No. 29

Summer 2005
Contest Issue

FUGUE

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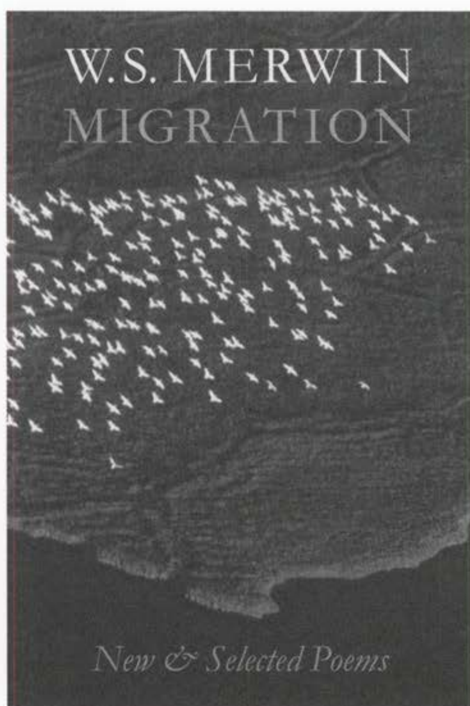

"The publication of W.S. Merwin's selected and new poems is one of those landmark events in the literary world... Merwin is one of the great poets of our age."
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—*Publishers Weekly*

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—*Library Journal*

"Complex, spiritual, and evocative, Merwin is a major poet, and this is a sublime measure of his achievements."
—*Booklist*

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Whatever talents may be, if the man create not, the pure efflux of the Deity is not his;—cinders and smoke there may be, but not yet flame.

RALPH WALDO EMERSON

Summer 2005

FUGUE

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University of Idaho
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Moscow, Idaho 83844-1102

This issue is dedicated to the memory

of

Robert Creeley

(1926-2005)

FUGUE

Summer 2005, Vol. 29

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Submissions are accepted September 1st through May 1st (postmark dates). All material received outside this period will be returned unread. Please address submission to the appropriate editor and send with SASE to *Fugue*, 200 Brink Hall, University of Idaho, P.O. Box 441102, Moscow, ID 83844-1102. Prose no more than 6,000 words pays up to $50 (as funds allow) and a one-year subscription. Poetry, all forms, pays up to $25 (as funds allow) and a one-year subscription. Please send no more than five poems, two short-shorts, one story, or one essay at a time. Submissions in more than one genre should be mailed separately, each containing an individual SASE. We will consider simultaneous submissions (submissions that have been sent concurrently to another journal) with the explicit provision that the writer inform us immediately if the work is accepted for publication elsewhere. We will not consider multiple submissions (more than one submission at a time). All multiple submissions will be returned unread. Once you have submitted a piece to us, wait for a response on this piece before submitting again.

Cover art, *Eisenman Landscape* (*Frank House*), by Julie Langsam, 2001.

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***Fugue* Fourth Annual Contest in Prose & Poetry Winners:**

Nonfiction—Judged by Rebecca McClanahan

Iraj Isaac Rahmim, *Memoirs of an Exile* (1st Prize) 26

Rebecca McClanahan: "A moving account of a self-described 'semi-Jewish, semi-Iranian, modern wannabe' and his search for a spiritual homeland. An ambitious exploration of culture, class, and religious identity, this essay is notable for its sensory and specific detail, its varied and imaginative structural movements, and especially its sense of urgent necessity."

Will Jennings, *How I Know Orion* (2nd Prize) 116
Rebecca McClanahan: "From the first sentence, the narrator's energetic, idosyncratic voice grabs the reader and does not let go. This is a page-turning narrative, a coming-of-age story filled with beautifully constructed sentences that dazzle and surprise."

Melita Schaum, *Restraints* (3rd Prize) 167
Rebecca McClanahan: "A gracefully written segmented essay that is both contemporary and timeless in its exploration of the many faces of love: safe, comfortable, long-term partnering; passionate, for-the-moment couplings; desire for children, for lost youth, for new places and old, and for those as yet untraveled."

Poetry—Judged by Tony Hoagland

Michael Bassett, *The Blackboard of His Eyelid* (1st Prize) 45
Tony Hoagland: "This writer has a rich, original ear for the improvisations of language; at the same time, she or he is able—in this instance—to remain in pursuit of the storytelling at hand. Thus this poem generates a Dickensian, gothic linguistic pleasure for the reader in its lyrical narrative of a persecuted nerd-child."

Chris Ransick, *How I Swam to the Bottom of the Ocean* (2nd Prize) 138
Tony Hoagland: "I admire the unwavering imaginative persistence of this writer in his or her fantastic story; pure, unironized narrative is one of the most endangered of poetic species now; this poem stays true to its mystery, with verve and dignity. Bravo."

Brandel France de Bravo, *Apricot* (3rd Prize) 187
Tony Hoagland: "This poem is full of flair and verbal bravado, and praise, and lots of personality; probably written by a Scorpio."

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From the Editors

Simple thanks never seems quite enough, but thanks is all we can proffer to the many people who worked to bring this issue, our twenty-ninth, to fruition. In addition to all the writers, and the editors and staff members, we'd also especially like to thank Tony Hoagland and Rebecca McClanahan—fine poet and essayist respectively—who generously donated their time to judge this year's Prose & Poetry Contest and award our winners, whom you will find in the table of contents.

For the cover of the magazine, we're always seeking artwork that might somehow both crystallize and embellish the mood of the issue as a whole. Of the many reasons we're drawn to Julie Langsam's beautiful painting, which provides the cover for this summer's issue, perhaps the biggest is its majestic and panoramic isolation. Some ineffable quality about that thoroughly modern house, standing alone on the plain beneath a mottled and suggestively apocalyptic sky, pulls at the viewer's imagination. Surely the image bespeaks the strength and individuality of art itself, which springs from that bedrock human necessity of creation. Several years ago Hollywood produced a small-budget, little-known film you might have heard of: *Titanic*. Perhaps including this overblown movie in the same paragraph with Ms. Langsam's wonderful painting will seem odd, but here's the connection. There's a poignant moment in the film in which a group of three tuxedoed violinists stands on the deck of the sinking ship playing a few numbers, supposedly to keep everyone calm. A passenger collides with one of the violinists, not halting in his rush to get past. The men stop playing briefly and one of them says, "What's the use? Nobody's listening to us anyway." "Well, they don't listen at dinner either," his friend replies and, after glancing around, continues: "Come on, let's play." A brief pause ensues and the violinists commence a rendition of *Orpheus*. Fitting, don't you think, this timely homage to that most famous poet and musician in Greek mythology, one whose lyre could make rivers cease to flow and mountains move just to follow his sound.

Indeed, this moment provides an apt metaphor for what we do each time we put pen to paper. The ship is sinking, friends. Whether it be in five years or fifty, we're all headed toward our end. The culture—often heedless, preoccupied, frenetic—teems around us. What could be more hopeful and resolute than to herald one's note in the midst of chaos? We forge ahead, hoping we will be heard, knowing we may not. Listen! we are saying amid the din as we record our words. Listen! We want our human music to make a difference. In an interview a few years back, Philip Roth recalled a bleak period in his writing career, a time when consecutive books hadn't sold well and he was bemoaning his station as a writer, wondering

whether he'd be read again. He remembered his friend bolstering him, telling him that if everyone who'd read his books could walk through his living room one at a time and talk with him, Roth would be so moved he'd be reduced to tears.

We like to imagine a similar scenario involving the writers of *Fugue*. This edition will transport you with its poetry from the bottom of the ocean to the ethereality of the very air you breathe. Its prose will take you from New York City to America's heartland to the Plains to the mountains of the West to the Philippines and Iran and beyond. We like to think of a room where all of our writers might gather, like a reception line, to meet the readers of their work, a host of people explaining how this story or that poem jolted them, rearranged the tenor of their day, made them laugh…made them cry. It's hard to find a higher aim for art than true human concord, a sense of shared possibility and wonder and moral responsibility. We're glad that such an event occurs in these pages.

In his poem "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower," William Carlos Williams famously says, "It is difficult / to get the news from poems / yet men die miserably every day / for lack / of what is found there." He's right, of course. And so let's keep playing. Let's lift the bow to the violin once more.

Ben George and Jeff P. Jones

Karen Gettert Shoemaker

Cain's Sister

The cat was an old calico with a notched ear, mismatched eyes, and a purr that rattled like she had something broken inside. We found her in a ditch almost dead from hunger late one morning on the front edge of summer when nights it rained and the days bloomed yellow gold with promise. When my brother and I first came upon her she was mewing and scrambling and trying like all heaven to get up out of a culvert, but not making much progress against the concrete sides. The two of us crouched down and looked at her for a little bit. She didn't look dangerous, but the possibility of it clung to her like mud to her fur and neither of us knew for sure how we should position ourselves in the face of it. Cain made his mind up about the whole matter quick and without consulting me and all the sudden he pulled his shirt off over his head right there beside the highway, right in front of God and everybody, slid down into the culvert, and draped it over that cat. He wrapped it around her until she was nothing but a faded denim work shirt bundle with a cat face that he cradled in his arms like she was some precious baby.

When he got back up to the road beside me he said to get her home we'd use the burlap bag, the one that held the pop bottles we'd found in the ditches that morning. I couldn't believe he expected me to give up on my dream of riches and dump the bottles out and I told him as much.

"I'm not giving up twenty-five cents worth of pop bottles for no cat." I talked tough but I knew he'd win, partly because I liked cats too.

"Come on, Abby, you can have my share," he said. "And I'll carry three of 'em and you can carry the other two. We don't need a bag for just five."

Well, glory be. I have to admit I thought right then that cat was something special because never, ever, had I won an argument with Cain so fast and without the intervention of some higher power.

I set the bottles out onto the gravel and spread the burlap out smooth as I could. Cain placed the cat bundle down in the middle of it and we picked her up and carried her in a bag-made sling between us. Funny thing how she didn't fight to get out of what Cain had wrapped her in. She just lay there, blinking at us when we got our faces up close enough to look at her. Her purr took us both by surprise when she started in. We thought there was a cicada caught up in the bundle or some such thing and we stopped behind a hedge a couple blocks from home and put her down on the ground to get a better look and listen to her. We had no idea the rattle we heard inside that cat was pieces of the world, getting ready to break.

"Let's name it Hot Rod," I said after we satisfied ourselves there were

no insects wrapped up with her. "He sounds like one of those things the Beckwith boys drive."

"First of all," Cain said patiently, "we know she's a she not a he, and second of all we got to get to know her better before we can know what her name is. Naming is serious business."

"How do we know she's a she?" I asked. I didn't even know what to look for to learn that sort of information and I liked it that Cain said "we" even though it was only him that knew.

"She's a calico, all calicos are girls. That's just one of God's decisions," he said. He motioned for me to pick up my side of the sling and we started toward home again. "We'll just take our time, maybe whisper some names in her ear and see how she answers. It'll just take some time."

My brother, can you believe his name was Cain? And in a Christian family yet. Cain cooed to her all the way home, telling her everything was going to be okay. She was going to be all right now that we'd found her. When I reminded him Mom wouldn't let us keep her, I whispered because I didn't want to be the one to break the news to the cat; she looked so peaceful between us. It wasn't that it was a cat, or even a stray, that made me say that about Mom. It was something about Mom, about the way she didn't like change. Mom's like a bird on a fence. With some birds it doesn't matter if you move toward it or move away from it, sometimes all you had to do was move and that bird will take off. Other birds you can get almost right up beside before it takes wing. You think you could almost touch it at times like that. Mom's like both those kinds of birds, you just never know which one, but instead of flying away, she flies into a rage and you better be the one taking wing. Cain says she wasn't always like that. He says before I came along she used to smile, not all the time, but often enough. He says this like it's not my fault, but I don't know.

I could see already Cain wasn't going to let Mom make the decision about this one. He got that way whenever he got around animals, like he didn't even notice people anymore. "You just keep your mouth closed" Cain said, "and this will work out fine." I looked down at the cat, which blinked back up at me, and I looked over at Cain's hand, the one holding the bag. My eyes followed his arm up to his shoulder and I noted muscles that weren't there last time I looked, shifting and moving beneath his fair skin. We were almost to our street, where the pavement runs out and the road turns to gravel. The houses along here belonged to old people who spent most of their days sweeping the dirt from our block off their sidewalks and scowling at us like they wanted to sweep us off too. The lady with the Holy Mary shrine by her front door, a half-buried bath tub with a statue in it, was staring at us as we walked past. Cain didn't even notice her, but I watched her watching us. She kept her slitty eyes on us until we got around the corner out of sight.

"This will work out fine," Cain said again, and I decided to believe him.

When we got to our block we cut through the alley behind Jantzens' and Wilsons' to get to the playhouse in our backyard. Nobody ever goes out there but us. We made a bed for her in an old egg crate and then set out to get her fed.

It was a beautiful thing how that worked out. Mom was standing in the kitchen when we walked in and without even waiting for Cain to tell me what to do I asked her about her garden, about what was that green lacy stuff coming up in the last row down by the street. She walked over to the door to look at it while she answered and Cain grabbed a cup of milk and slipped out the back door. I could hardly keep from laughing it worked so well and I almost ruined it by running out the back door to catch up with Cain, but I stopped my feet just in time so I didn't give it all away.

We fed her through a straw until she was strong enough to drink on her own. Then Cain talked me into agreeing that we couldn't keep stealing food out of the kitchen and the money we got for turning in the pop bottles could buy her food. "And nobody would be the wiser," he said. Keeping the cat a secret wouldn't be hard, I thought, but giving up my little bit of money wouldn't be easy. I had plans for my wealth and feeding a cat wasn't part of them. I had enough trouble with my own temptations.

For example, the Ben Franklin store down on Douglas Street had two doors along its glass front. A candy counter stood between those doors so no matter which one you chose you had to walk past it.

It was a vision, that candy counter. Glass cases filled with colors and shapes to make your mouth water. Your intentions disappear. You could buy as little as could be measured into a silver scoop, or as much as could fill it, though buying a full scoop was something I'd only dreamed about. Yellow and orange corn candy wedges. Pink circles of mint lozenges. Red and black licorice twists. Maple Nut Goodies—oh, the crunchy, chewy sweetness that could so often trip me up, and all that before I even got to the chocolate stars. When I think of heaven I imagine that it has two doors with a candy counter between them and when you step through one, your pocket grows heavy with spendable coins.

Same picture with temptation. If the devil wanted to turn my head around he'd just have to set up a candy counter with glass cases over rows and rows of bars and gum and rolls of mints. I found it almost impossible to walk past something that beautiful.

What I'd really been saving my nickels for, though, was something farther back in the store. Near the back between Fabrics and Toys, down the aisle from Knick Knacks, were the plastic animal statues. You could get most any farm animal you wanted, although why anybody would want a statue of a pig was beyond me. But the horses, ah, the horses.

For Christmas the year before I got a gray mare grazing. Her white tail molded against her flank like she'd been frozen in the act of swatting a fly. She had white stockings, a white mane and a white tail and I thought she was just about as beautiful as a gray mare could be.

With the handful of quarters I found in my Christmas stocking, and the dollar Grandma and Grandpa slipped me just before my eighth birthday last winter, I bought the white colt with the gray mane and tail that belonged to her. He had all four feet planted stiff-legged on the ground. His tail stood up impishly like they do when their tails are still more fluff than strands. With his head cocked to the side and his ears at attention, he looked like any moment he was going to spring into action and race across my bookshelf, kicking and prancing.

Just before school let out they got a stallion in and I knew the minute I saw him I had to have him. He was black with not a speck of white on him and he was standing on his hind legs. Braced by a flowing tail that held him upright, his fore hooves pawed at the air. He was an Arabian, I could tell by the shape of his head. The way his head and neck were thrown back he could have been fighting a grizzly or a man with a rope and you knew he would win.

He was so beautiful he made me want to cry every time I stopped in to see him. I was so afraid one time I'd come in and he'd be gone. Someone else would have taken him home and my horse family would never be complete. He cost $4.59. That's almost ninety-four pop bottles when you count in the tax. On a good day me and Cain could only find about ten bottles and I had to split that with him.

And now we had to figure out how to feed a hungry cat. I told Cain we could feed her food from our own plates instead of buying something special. I tried to make it sound like it was all about the cat, about how it would be better for her if we gave her the kind of good food Mom gave us, but Cain saw through that easy enough. He knew about me visiting that black stallion.

"It's okay," he said. "You give what you can." Did I mention how much I loved him? This was the summer Cain grew hair on his upper lip and his eyebrows grew dark and heavy, the summer his voice slipped down toward manhood. New changes seemed to come on him everyday and sometimes he seemed so different to me, like a movie star or someone I didn't know. I wanted to marry somebody just like him.

We knew that as soon as Mom found out we had a cat out in the playhouse the cat was as good as gone, so we decided we had to make it look like nothing at all was in that playhouse. We snuck through the neighbors' yard to bring in supplies. Creeping from the house to the playhouse with the things we needed, we tried to be invisible. I would serve as lookout while Cain ran from the corner of Mrs. Arbithnaut's garage around through the

lilac bushes and in from the back of the playhouse. After a little while I'd walk, slow like I had nowhere important to be, from the front porch around to the backyard, ending up at the playhouse like it was an accident. We did that two or three times before we had everything we needed. We lined an egg crate with some of Cain's old shirts and got another crate to put sand in so she could do her business without leaving the shed. Cain got a pail of warm water and some rags out of the house without being caught and we got her cleaned up. I always heard cats didn't like water, but that cat let us wash her up and flop her around like it was the best life she'd ever had. She never even tried to get away when we had to leave her alone for a while. That purr of hers rattled loud as all get out every time we touched her and we snuck out there every chance we could just to rub her belly and listen to her rattle. That notch-eared, rattletrap cat was our biggest and best secret. It lasted little better than a day.

You can't look innocent when you got secrets to hide. Or at least we couldn't. I don't know who saw us first, maybe it was the lady with the shrine who saw us coming home with the bundle between us, Cain's bare chest a flag we didn't recognize. Or maybe some other neighbor saw us sneaking in and out to the playhouse. I don't know. I don't know who saw what and I don't know who told Mom, and I don't know who first said we were doing something no brother and sister ought ever to do. All I know is the phone rang and then it rang again and with each call Mom's face grew paler and her lips thinner. When she set the receiver back in the cradle after the last call, all hell broke loose. She flew at us and demanded to know what we were doing out there, what were we hiding? Before we knew the cat wasn't anything we had to worry about anymore, it was too late; we were knee deep in lies.

Cain got it worse than I did. He's a boy and older than me and ought to know better our mom told him. She went wild in the telling, hair come loose from the ponytail she always wore, strands of it flying around her face like wings. Her eyes so red from crying they looked like she'd rimmed them with a marker. She was cooking oatmeal for lunch when it happened. She stood at the stove stirring so furiously that water from the oatmeal slopped out of the pan. The burner flame sputtered and flared, making the kitchen feel like a dangerous place to be. I stayed at the door and twisted a strand of hair around my finger, rolling it tight enough to hurt, and just listened. Cain sat with his hands flat on the table. He was shaking his head back and forth and I couldn't tell if he was trying to hold himself up or the table down.

What Mom was saying didn't make any sense and some of the words she was using sounded like ones she never let anybody say in front of me. She was saying sin and she was saying sex and she was saying a whole bunch of stuff that I couldn't make heads or tails of. She spits when she screams and

her words run together and get out of order. I flat out didn't know what to make of her or what she was saying. Cain tried to interrupt her, his voice pleading, but she wouldn't let him. She just kept getting louder and louder until finally he slapped the table and stood up. Mom spun toward him with the oatmeal-covered spoon out in front of her like a sword.

Mom's not a tiny woman but Cain loomed over her like she was a little kid, or a wounded bird. This was the summer Cain grew tall as a man and that particular change seemed to happen all at once, in that very moment. His hands gripped the table but it seemed as if he were reaching toward her, as if he were poised to strike. For a moment the only thing moving was a big glob of oatmeal sliding slow motion down the spoon handle until it reached Mom's hand and splattered onto the floor.

Until that moment the idea that Cain could hurt anybody was an idea that had never visited my head. Violence, I believed, lived in the domain of my mother if it lived in our house at all. She was fierce in her way, as likely to smack one of us on the butt as to hug us unexpected. What scared me was not the sight of my mother wielding a spoon like a weapon, she'd done that before. What scared me was what I saw in Cain's face. It seemed to have fallen somehow. His smooth young face canyoned with something dark and old.

Maybe I made a noise. Maybe I took a deep breath or something that made them look away from each other and turn toward me. I looked into Cain's eyes, at my mother's face. I had the strangest sensation that they were both naked and reaching out for me, as if something within them had suddenly taken shape and now stood newly born between us and they both needed something from me to help them catch their first breaths. My intestines twisted, hot and liquid. I did not want to choose between them and I began to cry, unable to move.

What saved us was not me or my tears. It was the untended oatmeal boiling over, lumpy strands of it bubbling over the sides of the pan into the flames. The stink of burning cereal filled the air and we all turned toward the stove. When Cain reached around my mother and turned off the burner she recoiled from him, as if his touch held the heat of the flames, or something far worse. Some things are unforgivable.

The kitchen popped and sizzled with silence until Cain went out the back door and let it slam behind him. I started to follow him but stopped and turned back to my mom. She stood at the sink running water into the pan of ruined cereal.

"Mom?" I said. She looked at me, tears sliding down her cheeks.

"You," she said, "you..."

I waited for her to say more, for her to tell me what was going on. Why was everybody so angry I wanted to know? She just stared at me and then she told me to get out of her sight.

THE PLAYHOUSE where we kept the cat was an old shed built by somebody who didn't know much about building anything. It had a dirt floor, one door, and two square holes in the wall for windows. A thick post smack in the middle of the room held up the roof. The post was bowed and leaned to the side, making it look like the shed weighed too much and was going to fall down at any moment. A piece of plywood on rusty hinges served as a door; a stretch of wire wrapped through two holes in the wood made a handle. What daylight could get through the lilac bushes along the side gave the only light so you always had to stand still a minute when you first came in if you wanted to see anything before you ran into it.

I went there looking for Cain. I stepped through the door and waited for my inside eyes. They had not yet adjusted to the dark when Cain stepped toward me. I knew he was there and I knew it was him and still I yelped, a pitiful sound. I flinched as I would before a stranger and it must have looked to him like I was on the opposite side of whatever crater had opened up when the phone had started ringing. As I said, some things are unforgivable.

I could see well enough by then to see his face. It was wet. I'd never seen Cain cry before. When things went wrong at our house Mom did the yelling, Dad did the talking, I did the crying and Cain did the waiting. That's how things worked. But things were different this time and the lump in my throat wouldn't let me cry. Everything was upside down. Cain and I stood for a moment facing each other before he brushed past me, taking care not to let even our shoulders touch in that small space. Once outside he stopped and looked back at me and I thought I could see that shape again, the form of something newly born, reaching; the possibility of danger clung to it like a shadow.

The cat rubbed around my ankles and I bent down to run my fingers along her tail. When I looked up again Cain was gone.

"Look what you done," I said to the cat. "Look what you done."

WHEN DAD GOT home he wasn't any help. Sometimes he was. He'd talk to Mom and then he'd come talk to us and then all the mad in the house would go back into hiding. Other times he'd come home and he'd get mad too and he'd tell us why and whether we agreed with him or not we at least knew why. But not this time. This time he came out of that back bedroom where he'd been talking to Mom and he sat us down at the kitchen table and stared at us like we were piles of something the cat had started leaving in the sandbox. Cain hadn't talked to me since his fight with Mom and she hadn't come out of that back bedroom all day so the house just crackled with quiet. Dad stared at us and we stared at our feet. I think we sat there for what felt like 500 minutes before he said anything at all.

"You know you're both going to hell, don't you?"

I looked up at him, my mouth wanting to pop open. He had tears in his eyes and he looked pale and old, more like a grandpa than a dad. He held his hands in front of him as if in prayer. I looked at Cain. Cain looked at his feet. The awful quiet in that kitchen got heavy enough to see. Finally I swallowed hard and whispered, "All we wanted to do was save her."

My dad leaned over and looked at me with squinty eyes. "What did you say?"

I looked over at Cain. He clenched his jaw so tight it looked like he had a jawbreaker in there, a big ball of something. I wanted him to talk. He told me if I kept my mouth shut everything would be all right but it wasn't working out that way. I knew nobody wanted us to have a cat but I didn't think we'd go to hell if we found one and saved her life. I would've thought Cain could've mentioned that possibility to me.

"I don't want to go to hell," I whispered. Snot started coming out my nose and I wiped at it with the heel of my hand. "I just wanted a cat."

My dad sat back in his chair and looked down his nose at me. Then he looked at Cain. "What is she talking about?"

Cain dipped his chin and didn't say anything. Now that Dad was talking and I was crying, Cain must have thought he could wait; maybe the world was right side up again.

"I said"—my dad leaned down close to Cain's face—"what is she talking about?"

When Cain still didn't say anything my dad looked at me. "Abigail, what, on God's green earth, are you talking about?"

When my dad gets mad he has a vein in his forehead that gets big and pulses like a wiggling snake. That night the vein looked as big as I'd ever seen it and I thought if I told him about the cat that vein would explode. I wiped more snot away but it was coming too fast now and I could taste it salty on my lip. I licked it away. "Nothing," I said. My dad's face was so close to mine I could see beads of sweat in the tiny holes on his nose. I was too scared to say anything.

"Did he promise you a cat?" he asked quietly. His blue eyes so close to mine looked like they had no bottom to the sadness in them.

That's when Cain quit waiting. He exploded. He stood up so fast his chair fell over backwards. "No!" he yelled. "I didn't promise her anything. I didn't DO anything. We found a cat. We saved a cat. It's just a cat. Why didn't somebody ask ME what we were doing out there? What's wrong with you people?" For a moment everything, even the dust motes in the light coming through the window seemed frozen. Nobody breathed or moved. We must have looked like a picture, like sculptures, not like real people at all. It was Cain who broke the spell. Some kind of calm seemed to come over him. He picked up the overturned chair and walked out of the house. The form I'd seen in him grew older, straightened his back. He

looked like a soldier walking away. My dad didn't try to stop him. He just sat there staring at the door Cain had let close behind him. Silence sizzled again around us. After what seemed like forever my dad made a noise in his throat. A gust of air came out his mouth and he sagged in the seat. He looked like he was going to disappear completely.

Hoping to catch him before he was gone, I whispered, "Why do I have to go to hell?"

THE CAT WAS GONE by morning. Mom said we could visit her over at old man Sutton's place. She said the cat would be better off there. She could catch the mice and come and go as she pleased and nobody would worry about her getting into things she shouldn't. Mom was sorting laundry like it was an emergency when she delivered this news. Cain sat at the table in Dad's place and I hid around the corner in the hallway just listening to neither of them saying anything for a long stretched-out minute. Cain's newly thick eyebrows were knitted into one dark line. The shadow above his lips didn't hide the trembling. His "Son Games" T-shirt had a hole on the left shoulder that looked as though he'd worked it from almost there to almost ruin. His jeans were too short and the knobs of his ankles stood out white against his tan. Mom used to say she couldn't keep him in jeans at all if he didn't slow down on growing. It occurred to me that to a bird on a fence, Cain might look like he was moving even when he was sitting still. My throat tightened just to look at him.

"You gave her to Old Man Sutton?" Cain asked in a quiet voice.

"That's right I did," Mom said. She scooped a load of clothes up off the floor and dumped it into the washing machine. She poured a cupful of detergent on top of it and then turned on the water. Even I knew she had things out of order but I didn't say anything. I just watched.

"He's got dogs," Cain said in that same quiet voice. Old man Sutton lived down the block from us in a little gray stuccoed house set back from the street and mostly hidden behind untrimmed bushes and a big wooden fence. It's not happened since I've been around, but some kids say he shoots anybody who tries to come into his yard. I didn't think that was true, but I didn't know.

Mom nodded vigorously, her ponytail bobbing. "Yes, yes he does. I know that. He has a goat too, as I understand it. And cats. He's got cats too. He's got himself a regular zoo over there and now he has one more cat. We have no use for a cat around here. You want to spend your money or your time on something you get out to that garden and do some work. You think it's easy growing food for this family? You think all this stuff we eat just pops up out of the ground?"

