No. 28

Winter 2004-05

FUGUE

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Nicholas Delbanco

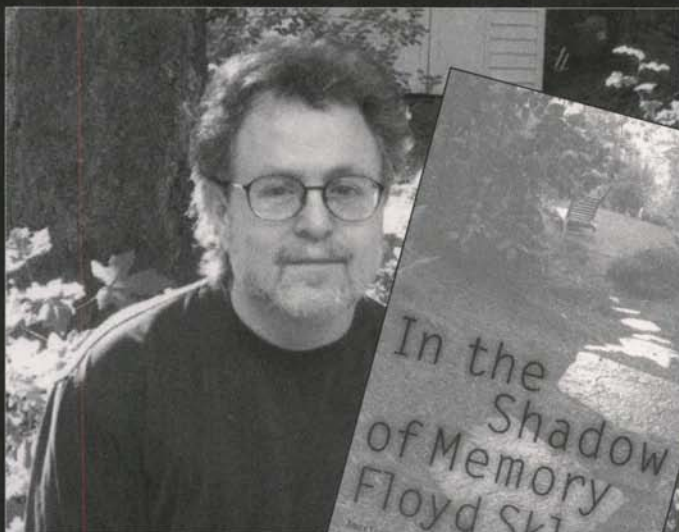
Brian Doyle

Cary Holladay

Marilyn Krysl

Margot Livesey

Kent Nelson



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In rebelling, I believe I protect the fruits of tomorrow better than my friend who keeps silent.

CZESLAW MILOSZ

Good literature doesn't evade any of the terrible things in life. It faces them and faces them squarely, but puts them in a context in which they have a richer meaning than they would as simply raw, descriptive facts.

ANTHONY HECHT

This issue is dedicated to the memory

of

Czeslaw Milosz
(1911-2004)

and

Anthony Hecht
(1923-2004)

FUGUE

Winter 2004-05, Vol. 28

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From the Editors

Don Marquis said, "Publishing a volume of verse is like dropping a rose petal down the Grand Canyon and waiting for the echo." Dwelling on such sentiments can bring on fits of despair. Who, after all, really reads literary journals? Sometimes it seems as if we labor very close to a precipice that opens onto futility. Yet compiling work for a new issue always reminds us how important is this venture, this ushering in of new literature. Thus we are proud to bring into the world *Fugue*'s twenty-eighth volume of verse and prose. Included also is an interview with best-selling author Margot Livesey, who gives insight into her masterful use of character, as well as many other facets of craft. We remain indebted to our diligent staff, including, especially, our hardworking genre editors—Sara Kaplan, Marcia Kmetz, and Nate Lowe. Thank you.

A recent cause for celebration was the unveiling of our new website, which features content from many past issues. We invite you to view it at www.uidaho.edu/fugue.

Writing, by and large, is consumed as a solitary act, a mirror of its creation. One of the greatest joys of editing is imagining how a reader will be affected by a particular piece of writing. Willie Nelson is said to pick out one audience member at every concert—and to play for that single listener. Always at the forefront of our editorial minds is to be careful to facilitate this monologue, this speaking of a lone writer to a lone reader and not to impede—or worse, deny—potential connections. One way we try to accommodate this process of transmission is, like many journals, to hold genre meetings in which we discuss manuscripts in-depth. These meetings elicit multiple responses and create, we hope, a microcosm of our readership.

As we imagine Teresa Villegas's cover art, *El Tragafuegos*—The Fire Breather—speaking for the work in this issue, we hear it proclaiming that the poems are the poets' personalities on the page, just as the stories and essays are the writers' truest expressions bursting forth. We believe our job is to facilitate this process through amplification. We hope by giving voice to the diverse work here—poetry of violence, grace, and acceptance; stories of grief, love, and awakening; essays of injustice, art, and identity—to turn up the volume.

As we toss this latest rose petal into the literary chasm, then, we will listen for its echo, hoping, as always, to hear a roar.

Ben George and Jeff P. Jones

Cary Holladay

The Burning

Waugh's Ford, Virginia
Beside the Rapid Anne River
January 29, 1745

The woman is burning alive. As the fire eats her skin and muscles and nerves, her screams shake the rocks. She is chained by the neck to a metal loop attached to an iron stake driven into stone, and heavy ropes around her waist hold her fast. Her arms are tied behind her, the wrists lashed together. Her skin flakes to ash, peels away from her body, and rises in pieces around her. Beside her, the river boils and churns from recent rains. It's bound to flood. Families who live by the river will gather their things tonight and move to higher ground, to the woods.

The woman, Rose, is a slave. She murdered her master, Peter Ryburn, by poisoning milk and serving it to him. Rose has had a trial in the Court of Oyer and Terminer, where she was found guilty and ordered drawn upon a hurdle to the place of execution and there to be burnt.

While the preparations were made, Rose was held six days in the gaol. Last night, Ryburn's son William and nephew Robert stopped there and paid the keeper to go away while they raped and scourged the woman. She meets her death bruised and lacerated, with a broken arm.

Had the men who bound her and lit the fire—William and his cousin Robert among them—anticipated the volume of her screams, they would have gagged her. They did grant her the kindness of a blindfold. Her shrieks rise and swell. The heads of the men and women gathered at the river are bells, and Rose's cries are the clapper. Children cover their ears with their hands and run off. No men went to work at the gold mine this morning nor the coal mine, though some of the planters stayed home to work their sodden fields and tend their animals, and they too hear the cries. In time, settlers all the way in the Blue Ridge Mountains, thirty miles to the west, will claim they heard the woman die.

The fire takes the woman fast. William stands with Robert as close as they dare, the fire too loud for them to talk. The slave woman is a live crouching thing, her skin blackening, blood and hair exuding their own particular stench as she roasts, her limbs changing position

as the smoke lifts and blows. Within the fire, tethered to the stake, she moves in a slow crawl as if stalking or hunting. She works an arm free and claws at the blindfold, casts it from her face so that it sails beyond the circle of fire and catches William full on the cheek. He staggers, cursing, flinging the blazing cloth away, searing his fingers and palm. Through the smoke and his own pain, he sees Robert scoop a rock from the ground and hurl it toward the woman.

William is the one who will go and report to Dame Ryburn—Eileen—his father's young bride, only recently arrived from Ireland, in Virginia barely four months and now eight months gone in pregnancy, that the execution has been accomplished. He dreads this chore. Eileen will ask for details. Beautiful, she nonetheless possesses the most expressionless face he has ever seen on a woman, and the most insatiable curiosity. You should have been there yourself, he will tell her if she presses him too much. He is surprised by how deeply the sight of the execution has troubled him. Eileen will remember forever whatever he tells her, with the same satisfaction with which she examines the jewels William's father gave her, treasures to be scrutinized and set back in their nests of velvet, inside a teakwood box, rings and bracelets that once belonged to the first Mrs. Ryburn, mother of William, a woman so much older than Eileen and dead so long that Eileen has admitted confusing her with her own mother, has pictured her own mother wearing these adornments, though her mother, dead too, was poor and owned no jewelry at all.

When the woman is reduced to an immobile form, like melted statuary, the rain begins. It falls on her smoking body, quelling the last flames, sizzling on the stones. The rain drives the people off, farmers and women, miners, blacks who came for their own reasons—curiosity or mourning—to watch her die, an Indian or two or three, for they have not entirely vanished as they are said to have done, only retreated to the darkest places of the forest, which they share with deer and bear and elk.

Rose is a knot on the boulders, a piece of bone showing through her charred leg. In death, she has twisted, woven herself into a mat of her own leather and marrow and hair.

William's face burns with a wretched heat and so does his hand, the fingers and palm that touched the blindfold the woman threw at him. How she writhed beneath him last night, while his cousin held her down. Now the running of the farm is up to William, in this time of damnable flood, and William is not the farmer his father was.

William turns away from the river and fetches his tethered horse. Robert has already ridden away. William will ride home to the Ryburn plantation with its three hundred acres, sixty slaves, and the splendid

brick house his father built, the house he shares with his wife and this young stepmother. He will enter the room where Eileen pours tea from a porcelain pot, hiding her condition beneath rugs and robes, the room airless from the fire she insists on day and night, believing it will drive off the fevers she fears in this strange new country. William will tell her that the slave woman is dead, and she will sip her tea and look out the window at the rain falling on the bare branches of trees and the flooded pastures, the forests of tulip poplar and the gouged red clay embankments where the rain has washed away chunks of soil, carrying with it horses, cows, and sheep and the unfortunate dwelling or two, and there will begin a long war between William and Eileen over the management of the farm. In the house, and even while drifting away from the burning, the Ryburns' slaves whisper among themselves that Eileen's baby will be born dead or deformed, a devil, but the infant that will come cannonballing out from between Eileen's legs the morning after Rose's death will be in fact superbly healthy, just small and premature, a posthumous son.

William and his wife have not been blessed. His wife, Martha, has not been able to bear a child, and now she is past fifty. She is older than William, who is forty-seven, and far older than eighteen-year-old Eileen.

As William mounts his horse and turns away from the river toward the road, children play with the wooden hurdle upon which Rose was dragged. They climb upon it, crashing and shrieking, and take turns pulling each other, for the object is, after all, a sledge, and it will be saved by the county officials for use again. William wonders if the King will be notified of the events of the poisoning and the execution. It's the sort of thing his wife Martha might take upon herself, regarding the King as she does with a sense of duty so profound that she writes letters to him on all kinds of Orange County matters, of crops and livestock and weather, even politics, though William has tried to discourage her. She pours into the letters the attention she would have given their children, had they produced any. He should know of this, she will say, meaning the King, and she'll disappear into her chamber. Hours later, William will find her with a thick stack of cream vellum stationery, filled with her beautiful hand, letters ready to go to England. She's a loyal subject, ever proving her obeisance, whereas William for his part has begun to question whether the colonies might not be better off with self-government.

William's horse stops in the road and whickers. William slaps his legs against its sides. Rain smacks his face. His burned hand is too sore to hold the reins. The horse behaves strangely, circling slowly, turning in the road as if performing a maneuver that circus animals

are said to do, preparing for some elaborate equine flight or trick. William cries a sharp command, flaps the reins, and kicks the horse's side, but the animal turns back to the river, faces the execution place, pauses, then gallops toward it.

William has owned horses all his life, but he didn't know one could spring from stillness to such speed in an instant. He loses his balance, slips from the saddle, shouting, then falls from the horse to the road, so hard he wonders if he has cracked his spine. Luckily, he fell clear of the horse; he wonders if the creature meant to throw and drag him.

William sits up with difficulty, feeling every moment of his age: the burned face and hand, the bruised spine, the sharp dental flares that signal the onset of one of the toothaches that have plagued him in recent years. By nightfall, he'll be tying his jaws up in a huge handkerchief and searching his wife's cupboards for laudanum.

The crowd is taking its time dispersing, people talking among themselves. Does no one see him dazed, here in the muddy road? He jerks himself to his knees and stands, dizzy. The shouting children, the bucking sledge on its rope, blur before him. Here comes his horse, ambling, returning to him, docile yet with lightning in her eyes. Nothing to do but catch the bridle and climb again upon her back. He thinks the children are laughing at him, that the women bending their heads toward each other and the groups of men knotting and unknotting as they leave the riverfront are finding fault with him and his family.

"Damn you," he says, unsteady on his horse's back. "Damn you."

A child mocks him, mimes his fall—that is how William interprets the youngster's swaying gait—and he leans from the saddle and cuffs the boy's impudent, startled face, sending him sprawling in the muck. The boy's mother screeches at William, and he takes off at a trot, then a canter, the horse's long strides familiar beneath him.

He can still smell the woman Rose and the fire, even through the rain. He needs a bath to wash her from his skin.

Rose took her secret with her: what she used in the milk. Trial and torture did not pry it from her, nor the Ryburn men taking turns in what for William was a surprisingly pleasurable assault; his cousin Robert kept his head enough to spit some questions at the woman, but she did not speak to them, just fought with demonic strength even after Robert broke her arm above the elbow so that it flapped and dangled. That was the only time she cried out.

Arsenic, people say, for arsenic can be found on every farm and in any apothecary's shop, and there are druggists in Orange and Stevensburg. Hemlock, perhaps, or some roots and herbs known only

to Africans, mixed in darkness and cursed in a savage tongue.

But it was powdered, dried foxglove that stopped Peter Ryburn's heart. That was what Rose used, and some of the other slaves know it, the blacks having discovered the concoction in a corner of the cabin where she lived alone, an arrangement created by Peter Ryburn the better to spend time with her. A little brown flower, a little dust, and a man's heart slows and halts. The milk was tart, but that might have been because of something the cow ate, or an effect of the flood, changing the taste of the water that the cattle drank from river and streams. Peter Ryburn, aged seventy-three: hale and strong. Everyone knew his was not a natural death, and the doctors agreed it was murder. He reeled from the table clutching his chest, his starched white napkin falling from his lap. William had leaped from the table to steady him, but Peter was dead before he fell to the floor. They had been arguing, father and son, over which crops to plant in which fields, while Eileen looked from one to the other with the only real expression of pleasure William had ever observed on her face, as if she were glad to see William at odds with his father.

All day, the day of the burning, Rose's remains lie on the stone. From high places in hills and trees, the buzzards come, dropping down to wait at the riverside until the body cools from its fierce heat to a pleasant warmth. Despite the char and ash, there is still nutrition in the deeper parts, savory to the creatures that can make a meal from carcass and offal. These morsels they reach with beaks and tongues, flapping their wings as they jostle and balance on the boulders. Tonight, men will come with burlap and wrap what's left of her. They'll bury her in the woods unmarked, white men, for they are keeping charge of her and they don't want her grave to be a witching place for other slaves who would do as she has done.

When the birds have eaten their fill and raised their huge wings to the sky, what remains among the tossed bones is a small white stone, the size of a grape, translucent and containing a frozen human form, as if fire can freeze and preserve: Peter Ryburn's last child, a loop of flesh with a discernible head, its legs a fishtail curved within the sac. The iron stake, Rose's stake, will be pried out of the stone by slaves in the night and, for years, will inspire plans of revenge.

Eileen will hear of the treachery of William's horse from others, as if she has an ear in the wind. That will please her, William knows, that he was thrown, humbled, that he was hurled into the mud. He and Eileen are rivals for reasons he doesn't understand. She doesn't care about Rose, just the burning. The horse and its small mystery, the puzzle of its turning, circling with William helpless and furious on its back, its headlong rush to the river, leaving him behind, then its

diffident return to its injured rider: Eileen will love that image, turning it over and over in her mind as she warms herself at the fire, as she suckles her baby, the weight of new motherhood melting away despite the toddies and rich, buttered shortbreads she enjoys. The servants cosset her, silent, turning the blankets back, swinging the bedwarmer between the cold sheets. She has no fear of them, pays them hardly any mind. They hated her husband, but so did she. She'll have the new baby to entertain her and the image of William in the red mud, and such information about the execution as she decides to cherish.

William knows Eileen heard Rose's screams, even in her rooms with the thick walls. His hand and face throb where the blindfold hit him. He trots home dully, hysteria building in his heart. He wants only silence and warmth. Peter Ryburn was buried three days ago, on Sunday, after services. The night before the burial, William and Robert sat up in the hallway of the great house with the old man's corpse, the cousins side by side on a bench beside the coffin. It made a sound, the body did. Deep in the night, a sound, not the crude farting and moaning and sighing that the dead are known to make, and which William has heard before—having sat up with his mother's corpse years earlier—but a spoken phrase, a few syllables that William in his drunkenness could not make out, which the corpse would not repeat despite his entreaties. Peter Ryburn was dead when they laid him out and dead when they put him in the ground, but for a moment during those hours in between, he spoke. Robert heard it too and wept, seizing the old man's shoulders, while William slumped back on the bench. It was so like his father, to have the last word. Then: sealed lips. Coins on the eyes. Gold, from the mine Peter Ryburn owns, the mine that William's wife has described shyly in letters to the King. William believed his father spoke, as his soul crossed over, in a language known only to the dead. Robert, devoted nephew, sobbed out his sorrow into the whiskey and tilted the bottle to the old man's open mouth to revive him. The liquor went down. Robert poured till the bottle was empty, and still the liquor never came up from the old man's mouth, and Robert cried out with hope, but William knew all along he was dead as a stone.

*

Eileen says to make use of the woman's cabin, there is no reason it cannot be occupied by several of the others. So William directs the slaves to clean it out. The blacks balk. William and Eileen stand before the cabin while the slaves study the ground, drawing their feet

through the dirt. A fine mist falls.

"It built on a rattlesnake nest," a woman says at last. "We stay away from it."

"That's ridiculous," William cries. It hurts to speak, the bad tooth radiating needles of pain through his jaw.

"She build it her own self," the woman says, an old granny with eyes gone icy from cataracts. "You can hear them snakes sometime. They's hundreds of 'em."

Eileen stands straight and slim, as if she has not borne a child only days before. "Tear it down," she tells William.

He hates for the slaves to see her making decisions about the running of the place, this young woman, while he stands with his face swathed and swollen, his body hurting all over from his fall from the horse. But tear the cabin down they do, once he gives the order. It's a sturdy cabin, though small. Three black men knock it down, and William asks later if they saw snakes.

"Yessir," they say, but they weren't bit. A whole nest of snakes is still deep in the ground, they say, *boilin' there*, they say, only a conjure woman would build there.

"All right. Burn the wood," William says. "Burn the ground, so that if any snakes are there, they'll die." His order goes unheeded. The wood remains unburnt in a messy heap, grim and wintry. Is it then that the unraveling begins, with the slaves' disobedience while William slouches miserably in his chair in the comfortable, enormous house, waiting for an abscess to burst in his mouth? Eileen hearkens to the slaves' stories, their excuses: that fire will bring the snakes out to take over, to multiply and swarm. Their fears have alarmed her.

The cabin remains a wreck of timbers. If snakes weren't there already, it's an invitation to them now. William holds his jaws with his hands until he can't bear it any longer and summons a doctor to pull the tooth. The long bloody root, ivory and red in the doctor's extractor, is his reward, that and the thick, bitter gush of pus into his mouth.

*

And my husband and his cousin had congress with the condemned woman, Your Majesty, in her cell in the gaol, the night prior to her execution. I saw, for I followed them. I have learned to walk quietly, and I do not need a lantern.

Did you not call us your loyal old dominion? As you would deem an old friend. My loyal Old Dominion.

*

By the time the flood recedes and the snow falls, William is sick. He blames the woman, Rose, for the sores that rise on his genitals and thighs. Fever plagues him, only to subside and then assail him again, so that he acquires a new habit: he climbs out of his bed at night to go outside in the snow and stretch out full length, clad only in his night-shirt, the heat of his body melting through the crust, down through a pillowy drift of snow so that in the morning, when he creeps indoors again, his human form shows his household where he lay.

Beneath the heavy snow, the earth is packed with water and ice. The river runs high, ice gathering at its shores in sheets and slush. It runs too fast this year to freeze. Those who would cut blocks of ice for summertime will have to wait.

Summer has never seemed so far off.

William asks his cousin Robert if he too is afflicted, but Robert says no.

Why would one man contract the disease and the other be spared? William remembers the gaol cell, its cold dirt floor, the smell of mice and damp, the strenuous climbing and conquering of Rose's limbs. He had been with slaves before, young women whose bodies attracted him, but that was long ago, and he had not forced them. It was a game then, and they were willing. He wonders if the sickness has been in his body for a while. No, it was Rose. He's certain. The woman, the sores: she wished the illness upon him. Is it possible his father gave her the disease, and she poisoned him out of anger?

Lying in the snow at night, aflame with fever, William turns face down until at last the fever cools. He has never known a season of so much rain and snow, and there are still months of winter ahead. The sound of the surging river is always with him, even when he's in his chamber with the draperies drawn and a pillow over his head.

He consults with his doctor and swallows bitter blue pills recommended for the malady. The medicine makes his gorge rise. He takes the vial of pills out one night and buries it in the ground, digging deep beneath the snow, and afterward, sweating and thirsty, he wonders why he bothered. The sores multiply on his body. His mouth isn't healing, either. The empty socket of his tooth runs with serum and stays tender, tasting foul, the edges ragged. He mixes warm water with salt, honey, and alum and gulps it, swishing it around his mouth, and that helps a little bit. Skin flakes from his burnt face and hand.

Sunshine and fresh eggs. His father swore by sunshine and fresh eggs, the keys to health. William directs the cook to serve him eggs at every meal. The sky remains heavy, the air colder day by day. Yet he

has never seen such magnificent shades of gray as the clouds during these weeks, pewter and silver, dawn and afternoon and dusk, nor does he recall the last time he thought the sky was beautiful.

He melts the snow at night with his heat and sweat, packs it into his mouth and around his scrotum, beneath the fabric of his nightshirt and robe. Eileen loves the snow. She makes the cook prepare a dish with sugar and cream. William can't eat enough of this dessert. Snow cream and eggs are making him fat. All day he looks forward to his bed of snow. Even that doesn't cool him enough. Fresh snow falling at night brings him a relief that borders on joy. It covers him, but it doesn't last. If there is moonlight and if he looks up toward the multitude of windows in the house, he might glimpse a gleaming candle and, above it, his wife's face gazing down on him.

During the day, his dogs sniff the hollows where he lay, spaces where he melted through the snowdrifts all the way to the grass. All his life, he has had a horror of illness, of weakness. He has scorned those who are frail, the lame and the infirm. When he was younger, he could throw off sickness.

"You're getting old," his cousin Robert says.

"You're nearly as old," William answers.

To look at the two of them, William has to admit, you would no longer know they were separated by only four years. Yet these are modern times. Men live longer than they once did. William's thoughts are too disordered for him to determine how to regain youth and health.

He was a young man once, courting Martha, who became his wife. Hide and seek in the garden that is now covered with mounds of snow. William's fever burns hotter than any heat of summer. Even in summer, down in the garden, there were cool spaces, shadows, dew under the boxwoods even in afternoon, and a trellis covered with blue ivy where Martha used to wait for him, stifling her laughter, jumping out to surprise him, even frighten him.

Martha: a scurrying sound in her room, at her papers and letters all day. He is married to a sound. The ivy in the garden smelled like an old, lost world, she used to say, a sweet old place, the smell of memory. She would pluck an ivy leaf and twirl it beneath his nose.

One night he awakes outside in panic, convinced all of his stock are dead. He bolts from his bed of snow and rushes into his house, calling out for his wife, but it's Eileen who appears on the steps with a candle in her hands, her hair carefully arranged, a velvet dressing gown belted at her waist.

"The animals," he gasps. "Are they dead?" He can't remember when he has last seen a sheep or a hog, a horse or a cow. The snow must have killed them weeks ago.

"They're fine," she says.

"You or my wife saw to them, then," he says stupidly, "or the Negroes."

Eileen goes to the heavy front door and pushes it closed. There is finality in her movement, as if by closing the door, she wins their long, undeclared battle, but it's hard for William to concentrate. He's troubled by a memory—the recollection of the stake, Rose's stake. "It was iron," he says, "so it didn't burn."

"What are you talking about?" Eileen asks.

"We should get that stake," William says. "Somebody should go get it. It must not become a talisman for slaves, a thing of witchcraft and," he flounders, the sweat beading on his face, "a thing of evil. I'll dress and go get it."

"William," Eileen says. "You must go to bed. The stake was pulled up long ago. It doesn't matter."

"But it does," he says, near tears.

"After a while, it'll be just an old piece of metal," she says, "and nobody will remember what it was. It'll be used for something else, or melted down, or lost."

He is getting old. He will not live as long as his father did.

"Where's my wife?" he asks.

"In her chamber, I suppose," Eileen says.

She stands aside, this woman Eileen, this stranger his father married, so William can climb the stairs. Sweat courses down his cheeks, and the stairs are steep and hard to mount, as if he's pushing his way through snowfall on a mountain. He has not thought about his wife in days. Is that her room, that closed doorway at the end of the hall?

He turns the knob, but the door is locked. He kicks it so the hinges crack from the frame, and he shoves the door open. There sits an old woman in lace cap and nightdress, frozen with horror in her chair at a writing table, surrounded by stacks of paper. In her hand is a dripping stick of red wax. Her gaze travels from his face to the broken door and back again.

"What are you doing?" William demands.

"Sealing my letter," Martha answers. The wax is blood red and sweet-smelling. She blows out the flame on the taper and presses a brass implement into the daub of wax.

"Who are you writing to?" William asks.

"The King," Martha says. She lifts the letter to her lips and blows on the seal. "I'm writing to the King. You knew that. There's so much to tell him. Tonight I've written him about the horses in this country, how they're descended from those on shipwrecks and those brought by early explorers. I explained how they grow so strong here

and are well suited to the work of farms and mines."

William reaches out and takes the letter from her hands. He touches the wax, which is soft enough to show the print of his fingertip. "Where did you get this?"

"The paper or the wax? I order the paper from a shop in Philadelphia. The wax and ink I've had since we were married. My mother gave them to me in great supply. Don't you remember?"

"Do you think the King cares about your letters?"

"I do," Martha says. "He's concerned about the colony. The people. He should know what's happening here."

William turns the letter over, reads the King's name in his wife's elegant script. "Who will deliver it for you?"

"I'll find someone traveling to a port city," she says, "who will take it to a ship's captain. I've done this many times."

"But he doesn't answer. The King."

"William, you're very ill," Martha says. "No matter what I say, you won't believe me."

*

Martha makes William lie down on the couch in her chamber, and she fans the sweat from his face with a folded sheet of paper. Her heart, startled to triple its normal beat by William's kicking in her door, has only just begun to return to normal. She takes a deep breath as William settles himself on her couch, his thick shoes leaving marks on the gray silk upholstery.

"That woman," he says, "is killing me."

"Eileen?" Martha asks, for she hates the younger woman, the smug one, who is now the mistress of the house, mother of the heir. Martha has expected that her husband would fall in love with Eileen, that he would divorce her, that she would be packed out of the house to live a pauper's life. Ever since Eileen's arrival, and with greater urgency since Old Ryburn's death, Martha has been saving money in a leather bag.

"Not Eileen. Rose," he says.

"No," she says. "Rose is dead."

Martha fans William's cheeks, the pores open and perspiring still. After a while, he falls asleep.

Yes, William wronged the woman Rose, but Martha must try to save him. She has watched him all these weeks since the execution, and she has hardened her heart against him, but she was with him in the days of the twirling ivy, when they were young.

He wakes in his fever and says, "Wife," then sleeps again. All night,

Martha sits up on her couch with his head on her lap. This person is a ruined stranger.

Toward daybreak she dozes, then wakes to find his arms wrapped around her waist. Laboriously, she moves him aside and stands up stiffly, as if her legs are uneven. She takes a clean sheet of paper and writes, *Downriver, there is a rock in the water. Only when the rock is visible is it safe to ford the river. The place is called Raccoon Ford because of the abundance of those animals in the area, their meat is poor but their pelts are warm; hunters prize the tails as decorations for their caps. Raccoons may be readily tamed and kept as pets.*

She puts the letter aside. Should there not be an expedition to explore the wild land to the West, across the mountains and beyond? She will write and suggest it.

But first she must tend to her husband. She orders a basin of hot water brought to her, and soap. She orders her servant to remove her husband's clothing. Snow is falling outside, and the basin steams up the windows of her chamber. She'll have to concentrate and work very hard to save her husband. Winter has been so long, and she must bring everything together in her mind, all that she knows of the poison and the business in the gaol and the burning. She herself had argued, albeit only in her head, for bullets or hanging, or even exile to the West. Why burning? Barbaric. She wrote about all of it to the King, who answered with his familiar silence.

William's skin is thick and yellow. While Martha bathes him, he sleeps on, his head sometimes jerking as if he would wake. The sores on his groin and privates exude heat. She has guessed they were there, but these are worse than she'd expected, a rampant, livid consequence of his visit to the gaol. For a moment, her heart fails her. She dries his skin with a cloth, covers him with soft blankets, and curls herself around him, stroking his head.

Her father-in-law, old Ryburn, had drunk the milk with deep swallows, smacking his lips as he set down the glass. He and William had been arguing about some matter concerning the farm. Old Ryburn rose from the table and took one, two strides toward the door, where a tradesman waited to see him, then gave a guttural cry. With one hand he gripped his throat, with the other he reached high, as if grasping for something. The woman, Rose, turned her head from her place at the sideboard, where she was stacking plates. Turned her head so that out of the corner of her eye, she saw him fall. Such a pretty shape Rose's cheek made, with her chin tucked into her shoulder, her face all eyelashes and stillness.

"The milk," Ryburn gasped. "Rose?"

It was William who caught Rose even as she tried to run and Old

Ryburn used to find hangings and beheadings such merry affairs. Martha has heard of his courtship of Eileen. On a visit to Ireland, his homeland, he had learned of an execution to be held in a far county, and he took the young beauty to it, with her father and brothers for company. The convict was a man who had killed his neighbor in a dispute over a hog. The scaffolding was so high, Eileen had reported to her new family, that she had to hold her hand over her eyes against the sun. There was the drop of the trap and a brief wriggling of legs, a motion that disturbed her far less than if a gnat had flown into her eye, and then the man hung limp. Eileen had declared herself disappointed. They had come so far for that. Why was she not moved by the spectacle when, all around her, the crowd displayed such fury and satisfaction? There was no turning back from Old Ryburn then. She had already agreed to marry him, was already carrying his child. Together, they would make the crossing to Virginia. When she arrived, her pregnancy was evident to everyone, not just to Martha. The day of the hanging, old Ryburn had bought his wife-to-be a length of lace from a peddler and a tray of cherry tarts, yet even then, Martha is certain, Eileen was bored, going home in the bumpy wagon, smoothing the lace out on her lap, scolding her brothers for dripping cherry juice on their shirts.

Martha knows that Old Ryburn drank the entire glass of milk that Rose brought to him, but somehow in her memory, the glass tips over from Ryburn's hand, and milk spills all over the table, a thick puddle spreading to the edges and dripping onto the floor, a white lake. Old Ryburn. He was some kin by marriage to Eileen's mother. Now Eileen is his widow, and William is bound to take care of her and her brat forever.

And Eileen is the one who killed him. Martha knows this as surely as if she'd heard Eileen order the slave woman: *Give me some foxglove*. Eileen must have mixed it with crushed vanilla beans and sugar, then returned the compound to Rose saying, *Put this in my husband's milk when next he orders it; it is to strengthen him.*

Yet during her trial and even at the stake, Rose, the slave, did not betray Eileen. Martha, with her husband sleeping heavily in her lap, considers the fact briefly as Eileen's infant wails down the hall in its nursery. The child's nurse, one of Rose's daughters, will tend to it. Eileen might have murmured a promise, or what Rose must have taken for a promise, when she accepted the compound from her mistress's hands, *I'll take an interest in the welfare of your children.* If Rose had accused her mistress in the courtroom, or from the stake, who would have believed her? Rose must have known that.

Martha rolls her husband from her lap so that he slumps on the

bed, snoring. Her relief that he's here in her chamber, instead of sleeping outside in the snow, is inexpressible. She goes to her window, parts the curtains, and looks out at the night. The landscape presents an odd reversal. As if the world is upside down, the snow glows like sky. These weeks since Rose's execution, Martha has assessed the particulars of the woman's final moments. William told her very little. He arrived home from the execution in a frenzy, his face scorched, his clothes muddied and torn. She had to work to get the story of Rose's death, from various neighbors. *No*, Rose said at her trial, when asked if she had murdered her master. *No, I didn't kill him.* Martha has heard that much. Yet surely Rose knew what substance was in the compound that Eileen gave her. Rose, not Eileen, was the one who put the powder, brown and innocent as cinnamon, in Old Ryburn's milk. Rose knew. Yet she didn't tell.

A wolf howls, and Martha lets the curtain drop from her hands. She loves to hear the wolves at night, to know they are near, and herself safe in the thick walls of her house. She has seen the bloody heads brought in for bounties at the courthouse, knows the values: forty pounds of tobacco for the head of a young wolf, seventy for an old. Orange County stretches to the gigantic lakes of the North, all the way to Canada, and westward farther than she can imagine.

How many millions of wolves live within that land? Martha writes to the King. *The balance here is delicate, between the land and those who would tame it. We plow, we farm, we herd and build.*

She pauses. The King doesn't know what's it's like, living here, when that balance could tip at any moment. In fifty years, this place could return entirely to savages and woods and darkness. She writes, *Do not wait. Come now. Come and visit your Old Dominion in its struggling youth, its early days from which it might rise to glory.*

The King will never come. He'll read her letter with impatience, holding it away from his weak eyes, wondering why this one subject, some old woman out in the wilderness, writes to him so eagerly, as if he would concern himself with wolves, as if he would know how it is to be alone, your only consolation a few pieces of gold in a leather sack, saved against widowhood or eviction from your home. He cannot know, does not care, that she and her husband and their family and slaves and neighbors keep a fragile foothold. *Indians and floods*, she writes, *and crop failures and our own hatreds and greeds, Your Majesty, these threaten us, yet this is the finest country.*

Beside her, William moans in his dreams. Martha writes, My *husband's cheek has healed badly from the burning blindfold the woman threw at him. It hurts him even when he sleeps.*

John Balaban

Two Ways of Looking at the Same Thing

1. A Poor Sap Taking It Hard

He would rather have held her
than the gun in his hand
but she was gone. The gun was second best.
It was a way of being with her,
the slugs snug in the beveled chambers.
A real comfort, to have it handy.

He wanted to do it in the woods
under wavering treetops
shaking light through leaves.
Put the gun to his head…
in deep woods generous
with creek-and-birdsong
where he was never a reproach
but companion.
Then, he thought, hell,
blow your brains outside her office.
Make your point.

Fuck the gun, he finally said,
for with his thumb on the syringe
he found a way to find her
in throwaway hypos he filched from a nurse.
Could find her, say, strolling a beach,
brine on her lips, wet hair tangled down
to the long curve at the small of her back.
From dunes they'd watch gulls teeter
on updrafts above the waves, drifting.

2. Villanelle on an English Song

My robin to the greenwood's gone
that hopped about my heart all day.
My love has taken wing and flown.

At forest edge I stand alone
recalling her quick peck and play.
My robin to the greenwood's gone

who used to make my hand her home
preening feathers in fine array.
She shook her wings and now has flown

no more to sing her willow notes
that warbled all my cares away.
Oh, robin to the greenwood's gone,

to wide woods where shadows roam
and robins bob as branches sway.
My love has taken wing and flown.

