appeasement. Or by a combination of all these approaches.

Me? All of the above, plus writing. I have spent fifteen years chronicling the ebb and flow of relapse and remission, the juncture where healing and managing illness meet. Now, in the ethereal zone of this sudden, pox-induced remission, I decide that the time has come to stop writing about illness. Telling this enigmatic story has brought me to a kind of clarity: having written about getting sick and finding my way back toward a stable state, having dealt with the ongoing fluctuations that make my stable state so volatile, my task must be to get on to other things. Not to focus on the minute adjustments or variations in my day-to-day health, or on the isolation that illness produces, but on what I encounter out there in the world. On the community and the flow of life from which I so easily become disconnected. Otherwise, obsessed with illness, I remain its hostage.

Like the virus that seems to have set me straight for a while, the world outside works its mysteries on me too. I have ignored that for too long, caught in the timeless stasis of chronic illness. Writing about life outside should be my next work, and this essay should be my Farewell to Illness.

Beverly and I drive down the hill to take a walk in "downtown" Amity, the village of 1,100 located two miles from our house. I can walk a mile again, provided I walk on the flat land below rather than the hillside where we live. At Third and Trade Streets, we see a Model A Ford waiting to turn left. It's a hiboy two-door from the Hoover

years, gray as the hair and old corduroy cap the driver sports. He wears thick goggles that sparkle in the sun, a bushy mustache and a gleaming smile. It's as though he's emerged intact from a 1931 motor company advertisement. A Nash the color of glazed brick pulls up behind him and toots its horn, the driver waving a gloved hand. The Nash is joined by a four-door Hupmobile and a Dodge touring car driven by a man who looks asleep behind the wheel. In the passenger seat, a woman is all but hidden behind a floppy turquoise hat. They are all waiting for a Packard sedan to turn right, but the Packard is waiting for us to cross Trade Street and we are waiting to see what else emerges from the sun's glare. Another vintage car? Theodore Roosevelt?

Here we are, all frozen in time, the noon light like a gloss laid over what we've chosen to do with a Sunday morning, watching a past that none of us knew in person assemble itself before our eyes. From somewhere, perhaps a CD player hidden inside one of the cars, perhaps from a fold in the ether, we hear the strains of Hogey Carmichael's "Star Dust," and take that as a signal that it's time to cross the street. If we stay where we are, pretty soon we'll have to start dancing the Charleston.

In the small village park across from the cemetery, more than a hundred cars are crammed together. Beverly and I stroll among the drivers, finding ourselves caught up in the spirit of passionate play. The cars are organized by era, and while we are intrigued with the lovingly restored cars from early in the twentieth century, it's the cars from the 1950s and early 1960s—our years of childhood and adolescence—that keep attracting us. A '61 Mercury Comet, like the one Beverly's family owned, which was wrecked because Fritzi, the dachshund, got himself wedged under her mother's feet. An Edsel, like the one owned by my Driver's Ed teacher during the summer of 1964, which had its automatic gear shift buttons located in the center of the steering wheel; a black '52 Buick, like the one my father drove through Brooklyn summer streets with the windows shut and the interior radiating heat; a '57 Chevy Impala I remember my brother coveting. Beverly and I walked around the park for most of an hour, smiling.

Back home, I begin an essay about the year 1957. What was going on around me during that pivotal year in my life, when I was ten and everything I knew began to change.

The essay came quickly, which is unusual for me. Then I wrote an essay about the cities and villages where my four immigrant grandparents came from, and an essay about Achill Island, off the west coast of Ireland, where Beverly and I spent the summer of 1994. The outward-looking focus of this new work, each essay a chapter of a

book-in-progress, seemed evident. I felt myself heading in a new and promising direction.

Then I had another relapse. Not apparently triggered by something outside, a cold or an exposure to some allergen, and not by becoming overtired or stressed because I was taking care to avoid just such hazards. No. I don't know why my health fell apart again, or remained compromised for another six months. But I do know that *I'm rot slowing to night around it*. I mean, *I'm not going to write about it*.

Anna Shearer

—First Place Story—

Limbus Patrum

Jane is heading south. She can see all the other people in their cars having conversations. Some of them are smiling and laughing with each other while they drive. She notices most cars have a man and a woman inside. Jane can't decide if people are always driving cars in pairs or if it's this particular day. Perhaps they all had the same frightening dream and are terrified to be alone. Three hours from Fort Worth, when she's still in Oklahoma, Jane pulls over at a rest stop and sits at a plastic picnic table surrounded by empty ketchup packets. Someone put a sticker on the bench that says I SAVED SEVEN LIVES: ASK ME HOW. It's the end of May and it's ninety-three out. It appears Jane is only sitting still, doing nothing, but really she is breathing in the heat with a sense of amazement and fear. This is the kind of heat that kills people, she thinks, this kind of heat is therefore murderous. Jane isn't entirely sure if moving to Texas is the best idea, but she forgets what it feels like to understand and think through plans. A brown dog comes up to her, tentatively, and licks her tennis shoes. She acknowledges it in the same way she does anything lately—without reason or any practical explanation.

The dog follows her to the car where it climbs inside, settles in, and looks out the window. It seems to be part of the rental car. This red two-door Nissan with its sunroof seems more like the kind of car a person would die in, rather than the white Honda Civic her husband had been driving. When she first saw the rental she thought it was a joke they were playing on her, giving her a car that others zip around in, or crash into things with, or kill people with. When she left Chicago yesterday she bought a pack of cigarettes and she drives and smokes one now without any sort of satisfaction. She quit smoking with her husband last year because he wanted to lead a healthy lifestyle involving vegetable smoothies and no addictions. She knows all about the last time she saw him. It was May 3. It was Wednesday. It's the last day she's named. The days that come after are without label or category and they have absolutely nothing to do with time. That morning he came into the bedroom and said, "I've lost ten pounds! Ten!" He stood before the mirror and smoothed his shirt over his stomach and took a look at his arms and legs. "Do I look any differ-

ent?"

"Not particularly," Jane had said.

"Well, I sure feel different!" he said, excited.

Jane misses the car she shared with her husband and she misses sitting next to him in the car changing the radio stations or touching the back of his neck. Jane hopes the feeling of grief will completely overtake her and kill her. She remembers learning about a culture where the widowed woman throws herself into the flames of her husband's funeral fire. She thinks she'd rather feel her flesh burning than the hollowness she feels now. The dog next to her has no collar or apparent expectations. As Jane drives she feels she can see the exact distances between things: from tree to tree, from cloud to cloud. Everything seems to be connected by thin, translucent lines of white.

Elise, Jane's older sister, lives in an apartment complex with an intimidating gate, keeping everyone out, or maybe keeping everyone in. A few miles outside of Fort Worth the billboards begin to appear. They say: TUNE IN! ELISE AND NORM IN THE MORNINGS! 97.9 THE RANGE! The photo of Elise is so big, her monstrous eyes looking down at all the people. At her side is a short man wearing a cowboy hat, holding his hand up in a wave. So many people drove around in their cars, listening to Elise, their eyes catching her eyes, when they glanced up. Jane finds the station even though her sister's show ended hours ago. Jane and the dog rode along for a while listening to a Willie Nelson marathon, with a DJ interrupting from time to time to say "Fort Worth's classic country—all three Hanks, both Georges." Elise has lived in Fort Worth for five years. Before this she lived in California and read the news for a syndicated morning show where the DJs played practical jokes on each other and gave out free cars to callers who answered questions correctly. When Elise tells Jane about her fame and success Jane only feels slightly sorry for her, because Elise is alone and often lonely, and she has a lot of money that she uses to buy silly, unimportant things.

Jane finds a call box on a wooden post in a bed of yellow flowers. She dials Elise's number and soon the big black gate slides open to reveal Elise on the other side, wearing a broad white sun hat and a dress printed with tropical flowers. She waves at Jane. "You're here!" she sings. "And you're driving a funny sports car!" She points at a parking spot and Jane pulls in, rolling down the window. The heat immediately hurts her face and makes her eyes water. "It's not a sportscar," Jane says. "It's just a red car."

Elise looks inside the car. "What?" she says. "Why is there a dog with you?" She opens the door and looks at the dog, who steps out of

the car and into the parking lot. A car comes in, the gate opens slowly, and the dog walks confidently through the gate and away. "Where is your dog going?" Elise says, frowning.

"It's not my dog," Jane says. She's struggling with her purse, her car keys, her sunglasses, trying to gather all these things together, but she can't do it fast enough and the car is filling up with heat. She can feel it in her lungs, pumping into her blood. Her sister isn't even sweating. Jane stands outside the car and shouts, "Hey! Hey!" towards the dog, who doesn't respond. Jane feels like crying because the dog rode all this way with her and now just leaves. She feels silly, though, because she doesn't even know the dog's name, and she has no way of calling it back.

"Is this all the stuff you brought?" Elise says. "No U-Haul or anything?"

"I sold our apartment as furnished. I kept it all in there. I even kept the paintings on the walls and the decorations and trinkets. I left it all there for the next couple!" Jane starts to laugh. She is thinking about a woman who looks just like her, lounging on the couch, and a man who looks just like her husband, flipping through channels on the television.

"Why are you laughing?" Elise says. "Are you all right?" Jane is still laughing. Elise looks at her, troubled.

"It's *hot!*" Jane says. "I'm exhausted. I left the hotel at five a.m. I'm just so hot!"

"Well come on," Elise says. "I have air inside." Jane can still see the lines. They are strong and make a variety of angles. Everything seems to be connected by these lines except for her and Elise. They are walking beneath and through these lines, affecting nothing. Elise shows Jane the apartment proudly, taking her from room to room. At the end of the hall is Megan's room, Elise's daughter, who is in Austin for the summer at a camp for gifted artists. It's painted light blue. On the ceiling are clouds and around the light in the center is a sun with wild orange and red flames. "Megan is pleased you'll be staying in her room," Elise says. "She really doesn't mind at all. She's coming home for a visit next weekend, but then you can have the couch." Someone had put all of Megan's things into cardboard boxes in the closet. Jane drops her bags on the floor.

"How's Megan doing?" Elise and Jane never talk about Megan. The sisters are nine years apart. Often something breaks down when they try to communicate and they confuse each other in conversation. All Jane knows about her niece is that she likes to paint. "She's fine," Elise says. "Typical teenager stuff—phases, silly ideas…you know." Elise wrings her hands together. "Listen Jane. I'm glad you

decided to stay here for a while."

"Me too," Jane says.

"I just feel awful about what happened. I know I'm terrible about these things, but if you want to talk about it, about what you're going through…" Jane understands her sister is talking to her, but she can't really hear the words, or realize they are meant for her. The words float, meaningless, above their heads.

"How about the living room?" Jane says.

The living room has large glass doors that open up to a patio where people can sit and do things. The apartment is cool and the central air blows gently, like a breeze in Jane's hair, as she stands looking out the glass doors. The view is of the parking lot and all the apartments on the other side of the parking lot. Jane sees a woman on her balcony, sitting in a chair with her feet up. She is surrounded by plants and is reading a large novel. The woman can't see the man in the apartment next to hers. He is sitting at his dining room table, eating a sandwich by himself. Jane says, "Do you think these people even know about each other?"

Elise comes over. "That woman is *always* out there!" she shouts, too loudly.

There's a place where the highway splits—Fort Worth one direction and Dallas the other. The cities are only fifteen minutes apart, Elise explains later, but they are completely different. Jane feels nervous when she thinks about one highway leading two ways, because people might reach to change the station or look around for a tape cassette or scratch an itch and they'd end up in a completely different place.

During the days Jane sits inside because she's afraid of the heat. She watches television or looks out the windows. The first day she stares at *Jeopardy*! on mute until she realizes she's only reading the answers and she'll never hear the contestants say the questions. What about the deaf, she thinks, but then she stops thinking about the deaf. Elise has to be at work at four every morning. This is wildly insane to Jane, who normally goes to sleep around that time. At eight every night Elise starts to yawn and she makes a cup of tea, then tells Jane, "It's late! I'm off to bed." Jane sits on the couch, stunned, thinking: my sister goes to bed when it's still light out, like a child. Elise comes home at two every day and drops her bags and keys on the table and hurries to the kitchen where she eats a salad with cucumbers and radishes. She puts on a bikini and grabs a beach towel and her sunglasses and says, "Jane, why don't you come out to the pool with me? Why don't you relax?"

If Jane isn't watching TV she's sitting at the dining room table with piles of newspapers that she gets from the gas station across the street. She tells Elise she's looking for apartments, or jobs, but really she's reading the obituaries. She's looking for her husband, or someone like him who has died, because she wants to pretend that it's normal for a thirty-three year old man to die suddenly and unexpectedly on his way home from work one evening. Jane sees plenty of photographs of teenagers who die in car accidents and also many old people who die of natural causes or people in their forties who die after battling some illness. She never sees anyone like her husband, which means there isn't anyone like herself, sitting here how she is, in this raw state without the marks of time. All these people around her are alive.

At night it's still unbearably hot but at least there is no sun. When Elise goes to sleep Jane wanders around, walking down the middle of the parking lot, which is a half mile loop around the complex. Cats move around with heavy tails and large paws. When Jane looks at them they dash beneath cars or around dark corners. Jane sees people in the gym on the stair-masters and the treadmills, their bodies moving as if attached to strings. The pool at night is the color of the sky at day. She watches people having parties on fifth floor balconies, crowded together drinking bottles of beer. Sometimes these people split into pairs and walk hand in hand to the hot tub, which is beneath an alcove of vines. The water is the color of steam. Jane can see the skyline of downtown Fort Worth, which is only a mile or so away. Each building outlined with such a pleasant line of light. When Jane looks through the black gate she can see cars passing each other, slowly driving into town or slowly driving away. This seems to be a city where no one ever really has to do anything, which makes it easier for Jane to ignore time. The temperature is always exactly the same and there is no process she needs to be a part of.

Elise is very aware of time. Every day Elise entertains thousands of people as they drive to work in the mornings, and she grows stronger every day as she works out in the gym, and her tan is constantly fresh and golden, and her muscles are always soothed from the laps she swims in the pool, and her apartment is always well kept, with fresh flowers, and plump pillows on the sofa, and the faint smell of lavender. Jane feels uncomfortable in the blue bedroom with the strange shadows of a little girl. At nights, when she's done walking, she plays a game called "a year ago" and she pretends upon a day, from morning until night. If she holds still long enough in bed she falls into a sort of trance, where she thinks about the space her husband took up when he was standing in the house or in the universe overall, and how,

when she was near that space, she was part of the heat his body generated, and part of the disruption his energy created. She makes herself remember the details of his face until she hears Elise's alarm clock going off at three-thirty. People in their cars listen to Elise and laugh at her stories and her jokes. What Jane knows is that people also listen to Elise when they get in car accidents. Maybe some of them are listening to her voice when they die. This is one of the great privileges of being alive, Jane thinks, the ability to be a part of the entire order of things.

It's the night Megan is coming to visit. She's getting a ride from a sixteen-year-old sculptor. Elise is in the kitchen cooking dinner for the three of them. Jane has been setting the table very slowly, taking long breaks to look out the glass doors that lead to the balcony. Elise is telling Jane about the man she is seeing, an ophthalmologist. He performs fifteen lasic surgeries every day and he tells Elise stories about people who cry to him with happiness because of all the things they can see. Suddenly Megan appears in the doorway with a backpack and a nice tan and white-blonde hair. "Mom!" she shouts. Elise and Megan rock a little bit in each other's arms. "Hey Megan," Jane says. She doesn't want to get too close, but Megan comes up anyway and hugs her, whispering, "Aunt Jane, oh, Aunt Jane." That's when Megan starts to cry. She sits on the couch and puts her hands over her face. Elise sits beside her and pets her hair and says, "Sweetie, what is it?"

"I just can't believe what happened. It's so *sad*. I want to go to my room. I need to go to my room." Megan stands up and hurries to her room, where Elise and Jane hear her crying for some time. Elise looks like she might cry as well. Jane decides to help Elise cut up some vegetables for a salad. She concentrates on the carrots, and the cucumbers, and the fresh parsley. She is only standing here, chopping vegetables. She is only standing in this kitchen cutting things into smaller parts. Elise is taking deep breaths while she leans over a cookbook reading a recipe to herself. Jane knows what Elise is thinking. Elise has said it before, to Jane, shortly after the accident. Jane doesn't want to hear it again and she doesn't want to explain again that some people have terrible grief-stricken crying fits and other people only feel completely numb and shocked. Megan comes out of the bedroom and stands in the kitchen. She is wearing a lot of little pink plastic bracelets that clink together as she runs her hand over the edges of the counters. Her eyes are lined in red and her face is swollen. She says, loudly, "Aunt Jane. I have to ask you something."

Elise looks up. "Megan, now come on. I don't want to hear about it right now."

"Mom!" Megan says. Her eyes begin to fill with tears again. "I just want to know!"

"Megan, some people don't want to hear about it. Especially at times like this." Elise is wearing a yellow sundress and her arms look strong and shapely in it. Megan is close to her mother's height and is just as tan. Jane stands in between them cutting the vegetables, feeling like the opposite of the two of them, with no color to her skin. "Hear what?" Jane says.

"Megan wants to know if you've found Jesus," Elise says, giving up. She turns the water on in the sink, running her hands under it, waiting. When the hot steam comes billowing up from the sink she starts washing the dishes quickly, scrubbing out the mixing bowls with a plastic brush.

"More importantly," Megan says, "I want to know if you love Jesus. If you really, really love Him, and I want to help you realize how much Jesus loves you."

"It's time to eat, all right? Let's eat," Elise says.

During dinner Megan explains her love for Jesus. She says if Jane only lives to serve Him, then she'll never feel despair again. Jane has no idea what to say to this girl. When Megan speaks about God her face becomes calm and commanding. Elise keeps trying to change the subject, but Megan is talking quickly, with more and more enthusiasm. Jane concentrates on her food because Megan is getting to the part about heaven. "And if you'd only understand that your husband could have gone to a place of pure joy. That he could have made the decision to be a good Christian and ended up in paradise!"

"So if he's not in heaven, where is he?" Jane asks.

"Well. It's unfortunate. But your husband wasn't serving Jesus. He made a poor choice in his life. Which means—"

"Megan!" Elise stands up, slams her hands against the table, rattling the glasses and the dishes. "Shut your mouth now! Do you hear me?"

"Mom," Megan says calmly. "I'm only trying to help her."

"You aren't helping anyone by telling them their husband is in hell! Now get to your room! Now! Go!"

Megan stands up and gathers her plate and her fork and knife and takes a piece of bread and puts it on her plate. She looks at Jane and Elise. "It could be a lot worse, Mother," she says. "I could be out fucking strangers, like you were doing at my age." She takes her food into her room and shuts the door. Jane thinks of her beneath the blue sky and the painted sun, praying. Jane used to be nervous whenever she thought about the Bible and God and the people who love Jesus. But now she hasn't been thinking about God at all. She has no thoughts, whatso-

ever, about God.

"I'm so sorry, Jane," Elise says. "I should have warned you."

"When did this happen?" Jane says. "How did it start?"

"She started reading a lot, and hanging out with some bad influences. They brought her to retreats, to Bible studies, to Sunday school. At first I thought it was only a phase. Now I don't know what I'm supposed to do about it." Tears come to her eyes. "I'm so sorry about what she said. She just wasn't thinking."

For some reason, Jane doesn't feel hurt, or even angry. She only feels irritated that the little girl believes there is a grand plan and all the people down below are moving along, reciting lines. The girl's religion gives order to the plan, it arranges the days, it explains cause and explains effect. "I've got to get out of here," Jane says. "I'm sorry. I'll be back later."

Jane decides to go downtown. It's early and it's Friday night. She finds a parking garage, then walks up and down the city blocks. She sees a park with a giant sculpture of a man holding a briefcase and wearing a cowboy hat. Some tourists are gathering around taking pictures. One of them reads loudly from a book with an American flag in the shape of Texas on the cover: "The sculpture in downtown Fort Worth epitomizes the Dallas/Fort Worth area with the combination of business and the Old West." Jane can't figure out if the people in this city are aware of the rest of the country. She also can't decide if they are merely living their lives or if they're conscious of the production they are putting on. She sees old women who are so tan their skin is folded over on itself. Policemen on horses nod at the citizens who are sitting outside of restaurants drinking margaritas. Women wearing bikini tops walk down the street holding purses. There seems to be an art festival in the park in the middle of it all. Most of what they're selling is made of turquoise or of clay. There are some paintings of horses, American flags, or buffalo. A man sitting in a rocking chair is wearing a plaid shirt and a cowboy hat. He's carved many cows out of blocks of wood. A woman next to him is smoking a cigar and fanning herself with her hand. Jane finds a bar where young people are sitting together in booths. The girls are wearing pastel tube tops and some of them are sunburned. The boys are wearing t-shirts with the names of places on them. Jane sits at the bar and asks the bartender about the beer called Shiner. A man sitting next to her hears her, then says, "You certainly aren't from Texas, are you?"

"I'm not," Jane says. "I'm from Chicago."

"Yank!" shouts the man. He has a mustache and his eyes are clear blue and glittering. He has a thick, white mustache. "So what do you think about Texas?"

"I don't know," Jane says.

"You just wait, honey," he says. "This state you're in, it'll grow on you. Once you're in it long enough, you'll never be able to leave."

Even though it's Saturday and Elise has the day off work she still can't sleep past seven. Jane wakes up on the couch to the sound of clattering dishes. "Jane," Elise says, when she sees her sit up. "I want to clean the living room closet this morning, and later I'm taking Megan to the dentist. You can sleep in my room if you'd like, where it's quiet." Jane goes to the end of the hall and curls up in her sister's bed. It's a king sized bed and the closet door is lined with mirrors. Elise has told Jane all kinds of stories about the men who have slept in this bed with her. Jane tries not to think about the cowboys between these sheets with her sister. When she wakes up the apartment is empty. She goes into Megan's room to find a change of clothes and sees rows of crosses on the walls and also a framed picture of Jesus on a cross. She looks in the closet, inside the boxes, and sees more crosses, more clutter. She tries not to look for too long. On the bed is a Bible with an index card resting on top of it. Jane picks it up, reading the handwritten words: Acts 26:18: *To open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins.*

Jane leaves the room. She wants to go swimming. She looks inside Elise's closet. In the corner is a basket with fifteen or twenty swimsuits—the tops mixed up with the bottoms, strings curling around each other. Finally she finds a one-piece and goes to the bathroom to put it on. Elise has a row of six candles that are all purple. She has her necklaces hanging in pretty lines. Jane doesn't look in the mirror because when she sees herself she sees her husband. Jane thinks of all the single people who spend time looking at themselves and all the married people who spend time looking at each other. Now she doesn't know exactly where she belongs. The suit fits nicely and she finds a beach towel in the living room closet, which was spectacular in its organization.

At the pool a man is reading a book about the LSATs and a woman is on her stomach with a spray bottle of baby oil at her side. It's June and nearly one hundred. Jane takes careful breaths because her lungs resist the heat. A country song is playing from somewhere. Jane looks around for a while until she sees a speaker designed to look like a rock, sitting in a flowerbed. Jane goes through the gate over by the small waterfall where a fat baby is pushing around a large plastic alligator. A woman who is either the mother or the sister of the baby is on her cell phone, saying, "Of *course* he wants to. You know he wants

to!" None of these people have anywhere to be, Jane thinks. She puts her feet into the water. She is sweating, but now her feet are freezing, and she gets a strange sensation of being in two places at once. The baby pushes the alligator at her and Jane grabs its nose and pushes it back towards the baby, who smiles. The water is only knee deep here, but Jane supposes the baby would still drown if it fell face first and couldn't get a footing. Jane wonders what Megan would say about this baby who wasn't serving Jesus in the slightest. She would probably tell Jane the baby was doomed.

Jane goes over to the side of the Olympic-sized pool. Two little boys in red shorts are hitting water at each other's faces. One of them cries, "It hurts!" Jane wonders when she slides into this cold water if the shock will stop her heart. When she was a little girl she'd imagine herself catching diseases from the things she touched. Growing fur from touching a cat, growing bark from touching a tree, adopting other people's thoughts by bumping into them accidentally. Now she wishes the water would take over her mind so she'd lose her memory and have nothing left but the things she could see now: that baby over there, the woman on the beach towel with her fingertips in the water, the way the heat seems almost colored when it moves in waves over the pavement. She goes under and can only manage to swim a few laps before she needs to take a break. She spreads out on her towel and doesn't realize she's fallen asleep until her sister wakes her up, saying, "Jane! We've been looking everywhere for you!"

Megan has on a light blue swimsuit that looks like a uniform for a swim team. "Hello Aunt Jane!" she says, smiling, walking towards the water. Jane sees her toes are painted a silvery blue. She dives in and begins to swim effortless, graceful laps.

"You're at the pool!" Elise says. "How great!"

"I suppose," Jane says.

"Isn't it nice out here? It's like a vacation every day. Look around! Is this not like a vacation?" Jane wants to tell her that people on vacation don't feel terrified and alone. Elise spreads her towel next to Jane. "You're not wearing any sunscreen?" Elise says. "You can't just come out here under the Texas sun completely unprotected. This isn't Chicago, you know." Elise pulls some SPF 8 out of her bag and starts spreading it all over Jane's shoulders and arms. "Listen, Jane," Elise says. "I've got this work thing tonight and I think you should come. I've been talking about it on the radio all week. It's a show down at the White Elephant Saloon? In the Stockyards?"

"Where they run the bulls," Jane says. She remembers reading about it in the newspaper. It's the main attraction of Fort Worth. Last week one of the bulls ran over an old woman who was taking a pic-

ture of it. She hit her head and died in the sand. Jane likes this story because she thinks an entertaining rule for the world would be that everyone gets a photograph of what will kill them.

"That's right," Elise says. "The old downtown. The streets are made of dirt down there. It gets pretty wild at night. There's tons of restaurants and a lot of open windows, and rooftops to drink on. Megan's going to volunteer at some church bingo night. We could just go for a few hours if you don't want to stay long. All I really have to do is introduce the band."

"That sounds fine," Jane says. "Sure."

"Jane?" Elise says, after they've been lying there a while.

"Yes, Elise," Jane says.

"Do you ever think that maybe he isn't really dead? That he's out shopping for a new pair of pants, or he's down the street, filling up a car with gas, or he's taking a nap in the sun or something?" This question is interesting to Jane. She has never thought about his being alive right now. She only thinks about the time when he was alive, and the time when he was dead. She tries thinking about him alive right now, about the things he might be doing: touching some moss with his palms, drumming his fingers against his desktop, or closing his eyes and picturing Jane's face. Jane can't remember what, exactly, people do when they're alive, but those things all seem rather nice. "I haven't thought about that," Jane says.

"This woman on the show, the one who does the sound board? Her husband died a few years ago and she told me that's what she does to help herself." Jane can't decide if this trick might help her or destroy her and the word *fragile* runs through her mind. The way Elise is speaking to her now makes Jane realize the seriousness of her condition. She's become a widow overnight. People must see her as heaving, always, towards the ground. "Jane?"

"What?"

"What do you do? When you think about him, I mean. What do you think about?"

"I think about how big the world is. About how there are so many billions of people." Jane closes her eyes and listens to the water. She can hear the sound of Megan swimming and then she can hear her breathing when she comes up to the edge to rest. Megan is probably thanking Jesus for this day. Jane doesn't want to thank anyone. Jane sees these days and wants to hold them to the light. She wishes she could see through them, to the other side, at whatever must be there.

That night Jane sees her sister on stage. Elise says hello to the crowd who all cheer wildly for her. She thanks them for making her

station the number one station in Fort Worth. Jane is getting used to the taste of Shiner. The people in Texas are very proud and this beer is one of the many things they are proud of. The band begins to play and a young woman next to her says, "This shit is honkey," to her friend, who is wearing what looks like a bandana for a shirt. The people are all sweating but no one notices, or maybe they just don't mind. There isn't one face that isn't shining. Elise is dancing with a tall man wearing tight jeans and cowboy boots and a large belt buckle. Jane smokes a cigarette and drinks her beer, watching the dance floor until a man comes up and asks her what her name is.

"I'm married," Jane says.

"All right," says the man, walking away.

A woman next to Jane shouts, "How long you been married? We just got married." She grabs her husband who is sunburned and drunk, wavering slightly. He kisses the air near her forehead, saying, "Yup." Jane feels very weary, looking at them. She can't tell if it's happiness or just life in their eyes. Emotion, lately, confuses Jane. She saw a commercial for Bayer aspirin yesterday where an old woman in sweat pants was clutching her knees in agony. Then she took an aspirin and started to push a child on a swing in a seemingly effortless way, shouting at the camera: "I won't let pain get in the way of my life!" Jane stands at the bar wondering if, in many years, she'll think like that old woman, with the same sort of triumph. When she tries to imagine her future the thoughts turn around and come right back to her—out and back, over and over, until Jane gives up and avoids any ideas of her life outside this place.

In the morning Jane and Elise are sipping mimosas and reading the newspaper. Megan comes home from church wearing a white dress with a collar of lace. She looks like a small doll. "Did you have fun at Bingo last night?" Elise asks. Megan sits down and helps herself to some fruit salad. "I did," Megan says. "A man who was probably eighty-seven won three hundred dollars. He could hardly walk. Someone had to help him in and out of the door." She stops talking and folds her hands in prayer. Jane looks at Elise who is staring at her daughter in utter helplessness. Megan's prayer comes out as a tiny whisper that settles, ghostlike, over the table. "Did you two have fun last night? Out at the bars?" She hisses the word "bars," drawing out the s.

"I don't know how to answer that without sounding like someone who has sinned," Elise says.

"Mom. We are all sinners in the eyes of God. I'm a sinner too. We were just talking about this at our service last week. I have to help out at Bible study. I'm in charge of eight children and sometimes I have

bad thoughts."

"What kinds of thoughts?" Elise says, alarmed.

"Well, I'm afraid I might cuss, or accidentally start to shout or lose control. I talked to Pastor Jon, though. He told me at my age the devil is tempting me more than any other age. He told me whenever I hear the devil in my ear I'm supposed to pray to Jesus to help me."

"Oh my god," Jane says.

Megan glances at Jane, opens her mouth as if to say something, then decides not to.

"Megan," Elise says, "you know I don't appreciate it when you talk about the devil. And I've told you I don't like this Pastor Jon giving you advice about your life. You're only fifteen! You shouldn't be thinking about the devil!"

"Mother," Megan says, sweetly. "I'm not worried about the devil. I know how to fight the devil and avoid temptation. Pastor Jon tells me to avoid any situations where I might be tempted. For example, I don't watch television, and I don't read trashy magazines. I don't allow myself to be alone with a boy. This way it's easier to defeat the devil. If it upsets you so much, maybe it's because you're worried about the devil yourself."

Elise is getting frustrated. "Megan. Please. Can't we just have a normal conversation?"

"I don't think you understand, Mom. Aunt Jane, can't you understand? It's my own mother, and every time Pastor Jon tells me about the lakes of fire I think about her, and the fact, *fact*, that if she doesn't choose to serve Jesus she's going to burn for eternity!"

Jane finishes the rest of her drink, then reaches across the table and slaps Megan, hard, across the face. "You're just a kid," Jane says, breathless. "You don't know anything about death. And you certainly don't know anything about hell. Don't try to tell me about hell." Megan gets up from the table, furious, her hand to her cheek. She looks at Elise, who, in a tired way, waves her hand in boredom at Megan.

"Get out of here," Elise says.

"Mom!" Megan says. Her face is getting red and Jane is pleased to see her so out of control. "Go to your room and pray for us," Elise says. "Go on, get out." Megan rushes to her room and slams the door. Elise pours more champagne into their glasses. "Come here," she says to Jane. "I want to show you something."

Jane follows Elise to her bedroom. Elise sets her glass down and slides open the closet door. She pushes aside some clothes on hangers and reaches behind a stack of shelves and pulls out a large, leather portfolio. She struggles with it and yanks on the handles, knocking

over the clothes piled on the top shelves. Some clothes drop off their hangers to the floor. She sets the portfolio on the bed and unzips it.

"What is it?" Jane says, folding it open.

"It's Megan's. It's her artwork."

Jane starts to leaf through the paintings. She holds up one that looks like a self-portrait, a face with large eyes and colored, scaled skin. "This is amazing," Jane says.

"She did that when she was nine," Elise says.

"*Nine?*" Jane says.

Elise comes over and starts piling the paintings up. "Seven, seven, six, five, nine, and this. Look at this one. She was four." The painting is of a woman, looking out a window, towards a dark ocean. Jane holds the painting in her hand. The brush strokes are like tiny footprints. There are probably eleven shades of gray just in the woman's hair.

"She's in a museum. In Santa Cruz. It's for gifted children. She's got five paintings hanging there. Last year she won a national award for talented and gifted children. She's already got her college paid for." Elise sits down and takes a long drink. Jane keeps flipping through the paintings, thinking about the eyes of the girl, and her mind, the way she must see the world as if through colored glass. Jane remembers hearing a Christian preacher on her college campus protesting abortion. "Your body is not your body," he shouted at Jane. "Your hands are not your hands. Jesus purchased your body when he died for you!" Jane remembers thinking how important it was for that man to believe everyone was owned, that no one was in charge of themselves—which eliminated fault, and coincidence, and chance.

"Elise," Jane says. "Where did she learn how to paint like this?"

"Nowhere. I mean, I certainly didn't teach her. Her father certainly didn't stick around long enough to teach her. No one taught her. I asked her once, and she gave me this." Elise unzips an outer pocket of the portfolio. She gives Jane an index card, with neat letters written in blue ink. Jane reads: "John 15:16. *Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you, and ordained you, that ye should go and bring forth fruit, and that your fruit should remain; that whatsoever ye shall ask of the Father in my name, he may give to you.*" Jane puts all the paintings back and zips the portfolio up. Jane knows some people believe in divinity and some people need to believe in grace. Jane can only look at the paintings and see paint and canvas. They're only paintings, Jane thinks to herself. They're only some pictures that a little girl painted.