She should've stopped and let it go at that, but she kept talking until even I couldn't stand the sound of her voice. She didn't have to make it

sound like saving a cat was something stupid to do. She didn't have to say her garden was more important than any stupid cat. Why didn't she know she could say something different? Why didn't she say she was sorry about anything? As far as I knew she never once told Cain she was sorry. She never once told Cain or me we weren't going to hell, that maybe they were wrong about that. Dad had calmed her down like he was smoothing her feathers and now she was talking like getting rid of the cat was the solution she'd been praying for.

She twittered on and on and Cain didn't wait for her to get to a stopping place. He got up and left while she was in the middle of a sentence. I guess he could already see nothing good was coming his way. He was out the door and gone before I could get across the room to follow him. I ran down the path toward the garden and hollered for him, but he must not have heard me. I stood at the edge of the garden for a minute, listening.

Back inside Mom was still talking, not even noticing she didn't have an audience. I sidled past her into my bedroom and got my horse statues off the shelf. Out at the edge of the garden I patted out a smooth area in the dirt for meadows and kicked my heel into the dry sandy soil to make canyons alongside them. I pulled handfuls of grass out of the yard and covered the meadow area with green. I set the mare and the colt in the middle of it and then started pulling dirt up into a ridge for a mountain range. It was hard work and I had a sweat on but try as I might all I could see was garden soil and plastic horses. I don't think even that stallion from down at Ben Franklin's could've helped me.

I took the horses back inside and the day slowed down to almost stop. Mom set sandwiches on the table for lunch and we each ate alone, walking through lunchtime like it was an empty hallway. For a long while I lay on my bed and looked at the cracks in my ceiling, but they weren't going anywhere. I pulled my coloring books from under the bed and looked for an unmarked page, but all the ones with horses were colored and the others didn't interest me. After a long while I went out to the front porch and I sat down to wait for something else to do. A couple of ants were pushing miniature boulders up out of a crack in the sidewalk. I leaned down and blew hard on some sand in their direction. That's not as bad as pushing it back down the crack, but even so. It made me wonder what hell would feel like. I curled my bare toes around the chipped edge of the top step, feeling loose, and without even checking to see if anyone was watching, I took aim at a daisy head.

Kicking heads off daisies was something we weren't supposed to do. Even though daisies grew up wild wherever they wanted to, Mom never considered them weeds. She insisted we treat them like any other garden flower. "Like a gift, dammit. You think it's easy growing anything on a wish and a prayer?"

I was better at kicking daisy heads than anybody. Most people can catch a blossom between the big toe and the second one and snap the head off a daisy if they want to, but they run the risk of grabbing too much daisy. You can pull a whole plant up out of that sandy soil before you even have the chance to realize the roots have come free. Try to explain that to my mother.

As far as I was concerned they were only good for exactly what I was doing—kicking their heads off by catching them between the tips of my second and third toes. Mom would have a fit if she caught me doing this but I didn't care. I felt reckless and almost lightheaded as I sent more and more daisy heads out across the lawn. Most of their little white and yellow faces landed upside down with their stems upright. They looked something like skinny headless women wearing big white skirts. I was trying to imagine what sort of dance they could do when all the sudden the screen door slapped open behind me and I thought sure I was good and caught.

It was Cain. I hadn't seen him since morning, but it seemed longer. He didn't pay any attention to me or the daisies. He sat down in the porch swing and kicked off so hard he hit the back wall. I squinted at him, hoping that would make him stop because we got in big trouble when we swung too high in that swing, but he kicked off again and this time left a mark on the stucco behind him.

"I'm telling," I said at the exact time he said the same words in that high-pitched voice he used when he wanted to make fun of me. We just looked at each other then, I think we were both surprised to discover we sounded so much like ourselves. Somehow you'd think we'd be different in ways that would show. Anyway, Cain stopped the swing from hitting the wall and turned his face away from me. A shaft of sunlight came through the trees right then and caught him full on but it didn't light him up. He looked as though he could swallow up the whole of the sun in his dark eyes and not even shed a spark. I knew something had happened since I last saw him. Something bad.

"The cat..." Cain's voice went all squeaky and high when he spoke, like air squeezing out of a pinched off balloon, and he couldn't get anymore words out. I didn't care. I didn't want to hear them anyway. All the sudden I'd had enough of that cat. When I'd run my finger along the notch in her ear she'd put her paw on my hand to hold it down and stop me. I figured if a cat could decide things so could I. If every time you thought about something—say something like elephants—if every time you thought about an elephant you got a hard pinch that locked up your throat so you couldn't breathe, wouldn't you do your best not to think about elephants? If you were me you would. You'd just take the word "elephant" right out of the list of words you know. Cats were my elephants now, especially a cat with a notched ear and mismatched eyes and a rattled purr. Too many pictures

started coming into my head when he said cat and each one of them felt like a boulder coming down on top of me. This is what hell feels like, I thought, and I didn't want to go to hell.

"No," I said. What I meant was, no, don't tell me, and no, I don't want to know. To emphasize my point I took flight. Off the porch, over the heads of daisies and I was gone. I hit my stride before I hit the green of yard and at the gravel drive I was running full out, long hair fanned out behind me like a wild horse's mane, my bare feet pounding hard as hooves on the powdery soil. I rounded the garden and kept going until my heart beat in my throat and I couldn't get any air. I liked to think I could go forever if I wanted to but my legs gave out and my toe caught sod and I was face down on the ground not near far enough away from what I was running from. Cain was beside me before I even caught my breath.

He dropped to the ground beside me and when I opened my eyes his face was so close to mine I could have touched it. His eyes, swirling charcoal rimmed in black, held me where I lay as firmly as hands. How can I ever say what passed between us then? All I know is that before he spoke I knew he was going to ask me to do something I didn't want to do, that we weren't supposed to do, and I knew I'd do it, whatever it was.

He cleared his throat and closed his eyes. On his right temple he had a tiny scar from when he had fallen on a nail when he was little, before I was born. It looks like a small crescent moon. It fluttered now over his wild pulse.

"This afternoon..." His voice came out in that same pinched-off squeak. Without thinking I reached out and put my hand over the hole in his shirt like I was trying to hold something in. "Two of Sutton's dogs got the cat," he said. Then he swallowed hard and took a deep breath, sending the words out in one rush. "I couldn't get across the fence in time. I had to run down the alley and around to the front. By the time I got there old man Sutton had got the cat free from the dogs and he tossed her up on the roof of his woodshed. I said I wanted her back. I told him I wanted to help her but he said she was dead and I was to stay the hell out of his yard or he'd sic the dogs on me too."

I rolled onto my back and sat up before I answered.

"So, what we going to do?"

"I don't know," Cain said. We got up without a plan and started walking toward the road. The sun that had seemed stuck in the top of the sky for so long had suddenly disappeared over the horizon and a squirrel chattered from a nearby tree. Other than that we seemed all alone in the universe. Cars didn't come down this road unless the drivers were headed for someplace on it, so not much traffic came through in any given day. All the trucks must have left town for the day because you couldn't even hear the hum of the highway. It was just me and Cain.

We didn't go straight to Sutton's. We cut around back to the alley and come up on his place from the back. I let Cain lead because I knew he was going to show me something I didn't necessarily want to see. I started thinking about what a cat would look like after two dogs had been after it. I started thinking about what holds a cat together and what happens when whatever that is gets ripped up and pulled apart. I fixed my eyes on the hole in Cain's shirt, the one he'd worked from tiny to too big to cover his shoulder. I looked at the white knob of shoulder-bone that showed through that hole. I started thinking about what's inside a cat, about the coils I'd seen strung out beside something that'd been killed alongside the road, about the smear of blood and something thicker that draws crows out of the sky and makes them brave even when a car is coming at them full tilt.

"Cain," I said. I reached out to grab his hand. "I don't think I want to see this."

He turned back to me and I thought for a moment he was going to stop, but he just said come on. He pointed to the place in the fence where a board had been broken loose and you could see into Sutton's backyard.

"Cain," I said again, but he pulled me toward the gap.

"I need you to get those dogs over here and keep them here. You understand?"

No, I thought, I don't understand anything. "Yes," I whispered.

"I'm going to go around front and go through the gate and get the cat. I'll come back for you here." The alley was dark with shadows even though the west still glowed like daylight. I looked around at all the places things could hide and I tried to tell myself not to be scared.

"What if Old Man Sutton shoots you?" I called out to him in a loud whisper.

"Then I'll be dead," Cain said over his shoulder. "You wait here until I get back."

This is not right, I thought, but I wasn't sure. I picked up a stick that looked big enough to get the dogs' attention and fight off any monsters and I wound up and hit the fence as hard as I could. The tin cans Sutton had nailed to the top rang out and the dogs came running, barking and growling like the end of the world. They hit the fence like linebackers. They were too big to get any more than their wet, black noses through the gap so I figured I was in charge of the situation now. I couldn't see the front gate to check on Cain but I was pretty sure anybody inside that house would be looking back here anyway. Those dogs were making one heck of a ruckus. I hit the fence one more time for good measure, then I grabbed a handful of foxtail from the fence line and started tickling the dogs' noses. They didn't like that any better than they did me hitting the fence. I could keep them here all night if I wanted to.

I heard Cain running before I saw him. "Come on," he said and grabbed

my arm. "Somebody's coming!"

I took off running after him, Cain almost dragging me to help me keep up.

A tangled hedge of lilacs and scrub trees lined the alley that ran behind Sutton's place. The hedge went on for a couple of blocks, opening up at the cross streets then closing in again. Some people had fences buried inside their portions of the hedge where you couldn't see the fence for the trees and others had paths right down the middle of them. You had to know which was which because you couldn't tell by looking at them and if you weren't careful you could get yourself cornered. Sometimes I did when Cain and I were playing hide and seek out this way, but not Cain. He could weave in and out of every yard in the neighborhood without stumbling against a fence or a clothesline or a stack of old tires. Whoever it was that was coming after us didn't stand a chance of catching us once Cain pulled me into the first hedge and we didn't go very far before we stopped to listen for whatever was behind us.

At first all I could hear was our breathing, fast and furious. Even Sutton's dogs had settled down. I couldn't see anything. I started to shift my weight around but Cain put his hand on my shoulder and pressed me into place. The weight of his hand held me still for what seemed like hours. When he decided we could move we did, slowly, crouched down to make our way through the paths in the hedge, following it all the way back to our own yard. From the edge of the lilacs you could see straight into our kitchen window. It wasn't until we saw Mom standing at the sink alone in the room and nowhere near the phone that we felt safe. No one following us and no one sneaking on ahead to report to her first.

We crouched at the edge of the bushes beside the playhouse letting our breath come back to normal. I saw Cain didn't have a shirt on and then I saw the bundle in his arms. He held her like a baby, just like he did when he brought her up out of the ditch.

"We don't even know her name," he whispered. His face was in shadow, too dark for me to see, but I know what crying sounds like. I sat back on my heels in front of him and settled in to wait. Over his left shoulder a scar-shaped moon appeared snagged in the treetops on the outer edge of our neighborhood. Its eerie light changed the look of everything, even the playhouse appeared strange to me. It felt as if our run through the hedges had delivered us into a foreign country, one that looked like home but wasn't.

After a time, Cain took a deep, shuddering breath and stood up. "Come on," he said. "We'll bury her in the playhouse." He helped me to stand and together, using a garden trowel and a tin can, we dug a grave in the corner. Night fell as we worked and darkness furred our skin. Our breathing grew ragged as we scraped the soil. When the hole felt deep enough we stood

beside it. We did not speak as we removed our clothes. In darkness and silence, we lined the steep sides of the grave with the clothes we'd been wearing. From outside of the playhouse our mother's voice floated toward us like a night bird's call. Handful by handful we placed the dirt back in the hole. Her voice came closer, but still we worked. ■

Iraj Isaac Rahmim

—First Place Essay—

Memoirs of an Exile

So it was that these unknown men of the unknown world of the unknown country of the unknown continent had lived all to themselves since an unknown time.

—Aziz Nesin, *Hoptirinam* (1960)

The first book I remember reading is *Memoirs of an Exile* by the Turkish satirist Aziz Nesin. I was ten years old then and lived with my grandmother in Tehran. I had probably read other books before that, I am sure of it, but Nesin's is the one that stands out.

On a hot summer day I crossed Tehran's Yusef Abad Fork for a trip from my grandmother's house to Amin's Bookstore. It was a *trip* since I had to cross several lanes of crushing Tehran traffic, mostly bad-tempered cabbies weaving through pedestrians and other cars. Amin's was a quiet place, a small bookstore with room for only a handful of customers, but I was still confused by the choices of books up the stacks and on the display tables and in the four-sided metal rotators. Mr. Amin, a gentle-voiced, balding man, asked me what I liked to read—I have no idea what my answer was—and handed me the soft cover by Nesin. Books were really cheap in Iran in the early 1970s and this was within my allowance.

MY ALLOWANCE WAS small given our circumstances, perhaps five or ten Rials a day, at most about fifteen cents. Sometimes I bought ice cream, but more often chocolate milk in a small glass bottle with a soft aluminum cap, brown on the outside, silvery on the inside. I would peel only a portion of the cap, just enough to get my lips around it to create a seal, and take small sips to extend the sweet foamy sensation as I wandered around the neighborhood.

The Yusef Abad Fork was a relatively new middle-class neighborhood full of four- or five-story walk-ups with one flat per floor and yards surrounded by high brick walls and pastel-painted iron gates. The houses on the north side of the streets had their yards in the front, the ones on the south side of the street had theirs in the back. That way, all houses got the right mixture of morning and afternoon shade and sun during our hot and dusty summers and cold and snowy winters.

Deep rectangular gutters on both sides of most streets separated the sidewalk from the roadway. The gutters were clean; they transported icy snow melt from the Alborz mountain range, whose white peaks are the

great backdrop to Tehran, all the way to the desert-like south of the city, where most poor people lived. The gutters were uncovered and functioned as car tire traps, and hardly a day passed without a car trying to park too closely and dropping one or two tires into them. The children playing in the street would gather and then some adults came, usually peddlers selling warm whole beets in winter or salted fresh walnuts in summer, or the green grocer or the baker, the type who didn't live close-by but were part of the neighborhood by virtue of working there. Sometimes a male neighbor also joined in to help, perhaps a burly man carrying an old leather briefcase on his way to or from the office, and they would all try to push the car out.

Okay madam, they instructed the embarrassed driver, *you sit behind the wheel and press the gas when we tell you*. They would then all get behind the back and sing along as they gave one big push and then another in unison.

Allah-o-Akbar.

Ya Ali Maddad.

The car would jerk out of the hole and perhaps splash a bit of water. If the car owner was a gentle lady of proper manners, and if the helpers were men of the appropriate class who would not be offended by a tip, she distributed some small coins—not much more than my daily allowance, I suppose—and thanked everybody and left. And then the crowd went about their business, play for children and work for adults.

Boys played soccer using an air-filled thin plastic ball and some school bags as goalposts that, since there were no crossbars, led to protracted arguments about high shots from time to time. The ball was light and cheap, important features since there would be less of a chance of breaking a neighbor's window and also less of a loss if confiscated and torn—a frequent occurrence by irate men home for their afternoon nap. When a car came through, the boys parted reluctantly and moved the goalposts and egged the driver on—*yalla baba, move it man*—and returned to the game soon afterwards, arguing about who had the ball last.

The girls mostly jumped rope or played Lei Lei, an Iranian version of hopscotch, on the sidewalk.

The play was often interrupted by disembodied heads of mothers or maids screaming from a second or third floor window.

Seema, SEEMA, come on up. It's lunch time.

Ali. ALI. Zahr-e-maar gereft-e. You snake-bitten kid. Where are you?

Tony. TONY. How many times should I call you?

Ours was a mixed neighborhood full of Jews and Armenians and upwardly mobile Moslems. There were also assorted foreigners—businessmen and diplomats from various countries and their families who had eschewed the old-money neighborhoods, perhaps because of their distance from work. Of my neighborhood friends, Tony was Italian, and there was Do-

reen (American), Yonatan (Israeli), and Shomeis (Syrian). I was Jewish with the very Persian first name Iraj—that of a king from two thousand years ago, not a particularly accomplished one as it turns out—favored by the educated intelligentsia who avoided obvious Islamic names that had Arabic roots.

During summer days, when school was out and my friends played in the street, sometimes I used my allowance to buy a plastic soccer ball and joined in the play, though not often since I was bookish and shy. Instead, I opted for chocolate milk or bought a book.

*

I AM NOT SURE why the bookshop owner, Mr. Amin, suggested *Memoirs of an Exile* on that first visit. Perhaps because it was a very readable book. Aziz Nesin's style, at least as translated to Persian, was informal and conversational, full of street dialogue, and full of the street. His books, this and the dozens I read in the years that followed, were populated with low-paid functionaries with mended suits, brilliant madmen running away from mental hospitals, laborers daydreaming about an afternoon's play at the fair, petitioners being run from office to office by tea-sipping officials, and misunderstood husbands and fathers. There were also farcical situations. The man accused of sexually attacking his elderly mother-in-law when, out of jealousy, they went together to the neighbors' bathroom to measure its ceiling height. The village simpleton arrested for leading an anti-government demonstration after losing his wife named *Edaalat* ("Justice") in the big city. The young man wearing shoes two sizes too small to save money who sits quietly in pain, perspiring, in someone's house and is offered the homeowner's daughter as a bride. (*Such a shy and polite young man*, they say.)

And then there is always the narrator, putting the pieces together, telling us how to make sense of this story, this farce, and of course it makes no sense at all, it isn't funny at all.

Memoirs of an Exile is the story of Nesin's own internal exile in a cold, inhospitable town in mountainous eastern Turkey. It is a straightforward tale of the trip and his poverty and loneliness; in some ways it reads like a sad travelogue. I read this book several times as was my habit then, and out loud, at least in parts, since to this day my father, who never read the book and who is always far behind, decades behind, in his attempt to build an intimate relationship with me, quotes my favorite passage when Nesin's name comes up:

> *I had enough money for bread, but perhaps I would have tea instead. Bread would fill me, but tea would warm me.*

Perhaps it was the novelty of the idea, of a man having enough money for either bread or tea, and not both, that made this a favorite passage. (Years later, attending graduate school in New York, I had a roommate who replayed the same scene almost nightly, asking himself, *Should I have food or should I buy beer?*) Perhaps, on the other hand, it was empathy, the understanding of a ten-year-old boy who, unbeknownst to himself, was making unpalatable choices every day, choices between mother and father and their family extensions, choices between nation and religion, between leading a trivial life or a meaningful one, between having an anchor or rootlessness.

THE NEW JEWISH Iranian middle class, my parents' generation, those who lived in Yusef Abad Fork and neighborhoods like it, tried very hard to shake away their roots. They were teachers and doctors and officials with parents who were shopkeepers and butchers and mechanics, but more often than not it was as though they came from a void.

What did Grandpa do, Dad?
He had businesses. Many.
Like what?
And rental buildings too.
Where? Around here?
He had many people working for him, you know.

Sometimes they created their own private myths.

I remember the first time your grandfather came down the steps of a plane, when he returned from Israel. There was a murmur; everyone said, "The second Moses comes."

In reality, my grandfather Moses was a simple businessman with no extraordinary achievement to his name, save raising a Jewish family in Iran.

Even though we didn't know where our parents' roots lay, they made sure to show appropriate disdain for certain types of people. Once, seeing an old woman from Tehran's old Jewish Ghetto, my mother whispered conspiratorially: *From her accent you can tell she is one of those Sar-e-chali*'s, meaning from the Ghetto. The Ghetto was by a well (*sar-e-chal*), separate from the rest of the city so Jewish water would not contaminate Moslem water. That was where Tehran's Jews lived in poverty and persecution, for centuries I suppose, until early in the twentieth century.

Jews from two or three generations earlier used education, when allowed, and also conversion to leave the ghetto. Some converted to Islam and many to the Baha'i faith which, in an ironic twist, is now heavily persecuted in Iran. My family took advantage of all routes, and so now we

are shopkeepers and doctors, carpet makers and professors, mechanics and engineers, and also Jews and Bahai's and a Moslem or two.

We strove to be modern. My sister and I loved our mother because she was beautiful and smart—a professor of medicine—and wore short dresses and had her hair done at the stylist and polished her nails, usually pink or red, with the proud accuracy of a surgeon. (*Look*, she held up her hands, fingers with flashing nails spread, *not a mark on my skin.*) We put on patchwork jeans with flaring bellbottoms and platform shoes, and boys carried male purses as soon as they came out. We wore our hair long, which was uniformly called *Beatle-y* regardless of the shape. On TV, we watched *Star Trek* and *The Six Million Dollar Man*, the moon landing and the Oscars.

We were not religious. We did not light Sabbath candles; we did not say blessings and prayers or have Mezuzot or wear Stars of David or the Chamseh on our persons. We did not read the Torah or study Talmud. We did not keep kosher. From time to time we sacrificed animals but with a sense of an iconic charm to distance misfortune rather than of stepping into the shoes of Abraham.

To the extent we followed any traditions, they were by rote and devoid of deeper meaning. We celebrated Jewish holidays minimally and then as social occasions and attended the synagogue during these annual events with resentment. Passover was for large meals with the extended family and for special sweets. Rosh Hashanah for visits back and forth. Purim and Nissan and Chanukah, much the same. Yom Kippur was the occasion for arguments about fasting with my father who, overweight by the time I remember him, bragged about how he hadn't eaten or drunk for over twenty-four hours, even as he worked the full day seeing patients.

I decided very early that all religions were wrong, and mine was the wrongest of them all since I was saddled with it. In my liberal private elementary school I resented having to study Hebrew during the government-mandated Religious Studies hour. Once a week, two other Jewish students and I were called out for a semi-private lesson in the drafty Exam Hall with its hard wood benches. And while we sat there, suffering through the alien script, which I never became good at, our friends were together in class and learned about ethics and the Qor'an from a thin green textbook, mostly in Persian, full of beautiful calligraphy.

English was a different story. It was the language of the West, of the movies and TV shows. We devoured books in English. We lived for Western music. Years later, when I came to the U.S., I brought most of my European or American rock music while leaving behind that by Iranian artists. The only books I carried were Somerset Maugham's *The Moon and Sixpence* and a history of the United States translated to Persian.

I did not bring my Aziz Nesin books.

THERE WAS A CULT of Aziz Nesin in Iran during the 1970s. My discovery at the age of ten turned out to be everyone's discovery. My classmates and I read everything by him, and the appetite for his work was so strong that some publishers began printing short stories by others, Iranian writers with similar styles, under his name. (We could tell the difference fairly easily, though, and the imitations were never as satisfying.) Publishers also printed mix-and-matched collections of his short stories several times under different titles. We bought these, complained to the bookshop owner, and read them just the same.

I vaguely remember some of his books being banned during the 1970s in Iran but am not sure. It is true that he was banned in Turkey, arrested several times, and exiled and jailed, and that alone gave him more status. He would get out of jail and write a book on how he was arrested and the prison life, which would be both roll-on-the-floor funny and subversive, and to jail he would go again.

When you truly love something or somebody, a book, a movie, a writer, you want everyone to love him. I used to read the jacket biography of Nesin out loud over and over, and was so pleased that he is one of the *world famous literary figures* and that his satire has a *large following in most European countries*. I knew that he is a *progressive inventor* who has *set aside the old restrictive literary language and selected the simple vernacular of the people*. I could recite from memory his book jackets' list of the Turkish writers he was better than:

> *Aziz has been writing for 35 years. During this period, great writers such as Arjemand Akram, Osman Jamal, Reshad Noori, and Mahmood Yasar have shone in the literary skies of Turkey, but none became an Aziz.*

I didn't know who these other writers were but was proud of Aziz Nesin for being better than them.

Over the years, I discovered that the Iranian society followed a Nesin plot. I remember a story Nesin wrote about one of his arrests—for insulting the Queen of England, the King of Egypt, and the Shah of Iran—where he drinks beer and daydreams about sitting at the bar and conversing with a beautiful seductress, and is then jerked out of the fantasy to find the woman morphed into a mustachioed arresting officer.

> *Aziz Agha?*
> *Yes my life.*
> *Aziz Agha?*
> *Yes my soul.*
> *Aziz Agha?*

Yes my sweet, what?
You must come with me to the police station.

I had read this before the 1979 Revolution, and then saw a post-revolutionary edition with the two words woman *and* beer simply blanked out throughout the story, making the sentences nearly incomprehensible. I can only imagine what Nesin would have done with this censorship, or the near banning of a slew of other words, including *Shah* and *Israel*, after the 1979 Revolution:

It was rainy, I picture him writing, *when I left home that morning after arguing with the wife over money for gym clothes for the daughter—"So let her not go to gym class any more"—and textbooks for the son—"So let him not go to school for a few days"—and had congratulated myself on avoiding the daily tango with the homeowner and the electricity and water bill collectors and all the other creditors at the door of the apartment.*

At the office, just after emptying the rain-water in my shoes—through the same holes it came in from—I saw the new order from the Ministry of Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice:

"All functionaries are hereby instructed by the Leader (Peace Be Upon Him) to desist using the following counter-revolutionary words:

1. A noun used by West-intoxicated elements to refer to 'sisters.'

2. A Western beverage, made of malt, and fashionable among the previous regime's circle of playboys and whores.

3. A term used by Zionists and their media pawns in referring to the Zionist Entity currently occupying Islamic holy places in Palestine.

4. The word used to refer to the former bloodsucking puppet dictator, who gave away the believing public's oil to Western Arrogance, and whose stain, thanks to the Leader (PBUH), has been removed from the innocent skirt of our Moslem nation.

5. ......"

Not too much later, in the early 1980s, Nesin was completely banned by the Islamic Republic and his books in Persian, even old used ones, disappeared from bookstores as far away as Los Angeles. This was during the

same period when the Islamic Republic was sending agents to the West to kill opponents, often by a knife to the throat.

*

AT THE AGE OF ten, with my mother and sister living in France and my father living alone in our large home and I in my grandmother's house, and despite all the kindnesses of my grandmother and aunts, I felt like an orphan. I am not sure whether I had my own bedroom in my grandmother's house, but even if so it didn't feel mine, the one with my wooden flip-top desk and my own comforter to hide under on chilly nights. Neither was it my street, my local park, my route to school. I felt like an orphan, but a temporary one, I suppose—my mother and sister were in Paris for a year only. I lived in limbo, with my things here and there, my thoughts here and there, daydreaming often about when we would live together again.

This was 1971 and I remember seeing the news scenes of hijackings and plane crashes and walking in numbed dread for much of the year: what if my mother's plane crashed on the way back to Iran? What would become of me?

Nesin, an actual orphan whose mother died at twenty-six, remembered her in his autobiography:

> *My mother could not read or write but she was a sensitive and thoughtful woman. All mothers are the greatest women in the world and my mother also, because she was my mother, was the greatest woman in the world.*
>
> *One day I picked a flower in the garden and brought it to her. She became happy and said: "Let's go and pick a few more."*
>
> *In the garden, she showed me a flower and said: "See how beautiful it is. Flowers have life too and live minding their own business. If you pick it, it will die, poor thing. It looks better on the branch; in a vase it does not have the same glow and beauty."*
>
> *Every flower we got to, she turned to me and said: "If it's okay with you, pick it."*
>
> *Whatever goodness I have, I have from my mother.*

MY PARENTS DID not get along, which I suppose made their yearlong separation easier. Their first fight was over the arrangements for their engagement party, and they never recovered.

At home, my mother read poems, helped with our studies, sat with us by the oil heater in winter months, fed us pomegranates, held sunflower seed-eating competitions among us, and told stories.

Her tales filled me with guilt and fear. Not that she intended them to, but she, as many of my family, perhaps many Middle Easterners, is a natural teller of sad tales. She does not say *I love you* but tells a story of love lost. She does not say *Be careful* but recites a poem on childhood dangers.

I remember a long poem she recited about a mother searching through the forests and the mountains for her lost son. She walked days and nights, asking the white clouds and the wind and the Earth for him, and none knew. When she found him, her beautiful boy was torn apart, half eaten by a horned demon and left in a well, and the clouds grew dark and cried for her pain, and the Earth shook and sealed the well, and the wind blew the land into a desert.

My father did not tell stories. He worked long hours as a pediatrician, read the newspaper, and slept.

Much of my joy during those years came from school: studying, friends, school trips, games in the yard, and even the ride back and forth on the school bus. I remember our driver well, Mr. Tahmasbi, an ancient man with a thick mustache and parched and deeply cracked hands. He was a great storyteller who every morning, as we sat riveted, recounted the previous night's ten o'clock radio soap opera and would do the same again in the afternoon on the way home. Students early in the afternoon drop-off route begged him to drive slowly so they could hear more, and stepped off the bus reluctantly. I was one of the lucky ones as our home was a few miles from school and so I heard each episode twice. My grandmother's house, on the other hand, was closer and I missed part of the stories during the year I lived with her.