At forest edge, at daylight's close,
I hear a birdsong dwindling away.
My robin to the greenwood's gone.
My love has taken wing and flown.

Colleen R. Valentine

Draft

There was fire burning between Mother's legs
one night after eleven.
Tall flames outlined
blue green red
brought to life by pixel colors
flickers
real images acting human.
Fire hid in cupboards behind our favorite
weekend sweetened cereals.
Empty gin bottles
took their place in line on the cellar steps
while Mother's fuel stained my parents' bed sheets
before rolling them tightly
stashing them down the hamper.
There was fire burning in Mother's voice
one night signing off to fireman Dad
as he blew a transistor kiss good-night
ten-four.
Fire hid in the man on my mother
when in my sleep I tripped to the theme
of late night television
walking over four naked feet
restrained by faded Levi's
and a wrangler's belt buckle making rhythm
to Mother's legs growing like a vine
around the stranger.
I remember a draft in my head
when the man with fire
pushed his hips off my mother
closed his pants with one quick zip
and gave me what for.
There was nothing left in Mother's eyes
blood gone to other places
her need to burn stronger than anything
she could feel for me.
Back in bed my left cheek on fire
made me go into the ocean
and swim away.

Catherine Neuhardt-Minor

Stowaway

my doll sits naked in a wooden box
her cracked head sprouts patches of hair
fingernails chipped paint

dark glass eyes   lids unable to close
stare into the opposite   rosebud lips poised to speak

what would she say

that the beating in her chest drowns out
the comforting tap of my fingers
the knot under her tongue
screams all the way down to her knees
where it's cut off by a double seam   a kneeling life

that she wore a white cotton dress
blue ribbon circling her waist
she felt like the shadow of a flame tonguing the wall
multiple and dazzling   but cool to the touch

that she waits for me to dress her
make her eyelids able to close   open again
certain of the elasticity of an inner life
no longer sitting naked in a wooden box

Cameron Shinn

Charlie's Stories

1. Time

Charlie has the same
shirt on again.
He smells like 3-in-One
oil from his bricked shop
where he slips clocks inside tree
stumps, our reminder once
the cancer takes him.
I need to write his stories:

It was unthinkable that Pearl
had been hit. No one believed
I heard it on the radio.
Said I was a stupid kid.
When the shit hit,
no one looked at me.

We shelled this plane
good. It dove into our
hangar. The ground shook.
Guys ran from their
hands and knees.

I ran the .30 caliber
for a few days. We ran
out of everything, quick,
but still shot. We was
dumb construction workers,
but we held 'em.

2. Employment

Charles Buckmaster Mellor
was brought aboard by MK
to lay runways for American Bombers.
He was 5'7", 145, but came back
four years later at seventy-eight pounds.

I wasn't Charlie
anymore. Twenty-three
was my name, ni-ju-son.

*

We got shipped to Japan
to stack bodies and pile rubble
after Fat Man and Little Boy.

What was it like?

It was gray. Too quiet.
We damn near killed some
officers. An I-beam
fell 'cause the cables they
gave us was shit.
I got beat till I couldn't walk.
The prisoners drug me back.

Details of dead bodies,
festering wounds, the smell
of rotting flesh are withheld
this time.
I fear it will
become a part of me
the way something sticky
congeals to your sole.

He speaks of intimate
violence:

They were kickin'
Ernie, an' he kept trying
to get up. An officer grabbed his hair,
stuck a pistol under his chin.
He pulled Ernie's face to his, then shot.

3. Nourishment

We got a glass of salt
water with a pinch of fish
and rice every morning.
I ate grasshoppers
for a good year. Didn't
know what it was. I woulda
stopped, but they had some sweet
stuff on 'em.
The nights weren't
too bad. We'd lie awake, dream
of dishes we'd make. Everything
had five pounds of butter, sugar,
salt, and our steaks would bleed
all over our plate.

He watches me eat.

Les and I ran
to the shack. Dead
Japs everywhere—the supply
drop crushed 'em.
Ribs were stickin' through
skin, eyeballs hanging by
the string in back.
One can of peaches
had an eyeball on top.
The peaches had really thick syrup.

They ate among the dead.

I can't listen to everything.
I tune him out, nod,
hear the fluctuation of his speech,
then change the conversation.

4. Quiet

I got brains on me
once. I knew I was dead,
so I sat still. The Japs used
a rifle butt to open
this guy's head.
I couldn't move.
They thought I was dead.
It was on my face,
my neck, in my hair.
It felt like pieces of heavy sponge.

5. Resigned

His stories are
in need of generous
ears I wish I had.
He lifts his drink
while I talk, smoothes
his napkin and leans close: he's ready
to tell another prison camp tale.

Marianne Walden

50 Young Men

60 mile an hour and rolling
        on the asphalt we are 50 fine
young men in starched shirts
        and brown trousers Buddy Holly
glasses military issue. 50
        young men rolling
Virginia tobacco in fine
        paper humming Elvis Blue
Suede Shoes tap tap tapping
        the window with pencil ends.
While moving 65 mile an hour
        over Midwest asphalt we look
at our Jane Betty-Jo letters
        in fine black ink we miss you
X O X O. We are 50
        new brothers born to America
nephews to Uncle - Sam - I - AM -
        I - can - turn - you - into - a - real - man.
50 rounds of ammo, camo-
        flauge pants, meal mess kits,
thirty caliber rifles, black boots and buzz
        hair cut government issue. We are
20 body bags, 20 grandfathers, 20
        future senate men who sit
in fine black suits and vote
        on 50 fine young men flying
35,000 feet over
        Atlantic ocean.

Nicholas Delbanco

In Defense of Quotation

In the course of this last year, and without conscious intention, I have been to places with matched names. My wife and I spent the month of March in the small resort town of Bellagio; in May, in the large city of Las Vegas, we went to the Bellagio Resort Hotel. Such a pairing is hard to ignore. The north of Italy and the state of Nevada share no obvious relationship, but the noun "Bellagio" connects them each to each. The coordinates of a mind's map may be loose-edged and inexact, yet city-fathers, city-planners everywhere mark where their parents' parents came from when they begin to name names…

Consider the map of New England. There's a Concord or Brewster or Plymouth or Manchester in most of the northeastern states; they suggest a common ancestry or tip of the traveler's cap. Those settlers who journeyed a hard month or year on their errands to the wilderness could not have dreamed how readily we'd compass, in this modern age, two or three cities with the identical name. The Arlington of Massachusetts—to take a near-random example—is but a morning's drive away from the Arlington in Vermont; Greenwich, Connecticut, and Greenwich, New York, sit four highway hours apart. The village due east of Greenwich, New York, is called Cambridge, the town to the north is called Salem—in honor, I assume, of those towns in Massachusetts from which their "founding fathers" traveled west. South along New York's Route 22 lie the villages of Chatham and North Petersburg and New Lebanon; this kind of repetitive naming is not the exception but rule.

Place-words that sound an echo seem neither a failure of imagination nor a result of the limits of nomenclature. Rather, they suggest the habit of quotation. There's more than one Hot Springs or Middletown because such titles are descriptive; the Lincolns and Washingtons and Monroes and Madisons in their several states refer to men honored and dead. Portland, Maine, and Portland, Oregon, are called the same because of functional geography; so too with the Springfields or Boulders or Centervilles that dot our nation's map. But a sizable proportion of the cities of America have to do with simple retrospect; we memorialize where we came from when we start anew.

The idea of family seems relevant here also. Strasbourg and Osaka can turn up on the unlikeliest billboards as "sister cities" in a dream of global linkage; Ann Arbor, Michigan—for reasons best known to its Chamber of Commerce—has been paired with Tubingen, Germany,

and Hikone, Japan. Yet how does Paris, Texas, relate to its original, or Ithaca and Troy, New York, to the work of the blind bard? New Orleans derives from the Orleans in France, New York from the York of Great Britain in ways that seem self-evident, but which yearning for antiquity led the settlers of Athens, Georgia, or Athens, Ohio, to endow their new-staked plots of land with that enduring name? What, if anything, do these places have in common; how do they refer to each other and what might the referent mean?

Another way of looking at this has to do with painting. That great portrait by Manet which alludes to its great predecessor by Velazquez—two black-garbed men standing on air—is an act of reverence and a form of artistic quotation. Elsewhere I've argued that imitation is the essence of apprenticeship, and those who would acquire a craft must copy those who practiced it before. The way that Goya studied Velazquez, however, and the way Goya was in turn reproduced by Manet, has more to do with emulation than a slavish copying; in this regard the process of quotation *must* be inexact. Brahms's "Variation on a Theme by Haydn" announces both indebtedness and independence; musicians everywhere refer—and the technical term *is* "quotation"—to music made elsewhere and previously. In the cultural transmission children take for granted—our parents' opinions codified or, turn by turn, resisted, our memories and anecdotes rehearsed in company once more—there's an element of variation but a constant theme. Look at the last sentence of this essay's opening paragraph ("parents' parents…name names") and note how a kind of repetition-compulsion enters into syntax. If the child is father to the man, the reverse is also true; we are what we were and will be…

The small town of Bellagio hugs the blue shore of Lake Como. It occupies the promontory that divides the two lower parts of that body of water; the lake extends thereafter to the north. In wintertime the resort shuts down; the hotels and restaurants and shops that welcome tourists all close for renovation; the cobbled streets are torn apart, the water-mains repaired. I have been there in the summer, when the narrow steep-pitched alleys are full of camera-toting and ice-cream eating visitors; by contrast in the month of March the buildings and their gardens are *chiuso*, undisturbed.

The Villa Serbelloni dominates the town's green crest. Owned since 1959 by the Rockefeller Foundation, it boasts a storied past. Pliny the Younger called the grounds home, and Roman roof tiles have been unearthed under the grass of the terraces; smaller reno-

vated buildings climb the stages of the hill. Leonardo may have mapped a stream nearby. Stendhal set *The Charterhouse of Parma* in the region, and *I Promessi Sposi* starts with a scene on the lake. There are breathtaking views of the water and, in the middle distance, Alps; there are olive groves and flowering trees and flowerbeds in abundance. The principal noise here is wind. An heiress who could have been conceived by Henry James—Ella Walker, whose family owned the Hiram Walker whisky distillery—married a Prince von Thurn und Taxis and purchased this choice property from a Swiss hotelier. At eighty-four, and childless, Her Serene Highness, Ella, Principessa della Torre e Tasso, willed the whole to the Rockefeller Foundation, which now provides—so goes the old joke—"the leisure of the theory class" and hosts study-groups devoted to world peace, world trade, world health…

A dozen men and women spend a month at the Conference Center engaged in research and creative projects of their own. I was one of those fortunate few. There were painters, musicians, sociologists, anthropologists, and doctors; they came from all around the world, and mealtimes entailed a polyglot babble. No telemarketers or television sets disturb one's concentration, and box lunches are provided if one wants to eat alone. A sense of privilege is palpable at the Villa Serbelloni, and the mores of this landscaped hill are those of ancient times. Gardeners tip their cloth caps. Noiseless maids change linens daily and waiters glide through banquet rooms; the grappa and the conversation flows.

There are waitresses and waiters also in the Hotel Bellagio of Las Vegas, but the former wear miniskirts and bring drinks to blackjack tables and the latter say, "I'll be your server, how are we doing today?" When you ask for wine or water, the answer is "No problem," and the ambient noise or "surround sound" is loud; an empty room means a space without commerce, and the rooms stay full. If the estate above Lake Como provides a pampered privacy, then the Bellagio Resort Hotel urges the reverse; unlike the silent villa, where isolation is jealously guarded, the palaces of Nevada embrace all those who pay.

The "reality"—that thing in quotes—of Las Vegas is mind-boggling and well-known. It has been widely described. This is the fastest growing city in the U.S.A. Its campy imitations render it original; nowhere else—except perhaps in Disneyworld or the occasional World's Fair—can the visitor move so rapidly from Italy to Germany or Japan and the Wild West. Indeed, with the perceived increase of the threat-level to Americans abroad, it may well be that this variety of tourism will replace true travel in the future; why put yourself at risk in Cairo or Hong Kong when you can come to Las Vegas with no

passport and on the comparative cheap? Only a titillating version of terror attends the roulette wheel or poker table, and the wages of this sort of sin can be a bonanza in chips...

The town seems immune to recession; prizefighters and singers continue to work, and the microcosmic world expands—or so it would seem—without end. London Bridge and the Eiffel Tower are available as site-sights on this irrigated "strip" of sand; scale versions of the Brooklyn Bridge and the Statue of Liberty invoke, instead, New York. There are hotels called The Mirage and Mandalay Bay and Treasure Island with its buccaneer motif. A tiger attacked its handler onstage last fall at The Mirage, though the man—Roy Horn of "Siegfried & Roy"—had been performing with wild animals for forty years. A honeymooning pair who watched weren't sure, they said when interviewed, if the mauling was part of the act.

High-heeled showgirls off duty strut past; men puff on Havana cigars. Fabricated butterflies festoon the potted palms. In ten minutes you can travel from the Hotel Venetian—with its gondoliers and blue canals adjacent to the parking lot—to the Bellagio's dancing fountain and its over-arching glass canopy designed by Dale Chihuly. There are restaurants and galleries and places to shop in abundance; there's a constant flow of cooling air and constant calibrated light above the slot machines.

The Bellagio Resort Hotel, however, seems to have been born full-blown as "concept," then provided with a name. There's no intrinsic reason for the sobriquet "Bellagio"; the place could just as well be called Firenze or Milano or Positano or Taormina—and even the Italian referent is vague. Perhaps its original owners had a relative from Como; perhaps some design consultant thought the word suggested class. There's a road called Bellagio in tony Bel Air; maybe that's what they copied instead. I have seen the name Bellagio on restaurants and beachfront condominiums and handbags; it's a free-floating allusion by now...

In any case Stephen A. Wynn—the resort's presiding genius—has sold his stake and moved along, installing his Picassos and Cézannes in another gallery; the show in the "museum" when I visited was a selection of Andy Warhol celebrity portraits. Jacqueline Onassis and Elizabeth Taylor and the rest stared out at the passerby from their glistening silk screens. The village of Bellagio felt very far away indeed from its namesake in Nevada, where more people watched the fountains in a single undulation than I saw at the edge of Lake Como during the whole month of March.

What to make of it, therefore; what's in a name? As Juliet so famously urged the air, "A rose by any other" title would retain its

odor, and if Capulet and Montague were called Maria and Tony they'd sing much the same refrain. If "a rose is a rose is a rose," as Gertrude Stein reminds us, then the habit of naming itself seems redundant; in every case—by implication in the previous and explication in this present paragraph—we quote and quote and quote.

Homer called Sicily "Land of the Sun," but the days I spent in Siracusa all were drenched by rain. It was the season for wet weather, and the Archaeological Park had few other visitors; I sat alone on the stone benches of the amphitheater and tried to imagine *Oedipus Tyrannos* or the *Oresteia* playing out beneath me. It did not work. Odysseus, of course, had various adventures there, and once the kingdom had been powerful indeed—a kind of ur-America in its self-confident reach. Having begun as a colony of Greece, it soon outstripped its mother country and, by the 5th century B.C., was a commercial and cultural center of the known world. One ruler, Hiero I, had been a patron of Aeschylus; another hosted Plato, though Dionysius the Elder—an amateur poet and playwright—seems to have done so by throwing the philosopher (who had arrived at the invitation of his brother-in-law) into jail.

The Roman Consul Marcus Claudius Marcellus, conquering it in 212 B.C., destroyed much of the city. Under Imperial rule, the amphitheater was converted from a place for rhetors and rhapsodists to a coliseum, and blood sports were enacted where late the sweet birds sang. The long history of Sicily thereafter records a long decline; the country feels more famous now for its Mafiosi than, say, for *The Leopard*, that great book by Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa. And what I saw of the old capitol looked like diminution: a town without charm in the rain. My memories of Siracusa are wine-soaked and self-pitying; Gelon's Temple and the Fort and narrow cobbled alleys seemed a momentary stay in the confusion of modernity, a sodden stopping place and photo op for tourists...

But the original in Sicily is beauty itself when compared to its namesake in upstate New York. That whole central region has suffered of late, its once-flourishing economy a distant remembrance at best. The countryside and nearby cities all seem in poverty's thrall. Yet Rochester, Auburn, Albany, Buffalo—even Utica and Binghamton—look to have weathered the downturn with greater resilience; Syracuse feels broken-backed, a town of large snowfall accumulations and unemployment and small hope.

I drove to see Raymond Carver there in October, 1987. The University where he taught sits on a hill, and the nearby streets pos-

sess some vitality. Ray's house was book-strewn, filled with light, and we spoke about the last of the short stories in *Where I'm Calling From*, his description of and homage to Chekhov's final hours that would prove self-reflexive. It is Carver's own last testament, though it signals what might well have been a new direction for his work. He was clear-eyed when I came, and not pretending that the cancer would remit; he and Tess Gallagher were planning to head west where, the next year, he would die.

It was, in fact, the reason for my visit; we both knew that we would not meet again. My stay was brief; I did not want to weary him and, though he refused to conserve it, his energy was low. We discussed, as always, books, the ones we'd read or planned to read, the ones we hoped it was in us to write, the memory of our shared friend John Gardner. I had visited Ray's house before, when it was night and winter, and have returned in springtime since—but this memory of Syracuse is autumnal, sere.

The writer and his implements, the journals he was reading of the great Russian doctor, the sandwich he made out of mustard and cheese...When I think of that last morning—Carver quoting Chekhov in a town that quotes the town in Sicily—I think how all is repetition, recapitulation, variation on a theme. He had been trying to preserve in art what faded from his life.

When my wife and I were cleaning out—or trying to—our attic, there we found a box full of maps. Small guides to Paris and Barcelona and London and Rome, large ones of Spain and Italy and Great Britain and France all felt well-worn and pliable; less so were the maps of places visited decades ago only briefly. There were ferry schedules from Woods Hole and Brindisi and Tortola and Oban. There were brochures from Göteborg and Hong Kong and Vienna and Bangkok and Berlin. In the spirit of triage we unfolded these sheets, and I started to throw them away. The roads of Cape Breton and roads around Athens had penciled-in markers and arrows; I must have followed them once...

Soon enough we were driving down Memory Lane, attempting to remember where we'd been, and when, and why. The Raffles Hotel in Singapore commended itself; so, too, did the Hotel Residence Duc de Bourgogne in Bruges. We had stayed in them long years before and could not jettison these markers of our shared romantic youth. The Restaurante-Bar Gran Vitel in Bogota announced its history and menu; there were photographs of chefs and rooms now no doubt remodeled or wrecked. A card listed room-rates for the "Yasa Samudra"

on Kuta Beach in Bali; that hut on the South Java Sea—"Breakfast and Service Charge Included"—once cost us nine dollars a day. There were maps of Uxmal and Chichén Itzá and Kyoto and Dublin—a jumble of geographies and places forgotten or dimly recalled. There was advice on "Where to Go in Hamburg" and "This Week in Istanbul" and elaborate instructions on "How to See Nikko." There were fifty illustrated pages on "The Crown Jewels of Iran." Less sumptuous, and produced by the Government Printing Office in December 1970, was a dog-eared fraying pamphlet on the city of Kabul.

Here is a pair of paragraphs from "Sightseeing in Kabul."

> **NOON GUN.** Originally part of the fortifications of Sherdawaza Hill, the gun faithfully announces the noon hour each day. The location of the Noon Gun offers a fine view of Kabul University and the Paghman Mountains.
>
> **MAUSOLEUM OF KING NADIR SHAH.** Situated east of the city on a hill, this marble edifice is an impressive tribute to the man who rescued the country from anarchy in 1929. From the mausoleum there is a fine view of the old city of Kabul, the walls, and the ancient citadel Bala Hissar.

What remains of all of this; how do the schedules of tram-lines convey, in the present, the past? A printed watercolor illustration of "The Living Goddess" fairly reeks of Katmandu. I need only look at an old map of Rhodes to remember the feel of the thick pants I wore, the light on the sea-wall and flavor of sea-urchin eggs. Unfolding a brochure on a Martello Tower in St. Johns, I remember the dog in the back seat and how, when I walked him, he lunged after sheep. Proust wrote of these matters at eloquent length, and I don't mean to rehearse the obvious: Kabul is not the place it was, and the memory of places visited is not the same as being there. Things change.

But it seems to me quotation is a constancy; it's how we preserve what we keep. If a menu or hotel brochure can evoke in its vivid immediacy a place or time far distant, then what we unfold when we open old charts is memory retrieved. Old letters and journals and maps and photographs each serve the same function as guide. It's a form of dreaming, really, a return to the experience of innocence—and some of those who read these words will think of William Blake. His *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* has become, at least in part, a part of common parlance; when someone says, "Tyger! Tyger! burning bright" or "Little Lamb, who made thee," it's not necessarily the case that they know they're quoting Blake. When the long-legged

models on the fashion runway offer the new "retro" style, it's a mode most are too young to recognize from previous fashion and use. But it's quotation nevertheless, a tip of the cap to designs of the past that, next year, will be last year's look...

Edgar Degas received permission to make copies at the Louvre in 1853, when he was eighteen. He copied Ingres and Poussin, among others, and traces of their influence would linger in his brush-stroke and palate till old age. Later he had this to say: "The Masters must be copied over and over again, and it is only after proving yourself a good copyist that you should reasonably be permitted to draw a radish from nature." The "radish from nature" is a box full of maps; the country or city they point to is referenced by memory, *(you have heard that song before, there was a full moon, that "Old Devil Moon," you were standing on a blanket on the lawn in Tanglewood)* and the reality of such a text or image is a quotation retrieved.

If a writer has been writing long enough, this kind of verbal retrieval must surely come to pass. Repetition is as natural as breath. When a singer known for a particular tune emerges for a concert, it would disappoint the audience if the old standard were not at some point in the evening performed; if a comedian has a familiar routine, the old chestnut must be duly roasted. Our themes declare themselves at least in part because recurrent; the texts of one's twenties and thirties will serve as a predictor of what follows on. Early Hemingway or Faulkner gives a template for the late. The characteristic syntax of, say, Elizabeth Bowen was established at a certain stage and would have been as hard to change as handwriting; the semicolon in this sentence is a form of signature, and the ellipsis with which it ends is habitual in Ford Madox Ford...Imagine for an instant that a trapeze artist shifted beats and tried to improvise a meeting with an airborne partner; such a performance *requires* rehearsal, quotation: a split-second timing not subject to change. We leave, in short, our fingerprints all over every page, and if I've written that before why then I've written that before...

There's a part of the cerebral cortex where such referents are stored. I knew a woman who suffered a series of strokes—catastrophic and finally mortal. She could not remember proper names or what she had eaten for breakfast, or if. She was unable to read. Astonishingly, however, she retained her memory for tunes and poems learned when young; she could recite great swatches of Longfellow or songs in Welsh, and bedridden for years she would entertain herself and those who sat beside her by repeating entire narratives from *The*

Mabinogion or "The Day is Done" or "My Lost Youth" or "The Birds of Killingworth." It was as though the lines were inscribed on the ceiling she stared at—verse after verse, rhyme after rhyme—and they kept her company throughout her long travail.

Sometimes quotation is conscious—a politician with a slogan, an actress reciting a speech. The "inspirational speaker" repeats his or her mantra verbatim, with a memorized message "on point." We pepper our discourse with other folks' talk, and if William Shakespeare or Mark Twain had copyrighted what they wrote, their estates would quadruple in size. That "there is no new thing under the sun"—itself a quote from Ecclesiastes—is of course not news. It's why we know what to expect from a line and when a line is apt. Boilerplate invades the boardroom, the classroom, the living room; how often in a single day do we produce or phrase a single new idea?

When I hear in my own voice—as I do now increasingly—my father's intonation, it's a tone that feels fore-ordained; no matter how closely I monitor myself I can't keep from repetition or the twice-told tale. Old jokes, old stories, old friends or enemies in their fixed patterns of behavior—so that we recognize and smile or recognize and scowl—all these are commonplace. Indeed, they're necessary, functional; we don't create the alphabet each time we write a sentence or invent the steering wheel every time we drive. If something has been said before, and well, why alter it for variety's sake? Alexander Pope's "What oft was thought, but ne'er so well expressed" can just as well remain verbatim on the page.

This is not so much a function of memory or education as of our system of discourse; it's impossible *not* to repeat. One word leads to another as the night to the day. It's how rote learning operates, and associative memory: the pleasures of a nursery rhyme where children know the chorus and shout it delightedly out. The actor or singer or politician is in this sense a particular instance of the more general case. Conversation has quotation at its epicenter; it's the engine that drives dialogue, both molecule and glue. *All* talk, it seems to me, is formulaic in its structure; we repeat an anecdote or routine. At other times we counterfeit spontaneity, pretending what we say is spur-of-the-moment and new. Quotation is the building-block of language, its very marrow and pith.

Had I written "pith and marrow," those who recognize the phrase would see it as a formula; as a chiasmus (where the terms of a phrase are inverted) it's a small-scale variation on a small-scale theme. We say "quote unquote" but don't really mean it; what we mean at the end of a line is "end quote" and not a retraction of what went before. We remember where we've been. We repeat what we have learned.

The third and fourth of this paragraph's sentences are structured similarly; they begin with the first person plural pronoun and each have seven syllables; their second word—a verb—begins with the letters "re." There all resemblance ends. Yet the retentive eye, attentive ear will find the lines echoic; this kind of repetitive structure is not the exception but rule…

In the month my wife and I resided in Bellagio, fighting began in Iraq; the dogs of war had slipped their leash, though the baying seemed far-off. It was hard not to refer to the great parable by Thomas Mann, and how the "magic mountain's" denizens were inconvenienced by what became the First World War. Herr Settembrini on *his* mountaintop would recognize the grounds; it isn't easy to gain access to the Villa Serbelloni, and the gates that give out on the village are locked.

Our insularity was less than total, however; such headlines vault water and walls. Newspapers can be bought. There was no one at the Conference Center who had anything to say about America that was anything other than appalled; the Russians and Egyptians and the Tamils and the Tuvas, though they tried to be polite about it, believed we were governed by madness—a nightmare of empire, not dream. The air attack of 1991 and "Operation Shock and Awe" of 2003 felt eerily dissimilar, though cut from the same bolt of cloth. The pairing here—Bush, Bush, Iraq, Iraq—seemed not quotation but rant. It was as though we'd heard and read and discussed the war a decade previous, but things were no longer amusing; the jokes about "Shrub" and "Bush-league" turned acid on the tongue.

So we walked beneath the ancient fort, its picturesque rubble and jumble of rock. Attempting to take comfort in the long reach of history, we spoke of others in anxiety who walked this way before. During the Middle Ages, Bellagio had been involved in the conflicts between the communes of Milan and Como, and between the Guelph and the Gibelline factions the fortress on the promontory changed hands three times by siege. In 1369 the Viscontis, one of Milan's ruling families, decided that the castle was more of an inconvenience than asset (it had become a lair for German mercenaries) and had the buildings razed.

There has been fighting since. The mountain passes and the hills have only rarely known peace. This area was occupied by Germans in the Second World War; they leveled olive groves to make way for landing strips and cut down cypress trees in order to improve their lines of sight. Mussolini, attempting to escape to Switzerland, was captured just across the lake; it is rumored he dressed as a woman and

his carriage was chock-full of gold. They dragged him back south to Milano, where his bullet-raddled body hung on display.

Pliny the Younger wrote of his villas—he owned two—in what was then called Comum: "One is set high on a cliff...and overlooks the lake. Supported by rock, as if by the stilt-like shoes of the actors in tragedy. I call it Tragedia. It enjoys a broad view of the lake, which the ridge on which it stands divides in half… From its spacious terrace, the descent to the lake is gentle."

I quote him in translation and nearly two thousand years later. Tragic actors no longer wear stilts, but the support of the rock-face has not worn away, and the Villa Serbelloni still offers a "broad view." White ferries ply the blue water, and for the month of March the lake stayed calm. There were olive trees and cypress waiting to be planted; there was a backhoe by the harbor, men working forklifts, and piles of manure. The camellias bloomed and faded; then the mimosa began.

The library where once the dying Ella Walker lay—reclusive in old age, attended only by her servants—has volumes donated by those who passed through. Another of the Thurn und Taxis properties—Duino Castle, near Trieste—sheltered the poet Rilke; he composed his *Duino Elegies* while waiting for words from the wind. I read them, tried to hear them—*Wer, wenn Ich schrie*—and tried to write lines of my own. It did not work. Each day before dawn I would sit at my desk and attempt the final chapter of the novel I was working on; each afternoon I would read what I'd written and tinker and correct the pages and then tear them up.

The Executive Director of the Fondazione Rockefeller is the widow of its previous director. The presiding spirit of the villa, Madame Gianna Celli is efficient and accomplished and rail-thin. Her staff and hired workmen and even her visitors quail. She has seen it all, she says without saying, she has known your elders and your betters and is by your antics unimpressed. The coat is adequate, but the shoes require shining and the shirt is a disgrace. The Nobel Laureate before you did a better job with accents, the Cabinet Minister here just last week was wearing the same trousers, except they had been pressed...

La Senora Celli has this to say at breakfast: You are insane, you will die in the sand. You Americans don't understand how everyone will hate you now, how serious things are. Gianna eats great quantities of fruit and, since the outbreak of Mad Cow Disease, will not permit the Serbelloni's cooks to buy or use red meat. She is imperious, opinionated, fierce. The gardeners, she says, insist on planting by the moon. And they are always wrong. These people get everything wrong. The Umbrians are sorrowful, the Tuscans arrogant, the people

of Lombardy sad. In Como, for example, you might see somebody smiling but you will never hear the sound of laughter in the streets. These people cannot cook, she says; their idea of high cuisine is rice with three slices of fish. When I ask her if there's anyone she in fact admires, Gianna pauses, shakes her head. And then her face brightens; she does have an answer: "The dead."

Tod Erkkila

Dirt Poured Down from Shovels and Trains and Empty Pockets

Ghost Town

Once more than a thousand people lived in Pleasant Valley, Utah. But now, early in the century's last decade, we're lucky to total one hundred. Every year the mayor rides to the edge of town and paints a smaller number on the welcome sign. Some townspeople say there are more ghosts than people here. There are no ghosts, only ghostly brick buildings and broken-down cars, boarded-up windows and toppled walls. The old schoolhouse leans, as if resting, against a hillside, while in an empty nearby lot, dust swirls like sandy-brown curls of hair, rising higher and higher before settling down on the one-room jail's historical replica. From there you can spy the bar, where miners sit on red leatherette stools, drinking canned beer. They quietly mourn our past, speaking always of better days. If only time could stand still as the icicle moon, they say, then the trainsongs wouldn't fade and leave us with only the sound of howling dogs echoing in our dreams.

Swords

When my younger brother and I hear the train coming, we run across the street and place pennies and double-headed nails on the railroad tracks. Then we step back and wait for the train to blow—all smoke and horns—and rumble by, carrying coal piles that rise above the cars' sides like lumpy, giant bellies. We count the flashing cars—one-two-three-four—and I see myself carried with them, winding southbound through the valley. The muddy creek unwinding beside us, making wider, slower turns as it travels north. Twisting up past the tipple and its mountain of coal to the tracks' end, where I leave the train, my momentum carrying me up Eccles Canyon to the west, where a silver stream and shiny conveyor belt snake down to the coal pile. Then it's into the pines, along a gravel road, down a black-mouth hole in the ground—deep, deep down where Father digs coal with his hands, chews slag with his teeth. He feeds the conveyor belt that feeds the trains. He comes home with coal dust on his hands and face.

After the train passes, my younger brother and I race back to the tracks. We pick little copper puddles and nails like tiny swords from between the rocks and offer them to our older brother, who stands behind, groaning. Baby toys, he says. Without another word, we slide our prizes into our pockets and cross the street.

From the driveway, I look north at the disappearing train. I feel its gentle grumble on the tracks beneath my feet, its quiet echo in my chest. I turn around, toward the pine-covered canyon to the south, a dark slit in twilit mountains. The round shadow of a Railroad Crossing sign stretches, becomes elliptical. I stand frozen, stuck between day and night, not noticing Father when he pulls in behind us, but then yanked from my daydream when his old Ford honks.

Inside, Father doesn't take off his muddy boots. After bursting through the door, all smoke and horns, he wants to know when dinner will be done. Mother says five minutes. Father plops down on a recliner and clicks on the television.

My younger brother and I follow him, showing him handfuls of flattened nails and pennies. He changes the channel, grumbles, shakes his fist. He tells Mother the mine laid off workers today—he was one of them.

She pulls the casserole from the oven and says everything will work out.

My brother and I stand there, holding out our hands. Look, we say. But Father doesn't look; he doesn't say a thing.

Trains

Long before the train's horn blows, the arrival begins with a clink and clank and the sound of metal grinding metal. There is a far away rumble like mountains slipping along fault lines. Old Mathers walks down the highway on his way home from the bar, and although the wind blows cold from the north, he isn't wearing a coat. He wears a United Mine Workers baseball cap over his white hair. Mud covers his boots. From time to time he stumbles and almost falls, disappearing between streetlights into blackness, as if he were a materializing ghost changing its mind. A hornblast splits the night in two. Old Mathers jumps, then slips into the night.

Bicycles

During the day boys on bicycles pedal up and down gravel streets. They pedal past our house, and my brothers and I follow on Western Fliers and Huffies. We wear denim jeans with grass-green battle scars and holes through which you can see our white knees. We ride to the park, an unfenced field where local barflies play softball against barflies from neighboring towns.

The team is called the Potguts because there are more potguts, or ground squirrels, than players on the field. All of the players have beer bellies. They roll packs of cigarettes in their shirtsleeves and smoke while they chase fly balls. The barkeep's wife keeps score.

On Saturdays most everyone goes to the games: old cowboys and their wives, young kids who play on the swing set or look for lost balls, mothers and fathers holding hands. Old Mathers drinks whiskey out of a brown bag.

In today's game, my neighbor hits a homerun. He runs the bases backward and stumbles across home plate. Later the barkeep pitches underhanded and watches a ball roll between his legs. In the last inning, my uncle has a chance to win the game. Everyone watches as he runs toward the right field fence. They clap and yell, Go, go, go. The ball arcs down. The sun shines in his face. He raises his glove and plants his feet. But the ball lands three feet in front of him. He picks it up and throws to second base, but the other team has already scored two runs and we lose ten to nine.