Jane decides to go for a drive. She's doesn't know how long she's been in Texas but she can't seem to remember ever being anywhere

else. She drives west to Abilene where she parks the car and walks around in the heat. She sees a building on the corner that says Grace Museum over the door and for a moment she gets the sense it could be some kind of church. Instead, inside, there are children running around a giant dinosaur made entirely of bones. Jane walks a bit unsteadily. She's not used to all the people around. The museum is like a giant gymnasium and all the children's voices echo up to the ceiling. She looks at a colorful map that explains how the museum is laid out. The first floor is a special exhibit called "Dinosaurs of Texas!" The second floor is the history of Abilene and the train stations. The third floor is artwork. Jane wanders through the history floor. The middle of the room has a miniature model of the state of Texas with a tiny train that moves over the green and brown like a snake, stopping occasionally at cities that light up. When the train passes through Abilene a bell sounds—ding!—which unnerves Jane and makes her think of people who must hear trains before they get hit by them. Upstairs is a display of Native American Art, Mexican Art, and Southern Art, which are mostly landscapes and eagles flying over landscapes. These artists are only people who decided to pick up a brush and start to paint. Jane is only a person walking through the room, looking at the paintings. The floors are made of wood and Jane thinks the sheen of the polyurethane is much more lovely than the paintings. Jane wonders if she should get a job soon. She can't imagine her life becoming days lined up in an orderly fashion. As of now, the days have no names. All time is in a heap, non-categorized, the way eternity might feel. Jane looks out a window towards the back of the museum, which seems to have a kind of yard. There is a group of boy scouts crouching in a circle around the edges of a flat pit of sand, all holding shovels and brooms. Jane goes down to find out what they're doing. A sign says: "Dino Dig Site: Help Unearth a Replica of a Fossilized Juvenile Hadrosuar!" Some parents are standing around in the sun, yawning. The boys are on the outskirts of the dinosaur pit, waiting for something, their eyebrows lowered in concentration. A whistle blows and the boys begin to shovel and sweep the sand away. Soon Jane can see the bones appear. She sees ribs first, then a neck, then a tail. The dinosaur is shaped squarely and is much larger than any human. The boys are very excited. Someone keeps shouting, "Careful! Careful with the bones, boys!" The bones are white and the sand is almost red. A man comes out and looks at the scene, confused.

"What's happening?" he says. Jane recognizes him from the history room, where he was intently watching the tiny train.

"They're playing," Jane says.

"What a silly thing to do," the man says.

But the faces of the boys are serious. One boy in particular looks like he might lose control he is concentrating so hard, sweeping so carefully. He seems to think if he doesn't remove every grain of sand before a certain amount of time passes he will die, or perhaps his parents will die. Jane remembers learning a funny statistic: Every day we have a one in one-hundred-thousand chance of dying, which also means that every day we do hundreds of thousands of things, accidentally, to avoid our own deaths. Maybe he had looked away from the road, out towards the sky. Maybe he'd looked down to change the station, or to find a cassette tape, or to scratch an itch. The highway splits, he looks down, and ends up in a completely different place.

—Interview—

Peter Ho Davies on Finding Meaning in Fiction

"I know a story is done when I finally figure out what it was about to begin with and why I wrote it in the first place."

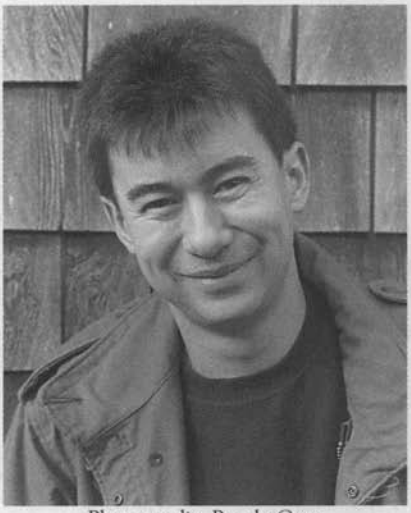

Photo credit: Pat de Groot

Born in Britain to Welsh and Chinese parents, Peter Ho Davies is the author of the story collections *The Ugliest House in the World* (1997) and *Equal Love* (2000). His work has appeared in *Harper's*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, *The Paris Review*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Chicago Tribune*, among other places, and his short fiction has been widely anthologized, including selections for *Prize Stories: The O. Henry Awards 1998* and *Best American Short Stories 1995*, *1996*, and *2001*. *Granta* magazine recently named him among its twenty Best Young British Novelists. *The Ugliest House in the World* was awarded the John Llewelyn Rhys and PEN/Macmillan Prizes in the UK as well as the H. L. Davis Oregon Book Award in the U.S.; *Equal Love*, a *New York Times* Notable Book of the Year, was a finalist for the 2000 *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize and the 2001 Asian American Literary Award. Davies is also a recipient of fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown. He has taught at the University of Oregon and at Emory University and currently directs the MFA Program in Creative Writing at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor.

Davies, whose first novel is due out next year from Houghton Mifflin, met up with *Fugue*'s editor, Ben George, at the Palmer House Hilton in Chicago during this year's AWP Conference. Despite a truncated and busy overall schedule, he was generous enough to grant a couple of hours of his time just before catching an afternoon train back to Ann Arbor. After a few false starts in the bar and lobby, the two ducked into a side entrance of the empty fourth-floor ballroom. Beneath the opulent Victorian drapes, they holed up in a quiet cor-

ner with their coffee, and Davies spoke about the craft of writing both the story and the novel and about some of the blessings of teaching.

Ben George: You've said before that your parents were not really storytellers and that your inspiration to be a writer didn't stem from their influence. What was the first thing that drew you to the idea of being a writer? I know you really liked the science fiction of Philip K. Dick and Kurt Vonnegut early on. Was it the experience of reading their work that made you want to write?

Peter Ho Davies: I suppose I should first of all correct that. I know I've said that about my parents, and it's true that they are not storytellers. Even less so now than they ever were when I was a kid because now they really worry that something's going to show up in my fiction. But even though they never told stories, they told snippets, scenes—this little detail, that little detail. I think maybe in my mother's case she just never followed through on a whole narrative, and in my father's case, maybe he just had a kind of reticence. So in a way the fictional instinct comes because they weren't storytellers, to fill in the gaps between those little snippets they used to tell.

But yes, I think I've said elsewhere as well that science fiction was what I read and what I loved when I was a kid. I'd just been a junk science fiction reader, but at the age of thirteen I found this little book in Britain called *Who Writes Science Fiction?*, which comprised interviews with about thirty science fiction writers. Now, I'd never met a writer or known anybody who wanted to be a writer and, in part, because my father was an engineer, I was planning to go on and do a Science degree. Many of these science fiction writers, though, had science backgrounds, and it made writing seem more plausible. I could certainly imagine myself being an engineer like my father; I could imagine myself going to college and studying Science. And those guys having done those things and then become writers afterwards made being a writer seem more imaginable. It was the way they talked about their writing, just the passion and the joy involved, that turned me on to the idea of it, but it also made it seem possible, frankly.

BG: Did you ever attempt any science fiction yourself?

PHD: Oh, yeah. Dreadful, dreadful efforts. I think if I had been any good at it, I might still be doing it. People tend to give science fiction and a lot of genre work a hard time—and sometimes it deserves it—but it's just really difficult to do. So yes, as a teenager, as a kid, I wrote two really dreadfully derivative science fiction novels, which I sup-

pose I still have somewhere in Britain.

In *Equal Love* there is a story called "The Hull Case," which is a UFO abduction story, and a small part of the pleasure of writing it was a little reconnection with science fiction. I could at least, for a month or two, pretend that I was once again working that whole vein.

BG: In a sort of "top ten" list of story collections, you recently mentioned books by Chekhov, Ray Carver, Alice Munro, Julian Barnes, Denis Johnson, and others. Have any of these writers exerted an influence on you? What do you find compelling about their work?

PHD: I doubt any of us are the greatest people to ask about our own influences. I suspect critics and readers are more able to observe those than we are, sometimes to our own fright. But I might as well talk about Barnes because I think he's slightly less of an obvious choice; many writers would name the others on that list as influences. I think the thing about Barnes, particularly about *Flaubert's Parrot*, is the constant invention. I suppose I derive some part of my broader aesthetic from Barnes, which he, in his own right, derives from Flaubert—the idea that Flaubert never wrote the same book twice. And I feel that's pretty true of Barnes as well. In *Flaubert's Parrot*, he never writes the same chapter twice. Every section of the book is inventive in a new way.

I tend to like that in writers, but I also tend to like it about the short story form itself. It feels to me like a form in which story by story you can do, or attempt to do, a completely different thing. There are always those invidious comparisons between a novel and a story, which inevitably are weighted toward the novel. It's better and fairer to compare a collection to a novel. One of the things a collection arguably has as an edge over a novel is its ability to range even more widely than a novel—in time, in space, in voice, in character. So when I came across that idea that Barnes derives from Flaubert, it was very influential to me and very encouraging to me and also dovetailed (even though I'm talking about this in aesthetic terms) with a very practical concern of mine, which is that I've often found myself blocked as a writer when I've tried to write the same kind of story twice. Because the inevitable truth is that the first draft of the new story always sucks compared to the last draft of the old story (laughing). You can never win in that comparison. So if the new story, in tone or in form or in effect, wants to recreate something of the last story, it feels like a losing proposition to me. Which is, of course, not to say that there aren't resemblances in my work. But there's still a pleasure in at least fooling oneself into thinking one is doing a differ-

ent thing story by story. So that's certainly one of the things I derived from Barnes.

BG: As some readers may or may not know, you have a science background. Your first degree was in Physics. Do you find that this background, this way of thinking, enhances your ability to dissect and analyze a draft once you're finished, to determine whether it's "working," for lack of a better term?

PHD: That's a good question. When I studied Physics and I sat through my three-year degree, I hated quite a lot of it and afterwards for a long time felt that those three years were wasted years. But after about five years, after I'd studied literature and begun to write a bit more and had come to graduate school, I began to think there was a certain kind of problem-solving mindset that the math of Physics had taught me—working through equations, which is the part of it that I was relatively good at. And that, I think, can be useful, in revision particularly. It's not so useful in the generation of work, but that kind of ability to break down a story into component problems can serve one to a degree.

The danger is that you start to think of stories as entirely modular. When I talk to my students about revising stories, I talk to them about what I often call the United Nations approach to revision—and I know I was prone to this myself—where you parachute into the trouble spots in the story. You think there's just a little local problem here. *If I fix it, everything will be hunky dory*. And of course you fix a local question, and even though you may be fixing an existent problem, chances are that the fix will have global ramifications for the rest of the story. So that, even though you tried to dissect the story in this pseudo-scientific way—even if you make changes on that basis—those changes are going to have effects beyond your control. But I suppose that's probably also the pleasure of the story growing as you write it and write through it. As you revise it, it morphs on you. So I like to try and bring that scientific mindset but also be willing to set it aside or at least be able to recognize its limitations or, if you like, my frustrations with it.

BG: How many drafts does it normally take you to complete a story to your satisfaction? Does it vary widely from story to story?

PHD: It varies enormously. Some come very quickly. I can think of two or three only that would fit that mold. The first draft of a story called "The Silver Screen" that I wrote for the first book very closely

resembles the finished draft that's out there at the moment. And I just published a short-short in *Harper's* that basically came over a couple of days. The opening lines of the story came to me while I was jogging one day and the story just spooled out from there pretty swiftly.

But those are major exceptions to the rule. The truth is that they take anywhere from a few months to a year or two to write—not consistently or continuously, of course. If they don't come relatively swiftly, very often there's some point where you look at it and say, this just sucks. And then you put it in the desk drawer and you forget about it, and a year later you're working on something else and then you think, boy, this *really* sucks and that other thing that I thought sucked is not half as bad as this (laughing). So you pull it back out. Hopefully there's an inspiration or a new thought or something else that's come to you that somehow dovetails with that story. You often get a second wind on a story. You have one idea that carries you a certain distance and you play it out, and you hope and look for that other little idea that will connect to it and give it a bit more depth. A lot of stories evolve like that. Then, of course, there's the next question of when you know they're done, which is also incredibly problematic.

BG: That leads to my next question. There's a famous saying that stories are never finished, only abandoned. One of your stories, "Think of England"—which sort of picks up on your story "A Union"—appeared in *Best American Short Stories* in 2001. Yet despite such acclaim, you said, in your comments about the story, you weren't sure you were finished with it. When is it time for you to move on from a story? And since you've been publishing successfully, have you written anything that you ultimately had to give up on, that—for whatever reason—you couldn't bring around?

PHD: "Think of England" was something of an exception for me, in that, at the time I published it as a story, I thought of it as a byproduct of the novel I was working on. At one point it had been the beginning of the novel. I had been struggling to find other ways into the material that I was working on, different places to start, and I thought that if I treated this story as an island and moved it away from the novel and got it out there in its own right, that it might be easier for me to move on from it in the novel. But of course then it gets published, it gets picked up for *Best American*, and I'm thinking, I better get that back into the novel now. And so that story is now again the opening chapter in the novel after a long prologue. It's found its way back. So it feels to me like there's unfinished business there because I

feel that there's so much more to come. The story, as it was as a chapter, has also gone through some revision to tighten it up, to pull out more of the threads. But the sense of its not feeling finished was less a reflection of its story nature and more a reflection of its pseudo-novel-chapter nature.

I have heard this idea that, where stories are concerned, we finish them when we just get bored with them and want to get on to something else. And I get a little of those feelings, but it doesn't necessarily mean that I'm done with the story. Often the boredom is a good sign. It means that if I'm bored now, then I need a new inspiration to push the story on a little bit further. It feels like boredom is often the antechamber to that next stage. And you have to go through it, I think; without the boredom you wouldn't be motivated to reinvent the story, as you need to often in revision.

What I've begun to think more and more is that I know a story is done when I finally figure out what it was about to begin with and why I wrote it in the first place. Very often you have a hypothesis of that. The British phrase I tend to use is that a certain idea or a notion will "tickle me." "The Hull Case" was like this; the idea that an early UFO abduction happened to this mixed race couple seemed very interesting to me. But only in the very last draft of that story did it occur to me that the experience of alien abduction paralleled descriptions of slave narratives and the abduction from Africa, which for my African-American character makes perfect sense and really crystallized that vague sense I had all along that the story might have something to do with race. Only as I saw that idea come together in the very final draft did I finally think, *that's what the story's been about all along*, which isn't to say that it's only about that or that it has to be about that for every reader. But for me it felt like one of those moments where you think, *that's been right there in plain sight all along. How have I not seen it before?* It feels like part of why I wrote the story in the first place; I just didn't know it at the time. And so when I write with that sense of discovery, that recognition, that's when I know the story is done. Because then I know why I wrote it.

I suppose as writers that in the revision process we eventually have to put away our conscious intent and say, well, what's the story's intent? What's it telling me? That's probably why that year of thinking it sucks is great because when you return to it, you forget what you meant. You read it again as though it's someone else's work, and you apply the same critical skills you'd apply to anybody else's work—*what is this guy driving at? Why this repetition of words? Why that particular phrasing?* These considerations may have had no conscious decision a year ago, but there's a consciousness in the language itself

sometimes. You do this over-analysis, and it yields—hopefully—some kind of discovery. In "The Hull Case," where they take out the guy's false teeth, that's just a researched detail about somebody who'd been abducted. It seemed comical as well as inventive, and I'm sure it just stuck out to me as a great thing. But of course the examination of teeth makes perfect sense within the context of a slave narrative, within the context of the buying and selling of slaves. Did I know that when I stuck it in? No, not remotely. Except, maybe, somewhere, not even at the back of the brain, but somewhere two feet behind the brain (laughing).

To answer the last part of your question, there are plenty of things in my work that have not been finished. But I'm a great believer in things coming back from the dead. One of the ways I fool myself into cutting things from stories—you know, we all hate to excise things that we love so much—is with this idea that everything that I love will eventually find a place somewhere in my writing life. It's a trick, but I imagine the entirety of my writing output, however many more years I have doing that, as a jigsaw. You're given various pieces, you pick some up, and you try to jam them in a part of a jigsaw. But they may not fit there, so you just hold that piece, you file it away on the hard drive, and maybe it plugs into another story or another chapter of a novel years down the line. Misfit pieces come back, it seems to me, and find their own home. I've never quite given up on anything, but I do cannibalize things fairly viciously from time to time.

BG: Point of view often presents a dilemma to the writer, and your story "Relief" seems an adroit exercise in how to handle this aspect of storytelling. We travel rather seamlessly from the consciousnesses of Wilby to Bromhead and even briefly to the batman (the table attendant) at the end, with a nice sideways movement into his character that feels Chekhovian. How did you conceive of point of view for this story in particular, and how do you think of it for your writing in general?

PHD: The Chekhovian movement was probably what was most in my mind, particularly towards the end in that sort of Chekhovian spin-out, which I think is a lovely device for creating that sense of an ending, that feeling of moving to a slightly different space. One of the ways I think we can resist a story closing down too much at the end is to shift point of view, which opens the story up. In the writing of "Relief," I wanted to get away from my own concept of contemporary soldiers—professional soldiers. I had friends who pointed me towards Babel's "My First Goose" and Chekhov's "Gusev." "Gusev," of course,

has that extraordinary and very famous point of view shift, the classic Chekhovian spin-out at the very end of that story. In a very contained and much smaller way, that was one of the things I had in mind when I was writing "Relief."

Where point of view is concerned in general, it's a slippery subject, and I wish I had a good, well-developed answer to this question. What occurs to me now is a story, the title of which I can never remember, by Somerset Maugham. It starts in the point of view of a young wife who suspects something is up with her husband, something's wrong. *George is acting strangely*. And of course we're in her point of view because the source of tension in the story is her not knowing, it's the mystery of George, so we wonder, as she wonders, what's up with her husband. And then he enters the scene, and, it being a Somerset Maugham story, in the course of their conversation, he reveals he's having an affair with a native girl. She—the wife—storms off-stage, out of the scene, locks herself in the bedroom. And we stay in his point of view because now his point of view is the one that serves the tension in the story, because he's wondering, *what's she doing behind that door? Is she calling my mother-in-law? Is she packing her bags? Is she thinking of suicide?*

Today the workshop is so attuned to inconsistencies or movements in point of view. But the first time I read that story, the action and drama were so gripping that the point of view shift was somewhat invisible to me. And it was invisible, I'm sure, because it was simply serving the action, so that ideally, if a point-of-view shift is not noticeable—if it serves the action and the action, in fact, disguises it—then it seems to me pretty successful. Rather than lay down hard and fast rules for myself or students when I think of point-of-view shifts, I'm inclined to say point of view is more a question of what you can get away with. There's a lot of technique in the Maugham story because, of course, the transitional space between her point of view and his point of view is a much more objective scene of dialogue between them, where they feel like they're on stage together. So there's a kind of buffer zone between the two points of view, which I think is very nicely handled. I think the struggle we all have when we're talking about the idea of consistency in workshop is that whenever there's a slippage with point of view, we think we can see the puppet master fumbling a bit behind the stage. But the mystery of fiction lends itself to a fluid handling of point of view.

For me the only viable definition of a short story is a narrative that somehow manages to contain more than it ought to be able to in twenty pages, or even fifty pages, or five pages—whatever it might be. Just to date myself and throw myself back to my geeky science fiction

roots, I always think of short stories the way I think of Dr. Who's time machine, the Tardis, which those who have watched those shows remember is spatially bigger on the inside than it is on the outside. That seems like a perfect image for me of what I want a short story to do, to somehow exceed what ought to be achievable in that limited space.

BG: One hot topic now seems to be fiction vs. creative nonfiction—the issue of truthtelling and how the boundaries between the two genres have become more blurred over time. Your story "How to Be an Expatriate" originally appeared as an essay in *Grand Tour* and was later listed as a notable essay in *Best American Essays*. The only significant difference I can remember between the essay and the story is the addition to the story of marital infidelities. Can you talk a bit about fiction vs. non- and your desire to have this piece succeed in both forms?

PHD: For me the distinction is probably that my wife wouldn't let me include the details of marital infidelity in the context of memoir because they are entirely fictional—as I always like to stress. I admire creative nonfiction as a form a great deal, but it's not something I can contain myself within. My instinct is always to move in the fictional direction. So in a way I tend to think of those two drafts, if you like, as just that. Drafts. The story evolves from some autobiographical material, and its memoir form is part of that evolution and still within the ambit of autobiography. But by the time it found its later form, which I think of as its final form—or its more complete form—I had pushed it into fictional territory. A lot of the issues I wanted to explore—and I think I was always interested in exploring these issues when I started to write about expatriatism or someone thinking about expatriatism—had to do with the way that, away from home, away from one's family and one's immediate cultural and social background, certain kinds of moral inhibitions are reduced. I used to see this amongst expatriate communities in Malaysia and Singapore just a little bit. Not that I spent a lot of time in them, but this was my sense from a distance. You become a little unmoored. It's the same feeling we all have when we go on vacation to a distant place. We think, oh, nobody knows me here. I can do anything. It's that feeling, but magnified, so that you're no longer on vacation but you're living in that place. Your whole life has that I-could-do-anything quality. I was interested in exploring that. Infidelity felt like the place to push it the hardest. So the story just feels like this growing outwards from the original autobiographical material, which of course is complicatedly

processed.

Much of it is about the details of me coming to the United States, coming to Boston, yet I wrote the story when I was in Atlanta, after I'd moved from Massachusetts after having lived there for four years, and I was feeling a kind of culture shock in Atlanta, a culture shock in which I was really struck, for the first time, by people thinking of me not as a European but just as a Yankee. That was a bizarre notion to me. But all of those experiences were also very much driven through my sense of being an expatriate when I'd lived in Malaysia and Singapore for a year, about seven or eight years prior to the writing of the story. It was those two or three displacements that ended up coloring this story. And some of the expatriate experiences are not my own directly but those of family members who talked about them. For example, there's a moment where the character talks about going into a McDonald's feeling homesick. And even though McDonald's is an incredibly American institution, it's also such a global phenomenon and so identical everywhere, that you can find a kind of solace, wherever you are in the world—even if you're riven with culture shock—by walking into a McDonald's. This was something that a Malaysian cousin of mine had said of Kentucky Fried Chicken, which is huge in Malaysia. So when homesick or when lonely in Boston, as she was, she would go to KFC and feel at home, which is ludicrous and paradoxical and not quite my experience but one that I believed in completely and one that made total sense to me.

BG: Half of the stories from your first collection are historical in nature, and you've written more historical fiction since. How do you do your research for these stories?

PHD: In my historical research, the fiction always comes first, so I tend to do enough research to be able to be inspired or have my imagination fired. But sometimes you can do too much. With that story "Relief," the text I read must have been a thousand-page definitive history of the entire Zulu Wars, with a good detailed chapter on Rourke's Drift. But I read the whole thing and probably read it, in fact, by way of prevaricating from actually doing the writing. Afterwards, I really couldn't write the story for three or four or five months. I made several abortive attempts that didn't even feel like drafts; they felt like pre-drafts, nothing that resembled the final story. And I realized it was because I needed that time, those three, four, five months, to forget ninety-nine percent of the book I'd read. Only the one percent of detail that had stuck with me, that had become my memory in a way, ended up in my story.

Other pieces have come in slightly more individual ways. I wrote "The Silver Screen," my very first historical piece, in part because that was the first year I'd been in the U.S., the first year I'd been reading a lot of contemporary American fiction. I'd been very struck by the work of Tim O'Brien and several other writers who'd written about Vietnam. It was incredibly raw, powerful, devastating material to me, and nothing in the modern British experience approximated it. Although the Malayan Emergency is only a very rough approximation, the more I thought about it, the more it seemed like a way of exploring some of those territories or a way of seeing what it would be like to explore some of those territories. Again, in that case—as is often true with a lot of these historical incidents—the Malayan Emergency feels like it's a little bubble of history; it's not a very well-known incident, which provides a degree of license. I would read one or two books on each topic area, and then I knew at that point that I knew more than most of my readers would. That idea of "you write what you know" becomes modified to "you write what you know more about than most of your readers." The research gives you that authorial edge that you need.

BG: What about actual physical research? In order to write the scene at the shooting range in "What You Know," did you feel you needed to go to one yourself, like the narrator?

PHD: You know, that story had a very odd genesis. I had gone to a shooting range with an MFA student at Oregon, one of the poets there who had owned a couple of guns and had taken a few of his classmates and a few of my colleagues to a gun range with him. And I thought, well, we're writers. Sooner or later we're going to stick a gun in a story or a gun in a novel. I didn't know anything about guns or firing guns, so my wife and I went along with him. Later was when the high school shooting took place in Springfield, which is basically the next town over from Eugene, where I was teaching. That was very odd to have just gone and used a gun and then have this thing happen afterwards. So in this case, the research, if you like, for the story came remotely before I knew the context—the rather dreadful context—I eventually placed it within. Then the struggle was to find a sense of how I could connect the materials, though it seemed obvious that there would be some way of drawing them together.

BG: Among some writers, there seems to be a bias against historical fiction. Henry James, for example, felt that it was impossible, for all intents and purposes, to project oneself into the consciousness of some-

one who lived in a different era. He didn't think the writer could achieve what he called "*the* real thing...the invention, the representation of the old *consciousness*—the soul, the sense, the horizon." How would you respond to such criticism?

PHD: Good God, how would I respond to Henry James (laughing)? Geez. Well, just because a thing is difficult, even approaching impossible, doesn't mean that we shouldn't try to do it. Which does not mean to say that we *achieve* it. I don't claim to necessarily do that, but the effort is worth something, the attempt is worth something, the approach is worth something, even if we don't necessarily arrive fully in that respect. Yes, the truth is that we can never completely truthfully or completely authentically enter the mindset of a character removed from us in time. But the same could be said for a character removed from us in space, a character removed from us in class, a character within our own contemporary society removed from us by gender or by ethnicity or by race or by language. We write fiction to close those gaps or at least to suggest the possibility of closing those gaps.

BG: Along those lines, James did feel that "to project yourself into the consciousness of a person essentially your opposite requires the audacity of great genius." So much of your writing seems to evince this genius. Your fiction is especially inclusive—women, blacks, gays, transsexuals, drug addicts, all groups that have been, or still are, on the fringe of society in some way. Being or having been somewhat of an outsider yourself, do you consciously try to achieve this quality of inclusiveness in your fiction?

PHD: I think I'm probably more interested in other people than in myself, but I also feel that I understand myself, to a degree, by trying to explore others fictionally. All these people, my characters, are other than me, but they're also all me in a certain sense. They're aspects of me or they're the worst-case-scenario version of me or, in some instances, perhaps the best-case-scenario version of me. They're the strong me, they're the weak me, they're the witty me, they're the sexy me. Who knows? So there's always that reach, that stretch.

I don't know that the outsider issue is particularly special to me. I do feel, and have felt, myself to be an outsider in various ways. When I was studying Physics and wanted to be a writer, I felt myself an outsider within an academic circumstance. When I was growing up in Britain, in *England*, with a Welsh father, let alone a Chinese mother, I felt like an outsider. When I came to the U.S., I felt like an outsider to

some degree. But it also feels to me like the short story as a form is characterized by people writing about outsiders. It's the Frank O'Connor idea of the short story being wonderfully attuned to writing about the submerged population group.

One way in which any group or voice is submerged is if it doesn't yet have a fully established literary value. Asian American literature, to some degree, found its first flowering and voice in the U.S. through short fiction, through anthologies. The consciousness of Asian American writing came about through the anthologization of shorter pieces and extracts of novels. I think the short story as a form is great because, in a certain sense, it's a low-risk form. The investment, of time for the writer and eventually money for the publisher to print a story in a magazine or a journal, is relatively modest. Of course, the fact that the story is a low-risk form in those terms means, paradoxically, that it's a form in which we're empowered to take a lot of risks. For instance, one of those risks is to write about peoples or subjects that readers might not want to spend four hundred pages reading about in a novel. It almost feels as though the short story comes along and establishes itself as a forum for writing about, say, Asian Americans, and once people start to say, oh, I think I'd like to read a few more of these stories, or, I could read an anthology of these things, then behind that idea comes the sense that, oh, we could write a novel about this, we could publish a novel about this.

Because I'm writing a novel about the Second World War and partly about D-Day, I think in military metaphors a lot at the moment. So it feels like short stories are the landing craft that hit the beaches in Normandy, and the novel is the heavy armor that rolls on afterwards. But the beachhead, for certain kinds of subject matter and certain kinds of communities, is established by the story. That's a very interesting kind of symbiosis to me. The story comes along, it stakes a small claim, and as that claim is advanced, eventually the big guns of the novel roll in because now we know people will take that material seriously.

BG: Although your story "The Silver Screen" presents an extreme situation, it does seem to suggest that there are dangers inherent in being an artist who merely observes and records, as Lee does. Do you feel that writers have a moral responsibility and duty in their work to go beyond reportage, however accurate the reportage may be?

PHD: That's not a question I feel I should answer on behalf of other writers. But for me, the danger in simply holding up a mirror to nature, to life, is this: my experience with life—day to day, most of my

interactions—is that I don't know what's going on. I'm getting a little bit better at this as my life goes on (laughing), but fiction is where I make sense of those experiences. In the crudest and broadest terms, I would say that my experience of life is that life is meaningless, and I look for the meaning of life in fiction. Often, you find it, and then life feels like it's *got* meaning. But it takes me the fictional space to slow life down, to look at it from different angles, to find the meaning of it through distillation and rarification. So in those terms, simply reporting what happened doesn't feel like enough to me. Except in very intense circumstances, I don't always understand what just happened. I need to take it away and rethink it and reshape it. And when I present it finally to the reader—without necessarily offering a completely narrow or unitary interpretation of what's happened—I still feel that if the reader's going to give me twenty minutes or half an hour or an hour of his time, I've got to have something to tell him. I've got to say, this is what happened and to some extent this is what I think and feel about it, or at least what my character or my narrator thinks or feels about it. So yes, up to a certain point, I don't think it's enough just to report. Reporting has to involve interpretation.

My thinking on this matter may derive from my study of Physics, which I studied in association with the history and philosophy of science. There's this very 50s, very flat vision of scientific authority, which is that scientists are completely unbiased; we can trust them completely. They know what the best washing powder is. But scientists are as human as the rest of us. They do not approach nature with no idea of how to interpret it. They approach it with a hypothesis; they see it through a lens. If we were to conduct an experiment in this room, we might make an assumption that the color of those drapes isn't important to the experiment we're about to conduct. So you come to an experiment with a hypothesis. I think we all do that. There's no pretense that this is just the way it is. Rather, this is the way it is only as perceived and understood and processed by me. If we're going to be frank, then let's be frank about that.

BG: Many of your stories seem to contend that it's absolutely vital for humans—whether it's the elderly, the unemployed, or any of us—to feel useful to others, that we want and need to help each other, to contribute in some way. How do you see this idea informing your fiction?

PHD: I see that idea mostly informing my teaching, as a matter of fact (laughing). One of the reasons I like to teach is because I do feel as though the writing activity we're engaging in is to some degree a

selfish one, and there are parts of teaching that feel less selfish to me, that feel like they could be useful to other people.

BG: I think I understand in some part what you mean when you say writing is selfish, but isn't it also unselfish in that you're trying to reach readers?

PHD: Yes, that's certainly right. Yet it's true that when you're in that room by yourself doing a thing you love to do, or at least—even though it's painful from time to time—want to do, there are still times when you feel like you're getting away from reaching people, where you do it for yourself. When I'm writing, there's a part of me that says, okay everybody, I'm going to lock myself in this room for many, many hours. I'm not going to hang out with you; I'm not going to see you. Don't disturb me, please. Turn the music down. I'm going to come out and sometimes I'll be in a bad mood, and just don't give me any shit about that and I'll go back and work. And then one day I'll come out and I'll put this thing in front of you, and then all you have to do is tell me it's bloody marvelous (laughing). If that isn't selfish, I don't know what is.

Teaching is such a pleasure for me partly because I can't sit in that room for twelve hours a day. I cannot be alone with myself that long. So the social part of teaching is very satisfying. Since teaching is a conversation, a dialogue, it's interactive in a way that writing itself is not always. It does feel as though it's a way of making a contribution to other people. So that's satisfying.

BG: The stories in your second collection appear, on the whole, to be shorter than the stories from the first. Any reason for this difference?

PHD: Not consciously. But once in a while, nowadays, I think I have just become a more efficient storyteller. In the second book I think I knew what I was doing a little faster in each story and just needed a little less working-it-out space within the story. I'm not sure about that, though. The range of some of the stories in the second book is just a bit smaller, and because some of them are more contemporary and more American, there was less need to provide contextual explanation than might be needed, for instance, in the title story for *The Ugliest House in the World*, which spends a lot of time just setting up the place and the voice and the idiom.

BG: You've talked before about your first collection not being "con-

sciously conceived as a whole" in the way your second book is, the second being arranged around this theme of love and obligation between parents and children. Yet I think you're right also to like the breadth of your first book, the way, as you've said before, it "surprises story by story." However, today there's a lot of commercial pressure on story writers to make their collections somehow interconnected—by having the same characters, by exploring similar thematics. What's your opinion of the art of this practice? Do you feel your second book, because of its overall conception, is better than your first?

PHD: I think the second book is *more* of a book, not necessarily better, just more of a set. It's a collection that feels collected, whereas the other one was all of the good stuff I happened to have available, and I said, here it all is. I stand by that first book. I love the stories in there, and I love the range of them. And there are little ways in which they bounce up against one another. You know, reviewers will tend to look for a theme, whether there is one or isn't, that links the various stories. The most ridiculous instance of this is that when the first book was reviewed in Britain, the headline of one of the reviews (a pretty good review, actually) was "Linked by Flatulence," because three of the stories featured, in very slight ways, a little bit of farting. They had my author photo, and the caption underneath said, "Peter Ho Davies—What's he smiling about?" So it could be that I was a little scarred after that experience (laughing).

I think in the second book I just wanted to do a slightly different thing. To be honest, I had not known that I was writing *Equal Love* until I had about two-thirds of the stories. I just thought, these are stories I happen to have. Maybe I'll sell them separately, and maybe a few years from now they'll be a collection. I really was trying to write a novel after *Ugliest House*. But my wife came across the Forster quote. She was reading that novel, *Where Angels Fear to Tread*, which I'd read years before. We were talking with some friends about parental/child questions, and my wife plucked that quote out. I suddenly saw it as a crystal that falls into a super-saturated solution, where everything around it solidifies. It fit with the stories I had in hand and with a few other stories that I had in mind to write.

The thing that I dislike, though, is the confusion of a novel and a story collection, which is particularly acute in Britain, where there are many fewer places to publish short fiction and where, consequently, the form is less well understood. Big magazines don't publish stories as much, and there are very few small magazines. So I think there's a degree to which the British reading public is a little out of the habit of reading short fiction. When they pick up a collection, it looks like a

novel. You know, it's the same format, same size and shape. But then, if you read a collection with the same expectations you bring when you read a novel, and you read it sequentially and so forth, you're likely to be disappointed. In a fundamental way, when readers come to the end of a chapter in a novel, any novel—whether it's John Grisham or Jane Austen—their gut-level response afterwards to the question, "How did you like this?," might be, "Couldn't put it down, kept reading it, stayed up all night, just kept on turning the pages." But when you read a story collection and you get to the end of a story in a good collection, I don't want you to be able to read another page, not for a while. That story should be enough. So the idea of stories in a collection is discontinuity. *That's* the idea. You bring readers to the end and you close it down. You satisfy that world.