NESIN, OFTEN IN transit to prison or exile or award ceremony, never seemed to lose his own place. Sometimes his countries would be *nowhere* and his people *unknown men*, as though these were fables, but they were not. From here he would go forward and show the absurd, and the absurd seemed familiar to the reader—but not enough, usually, to land Nesin in jail. His people were every one of us and the places, our own city, our neighborhood, our institutions. We were all actors in a farce, both laughable and painful.

> *From what the people call the "madhouse" and from what doctors, if they are in official positions, call the* Mental Hospital, *five madmen, pardon, five mental patients escaped. The date on which the hospital personnel learned that the five mental patients were no longer in the hospital was accepted as the date on which the five patients ran away.*

The fact is, whether left undefined or sharply drawn, I identified with his heroes. I, a definite product of my time and place yet on shaky ground, a semi-Jewish, semi-Iranian, modern wannabe from parents with no background, lost in a modern neighborhood of an ancient country, with an ancient first name given because of its modernity, I was of this place, yet was as lost and rootless as the children of slaves generations removed or a deserted dog limping off in the wrong part of town.

WHEN THE TIME came, I did not choose between my mother and father, between motherland and the religion of my fathers, but escaped them all. A spring morning in my teens I boarded a plane and left all that behind, first in the guise of a high school student who would someday return, and later—with my parents divorced and Iran a fundamentalist Islamic Republic, my minimal and shallow familiarity with my religion diminished to an uncomfortable disdain at best—as an immigrant, moving from city to city, from the central U.S. to the West Coast to the East Coast back to the central region, in search of a homeland or perhaps running from the idea of a homeland, and finding that over the years I have created my own culture, my own homeland and family and religion, individualistic, distant, walled-in, a sterile and safe homeland of one.

In America, the birthplace of mobility, the home of self-reinvention, as I moved around, I found other mothers and children, other causes, motherlands of others to care about. A latter-day wandering Jew, all motherlands were mine and yet I felt at home in none, save America, and that rarely.

I worried about Palestinians for a while. I demonstrated in Los Angeles. In San Diego, I produced powerful posters. *These children are dead*, one said after the 1982 invasion of Lebanon by Israel, captioning a playful picture of refugee camp boys and girls.

I found other family, other people to save. A working-class girlfriend with an out-of-wedlock five-year-old; a Mormon teenager in Salt Lake City, sexually abused by her father at the age of two; an old Italian man in New York, very old, who needed someone to feed and to tell stories to, stories about his 1920s youth spent in Monaco playing Baccarat; assorted abandoned and lost cats and dogs and confined and confused rats and chipmunks.

I married the daughter of a Mexican warehouse laborer and grilled burgers and hot dogs on the front porch and watched football and Johnny Carson in bed and helped her through law school, and then divorced her.

I experimented with names. George to fit in. Jamal as a joke but perhaps also to self-exclude and prove that the world is set against me. I revived Isaac after moving to the South. A long-dead uncle's name, one whom I never met. Jewish but not too much so in my new context. A bit black, a bit Bible Belt Christian.

At some point during the late 1980s, when living in New York, I became interested in the Holocaust. I studied German train timetables to Auschwitz and imagined my own grandparents herded and tattooed and gassed. I claimed, a bit self-consciously, survivorship since the Nazis could well have selected Iran as a next target, had they not been stopped, and my parents, both under ten during World War II, would surely have perished. As the years passed in New York, I ate bagels and knishes, loved pastrami and semi-sour kosher pickles, and constructed phantom memories of a childhood home with side-locked men wearing broad-rimmed fur hats and hunched Jewish grandmothers slowly pushing small shopping carts to and from the local grocery store. I kvetched and schlepped and, when mad, called people schmucks.

It was years before I began to consider what it really means to have my very own roots with all that makes it specific to only me, or rather not have my own roots, to have my roots taken, to have my homeland taken from me, or worse, to have given them all up, voluntarily.

It occurred to me that black Americans lost their history forcibly through the conspiracy of slavery and time, my family through forgetfulness of humiliating memories, through an unhealthy avoidance of not-so-distant pain, and so I did not grow up knowing about my ancestor's ghettoization but felt normal, even privileged.

Now, so many years later, my spiritual homeland is still an unsatisfactory homeland, this disembodied intellectual space where I hide and reject all that invade and all that are foreign, all contamination, before they take root. For years, in my teens and twenties, when I was still new to the U.S., when I was hurt, when I felt unwanted, by a girlfriend or classmate or even a total stranger muttering post-Hostage Crisis *Iranian Go Home*, or even without such muttering, perhaps a look, a strange look, or even no look at all, I would preemptively repeat to myself *I am leaving town* over and over, as though elsewhere I was to find … what? I was not sure but never mind, escape from here and now was more important than the destination.

Sometimes, to place myself, I calculate distances. On vacation in Israel, I measure how far I am from the Yusef Abad Fork. A hop really, a one-hour flight. It quickly dawns on me that it is not a hop, that for a man with a Persian first name and a Jewish last name and a blue American passport—*Place of Birth: Tehran*, it says—and an Israeli visa stamp, there is no direct route to Tehran.

I measure the passage of time. Years and months and days from the last time I sat in trigonometry class in Tehran, fantasizing about the three pretty girls in the front row named Susan and Venus and Niloofar, years since the last street soccer match, or perhaps more sophisticated calculations, the fraction of my life lived in the U.S. or in California or in Texas. These require notes and numbers and addition and subtraction. They

require hard facts. They do not require stories or memories.

IN 1993 A MOB of fundamentalist Moslems in Turkey, egged on by preachers during Friday prayers, tried to kill Nesin—*the devil* they called him for his strong secularism—by setting fire to a hotel he was staying in, but managed instead to kill thirty-seven others.

In my adult years I learn more about Nesin. His defense of freedom of speech, his pointed and brave, yet futile, attempt to publish banned books in Turkish, his support of orphans, his orphanage. He leads a simple life. He is short. He sits in an old-fashioned way like poor people, with a leg tucked under his small torso. With a bounty on his head and multiple fatwas against him, he refuses to take a private bodyguard. *Why should another person die trying to protect me?* he says.

There are other heroes, better writers, those who have sacrificed more, have not survived the fires. The world, the Islamic world of the twentieth century, is littered with these, with their beaten bodies and their torn verse, where to stand they risked arrest, to write, prison, to tell the truth, death. Naghib Mahfuz in Egypt; Behrangi and Forouhar in Iran. Writers who advanced secularism, writers I read and admired over and over but did not know, not like Aziz. This was my childhood Aziz, my own Aziz Nesin.

Nesin died in July of 1995. I found out several months later, in October, the night before I began a new job in Houston after leaving another in New Jersey. A Persian magazine had introduced a reprint of one of his stories:

The late Aziz Nesin, who passed away last May…

I called my sister.

Did you hear Aziz Nesin died?

Or perhaps it was the other way around, perhaps it was she who called me and that is how I found out and then I saw the magazine article.

I had for years wished to visit Nesin in Istanbul, planned on it. He would himself open the door to his small apartment. I would sit in his study and so would he, his short limbs, one under his torso, the other hanging, and he would not just autograph a copy of a book and shake my hand, but would understand.

> *When I was a lonely ten-year-old, I read your* Memoirs of an Exile. *I stood and read it, I walked and sat and lay down and read it, I kicked around a cheap plastic football, I sipped small amounts of chocolate milk and read it. I read your sentences and pages out loud, and they kept me company. Reading about your choices took my mind off mine.*

Instead, on the next morning that October, I wore a dark blue suit and starched white shirt, tied a patterned red tie, put on new gold cufflinks and shined shoes, drove to work, and walked from office to office in the new

job, introducing myself as Isaac.

And also this: after work, at home, when I was alone, I walked around from room to room and thought about Aziz and tea and bread, Mr. Amin and his bookstore, gutters full of cold water and plastic balls, and also Iraj and Jamal and grandfather Moses. ◼

Reginald Shepherd

Cold Pastoral

Winter wonders where when weather wanders,
repeats its speech impediments of snow
and stuttered sleet and freezing rain
spilled from the fringes of its worn
cloud cover: coats March
in frost. Damp grass springs back
and then is put to bed again
beneath white sheets, under the weather
when winter lingers, won't take its leave
of slicked sidewalks, flurries here
and there but stays, keeps spring at bay
until the ice-walled creek falls, overflows
two seasons all delay and roundabout;
cracks in their composure augur warmth.

In Bloom

You gave me an iris, surprising modesty
unfurling its purple and yellow tongues
to taste the air and call it good,
call on the opening eyes to draw out
the alternating falls and standards,
sing to the fingers that want to trace
those colors' outlines in that same air
we're breathing in, we're breathing
out, exchanging molecules and shared
minutes (taking in what the flower
discards, while it takes in the same
of us), irises widening to take hold of all this
reflected light, particles, waves
filling the room like perfume, scattering
what the surfaces give away: the
pigmented muscular curtains part,
make room for all that bountiful, our
open hands flowering between us.

Some Dreams He Forgot

Dreams in which I realize that I'm not wearing shoes; I'm walking through fields of broken glass or sidewalks of rain, slush, snow with naked feet, stepping carefully so as not to cut myself. My feet get dirty fast, pebbles and dead leaves cling to them. Dreams in which I'm wearing only one shoe. Dreams in which I realize I've forgotten my shoes five minutes before my flight and have to go back for them, but I never make it anywhere near home; the airport becomes a labyrinth and I never find my way out of the maze.

Dreams in which I'm not wearing pants, running my errands obliviously. Sometimes people look askance, but no one ever says anything. It must be a minor faux-pas, like passing gas in an elevator or not saying "Excuse me" when you brush past someone. I'm browsing in the local independent bookstore, looking through modern poetry and Adorno, when I realize that I've driven all the way downtown, walked blocks from my car to the store, wearing nothing but a T-shirt; I'm naked from the waist down. The store owner lends me a pair of shorts, but I'm not sure if they will fit.

Dreams in which I'm trying to go somewhere that should be just around the corner, just a block ahead, but the way gets more and more convoluted. I'm running through a maze of muddy streets (sometimes without my shoes), passing Marilyn Manson talking on a cell phone and being passed by a muscular runner with a shaved head who thinks I'm racing with him, but no matter how fast I run I never arrive. I'm supposed to look at an apartment and I've forgotten the address, even forgotten the last name of the man I'm meant to meet, but it doesn't matter because I'll never find my way.

Dreams in which I'm taking the subway home, a trip I've made a dozen times, but I end up somewhere I've never been, some barely populated wasteland from which I have to find my way back. It's the end of the line, or just the wrong stop. Dreams in which the elevated train derails miles from where I meant to go; I barely survive the crash and have to walk home bewildered through an urban wilderness.

Dreams in which I can hardly walk, my legs are so heavy and weak, as if they were made of cement or lead. I'm trying to run across a field from danger, zombies or perhaps there's a war on, but I can hardly move, and the danger's catching up fast. If it hasn't seen me, it will soon.

Dreams in which I should be able to fly but can barely stay aloft, and that only by intense concentration, my feet dragging against the crowns of trees, protruding rocks and elevated patches of ground, or barely clearing the flat roofs of low buildings. Sometimes from outside it looks like soaring, I've escaped whatever trap or monster threatened me, but I always feel that I'm about to sink.

Dreams in which I should be able to breathe water but instead I drown (only one of these, actually, in which I'm saved from drowning by a talking whale).

Why am I always dreaming about not getting what I need?

*

Dreams in which I wake up to the sound of someone trying to force the locked bedroom door. I hear the knob clicking and turning, but I can't move, can't cry out "Who is it?" or "Go away" or "Help," or even open my eyes. Then I shudder awake to a familiar rhythmic hum, it's just the fan I run all night to block out noises and help me sleep. Betrayed by sound again.

Dreams in which the doors won't lock or even close properly, the door suddenly shrinks so it's smaller than the frame, the dead bolt becomes a simple hook, and something dangerous is coming, a zombie, werewolf, vampire, or just a deathless serial killer. Sometimes it's something doors won't keep out anyway, some shapeless nameless evil—the featureless is always frightening.

Dreams in which an unstoppable werewolf is coming for the young; he'll kill everyone in the house if we're not turned over. Before anyone can stop me I scoop up all the young (including my Robert) and put them in my pocket—I have a shrinking ray—and then I seal us all up in the panic room, totally self-enclosed and impenetrable, with its own supplies of food and air. We'll wait the werewolf out, and ignore everyone else's screams.

Dreams in which I start seeing hard, unfamiliar faces at the porthole windows of the doors at my private high school, furtive men in black trench coats, black hats, and high black leather boots. My friends start disappearing one by one, and the white students start acting strangely toward us black students, distant and cold. Then we're invited on a field trip, just the black kids, a special opportunity they say. As we're walking to the bus I see a giant hose leading to it and I know they're planning to gas us. I run, but am trapped in a cement stairwell. A black janitor tells the commandant

where I'm hiding ("You fool," I think, "they'll kill you too when you're no use to them"), but the commandant just laughs: there's no need to pursue me because the doors form an airtight seal; I'll slowly suffocate. I sit on the concrete stairs with my head in my hands, and wake to the sound of his laughter echoing against the whitewashed cinderblock walls.

Dreams in which all the white people have gone away, and I'm one of the leaders of this new world, where everyone's free. Then the white men come back from outer space, we welcome them to the world we've made, but they just say "We've come to take our planet back." They conquer us, execute many, imprison many more, and suddenly we're all slaves, when yesterday the world was ours. I'm someone's butler or valet, I'm walking down the corridors of headquarters on an errand and I have to pee; I go into an executive men's room, which is strictly off-limits, whites only, but I can't hold it until the colored men's room. A white executive is in there, an important man, and demands to know just what I think I'm doing. "Boy, where do you think you are?" I've had enough. I smash his face into the urinal repeatedly, gouge out his eye with the flush handle, and then I'm running with blood on my shirt, hiding in the crawlspaces and climbing through the ventilation pipes. I pass rooms full of white people who could have been my friends, hear them talk and laugh like human beings, but I know that they'll betray me if they can.

Dreams in which I'm in a burning building (how did I get there?) with Seth Green and three other young guys (ten years from now that name will mean nothing), and we're running down the stairs to get outside before the flames consume us. We reach a huge window two or three stories tall and they all jump out through the glass into the pouring rain, but I look and think that there's no way I'd make that jump, so I walk out through the door, where it's not raining anymore. We sit on the grass (it's night by now) and watch the building collapse, and one of the young men explains that they're on a tour of Moravian churches—there are only three in the entire country. I say, "But there's one right there," and dreaming ends.

*

Dreams in which I'm in a bathroom where every man or boy is having sex but me, dreams in which I'm looking for the cruisy bathroom or bookstore where men have sex with men without talking, just down the street or across campus, just up a set of stairs in the dorm or library or classroom building that never end. The promised sex keeps getting farther away, I keep being waylaid by conversations or suspicious eyes, or I'm just walking, walking, searching until I wake up. Too many dreams in which I never get to sex.

Dreams in which I'm in the shower and suddenly realize that I should have been teaching a class for the past half a semester, I rush to the Greyhound station and by the time I get to campus it's evening and I don't even know where the class should be meeting. Dreams in which I've forgotten to take a high school class and I have to go back for a semester. The building is a maze and I don't even know what room I'm supposed to be in; I end up in the wrong class over and over without even a notebook or a pen, or I'm wandering the halls all day until the bell rings for the end of classes. Dreams in which I have to go back to my isolated little college in Vermont to take one last class; I have two master's degrees but that doesn't matter, and I'm waiting in line for my room key again.

Dreams in which I have to return to college and I can't find my room. The dorm turns into a maze in which I'm trapped, I keep passing the same rooms over and over, never mine, the same living room and kitchen, I go up and down the endless stairs and all I want to do is lie down in the bed I've never seen, all my belongings are already in the room and they'll never be mine again.

Dreams in which I dream about my dreams, dreams which remember other dreams: the giant cafeteria in the library in the middle of the maze-like high school, all that eating and reading together. "I dreamed about this, but it's real," I say, before I wake up.

*

Dreams in which my mother isn't dead but only hiding. Her survival is a secret I mustn't tell, she's in danger otherwise. Only I can know that she's alive. I wake up so happy and then I remember.

Dreams in which the black opera singer Jessye Norman slowly promenades over an elaborate stone bridge, wearing a powder-blue gown with a jeweled headdress and an enormous train billowing behind her, singing a stately, soaring aria (reminiscent of Bellini's "Casta Diva"). During the refrain an unseen chorus sings "Ah-ah, pale Gomorrah" over her extended, melismatic vocalise. She looks like some ideal version of my mother.

Dreams in which I write the perfect poem, painstakingly setting down each word, but forget it when I wake up. Dreams in which I wake up and write down the poem I've just dreamed to make sure that I won't forget it, but then I wake up again and realize that I was still dreaming. Sometimes a phrase or a line lingers in my head, and it makes no sense at all.

My sleep is jagged, has sharp edges. I wake as someone I've never been.

Michael Bassett

—First Place Poem—

The Blackboard of His Eyelid

If he had Becky Wilson here,
he'd make her confess that she had lied
about how his parents make him drink
from the toilet and sleep
in a rabbit cage. A pale and skinny
clump of literature, always out past
the curfew of acceptance, behind
enemy lines of imagination, he plays
torturer of the inquisition,
brandishing the garden shears.

On the playground, while he practices
impossible contortions
of introspection, they bloody his nose,
hating the secrets hidden
in the scriptorium of his oddness.
They crack his sharp ribs, desperate
for the futures he reads
on the blackboard of his eyelid.
They shake from his green satchel
two dung beetles, most of a Mabel
Garden Spider, a scab from his skinned
knee, a sliver of bailing wire,
a cat's eye marble, and a quart
of Quick Start lighter fluid.

He's a Chihuahua-eyed chicken boy
with hundreds of freckles
his mother swears are seeds
from the pumpkin they carved
him out of. But he knows where
babies come from. He knows the darkness
of the closet, where he listens
to his mother's crying. He learns, under
the henhouse, the weasel's way.

He can't stop thinking about apricots
shriveling, paint belching, tiny frogs
dripping above matches. Outside
his secret fort, yellowing
sycamore leaves crackle.

Jody Lisberger

In the Mercy of Water

The first time I see Annabel jump from Simmons Bridge, she looks like a sliver in the air, a splinter of falling light. It isn't just her long legs outstretched, locked at the ankles, toes pointed toward the water that make her look sharp and invincible, or the evening sun that lights up the whole side of her body, but her bony arms pressed skyward as if in prayer. Not that she wants us to think she's asking for something. Not Annabel. Never ask. Merely proceed.

Even as she prepares to jump, she makes certain to look as if she were simply responding to Billy's instructions. "Jump way out. Beyond the rocks and the broken branches. See them?" Together they peer over the edge of the railroad bridge, forty feet down into the gorge. Billy keeps a foot on the rail. To feel the vibration, he says. Just in case.

"One last thing," he adds, still out of breath from his own leap. He points to the ragged timbers jutting from the abutment. "You gotta jump like you mean it. Straight and clean. Yeah?" He touches a hand to her shoulder.

Damn you for listening to him, I want to call out to her. And damn you, Billy, for telling her to do it. But I only watch as Annabel curls her toes over the edge of the trestle, crouches, and without so much as a glance toward me, thrusts forward her arms and leaps, hollering not "Geronimo" but "Oh shit" as she goes down, a knife into the dark pool.

When she comes up, her laughter is beyond exuberant, almost hysterical.

"What a rush!" she yells to the four of us—me, Megan, and Betsy standing on the rock ledge and Billy making his way back from the first opening in the trestle, not far from the overhanging rock. She must see our eyes fixed on her, mesmerized by her bare scissoring legs, her pale arms sweeping in slow circles.

"Did you go deep?" Billy yells.

What is he thinking? Would going deeper make a difference?

She shakes her head.

"No way!" She cups her hand around her mouth like a megaphone. "Too cold down there!" Her lush Southern accent rings out over the river, so unlike the flatness of our Connecticut voices. She laughs again, then strokes toward the bank, as if proud of her own happiness.

"Anybody else?" Billy looks at each of us. He pauses the longest on me. "You got the nerve this time, Julia?" His voice has a swagger to it.

He keeps his eyes on me as he bunches up his T-shirt and uses it to towel off his chest, flexing his muscles as if he's the next Rocky. And what

if I do jump, I wonder. Is it his nerve or mine I would be testing?

"Show him who has the balls," Annabel had said earlier. "Jump."

As much as I love Annabel's bravado, I hate Billy's more. He never used to be this way. "No thanks," I tell him, turning away.

"But Julia," he says, grabbing my arm, pulling me to one side. We used to ride the school bus together. "Those girls are losers, and you know it. C'mon, jump."

I shake my head, just like last week up at Hound Rock. Only Billy and Annabel jumped then, too. Hand-in-hand in the dark, over the sheer rock face. "We'll hoot like hyenas as we go down," they'd said. But on the bank below, Megan, Betsy, and I heard nothing until their heads erupted from the black water and their laughter spewed out over the river. In the moonlight, I saw Billy raise Annabel's hand high in the air. Not as if she'd won some strenuous bout, but as if he, by declaring himself her judge, was declaring her his prize.

"So, what's the problem this time, Julia?" Billy says. He sweeps his shirt along his muscular arms. He thinks we spend our days admiring his pectorals, his abductors, his *biceps brachii*—the muscles we learned last year in tenth grade. To a certain extent, he's right. We watch every bulge, every curve, though we aren't about to admit our fascination. We tell each other how much we hate him. Swear he'll never have us. He's our pact, the thing we'll resist together.

Down below, on her belly, Annabel inches along the flat rocks, thick with slime.

She pushes aside the foliage on the bank to make her own path, ignoring the trail already there. The thought of her bravado buoys me.

"I'm just in awe of that bulge in your shorts, Billy," I say, loud enough for Megan and Betsy to hear. I wish they would laugh with me. But they don't. They sidle toward each other, Megan with her T-shirt stretched over her hips, a book under her arm. Betsy with her curly hair pulled high in a ponytail, always asking, what happens when you hit the water? Does it hurt? As if she would ever jump.

Billy looks down, as if to hide his own blush, before he stares back at me. "You're scared, aren't you," he says. He flashes that boy-beautiful smile.

I could answer all sorts of things. Like this jumping crap doesn't give me a rush the way it does you. I can't be bothered. It's stupid. Leave my friends out of it. Or, yeah, it scares the shit out of me. But admitting fear would be as bad as pretending I don't like sex.

"No," I answer quickly. "I just don't feel like jumping."

Billy smiles and leans close. "If you don't plan to jump, Julia, why do you come? To see me—or her?"

He stares at me with his ice blue eyes, eyes that say, I nearly had you once. But it won't happen again. Even if we kissed and touched in ninth

grade. Even if he fingered me wet between my legs. *Let me touch you.* Another of his instructions. He's not going to "have" me again.

"None of your business," I say.

"Is that so?" he taunts.

Behind us, Annabel parts the brush.

"That was incredible!" she says. She tilts her head to one side, hitting her ear to clear out the water. She jumps a few times. Her breasts bob. Surely she knows they call attention to themselves. Billy picks up her towel. He goes behind her, draping the towel over her shoulders and rubbing her back. Blood runs down the outside of her calf.

"That blew my mind, Billy," she says, craning her head around. The breeze brings goose bumps to her arms. Her nipples poke through her tank top.

"You're hurt," I say, gesturing toward the blood, expecting her to be grateful.

Without looking, she leans down and brushes her hand over the cut. "Just a stick, Julia," she says. "No big deal."

Billy squats. Fingers the cut. "No big deal, Julia," he says. *Don't make big deals, Julia.* "She'll be fine." He runs his hand the length of Annabel's body as he stands up.

"You gonna jump now, Julia?" she asks, her voice softer than usual.

"No thanks," I say. Without another word, I pull a shirt over my bikini and head home.

I WAIT A FEW hours before I call Annabel. My mother's gone out on her usual Friday night date, so I have the place to myself. She knows Annabel is coming over—knows she comes over a lot, which Mom thinks is fine. One of the girls. Some new blood. I try to sound casual when I ask Annabel about her plans for the night, but I can hear the edge in my voice.

Annabel chuckles. "You upset about something, Sugar?" She speaks low and gentle, full of her charm.

I take a deep breath. "You coming over, or are your other attachments too pressing?"

Annabel snickers. "Who'll be there?" she asks. She makes no secret about not wanting to be around adults. Her own parents stayed back in Tennessee, as she puts it. Not dead yet, though they might as well be. When she first arrived at our high school in November, she told everybody she'd been on her own for a year and a half. Waitressed in Memphis, trained to be an EMT in Richmond. After that, an internship in Little Rock as a homicide photographer. "Got tired of wading in blood," she said. "Tired of seeing red. Figured I ought to come north. See what makes you Yankees so yellow." She grinned as she spoke, so full of confidence, nobody doubted a word.

I can still picture her standing in the cafeteria line that first day, running her hand through her bristly hair. I was immediately in awe. A girl who could drive fast and rescue bleeding people. Who lived without her parents. Who wasn't afraid to go where she wanted, make some money, and rent her own little place. She could do whatever she damn pleased.

In January, she dared me, Megan, and Betsy to swim with her in the Sound. I never thought she'd do it. But she plunged right in. Clothes and all. Megan and Betsy helped me pull her out. Annabel, her lips blue, her limbs stiff, laughed with a touch of hysteria all the way home. Megan and Betsy started saying she was crazy.

On Valentine's Day, she proposed we drive my mother's jeep up the bank behind Kmart. "Just you and me," she said. I let her take the wheel. She gunned it up the incline, shrieked with laughter when the jeep bounced down the other side.

"Aren't you ever scared?" I asked.

"Scared?" She spun the jeep around the lot. "Sugar, if I got scared, where would I be now?"

BY THE TIME Annabel arrives at my house, a cool breeze has washed away the humidity. I've gathered fresh mint from the garden and made mint juleps, something Annabel taught me to do last weekend. "Real Southerners put the mint on top," she instructed. "Bury their noses in it while they drink. Like this." Only she pressed her nose not into her drink but into mine. Then she kissed me on the forehead.

"C'mon, kiss me back," she said. "On the lips. It's what you've been wanting all along, isn't it?"

"Anybody home?" she calls as she comes to the screen door. She lets herself in, checking each room as she strides down the hall. As if she doesn't know my mother goes to the movies with an "old friend" every Friday night. Nothing serious, Mom tells me. *Just friends*.

As she comes into the kitchen, I can smell the vanilla she's dabbed on her wrists. She's wearing my favorite T-shirt. Teal blue, V-neck. But I don't say anything. Not even hello. I need to know first what she's doing with Billy. She must know that from the way I hand her a drink without a word and gesture toward the living room. Nothing like our usual laughter, singing to the music, touching. She has a little jaunt as she walks, as if nothing can hurt her. She smiles when she sees the Scrabble board on the coffee table. Without a word, she too settles onto the sofa, just as we have for many Fridays before this, turning ourselves inward, drawing up our legs Indian-style. I reach behind the sofa and pull down the blind. Still saying nothing, I open the Scrabble board across our knees, and hold out the bag of letters.

Grinning, as if this wordless duet were her idea, she first lifts her glass

in a playful toast. I wait for her to drink before I take my own sip, savoring the sweetness that fills my mouth, the cold that numbs my head.

Our letters clack as we play. Her Q-U-I-L-L on the center pink star. Her smirk. But I'm lucky, too. An S on top of her quill. My own seven-letter S-C-E-P-T-E-R. I watch her face tighten up.

She leans over the board. "S-q-u-i-l-l?" she says. "What the hell is that?"

I smile. The moment seems almost too perfect. "Blue, bell-shaped Northern flower," I say, as if I were reading straight from a dictionary, though I can hear the edge in my voice. "One of the first to bloom after the snow melts. In case you didn't know."

Annabel stares at the board. She blows a stream of air through her lips. A long whistle without sound. "So why don't you just out with it?" she says, looking up.

"Okay," I say, but I don't plan to rush anything. It's nice to hear her nervous for a change. As if she's scared I might test her in my own way. I take a sip of my drink. The mint presses against my nose. I breathe it in as I look around the room at the quilts my mother has hung, the photos she's placed on the mantel. Me and her skiing. Me and her apple-picking on Atkins Hill. Me and Dad in our tennis whites. "No need to banish this photo," my mother said. "He's still your father."