City Boys

Buses split the day in two. On their way to summer camp, they shuttle city boys through town. Trains of black smoke tumble out the exhaust pipes, leaving behind diesel odors. Sometimes my brothers and I see the boys on field trips, hiking up Winterquarters Canyon to see ruined mine buildings and the general store's two remaining walls. Or we see them walking through town, looking at the old post office and an old barn's creaking skeleton. My older brother tells us there are too many city boys, more tourists than townspeople. They are everywhere, swarming like flies, sullying our soil. How long before they realize their strength? he asks. How long before they run us out on a rail?

Fences

Fences split and shape our world. In early summer a rancher hires my older brother to mend fences, and sometimes, when I "act my age," he lets me tag along. We carry bailing wire, tension bars, wire stretchers, walking the hills in straight lines, looking for holes, weak spots, disconnects, places where the fence has been trampled by elk or flattened by snow. Every fence we fix is barbed wire. Sometimes in town we see chain-link but never white pickets—Utah isn't that kind of state, no Tom Sawyer's Missouri.

My brother and I dig holes for new posts. We use old railroad ties and unmilled aspens. The posts stand slightly askew. On every twentieth post hangs an old tire, which reads KEEP OUT, painted in big, white letters—the markings of faceless fence-menders.

Sometimes our route takes us through gates, under which dirt roads pass, slicing through sagebrush and Canadian thistle landscape. These roads lead to mountaintops, to TV towers, to a small stream one can-

yon over, where our grandfather and his brothers fly-fished in the 1930s. Other times there are no roads, only gates opening into fields, cattle lowing and licking blocks of salt or sheep grazing high on the mountains.

In the evening we pass Mexican shepherds riding brown horses out of town, where they've purchased beer and cigarettes. Two scraggly dogs always lope behind. The shepherds never say much. They just shake our hands and call us *amigos*. And when we part ways, they yell, *Buenos noches*. We say the same.

Dreams

We are steel boxes traveling on steel rails, and the friction warms the air around us. We rumble through the dark and rage with our hornmouths blasting the still air, waking sleepy townspersons and rousing dogs from cat-chase dreams. The dogs howl as we pass. We blaze a path, forget about the rails, wind our way through canyons, across coyote deserts, sleeping as we go, without stopping. The moon is an icicle melting in the sky, the sky a mine no one's entered yet. After the desert, we cross a hill, a hill, a mountain, and coast down the other side, our mouths wide open, breathing—deep gulps—Midwestern air. We haven't seen Kentucky before, but we remember our coal father talking about the big boss from back east, the man from Louisville who always said "bagel" instead of "beagle"—*In Kentucky, we don't eat our bagels. We take them hunting*. And we don't stop, even when the bluegrass starts to look like a blanket, even when our eyes keep closing and we have to sing hornsongs to stay awake. We keep moving because a long time ago we promised to never stop. There are too many mines, too much coal piling up, no end in sight, only miles and miles of track—footprints appearing before we step.

Good Night

In the middle of the night the phone rings and wakes me. Down the hall, I hear Father peeing, running water, then brushing his teeth. Silence. I count, One Mississippi…and wait for the front door to squeak open and bang shut.

Later I hear the coal train and howling dogs. The train blows its horn six times—three toots at each railroad crossing. In the middle of the night the hornsongs sound different—meaner, louder—as if the train's rolling over the town. During the day the blasting horn is just another muffled noise, mixed with the sounds of cars and dogs and Mother vacuuming or washing dishes. At night the trains are big black devils shattering dreams with hellcries, bringing nightmares and trying to steal our souls, but there's nothing we can do, no way to pull

the covers over our heads and be passed over.

In the morning the train barrels back down the tracks and wakes the town with its cockcrows. I go to the kitchen for a glass of water and see Father asleep at the table. His face glows bright white in sun. Why is he so clean? I wonder, then realize what he's done, what apparently we'd both forgotten: he couldn't go to a job he didn't have.

Swords

Outside, my younger brother and I wield blue plastic swords and slice ghostsheets swaying on a clothesline. My younger brother swings his sword at me. I parry, then lunge. He falls over to die. Death by our rules is sixty seconds long. Lying on the ground, dead, he counts, One Mississippi…and waits to be born again.

Old Mathers

Old Mathers is the town. We live and die with him. When he got black lung, we coughed; when he stumbled home sick with drink, we felt our heads swirling like clouds of train smoke. He is old—old enough to remember the May Day mine explosion of 1900, old enough to recall the town filled with a thousand miners and their families.

There were thirteen saloons in those days, he once told us. Enough to fill every man's belly with beer.

But why did they do that? we asked.

Mining, he explained, takes something out of a man, and the only way he knows how to fill it is with liquor.

Even now he's still trying to fill in the holes. From my window, I watch him leave the bar and walk down the highway, his green Army coat flapping in the wind. It's dark and the streetlights glow like miners' lanterns. He walks the white line, wobbling from side to side. The barkeep's Old English sheepdog follows close behind.

Old Mathers is halfway home when he falls, his arms flailing as he tries to brace himself. He pushes himself partially up but quickly falls back down. The sheepdog licks his face.

When I realize he can't get up, I walk into the living room and ask Father to help me help Old Mathers. We climb into Father's pickup and drive down to the highway. Father lifts the old man into the passenger seat. We drive seventy mph for forty miles and pull into the hospital after only thirty-five minutes, rushing Old Mathers inside. After three hours the doctors diagnose him with a broken hip and tell him he'll need a wheelchair for a few weeks. He mumbles under his breath.

On the way home, Old Mathers tells us he started mining when he was twelve. He carried an arch-top lunchbox and followed his

father up the hill. They shoveled coal into carts and came home with coal dust on their hands and face, leaving footprints on rugs, black fingerprints on glasses and silverware. Later when Old Mathers married, his wife followed him from room to room, buffing everything he touched with a chamois rag.

But what could I do? he asks. You can take the man out of the mine but you can't take the mine out of the man.

He's right; he'll never change. A few weeks later I see him pushing the wheelchair up the highway toward the bar.

Ghosts

At night the boys put away their bikes and look for ghosts. The older boys carry black metal flashlights, which they shine through windows, into abandoned houses. They click off the lights and we walk through the cemetery, the shadows of gravestones moving in the shapes of men. We see no ghosts.

But there have to be ghosts in the old hospital, in the schoolhouse, in the jail. Two of the older boys swear they hear moaning. We shine our flashlights into the empty buildings. Nothing but cobwebs and dust bunnies. In the schoolhouse, we see shifting white shapes behind windows, red stains like bloody handprints on the bathroom door. Downstairs, boxes are stacked to the ceiling; we open one and find saltines inside. A bat flies out of a closet, and the younger boys run for home. The older boys laugh.

Bicycles

My brothers and I climb a hill and push our bikes down the side, watching them tumble end over end. We leave our bicycles out in the rain, take the kickstands off, tip them over. We ride hard—over railroad tracks and across ground pock-marked with potgut holes. Our bicycles begin to fall apart: the brakes squeak, the chains slip, the tires won't hold air. Mother warns us, tells to take care of our things. But we hope, when we've broken these bicycles, she'll buy us new ones.

The Enemy

Our father is a broken record. It's been more than a month since he was laid off and he hasn't done a thing. He lies on the couch and watches TV. And although he never lets us watch what we want, we don't complain. We stay outside all day, my younger brother and I sword-fighting, my older brother and I mending fence. All three of us explore what's left of the Union Pacific Mountain mine—crumbling brick buildings and piles of rusted steel drums—and often meet up with the other town boys to build forts from dead trees, nails, and

twine. We give ourselves ranks and form armies. Armed with plastic swords, we stalk through the brush and trees and try to capture each other's bases. Other times we guard the fort from invisible enemies—Russians, Nazis, North Vietnamese.

One day five city boys run away from summer camp and find our fort. We never see them coming. They stumble through the sagebrush, making a lot of noise, and we swear the enemy army is upon us. There must be hundreds or thousands of Communists descending upon our fort. We don't know what to do—run or die? We decide to run and hide; we wait five minutes, then sneak back for a look.

The boys are sitting in our fort, eating our cookies, sipping our Kool-Aid. No longer afraid, we say to each other that we won't stand for this and swagger over to them. They're bigger than we expected. Operation Kamikaze Fort-Recovery is aborted. Instead, we shake their hands and introduce ourselves, telling them we were just playing: we weren't really scared. Wasn't that a funny joke? we ask, and they laugh and go along with our story.

After they leave we tear down the fort. We say it's for reasons of security, but really it's because the fort is no longer ours: like everything they touch, the city boys have made it theirs.

Coal Fathers

Our miners are no longer miners. Besides Father, ten other locals have been given pink slips. The mine's accountant is the only local who keeps his job. The others drove bulldozers, front-end loaders, backhoes, and shuttle cars, or, like father, they loaded trains or semis towing belly-dump trailers. The real miners are always the first to go. No one worries, though: this has happened before. Layoffs come and go, one miner says, but the coal fathers never die.

But this layoff doesn't go. The union is dissolved; no one in the county is rehired. Instead, new miners (mostly Mexicans who'll work for next to nothing) are bussed in from Provo and Salt Lake City.

With nothing to mine, the townsmen become welders, electricians, long-haul truck drivers. Anyway we look at it, they say, it's better to leave. We waited too long; we never acted. Now there is nothing here.

The Train Enters the Town

In a recurring dream, I hear grunting and groaning and shrieking. Somewhere in the distance, a train thunders. I see smoke rising in puffs, like signals warning the town of death and doom.

In the dream, it's nighttime, and everyone is asleep. I hover in the air—inside and outside—so I can see both the length of the valley

and myself sleeping. The hovering part of me wants to warn the sleeping part but my mouth is sewn shut and my shouts come out like muffled horn blasts. The smoke becomes thicker, blacker. It's the only thing I can breathe. The train enters the town. Sparks shower from the wheels. The belly dumps open, but instead of coal, fire pours out. The flames melt the volcanic rock that lines the tracks. Grass and sagebrush burn, too. All around, the darkness grows blacker and blacker until the only thing I see is the train. Even the fire disappears. By then it's too late to save anything, and the train vanishes behind the hills to the north.

Good Night

By late summer everything has vanished. No lights, no yellow windows, no signals on the doorsteps inviting us in. Streetlamps, like bronze V-shaped landscapes, grow out of the night. No one, not even Old Mathers, walks the streets. Those of us left behind sit by the fireplace or window, waiting for sleep, then daylight, when we can fool ourselves into believing that the houses aren't empty, when we won't feel so alone.

Bruises

One night Father comes home with bruises on his face and a cast on his left hand. My younger brother and I ask him what happened: had he wrestled a grizzly bear or chased a cougar? We are sure he must have done something great, but my older brother tells us to shut up and leave Father alone.

Grave Robbers

At one boy's house we play spades. Two of the older boys tell us they've seen strangers—old men in denim overalls, with black, soot-covered faces and kerosene lamps attached to their helmets. The old men walk the back streets, where there are no lampposts. They call out to friends who died in the 1900 explosion. One older boy says the mine is still on fire, and in the winter, you can see smoke rising from vents in the mountainside. No one knows when it will stop burning, or when the ghosts of the trapped miners will be set free.

Only the part about the fire is true. Everything else is a lie. We're the only ghosts here. Those of us who haven't moved away since the mines closed are the ones who haunt this town. We've been lost and forgotten. Only the coal company and a few vacationers remember we're here. The coal company remembers because we buy food from their store, fattening their pocketbooks. And the vacationers remember because without us they could ride their four-wheelers through

the cemetery, across the graves. They could take apart the town stone by stone, to keep as souvenirs. I can already see them swarming out of their buses like fire ants, pulling bricks from the old Winterquarters store. They're carrying hammers and chisels and knocking holes in the walls. Later we'll look through the holes and see nothing. Not even a pile of bricks.

Ghosts

My brothers and I ride alone now; we have no one else. When we started out there were six other kids. As usual, we ride to the cemetery, and when we come down the other side, one bike is riderless. Two other boys disappear in the park, swallowed by potgut holes or buried by yellow, overgrown grass. The last three pedal out of town, following orange and silver moving vans that their parents drive. My brothers and I watch them vanish, like departing trains, behind the hills to the north. Then we turn for home.

Keep Out

By fall Father never leaves the house. He doesn't get out of bed anymore. Two weeks ago he carried the TV in there and closed the door. He comes out only to eat and pee. Every day he wears the same pair of flannel pajamas, and he never says a word.

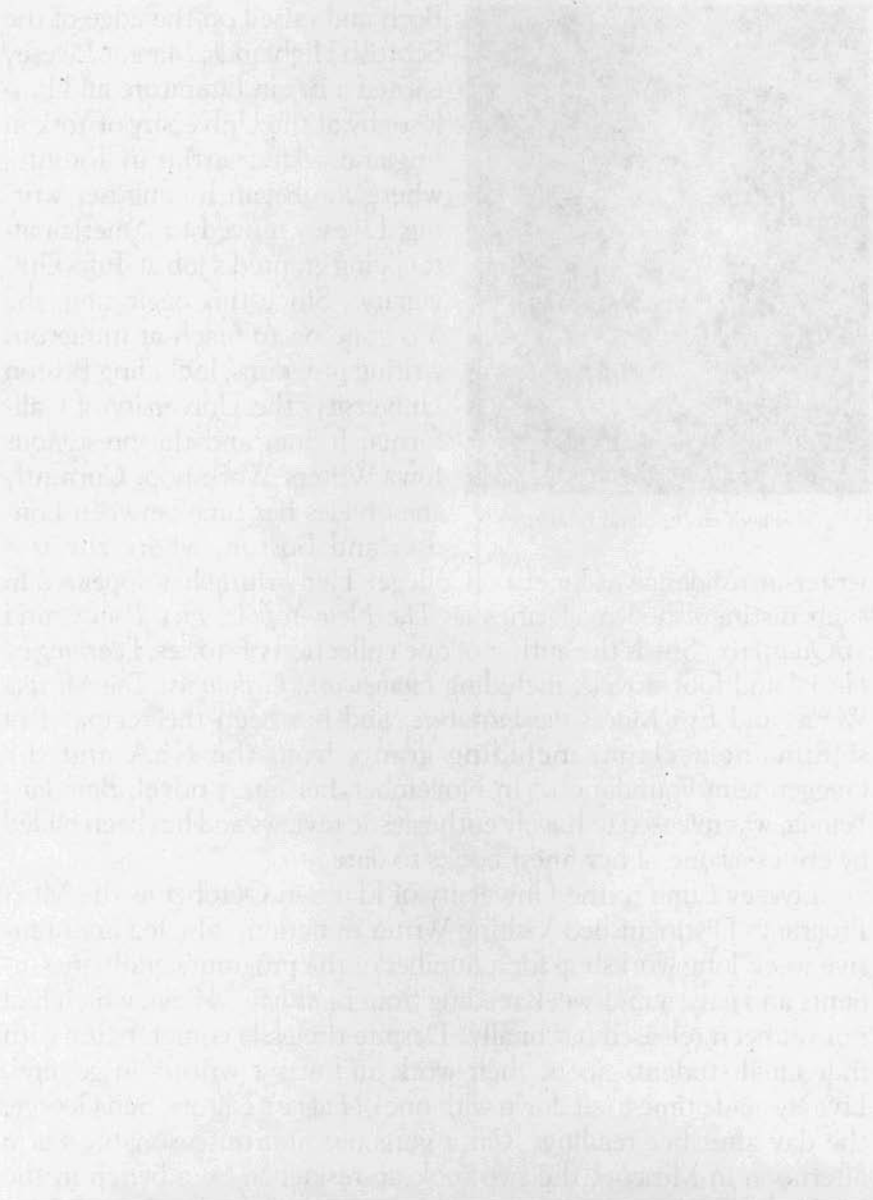
Mother doesn't speak much either. She tells us to eat, sleep, wake up, brush our teeth, go to school, and for god's sake please be quiet because she has a migraine. She forgets to tell us to keep our heads up and keep dreaming. She doesn't read to us or say "I love you" before we go to sleep.

Everyone is quiet. Silence creeps up like sparks on wheels, refusing to rest. At lunch we open our mouths only to chew our grilled cheese sandwiches. Nothing is simple, now. For a while my brothers and I play the same old games with ghosts and swords. My younger brother gives up first. He sits by the railroad tracks and waits all day for the train to chug past, after which he smiles. As weeks pass, production slows (the old miners outside the bar say the coal's disappearing) and the trains stop coming every day. My older brother and I ride our bikes and keep an eye on my younger brother. We worry that someday the trains won't come at all and he won't smile anymore.

My older brother gives up next. He takes his backpack, hunting knife, and sleeping bag and hikes up Union Pacific Mountain. He rebuilds the fort and moves into it. Before he goes, he tells me he's going to live off the land.

After my brothers have been gone for weeks I have nothing to do. I ride my bike through the park and teach myself to draw, sketching

brown men leaving Mexico on brown horses. They ride across the desert and into the hills of central Utah, where they herd sheep for two dollars an hour. They don't have immigration papers. They live alone on mountaintops and write letters to their families in Mexico. They say when they have enough money, they'll bring their families here. But they never have enough money, and in the end, I draw them riding down the hills, across the desert, back to Mexico.



—Interview—

Margot Livesey on Continuing To Push Oneself as a Writer

"Go look at the world and compare your pages to the world."

Photo credit: Sigrid Estrada

Born and raised on the edge of the Scottish Highlands, Margot Livesey earned a BA in Literature and Philosophy at the University of York in England. After a stint in Toronto, where she began honing her writing, Livesey moved to America after being granted a job at Tufts University. Since this beginning, she has gone on to teach at numerous writing programs, including Boston University; the University of California, Irvine; and the prestigious Iowa Writers' Workshop. Currently she divides her time between London and Boston, where she is a writer-in-residence at Emerson College. Her writing has appeared in such distinguished magazines as *The New Yorker*, *Five Points*, and *TriQuarterly*. She is the author of one collection of stories, *Learning by Heart*, and four novels, including *Homework*, *Criminals*, *The Missing World*, and *Eva Moves the Furniture,* and has been the recipient of significant acclaim, including grants from the NEA and the Guggenheim Foundation. In November, her latest novel, *Banishing Verona,* was released to hugely enthusiastic reviews and has been hailed by critics as one of her finest books to date.

Livesey came to the University of Idaho in October as the MFA Program's Distinguished Visiting Writer in fiction. She led an intensive week-long workshop for a number of the program's graduate students and gave a mid-week reading from *Banishing Verona*, which had not yet been released nationally. Despite tirelessly conferencing with individual students about their work and about writing in general, Livesey made time to sit down with one of *Fugue*'s editors, Ben George, the day after her reading. On a gorgeous and unseasonably warm afternoon in Moscow, the two took up residence on a bench in the

University Inn courtyard, surrounded by the changing foliage, and Livesey spoke about the ever-increasing—rather than diminishing—challenges of writing fiction.

Ben George: I'm always interested, to borrow Eudora Welty's phrase, in a writer's beginnings. You mention elsewhere writing your first book, which you claim was a pretty bad novel, because you had a philosopher friend who was writing a book and you thought, *Why not?* Was it this simple? What brought you to reading and then to writing? What made you believe you could do it successfully?

Margot Livesey: Gosh, that's a lot packed into one question. I grew up in the countryside, so there weren't many diversions and there were very few examples of possible jobs for women. I realize when I look back that every profession I had in mind came from a book. I wanted to be a nun because I'd read *The Nun's Story*. I wasn't a Catholic, but I didn't think that was any impediment. And then I read a wonderful book about Marie Curie, and I got very set on discovering a new element. I spent a lot of time in my high school laboratories, pestering my unenthusiastic Science masters about finding a new element. There were other professions as well; I wanted to be a vet and an explorer.

But then—for reasons I don't quite understand, though I suspect they had to do with a very influential English teacher—I went to university and I studied Literature and Philosophy. The curriculum stopped, however, when Virginia Woolf walked into the river. We never did anything past 1941. So I didn't really think of there being living writers, even though I was reading Bellow and Lessing and Sorentino and Pynchon. I didn't think of them as existing in the same plane as me. They were on some other planet somewhere [laughing]. But then when I was traveling with my philosopher friend, at a certain point boredom took over. I just couldn't explore one more marketplace or cathedral or ruin by myself while he was working, so I decided I would write my own book. But I didn't have a subject. I mean, I couldn't write a history of beekeeping or an overview of the Crusades—I just didn't know enough and I didn't have the facilities to learn more. So a novel seemed the obvious kind of book to write. And I thought I knew how because I'd read so many.

I don't think I did believe, though, that I could do it successfully until I wrote a story called "Obituary." For whatever reason, I knew that story worked. It was a complete thing—not necessarily a brilliant thing, I don't mean that for a second. But I suddenly got the idea, *Oh, this is something I could get better at*. I think that was the key

thing for me, not feeling I could be successful but feeling I could improve.

BG: You also mention elsewhere the meager, struggling times in your twenties in Toronto, where you found yourself in a series of jobs that ranged from working in an incense-packing factory and a dry cleaner to selling roses in nightclubs and restaurants. How did these less prosperous times deter your writing, add to it, or influence it? What made you determined to keep writing?

ML: I think, in fact, that each dreadful job made me more determined to keep writing. I thought, *My God, if my life is going to be spent working in a pharmaceutical factory, I might as well just jump off a bridge.* These jobs were very active goads in keeping me doing this other thing. And they did finally help my writing, but it certainly didn't feel like it at the time because I was so short of continuous periods of time. I couldn't help feeling that this wasn't how stories and books got written. I had an ideal of how a writer's life was, and it was much more like the upper-class or not-so-upper-class Victorian writing. You know, you sat in the parlor and wrote, and the servants made lunch and tea and brushed your hair. My life did not resemble that in any way. It was much more like Raymond Carver describes his twenties—scrambling to make money, rushing from task to task.

But I think it did make me realize how much earning a living constrains all kinds of emotional and psychological possibilities. And it made me feel deeply fortunate when I began to have stories published and was able to bring writing closer to the center of my life. Since I started teaching in my thirties, I've spent a tremendous amount of time very happily in writing programs and universities, and I feel deeply, deeply fortunate to be here. But I think it's good that there was a period in my adult life when I wasn't in these institutions.

BG: I'm curious about your unique perspective as a Creative Writing teacher, since you're a writer who is from Britain and now divides her time between Britain and the U.S. There seems to be sort of a snide attitude among some British writers about the "financial crutch" that MFA programs in American universities provide for writers and about the idea of "teaching" writing in general. I wonder what you make of the difference in attitudes and what you think about the possibility of "teaching" writing.

ML: As someone who only studied writing very briefly, I continuously envy my students, who get to really focus on writing, who feel

that they have a community in which to discuss and show their work, who learn in six months what it took me six years to figure out. I think there are many good things about writing programs, and the arts have always had patrons. That patronage has varied and shifted. But whether you're your own patron, like Trollope working for the post office and also writing novels every morning or like Henry James constantly hounding *The Atlantic Monthly* to pay him for this serial or that, or whether you're independently wealthy like some of the members of the Bloomsbury Group, art and money have always been inextricably connected.

One thing I'd say is that Creative Writing is increasingly taught in Britain, and in the last twenty years numerous programs and courses have come into existence. So I would say that Britain has come round more to the American way of thinking. I don't think it's been bad for British fiction that British writers have traditionally come to fiction writing through journalism. But I don't think the other model, coming to writing through writing programs, hurts either. The fact that writing programs have, in effect, become patrons for writers who can teach in them seems, to me, a great blessing. But, of course, I'm quite self-interested in this answer [laughing].

BG: As you just alluded to, you yourself never went to an MFA program. Yet you've obviously been quite successful. Do you think an MFA program would've been helpful to you?

ML: What I see from my students is that at a very basic level they feel that someone is waiting for their work—me and the rest of the class. In the wider world, nobody cares very much if you write another story or novel, so it's easy to get seduced by all the other demands we have in life. Being in a Creative Writing program forces you to give your work priority. Invariably you tend to make considerable progress.

BG: How does being a teacher of writing affect your own writing? Do you think it's beneficial?

ML: I think for the most part it's beneficial, and I think I'm fortunate because I don't share the background and material of most of my students. It's quite a luxury, in a way, that I teach in America rather than in Britain. I've actually never taught in Britain, and I'm curious what that would be like, when I would have much more overlap with my students' material. I find that I learn a lot from my students, probably not in quite the ways they expect.

I'd also say one of the great things about teaching is that you do

get to come back to work you love and explore it with other people. Because the other part of teaching, of course, is not just my students' fiction but coming into the classroom and saying, Let's read this story by Chekhov. Let's read this story by Diaz. Let's read this story by Cisneros. Getting to explore all those different voices in the company of other people is a huge luxury. You don't get to do that very much in other parts of life.

BG: You began your career as a story writer—your first book was a collection—yet since then, even though you've published stories here and there, you've primarily worked in the world of the novel. Why did you move from one form almost exclusively to the other?

ML: I think this move was quite inadvertent on my part. In the early nineties I did regard myself as working on a second collection, but for a number of reasons—not anything terribly publicly interesting—it's never seen the light of day. Part of what's happened is that, as time has progressed, I've become less and less satisfied with the stories. Stories I once regarded as complete have unraveled as I've learned more as a writer. But I remain very interested in the short story; it just hasn't been so publicly apparent.

I do absolutely love writing novels. I love the sense of making this huge structure in my brain over several years. I find that really exhilarating. But even though it seems now that I've totally given up on short stories, that doesn't feel like it's the case at my desk. It just seems like it when you go into a bookshop.

BG: So you like the different challenge that each form presents to you—the story and the novel?

ML: Yes. For me, one of the best things about the short story is that you can experiment in a way that is quite hard to do over several hundred pages. In fifteen or twenty pages you can try on a very high-diction, Jamesian voice, for instance, or a thuggish voice, or attempt the omniscient point of view and regard it as a kind of play.

BG: What makes an idea for a novel compelling enough for you to begin work on it?

ML: I suppose that it sinks its hooks into my brain and kindles my imagination. It's also important for me to feel that the idea is publicly interesting, that I could make an argument to people as to why they might be interested in this novel, that it's not just the product of a

private obsession. I'm always looking for that intersection between my own passionate interests and something that the larger world, the larger culture, is also interested in.

BG: Do you generally start from an idea or situation and attempt to build a character around it, or vice versa? Or neither?

ML: Different things. With my novel *Criminals* I had the idea very clearly: as I was walking to teach one evening, I saw this group of people standing beside a bus stop, holding up pictures of babies. Before I realized what I was seeing, which was a protest for Operation Rescue, what I fixated on and decided to write about was the juxtaposition of a baby and a bus stop. I thought, *I'll write about someone who finds a baby at a bus stop*. And then I immediately thought that it shouldn't be someone like me who finds the baby; it should be a banker. Maybe the alliteration had something to do with it. And one of my childhood friends had become an international banker, so I thought, *Oh, I'll just borrow one or two things from him*. But that was an unusually felicitous coming together of things.

In the case of my novel *The Missing World*, I read a piece in *People* magazine about a couple who were getting married after their second engagement; the first had been broken off when the woman lost her memory in an accident. That was what sparked the idea, but I think it sparked the idea because I was interested in issues of memory for personal reasons. As someone who mostly lives abroad, I'm particularly dependent on my memory to make my life whole. And also because there were all these questions floating around in the culture about how important memory is to our sense of identity and what happens if you're like Ronald Reagan and leave your memory behind, etc. So I come to different books in different ways.

BG: *The Missing World* boasts amazingly complicated plotting—an intricate web of connections among the central characters. You drop subtle clues for us as we go along, but you trust us to pick up on the connections that are slowly but inevitably melding together. How difficult was it to achieve this aspect of the novel? How many of these connections did you foresee and how many did you discover in the writing itself?

ML: I think writing that novel was a particularly incoherent process. Originally I had things reversed and thought that Jonathan would leave Hazel. I wrote eight chapters from that perspective, and then I realized I was hitting a wall. I didn't know what to do next, so I went

back to the beginning and I rewrote the novel, making Jonathan more like the not terribly good person he presently is. Then I started to feel the wall approaching again. I thought, *I've got to stop and think how I'm going to enlarge this novel so that it isn't simply a medical case history and a struggle between these two people*. That was when I started to bring in, in a much more active way, the other two characters, Freddie and Charlotte, and to see how they could enlarge the scope of the novel—not just in terms of plot but by their own struggles with memory. But it wasn't a very organized process [laughing]. It wasn't until I was about two-thirds of the way through the novel that I thought, *Okay, now I know what I'm doing*, and I could start figuring out how to make everything work. Happily I discovered that I simply loved writing about Charlotte and I loved writing about Freddie, so there was also a passionate affair with both of those characters. I had many, many pages about each of them that I had to discard because they just didn't fit.

BG: It's kind of amazing that that could be the process because it comes across as terrifically organized when you read it, which is, I guess, what all writers would hope for.

ML: Well, that's very reassuring, and I wish I could say, No, no, I had it all in mind to start with.

BG: Do you have a general practice of plotting? Do you ever outline your novels ahead of time?

ML: I do have a general principle of having a place I'm heading to, which I see shimmering ahead of me on a distant hilltop, and my question is how to get to that hilltop. So I would say I have a destination but not a route. I do write notes as I'm going along, which I actually very seldom reread, but they're all part of me trying to work out where I'm going next. I've always envied Henry James with his great notebooks of the 1890s, where you can read the plots of many of his future wonderful stories and novels, but I've never been able to do that myself. It's a much more stumbling process for me.

BG: The Flannery O'Connor write-to-discover-what-you-know process.

ML: Yes, but you notice that she wrote mostly short stories [laughing].

BG: Right, that's true. You need to have at least some goal, then, when you start a novel?

ML: I think it helps.

BG: In its depth and breadth of characterization, *The Missing World* reminded me a bit of Virginia Woolf and *Mrs. Dalloway*. She's doing a different thing there, focusing on a sole day—though she does give backstory as she goes—but I did think of the way she successfully delves into so many different consciousnesses when I read your novel. Do you claim Woolf as an influence at all?

ML: *To the Lighthouse* and *Mrs. Dalloway* are both books that I do go back to a lot, and I'm always amazed at how fully Woolf inhabits those different characters at a level of such sensual specificity. There's something really remarkable about it. So I would love to claim her as an influence, while at the same time I always feel that one of my major problems as a writer is that I haven't been *sufficiently* influenced. I would love to be more in the grip of some of these great authors.

BG: One idea that seems to operate in *The Missing World* is the inability of these characters, despite all the complicated ways in which their lives touch each other, to establish a true human connection. How, if at all, do you see this idea at work in the novel?

ML: Well, this isn't exactly an answer to your question, but one influence on the novel besides Virginia Woolf was *Portrait of a Lady*, a novel I've read several times. When I reread it around the time I was struggling with *The Missing World*, I was struck by that amazing moment when Isabel Archer realizes she's been tricked by Osmond and Madame Merle and that all the time she felt she was exercising free will and had this certain perception of Osmond, she was just being manipulated by the two of them. That's such an amazing and chilling scene in the novel, and I think in my own way I was trying to pay homage to that.

I was also exploring the way in which people sometimes impose their ideals or ideas on one another and how this often happens in romantic love: a kind of willful misreading of certain signals and behaviors. Often there's such a gap between how you feel and regard the world entering a relationship and how you feel and regard it after the demise of, or a major change in, that relationship. Obviously, for me, in *The Missing World*, that is linked with these problems about

remembering. Do we remember accurately? All the evidence is that we don't. So this major tool that we rely on for sorting out our lives is actually a very faulty apparatus.

BG: The way you deal with Jonathan in the novel seems to reveal a lot about how you view characterization. In many ways he's despicable, yet we're so far inside his psyche and we have such a clear understanding of what, to him, is a pure and benevolent desire for Hazel and her love, that we often find ourselves empathizing with him. How did you yourself view him, and how do you go about achieving this level of complexity in character?

ML: Well, I think it was very important for me to write about Jonathan in a point of view that, while not first-person, was very close to him. And after a certain number of chapters, I suddenly thought, *Oh, this person is behaving very badly* [laughing]. Much worse than I'd imagined when I started the book. It perturbed me that readers might not empathize with him, and it was at that point that I decided to make him a beekeeper. As a child I had an uncle who kept bees, and I found it very spooky and interesting—the costume, the hives, everything seemed very appealing. I thought it was the perfect activity for Jonathan, both solitary and complicated. And I hoped that you could start to see that by his own lights he's not behaving so badly. He's reading the world, he's thinking about the world, in a way that makes it seem that to him he's actually behaving quite well. That's a species of behavior that interests me very much and has caused an awful lot of trouble in human history. So I tried in various ways to make him sympathetic and to make sure that at a number of key moments you had some understanding of either why he was doing what he was doing or why he saw what he was doing in the way he was seeing it.

BG: You've done a considerable amount of research for your novels. How do you know when to stop? Peter Ho Davies, for instance, has said that sometimes he's done too much research and afterwards hasn't been able to write—to invent what he needed to—until he'd had enough time to forget much of what he'd read. Does research ever begin to limit you?

ML: I have to say that I don't think research has ever felt like a limitation, but that may be because I'm sloppy about it. I don't do it ahead of time; I do it in tandem with the writing. I typically will make something up, and then I'll go looking for the real answer. So when I started writing about Jonathan keeping bees, I didn't know much about

beekeeping, but I just made things up at the same time as I started finding beekeepers to interview.

In the case of *Eva Moves the Furniture*, research played a crucial role in the novel because I'd written so many versions that didn't work. Then I found this book in a secondhand bookshop about a pioneering plastic surgeon in the Second World War, and I realized that the Second World War was the cradle of plastic surgery in Britain (to mix my metaphors). I found it wonderfully interesting material and also wonderfully apposite for what I was trying to do in the novel—to show the gap between appearance and reality. So that was a case where research made a huge difference. I do find research quite addictive, so if I did it ahead of time, I might never start writing the novels [laughing].

BG: In the lovely passage you read last night from *Banishing Verona*, your forthcoming novel, I noticed that the character Zeke, while externally dissimilar to Freddie in *The Missing World*, appears to share with Freddie this generous—and perhaps unwarranted—compulsion to help other people, including a stranger he's just met. I wonder if you agree and, if so, what draws you toward this kind of character.

ML: I think I'm very interested in what some people call the problem of altruism. For me, the opposite side of random bad behavior is random good behavior. Why do some people reach out and help others? I hadn't thought of it before but you're right: Freddie and Zeke do share this characteristic, though I see it as coming from rather different impulses. In Freddie's case, it's this terrible thing that he feels he's done in his past that he's always trying to make up for, whereas in Zeke's case, with Verona, I don't think he ever really sets out to help her. He just falls in love with her and wants to get her back, and if he has to help her along the way, he will.