BG: You like to encourage your students to develop a wide array of voices in their writing rather than a singular distinctive voice. Have you found that having a command of and using a wide range of voices frustrates editors or critics who would like to be able to pigeonhole or categorize a writer?

PHD: I don't think it's frustrated my editors, or at least they're too polite to complain about the sales figures. I suspect, though, that from an overall professional sense, it does make the lives of the marketers and the lives of the publicists harder to promote an author whose works are very varied, who doesn't have a very distinctive persona or personality for public consumption. I think that's one of the reasons why so many collections are very hard for people to sell and for publicists to market. It's the problem of jacket design that's faced with collections. What do you illustrate when you're dealing with a collection?

BG: In a way, though, doesn't the difficulty of selling a collection seem odd? With the time crunch in today's society, you'd think people would want to read stories, yet more of them want to delve into these bigger worlds of novels.

PHD: Yes! This is a theory I've held as well, and a lot of publishers have said to me, stories are perfect to read on The Tube when you're in London or wherever you're commuting. But I heard Lorrie Moore say once—and I think she's absolutely right—that stories are more demanding to read than a novel. I would never have the confidence to say this, but Lorrie quite rightly does, and did. The twenty pages of a story demand great attention, whereas you can read a novel, and

you may miss some things as you read those twenty pages or that chapter, but still the through-line is moving along for you. A story—a good story—demands your full attention for those twenty pages, may even demand as much attention as a hundred pages of a novel. It's a kind of immersion that doesn't quite serve that oh-I-can-just-dip-in-and-out-of-it attitude, which is why it's not the same as the novel experience, where you've got a big novel going over a week or two and you're just dipping into it for an hour here or an hour there. You don't have to be at a tremendous pitch of focus for every hour you're reading that novel, whereas the only hour you're reading a story, you have to be at that pitch.

BG: You definitely practice what you preach when it comes to developing many voices. Your stories showcase a disparate crew of characters. But you also experiment with style. A new story in *Harper's* this year called "The Criminal Mastermind Is Confined" is a radical departure from some of your previous work. It's more in line with what you have called the "fantastic path" that leads back to writers like Donald Barthelme. Do you see this story as a trend for your future fiction or just something you wanted to try?

PHD: It's a mini-trend, but it may already be over. It's hard to tell. There are two pieces. One is the piece that was in *Harper's* called "The Criminal Mastermind is Confined," and perhaps not surprisingly its companion piece is called "The Name of the Great Detective." They're sort of bookended pieces. They were written very closely together—not quite conceived as a pair, but one naturally led to the other. I don't foresee many more stories in this vein; those two seem to buttress each other very nicely. There are a few more playful ideas I have that might serve in the space of short-shorts, but they're not high priorities at the moment. In a way, I suspect "The Criminal Mastermind" in particular represents a jailbreak from the novel I've been writing, which is largely traditional and realistic. But also, given that the novel is about, in part, prisoners of war, there are probably some thematic linkages between the two pieces.

The other part of my answer is that, you're right, in the very broadest terms there are these two strands in short fiction—as others have noted. One is fantastic, from Kafka, Borges, Barthelme. The other is the more realistic, some would say "Chekhovian," vein. You can almost go right back to Gogol, who I think of as the father of the modern short story. I think about "The Overcoat" and "The Nose." "The Overcoat"—despite its ghost-storyish aspect at the end—feels, in its grinding poverty, like a realistic story. On the other extreme, "The

Nose" is a completely fantastical, absurdist piece of work. People like to use that pun that we all came out from under Gogol's overcoat. But there are plenty of people who also came out, so to speak, from underneath Gogol's nose, which is, of course, why we don't say that (laughing).

I've been teaching a class in the history of short fiction for a few years now and making this distinction, and it occurred to me that of these two veins, I've been working in one of them for nearly all of my career. It seemed interesting to work potentially in the other. The materials that I had for this couple of stories fit themselves for a different kind of treatment. The truth is that much of the time I'm looking to find out how to tell the stories I want to tell, and one style or one voice or one approach would limit the range of stories I could tell. I like flexibility mostly because I want to be able to tell more stories and a bigger range of stories, stories that are as different as possible. Even though both of these broad veins—the fantastic and the realistic—feel as though they're very distinctive, they actually start from the same problem, which is that the short-story writer only has five or ten or twenty pages. It's the issue of space. One of the ways you compensate for space is by saying, well, I'm going to tell you about the world you know, the contemporary realistic story. So I don't have to explain where we are; I don't have to expend pages and pages and pages explaining the world that you live in and know for yourself. The other avenue is to say, well, I'm going to move you so far away from the world you know into such a territory of the fantastic or the absurd or magical realism—or however we might construe this—that it's so absurd I'm not even going to try to explain it. The Kafka/Borgesian line, for example, doesn't bother with explanation.

BG: You just say you woke up one morning transformed into a gigantic insect.

PHD: Exactly. And then we'll go from there, maybe even in a kind of realistic vein. We start in that one place, and then we're pushed along. But a beginning like that accelerates the text in the relatively small space of the story.

BG: You've been working on your first novel for a while now. With stories, you say your habit is to quickly write a first draft before any revision. Did you, with the novel, write a whole draft straight through or did you revise as you went along?

PHD: I'd been trying for a long time to write that one whole draft of

the novel, to get it all in one piece. As my friend Fred Leebron always used to say, it's better to make something from something than something from nothing, even if the something you're making it from is a crappy first draft. But I could never quite get to the end of those drafts with the novel because it would collapse under my lack of faith in it somewhere round about page one hundred, two hundred, three hundred—depending on how far I'd pushed forward.

Just in the last year or so I read a review of Zadie Smith's second novel in which the reviewer spent a good amount of time talking about *White Teeth*, her first novel. The reviewer had loved *White Teeth*, describing it very enthusiastically as the best book about London since Dickens. He thought it was a marvelous, marvelous, marvelous book but that it fell apart at the end. I thought that was a very interesting thing to say about a novel. I'm not sure I necessarily agree with it where Zadie's book is concerned, but I've read a whole bunch of other well-regarded contemporary novels recently that I loved and enjoyed reading a great deal but that I also felt didn't end very well. I think the more people you talk to, the more there's the sense that novels don't always end very well, partly because, as I've mentioned, they're all about keeping you reading forward. If the novel's energy is all about moving forward, then inevitably it's going to be lousy at stopping, it seems to me. But I thought the statement that a book was a marvelous, wonderful book that falls apart at the end would be an impossible statement to imagine anybody making of a short story. If a story falls apart at the end, you've got *nothing*. There's an aesthetic difference there.

I would like my novel to come together in the way a story comes together, but to get it written I had to tell myself that it was okay to write four or five hundred wonderful, entertaining, enjoyable, colorful (if I can do all those things, I'll be very happy) pages and for the last twenty to not quite pull it all together. The shape and the neatness and the beauty of a story, those aesthetic desires, might not be entirely appropriate to take over into the novel. All along the struggle for me, in fact, has been reshaping my aesthetic and my sense of what works and what doesn't from the story form to the novel form. There have been various things that I have modified along the way. This change in thinking about novel endings has been recent and quite useful. It's helped me write what is now the final draft of the novel. It's closing in on its end, and we're about to find out if it falls apart or not. We'll see.

BG: When you're writing your novel, do you have to go back and reread where you've been to get yourself moving forward or do you

just push ahead without reading back?

PHD: At the moment, I'm going chapter by chapter because I'm sort of compiling and rewriting two or three earlier drafts, pulling together material that's written from a couple of different points of view. I'll steep myself in the material of a chapter and often reread material from the previous drafts and then rewrite the chapter. Often when I teach there can be periods of a month or more, occasionally even a semester, in which I won't write. That situation was killing me writing the novel because then I really did feel like I had to go back and reinvent the wheel. It just felt hard to remember it all. And then when I did get those little precious moments of writing time, it felt tough to say, well, before I sit down and use this hour of writing time, I will read the last hundred pages (laughing) and throw away all that apparent writing time. So that's tough. Now, working on the novel, I feel I need to touch base with it at least every couple of days, even if in bad or busy weeks that just means checking in with the material, rereading some pages. An attempt to do that keeps the book alive for me.

BG: Since you started work on this novel, you've still published several stories. Are you able to work simultaneously on a story and your novel, or do you postpone the novel when you're working on a story? How do the two forms influence each other for you?

PHD: The stories I've published while working on the novel are "What You Know" and "The Criminal Mastermind." The other pieces that have popped up in the interim are all bits of the novel in various ways or forms. Of those two completely independent stories, "What You Know" was begun during a lengthy hiatus from the novel pretty early on in its writing. So they weren't exactly written simultaneously, but the novel was still in its infancy. It wasn't hard to change tracks. And because "Criminal Mastermind" was such a short write—just a little burst—it wasn't much of an interruption. I think it actually came at this time of the winter semester last year, which is always a brutal time of the year, incredibly busy. I had not been able to work on the novel for several weeks at that point, so the novel had already been interrupted by other things. The story was just a little gift in the middle of all that.

BG: I wonder if, based on what you're seeing now in the workshops you teach, you have any final advice for aspiring writers.

PHD: Well, I think there's a new potential kind of "workshop" fiction that might be afoot now, not in a widespread way but enough for all of us to be wary of it in our writing. I, and others I think, generally associate the "traditional" workshop story with the heyday of minimalism. Those people who were writing minimalist fiction in workshop were writing the safe stuff, essentially. They were writing the stuff that wouldn't be criticized. They were writing the stuff that everybody said was the established and successful norm, as approved by *The New Yorker* or as approved by X, Y, and Z—famous and distinguished writers. So the workshop story, separate from its style or its form or its content, is most clearly characterized by a desire for safety and a desire to avoid criticism. We all go in to workshop hoping people will say, oh, it's genius, let's go and have a drink now. End of story. God knows, the great terror of the workshop is criticism. So we all try to write a story that will resist criticism, and we can sometimes do that by writing something that's just terrific. But sometimes we can do that by writing a thing that in its own way has a strategy to resist criticism, which is either to write the thing that's normally accepted or to write something that seems to stand apart from criticism.

The new workshop story I'm talking about is a certain form of postmodern work that often younger, hipper writers are attracted to. They follow in the footsteps of people like David Foster Wallace and Dave Eggers, both of whom are themselves terrific writers I wouldn't accuse of writing remotely safe fiction. These writers are very popular, particularly amongst my undergraduate students, but undergraduates can take those messages, those lessons, and produce work that is hip and ironic but uncriticizable because to criticize it is somehow to be unhip. This kind of work that resists criticism, that avoids it, that obviates it, that says it's uncool even to criticize this—*why are you even trying to find out what it means, it doesn't mean anything*—this kind of stance feels like the new workshop fiction to me. This feels like the place of safety now, the place of protection from criticism that certain kinds of fiction lean towards. I don't think it's in any way as dominant as, say, minimalism or other workshop fiction of the 70s and 80s, but I'm wary of it now. I'm looking and wondering if I'm going to see a lot of it in the next few years.

The one thing that I think will protect us from this becoming a dominant mode of workshop fiction is that the obvious, frontrunning standard-bearers of this kind of work, Jonathan Franzen, say, are trying to write big books, not stories. Even if I'm right and writers like Wallace and Franzen could be seen as towing a movement behind them—there are, of course, many other fantastic writers in this loosely arrayed group—I still don't know if we'll see that influence as mark-

edly in the workshop as we saw the influence of Carver and his ilk twenty years ago, simply because these folks are writing novels, and big ones at that, rather than stories, which remain the workshop staple. I'm not quite sure the trickle-down will be as extreme as the one in the context of minimalism. This is not really advice for people in a workshop; it's just an observation I've made.

BG: It does seem to be advice not to avoid the risk.

PHD: Yes. Workshop feels to me like a space where there is an enormous amount of fear, and not necessarily wrongly. Fear is usually a smart reaction. But workshop is also a space—and this will sound sappy but it's one of the reasons I like teaching—that becomes a forum for bravery, a forum for people to take chances, to take risks, to be bold. And that's why it's so exciting. That's why it's thrilling to teach in it. You get to see people being brave every week. Again at the risk of sounding sappy, that's an honor. It's one of the reasons it's such a pleasure to teach.

There's always so much to say and so little time in which to say it in the context of a semester or a workshop. But when people ask, what kind of advice can you give to young writers—which I still think of myself as, to some degree—my most recent answer has dealt with the question that young writers often ask of themselves: Can I really be a writer? Can I do this? Which is a crushing question, it seems to me—partly because it's a censoring question. You know, *I'm not wise enough or smart enough or poetic enough or I haven't done enough drugs or I haven't had enough terrible things happen in my life.*

BG: Reading Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet*, beautiful though it was, pretty much gave me a complex.

PHD: Right! Exactly. Or we're just not disciplined enough. *I don't get up at five o'clock every morning and write for three hours before I go to work.* That kind of stuff. It's all these things that make us feel like we're not quite able or ready to claim it, to do it. There's this notion of nirvana, this idea that at some point in one's writing life, one will arrive at the point and say, Aha! Yes, I woke up this morning, and I *am* a writer! We often associate that moment with first publication, first book, first major prize, whatever it might be. But while I have enormous sympathy with that question, I also think that one of the great things about workshops in general is that they say, let's put that question on hold for a semester or a year or two. Let's focus on the much more practical and productive question of how to make this

story better, rather than, "Are you a writer?" Table that one and get down to brass tacks.

There is, though, a kind of intellectual honesty buried at the heart of that nervous question of whether I'm good enough to do this. I don't think it's a bad question to ask yourself. The truth is that I still probably ask myself that question at least once a month. And in bad times, once a week (laughing). I guess I console myself by saying that that question might not go away, ever, and maybe it's actually an okay question to ask if the reason I write is because I don't know the answer yet. You write to find out if you're good enough. If there comes a day when I wake up and say, yes, I've made it, that'll probably be the day that I stop.

Padgett Powell

Noble Soldier

Smokin and salutin. Salutin and smokin and slippin things in the dumpster. Smellin the oil, smokin, slippin things in the dumpster, salutin. Vehicle maintenance. I don't have mental problems per se. Garage is neat. Need new smokes. Wives are not calling today. Smokin, oil changin, salutin, keepin it all neat. New trucks look better but they aren't. Better. Get oil on my forehead from salutin on Oil Day. Three cigarettes per change. New doohickey on the new Toyotas I don't know what it is. Piece of straw on the bumper. Piece of high-tech shit under the hood nobody can figure out what it is. Smokin, studyin, salutin a gunny, Hey Sarge you got any idea what this does? What what does? This. That? Yeah. No, what is it? That's what I'm asking you. You the mechanic, Private. Salutin, smokin, studyin. Dumpster about full. Took a nap in it once. Risky. Hard to relax with BFI (Black Fucking Idiots) around. Doohickey has a drawing on it like that idiotgram on the space probes but looks like Bugs Bunny. Oughta take it off. Find out what it does that way. Take it off, get in the dumpster, smoke three, bag some, get out, see if the Toyota still running. Wife call. I 'mone take Bugs Bunny off new Toyota, I tell her. That is all I got to report to you. The Japs have copyright infringed Bugs Bunny. Is it she says. Yes I say. I don't know what Bugs Bunny does but I am taking him off. I need to have my head examined she says for marrying you. You didn't marry me I say I married you. Wife hang up. Study Bugs. Smoke, salute, 5/16" will get Bugs off. Once this thing in my hand I can figure it out better. Smokin.

Planes of slightly different-colored light ray over the base, intersecting in plate-tectonic actions. Baby blue and pink planes sheering together produce a ribald, boiling purple squall line running northeast, dropping light hail, sucking up trash. This line is cobalt and blood-colored and bubbling a tight black cloud rubble from its edges, like a crusty old wound. While the mechanic stands under it, smoking and regarding the sky, he looks a fair, honest man about a job of work. He looks noble, a soldier grinding out a cigarette butt with the ball of his boot. It cannot be seen from this prospect that in his hand is an automotive appliance with Bugs Bunny printed on it and wires with ripped-out terminals extending from it.

*

There is no short run in the long run. This is obvious. But there is long run in the short run. People, who are misguided fools, assume that a long run is a series of short runs, but they get another think coming if they think this. A long run is not composed of short runs hooked together; it is completely different. It would be like saying long hair is composed of short hairs. You see? The truth of this is borne out in the expression Who licked the red off your candy?

You have never heard that? Well, it is a good expression, very useful, it irritates the shit out of people and therefore I want it in your repertoire. Let's practice it now. Who licked the red off—and here, be very heavy on "your," it would be in italics in print, maybe caps, and also we want to distort the sound from your to yer for maximum irk quotient, okay—Who licked the red off *yer* candy? Good. Again, with gusto: Who licked the red off'n *YER* candy? I threw in a little touch, off'n, a real easy little addition that chaps ass well. People especially don't like a hick asking them about the red on their candy. This will take care of anyone presuming there is a short run in a long run. A close second to Who licked the red off your candy, but somewhat confusing sometimes, is Who painted your wagon? The difficulty I think is that one involves removing color and the other adding color, and it just throws people. Let me say right now that we never use Put that in your pipe and smoke it, or If the shoe fits wear it, or How do you like them apples? Never use these, they backfire badly in modern times and I don't think they were effective even in the old, simpler days. What are all those crows doing out there in the street? Look at them!

Anytime you see a short-run-in-long-run presumer, just walk up and pop him one. Don't let him get in range with that shit. Like a bank president (but not a bank teller) or a military officer (but not a grunt, etc.): Hey, buddy, who licked the red off'n *yer* candy? You can also say, then, once he's softened up a bit, Do you want to take your football and go home now? Well, go ahead, we'll get another ball. I have never seen this combination not work extremely well. Once I said, Take your ball home, then, ballistic nuts, we'll get our own candy. This combines the football thing with the candy thing, and the odd touch with the nuts was just too much. I don't know where it came from but it worked very well. Sometimes now in a hurry I just use it alone: Ballistic nuts! Works good in any number of situations, and in non-situations.

Now out in the street where the crows were there is a man wearing pajama bottoms and one of those Russian hats that look like fur

bowls that I don't know the name of. I want to say *babushka*, which sounds like what they look like, a big furry *babushka* on your head, but I am afraid that may mean woman or something like that, you know a northern *mademoiselle*, except potato-shaped. Paris, man, is one city that is all it's cracked up to be, I can tell you that. I don't know what is going on down in that street, but something is. The man does not look like a presumer, in his pajamas, and we know the crows aren't. I don't have to fire anything from the window. I can relax and we can continue with our lessons.

For tomorrow I want you to consider the idiot who goes around saying History repeats itself. We have some very good moves for this joker. One of them is, Pull the little waxed strip out of the Hershey's kiss of your ass and smell it. This is deadly effective. I'll show you others tomorrow.

Emma Wunsch

—Second Place Story—

Swahili

Patrick has an episode during dinner. He cracks up over something stupid so that milk scrambles into his nose, drips down his chin, and spills onto his plate, which makes him stop laughing because milk on meat upsets him and then he realizes that there are things that shouldn't be up his nose. Suddenly, milk and mucus come out in a volcanic eruption all over the table. It's another dramatic yet ridiculous catastrophe, the kind that happens every single day, which is why Michael suddenly loses his appetite.

"Retard," Michael mutters, standing up. His mother, busy cleaning the mess on the table, doesn't hear him. "Fucking retard," he says, walking out. "Fucking up a fucking hamburger."

He's outside his bedroom when his mother tells him to come back. Instead of walking downstairs, Michael leans over the banister and looks into the kitchen from above. Patrick has stopped crying and is eating ice cream out of the container.

"I have to go to Fitzgerald's, Mike," his mother says, hanging up the phone. Fitzgerald's is a bar that was built by Michael's great-grandfather and now belongs to Michael's father. "Orders are messed up with Budweiser. I need you to watch Pat. With Dad gone we make sacrifices, okay?"

It's an order in the guise of a question and Michael hangs further over the banister so his torso is ninety degrees from the rest of his body. He is daring his mother to catch him, to reprimand him, but instead, in a graceful, effective and well-practiced swoop, she grabs the sponge from the sink and wipes ice cream off Patrick's cheek.

"Can I get a video?"

"It's a school night."

"I have nothing to do." He straightens up. "Tomorrow's Friday."

"No tests?"

"Nope." A vocabulary quiz is not the same as a test so technically he's not lying.

"You'll rent something Pat can watch too?" She must be tired since she doesn't usually consent so quickly.

Michael nods. "We're not getting *Rugrats,* forget that." He shoots his brother a don't-even-bother glare, but Patrick doesn't notice. He

is beaming wildly. Spending time alone with Michael is one of Patrick's favorite activities and it's rare.

Idiot, Michael thinks as he walks into his room. He takes his crumpled vocabulary list out of his backpack and lies down across his bed. Ugly ice cream slobbering Down's Syndrome freak show. He closes his eyes. Vocabulary tests are stupid. Even when he gets a hundred, he doesn't remember the words from one week to the next so he shouldn't feel bad about renting a movie. Although he doesn't feel like walking with his stupid brother to get it.

As if Down's Syndrome isn't enough, Patrick's been gaining weight this year, making his jaw droop and his eyes, which are already too high, slant deeper into his forehead. The new weight exaggerates Patrick's jerky movements, and since he doesn't comprehend the width of his body, he keeps knocking things over, bumping into furniture that hasn't been moved in years. There are times, like dinner, when Michael has to work to suppress an overwhelming desire to bash his brother's head. One punch through the jaw, Michael imagines, would flatten Patrick's balloon face in no time.

When he hears Patrick and his mother walk upstairs, Michael grabs his vocabulary list, walks downstairs into the living room, sprawls on the couch, lays his vocabulary sheet on the floor next to him, and turns on MTV.

"You can get chips if you want," his mother says when she walks in a few minutes later. "Pat doesn't like the ruffled kind, though." She hands him ten dollars. "I shouldn't be home too late. God, I can't wait till Daddy comes home."

Michael's father is with Michael's grandmother who had hip surgery in Florida. His father has been gone all week and, because his grandmother is recovering slower than expected, he won't be back till Thanksgiving, which isn't for another ten days. Patrick walks in and immediately tries to squeeze his wide hips onto the edge of the couch. He nearly sits on Michael's ankles.

"No way, Fatso. You'll break them." Michael pulls his knees to his chest.

"Michael," his mother sighs, "don't talk like that. You know better."

As Michael gets up, his foot slides the vocabulary sheet underneath the couch. He leaves it, pushes through the swinging kitchen door with his shoulder, and opens the fridge, hoping something will both appeal to him and be free of Patrick's contamination.

Nothing.

"Just a little effort, Mike," his mother calls.

Michael stares at the mayonnaise, an old bottle of ranch dressing,

a tub of grape jelly, and an unopened jar of mustard. The sides of their fridge are choking with condiments. "We have no food," he whines.

"I'm going to C-town tomorrow. I haven't had time." His mother sounds like she really feels bad, like there really isn't anything at all, which makes Michael feel bad. Even though his father told him to help out, Michael hasn't done much at all. Laundry is piling up in the corner of his bedroom and Patrick's room is an explosion of toys and stuffed animals. Then again, Michael thinks, *he's* in school all day; Patrick only goes in the afternoon.

Closing the fridge a little harder than necessary, Michael decides to do laundry before watching a movie and now, because he feels sorry for his mother, he wipes a puddle of ice cream off the floor.

"The green sponge is for dishes, Mike. Use the blue one on floors and counters. What did you spill?" His mother stands above him, keys in hand, her eyes accusing and tired.

"Forget it!" Michael throws the sponge into the sink and storms back into the living room. Screw his mother. He's not the one who slobbered all over the ice cream. He didn't even get any.

When she calls goodbye a few minutes later, Michael turns the volume on the TV up and pretends not to hear her.

Two minutes later Pat wanders in.

"Fuck off," Michael says.

Patrick smiles and fury ruptures Michael's body. Everyone loves his brother's smile. Doctors, dentists, and random people in grocery stores are constantly smiling over Patrick's lopsided smile. He's so sweet, old women say. Such a doll.

"Whatdaya want?" he asks.

"Movie, Mikey." Patrick holds up the video card. "Let's get a movie."

Michael looks at Patrick. More than anything right now, he hates his brother's fucking smile and his fucking mother and fucking father for fucking and fucking up with their lousy gene pool and having Patrick and then, probably just because Pat was a fat retarded freak, having him. "No," he says. "I'm not in the mood."

"Why?"

"I have to study." Michael pulls the vocabulary list from underneath the couch with his foot. "I have a test. Oh wait, you don't know you fat little fuck. You've never taken a test."

"Mean." Patrick scowls. "Mike, you're being mean."

"I'm not mean just because I don't want to walk your fat ass downtown." He watches as Patrick's face twists purple and crumples like paper. The word on the top of the vocab list is "lugubrious." Michael can't read what the definition is because his handwriting is scratchy.

Screw it, he thinks. He jumps up, turns off the TV. "Alright, alright. God, don't be such a crybaby, Pat. We'll go."

"I'm not a crybaby," Patrick says. "I *wasn't* going to cry."

"Let's go, dogface," Michael orders.

The sky is starless and swollen and they walk in silence, Patrick's sneakers flashing red lights when they touch the ground. The cold makes Michael think about how soon it will be Thanksgiving, which means only a few weeks till Christmas. If he can make it to Thanksgiving, then he can make it till Christmas vacation and the year will be half over. And then what? Summer will turn into fall and he'll go to high school, which will probably be worse than middle school. Michael walks faster, like he's angry at the way the sky makes him realize that days that become weeks that become years are absolutely meaningless. Soon, he's practically running. If he didn't have Patrick tagging along, he thinks, he'd really be able to run down the hill, past the grocery store, his old elementary school, and the fire station, past the video store, even. He could keep going into the dark cold nothing all the way through town. But he can't run, he thinks, slowing down, not with Patrick breathing hard and heavy, desperately trying to keep up behind him.

Except for the owner who doesn't look up from his paper, the video store is empty. Almost immediately, Patrick ducks behind the skimpy shower curtain that partitions the adults-only section. When Michael gets him, he barely glances at the videos. These movies aren't exciting since Michael has become best friends with Brett Bloom, one of the most popular guys in eighth grade. Even though he and Brett have been in school together since sixth grade, for some reason, Brett has decided to become friends with Michael this year. Now, Michael is becoming one of the most popular guys in school, too. Before he wasn't popular or unpopular. He was just kind of there.

The first time Michael went to Brett's house, his friend dragged him into a storage closet in the basement stuffed with bikes, obsolete video game equipment, and roller blades. Brett picked up a crate of U.S. Open videos.

"My dad hates tennis," he said with a sly grin.

Some of Dr. Bloom's movies are okay, but most make Michael sick. Like the one where a woman is gagged and raped when she sits on Santa's lap. Or the video where men dressed like farmers make a woman do stuff with sheep and horses. Michael would rather not watch these particular videos but Brett thinks they're funny. Hysterical, Brett always says, fucking hysterical.

Michael pushes Patrick through the curtain and walks to the new releases. Why would Patrick look at porn? Michael wonders. It's not like he thinks about girls. He watches *Rugrats*, sleeps with a nightlight, and is obsessed with a stuffed green duck named Duckie. Patrick couldn't possibly be interested in sex, Michael thinks. Patrick waddles over with *Big Bad Bush* and *College Girls 4*. "Let's get these," he says.

"Put them back."

"Why?"

"Because."

"Why?"

"Because I said so, Patrick. They're retarded."

Patrick drops the videos on the floor.

"I don't have time Patrick." Michael grabs *Water Boy* even though he's seen it and Adam Sandler annoys him. He sticks the porns on the empty space on the shelf.

The owner rings them up without looking.

"Let's go, Chromo," Michael commands, savoring the last moment of warmth as he gives his brother a not so gentle shove through the door. Just as Patrick lunges into the open space, a woman, wearing a Northface jacket the same color as Michael's, rushes in and Patrick and the woman bump head to jaw or chin to cheek—it's hard to tell. Patrick starts howling and steps onto Michael's foot.

"Fuck!" Michael kicks Patrick off.

"I'm *so* sorry," the woman says. She says it like she means it even though it wasn't her fault. Michael's foot throbs and he shakes his head with disgust at Patrick. When he looks up, he sees Ms. Lynch, his social studies teacher.

"Oh, Michael! Funny to see you here." Ms. Lynch looks at Patrick. "I'm so sorry."

Patrick mumbles something inarticulate.

"Is your brother okay?" Ms. Lynch looks at Michael.

How does she know that he and Patrick are related? Do teachers get a letter explaining that Michael's older brother has Down's Syndrome? They don't look anything alike. Michael is on his way to becoming one of the most popular guys in eighth grade. If not in the top five, certainly the top ten. But at the moment, his brother is picking his nose.

"Mike?" Ms. Lynch sounds like a teacher.

"He's-fine-nothing-to-worry-about," Michael whispers, suddenly embarrassed to be here on a school night.

"Well, that's good." She smiles as if they are two grown-ups renting a movie. Michael should say something. Should he apologize? Should he thank her? "Thank you" would be weird. And his teacher

already thinks Michael's brother is weird, totally gross. He's really embarrassing. And where is he? Michael looks around but Patrick is nowhere to be seen: it's just Michael and Ms. Lynch.

And then, things are falling. Michael turns toward the noise, which stops in a tense, exaggerated moment of silence before a deep bassoon-like gasp bellows from the adult-only section.

An entire wall of shelves has collapsed and Patrick is sitting in the middle of a pile of videos. Just as Michael tries to formulate how to tell his teacher not to touch Patrick, to warn her not to touch his brother, Ms. Lynch jumps into action and runs over to him. Michael knows that he should go over to his panicking brother but all he can do is watch Ms. Lynch place her arm around his brother's shoulder and listen as Patrick releases a torrential howl and practically shoves Ms. Lynch onto the layer of videos beside him. Michael wants to move but is captivated by a long strand of blue-gray mucus that is bouncing from Patrick's nostril. One more second and it will fly all over Ms. Lynch. He can't bear to watch so he looks at the ground where there is a Middle Eastern woman on the cover of a video with a bunch of foreign letters. *Sexy Sex* is splashed across the top in hot pink script. Michael remembers the video he watched at Brett's last week that had a tiny Asian woman asking sailors if they wanted to "fucky-fucky." The woman had a childlike, high-pitched voice, which, of course, Brett found hilarious. For days Brett walked around singing "fucky-fucky?" Fucky-fucky, Michael thinks, is so stupid. Asinine, really. Asinine, he remembers, was one his vocab words. Asinine, adjective, means trivial, silly, stupid, foolish, or idiotic. But he's being asinine, more asinine than ever before, thinking of vocabulary words while his brother sobs snot all over his social studies teacher. Michael moves one foot in front of the other, suddenly realizing that if he doesn't pull his brother up, and tell him that everything is okay, he will remain here, in this horrible situation with his brother and teacher and more porn than even Dr. Bloom can imagine, forever.

*

Michael leaves Patrick in the hallway when they get home even though he knows it will take him a long time to get all his layers off. Let him struggle, Michael thinks, furious that on top of everything he forgot to buy chips. If it weren't for Patrick, he'd have Doritos but now has nothing but his mother's no-butter, fat-free popcorn. As he listens to the kernels popping, he smashes his right knuckle into his left palm, but as hard as he tries, he can't make it hurt. Their microwave is old and in a minute the kitchen smells like burnt kernels.

Soon, the hypersensitive smoke alarm goes off, and Michael has to wave a dishtowel around like a lunatic trying to dissipate the smoke. When the alarm finally stops, Michael sees his brother in the doorway beaming. It takes Michael a moment to realize that Patrick must think he's dancing.

Patrick loves dancing.

Whenever he hears the tiniest bit of music, even in malls or doctors' offices, Patrick starts swaying. Of course, everyone else thinks Pat's dancing is incredibly sweet.

"Whatcha looking at?" Michael asks, pouring the semi-burned popcorn into a bowl.

"Nothing." Patrick shoves two handfuls of popcorn into his mouth.

"No wonder you're putting on the pounds."

"Don't make me mad, Mikey."

"Don't make me mad, Faggy."

"Fuck off."

"What? Did you tell me to fuck off, you little cretin?" Michael has never heard Patrick curse before. Their mom would freak if she knew Patrick, her darling dancing doll, said the F word. Most likely she'd blame Michael for teaching it to him. It's crazy, he thinks, that Patrick just told him to fuck off. Patrick worships Michael. It's not possible, not right, and without really thinking Michael pushes his brother up against the refrigerator. Patrick is bigger but squishy and weak so Michael has no trouble keeping one hand on his brother's shoulder and drawing his other hand into a tight fist. Patrick squirms and Michael tightens his grip.

"Don't tell me to fuck off!" Michael pushes his fist into his brother's cheek, which is warm and soft. "If you tell me to fuck off again, Patrick, I'll beat the crap out of you."

"I'll tell," Patrick whimpers.

"You won't tell, Patrick. You know how I know you won't tell?"

Patrick shakes his head.

"You won't tell because you won't talk. You won't be able to talk since I'll punch you so hard your jaw will bleed for a freaking week."

Patrick blinks rapidly. He's about to cry and since Michael doesn't want to deal with Patrick crying again tonight, he loosens his grip. "I'll let it go this time. But let it be a warning."

Patrick remains against the fridge.

Shit, Michael thinks. If his brother tells their mom, she might ground him. Michael taps Patrick's shoulder. "Hey, Patrick."

Patrick slides down the fridge and sits on the floor.

"Pat?" Crap, Michael thinks, he's got to get out of this one. "Hey, big brother? Let's not fight anymore. Okay?"

Patrick shrugs.

When did Patrick start shrugging? Michael wonders. "You want some ice cream? I won't tell."

Patrick looks up.

That's the ticket, Michael thinks. "Yeah, I won't tell if you won't tell. How about ice cream and sprinkles? You want that?"

Patrick nods slightly.

"Cool." Michael turns toward the kitchen door. "Patrick," he calls, leaning toward his brother who is back on his feet. "You know I love you right? I wouldn't hurt you. I was only playing."

"I love you too, Mikey." Patrick smiles.

"What a retard," Michael mutters as he opens the cabinet above the sink looking for the sprinkles his mom tends to hide behind the canned tomatoes and peas.

*

Later, he looks up from the television and sees Ms. Lynch, not Patrick, next to him. And oddly enough, while his teacher is still wearing her Northface jacket, she isn't wearing pants.

"I wanted to watch a movie with you, Michael," she whispers. "It's about dancing but not really. You know what I mean?" His teacher holds up a video with a naked blonde woman on the cover.