"So what were you doing with Billy?" I ask, trying to sound calm but firm. I put my glass on the table, my letters next to it. Didn't she ask me to kiss her?

She smiles as she runs her hand through her hair. "Oh my—" she says in her honeyed voice. "Do I detect a little—?"

"Annabel." I feel myself fighting against her. "Why do you let him put his hands all over you?"

She pauses and chuckles. "You mean why don't I put my hands all over you? Is that what you want?" She reaches over and plucks the mint from my glass. Tickles it around her lips like a feather.

On the mantel, the Waterbury clock strikes ten.

"Tell me, Julia," she says leaning closer. "You ever been with a boy?" She looks at me with wide eyes. As if she doesn't know already. As if she herself didn't confide, "Anybody can turn a girl on. Any fingers will do the same."

"You told me you don't like boys," I say, focusing on the trickles running down the mint juleps, the circle of water around the base of each one. "On a glass table, water doesn't matter," my mother says. "But on wood it stains." I should be getting coasters.

"Is that so?" she says. "And when did I tell you that?" She picks up the board and folds it on itself, the letters stuck inside. As she swings her legs around, she tickles her mint on my nose. I grab the sprig and close

it in my fist.

"My, my, we are mean tonight, aren't we," she says very softly.

I take a deep breath. "The night you told me about your mother, you said—" I pause to get it right, hardly expecting the lush Southern drawl that comes out my mouth. "I—don't—like—boys."

"Oh, do that again," Annabel says, grinning. "You do it so—"

"Annabel, stop it," I snap, feeling a blush rise on my face. "You know what you said," I tell her curtly, as if I can erase my blunder. And I know she knows because she cocks her head to one side as if daring me to remind her of the story she told me last week, hours after her jump with Billy, while she and I sat alone on Hound Rock listening to the water suck down the channel. She told me about her mother, who kicked her out of the house, not because of the girls, but because of Annabel's hair, her clothes, her sassiness, never able to admit the truth Annabel yelled and yelled at her. *I'm gay, Mother. You hear me?*

We don't raise our voices in this house, Annabel Sue. I can't hear you when you are yelling.

I'm gay, Mother! Annabel had turned to the moon, screaming at the top of her lungs. *Can you fucking hear me now?*

"So what do you want me to tell you, Julia?" Annabel asks. For a moment, I wonder if she's going to remind me how I took her hand and stroked it, telling her how sorry I was. As if my mother and I would ever have that conversation. Or my father, who's too busy assuring me life goes on like normal. But instead she pushes up from the sofa and walks over to the mantel. Picks up the picture of me and my mother on Atkins Hill. "Something about your mother, perhaps?"

I shake my head. No, Annabel, I want to tell her. This isn't about my mother or yours, but about me. My quivering body in your EMT arms.

"Annabel," I say in a warning voice. "You—told—me—you—told—your—mother—you—were—"

"You, you, you, you, you," Annabel says, a glint in her eyes. "You, you, you, you," she says again, a little louder, and then again, chanting as she sets the photo back, picks up our glasses, and carries them into the kitchen. She thunks the bag of ice onto the counter, hacks the cubes with the mallet, clinks the spoon as she dissolves the sugar. Then silence. The silence of cracking ice. When she re-enters, she holds out our glasses like offerings, the mint wreathed on top. I shake my head. She sets them on the table, in the same rings of water.

"I ever tell you about my daddy?" she asks, quiet and nice, as if we were starting over. She sits down, pats the sofa for me to move closer. I don't budge. She leans back and pulls up the blind. "Now where do you suppose my daddy was," she says, "while my mother graced me with her kind words?" She looks out the window as she speaks, as if she can siphon her

story from the moon.

"Annabel," I say, full of impatience, "I don't want to hear about your—"

"Milo fields," she says. "You know milo, Julia, don't you? Early-growing Southern crop? Drought resistant—?" She pauses a moment, as if to savor her own mimicry, then reaches out to touch my cheek.

I push her hand away.

"He was looking out over the milo fields," she continues, a false cheerfulness in her voice. "Leaning against the porch pillar, next to my mother. Now wouldn't you think he would have said something to comfort his daughter?" She pauses a moment, as if waiting for an answer, but, before I can say anything, lets go with a sharp cry that seems to come from her ears. "But it was my mother who spoke," she says, her voice getting higher and tauter. "How well I remember her words. *Your daddy's been down at Buddy's Pool Hall. Down there playing with the boys. Now isn't that nice?*"

Annabel's voice has become so tight and shrill, I want to put my hands over my ears. "Stop it," I want to yell at her. "Enough of your story. What about my story?"

"Annabel, what were you doing with Billy?" I ask one last time.

She reaches out and presses her fingers to my lips, then stands up and goes to the mantel, stares at the picture of me and my father.

"You know, you don't look much like your daddy," she says. Her voice has an odd tremble in it. "Not like me and my daddy," she says, her pitch getting higher and thinner again. "Why, we're spitting images. High forehead. Round chin. Ears that curl like fiddleheads." As she speaks, she touches each of these places on her face. "Why, some people say I'm the son my daddy never had," she says, turning around and starting not only to laugh but to rock back and forth, tears in her eyes, catching her breath, until it isn't laughter at all filling that room but something more like the scream of a engine about to explode.

"Annabel," I shout, hoping the suddenness of my voice jolts her back. Or have Megan and Betsy been right about her craziness all along?

Slowly she quiets. Wipes her eyes. "Can you believe that?" she says softly, sitting down. "'The son he never had!' Oh, my, my, my." She starts to laugh again. Except this time it isn't shrill but gentle.

"You know what?" she says. She speaks so quietly I have to lean in to hear her. "All those years my mother knew my father was fucking the boys." She shakes her head slowly. "And look who she asked to leave. Now isn't that a pretty picture?" She blows air soundlessly through her lips.

For a moment I sit still, my eyes cast down. "I'm sorry," I want to say. But I can't summon up the words, can't stop myself from thinking, from knowing—in the moment of uncertainty—I've judged her. Just like the rest of them.

"And about Billy?" she says, turning to face me. "People do things for the oddest reasons. You know what I mean?"

She must see my eyes grow wide with alarm.

"Oh, girl," she says suddenly. She takes my hand. "Girl, girl, girl," she says low in her throat. "C'mon. Let's forget the Billy stuff." She points out the window. "Look. The moon's full. We can jump, just the two of us, if you want."

I pull my hand back a little. Does she think we can just forget?

"You can jump with your eyes closed," she whispers.

I try to imagine going over the edge, seeing the water below me, as if it could swallow me. Hide me, at least for a while.

"I'll hold your hand. All the way down," she says more urgently. She tightens her grip.

For a moment, I close my eyes. Will our laughter spew out like hers and Billy's? Do I want that? I take a deep breath. If I don't jump now, will I ever?

"What is it?" she asks.

So much I could tell her. Of my timidity. My fear of heights. My not knowing what's down in the darkness. Any darkness.

I feel her fingertips on my eyelids, light as air. "Sometimes when you jump," she whispers, as if she were reading my mind, "it makes everything easier. Just look at me." When I open my eyes, she shrugs, as if to say, "Am I all that bad?"

"So what do I wear?" I whisper.

"Oh, goodie," she says, grinning. "Nothing with girls. That's half the fun."

"Sorry," I say. "I'll wear my bathing suit."

"Okay, then. Who cares?"

ON THE PATH TO Simmons Bridge, I listen to the wind and try to quiet my heart. Next to me, Annabel can't stop prancing. "Step on a crack, you'll break your mother's *back*," she chants, accenting the word each time she stomps where the shadows cross.

When we come to where the bridge takes off from the land, I walk ahead a few steps and stop. I look down. The water shimmers in the space between the ties. I put one foot on the rail.

"The train doesn't come through till morning," Annabel says.

I look at her and pause.

"Believe me," she says. "It's my life, too." Without another word, she takes my hand and steadies me as we move along the tar-streaked ties. I rest my other hand against the girders as we walk, glad to feel the solidity of the welded joints, the bumps of fused iron circled like numbers on a clock. We walk past several openings in the trusses, far beyond where Annabel

jumped the first time. "We want to be where it's deepest," she says. She must see my pinched face, my small worried eyes, so unlike hers.

When we get to the center of the bridge, she helps me take off my T-shirt. Holds onto my sleeves as I pull out my arms. Loops the shirt over my head, uncatching it from my ears. She folds and sets it down on the rail.

"Don't worry," she says, reading my mind. "I'll come back and get the clothes afterwards. Now can you slip off your shorts?"

I do, looking down into the water as it sweeps by the concrete pilings. You can't tell it's pulling hard, but it must be.

"Okay," Annabel says, resting her hand on my shoulder. Does she feel me shaking? She points down into the gorge. "You don't have to jump out far here. Just straight down. Okay?"

I nod, staring over the edge into a sheen so black and taut it gives the illusion of stillness, of safety.

"But first you have to let go of the truss," she says. Then she chuckles. "But oh-la-la, what a suit to wear!" She runs her finger along my bikini bottom. "It'll wedge so tight between your cheeks, even floss won't pull it out! Won't that be something?" She laughs, meaning for me to laugh, too, I'm sure. A moment of distraction. "But wait a sec," she says. One foot at a time, not even needing to hold onto the truss, she slips off her cutoffs and underwear, folds them, and lies them on the rail with my clothes. Slowly she takes off her T-shirt, her breasts pure white in the moonshine, her tuff scanty and almost blonde, nothing like my own.

"Later, Mahvin," she jokes in a mock Boston accent as she sees me stare. Then she grows serious. "Now remember," she says. "We have to jump at the same time. Because if one person jumps and the other drags—" She points to the wooden beam running along the trestle. "That could do a number on a person. Yes?"

I nod.

"Okay," she says. "Eyes open or closed?"

"Closed," I whisper.

I KNOW NOW WHY Billy and Annabel never hooted when they jumped off Hound Rock. Having your heart in your mouth makes it impossible to cry out, the rush so extreme it's a wonder your heart doesn't burst. But I don't have time to worry about my heart. At the count of three, together Annabel and I leap off that bridge, holding our hands tight, sucking in our breath, our bodies cleaving the air until we cut into the water, let go our hands, and feel the coldness swallow us. I don't open my eyes. I let the water take me down. I feel it wedge my bottoms and yank my top. My head aches with cold and pressure. Only when I stop going down do I open my eyes, see the blackness everywhere, and begin kicking, pulling to the surface, my lungs exploding so desperately into the air, it takes a few seconds before my hoots ring out over hers. ■

Chad Willenborg

Plowing the Stars

His penchant for passing on the shoulder was, by then, uncorrectable. In his defense, there's general trouble out here with deceleration, with the slowing down, I'm saying. Folks simply don't have to—they expect *not* to have to—and a staggering amount of road kill attests to a troubling ambivalence about when they should. We're rural. *Rural* rural. The urbanites' gridlock is of no concern to us, nor are we afflicted by the so-called stop and go, of which, on clear days, during drive time, the St. Louis station apprises us on the tens. Such maladies we cite as reasons not to go to the city.

What hazard we've got, instead, is this treacherous network of two-lanes gridding the farmland, fairly straight lines of asphalt, coded with stripes and hemmed by ditches. Given a single lane within which to operate, the simple act of passing becomes improbable at best, often outright illegal, and pity him at harvest whose tractor drags a wide rake, whose overladen seedtruck, say, slouches towards the Equity silos. To be trapped for interminable miles behind such machinery many find a fate worse than waiting on a train, and as vehicles stack up behind these lumbering implements of husbandry, there's no end to the swearing and the light-flashing, the horn-blowing and the bird-flipping, as the would-be passersby jockey to overtake the impediments in question.

Comes with the territory, I say, and have marked such agony as penance for our original sin of being born on America's fruited plain, we that sparse but taxpaying populace, who have no multi-lane highways in our foreseeable future. Bitterness grows, though, and an angry religion of impatience has cropped up as surely as those white crosses in the weeds off the shoulder. I've even witnessed a van with CV plates engage in Pass-or-Perish without second thought, this bevy of gray-haired sodality women nearly meeting their demise head-on in the form of a blue septic truck. Releasing cruise to let the van by, I wondered, as I can't help *but* when being overtaken, for what they might have been late, and, then, as they narrowly escaped in the cry of an air horn, what churchgoers of their dwindling generation might whisper when taking such risks. Altogether new prayers, I supposed. Our Lady of Lead Feet and Blind Faith.

Surely I'm no saint, though, either. Shortly after closing time last December 19th, I met my own fate, as it were, at a darkened crossroads just before the overpass on my way home. Rolled one stop sign too many, as the arresting officer kindly put it. My feet couldn't find a straight line. The consequences of my transgression: a revoked license and some rather expensive remedial coursework supervised by the State. Rightfully. I make

no bones.

But even in daylight and sobriety, my confrere, Elvis Passalacqua, had acute problems. He was particularly fond of using a curve's inner lane to increase the efficiency of travel from corntown to corntown (our steady gig was the safe transport of auctioned vehicles to Mr. Luckett's car dealership; there were four or five of us drivers, part-time). The mathematics of Passalacqua's vice were simple, he explained: *tangents*. The shortest path between the ditches. The practice, though, was terrifying: high-speed chicken matches with semis and minivans on those rare bends between Stewardson and Strasburg, Cowden and Herrick. Blame the conflation of a B+ in geometry and a Protestant work ethic, I say. A strong ambition and a low self-esteem, perhaps. Passalacqua was an odd duck. At the Christmas party, Mr. Luckett pointed him out in our awkward circle and called him a real go-getter. Several drinks later, when the lines of professional demarcation had grown fuzzy and it seemed an all-for-one/one-for-all camaraderie was fermenting there in the Knights of Columbus Hall, Mr. Luckett slurringly referred to me as the goat sent in to calm the stud. Even Rachel laughed. I shrugged pleasantly and scratched the holly leaves printed on the plastic tablecloth. Whiskey don't make liars, my grandmother always said.

Good to have work, though, and Passalacqua and I were boon companions. In my probationary period, until I had my license back, Luckett kept me on washing cars and sweeping the garage. I still rode with Passalacqua now and then. At night, we took classes at the community college: mathematics for him, mythology for me, which, I confess, I told Rachel was accounting.

*

SHE SAYS TO ME, "Your only problem, Seth, is that you're not assertive. You're absolutely not. And, actually," she says, "that's just one of your problems."

"I am willing to address the others categorically," I tell her, "but first let me say that—"

"Not in the *least bit*. End of story."

"—that what I think you see as a lack of assertiveness in me actually stems from your highly aggressive nature. You operate differently. More than aggressive, in fact, I'd call it vigilant. You're a vigilant person."

"What do you mean vigilant?"

"You seek out things that might possibly upset you. And then you pound them into the ground—"

"Oh please."

"—before they can realize their potential."

"Their *potential*?"

A summer breeze riffles the linen curtains, smoke wafting in from the patio grill.

"To upset you, I'm saying. Let me have that."

She brandishes the hammer but won't deliver it. "To upset me. It's what those of us with jobs call *proactive*. You're thirty years old, Seth."

"Proactive, right. Just, I don't see it that way. I think it's—"

"Because you don't have a job."

"I think this proactive vigilance on your part breeds bad things like..."

"Like what?"

"Like mistrust. Undue suspicion. The stuff of fascism, on a grander scale. You need to relax—"

"*Relax*. And let things walk all over me like they do *you*, you mean." She waves the hammer. "What are your intentions, anyway?"

This is often how it starts. She may keep us up all night, developing new insults here in the kitchen, or she may follow me from room to room, reciting the litany of old ones. The neighbors may knock on the door again. The police, this time, just might be called. Something almost certainly will be broken. We stare each other down, amid the drone of lawnmowers and the smell of charcoal, and wait for all of our wild words to catch up with us.

"I do too have a job," I say.

"*Real* job," she clarifies. "How much are you in for? With me? Seth!"

"For whatever comes."

"Like someone else, maybe?"

"Maybe. Maybe there's someone better. For you, I mean."

"No one *doubts* that. Did you ask the dealership about Payroll? I taught you spreadsheets, and they were *begging* for you to show one *ounce* of...Christ. I could use a little help with the mortgage and groceries if you're staying here. Okay? What do you plan to do about that?"

"It's just staying I'm doing here? Huh?"

The hammer strikes the counter, rattling the silverware in the drying rack.

"Goddammit!" she says.

I shake my head and put the paintbrush back beneath the sink. I'll fix Passalacqua's boards together later. There's no sense doing it now. These crosses are tawdry and maudlin, I know, and we had our share of gallows jokes about them, but in spite of it, perhaps because of it, I feel compelled to make him one.

"Seth!"

I raise my voice to match hers. "The résumés are out, Rach. That

phone will ring."

"Not for nothing," she spits, "but that phone *dials out*, too."

*

BY SUMMER, Passalacqua had rationalized shoulder use to recoup lost minutes and increase his bottom line. Riding shotgun on the homestretch of a one-for-one swap in Dieterich, I was afraid to take my eyes from the road to use the tobacco cup we'd wedged between the bucket seats. The car lurched from side to side as he challenged a crawling seedwagon.

"No, it's a bad idea," I said. "*Elvis*!"

The keel evened. The speedometer needle dropped like a red timber, and he pointed his travel mug past my nose. "Come on. How wide you think it is, Seether?"

Oncoming traffic huffed by us on the left, the sun glaring off the windshields.

"Who cares how wide?"

He lowered his nose and slurped.

Spilled corn kernels bounced in front of us like golden gnats. They pinged against our undercarriage as we crept up on the seedwagon once more, its bright, cautionary triangle looming before us, oranger and oranger. I braced myself. The front wheel drummed the rumblestrips. "El," I said on drawn breath, sucking the words into me, "it's not a car width."

"This boat gets to Ewington by noon, Seether, I clear fifteen bucks an hour." He pressed the pedal. "Do the math, bro."

He wasn't so aggressive off the clock. Tuesday and Thursday nights, after class, we'd drive the so-called scenic route home from Mattoon, trying to pick up any rumor of rock stations from the cities. Central Illinois is vast and flat, especially when the crops are low, and I fancied these roadtrips searching for airwaves something like sailing for treasure or new passage. I was glad to be away from home. We would set a course for wayside taverns, where we could buy package liquor, then Passalacqua would glide his Nova back into the pitch. Beyond the stunted luminescence of our headlights, visibility was near zero, and more than once I felt I'd slipped the bonds of earth entirely to hurtle through space, a three-subject notebook full of gods in my lap, Passalacqua howling Zeppelin at the wheel. Our tack we configured by the flashes of radio towers, the vaporlights of distant cowbarns, that pink glow of commerce at Ewington's interstate exit—this penumbra, this almost placental bloom in the Midwestern night—which would invariably reel us out of orbit around twelve, the last cigarette spraying sparks in the rearview, the last Miller bottle bouncing in the ditch. If it felt like we were heading into port too quickly, I'd throw my arm out the window and let my fingers plow the stars.

Passalacqua turned the radio down. "And, so, okay, that's what she says. What about you?"

"Well." I directed the vent louvers away from my face. "I will cross that bridge when I come to it."

"Ah, I see, Billy Goat. Cross that bridge. Sounds like a no. You're saying you're not *actively* looking for the bridge. The bridge's function, to you, is secondary. If the bridge happens before the Seether, if it, like, rises out of the mist, he will cross—"

"I would probably cross."

"But it's not the crossing, of the river or the canyon or whatever, that is important."

"We're talking about a family, El. You're clear on what we're talking about?"

"Rock and roll."

"Okay."

"It's rather that here, now, the bridge would happen to be in front of you..."

"Maybe let's drop the bridge metaphor."

"The *journey* more than the *destination*, you're saying." He nodded at this, comprehending himself.

Following a major blow-out over the family issue, Rachel had stopped picking me up from work. The sidewalks didn't make it all the way out to her place, and it was an arduous three-mile trek over culverts and under roadsigns. When I reached the narrow drive, each time, I would stop and stand there like a stone in the dusk, look at the light coming from the living room window, and wonder why on earth I was going to go inside. I always did, though.

"El, I don't want to go home. Don't take me home."

If he said something then, I couldn't hear it. He untwisted a bottle cap, kissed the moon-riding cowgirl on the neck, and tipped the bottle back. I thought I felt the car slow just a tad.

*

SHE WAITS FOR me in the driver's seat, parked on the shoulder. There are no skid marks to be seen, but there are some severe-looking ruts which cross the ditch at an angle, and then, beyond this, the soybeans are down and the ground is torn up where the pickup Passalacqua was driving flipped to a stop and was subsequently hauled away. The whole empty scene bears testament to violence and tragedy. He died alone out here. I'm in the gray suit I wore to the service, the sleeves too short. My black tie is flapping in the wind, and my truck stop sunglasses keep falling from my nose because the hinges are weak and the arms have splayed. "Where should

I put it?" I yell.

She won't lean to the window.

"I can't put it out here," I tell her. "It'll get, like, *harvested*. It'll have to go in the ditch somewhere."

"Then put it in the ditch, Seth. That's what *most* people do with them."

I sink the cross into the soft slope, then tap its top with the hammer.

"Hurry up," she says. "I don't want to be behind this guy!"

A mammoth combine is grinding up the highway, going our direction. Instinctively I look the other way to see if someone's coming, then step back. "It's a little crooked, isn't it?" Indeed, the gibbet is loose.

"No one ever mistook you for a craftsman," she mutters. "Come on."

But I feel the need to be stubborn, to assert myself, and so stand there waiting, waving to the combine as it passes, the farmer's capped silhouette high in the cab waving back, knowing what's happened here, a sympathetic salute. He's damming a long stream of cars. I count all seventeen.

"Thanks for the hurry," Rachel says.

I take my jacket off, and then my tie, toss them through the window onto the seat, and start walking down the shoulder. She's out of her seat in a fury, coming around the hood in heels. "What are you doing?" Her wristwatch glints in the sun. "What are you doing?" The buttons on her navy suit are fiery, golden nailheads.

*

AND, FINALLY, forty days after his death, the phone does ring. I'm expecting to hear from the business supply company on Jefferson Street. Every night I have been preparing, scripting dialogue on the back of my incisors with my tongue as I watch the ceiling fan churn the air above the bed. I've built a series of ready answers around positive words like *delighted*, *yes*, and *immediately*. I am *looking forward to the opportunity* and certainly hope to be *activated into your workforce*. Rachel sits at the table with the phone, the red cord stretching taut across the messy kitchen. A pot shifts with a clank in the loaded sink. "Uh-huh," she says, nodding and opening my notebook on the table. She shakes her head briefly at a doodle of the Gorgon, then scratches down some notes of her own on the first blank page. When she looks at me—looks at me, who has risen eagerly from the couch and is gung-ho in the doorway, all bright eyes and firm handshake—I sense at once it isn't prospective employment. It's the clinic confirming our at-home test.

The mist disperses. The bridge reveals its long, rickety arch.

In the next weeks, I make use of my positive words. *Absolutely*. We

spend more time at her mother's, who has assigned herself the planning of a simple ceremony for us, coinciding with the completion of her patio deck, upon which we will stand before Reverend Fusco, apparently sometime in September, she swears, though maybe early October, depending on the carpenter.

We buy two rollers and a foam brush from Wal-Mart and set to painting the spare bedroom yellow. Rachel seems agreeable—sedated, even; she's barely raised her voice in days. She tapes the nebulous ultrasound photo to the pane while I'm dabbing around the window, and I stop to study it a moment: there's the certain curve of a skull, the suggestion of an elbow, the possibility, I tease, of a horn. She sighs as she begins to move my things from this closet to the one in the hall.

The day of Passalacqua's funeral, she waited in the Handy Dan's parking lot, the first one she came upon, up the road a piece from where I drove his cross into the ground. I was a sweating mess. My feet were sore from being pinched in wingtips a half-size too small, and when I dropped sheepishly into the seat beside her, I began to unlace them, hoping the air conditioning would restore me before she let me have it. In the summer heat we sat perfectly still and silent for a spell, like we'd never done before. "Seether," she said. Softly, she flicked my knee.

"What."

In another mind, I would have relished her placidity—her recent rages had been more than I could answer—but I was still blinded by the image of her red car stitching through that queue of seventeen, arcing wildly around the combine before disappearing in the shimmer off the asphalt, speeding off to leave me walking along the highway with my dumb conviction and a prayer card folded in my pocket. To teach me, as she often said, a lesson.

The ride home was a tense one. I left my clothes piled in the hallway. She went to the grocery while I showered, and as I was toweling off, positively beat and too tired for more sorrow, certainly too tired to fight, she stepped into the foggy bathroom and handed me an ice cream sandwich, the paper folded back like a banana peel.

"I didn't ask for this."

"It's ice cream, Seth. Just eat it."

I stuck it in my mouth, remembering how I had seen her, through the drapes, carry my birthday cards from the mailbox to the tall trash bin beside the drive. "Thanks," I said.

Now, preparing the nursery, she's struggling with something in the closet. She curses violently and kicks it hard.

"Here," I say. "Don't. I'll get it."

She marches out of the room. "Yeah, *get* it. Do something."

I wipe yellow paint on my jeans and drag my box of papers out of the closet. Last spring's graded term paper's on top:

Your analysis of the House of Atreus is generally solid, although I question your assertion that a "defiant apathy," as you put it, will forestall vengeance or wrath. What makes you so sure? Have you read Hamlet? *Grammar good. Awesome job. B+*

*

IN OCTOBER, SHE comes into the soft yellow room with a sample book of wallpaper borders and slowly lowers herself to sit cross-legged on the floor, in the morning sun, beside my sleeping bag. My eyes are open, but I have nothing more to say. I can smell coffee brewing. She opens the book and says, calmly, that she doesn't favor the ducks (she likes the picket fence). She shakes a little, but doesn't apologize. Loose pages fall from the book, and she gathers them and holds them out to me, until I sit up. Adhesive glow-in-the-dark stars fill the square sheets, their rays neatly interlocking, a teeming mass wanting design. I wait to see if she'll say more. She can't. She leans and, sniffling, switches off the paint-spattered clock radio, which I hadn't noticed was buzzing.

"Wake to static," I say.

Slowly she kisses last night's cut, a small stinger above my eye. Her remorse doesn't linger. "You can reach, can't you?" She points to the ceiling. "I want one there. And there. And there." ■

W.S. Merwin

To the Air

Just when I needed you
there you were
I cannot say
how long you had been
present all at once
color of the day
as it comes to be seen
color of before
face of forgetting
color of heaven
out of sight within
myself leaving me
all the time only
to return without
question never
could I live without you
never have you
belonged to me
never do I want
you not to be with me
you who have been
the breath of everyone
and of each word spoken
without needing to know
the meaning of any of them
or who was speaking
when you are the wind
where do you start from
when you are still
where do you go
you who became
all the names I have known
and the lives in which
they came and went
invisible friend
go on telling me
again again

To the Tray Dancers

None of the words drifting
across the upturned faces
down in the packed street
was meant for your ears
all the way up there
too high to believe
on that June morning
in the unknown city
the year I was nine
all the words were saying hush
whatever they were saying
as we stood watching you
on the roof of the hotel
that looked even taller
than it did in the post cards
could you be real there
so small and far away
from who we thought we were
you in the shining gown
and the black suit and top hat
raising your hands once
then turning to the ladder
that rose from behind you
and spidering all the way up
the high pole to the round
tea tray on top
while a drum rolled until
first one then both of you
stood on the tray up there
in the clouds and daylight
you raised your hands again
then the music began
and you started to dance
revolving together
turning around and
around on the tray
arms out over air
heads thrown back as you whirled
and where were we all that time

what were we standing on
with our terrors spinning
on top of the pole there
while the music played
and when the playing stopped
we knew we were falling
but then we saw you climb down
toward the lives waiting
at the foot of the air
and a whisper began
that it was all an act
to sell some brand of shoes
but you bowed and were gone
from us as we had been

To Grief

Oh other country
which we never left
rich in anniversaries
each in turn wearing your crown
how many of them are there
like stars returning every one alone
from where they have been all the time
each one the only one
and to whom do you belong
incomparable one

recurring never to be touched again
whether by hand or understanding
familiar presence suddenly approaching
already turned away
reminder hidden
in the names

back of the same sky
that lights the days as we watch them
what do you want it for
this endless longing that is only ours
orbiting even in our syllables
why do you keep calling us as you do
from the beginning without a sound
like a shadow

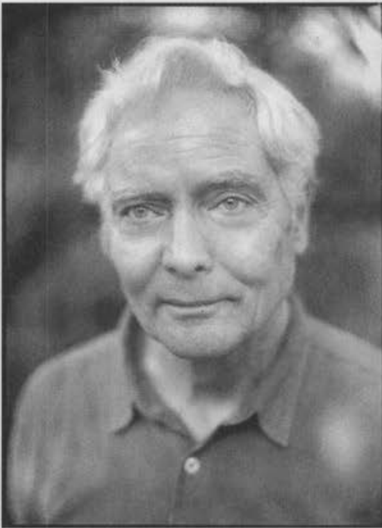
To a Departing Companion

Only now
I see that you
are the end of spring
cloud passing
across the hollow
of the empty bowl
not making a sound
and the dew is still here

—Interview—

W.S. Merwin on the Unity of Poetry

"Whatever happens to the world as a whole, the great privilege is to have this moment in the continuity of existence."