BG: Often writers with a number of books behind them seem distanced from their early work. Even though your novel *Eva Moves the Furniture* is your most recently published book (with the exception of the novel that's about to come out), it was the first of your published novels that you began to write, and it took you fifteen years to write it. For this reason it occupies a sort of unique place in your oeuvre. How would you describe your relationship to this book?

ML: I'm totally thrilled that it's out in the world. It was the novel I put most of myself into. I pestered so many people to read different drafts; I wrote so many different versions; I tried so many different

things to make it work. And when it saw the light of day, I couldn't have been more delighted. I don't know how to say it without sounding pompous, but I do think that finally the book that's published is the best book I could have written about this subject, which is to say I think someone else could probably have written a much, much better book. But I felt when it finally was published that it was the book I had wanted to write for so long. My mother died in her thirties and didn't write anything or leave mementos of that kind, so it gives me a special pleasure hearing people say her name, having total strangers talk to me about this person, Eva, as if they knew her.

BG: And of course they do know her. I am curious, though, as to your thinking about why it took such a long time to write. Why did it live with you for so long?

ML: I think the reason is one that I see haunting a number of writers, which is that the material—my mother and her relationship with the supernatural—was deeply interesting to me personally. But it took me a long time to realize that I had to make that publicly interesting to make it a novel. I had to remember that everyone else had mothers; there was no reason for them to be fascinated by mine. So it was a process of learning how to transform my mother and, given how little I knew about her, how to invent her.

I also think it's terribly difficult to write about the supernatural because people tend to have these very conflicted feelings about it. We don't want to subscribe to *The National Enquirer*, but we have a small body of stories we believe in, often about coincidences or omens or moments of telepathy or some sort of closeness with someone who's dead. This mixture of skepticism and credulity makes it complicated territory for fiction. If I had a dollar for every person who told me to go read "Turn of the Screw," I could have retired [laughing]. But it was interesting that people couldn't think of many other literary models in the white Anglo-Saxon tradition.

BG: Right. You have *Beloved*, but that's not in the Anglo-Saxon tradition.

ML: Yes, as soon as you step outside—to Native American or Indian or Chinese or Latin American—you can have as much supernatural stuff as you like.

BG: You haven't hidden the fact that Eva is based largely on your mother, who died when you were young. As you mentioned earlier,

she even has the same name. Do you feel that by creating the character of Eva you were able to learn more about your mother? Was that something that interested you personally in writing the book?

ML: You know, you read these literary biographies—well, *I* read them (W. H. Auden or Virginia Woolf or what have you)—and an astonishing amount is known about these people. What they had for tea and the color of their socks and what they said to their lovers or siblings—we just know a remarkable amount. When I began the book, I had the naïve idea that I could find out more about my mother, but that turned out not to be the case. Over a decade of trying to write the book, I learned very little about her that I didn't know to start with. But I did learn things imaginatively and about myself that surprised me. So the ambition changed. If you'd asked me in 1987 when I started the book, I would have said, Oh, I don't think of myself as having a mother. Biologically, yes, but not in any other way. By the time I finished, in 2000, I thought, *Oh, I do have a mother and we did have a relationship, and even though she's dead—and has been for almost my entire life—it's still a powerful relationship*. In a way, I got back something that I never expected to.

BG: In the last section of the novel, we discover that Eva is essentially telling the story to her daughter, Ruth. Did you imagine yourself at all as the character Ruth, as though your mother were telling her story to you? If so, how did the construction of the novel differ from other less ostensibly autobiographical novels of yours?

ML: In some part it was a writerly decision. In my many failed attempts at the book, I had one attempt in which the daughter was the one telling the story, and I had another attempt in which the mother was telling the story *to* the daughter. Neither of those succeeded. But something stayed with me, and I felt like it could make a very powerful ending to the book—after naming the other sections after places—to suddenly call the last country "You."

BG: Yes, it was.

ML: And I thought I could get away with using that second-person voice for a limited number of pages in a way that wouldn't make the reader say, Hey, I'm not you, I'm not your daughter. I'm not sure I thought of myself exactly as Ruth, but I obviously liked the idea of playing some role in the book. So there are probably rather tangled motives around that.

BG: In your essay "The Third Servant," one of the things you address is not having had an especially close relationship with your own father. Do you think the affectionate, doting relationship between Eva and David in the novel was a way for you to establish a connection in your book that you didn't have in your life?

ML: You know, I still haven't figured out what I think about that. I have a number of pieces I've written over the years—pieces of fiction—in which there are quite affectionate portraits of fathers. I don't know where it comes from because I can't say that I can summon it very easily out of my own autobiographical relationship with my father. So I think there is an element of longing there. Perhaps there was also a period in my life, probably between the ages of about three and eight, when I did actually have quite a close relationship with my father and I can get back to this in my fiction in a way that I can't more directly. In *Eva Moves the Furniture*, I was deeply fond of David and felt real tenderness about his relationship with Eva. When I wrote that scene where she rescues him, I was very moved by it myself, and I hope that some of that came across on the page.

People are always saying, Oh, the unexamined life is not worth living. But there are some things in my own psyche that I see in my fiction, and I just let them go. They're there, on the page, and I don't know what else to say about them. They're obviously part of me, but I couldn't exactly say how.

BG: What habits do you generally follow when you're getting your best writing done? Are you a strict write-every-day writer? Or one who gets the work done in fits and starts?

ML: I do aspire to write every day. In my ideal life I write every day from about eight a.m. to two p.m., which, of course, doesn't mean I really do that but that I'm present at my desk. I'm resisting the outside world, and if I read anything else, it will be something like the dictionary or a poem—not a novel or a story, not something that takes me that far away. In my actual life, my time is much more interrupted than that. So I have gotten more patient with trying to learn to write later in the day and in much less ideal conditions than I used to. When I was younger the only thing that supported me in my writing was my habits. No one cared if I wrote another story or whatever, so the routines were dreadfully important. Now that I have more support in my work, I think it's easier for me to be more flexible.

BG: You said the other day that the vast majority of writers struggle to

achieve verisimilitude in the all-important aspect of character. What advice do you have for young writers trying to create unique, believable characters?

ML: Probably nothing very startling, but one thing I'd say is, If you spend an hour in a café, for instance, watching people, and then you go back and look at a scene you've written in a story, very often you'll find how paltry or minimal the range of gestures, expressions, and behaviors you've given to your characters is. Too often I use words like "look," "shrug," "frown," "smile"—four big ones for me—and then I'm out in the world and I see all the things people do: little odd gestures they make with their faces and surprising hand gestures, all the things people actually do. So I guess one thing I'd say to young writers is, Go look at the world and compare your pages to the world. For me, it also really helps to try to think about people I know. How would I go about trying to bring to life a friend or a relative? Again, I think that's very salutary because it makes me realize how superficial my characters are, especially in early drafts. And of course I do borrow from people I know in creating my characters.

BG: What's one new thing you've discovered about writing and the writing life within the past year?

ML: Maybe we're going to have to turn off the tape recorder while I agonize about this one [laughing].

BG: It's one of those sort of unfair questions, but I thought it would be interesting to see what learning curve is still taking place for a writer who's already mastered a great many things.

ML: Well, I remember Francine Prose telling me about a conversation she'd had with Harold Brodkey. Brodkey was talking about how writing got harder as you got older. Francine did not go on to tell me what he meant by that, but I think one of the revelations of the last year for me has been really feeling that statement in my life as a writer. I'm very aware now that I actually have a body of work and I have a body of work that, broadly speaking, is in the public domain. So I really have to think quite carefully about how to enlarge that body of work, how to go into new territory in terms of plot and theme and character and content, and in terms of the voice of the prose—how to push my sentences harder, how to get better.

As a young writer publishing stories in very obscure magazines, I vaguely had the sense that no one had read them. If I wanted to

repeat the same simile again—I mean, I didn't want to repeat it, but perhaps somehow I had and eventually noticed—I didn't worry too much. It was fine. But recently I reread *War and Peace*, and quite near the beginning of the book Tolstoy describes a baby's wrist as having this crease, as if a piece of string had been sunk into the flesh. (That's not quite how he puts it; it's much more beautiful.) And then something like 900 pages later, he describes a baby's wrist again—different baby, different wrist—in the same way. *Oh, you're doing it again*, I thought. It made me realize that readers actually do remember and do notice. You can't get away with being lazy. I guess that's the thing that's been most striking to me in the last year, and I think—I'm sorry, I'm rambling on here—we all have these blueprints of certain psychological patterns we return to, certain patterns for the family we return to. One has to beware of just being lured back to those patterns in moments of inattention or laziness. I guess I'm saying that I'm facing up to the challenge of my next book [laughing].

BG: What is that? What's the next challenge? What are you looking forward to?

ML: What am I looking forward to? [musing] Several things are shimmering at the edge of my consciousness, and which way I'll turn is unclear. Like a number of other people, I've read some of Philip Roth's recent novels with huge admiration for the vitality of his prose and his vigorous thinking about public matters. I have been intrigued by the idea of trying to write something that has a more public dimension. I've also been intrigued by the idea of trying to make a work that has a different form. One idea I have is of putting together a number of novellas that would each seem quite separate, but where if the reader read, say, all four, he or she would also find a larger story emerging. So those are two rather hazy ideas. There's also just the endless pursuit to get better at the level of the sentence, to write better sentences.

The poet and fiction writer Stephen Dobyns once said something to the effect that language is always a diminution, but with poetry it's less of a diminution. I can't write poetry but making the words work in some magical way is something I aspire to in my prose.

Sarah Flygare

The Things We Leave Behind

We're ten blocks off when we see it—an electric-pink flamingo pulsating at a rate of eighty flashes a minute, lighting up the snow in my father-in-law's yard.

My father-in-law is a landscape architect. During the dormant winter months he and his colleagues flood each others' lives with the most flamboyant flamingos they can muster. In the Midwest, landscape architects are like farmers: every year they go a little crazy waiting for the ground to thaw.

I concentrate hard on the flamingo flashing in the snow. I don't turn my head left to look down Maple Lane—the street I grew up on. Since my parents died two years ago in a jack-knife double-semi blink of an eye, I haven't been able to look down Maple Lane, let alone at the house itself.

It's almost two a.m. in the dead of January but BG, my father-in-law, is waiting on the porch. He's wrapped in a big red rug, hopping from one bare foot to the other.

"That's your grandpa, Baby," I say.

"I'll deal with the stuff," Tom says. "You get the little guy inside."

The chill of Midwestern winter rushes into me as I carry Wyatt through the snow. He has never seen snow before. I wonder how he will react, awakening to a world gone white.

BG folds us into a big red rug hug.

"There you are," he says.

We stay that way for a long time not saying a thing.

"Get yourself upstairs," he finally whispers. "The sheets have been rolled around on a bit but they're pretty clean."

My father-in-law's house is as home as it gets for me. I know he knows this from the way he looks at me when he thinks I'm too absorbed in a book to notice, and from the things he keeps. If I leave behind a nearly spent bottle of seaweed shampoo, it's waiting for me the next time we visit. If I leave a single blue sock, a silver-edged scarf, a dog-eared Dunning mystery, a pile of coins and gnarled grocery receipts, he gathers and stashes them in the top left drawer of the loft's dresser. He never disturbs what's already there.

I'm too tired to undress. I lie on the big feather bed and concentrate on matching my breathing to Wyatt's, listening to the silence of snow falling on the corrugated roof. I know Tom and BG need their private time. BG has called us home because he thinks that Joy—

Tom's mother—is ready to die. Packing, I included our black clothes in case he is right. Tom and I haven't talked about it. She's been in a nursing home for ten years, sick for twenty. She hasn't recognized Tom for forever.

In the morning I scrub at the three-hundred miles of eastward travel coating my hands, face and neck. Three pink flamingos reside in the center of the glycerin soap. I smile as I set the soap in its lime-green dish. I leave Tom and Wyatt sleeping and head down to the kitchen where BG is dressing a duck.

"I decided to make it a fowl year," he says. "Fowl every single night. Tonight it's Muscovy duck with a star anise rub. This here's Tracy," he says, patting the duck fondly. "Tom's in charge of stuffing if he ever gets up."

I glance at the clock. It's almost ten.

"We must have been tired," I say.

"Yeah, well, Motor Mouth didn't keep *you* up all night bragging about his baby."

I smile. Tom is known for his taciturn nature, but his father's always accusing him of running off at the mouth. I also know that they were not talking about Wyatt, but Joy. BG is the only person Tom will talk to about his mom.

"The house looks great," I say, as BG hands me a steaming mug of rich Arabian coffee.

I know that when I get to the bottom of the mug, I'll find a giant ceramic cockroach. This mug has been in this kitchen since I was a girl, but BG still thinks it's funny and gives it to me every time.

I am wondering if there is too much levity here. Shouldn't we be solemn, silent, scared? There is a possible death knocking at the door here. Another one.

My father-in-law's house is not small. It's not a place you have to cram yourself into but one you have to expand to fill. It's huge and roaming and the walls ride long journeys passing native rugs and masks and avant-garde lighting fixtures up to the far-flung ceilings peppered with skylights—round, square, and obtuse. Over a spell of years he ripped the roof off and built the walls higher and higher. He has traveled in planes and on the web—searching out the masks, the goddesses, nymphs, and gnomes that make you stand back and simply catch your breath over and over again.

When he began renovations, he was anticipating Joy's return from the hospital. It was to be a gift to his stingy lover of light. He opened the savings accounts she had sealed to create for her the wide open

spaces she was always craving. He bought hundreds of books and every symphony under the sun. He installed floor-to-ceiling bookcases and arranged the books alphabetically within their eras. He installed an indoor waterfall which trickled from the fourth story to the third to the second to the first. He invited Gallo to design gargoyles for the water to bounce against. He even installed hidden scent-spigots so the whole place smells like lilies year-round.

As the doctors said *one more week,* week after week, he built the walls higher and higher until he reached the day of knowing the woman he knew as his wife wasn't ever coming home. He capped the roof and began buying wine ten cases at a time.

That was ten years ago.

The kitchen is the only room he didn't renovate. The drawers are still marked with the labels BG affixed when the dementia began winning the war. *Plates, saucers, bowls. Stove utensils, forks, knives, spoons.* It had frustrated her that she couldn't remember how to unload the dishwasher and he had tried to help.

The funny thing is, we always seem to end up in the kitchen, no matter how hard we try to use the other rooms.

"Jesus," I say, "This phone is probably worth about a million dollars by now. Must be one of the only wall-mounted rotaries left."

BG laughs.

"That old thing," he says.

I remember the nights and nights of my adolescence I spent curled on the stairs leading to the kitchen of my parents' house, tethered to the phone line with Tom, imagining this same phone pressed against his ear. We didn't have that much to say, but liked to listen to each other breathe.

My father-in-law is dressed in a winter-linen suit. His fingers are loaded with turquoise rings and his belt buckle competes with Wyatt's head in circumference. He is drinking sparkling wine with a dash of lime juice out of a complicated yet elegant flute.

"You look simply grand," I say, because he does.

"We have to introduce the little guy to his grandmother today," he says. "To Joy," he says, running his hand through his thick hair. "If Motor Mouth ever gets out of bed. You'd think yours was the first baby in the world to have a bowel movement to hear Tom go on about it."

My throat constricts. Visits to the nursing home are hard on all of us, but they hit Tom hardest. When Joy is particularly agitated, my husband can close up for days in response. I have never known how to talk about any of this with him or anyone else.

"I'll wake Tom," I say.

"Don't even," BG says. "We've got nothing but time."

Sometimes Joy seems to recognize Tom. Other times she doesn't. This time her eyes are wide liquid saucers that will not leave his face. She seems miles from death. She doesn't notice the baby in his arms. Her lips, too, form a perfect circle, as if she is afraid to believe her eyes and also afraid not to. I keep my hands in my pockets, not wanting her to know that I wear her engagement ring. BG says I should show her—it might bring a warm memory. I don't agree. I think it would feel like a slap.

Her agitation begins almost immediately once she sees Tom. She splays her fingers as if looking for piano keys, trying to communicate through the chains of the illnesses that have locked her up. Her right index finger finds middle C and bangs away at it, making no sound. BG waves us out of the room and bends to calm her, wrapping her in a gulf of his aftershave. Tom and I walk to the car, strap Wyatt into his seat. We sit in silence.

I can feel Tom closing all of his doors and windows, locking himself up tight. Finally BG climbs behind the driver's wheel, brushes his hair back, and says, "Let's go see a roasting rack about a duck."

BG tends the duck while I set the table. Tom makes the drinks. He pours all of his concentration into mint juleps. He dices the mint leaves so thin, they are almost liquid. The tragedies of our lives have turned us into amazing chefs, us three. We concentrate on food when we can't face the rest.

In high school, all of the girls thought Tom was a knockout. They liked his silence, his quiet smile. What they didn't know was that he was learning how to lock himself up even then. And who can blame him? Every day after school he'd go home, not knowing who he would find—a mother who recognized him or one who didn't. His head learned not to expect anything, but his heart still struggles. Even then—even when we were just little kids—I responded to his lockdowns by filling the air around him with chatter, as if I could protect him by hiding his hiding. I still do. Unless we are alone. Then I let the silence blanket us both.

"Sylv, a toast please?" BG says as we sit down to dinner.

I raise my glass.

"To Bird Tracy, Wyatt's first duck," I say.

"Remember that year," BG says, "that Tom here decided we'd cook us up some Mock-Stringhopper Pilua for Thanksgiving? We missed the whole game, trying to find a store that sold ghee."

"Yeah, well," I say. "Like you can talk, Mr. Lamb Piralen."

We go on like this, BG and me, resurrecting every menu we can remember having served at this table over the years. I feel like a couple of hens clucking around our silent rooster, but I don't care. It's our way of keeping Tom here as much as we can.

When Joy first went to the hospital, the home, ten years ago, Tom left for Asia and we didn't see him for a year. It's not that either BG or I really think that could happen again, but still, we chatter like words can still flight.

After dinner, BG retires to his part of the house. Tom and I leave the duck and dishes on the table and sit side-by-side listening to the water falling. Tom strokes Wyatt's hair, lost. He is somewhere in his past with his vibrant and alert mother—the one who marched for women's rights and refused to cook or clean; the one who wore bowler hats and smoked cigars; the one before her time—the woman, the mother, she was before she got locked up inside of herself. I fill my own space.

Before my parents died, I was better at this. I knew how to be present for Tom without requiring his presence, but I don't know how to do that anymore. I never felt safe talking to him about their deaths. I never felt like I had the right, somehow. They lived every single second up until the one they died. Jack-knife clean out of hell. Joy's been doing more dying than living for decades. I no longer know how to touch that. I want to be able to tell him that I miss them. But I know he misses Joy. I know that at least I have resolution—I know for sure my parents are gone. He doesn't have that, and I want to protect him, always, from all of the pain surrounding that limbo.

It's a relief to be in BG's house, to have a break from our own house, our house full of my parents' furniture. Their old guitars, sheet music, pots and pans, photo albums, dying ferns, their elephant collection. Their refrigerator magnets, cookbooks, candelabras. Truth be told, I get a little tired of remembering. But I am more horrified of forgetting.

I thought having a baby would take away some of the grief, that it would shift my perspective, allow me to at least paint the old furniture. Maybe just the table legs. But it didn't happen that way. Holding Wyatt only makes me miss my parents all the more. I am constantly resisting the urge to raise Wyatt into the sky so they can get a closer look. That's not something I want Tom to see.

I don't know how much time passes before I take our sleeping Wyatt from Tom's arms and carry him up the stairs to the crib Tom used as a baby.

I watch Wyatt sleep. He's a perfect baby, really. He smiles in his

sleep. Giggles, even. I wonder what he's doing in his dreams, where he goes. Can he walk? Fly? Does my grief keep him grounded when he is awake, tethered to a too-adult, grief-stricken world so that he has to pack all of his joy into his sleep? Am I a bad mother, making him live in a shrine? A mausoleum?

I've read that a mother's grief affects her child, downright chemically changes his nervous system, making him hypersensitive to some things and numb to others. Even with this knowledge, I cannot let go—I cannot throw my parents' ashes to the wind but keep them hidden in shoe boxes in the attic.

I smooth Wyatt's fine hair over his tiny, vein-riddled head. I watch the pounding of his heart, right there, exposed on his scalp. I think about the morning he was born, the look on Tom's face when he first saw Wyatt—complete and immediate love for that utterly helpless, tiny baby.

I walk down my father-in-law's stairs and inch down the hall. BG and Tom are in the kitchen. BG and I react to Tom in exactly the same way, sitting silently next to him as long as we can, as if he is a veteran of some war we have only seen on the screen.

I stand with my back against the wall, glad BG has emerged. I am worn out. I don't know if I could have handled another shift. I am quiet. They do not hear me or see me. But for once, I don't want to give them their space. I want to be there, too. I want to be part of the silence but also apart. I concentrate on a rug—fuchsia and electric-blue triangles—hanging halfway up the wall.

Finally, Tom breaks the silence.

"She still gets really sad sometimes," he says. "But she's getting better. I'm pretty sure she's getting better."

I can tell by the way his voice comes out that he's rubbing his right temple with his right hand.

I'm shocked to hear his voice. I didn't expect to hear it for another few days.

At first I am confused, imagining they are discussing Joy. It takes me a while to realize he's talking about me.

"Her grief kind of surrounds her," he says. "Holds her in, keeps her from people. It's like a bubble. A princess locked in an ice castle."

My face is frozen. Inside, hot blood races.

"I feel like she's that snowman in the paperweight, you know? She's the thing that remains rigid, even as the snow—the very stuff you are made of—flutters all around."

I'm crying now. Warm tears. Hot tears. Scalding, melting tears. Tom and I have unspoken boundaries. I can bring up my sadness, he can bring up his, but we leave each other's alone. It never occurred

to me that he might talk about mine with anyone else; it never occurred my description of him would ever fit me.

BG's voice comes, quieter than I've ever heard it.

"She didn't have the chance you've had to get used to it," he says. "I don't know if that's good or bad, but there it is. She'll come back, Tom," he says. "Just like you always do."

I slump against the wall. I'm crying again, but differently. The quietest kind of crying. The kind of crying you never want to end. The kind that makes you porous. I can feel myself letting go. I can feel my grip loosening. I hear BG's shuffle and then he grabs my shoulders and pulls me up. He looks me dead in the eye. His eyes are like my husband's—they can see all of the way into you.

"Go ahead and cry, girl," he hisses, "You're not saving him from a thing."

It takes me years to mount the stairs to our bedroom. Parts of me are still standing where my father-in-law left me. I can still feel his purple grip on my shoulders. I know he's not angry at me, he's angry at the sickness for ripping our lives asunder over and over again, and angry at the senselessness of my parents' deaths.

I close the bathroom door and turn on the hot water. I am Lady Macbeth trying to wash the weight of death from my hands. I need to know if, when I reach the flamingos, they are going to be something that is going to last—something to hold onto—or if they, too, were meant to melt away.

I tell myself if they last, these flamingos, if they were meant to stay after the glycerin melts, I will sneak to the yard of my childhood house and bury them in the snow covering the lawn in which I took my first step. I will say goodbye. I will know my parents are alive not in the old heavy furniture that adorned their house and now mine, not in the sheet music or wax-laden candle holders, but in the hearts of my husband, myself, my son—in the heart of my father-in-law's house.

When the flamingos emerge and remain, I tiptoe to Wyatt. I place my hand—cleaner than it's ever been—on his head and feel the blood coursing through his body, journeying from his little heart to his limbs and back in mere seconds. I stay like that, with my hand on his head, feeling his pulse until my own slows and merges with the heartbeat. I feel my mother. I feel my father. I feel my mother-in-law and my father-in-law and my husband and myself. I feel us all pulsing steadily, stealthily through his veins.

Brian Doyle

Hope

I'll tell you a story. It's about a tiny woman named Hope. She is seventy-nine years old. She was born on Post Street in San Francisco. Her mother was a nurse. Her father grew flowers. When she was an infant her father was crushed by a train. When she was seven her brother drowned in the bay. When she was seventeen she and her mother and brother and sister were evicted from their home by order of the federal government of the United States and sent to live in a horse stall at a racetrack with other men and women and children of Japanese ancestry.

Hope tells me about this.

My brother slept in the front of the stall, she says, and my mother and sister and I slept in the rear of the stall. It was raining on the night we arrived there. We were given Army mattress covers and told to go to the barn and fill them with hay. We were there six months. Then we were sent to Camp Topaz in Utah. It was in the high desert. The barracks were made of wood and tar-paper. In the winter it was very cold and in the summer the dust came through the windows and doors and walls.

In the camp, she says, I went to high school and became engaged to a boy named Hiroshi. His family was ordered to Japan on prisoner exchange. I went with them. We were two months at sea. We slept on the deck. We washed our hair in the rain when the rain came every afternoon. We went around Africa. The captain of the ship told us one day that Japan was losing the war and there wasn't enough food in Japan and he would let us off the ship before we got to Japan if we wanted to get off. All the young people on the ship had a meeting and we decided to get off the ship in Singapore or Manila. I got off in Singapore. All the ones who got off in Manila died. Where I was the bombs fell all around. When the war ended all I had was the clothes on my back. Many ladies were scared of rape so they cut their hair real short like a man. I did not.

I went on to Japan, she says. First time I ever set foot there. It was very cold and we sewed coats and pants from blankets. I left Hiroshi because he treated me badly. I found a job with the United States Eighth Army. That's how I met my husband. His name was Art. He had red hair. He was Scottish, English, Irish, and Cherokee was in there too. All the other American soldiers worked very hard but he seemed to spend all his time fooling around and teasing the girls. One

day the promotion list came out and I took his name off. He didn't get the promotion. When he found out he came storming into the office and read me up and down and I heard words I never heard before. Two weeks later he came to apologize and he brought me silk stockings. A month later he invited me to the theater with him. We went to see the *Mikado*. That was our first date.

After a while he asked me to get married, says Hope. I said no: I had to go home and find out what happened to my family. So he said okay, fine, and he went home to Oklahoma. A year later I went home and when my ship came into San Francisco there was Art waiting for me at the wharf. He asked me to get married again and I said no again. He went to my family and asked my brother if he could marry me and my brother said no. I went to work at a hospital and lived in a rooming house, and Art was working for the railroad and living in another rooming house, and he kept asking me to get married and I kept saying no but finally one day I said yes. We got married in the morning at city hall and moved in together that afternoon and I was so excited I got sick, and that was our honeymoon, me sick in our new apartment and Art taking care of me.

Hope folds her hands in her lap and smiles. She tells me about their two sons, one named for Davy Crockett, and about the house they built in the California mountains, and how her husband lost his voice at the end of his life, which was a great blow to the both of them, for he loved to tease her and she loved to hear him, and how when she was a little girl she loved to run barefoot in the city, and how in summer she and her sister and cousins and friends would sing on the roof of their building at night, huddled and hungry and happy, a long time ago but not very long ago at all.

*

Hope and her family were evicted from their home in 1942 by provision of Executive Order 9066, issued by Franklin Delano Roosevelt on February 19, 1942. "Whereas the successful prosecution of the war requires every possible protection against espionage and against sabotage," wrote FDR, "I hereby authorize and direct the Secretary of War to prescribe regulations for the conduct and control of alien enemies..."

Alien enemies including, for example, the teenage American citizen Hope.

More than 110,000 American citizens of Japanese ancestry were eventually held in ten internment camps (or "concentration camps," as FDR himself called them) in the American West for the next two

years. In March of 1942, Public Proclamation Number One created Military Areas Numbers One and Two, which comprised California, Oregon, Washington, and Arizona, the states from which the Nisei—Americans of Japanese heritage—would soon be excluded as possible alien enemies. Two weeks later Roosevelt established the War Relocation Authority, which carried out the task.

Amache, Colorado.
Gila River, Arizona.
Minidoka, Idaho.
Jerome, Arkansas.
Manzanar, California.
Heart Mountain, Wyoming.
Poston, Arizona.
Rohwer, Arkansas.
Tule Lake, California.
Topaz, Utah.

One hundred and ten thousand children and women and men.

Evacuees, the government called these of its citizens.

Prisoners, inmates, internees, they call themselves.

How do we count them?

As the late Oregon poet William Stafford said:

One.
One.
One...

*

O Topaz, O one square mile of wind and dust, O searing light and wrenching cold, with your forty-two blocks each exactly the same, each grid with thirteen barrack buildings and a recreation hall and a mess hall and a laundry and a pile of coal and a latrine and shower stalls and a manager's office and one tree. The Paiute Indians who had lived there for centuries immemorial called it Pahvant, the place of abundant water, which it was before white settlers diverted the Sevier River for irrigation and made it what the first white American maps called it: the Sevier Desert, on which only greasewood and salt grass grew. And forty-two trees—elms, olives, junipers, and locusts, sent by the forestry department at Utah State College, which also sent ten thousand cuttings of tamarisk and willows and currants. Which all soon died in the heat and wind and salt soil.

Rank on rank the forty-two blocks were stacked around the center of camp, where were the schools and libraries and churches and post office and gymnasium. To the north, administrative offices, the

hospital, the military police station; to the south a fifteen-acre community garden plot, playing fields (of raked dust), and the cemetery that was never used for the 144 prisoners who died during the life of the camp; their bodies were sent to Salt Lake City for cremation and their ashes held for their families to claim after the war.

Around the perimeter of camp, every inch of it, a tall barbed wire fence. Around the perimeter, every quarter mile, watchtowers with searchlights and armed guards. Pinned to the lapels of the prisoners arriving at Topaz: identification tags.

The first two hundred prisoners arrived, by train, on September 11, 1942. Then five hundred prisoners on September 16. Then five hundred prisoners a day until October 16. All told more than eight thousand prisoners in five weeks.

Each contingent of prisoners greeted by a drum and bugle corps at the front gate.

Among the prisoners: Shirley Temple's gardener.

*

On June 25, 1943 the first graduation class in Topaz High School history conducted its commencement exercises on the plaza in front of the high school building. It was windy. It was always windy, says Hope.

The graduating class entered the plaza to the strains of the English hymn "Jerusalem," based on a poem by the mystic genius William Blake. After the Pledge of Allegiance, and the playing of the American national anthem, and a prayer led by a Protestant minister, Mr. Joseph Tsukamoto, and songs by the German composers Johann Sebastian Bach and Richard Wagner and the Polish composer Frederic Chopin, there was a flurry of speeches, and translation of them into Japanese by graduating senior Motoichi Yanagi, and presentation of the 216 degrees, and then the class sang the alma mater (*...from far and wide we've gathered, and made now into one...*), and then the choir sang "Jerusalem" again and marched off to a reception in Dining Hall No. 32. So ended the first year of Topaz High School in Topaz Internment Camp, Utah.

Soon thereafter the 1943 yearbook was published. *Ramblings*, it was called—the school's mascot being a ram—and along with its accounts of the doings of the dance committee and the newspaper staff and the thespian club and the choir and the Future Farmers of America chapter and the home economics club and the basketball team, there are pages and pages of photographs of and notes on the seniors, one of whom was Hope, and I spend hours and hours in these pages, staring

at her face, and all the faces.

Teruko wants to be a beautician. Minoru wants to be a surveyor. Stanley wants to be an entomologist. Mitsuyo wants to be a seamstress. Kazuko wants to be a dietician. Hisako wants to be a stenographer. Teiko wants to study mathematics. Kazuyuki wants to be a carpenter. Seiji wants to join the United States Army. Mariko wants to be a pharmacist. Hisashi wants to be a chef. Peter wants to be a farmer. Kazuo wants to be a mechanic. Masaru wants to be a writer. Umeko wants to be a housewife. Tomi says he wants to be the ideal husband. Motoko wants to be an oculist. Minoru wants to be an actor. Miyeko wants to be a librarian. Eiji wants to be a chemical engineer. Fusaye wants to sing. Himeo wants to be the fastest runner ever. Yemiko wants to be a nurse. Rey wants to be an artist. Teruko wants to be a teacher. Okiko is looking forward to the day when she will become, as she says, a Doctor.

Their faces peer at me from 1943, smiling, grinning, shy, scared, startled by the camera, their eyeglasses slightly askew, neckties neatly knotted, hair curled just so, stern, beaming, one boy wearing a rakish cap, one girl with a handkerchief meticulously folded into her blazer pocket. Hope's smile is big and confident.

After each senior's name and before each senior's feats and accomplishments and desires and dreams and ambitions and hopes and plans there is, in parentheses, the name of the high school he or she was attending before being sent to Camp Topaz. Oakland High, Berkeley High, San Mateo High, Alameda, Hayward, San Leandro, San Jose, Pescadero. Hilo and Konawaena in Hawaii. Pascal High in Texas. Theodore Roosevelt High School in Fresno. George Washington High in San Francisco.

*

On December 18, 1944, as Douglas MacArthur's soldiers and sailors and airmen and divers and intelligence agents drove through the Pacific theater toward Manila, their hearts and fears fixed on the inevitable invasion of Japan, the United States War Relocation Authority announced plans to close all ten American concentration camps within six to twelve months. On August 6, 1945, the United States dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima. The Americans called the bomb Little Boy and the Japanese called it the Original Child. The fireball created by the bomb was one hundred million degrees at its center and burned one hundred and thirty thousand people to death by the end of the day. On August 9 the United States dropped an atomic bomb on Nagasaki. Seventy-five thousand people burned to

death by the end of the day. On August 14 Japan surrendered. On August 15 the first prisoners were released from Topaz, heading back to the Pacific coast. On September 2 the war was formally ended by signature in Tokyo Bay. Hope's family went home to San Francisco. On October 31, at one in the afternoon, the camp's front gate was locked from the outside after the last prisoners were released—mostly families from Hawaii waiting for space on ships to get home.

In three years at Topaz there had been two assaults, two major thefts, six arrests for public drunkenness, ten arrests for gambling, thirteen prisoners sent to mental hospitals, eighteen prisoners sent to Japan, one hundred and seventy-eight prisoners joining the United States Army, one hundred and thirty nine deaths, and three hundred and eight-four births.

Topaz's nineteen thousand acres was eventually sold (for a dollar an acre) to local farmers, who also bought many of the buildings to use as chicken coops and tool sheds. By 1966 nothing remained of the camp but concrete barrack foundations and a laundry boiler smokestack.

In 1976 the Japanese American Citizen League of Salt Lake City bought an acre of camp land (near what had been the front gate) and erected a commemorative marker.