"Yeah?" God, he sounds stupid. What's wrong with him? What is Ms. Lynch doing?

"I want you to see my breasts, Mike. Want to touch them?"

"Okay." Michael leans forward. Is he supposed to take off her Northface? Or just put his hands underneath it? How did she get in? His mom will kill him if he forgot to set the alarm. He opens his eyes and sees that it's his mother, not Ms. Lynch next to him.

"What?" He's surprised at how nasty he sounds.

"Nothing." His mother sounds hurt. "You were sleeping. It's after two. You should go to bed."

Michael stands up, hazy and unsure.

"Michael?" his mother asks quietly, as if she wants something from him that does not exist. "Everything okay? Pat good?"

Laundry, Michael realizes—he forgot to do laundry. If he had put the clothes in the washer before they went to the video store, then instead of threatening Patrick when he got home, Michael would have put the clothes in the dryer and halfway through the movie, which was really dumb, he could have folded everything into neat piles the way his mother does it. Patrick could have matched all the socks and when his mother came home to clean clothes, she wouldn't

be pathetically leaning against the wall, dark smudges under her eyes.

But then Michael remembers the videos. Ms. Lynch. His stupid fucking social studies teacher. Patrick in the middle of a million porns. Fucking nightmare.

"Everything okay?" his mother asks.

He shrugs and turns to walk up the stairs, suddenly happy that his mother will have to do laundry by herself tomorrow.

*

The vocabulary words are killers: exonerate, emancipate, placate, and exacerbate. Michael knows he bombed, but he's not going to think about it since all that separates him from the weekend is fifty-five minutes of social studies.

Social studies is his last class and although he's been trying not to think about it, he's had an odd pulsing in his stomach all day. Like a countdown—five more classes, three more classes—as if he's waiting for something to go off, to happen.

When he sits at his desk, he focuses straight ahead. Ms. Lynch's walls are plastered with posters. In front of him is an enormous photograph of Franklin D. Roosevelt, Ms. Lynch's favorite president. Michael knows this because she told the class on the first day. Today, Ms. Lynch is frantically drawing a map or graph on the board, Michael isn't sure which.

He is sure that, especially today, Ms Lynch has enormous breasts. Usually she wears floppy dresses, but today she's wearing a yellow blouse and when she raises her arms, it's impossible not to notice the lacy outline of a dark bra and the sweat stains under her arms.

It makes Michael vaguely sad, like maybe his teacher was too busy to do laundry, too. Maybe she thought about doing it but decided to watch a movie instead. He imagines his mother, at this very moment, taking all the dirty clothes in the house down to the basement.

"I want you to *really* think about your perspective when you do this. Where *you* are is equally as important to consider," Ms. Lynch says enthusiastically.

Michael looks around, but even Brett is taking notes. Ms. Lynch's breasts *must* be distracting someone else.

Then Ms. Lynch is saying his name. "Michael." It is hard and direct. "Michael." Chalk is smudged on her cheek and a wisp of hair has escaped from her too-tight bun.

"Your project, Michael."

"Project." Michael swallows. "Uh, my project is, um, Swahili." The word seems to land in the room with a thud.

"Swahili?"

"Swahili." The only possible explanation for Michael saying Swahili is that after telling the class that FDR was her favorite president, Ms. Lynch pointed to a poster that said "peace" in 1,000 different languages. Ms. Lynch took forever identifying each language: Russian, Arabic, Tagalog, Chinese. When it came to Swahili, Ms. Lynch said it light and fast and Michael thought of that annoying "Tequila" song that Patrick likes. Since then, whenever Michael looks at the poster, he can't help but hear Ms. Lynch say "Swahili" in the bouncy rhythmic voice on the Tequila song. He hopes he didn't say it like that.

"Swahili," Ms. Lynch says. "Well, language is a terrific way to understand different cultures. I think you'll have a unique perspective about communication and language, Michael." Ms. Lynch writes Swahili next to Michael's name on the board. "It's stretching the assignment a little but I'm sure it will be fascinating." His teacher smiles.

"Yeah?" Michael says. "Yeah." Ms. Lynch's eyes are right on him now and when she smiles at him again, before calling on the next person, he wonders if she knows, feels himself blush, and hates himself for it.

*

"How did my nice Irish-Italian son get so many Jewish friends?" his mother asks early Saturday morning as she writes a check for Heather Samuels. "You're going to put us in the poor house." She puts the check in a card and hands it to him. Ever since he's been friends with Brett, Michael has been spending almost every weekend at his classmates' Bar and Bat Mitzvahs. Going to temple used to make him nervous but now he's an expert.

When he gets there, he slides into the last row with Danny Fish, and Brett, who smirks every time Heather stumbles. After the service, the girls reapply lip-gloss and glittery eye shadow in the bathroom while the guys stuff themselves on mini pigs-in-a-blanket. Brett tries to convince Heather's cousin Larry, a college student with a fake ID, to get him a rum and Coke from the open bar. Whether or not there is alcohol in the soda the cousin finally gives Brett is a source of a heated debate in which Michael and some other guys are required to take sips. When they decide that the Coke is not spiked, Brett pours it into a basket of flowers in the reception hall.

Only the old people and little kids are dancing to *Tequila* when

Beth Herets walks over to Michael's table. "Want to go downstairs, Mike?" Beth asks.

Brett nods and Danny Fish winks. Michael tries to think of what to say, whether or not he should stand up since going downstairs means going into the boiler room and touching Beth Herets' vagina.

Lindsay Cooper-Miller and Scott Farrar started third-base-in-the-basement at Matt Green's Bar Mitzvah three weeks ago. Lindsay and Scott are the most popular couple in the whole school and now everyone has been attempting to go to third base, too. Beth Herets is not as pretty as Lindsay but her family is super rich; they live on a golf course and Beth's step-mom gets a new Porsche every year. The license plates on the Porsches always say Dr. Stan. Dr. Stan is Beth's father.

Beth and Michael don't say a word as they walk towards the basement. They're the third couple today and everyone knows where they're going.

The boiler room is full of wine-stained table clothes, boxes of candles, and cheaply made yarmulkes. There are leftover party favors stacked in the far corner: light pink "Samantha's Bat Mitzvah 1997" tee shirts, "Marc's Rock and Roll Bar Mitzvah" CDs, and "Jon's Bar Mitzvah" boxers. "Summer Programs in Israel" pamphlets are scattered on the floor and a poster of Bert and Ernie saying "Shalom" is stuck on a wall with masking tape. A water-damaged picture of Stevie Wonder sitting at a keyboard is tacked, on three sides, to the ceiling; the loose flap flutters slightly. Beth leans against a wall and takes off her glasses, waiting for Michael to kiss her. Once he starts, it's okay since there's no more pressure to talk. But soon he notices garlic lingering on her breath and that her tongue is doing cartwheels on the roof of his mouth. After a minute, Beth untucks her blouse from her skirt, lifts Michael's hands under the two white triangular flaps and puts them right on her breasts. All of a sudden he pictures Ms. Lynch and how she would think this is all very strange. But having Swahili as a project is also strange, Michael thinks. His teacher's breasts would certainly be bigger than Beth's. Patrick, with all the weight he's gained lately, might have bigger breasts than Beth. Man-tits, Brett would say. But why is he thinking about this when Beth is sucking his neck, making it sloppy-wet? Is she trying to give him a hickey? Michael doesn't want a hickey from Beth: his mother will notice.

"We can do more, Mike," Beth whispers.

"Great!" Michael says loudly.

He feels stupid, but Beth lifts up her skirt. He stuffs his right hand into her green and yellow striped underwear. What if someone comes

down? What if he gets caught with Dr. Stan's daughter? They have three classes together but he has never talked to Beth, has had no idea that she liked him. She must like him. Otherwise why would she let him do this? Michael peeks at Beth's vagina but all he can see is curly pubic hair. The vaginas in Dr. Bloom's magazines don't have hair and unlike the women in his videos who moan and scream, Beth is silent. Michael looks up; Stevie Wonder grins. The beats from the DJ above them make Michael feel as if he's underneath the ocean, surrounded by a thick darkness, floating blindly in a tunnel. Patrick hates tunnels: they make him nervous.

Beth snaps open her eyes. "We should go back upstairs. They'll be serving cake."

Michael removes his hand from the underpants. Beth pulls up her skirt and brushes off invisible cake crumbs. Beth can't know that he wasn't paying attention can she, that his mind kept thinking about other stuff? Man-tits. Tunnels. Patrick. Women with boobs like Ms. Lynch's. Jesus Christ, what's the matter with him? Why is he thinking about completely random shit? Shit, Michael thinks, he shouldn't be thinking about Jesus Christ in a temple.

Later, Michael is simultaneously relieved and aghast when he hears "Mikey! Mikey!" bounce off the temple wall. Without saying goodbye to the girls who are flirting with the DJ or the guys who are setting ants on fire with *Heather's Bat Mitzvah* matchbooks, Michael leaps into the car, leans over Patrick, and rolls up the window. As his mother pulls out of the parking lot, he sees Beth walk out with Lindsay Cooper-Miller. Should he have said goodbye? Is he supposed to call? He doesn't know what he'd talk about but she did let him touch her pussy. That's a big deal. But it wasn't so great. Nothing, really.

All the pigs-in-a-blanket and two pieces of cake he inhaled after coming up from the basement skip in his stomach. Don't puke, he orders himself. He remembers Beth's pubic hair and gags. His bile tastes like rum and Coke.

"You alright?" His mother glances at him in the rear-view mirror.

"Yeah." Don't think about it, just don't think, he tells himself. Do something. Anything. Without warning, he grabs Duckie from the crook of his brother's elbow, rolls down the window, and holds the animal into the breeze. The animal is filthy, Michael thinks, it's swarming with his brother's retard spit and bacteria. If Michael threw Duckie out of the window, it would be for Patrick's own good. Patrick howls and his mother glares at Michael in the mirror. Fuck it. Fuck them. Michael shoves the animal back under his brother's heaving chin. He never said a word to Beth Herets so fuck her and Brett Bloom and

Lindsay Cooper-Miller and Scott Farrar. Fuck them all. Fuck the entire eighth fucking grade.

*

Sunday, Michael wakes late and hungry in a quiet house. A note on the kitchen table says that his mother took Patrick to swim at the YWCA. After he reads the note, Michael gulps orange juice out of the carton, throws eggs in a frying pan over a flame his mother would say is much too high, and eats the last French bread pizza, which technically belongs to Patrick.

He should do homework—he needs to figure out something to tell Ms. Lynch about Swahili. He wants her to think he worked hard on it, but what's he supposed to say about a language no one understands? Michael walks into the living room and lies down on the couch. Suddenly he feels very tired. The phone rings.

"Fitz."

Brett.

"Hey, watchya doing Fitz? You just took off yesterday from Heather's."

"Oh," Michael mumbles, "you know."

"No I don't fucking know. You never did give me the scoop of Bethie Wethie Wet 'N' Wild."

"Well…"

"What happened? Did you go all the way?"

"I don't know," Michael says quickly. He shouldn't have answered the phone, he thinks. He should have let the machine pick up.

"What do you mean you don't know, you fucking retard? How far did you get? How's her booty?"

Michael bites his thumbnail.

"I won't tell," Brett says.

"Yeah you will."

Brett laughs. "Yeah, of course I will. Alright, tell me later. You should come over. My dad got some new movies. Fucking hysterical."

"Can't," Michael says without thinking. "I'm grounded."

"What'd you do?"

"I kicked the shit out of my brother." The words come out so naturally that for a moment Michael forgets that he isn't grounded.

"How come?"

"He was pissing me off." Michael kicks open the kitchen door and drags the phone till the cord is stretched to its maximum—one more inch will make it snap and no more Brett. Keeping the phone tucked

into the crook of shoulder and chin, Michael knocks a box of Lucky Charms off the top of the fridge.

"Oh," Brett says slowly. "I forget that you have a brother, you know."

"Yeah, well." What's Michael supposed to say? He pours milk onto his cereal.

"Anyway, Jeff talked to Becca who heard from Kate that Beth's going to go all the way with you. She's hot as shit for ya, Fitz. She says you the man, man," Brett snorts.

As Michael chews, sugar catapults into his molars and makes him feel like screaming.

*

He's still in his boxers and *Heather's Bat Mitzvah* tee shirt when Patrick and his mother come home at three. His brain feels heavy from TV and Lucky Charms. A shower might motivate him, but he's both disgusted and delighted from the peppery waft from his armpits that he decides to stay dirty. Patrick's hair is plastered to his forehead and he smells like chlorine.

"Want to play Connect Four?" he asks. Patrick has always been surprisingly good at the game although Michael can't remember the last time they played.

"No."

"Whatdaya mean?"

"Not in the mood."

Not in the mood? Patrick? Michael is stunned. "Your loss, Tardarella," he calls as Patrick walks upstairs.

He waits for his mother to tell him not to be mean. When she doesn't, he turns up the volume on the TV, and waits for her to tell him to do his homework.

She doesn't.

He's left alone until dinner. When they finish, he volunteers to do the dishes. He can start his social studies project after.

"Really?" his mother asks. "That'd be great, Mike. Maybe I'll take a bath." She sounds really grateful. Michael pictures Ms. Lynch in a bathtub, her eyes closed. Shit. He clears the plates from the table, thoroughly rinses each one before putting it in the dishwasher. He hears Patrick turn on the television and waits for *Rugrats* but it stays on *Sixty Minutes*. Michael scrubs the sink as Mike Wallace interviews a South American warlord. *Rebel. Trade. Illegal arms.* Michael is in a groove, wiping down all the counters before removing the flame tamers from the stove. The sponge does little to free tonight's spa-

ghetti sauce and other cemented food, so he scrubs vigorously with steel wool. While Andy Rooney mumbles about fender benders, Michael sprays the microwave, toaster, and Mr. Coffee with Fantastik. He pushes all the chairs into the table and fills the napkin holder. He's vigorously scrubbing the handle of the fridge when he notices Patrick's drawing of their family securely fastened with alphabet magnets to the freezer. Patrick has drawn Michael with a frown, even though everyone else is smiling. How come Michael isn't smiling?

He's wiping right below the picture when he notices that the green sponge is the same color as the stripes on Beth's underpants. It's wrong. This sponge is for dishes, not surfaces. Michael throws it into the sink. He does not want to go to school tomorrow. He doesn't want to have to talk to Beth or Brett or any of their friends. He doesn't want to learn anything at all about Swahili. His mother walks in, a towel wrapped on top of her head but he runs upstairs before she can thank him for doing such a good job.

*

"Can we go to your house for a change?" Brett asks as they leave Ms. Lynch's class, which has been miraculously uneventful other than a stern reminder that their projects will be 25% of this marking period's grade. Beth was absent and Michael hopes it has nothing to do with him, with what happened in temple.

Michael doesn't want to go to his house, not with Brett, not now, not ever. But it's getting weird. Brett probably thinks it's weird that they never go there. But Brett's the one with all the movies. "I don't know cause, like, I'm grounded."

"Right," Brett replies. "I forgot. So come to my house. My dad doesn't teach today but he's probably playing golf. We can do our stupid social studies reports or something if he's home. We've got high speed Internet now."

"I guess," Michael says slowly.

"So you beat up your brother. Ha. Wouldn't expect it from ya, Mike. Not a sweet guy like you." He laughs hysterically.

"Fuck off." Michael turns to see if the bus is coming.

"So Lindsay says that Beth said you were sweet." Brett elbows him. "*And* sexy. You going out with her?"

"Yeah," Michael says, "maybe. I dunno."

He's relieved when the bus comes and he can lean his head against the window, as Brett yaps to some seventh grade girls behind them.

*

No one is home at the Blooms' and Brett takes a liter bottle of Diet Pepsi out of the fridge. "Let's watch some videos before my dad gets home," he says.

The first movie has a large black woman getting whipped by white men who call her nigger bitch. When Brett laughs Michael laughs although he can't help but think about his project. He wonders what it's like in Africa right this minute. Hot probably. Are there two African guys doing what he and Brett are doing? Do people watch movies like this in Africa? Do they like them? Probably not, Michael thinks. They probably don't have VCRs.

Michael is beginning to get the same sick feeling he had after Heather's Bat Mitzvah. He swallows. He doesn't want to be here. Brett spits a mouthful of soda back in the bottle, belches, and laughs before getting up to put in another tape. Shit, what about their reports? Michael will be in trouble since he didn't bother to get books from the library during lunch and he doesn't have any Internet access at home.

"What the fuck is this?" Brett asks.

Michael stares at the screen. This video doesn't look like any of the other ones they've seen. It's grainy and old and the camera keeps pointing up at the sky and the glare from the bright sun makes it impossible for the cameraman to keep the camera steady. Finally it focuses on a family on the beach. It looks like an old home movie except the people look nothing like Dr. and Mrs. Bloom. The woman's lips move, but there's no sound and the sun makes her face look bleached white. Brett bounces his knee up and down. Michael feels sicker as he watches a man wearing bellbottoms twirl a little girl into the air. The girl's swinging legs cut the sky into diagonal sections, her braids whip around her head. Brett holds the Diet Pepsi in front of Michael. But it's so obvious that Michael just saw him backwash. Does Brett think Michael is blind, that their friendship is a joke? What if Michael walks into school tomorrow and discovers that he's no longer Brett's best friend? Not popular. If that happened, would he just go back to who he used to be? Michael shakes his head and to his relief, Brett puts the soda back on the floor.

"This is stupid. Why aren't they naked?" Brett asks.

But Brett's stupid, Michael thinks. He's so stupid to watch these movies and laugh at so many things that aren't funny. Then again maybe Michael is stupid. Right now he's really fucking stupid to be here, to have gone to the boiler room, to have friends like Brett Bloom and Scott Farrar and Lindsay Cooper-Miller. And another thing: if he ever gets started on it, Michael is going to look like an ass when he gives a presentation on a language instead of a country. See what

happens when you're too busy thinking about your teacher's tits? Who thinks about their teacher's tits? The same moron who chooses to do a project on Swahili. He's the asshole. The joke is on him.

"Here we go," Brett says. "It's about fucking time."

Michael looks back at the screen to see a young topless girl with thick glasses, a wide body, and a drunken smile wildly dancing. There is something wrong with the girl. Although she is definitely related to the one with the braids—the normal one being tossed in the sky—you can see the girl is not normal by the way she moves, her soft fleshy features, the way her head fits so awkwardly on her neck. The camera moves away from her and back to the rest of the family. But there's a hand, an arm, the doll, and in another moment dancing doll girl is back. She squints as she smiles and waves a pair of white underpants at the camera. Sunlight shines through them. Bellbottom man grabs her by the wrists, trying to get the underpants, which flap up and down. It's a frantic moment before Bellbottom man gets them and the battle ends. Like a flag of surrender, Michael thinks. Generals on black horses holding white handkerchiefs so they don't have to fight anymore. Brett laughs and Michael wonders if he's said this out loud.

"It's going to get good, man. It's about time. Let's see some action," he tells the screen. "She's really hot, isn't she? A little monkey of a Mongoloid." He looks at Michael.

"Huh?"

"You know what's coming. You're down with the Down's man. Beating your brother? Raping the retards?"

Before Michael can get a better angle or rearrange his body so he's not half off the couch, his fist is deep in the warm, soft section of Brett's mouth, the chiseled edge of his chin. Slow and steady, Michael tells himself.

When you take it slow and steady, you see clearly.

And Michael is so focused that as his fist pummels Brett's jaw in the last remaining moments of Brett's surprise, Michael is actually able to see beyond it; he suddenly has the power to see himself on the floor of the Blooms' fancy floor-to-ceiling mirrored bathroom where the remaining orange daylight floods through the tiny slits of the Venetian blinds and illuminates the crisscrossing spray of his blood. It's so beautiful, Michael will think, it's like a movie and for a moment he'll be glad to be here, lying on the bathroom floor because, for a moment, it won't matter that his jeans are soaked with urine or that his eyes are rapidly swelling. He'll look up at the sunlight and remember going to church. It was only him, his mom, and Patrick since his father had to keep the bar open so late on Saturdays. They used to go

every Sunday but haven't been in years, Michael will realize, bringing his fingertips to his head. Brett will be waiting outside, banging on the door, telling Michael to leave, telling Michael that's he's a fucking asshole, a fucking retard, but for some reason Michael won't get up. Not yet. He'd rather stay and slide his fingers down to his eyes, which will be steadily rising. His eyes are just filling space, he'll think, filling the space between his nose and forehead. This thought will make him smile because he'll imagine that it will make it easier to avoid seeing and talking to his mother and brother as he dutifully swallows the aspirins they bring him every four hours. While they are in his room, Michael will keep his eyes closed underneath the warm, melted ice packs. Only later, when they are sleeping, will he get out of bed. Holding the banister, Michael will make his way to the kitchen and sit at the table. The clock on the microwave will read 3:30, but Michael will not go back to sleep until he has written every word the encyclopedia says about Swahili on the 4X6 index cards his mother bought him when they went back-to-school shopping, way back in September.

Tina Royer

sin

I'm gonna
buy you
all the Barbies
you
can play with

his breath
writes
under the glow
of the Chevy
dome light

as
he
unbuttons
my
goodwill
jeans.

Daniel Mahoney

Mining

The Fresno Air Terminal is known all over the world as FAT

A name so disgusting local politicians built a new city hall

In the shape of a giant clam shell

The open side is made entirely of glass and steel

In the summer, symphonies of concentrated light allow chance observers

To see the face of God

Before bursting into flame

This fact has been well documented

A local farmer whose land straddles Highway 99 has erected a billboard that reads

Enter the clam Watch us burn

*

When my brother and I were too young to worry about having sex

We worried through boxes of stamps collected by an old man

Whose shop shared an entry with a strip club called *Lick*

I walked into *Lick* on a dare and was struck dumb by breasts and other revelations

Until the lights went out

I found myself downtown

I huzzahed and laughed hard from the belly

Someone ordered another round

I drank whiskey and watched my brother seed himself into every conversation

We spoke of the importance of roofs

Fashioned eyelashes into slender whips, watched the bodies of women

*

The refrain of a traditional coal mining song goes

I'm down in a hole, down in a deep dark hole

Which, even to the most casual listener, seems true enough

There is a mining town in Pennsylvania that has been on fire for thirty years

Residents say it was an accident, a miscalculation,

Like falling off the high dive

Carrie's brother miscalculated that way

Later, I asked her to have sex with me

Another miscalculation considering her brother was in the hospital

And what I had tried to say was

I'm sorry

*

They've hung a huge sign on the city hall that reads

Who are you here to see?

The lines go on for miles

My brother will never go back there

He's in jail tying everything he can into a knot

I send him letters recalling the times we drove into the deep shag of the Sierras

How we'd bring sandwiches and Old Granddad

How, when inspiration hit, our eyes would lock on each other

Widening beyond the whites

Until he was burning and I was burning and the air whirled

And rose from the earth

Ander Monson

—Second Place Poem—

Forms of Punctuation

Wedge, you straight and leaden comma,
inclined plane, sharp but needing force to fulfill
your fission mission. Sledge, your dumb
pocked head and maple
stretch of neck—how like an exclamation!—gripped
in our fathers' hands to break the ends of lines
to fit the stack. Crosscut saw—to dash across the grain. Rip-
saw used to plow a furrow down the vein
and separate like clauses, you semicolon;
too, division tool. Like all implements that sift
out form from motion, meaning from incision,
when bowed or tuned right you gather pitch,
can be played or made to sing
strung, rung, or set to hum.

Harry Newman

Trotsky in Love

Head filled with manifestoes,
Bolsheviks, Mensheviks, Five-Year Plans,
the proletarian dictatorship; with
Lenin, Bukharin, and the Georgian bully,
no threat yet, but who could tell how
his lip must curl beneath that mustache,

he never once considered the girl,
the waitress, who stood by the bar
after bringing his drink, a vodka,
and watched while he talked, not hearing
a word, not caring, but liking the way
his mouth would move, always smiling, she thought;

until he looked up one night as she put down
his drink, looked up and saw her reaching
towards him: "You're beautiful," he said.
Now, he stood by the bar while she helped
close up—chairs on tables, upside-down,
an order inverted, but ordered still.

She took his arm as they went out the door,
working her fingers between his, took
his arm against her breast, damp from sweat,
and they walked through the streets, his city
for now, through the square her apartment
overlooked: a room, mostly bed.

His eyes blinked shut when she turned on
the light, such sudden light, and she slipped
from her dress with less than a shrug, then
sat on the bed as his eyes readjusted,
sat there half-naked arms by her side,
fleshy, strong, waiting to pull him towards her.

When they touched the revolution came
to an end, for a moment, and the world
cleaved into a world of two—him, her—
but rejoined itself once they slipped from
each other, back in the darkness, his face
by her breast: "Your mind, I love your mind,"

she breathed, stroking his mouth, his cheeks,
his eyes, lulling him down into sleep
to dream of honeymooning in Mexico.

John Patrick Bishop

The *Hae-Sam* Revolution

In the days of the Second World War, at the end of the Japanese occupation of Korea, on an island of mist and forest, Chol-su's father was the greatest opponent of what would come to be known on Myong-do as the sea cucumber revolution. Though as a young man he had demonstrated against Japanese rule, forty years of occupation had shrunk his limbs, grayed his mustache, diminished his ambitions. He mended his fishing nets. He cleaned the graves of his ancestors. He sold his catch of squid, crab, and sea cucumber—the prized *hae-sam*—at the harbor. "Our island is small, our people are poor," he would say to Chol-su. "Life is a struggle, even without upsetting the Japanese." And for much of his life, Chol-su heeded his father's words.

Several miles off the southernmost tip of the Korean peninsula, the island of Myong-do was small enough that a man could walk from one end to another in less than a day. The island's hills were covered with pines that gave way to cliffs and wide stony beaches where the fishermen repaired their skiffs or affixed glass floats to their nets. Because of its size and isolation, Myong-do was ruled during the occupation by a series of Japanese magistrates who had been passed over for more glamorous posts. When the empire mobilized its troops for the war, a new magistrate was dispatched to Myong-do, a slight man wearing thin, wire spectacles. He seemed harmless enough, but after three years of life on the island—far from his family and native tongue, far from the war and the possibility of glory—the despot of this insignificant fiefdom grew eccentric. Each day he led his troops on a patrol of the island dressed in full combat gear. He developed a ravenous appetite for the island's one treasure, the bumpy, tubular *hae-sam* that clung to the ocean's rocks—a delicacy he had never tasted until his arrival at Myong-do. Over the course of these three years he became corpulent, his uniform stretched across his belly and chest, the buttons threatening to spring from their thread lashings. As his body grew, so did his appetites. He began to personally torture suspected radicals. He forced island girls into his bed.

Chol-su's wife, Kyong-hui, was one of those girls. The rape occurred within the first year of their marriage. On the night Kyong-hui went missing, Chol-su searched for her in the village and forest before coming to his own conclusions. She didn't have to say anything the next morning. She walked into the house and crouched beside the wood-burning *agungi* to start the fire. Chol-su watched her work.

Her delicate profile, her almond colored skin, her obsidian waterfall of hair—all the things that had defined her beauty for Chol-su—now shone dully like tarnished brass. Since their marriage, they'd been trying to conceive a child, a son. But after her rape, Chol-su found he could no longer respond to her when they lay beside each other on their cotton-stuffed sleeping pad. Two months afterwards, Kyong-hui flung herself from one of the island's northern cliffs. After her body was discovered, after the preparations for her funeral were made, one of her sisters admitted to Chol-su that Kyong-hui had been with child, and Chol-su understood the depths of his wife's shame. But as he donned the white mourning clothes for her funeral, it was Chol-su who felt shamed. As he grieved for his young bride, he felt the eyes of the island upon him, and rage towards the magistrate sprouted in his chest—a lotus fed by his conviction that the island would judge him by what he did next.

Had he been a warrior he would have matched death with death. But Chol-su was a teacher and began his personal revolution by teaching forbidden subjects at the village school. Each day, as one student kept watch for the Japanese, Chol-su instructed his classes in Korean language, history, and the memorization of passages from a banned translation of Marx.

One night, a few months after Chol-su began his secret classes, his father accosted him by the stone well in the courtyard between their adjoined homes. Bags hung from the deeply etched hollows of the old man's eyes, spittle clung to the corners of his mouth. "What do you think you're doing?" he demanded. "Do you know what you're risking with all of this nonsense?"

Chol-su ignored his father and retreated to his empty bed.

When Chol-su's activities were discovered by the Japanese, he was arrested and taken to the barracks where a shirtless jailer clubbed the soles of his feet so savagely he could not walk for weeks. As he convalesced at home, his father knelt beside him on the heated *ondol* floor and begged him to stop. "Think of your duty on this earth," he pleaded. "Who will preserve the name of our ancestors if you die?" After his recovery, Chol-su continued to teach despite a second arrest and beating, which forever hardened his disposition and made it impossible to fully open his left eye. Once again, his father knelt beside him on the floor. "Don't you see it's impossible?" he said. "There's nothing we can do."

Lying there, Chol-su almost sided with his father. He knew there was no way the villagers could defeat the garrison of armed Japanese troops. Even if they did manage to murder the Japanese, it would only be a matter of time until new troops were sent to the island, and

their retribution would be terrible and severe.

The answer came to him in a dream. In the dream, Chol-su and his father were wading among large rocks on a cloudless day, picking *hae-sam* from the sea and placing them in a steel bucket.

When Chol-su awoke, muted sunlight shone through the rice paper windows. Though he felt a stabbing pain when he breathed, though his legs were weak and ineffectual, he felt healed. In a few days he found he could walk again and called for a meeting of the island's elders to propose a ban on the gathering and sale of *hae-sam.*

The meeting was held in the two-room schoolhouse next to the county seat office, on the opposite side of town from the Japanese barracks. After Chol-su had made his proposal, the seven elders of the island's clans inspected their starched cotton shirts and shook their heads in doubt. Chol-su's father was the first to speak. "The sea is rich with *hae-sam*. We depend upon them for our prosperity. Why should we throw away our only fortune?"

Though Chol-su knew he would shame his father by disagreeing with him in public, he spoke with fervor. "We may not be able to drive the Japanese from the island," he said. "But we can still strike them at their bellies. We can show them what kind of men we are. We can lift our heads in front of our children and grandchildren."

"If we oppose the Japanese," Chol-su's father said, sneering, "many of us will never see our children or grandchildren again."

"If they kill us, there will be no divers to gather the *hae-sam*," Chol-su said. "The magistrate knows this."

The council argued for several hours, but in the end voted by a slim margin in favor of the proposal. Chol-su's father was one of the men who had voted against it.

"I will honor the decision," he said afterwards. "But it doesn't make any difference. There will be someone who will trade the *hae-sam* for special favors."

The council agreed with Chol-su's father. The success of the revolution depended upon a united front. Thus, they entrusted Chol-su with the authority to punish anyone in violation of the prohibition.

It took weeks of badgering before the merchants and fishermen finally succumbed to the rule of the council, and for more than a year the prohibition of *hae-sam* was followed strictly. In the first months of the embargo, the magistrate accepted the merchants' excuses: the season wasn't right, the tides were uncooperative, a bad moon had swallowed the *hae-sam*. But eventually, he grew suspicious. Believing that the villagers were secretly selling *hae-sam* to Korean buyers, the magistrate began to visit the harbor market daily, only to leave

empty-handed. One day, he asked a gap-toothed, elderly merchant if there might be any sea cucumber available. She ran a hand through her limp hair, saying, "no *hae-sam* today, sir magistrate. Bad luck, they're not growing as they used to." She smiled too broadly and the magistrate slapped her across the face. The entire market silenced and glared at the magistrate. As he scurried back to his barracks, he accidentally overturned a bucket of mussels. The islanders regarded the magistrate's swift retreat as an admission of weakness. When Chol-su heard the news, he flushed with pride. At the market that evening, each vendor offered him free fish and produce. "For your leadership," they said. The next day, the magistrate posted a declaration that the empire would double the market price for sea cucumbers. Still, not a single *hae-sam* reached his plate.

But this was a difficult time for the island. The war effort required a heftier tax from all the empire's colonies, and the villagers of Myong-do were forced to subsist on spare portions of rice and *k'ongnamul*. The men's ribs began to show. The children's raw gums bled to the touch. The schoolmaster's wife gave birth to a stillborn daughter. Even the Japanese soldiers felt the effects of the empire's struggling economy. Resupply from Japan became less frequent, and the troops continued their patrols in threadbare uniforms.

In these desperate times, just as Chol-su's father had predicted, someone began supplying the Japanese with *hae-sam*. The magistrate's daily visits to the market ceased, and his local cooks reported preparing buckets of *hae-sam* for the magistrate and his troops.

At an emergency meeting in the schoolhouse, the council argued bitterly. The schoolhouse had been built by the Japanese at the start of the occupation and its floor plan bore a striking resemblance to the army's jail. Listening to the council bicker, Chol-su's feet throbbed.

"Why should one man profit while the rest of us starve in poverty?" Chol-su's father asked the bickering crowd. "I beg you to lift the prohibition."

The council dismissed him immediately. The *hae-sam* revolution had become a matter of pride, a test of wills. Now emboldened by a taste of resistance, the council was resolute. They would find the traitor and punish him. After hours of discussion, the council agreed on a likely suspect: the fisherman, Soon-Taek, a known collaborator and informant. That evening, Chol-su and several men walked to Soon-Taek's house carrying long, hardwood sticks. Standing in Soon-Taek's courtyard, Chol-su called the man outside. Soon-Taek had a plump belly and the face of a rat. When he realized what the men had come for, he dropped to his knees. "Have mercy," he begged.

Chol-su was the first to strike Soon-Taek. The collaborator

shrieked as he took the first blow, then ran through his house into the backyard. Chol-su overtook Soon-Taek and threw him against the half-buried earthenware crocks of fermenting winter *kimchi*. As the men continued to strike Soon-Taek, his wife and young son ran from the house, pleading with them to stop. The boy was one of Chol-su's students, and looking into his eyes, Chol-su felt a stab of regret. He considered stopping. Instead, he tightened his grip and struck the collaborator again, knocking him squarely on the chin.

When Chol-su returned home that night, his father boxed his ears. "What have you done?" he demanded.

Chol-su clenched his teeth in anger. "It was necessary for the revolution," he said. "It was necessary for our freedom."

"It was a mistake," his father said. His father's demeanor grew almost tender. "You can beg his forgiveness, there's still time for that. We all make mistakes."

Chol-su's eyes narrowed. "I would make the same choice one thousand times than live as you do, live as a broken coward."

His father remained silent as he retired to his house. Neither man spoke to each other again. A week later, his father's boat disappeared. The body was discovered three days later, tangled among the cultivated seaweed in the western shallows, bloated and mottled from seawater.