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W.S. Merwin was born in New York City in 1927 and grew up in Union City, New Jersey, and Scranton, Pennsylvania. The son of a Presbyterian minister, he graduated from Princeton University, where he studied under John Berryman and R.P. Blackmur, and later tutored Robert Graves's son on Majorca. He is the author of more than forty books of poetry and translation and four books of prose. The first of these, *A Mask for Janus*, provided an auspicious start to Merwin's life as a writer when W.H. Auden selected it for the Yale Series of Younger Poets Award in 1952. Subsequent collections have garnered Merwin the Pulitzer Prize, the Lenore Marshall Poetry Prize, the Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize, the Wallace Stevens Award, and many others too numerous to recount here. He has lived in Hawaii for the past thirty years.

In March, Copper Canyon Press released *Migration*, a new and selected volume containing poems from 1951 through the present, and later this fall they will publish *Present Company*, a new collection of verse. Merwin was one of the featured readers during this year's AWP Conference in Vancouver, British Columbia. On Saturday, April 2nd, he and Anne Carson gave their readings to a standing-room-only crowd in the British Columbia Ballroom of The Fairmont Hotel. The previous afternoon, after having arrived from a reading in San Francisco with Adrienne Rich, Merwin sat down with one of *Fugue*'s editors, Ben George, for the following interview. The two spoke in the poet's suite at The Fairmont, one of the stateliest landmarks in all of Vancouver, and Merwin discussed his life as a poet and the essential sound of poetry.

Ben George: In the past you've expressed an aversion toward collected and selected volumes of poetry, pointing out how such collections obscure the integrity or the cohesion of the specific books from which the poems

are drawn. What made you decide to do *Migration*, the comprehensive selected volume that Copper Canyon just published?

W.S. Merwin: So many people wanted me to. My agent wanted a *Selected*. A lot of people said it was hard to teach the books because you can't get the students to buy that many books, and they wanted a *Selected*. I thought, *Well, sooner or later I might as well make a selection because if I don't it'll be made anyway*. I wanted to be sure that there was a book to follow it—*Present Company* is coming out in September—because otherwise a *Selected* looks like a tombstone. A statement that it's all over.

I still feel the integrity of the different books. But I feel that if anybody's really interested in the poetry, they'll go to the individual books and they'll read them as individual books and perhaps they'll discover that integrity, if it's there. I hope they do. The *Selected* doesn't prevent anybody from doing that. And those things change over time. It's been years since *The Lice* was published, almost forty years.

BG: One distinctive feature of your career as a poet is that, unlike most, you never got involved with teaching in the academy. How were you able to sustain yourself?

WSM: I barely did, you know. I lived on very little money, and I lived in Europe in those early years and Europe was much less expensive than the States. I knew if I came home I would have to teach or something like that. I never wanted an academic career. I never wanted to live in a university and get involved in the tenure track and do all of that. I saw many of my contemporaries doing that, and for a while it seemed that they thought the university was the world. But all of the writers and artists that I admired in the past had never done that. Some of them had been pretty poor. I suppose it's lucky to have been part of the last generation that really felt they could live on very little money. I guess I should say *some* members of my generation felt they could. I mean, Jack Gilbert's a little older than I am, but he knocked around Europe for years and years with no money. It just seemed to me that the most important thing was independence. If I'd had a family and washing machines and mortgages and all of that, it might have been different. But I didn't.

I mainly had a hand-to-mouth existence for years. I worked as a tutor, and you didn't make much money doing that. Then I went to England and I lived on what I earned from the BBC, which wasn't very much, but enough to manage to live. It didn't take much money. So I just kept that going as long as I could. I kept thinking, *It'll come to an end and I'll have to go to a university*. But year after year it didn't. And then I got a few fellowships. But fellowships in those days were $3,000—I eked it out. My

models were people who lived on very little money, who assumed that if you were a writer or a composer or something like that you didn't have much money. Maybe later on in your life you had a bit. But you took it for granted—that you'd have no money. It didn't seem important.

BG: Many readers are probably aware that your father was a Presbyterian minister. What influence do you think the biblical rhythms of language you grew up with had on your poetry?

WSM: I don't know what influence they had, but I know that I loved the King James Version of the Bible. I'm not a Christian and I'm not part of the Abrahamic covenant tradition, although I was brought up in it and I read a lot of Christian literature, obviously. There are really things of such beauty in the King James Version of the Bible. I used to know long bits of it by heart. That's a great gift. I'm grateful for that.

BG: I wonder whether your poetry ever caused any friction in your family, whether your father's Christianity was something against which you had to battle as a young poet. For example, in "Two Paintings by Alfred Wallis" from *Green with Beasts*, the speaker refers to the morning as "mindless / And uncaring as Jesus."

WSM: I hadn't thought about that and I don't remember that line, but the phrase may have come from Alfred Wallis himself. I was told—as one was in that generation, certainly with my kind of background—what I felt about everything. It was only as I grew up that I began to say, "That's not what I really feel." It was very hard to do. And in fact I know people who come from the same background and same generation who have never done that. They really think they feel what they're supposed to feel, and they believe what they're supposed to believe and they've never questioned any of it. I don't know, maybe you can get through your whole life that way. I find that hard to imagine.

Yes, I'm sure I did contend against it. By the time I got to college, I was pretty far away from it. I then reexamined it very carefully, some years later, and as I read a whole bunch of things like Eckhart and the Mystics, the kind of Christianity that most appealed to me, in a way, was Greek Orthodoxy, mainly because of the contemplative tradition I found there. Its rigidity and the dualism and the role of women in it put me off. I believe historians keep learning more about the contemplative tradition, which, in the Near East, probably was influenced by traditions in India, both Hinduism and Buddhism. Those teachings were being brought back on the trade routes to places like Antioch and Constantinople. It worked both ways, of course. Sculpture went east and many of the ideas came west.

BG: In an early poem called "On the Subject of Poetry," you write about a man listening to a mill wheel: "He does not move / His feet nor so much as raise his head / For fear he should disturb the sound he hears." Is this the poet's task, simply to listen to whatever is there? To hear the unheard, inherent music?

WSM: I suppose that's what I was trying to say in that poem. What is the millwheel? I'm far enough away from it so that I wouldn't exactly interpret it. But I suppose the universe is motion, the universe is a wheel, the universe is one great circular motion. That's what one's listening to. I really believe that both things happen, that the universe which exists as an evolution in time from the Big Bang (or however you envisage that moment) to this moment is one dimension, but that at the same time, the entire thing is there from the beginning to now in one instant. It's there in every instant. And it's all borne in the same turning motion. This is the mysterious reality of the world we live in. The universe is not separate from us and we're not separate from it. One of the things that distresses me very much in our time is that, somewhere along the line (and I see it in the Abrahamic tradition) we've separated ourselves—or tried to persuade ourselves that we're separated—from the rest of life. I think this is sad and dangerous.

BG: I wonder if the problem comes from the idea in the Abrahamic tradition of Adam having dominion over the animals rather than a communion with them.

WSM: I think it does. It's not this way in every mythology. I think the truth in that story is in the expulsion from the garden, because the expulsion from the garden is a separation from the rest of life.

BG: I sense a journey in your poetry with respect to your attitude toward the environment. *The Lice*, as many have noted, is incredibly angry. Later on, in *The Rain in the Trees*, there's a kind of irony, where the speaker, after addressing the devastation of the earth and of trees, says "but what do I know I am only a witness." And in your most recent collection, *The Pupil*, there's almost a kind of acceptance. In the poem "In Time" the speaker remembers dancing and feeding oysters to his companion on "the night the world was about to end." It's a celebration in the midst of apocalypse—completely antithetical in spirit, it seems to me, to *The Lice*. It reminds me of the quote from Thoreau you mentioned elsewhere, where after the Concord Common was closed he said, "I didn't pay enough attention to it while it was free." I get the sense that this is the attitude you want to have toward the natural world now. Is this right?

WSM: Both things are still there. There's the real effort to save what can be saved. The pessimism of *The Lice* is, to me, every bit as dark as it was then, but I see two sides to it. When we destroy the forests, we are destroying ourselves, and this is something that we don't see. If we don't see it, we will be destroyed. I think we are destroying ourselves. There was a recent book about what happened at Easter Island. It's a real agar plate of what we're doing everywhere around the planet. I don't feel optimistic about that at all. On the other hand, if we get stuck in our despair about the whole thing, if that's all we see, then we've allowed the destruction to take us over completely. It's very important to see that in every moment there's the other thing, too, which is that each of us is a part of the world as a whole. Whatever happens to the world as a whole, the great privilege is to have this moment in the continuity of existence. I don't want to contribute to any of the destruction, and I will do what I can to prevent it as long as I can. It's not very much, but I want to live that way. I want to live by not abetting the destruction. We can't separate ourselves from the fate of the world, but I want, at the same time, to be aware of what's unique and precious about it.

BG: Peter Davison, the poetry editor of *The Atlantic* until his death in December, said that your poems are "as broad as the biosphere yet as intimate as a whisper." Is this paradoxical quality something for which you strive when you're writing?

WSM: Not consciously. I don't think of those things consciously. I work toward something that feels and sounds right, and if it comes to do that, it incorporates a kind of wholeness and the wholeness is going to be at once the moon and its reflection in the dewdrop. They're both there at once.

BG: "The Judgment of Paris" from *The Carrier of Ladders* is dedicated to Anthony Hecht, who also died last year. I wonder what your relationship to him was and what you felt about his poetry.

WSM: A long-term friendship. We'd been friends since 1960, I think. Tony was much more traditional in many ways than I was, I suppose. I think he was very troubled when I began to write in a very different way in the Sixties. And it took him some years to come to terms with that. He talked to me once about that, how he felt that I'd really gone off the deep end, that I was betraying the things we all believed.

BG: How did you respond?

WSM: Well, he only told me afterwards, when he told me he'd come to

see what I'd been doing and that it was fine. Tony was extremely scrupulous and very precise, a man of great integrity and probity and seriousness. He took things that he took seriously *very* seriously, and I respected him enormously. I love his poetry very much. The late poems (I don't know if you've seen the very late poems, most of which are to his wife) have to do with knowing the end of his life was right upon him. They're very moving; at least I think so.

BG: I remember one called "Sarabande on Attaining the Age of Seventy-Seven."

WSM: That's one. And there's one called "Aubade." Beautiful poems.

BG: How do you feel about contemporary poetry's sense of the line? Do you think there's still a pervasive lack of clarity among younger poets about what a line is or should be?

WSM: No, I think this is something that's got much better in the last ten or fifteen years. I felt that way about twenty years ago, and I think it was true then. Of course, some of the poets that were younger poets then aren't younger poets any more. They're twenty years older and they have a much stronger sense of the line. There's been a lot of remarkable talent emerging.

BG: You claim Dante as one of the major influences on your poetry, but among Americans, you've cited Thoreau, primarily a prose writer, rather than Whitman, whose unchecked American optimism troubles you a bit. Are there any American poets you feel have influenced you?

WSM: You know, influence is a very strange thing. I don't know what influences me; everything influences me. I'm not aware of any particular influence. But I read the poets of the generation just ahead of mine with great, great attention and care, and I loved them. I think it was a great generation—the generation of Roethke and Berryman and Elizabeth Bishop and Lowell and Jarrell. They were wonderful writers. Very individual. I had Berryman for a teacher, and I respected him. I turn back to these poets all the time.

But I wasn't ever trying to model myself on any of them. The ones I *wanted* to be influenced by were old poets from much earlier times. That's something I realized later that Pound had said. He said that you don't want to be influenced by anybody too near you. You want to be influenced by poets from other ages and traditions. And I thought, *Ah, that's just the way I've felt about it, always*.

BG: Is that what Pound meant, do you think, when he said to read "the seeds, not the twigs" of poetry?

WSM: I think he meant read the beginnings, when all the possibilities were there, rather than the ends of things. It's a lovely bit of advice, but actually you want to read them both. The opposite of a seed is really not a twig. It's the fruit.

BG: Elsewhere you've referred to American poetry of the 1940s as "wooden." In what ways was it restrictive for you?

WSM: Well, not all American poetry of the forties was. The breakthrough anthology for us at that time, which you've probably never even heard of, was Oscar Williams' *Little Treasury of Modern Poetry*. Those were the poets I knew, and there were a lot of poets in there that nobody's heard of any more. Too bad. Some of them were good.

But some of it was rather abstract and formally restrictive. While the poets in my generation didn't sit around a conference table and decide to do it, many of us arrived at about the same time at the same conclusion: we had to write differently. Donald Hall, who's here at the conference, Louis Simpson, James Wright, Adrienne Rich. Not everybody, of course. Some people broke through without changing. Jimmy Merrill and Tony Hecht came to write differently within the inherited way of doing it. And Edgar Bowers. Really good poets. But many of us decided to try to do it differently and listen to something different. I think many of us were influenced by foreign poetry, especially Spanish. Some in French. Well, for me in French. And particularly South American poets. I don't think any of us stayed there, though. Robert Bly had a way of describing it once. He said he thought that the poets who interested him in his time had all come *through* surrealism to something else. You know, surrealism is one of those sloppy words that you use when you can't describe something. But he meant surrealism as an ideology, as in Andre Breton and early Neruda.

BG: Wasn't Bly convinced that you were a surrealist because of some of your images, like the one of the flies and the "statue to nothing"?

WSM: That's right. He said that was a surrealist image, and I said, "Robert, this is exactly what I'm saying. If someone doesn't understand or can't catch a metaphor, they ascribe it to surrealism." Robert was coming to see me in France, and I just took him into the cow barn in the middle of the day, when the cows were out of there. I left the door open and I said, "Look." In the middle of the cow barn, there were these flies going around and around and around the empty space in the middle of the room.

BG: You've said that images are a way of seeing the world that one hasn't noticed before, but that as a poet one can't make them by an act of will. Is it fair to say, then, that you don't start with an image when you're writing, that you prefer to arrive at one rather than begin with one? What's the germ of a poem for you?

WSM: The germ of a poem to me has always been hearing something and hearing the sound of something, or a phrase—hearing the life in a few words, hearing a phrase or a few words in a way I'd never heard them before. Suddenly it's exciting and the excitement, to me, is leading to something. Sometimes it's related to its subject right at the beginning. Sometimes not. It's a way of putting words and lines together, a rhythm together, that makes sense to me. Hearing is the sense that's most important to me for that thing. It's not visual. The image is a metaphor that invents itself. It comes out of *you*, and you come to see that, too. Mandelstam had a wonderful way of describing an image. He said that a real image is like running across a river on a bridge of boats, and when you look back all the boats have moved and you couldn't do it again.

BG: That is beautiful. So the sound and the rhythm of the poem—that's something you find very early on and try to follow?

WSM: Yes, I don't mean it has to sound like Swinburne or very mellifluous like Tennyson. But sometimes you'll hear what I'm talking about in a passage of Shakespeare, something that you can't get out of your head, and it may be very simple. Very simple. Think of the line in *Henry the Fifth*, the scene before the Battle of Agincourt, where King Henry is walking, disguised, before the battle that everyone thinks they're going to lose and even he thinks they're going to lose. He meets a soldier, Michael Williams, who doesn't recognize him, and Williams asks about his own commander, "I pray you, what thinks he of our estate?" And Henry says, "Even as men wrack'd upon a sand, that look to be wash'd off the next tide." That's an incredibly simple thing that just takes your breath away. You *hear* that. It's not that it has to be wonderful meters that put you to sleep. It's the *life* of the language.

BG: That's the sense I get all the time when I'm reading your poems, especially this last collection, *The Pupil.* It feels as though you're trying to tap into some kind of primordial music, the thing that's always been there somehow.

WSM: I want it to be very simple. I want it to look as though I hadn't done anything. That's the kind of art I admire most, the art that looks as

though it just happened that way, when it may have taken months or years. It *has* taken you your whole life so far.

BG: You've referenced Camus's belief that all true writers have two or three images to which they continually return. Is this something of which the poet himself can be aware? Do you have a sense of the two or three images that haunt you?

WSM: I think partly aware. I wouldn't say what I think they are. But I think it's true. I think if you look through many writers you can see that. Look at Faulkner and you can see that he's sometimes writing the same story over and over again in different ways. Different characters, different everything, but basically the story is the same. There's something about the way the story develops that's deep in Faulkner. Then take a great poet like Milton. I realized some years ago that all of Milton is in the sonnet "Methought I saw my late espoused saint." Everything that Milton ever wrote is in that sonnet. Milton is blind and the whole theme of blindness runs through Milton. Blindness in every sense. That's there from the sonnet "When I consider how my light is spent" all the way through to *Samson and Agonistes*. There's the sense of lost innocence, and the wife he's talking about as his "late espoused saint," he never saw. He was blind already when he married her. He *dreamed* that he saw her. So this is the lost paradise, which he sees only in his imagination. He sees it only in a dream. "But Oh! as to embrace me she inclin'd, / I wak'd, she fled, and day brought back my night." I think in some ways it's the greatest poem he ever wrote, that sonnet.

BG: You've spoken about "moving on" in one's work from one kind of writing to another. The huge movement from the poems in *The Drunk in the Furnace* to those in *The Moving Target* has been well-documented. In reflecting, where else do you see a clearly demarcated "moving-on" in your poetry?

WSM: This isn't planned or programmed. But I really come to the point where I try to find some slightly different way of doing something, which is, in part, a feeling that I'm coming to the end of what I have been doing.

BG: You talked about feeling that way particularly after you finished *The Drunk in the Furnace*. I guess I'm wondering whether you've had that same kind of feeling after any subsequent book.

WSM: Not quite as crucially as that. But in a general way, every new poem is supposed to be somewhat different. There's always a point where the

poems seem to group together and make a book, and that's a sort of phase, although I notice that the phases reflect each other forward and backward. There's something in each book that more or less suggests what's going to come afterwards, and there are things afterwards that pick up from what's been there before. I think there's a continuity anyway because it's my own voice and mind and imagination at work. I'm certainly not trying to turn into anybody else.

BG: I wonder what you think of poets of your generation like Richard Wilbur who didn't dispense with predetermined forms. Do you think the idea of constraining yourself in a form still has currency? Is it just a matter of responding to a different tradition?

WSM: I really think of Richard as one of our elders.

BG: He is about six years older than you, I guess.

WSM: Is that all? Richard has somehow always seemed much older than I am. I certainly admire him very much. I think he's a wonderful poet. You know, Bly went through a period of being rather a preacher about things, saying that if a poem wasn't *this* kind of poem, it wasn't a real poem at all. Robert Graves did the same thing. I've always really deplored that. I love poems of all kinds. If it seems to me a real poem, if it sounds to me like a poem and wakes me up the way a real poem does, I'm happy if it's in a form that I'm not used to.

BG: So it didn't seem to you like everybody needed to be leaving some of these forms behind and to be writing differently?

WSM: No! I wasn't telling everybody else how they had to do it. I just wanted to do it that way. But I did begin to feel, around then, bored by iambic pentameter. I really felt that there had been enough iambic pentameter for a while. Not that there weren't very fine contemporary poems being written in it. But I disagreed with the assumption that writing in blank verse was enough. I just thought, *That's a tired form, and I want to get away from it.* I was always trying to listen *past* the iambic pentameter for something else. Now, somebody like Melville was high on that form. There are whole passages of *Moby-Dick* that are almost perfect iambic pentameter, although they're in prose.

BG: In your book *The River Sound*, there's a return to slightly more formal poems, even a number that employ end rhymes. What prompted this?

WSM: I wanted to go back to it, after a long absence. I wanted to write, besides, those two poems that are deliberate echoes of earlier poems, the Dunbar poem "Lament for the Makers" and then "Testimony," in the manner of Francois Villon. I'd always wanted to be influenced by Villon, and while the latter poem isn't really in the meter of Villon, I'd finally used his stanzaic form. It's pretty hard to do his meter in English. You do get the octosyllabic line and the octosyllabic stanza, but you couldn't have the exact ring of Villon, so I didn't try to do that. The poem as a whole follows the form of Villon's poem. Both of those poems of mine are homages to the elders, the masters.

BG: Much has been made of your decision to abandon punctuation partway through *The Moving Target*, and you've discussed your desire to adopt the oral tradition and to avoid the feeling of the poems being "nailed" to the page. When you made the decision to abandon punctuation, did you think of it as a momentous one? Did you know you were never going to use it again?

WSM: No, I didn't. I was curious about it, and I looked at some unpunctuated poetry and realized that this was a form of its own. I also noticed that it had to do with speech rhythm. Actually, doing without punctuation makes it harder. It's just like writing in stanzaic form or meter or anything else. And as with all the forms of poetry, it's an empowerment, a liberation, at the same time. You give up something and as a result you can do some things you couldn't do before. But I certainly wasn't planning to do it forever. Once I got started on it, though, it seemed a very valuable way of writing, and I stayed with it. I suppose I will stay with it. Basically by now I feel more than ever that punctuation is a protocol of prose. Certainly punctuation is useful in poetry. But I'm sure you've noticed that many poets ignore the rules of punctuation in poetry and use it in very idiosyncratic ways. They use punctuation their own way, not the way *Fowler's English* says you should use it.

BG: Without punctuation, your poetry often seems, formally, to mimic natural elements like water and air, things you write about quite a bit—as though without punctuation your lines, like air or water, have more vacillating starting and stopping points. They're more fluid. Is this mimicry anything you're trying to approximate?

WSM: Not consciously, but there may be a connection I don't know about. I think writing without punctuation probably takes one closer to elemental things. At the same time, I want poetry to be as specific and as individual as possible—as rooted in specific circumstances as possible. And yet there

aren't a lot of names and historical circumstances in poems of mine. I admire poems that have them. I admire Lowell's *Notebook* and *History* and *Dolphin*. That's wonderful writing. It's not the kind of writing I ever got around to; I suppose it's not for me to do. But I admire it very much.

BG: In the sixties, when your poetry changed a great deal, some critics accused you of writing intentionally and unnecessarily difficult or opaque poems. Yet in actuality, as you've said, you were trying to write more simply and directly. What was your reaction to this criticism?

WSM: I didn't know how to react to that criticism. I mean, I don't *react* to criticism generally, except to think, *Oh, isn't that nice* or *Isn't that unpleasant.* I don't think I really altered my writing as a result.

BG: No, I wouldn't say so.

WSM: One of the nice things that happened at the same time was that people would come up and say that they'd been using poems of mine in teaching grade school. And I said, "How do the children respond to the poems?" And they would say the children liked them. I thought that was wonderful. Probably the teacher read the poems out loud or got the students to read them out loud, and by the time they heard them, they weren't concerned about whether they were opaque or whether they were understanding everything. Children don't worry about things like that. They worry about what comes *through* the words. I think that's right. There are stanzas and whole poems, heaven knows, of Blake and of Yeats—the twentieth-century poet who's always mattered most to me—that I knew by heart for years before I began to understand them. It was the sound, some quality in the sound, that I responded to.

BG: The "meaning" of a poem doesn't necessarily affect your experience of it.

WSM: That's it. It was the experience of it that always mattered, that made the difference—something in the sound that I was hearing in the poem.

BG: One theme that seems to crop up in your poems is the idea of departure. You've mentioned the joy you felt as a young boy watching from your father's study as the boats left port. Do you find this idea of departure compelling?

WSM: I think so, yes. Why, I don't know. And yet I'm someone who loves to be at home, and more and more I hate leaving home. I'm always

homesick when I'm not there. Wittgenstein said—and whether this is true of everybody or whether it's true only of poets, who knows—but he said that the central theme of all poets beyond a certain age is homecoming.

BG: I wanted to ask you about home. After living many different places in your life prior to Hawaii, you've now stayed there for almost thirty years. What is it about this landscape that compels you and keeps you there?

WSM: A number of things. It's very beautiful. Maui's very beautiful. I love gardening and I love a garden; I love living among trees. And I realized when I got there that it was a place where I could garden all year round. I could be surrounded by a garden. In a world which was destroying the forest as fast as it could, I knew I couldn't stop that. But I could go out almost every day and plant trees and take care of trees. That's been wonderful.

The other thing is that, to go back to one of your first questions—and there's no judgment in this as far as what anybody else should have done, only what I should have done—I noticed that more and more people of my generation were living in a job or in a situation. They weren't living in a place. And I didn't want to do that. I always wanted to live in a place, and I wanted to *be* in a place. Independence seemed important to me. And, in a way, poverty too. I didn't mind relative poverty. I didn't mind having very few clothes and no car, saving up a little bit, back in England, to go to the theatre when it used to cost ten and six. Ten and six was a couple of dollars. You could go to the theatre for that. You could go to see Shakespeare. That was the kind of thing I was willing to spend money on. Go to the Old Vic, see Olivier. Not having to be rich to do it.

BG: One term you've used for the muses is the "collective unconscious."

WSM: That's not original, of course. That's Jung.

BG: It seems to me that this "collective unconscious" is the place at which many of your poems seek to arrive. Without being arrogant the poet is nevertheless trying to speak for everyone. Do you agree?

WSM: I think that's true. I don't know who the ideal reader is, but the ideal reader really is everybody. If you're being true to your own experience, you're being true to experience in general. And if people pay enough attention, they'll find it recognizable eventually—if you make it worth their while to pay attention.

BG: You've described language as the most "flexible articulation" of our experience that we've yet devised. Yet you note the paradox that, even so,

our experience is not something that can ultimately be articulated, which, as you've said, makes poetry simultaneously "painful and exhilarating." Is there ever a feeling of dissatisfaction when you complete a poem, because of this idea?

WSM: Language always falls short of what it's talking about. But of course the difference between imaginative writing—like poetry or highly imaginative prose—and every other kind of use of language is that poetry exists as something in itself. It is something primary. It's a new making of something. Even though insofar as it's about a subject it doesn't arrive at being the subject, it still arrives at being itself, which is something else. Whereas prose that is *about* something never accomplishes that, and is never really identical with the subject it's talking about either. It can only express a certain amount of it, a certain part. The conveyance of information is never complete, it's only partial. But a sonnet of Shakespeare conveys a sonnet of Shakespeare, whatever else it conveys. It doesn't tell you everything about love, except in a sort of holographic sense.

Put it in terms of painting, the visual world. You've got a Japanese painting of three persimmons. What the painting is saying is, "Look at these three persimmons. This is the whole world. If you really look at this right, everything is here, somehow all of experience. You can look at this, and it will show you something that you won't be able to see otherwise." In a sense, this is not true. But in a vital and unchanging sense, it is. ■

Robert Wrigley

An Amplitude of Stars: On W. S. Merwin

Vatic, oracular, gnomic. It's always tempting to describe Mr. Merwin and many of his poems this way. There are poems in his books that seem somehow truer than true, poems that seem something close to essence, to a purity of expression that can only have come from a shaman. In 1974, I was twenty-three and I owned a total of four books of poetry by contemporary poets. James Dickey's *Drowning with Others*, Robert Bly's *Silence in the Snowy Fields*, James Wright's *The Branch Will Not Break*, and W.S. Merwin's *The Lice*. I read them and reread and reread them. I had not cared for poetry ever before, neither in elementary or secondary school nor in my earliest English classes in college. I was stupefyingly naïve. I thought I might become a writer of novels, preferably the kind that would make me rich and famous. I could almost imagine myself driving a British sports car from Monaco to Nice, and wearing an ascot. But then, for some reason, I took a poetry writing class.

The four poetry books I owned in those days were ones I had been guided to by my teacher. It would take me some years to come to grips with Dickey, longer still to see what Wright's great yearning was all about. I thought Bly made sense to me. Like me, he was Midwestern. I knew a few things about wind and snow and fields, I thought.