In 1988 the President of the United States, Ronald Reagan, signed House Resolution 442 into law, directing the government to issue a formal apology and pay $20,000 to each surviving prisoner.

In 1990 the first payments were actually issued, accompanied by a letter from the President of the United States: "We can never fully right the wrongs of the past," wrote George Bush the elder, "but we can take a clear stand for justice and recognize that serious injustices were done to Japanese Americans during World War II."

In 1993 a newly constituted Topaz Museum committee bought most of the campsite back (for fifty dollars an acre) and, working with the Utah State Historical Society, began to restore the camp. So far there's half a building standing amid the greasewood and salt grass—half an old pine-and-tar camp recreation hall, through which the wind whistles freely, blazing in summer and frigid in winter.

I ask Hope if she remembers the recreation hall. O yes, she says. Yes. I remember the wind and the dust coming through the windows. It was always so windy in camp. You could not escape that wind. It would find you. It lived with you.

I ask her if she is bitter about being imprisoned by her own government for having parents from another country.

No, I am not bitter, she says. No. Bitter is no place to be. But I do not forget.

Louis Phillips

Love Poem for My Wife After So Many Years of Marriage

As you might wander to a field or meadow
To pick Love-in-a-mist,
This day winds down with a burst of rain,
My mouth & hairs, each moist
Watching you undress, as
The rafters of our small room sing of
Interludes & fugues, then night.

Dick Bentley

Another Mountain

I'm short-winded, there are clouds,
and from the summit we see
slim shadows, continents with
nearby islands stirring over the hills.
The air has a faultless lightness,
perfect for carrying the tang
of pine moss, the drift of delphinium
that grows by the fire tower.

The granite down the rock face
still has the dash and surge
of rushing lava.
We climb down slowly
inhaling the woods, deferential
to the moss,
with its new growth
of red hair and

microscopic flowers.
The stone bed of the lowest stream is paved
with moss all green and golden in the pools,
and suddenly we hear
the noise of water
pouring over stone,
pouring, pouring,
kinder than melody, this pouring.

Rachel Squires Bloom

Canoe Trip

Water buzzes in conspiratorial static,
busily rushing to river's end, infinitely
different molecules caressing solid rocks.

On this trip of couples, like an advanced
Noah's Ark let loose on shore, all note
your straight back, burnished skin, firm
but slender biceps. You're the natural
here amidst woods and water.
For the first time, I see you stripped
of what armor women don: serious skirts
expressing workplace importance, fitted
dresses and sleek heels stressing beauty.
You're uncovered; I see no marks on flesh
but sense you're slightly hurt. Fleeing
or fighting, the wounded are always
the most dangerous animals.

Bill Cowee

Moving Yet Another Load into the New House

Forces have not finished shaping this
ground, earth settled by seismic
shudder, honed by the whetstone
sands of Rose Peak,
gouged by wet-tongued storms
along the dry washes
on their way to the Carson River.
High mountain desert
waits what would be made of it.
For now it is
a ragged seam joining
conifer forests to the white-laced,
rimed alkali flat.
Who would send down their root
into the eddies of clay
and sand but one also being wrought,
one whose once-rock fractures,
swept along before prevalent winds,
one who through the membranous skin
inhales the breath
of soil after each soft rain.
Right there, in a broad bend
of Pleistocene riverbed
someone has built a modest home.
Who could ever do anything
to deserve a single night's sleep in it?

William Ford

The Property

It's a land of tailings
Incapable of growing
Anything valuable
According to the Amish,
A tax write-off at best.

The corn's volunteer,
Carried here by coons
Or dropped as turds
By deer that vanish
Right before the eyes.
At night, something
Boulders the pond
And leaves no print.

One day, I could,
To please myself,
Build a house half
Into its stony face,
Roof angled for the best
Light in all seasons,
Cool in summer, warm
In winter, with no back
To protect, ever.

The Crab

Where the dark of water is light,
You eat what we will not touch
Making death sweet for a time.
After giving thanks, we break
Your back and slowly chew.

Fred Yannantuono

Leeward Palindrome

Way alee few do go ere, O God, we feel a yaw.

Mary Elizabeth Pope

Junior Lifesaving

The morning before Adam slips beneath the glassy surface of Lake Michigan, you find a letter from the woman you know he is in love with hidden in a closet of the house you are sharing for the summer. You are putting away a pile of his clothes that you have spot-treated and ironed, as if getting out all the stains and wrinkles will somehow fix things between you, when you see the sheets of stationery tucked behind a pile of socks, along with a carton of the Camels you didn't know he was still smoking. You are twenty-seven years old on a day you will replay over and over in your mind in the years to come, wondering, always, if you are to blame for losing him.

*

You met the woman once, his friend from college who tottered up on a pair of stilettos as you waited with Adam outside the Chicago Institute of Art. She was petite, blonde as a Barbie, thirty minutes late. Jessica. She draped herself around him—an embrace, or some version of it, that lasted the full six hours you were there—and went on about the number of marriage proposals she had turned down and the fact that people were always asking her if she was anorexic.

Really? Adam asked.

Totally, she said.

You wandered among the galleries that day until Jessica confessed her ignorance about Seurat, and as Adam explained his work to her, you studied the three of you in the reflection of a tall glass case. Jessica, slender, fragile, diminutive, blinking her pale blue eyes. You, also slender, but strong instead of fragile, with limbs that seemed, next to hers, ungainly in their length, your curly red hair dingy and wild beside her smooth platinum light. Adam, shorter than you but taller than Jessica, coke-bottle glasses, black curls, his doughy arms and legs sticking out of his tee shirt and shorts.

Until that day, you had believed that he loved your discussions about postcolonialism and Pinochet and the collapse of the South African rand, conversations that began in the cafeteria when you met in law school two years before and led to the afternoon when you had argued about whether the first amendment should protect hate speech. You had been talking for a while before you noticed the way he was looking at you.

What? you asked.

You're just so smart, he said before he looked away.

You had turned this over in your mind for weeks afterward, thought about the way he'd said it, softly, kindly, so different from the way your last boyfriend had spat the same words at you as you'd been breaking up. And so one night when he took off his glasses and leaned in to kiss you after you'd studied for an exam together, you let him, because he never seemed to mind your intelligence and competence, things you'd spent most of your life trying to conceal because you knew they were considered unattractive in women. In return, you didn't care that he had never played sports and had no idea how to change the oil in your car, or that once, when you sent him to get a wrench out of your hall closet, he came back with a pair of pliers. This became your unspoken pact, the deal you had struck. He forgave you your strengths, you forgave him his weaknesses.

And yet, even before you met her, you knew. Sometimes it was the way he said her name: *Jessica* is a dancer. *Jessica* is working on an advertising campaign for Colgate. *Jessica* is moving to Manhattan. And sometimes it was the way he didn't, like the time in the Japanese restaurant when he insisted you liked miso soup and you said you'd never tried it.

He said, I must be thinking of someone else.

You said, Yes, you must be.

But at other times, unaccountably, almost meanly, he would make fun of her. *She's not exactly graceful*, he'd snort after seeing one of her recitals, or *What a mindless career, advertising*, and you would comfort yourself with the fact that he seemed not to take her seriously. But that day in the museum, watching him elaborate on Seurat's post-impressionist school of painting, on the illusion of a woman's face *here* or the corresponding technique on the frame *there*, you realized that it was this that should have worried you most of all.

*

By the time you were ten you had passed all of the swimming lessons offered at the local pool in the small Michigan town where you grew up, so your mother enrolled you in a class called Junior Lifesaving. It sounded boring until you showed up for the first class and fell in love with Tim the Lifeguard, who taught you how to inflate a wet pair of jeans by tying knots in the ankles and blowing into the waist to make your own flotation device.

You expected the class to be about saving other people but Tim the Lifeguard spent the first part of the summer teaching you basic

water survival skills like treading water, floating on your back, and bobbing up and down. He said that you had to know how to protect yourself first before you could save anyone else. This was, he insisted, the number one rule of lifesaving.

*

The stationery is as delicate as she is and you know it is hers before looking at the signature because even cards from his ninety-year-old grandmother are tossed in the trash the minute he reads them. You hold it in your hands. Where were you when it came in the mail? Where did he sit when he read it? You try to picture the look on his face as he buried it behind the pile of socks. Guilty. The cigarettes he knows you hate confirm it.

You think: What kind of person reads someone else's mail?

Then you do it anyway.

You had lagged behind the two of them that day in the museum, sometimes disappearing in the maze of galleries so you wouldn't have to watch them, other times hoping he might notice your absence and come find you. One time, he did. You were standing in a room full of Goyas when he laced his fingers between yours to lead you back to where Jessica was waiting, but he dropped your hand the moment she was in sight. You wanted to say something then, to shout or scream that what she was doing—what he was allowing her to do—was not fair, not appropriate, not right. But instead, for days afterward, you cried in the car, in the shower, in the ladies' room, because you *couldn't*, because you had begun to understand that her total lack of substance and strength was her greatest asset. Defending yourself would have been pointless, or worse than pointless. There was nothing you could have said to Adam about this that would not have instantly served to make her even more appealing to him.

So now you let him win at Euchre. You pretend to know nothing about Mussolini so he can explain Italian fascism to you. When he slices his golf ball, you don't show him how to fix it. When he takes a wrong turn while you're camping on Lake Superior, you let him get good and lost and find his own way back, even though it costs you an hour, even though you knew the moment he veered left that he was supposed to veer right. And when you go crayfishing with strings and bits of raw bacon off a nearby pier, you secretly shake off most of what you catch so that he can drop more of the slimy creatures than you do into the bucket wedged between you on the dock.

Lost another one, you say.

Again? he asks, but with a smile.

It works.

So the ticket you paid after you watched him park your car next to a fire hydrant, the concert you missed because he insisted it started at eight when you knew it started at seven, the sleep you lost when the hotel gave away your room because he miscalculated the distance to Detroit, a drive you'd made a million times growing up, and so you knew the whole six hours that there would be no room waiting for you when you got there—these have seemed like small sacrifices to make compared with the pain of losing him.

But as you tuck the letter back behind the pile of socks, the kind of letter you wrote in the third grade to your cousin Jimmy—*Hi Adam. How are you? I'm fine. What have you been up to? I went to see a movie yesterday*—you realize that you still have a long way to go. In the vapid lines, you read your own failure at being the kind of girl he could really love, and you swear you will make yourself even more inane, more inept, more agreeable, if only he won't leave you.

This is what you are thinking when he drives you to the beach that evening, where you wash his hair for him like always, where he only ever goes in up to his waist, no further, because he does not know how to swim.

This is what you are thinking as he turns his back on the shore and begins to wade out to a deserted sailboat anchored a hundred yards away.

This is what you are thinking as you follow him instead of saying *stop* or *no* or *wait* or reminding him that he can't swim, as the smooth surface of the water rises over his waist, then his chest, then his neck, and he just keeps on going.

*

When you finally reached the unit on rescuing others, Tim the Lifeguard chose you to spend the hour splashing around in the center of the pool pretending you needed to be saved. The other students threw you ropes and life preservers and tried to drag you out of the water using poles with crooks on the end, and each time one of them succeeded, you had to swim back out and pretend you were drowning all over again.

But Andrew Fribley, who was also ten and had terrible aim, gave up trying to save you by throwing things and dove in after you without a lifejacket.

Tim the Lifeguard blew his whistle.

Stop, he said to Andrew Fribley, who swam back to the side of the pool.

What is the number one rule of lifesaving? Tim the Lifeguard asked.

Always protect yourself first, you all said in unison.

He told you, Only the most experienced lifeguards can get that close to a drowning man and not lose their own lives in the process. A drowning man, he said, will take you down with him.

*

Sixty yards offshore the water eases over your heads and Adam begins a palsied sort of paddle. His hands, gray with cold, break the surface in uneven strokes. At first you don't understand why his chin is held so high, but then you realize for the first time, with nothing to cling to but the chill around you, that he does not know how to hold his breath underwater.

He begins to pant. You are closer to the sailboat than to shore when you hear him sputtering as you swim ahead of him a few feet. If only you can make it to the boat, you think, he can rest. And you do make it to the boat. But there is nothing to hold on to once you get there, no ladder, no lines, no windows, no bars. You press your palms against the smooth fiberglass bottom. It arcs over where you float, and instead of stabilizing you, it glides away, your hands sinking into the darkness below.

Adam wheezes beside you. Against the nearness of the boat, it is as if the volume on his throat has been turned up, the nuance of panic in each breath suddenly distinct.

Reach for the deck, you say.

You both reach for the deck, but miss it. You try again, kicking your legs and cupping your hands for resistance. You can hear Adam gurgling beneath you as you touch the edge of the boat but slide back into the water again.

You take a deep breath, cup your hands and kick again, and with one of the arms that had seemed so ungainly next to Jessica's, you reach the edge and grasp it. You dangle there, shaking too much to pull yourself up, so you hook the back of your heel over the edge, using your leg to lift you until you fall onto the deck.

But when you scramble up and look over the edge, Adam is gone.

The sky is darkening and the water is calm, reflecting clouds that are lit by the setting sun, which is all you can see in the water below you. It is a quiet night anyway, no wind or waves pounding the shore-line, but suddenly it is as if the world around you has frozen: the seagulls in midair, the speedboats mid-zoom, the cars on the gravel along the beach midway to their destinations. No dogs bark. No children yell.

Everything stops moving and making noise.

How long do you stand there in the silence? Ten seconds? Fifteen? How long before a face breaks the surface below you, a face you don't recognize because it is so disfigured with fear? When you replay this moment in your head, you will pause here. It is like looking at someone you do not know, as if Adam disappeared into the water and a stranger emerged from it, a stranger whose voice is high and thin and desperate.

Help me.

But when you look around the deck, there is nothing to throw to him, no rope, no pole, no life preserver. So with one hand you grip a guardrail and pitch forward with your head and chest and waist and hips until you throw your body off the boat to offer him your other hand.

*

Adam does not look at you the next morning at breakfast, nor the next evening at dinner, nor again as he spends his days at a separate job and his nights on a separate side of the bed, always saying *yes* and *fine* to your polite questions about what he wants for dinner or how his day went during the two weeks that pass before he packs up his things and moves out.

What if you had waited? What if you had given him more time to follow your lead? What if he really could have saved himself? What if. All you know for sure as you stand in the driveway and watch his red taillights vanish in the distance is that what you feared the day he almost drowned has come true anyway. You will never see him again.

That night, you choke down the leftovers of the spaghetti you made for him the night before. You wash and dry your one plate and one cup and one fork and one spoon. You change into your nightgown. And after you've cried yourself to sleep, you realize that your body is drifting in the currents at the bottom of the bay where shards of green sunlight filter around the sailboat that floats above you. Soggy playing cards are strewn across the lake floor. Seagulls that can fly underwater duck in and out between your limbs. And you think you must be swimming until Tim the Lifeguard glides past to say you broke the number one rule of lifesaving.

Dawn Morais

patriot acts

What is patriotism but the love of the good
things we ate in our childhood?

Lin Yutang

Growing up Indian in mixed-up Malaysia, the warm, toasty aroma of steaming *putu* woke us every morning with a promise of a breakfast that would send us off to school, fortified and full. Whole wheat flour mixed with bran, sprinkled with salt water and worked with the fingertips till it resembled gritty sand, then dribbled gently into a ten-inch tall bamboo steamer, each handful of the mixture separated from the next by a light layer of freshly grated coconut. The bamboo steamer sat tight atop a short, bulbous pot of water. Where the steamer met the pot, my mother would wrap a length of cotton cloth as tightly as she could, round and round till it was swaddled so well, no puff of steam dared escape. Instead it went right up through the perforated base plate, cooking the *putu,* layer by layer. As we got into our convent school pinafores, we kept an eye on the *putu koleh* till the first wisps of steam escaped through the small holes of the steamer cap on the top. With it came the first whiff of well-being: as uncomplicated and promising of goodness as the *putu* itself. Lifting the bamboo steamer out of its swaddling almost as carefully as she would a baby, my mother would remove the cap, tilt the canister downwards, then push slowly and firmly from the base with her special *putu*-pushing stick. Special because it was a foot-long remnant of a souvenir totem pole brought back by my father after he had visited the United States a decade earlier, part of a contingent of Southeast Asian journalists who had been taken on an escorted tour of the American dream. Years later, loath to throw away the broken fragment of an experience that for my father remained immediate even as it receded, she had wrapped a fragment of *batik* around the stick's faded gaudiness, stitched it into place and given it a new purpose in her kitchen. That small stick of faux American Indianness was just thick enough and firm enough to be held in one hand and slipped easily into the *putu* canister held in the other. The stick would drive the base plate slowly forward, pushing the *putu* ahead of it. In a small tumble of cooked, fresh coconut, out on the dish would emerge an unbroken succession of circular bands of brown and white; sugarless, and yet so sweet to the memory of who we are and where we came from.

*

Kerala. Three generations removed, yet vividly present in daily conversation at home in Malaysia. In the fronds of a language that could only be spoken with excitement and a landscape that ran the whole gamut of green. In the signature coconut palms planted in the garden of every house we lived in to recall the home left long ago by those who had made the voyage to the shores of Malaya, land of new dreams. In the yearning for the home by the sea in the homeland left behind. Miles and miles of white sand, long walks to school, returning home to ripe mangoes plucked off the trees in the family orchard. "Nothing less than a whole mango," my mother said. Having trudged back from school, books cradled in the crook of her arm, tired and famished, my patient mother spoke of girlhood petulance. "Who would want just *a piece* of mango?" she asked. "No, it had to be the entire fruit, uncut. A plump, ripe mango that we could make a hole in at one end. Then, cupping it in our hands, we would suck the juice and pulp out slowly." Thus we learned about Kerala: in stories of family we had never met, feasts we had never attended, a wandering tale of which we, in Malaysia, were one chapter. For sixteen years, busy raising a family, never wanting to leave her husband's side, my mother did not return. But watching, sometimes listening, to her read letters from Kerala, and watching her sit down at the dining table to fill blue aerogrammes with weekly reports to our grandmother, written in the rounded Malayalam script she still remembered, we learned to fill in some of the contours of the land of our ancestors.

Literacy: Ninety percent. Nearly a hundred, my mother said. Kerala was special. Kerala, where the women wore signature *kassava* saris of cream and gold; where real power rested with the women through whom family names and property were passed to the next generation; where everyone had a degree or two, even if they had no job. "In which case, they'd tuck a rolled-up newspaper under their arm and head off to the coffee shop to talk politics," she said. If they did have jobs, money was still modest and so the daily morning breakfast of *putu* and bananas, mangoes or jackfruit was as important to the farm laborer as to the civil servant in his starched whites. It provided an inexpensive, nutritious start to the day that would sustain them, peasant or peon, till tiffin at twelve.

Tiffin-carriers. My mother remembered classmates at school in India, rich Brahmins, who had their lunch delivered to school in tiffin-carriers. She made the simplest meal sound sumptuous in the colors

she painted and the piquancy of the flavors she described, the memory still a little tart with envy. In British Malaya the tiffin-carrier did duty for converging communities, divided by the needs of colonial enterprise. A many-storied tower of flavors bearing rice and *roti*, curries and chutneys, deviled eggs, ladies' fingers, lentils and brinjals in a vegetable *sambar, tandoori* chicken, perhaps a dry, slow-cooked lamb *peratal* one day, a fiery pork *vindaloo* the next. The British planter. The rubber tapper leaving in the pre-dawn light to draw the latex and send it off in the trucks before it began to coagulate. My father, the orphan kid from Kerala, turned newspaper reporter, then editor of the white man's paper. The Chinese coolie in the tin mine. The Malay administrator. Professionals. Everyone relied on tiffin-carriers, each tray stacked neatly on top of the other, keeping the flavors, like the different communities safely separate, yet ready to be mixed together at any time. Tiffin-carriers advertised our households and kept us all in our place in the new country.

Malaya. Then Malaysia. Rice paddies, then rubber trees, then rows and rows of oil palm, then the world's tallest twin towers, define and re-define the landscape. It is very hard to find a real Malay house in urban Malaysia. *Attap* roofs have given way to Monier tiles. Hibiscus hedges, coconut trees and vegetable gardens have yielded to concrete and iron-spiked fences and trained orchids. The more prosperously middle-class among us have cupolas perched three stories up, fortress walls (edged with glass shards—they stop trespassers in their hands) and driveways for two, maybe three cars: one luxury limousine preferably with chauffeur, one SUV, one old bone-shaker, once the glory of earlier days. The wheels we use to make our way to work and back tell us—and the neighbors—who we are and how far we've come from the small towns and villages our grandparents fled.

India. Our grandparents remained tethered to India through pride, memory and desire. But Malaya meant work and income, both of which were scarce in Kerala. So they came to the new country but did not plan to stay. My mother was born in Batu Gajah, a small town in British Malaya but was sent to boarding school in Kerala where my grandparents eventually retired. My father, orphaned and restless, clamored to come to Malaya until his eldest brother, already established there as a Normal-trained teacher, yielded to his entreaties. Sixteen years old, educated in Malayalam, my father began to learn English and learned it well enough to aspire to journalism as a career. A career he prepared himself for by building notebooks full of new words and phrases from famous people, and by taking a correspondence course

in journalism from a London institute plucked from the classifieds. And thus he began to write his future and ours.

Origins. Never forget where you came from, my parents said, as they chose to raise us speaking English in a Malay country ruled then by white men wearing suits too hot for the sun that beats down on where we sit, just north of the Equator. Naturally, everyone forsakes cotton sarongs and singlets and *kurtas* for wool suits and silk ties. It's how you get ahead. Look like the masters you despise and admire and pay homage to. Slight strangulation is a small price for success. Visitors from the home country are visibly impressed and envious. Their reaction is gratifying, more so because we still fly the flag of our culture in the land of our uncertain adoption. Everyone sees tradition and success in the silk saris my mother learns to wear, forsaking the starched frocks and heels and hats she had first adopted as a young bride in British Malaya. They can see it in the gold bangles on her wrists and the solid gold choker around her neck, the red rose tucked into the neat bun at the back of her head when she goes out on my father's arm. They approve the preservation of Indianness in the Malayalam that my parents speak privately, and we children stumble in publicly, to attest to our roots. The enthralled visitors take word back that, despite being raised in a foreign land, we are still quite verifiably Indian. And faithfully Catholic. Notice the enthroned picture of the Sacred Heart of Jesus flanked by candles in the living room; notice the rosary recited before the altar every night on our knees, with my father sternly standing watch in the rear, demanding "*We Stand for God*" when the rosary ends.

Prayer. In moments of grave danger, in moments of crisis, my mother prays. When she weeps and before she sleeps. When my mother remembers her children scattered around the world, flying in airplanes that she wished had never been invented "or my children would all have stayed at home." Whenever she wonders why she ever came to this country only to see her children leave and go yet elsewhere ("wasn't this country good enough?"), on every occasion of grief and fear and confidence in the Sacred Heart of Jesus and Mary, my mother prays in Malayalam. And we feel stronger, braver, more protected. We call home, wherever we are, with our flight schedules before we embark on any trip. With some difficulty, we figure out the time differences together ("Is it tomorrow there already for you?") so that, as we take off and touch down, we know she will be lighting a candle and imploring Heaven to weave, she says, an unbreakable, protective cradle around us, to keep us safe till we return to her.

*

Fly. The years certainly did. She wonders where the years have gone since she came to a new country as the eighteen-year-old bride of the handsome, confident newspaper editor. The determined, well-spoken suitor who returned to Kerala in search of a wife who could make a home and a family to accommodate his success in the new country. He had returned from British Malaya (where it was known throughout the community that he was doing very well indeed, at the Paper) to pick a bride. He was not scheduled to visit her, but her mother, hearing of his mission, had contrived to invite him home for a meal. They were distantly related after all, and the hospitality was to be expected. He came for breakfast, stayed to lunch and was still there when afternoon tea was served. The conversation went so well, he sent a telegram off instantly to his eldest brother waiting for news in Malaya: "Met Gladys. Crave blessing to wed." And wed they were. She was somewhat prepared for the next fifty years, having been sent to boarding school in Kerala where Italian nuns had shown her and her classmates how to be ladies. What Huns they were! And how they had drilled into each of them the niceties of turning a bed sheet sharp and tight. The importance of polishing your shoes till they shone for Sunday Mass and laying everything out in a row the night before: prayer book, rosary, clean underwear folded and tucked out of sight under a freshly starched and ironed blouse and skirt, coins for the poor box—the rich girls gave notes. But they had not taught her how to wear a sari or how to cook.

Feasts. Every guest at every gathering of visitors to our home agreed that my mother did not just provide dinner. She put on a banquet. We knew we were celebrating or entertaining when the dining table was cleared and laid with a hand-embroidered linen tablecloth from Hong Kong to cover the pink formica. She set spoons and forks, no knives, for the feast of *biriyani* rice, chicken *kurma,* a dry mutton fry, a mint *chamanthi* chutney, a real *resam*, not the *mulligatawny* that had been pilfered by the Brits, bastardized and made their own, like the Koh-I-Noor diamond they stole from India and embedded in a crown for the British sovereign. They had no shame.

Pride. We were taught to be proud. First because we were Indian and then because we were Malaysian. Proud that we had mastered the Queen's English, the language of education and jobs. We dressed like those who hired us, whose approval provided admissions, promotions and public standing. We went to bed as children mindful of Wee

Willie Winkie running through our town in his nightshirt—even though in its tropical lushness Kuala Lumpur could not have looked anything like the cold, small towns of England where he did first duty. We grew up thrilling to the boarding school adventures of Enid Blyton term after term, and entered adulthood intoning Churchill. But we invoked the wisdom of Gandhi and the greatness of India as we waxed eloquent and bitter about Partition, divide and rule, and the presumption of the colonial plunderers and trespassers. Ultimately, independence in Malaysia was negotiated by a genial prince and a colonial power somewhat chastened by the ferocity of the Indian fight for independence a decade earlier. And so, growing up in Malaysia, untempered by fire, our loyalties to both the land of our ancestry and the land of our adoption, were neither fierce nor bloody.

Allegiance. Time passes and ours is questioned more, not less. Three generations later in the parlance of our politicians, we are still "immigrants" who should be grateful that we have been allowed to stay. Is there somewhere else that we should go? Certainly not back to India. When we do visit, our accent, our Western attire—saris only for those special occasions—and our aspirations betray us as foreigners in the land of our forefathers. Deep down, perhaps, we are pleased. And we are grateful that our voices lack the drama, the earnestness and the inflections of English spoken in India. Our speech leans toward a harder-to-place British-American plainness that gives us easier passage, we think, through the societies towards which the currents of our education make us drift. But in the culture of the land we most call our own, we are an irritation. One of three races. Pressed into service on the plantations, in government and in the professions. Building a country but not quite a nation. Drawn to this land by the shifting tides of need and commerce, we become Malaysian by accretion. Until the simmering resentments of politics and economics explode one May 13 into a brief racial confrontation that is forever after inscribed in who we all are. That makes it first necessary, then politically useful, to tear back the very layers that have made us similar so that we can be made to see more clearly that we are different. So different as to become increasingly bystanders in a country to which our grandparents came, meaning merely to make enough to retire. To retire was to return to India, to ancestral land and a home by the sea. But the longer they stayed and worked in Malaya, the more India became a place to which you sent food parcels and bank drafts that translated ten times over in rupees. And thus the first adventurers who had made the voyage to the Federated Malay States, or rather to FMS, in the tired ship, *Rajula,* shared some of their new found pros-

perity with those who had not found the will or the good fortune to leave. Two generations later, Malaya, then Malaysia, is the only place we know as home. India is the India of our parents' memories. But the more Malaysian we feel, the more marked we are as Indians.

Malaysianness. Yet undefined, except in the manipulative language of politics, devoid of subtlety. We are three communities, Malay, Chinese, Indian. Our national psyche is one that feeds on official self-congratulation laced with dark intimations of what might happen if we do not tiptoe around each other carefully and show the world what a model of goodwill and tolerance we are. The essence of that tolerance is to never cross the line that separates. To never question. To be sensitive to our sensitivities. To mark our place, know our race, and mind it. To be grateful for what we enjoy in our spheres of influence: government, business, the professions. We understand and we acquiesce as overlapping circles are drawn on these spheres; policies and programs to share the spoils of progress. And thus with our clumsy meddling do we slowly water down the piquancy of the emerging, erratically, earthily blended culture of immigrants. Immigrants who, whatever their origins, have learned how to thrive under colonial rule, survive under Occupation and evolve into a haphazardly thrown together dish of a country. Shot through with flavors, free of extremes, easy in its mellow mingling: a *rojak*, a dark green salad, interrupted with pineapple wedges and slivers of turnip, dripping with a thick, tangy peanut sauce. Different ingredients borrowing from each other. It gets harder and harder to separate what went into the mix in the first place. And the dish keeps getting better all the time. Until, in a grand experiment, we try to turn back the clock, separate the races and assign to each their entitlement by order of arrival. Who came first? What was invested in the mix to start with and by whom? Who are we supposed to be? Who is first among equals? Who is native and who is not? It gets harder and harder to make things out.

Darkness. It's a matter of skin and soul in multi-colored Malaysia. We woo visitors to our land of bronzing sun but crowd the beauty counters with skin whiteners. Once upon a time the people of this land spoke of the beauty of *hitam manis,* sweet black. Today, globalized and re-colonized by multinationals and by Hollywood, we sell crude oil and buy skin-whitening Oil of Olay. "So fair" is a compliment; "so dark" a curse. Like the cloud of smoke and ash that hangs from time to time like a gray screen beneath our blue skies. From burning peat fires in neighboring islands, from the vapors of industry, from too many cars and not enough care in how we choose to live. It gets

harder and harder to breathe easy. Little whiffs of remonstrance escape through apertures provided by work and play and the half-hearted congregating of dissent, but it dissipates quickly, never gaining in force or heat to mark our place or send signals that matter in this adolescent nation. We are prosperous enough not to want change. Those who need change most are mostly hidden from view in plain sight on the plantations and in the *padi* fields and in the designated settlements for the *orang asli*, a name that translates as "original people," even if they have the smallest voice in the big issues of their native land. The middle class neighborhoods get more middle class through cunning and collusion. Clever enough to stay out of politics so as not to break into jail; yet cunning enough to consort with the politicians least likely to land in jail. Just cozy enough to be able to hang out one's shingle and get on with the business of staying in business. And thus may one prosper well beyond the wildest dreams of those who came to this country, penniless, yet, who before long became patrons for those left behind in poverty. We have learned their lessons better than we might like to admit: stay out of trouble, make enough money, do not anger the masters and live to enjoy our favorite foods.

Noodles. Thin, fat, flat. Translucent, white, egg yellow. Coiled and sprung. Soft and squiggly. Crisp and dry. Lightly sprinkled or heavy with the flavor of pork strips, shrimp and soy sauce. Swimming in lard or flashed quickly through hot oil, in a big wok over a coal fire by hawkers at open food stalls, grimy with popularity. Like the man who twists and twirls thick ropes of well-oiled, shiny dough, slapping it about repeatedly till he collapses it in a soft mound on a hot griddle. It settles into a thick, not quite flat, round that sizzles and turns an uneven golden brown, flaky on the top, soft and yielding beneath, heavy with fat and flavor. The popular wisdom is that if it got hygienic, it just wouldn't taste as good. Witness the same dish as it travels south to squeaky-clean Singapore, losing its zest as it gains in virtue.

Vices. They are not allowed in Singapore, a tiny, packed in, built-up island that sits primly like a period at the end of the more rambunctious statement that is Peninsular Malaysia. Singapore's very success invites Malaysian disdain. Its apparently unstoppable ascent to first world status: humming with high finance, high consumption, and a certain high-handedness of demeanor. Once parts of the Malaysian whole, now sundered, Singapore and Malaysia look at each other with angst, wrestling daily with both sibling rivalry and the realization that theirs is a connection that can never be broken. Transgressions, minor and major, are swiftly diagnosed and purged by pre-

scription. Justice is dispensed curtly, free of the corruption of personal discretion. Once a triad-infested backwater, its sleek, bougainvillea-draped expressways bear labor by the lorry-loads from the teeming masses of the lands that surround the island, and from further afield. Condominiums called Balmoral and Ascot announce a colonial past that has reinvented itself in the *amahs* who watch over the two children and dog and cook dinner for *Sir* and *Madam* who work in the gleaming towers downtown. Confucianism imposes order. Oxford and Cambridge have contributed Western arts and letters. Increasingly, the nod is to Harvard and MIT and America is a best friend. A world-class symphony plays today in the stately Victoria Concert Hall that still does homage to the Queen of yesterday. But for those who seek the original face of the Surprising Singapore promised in the advertising, there are options. Dragon boat races and lion dances: carefully preserved and faithfully reenacted. Proof positive of enduring culture. Like Arab Street and Little India. Chinatown in a Chinese city-state. The Malay *kampong* is a memory unless one ventures north into the Malay peninsula. Kampong houses on stilts are immortalized on postcards and paintings sold in the $1000 a night Raffles Hotel. For those who do not know the history that lies within its walls, for those for whom that may not be enough, the Raffles Hotel promises that it is today "patronized by nobility, loved by all." And so it is there that visitors in search of the real Singapore, pause for a brief sojourn when their luxury cruise liners come into port. In two amazing days they discover the cultures of the region expressed in well-modulated tones, packaged and delivered, all in one place. Kleenex-land. One may not spit. And the tourists go home delighted with this safe, sampler version of Asia, free of sin.

Halal. To partake of food that is not *halal* is to imperil the soul of a Muslim. More than two hundred million pressing in from Indonesia. Twelve million or more in Malaysia. To protect our Muslim friends from the contamination of sin, non-Muslims cook in separate kitchens, sit at different tables, and schedule their public feasts around the call to prayer and fasting. By such means do we safeguard the purity of native communities, protect against offending our neighbors, and reconfigure our place in a culture not yet ours.

In the absence of larger ideas about who we are, we announce ourselves through the strength of our spices, the diversity of our starches, and the depth of our memory of the foods of our childhood. Our once Anglo, now increasingly American, educations take our careers on a trajectory to London and L.A., Brussels and Buenos Aires.