Shortly after Chol-su finished the obligatory forty-nine days of mourning, word came from the mainland that the American army had dropped an unmatchable weapon on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The war had ended. The *hae-sam* revolution had been a success, though not without its victims.

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After the Japanese occupiers lowered their flag from the wooden clapboard barracks and boarded their boats to return to their country, the entire island of Myong-do rejoiced. Only the poorest families worked that day. The men drank *soju* to excess, and eventually the drunken carousing brought the entire island to the dusty village square, where Chol-su pushed his way to the front of the crowd and made a declaration of freedom under the eaves of the county seat office. By the schoolhouse, a few chickens pecked at the sun-cracked dirt. Chol-su's wounded eyelid twitched as he spoke. He wore his injury like a badge. He led the villagers' jubilant voices in *Han-gul* songs, Korean songs, the very songs the empire had tried to eradicate. Liberation was just as Chol-su had imagined when he first read the words of Marx and Lenin—celebration, brotherhood, freedom. Every house

on the island feasted on *hae-sam*, which in this festival of liberation, the vendors at the harbor market sold at little cost, simply shrugging and saying, "It's a new world today." That night, Chol-su ate at his uncle, Chong-Ik's house. His aunt boiled the bumpy tubes, serving them in a spicy sauce of vinegar and *kochujang*. As Chol-su bit into the gelatinous *hae-sam*, he believed he had truly tasted freedom.

The new government troops arrived a month after the occupiers left. They moved into the barracks the Japanese had built and called it a victory for the nation, a victory for the Korean people. At the first town meeting, the new lieutenant stood before the murmuring islanders in a crisp uniform. He was no more than twenty-five, tall and lean, with arched, feline eyebrows and a shorn head. He said that a generation which had grown up under Japanese rule would now know freedom. Again, he used the word victory.

"These personnel are only a temporary addition to your island, until a proper police force can be trained. Your new government also intends to pave a road and bring electricity. Imagine!" he cried. "Your children will grow to be scholars under electric light."

At the end of the meeting, Chol-su presented the lieutenant with a small bowl of *hae-sam* to properly welcome the troops. The lieutenant looked at the small, rocky nubs and his eyes lit up. "I've heard much about this island's *hae-sam*," he said. In that moment, Chol-su wondered whether they had simply traded one dictator for another.

After the meeting, Chol-su's uncle took him by the arm. "What are they doing, sending someone so young?" he asked, stroking his thin moustache and sucking greedily on his pipe. As he coughed, he beat one fist against his sunken chest. "Anyway, did you hear his accent? From the city, that's for sure. If you want to know the truth," he continued, "I'm surprised no one asked you for your leadership, after everything you did."

Chol-su thanked his uncle for his generosity and kind words. "Too kind. I was only a teacher, nothing more," he said.

"You were our strongest voice," Chong-Ik said. "No one will forget the *hae-sam*. We showed those dogs what we were made of!"

Again, Chol-su thanked his uncle, and when the road forked, the two bowed courteously to each other. As Chong-Ik was about to make his way home, he turned to his nephew and said, "Your father would have been proud of you."

Chol-su merely nodded and smiled before walking home to his empty house.

A day later, the island's schoolmaster, Pyong-chol, invited Chol-su to resume teaching. On the first day of classes, Chol-su supervised the burning of Japanese textbooks. The older students dutifully fed

the fire, while the younger children chased each other around the flames. In the next months, Chol-su spent many late nights developing a modern curriculum for his students. During the days, he instructed them in mathematics, Korean language, world history, class struggle, and the plight of the workers. But he found the greatest comfort in the daily calligraphy class. Lost in the gentle strokes of black ink against rice paper, Chol-su did not think of his wife or father. In the simple perfection of the task, Chol-su did not consider what had been lost.

Within half a year, rumors began to trickle from the mainland that people were disappearing. Communist dissidents and revolutionaries—the very men who had opposed the Japanese during the occupation—were being rounded up by the new national police and interrogated. Those who returned had been tortured and disgraced. Those who did not were publicly executed.

Chol-su knew it would only be a matter of time before he too was brought in for questioning. When the day arrived, he was at home practicing calligraphy by a small kerosene lantern. He heard sandals smacking on the dirt path to his house and stepped into the courtyard to find Pyong-chol running towards him, his hair drenched with sweat.

As Pyong-chol caught his breath he rested his palms on his thighs.

"What is it?" Chol-su asked.

"My brother overheard two policemen at the *jiso*. They're coming for you."

"When?"

"Tonight. You have to run. Take food, whatever you can carry."

Chol-su rushed inside and gathered his traveling bag, some fruit, a small knife, and a thin coat before meeting Pyong-chol outside.

In the courtyard he bowed to the schoolmaster. "I know what a risk it was for you to come here," he said.

"It's my duty. Come to my house tomorrow night. We'll feed you."

Chol-su hurried into the forest. He walked for hours on darkened paths he had known since childhood. Next to a rock, curled under his jacket, he finally slept. He spent the next day moving cautiously, starting a slow circuit of the island. He rested in a persimmon orchard, the fruit still hard and green. As promised, that night he descended from the forest, walked the narrow pathways separating rice terraces, and arrived at Pyong-chol's house. Pyong-chol's wife fed him and told him that the police had ransacked his home the night before. Before Chol-su left that night, the schoolmaster said, "Tomorrow, go to Soon-chul's house. They will feed you there."

Chol-su spent the day wandering in the forest and the next night ate at Soon-chul's home. In this way he spent the next six days. At every house, the families of the island offered him food from their table and precious information. They informed him of troop patrols so that he might adjust his own movements accordingly and avoid capture. From a distant cousin, Chol-su learned that he had been denounced as an outlaw and that the lieutenant was personally leading the manhunt.

On the seventh night he took a meal at an elderly widow's home, a woman who had grown up with his mother. She had lost both her sons during the occupation and now lived in a dilapidated hut with a rickety outhouse. She said that the lieutenant had promised an equal punishment for the outlaw and for those caught aiding the outlaw. She lowered her eyes and spoke softly. "These mainlanders, they're no better than the Japanese. Last night they took Pyong-chol into custody. When he returned this morning, his teeth were broken and he could eat only rice gruel."

"I have to give myself up," Chol-su said. "There is only one way to end this."

"Don't talk nonsense," the old woman responded. "You can't give up now."

And though he nodded in agreement, he made a silent oath to remain in seclusion.

He spent the next three days in the forest without food. On the third night, he awoke in a downpour. His innards ached with hunger. With the rain on his face he could not tell if he was weeping.

As it rained, he slept under a wide, green tree and was met by the ghost of his father.

His father appeared as he did before he drowned, the skin and face withered with age, hair gray, but eyes vibrant.

"What are you doing here?" his father asked.

Chol-su stood and addressed his father. "*Aboji*?"

"You're not safe."

Chol-su's pulse quickened. "They're coming?"

"They will be here soon. What are you waiting for?"

Chol-su opened his eyes and heard feet trampling the earth. He reached for his small bag of belongings, then quickly drew his hand away. A few feet beyond the bag, a gray rabbit sat on its haunches, watching him. Somewhere beyond Chol-su's vision, a bird cawed. The rabbit took a few tentative steps and once again lowered its gaze upon Chol-su. When the rabbit moved, Chol-su followed it, first on his hands and knees, then standing, running, heart pounding, legs and arms cut from the branches he stumbled through, the rabbit al-

ways just within sight. When it finally disappeared he collapsed and slept.

He awoke just as sunlight penetrated the forest's canopy and immediately gave thanks to his father's spirit. That day, he walked through the forests of persimmon and thorny *yuja* trees, singing the songs his father taught him. Some were folk songs; others, work songs to be sung to the cadence of a steady oar stroke. He could almost hear his father's voice singing underneath his. By dusk, though, his hunger had grown. While leaning against a crooked pine tree he remembered his father's countenance in their final argument—the color draining from his cheeks as if a vase of water had been overturned—and Chol-su was again plagued with shame.

That night, the ghost returned. He sat on a rounded rock, brushing a ripe persimmon against his linen shirt.

"*Aboji,*" Chol-su whispered.

His father took a bite from the persimmon. A thin trail of juice trickled down his chin. He closed his eyes while he chewed, as if lost in private reverie. "Delicious," he said.

"Why have you come to protect me, *Aboji*?"

His father looked at him quizzically. "It's my duty to protect you."

"I failed to honor you in life. I do not deserve your protection."

"It's not a matter of choice," his father said, shrugging. "This was something you never understood."

Chol-su was suddenly flooded with indignation. "I was doing what I thought was right," he said.

His father's face slackened.

"What is it *Aboji*? Have I hurt you?"

"No, it's not that," he said, tossing the persimmon aside. "They're coming for you. Wake up. Run."

Chol-su sat up and saw the rabbit waiting for him. In the darkness he heard a man's voice.

"He's close," the voice whispered. "I can smell him."

The rabbit sprang towards a rocky slope and Chol-su followed it. He heard bodies stumbling in the darkness behind him, voices yelling, but Chol-su did not look back. His body was hungry and agile. He sensed the path before he saw it. He did not know how long he ran before he stumbled and fell asleep.

By the next morning, Chol-su's hunger overcame him. The sun was bright in the sky and he slowly made his way to his uncle's house, arriving mid-afternoon. Chol-su sat in the forest beyond his uncle's barley field waiting for the sun to set, waiting for his uncle to finish dinner and step outside for his nightly smoke. After dusk deepened into night he heard the door slide open, footsteps on the stone path,

and his uncle's rasping cough.

Chol-su approached him slowly. "Uncle," he whispered.

His uncle dropped his pipe. "Chol-su. How long have you been here?"

"Several hours."

"Why did you wait? Were you afraid of your own uncle?"

"No, forgive me. I didn't want to put you at risk."

His uncle's face became grave. "Come inside," he said. "You don't look well." He took Chol-su's arm and led him to the house.

When his aunt saw him, she clasped her hands to her chest.

"What are you waiting for?" his uncle said to her. "Can't you see he's starved?"

His aunt reached for Chol-su's hands, held them briefly while examining his face, and then immediately located a bowl.

"We still have some fish *chigae*, nephew," she said fanning the embers in the *agungi*. "Where have you been?"

"In the forest. Hiding."

She handed a bowl of rice to Chol-su and warmed the clay pot of fish stew over the growing fire. Chol-su's hands trembled as he brought the rice to his mouth. His aunt gave him the stew. He ate quickly, though the *chigae* burned the roof of his mouth.

"They've doubled the men searching for you," his uncle said.

"Everyone's telling stories about you," Chol-su's aunt said.

"What are they saying?"

"That each night they get closer," his uncle replied. "But each night, just as they think they've got you in their net, you slip away." His uncle poured a glass of *soju* and handed it to Chol-su. He sipped the drink and felt the alcohol spread to his extremities. His uncle puffed meditatively on his pipe.

"What is it, Uncle?"

"It's a dangerous time for you. This is a small island, you could last one month, two months. But eventually you'll be caught. And when you're caught those who helped you will be punished. I'm not worried about myself, nephew, you're my blood, it's my duty. But I don't know how much longer the other clans will protect you. The lieutenant is growing desperate. You should hear him barking in the square, every day a new proclamation. He knows that as long as you're free his authority is in question."

"I cannot be caught," Chol-su said.

"No one can hide on this island forever."

"You don't understand me," Chol-su said. "I'm protected by my father's spirit. He meets me at night. He sends a rabbit to guide me through the forest to safety. Tell everyone they should not be afraid.

Tell everyone I have heaven on my side."

Chol-su paused. His aunt and uncle stared at him silently. Finally his aunt spoke, "Is your father in heaven or is he a wandering spirit?"

Chol-su's heart dropped. He had never considered that the assistance he received might be at a terrible cost. He imagined his father's soul, bound to the earth by fishing nets. *Even now, I am a burden to him*, he thought. He sipped his glass of *soju* but had lost his taste for it. He finished his meal in silence and then, against the wishes of his family, returned to the forest. Much later, on a bed of pine needles, he fell asleep and waited for the ghost.

His father prodded him, "Wake up, Chol-su."

"Are they coming tonight?" Chol-su asked.

"Not tonight," he said, crouching down on his heels and groaning.

"Are you in pain, *Aboji*?"

"It's not what you think. Pain doesn't exist in the body."

"Forgive me, *Aboji*, for chaining you to this earth. How long does your spirit have to wander?"

"It's not a matter of time. Here, there is no time, only duty."

"I'm afraid I've failed you," Chol-su said softly.

"It is every son's fear. Your son would have felt the same."

"I hope you can understand me, *Aboji*. Understand what I did."

His father's eyebrows suddenly drew together in anger. "I understand your vanity. You were always putting yourself ahead of others."

Chol-su felt the blood rise to his ears.

"What I did, I did for the good of the island," he said. "What I did, I did for the good of the nation. How can you call this vanity?"

"Was that why you did it? Ask yourself, why did you tell your uncle about me? Why would you betray the secret of your safety? To prove your mandate? To prove that you were blessed? Ask yourself, why did you resist the Japanese?"

"Kyong-hui died at their hands," Chol-su stammered. "I did it for her."

"Her spirit had passed, there was nothing you could have done for her. No, you did it because you could not bear the shame that your wife had been taken by another man. And all those beatings you endured, you didn't do that for her. You didn't do that for the island. You wanted to parade your grief."

"But the *hae-sam*," Chol-su insisted, weakly.

"More vanity. The island starved for your vendetta. Not to mention what happened to poor Soon-Taek."

"He was a collaborator."

His father clucked sadly. "I sold the *hae-sam* to the magistrate. Of

course, you never noticed, blinded as you were by revenge. And unfortunate Soon-Taek. What he suffered…"

"*Aboji*," Chol-su said quietly, collapsing to his knees. "How could you have done that?"

"I fulfilled my duty to my family. How do you think you survived your revolution? Did you imagine the Japanese didn't know who was behind it all? I bought your survival from the magistrate with *hae-sam*. And meanwhile, you strutted about the island, swollen with pride. You should have thought of your family before yourself."

Chol-su's father exhaled and began to weep softly.

"*Aboji*," Chol-su said.

"Forgive me," his father replied. "No man wants to see his son suffer. And you will suffer terribly."

Chol-su watched his father with horror. His skin was graying, distending. "All because of pride," his father whispered, standing up. His clothes saturated with seawater, the air smelled of brine. "Here," he said, opening his palm. Inside were two *hae-sam*. "Take them," he urged him. "They are all you have."

The next morning, as the lieutenant tended to his paperwork, the fisherman Soon-Taek appeared at the barracks, begging an audience. He told the lieutenant what he'd heard in the markets—that Chol-su was protected by the ghost of his father.

After Soon-Taek finished, the lieutenant laughed. "Come now," he said. "Do you think I'd believe your fairy tales?" He then ushered the fisherman out the door.

But after Soon-Taek left, the lieutenant reconsidered. These islanders were superstitious people. Whether or not the ghost existed was beyond the point. The point was the idea of the ghost. An army can be defeated in all the usual ways, but defeating an idea required creativity.

The lieutenant poured himself a glass of tea. When he finished the tea he called for his six strongest men, instructing them to get their spades. They marched across the island to Chol-su's father's grave—a green mound which rose from the earth like a belly. The lieutenant ordered his men to put their shovels into the ground, find the bones underneath and scatter them. The men paused before beginning their work, made silent entreaties to their own ancestors, begging—if only briefly—for forgiveness. Then they assumed a forced, professional demeanor and began to dig. When they were done, the sun was at its peak and the men had taken off their shirts.

That night, the lieutenant and his troops approached Chol-su as he slept. Chol-su did not hear their boots on the forest floor. He did

not resist as they handled and bound him. As the lieutenant approached, he saw the bedraggled outlaw clasping something in his hand. The lieutenant struck Chol-su once with the butt of his pistol before prying his fingers apart. The *hae-sam* that dropped to the ground were shriveled and dry, small and hard as pebbles. The lieutenant picked them up. He held the weightless sea cucumbers in his palm before ordering the men to bring Chol-su to his knees.

Melora Wolff

Joy

There was a ladder. And above the ladder, an open door.

I saw my cousin peering down at me. She beckoned for me to climb up. The barn below, where I hesitated, was dank and musty, long empty of animals and in the first apparent stages of decay. At one end of the barn, morning sunlight shone through the top of a half-opened door, and at the other end as well—the day was still there, reachable and easy, but I stood in a dark center.

"Come on!" Jessica said. She had managed the ascent up the ladder by herself.

I climbed slowly, reaching across the wide distance between the rungs, watching my own hands, and then Jessica (my age but brave and strong) reached for my arms and pulled me over the lip of the barn floor. Oh, the world smelled so sweet! The sweetness was too much, a solid thing that cloaked our bodies, and we rolled through the rotting hay, flung it at one another, burrowed into it, laughing, and my head was aching with the scent, the air was a visible soft cloud of yellow and blue fuzz that could be pulled deep into the body and held. Jessica pried open the loft window, which swung out, letting the sunlight and fresh air inside. The hay turned gold instead of grey, and there was a rush of wings as swallows started darting and fluttering around us. There were dozens of them waking and diving toward the light, out into the open air and then back in again. My uncle called up to us from the ordinary gravel far below, "What are you kids doing?" We lay on our stomachs at the window and stared down at him. From up there, he looked like a boy in his proper shirt and pressed jeans, a city boy left out of all the fun. "Lunch is ready," he called to us, and waved. He headed back toward the house, singing.

I have concluded my fortieth year, and I am waking each day to that sweet-smelling thought that won't quit me as so many of my thoughts have done. It comes to me for some reason I feel I must grab onto, before it's too late. It was summer or spring. There was a barn adjacent to a house on a road in upstate New York. It was early in the day, and early in the 1960s. Or else it was none of these things at all. But I believe that the morning in the loft was the first time in my life that I knew joy. I knew it—that is to say, I looked out of the loft window into the morning and thought, I am happier now than I

have ever been in the five long years of my life, and I will remember this moment always.

Once, at a cocktail party, I heard a greying man sigh and remark, with some drama, to his guests, "Joy is not something that children are capable of feeling. Joy is an old people's illness." That frightened me, the notion that the best of human response to being alive, to being human, would come only near the end of living, in the quick descent to dust. And that its intensity, arriving so late, would feel like an unjust invasion, a final illness foisted upon illness, as a last extinguishing blow. But I think he was wrong, and that joy begins when the mind first reels at the power of the senses; when the body trembles and whispers a word you can taste and let spill from your lips again and again, declaring, *Now. This. Always.*

I was five. But I was not five. I was just myself. And this message is sent to me along that delicate but durable circuit between body and brain established so long ago in the hayloft; it is sent into my dreams, into my waking each day as my lover brews coffee and showers. He is always up early, eager to see the moment when dark turns to light, and preparing himself for his day's tasks. He is building a barn, steadily, neatly, without hesitation, lining up beams for the floor of the loft, cutting windows, polishing glass, but first are his rituals of washing, eating, praying, sometimes singing in the kitchen songs about bears and deer, and coyotes dancing on the hillside. Sometimes he makes phone calls to connect us again to all the people who have left messages for us that I have not bothered to return. What would be the purpose in that? In hearing voices asking simple questions I cannot, or refuse, to answer? *How are you? What have you been doing? How's life?* "Interesting point," my lover nods whenever I explain.

"Thanks for your message," I'll hear him say to another neglected caller in the morning. "We've been meaning to get back to you!"

The message, I think, loving the word as I linger on in our bed. *What is the message? I was five. But I was not five. And now I am forty...* There, I get stuck, and can't quite make the connection that will allow me to say, *I am not forty, I am myself.* Where is my self? Why can't I recognize her? "Mid-life?" my lover has guessed. But I think I am back in the loft these days because it is the surest place my body knows to find me. Of course, there are other places too. Other places I'd like to be, all of them in the past, which seems oddly less predictable than the future. On some mornings upon waking I feel I am not in the loft, but instead in some *other* unexpected ecstasy of childhood, running back and forth through wet laundry—yellow and pink sheets hung to dry, rippling like sails on a line that stretches the width of an

ocean of grass.

I need coffee, that's what, I think, *to get myself going*, and when my lover stops singing and greets me as I appear at the top of the stairs, he says, "Good Morning, Granny!"

My lover appears to me to be getting younger and more virile by the hour. *Poor, poor man*, I think to cheer myself. Like most men, he will not realize he is dying until he is nearly dead. My lover suggests I should do more things that bring me joy. Or that I should do the things that once brought me joy, revisit them although I am older. "Time is not terminal," he says, "and joy is not an illness. There's nothing really wrong with you, except your attitude. Admit it. You're perfectly healthy. Healthy. Perfect. Joy is always waiting for you. There's no shame in saying simply, to your self, I've been meaning to get back to you." He is so sure. So right. Where is the attitude I long for? Somewhere between sheets and sails, between the scent of cut grass and clean laundry, between what looks easy and what looks hard, between the dark barn and the loft. But when I picture myself stepping out onto our lawn and running back and forth between the wet bath towels we have hung out there to dry, *revisiting*, I see not a woman who has lost her sense of joy but a woman who has simply lost her mind.

"You have," my lover says, and laughs. "You have lost your mind."

But I haven't really. My mind is with me too *much*: in fact, I wish it would get lost. Instead, it bullies me, delivers absurd ultimatums, transforms at inappropriate moments into a tantrum artist who flings my thoughts like the hundred pieces of a jigsaw puzzle so that no clear picture can ever be discerned, and obsesses weirdly over mathematical equations, though I have always detested math. *How many lovers does it take in one lifetime to equal love? If you know yourself for five years as a child, and for twenty years as an adult between, say, 45 and 65, and lose yourself completely for all the years between, when you die will you feel more or less yourself?*

No, my mind is not lost. But my body and its simple language of pump and flow have gone missing, so that words I once felt rushing freely in my blood drift as soundless as flotsam. *Birch tree. Pipe smoke. Guitar. Lilac. Cinnamon.* I no longer know these words, which are open and endless. In their place are prickly absolutes that sting me, the decrees of a woman's reason. Or attitude. You, my body tells me, will never dive gracefully from the top of a cliff into a surging river; you, my body tells me, will never repel backwards, boldly, down the face of a mountain; you, my body tells me, will no longer be tossed from the arms of one beautiful young man to the arms of another, as

you sample all their sweet and bitter flesh; you, my body tells me, will never bring forth a great brood of children with hair that smells of lilac and who will play guitar for you into your old age and who will carry your ashes in a vase and plant you in the earth where you will bloom for them, a perennial mother. Your lungs are small. Your hands are shells, wobbling on the table in front of you. And your heart!

"Your daughter's heart," the cardiologist from Cashmere told my mother when I was seven and she was forty, "is funny. Not 'ha-ha' funny, but the other. There's a hole, you see. Very common. Just a little whirring, like an alarm clock in the laundry. Not a bad thing. Unless the hole gets bigger. Then she has heart failure and kaput, she drops dead. But if it's like this? Now? Always? Then just a funny heart. Like so many. And as she gets older, of course, pain."

"Of course," my mother said.

Now, my heart flutters and flops at night, a swallow that's slammed into a wall.

It's August, in the year 2000, and I am meeting my cousin Jessica in Greenwich Village, where both of us once lived. I take the bus down from my place upstate and head straight for Bleeker Street to join her at a café. We drink wine together in a sophisticated manner, although once we stuffed hay into each other's mouths and flopped onto each other's stomachs in a loft. Jessie, also forty, is still brave and still strong and I still can picture her reaching her hand out to me and pulling me up into the loft, though over the years, she has told me many times that people depend upon her too much, so I try to be confident, not needy, in her presence. She lives now in Oregon and has three children and a husband of twenty years who sings opera. Her tenor husband rises each day and takes a deep breath, fills his lungs to the size of gourds, and sings out the great works of Verdi, Paganini, Mozart, and Tchaikovsky. He travels to foreign countries where magnificent singing is celebrated, and there he unpacks his suitcase, opens his arms wide, and sings. Once a year, he stays at home with the kids, while Jessie makes a trip to New York City to study fiercely for her doctoral degree in Child Psychology. In her temporary apartment, she works faithfully at a table in a small ring of light, reading pages of notes on childhood development, play therapy, learning disabilities, syndromes, behavioral afflictions, emotional disorders of nonspecific origins, the absence of language, the meaning of dreams, the spinning of objects, the humming of tunes, the telling of stories, the fluttering of hands, of eyelids, of hearts, the bodies that test the limits of all space, fragile falling selves that do not hear the voices of adults calling. She wants to know just how we get from there to here.

I'm startled then when Jessie tells me she feels anxious, restless, and unable to sleep at night. Like her whole life needs revision. Should she change her career? Get another degree? Move to Europe? Take a lover? Do I think it's possible that the choices she has made might have been the wrong ones? "On my birthday, I put on black leather and rode a motorcycle. Is that *like* me?" she wants to know. "Or *not*?" She wants to feel joy. "I cry a lot. I miss my mom."

Our mothers were sisters—mine frail and nervous, hers strong and brave—but both of the mothers are gone, their bodies burned, their ashes sunk deep into the earth. There is no one left to tell us about our mothers' lives, about their fears, their choices, about the 12,775 nights they spent lying in the darkness thinking beside their sleeping men. We wonder if they once lost themselves, for no reason at all but the whim of their hearts, or what dreams came to them if any to remind them of who they were, and we even wonder who they were, for we understand now that they were not our mothers but secret selves adrift and often empty of joy. And did they know, suddenly one moment when they were young girls in Lambeth, rushing out the door to a dance or pushing their canoe off the shore of Lake Ontario, that they would not have long lives, relatively speaking, and that no matter how far they traveled from one another, they would one day confound their doctors with parallel and simultaneous deaths?

It's funny, one mother's doctor said to the other mother's doctor, *it's as though they share the same clock. These two bodies, so different from one another, one fat, one thin, harboring two totally different women, one an optimist and one a pessimist, have shared a biological clock.*

Not biological, said the other mother's doctor, *psychological. Early trauma, perhaps, encoding the psyche with a shared and specific sense of limitation, exchanged between siblings bonded in the catalyst experience. An abusive father, perhaps. Or a crisis event witnessed together. A drowning. A murder. A suicide.*

Or perhaps, the first doctor posited, for he was enthusiastic about recent discoveries in this field, *early simultaneous psychological trauma damaged cellular structure itself, altering independent cellular life cycles to adopt one shared rhythm.*

The doctors looked down at my mother in her hospital bed, and at my aunt in her hospital bed and asked them each; *did you and your sister share a trauma when you were children? Did you have an abusive father? Witness a crisis event? A drowning? A murder? A suicide?*

No, our mothers said, and a few weeks later, they died.

Don't worry, one doctor said, *their illness was not inherited.*

Be careful, the other doctor said, *their illness was inherited.* Passed

down through the centuries from woman to woman, like a Chinese fan or a pair of tiny gloves. The body is mere lace, and easily torn.

At night, dreams repair the damage done by living, and lately I have been dreaming that I am composing an opera in German, that I am a fluent and skilled librettist and composer in a language I have never spoken, and that I am teaching this opera of mine to a chorus of gifted singers who ask me questions in German as I scribble new harmonies onto the parchment in my lap; or I dream that I write Italian elegies, volumes of verse more inspired than Dante's; or that I play the first violin in an eighteenth-century string quartet. And when I wake, for a split second I retain the gifts my sleep has assured me I possess. I speak German, or I hum my opera, or my fingers are folded perfectly around an invisible violin. Sleep weaves a powerful self together out of exotic threads, and I am amazed at who I am, and by the skills I might summon if only I could remember how. Surely these dreams are messages passed down to me through the centuries, from woman to woman, out of the open space of memory, where my mother wanders, and her sister, and their mother too, all of them looking for their lost selves.

Years after the deaths of our mothers, we are still discovering objects of mystery hidden in the back of their closets beneath boards, messages scribbled cryptically in the margins of their books, bundles of unsigned poems on yellowed notepads held together with twine. In one of her mother's drawers, Jessie tells me, she found a box, wrapped in linen, and inside were two pairs of tiny lace gloves, stiff with age, a satin Chinese fan folded shut, two garter belts and a two-inch prayer book, a gold cross etched onto its cover. The pages were thumbed and dark. "Heirlooms" the lid of the box announced. But heirlooms passed down from whom? Once long ago, a young girl, a nameless ancestor with wild thoughts in her head, sat obediently in a Lambeth church. She felt trapped in a starched costume and she turned the pages of her prayer book looking for some comfort, some path to follow as her husband stood beside her, singing a hymn. Whoever she was, she has left us her prayers. And with them, I have inherited furniture, scrapbooks, photographs of houses where we all lived as children, pressed flowers from unknown romantic occasions, pipes and tobacco boxes, doilies, glass statues of milkmaids and cobblers. And I have inherited a box of wedding rings, diamond, opal, garnet—three rings, each one removed by a daughter from her mother's open hand.

There was a party, a celebration of the opal ring my grandmother

had worn for forty years, a fortieth anniversary party in the white house where my mother was born, and her sister after her. Each morning for forty years, their mother had woken at dawn to see my grandfather rise from his bed and fall gracefully to the floor where he performed one hundred pushups before he walked happily up the road on his "morning constitutional." The rooms of their house smelled of his pipe tobacco and of her garden's flowers, and every room was filled with party guests. My mother and her sister wore high heels and bright summer dresses and passed platters of food, while Jessica and I pushed through the crowd to reach the ashtrays of red peppermints that decorated the tables. We carried the mints inside our shirts, out onto the lawn where we lay between two lilac trees that grew beside the house. A jay screamed at us from an upper branch, the first blue jay I ever heard, and he shook petals onto our bodies, and flew from that sweet smelling spot only when Uncle Ottmar arrived on his motorcycle, singing a German aria. Ottmar was an actor and three-ring circus performer in a traveling troupe of players and stunt men. Ottmar was family legend. He had had wives and lovers, children and freedom, homes and travel, and he seemed to pull the whole world to him with the centripetal force of his embrace, or else with those great circus leaps of faith and logic that say, a man can fly through the air, with the greatest of ease! Ottmar revved his engine in the driveway and lifted his helmet to reveal thick white hair. "Anyone want to ride my motorcycle?" he bellowed, "and discover *incomparable* joy?"

The party went on, or commenced at last, with Ottmar yelling and singing at its center and telling his wild stories, all of which had dramatic endings and happy twists of fate and exciting plots, but Jessie and I were taken away from the drama to the room of flowered wallpaper where our own mothers had slept when they were small. My grandmother came to us there, as she had once come to our two mothers, and she placed a lit candle on the bureau where we could stare into the flame. When we asked for a story, my grandmother said this:

I've been thinking that forty years is a very long time, and I suppose I have many stories to tell after forty years. But what I remember tonight is standing on the side of a dirt road in Lambeth when I was a girl. I grew up poor on a farm, and no one in my family had ever gone to school. But I did. I was the first. I went out each morning before the sun came up. The wind was bitter against my face, and I wore rags from our kitchen wrapped around my hands and feet to keep them warm. I held a candle my mother had given me so I would be seen in the dark, and I had to cup the flame to protect it from the wind. And every morning, just as the sun was showing at the edges of the field, my friend, an older boy, would come along with his buggy. I could hear the horses before I could see them, and when they stopped for me

my friend let me warm my hands on the horse's belly. Then I'd climb up into that buggy and go off to the school, to a one-room schoolhouse where all the farm kids went. I don't know why I remember that now. It comes back to me sometimes. The wind, the way that little candle would dance, the sound of the horses that would take me to school. She tucked us into our beds and blew out the candle.

Jessie and I walk together from the Village café toward the piers by the Hudson River where kids and couples are making the most of the last week of summer, playing dance music on a radio that sends voices singing out across the water. Everyone down by the Hudson is dancing, even the people there alone, moving their bodies a little to the rhythms, self consciously at first, then twirling, their hands out, their eyes wide, smiling to the sound of hands clapping, marking time. The air by the river smells of hot bagels and beer, and Jessie says, "We should do something wild tonight, something we'd never do, like we're young and can still do anything we want."

"Like what?" I say.

"I don't know. Maybe get a boat and go out on the river. We could circle the island. I hear it's really pretty when you're not on it."

"Where do we get a boat?"

"I have no idea. I guess we'll just walk then. Anywhere. I could walk all night. I have energy. More than I've had in months. After all, when will you and I be together again?"

We cannot answer this. It is only a question sent into the air, into the waves of music, and it drifts and grows smaller, a question that seems to be about the future but is really a question about the past. What is it that has changed? We have always parted saying, *next summer*, or *at Christmas*, as it has always been and will always be, year after year, because we will remain women pulling our loose threads back together, reweaving what has torn, unafraid of our own unraveling selves. After all, this is what it means to remember our mothers—holding it together without them. But now it seems there is more tear than thread, more space than substance, less time than desire. It seems there is only this: Jessie walking beside me, me walking beside her, two ordinary women of forty, who have gone their separate ways after descending from a loft, now brushing up against one another on a New York City street, not knowing how they got from there to here.

"Do you think it's a *sad* fact," Jessie asks me curiously, as we approach the subway station where we will soon part, unable to decide what we should do with our time, "that I have loved always and only one man, the father of my daughters, my husband of twenty years?"

This is a mathematical question. *How many lovers are carried within*

one man's body?

Is it a sad fact that I, too, have slept always and only with one man, who travels artfully from one lover's body to another, like a circus performer, a stunt man, wondering if I will recognize him in each of his virile costumes? *How many lovers' bodies can carry one man?* Shall I tell her *yes, I think it's sad, terribly sad*, or shall I tell her that the love-making I have known with my traveling-circus lover is not joy, exactly, or not joy at all, but only its perfect inverse? And what will she tell me about the life I will not lead, the life of a daughter who has become a mother, with her daughters waiting for her across the distance?

Time is short. Traffic is heavy. The Village is buzzing with light and in an instant, Jessie and I must exchange lives. I know it's possible to do this, as the physicists confirm. We have only to become two particles, two complementary natures acknowledging one another from opposite ends of the universe, each sending out to the other all the data of our existence in small losses of heat that travel at the speed of light, in a mutual flash of energy, in the absence of language or of dreams, like a fluttering of eyelids, or of hearts, and then there will be silence and calm. It's as simple as two hands, reaching across open space.

Jessie reminds me that our mothers cried and then laughed aloud when their own mother died, how they began to tell us kids a story that seemed to fall out of nowhere. Their voices had changed as they told it, as they tossed the story back and forth between them like something light and alive, although they were dressed for their mother's funeral.