It was spring that year when I bought *The Lice*. I used to scrawl my name and the date of purchase inside the covers of the books I bought. "April 5, 1974." Exactly a year before the fall of Saigon, four months before the resignation of Richard Nixon, whose tribulations pleased me enormously. I had the sense that I was living in the true midst of history. But on the day in question, I was sitting on the floor, deep in the stacks of my college library, in solitude, when I read this poem:

APRIL

When we have gone the stone will stop singing

April April
Sinks through the sand of names

Days to come
With no stars hidden in them

You that can wait being there

You that lose nothing
Know nothing

I cannot assure you that all of the poem's complexities have revealed themselves to me in the three decades plus since that day. At the time I was aware only of the sudden chill at my neck. Recognition, it was, but of what, exactly? The poem begins with a seemingly sanguine pronouncement in its opening line, but how was I to read that line? Did the pair of Aprils that made up line two mean to suggest that the first April was in fact part of the opening line before? That "April" will have been what the stone was singing? And thus the second April was the subject of the sentence line three was the predicate of?

This is among the most vivid memories of my entry into poetry. It was a life-altering experience. For all the seeming calm of its opening declaration, there was lamentation in the poem: the middle stanza struck me as an apocalyptic declaration, both planetary and personal. And yet the end of the poem, the way the early "we" disappears and the "you" comes into play, rang accusatory. This is that gnomic quality, the truer than true Merwinesque assertion. And I understood it was both universal—directed at all of us—and distinctly personal, which is to say, aimed right at me.

Did I feel a little strange sympathy for Nixon then? His loss? Did I think of the thousands of dead American soldiers and the hundreds of thousands of dead Vietnamese? Did I wonder what I had lost? What I might know?

What I experienced that day was my first real glimpse into the enormity of poetry's concentrated power. Thirty-eight words in eight lines, and those eight lines arranged in such a way that the poem just keeps on saying and saying and meaning and meaning. In a way, the poem resembles Shelley's "Ozymandias" writ larger still. We are all vainglorious kings. And yet isn't it also—and simply—a poem about the annual coming, and passing, of spring?

No one has given us a richer trove than W. S. Merwin in the monumental body of his work. To imagine future generations exploring his poems is to imagine all the Aprils ever strung end to end, and as long as Aprils will last. Such is the scale of this poet's accomplishment. So many days to consider and reconsider, and so many stars. ■

Jeffrey Greene

Read Seeds Not Twigs: A Tribute to W.S. Merwin

The telling advice that Pound gives W.S. Merwin in a series of cards written after the young poet visits him at Saint Elizabeth's is "read seeds not twigs," meaning learn from the originators. Like Pound, Merwin pursues this advice even to the degree of translating ancient, traditional, and new poetry of many cultures as the best way to understand it, and more importantly the best way to love it. Also like Pound, Merwin has become one of our most original and enduring poets, a "seed" in his own right in American letters since the mid 1950s.

In the late 60s and early 70s, Merwin made his dramatic formal shift in *The Moving Target*, *The Lice*, and *The Carrier of Ladders*, claiming that he could not continue writing in the same way as he had in his four previous volumes. These books were a revelation with their internal vision, daring, and sheer elegance. The need to shift formally and experiment continued throughout the next three decades, and while the vehicle for accessing material changed, the soul of the poetry continued: a poetry distinguished not only by extraordinary image-making and a voice that borders at times on the mystical but also by its celebration of the best part of the human heart—creator, lover, and worshipper of nature. This celebration of nature is more vital than ever, as we see in a recent poem of address, "To the Moss":

> how you discovered the darkness of green
> uncurling into this daylight out of
> its origins unsounded as your own
> how you learned to fashion shapes of water
> into softness itself that stayed in place
> and kept some secret of caves

Merwin's books of poetry remain for me, as they do for several generations of younger poets, among the most inspiring from any period. However, over so many years of reading his poetry, memoirs, stories, and correspondence, the awe I experienced as a young writer has transformed into a more meaningful and sustained admiration for the writing and the man. While Merwin has emerged as a great innovator, he is also a conservationist in the many senses of the word, a conserver of poetry, native histories, endangered species, and even human life, arguing vehemently against war. The innovating in poetry comes from an inexplicable sensibility with language, but conserving, as such, planting endangered trees and struggling against war, is a virtue manifested through careful contemplation and heartfelt affinities with nature and the good in men. ■

Betty Adcock

Surprised by Merwin: A Personal Appreciation

I have been drawn to the poems of W.S. Merwin since my discovery of his powerful fourth book *The Drunk in the Furnace*. Later, puzzled and curious, I read *The Lice* with a kind of bewildered joy. The poems in that book were spare but spacious. They were impossible to paraphrase, impossible to trace a line of narrative or poetic logic through, yet they seemed to me to be perfectly clear. A lover of stories, I found myself now in love with poems that had stripped away identifiable narrative. Yet the images progressed with such inevitability, with such undeniable necessity, that it was impossible to lose the tenuous thread of light that guided the reader into the moment when the poem became whole, became clear, became wholly bathed in light. This moment of surprise, of illumination, occurred in language by means of language, but in its instant of completion it touched not only the unconscious mind but the real, named world, now named anew. Poems such as "The Gods," "April," "Come Back," "Whenever I Go There," "Avoiding News by the River," "Peasant"—all these and more I got nearly by heart. I trusted the run-on unpunctuated line that seemed to hold news that would stay news—what Pound declared poetry should be. The susurrus of myth blew through Merwin's lines like a wind through wires tuned perfectly for that wind. It was both the oldest song we know and something utterly of our time. It was this remaking of archetypes, not merely invoking them, that was the key, I later believed, to my sense from the very first that this poetry was absolutely clear, that I understood it completely though I could explain it to no one. I knew few people who read poetry, but I pressed this book into the hands of those who did. Most of them found the poems abstract, impossible. Perhaps the poems shocked me into comprehension, surprised me into opening to them. I was young, uneducated, just beginning everything.

I had been reading the prophetic poems of Robinson Jeffers, both the flawed narratives and the chiseled lyrics, when I discovered Merwin's "The Last One," a poem that remains for me the finest *protest* poem ever written. I read it at a time when my friends and I were standing in a line every Wednesday noon to protest the Vietnam nightmare. Much of the poetry written during that time was good protest but weak poetry. "The Last One" was different: a damning incantation, a terrifying invocation of a reality truer than either our everyday perception or our projections of the sacred. "The Last One" rang in my mind against Jeffers' prophetic lines as both confirmation of Jeffers' vision and deepening mystery—just as strong but tempered with a formal and resonant restraint.

That poem's indictment of human selfishness branches from the oldest

tree, the Tree of Life, and from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil in the Christian myth, but contains earth's material forests, whose numbers grow smaller every year. Under the wide shade of this—shall I call it meta-symbol, mega-metaphor?—could be seen not only our unimaginable destruction of the nonhuman world but also our wars, our raging cities, our terrifying human condition, and our particular American moment: *everything was theirs because they thought so.*

Merwin's poems continue to surprise me. His work is itself a tree that grows and alters form through seasons and years—to read from each of his books in turn is to encounter changing weather, early blossom and bare bone, rich leaf and new graft, fruit of many names and many languages—always rooted firmly in the earth and the human footprint. W.S. Merwin is like no one else, and he is a master. ◼

James Richardson

On W.S. Merwin

Even at a great distance, it's easy enough to remember first reading W. S. Merwin. There was a landscape that seemed to have a new and secret way of possessing itself. A poem so still you could hear time blowing through it. You were haunted, but more than that you became a kind of ghost as you made Merwin's exhilarating and frightening discovery about the transparency of the self.

And if you were like me, you walked away from that first reading muttering something about what was "not there." Partly because that's what the poems seemed to be about. But mostly because poetic expression is intricate with restraint, and any poetry that is to be newer than just a new subject, any poetry that is to be a truly new language, has to reshape silence too.

Richard Howard once said that W.S. Merwin's poems were intimate without being personal, by which he probably meant that they work close to silence, absence, death, where we are most alike and where a very few words will suffice, over and over, to say how we lose ourselves. And that has remained true even now that Merwin's poems are more directly autobiographical. He is an elegist, but only secondarily an elegist *for* or *of* anything. He writes that continuous elegy for the self that we call knowledge. "You that lose nothing / Know nothing" one of his poems says. And from his losses he gains freedom from the world and a strange power.

A poet belongs to no one, really. But he gets claimed by his own generation. And maybe there's an even stronger bond for the generation that comes of age as readers just when he is coming into his own. That would be mine. We were the ones who waited for his books, who read them standing up in bookstores, who bought them on the next payday (or who strongly urged close friends to do so). Who thought the world might turn out to be a just place when he won the Pulitzer Prize for *The Carrier of Ladders*. Who dug his senior thesis on the Metaphysical poets out of the Princeton University library and read it from cover to cover.

Already thirty years ago, his idolaters, among whom I certainly include myself, were already talking about Early Merwin, Middle Merwin, and Late Merwin. Which made no provision for all that has come after, which will have to be Later Than That and Even Later. Indeed, he's always been a poet of last poems, of poems light for the long journey, but somehow he has also become earlier and earlier, more and more *essential*.

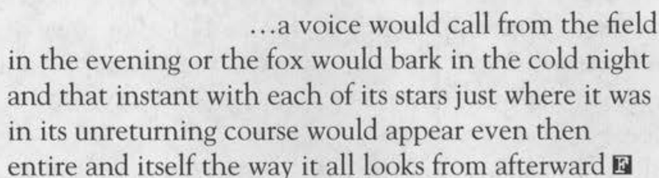
His poems of recent decades aspire to the condition of the wind, of the river sound, of the voice beneath our voices. They are so swift and clear, so fluid, so continuously opening that they bring us to the moment

when, staring into a stream, we cease to see the moving water and know only its depth. They seem to lift into the simultaneity they had in the mind, before they had to be words. They make us believe they are what we were about to say:

words that I hoped might seem
as though they had occurred
to you and you would take
them with you as your own

(from "Cover Note")

"You already know," he says, "you remember, you **will** remember." But even more than that, the poems seem to dream in a voice faster than words, that knows the thoughts we are **about** to have, that looks back, like a future that is already formed, remembering us, as in "Completion":


...a voice would call from the field
in the evening or the fox would bark in the cold night
and that instant with each of its stars just where it was
in its unreturning course would appear even then
entire and itself the way it all looks from afterward

Judith Freeman

Everything Takes Me by Surprise

I first met William Merwin on a small plane, flying from Salt Lake City to Sun Valley, Idaho. The plane was filled with writers headed to a literary conference in Sun Valley. Peter Matthiessen and his wife Maria were on board. William and his wife Paula. Michael Dorris and David Halberstam, as well as many of the other regulars who attend this conference. In the midst of our particularly bumpy ride, I remember thinking, Please lord don't let this plane go down. It would put such a dent in Western literature.

William seemed oblivious to the turbulence, however. By then he had taken out a small stub of a pencil and a little spiral notebook and he was writing. Writing a poem, or so I imagined.

Everything takes me by surprise. This is a line from one of my favorite of William's poems. He once read that poem in Sun Valley and I never forgot the experience of hearing it out loud, in that beautiful voice of his: *Everything takes me by surprise.* It seemed to me the way a poet might move through the world, in wondrous appreciation, and a state of willed and naked innocence.

Poetry, William has said, is how the language started, as little dots and dashes and glottal stops that gave shape to the first primal sound of grief and joy. It is the stuff of deep consciousness and conscience. Our poets are our lode-stars.

I've heard William read many times now. I've also heard him speak on a variety of subjects that matter deeply to him—the lives and well-being of animals, the state of the earth, the palm trees he raises, writers he admires, the nurturing of translation as art. I am always inspired. I become wiser in his presence, simply by seeing the world through his eyes and words. His poetry makes me feel acutely alive.

I once heard him read his poem "Lives of the Artists," inspired by a reproduction of a Cheyenne ledger painting, and I wept as if the words had opened wounds in me. Later I was with him when, by chance, we encountered the painting on the wall of a house in Idaho, and he recited the poem, a moment of exquisite confluence.

Another time I heard him read the opening pages of *The Folded Cliffs*, his book-length narrative poem about the lepers of nineteenth-century Hawaii. Its brilliance took my breath away.

William has won many important literary prizes, and I'm sure he has valued each one, for he is nothing if not a sincere and gracious man. But I feel that voles and foxes, the endlight of day, devoted dogs, a forest at dawn, the flash of fish, cicadas and drunken wasps swirling variously in shadow

and sun—Edwin Muir, Francois Villon, his lovely wife Paula and his many friends—these are what he prizes most. What has he not truly loved? War. The desecration of the earth. Foolish politicians. Suffering, cruelty, any form of banality. He is a precise man: Recently, during a reading in L.A., he suggested we might avoid saying "9/11" and at least use the full date of September 11th. There are no shortcuts. We must guard against real meaning being engulfed by the banal.

We think of W. S. Merwin mainly as a poet, but may I put in a word for his prose? *The Lost Upland*, his account of life in a small village in France, is an extraordinarily beautiful work. His translation of Dante's *Purgatorio* was for me another important book, which my husband Anthony read to me out loud, making it seem as if William *and* Dante were somehow in the room with us.

Every morning I awake to birdsong in the midst of a hardened city, birdsong more varied, more beautiful than anything I hear in the country—trills, flutes, chirps, melodic small cheeping calls, all floating in on the bluish light that weds the night to day.

The birdsong always takes me by surprise. It comes each day as a gift. So it is with poetry. But I have come to understand how you must choose poetry; it does not come in any other way. You must already be in a state of readiness—poised, receptive, *there*.

This morning I read Merwin's poems aloud as it grew light, sitting near an open window. The susurrus of words against the background of birds, song upon song. A gift, I thought, to match theirs.

It's appropriate this new volume of Merwin's collected poems is called *Migration*. It speaks to the great movement of life, physical and spiritual, all the landscapes we cross and all that we encounter as we seek out meaning. How could we not be grateful for W.S. Merwin, who so kindly lights our way?

April 25, 2005
Los Angeles ■

Ed Skoog

"When you look at things in rows, how do you feel?": An Appreciation of W.S. Merwin

Go through the first five books of poetry by W.S. Merwin and the word you'll find dominating all others is the command "must." I must, one must, the world must, the night must. In "Dictum: For a Mask of Deluge," it is "The hush of portent" that **"Must** be welcomed by a different music." Elsewhere, "other writings / **Must** be dissolving in the roof." Must must must. That early poetry of Merwin was like the contorted hand in Rilke's "Washing the Corpse," which "lays bare and gives commands," and, of course, also like the scrutinous Rilke at the end of "Archaic Torso of Apollo," whom Art has encouraged to say, "You must change your life."

"There is nothing for you to say," Merwin writes in "Learning a Dead Language." "You must / learn."

Then, suddenly, in 1967, with the publication of *The Lice*, the word disappears. What replaces the word "must" from *The Lice* onward is the undifferentiated pile. Merwin is our supreme poet of piles. "Walking beside a pile of unsorted keys / in an empty room / the sun is high." Thus begins one of his finest poems, "Apples," which entreats its metaphors and sounds to change places in the "cold morning / the colors of apples." One of his most anthologized poems, "The Night of the Shirts" likewise turns the world inside-out without commands. The new Merwin moves with questions now instead of demands. "Oh pile of white shirts," he asks, "who is coming?"

Other poets, other piles: Robert Frost and "The Wood-Pile." Wallace Stevens and "The Man on the Dump." Some poets pile it on, pile up, peel out, implode. Not Merwin—his disorder doesn't retreat from order. Rather, it turns inside-out the world.

What a difference there is between ordering the reader and re-ordering the firmament. In—notably—"Questions to Tourists Stopping in a Pineapple Field," the most telling and terrifying question the speaker asks still, years after discovering Merwin's poetry in 1987 in the neat rows of the Topeka Public Library, stuns me answerless: "When you look at things in rows how do you feel?" F

Marilyn Krysl

Let There Be Praise

I'm obsessive about Merwin's "Thanks." Before the Iraq War I reread *The Rain in the Trees*, and when I came again upon this poem I rose up from despond and went to the Xerox machine and then out into the world like a crier in the streets waving this piece of paper. It got me through the beginning of the war, and the continuing of it, and through the 2004 election, and it is still folded in my pocket where I can feel it with my fingers and take comfort while I wait for the bus. I keep a stack beside my front door and take some whenever I go out. I give it away at the grocery, the laundry, the coffee shop. On the bus I show it to whoever's across the aisle and let her keep it.

Why don't we publish it on the front page of every newspaper in America!

And let's send it abroad on the Internet and around the world.

Think of it as an export: with this poem we can take over the World Bank.

I imagine the people I gave copies to all making copies and giving them away. It gets read to the congregation at the Unitarian Church, and before the committee meeting, and after the ball game, and while it snows. It gets read in the bedrooms of tired parents and the kitchens of the lonely, and lovers read it to each other in cars, in bed.

Let's pick a National Thanks Day and carry stacks of this poem to the top of our tall buildings and let the sheets drift down to the sad, hard streets.

Hail to Merwin, that human place on the earth where this poem first appeared. ▣

Willis Barnstone

W.S. Merwin, Prince

W.S. Merwin is the prince of modern poetry. Juan Carlos of Spain was a crown prince who defied Franco's wishes and heirs to bring freedom to his country. After Saint Exupéry's little prince came down from the asteroids, he stayed loyally with his father Antoine, who was still writing at the bottom of the Mediterranean Sea. These are fine examples of modern courage, but Merwin is the prince of many tongues, in many genres, and not only in modern times but from antiquity to now. His translations alone take him from Latin and Incan to Korean, Spanish, and French. As in Elizabeth Bishop and James Wright, each line he converts from another tongue gleams with freshness and inevitability. One wonders whether sometimes the lyric suffers in the original. His English versions contain the magic of his own poems.

Bill has periods. I've followed them, three or four books in each. As earlier I used to wait for each new volume by Albert Camus, now I wait to see what new mischief the honest Merwin is up to, what courageous, artistic, and thematic leap he has taken.

And then the readings. Except for Robert Frost, whom I first heard in high school and who thereafter was ubiquitous, Merwin comes next for showing up everywhere. Yet here is a man who lives hermetically most of the year, not in the academy, but off in southern France during much of his young manhood and now out in the Pacific on one of the islands. But turn on TV, go to a conference, see who is reading downtown or at a school, walk into a bookstore, and Merwin has a novel in verse, a new volume of poems, a memoir, a selected book of translations.

Others will describe how Merwin is the mirror of eras, how he reads all, reflects significance, and innovates, how his punctuation moves into unpunctuated thought, image, and water fluency. I keep reading, learning, and loving. But I wish to be more personal. It is not that by chance we encountered each other for decades. Rather, it is because with Merwin I note a few common vital facts. Along with Galway Kinnell and James Wright, we were born in 1927. We are Hispanists. In 1959 the small but influential New York press Las Americas helped introduce Spanish poetry to America with its Cyprus Book Series, of which volume one was Merwin's translation of the epic *Poem of the Cid*. It was followed a month or so later by my *Eighty Poems of Antonio Machado*. Merwin went on to translate many of the great writers of Spain and Latin America. This coincidence of interest is repeated in memoir, novel in verse, classical translations—his Persius, my Sappho. I mention these habits without reference to quality and reputation. We are not in any common movement or club, both of us being clearly clubless.

Nothing like that. It is that we two, who also share the common name of Bill, have wandered like roads. I see a friend out there, sharing good things. Good things may be his Hawaiian island or my Greek one, or especially may be two poets who have a common love of other tongues and their literatures, and do something with them. We're not alone, but in Merwin I feel most keenly the other, the admired artist and prince in his domains. His wanderings have been our food and light. ■

Christopher Buckley

Seen from Afterward

It occurs to me, having been asked to be one of many offering tributes to W.S. Merwin and his fifty or more years of poetry, that I am only slightly less unworthy to do so now than I was thirty, or more, years ago when I first read his poems.

I am not a friend; I met him only twice after readings, saying briefly what any other young student or poet would say—Thank You, I greatly enjoyed the poems. Moreover, I hold no position in American letters—how should I presume? By way of praise, what I have to offer, then, are only personal recollections and observations.

Thankfully, when we are young, it seems we have little real idea how much we don't know; otherwise we might never come to art, try to seriously learn a craft. Enthusiasm, wonder, passion, and energy compensate for a great deal and keep us going. In 1972 I entered the M.A. program in Creative Writing at San Diego State having never read beyond Eliot and Cummings. Of the three books of contemporary poetry I bought for my first workshop, one was the landmark anthology, *Naked Poetry*, edited by Berg and Mezey. I and others in the class were struggling to write an occasional coherent stanza, never mind a successful poem, and so no one, I think, was then trying to imitate the more established poets we were reading.

Yet I remember clearly the first Merwin poems I read on my own from *Naked Poetry*, especially "Air," "The Asians Dying," "The Gods," and "For the Anniversary of My Death." I knew next to nothing about poetry from the 1950s forward, but whatever unconscious, communal, spiritual/human voice that lay buried in my brain or blood immediately recognized the purity, modesty, and mystical resonance of those poems, a voice that spoke outside of personal concerns and complaint, that could elevate each individual with understanding and transcendence, allowing him to recognize an elemental light available in the world—if one knew where and how to look.

"This must be what I wanted to be doing / Walking at night between the two deserts / Singing." ("Air"); "Rain falls into the open eyes of the dead" ("The Asians Dying"); "If I have complained I hope I have done with it," "I / Am all that became of them / Clearly all is lost," and "The gods are what has failed to become of us," ("The Gods"); "Every year without knowing it I have passed the day" ("For the Anniversary of My Death"). The flawless natural rhetoric and syntax of these lines/poems, the core metaphysical vision stripped completely of pretense, seemed as direct, as honest, as light—a trance that took you out of the body to better see, and sing. How, I wondered, did someone get there?

I bought and devoured the books from which these poems came: *The*

Moving Target, *The Lice*, *The Carrier of Ladders*. And though I did not know much at twenty-three or twenty-four, though I wanted to write and speak in that voice more than anything, I quickly realized that I did not have the skill, the innate talent, to do so. Working on another graduate degree in the mid 70s, it seemed to me that most of the poets in the workshops and little magazines were trying to sound like Merwin—who could blame them? And though I must have written some failed inward imitations, I did not do so consciously, and headed off in more accessible directions.

Still, as I went my own way, those lines, those poems, never left me. I carried them in an envelope of love and envy, folded in an invisible inner pocket. My hope after all these years is that I might be finding my way back toward an aspect of that vision and music I first recognized and loved in Merwin's poems. Who knows? We each do the little thing we can.

And yet, all this time later, I pick up *The Vixen* and read "Completion" realizing how little I have moved down that road, what pure music and inimitable vision W.S. Merwin has given us and continues to give us:

> Seen from afterward the time appears to have been
>   all of a piece which of course it was but how seldom
> it seemed that way when it was still happening and was
>   the air through which I saw it as I went on thinking
> of somewhere else in some other time whether gone
>   or never to arrive and so it was divided
> however long I was living it and I was where
>   it kept coming together and where it kept moving apart ■

Ann Fisher-Wirth

W.S. Merwin's *The Folding Cliffs*

> she looked back down through the valley where she had been
> where she had known that pain was ahead of her and she looked
> for that pain as though she might see it but there was
> only the moonlight in the valley now where she had stepped past
> the days and where she had lost and hidden and had known
> what she was losing and had expected to die
> she looked through the moonlight and thought that perhaps she
> had died and was seeing the valley from afterwards
> but she felt it still around her sheltering her
> protecting her as it had done through all that time
> and a love for it welled up in her eyes and filled
> with moonlight and she stood up and started along the trail
> and climbed to the mountain house where they had first stayed

The Folding Cliffs, W.S. Merwin's stunning narrative of nineteenth-century Hawaii, tells the story of one dark era in America's imperialist history, when native Hawaiians who had contracted Hansen's disease from imported Chinese laborers were forced into exile at the leper colony at Molokai, by white settlers and authorities who wanted to claim and develop their land. Set in the context of all of Hawaii's history, beginning not just with the first human habitation but with the geological time when "The mountain [Kauai] rises by itself out of the turning night / out of the floor of the sea and is the whole of an island," *The Folding Cliffs* centers on those who rebelled against their forced eviction and escaped into the impenetrable cliffs and valleys of Kalalau on Kauai; it especially focuses on the legendary hero Ko'olau, his wife Pi'ilani, and their child Kaleimanu. Though the others eventually surrender when their fastness is invaded, Ko'olau, Pi'ilani, and Kaleimanu are never taken. They hide out, avoiding capture, for years. Eventually, both father and child succumb to their disease. After her family's deaths, Pi'ilani returns to her village and eventually agrees to tell her story in Hawaiian to a sympathetic white newspaperman, John Sheldon. It has been published.

Last spring I taught a graduate seminar in ecopoetry: poetry that does not simply present the nonhuman world as a backdrop for human desires and actions, but explores the infinitely rich, myriad interrelations and interdependencies between ourselves and the living universe, and does not shirk the ways in which we are destroying the universe. We ended with *The Folding Cliffs*—with this heartbreaking masterpiece that not only chronicles one bleak history of human victimization and environmental

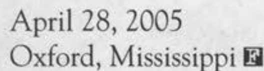
depredation but also creates a narrative of love and courage so strong that it truly does counterweigh unspeakable desolation. What is most beautiful to me: not only do Ko'olau, Pi'ilani, and Kaleimanu form an invincible human family, but—when they have lost everything, and *because* they have lost everything—they come to dwell in the imbricated body of the world. After leaving Kalalau, Pi'ilani returns, once, to Ko'olau's hidden grave:

> and now the grave was part of the place and its light and age
> it was looking past her at something she could not see
> that must be all around her in the daylight and the shadows

This "something she could not see" is everything, is holiness. Trying to evoke it, Merleau-Ponty calls it "the flesh of the visible," "the world which precedes knowledge, of which knowledge always speaks." And the image of folding cliffs conjures, too, the body of the mother—but extended beyond the human to describe wild existence itself. It is what we are made of, what we can't escape, yet what we are destroying.

Yesterday the Senate voted another $81 billion to carry on our war in Iraq—a war, I believe, more for oil than for freedom. Today or tomorrow, Congress will no doubt pass the budget to drill for oil in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. On my campus the dozers are busy, cutting down trees for yet another parking lot.

I honor W. S. Merwin. I honor his clear understanding of the despicable nature of greed and the desperate dignity of heroic resistance. I honor especially his deep reverence and sorrow for the more than human world. He is one of our bravest, most eloquent poets. One night last spring, I read aloud to my class Pi'ilani's lines of farewell to the folding cliffs—lines too long to quote here except for their summation: "I will remember you / with love until I am nothing but bones in the ground." I have been teaching for thirty years, but until that night I have never seen a graduate seminar—all of them—cry.



April 28, 2005
Oxford, Mississippi

Suzanne Paola

From the Pale Future

I remember meeting W.S. Merwin at my four-year college when I was a student, twenty years old perhaps. I came to that college a high school dropout with a GED and some community college experience, and slipped out of the Creative Writing Program: my writing continued to order my world, but my fumbling relationship with language as a writer—even with knowing how to articulate what gut-punched me when I read—made it too hard. I took writing classes but could not decipher what I was told; it came wrapped in a dreamy, low-consonant language I did not then speak. I drew writing from my life and found it glottal to everyone else. I looked through a frosted window at the dim shapes of what felt to me at the time like the chosen ones, the students who could be admitted to these classes and use these words, and felt that what I had so desperately wanted would move dimly away for the rest of my life.

Merwin had gut-punched me, as only a few writers had then: I had a photographic memory and was poorly read but found a small roster of loves—Shakespeare, Merwin, Plath, Stevens, Hass, Gregg—through whom I became my own anthology, saying these to myself. I absorbed *The Miner's Pale Children* and could recite "A Garden" now. I generally avoided meeting writers I loved—those shapes sequestered—just going to their readings, but for some reason I decided I needed to meet Merwin. He had a reading scheduled at my college, and a dinner arranged, luckily at the apartment of a close friend, but unluckily not open to anyone but Creative Writing majors, even if that anyone happened to live there.

My friend Mary and I decided to crash the thing anyway. She let us in with her key and we climbed up to the apartment, a gray spot in this small place's Monopoly version of a downtown. Merwin sat on the couch, eating thick bread and soup. I'm not sure exactly how it happened, but I remember being sharply asked, by a faculty member, to leave. Then, miraculously, Merwin was talking to me. I don't know if he heard me being asked to leave and was trying to bail me out, or if he hadn't noticed that at all. But suddenly I was there on the couch, being offered thick bread and soup too, as if his words vindicated my presence.