But after the business deals and the high level brokering in globalized English, we flee the bland mastery of our acquired cultures and return to who we remember ourselves to be: in the tea leaves, the tamarind soup, the rice and curries, and the cloying sweetmeats to be found in unlovely cafes on low-end streets. Kitchen Aid can do what the seemingly endless succession of house maids used to do with rhythmic ease: pulverize chilies to a fiery paste on a grinding stone or pound rice to a powdery fineness with each throw of a mighty wooden pestle into a floor-standing mortar. But in the metropolitan centers of the world, where the masters of the universe reside and to which we have lately come, we are hard-pressed to find exactly the right ingredients for the many-splendored confections of our youth. Even harder is it to summon the will or inclination to re-create those remembered pleasures, to parade our little patriot acts. But we do not hesitate, in alien company, to wax lyrical about the foods we miss and remember. Perhaps we even overstate how much we miss and what exactly we remember. In so doing, we define our difference, paying homage to the countries that gave us our history, the nests where we were nurtured, and the cultures into which we have slipped and found our place.

Heidi Shayla

Gizzards

I am not big enough to stand up and be counted. As a child, I was never tall enough or strong enough for anything that mattered, but I always thought when I was an adult, my world of options would open up and I would step out into it. It turns out, though, that the older a person gets, the bigger and faster the world becomes. Some days it's more than I can stand.

My father says that I'm not really so much smaller than anyone else. "Lord, Jincy, you're five feet tall." He rubs his head when he says that, as if my carrying on about it all the time gives him a headache. "You're the same height as your mother and she did just fine."

But I can see the difference between everyone else and me, especially when the women get together and they are bold, and sure, and laughing. Then I can see clearly how I am child-like, even though I'm full-grown. It's no wonder that I've never married or had children; every time a man looks my direction, I'm lost behind some other woman's skirt or in the long shade she makes as she saunters down the road of life. Men want someone life-size, not a woman in miniature. And as for my mother, she may have married and had me, but she died before I had time to form even one memory of her, so I don't see that she managed so well.

And then my father married Lovey Hamm, who is a dizzying five feet and eleven inches tall. She's nearly half a foot taller than he is and towers over me. My father likes her tall. I heard him tell her so once, when I was not more than twelve years old, in the back yard where they were weeding the Canadian Thistle out of the bush beans. I was around the corner of the house trying to make the spigot stop leaking, but when I heard my father and Lovey begin talking in ways that had nothing to do with me, I rested my head against the wall, listening for what two people say to each other when they think they are alone.

My father's voice was rumbling, low, the way a truck idles. "Lord, Woman! When you bend over like that, it makes me want to climb right up your backside."

My stepmother laughed, her voice idling up next to his. "Strap on your climbing spurs, little man, and come on up."

"You want it right here amongst the beans?"

Lovey made a noise that could not be translated into English.

My father must have taken it as a yes. "Well, stand up straight

then, Honey," he said.

"We'll make the neighbor's dogs howl if we do it out here."

"Let them howl, Lovey. And let the neighbors howl with them. If they'd ever had a piece of a big woman like you, they'd understand there ain't nothing like it. Best damn loving a man can get."

And then I heard my stepmother whine a little and I dared to peek around the corner of the house. Lovey was standing between the beans like a giant sunflower thrown in amongst them, the sun beating down on her big bent head. I couldn't see my father and thought he must be down on his hands and knees in the bean rows, until I saw something rise up beneath Lovey's long skirt, humping up the material between her legs. Lord, I thought, that must be my father down there, not climbing her backbone at all, but getting right down under her. My father began to move under the skirt, back and forth, up and down, making Lovey whine again and her whole body shudder. She threw her head back so the sun shone full on her face, her mouth open and gasping, like she'd been swimming and had just now come up for air.

I went back to my spigot, not sure at the time what my father was doing down there, but knowing that what I had seen and heard revealed the false note in his head-rubbing lectures to me about how I am a perfectly acceptable height. I watched the spigot drip and told myself that I would never be big enough to make a man break through the treetops and feel the wind in his hair and the sun sliding down his open, gasping throat. Wasn't no man ever going to climb my backbone and no dogs going to howl over anything I did in the bush beans, because I'm hardly dizzying; I'm so small I might be a perch for observing the slow passing of bugs and snails.

Now though, I'm twenty-seven years old and know full well what my father was up to beneath Lovey's skirt. I have all the ache and desire of any other grown woman — some days, in fact, I think I have more than my fair share. But I know I will spend the rest of my life buying shoes in the children's department.

*

My Grandma Tem is a woman who believes in superstition and magic. Her name is Temple Jubilee Wilson, but everyone calls her Tem. My father and Lovey adore her. When I moved into my own apartment, they brought her to live in their house, in my old room, declaring that she was too frail to get along on her own. I think it's strange that my mother's mother would live with my father and his second wife, but Grandma Tem says it's all right because she worked

the love magic that drew Lovey and my father together in the first place. She says my father is the son she never had and, when my mother died, she couldn't bear his sorrow. So after enough time had passed, she burnt some herbs in a dish, ate some chicken hearts off the ashes, and rolled some pinto beans in the palm of her hand to see which way they fell. Apparently they fell in Lovey's direction.

According to Grandma Tem, chicken hearts make you want to be in love and chicken gizzards make you horny. I think the livers do something also, but I can't remember exactly what, so I avoid them in case it's something bad. Chicken hearts and gizzards are my father and Lovey's favorite foods. They roll them in flour and fry them in butter and olive oil with hot sauce and minced garlic. Then they sit at the kitchen table and eat them with their fingers, looking doe-eyed and slant-wise at each other as they chew, the grease running down their hands and lips. It seems to me that a lot of Grandma's magic and superstition revolves around innards.

*

My father and Lovey had a baby boy when I was nine years old. By the time he was nine, he was taller than me and now that he's eighteen, I spend all my time looking up at the underside of my brother's chin. His name is Beauregard Trevor, but he goes by Beau.

My father and Lovey are throwing him a big barbecue to celebrate his graduation from high school. He called me at work, at Earl's Sure Clean Drycleaners, to tell me about it. I was putting a man's suit on a hanger, holding the phone against my ear with my shoulder. "It's my graduation party, Jincy. Mom and Dad are having a FAMILY party. Everyone's coming."

That meant all of Lovey's relatives would be there and that I was expected to come anyway—even though being in the same room with Lovey's aunts and sisters always made me feel like one of Grandma Tem's pinto beans, bouncing around in the palm of a giant's hand, small and hard and plain, forever at risk of being dropped and stepped on. They are women who throw their heads back when they laugh, hair flying, hands on their wide hips, big legs spread and solid beneath them, breasts bouncing and, likely as not, hanging out of their shirts with one baby or another attached at the nipple. I'm a small gray mouse skittering in their shadows.

"Even Uncle Lloyd is coming," Beau told me, which was saying something because Lovey's youngest brother, Lloyd, was as awkward, fumbling, and uneasy with his female kin as I was.

At reunions, Lloyd and I were two moons caught in the overpow-

ering gravitational pull of the Hamm Family planet. Our separate orbits crossed paths at a point directly in front of the coat closet, where we both inevitably ended up as we each tried to slip away without rousing the notice of Lovey. Otherwise, while I hunkered in a corner of the kitchen or tried to disappear amongst the nieces and nephews, Lloyd listened to music with Grandma Tem, sitting in her room with a stack of records across his lap, boots tapping to all her old songs. He also drank beer in the backyard or the living room with his brothers and uncles, or sometimes helped carry food to the table. But he always arrived at family events late and stayed out of reach of his sisters and aunts, humping his big back against their loud laughter and teasing and, in the end, looking like a red bear lumbering off, leaving the parties before they'd really got wound up.

What Beau meant was that if Lloyd could endure the Hamm women for another long afternoon, then so could I.

I pulled a plastic bag over the suit. "I should join a convent and become a celibate recluse," I said.

"God, Jincy. You got to get a life." Beau had the same tired tone in his voice that my father used whenever I said things like that. "See you at the party." He hung up the phone before I'd gotten the suit onto the Orders-Ready-To-Be-Picked-Up rack.

*

On the day of the party, Lloyd, with his red beard and long hair going every which way, rode up to Earl's Sure Clean Drycleaners on his Harley, making enough racket to draw Mrs. Cready onto the street from her restaurant in the next building, where she yelled at him first in English and then, when he just smiled back at her, in Gaelic. She'd been teaching me to swear in Irish, so I could hear that she called him everything short of Satan. When he got off the motorcycle, six feet three inches, black boots, leather jacket, Mrs. Cready went back in her restaurant. I figured she was locking the door and calling the police.

"Earl," I hollered to the back of the shop. "You got to come work the front counter. I don't want to talk to him."

Earl was at the pressing machine. He wiped his hands on his sweat-stained shirtfront and came to see what I was talking about. I pointed out the window at Lloyd, who was raking his fingers through the tangle of his beard and looking at Mrs. Cready's closed door.

Earl scratched the soft round fruit of his big stomach. "Isn't this the day you're supposed to be at your brother's graduation party?"

"You know it is, Earl." I was edging toward the back of the shop,

where I might hide behind the hanging clothes bags. On the sidewalk, Lloyd was unzipping his jacket and smoothing his hair.

Earl nodded like things were starting to make sense to him now. "You think your father or Lovey sent Lloyd to bring you to the party."

"Well, there isn't any other reason why he'd be here, unless you figure he's come to have his leather jacket dry-cleaned. Tell him you sent me on an errand. I'm not going to that party until the last possible moment."

Earl sucked his teeth, like he was pondering that, keeping his eyes on Lloyd out the window. "Nope, Jincy," he finally decided. "That party's for Beau and you should be there right now. Gonna have to face Lloyd yourself." He turned around and trudged back to the pressing machine.

"Shit, Earl." I tried to dive behind the counter, but it was too late. Lloyd was waving at me through the window. The bell over the door jangled when he came in. "Hey, Earl!" he hollered, his big voice rolling off the walls, vibrating in my ears.

"Afternoon, Lloyd." Earl raised an arm to him.

Lloyd leaned on the counter. "Is it true you're making Jincy work today? I hear she's got to be late to her brother's graduation party because she can't get the day off."

Earl stopped working the pressing machine and looked hard at me. "You ask her the truth of that."

Lloyd raised his red eyebrows in my direction. I saw he had spots of gray in his beard, thrown in amongst the red like bits of ash rising and swirling in the heat of a fire. I tried to think how old he was by counting backwards from Lovey's age and realized he must be more than thirty-five, maybe almost forty. He ran a Harley Davidson shop on the edge of town: repairs, paint jobs, and sales. The times I'd driven past his place, there were always bikers out front, smaller versions of Lloyd sitting on motorcycles that gleamed in the sun, so brilliant and vivid they made my breath catch and stutter in my throat.

I clutched the cash register. "Earl needs the help. There's a lot to do."

Earl crossed his arms and rocked on the balls of his feet. He looked like a beach ball rolling on the water. "Ain't nothing to do today, Jincy, and you know it."

"I've got to do the accounts." I opened the register and started pulling out checks.

Lloyd's eyebrows went up farther, like caterpillars migrating across his forehead.

"It's true. I've got to do the books. I...well...god dammit, Lloyd, stop looking at me like that." I slammed the cash register shut, send-

ing checks flying every direction. "All right! I'll get my coat. I hope you both get hit by a truck."

Earl had already turned back to the pressing machine. "See you Monday."

*

Riding behind Lloyd on his Harley was like riding at the edge of a storm. The wind whipped past on both sides, pulled at my jeans, sucked at my hands and arms around Lloyd's waist, picked up my hair and strung it out behind us. But my face and chest and belly were pressed against the wide back of Lloyd's leather jacket; I was anchored to the solid curve of his spine. The idle and rev of the engine vibrated up from the seat, spreading heat through my crotch.

When we left Earl's, Lloyd didn't turn toward my father's house, heading instead out onto the highway. "Where are we going?" I yelled.

"I'm not ready to go to the party yet," he yelled back. "And neither are you."

"That doesn't answer my question!"

He shifted gears, went faster, passed a car. "Trust me," he shouted.

If a man who looks like Lloyd told you to trust him, and if you were a sane person, you would hurry home and lock your doors, just like Mrs. Cready. I hunkered down behind him, held on tight, and rested my face against his jacket the same way I had laid my head against the wall of the house when I was twelve, listening at the spigot for what people say when they think they are alone. The wind was a wild woman, pulling at Lloyd's hair so that it streamed out above my head, but it couldn't touch me there where I sat behind the solid wall of his back.

He took me to a roadside bar and grill called the Loosy Goosy. It had a mechanical chicken on the roof, a giant White Leghorn that bobbed its head toward the shingles like God had reached down His hand and scattered scratch. The cars in the small gravel parking lot were old Chryslers and Buicks. Lloyd pulled in between a rusting Lincoln Continental and a pink Seville that had a gleaming white interior. The Harley Davidson looked like a black cat slinking in amongst a bunch of lap dogs. When Lloyd turned off the engine, I could hear the whir of the White Leghorn's motor on the roof, clicking and buzzing as the chicken dipped its head to the shingles. I slid off the Harley, my crotch thrumming from the ride and my legs quaking like new leaves, shivering at the underhanded way the wind slips beneath their soft parts.

Then I saw the neon sign glowing in the window. It said DEEP

FRIED CHICKEN GIZZARDS. *Oh Jesus*, I thought.

Lloyd pulled off his leather jacket and headed for the door. "Come on, I'll buy you a beer before we go to the party. You'll like this place. Tem first told me about it."

He held the door for me, smiling, and I swallowed hard, looking between the neon sign and the red hair that exploded out from beneath his tee-shirt sleeves, covering his thick arms and straggling out onto his hands and across his fingers. It reminded me of the sugar pumpkins that Lovey and my father planted in their backyard, the vines gone wild, left to run amuck across the lawn. Lloyd put his hand on my shoulder and ducked through the door, pulling me after him, the smell of leather and sweat and wind sliding off his skin.

As soon as we walked into the Loosy Goosy, I could see that this was the sort of place Grandma Tem would come with her friends, a place to drink a beer and have some fried chicken while they listened to music that had been popular about the time of the Great Depression. The smell and sizzle of chicken frying drifted from the kitchen and hovered around the steaming plates of thighs and breasts that a waitress was serving to the tables, setting the plates on red and white checkered tablecloths and pulling heaps of paper napkins out of her apron pockets so people could wipe the grease off their fingers. The rising heat from the hot oil in the kitchen fogged the windows. I took off my coat.

There was a gleaming jukebox playing in the back corner, Bing Crosby and the Jimmy Dorsey Orchestra doing "Pennies From Heaven." A dozen gray heads around the Loosy Goosy bobbed and swayed in time. Lloyd steered me toward a table by the back window, past the jukebox. He stopped to look through the bubble-topped glass at the other selections. I peered in. Al Jolson. The Casa Loma Orchestra. The Boswell Sisters. Louis Armstrong. The Mills Brothers. Lee Morse and Her Bluegrass Boys. The Artie Shaw Orchestra. It looked like Grandma Tem's record collection.

"Pennies From Heaven" was winding down. Lloyd put in a quarter and made a selection. By the time we'd sat down, Bing was finished and some sort of ukulele music started up, stamping down Bing's croon with fast-strumming, bouncing cords that reminded me of island music, undertones of a Hawaiian luau. Lloyd sighed and stretched his long legs all the way beneath the table so that I could see his boot toes sticking out on my side. He spread his arms wide toward the jukebox. "That's Roy Smeck, one of the best ukulele players of all time. He's in the Ukulele Hall of Fame."

I rubbed my forehead. "There's a Ukulele Hall of Fame?"

Lloyd closed his eyes, arms wide, boot toes bouncing to the ukulele music. "Yeah, there are only four men in it. Roy Smeck's one of

them."

"Uh-huh." I motioned to the wide-hipped waitress who was passing by wiping her hands on her apron. "Could I get a beer, please?"

She smiled and tipped her head at Lloyd. "You gonna want a beer too, Lloyd? And some gizzards, same as usual?"

Lloyd waved his hands at her, keeping his eyes closed. "Wait, here comes the best part."

She planted both hands on the shelf of her hips and rolled her eyes at me. "Every time he comes here, he's got to have Roy Smeck first thing. Then he's in the right state of mind for his gizzards."

The music from Smeck's ukulele bounced through the Loosy Goosy.

"It sets the mood," he said. "Some people listen to Marvin Gaye to feel sexy. I listen to Roy Smeck to eat gizzards."

I rubbed my forehead again, harder. "How about a Tylenol? You got a Tylenol you could bring with my beer?"

The waitress just laughed.

Lloyd waved his hands again, like he was trying to shush us. "Bring us both a Guinness, Rosemary, would you? And a mixed order of gizzards and hearts. Shh, shh, here comes the last part."

Rosemary shook her head and winked at me. "Ooh, a mixed basket. You must be special, honey." She headed off toward the kitchen, stopping to chat with customers along the way, her big back end swinging past tables, brushing against chair backs and men's arms.

Roy Smeck ended and Lloyd opened his eyes. "Rosemary's good people. She keeps this place hopping. All these old men want to marry her."

I watched Rosemary whisper something in a big woman's ear, pointing at the woman's husband who was sitting across the red and white checkered tablecloth from her, across a heaping plate of fried breasts. The woman and Rosemary laughed out loud, their voices bounding up over the rising strains of the Artie Shaw Orchestra. They reminded me of Lovey and her sisters and aunts, the way they rolled in their bodies so easily, everything about them coming out loud and full. "How about you? You want to marry her?" I asked.

Lloyd laughed, his voice as loud as the women's, but deep, the sound Beau used to make banging sticks on the empty fifty-five-gallon oil drums that our father kept in the backyard for burning trash. "Lord, no! Rosemary goes at life like a hurricane. We went out a couple times, but sometimes I just want to crawl off where it's quiet and read a book, you know? She doesn't have much patience for that kind of thing."

I looked hard at Lloyd, at his chest and arms stretching his tee-shirt tight every time he breathed, his red beard snarled over his shirt collar, and his hair, tangled and wild, hanging to the table. People

stepped aside when Lloyd came into a room, spoke to him like he counted for something, like he mattered, or maybe more like they were afraid he would break their legs if they didn't. It was hard to imagine him needing to crawl anywhere.

I wiped the window, where it was fogged from the heat and the steam, so I could see out. There was a fenced hen yard down the hill behind the restaurant, and a small blue chicken coop. Someone had painted tall wildflowers all around the walls, like they were growing out of the foundation, and the steep pitch of the roof was stippled with white stars and a full-faced moon that had one sleeping eye and a pouting mouth. Eight or ten black and white hens scratched and pecked outside the coop, dwarfed by a huge black rooster who watched over the tops of their heads, keeping an eye out for danger.

Rosemary came back balancing a tray on one hand. She set two pint glasses of Guinness on the table and then a red plastic basket, lined with white paper and piled high with gizzards and hearts, a brown-battered jumble of innards. The grease was already soaking in and spreading across the paper. The smell of it rose up on the steam, oil and meat and batter, drifting against my face and neck, clinging hot and sweaty. Rosemary set a small bowl of fried minced garlic swimming in butter and hot sauce next to the basket, and pulled napkins from her apron pockets and piled them between us. "Mixed basket." She grinned. "You two enjoy yourselves." She balanced the tray on one hip, swinging off across the Loosy Goosy, picking up empty baskets and dirty dishes along the way, her hips swaying and bouncing. I took a huge gulp of beer, thinking how Rosemary moved like fire. She was all rising heat, crackling and popping.

When I looked up, Lloyd was watching me. The expression in his eyes was a conundrum, which is to say that I had seen this same arrested interest on men's faces before, but never directed at me. I shifted in my seat and looked at the chickens out the window again, seeing my own reflection in the glass too—brown hair, small bones, eyes too big for my face, a kewpie doll holding her breath while a man looked at her with speculation and purpose.

Every once in a while the big black rooster made a run at a hen, grabbed her by the feathers at the back of her neck, and jumped on top of her, humping away, a momentary squawking mess of flying feathers and flapping wings. Then he hopped off and went about his business while the hen shook herself and settled back down to pecking for bugs. Before long the rooster found himself another hen and had a go at her too.

"That's the way to live." Lloyd picked out one of the innards from the pile in the basket and bit it in half. It was a heart.

"You mean how that rooster has a whole harem of hens he can use whenever he wants?" I put a hard edge on my voice, but had to swallow it back before I'd meant to because the smell of the innards was making my mouth water.

Lloyd held out the other half of the heart on the tips of his fingers, the soft cooked organ meat showing dark in the deep-fried crust. He reached across the table and offered it close to my lips. I saw he was swallowing, slow and hard, which might have been half a heart going down, although it appeared to me that he was still chewing what was in his mouth. "No, that isn't it." His hand shook a little, the half a heart quivering. "Chickens know how to live is all. They get up early, spend their day together doing what they need to to feed the family, have a lot of sex, and go to bed when it gets dark. You ever listen to chickens at night, when they're roosting?"

I shook my head, my lips brushing the curve of his fingers and the heat of the heart the same way Rosemary's round hips slid against the old men's shirtsleeves.

"They talk to each other," he said. "They snuggle in close together and cluck and coo at each other, quiet, like they're whispering. They talk everything over before they go to sleep. Chickens got life all figured out."

The rooster in the chicken yard leapt on top of a hen. He ruffled out the black feathers on his head and thrust hard against her. She arched her neck and set her legs to hold his weight. I opened my mouth and Lloyd slipped the half a heart between my teeth. The meat was warm and soft, like a ripe pear, the flesh all give, with no resistance.

I looked at the bit of Lloyd's face that showed through his hair and beard, the wind-chapped skin of his cheeks and nose, the flesh of his lips, everything a pallet of red. He wasn't smiling, wasn't teasing or making light of things the way my father, or Beau, or Lovey would have done. I took a long drink of Guinness. "You like chickens?"

He moved his eyes down my throat, letting his gaze wander across the collar of my blouse. "You ever try grilled chicken thighs on a bed of mango salsa?" He said the words "thighs" and "bed" like he was sliding them around his tongue, feeling their round surfaces and poking into their hollow places.

I reached for the basket of innards, feeling for a gizzard with trembling hands, the thrumming between my legs rising up again like a fast beating of wings against a wide-open sky. I dipped the gizzard into the bowl of melted butter, dredging up bits of garlic and swirling the hot sauce clear over my fingertips, drawing the heat up to my lips and taking the whole thing in my mouth as if I were starving. It was

tougher than the heart, chewed harder and longer, rolled across my tongue full of fire. I reached for more.

"Wait," Lloyd said. He got up and put more money in the jukebox. Roy Smeck's ukulele music came tumbling out. Lloyd slid back into his chair, pushing his boots under the table, up against my ankles, letting them brush lightly over my skin. "Now try the gizzards again." He dragged one through the hot butter and garlic, held it out on the callused palm of his hand, but his hand shook and the gizzard slid on its own grease and fell onto the table. The shimmering surface of hot sauce spread, a widening pool on the red and white checkered tablecloth.

We both leaned to pick up the gizzard at the same time, our hands colliding mid-air, hovering, our fingers entangled over the steaming basket of innards, Roy Smeck strumming like crazy on his ukulele, beating the strings like a hungry and desperate man.

*

Grandma Tem says that gizzard magic lights a fire in your belly. I can feel it burning, scorching my insides, warming my heart, smoldering down through my crotch right into the seat of the Harley, fanned by the wind that whips at the edges of my body as we roar off from the Loosy Goosy. The magic tastes of garlic and hot sauce and Guinness. The feel of Lloyd's back pressed against my breasts and the deep heavy smell of him are dry logs, fuel that he is heaping on my fire, building a blaze that is big enough to consume us both. There is tinder enough between us to burn all night.

But first we have to stop at Beau's graduation party. As soon as we turn into the driveway, I can see Lovey on the front porch. Grandma Tem is with her, sitting on the porch swing, rolling pinto beans in her hand. She looks up and the beans fall, bouncing across the floor in our direction. Lloyd turns off the Harley and we all watch the beans rolling right off the porch, landing in the grass in front of the motorcycle. Grandma Tem smiles at me and nods like that settles things. And then Lovey starts to laugh, throwing her head back, her long blond hair shivering from the rocking of her body, until finally she is so weak from how hard she is laughing that she has to lean against the rail. All I can hear is the sound of the beans, clattering, echoing through me, and Lovey's loud laughter bubbling up. I grope for Lloyd's chest and stomach, grabbing fistfuls of tee-shirt. The laughter feels like something combustible, feeding the flames until the fire ruptures out of me, bursts simultaneously from Lloyd, and we are sucked into its center, laughing and clutching at each other in the midst of its enormous heat.

Kent Nelson

Somebody's Son

It's late afternoon, and I'm driving my Toyota Corolla back from Nashville to North Georgia, from a seminar in city planning—one of my two classes this spring. I'm good at numbers and shapes, so I like planning—highway corridors, open space, land usage. The two-hour commute is a ritual my husband and I weave into our lives. I'm gone Tuesdays and Thursdays—I'm also taking Twentieth Century American Poetry, fulfilling an English requirement I missed in college ten years ago. My husband, poor darling, has to go out and forage.

Over the Cumberland Plateau is a mix of clouds and sun, though to the southeast, thunderheads are boiling up far away over the Tennessee River. I've driven this stretch of interstate so many times I don't much notice the terrain anymore, but on this particular afternoon a soft light makes the colors intense—various greens in the meadows, reds in the clay banks, white dogwoods among the oak and beech. Now and then a startling pink redbud or wild azalea shines from a shaded glen.

I drive sixty-five as a habit, five miles under the speed limit, slower than most of the traffic. There's no rush because my husband won't be home when I get there. The evenings I'm away he stays out late, as if my working for a degree is an insult which gives him license to behave as he wants. I've learned not to ask where he's been or with whom.

Ahead of me a semi climbs the upside of a long hill, and I signal and move into the left lane. I cross the bridge over the creek and pass the truck halfway up. In the rearview a motorcycle coming up disappears behind the truck.

I'm thinking about my poetry class—I like it better than I expected to. I'm not good at seeing what's there in the symbols, but I like rhythms of words, like the ones I memorized today:

You passed through me so easily to somewhere else
but I remember the day we put in the canoes and
imagine still your face gliding above the water,
arms forward, ready to thrust the paddle into that icy lake
nameless as love, bottomless as despair.

At the crest of the hill a straightaway unfolds through farms and rocky fields, and an Appaloosa gallops against the green meadow and

the clouds, running full tilt for no reason I can see. Then the horse is behind me, and in the rearview the motorcycle appears over the rise and comes up fast. He must be doing eighty.

I expect him to speed past, but when I look for him out my side window, he isn't there. He's not in the rearview, either. There's a pause, a hesitation. I look back over my left shoulder and take a deep breath. Yes, he *is* there—a kid, maybe twenty-two, jeans, dark long-sleeved shirt, long blond hair flying behind a yellow headband. He knows where my blind spot is.

We ride this way for a few seconds at sixty-five. I pump the brakes twice, but he slows, too, so he knows I know what he's doing. Has he followed me? I think of pulling over at the next interchange and calling the police, but he's not harassing me exactly.

But he's made me think of him. Maybe he's in my poetry class. It's a lecture with fifty students. I run back over the people I'd recognize, but there aren't many. I'm usually late coming across campus, and I sit in the back of the amphitheater. I know the people around me and the ones who speak up in class, but this biker doesn't look like any of them.

Of course he might have seen me when I came in late, or after class. If he'd followed me, I wouldn't have noticed. After class I'm absorbed by words, like Sharon Olds's.

> *How do they do it, the ones who make love*
> *without love? Beautiful as dancers,*
> *gliding over each other like ice-skaters…*

I hear the motorcycle whining alongside. The rider pulls up close beside my window. He has a high forehead and a good, straight nose, wire-rimmed dark glasses held in place by a black elastic cord. His shirt's dark blue, without a collar, buttoned at the wrists. For several seconds, he stares straight ahead, but then he turns his head a fraction. I can't see his eyes, but his expression isn't a leer or a smile, not a look of contempt, but a simple, curious glance.

Meaning what? I'm no one special. I have on a loose shirt, nothing sexy. I've got brown eyes, short sandy hair—short because it's easy—and I don't wear much makeup. I have shapely breasts my husband calls bazooms.

The biker doesn't pass, but slides back out of sight.

I keep it steady at sixty-five for two more miles, thinking how my husband likes being single more than he admits. We've been married six years, and we're in the stage of decompression, moving apart, planning for the non-future. It's a cliché, but women want love; men

want sex. Like the poem says, love without love. How do they do it? If my husband wants to touch my breasts, he does, even in front of his friends. I'm supposed to laugh. If he runs his hand between my legs, I have to give in to his desires. At night I feel as if I'm trapped with him in the bed.

The biker is back there waiting. I know nothing about him—where he's from or where he's going, nothing of his past or his future. All I know is what he looks like.

As an exercise, I make up poems other people would write, real poets. The man's wild hair makes me think of Teresa Middleton—now there's a brooder. She'd make the motorcycle rider a demon from hell. Armo Baltar would create a lyric dancer, incomprehensible, mystical in our world of tenuous connections. Or Lev Cash:

On this highway soiled with tears,
burdened by the springtime sun
in my vision now undone,
the motorcycle man appears.

Without warning the motorcyclist bursts into view and jets past me, not even looking. His shirt flails from his slender bare waist, his blond hair streams in his wake. Without signaling he veers into the lane in front of me. The highway splits a woodland and after a few seconds he holds out his right arm and points toward the exit ramp—a rest area.

My left hand touches the blinker but I don't follow, and the biker descends the ramp, slows for a car in front of him, and disappears. I regret, however foolishly, and immediately Wilfredo's face comes to me, a boy I met in Puerto Rico the spring I was nineteen. Wilfredo took me on his motor scooter to the Playa de Fajardo on one side of the island and the next day to Cabo Rojo on the other. We walked together, swam in the waves, went to movies. We laughed because neither of us could speak the other's language. He had bronze skin and black eyes and, at the left corner of his mouth, a scar I wanted to kiss. He was polite. In the few days we were together he only touched my hand once, though at the airport he said goodbye with tears.

I wanted more.

Without being aware of it, I let off on the accelerator. The sun is heavy in the leaves of the green woodland. Then the trees dissipate, and I'm back in open country, pastureland. A pond here, another there. I'm past Manchester, nearly to the foot of the plateau.

I need a divorce, a way to escape. My husband is fucking another woman. I don't like the word *fucking*, but there it is. I can't glamorize

it. He's a high school football coach and a Titans fan and likes to be with the boys in the sports bar. There are women who watch football and basketball and who embrace the *fan*, but I've never been one of them. I'd rather *do* something physical—bicycle or run or play tennis. I need an outlet.

And yet, with the biker, I've watched. Should I have followed him?

Ahead, the road splits—the southbound lanes climb and the northbound lanes descend. I haven't been paying attention to the sky, but clouds have gathered and the air is heavy, though here and there the sun still slithers down in wild rays, as if it's the beautiful dawn of the earth.

The sun laid its body upon the wood
Weary, with arnica and crimson staffweed close by…

The Toyota slows to fifty, forty-five. Isolated raindrops hit the windshield as the car climbs up the grade.

Then I look back and see the motorcycle coming up, closing the distance fast. The yellow headband is easy to see. In a few moments, the biker is coasting on my rear bumper—no hiding now. He accommodates my speed, flirting openly now, and I feel giddy with the idea of intimacy with a stranger. Does he understand what I'm going through? He's asked me to say yes or no, and it's a power I haven't felt in years.

I look into the rearview mirror. "No," I say.

My car slows to forty. He slows, too.

There is one thing I know about him: he's somebody's son. He's been loved and dressed and fed. He was taken to school. Did he learn poetry?

We launch the dinghy from the spiderlegged dock
Far out already in clear water deep as love.

He's taken off his dark glasses and tilts his head slightly to fend off the wind and the few drops of rain. The exit for Monteagle is a mile ahead. I've stopped there for gas before, so I know there's a Shell station, a restaurant called The Smoke House, and a Best Western motel. We could have coffee.

"Maybe," I say.

On the Plateau I speed up again. It's raining a little more, and I turn on the wipers. It's gray now, no sunlight, moving toward dusk. When I get within sight of the exit, I slow down and signal to turn

right, drift that way, but then I speed up again and turn the signal off. I can't decide, and I don't need gas. The exit goes by.

The next exit is a truck weigh station, no services, and then we're on the downhill side of the Plateau, speeding up again, and the biker keeps pace.

Clouds diminish the distance, though I know the view is farmlands and lakes. Gray-green is the feeling. When I get home, I'll park in an empty driveway, enter an empty house, a dark kitchen. There won't be a message on the counter, or on the phone either. My husband won't know I'm late.

It rains harder, and the windshield wipers slap back and forth, like my mind. The biker is still behind me. I argue with myself and do nothing. Why debate the issue? I don't even have to conjure a reasonable lie, that I had a flat, or stayed to do research on the fifty-year master plan of Bellingham, Washington, or had an appointment with my professor to talk about Robert Lowell.

Meeting his mother makes him lose ten years
Or is it twenty? Time, no doubt, has ears…

A fifty-year plan. What will the world be like in 2054? When I'm eighty what difference will it make what I've done tonight?

But I see the darker picture, too. What if the biker hurt me? How would I explain the black eye? Cigarette burns on my arms? He might tie me up, gag me, kill me. But then, of course, I wouldn't have to explain anything.

Rain slicks the highway. The rider's wet hair sticks to his neck. His shirt's soaked through. He's close enough to get the cold spray from my tires, and I slow to thirty behind a van throwing up mist.

My husband isn't interested in being close. He never asks what I want. He touches me only enough to get himself hard, and then he does what he wants. So why do I imagine the biker as gentle? In the motel room I imagine him in the shower, me on the bed. He comes to me wrapped in a towel, unbuttons my shirt, caresses my breasts gently, takes a nipple in his mouth…

On the downslope, rivulets of water run sideways across the highway. The biker's face blurs through the back window. His eyes are hidden.

"Yes," I tell him.

We descend the last two miles to the flat, where the roads conjoin, and even though visibility is limited, the pastures open out along both sides of the highway. Signs announce Kimball and South Pittsburg. The rain slackens.

A garish fireworks mall looms up—huge red neon signs splash across the landscape. M-1s and cherry bombs. Trinkets. Souvenirs. There's a gas station and a motel, the neon lights flashing from the near-dusk, but I can't bring myself to turn on my blinker. Not here.

From the west a refraction of sun colors the higher clouds pink and orange. The rain has changed to drizzle, and I speed up, anxious now for the next exit.

But the biker recedes. Is he teasing me, falling back when I've made up my mind?

In the rearview mirror I watch him pull to the side of the highway, and I turn off onto the shoulder and wait. He gets off his bike and bends over it, but I can't tell what he's doing. A minute passes, two. All I've imagined dissipates.