There was a dance party on the shore of Lake Ontario, they began, where their mother—our grandmother—had taken them one summer to meet boys of a marrying age. There was a hotel, with a wide verandah, where the young men and women gathered at dusk, and lights shone out across the lake, and five musicians played on the lawn. My mother was sixteen, a slender beauty, and her sister was ten, tough and funny. "I wore a gorgeous dress that night," my mother exclaimed, touching her funeral dress absently, and my aunt said, "Oh, that dress, with that sequin snake on the front," and my mother said, "What a gorgeous dress, the sequins picked up the moonlight and I glittered! My dance card was filled, but I snuck down to the lake with that one boy and we sailed off in the canoe till we could hardly hear the music anymore, and we just drifted out there on the water while couples came down to the shore and danced. The moonlight was reflected on the lake. And that boy, he recited a poem about the

moon. I'll never forget the waltz they were playing that night."

"And I never told Mother where you were," my aunt said

"You were a good scout."

"Yes, I was, but," she added, "I really couldn't stand being left behind."

They stood watching one another in silence for the last time in their mother's house, and then moved gracefully together in their black dresses, on their way to their places in the cemetery.

This is how I remember my mother: *not* the way she looked to me when I watched her perishing in a hospital gown like her mother before her, but the way she remembered herself in the moment I believe must have been her greatest joy, as a girl drifting across a lake in the moonlight. And when she grew older, she may have seen herself the way that her sister saw her that night from far across the water—unreachable, growing smaller, less and less distinct in the darkness until she was invisible, dissolved into the night air. In her last years, when she slept (and like me she slept fitfully on most nights, and on some nights like the dead) she dreamed of a dark water beckoning her, of a young lover whispering verses about the moon, and she woke knowing she was truly gone.

"She was a creative soul," people have said of my mother, a poet disappointed by a prosaic life. And what she left behind, my inheritance, seemed so small it went undetected for years in a cardboard box beneath her soft sweaters—just a short letter she composed when she was forty, twenty years before her death. *Goodbye, my poems, my loves,* she wrote. *I can't sustain you anymore. I don't know you anymore, or myself. Perhaps if I grow old, I will remember you, the sound of words I once loved.*

Sequin. Moonlight. Waltz.

Sometimes at night, instead of sleeping, I make long lists of the things that I believe will bring me joy as I stand apart from the moments I've been living. I want to walk along the Grecian shore of the Mediterranean Sea, my feet burning in the sand; I want to swim with a school of dolphins and look into one keen eye that sees beyond my body into my permanent spirit; I want to hear the poetry of Rilke read to me in the German, until by the last poem I can speak the language in my sleep; I want to stand in the Sistine Chapel and look up at the hands of God and Adam, reaching for each other, and to see the divine spark of joy as it was offered by God to the first man. And where was the woman? Waiting patiently in the darkness for her own first spark of life? These things I long for could still happen, but what

happens first is that I leave Jessie and the city and return to my place upstate, and Jessie leaves me and returns to her place in Oregon, and no, we do not know when we will see one another again, although we have stood hugging on a street corner, feeling our small losses of heat in the embrace. As she departs I call after her, "Do you think our mothers are watching us?"

"We're here," Jessie says, turning gracefully and raising her hand. "That's what matters now."

Back upstate, I swing my duffel bag over my shoulder as I walk the dirt road toward my home. I see my lover beckoning to me from the high open window of the barn he has been building. He has completed the outside structure, a solid design of simple lines and repeated patterns in a European style, and now he is at work on the loft, a smaller space with only one window where he is perched and grinning boyishly. He looks five years younger than when I left. "Hey!" he calls and waves to me, and points to a wobbly ladder he has propped against the wall. "Come on up!" I hesitate for a moment, doubting the ladder, doubting him, doubting myself, suspended between what looks easy and what looks difficult, wondering if I remember how to climb—and then, one, two, three, and up, and I'm sitting perched with him on a single jouncing board he has stretched across the open space that will become a solid loft floor.

"Wow," he exclaims, "I didn't expect you to do that! That's not like you!"

I shrug and look out at the shadowed valley and know I am not who he thinks I am.

Time is not terminal. And joy is not an illness. And my body and Jessie's are the solid life made of the dust that was a star, and these bodies have circled the sun forty times. And five million years ago—*a mathematical thought*—two bipeds walked across a rain swept sand, and left their footprints behind, one set moving in a straight path, the other wandering to the left, as though lost. *This*, I think, *must have been the woman*, wondering if some other way, lit by the Pleiades rising in the eastern horizon, might not have been the wiser path as the sand keeps sifting beneath her feet. But she returns, resumes her walking, and the man continues singing, pretending he has not noticed her straying off like that, or perhaps not even noticing at all that she went looking for herself. And again and again her lost self sweats and prays and dreams itself into being through words shaped by the senses, words sent as a thread, a lifeline, to what has been and ended, words

the body whispers, and which I translate now, listening to the message of my puttering heart.

Lilac. Wind. Hayloft. Lake. Mother.

And what is passed down from woman to woman through the years in the guise of gloves and garters and prayer books and footprints and poems is only this, the essential self, moments of remembered joy that make it possible to live.

There is my mother drifting away across the lake, where nothing but moonlight and music can reach her. And there is my grandmother, at the side of the road, holding her candle and waiting to learn.

Now. This. Always.

My mother was not my mother. She was water.

My grandmother was not my grandmother. She was a flame.

And I am a swallow, startled by light.

Faith S. Holsaert

—Third Place Story—

Freedom Rider, circa 1993

My son Robbie phones me. His words cast shadows into the Kanawha River, above which I have lived for twenty years, stirring in its depths my eighteen-year-old self cowering on the Freedom House floor. I am always afraid. This call, I expect to hear that he and Karen are having difficulties again. He tells me, "Someone broke into our apartment last night," and my heart pales.

Robbie lives in the city where he went to college. Midwestern, but with outcroppings above the river, so that he and I said "Appalachian" the first time we saw those ridges with houses built up and down them. I am an odd and awkward woman—I can feel that judgment in the teachers' lounge at school. Cerebral. Thwarted. Wish I were direct and tender, but am not. When I was eighteen, a hand groped through a window across my bed; five adult policemen enclosed in their serge uniforms leaned upon the precise envelope of space shielding my adolescent female body. Zekiel was beaten on the courthouse steps. The fear—is always tamped down.

"Are you and Karen all right?" I bring myself back to the present.

"Yes. I think so. I mean. Yes."

"Was anything taken?"

"Yes. Some." His voice cracks.

"Were you all home?" I try to remember questions that demand more than yes/no, but fail. My incompetence on the phone is a family joke.

"No."

"How do you feel?" I fumble toward the idyll twenty-five years ago when I lifted his limp body in the white and purple gown I had sewn. The kitten mews and squirms when he roused, opened his dark brown eyes, before sinking back into sleep. Human body which had accreted, cell division by cell division, within my own, only to separate into his own. When he was a week old, I could feel the click when I held him about a woman's arm's length from my face and his immature eyes focused on mine. As he grew, he could see me at increasing distances and distinguish my shape in more complex settings.

"Mom, I wish I could come home."

"That would be lovely, you and Karen." Suppress gushes and explosions. Refrain from speaking memories of his infancy.

"I don't think Karen would come with me."

"I'm sorry." Refrain from asking why.

"Mom, Karen's father thinks we should get a gun."

The eighteen-year-old on the Freedom House floor raises her head crowned with far more and far darker curls than I have now.

"But Robbie, more people are hurt by their own guns than by strangers." I think this is true of guns, as it is of rape. It should be.

"Have you ever kept a gun?" he asks.

"You know me better than to ask, don't you?" My right hand to the lower rim of my eye and brush as if to smooth off mascara, which I haven't worn since the early 70s. Wipe away tears. My memory nags me, that I did learn to shoot a gun during the 70s, but I thrust the thought aside.

"Why not?" he asks.

"I hate force." My voice cracks on the smooth surface of the word.

"Why?" He's being quite persistent and it irritates me the way the scent of hamburger oil can make my gorge rise. Reflux.

"I hate force. I hate it," is all I can say.

"Yeah," he whispers, "me too."

In a minute, he says he'll call me about visiting this weekend.

A more adequate mother would have fixed herself some tea while she talked to Robbie. She would have sunk into a chair at the table. "So, tell me about why you're considering a gun," she would have begun. I am afraid of overwhelming my children with my judgments, afraid of overwhelming them with my woman's love, which is powerful and meticulous. Though I am odd, I love Robbie and his sister Mimi very much.

I tell him, "I want you to come."

*

Robbie is a sad man and I am afraid his sadness is my fault. The sadness was there when he was a boy, even though we often laughed. In fact, his last two years of high school we were silly, treasuring the time before he left. In those same years, his younger sister went from being a child whose mother could do no wrong to being a ten-year-old from whose mother's mouth issued nothing but shit. Six years later, what I thought was Mimi's precocious teenage anger persists, and it hurts.

Time for bed.

I check the front door. The cats come in, Robbie's square black Shadow, Mimi's orange Squeaky. He who purrs in her lap at the scent of chocolate and peanuts as she eats candy and watches TV.

Mom, have you ever kept a gun in the house? His words follow me through the house.

"Good night," I call to Mimi, through her bedroom door.

The neighbors' car lights strafe the ceiling of my second story bedroom. I roll uncharacteristically from one side of the big bed to the other with each pass of lights. I have been alone in this room for six years. Each night, I sleep unmoving on my side. In contrast to my restricted nights, my garden has become brilliant and complex since my lover Joy left. My peonies, rhubarb, and mums have flourished—transformed orgasms? Usually, Shadow anchors my feet, but tonight he hisses and leaps off the bed after I inadvertently kick him for the third or fourth time.

This question of guns probes me like the lights probe my bedroom, arouses me even more than the questions about my teaching that sometimes keep me awake, more than the worries I worry about Robbie or Mimi.

Night stick. Georgia, 1963. Crack Ezekiel's head. "He's been hit so many times, he'll die if he is struck *just right* again," Lucinda told me as we sat across from Zeke. Zeke's pale brown face, large brown eyes, soft mouth. The bones below his close-shaven hair: sturdy but delicate eggshell—like his sturdy but delicate thoughts. He had stood on the steps of the county courthouse. The sheriff beat him. Blood latticed Zeke's face. Front page photo, *New York Times*. I understood Zeke could not abandon the courthouse steps just because he might be hit *just right* one more time, but I never stopped wanting to say, "Zeke, don't go," when he and a swirl of students would head off, jaunty and jolly, to confront Olde Jim Crow with their bodies. That sheriff wore a gun, but had expected a stick would be enough. There are days and months when I think I have abandoned the courthouse steps.

There are days when I seem more in Georgia than in West Virginia. In Georgia, Lucinda up in front, singing "Come by Here, Lord." Voices pound like boulders in a rock slide. I sweat between my breasts. In front of me, the back of a warm, brown neck, high school student who carries messages by bike when we don't trust the tapped phones. Within months, a bullet entered his warm brown neck, right there, a split second from his spine. If a stick won't stop the students, a gun will do for these crazy-ass white people who hold up the pillars of this legalized hatred with their guns. Pillars like white Mississippi State Representative Hurst, who shot and killed Herbert Lee, a sharecropper who had tried to register to vote in the town of, get this, Liberty, in the county of, get this, Amite, in the state of Mississippi. Goddamn.

There's a public record. There's a record in our bodies and a record

in our hearts, river shadows below rock cuts. Each night in West Virginia, I drive home across the river, zigzag up Oakwood Road through the woods, as a hand in Georgia once zigged and zagged across the bed still warm from my body. Moments before in the dark Freedom House, I'd heard a noise outdoors, sat up, peeked through the curtain, and there was a man's face, big and white, shining like a dinner plate, a few inches from mine. Without a pane, I could have felt his breath. Quite composedly, I called to Lucinda in the next room, "There's a man outside my window," and scrambled onto the floor. Lucinda in the dark front room phoned the cops (hah). The man smashed the window. He reached in through the curtain, dragging shards of glass back and forth across themselves, feeling for me on the bed. I watched his hand moving back and forth through the broken glass where I had lain. His arm remained cloaked in the curtain. After many passes over my rumpled sheets, he withdrew. Over the years, I have maintained my composure, but that night's scream swells and waits. Doctor calls it reflux. I call it "that unscreamed scream." When Robbie asked me about the gun, it's as if he had phoned me as I cowered on the Freedom House floor.

*

Before going to work, I phone Robbie. I get a machine message—Koko Taylor singing "Meet Me with Your Black Drawers On," a riff of Robbie's chuckle, some stranger's voice mockingly screeching, "Hello? Hello? This is your mother." A joke, I tell myself. The beep.

"Robbie. This is your mom. Just wanting to say 'Hi.' Nothing important." On the ridge, the oak trees are purple brown and the poplars the acid yellow of my fear. Orange juice from breakfast climbs back up my throat.

In my forty-second year, my first reflux attack. The massed yellow of poplars that lick up the autumnal hill like fire, consuming my esophagus. Reflux. In a rambling letter to Africa, I'd just come out to Lucinda and was afraid she'd call my love for Joy some white aberration. Effete. As my doctor explained reflux, my own stomach acids were digesting the lining of my intestines. She wanted to give me a new expensive medicine.

"I'll just watch my diet." Diet was my middle name those years.

"Last week, you had an EKG because the reflux was so bad you were having chest pains."

"I just didn't understand the pain."

I re-dressed and went home. That night, the pain was worse than the sound of glass scrabbling over itself, and as the burning mounted

from my stomach toward my quavering heart, I felt helpless. Like the eighteen-year-old, I didn't scream. My terrors consume me from the inside out. If Lucinda hadn't written back, it would have been one more scream.

But she did.

*

The practical side of me, which has continued all these years, dresses with care—long patchwork skirt, dark green tights, a sea-green jersey, black and white horn beads from Lucinda, sandals and a denim jacket from Mimi's favorite store. On my hand, the gold and garnet ring my mother gave me when I turned twelve. Five faceted bohemian garnets—my birthstone and Robbie's—which are different heights. When I stroke the stones, or run them across my lips, I am reassured by the anomalous height of the end stone. This practicality has shielded me.

I am caught up in a flirtation, something that happens occasionally in this town of secrets. She is married, but she pays laughing attention to my smart remarks. These flirtations have a predictable shape, even though at their height, they feel distinct from one another. The sloughing off happens faster each time. In this town of closets, I have learned to display my interest without showing my hand. Mostly phenomena of conversations that occur in public places; once or twice I have been to a lodge in a state park. Never in homes—mine or theirs.

*

Mimi turns from the toaster when I enter the kitchen. Her chemically crinkled hair falls below her shoulder blades. Round wire rims magnify her quick eyes.

We smile as I pick up the coffee pot.

She fingers my skirt. "New? Nice. Can I borrow it?"

"Have you vacuumed your room?" It was what I'd meant to ask before she spoke, but now it is abrupt.

Juicy tears well behind her lenses as if I've struck her.

I haven't meant to hurt her any more than she has meant to hurt me by not doing the chore.

"I bought it at Yesterday's Treasures." I zig back to the skirt. I hate when she tears up as if I've hit her. I don't think I was hit often as a child. Once or twice with a hair brush. With my children: I swatted Robbie occasionally until he was three. In a Laundromat when he'd run out the door, I thought, I will just have to hit him harder and

harder to enforce my will. I never hit him again. And I remember hitting Mimi only once, when she howled at the babysitter's because the sitter's dog chewed her toy. And I probably wouldn't have hit her, but it was actually the sitter's seventy-year-old mother with a heart condition who got into a palpitating tizzy about it. My mother's weapon of choice was her words. I got the Word Gene from both sides.

"Robbie's apartment was broken into," I tell Mimi.

"What was stolen?" Mimi asks.

"I don't know."

"You don't know?"

"I asked, but he didn't answer."

Mimi tears up again. She leaves the room.

After I finish brushing my teeth, I call, "Mimi? Are you still here?"

I push open the door to her room to say good-bye, but she has already caught her ride to school. In the hot room, I smell patchouli. The comforter she selected when she was in junior high is on the floor. It is marvelously puffy, with a pattern of long-necked swans gliding among dusky reeds and weeping willows. It cost three times what I had budgeted. Sunlight, filtered through leaves, webs the white wall, which she has covered with necklaces, bracelets, earrings, and archaic evening bags—thousands of beads that glint. Mimi has arranged the beads on their nails in a pattern, rivers of turquoise and red and purple, flowing through black jet.

I leave the peaceful room and my house. There is a skin of ice on the water in my drive. I back into the road, pivot, and snake downhill.

I haven't chosen a peaceful or comfortable life. Teaching barely pays the bills. Throughout Mimi and Robbie's childhoods I have been at meetings—everything from welfare rights to opposing U.S. intervention in El Salvador. Fulfilling the trust I'd entered in Georgia. When my children were toddlers, they came with me; later, I'd leave pot roasts and homemade bread with heating instructions wreathed in daisies and suns and smiles I'd drawn. I drew daisies and suns and smiles as talismans, blanketed them in warm, puffy quilts.

In Georgia, the Black marchers were processed first, leaving me alone, surrounded by police in the booking office. Had Zekiel been hit? They screamed my name from the holding cell—Zekiel, Lucinda, Mattie Jae and all the Movement behind bars that night, some people whose names I didn't know. The police leaned their butts against the desks. They patted me down. In the heat, I wore a sleeveless blouse and skirt. Their options hung like midges in the air. Hurt her. Don't hurt her. Hurt her. From the holding cell, the other marchers screamed

my name. A sandy-headed one touched my breasts and ribs. The police moved closer. Hurt her. Don't hurt her. How they pulled back from the decision—hurt her—I'm not sure. I was put in a cell by myself on the white side of the jail. I screamed to the other side—"Is everyone safe?" They shouted, "Yes," so Zeke had not been hit *just right*. The sandy-headed cop told me to quit hollering like a nigger and I said, "That's what I am." Mess with him a bit. Nonviolently. All night, they came back to my cell, poked a night stick in my scalp. "You awake, gal?" "You white or colored, gal?" "She's a New York Jew," said one of the police. At least they were right about that. Each time the police came, the marchers screamed my name on the other side. Protecting me.

Having known that protection, I could come alone to the Southern mountains. We agreed, white people needed to work with white people. Lucinda and Zeke live hundreds of miles away, but I am closer to them, though we may not write but once every few years, than I am to anyone except my son and daughter. I am so far off the civil rights map, I don't get interviewed for Ph.D. theses about Women in the Civil Rights Movement, do not get interviewed for the books. But I was so close that I can be walking down a street in Chicago—maybe been at a conference on children with behavior problems—and a congressional representative from Georgia will stop in his tracks, recognizing me from the Movement.

I'm driving across the Kanawha River away from the purple-brown oaks and yellow poplars of the ridge. My fingers on the steering wheel are stiff and cold. Public radio news. My government alleges the deposed president of Haiti is emotionally unstable. My government cites Documentation. Bill Clinton will be recorded as a Great Friend to the Haitian people, just as people think JFK was a champion of the Civil Rights Movement. I'm talking back to the radio and steaming up my windshield. Hah, just ask Mrs. Keeling about JFK, I say. Mrs. Keeling and her daughters—age seven, nine, fourteen—were arrested hundreds of times. Mattie Jae, aged fourteen, was placed in isolation with no windows or light. She sang "This Little Light of Mine," until they let her out. Fourteen, she was. When she was released from the Camilla jail that time, they brought her to the church and she wept in our arms. Bobby Kennedy sent some white men to take depositions from the Keelings, but the next thing we heard, the Justice Department was suing the Movement. We had to protect one another in a deep sense, regardless of the abrasion of sheriffs and feds, understanding we could never ward off the physical blows.

Without the deep protection, I would not have survived. Even with it, I've been skewed like arthritic fingers by the isolation of the

70s and 80s; the violence set my insides on fire.

*

Lucinda had written from Tanzania to suggest, maybe, although they were bourgeois feminists, I should check out the local National Women's Coalition to fill the hole in my chest. It was the spring that Joy had left. So, one daffodil March afternoon, I phoned the local chapter of the NWC. I was on the phone with the local chair when a man's voice boomed out of my bathroom. "There's a man in my bathroom," I blurted into the phone. The NWC Chair exclaimed, "Oh God, are you alone in the house?" Just then, Robbie came out of the bathroom. "Oh, it's my son. His voice has changed."

"We're going to be lobbying next week," the chair told me. How could Lucinda suggest I take up with lobbyists?

Robbie was standing in the dining room, in his new, cool-dude way. When I hung up, he asked if he could go over to a girl's house. "Kristi?"

"No, I'm not seeing her anymore."

He dropped me at my first NWC meeting, which was in a church basement. When I arrived, a tall woman who shook her head like a bird was saying, "We must become sensitive to issues of poverty and women. Especially mothers who've been left by their men."

"And not just men," I said, the loss of Joy gaping between my teeth.

They looked at me like, Oh, she's one of them.

"The statistics are so arresting," said Shake Head.

"The real thing is worse," I said.

The next order of business was purchasing Historical Voter Rolls. I did not share my jokey question: do you serve yours with apple butter? I did not say, I worked on voter registration in Georgia in 1963.

I caught a ride home from the NWC. I asked Mimi if she'd heard from Robbie.

"Where is he?" she asked.

"At Joanna's."

"What about Kristi?" she asked.

"He's not going with her anymore."

"Mom. Robbie, all those girlfriends. It's screwed up."

"He seems to *like* girls. Womanizers hate them."

She hmmphed and looked past the clotted mascara in the corner of her eye. "Kristi is afraid of Robbie when he's been drinking."

"I worry about Robbie's drinking, too," I said.

She rolled her eyes and left the room.

I believed, and wanted to believe, my children—all people—were the experts on their own lives.

Robbie came home past his curfew that night, festooned with the smell of smoke and the aura of a little shit-eating grin. I dreamed that the National Women's Coalition had me up on charges of raising a philandering son.

When I woke, the songs of migrating geese high above the house drowned out the screams.

*

After work—I teach elementary school—I phone Robbie in Ohio again and get the tape.

Mimi enters the kitchen. "I need to go to the doctor. My throat is killing me."

I touch her high, golden forehead. Clammy.

"I'll call the doctor."

She pours orange juice.

The doctor will see her immediately. I say I'll get dressed. She says no, she wants to go by herself. It's just her usual autumn sinus infection. "Sit down. Enjoy your coffee, Mom. I'll be back in an hour."

I write my driver's license number on two checks and sign them, one for the doctor and one for medicine. I give her the car keys.

Out of my bewilderment, I tell her, "Robbie asked me, have I ever thought of keeping a gun."

She wrinkles her nose. She would never have asked it. "Would Robbie?" she asks.

"Karen's father wants them to."

"That's ridiculous. I bet more people get killed by their own guns than by strangers," she says self-righteously. I smile, looking forward to the day when the teenage animosity is gone and it will be easier to adore her, again.

She rattles the keys and bends toward me.

"Be careful." I kiss her cheek.

"Don't worry, Mom."

She is the supreme worrier. She almost refused to learn to drive: I already have enough to worry about Mom, she'd said. For a while in the fifth grade, her rosebud face would wink involuntarily. Should we see a therapist? I'd asked Joy, but Joy thought the tic would go away.

Worry child. Mimi, who taught herself to read—consonants one week, vowels the next—came home in first grade worrying about the paddle. "You won't be paddled, sweetheart," I told her. She'd sobbed in my lap. "You're never in trouble," I'd said. When I left the South,

I'd thought I would love my children so they would never doubt it and they would be safe. My children would be safe from the nightstick, the hand groping through the curtained window, because Zekiel, Lucinda, Mattie Jae, all of us, with our bodies and our lives would Overcome. Each time Mimi whimpered and I couldn't figure out what danger she faced, I would feel regret rise in my chest like the reflux. Mimi sometimes cried as if, hit *just right*, she would die.

I allowed Joy to teach Mimi not to cry.

One morning, Mimi in my lover's lap as I drove, she began to cry about the paddles. "Mimi," said Joy, "you can stop crying." Mimi floated watery brown eyes at her. "Think about something else. Say, *The paddle can't hurt me.*"

"But it can."

"Think about something else," Joy demanded.

"I don't want to stop crying," Mimi screamed.

"Let her be," I said.

"You baby her."

"I don't want to go to school," Mimi cried out as I parked beside Kanawha Elementary School. Out of the car, I picked her up and held her against me, her baby-soft hair in my eyes. "We'll paint this evening." I set her on the sidewalk. In the flowered jersey dress I had sewn and dark, old-fashioned tights, she waved good-bye before walking into the school building. For breakfast, the cooks prepared biscuits and bacon, or potato pancakes, or fried apples, in skillets three feet across. Mimi didn't run toward the school where she did so well and I noted it.

By spring, Mimi had stopped crying and the facial tic disappeared. The disappearance makes me think of how mountain home places deteriorate into the brush after a few seasons of standing empty. Long after the abandoned houses have disappeared, their location is marked by the flamboyance of forsythia blooming in the spring. Unscreamed yellow screams. My uneasiness about Mimi remained, returned periodically like the forsythia, and faded.

At least once a week in the country school where I first taught, the crack of the paddle was heard by teachers and students. The whistle of the flat wood blade with quarter-sized holes cut in it. Students paddled out in the corridor so we all could hear. Whack. When I started teaching, if I called parents to discuss a problem or sent for the principal, they'd ask, "Use the Board of Education?" meaning the paddle. I'd say, "No, I don't believe in it." They'd say, "What do you expect us to do?" I don't paddle, but I admit: twice I have.

I liked the troublemakers, started teaching children with so-called behavior disorders. I was bitten on the fleshy inner arm, scratched

across the cheek. A student scavenged a long rod from the mechanism of a file cabinet and brought it down past my face, window glass falling into my hair. I told my supervisor, Get me interesting materials. She looked at the angry red briar scratched across my cheek and said, "Physically restrain your students. Show students who's boss." It's hard, being so alone, when you make choices like that. So I physically restrained students when I ran out of strategies and humor. And I'm ashamed that I did.

I held the arms of eleven-year-old Donald behind his back the day he saw a neighbor woman's brains blown out by her "boyfriend." I restrained Sergio who brought numchucks to school, Sergio who laid his cleanly trimmed head on his student desk and slept in the afternoons. "My moms," he stammered up out of sleep one afternoon. "Her boyfriend. I can't protect her." Matthew who shrieked when I asked him to do one fucking math problem. "I can't do it," he screamed. "I can't do it. Mommy," he cried as if she were present. "She told me I could tie my shoe when I was a baby. Mommy, I said, I can't. She broke my ankle." Sometimes I think that fatal blow did not get Zeke, but it exploded in my classroom, reverberated in the bodies of those children.

Mike brought a knife to school. He bragged his father was a Nazi and that he, Mike, hated Jews. I said I was Jewish. Mike said, "I hate that other kind of Jew." He relinquished the knife. Matthew did one math problem, sometimes half a page, but in the late spring, Matthew's stepfather started making him eat from a dog bowl on the floor. I talked to the principal, who said Welfare had been called about Matt twice the year before, but they did nothing. I knew about mandatory reporting laws, but I didn't report Matthew's situation, was not dogged and tenacious, as Zeke had been on the courthouse steps. It's taken me ten years to acknowledge, I was one of the cumulative hits that might or might not contain those boys, that might or might not destroy them. To describe my role in that room is to "out" that part of myself that enforced the will of society on those children, in spite of our good afternoons when we discussed equality, race, truth, and beauty, as a teacher and her eleven-year-old students should do.

When she set about teaching Mimi not to cry, Joy would tease, "You're not crying, Mimi, are you?" Half teasing, like when we'd try to trick one another into being the first to laugh, like those mountain fathers, knocking their bald toddler sons to the ground, again and again, until the babies learned to laugh as soon as they started to hurt.

*

I make Mimi's bed so she will have clean sheets to crash into. As soon as I am done, her purring orange cat curls on the pillow, among swans and willows.

She comes home with antibiotics that cost $56 and goes to bed. I remember how this antibiotic, an orange liquid, would sweep through my infant children from throat to urethra, candying their breaths and then their diapers with orange scent, wiping them clean of bacteria both harmful and helpful.

I wash a couple of loads of laundry. Grade papers. Idly, I plan to call Robbie some time during the evening but put it off.

Mimi never stirs.

The next morning, after putting chicken in the crock pot for evening soup, I leave Mimi sleeping and go to work. Midmorning, I call Lisa, my infatuation, and we agree to meet at a coffee shop after work. The cafe is a mistake, I think, after I hang up. A hole in the wall with only three tables. People waiting to pay will poke their elbows in our ears. Maybe we can walk along the river before our hour is up. Quit worrying, I tell myself.

After school, Mimi is still not answering the phone and when I meet Lisa, I'm distracted.

"My daughter's home sick."

"Do you need to leave now?"

"No, not quite yet." We sit with our drinks. "I lived in a relationship with a woman," I tell her. "I hope you don't think that's gross,"—wanting to end things if she does, flirtily offering her the gift of my secret self.

She gives me a brilliant maple leaf. "For you." It is menstrual pink in the skin, crimson in the veins.

She says, "A friend described the wife of an alcoholic. And," Lisa smiles at me, cheeks flushed as the leaf, "I saw myself in her words." Lisa works on her apple juice, chewing the straw. A woman thumps her shopping bag into my back. Lisa continues, "Yesterday, my husband forgot to pick up my older daughter from play practice. Just forgot. This morning, as I was driving her to school, she said, 'Mom, I can't stand it when Dad forgets, then yells at me and says it's my fault.'"

I think of my sixteen-year-old in her darkening room, sheets damp, breath smelling infected, but I can't leave.

"'We can stay and adjust,' I told my daughter,'" Lisa says. "'Your father can change. Or we can leave.' 'He's not going to change and I'm not going to adjust,' my child told me."

"He drinks?"

"Beer."

I pick up the leaf. Lisa has small hands, which, she has told me, once dug a fifty-foot drainage ditch across an untilled field. The leaf stirs the air. We glance hotly into one another's eyes as the electric light in the shop comes on and the wattage bounces off the black plate glass.

"I don't wish him harm," Lisa says. "But sometimes I imagine him running his truck off the road in the middle of the night."

*

At home, the vaporizer sighs in Mimi's room. *All's well here.*

When Robbie and Mimi were school age, and my lover called me names, I would go into my children's dark room while they slept. I would sit on the floor between their beds and press my forehead to one of their mattresses, listening to the breath of their sleep. Bone of my bone, I would breathe. I would cry without a sound. After a while, I'd go back to my bed with Joy.

Time to finish making the soup. As I work at the kitchen counter, she asks, "Mom?" Her voice is froggy but smiling.

Rumpled, she watches me while I strain the broth, remove meat from the bones, boil egg noodles. I make it the way she likes—no vegetables.

While we're eating, her brother phones.

"How are you doing?" I ask.

"I don't know. Okay, I guess." He breathes as noisily as the vaporizer, perhaps breathing out cigarette smoke. He will visit in two weeks. A crimson spurt of happiness in my chest. He and Karen have repaired the bathroom window. Karen's camera, Robbie's guitar, their jewelry, were stolen. Perhaps the burglar knew the apartment. The brash menstrual pinkness drains from me. He without his music, she without the instrument of her art, they without adornment: I feel bereft.

"Are you safe?" I ask shriekily.

"Safe as we can afford." There's mumbling in the background and Robbie tells me, "Karen says, safety's a middle class illusion. Even with a gun."

"I've had the strangest thoughts about violence since your question about guns. The old freedom rider, and all that."

"Yeah." He exhales.

When I hang up, Mimi has rinsed her bowl and placed all traces of her meal in the dishwasher. She has covered my bowl with a saucer because of the cats.

*

Morning, Mimi is dressed in my new skirt and she needs cash for her science project. Her ponytail is tied with a puffy scarf, as we did in the 1950s. Her 80s triple earring holes speared by tiny silver fish. I don't like her magenta mouth outlined in black but bite my tongue.

"I have a sore throat."

"I'll give you my card for the automatic teller."

"Don't you have cash in Grandma's coin box?" The mouth inside the spitty black outline quivers.

"No, I raided it for gasoline."

"Maybe Mary Beth can lend it to me."

She returns from the phone, shaking her head.

"Why not the cash machine?"

"A woman was robbed at one last week."

"That won't happen to you." I feel irritated and scared like when she would cry outside Kanawha Elementary.

"They held her overnight at a motel so they could withdraw another day's cash limit."

"My account's worth one $69 spree."

"Mom, it's not funny."

"If you want to talk about things to be afraid of—worry some fundamentalist will gun you down for having me for a mother." I speak without a mental filter.

"What makes you so special?"

"History."

Pain webs the back of my throat. Another hundred-plus dollars—doctor and medicine for myself—I bet.

"This is not about freedom riders," Mimi says. "Please just drive me to the ATM."

"I'll be late for work."

"Mom." Her voice rises. "You only care about yourself."

I put the ATM card on the table.

"You're selfish," Mimi screams.

"Don't."

"Why not?" Under the mascara, her eyes swivel. "Joy yelled at you."

"Reason enough."

"I hate you."

"I treat you with respect." I turn on my heels. My head throbs.

"Mom, don't leave me," she wails as if I routinely abandon her at unfamiliar shopping malls.

"Mimi, please stop screaming."

"You don't care about me."

I pick up my jacket and leave. "Mom, the school bus has already left."

By the time my windshield is defrosted, I am starting to cry. Her face—magenta, black, and popping eyes—appears outside my streaked window. When I roll it down, she says, "I don't need your ride. Goodbye." I back out the drive, a snotty croon in the back of my throat. I can't imagine that I have left her like this, but I remember her screaming, and it propels me away from the house.

When I first got to Albany, Georgia, the police stopped me all the time in the street, until each of them had met me. Bulging blue serge thighs, with guns close to their crotches, torsos swelling their twill shirts. To each one I handed my birth certificate, a piece of paper that became increasingly smudged and rumpled in their hands.

My father frightened me with his voice.

My mother lashed at me with her words, but didn't usually touch me, though once on a weekend when I didn't get up on time to walk my dog, she slapped me with the newspaper, like we slapped the dog.

I have tried to respect Mimi and Robbie's dignity.

Bile coils through the swag of my intestines.

I have been afraid much of my life, even though I have done some courageous things.

In front of school, a woman in jeans, a gray sweater, and a torn and grease-stained jacket stands by the gate. Her blond hair is clipped back, her skin weathered with white in the creases around her mouth and eyes. A little girl in a pink and green squishy nylon jacket holds her hand. I smile at the child, one of those feisty school-age blondes who probably has a mouth as big as a mountain on her. Around here, they call little girls like that "Firecracker." "Hey," I say when the child smiles back.

The woman says, "Miss, do you have a quarter?" She confidently reaches out her hand.

Another teacher comes up the sidewalk.

"No."

"Have a nice day." The woman yanks her child up short beside her.