So: that's it. He had written "For a Coming Extinction" and "A Garden" and he talked to me, about bread-baking and things like that. He didn't care if I limited myself in response only to bread. He talked to me a while, and he was completely kind.

I have never seen or had any contact with W.S. Merwin again, and he would not know me from Eve. But there are these moments that mentor us, to use an overused word: give us what we need to go on, perhaps, to the

next stage of things. Somehow, when I met Merwin, rescued from being sent back down the steps of a dingy apartment and left to crumb bread nervously in his presence, I felt that writers could be many things: more open, expansive, simpler than I had thought. They could be good people.

In a recent issue of *Tin House*, Nathan Alling Long wrote an appreciation of *The Miner's Pale Children*. I saw that article after I had decided to write about the book for this tribute; underappreciated as it is among Merwin's books of this period, *Miner* can stand our twin praises. It presages, as Long says, a lot of our period's bending of prose forms—some sources call it short fiction, some "pieces," some fables, etc. It's a mark of the power of the book, I think, that we still aren't sure how to interpret its pull on us.

Perhaps any book so concerned with consequences, with hidden legacies and what lies under the sweet, simple grass of the future we imagine, would have to be, if successful, uncategorizable: something as vague as the fist our future shook at us in 1970 and continues to shake at us. It is the miner's children who are pale, not the miner himself; he has retired to the surface, perhaps, with a drink in his hand, but the cheeks of his offspring will stay sapped. Forever? Who can tell? In "A Garden," the speaker addresses a garden in which a bomb lies sleeping among the roots of its trees, which "fell around it like nets around a fish." Grubs, ants, even lovers sleep near it, the sleep of life gathering itself; it sleeps the sleep of eruptive intention. The garden is you, the reader, the culture, the world. You can't imagine the rude metals drowsing inside you, until the smallest burrowing thing sets them off. Only then—Iraq, Columbine, September 11th—"in vain will they look for your reasons." ■

Tod Marshall

"There is no loneliness like theirs": Solitude and Otherness in Early Merwin

Among the poets of his generation, James Wright is probably the writer immediately associated with loneliness, that condition where isolation and desire fuse into an existential longing for contact. His famous poem, "A Blessing," offers a good example of how Wright presents this subject; in the poem, the speaker encounters "two small Indian ponies" for whom "there is no loneliness like theirs." Describing the animals through personification, the speaker builds toward an ecstatic ending where rapture arises from recognizing the human within the wild and the wild within himself: his comparison of the pony's ear to a girl's wrist and the longing to hold the animal in a human embrace juxtaposed with the speaker's breaking "into blossom."

In Merwin's poetry, though, loneliness is isolation of a different sort. In many ways, his work is completely distinct from most of his contemporaries because, as in only a handful of poets, perhaps Snyder, perhaps Everson, the natural world is and remains completely other. When the speakers in his poetry encounter this otherness, they may strive toward recognition, they may stretch toward embrace, but these gestures, gestures toward personification, toward making the wild familiar, toward domesticating the untamed, usually collapse as the speakers realize the inscrutability of the external.

This is especially true in Merwin's great early books. Heralded at the time as a pinnacle of American poetry in the late sixties, *The Lice* still makes for rather unusual reading more than twenty-five years after its publication. Many of the poems float in a hazy world of subconscious imagery or an absolutely dreamlike realm of myth and abstraction, violating various workshop dicta about the clarity to be expected in a poem. This strangeness, though, rather than obscuring the obvious or making something simple into something complicated, instead bespeaks poetry of original imagination. To put it simply, intensely informed by translation of poets such as Neruda and others, these poems have retained freshness and vitality.

Consider this poem:

EVENING

I am strange here and often I am still trying
To finish something as the light is going
Occasionally as just now I think I see
Off to one side something passing at that time

Along the herded walls under the walnut trees
And I look up but it is only
Evening again the old hat without a head
How long will it be till he speaks when he passes

Whether the first line is a declaration about a particular locale or about the visitation that is life, the poem does not elaborate; the wisdom of the second line, though, reveals a speaker fully aware of the tension that poet Cid Corman called "livingdying." The light is always going; evening makes the vanishing all the more visceral. However, the vision of lines three to six announces further tension. The "something" that passes along the "herded" wall is mysterious, ephemeral, and, apparently, not even for the speaker to fully apprehend at this time. "Herded" is a curious and powerful word choice, suggestive of movement en masse, a movement of a group, that movement in which all are ushered toward death.

The old hat without a head—evening, "death's second self"—passes without a word: this time. But the recognition of its presence affects the speaker, and forces him to live with the pressure of livingdying; when "the old hat without a head" does speak, he will usher the speaker from this temporary visitation to the ultimate unknown. Eight short lines that touch upon our temporary habitation in this world and the more anxious unknown of the next: at the heart of this poem, though, and many others throughout *The Lice* is a compelling sense of isolation. The speaker herein gets no solace from the external world; instead, he is forced to confront his absolute aloneness in a strange land; further, this visitation is just that, a temporary stay before evening ushers him onward to that even more distant frontier that is death. Merwin presents all of this in simple diction, but the strange syntactical stretching of the opening independent clause takes the reader through a meandering pathway of modification and qualification: "occasionally," "I think I see," "but it is only." Just as the speaker realizes his strangeness in the poem's landscape, the reader is kept unrooted, kept from feeling at home.

Estrangement may very well be the central tonal quality of *The Lice*. Such an emotion is distinct from the pathos one finds in Wright, the Whitmanic embrace of Kinnell, the surrealist riffs of Bly. In Merwin, the world is wholly other; our inhabitation of it is brief, and yet the speakers retain a passionate engagement with this isolated state and demand that a reader likewise confront how he or she, too, is strange in the ongoing evening which is this brief life. ■

Tony Hoagland

Tireless Traveler: My W.S. Merwin

I keep wanting to give you   what is already yours
"A Birthday"

Like a lot of readers, I was initiated into the work of W.S. Merwin in the early seventies, a few years after *The Lice* (1967)—that runic, fragmented, metaphysical-political period style. At that time, you will remember, it was the edge of incoherence that seemed most appropriate to us and most authentic to our time. It was the early seventies, which was an extension of the sixties, and the syntaxes of sense-making seemed hopelessly compromised to us. Rather, it was the border of the irrational which fascinated—the fantastic, the furious, the estranged, the surreal. Merwin's work fulfilled all of our criteria for strangeness and urgency. His poems of that era seemed both raw and dry; ancient-sounding, as if the words and phrases had been transcribed from mummy wrappings; oracular and oddly depersonalized:

Ahead of me under
False teeth hanging from a cloud, his
Sign that digs for his house, Tomorrow,
The oldest man
Is throwing food into empty cages

(from "The Crossroads of the World")

Oh, we had a fervent belief then in the language of the unconscious, and Merwin was a reasonable guide. All the poets I knew could recite "For the Anniversary of My Death," or "The Students of Justice," or "Caesar." Also, it might have been around this time, in the early seventies, that I stumbled upon "Lemuel's Blessing," a poem unlike anything I had previously encountered—a straight up, visionary prayer. It was as if Merwin knew, as Blake did, that poetic power could be channeled straight from the Biblical prophets, or The Song of Solomon. Whether your orientation was Dionysian or existential, beat or Eastern-religion, the annihilation of the self was in, and that was one current that ran adamantly through Merwin's early work—the self is nothing; don't believe in it, don't subscribe to it. Maybe in that indulgent era there was something especially bracing about the intense renunciation that runs like a sensation through Merwin's work:

what I live for I can seldom believe in
who I love I cannot go to
what I hope is always divided

but I say to myself you are not a child now
if the night is long, remember your unimportance
sleep

(from "Teachers")

But looking back, I'm not sure how much I, or anyone, understood of what Merwin was actually doing. We thought he was a ghost or saint. The human dimension of Merwin's voice was inaudible to us. Furthermore—to speak selfishly—Merwin wasn't really a good poetic model if you were a young writer; his work was so intuitive and minimal that if you didn't have the existential depth, or his deep erudition, you would make cheap Merwin imitations, like plastic jewelry. Many of us did.

After that, I moved away from the Merwin work; in pursuit of more conversational and, well, "affectionate" voices, I lost track of him. When I came back later—around the time of *Opening the Hand* (1983), perhaps, or *The Rain in the Trees* (1987)—it was another revelation. He who had seemed an existentialist poet was also a speaker with a great, deep sense of the dignity and continuity of human culture. He who had been a pallbearer of history was also one of the most tender of pastoral poets, praiser of rain and flowers. These latter are some of the poems that mean the most to me. Consider the strange, delicate ecstasy in this passage from "The Love for October":

I have been younger in October
than in all the months of spring
walnut and may leaves the color
of shoulders at the end of summer
a month that has been to the mountain
and become light there
the long grass lies pointing uphill
even in death for a reason
that none of us knows
and the wren laughs in the early shade now

Of course, it was me who had changed. Each time I came back to find him doing something different, and this is the thing I would emphasize about Merwin—that his location has kept shifting. Pastoral poet, historical traveler, ecological centurion—Merwin has been a moving target. If you

think you know his work, you don't. If I were to recommend a single book to the novitiate it might be the collection *Flower and Hand*, which is a kind of mini-selected, full of hidden treasures, many of them quiet.

It bothers me that of the great generation of American poets born in the twenties, Merwin is not so well-known to young poets. They don't get it, or they haven't investigated. But why be surprised? In a way, it is his refusal of cultural specifics, of markers, that frees his poems from the contemporary, that makes them both anonymous and deeply resonant. I'm not sure you can appreciate Merwin before your odometer has turned over a few times. Just consider how many different kinds of knowledge coexist in a poem like this one:

PASSAGE

In autumn in this same life
I was leaving a capital
where an old animal
captured in its youth
one that in the wild
would never have reached such an age
was watching the sun set
over nameless
unapproachable trees
and it is spring

This is, characteristically, so lightly borne and so deep. In this poem, we could say that the animal, the capital, and the speaker are all in a similar condition of being precariously blessed. Even loss is a blessing, and the trees are still nameless and unapproachable. To me, Merwin is a great poet, and one of the very, very rare contemporaries who has taken the ancient pledge of poetic responsibility—pilgrim, spiritual seeker, recorder of the spirit life. How often, when I have been lost, his words have calmed me and reminded me what to value. And reassured me, too, that being lost is a fundamental, normal condition. It is a given. ■

John Balaban

A Life in Letters

W.S. Merwin's distinguished life must often have seemed a miracle even to himself. At nineteen, he spoke with Ezra Pound about translation; at the age of twenty, he graduated from Princeton and then took off for Europe, where he earned his living translating Latin, French, Spanish, and Portuguese while tutoring the children of Robert Graves on Majorca. Never in his long career did he tie himself to the academy with all its corrosive demands.

As the late Peter Davison wrote of his friend, "He is not only profoundly anti-imperialist, pacifist, and environmentalist, but also possessed by an intimate feeling for landscape and language and the ways in which land and language interflow....The intentions of Merwin's poetry are as broad as the biosphere yet intimate as a whisper."

Davison was referring to that whisper that comes to us in the moments of self-surprise when our drowsy souls wake to see the world with compassionate interconnection, a moment of self-awakening that might be roused by ambulance sirens from St. Vincent's Hospital or the rustle of a weasel in the wall of a French farmhouse. This whisper, this moment of waking up to our selves, is the hallmark of Merwin's abiding artistry. ■

Toi Derricotte

For W.S. Merwin

who first taught me to go
backwards from my death into
poetry, turning my
head   to gaze   at the surprising

*

(on seeing him)

how could you not love
him!—seeing the man so stunning that you look
through him to those great
poems you have loved for years. ethereal and
sexy, elegant,
a man of
Buddhist goodness. I saw him from a
distance, his silver hair lit up like the hair of
people in a cab
that passes by. that's how you know it's
full, a three-year-old once told me, by that glow
you see after.

R.T. Smith

Merwin's Arrows

When I started writing poetry in the seventies, I was callow and fallow and so ignorant as to approach a kind of canine purity. I didn't know anything about twentieth-century poets other than Eliot and Frost, and I wanted to write poems that sounded the former but were as exciting as Homer. The first poet who helped was James Dickey, but beyond his own work, he provided me inadvertently with an even more provocative guide. In his ambivalent but optimistic review of *The Drunk in the Furnace*, Dickey said Merwin was "one of the master prosodists of our time" and that he should "soar like a phoenix out of the neat ashes of his early work." I wasn't acquainted with that earlier work, and my local library didn't have the book in question, but the review was over a decade old, and I was able to locate a copy of the more recent *The Carrier of Ladders* at a local bookstore. After that, poetry would never be the same for me.

Much of what Merwin offered me I can still locate around the projectiles in two of his poems, "The Judgment of Paris" and "Song of Man Chipping an Arrowhead." The first poem is narrative, allusive, authoritative, astute, alive with incremental variations and patterned echoes, rhetorically rich, with more narrative than ellipsis for anyone who knows this story of the seeds of the Trojan War. I was excited by the fresh perspective, the feel of the brilliantly extemporaneous (which was probably the result of substantial distilled reflection), the deft and severe presentation of the three cynical goddesses. In Merwin's poem, the Paris whom I enjoyed despising in *The Iliad* becomes ever more clearly a pawn of the immortal forces.

One facet of the poem that has continued to haunt me is vegetable in nature, rather than human or divine. From the title, we know that famous apple, "its skin / already carved / *To the fairest*," will inevitably appear, and some readers will already be recalling that Helen is, in some versions, gathering a bouquet when the Prince of Troy arrives. But who expects the vividness of "one girl gathering / yellow flowers," so stark and isolated as the poem begins to turn toward its ultimate revelation? At the poem's conclusion we learn that this is her perennial habit—

> ...to gather
> as she would do every day in that season
> from the grove the yellow ray flowers tall
> as herself
>
> whose roots are said to dispel pain.

The yellowness of those flowers still arrests me, and the hope suggested by their matching the beautiful girl's height, their underground components which are allegedly healing. But Merwin has already suggested the onrush of the tragic pattern—of promise gone to suffering—with the previous and ominous stanza:

> in the quiver on Paris's back the head
> of the arrow for Achilles' heel
> smiled in its sleep.

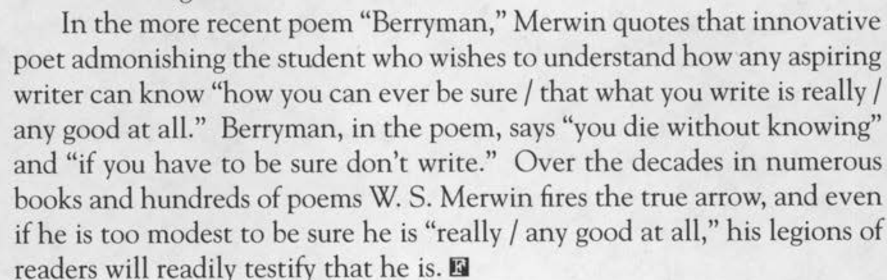
The arrow's shaft, also, is of wood, but surely not healing. Smiling in its sleep, this instrument becomes as sinister as most anything I can think of in poetry, and when we juxtapose this image with that skeptical "are said to," we know that pain will not be dispelled, that the players and the stage will all fall.

"Song of a Man Chipping an Arrowhead" (from the next collection, *Writings to an Unfinished Accompaniment*) is concise, almost Asian, nearly cryptic, three wise lines with a "primitive" wisdom and resonance:

> Little children you will all go
> but the one you are hiding
> will fly

Addressing the chips knapped away, the craftsman offers comfort for their sacrifice, and I keep feeling that the flakes are much like the words a poet summons, while the larger thing remaining, the unsaid, that streamlined and potentially lethal point, will act as messenger for both the discarded pieces—those casualties—and the artificer. This arrow is not sinister, but the swift envoy for all.

Balanced between these modes of the carefully said and the unsaid I always find a generous heart and a ravenous imagination. Even the former displays a graceful compression, a sure sense of the essential. Even the latter is intricate, the chronicle of a resonant moment on the threshold, just before some significant event unfolds.



In the more recent poem "Berryman," Merwin quotes that innovative poet admonishing the student who wishes to understand how any aspiring writer can know "how you can ever be sure / that what you write is really / any good at all." Berryman, in the poem, says "you die without knowing" and "if you have to be sure don't write." Over the decades in numerous books and hundreds of poems W. S. Merwin fires the true arrow, and even if he is too modest to be sure he is "really / any good at all," his legions of readers will readily testify that he is. ■

Molly Lewis

Centavos Like Stone

Every morning, my father watched my sister and me eat breakfast as though it was a new and suspicious activity. Before he sat between us, we would kick each other with playful mischief, straining to find each other's feet in their tightly laced saddle shoes. We would tease quietly, careful not to wake Mother with our squirming and giggling, until our father sat down. Then, with him sitting there like a stone, we would focus on keeping the farina in our spoons, fearing it would spill on the way to our small mouths. We pressed our swinging feet tightly against the bamboo rung of our chairs, holding them still, the muscles in our legs tensed. Bella, two years younger than I, pretended not to notice his stares. We ate in hurried silence before grabbing our bags, full of chapter books and fistfuls of clinking lunch money, and rushing out the door.

My father was a colonel in the Army. Our house was on a remote camp in the mountains of the southern Philippines. In a time when the Army camps of Vietnam, a short sea away, were urgently throwing up buildings with quick, corrugated tin, our camp was a nearly forgotten training facility, dwindling away like a dying town. The camp was getting smaller and smaller, but even when we first arrived, I don't remember thinking anyone was quite as important or imposing as my father with his carefully pressed uniforms and tall, crisp stride. I felt important, waving to the guards as we made our way through the compound gate. My sister and I attended a small international school, half an hour from home, run by Lutheran missionaries. Every morning and afternoon, we took a jeepney, a strange hybrid of bus and wagon, to and from school. We waited for it on the edge of the two-lane road. Every morning, an old woman, squat and wrinkled like the leather of my book bag, would circle round and round my sister. Bella's small hand clutched my sleeve resolutely. She made the mistake once of giving the woman money. I told her not to. Father had said that they used it only for drink, and I believed him, or wanted to. I liked the sound of my centavos jangling around in my bag, the sound of security. I had never been without money to buy Bazooka gum or dried mangoes from the other children at school. But Bella never heard a word of Father's opinions.

"Please, girl," the old woman cried and tugged every day, "please for food for baby please." Our feet stood rooted to the muddy street. The air was filled with the smell of diesel and piss while we waited for the jeepney to pick us up. "Please for food for baby please, girl." I looked straight ahead. I did not turn. Bella pulled the centavos out of her pocket and dropped them in the woman's shaking, wrinkled palm.

We went to school. On a good day, I beat the other girls in our recess

games, often returning to the classroom with my pockets full of marbles or loose change. On a bad day, Bella found me in the headmaster's office after classes, my hands folded tight between my knees and my head low. Cursing was against the rules at a Lutheran missionary school, but I often forgot where I was in the heat of a recess quarrel. I would look up from the smooth slats of the mahogany floor to see Bella's small, satisfied smile. She liked my cursing. I got up and took her hand, and she followed me without explanation. We would make our way out of the school, out of the yard, and across to the newly-paved road, the afternoon rain just beginning to pepper our hair, and she would ask no questions.

These were the hours in the open, the hours we breathed and ate and walked as two calm children, unpursued. We climbed out of the jeepney each weekday afternoon, huddling together as I unfurled the black umbrella and swung it over our heads, running across the street and through the compound to the front door. And then we paused.

We never liked coming home. We stood outside, Monday through Friday, letting the rain pour over our heads and around our feet, staring at that door. We both willed ourselves every day to be in any other moment but this one. Without realizing it, we began a pattern of concession; I opened the door on Monday, Bella on Tuesday, and on through the week. After we stepped inside, the days stretched out wide and tired, ageless evenings of testing and being tested. No, we didn't like being home.

My mother was a beauty queen. Once we stepped inside, we saw her stretched out on the imported divan, fanning herself languidly while chatting to one of the other military wives, Betty, Norma Rae, Louise, or Patricia. They sipped calamansi juice over ice or Fanta in crusty glass bottles. They gossiped about each other, about their husbands, their most recent trips back to the States, letters to and from their parents. These topics might switch in order and intensity, but they were always the same few.

My mother would raise her eyes to us as we shuffled inside, lifting her thin bamboo fan with practiced delicacy and offering us our daily smile of repetitive assurance. She was there and she was not moving. We headed to our bedrooms, pulling out books, dolls, crayons, anything to occupy us in silence. When Mother's guests had left, we ventured out. Bella went to the kitchen where Atti Ana, our Filipino maid, was preparing dinner. Bella helped her sift the raw rice grains, still dirty from the fields, in a wide bamboo dish. Holding its sides, they would toss the grains into the air and catch them as they fell, pattering down like sheets of intermittent rain. I slipped out to the sala and opened the upright piano, running the tips of my fingers over the ivory keys before easing into light melody. I was not allowed to practice scales when Mother was in the house, so I prayed for the rain to cease and fingered my way through Bach until she went out to the garden. I could see her from where I sat, her hand still waving the fan

with unbroken rhythm, my unconscious metronome. She made her way through the bougainvillea, the frangipani trees and winding orchids. The santol tree was dropping its fruit on the walkway, and she picked her way around them. I could see her disgust at their squashed stench, their thick, juicy texture under her sandals. I knew my mother best from this vantage point, the boredom in her face unmasked.

Just as Atti Ana set the plates on the table, Father came in. His uniform would be just as starched and smooth as it was that morning, his posture just as straight, his eyes just as hard and steady. I had heard many of my parents' friends say of him, "He is a good man," in the way you might slap an athlete on the back after a good play—hard, careless, and unreflectively. Perhaps he was a good man, but I confess I hardly knew him. My sister and I would sit resolutely—Bella eating each bite with critical consideration—waiting for him to ask us how our day had been. This question was asked with disturbing consistency immediately after he finished his last bite of rice. I was afraid of catching his eye until that moment. I was tired of seeing the same face staring back, saying unmistakably, "I am a dutiful father, though I would rather have had a son."

On one particular morning, I rose with greater hesitancy than usual. The sun had found its way through the window screen and the thin wall of my mosquito net, waking me against my will and driving me out into the cool wet of the morning. If it wasn't raining, I liked to eat my breakfast in the garden, watching the lizards dart across the wall of the house, eating moths and spiders. Mother always awoke later than Bella and I. Father began the day with the dawn. On this day, Father wrote at his big roll-top desk when I came in from the garden. He didn't say anything, and I took my bowl with its lingering clumps of oatmeal into the kitchen for Atti Ana to wash. Bella and I picked up our book bags and headed toward the door just as Father rose from his seat, closing the desktop behind him. He was in uniform as usual, and his hair was slick and tidy. He walked after us with long strides and followed us out the front door.

"I am coming with you," he said, as though we needed no other explanation. I didn't particularly care to know, but Bella looked up at him with her round green eyes and asked why.

"I am meeting with your headmaster," he told us. "To discuss building plans for a new wing to your school. I am on the board." Great details of his life often came out like this, in brief, surprising statements. We walked to the road's edge, and I wondered if Bella knew what a board was. She wasn't clutching me this morning. She had learned by then that I didn't like her hanging on me in front of our father.

We hadn't stood there for half a minute when the beggar woman came out from the trees where she must have slept every night. She hobbled up to us and began her circling, crying out, "Please for food for baby," with her

thick, nasal voice. My father tensed up, the muscles in his neck straightening like cords. The woman circled Bella, reaching out her wrinkled hands to tap on her clean white sleeve. We stood very still, staring ahead as we always do, but I couldn't help stealing another glance at my father, his nostrils flaring above his pinched upper lip. A jeepney turned the corner down the street, headed toward us but still a good distance away. My father stepped forward, stretching his arm out to flag it down, like a taxi. Three years in this country and he still didn't know that it would stop for us without a signal.

Just as he stepped forward, his back to us, Bella reached into her pocket and drew out a fifty centavo piece. She put the coin in the woman's hand and stepped quickly to join my father.

Without a word, my father grabbed Bella's right shoulder with one hand and boxed her left ear with the other. He had seen her, apparently, out of the corner of his eye. I didn't move. Bella didn't cry. I wondered if Mother was watching from her window.

We climbed into the jeepney. Every person in there stared at us in an unusual silence. I suppose they must have seen him hit her, must have heard the slap of his hand, as I did. My father is three times as big as any one of them, and they had trouble making room on the bench-like seats. They were all looking at him strangely, and at Bella like they understood something we didn't. I think now that it was a look of compassion all around, but at the time I didn't recognize it. We sat like stones. I was unnerved by the silence of the car, the sputtering roar of the engine sounding a hollow backdrop to our stillness.

We had traveled for ten minutes this way, our fellow passengers picking up hushed conversation with one another, when Bella leaned over to me slowly and whispered, "Eileen, I can't hear anything. In my left ear. It's all a hum."

I turned her head in my hands, trying not to attract Father's glance. Her left ear was red where his hand had thudded across it.

"Does it hurt?" I asked.

"Yeah," she said. "Real bad. Like daggers and knives."

It was then I noticed her eyes, bright red from holding back tears. Her teeth and fists were clenched and trembling. I stared straight ahead, not knowing what to say or do other than put my hand on her knee and press hard in vain encouragement. Father didn't look at us. When we were dropped off at school, he made his way to the headmaster's office without a word. I took Bella straight to the nurse.

The hum in my sister's ear continued for the rest of the day. The nurse didn't know what to do. And the next day, when Bella said that the hum had turned to a roar, the nurse sent a telegram to a doctor in Manila. By the end of the week, the noise was gone—and all other sound with it.

When the nurse talked to my father that first afternoon, he looked sincerely concerned. He looked concerned the way people do when they find they have put a big dent in the side of their car. They know it is their own fault, so they curse gently.

When we went home and Mother found out, she took Bella's face carefully in her hands, barely touching skin to skin, and brushed her lips against the curve of the ear. "We'll make it better," she said with a smile, lifting her fan again and lightly tapping it against Bella's tight knuckles.

That night, I took Bella into my room and curled her up with me under the thin cotton sheets. I sang into her right ear, my voice low and whispering, a native lullaby I had often heard Atti Ana sing on the nights that she watched us in our parents' absence. I sang in Visayan, the people's language, because I knew my parents wouldn't be able to understand. They had never bothered to learn it as Bella and I had. I was grateful for it this night. The song was for Bella alone. It went something like this:

> *Sleep, my sister, in the silence,*
> *Sleep, my sister, in the night.*
> *Let the balmy wind embrace you*
> *With its stolen sympathy.*

The rain softened overhead, and I could hear the barrio dogs howling outside. She slept, then, her head against my shoulder.

Two weeks later, my father waited again by the road. Our headmaster had asked for him on another financial matter, and, as before, he chose to ride with us. The beggar woman came again, though with some hesitancy. When my father saw her coming, he glared at her hard and firm. She stood hunched several yards away. I could see her fingers twitching toward us, but her feet wouldn't move. I took Bella's hand and squeezed it hard. She didn't have any coins in her pocket this time, anyway. The jeepney pulled up and we climbed in, our feet between bags of wind-blown rice and baskets of fruit. I looked out the open window to the woman outside, her hand still half-stretched in our direction. It was something about that hand, I think, waving and empty, and Bella's eyes looking so poor and rich at the same time, like she would have handed out fifty centavos every morning. Even if it meant giving both her ears and her tongue and teeth along with it.

I dug my hands into the pocket of my book bag and pulled out a fistful of cold, dirty coins. As the jeepney started moving again, wheels startled and spinning, I threw the coins out the window toward the woman's stretching hand. They scattered over the muddy earth like so many stones. ■

Will Jennings

—Second Place Essay—

How I Know Orion

Tagging the top of the tower with a hand meant climbing way past close enough, when close enough was all it took for a flash to streak for ground and shock him off the ladder's rung. So when Bobby fell it was the wires just below his feet that caught him prone across his body. Face to the side and arms stretched out to ward off blows, his hands palm down and flexed above his head. His leg spasms coiled him more tightly in the loose cabling along the tower's span and so he was held there, fixed in the current for the forty minutes it took the Power Company to shut down that section of the Suburban Grid. Thirty feet up, he was still conscious and crying out. He was being slowly burned alive. He was twelve.