At the same time, now he knows I've waited for him, that I'm willing. He lies down on the shoulder, fiddles with something. I can't turn around and it's too far to back up. A stranger, but not a stranger now.

He gets up and waves to me, and I recreate my wanting. For a moment the sun slides out and all around me the droplets of water on the leaves shimmer, the highway gleams, the woodland trembles. Light shines everywhere.

The biker passes me slowly and smiles at me, pleased at my agreement. As he accelerates, I signal and pull from the shoulder. He knows.

Maybe instead of offering myself on the bed I will take off my clothes and enter the misty bathroom and get in the shower with him. We'll soap each other, clean away the past. We'll kiss, touch each other. Would he get on his knees and lick me? Would he do that—the ultimate ultimate?

At Jasper is another exit, and the biker holds out his arm. This time I turn on my blinker, and he gives a thumbs up.

If I'd known you would visit me, I'd have set out a feast,
poured wine, turned back the covers of my bed,
welcomed you, you prince, oh you god.

We move down the ramp in tandem; I'm a little behind. The sun is out now and flashes from the pavement, glints from the guard rail. I look ahead to the stop sign and beyond to a motel on the left, not a chain but good enough. The motorcycle curves toward the sign, wavers slightly on wet gravel washed from the berm, then slides. Nothing serious is what I think until the bike and biker spin in slow motion, until they are halfway around and traveling backwards. I

whisper out loud, "Oh God," to no one.

The bike strikes the guard rail, and metal buckles with the impact. The man is suddenly flying through the air, legs pumping, arms akimbo, while the bike skitters down the ramp on its side. The man tries to right himself in the air as he disappears over the embankment. He's gone, and the sky is bluing, the sun bright now through the trees.

Glen Retief

Intimacies: Reflections on Sex, Love, and Marriage

1. Marriage

When I was seventeen and attending boarding school in a small South African town, my best friend and I used to tease each other about how we were never going to get married. "No woman could ever put up with your eccentricities, Glen," he often told me, and that seemed as impossible to dispute as it was unnecessary to point out its corollary: that James, skinny as a broom and freckled from hairline to ankle, who blushed radish red when the teachers asked him a question and locked himself in the music room practicing scales while the other boys sat on the steps with their girlfriends, would also one day become an elderly bachelor. We would both live in cramped flats with dust on the bookshelves and stale takeaways in our refrigerators. Children in parks would point at our wrinkled clothes and unshaven faces until their parents stopped them: *Not that old man, dear. You can see that life hasn't been kind to him.* Perhaps—our nightmare scenario—we would even end up like Porky, the art teacher, a ginger-bearded forty-something who lived by himself in a flat in the boys' hostel, had no visible friends or family, and was said to tell himself jokes and roar with laughter before he could get to the punch lines.

There was, of course, something jealous about the way James and I goaded each other about bachelorhood, something possessive and lover-like about our friendship, even though it was never physical. "Go on and leave me," we seemed to be saying, "and see where that gets you." Our relationship, for all its prissy adolescent sexlessness, was in many ways a perfect rehearsal for the trials and joys of adult committed relationships: living together for three years in that tiny room, with the desks that rattled when you wrote on them, keeping the other person awake unless you lodged your shoe rims under the table legs; spending weekends together hiking to waterfalls; taking joint pleasure in sunrises and art magazines and novels. We shared everything, including an unspoken solidarity that I have since come to regard as being fundamental to emotional commitment, a sense of *us versus the rest of the world*.

There have been many times, in adulthood, when I have marveled that the two of us never allowed ourselves to become romantically involved—never allowed our hands to stray in sexual curiosity

on those nights when we shared a bed, sleeping head to toe as our parents told us to do; never grabbed at each other's genitals in horseplay, as the macho boys did with abandon. It is as if we sensed a boundary in each other, a red flag fluttering on the highways to our interiors, beyond which, if either of us ventured, our mental worlds would collapse. To begin with, if we had kissed and embraced, it would have been difficult to avoid articulating the unspeakable: *Yes, I think I, too, am probably a homosexual.* Beyond that—who can say?—we might even have been able to see ourselves as normal, marriageable, and to tie the knot with each other, as did so many other adolescent sweethearts among those squat granite hills and expansive green sugar cane fields of our native Lowveld.

As I get older and my life solidifies, I sometimes dream up alternative histories for myself. In one of these, James and I are living together in a tin roof farmhouse in his home village of Graskop, running a curio shop for tourists, and having lunch with our families on alternate Sundays. *Isn't it sweet, the two of them?* people ask. *Best friends, you know, since high school; I wonder what will happen when one of them gets a girlfriend?*

Instead we both came out as gay men at university, far from our home region and from each other. James attended the University of Natal in Pietermaritzburg, whereas I headed for Cape Town, that green-and-white city on a bay that, exactly like its geographic and architectural carbon copy on the west coast of North America, served as a magnet for political and sexual dissidents. It took me a year or two of anguished poetry-writing, trips to the student counseling center, and awkward dates with women that never led anywhere before I got around to admitting to myself and the world that I was gay. When I did so, I made up for lost time by embracing the radical-hedonist counter-culture, queer and straight, that had arisen during the decaying years of apartheid. I cut my hair short, hennaed it a brilliant orange, and wore thick silver earrings. I attended mock-tribal parties where, with Bob Dylan crooning in the background and the smell of woodsmoke from the bonfire wafting out over the courtyard, everyone painted mud on each other's bodies before retreating to the bedrooms or garden to sleep, make love, or meditate. I demonstrated against beach segregation and wrote editorials in support of striking maintenance workers. Needless to say, in the spirit of the times, I had loads of casual sex: mutual masturbations, redolent of sweat and semen, in airy left-wing student communes; romantic one night stands in crumbling inner-city apartments and in wine estate mansions surrounded by vineyards.

They were exuberant, exhilarating times, a breathless expansion

of mental space and possibility. I remember feeling terrifically happy. People think of promiscuity as something lonely and unsatisfying, but my experience of it, at least then, right at the beginning of my adult life, was overwhelmingly positive. I was intoxicated by human existence, by the city, by racial and cultural diversity. I had an affair with a Muslim in an eighteenth-century Cape Malay bedroom decorated with a tapestry of the Ka'ba. He left me to attend midday prayers at the mosque across the street. I spent a night in an African township hostel, a house of horror and danger in the mythology of my youth, where the neighbors sang tribal hunting songs before they went to bed. Sex was my passport to my own country, and I traveled voluptuously, soaking it all up as enthusiastically as any awestruck American on the Champs Élysées.

At that point, the last thing I thought of was that I would ever get married. Marriage was, in the prevailing view in my social circles, bourgeois and antiquated, a sexist relic unsuitable for our brave new world of fraternity and rebellion. Marriage and the nuclear family provided warmth, it was true, but we disliked the way that it kept that warmth within itself, closed and tight, like a roasted chestnut. In a way, I had neatly flipped my adolescent concept: marriage was still something distant and "other," but this time married people, with their neurotic co-dependencies, and their oppressive gender roles which maimed and stunted them, were the ones who were abnormal and pathological. I had nothing but contempt for gay and lesbian people who wanted to marry—sad imitation heterosexuals in their suburban houses, with washing machines and matching butch-femme outfits and cats and dogs to compensate for their conspicuous biological inability to have children.

In my own life I felt energized, complete. I had people with whom to have lunch, share a joke, and talk gender-bending philosophy. I even felt loved and cherished: I had people I could talk to when I got depressed, and when I got tick-bite fever or the flu, I had friends who would make me chicken soup and rooibos tea. At age twenty-two, in short, I already felt that I had got hold of the most important things in life—sex, work, a sense of purpose, and support and affection—and it was hard for me to imagine, in anything more than the broadest outlines, a time when my needs might be different.

Of course I was wrong; we are always, at some level, wrong—the human condition is that of being wrong. Among all my memories of that time, there is one in particular that sums up for me how shortsighted I was. At a Pride March in Johannesburg, a mild-mannered man, middle-aged, balding, wearing a black business suit and tie despite the blistering heat, asked me to sign a petition to allow the legal

immigration of the foreign same-sex partners of South African citizens. I picked up the sheet, hesitated, asked him whether he also supported the immigration of friends, aunts, uncles, cousins, families of choice, and other "intimate connections." When he said no, I refused him.

"Sorry," I said, "but I'm not in favor of the privileging of romantic ties over other bonds. I'm afraid this just isn't my issue."

2. Love

Perhaps if I had stayed in Cape Town, I would have remained an implacable opponent of marriage, monogamy, and all its trappings: romantic nights in bed together watching a video; squabbles in the morning about laundry, grocery-shopping and domestic chores. Perhaps, at thirty-four, with crow's feet in the corners of my eyes and frown lines etched across my forehead, I would still be a hard-core rebel with spiky orange hair and at least ten different body piercings, who stayed out all night every Saturday at the clubs, and who lived in a leaky, crumbling farmhouse on the Cape Peninsula with other ex-hippies selling tie-dye T-shirts at the local flea market. Probably I would, at some stage, have entered into a "commitment ceremony" with a bunch of my old friends and comrades, standing at sunset on Noordhoek Beach, in front of a dreadlocked white *sangoma,* a traditional African healer, and vowing to love and cherish the other members of my "alternative family."

However, in January 1994 I decided to leave my home country. Horrified and unnerved by the blood-letting and terrorism that preceded the country's transition to democracy, and with a strong desire to see the world before I settled down into a trade or profession, I loaded my green backpack on a luggage conveyor belt at Johannesburg Airport, waved good-bye to my family and friends, and headed off to New York City, where I had a friend who was willing to put me up for a couple of weeks until I found my feet. There, I found a job and a work permit as an adult educator, eventually obtained a green card, and moved into a Brooklyn brownstone. Three years later, I relocated to Florida to pursue a graduate degree in creative writing at the University of Miami.

At first, living in my new country, I was satisfied with continuing my old sexual lifestyle. Where Cape Town had had two gay clubs and a single gloomy, half-empty gay bar, both New York and Miami had literally hundreds of venues for meeting men. Delighted at the sexual opportunities they offered, thrilled to be in this brave new world of

adult video stores, bathhouses, Sunday morning after-hour clubs, and back rooms, I frequented as many of them as I could. In Manhattan I hung out in piano bars and cruise bars, video pubs and strip joints, leather dungeons and parties where near-naked muscle boys dangled in cages and offered me little plastic beakers of their urine in return for a single dollar bill stuffed into their Doc Martin boots. In Florida I went cruising on the gay beach, met men at night in the parks, and, after the invention of the Internet, hooked up with strangers I got talking to in AOL chat rooms. At some level I knew I was lonely—separated now from both my family of origin and from my Cape Town community, and returning on Sunday mornings to my ever-emptier bedroom, with just me, the little desk with the laptop computer, and the soundless movement of the digits on my alarm clock. However, committed relationships simply did not feature in my life; they seemed as alien as walking on hot coals, or speaking in mysterious tongues.

Love, romantic love, passionate love, the all-consuming sort that picks you up and shakes your insides around and leaves you unable to think of anything else, just *him,* the smell of his deodorant, the brand name of his favorite walking shoes, the kind of tea he likes and how beautiful and dark his eyes are—this kind of love exploded into my life when I was twenty-nine years old and least expected it, without prelude or warning, and with all of the devastating force of a lifetime's worth of missed love affairs.

I was on holiday in Madrid, Spain, just before moving from Miami to Tallahassee, Florida, to pursue a doctorate in English. I ended up in that bar on Pelayo Street, just north of downtown Madrid, in the gay district, by the purest and cleanest of coincidences. I was strolling down the street, just another lost tourist, peering at my map and trying to find a club which had been recommended by the desk clerk at my gay *pension,* when I spotted the flickering neon sign in front of me that read *Cruising.* It was not the club I was looking for. Nevertheless, I thought: *The name sounds provocative. Let me just take a look.*

Inside, I was more or less immediately put off by the gritty seediness of the place, the porn videos playing on the screens above the bar, the plump, older men standing around in their leather jackets and chaps giving me meaningful glances. Nevertheless, here I made another casual but fateful choice: I decided to use the restroom before leaving—a dark, smelly pit of a toilet located in the basement behind the dance floor, off a pitch black passageway that was full of men. On the way back from relieving my bladder, I paused. In that hot, stifling passageway I could hear men breathing, the mysterious rustle of cotton T-shirts, the clink of loosening belt buckles. It was simultaneously frightening and erotic. Someone lit a cigarette lighter. I saw, off to my

right, the ruddy glint of flame light on bald skin. *Interesting*, I thought. *Maybe rough trade.* I took a step in that direction. He moved towards me. In the infernal blackness I touched his head; he leaned forward, ran his hand gently over my face, and then kissed me. We touched and held each other for a minute or two, with other men breathing on us and trying to touch us from behind, before he leaned forward and whispered, first in Spanish, and then when I didn't understand, in perfect English: *I have a place near here. Much cooler and nicer than this. Just five minutes' walk. Do you want to go there?* I said yes.

On that five-minute walk back to Alejandro's apartment—for that was the name of my plump and balding, not shaven-headed, stranger—I managed to establish that he was one year older than I was, that he worked as a painter and graphic designer, and that he liked reading many of the same authors and listening to the same composers that I did. I also learned that he had recently broken up with the only man he'd ever had a serious relationship with, a fifty-year-old alcoholic aristocrat. In Alejandro's beautifully decorated apartment, among the photographs of his grandparents who fought in the Spanish Civil War, his own art photographs, paintings, and homemade furniture, and his vast collection of smiling ceramic owls, I let him make me Twinings Earl Grey as we talked about Gaudí's architectural innovations and Goya's series of dark and light paintings in the Prado. After talking nonstop about art, history, literature, and politics until the early hours of the morning, we finally fell into bed. I was deeply moved by his gentleness, the way he touched my body lightly and respectfully, as though he were touching an artwork, the way he embraced me with such fierce and spontaneous joy and planted dozens of kisses on my hair and on the nape of my neck, like a child greeting a parent after a prolonged absence.

Tolstoy wrote that all happy families, and by extension all happy relationships, are alike. Perhaps these are the experiences that make them so: an easy, relaxed pleasure in each other's company; common interests; a spontaneous, contented expression of mutual consideration and affection, which in turn inspires a profound and peace-bequeathing trust. Although I had only known Alejandro a few hours, I had never, since those early days of living with James in the boarding-school bedroom, experienced such a level of instinctive comfort and tranquility in the company of another human being. Certainly I had never felt such consolation descend on me so quickly and instantaneously: a miracle, like sudden rain, a peace welling up in me deep and unfathomable as pain. That night I slept the joyful sleep of the satisfied, held in my new friend's arms until the sunlight crept through the slots in the metal blinds and woke us.

That afternoon he joined me to go shopping for gifts in the famous Rastro flea market in downtown Madrid. When I discovered that I had left my cash in the hotel room, he loaned me $100 without hesitating. Afterwards we had lunch together, lay on the grass in the park, and talked about friends and family. We bought ice creams. We went for a stroll along the lake. Without really planning to do so we were already in some way behaving like newlyweds. He invited me to spend the rest of my time in Madrid with him. We went together to my hotel room to pick up my luggage. I moved into his little apartment in the gay party district. The next day when he got off work we went together to see the medieval city of Toledo just south of Madrid. When I had to leave that Tuesday afternoon, I left him an American coin and a note saying that I hoped that lucky penny would draw us together again. He in fact surprised me at the bus station, showing up among the passengers and suitcases like an unexpected guardian angel to help me find my correct gate and show my ticket to the bus conductor.

At this stage we both agreed that, given the practical realities of our lives, this could not be anything long-term. However, neither of our sensible resolutions lasted very long. When I arrived back in Florida, I had an email waiting for me, saying how much he had enjoyed meeting me and wishing me luck with my classes and in finding a new house. I wrote back the same day. Before I knew it I was checking my email several times a day, waiting on tenterhooks for those messages full of sweet thoughts and wishes and counting the days until the weekends when we could talk for hours at affordable phone rates.

In December, he spent a month with me in Tallahassee. We went camping in the Appalachian foothills, huddled up in the icy mornings in a single sleeping bag, and laughed together at cheesy song lyrics on country radio stations. We talked about our childhoods, and we spent days comparing South African and Spanish culture. On Christmas Eve, half a globe away from our respective biological families, we got a small Christmas tree and ate roast turkey and vegetables by candlelight. It was unbearably romantic. Days later, when I said good-bye to him at the airport, the sense of aloneness was so abrupt and shattering that against all my English-speaking, South African, stiff-upper-lip instincts I burst into tears—a distraught *telenovela* lover—when he disappeared through the security checkpoint and into the crowd.

Love's notorious shortsightedness exists, like the side-effects of any drug, in direct proportion to its intensity. This intensity, in turn, is related to how much its practitioners need, want, and desire love, how much they long for it in their souls. Alejandro and I, each of us

for our own reasons impoverished in adult love, each of us deprived of the kind of everyday and nourishing romance that most people take for granted in their teens and twenties, were famished for each other, starving beyond rational thought. We thought only of each other, of the joy we felt in being together; long-term practical issues, such as what kind of future our relationship could have under homophobic immigration laws, were distant and alien to us.

As a graduate student, with my summers free and access to near limitless amounts of federally-subsidized student loans, I could, of course, take off for lengthy breaks if I wanted to—even for places as far afield as the Iberian peninsula. That summer, I spent three months living with Alejandro in Madrid—three months of more or less unadulterated happiness, underwritten by the U.S. Department of Education. We cooked our favorite recipes for each other, hung and folded laundry together, went shopping at Mediterranean markets loaded-up with fruits, vegetables, cheeses, olives, and meats. I met his siblings and parents, who spoke a rapid-fire Spanish that I found hard to understand, but who made it perfectly clear to me, with smiles, gestures, and touches, that they considered me part of the family. I even, like an adoring 1950s housewife, fell in love with Alejandro's domestic flaws and idiosyncrasies, the way he would leave clothes on every one of his seventeen designer chairs, which I would have to fold and put away in the closet, how he would come back to the apartment in a bad mood after a stressful day in the office, and melt when he saw me, smiling gently as he ruffled my hair. *Menos mal que estas aquí,* he'd tell me. Life is more bearable when you're here with me.

I felt as if I had been a fool, a blind man, a wayward infant. During the day, when I took breaks from my chores and from my reading and writing, I strolled through the gay district of Madrid, laughing at the man in the Spandex cycling shorts and the skin-hugging T-shirt who tried to pick me up at the Berkana bookstore, passing the entrances to the gay saunas and sex clubs feeling simply lucky and blessed with what I had and not in the least bit tempted to throw it away by going back to my old bad habits. On the phone to my old friends still struggling to trust their boyfriends and wondering if committed relationships were for them, it was all I could do to bite my tongue and not say: *You're crazy. This is the answer. There is nothing in life more important than giving and receiving love.*

At the end of those three months Alejandro and I did the inevitable: we made plans to try to extend this idyllic honeymoon for the long-term, which meant that one of us would have to leave his current life, and move continents to be with the other person. As a writer in the middle of an English Ph.D. who was unable to speak

Spanish, it was hard to imagine how I could get a work and residency permit in Spain. Alejandro, on the other hand, as a graphic designer, could conceivably find a job in the American hi-tech boom economy that was the late 1990s—the miraculous, never-ending expansion that was going to defy all previous economic laws and continue generating wealth and employment as long as our generation was alive. That August, as I returned to Tallahassee to take courses on social and literary theory and Renaissance Literature, Alejandro resigned his lucrative graphic design job, vacated his rent-control apartment in prime downtown Madrid, and bought a plane ticket to Florida to start a new life with me.

3. Marriage

He arrived on a hot, humid summer's day in September of 2000. I remember that he exclaimed in shock as we exited through the sliding glass doors of Tallahassee Regional Airport. The air was thick with heat, a wall of warmth, and the cicadas were screeching in the swamps of the neighboring Apalachicola National Forest. There he was, in his European tweeds and his long brown corduroys, his elegant and urbane wheeled suitcase and his small round spectacles, about to face down a continent of palmetto trees and diamond-backed rattlers, of Indian reservations and wooden barbecue shacks, of the bottom line and the information superhighway and endless sprawling strip malls and freeways and suburbs.

We investigated his immigration options. Obtaining a student visa was out of the question, because neither of us had the $25,000 to deposit in his bank account in order to show adequate means. So, too, was finding a woman for him to marry: I didn't know any willing single straight women or lesbians, and a lawyer friend advised us that the risks would be enormous—up to a $ 500,000 fine, five years in jail, and permanent deportation. That left the route by which I had come to the country six years earlier: finding a job, a temporary work permit, and then either a green card in the lottery or a rare and almost-as-difficult-to-obtain employment-based immigrant visa.

He sent out his resume, circled newspaper ads, and dropped by all the places listed under "Design" in the Yellow Pages. At first he got no responses. Then, slowly, the calls started coming in. He interviewed and was turned down for a position designing sports and academic trophies for local high schools: sculptures of farmboys in baseball gear wrestling brass alligators, presumably symbols of their inner vices; brass replicas of oval-shaped footfalls and crossed, elongated hockey sticks.

He tried to get a job laying out promotional literature for a downtown art museum. Finally, just weeks before his tourist visa was to run out, he got a job offer designing web pages for a software company that provided educational applications, and a promise of sponsorship for a work permit.

We were ecstatic. We celebrated by driving out to a nearby lake and drinking a bottle of California champagne, watched only by the anhingas perched on their skeletal cypress trees and the shrieking, invisible cicadas. We ate strawberries and blueberries and drank toasts to the life we would share together. *Until death or divorce do us part,* I remember joking with Alejandro, but thoughts of both death and divorce were far from our minds that crisp winter afternoon in the sunlight, beneath a clear blue sky and wispy white clouds. We had loved and overcome obstacles, and now it was time, like in the novels and the movies, for the two of us to live happily ever after.

He left to wait for the processing of his paperwork back in Madrid, which ended up taking much longer than the two months we expected. Then, in early March, the dot-com bubble burst. The letter from Infinity Software, in its neat little white envelope, left in my blue plastic mailbox next to the gray little garden gate that creaked when you opened it, was polite and regretful, but firm. *Sorry,* it said, *but circumstances have changed, and unfortunately we have to withdraw the job offer made in our previous communication with you.*

Alejandro now had no choice but to look for another job and apartment in Madrid. Fortunately, within a few weeks of his setbacks, he found both. Scared of uprooting my life and moving halfway across the planet, I did briefly contemplate ending the relationship, breaking off ties and saying in my own courteous, remorseful way, *Sorry, we tried, but it just wasn't meant to be.* But by this time he had become a part of me. I was about as eager to cut him loose as I was to tear a piece of muscle out of my own chest. Moreover, I was adamant that, having at last found love and marriage, I was not going to be deprived of it by the American government's homophobic policies. So, at the end of 2001, when I was getting ready to pass my Ph.D. examinations and begin writing my dissertation, I decided to relocate to Spain, with a view to beginning yet another life for myself there, this one at the side of my chosen partner.

Three continents, three epochs of my own life, two moves across half the earth's surface to pursue some dream relating to sex, love, and marriage. The first of these relocations was an attempt to escape irrevocably from marriage, to get as far away as I could from that acacia-strewn, churchgoing world of my childhood where the only meaningful and obligatory thing in life was to get married to a girl, raise

kids, and grow old together eating rusks and biltong in front of the television. Now, eight years later, I was moving to a new continent in order to pursue the very thing I had once run away from. I was attempting to create a family and a sense of domesticity for myself among the towering apartment buildings of Madrid, the corner fruit and vegetable markets, the living-rooms and balconies in which Spaniards of different generations gathered to eat tapas and drink red wine.

Like wily tricksters, places and countries at first glance always manage to be what we want them to be. We mold them with our dreams and fantasies, and they willingly comply. It is only later that they exert themselves on us, with merciless force, as they really are. Just as New York had at first lived up to my dream of being a free-spirited, hedonistic paradise, so, for the first six months or so, while I worked on my dissertation and attended Spanish classes at the university, Madrid indeed seemed precisely the kind of beautiful, cultured, happy Mediterranean city where I might live forever with my chosen love. We would visit the in-laws on Sunday afternoons for fun, laughter, and *tortilla de patata*. We would attend exhibitions at the Prado and the Reina Sofia, and get together with friends in one of the city's seemingly countless charming restaurants. Alejandro and I fantasized together about buying a house in the mountains on the outskirts of Madrid and turning it into a bed-and-breakfast.

In time, though, problems began to arise. The first of these, predictably enough, was immigration. If in the USA it was difficult to get a work permit, in Spain it was next to impossible: trying to deal with the fourteen-percent unemployment rate, the government had just announced that it would be issuing no work permits at all for the foreseeable future. I could maintain a student visa fairly easily, but needless to say, I could not be a student for the rest of my life without earning any money: Alejandro's income alone was not nearly enough to cover our monthly expenses. My anxiety grew.

As Alejandro had done in Spain, I sent out my CV everywhere, and in time, an opportunity of sorts presented itself: I could become an adjunct lecturer at NYU's Madrid Study Abroad center, one class a semester, a four-month contract at a time. The payment would be in the region of $2000 a class, providing me with an annual income of around $4000 a year. I could supplement this income by working illegally as an English Second Language Instructor at a Language Academy, where, like any undocumented alien, I would be making rock-bottom wages of anywhere from $5 to $10 an hour, without benefits, in a city with a cost-of-living similar to that of the U.S. Unable to marry Alejandro and obtain legal residency through family reunification, I seemed sentenced to live a hand-to-mouth existence on the

economic margins of the society, much like cleaners or migrant laborers in the U.S.

My sense of myself as a viable, economically self-sufficient adult human being was imploding. I now had love in my life, it was true. But chiefly as a result of not being able legally to marry that love, it seemed that I would have to sacrifice everything else I had come to take for granted as an educated, middle-class American: financial security, career, basic social and political enfranchisement, the ability to control my own destiny. The thought filled me with a blind, cold terror that prevented me from sleeping at night in that cozy little apartment with all the paintings, photographs, and ceramic owls. At two a.m. I lay next to Alejandro, my heart palpitating in my rib cage like a skittish rabbit, the sweat pouring off my body as all the *ifs*, *buts*, and *maybes* flew around in my brain, terrifying and tormenting me. In the mornings, when I was supposed to be sitting at my computer writing, the despair and exhaustion weighed on me, and I sat, listless and unfocused, staring out the window at the busses and pedestrians and clutching my tense, knotted stomach.

Once again, I knew that my life didn't fit me anymore—that it had tilted off balance as surely as, years before in New York, it had been unbalanced when it consisted just of casual sex. Before, my life had been empty of romance; now, in a sense, it was empty of myself—I had sacrificed absolutely everything in my life *but* love, in order to have love. But I still didn't have the courage to change. As I lost more than twenty pounds due to my anxiety, and as Alejandro's and my relationship suffered when I began to work longer and longer nights at the local language academy, I continued trudging along, depressed but still committed to the decisions I had made, determined to continue until I simply could not anymore.

Then one day it happened. We were sitting on the chairs in the study, on Sunday afternoon, talking about the same old problems: where were we going to move once Alejandro's father needed to sell the apartment, whether or not we could afford to buy a place, how we were going to pay the electricity, when suddenly Alejandro's eyes flashed into the distance.

"What's wrong?" I asked him. I had a sinking feeling inside. I had seen this vaguely distracted, sheepish expression in his face before, and it was almost always when he had a secret he needed to spit out—precious money he had been spending without telling me on antiques, glass sculptures, or artwork; bad news about a request for a raise that had been denied or a setback in his mother's health.

"I have got something I have to tell you," he said. "You know how you were always worried that you would be unfaithful to me?

You know, because of how you were before you met me? And how I always said that if you did that it would be worse for me than anything in the world?"

"Yes," I said. Somewhere at the back of my mind I could sense what was coming, although it still did not seem real to me—not possible from this sweet, kind man with his bald patch and his soft, beautiful hands, his love of architecture and painting and his promises, whispered to me in the early hours of the morning when I was most afraid, that he would always be by my side and loyal to me.

"Well, I have been the one who has been cheating on you, Glen. On these nights when you've been teaching, I've been cruising in some places that I knew downtown. I don't know why I've been doing it. Just a way of coping with all of these problems, I suppose—a way of letting off steam. I wouldn't have told you, except that I've picked up some crab lice. The doctor said we should both use disinfectant shampoo and wash our clothes in hot water. Perhaps I'm the real slut here, after all." He began to cry.

I held him, kissed him on his forehead, told him that of course I would forgive him—I, of all people, who knew about the inability to resist sexual temptation. But in the end this was the proverbial final straw. I still loved him, but I could not deal with a crumbling relationship on top of a collapsing life. Three weeks later I told him I was going back to Florida. Four weeks after that I was in a plane heading back to Tallahassee, and several months later, when his further attempts to immigrate to the U.S. proved unsuccessful, the two of us agreed that it would be best if we went our separate ways.

4. Love

There are times, in the aftermath of having discovered great love and then lost it, that I think back to my homeland, South Africa, and I remember that middle-aged man in a business suit who wanted me to sign that petition to allow same-sex marriage for immigration purposes. I wonder: did he, too, have a loved one prevented from joining him due to discriminatory immigration laws? Did the law get changed in time for their relationship to survive? If so, it was no thanks to me, but fortunately the world is full of wiser spirits than I was at the time, and I have no doubt that others helped him out on that dry, sweltering afternoon.

Along with all the other lost lives I carry around in my head, I now have one more. In it Alejandro and I are living in a village in rural Asturias, our favorite province in Spain, and one where we went

on holiday together when I first arrived in the country. We live in one of the slate-roofed cottages overlooking the sea that dot that verdant, unspoiled landscape below the towering, snow-capped Cordillera Cantábrica. We chop our own wood, tend a vegetable garden, look after a family of dogs. We have grown old together, retired; the table in the living-room is piled up with photo albums. I now spend my days reading books and going for walks, and he spends his puttering about in the shed with his furniture and paintings. Occasionally the phone rings: friends calling to say hi from South Africa, America, or Europe. At night we hold hands just like in the old days. We eat fish stew for supper, followed by steaming mugs of milk.

Oliver Rice

Driving Through the Night with the Junior Congressman, in Recess, Toward His Origins

There! Lightning in the west.

Aha. The governed are at their dream work.
The general will rumbles in the hills,
above the steeples and the silos.

The body politic ruminates on the next election.
On old scores.
On the main chance.

Out in the darkness, lives are turning, turning.
Someone has reached the age of his father's death.

Someone is seeking the terms of passage.

Someone is having a party
to celebrate his self-destruction.
Somewhere the cops are staked out.

Various marriages have occurred.

A heron nests beside the river.

In back rooms the cycles deliberate.

Whatever the music, someone will dance to it.

Somewhere in four-posters,
in pop-up trailers, are persons
for whom you would name your child.

Yahoos, know-nothings, mutual predators,
committing abominations in their sleep.

Carpenters.
Illegal aliens.
Victims of cyclones and fraud.

Back there we debate in the common muddle,
with sporadic clarities that catch the light
like mottoes for a golden age,
then disappear into some reporter's notes.

You cry easily, for a man.
What was intended, then,
when they affixed those seats
in that chamber beneath that eloquent dome?

It seems a real place when you are there.

Aristotle said all great men are melancholic.

And Plato despised democracy.

I may not run again.
May go play the mandolin
or howl at the coyotes.

The wind is rising. See how the poplars sway?

It is the citizenry declaring their rights.

And the vulgar. And the fatuous.
And the media lying in wait.
It is your fundraisers working until all hours.

Or I may hope for less,
streets where some men
all the time and all men
some of the time feel they have a chance.
Rooms with honest consummations.

And all the advanced medicaments.

You are weary.

I may feel ancient.

And dubious.
I may not run again.

The cattle huddle against the wind.

A phone is ringing.

Everywhere is somewhere out there,
rural free delivery or post office box.
The greatest number, after all,
may have a sense of the greatest good.

I see them! I see them!
All civilization has devolved upon those
who brood, dance, proliferate,
slouch against the culture,
take their consolations where they can,
in the flea markets, at the dog races.
Here! Take this exit!
Let us find them in their predicaments
in the very next town.

I may not run again.

Or I will turn radical,
skilled, supple,
invent social goods that stretch
across whole territories,
whole decades.

You will rise above history?
Above the platitudes and the guile?

In the hollow a raccoon sniffs the air.

The urban planners are in convention.

Equality, they cry in the old history book!
Liberty! Bread!

Rafael Oses

The After-Dinner Speech

The Gothic architecture of the Kiwanis Club
overshadows the hardened politician. He tinkers

with his plumbing in a gunny pin-striped suit,
as he makes his way toward the hardwood podium

in front of brand-new flags and "MAN OF THE YEAR"
banners. (The leftover food was already warping.)

"This ass comes from a better class of donkey,"
he says to himself, and in fact to the audience

as a test of the microphone. This brings laughter
and embarrassment, as he had planned to begin with

something against the Bottle Bill, or the Governor.
He blanked, but then thanked God for what he said,

as he thought *God, what an American thing to say*,
and said that, too. The audience began applauding.

Nancy Powers

from Adversities

Garbage

The crow is said to have a cutting wit
and thievish disposition at his core;
he rakes his oily feathers as he hops
upon a heap of fast food trash or pecks
a mutilated squirrel, its matted fur
all tangled up with French fries, bloody red
from ketchup packets squirting underneath
the screeching tires of rush hour's zany chase.
The crow's shrewd, stabbing eye stays treasure-sharp,
his timing's more exacting than the lights
that blaze their changing colors on the scene;
he flutters, hops, then soars when they turn green.

Natasha Marin

Zilker Park, October 17th, 1993

A man is sitting by himself cussing pigeons
with the hem of his breath. He tosses chunks
of his sandwich squeezed into balls at their
purplish claws, surprised that they look so soft
like nipple-skin or turkey waddles. He notices
they don't mind the mayo he tries to scrape off
and they fight viciously over the bologna slice
that falls to his feet. *Didn't know they ate bologna*
he thinks to himself, lips moving into the wind
tugging at the gray patches of hair at his temples.
He hates pigeons, always has. Calls them names
that remind him of his ex-wife *moneyhungryshedevil*
and *lyingcheatingbitch.* He hates pigeons, hates
the way their filthy wings fluff in excitement, hates
the stupid way they peck at a tossed stone
the same as a seed, and the way they fight over
who has the most bread, like those boys down
the street whose mothers don't know where
they are. *I hate pigeons* he thinks,
but he hates being alone more.