Why'd I say no? The other teacher coming up the walk? Fifty-six-dollar antibiotics? Mimi screaming, "Mom, don't leave me"? Fronds of yellow screams.

In my high-ceilinged classroom, the sun, which is fingering the roofs of town, knifes through the windows in a long slant. In the empty room, along the blade of light, I am determined to wait, wait as I waited in that booking office while the decision hung in the air:

Hurt her. Don't hurt her. Mom, don't leave me. How can I know whether I'm doing the right thing?

My first student arrives—Mike, Nazi Mike, who has to tell me he saw the sonogram of his family's expected baby last night. His hair is Nazi short, his eyes bright as the light bouncing off the roofs into my room.

"When my children were born, there was no such thing. As sonograms," I say.

He eyes me gravely.

"You're kidding, right?" he asks.

"No. Sonograms weren't invented then."

He laughs. "That's funny," he says and goes to sit at his desk.

The cop uniforms I hate the most are the paramilitary ones: the lace-up boots, pants legs tucked in. Pants legs bulging with pockets up and down the side and back of the leg, like misplaced jockstraps. The gun on the hip, the cord draped in a circle over the shoulder, between arm and torso. The canisters. The goggles clanking against their butts.

Midmorning, I settle everyone into math, leave the aide in charge, and go down to the teachers' lounge to roast some chestnuts for my students in the microwave, which I have never used. I punch buttons and launch the machine for two minutes of high power.

No one else is on break; I risk phoning Lisa.

"Reason enough to leave Mimi standing on the steps? She was crying. She was screaming," I say over the lump in my throat. Chestnuts explode all over the inside of the teachers' lounge microwave. I have to hang up and clean the spattered pulp before one of my colleagues discovers it.

The chestnuts exploded with a soft, plummy sound. My child's screams thudded inside me.

*

Late in that glazed sick summer in Georgia, Lucinda came to see me.

"Hey, what's happening?" I asked.

She sat on my bed.

"I've been gone," she said.

"I heard. Lobbying in D.C. to get the teenagers out of jail."

"Yes, that." The skin around her mouth and nose seemed so painfully brilliant. "I had an abortion," she said.

Like the sound of a fly hitting the sagging window screen, her words hit my eardrums and then the sound went away.

"Zeke?"

She twisted her mouth as if it were a hanky. "Who else?"

I sat up and took her hand. I hadn't held anyone's hand, except a boy's, in years.

"Are you okay?"

"I was so scared, but I wouldn't cry. And now I can't stand for Zeke to touch me. He said I shouldn't tell anyone. I didn't tell my mother."

"Will you be okay?"

"Of course," she said angrily, "and I need you to get up out of this bed."

I did get up the next morning. I walked to Freedom House. I went to the staff meeting. I fainted in the bathroom and Zeke deposited me at the bus station in time for the next bus north.

*

Car lights on the ceiling. One of the ceiling tiles is smashed out. Joy, misnamed and well-gone lover, threw a candlestick at it in a rage. When Robbie and I checked it, we found the remaining tiles were so old that if we hammered in a new one, those around it would crumble. So I sleep below that hole. Robbie, Mimi, and I have sheet-rocked the kitchen, which had been finished with splintering wood panels that bowed out from the wall. There are mature ferns, May apples, and wild ginger from the forest on the steep, falling-down hill behind our house. We transplanted them when Squeaky and Shadow were kittens and my children and I were newly alone, after Joy.

It's Friday and Mimi costumed in polyester has gone to *Rocky Horror Picture Show*, the midnight movie downtown. As I sit reading, Shadow springs into my lap, after days of flighty testiness. He purrs extravagantly, sighs against me, rises to breathe fallen leaves into my face before leaping off my lap and asking to go back out. I let him out and go to bed after taking my fourth dose of decongestant.

1:30 a.m. The phone is ringing. I fear for Mimi.

But it is Robbie.

All he does is sob, cries he pulls from deep in his chest.

"Robbie."

He cries.

I imagine the Cincinnati apartment, Karen's photos on the wall—splattered with blood.

"Robbie, talk to me."

"She's gone," he jerks out. Snotty crying.

"What?" Karen crushed by a car?

"Karen's leaving me."

"I'm coming to get you tomorrow," I say, suddenly authoritative.

Snuffling. "You don't have to."

"I want to."

"Okay," he says, high like a child.

*

The next morning, I find Shadow beside the road, stiff, his front paws lifted in a run, his eyes open, his face set in that untamed stubbornness with which he'd lived. The only mark on him is where the skin on one front paw has been drawn back like a glove to reveal delicate bones and gray flesh. I remember his breath of fallen leaves. The neighbor woman yells from her car park, "You aren't going to leave him in my drive."

"I won't."

I wrap Shadow in a pink turtleneck, one Lisa gave me a compliment on last week. With mattock and shovel, I hack a hole behind the peonies; it comes to my knees when I stand in it. I pick him up in the pink shirt, and his front paws remain raised as if at a run, his eyes staring straight ahead. I bury him. I have dry mouth, bad, from all the decongestants, but my sore throat is gone.

In the house, the phone cord runs into Mimi's room. I go in to wake her.

She stirs. "Karen called me."

"When?" I ask.

"About 5:00 a.m."

"I didn't hear the phone."

"I brought it in here when I went to bed." She looks healthier this morning. I brush her cheek with my hand. She smiles.

"I'm going to pick up Robbie," I tell her.

"Karen said Robbie hit her."

"What do you mean?" Unfairly, I'm angry at Mimi, as if she is crying once more. And at Robbie. I'm a loaded gun.

"Just what I said, Mom."

"But, how?" I ask.

"I don't know." She takes a deep breath.

I say, "Shadow was killed last night." She rises from the swans and reeds of the coverlet.

"Oh, Mommy, you should have woken me."

"I buried him. I better get going. Thank you for telling me about Karen."

"What will we do? About Karen? About Robbie?" Mimi asks.

"I'll talk to him."

"Oh, Mommy, that will be so hard." I grimace through my tears. "I'll miss you." She smiles and throws aside the coverlet.

"Good-bye, dear." I kiss the warm peak of her head.

As I'm leaving, Lisa phones.

"I'm going to pick up my son."

"Could you come here, tomorrow?" Lisa asks.

"To your house?"

"Yes. I want you to meet my children."

We hang up and I walk past the lumpy dirt behind the peony. I think of seeing Lisa, tomorrow. Mimi stands on the stone steps, wrapping her golden robe around her. A fistful of asters blooms by her feet. She waves as I back out of the drive, back into Mimi's words.

"Robbie hit her," it rises like reflux's half-digested lettuce and choking honey-mustard salad dressing. I drive west through this honey mustard, these rotten leaves, which burn yellow from my sternum to the base of my ear canals until I gasp and choke, my heart beating in my cheeks. I expand my chest, to make room for a breath to slip down and sustain me. I drive west beneath the flicking green and white of interstate signs. I sweat and open a window to a wet autumn smell. The sweat on my forehead chills me as it dries. My heart slows.

*

In front of his brick building, Robbie stands out of the rain in a black and white plaid wool shirt. His wild hair has been trimmed to his nape, but he still wears a two-inch silver hoop in his left ear.

On the road ahead of us something enormous gleams yellow in the river vapor.

"God, what is that?" Robbie asks. I am remembering Mimi's acid words.

"Salt truck?" I suggest.

"Too big." Robbie says.

By now, we are upon it. Its name is written in chrome across the back, The Gem of Egypt. It takes up two lanes on the road.

"Strip mine equipment," Robbie guesses.

I pull left. The berm vibrates the steering wheel in my hand. The Gem's rotating tires are taller than our car. The earth mover throws mud on my windshield. There is no safety of the predictable curve here. I must meet Robbie in the heart of this. "Bad news," I say. Robbie startles. I'm not sure what is coming toward me beyond the muddy glass. "Shadow was killed last night." I grind out the words over the lump in my throat. My wiper blades restore visibility. We'd gotten Shadow right after Robbie's bar mitzvah, and here I am picking him

up from the apartment where Karen has left him, and Mimi has said, Robbie hit Karen. I am shaking by the time I get around the earth mover. Oh for the sweet, unproductive curve of my flirtations in a closeted town.

"What happened?" he asks. A truck passes with a gun in its rack.

"Hit by a car. He was caught in mid-flight, running like mad."

"Good old Shadow. He was a strange agent." Robbie inhales noisily through his nose.

"What happened with you and Karen?" I ask and it is as perilous as when I blindly pulled around the Gem of Egypt.

"It was a lot of things." Another noisy inhalation.

I am afraid in the car with my 25-year-old son, afraid as if he were running flat out with his paws raised, his untamed eyes trained stubbornly into the head lamps that will explode his brain.

"Like?" I press.

"A long story." For some reason, this prompts me to remember his asking: *Have you ever kept a gun* and the memory I'd thrust aside.

I click on my turn signal, exit to a cafe on a bluff above the Ohio. As I turn into the parking lot, I tell Robbie, "The first time I shot a gun, I was five months pregnant with Mimi." I'm not sure where I am going with this story. I drive across a wet, pebbled lot and park in front of the picture window and continue. "The FBI trashed the publishing collective where I worked. This was after Georgia." Robbie and I thump our car doors closed. "We decided to guard the office. With shotguns." Robbie opens the cafe door for me and we sit in a booth. "We trained at a rifle range." Robbie smiles, like, *You, Mom, at a rifle range?* "The first time the gun exploded at the range, I was scared for the baby." Audibly, he breathes in and out.

We order 24-hour breakfasts—biscuits, bacon, scrambled eggs, fried apples.

"Makes me think of breakfast at Kanawha Elementary," he says with his dimpled smile.

"Those cooks loved you." I smile. "Your dimples." The first sip of coffee burns the tip of my tongue and is flavorless.

"Is that the only time you've shot a gun?"

"Yeah."

"Kick, don't they?"

I nod before finishing this story. "One night, about 3:00 a.m." He smiles appreciatively, as if I am telling a ghost story. "I heard a CB radio outside the office. Squawk, squawk." I'm usually too self-conscious to tell a story and usually tell the end before I get to the middle, but I'm getting into this. "I looked out the window. Three men got out of a van, and stood on the pavement. Under the street lamp, I

could see the wrinkles in their jackets. I could hear the changes in their intonation, though I couldn't understand their words. They put out their cigarettes, laughed, and turned toward the window I was hiding behind. Time to *man* the guard station at the head of the stairs, I knew. I paused beside the shotgun, but didn't pick it up. I looked down the flight of stairs to the door I'd bolted with three two-by-fours. Right then,"—Robbie draws in his breath—"I knew, I couldn't shoot, no matter who came through that door."

Our food arrives.

"You're here, so no one blew you away," Robbie says.

"After an hour, the men got back in the van, and drove away."

"Long hour." He chuckles.

Each of us is preoccupied—buttering biscuits, peppering eggs, starting our second cups of coffee. How to move from here to, *Karen says, Robbie hit her*?

Robbie takes a deep, mucky breath.

I think I have told him the wrong story and this makes me sad like he is.

Maybe I should just say, *Robbie, sometimes I am so frightened. And alone.*

All the things about fear and sorrow that he could say with his post-deconstructionist degree, my bachelor son.

I say, "Mimi's eardrums could have been shattered. A fetus's eardrums must be as fine as silk." This eardrums business is one of my made-up-but-should-be-true Science Facts, and he probably takes it as such. "Sometimes we do things that could hurt other people. Each of us."

He exhales and looks out the window, his tears the color of the rainy sunlight.

"She'd have been cushioned. Amniotic fluid," he says.

I think, Well, then, surely I have told the wrong story.

Robbie tells his own story.

"Remember when Mimi and I were in grade school. Even older," he elaborates with his dimpled chuckle. "Whenever you had any questions about something we'd done, like why had I left the lawn mower outside when it rained, and I'd say, 'You asked me to mow the lawn, you never said anything about putting it away.'"

Gallant-Single-Mother-And-Her-Children stories.

"And you, or Mimi, would say, 'It's not my fault.'"

"Remember what you'd answer?" he asks.

"No." What is this boy with the glinty hoop and snapping black eyes up to?

"You'd huff," he does a fair imitation, "'Well, then we know whose

fault it is,' you'd say. Do you remember what you'd say next?"

"Yes." I supply it reluctantly, "'It must be my fault because I gave birth to you.'"

"God, I used to hate that," Robbie says. "Mom, promise me, you'll never say that again. It's sick."

I quail a bit. "Okay," I say faintly. I feel as repulsive as Mimi when her sinuses are bad.

"Karen called Mimi," I say.

We sit. No dashing off into stories. Since he turned twenty-five, I sometimes see my expressions on his face, the way when light glances off his eyes, he winces—a little contraction of his forehead that makes him look afraid.

"I hate myself," he says. He says it quietly, not to beat himself on the chest, I think, but with the same quiet that came over Zeke when he would go downtown to stand on the courthouse steps.

Saying, *It's okay*, would be dishonest. "This is what all that was about. We Shall Overcome. Et cetera," I tell him. He steadfastly looks away from me as I insert the thought, "We can change."

Saying these hard things, I think how it must have been for Lucinda to tell me about her abortion in 1963. I remember how I took her hand when she told me, and I take my son's hand in my own. I have to breathe hard to beat back the yellow fumes, but when the reflux threatens to choke me, I have his hand, warm, muscular, and shaped like mine, to hold onto.

John Smelcer

The Book of Genesis, Revised for American Indian History

In the beginning God created Indians
and he saw that they were good
and he loved them for a long time
but then he must have got really mad at them
because they didn't speak english or something
so he created Whites and he said unto them,
"From this day on you shall
have dominion over Indians"
which was kind of the same thing he told Adam
about the animals that creeped or crawled

And God saw that this was good
so he told the Whites to multiply and go west
and he said unto them,
"Let there be colonization,"
and so there was
and from his words sprang colonialism

who begat expansionism
who begat broken treaties
who begat assimilation
who begat disease
who begat wars
who begat genocide

And God knew that this was good

When he returned from a paid vacation in Rome
God said, "Let Indians be slaves to the Whites"
and so they were the first slaves to pick cotton
but then the Whites ran out of Indians
so they imported Black people from far away
and that is all that people would remember
forever and ever, amen

Then one day after he made the dodo extinct
God decided that Indians needed exercise

so he created the Trail of Tears
and then he told Whites to kill all the buffalo
so that Indians would be vegetarians

and so it was
and so it was
and so it was

Then, after he got over a bad cold or something
God looked around and saw that Whites
were everywhere like locusts
and he saw that this was a good thing
so he said, "Let there be reservations"
and lo they came into being
and from his words sprang dislocation

who begat racism
who begat poverty
who begat alcoholism
who begat depression
who begat suicide
who begat genocide

And God knew that this was good
so he created allotments and the BIA and
HUD housing and commodities and rez dogs
and IHS and bingo halls and casinos
and The Church of Infinite Confusion

And on the last day God returned from Wal-Mart
and the Mega-Mall and the cineplex
and he saw that there were no more Indians
upon the land and he knew that this was a good thing
so he created the La-Z-Boy and the remote control
and TV westerns and the Washington Redskins

and from his comfortable, reclining throne
he looked out across the world he created
and he saw that it was good
and he called it america which means
"place where Indians once roamed"

and so it was
and so it was
and so it was

Judith Bishop

Desert Wind

High, bright winter's morning: the tenements' bare tree-antlers clattering
on each corner and the stepping black spines smooth and glossy
as mirages; framed, the scene shines as if transported to a desert, and never
(since this winter day will not end hereafter, having left the field of time) will the trees
rattle leaves again, or carry broods of flowers; but still, as in a desert,
a random bird alights, hoarse-throated after days of luckless questing
for a moth or a spider that has cellared spring rains in its body, so honeying
the juices of itself; and when startled by a boy skating down the lane a moment,
she is swallowed by the wind, as a rasping draws nearer on the dirt and turns articulate,
becomes the *shuck, shuck* of a snake tasting engine oil and frost as if astonished
how far he has gone across terrains, when last he knew an iridescence
meant the felled wing of a hummingbird, and thus the sweetest
meat, but never such a black stench as pools below this metal corpse...
High, bright winter's morning: the desert wind whistling from the north,
radio static from the kitchen clarifying to the small maracas rattle of the sand,
briefly clambering with every wave of air: go, stop; go, stop; and then, a long silence—
(as if entire days have held their breath). Now comes a human voice: low, soft,
perhaps yours, rising like the yam tendril, which knows how to bind whatever's still,
and for long enough to touch.

Alison Stine

—Third Place Poem—

Shut-In

Heat turns in its mouth the scissor-hum:
cicadas. Their wings are eye-shaped.
The skin they leave is its own creature,

talons curled on the questioning trees.
Behind so many doors are the faces
of sons, shut-ins who sleep until dusk.

The Japanese call them bean sprouts,
and their name for sprouts means, *fins*
of the field. Should I take you to a field,

pare the grass with my hand to where
it shoots white from the earth, show you
the fruits of the earth—mushrooms,

spotted, tender as skin? Would you eat
from my skin? Light persists, a white
vein brightening the floor. I will not ask

for entrance. And darkness? What of
darkness? Shutter to hide your passage,
the city set up for reclusion, all-hour

drugstores, delivery, each human figure
a flare against neon. Here, drone becomes
thickest by the river, blight of insect

whose body is born twice, whose song
is not song, now wailing, now mating.
Now it's dark. No one moves.

J. R. Solonche

The Movie Version of This Poem

For the movie version of this poem,
I want James Dean
and Martin Sheen

to play
the masculine rhymes.
For the feminine

rhymes, I want
Marilyn Monroe
and Brigitte Bardot.

For the role
of the accented syllables,
I want Richard Burton.

John Gielgud
must play
the caesuras.

I'm not sure
about the music.
But Ingmar Bergman

or Stanley Kubrik
will have to direct,
in black and white.

Never mind.
A silent film.
With Chaplin and a dog.

Justin Courter

The Bipedal Conspiracy

Sept. 12

Dear Dr. Eliot,

I happen to think that our bi-weekly, one-hour sessions are more than enough. And frankly, I resent your homeworky suggestion that I keep this journal. So I will address the entries to you. At least someone is listening to me now. But remember that I am fluent in psychiatric doublespeak. For instance, you stated that the purpose of our sessions is to help "clarify my thoughts," which I understand translates to "change my mind" about the events that landed me here. I suspect Brandon was trying to do the same, in his own way, when he referred me to Dr. Drake.

But you are right on one point; after thinking about your questions for a day, I do find I can come up with more detailed answers to them. Yesterday, when you asked why I no longer want my legs, I had trouble answering because it's not a question I would consider. Who says I need a reason? My response was to ask you why you want to have sex. When you answered that it was a desire that had been with you since adolescence and I said nothing more, I believe you thought you had cleverly stumped me. You had not. I was quiet because I was thinking back over the history of a desire that predates my adolescence.

The fact is, I have been repelled by bipedalism since I can remember. It disgusts me to see the insect-like movements of human beings as they walk, run, climb and pedal. I want no part of that antique culture of pedestrianism. According to my parents, I learned to crawl early but walk late, probably because even then I was disturbed by all the perambulation I saw around me. Out of an instinct grew my childhood interest in orangutans, those most beautiful of brachiators, and later, my enthusiasm for gymnastics. Yes, instinct. An instinct toward nonpedalism. Put that in the next article you submit to *JAMA*. Perhaps, as I swung myself around on the rings and parallel bars, in the back of my mind I harbored the belief that if I focused all my concentration on my upper body, the lower would atrophy, wither away eventually to nothing.

I'm finding I don't mind writing my answers to you in this journal. It's less stressful than the sessions, where I feel you are toying with me like a lawyer who has already interviewed the other witnesses. (I know

you must have at least talked to Brandon, that turncoat, as well as Dr. Drake.) Besides, there's not much else to do here. The other patients shuffle around in bedroom slippers, moribund expressions on their bleached faces, muttering to themselves. Or they stare unblinkingly at game shows on the television, which in this context seems like a relic from some other, ridiculously animated world. Richard, my roommate, is an obsessive-compulsive who, with what appears to be a permanent crease of perplexity between his dark brows, can spend hours aligning the seven pairs of footwear beneath his bed and re-spacing his few garments hanging in the closet. He spends more time on those shoes than the people who made them. On Monday I sat on my bed all day to count how many times he washed his hands. Sixty-five. Though at first I thought it was a humane consideration, I'm beginning to wish these rooms did not have sinks in them.

Sept. 14

Dr. Eliot,

Of course I told you to go to hell. You wanted me to tell you what particular incident impelled my nonpedal instinct to manifest itself in a desire to amputate my legs. Oh, certainly. Would you like the date and the hour? Now, for a moment, I'm going to sit in the wing chair and you're going to be horizontal on that stupid crunching leather couch. Alright? Comfy? Good. In your relentless insistence upon clarity, specifics, causes, hows and whys, I recognize a pathology not so distant a relative to Richard's here, who as I write is scrubbing his hands for the sixth time since lunch. I was offended by the smug way you modified and quickly found an opportunity to employ my phrase, "nonpedal instinct." You are presumptuous and condescending, which is entirely inappropriate for a member of your profession. You should be told that.

Nevertheless, I did think of something. But it has not the simplified cause-and-effect relationship to my condition you are so bumptiously seeking. I grew up in a very small rural town and occasionally my parents would take us in to New York City for a day or two. It was shocking—all those huge buildings, all those frenetic swarms of people everywhere. From a child's point of view, the scissoring to and fro of all those numerous legs, in a place like Grand Central Station, can be nauseatingly oppressive. I distinctly recall the first time I saw an amputee. I was about eleven years old. She was in a wheelchair, begging with a cardboard sign and a paper cup on the sidewalk beside a steaming grate. The stub was partially exposed and I saw the smooth, rounded

end of her leg like a knee, higher than the other and without the revolting knee joint and the rest. I wanted to go to her and, as a way of knowing it better, touch the abbreviated leg, to feel the flesh, to press it until I felt the firm bone beneath. I stood and stared until I was hustled along by my parents. The answer to the pornographic Freudian question taking shape in your mind is no. It was nothing like that.

I thought about that woman every day for a year and finally reached the conclusion that I wanted what she had. To put it more precisely, what I came to realize was that was how I should be. I consider my legs a birth defect. In the perfected self-image that exists now only in my mind's eye, I see myself in a chair with two smooth rounded stumps ending my legs in the middle of my thighs. All I want is to correct the physical discrepancy. This is the excruciating desire with which I have lived—you perverse time fanatic—for twenty years. Most of my life I have been unable even to talk about it to anyone without alienating him, until I met Brandon. It's his fault that I am here. I can understand why my landlady does not want me back after the business with the fire trucks, ambulances, police and paramedics running all around the building. But I'm just using this place as a way station for now. I intend to stay here only until I've decided on another place live, somewhere I can get this properly taken care of. In the meantime, I'm going to ask to be put in another room. The waterworks going on four times every hour like an overactive Old Faithful is going to drive me nuts.

Sept. 19

Dear Doc Elly,

Though I didn't explain myself at the time, I had to get up and sit in the wing chair across from you because lying on that goddamn couch makes me feel that I am a dog and you are one of the keepers of this kennel, prodding me through the fence with questions, stroking me with the affirmative noises muttered through the hand you keep over your mouth in a philosophical pose. But now I'm not sure I like sitting across from you either. I don't like the way you keep your grotesquely long legs crossed at the knee, nor the way in which you rotate your elevated foot from time to time, nor the leather loafers on them—the cow skin covering human skin covering that sticky web of bones, tendons, cartilage and veins. Nor do I appreciate the supercilious looks beamed at me over the rims of your reading glasses. I have to wrestle an urge to swipe that cowardly yellow legal pad from your hands every time I see you jot something down on it. Your writ-

ing is a sure sign that you're not really listening.

The general attitude of mocking superiority you convey is probably why I lied to you about Brandon. This, and your insinuation that I might be an opportunist, viewing Brandon not as a friend but merely a "facilitator." I can't believe you used that word! It relegates Brandon to a station on par with bathroom plumbing. If anything, considering the flow of events, he turned out to be more like a blockage in the pipes.

I didn't meet him at a party, as I told you yesterday, and he is not a professional football player. He was a coworker of mine. We had gradually become friends and he told me some time ago that he had realized he was gay. He was coming out of the closet, was happy, liberated, etc. So I told him my predicament and thought he understood. His questions were nothing like yours; they seemed to have as their objective the discovery of a practical solution to my problem. He said he would introduce me to a friend of his, a doctor who might be willing to help. I told him about the time I'd made an appointment to see a surgeon on my own. That pompous ass had stood there and told me that it would be a violation of the Hippocratic oath for him to perform the surgery I requested. I quoted to him his own words from an article I'd read in which he'd spoken in defense of euthanasia. It was the reason I'd come to him.

"That is a completely different matter," he said, though scarcely able to conceal his surprise and his pride at hearing himself quoted.

"So you would help me die, but will not help me to live more comfortably?" I asked.

There was no reason for him to get as red and blustery as he did then, treating me as if I were an impudent child. That Hippocratic oath is nothing but a convenient hiding place for hypocrites like you.

Brandon promised that Dr. Drake was a close friend of his, that Dr. Drake was very understanding. We talked about it in my apartment. Brandon sat in one of my kitchen chairs with a patient look on his face, drinking a bottle of beer, a calm assuredness to his movements. He sat there smiling at me, not ten feet from the bathroom where I would come to within minutes of death. Smiling! I thought he was really listening to me, that he was empathizing. And all that time he was plotting against me, just another scheming biped in sheep's clothing. You are all in league together—you might as well be an army forcing the whole world to march along with you.

If I were, as I ought to be, in a wheelchair now, I would be excused from this interminable table tennis competition. It is the only thing we do here, aside from watching television, and it has come to feel like a part-time job. I play for at least three hours every day. I was

in the finals on Sunday, but no one seems to know or care what round it is anymore—it just keeps going round and round kaleidoscopically rearranging its face as new patients are admitted and old ones "get well" and leave.

I thought Richard was "getting well" because last Friday I only saw him wash his hands once. He looked more preoccupied than usual, the crease between his eyebrows deepening significantly and remaining there all day, even while he watched reruns of an especially fatuous sitcom. Then on Saturday he returned to the hand washing with renewed vigor and added foot washing. That's right. He now also bathes his feet in the sink approximately sixty times a day as well, and I've begun brushing my teeth in the showers down the hall. My request for a room change was turned down. Apparently we're full and the staff does not want to "upset the balance" they think they've achieved.

Sept. 24

Dr. Eliot,

That goatee you're trying out really is a bad idea. Not only did you miss the vogue for that look by several years, but it's so wrong for your face it looks like a dime-store disguise. And in your line of work it is so cliché you might as well have been sitting there with a calabash pipe, too, when I came in on Thursday. That was why I kept laughing throughout the session. Not, as you doubtlessly diagnosed, as a "defense" against your onslaught of pointless queries or as a "coping mechanism." Those are probably the very words you scratched on the piss-yellow legal pad—correct? You dolt.

The risibility inspired by the sight of you, scribbling away like a madman in that goatee, prevented me from answering your question as to how long (this obsession with time suggests that the severity of your obsessive-compulsive tendency borders on that of the autistic—have you had your head checked lately?) I have thought about severing my legs myself. I suppose that thought was concomitant with the realization of how I should have been formed.

I know you believe that by defining these things, you can get to a single root of my desire, then neatly extract it. You seek to guide my thoughts. Forget it. I know that I will only feel complete when I am rid of my legs. Even now, as I look past Richard—busily adjusting the aperture between the tennis sneakers and suede shoes beneath his bed—to the large window in the far wall, I cannot help thinking of how, if weighted sufficiently and fixed with a blade, the sash could be

turned into a guillotine. One could sit on the sill, cut the cord holding the weighted sash and with a *kachunk*, one's legs would fall down onto the sidewalk below and one would topple over backward into the room, free of them forever. Ahh. If only could be done as easily as said. I live for that moment—to feel the sweet sensation I suppose you could only imagine inverted, perhaps in the ugly guise of a novice surfer rising to stand on his board for the first time.

I once spent an entire day lying on the ground with my legs across some railroad tracks. When a train finally came, it slowed to a crawl, a man stuck his head out the window and yelled at me to get my stupid ass off the tracks before he had to get down and kick it off. Another time, I managed to get myself hit by a car but only broke one of the legs below the knee. It was encouraging to see the bone sticking from the skin like a white blade from a sheath while I lay there on the street. In the hospital wheelchair, before I was given crutches and sent home, I tasted the bliss in which I wish to live. But to my deep chagrin, the mended leg healed unfortunately well and I was walking around normally after a couple months. This incident precipitated a year-long despair during which I all but gave up the hope of never walking again. I realized I was risking my life for this dream and thought Dr. Drake would be my savior.

Shawn just came in here in that ratty, smog-colored bathrobe he seems to live in, and told me I was "up" at the Ping-Pong table. When I told him I didn't feel like it today, he at first looked bewildered, then betrayed. I almost feel I should donate the money myself to get a pool table in this place. Shawn was so hurt and vengeful, he went so far as to ask Richard if he'd like to take my place. Richard, a bar of soap in one hand, one foot in the sink, awkwardly twisted toward Shawn and shrieked, "Can't you see I'm busy!"

Sept. 28

Dear Doc,

Okay, okay, I'll tell you about Dr. Drake even though I know you'll sit there with a knowing smile, perhaps re-cross your legs and nod idiotically. I sat mute with my arms folded for our entire session yesterday for a few reasons. First of all, you used that word "share" almost as soon as I sat down. I never again want to hear that word used in reference to a noun less concrete than French fries. Second, I wanted to demonstrate for you that my participation in our sessions is voluntary, just as is my residence here. I wanted you to take a little time to think over your motives in regard to me. I have known for a

while that you are a believer in altruism. It is important that someone with as specious a sense of purpose as yours bear in mind that a society's concepts of welfare and beauty are just as subjective as an individual's. If you really want to help me, your psychiatric evaluation will recommend mid-thigh amputation of both my legs. All this time, I have been hoping that I could persuade you to be more open-minded about this. Unlike you, I am not trying to assimilate you, to make you see the world as I do.

Anyway. Brandon gave me Dr. Drake's phone number and even said he would call first to tell him about me. I called and made an appointment for a consultation. As I drove to this appointment, alone, I thought optimistically about how soon I would be able to get my car fitted with the hand controls legless people can use for gas and brakes.

I was a little surprised, as I followed the directions I'd been given, that Dr. Drake's office was nowhere near the hospitals, as I would have expected an elite surgeon's to be. Instead, I found myself in an extremely posh residential neighborhood. He's one of those exclusive ones, I thought, with his own little eponymous hospital and small staff in a tastefully converted mansion, and he only takes movie stars or people like me who are willing to pay top dollar for unusual operations.

I was ushered into a dark-paneled study where an affable man rose from a desk to shake my hand, suggested we sit in a pair of comfortable chairs by the fireplace and talk. Dr. Drake assured me he had discussed my wishes at length with Brandon, and I sighed with relief. At last someone was listening, taking me seriously, and even willing to help! I imagined the laboratory attached to the back of the house, which he would likely show me soon in order to allay any fears I might have about the upcoming surgery. While we talked, I noticed the titles on the spines of many of the books on the walls around us. I told myself that any doctor of broad intellect, with a head bursting with genuine scientific curiosity and not stuffed chock-full with petty moralizing, could be expected to read extensively on a variety of subjects. His questions took a compassionate route; he asked if I understood the implications, the lifelong complications—physical and psychological—that would be a result of leglessness. Yes, yes, yes. I eagerly went down this path with him, expecting at any moment that he would go to the planner on his desk and pencil-in an appointment for my surgery. But he kept talking.

Finally, he said there were a couple of other people with whom he wanted me to consult. He went to a door and admitted into the room Brandon, my mother and my sister (my only living relatives) and my heart almost stopped for good. I know you're hiding an incipient grin

behind your hand now, you dishonest quack. Yes. It was what in your doublespeak has been termed an "intervention," which in fact means "ambush." There was no laboratory behind the house and this Dr. Drake knew as much about surgery as I did. Needless to say, I bolted, but not so quickly I could avoid seeing the name of the institution on the framed diploma on his wall, possibly the same one you attended. For all I know, you two are squash partners.

Oct. 3

Doctor Eliot,

Fuck you.

Oct. 7

Dear Dr. Eliot,

Two days ago, in the middle of his shoe-straightening routine, Richard suddenly stood up, let loose a tortured animal wail, knelt down again and pounded his tidily tucked-in bed with his fists until the blanket and sheets were all bunched up. Then he scooped into his arms as many of the shoes from under his bed as he could, took them out and dumped them in the trash bin in the hall, came back, tears dampening his scrunched, reddened face, picked up the rest and likewise threw them down into the bin with what sounded like considerable force. They don't take the trash until the end of the day, and I fully expected Richard to take all the shoes back after lunch. He did not. He has only his bedroom slippers left to wear, but the crease between his eyebrows remains. Now, whenever Richard is out of the room and I happen to look down at that vacant space beneath his bed, a lump forms in my throat and tears well up in my eyes. It's terrible. I don't belong here with these people. They don't bother me about the table tennis any more. Richard sometimes plays now.

Oct. 10

Dr. Eliot,

And there you sit looking professorial in your wing chair, trying your best to exude an air of omniscience. You truly disgust me. It was all I could do the other day to restrain myself from getting up, going over and vomiting all over you. I would have loved to see the shock

on your bespattered face as you uncrossed your pretentious legs for once, took off the silly reading glasses—letting a few of the chunks they'd been holding plop into your lap—and looked around for something to clean up with.

I could see that the only dignified option for me was to once again sit with my arms folded, ignore your questions and say nothing. I know what you wrote down on your pad: "Withdrawal." You and your quixotic ilk all believe you are improving the world by running around pasting labels on everything. If you'd paid any attention in History class, you would see that psychiatrists are the crusaders of our times.

You think that getting me to regurgitate the sequence of events is part of "the healing process." You already know what happened. You must have at least read the police report and you've probably heard a version of the story from everyone who was present at my ambush. The only "process" I need to undergo is the removal of these ghastly lower appendages of mine. *They* are what keep me psychologically crippled. Why can't you accept that? As you have turned out to be useless, I have decided to leave this institution tonight. For your edification, I will leave this journal and include a last answer for you.