Heather Sellers

Dating Men with Children

My friend Amy just divorced her husband. His lips always burned her lips, she tells me. Whenever they kissed. She couldn't kiss him. He's a perfectly nice man. The body knows, she says. She says she wishes I could go out with him.

The next day I have a doctor's appointment.

The doctor says: ambivalence. You have a bad case of ambivalence. Hiccups aren't serious, no one dies from them. Breathe in, breathe out. The doctor also says: if you are still thinking of using the uterus, that needs to happen. You're experiencing a precipitous decline in egg production. The drop-off is steep.

He angles his left hand a little down ramp.

I say: "Isn't there a nicer way to say that?" And then I burp.

Those exact words: Drop-off. Decline. Precipitous. Use the uterus.

The boyfriend I have has kids, they say "our Dad is fixed." He just wants me to be happy, he says, and he will do whatever he can. He also says: the burping makes him feel funny sometimes. Like there is something wrong with him.

Back at their apartment, Jacob plays Runescape, where he has to kill a lot of tiny blocks of colored light with unusual and forceful powers. You can scramble people, block them, freeze, range, thieve, and melee. Little dialogue boxes appear above all the heads of the characters. He is talking to priests in peril all over the world. I wish my life was like this. My dogs come see me, hello, hello, hello.

Jacob clicks away at his people.

"Did you miss me, did you miss me?" I say to Jacob, via the hounds.

"Yes, we did," Jacob mutters in a sweet, high, not-ironic voice. "Yes we did, Mommy, yes we did. Actually we really didn't know you were gone." He turns in his office chair, his body faces me, but he doesn't take his eyes off the screen. He clicks at the keyboard—he types and bombs fly, not words.

"Is your dad here?" I say, my lips burning.

Brian Doyle

Abhrain ata Leaghta
(Songs & Poems)

I will tell of Rachturaigh the poet
Whose hand was on the violin also.

It was said that he was *caoch*, a bit
Of sight left in his eye, but this was

Not so: *dall* he was, blind as stone.
But what a tongue in his mouth!

He walked and he wandered,
Hedge to house, saying poems

Which he composed in the night;
And in the morning they sang

In every heart in that house.
That was a miraculous thing.

Ag baint ceoil as stegreachai cait,
He made music from the guts of cats

Strung on the bit of beech wood
He carried with him everywhere.

If another laid hand to it to play
It would only screech like the cat,

But in the hand of Raftery the blind,
Wonders came from it like waters,

The songs pouring from his throat,
His voice whirling like the wind.

Marilyn Krysl

Sustenance

I'd come to southern Sudan to do aid work feeding refugees in the terrible famine of 1989. I had an obsession around food. Stateside I'd wandered supermarkets examining lettuces and flank steaks the way a kid at the zoo gazes at giraffes and elephants. I liked the feel of being in the aisle of cereals, beside the dessert case. In camp I was making regular pilgrimages to our warehouse. I wanted to be surrounded by abundance. Let grain bags tower around me, let me climb into food's yummy body. Though my mania was more complicated. Purity and abstention also caught my eye, and in camp abstemiousness had a certain cachet. The vegans had a look: I Am Into Serious Mortification Of The Flesh So Be Impressed. I was repelled by their stringency and fascinated. Having high principles was cash in the bank, but no way was I going to stint. How then could I get the vegans to admire me?

I was soaking up grain vibes when Marsden, the camp's head, walked in, back from his afternoon stroll to the gate. He'd forged a chumminess with the guards. Any lorries? he'd ask. Jacob, a Nuer guard, would answer. Very sorry. There is no arrivement. The phrase had stuck.

"No arrivement?" I said.

Marsden shook his head. "No arrivement."

I turned on solidarity. "Just look at this." I pointed to a grain bag logo. *This is a gift from the people of the United States of America,* it said. "Can you believe this government? Advertising their good deed to the starving."

Marsden looked uncomfortable. He was lean, plain, and in command of a gnarly discipline. Apparently my remark was not news. I would have to curb my affect, I thought. He probably admired people who completely lacked it. Only Garang—a Dinka Brit and the camp's head doc—had playfully flipped him with a towel and got him to laugh and flip back. Word had it that Marsden had chosen aid work not for the money—he didn't take R and R—but as a vocation.

"This logo is so cynical," I said, "because we also fund Khartoum's slave dealers."

He frowned. This also was not news. I was carrying on a conversation with myself. Men like to be asked questions, I reminded myself. I gave him a smile, with eyelashes. "I've been wanting to ask you. When did you become a vegetarian?"

"I was seven," he said.

"Surely you weren't reading Gandhi at age seven."

"That came later. We lived on a commune in Colorado and one day I went to the river with a girl going fishing. A trout hit her line, and she landed it. The hook was in the corner of its mouth. I watched it leap against the pain, and that was the end for me. No more eating animals."

He flushed. He'd laid his emerald in my palm. But I felt one down—I possessed no such sterling accomplishment. As a kid I'd fed squirrels and birds, but I'd also tortured beetles by pushing dirt into their holes and stamping down. Marsden would not have. Though his cotton shirt was severe in its plainness. No way was I ever going to dress like that.

"You are dedicated," I said. "I really admire that."

He covered his diffidence by quoting his master. "Gandhi got it right. We are not ashamed to sacrifice a multitude of other lives in decorating the perishable body and trying to prolong its existence for a few fleeting moments."

I was fond of a Wild Rice Rösti with Carrot and Orange Purée. Now I considered: could I give up *cordon bleu* and subsist on Rösti? He looked poised to flee. What a sweetheart, I thought. Like a gawky fifth grader.

"By the way, I've been meaning to tell you," he said. To cover diffidence he put on stridence. "You turned in receipts. But the project doesn't pay for toiletries."

Toiletries? It was standard to get reimbursed. "You're not brushing your teeth in Africa?"

He blushed. "The U. N. can't buy your tampons." He hunched and turned sharply away. Then he went off as though to get far away fast. Wah, I thought. My attempt to build my account with him was a bust.

I arrived late for dinner. People were talking Khartoum's human rights record. The "ghost houses" were notorious. Once people went in, they mostly didn't come out. There was a coffee table book in the dining hall with photos of human rights workers from fifty countries. The Sudanese worker was the only one who feared being photographed for the book. He or she appeared as a black robe and a black hood with a rope noose around the neck.

We couldn't get the BBC and you were lucky to get a month old letter. News was Garang's *Manchester Guardian Weekly*—though it arrived weeks late. Marsden reported that there'd been a huge oil spill in Prince William Sound. Another stupid *Turuk* disaster, I thought.

One of the cooks had whipped up a serving of Rösti just for me, and I was psyched. I was torn between relishing the Rösti and Garang's presence. He wore the surgery greens and his lanky height with distinction, as though to say, *I'm Michael Garang—someone you'll want to know.* His skin was so black it was what the Dinka called blue. Since day one he'd been flirting me up.

"Sassie Annie has charmed the cook," Garang said. "Or slipped her an upper."

"I could use an upper," I said. "How about stirring up some chaos."

"We could stroll to the river—and pretend it's Kew Gardens."

"Oh awesome, let's," I said. "I'm so starved for water." I'd walked to the river before with my woman pal Beryl. It was camp's version of taking in a film or downing daiquiris while listening to jazz. What Garang proposed, I thought, was a date—our first. Our exit was noted, which upped my stocks with the crew. It was dusk, and Garang brought along his lamp for the walk back. We had to stay on the narrow path because the countryside was mined. Men like to ogle your ass, so I went first.

"Look there, love." Garang pointed. "At the far edge of our tarmac. Hyenas."

He liked to instruct the female, I thought, and insert a sliver of danger into the flirt. We gazed at the hyenas' round ears in silhouette. Africans didn't bury famine victims because it was a disgrace to starve to death. If we have food, Bol, a Nuer teacher in camp, had said, we give to strangers. If someone starves, that person has not lived well—or people would have fed him. I'd argued that the famine wasn't the victim's fault. Humans sometimes fail their human duties, he said. And hyenas too must eat.

"Their teeth grind bone," Garang said. "Their jaws are vices for crushing bone. And in those acid bellies of theirs the bone bits dissolve. They can go three days without water."

I produced a feminine shiver. "They look so sinister."

"They live in female clans, you should like that: a pack of feminists. The occasional male tagging along. Two cubs, at most three, and when the cubs play, one cub kills the other two."

"You're making this up."

"True every word. The mum then trains this last cub to hunt. Bloody ballsy, these dames."

The surround was dun ground flat to the horizon, set here and there with a lone black thorn tree. He hummed a Phil Collins tune. *Turn it off if you want to, switch it off or look away. I've seen about all I can see for one day.*

"I grooved on that same song!" I said. "Would you believe I had

pink hair, like Cyndi Lauper? I bopped around to 'Girls Just Want To Have Fun.' And practiced her Betty Boop voice. And Boy George? Loved his braids, the fem make up." I raised a fist. "Screw the establishment!"

"I can see you with the hair, love. I was into reggae. Banghra. And there was no screwing the establishment for me. I went straight down the wankers' path. My father did law, I did medicine. We had to be very legit, to get in."

I was liking the feel of things between us. The bank of the Lol appeared suddenly in flat earth. Above us the tamarisks' teeny pink blossoms swayed. I imagined this water flowing into the Nile and on to Egypt. Egypt would never let the southern Sudanese secede, Garang had said, because those *abids*—the word meant both black and slave—just might decide to divert Nile water onto rich southern soil and declare themselves Africa's breadbasket.

The water looked lush and cool, a silk robe I'd slip into. But I'd been told, Do not swim—unless you want to host some parasites. Garang pointed to a Crested crane standing in shallows. Above a long, lavender neck the head was black, with white and red stripes, the spiky crown like long, shimmering hat pins thrust into a pincushion. "That this Crested chap's here at all is thanks to Brits."

I gave his shoulder a playful shove. "Only evolution can make a Crested crane."

"Cranes are tasty, and if Brits hadn't brought the permit he'd be gone. One animal per year—and you had to take it with spears, arrows, snares. No guns allowed, that should please you." He said that when the Brits pulled out and Khartoum's General Hammad sent men in helicopters, they'd offed twenty-five elephants a day. "Though now humans are the Hammads. And we'll get what we pay for. Rats, cockroaches, your common pigeon—these will be our wildlife. We are not an endangered species, love. We're the plague."

"It's Garang's BBC World Service live," I teased, "here in the heart of Africa."

"BBC is what I do in lieu of getting smoochy kisses."

"One of the nurses might give you a whirl," I said, "if you weren't continuously occupied with polishing those boots of yours."

"On the contrary, love, vanity is *your* bailiwick. I wouldn't think of intruding."

"Who actually irons—irons!—in the desert?" I said. "You."

He got serious then. "Tell me everything I need to know about you," he said. Suddenly I wasn't Sassie Annie, flirting. Or I was, but I would cut right to the nitty gritty.

"My father uses food to show off his bucks," I said. "He got an

MBA, then determined to live as though he'd come from money. He disdains anyone who doesn't recognize a Kodelka. Decor in our house is Etruscan pottery. Replicas of Grecian torsos. He subscribes to the Philharmonic and took Felicia and me to the ballet. When he entertains he hires string quartets, or a jazz group. He wants his circle to know he has class." I was into it now. I would tell Garang my bitter truths. "Once after a bash I asked the cooks to keep what was left. I got Rita to drive me to where the street people hung out. Some were drunk, beards and hair matted. You get the picture. I'd gone down there in fury at my father. Now here I was, a spoiled brat, stepping out of a Mercedes with two plastic bags. I handed them to two men. One said God bless! No one had ever spoken those words to me."

Garang squeezed my shoulder, then let go.

"Then there was our mother, Felicia's and mine. Once I made two cucumber sandwiches the size of silver dollars—bread and a slice of cuke—no butter, no mayo—on a blue willow plate. She would eat only one, so I ate the other. I told myself we were actually dining together. Later when our father put her in the hospital, I fantasized that she'd come looking for me."

"Pink Cloud Tamarisk Annie," Garang said. I thrilled. He'd devised a new name for me. "I didn't know what it was. It makes me want to protect you."

His long legs folded up like a chaise, and he pulled me down beside him. Up rose an afternoon after our mother was gone from the house. Felicia and I on the wicker couch in the solarium, doing homework. I'd blabbed to Felicia my thoughts on Indians and how it was stupid Custer who'd shot them down. Now the assignment was to read about the battle. I studied the pictures of tepees, women gathering wild onions. On their horses the men looked regal. I don't want Custer to come, I said. Felicia stopped her subtraction problem. She reached and took my hand. I don't want him coming either, she said. It felt then as though our hands were talking, saying even if Custer comes, we're going to make it.

"I thought of my father as handsome," I said. It came pouring out, the intimate talk you have to have before you can touch each other. "Though this may have been my way to make him into a mensch. Underneath he was raging. He hadn't planned to marry an anorexic. Once I asked what our mother was like before they married. She ate, he said." I kept my eyes on the moving water. "When I was eleven, Felicia was second grade. I'd determined to coax Mom to attend our school concert. I wanted her to see me on stage—and to notice how other parents watched their kids perform. I climbed the stairs. Her bed was empty, and a lid off one of the shoe boxes. The shoes were

gone. She'd stood and walked. If she could walk away, I thought, she might walk back. But as soon as I thought that, I knew she wouldn't. I heard Felicia practicing the violin, the faltering sound of her bowing. Then on the nightstand I saw my mom's diamond ring. I knew she'd left it because she wasn't coming back."

I flipped the ring on its chain from beneath my tee so that Garang could see it. He picked up a fallen tamarisk twig and presented it to me. "Tamarisk," he said.

"Now you."

"My folks fled to London of all places. I was born into the era of the Coronation. Had my electric train flanked by sheep and hedgerows—but they also steeped me in cattle songs. Weekends our house filled with women cooking, men talking Parliament, candidates. Toured the British Museum, all that loot filched from Africa, case after case.

"Then the backlash. I'd be high on soccer, white boys' skins and mine open under the sun—and some kid would hit me with the word: Nig!" He paused. "My Golden Retriever, Majok, was my chum." He turned on his comic riff. "Me, I'm the advert for quantum mechanics. You've heard of Schrödinger's cat? This is what they call a thought experiment, Tamarisk. Hypothetical. Imagine a physicist bloke prepares a box equipped with a kitty sized guillotine in the center. Pop kitty into box, close box. Whether or not the guillotine gets tripped is decided by a random event just after we pop kitty in. Now kitty is either dead—or alive." He turned his hands up. "Dinka or Brit, which am I?"

"You're the kitty," I said. "That's not hypothetical."

"You heard of that chap who strung his tightrope over your Niagara Falls? He took along a stove and in the middle cooked an egg. That's me, love—scrambled egg on the cusp." He grinned. "But don't forget, I come from privilege. My father's lecturers levered him into a prestigious firm. We hung out with the pale upper crust: how I got into Cambridge. I'm whiter than you—save for my Dinka skin."

It was heady, this truth telling, and a relief. I didn't have to make myself into a production. He looked at me and said it again. "Pink Tamarisk Annie."

"Take off those shiny boots," I said. "Let's see you get down and dirty."

"Is this a come-on, this invitation to undress? What will I get for it?"

"The feel of your very own African mud between those spiffy Brit toes."

He laughed, and we stood up. It was nearly dark. "I'll shine the

lamp," he said. "But first look at this." He knelt, picked a vine's fruit. "*Kwol-jok*. Wild cucumber. If you get sick, love, I slice the sacred cuke in half. Fling the halves up. If they land open side up, you'll live."

"And if both halves fall face down?"

"Means you're scuppered. But I throw them up again. I toss cukes into the air until I bring round the result I want."

"Gods change their minds?" I said.

"On the head. The immortals can be nudged."

I put that in my pipe and smoked it on the path back. We passed beneath the flame trees' drowsy burning. At my tent flap he paused. "You look very fetching. And should you continue to provoke, I cannot be responsible for the consequences."

"And what, pray tell, might those be?"

He paused, the way an actor pauses for emphasis. "Are you testing my waters?"

"Just with a toe, Garang."

"Let me examine this toe," he said. "I blather about getting a leg over. But I don't want to rush us headlong."

I looked up. "All this Dinka height makes your mouth seem very far away."

"I'll lie down!" he said.

"Yes," I said. "Do that."

*

Yum yum. We say that. I woke at dawn inside the mosquito net to him watching me.

"I feel fucking splendid," he said. "That was Christmas for rock stars. Look what I got."

I imitated Beryl's sensuous poise. "You certainly had me."

"You liked it, a little?"

"Of course. Didn't you notice?" I kissed his nose. "You bull boy. You *balan*."

"The backhanders here coax girls to elope so as not to pay the bridal cattle. But me, I'm sterling. Though you need to know I'm Type A. I came here hoping to ease out of that some."

"You don't dawdle. You need to learn dawdling."

"But if I dawdle, the world might collapse! And you, Tamarisk—you might disappear."

I'd pulled on the public face and propped it up with smart duds, the come on cleavage. Now he'd chosen me, a fake. I wanted to probe on the skin thing. It needed to be settled between us. "Why have you chosen a paleface?"

"Because it drives the white boys crazy," he teased. "And you too like that. Hang with me and you've one-upped them."

"I think your skin is beautiful," I said. "And it shocks me. And you're right. I love going against the norm."

"Same for me, Tamarisk. Though I look at your Yank bod and think, *This woman was born in that skin, and I wasn't*, and I'm envious. I've had to scramble." His eyes turned impish. "Then I get condescending. Those clueless U. S. types, I think, they seem a bit stupid."

We laughed then, and I suspected that there were things he wasn't telling me, not now when we were happy. In boyfriends I'd sought a sumptuousness of personality: be Mommy, Daddy, a bursting bank account of attentiveness, and fixate on me as top of the line. This is not a package males are encouraged to develop, and I'd been disappointed in love, except my first high school boyfriend.

"He got trained by four sisters staying up late in nightgowns, giggling," I told Garang. "He knew how to talk to girls. We played clarinet and jockeyed for first chair. But just before graduation I got scared he might drop me. The only way to prevent that was to break it off myself."

"I was lonely and scared too," he said. "My first plunge was with Sar 11. Don't laugh—they're microscopic chaps of the oceans. More of them than any other blokes. Our teacher said the species were disappearing, and then this bloke comes on the tellie and talks up Sar 11. They're teeny and so bloody numerous that they'll never go extinct. So I took the chaps on. When things went bad at school, Sar 11s cheered me on. Took them everywhere. Even packed them along here."

"Remember Sar 11!" I said. "Solidarity forever!"

"We die," he said, "individual Sars die—but the great horde of Sar 11 goes on!" Then he turned serious. "So listen, Tamarisk. Do you accept me as your obsessed?"

"Be my obsessed."

"Is there a bloke waiting in the wings? Because I'd have to challenge him to a duel. All that gets messy."

"No bloke."

"I can be the bloke, then? I feel I'm about to say ridiculous things."

"You already have," I said.

I sat up and pushed aside the net. Then I took his right hand which had pulled me down beside him on the river bank. I kissed his palm, then closed his fingers over this kiss.

"So it's settled then?" Garang said. "I'm your obsessed?"

"You are. And don't try to weasel out of it, Darling." Darling. I was signing on.

*

"You snagged him," said one of the *Medicine San Frontieres'* nurses. I tried this on, as though in the dressing room at Nordstrom's. It fit. The way guys wear cars, women wear men, and I'd snagged a choice one. Garang was one hundred percent black, but those parents from a village near Abeyei had risen. He was upper crust now, flamboyantly. Precisely because he had Cambridge credentials he could say, In Khartoum I'd be lucky to be a doorman at the Acropole Hotel.

My status with the crew shot up. I sensed envy. "The French are after you," I said. "You *balan*."

"I'm your *balan*," he said.

And what did he think of Beryl's brassy smoldering?

"She's not my type. You are." He grinned. "High maintenance, though. Didn't I have to come to Sudan to get you, just."

One blue dusk I was off to harangue with the women. "Leaving me to my lonesome?" Garang said.

"Go bond with some guys," I said, teasing.

"Been there, done that." He turned wistful. "We're matey, you and I. You know that, don't you? Me, the black dude trying to measure up. You with your heart hurt by that mum and dad. Now both of us signed on to ease the world's pain. That's the glue that sticks us together."

"Totally, darling. We're in this for the long haul."

I was psyched. There was no female who wasn't elbowing her way to him, and he'd chosen me. Now I'd discard my icky past the way you step from a dress you let fall on the floor—and go forward. I was vague about what this advance would look like but convinced it was imminent. I'd come to the sweltering bush to give away two years of my life, and the universe approved and had given me Garang. In the cauldron of southern Sudan, what more could I want? But you swear to love each other and don't imagine the conditions in which you won't be able to keep the vow. I imagined the swath of time ahead of us, how I'd take it by handfuls, and had no way of knowing how little time there would be.

I was getting used to my new status the way you get used to wearing a dress you'd previously thought too risqué. I intended to bask. But how bask in Hell? Take the teenager too thin to sit up alone. His father held the kid on his lap. This is not a pic out of *National Geographic*, I thought. Bol's wife Nyanbol, also a teacher, would say, Annie, can we get biscuit for this young mother, she is only a girl. Or Annie,

there's one girl who needs Big Milk please. Off we would go to the storeroom above the dining hall. We kept *Turuk* food there, and also the power food—peanut butter and powdered eggs, the Big Mac High Energy biscuits. And top of the line Big Milk, the U.N.'s Courvoisier for worst case scenario skeletons—powdered whole milk bursting with vitamins and ratcheted up with soy protein. I'd imagine I was getting used to Hell, and then up popped Nyanbol in the yellow kerchief. Annie, this mother saw bad things. The soldiers took her children, the ones old enough to work. But the three-year-old, they don't want him to grow up because he will become fighter. They push this boy's head to the ground. Then one puts gun to this little head and shoots it.

There was ambivalence around these stories. On one hand we who were *Turuks* used them shamelessly. Shock is titillation, it gets the adrenaline moving, and stories were a wad of cash you'd dispense at dinner. But we were also torn open by the stories. One afternoon Bol told me a story about three hundred Dinka in Abeyei who'd boarded a train to Khartoum. The shock of the story buzzed me open. It was a high I felt I shouldn't enjoy because the details were awful. I headed for the hammock beside the dining hall. Smell of oregano: pasta night. Through the screen door I glimpsed Garang reading in the dining room. He was giving each sentence his piercing attention. I stepped inside.

"Tamarisk! Listen a mo." He was revved. "Newton's passed the sell-by date, and now that chap Heisenberg pops down with his Uncertainty Principle. Says you can't see a thing objectively because your looking influences the thing you look at. In effect, you're a slice of what you're looking at—though the fellow doesn't say exactly that."

I called up Bol's story: I was indeed an awful slice of it.

"Then some other chaps put it about that what happens in one spot affects what happens in other spots. This event right here knows right away what's going on far away, and immediately gets in step. The orchestra stays synced." He stabbed the book's cover with his finger. "Then they come out with the really big one. This business of events knowing about other events happens at the subatomic level. AND it also happens at our big, blundering level of trams and trips to the theater and my kissing you up one side and down the other. What it means is we are so connected—by our knowing—our intuition—our *je ne sais quoi*—that there is *no way* to come apart. We're never apart. No such thing as apart. This is the West's version of *cieng*, Tamarisk. Is this not top drawer?"

He was a lit being. "Does this mean I can't lose you?"

He frowned. "Means we could be on opposite sides of the blimey

planet and still be crotch to crotch—figuratively speaking."

"You're so excited that you're giving off wattage," I said. I tried a smile: it went haywire.

"Tamarisk? Something's hurt you," he said.

There was this ironic way in which the trains operated in the famine. Some of our U.N. grain got shipped south by rail, and sometimes Dinka rode the empty cars back to Khartoum to look for work. Never mind that in Khartoum they'd live in Hillat Kusha, that slum camp built on a toxic dump. It would be safer there than here, because here was not safe. But there was no famine in the south, Khartoum insisted, and the war was merely a disagreement over boundaries—nothing genocidal about that. Meanwhile the starving fled north because Khartoum had torched their fields and granaries—and U.N. grain came south to feed the starving who Khartoum insisted were merely victims of drought.

I told Garang the story then as another of the war stories which happened to involve a train. Though as I told it I began to break into little pieces, and so did he. Three hundred Dinka in Abeyei had boarded this train. Soldiers helped them into the cars. Soldiers slid shut the doors. The train began to move. Some of the Dinka were weary and lay down. Mothers nursed their babies. Children started a singing game. In the next car more children took up this song. It felt good to hear singing, and the thrum and clack of wheel on track was music taking them to a safe place. That sound and the motion lulled them.

At some point the train slowed. Stopped. There was no window through which to look out. They heard a man's voice shouting Arabic. Then the sound of splashing against the outside of cars. And fumes. A man shouted the word: petrol! A baby, in surprise, let go the mother's nipple. The sound of splashing stopped, and a woman began to weep. How long did her voice go into the air like a monk going down a street begging food? There came another sound like many whips, flaying the air. Someone began to sing. Others took up the song. For a while the sound of singing drowned out that other sound. Then that other sound rose and drowned out the singing.

—Contributors' Notes—

John Balaban is the author of eleven books of poetry and prose, including four volumes which together have won The Academy of American Poets' Lamont Prize, a National Poetry Series Selection, and two nominations for the National Book Award. His *Locusts at the Edge of Summer: New and Selected Poems* won the 1998 William Carlos Williams Award from the Poetry Society of America. He is the 2001-2004 National Artist for the Phi Kappa Phi Honor Society.

Dick Bentley has been an urban planner for the Massachusetts Office of Communities and Development and has served as Planning Director for the Boston Housing Authority. His short story collection *Post-Fruedian Dreaming* is available via amazon.com.

Rachel Squires Bloom tries to create speakers whom the reader recognizes because they are a sister, brother, friend, or self. She hopes that her poems connect with the experience of others and become a part of the web of art and words that binds us. Her work has appeared in *True Romance*, *Green Hills Literary Lantern*, *Bellowing Ark*, *Panhandler*, *Clackamas Literary Review*, *Urban Spaghetti*, *Mad Poet's Review*, *Taproot Literary Review*, *Epicenter*, and *The Hawai'i Review*.

Bill Cowee is a retired Chief Financial Officer and founding member of the Ash Canyon Poets. He has been awarded an Artist's Fellowship by the Nevada Arts Council and a Governor's Arts Award for Excellence. His book *Bones Set Against the Drift* was published by the Black Rock Press at the University of Nevada library.

Nicholas Delbanco is the author of more than twenty books of fiction and nonfiction. His most recent novel is *The Vagabonds* (Warner Books, 2004), and his forthcoming collection of essays (Columbia University Press, 2005) is called *Anywhere Out of the World*. He is the Robert Frost Collegiate Professor of English at the University of Michigan, where he directs the Hopwood Awards Program.

Brian Doyle is the editor of *Portland* Magazine at the University of Portland and the author of five collections of essays, most recently *Leaping: Revelations & Epiphanies* and *Spirited Men*. "Hope" is drawn from his new book, *The Wet Engine*, a musing on the magic and muddle of hearts, which will be published in May 2005 by Paraclete Press of Massachusetts.

Tod Erkkila grew up in the tiny coal mining town of Scofield, Utah. He received his BA from the University of Utah and his MFA from Eastern Washington University. Currently, he lives in Salt Lake City. This is his first published story.

Sarah Flygare lives on Squak Mountain with her husband, Kimber Bartlett Riley, and her son, Willis Bartlett Riley. Her work has appeared in various literary magazines, including *Nimrod*, *Explorations*, *Inkwell*, *Kinesis*, *The Ledge*, *Louisville Review*, *Oasis*, and *Rosebud*. She is the recipient of an Artist Trust Grant, the Katherine Anne Porter Prize, the Kestrel Short Story Award, the Lullwater Award, the James W. Hall Award, and the Richard Blessing Award, among others.

William Ford's first book, *The Graveyard Picnic*, won the 2001 Writing Award and publication by Mid-America Press (2002). His poems, twice nominated for a Pushcart Prize, have appeared in *Poetry*, *The Iowa Review*, *New Letters*, and elsewhere and in two anthologies: *Poets on the Landscape* (Loess Hills Press, 1996) and *The Second Set* (Indiana University Press, 1996). He teaches at Kirkwood Community College in eastern Iowa.

A native of Virginia, **Cary Holladay** is the author of a novel, *Mercury* (Random House, 2002), and two collections of short stories. New stories appear in recent issues of *The Hudson Review, Black Warrior Review, Idaho Review, Gulf Coast, New Letters, Five Points,* and *The Southern Review*. Holladay received an O. Henry Prize in 1999. She and her husband, the writer John Bensko, teach in the Creative Writing program at the University of Memphis.

Marilyn Krysl has published seven books of poetry and three of stories, the latest of which are *How To Accommodate Men* (stories), Coffee House, 1998, and *Warscape with Lovers* (poetry), Cleveland State Poetry Center, 1997. Her stories have appeared in *Best American Short Stories*, *O. Henry: Prize Stories*, and other anthologies. She has worked as a volunteer for Peace Brigade International in Sri Lanka and currently volunteers with the Lost Boys of Sudan. She is working on a novel.

Natasha Marin hails from Trinidad and Canada. By day she is a corporate drone, by night an aspiring writer. Her work has appeared in *Borderlands*, *International Poetry Review*, and *English Journal* and is upcoming in the *Bryant Literary Review*.

A Malaysian whose ancestors from Kerala made the journey to British Malaya, **Dawn Morais** has now made a home in Hawaii on a Green Card, thanks to her American husband. She graduated with a First Class Honors Degree in English from the University of Malaya and completed a Master's in American Literature at UCLA. A career in communications continues to provide a livelihood while she pursues a PhD in English at the University of Hawaii, Manoa.

Kent Nelson has published four novels and four collections of short fiction, together with over a hundred stories in America's best literary magazines. Several stories have been included in *Best American Short Stories, The Pushcart Prize, O. Henry: Prize Stories*, and other anthologies. His most recent novel, *Land That Moves, Land That Stands Still* (Viking), won the Colorado Book Award and the Mountains and Plains Booksellers Award for best novel of 2003.

Catherine Neuhardt-Minor's work has appeared in *Chelsea, Peregrine, Folio, Lullwater Review, Chariton Review, Bloomsbury Review, Mindprints, Phi Kappa Phi Forum, Poet Lore, Borderlands*, and other literary journals. Catherine's work has won many conference prizes. She teaches Art at St. Margaret's School in Tappahannock, Virginia.

Rafael Oses was born in Hartford, Connecticut, and holds degrees from Hartford Art School and Columbia University. His work has also appeared in *Black Warrior Review*.

Louis Phillips is a widely published playwright, poet, and short story author, whose most recent book of stories is *The Bus to the Moon*, published by Fort Schuyler Press. Livingston Press has published *R.I.P.*, a sequence of his poems based on Rip Van Winkle.

Mary Elizabeth Pope is a professor of English at the College of Notre Dame of Maryland. Her creative work has appeared in various journals and anthologies, including *Clackamas Literary Review* and *The Fourth Genre: Contemporary Writers of/on Creative Nonfiction*.

Nancy Powers is a life-long St. Louisan, a working journalist and a member of the MFA program at University of Missouri-St. Louis. She hopes to receive her degree before Social Security kicks in (but it could be close). She has won several local prizes, and her poems have appeared in *Mankato Poetry Review, Fan Magazine, PMS (PoemMemoirStory), Small Spiral Notebook*, and *Melic Review*.

Glen Retief grew up in a small Afrikaner village in rural northeastern South Africa but now lives in the USA. His stories, essays, and novel excerpts have appeared in *The Massachusetts Review, Puerto del Sol, New Contrast, Tribute, Mangrove, The James White Review*, and other magazines. He is currently a PhD candidate in Creative Writing at Florida State University and is working on his first novel.

Oliver Rice has received the Theodore Roethke Prize. He has also been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and was twice featured on *Poetry* Daily. He appears in *Ohio Review*'s anthology *New and Selected* and in the Bedford/St. Martin's college textbooks *Poetry: An Introduction* and *The Bedford Introduction to Literature*.

Heather Sellers grew up in Florida and now lives in Michigan. She is the author of a poetry chapbook, a new book of poetry called *Drinking Girls and Their Dresses*, the story collection *Georgia Under Water*, and a memoir of the writing life. Her first children's book is out from Henry Holt. Sellers teaches writing workshops at Hope College, competes in triathlon, and raises rescue corgies. Her website is www.heathersellers.com.

Heidi Shayla's fiction has appeared in *Prairie Schooner, Mississippi Review, South Dakota Review, Iron Horse Literary Review*, and *Writers' Forum*. She is a recipient of an Individual Artist's Award sponsored by the Oregon Arts Commission and the NEA, and has been awarded the Silver Rose Award for Excellence in the Art of the Short Story by American Renaissance for the 21st Century. She received her MFA in Creative Writing from Vermont College.

Cameron Shinn is a sixth grade teacher in Wellington, Colorado. Through the National Writing Project, he has taught at Colorado State University and works as a writing consultant in various schools throughout Colorado. When he's not grading papers and planning lessons, Cameron spends time writing poetry and fiction in coffee shops.

Colleen R. Valentine recently relocated to the Pacific Northwest from Atlanta, Georgia. Over the past three years, she has self-published a book of her poetry called *When I Was Me*. Her poetry has also appeared in *Words & Images*, *Stolen Island Review*, and *Lullwater Review*.

Teresa Villegas's cover art, *El Tragafuegos*, is a detail from her installation entitled *La Lotería: An Exploration of México*, which is based on the popular Mexican game of chance called *La Lotería* and was created

with a grant from the NEA and The Arizona Commission for The Arts. The University of Arizona Press has recently published her work in *¡Lotería!* with essay and riddles written by Ilan Stavans. Visit her on the web at www.teresavillegas.com.

Marianne Walden is a recent graduate of Indiana University, where she obtained her degree in English. She currently resides in Utah. This is Marianne's first publication.

Born in Yonkers, New York, **Fred Yannantuono** studied Literature and Psychology in college. He has held a variety of jobs, including truck driver, dishwasher, and film festival director. He finished 183rd (out of about 10,000) at the 1985 U.S. Open Crossword Puzzle Tournament and once won a yodeling contest in a German restaurant. Paul Newman once claimed to have known him for a long time. Fred hasn't been arrested in seventeen months.

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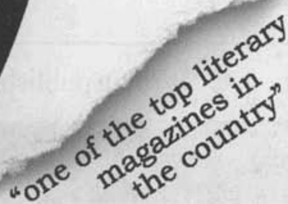

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