Yes, of course the ambush brought things to a head. I realized no one on this earth would help me. The very next day, I stole a wheelchair, tied tourniquets around both my thighs and packed the legs in ice. My plan was that once gangrene had set in, I would admit myself to a hospital where amputation would be an absolute necessity. The flesh of my legs turned purple, then gray, but after a few days it didn't seem that I was making any more progress. I tightened the tourniquets and waited. My thoughts kept turning to the hacksaw I'd once seen in the basement along with other tools belonging to the landlady, who lives in the building. It was difficult getting down there and then pulling myself back up the stairs, but I managed. I dragged my phone into the bathroom, got into the tub, which I'd filled with ice cubes, and downed a bottle of painkillers. I began sawing just below the tourniquets, where there was almost no feeling, at least at first. But through the analgesic and the numbness my damaged nerves started shooting such pain and alarm to my brain that it was as if I were wrestling not just with the saw, but with the hands of Brandon, Dr. Drake and my family trying to tear it from my grasp. I was forced to turn my head at one point and throw up over the side of the tub onto the floor. Even in the delirium induced by physical agony and drugs, I realized I would have to work more quickly; I had to be capable of dialing 911 before I lost consciousness. I'd managed to completely sever the right leg and had started on the left when I felt so dizzy I decided to make the call. Most of the ice had melted and I was sitting

in, well, a blood bath. With the ice floating around it looked like vampire punch. After putting the phone down, I made a final attempt on the left leg. I recall striking bone—your whole body registers the tremors when you are sawing through bone; it feels something like an electric current running through you as the saw goes back and forth. But I must have blacked out before I finished the job.

It really was a mess and I can see why the landlady was so upset, especially since she was allowed in the apartment during all the commotion, when the paramedics were tracking blood all over the place. What made it especially gruesome for the bystanders, apparently, was that, in their haste to get me into the ambulance, the paramedics left my right leg in the tub and someone came running out with it wrapped in a towel just as they were turning on the siren and pulling away from the curb. These people should have more thorough training. Blood was spilled all over the runners in the hallway, down the steps and on the sidewalk.

When I came to, the nurse on duty buzzed for the doctor. He yanked back the sheets as if unveiling a completed sculpture and proudly announced that my legs were saved! He'd fused the bones, reattached the severed nerves and veins; I'd be able to walk pretty normally before long. He pretended to be humble while patting himself on the back—praising the wonders of modern medicine and technology that had been his assistants in the performance of this miracle.

My voice raised to a yell, I poured forth such a cataract of epithets upon that ridiculous bastard that he rocked back on his heels. The nurse rushed from the room. I threw a box of tissues at the good doctor—who'd changed his tack and was now trying to speak soothingly—then hurled a vase of flowers that missed him and shattered against the wall just as the nurse was returning with two enormous orderlies who held me down while she plunged a needle into my arm.

So there's my side of the story for you. I've been a victim of this bipedal conspiracy to which you are a party. I'm sure you want to know now where I've gone. Where? When? Why? How? You could have put your insatiable hunger for answers to practical use as a newspaper reporter. You are a failure. You aren't even a real doctor. Just to feed your imagination I'll let you know this much: there are plenty of places in the country where large saws cut through tree trunks as if they were sticks of butter. I could seek employment at one of these places and easily find an opportunity to make myself the beneficiary of an excellent severance package.

So long, Doc.

Kathleen Zamboni McCormick

Staten Island Ladies of Cootras

"Aunt Louisa Morelli and Aunt Esther Zolini aren't technically your aunts," my mother explained. "Aunt Esther is Uncle A's cousin, and Louisa and Esther are something like half-sisters."

It was hard to figure out everyone's exact relationship to everyone else with the Staten Island Italian relatives because there were so many of them, and some of them were named after their parents, and a lot of them just went by an initial, so there was "Little Sophie" and "Big Sophie," and "Aunt E" and "Cousin E," an indeterminable number of Joes and Als and Jildas in many shapes and sizes. Although I couldn't picture every one of them, I loved to think of all of those people related to each other—and to me—doing things together out there on Staten Island.

I had few aunts and uncles in Boston, and they were mostly Irish—on my father's side—but we hardly saw much of each other. So it was a big event for me when any of the Staten Island relatives came to town.

"They aren't technically anything," said my father, dismissing Aunts Louisa and Esther and the whole Staten Island family in one swift sentence.

All that I loved about the Staten Island relatives seemed to drive my father nuts. Every July, they would arrive noisily in a trailer that they would then set up in my grandparents' driveway. My father said that vacationing in a trailer was low class. Uncle G, a short and wiry man with a quick smile and elfin moves, would put down lawn chairs around the trailer so everyone who wanted to could sit and eat and drink in the sun. My father always had to sit in the shade because his fair Irish skin burnt easily. About four o'clock every afternoon, when it was too hot for anyone else, I could find Uncle G in one of the lawn chairs with a steaming cup of coffee and a cigar. "Never too hot for your old Uncle G," he explained seriously to me one afternoon. "Because I have a clean conscience. The flames of hell are reserved for evil-doers, and you can tell who they are because the heat bothers them." I began to make a mental list of all of the people I knew who were troubled by the heat—and then he winked at me to show he was joking. My father hated it when people made jokes about religion.

I was never allowed in the trailer, but was always curious about it.

"It isn't much to see," said Aunt E, Uncle G's wife, who had a gruff

voice inside a tiny body. She stroked my hair as I hung around the door one day. "It gives us a place to sleep and lets us be able to see your Nana Sophie and Pa Joe whenever they want us."

"It's functional," said Uncle A, taking a long drag from his cigarette. "And that's all we need."

But from what I could see, that wasn't all Aunt Esther and Aunt Louisa needed. They never slept in the trailer. They stayed in my grandparents' spare bedroom.

My father disliked Esther and Louisa intensely. There were all the usual conflicts between the Irish and the Italian, with the Italians, regardless of their money or status, or their trailers, somehow still being "just off the boat," which, when I thought of it, was also kind of true when you lived on Staten Island.

Esther and Louisa, but particularly Louisa, were a bit withdrawn. Esther was dark and somewhat larger-boned. Louisa was frail, with thin, light brown hair and very small bones. Most of the Staten Island relations were fairly old to me, but Esther and Louisa were a different kind of old. They were old *ladies*, and this, I thought, was perhaps why they didn't sleep in the trailer. My mother told me that they were very devoted to each other, and I thought that if I'd had a sister, even a half-sister, we'd be devoted, too.

In the summer of my tenth year, they took it upon themselves to educate me, as Louisa intoned softly, in "the finer things of female accoutrements." I was flattered, even though I hadn't ever heard of "cootras."

"You'll be wearing perfume soon, Kate," said Louisa one morning, "and it's high time you start to get a sense of your scent preferences."

Scent preferences. I liked the idea.

"Let's put this one on your left wrist," Louisa said, energetically for her, "and see what you think of it."

The bottle was clear and round. It had a little purple bulb extending from the top, which Louisa squeezed at my arm.

It felt cool. I put my nose to my wrist and sniffed. My head reeled and my nose itched where it had touched the perfume. I could see its wet shine on my wrist. I coughed.

Louisa pursed her lips. I was not doing very well so far.

"It's kind of nice," I said, my eyes watering. "But maybe it isn't my preference," I added, trying to sound grown up and appreciative.

Louisa sighed. She reached out her hand to Esther, who took it and gave her a reassuring nod. "Get me the Arpége, would you, dear."

She locked her eyes on mine. "Arpége is a very romantic scent. It's been around since 1927, so it's got a history." With the confidence of

what I saw as a highly trained nose, she smelled the bottle, which must have had some perfume residue on it. "Oh, the honeysuckle and jasmine and that faint hint of orange blossoms." She looked rapturous.

"This is too old for you now," Louisa said, "but it may still be more to your liking."

If it were too old for me now, I figured it would be even older when I grew up, but I didn't say anything. This looked like serious perfume. The bottle was fancy, and the liquid inside was golden brown.

"Right wrist," Louisa said. "Just a small spritz because it's very expensive."

I was overly sensitive to smells in general and prone to feeling rather nauseated in the presence of too much perfume. The doctor had said I had a nervous stomach and had prescribed peppermint oil, which I took regularly, particularly if my parents had been fighting. But I tried to be strong for Aunt Louisa because this seemed important.

"Now smell this one."

I didn't need to put my nose to my wrist because this time the odor overpowered me. This was the kind of perfume my mother and I would smell on some of the younger, more attractive, women in church. The kind that, if we had arrived early, my mother would say was enough to allow us to move pews, even though we might have looked a bit rude. "Better than throwing up before the Kyrie," my mother would add in a whisper and we would both smile and move as quietly as we could to a pew that wasn't near anyone looking fashionable. The older women in our parish usually smelled of mothballs, which while kind of stinky, didn't give us headaches or upset stomachs.

So there I was, with a different scent on each wrist, hoping that someone would open the windows. Louisa was against opening even the blinds, let alone the windows, and I was never really sure why, but it seemed that Louisa worried that the furniture or even she herself might fade if in the presence of too much light.

"Enough for today," said Louisa. "Wear these perfumes all day and inhale them from time to time. Tomorrow we can try some others."

I thanked both my aunts and tried not to rush from the room, tried to exit like a lady, even though I was wearing sneakers, a tee shirt, and seersucker shorts. Once the door closed, I made a beeline for the bathroom and scrubbed and scrubbed with the special soap my grandfather kept in a bucket under the sink for when he needed to wash off paint or grease from working around the house.

Even though I felt lightheaded, I was pleased that my aunts thought I was old enough to develop my scent preferences. It became obvious

to me that they could never stay in the trailer because womanhood like theirs took up a lot of space. One had to set out those perfumes just so on a wooden dresser with a nice dresser scarf underneath, and no matter what the trailer was like inside, there wouldn't have been room for dressers with scarves.

In addition to scents, I was to learn about fabrics this particular summer, and Louisa had decided to focus on silk. One morning, I was invited in before they had even finished dressing and cleaning up the room, though it was fairly late in the morning.

"The heat makes us all so slow-moving," Esther called out to me from a half-open door, "so we aren't quite ready for you, but if we don't start now, we'll never get your silk cootras in before lunch." Louisa scowled at her. By now I had realized my mistake, and Louisa didn't approve of ladies making verbal errors because "it showed poorly on their social class." Esther found it amusing and smiled and pulled gently on my braids.

After a quick good morning hug, Louisa started immediately. "Silk began being woven in the eighth century." She lowered her voice so that she sounded a bit like the narrator on one of those Mutual of Omaha wildlife programs. Still in her lace-trimmed sleeveless violet nightgown, which exposed the wrinkly flesh on her thin upper arms, she rummaged through the closet to find something "cool enough to wear." I thought her freshly manicured rose-beige nails were quite glamorous, even if she had at least two dozen age spots on her hands. I followed her around the small room as she picked up a small tortoise shell comb for her thin hair, lifted her stockings out of the top drawer of the bureau, and lay out her undergarments—girdle, bra, and full slip—at the bottom of the bed and then finally a dress. She had decided to wear her yellow cotton print three-quarter-length-sleeve dress that day. Esther came up behind me and, giving my shoulders a friendly squeeze, told me to sit down on the side of the bed, which was still unmade, because there wasn't space for three of us to walk around in a room so small.

Louisa stopped momentarily and looked off into the distance—at least as much as a person could in a bedroom with a window that faced the neighbor's house—then smiled with relish. "Silkworms eat only mulberry leaves—imagine that—just one special food for all of the creatures that help us make such a beautiful fabric. And they eat thousands of pounds of them, not knowing what their fate is about to be."

She paused to see if I knew what this fate was and took off her nightgown, having managed to get on all her underwear and her full slip underneath it, then stepped into her dress. Esther helped her zip

it up and, following a quick head nod of Louisa's, found some pearls and hooked them around Louisa's thin neck.

Sensing my ignorance, Louisa leaned forward, so close that I could smell her mouthwash. "If they let the silkworms come out of their cocoons themselves, they would make holes in the silk thread. So they have to be baked to death and then boiled."

I gasped.

Despite being a lady, Louisa seemed to like the look of my grim, blinking expression.

Then, as if on cue, a garment bag Esther had silently taken from the closet fell to the floor, and together Esther and Louisa held out to me a deep red dress made of silk crepe.

"It takes about 2000 cocoons to make this dress," Louisa said proudly. "In Japan." She moved closer to me. "Look at the way it drapes, just on the hanger. Clean your hands and you can touch it. But dry them carefully."

Esther had a wet facecloth on hand and assured Louisa that this was enough, if I'd dry my hands on another cloth she had in her pocket. When Louisa was sure my hands were dry, I was allowed to run my fingertips over what I thought was an unusual, rather fleshy texture.

Louisa and Esther looked at me expectantly. I was required to say something important after this intense discussion and display of silk. I thought through the fabrics my mother and I sewed with. Velvet: soft on one side, not so soft on the other. Cotton: versatile, but fairly boring. Seersucker: puckery and striped.

What could I say? They were both waiting. My hands were getting sweaty, so I moved them away from the dress and took a deep breath.

"Fabrics from Japan and Staten Island are very complex," I announced in my most grown-up voice, and their smiles told me I had said the right thing. Many of Louisa's and Esther's blouses and skirts were made of silk—of varying colors and weights. Some of their blouses had tiny tucks, and we admired their craftsmanship as Esther brought one after another out of the closet, each in its own cloth garment bag.

Then Louisa looked at me with slightly teary eyes. "Remember the silkworms, *cara mia*. Life can be like that, and you'll see, even in the move into your own womanhood, that you'll need things for the transition that you won't need or want after you've made it."

I decided right then that I would wear nothing but silk when I was a woman. Even in summer, despite the heat. Even in winter, despite the cold. Despite the worms' fate. Even more than Louisa wore it. I imagined myself dressing slowly in front of a mirror in matching

ivory and jade green silk clothing—from bra and panties, to slip, to flared dress. Sleeveless.

*

For at least one of the days when the relatives were visiting, my father would be invited to come for dinner, which always led to the same argument at home.

"I'm not coming this year," he stated firmly. And when my mother started to cry, I went out the back door and down the two flights of stairs to my best friend Lucy's apartment.

Two of my other friends, Donna and Anne, were there. When I arrived, they were in Lucy's room playing one of our favorite games, Bible Sex Stories. We were all Catholic and all ten years old and starting to think a fair amount about sex, but were still too nervous to talk about it directly. So we spent long and rather titillating hours speculating on Biblical sins involving sex that we'd read about in our *Bible Stories* books and then comparing them, whenever relevant, to people we knew, especially older boys in the neighborhood.

This afternoon they'd been rereading Mary Magdalen stories and talking about what exactly *sins of the flesh* could entail. Lucy informed me that I had missed some juicy stuff about Robbie O'Donnell and Nina Jones, which she promised to fill me in on later. Donna and Anne were speculating on how hard it would be to show repentance by washing a person's feet. They made room for me to come and sit on the floor and asked what I thought. Quickly, we all agreed that one of our sins would have to be pretty bad to get us to wash someone's feet—especially if the feet were really dirty and shampoo hadn't been invented yet. But the thought was still kind of exciting.

"Oh, c'mon," Donna said, "let's try." I was still thinking of my parents upstairs fighting and was looking for something to distract me. "Let's do it," I said. "Let's think of something sinful we've done and then wash each other's feet and see if we feel atoned for our sins," I suggested with more enthusiasm than I felt.

With her usual flair for drama, Lucy worked our role-playing in a way that would preserve the Biblical feeling necessary to keep us from any sinful paths of our own. We all had long hair, and we could take turns playing Mary Magdalen and Jesus, pretending to wash each other's feet. Our hair would stay dry, of course, and we would put on clean socks, which Lucy pulled out of her top drawer. We didn't care if they matched or not. Lucy and I, and Donna and Anne, would be partners. Lucy sat in the chair in her room while I unbraided my hair, and Donna pulled hers out of her ponytail. Donna and I would be

Mary Magdalens first. I began to think about Robbie and sins I might commit with him and bent my head over Lucy's feet, saying "Oh Robbie" very softly. I rubbed my hair all over Lucy's yellow sock on her left foot and the white sock on her right. Then we changed places and she said that she would think about Patrick Lehy while she washed my feet. Lucy and I were pretty hysterical and congratulating ourselves on the great game we'd made up when Anne screamed out to Donna, "Get away, you lezzy!"

Donna seemed to have gotten carried away in her role as Mary Magdalen and had started washing up Anne's legs with her hair—on the inside and well above the knee—and Anne jumped up. "This game sucks and Donna, you're queer," Anne announced. Then she looked at her watch and said that she was late for dinner and quickly left.

Donna shrugged off Anne's accusations. "Just shows how desperate she is."

Lucy was ready to discuss whether we were feeling any sense of atonement for our sins from our foot washing experiences, but Anne's yelling reminded me of my parents arguing, and I decided I'd better leave to see how things were going upstairs. Donna decided to go home too.

"That Mary Magdalen was a real slut, huh?" she asked me as we stood on the landing.

*

The afternoon when we were waiting for my father to come for dinner, I looked for Louisa and Esther, but Louisa had hung her "Do Not Disturb. Thank you. The Waldorf" sign on the door. She often needed to rest and take a sponge bath on hot afternoons.

"Wash your hands, Kate, and come help us in the kitchen. There's still a lot to do," called one of my aunts, who must have noticed me hanging around looking sad outside Esther and Louisa's door.

Sometimes it seemed that grownups felt that whenever anything was wrong, it could be solved by asking me to wash my hands.

When my father finally arrived, things tensed up for everyone, or so it seemed to me. Somehow he managed to convey, without saying anything, that he'd been at work all day, which they hadn't, that he'd taken hot trains and buses, which they hadn't, and that he was tired and wanted to come home to the peace and quiet of his own apartment and not to a lot of cackling Italians who'd been drinking casually all day and were eating too much garlic at dinner.

My mother looking frightened for most of the evening.

"I'll stay behind to help clean up," she said with a stiff smile on her face, clearly upset and wanting to make amends with the relatives.

So my father and I set off walking home. I began to tell him about Aunt Louisa and Aunt Esther and their cootras and how there were real ladies in Staten Island and how important it was for me to consider clothing and scent preferences. My father usually liked it when I told stories, but he stopped dead on the sidewalk and looked me straight in the face and said, "Kate, I don't want to hear another word about Louisa and Esther and the *ladies* of Staten Island and *scent preferences*. Those two old cats. Ladies of the evening, more like it."

I don't know how exactly I took in the meaning of "ladies of the evening," but it reminded me of the *sins of the flesh* of the Mary Magdalen Bible chapters, only it wasn't titillating like when Lucy and I had washed each other's feet.

I fell asleep before my mother got home, wondering if my aunts really were prostitutes and if my mother knew and if everyone knew and if I were low class and if garlic really didn't taste good and whether it was shameful for men to have jobs where their hands got dirty and if Nana drank too much. I tried not to think about being half-Italian. And I didn't want to think about my womanhood coming on.

After that night, I wanted the Staten Island relations to go home. I sat sullenly in the living room while my grandfather chain-smoked and talked to my aunts and uncles, laughing and eating and sipping lemonade.

My mother was watching me and finally announced that she and I were going for a little walk. Once we got outside, she headed for the stores where it was noisy and smelly from the traffic and she proceeded to take me to task for my moodiness.

"Why do you think Esther and Louisa have brought all of those clothes with them?" she whispered to me, rushing us around the corner from my grandparents' house. I didn't say anything.

"Surely not to wear in the hot summer." Then she stopped and grabbed my shoulders tightly, holding me so she could look straight into my eyes.

"They've brought them to show you because you're the youngest girl in the family and they have no daughters of their own, and they care so much for you. And furthermore, why do you think they have so many clothes and know so much about fabrics?" Her eyes bore into mine.

I pulled away from her. She was getting dangerously close. What if she did know? What if she were going to tell me? I didn't think I could bear to hear it again.

"I don't know," I screamed right there on the street, crying and

putting my hands up to my ears. "And I don't want to know. Don't tell me." I started to run, but she caught my hand, and pulled me to her.

"They worked for years together in the garment district," she said speaking too loudly. "Hard, long hours. In fact, that's how they met." She was walking very fast and I had to rush to keep up with her.

"Years ago...are you listening, Kate?" she said over the traffic. "Louisa wasn't a fast seamstress and Esther used to help her out." She held my hand as we crossed at a busy intersection. "And then they finally left because Louisa wasn't well and she hated working in a factory, and they started a small shop of their own on Staten Island in a house that Uncle A, who was very understanding when you think about it, bought for them, and they lived together above the shop."

She was hurling words at me, the way she talked when she and my father fought. Why were both of my parents all of a sudden so interested in telling me stories about the Staten Island relatives?

"Truth be told, Esther did more of the work, but Louisa could always convince the customers to buy a more expensive fabric than they had come in for. And Esther was happy for them just to be together and not to have the commute." My mother paused to laugh, which relaxed me a bit. "Can't you just see Louisa telling someone who wanted Esther to make them a nice cotton dress that they'd look much more elegant in a silk kimono and managing to convince them of it?"

I didn't know what to think. Was my mother making all of this up to hide things from me? Did she really not know? Was this the truth? For all of my life, they had just been my aunts. Then they'd become prostitutes. Now they were dressmakers.

"They never talked to me about working," I said, refusing to be convinced, and—for reasons I couldn't understand—holding on to my father's account of them.

"Well, how do you think they can afford to have all those clothes?" she asked.

"How many men came as customers?" I asked with an authority I didn't feel. What I felt was the shame of being associated with these women, of being lied to, of not knowing the truth, of having a mother who didn't realize what had been going on.

"What an odd question," my mother said, and she looked askance at me, but continued. "I suppose a few men, from time to time, would come to them and ask them to make a hat or a dress for their wives or sweethearts for Easter or a birthday, but probably only if the woman was a regular customer and Esther had the measurements on hand. She didn't much like doing alterations."

I don't know why I found it so hard to believe that my mother might have been telling me the truth, since everything she said made sense, since it redeemed the Staten Island relatives whom I loved, Esther and Louisa whom I adored, and my mother herself, still the center of my universe. But my father's words had cut deeply into me, and I couldn't rid myself of them so quickly. We walked the rest of the way back in silence.

When we got back to Nana's, I felt a little better, and Esther had wrapped up a present for me. It was a lovely small cameo on a delicate chain with a flower carved into it that looked like icing sugar. But it was rock hard. Esther asked me to look at the box carefully because this was a cameo she'd been given as a girl. It came all the way from Italy, and the jeweler's name was right on the outside. And inside the box, which was only about one inch square, she had written a short inscription in a shaky hand. I took it and, even though I couldn't read what she wrote, I thanked her and started to sob.

My mother fastened the cameo around my neck, and I began crying again, hugging her tightly, because I knew that everything she'd told me must be true.

And Esther said, "Surely the poor girl must be having her hormones coming in," and Louisa started on some speech about hormones, but no one seemed to be listening.

After I calmed down and was sitting comfortably in the living room, I wondered how the cameo would look with that jade green and ivory silk clothing and whether I should wear my hair loose or pulled back, when I noticed that Aunt Louisa and Aunt Esther weren't with us.

I rushed into their room, but they weren't there. I checked the kitchen and the bathroom, but couldn't find them. I ran outside into the backyard, around to the driveway, and then I spotted them, just inside the door of the trailer. Louisa's head was on Esther's shoulder, her arm around Esther's waist. Esther's hand was gently touching the inside of Louisa's leg, above the knee.

I stopped running and stared at them. My head spun with images. Mary Magdalen. *Sins of the flesh*. Donna's hair. Anne's leg. "Get away!" Ladies of the evening.

Esther saw me first. She and Louisa slowly separated, turned, and looked at me expectantly.

I could hear my parents' voices as my heart pounded in my ears. "They lived together above the shop." "Devoted to each other." "They aren't technically your aunts." "They aren't technically anything."

I wanted to scream out, "They *are* technically something. They are my aunts. They are dressmakers. They came into their woman-

hood a long time ago. They are Staten Island ladies of cootras."

But this was not a time for screaming. I touched the cameo around my neck and took a deep breath, willing myself into ladylike behavior. I was dressed in my jade green and ivory silk, now with matching pumps, and was wearing Arpége with my hair pulled back. I walked slowly over to them, raising my head, and swallowed hard.

"It's getting pretty smoky inside because Papa's handed out cigars, so I thought I'd come out here and be with you," I said quietly.

We looked at each other and no one spoke for a few moments.

"Want a tour of the trailer?" asked Louisa.

Esther held the door open and I stepped inside.

Maura Stanton

Snow Mountain

After the ladies are out of breath,
ten gentlemen in lacquered hats
pile more snow in the garden

making a mountain for the Empress
while everyone starts placing bets—
How long before it melts?

Fifteenth of the first month,
Sei Shonagon says, sleeves wet
from scooping up the snow

with the flat lid of a basket.
This is her joy. She writes
on the veranda, listing

famous mountains from poetry,
Ogura, Mikosa, charming Miwa,
imagining the dizzing views,

wild geese under the pines.
But this one! She exults
that her snow mountain remains

and doesn't melt, though unfairly
the Emperor orders new snow
swept off the top when it falls.

When the rain shrinks her mountain,
Shonagon pays a gardener cakes
to keep children off the sides

and as her victory day approaches
writes a brilliant poem
to send to the palace at dawn.

But in the deep night the Empress
orders a troop of servants
to trample down the mountain

and dump the snow over the wall
of the south guardhouse.
Shonagon's servant, sent

to gather a mound of pure snow
dug from beneath the dirty slush
returns with the empty basket

pulled over her head like a hat,
and across a thousand years
the court's mocking laughter rises

out of the calligraphy
as Shonagon describes her defeat.
She refused to recite her poem

even to the Empress
but her story conjures
the snow mountain back. It rises

higher now in the dead garden,
her flakes of shimmering words
burying the blighted stalks.

Comet on My Birthday

Walking around the park that starry night
On fresh new grass, I was astonished by
The comet, its cloudy web of light

Traveling the western quadrant of the sky.
Large and brilliant, it seemed to magnify
What's wrong on our earth with its cold flight.

That night in Florida's electric chair,
The surge streamed out of a man's charred face
Just after the chaplain had said the prayer.

Thirty-nine humans witnessed that grimace,
While thirty-nine others left for outer space
In California, dying to forswear

Our hopeless planet, and join the angels
Streaming toward Sirius on a spaceship
Parked behind the comet. They heard bells

Ringing through heaven's gate. That's no trip
For unbelievers, though, stuck in the grip
Of being only here, that nothing dispels.

Posthumous

Across hot paving stones a bronze Ovid
  Looms over this square, lean-faced and handsome
As he surveys his birthplace, Sulmona,
  A place he ached to get out of for Rome—
Like all these restless, horny teenagers
  Swarming around his pedestal,
Making out or babbling into cell phones.
  Beyond these rooftops are the limestone mountains
Where Ovid used to pace the ancient sheep tracks
  Winding through beech forests up to cedars.
Yet how he longed to be back here when Caesar
  Shipped him away to the hell of icy mists,
That frontier town on the edge of the Black Sea,
  To punish him for sexual indiscretion
And put an end to dangerous, wanton poems.
  But if ambition drives you away from home,
Gets you in trouble, makes you miserable,
  In the end the state likes to bring you back,
Tamed and sightless, your shaved head bowed
  On its hollow neck, ready for pigeons,
Your poems safe in libraries, hardly read.
  Metamorphosed into this civic shape
Of a Roman in a stiffly pleated toga,
  Sexless, silent, reduced to a wry smile,
Ovid seems to contemplate his afterlife—
  Trysting place for lovers in his hometown.

—Contributors' Notes—

The son of American diplomats, **John Patrick Bishop** has lived in Taiwan, China, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Korea—his mother's home country. He studied Creative Writing at Colby College and the University of Michigan, where he received an M.F.A. in Fiction. He now lives in Beijing, China. This is his first published story.

Judith Bishop was born in Melbourne, Australia. She recently completed an M.F.A. in Writing (Poetry) at Washington University in St. Louis. Her poems have appeared in journals and anthologies in the U.S., the U.K., and Australia, including *Verse*, *Quarterly West*, *The Iowa Review*, *Slope*, *Jacket*, *Oxford Poetry*, and *The Oxford Book of Modern Australian Verse* (ed. Peter Porter).

Grace Butcher is Professor Emerita of English from Kent State Geauga Campus and the editor of *The Listening Eye*. She was Ohio Poet of the Year in 1992 for her book *Child, House, World*, and she has published poems in *Poetry*, *The Literary Review*, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *Nimrod*, and many anthologies. Her work appears in *The Best American Poetry 2000* and *The Poetry Anthology 1912-2002*.

Justin Courter's work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Crab Creek Review*, *Pearl*, *Barbaric Yawp*, and *New Wave Fabulist Stories*—an anthology from Omnidawn Publishing. A novel of his was short-listed for Graywolf Press's S. Mariella Gable Prize and a story collection was a semifinalist for the 2003 John Simmons Iowa Short Fiction Award. He lives in New York City.

Ginny Grimsley teaches Creative Writing at Florida State University. She received her Ph.D. in English/Creative Writing from The Center for Writers at the University of Southern Mississippi in 1996 and a M.A. from Texas Tech University. She lives in Tallahassee with her husband, the poet David Chester, and their daughter, Eliot.

Karl Harshbarger lives with his wife in Germany, where he writes, teaches English as a foreign language, and plays squash. His stories have appeared or are forthcoming in many magazines, including *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Ploughshares*, *The Iowa Review*, *The Antioch Review*, and *Prairie Schooner*. He is currently working on a novel.

For twenty years, **Faith S. Holsaert** grew up in Greenwich Village in

the 1950s. Since registering black voters in the South in the early 60s, she has lived in West Virginia, where she raised her children. She has published short stories in journals since 1979 and is currently working on her second novel.

Luisa A. Igloria is an Associate Professor in the Creative Writing Program at Old Dominion University. In 2003 she was a finalist for the Dorset Prize for Poetry as well as for the Larry Levis Editors' Prize for Poetry. She is the editor of *Not Home, but Here: Writing from the Filipino Diaspora* and the author of five poetry books, including *Blood Sacrifice* and *In the Garden of the Three Islands*.

Daniel Mahoney lives in Greenfield, Massachusetts, with his wife, Jodi, and his daughter, Ruby. He received his B.A. from California State University, Los Angeles and his M.F.A. from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. His poems and translations are forthcoming in *Unwound*, *Diagram*, and *Left Curve*.

Kathleen Zamboni McCormick is Professor of Literature at Purchase College, SUNY. The author/editor of seven books, including *Reading Our Histories, Understanding Our Culture* and *The Culture of Reading and the Teaching of English*, which won the Modern Language Association's Mina Shaughnessy Award, she is currently co-editing *Approaches to Teaching Italian American Literature, Film, and Popular Culture* and working on a book-length memoir on growing up as a half-Italian-American, from which this essay is extracted.

Ander Monson lives in Michigan, where he edits the magazine *Diagram* (http://thediagram.com) and the New Michigan Press. His poetry collection *Elegies for Descent and Dreams of Weather* will be published by Tupelo Press in 2005, and Sarabande Books will publish *Other Electricities*, a collection of fiction, also in 2005.

Harry Newman's poetry has appeared in the *Red Cedar Review*, *Visions International*, *Slipstream*, the *Amnesty International Calendar*, and other publications. His plays and translations have been staged at theaters around the U.S. and in Holland. He lives in New York City.

Padgett Powell has published four novels and two collections of short stories; his latest is the novel *Mrs. Hollingsworth's Men* from Houghton Mifflin. His fiction and nonfiction have appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Harper's*, *The Paris Review*, *Grand Street*, *Esquire*, *The New York Times Book Review* and *Magazine*, *Oxford American*, and elsewhere.

Tina Royer is currently pursuing her M.A. in English (emphasis Creative Writing) at Sacramento State University. Her work has appeared in *Calaveras Station* and *Suisun Valley Review*.

Terry Savoie has published material in well more than a hundred literary journals, anthologies, and small press publications. These include *American Poetry Review, Poetry, Ploughshares*, and *Poetry Northwest*, as well as recent or forthcoming issues of *Poetry East, Free Lunch, Great River Review*, and *North American Review*. His full-length manuscript, *Reading Sunday*, is currently in search of a publisher.

Anna Shearer is currently an M.F.A. candidate at the University of Virginia. She received her B.A. from The University of Iowa and grew up in Athens, Ohio.

Floyd Skloot's latest book, *In the Shadow of Memory*, was one of two finalists for the 2004 PEN Award in the Art of the Essay and the Barnes & Noble Discover Award in Nonfiction. His next book of essays, *A World of Light*, will appear from the University of Nebraska Press in fall 2005. He lives in Amity, Oregon.

John Smelcer's recent books of poetry include *An American Indian Dreams the American Dream, Without Reservation*, and *Songs from an Outcast*. His poems have appeared in more than three hundred magazines, including *The Atlantic Monthly*.

J. R. Solonche lives in Orange County, New York, with poet/pianist wife, Joan Siegel (with whom he wrote *Peach Girl: Poems for a Chinese Daughter*) and poet/pianist ten-year-old daughter, Emily (about whom it was written). He has published in many journals and anthologies, including *The American Scholar, The New Criterion, Poetry Northwest, Salmagundi, The Atlanta Review, Poetry East*, and others. One of his poems was recorded for airing on National Public Radio this summer.

Maura Stanton has recently published a book of poetry, *Glacier Wine* (Carnegie Mellon, 2001), and a book of short stories, *Cities in the Sea* (Univ. of Michigan Press, 2003). Her new book of poetry, *Thigh of Naiad Stew*, is forthcoming from Carnegie Mellon. She teaches at Indiana University.

Alison Stine is the author of the chapbook *Lot of my Sister*, winner of the Wick Prize (Kent State University Press, 2001). Her poems have recently appeared or are forthcoming in *Poetry, Gulf Coast, The Paris*

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Matthew Vollmer's stories have appeared in *The Paris Review*, *Tin House*, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *Gulf Coast*, *New Letters*, and *PRISM International* and have twice been short-listed for the *Best American Short Stories* series. He lives with his wife and son in Lafayette, Indiana, where, as a lecturer, he has taught introductory and business writing at Purdue University for four long years. He will attend the Iowa Writer's Workshop in the fall.

Melora Wolff lives and teaches in upstate New York. She is the recipient of The Philip Roth Residency in Poetry at Bucknell University, of The Artists Fellowship in Nonfiction Literature from The New York Foundation for the Arts, and of an M.F.A. in Creative Writing from Columbia University. Another of her essays appears in the summer 2004 issue of *Rivendell*.

Emma Wunsch has work forthcoming from *The Vermont Literary Review*, *The Chiron Review*, and *Inkwell*. Her stories have also been published in *Wilmington Blues*, *Aurora Arts Literary Review*, *PoetryMemoirStory*, *Hanging Loose*, and *Across Cultures*. The title story of her M.F.A. thesis, "How to Be Honest Without Getting Drunk," was short-listed for this year's Raymond Carver Fiction Award. She is currently working on a young adult novel and lives in Brooklyn.

FUGUE

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