Below and in the back of an ambulance, Bobby's mother was lying sedated on a gurney, her arms bent straight up at the elbow and her fingers flexing as if trying to shape themselves to hold something much too large for her size. And in the backseat of a police squad two officers flanked his father and they kept him facing away and they kept the windows rolled up and their motor was running and they were talking to him while he smoked, talking to him as he turned red and pounded the back of the seat in front of him with his fists, talking to him until his head collapsed down in his folded palms and they rubbed his back while he convulsed.

Scattered in small clots were mostly adults who looked afloat in a stupor so complete it could only form a sound entirely low and like a swell on dark water. All day the air had been humid and almost as warm as July, but the mass of cold Lake Michigan was still shaping out from winter and this mixed without a breeze to form what I had learned to call Halo Fog. Against this haze was the reflected flash of police and fire lights, and there were these stray, piercing yelps and sparks and from some place, I couldn't tell where, there were oh gods sweet heaven my baby boy Bobby please Bobby please Bobby *please* don't let go we're coming baby coming *soon* Christ Jesus when they gonna get him *down*.

This is what I saw that Friday night, the 11th of May.

SOME NIGHTS AFTER dinner I'd ride with my dad, closing out the final calls of his day. Sometimes he carried a box of hard-looking tools, sometimes just an estimate tucked crisp in its envelope. He mostly carried poise and the pockets of his trade: thin screwdriver, circuit tester, penlight, a mechanical pencil for sketches and notes. We would ride out to some house in a nearby suburb and ring the door to be met by a businessman just home from the

commuter station and knocking gin while the wife rustled supper. Down into closets, basements, or crawlspaces we'd go, checking the cleanness of the burn, gauging the flow of air in exchange. My father would eyeball the rooms, squaring up the volume of a space until he could slide rule what was there against the measured cost of ambition.

This night, my father and I had been out driving to look at the furnace and duct work at a house where the owner wanted to install central air before putting the place up for sale. All the tract homes came with stuff done on the cheap, but it all looked the same under the mug shots of the Realty Pages. My dad wore his best hitched smile and I could hear the neutral flatter in his voice while his eyebrows twitched past all the sloppy work and cobble he uncovered. The owner took pains to point out his own weekend handiwork: "It'll bring in twice what it cost me for sure…" When my father "suggested" his rough estimate, the guy took it like a soft kick to a sharp target, the kind where your lips curl a smile but your tongue tightens to a dart behind your teeth. I came to think that growing up meant learning how to talk in this sort of polite exchange, like being paid back in Canadian money, where things meant less than you'd guess but looked and felt almost the same.

That particular night we walked out into the particulate gauze of dusk, and I counted the street lamps forming halos as they came on a bit too soon even for this time of the spring.

A FRIDAY IN MAY and my father and I were headed home down the old Glenview Market Road, the crumbly two-lane blacktop still crowned high from before there were sewers this far west. And nearing the Milwaukee Road feeder tracks, bouncing up off the fog were lights and then a few cars pulled over and then it was surely something very wrong because there were cops and a fire truck with its ladder up but reaching nowhere, and the Rescue Pulmonator guys with their tanks and hoses and nothing to do but lean. And what looked like a hearse but was really a private ambulance.

Our first guess was somebody'd been clipped by a train, but there wasn't anything twisted or shorn in sight: no rumpled wrecks, no scraped and idling diesel. And stiffening in our skin as we got closer, we started to piece together the goings-on: there was something or maybe somebody up on the wires of the highline tower and no one was doing anything. There were blue flash sparks. And as I leaned out the window I heard what sounded like the soft pinch of a yell.

My father's inclination has always been to keep driving and so that is what we did. But traffic had bottlenecked and there was no way out but to go through and to go through at a crawl. The last person I saw as we went by and cleared on the other side of the tracks was Peter Harvey, a guy from my grade at school, standing slouched in who I'd guess to be his mother's

arms and he was crying and pleading something he didn't do didn't mean to do didn't anyone believe him he was so sorry.

OF COURSE, NOTHING made the evening news. And it wasn't until Saturday afternoon that I could reconstruct what I had seen on Friday from the others in the Scout Troop. We were off in an open field learning how to tell both compass and stars by plotting out the shape of assigned constellations. We were stepping them off by metered paces and placing sticks into the ground to represent each major star. But mostly we were hearing and telling all we knew about the night that Bobby Sellars climbed the high pole by the tracks and fell into a blue-gray flash that held him like a magnet.

Now he was slowly dying in the Burn Unit at Evanston Hospital.

The first leg is one-hundred-sixty-five degrees for thirty-seven paces.

Blood was the problem, somebody said.

And mark. Now take a reading of thirty-seven degrees and step off ninety feet.

They couldn't keep it in him. Twenty units. Thirty units. Fifty-five units.

Mark. Triangulate your start to present position. What are the angles formed by these lines?

And none of us knew what a unit was exactly but only that they seemed not to stay for long enough to fix.

Peter Harvey had been out walking the family chow, Tuffy, when Bobby came scissor kicking over the hedge, which ran like a fence in his yard. Both freed from their supper tables on a Friday in May, foggy or not, they decided to walk out along the tracks. At some point, because there wasn't enough on the ground to hold their attention, Bobby goaded Peter into goading him to do something, anything, stupendous. Bobby was good at these ploys. He'd constantly drift from the older grade playground to the younger during recess and get some little kid to dare him to stand atop the very top of the jungle gym and then he'd fake his fall and act as if he'd been killed.

The highpole was singing its frazzle in the mist above them.

SATURDAY EVENING and Orion is roaming the southwestern sky. Walking the alleys home from confession at St. Joseph's, I am stalking him, tracing his stick figure as it comes apart behind the crowns of trees just beginning to leaf, losing him entirely behind the dormers of angular houses beginning to light in their windows. As I walk along he emerges and assumes his flesh and fable, his boxy upper body and a trophy belt of stars like silver conchs.

At Scouts we talk about cars, sex, what's the best and worst way to get killed, TV shows, and sometimes sports. Some kids know the underhood details of every stock car, drag rail, and new model *Super Sport*. Some swear

they know the underneath workings of girls and why this adds up to sex. A few have spent hours applying new math to what they glean from the backs of their baseball cards. I watch a lot of television and try to make up stories to prove I know something about everything, which no one of any consequence ever believes.

When we talk about the best ways to die, we make it happen in a war or in some way that ensures a lengthy buildup which results in a quick, painless end. When we think about the worst ways, someone'll say "drowning," then "burned in a fire," and then finally we think about being picked out at random, taken someplace and tortured. We think about being deep in some woods, about never being found.

Bobby is alive tonight and I have put two quarters in a slot and selfishly lit a dozen votive candles, spacing them out in the rack, connecting those already burning, to draw a shape which appears familiar and, hopefully, brave. Some parents in the PTA have gone to the hospital to give blood, to sit with Bobby's family. My mom and dad have said they can't imagine what that wait would be like and they tell me to be careful.

Walking the last shortcut home through Pinkowski's Nursery, the tall trees and houses give way to an open field just turned for a summer crop of sweet corn and pumpkins. Along the dirt track that ends at the corner of my street, a set of telephone and electrical lines loop from pole to pole. Looking up I can see him clearly, becoming brighter as I walk home and into this night, stretched out with his arms above him and legs bent to his side across the wires.

BOYS WHO FALL *from the sky*. I have been thinking about this for weeks. It bothers me, even though I don't quite picture them clearly enough. Most times they are wearing these leather jackets with sheep's wool lining, and these pull-down hats of the same stuff, too. Sometimes it's Bobby, and I pretend to see him because his face is one I know for real. The rest of the time they all look like Sergeant Saunders from *Combat* or *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.*, Robert Vaughn. Only younger. Lots younger. These aren't dreams, really. I mean, what happens is I sometimes think of things like this, and maybe try to solve them before I can actually *go* to sleep.

It's 1966. The hit song on the radio is all about men in green berets who jump and die. I am small, blond, shy, and always in the middle of whatever line there is to form. So I also tend to picture myself looking kind of military, with sunglasses, and posed. In those pictures I have a reddish tan, silvery sunglasses, spine like a ramrod, and neatly rolled sleeves which reveal lean, muscular arms.

Sleep is often a hard place to be so deliberate, to calculate entry by clock or the end of a television hour. So lying in bed, I try to make sleep the type of place where I can come to it sideways. I ball up to one side

and often it's just a phrase which appears first. A phrase I can repeat in a thoughtless sort of dawdle. *Boys who fall from the sky*. And letter by letter, as these words take place, they begin to form a certain shape against the dome of what I know to be sleep. Somehow—and I'm not exactly sure just when this happens, I only know that it does—these letters and words repeat and repeat until their pictures begin to stand in place. And once they are fixed there, I begin to move beneath them and into the soft hold of the night.

Even this late into spring we have to run The Humidifier to keep my sinuses from leaking so that my eyes don't cake shut by morning and my mom doesn't have to slowly dissolve the gunk with a warm wash cloth until I can see again. The Humidifier is brown-enameled tin and big as a kitchen wastebasket. It sits right next to my bed. The water inside jiggles a bit while its motor hums, and the effect is this drone where, if I cover my ears just a bit with my pillow, it sounds like the cruising engines of a bomber plane near contrail altitude. Or at least the way those things sound on our TV.

I sometimes think about being in one of those planes, nestled in a hunch of sheepskin and fatigue, prone against the curve of its fuselage as we fly on and on through the night. I like to picture how the sky and the stars would look from up there and I imagine everything changed, the constellations further apart and harder to gather, the sheer bristle of too many stars turning a bit hypnotic, like the reflections of snowflakes coming straight at you through your headlights on the highway after dark.

*

THERE ARE A FEW things you learn in the way you're intended. The rest, my dad says, you do things you mostly don't want but you do them anyway because your whole life just isn't about the stuff you want or like to do. Sometimes when he smokes one last Lucky before turning out the kitchen light, my father looks likes he's reading from a book, but really he's just looking at his own hands.

Boy Scouts started out to be a promise made to us by other kids' dads. We were going to cook hobo bread from dough on a green stick, dig a trenchline and call it a perimeter. Instead, Boy Scouts turned into a kind of playacting I do well but that I don't much enjoy. Pictures lie, I think, like when we bought my sleeping bag and the box had this scene where the long flap into which the thing rolls up can also be strung up like a little awning above your head. You're supposed to whittle sticks to do this right. But the flap is never long enough once you unroll the thing for the first time.

First Aid is actually this elaborate drill we do in a high school gym in front of judges and kids who bleed iodine and don't move. We mush a Klondike Derby with dog sleds in winter, but no dogs and no snow, and

so we have to pull the sleds over cinder horse paths ourselves. When we build towers from lashing staves and binder's twine, we do it indoors, in the gym, again, and we never get to climb to the top and do semaphore. I had practiced semaphore until I could make the flags snap. When we do semaphore we stand a hundred feet apart and I am wondering the whole time why it is we just don't yell.

There are times when disappointment unfolds and I think it deliberate and pointed, maybe even pointed at me, but at the very least the result of some adult who should either step in or step out to make things happen right. What I can't quite figure is how what's deliberate and gets done by adults turns out feeling entirely random.

It's the same with stars. Who's to say how a constellation should be made up of those six over there, but not the seventh? Or eighth? So far in school we've been learning how the Chinese invented gunpowder and rockets first and mapped out stars for navigation, same as the Phoenicians. Greeks and Vikings, too. And I've wondered if they all picked the same stars to make the same shapes, or if maybe one had a bear and the other drew a camel, and wouldn't one or the other require more, or fewer, dots to connect?

Sandy Estrin is this kid who is pretty smart but wants always to play shortstop, you *know* the type. He says his dad told him how some stars aren't even really there anymore at all. And "all we ever get to see is their reflection, *anyway*," he says. So if light takes *that* long to travel, the star itself might've been destroyed by meteors or somesuch even *before* the Chinese. What happens when the dipper springs a leak, I'm thinking. For days I sat in class while Mrs. Sand traced the dotted tracks of various explorers and I thought about Amerigo Vespucci and Ponce de León, halfway out into nowhere from the coast of Spain when suddenly the lights start to go out one by one in the middle of the sky. Only there're so many stars, they can't be sure. As their wakes disappear behind them they try to adjust, circling without reference, waving their sextants, handy as hammers. Another dad is supposed to be teaching us about both reading maps *and* the stars. The thing is, you can't read maps at night and you can't pick out constellations during the day. Time and dads being what they are, it's not entirely clear that we can fix this.

MR. SAIL HAS thought out this course that's drawn to carry us across the sky, but in a way that we can walk it, tracking the point of a needle, which bobs and floats its way to North from stick to stick, from star to star, and step by step. For the past several months I have been going out after school and into this vacant lot to practice the lines of Orion, the hunter's constellation. He is supposed to be Greek, I think, and has his own story. But what I've found by this time of spring is that he lays out plain and high in the

sky at night. Once I learn how you can tell him first by the belt, I begin to notice stepping out each night to carry kitchen scraps to trash, or looking up from the patio stoop after clicking my dog to her chain: I see him and see him first of any, even the dippers big *and* small. Belt first, then the legs and arms, and while everybody, including the books they give us at Boy Scouts, wants to imagine a club in his hand and a pelt which dangles from his waist, mostly I see him stick-like and stretched out as if he's fallen in his tracks. Or maybe I think he's stalking this group of deer in another hemisphere and is hiding prone just where he is and not actually walking anywhere, which is how he is supposed to look from down here. Maybe I picture him flat because that is how he is in the field when I step him off in practice, in silence, off by myself and by degrees.

MR. SAIL IS Marty's dad, and he's short and thick and looks out from behind and over these roundish lenses, bottle-bottomed and floating on thin gold wire. His beard is all the colors of our hedges in winter and tight like the wooden-handled brush my mom keeps under the sink. He speaks with short puffs off of Chesterfields, his round, black eyes looking first to you and then quickly out to wherever it is he wants your eyes to follow. He explains to me the difference between near- and farsighted probably six times before I start to remember—and each time it's the horizon where his glance finally fixes.

"A surveyor turns what he sees into lines. And numbers. Long, wide, high, and low. We set a baseline and all of our measurements read from there..."

When we first get to where we are going, this is how the morning begins. And I am fumbling with the case to my Silva Ranger, a newer and fancier compass than I am used to. It has this "sighting mirror" that unfolds at a right angle to the base, but for the life of me I have no idea just how this is supposed to help. I decide if I ever get lost I could use this mirror part to sun-blink search planes, and just as they would be about to bank away from where I am, my glint would catch them and they would double back on some dare or intuition and see the large and elaborate Universal Distress Code figures I'd have paced out with rocks and smudge pots below: "AM OK. NEED FOOD AND MAP."

"*...and from there we translate the land into a language any surveyor can understand. Even if they don't speak a word of English. The stars and constellations are like this, too, see...the universe is full of pattern...*" But that would be a lie, and what I'd really want that plane to know was that I needed more than a map, I needed instructions. Maybe even an entire rescue.

We ride on Saturday mornings to this field far out between some western suburbs, the four of us who are trying to earn merit badges in both stars and surveying, and we are riding in Mr. Sail's work truck. It's a Tradesman Van with custom nooks and slots to hold all of his necessary

chains and sighting posts. There is also this special padded case that rides on a gyro-like pivot, and in there is the center of his work, which is optical and polished, and he calls it a Transit. At first I thought it might be like a telescope, but Marty told me its lenses "*drop out too fast to infinity…too fast to pick up stars*." I have no real idea what he means, except something like being nearsighted. Still it looks to me a lot like a smaller version of the machine they use at the planetarium to plaster stars across the black dome of their indoor sky.

Sometimes we pretend it's really a Norden Bomb Sight, the kind, Mr. Sail says, "*that, along with a few thousand boys who fell from the sky, is what won the war in Europe*." As we pass through village intersections we each take up positions in the van: navigator, ball turret, and tail gunners, and Marty is the bombardier. We chatter back and forth the way they do on *Twelve O'clock High*, starring Robert Stack, which is this Friday-night show about the Air Force over Germany. Bandits and bogies appear in the shape of Chevy Monzas and Mercury Comets, and these we grease or splash with lots of chukka-chukkas and ammo to spare. AK-AK and flak are what we make of potholes and the rumble over railroad tracks. At some point Mr. Sail tells Marty:

"*Bombardier, she's your plane. Take us in to Primary*."

And brushing back his surfer bangs, Marty leans over this boxed up gizmo and waits and waits and waits.

Then he says:

"*Away*."

SOME OF THESE mornings out in tall grass, my feet get wet in a hurry and for the rest of the morning I am cold and make mistakes. By the third week I learn to bring two extra pairs of sweat socks, balled up and stuck down into my lunch sack. Warm and dry, my attention to detail improves. Constellation Map & Compass is the official name for the game we are playing. At least that's what Mr. Sail calls it and expects us to, too. He has this idea where he might write this booklet and try to sell it to the Boy Scouts. But months of stamping out star shapes in wet grass, poking sticks at every turn, and we are not convinced this is such a good idea.

When we started to come here, there was still snow on the ground, and then for a few more weeks our feet left obvious tracks in the mud. For a while the paths we stamped spelled out a larger shape and when my steps or bearing began to warble, Orion's rough outline would emerge from the tangle underfoot. Enough to hold me, enough to find a fix and decide my compass should be wrong. But now we are nearly into June and we've just the dew to mark our tracks.

The Saturday after Bobby died we stayed long into the afternoon, drilling over and again until what had been close enough became exact, and

exactness became as rote as any driven rule. We didn't go to the funeral because it was small, because it was only for family, because it would be just too hard to have that many kids to remind his parents what they'd lost. We'd repeat the details we knew over lunch, at recess, and out here in the taller grass, shaping and reshaping the myth until the truthful story hardly mattered at all. He was our size, he was our age, and he was fearless.

As the morning lengthens, our paths evaporate, and we are left with only what we can hold in our heads and in our hands. It occurs to us while walking along these lines, or standing off alone and where we plant these sticks in turn, that no one but birds, or people in planes, and maybe even the stars themselves could ever tell what it is that we end up drawing. ■

J. David Stevens

Dragon

You make a dragon using a spell that you learned from a library book in the fourth grade. You don't know why the spell works now when it didn't then. You don't even know why you remember the spell, except for Ned Barker, red-haired and freckled and nine years old, who discovered from an intercepted note that you liked him. He called you "beetle breath," and even though no one knew what it meant, the name stuck with you through high school, at least with the football team, for whom Ned Barker was the hero quarterback until he defected to the nearby prep school with connections to several Division I colleges. The dragon is blue, just short of aqua, the color of a matching throw pillow for your sofa. He is the size of a cereal box but will get bigger; you've heard they grow. You know that Ned Barker never made it to a Division I school and crushed his father's hopes of professional stardom. Meanwhile, you were *beetle breath*. You imagine a day when you can train the dragon, big as an elevator, to track Ned down and scare him in front of large groups of people until he loses bowel control. It would be almost fitting revenge. You name the dragon "Skip," a good name for any pet, in case the neighbors ask.

YOU SIGN UP FOR several services—*matchmaker*, *datefinder*, *luvconnect*, even *thelastchance*—all of them dot-com. You must send a picture, and even though you would like to send the maid-of-honor photo from your friend Brenda's wedding (it's a professional photo, very slimming, and even the dress looks good: a minor bridesmaid miracle), you realize the bouquet is an issue. Flowers and small children send signals. So you settle on the picture of you in the red one-piece standing by the cruise-ship pool, a trip on which you took another girlfriend after your parents gave you their tickets because of your father's prostate. You lost seven pounds in two weeks for that trip. In the picture, your hand clutches a cliché of a drink: coconut shell, pink bendy straw, far too many paper umbrellas. The picture says all the things you want it to, even if you don't *really* want it to: fun-loving, slim, outdoors-y, and not afraid to show some skin; a grab-life-by-the-horns gal; a not-afraid-to-try-new-things gal. And what lurks in the dusky corners of your eyes: happiness or veiled concern, your next birthday trailing in the ship's wake? In front of your computer, you already feel jaded. Fear and skin, skin and fear: things that can be molded. You press the button to send the photo out into the world. It's what they need to see.

YOU TREAT SKIP like a child, let him sleep in your bed and give him most of the pillows, tickle him under his wings until he rolls off the couch in

paroxysms of dragon laughter. Together you watch a PBS show where two children, a brother and sister, have adventures in a realm of dragons and learn to behave properly. The dragons like music and burst into spontaneous song-and-dance. Sometimes the children and dragons argue, but things always resolve themselves amicably—a puzzle is solved, a lesson is learned, and everyone sings and dances again. You have to wonder, though, how much better it would be if just once—in a moment of ineluctable honesty—one of the dragons ate one of the children. No reason would be necessary, just a loose theme about the occasional misuse of power, something that PBS should teach a child on the cusp of falling into the world. You of all people can appreciate that logic, even if in the end you long for Skip to be a good dragon citizen and so memorize all the dragon songs about friendship and trying one's hardest. Perhaps if you'd had brothers, you think, life would have been different. Or perhaps it would have been better had there always been dragons—a constant insinuation of fire and teeth.

AS IF THINGS weren't bad enough, some of the services record the number of people "hitting" your profile. That way, you can track how many men consider—but do not desire—you. Of course, you get responses, many of them immediate: men twenty years your senior, men "between jobs," men being deported, men seeking a girl to please Mom. You wade through them dutifully, as if no matter the lack of promise they each deserve personal consideration. When there are no promising matches in a month, you start to worry. You watch the number of your hits dwindle. You check the sites of other women, whose hit meters seem to spin like slot machines. In desperation, you agree to a date with Barry, a thirty-eight-year-old accountant with a condo on the Upper West Side. He takes you to MOMA, and you don't correct him when he confuses Kandinsky with Mondrian. He takes you to Montrachet, and you force yourself not to wince each time he mispronounces a menu item or snaps his fingers for the waiter. He takes you to watch him play ultimate Frisbee in Central Park, a game his team loses badly, and you compliment his physique even though you want to say that his team is comprised of forty-something Jewish bachelors still chasing NYU coeds. He takes you to his bed, where you tell him repeatedly that it happens to lots of guys. You don't talk politics or religion unless he wants to, and then you largely agree with what he says. Once, you tell him about your deep respect for Judaism despite being raised Methodist. This sentiment gives him pause, and the next day he calls to tell you that he cannot see you anymore, that he could never marry outside his faith. In a rash moment you offer to convert, but he fumbles at the other end of the line until he comes up with the words that he wants to sound regretful. "Once a shiksa," he says, "always a shiksa." Then, to make it seem like you've reached this conclusion mutually, he says in the most liquid tone

he can muster, "I think we both know it's for the best."

SKIP DOES GET bigger—his wings soon stretch the length of the sofa—but he is otherwise an ideal pet. He does not scratch the furniture or poop on the carpet. Indeed, he never poops at all, and though he will occasionally eat something that you offer, he does not seem to require sustenance in the traditional sense. Now and then you come upon him sitting Indian-style, eyes closed, with a network of electric sparks fizzing around his head. And you imagine this is how he grows, drawing on power received from the magical world into which you accidentally dipped your toe, never to enter fully. You remember a movie about a houseplant that grew big enough to eat a person, and you worry about what you have unleashed on the world. But Skip is gentle to a fault. He catches insects that wander into the apartment and releases them onto the window ledge. He puts his head in your lap when you are silent for too long, as if he knows the act of touch, performed correctly, can be a cure. You spend a few Fridays watching movies together, and he chokes up at all the moments you do: when Bambi's mother is killed by the hunters or at the end of *Old Yeller*. Sometimes you think that Skip exists merely to suit your predilections, an idea that you could adopt fully except that you know what it's like to play a role for someone else. You make the promise—Skip will be whatever he was meant to be—even as you doubt the power of oaths generally. After all, words and reality seem to mesh only in divorce proceedings and poison warning-labels, and then not often enough.

HANK COMES NEXT. He is six-four, blond, big upper arms and a small beer gut, decidedly Gentile. He migrated to the city from Iowa and, before you can speak, tells you that he's nothing like your Midwestern preconceptions, all pig slop and tractor pulls and waving fields of grain, then bends your ear for two hours with the details of his childhood on a farm. He has a truck on his tee shirt and jeans the color of new asphalt. The slightly wilted flowers that he has brought, wrapped in cellophane, still bear the orange discount sticker that he forgot to remove. On your first date, he takes you to a barbecue joint near Times Square, mostly so that he can laugh at the tourists. There are paper napkins on the table, and he uses five at a time. When you ask what he does for a living, he tells you "Fences in Jersey," but refuses to elaborate. He tells you that he lives in the meat-packing district because his cousin cuts him a break on the rent. He notes that their apartment is "open," meaning that the only interior door is to the bathroom, but reassures you by placing his big hand over yours and telling you that he and his cousin have a "sock on the doorknob" arrangement. He is not as romantic as Barry. He offers to bed you the first night, and after a few dates this way, you agree, mostly out of exhaustion. He puts a sock on

the doorknob, then goes to work, leaving you to wonder—your left cheek mashed into the pillow—if this is how the farm animals did things. You proceed in this fashion for almost a month. On the nights that he does not fall straight asleep, you talk. He tells you about a dog that he had as a boy, a faithful black Lab also named, perhaps by coincidence, Hank. You tell him about a Himalayan cat, Lulu, that you owned as a teenager. He says that he never trusted "cat people" and asks so many questions about your relationship with Lulu that you finally say she was your pet, that's all, you weren't married to her or anything, until his face splits wide into a grin and he hugs you and says "Okay already," then turns over and starts to snore. You think nothing of it, though he does not call the next day or the next or the next, then does not return your messages. You return to the online service to e-mail him, only to find that his profile has been removed. Finally, pushed to anger, you make a trip to his apartment but leave without knocking when you spot the sock on his door.

WHEN SKIP IS AS big as a man, you start to worry. Where will he go if he gets any bigger? Are there other dragons like him? For the first time you admit that playing with magic might not have been worth the risk, and you seriously consider calling your elementary school to track down the book of spells in the hope of finding one to send Skip back from where he came. You begin to think of your apartment as the nadir of a swirling black portal, door to another dimension, that attracts kindly dragons and unsuitable men. You fantasize about a hero who will one day come to close the portal, like in the movies, then marry you and take you to a house in the country where you will have children and a rewarding job with telecommuting and flexible hours. While eating peanut butter straight from the jar, you try to remember the last Hollywood film you saw that had a realistic ending. At the other end of the couch, Skip blows smoke rings from his nostrils and watches as they link in the air before dissipating. You know that he knows what you know. You know he can hear the gears in your mind that calculate the fortune you could make taking him on the road, charging admission—a real dragon. And he would do it, too, if you asked him. Because he trusts you. And you have to wonder when you began to see trust as a weakness. And in wondering, you have to realize that you are still responsible for your own life, that you may not be perfect but you're not completely damaged either. At least not yet. Not so long as you can keep one secret—Skip, blue and trusting and comfortable at the end of your couch. As long as you refuse to trade his life for what yours might be, you can hope that something good remains for you, that the universe rewards those willing to accept their place in it, who play by rules that should be fair and manifest to all. And you don't need lightning bolt trumpet fanfares, but one small honest thing, and you tell yourself it is only a matter of time.

You suspect this is why Skip came to you when he did, to let you prove yourself to the universe once, but to yourself again and again.

EVEN THE SUCCESSES are disasters. Joel, who didn't kiss you until the second date, gets transferred to Rome. And Frank, who surprised you with matinee tickets to *Les Mis*, finally admits that he's not over the divorce and needs to focus on his kids for a while. Both of them stay in contact, glib "let's be friends" messages expressing their support, which makes things worse in a way. You take to watching home improvement shows on The Discovery Channel and Home & Garden TV. You try a recipe for a vegan "cheese" sandwich and beet sangria that you see on the Food Network. Your mother calls such behavior your nesting instinct and says that any man would be foolish not to want you. She says that things were easier in her day because young people did not have so many *expectations*, drawing out the word like the Latin name of a disease, then recommends that you try a church meeting or volunteer organization, where nice men are known to collect. You decline to tell her about Phil, the Unitarian with the biggest porn collection you'd ever seen, then choke on the possibility that your own mother has started to see you as a charity case. You have a friend in Connecticut who likes to parade her three daughters in front of you like some kind of pageant, then has the audacity to say that kids are so much trouble you're better off without them. Secretly, you've imagined ten ways to kick out her teeth. She married a pharmaceutical VP, a small thin man who likes to think of himself as athletic because of the daily half-hour he spends at the company gym but who is more comfortable with numbers than people. He accedes to her whims, works the grill when they have weekend cookouts, obscures himself in meat-smoke as his wife sifts the guests, always talking. Once, sliding a hamburger onto your proffered plate, he smiled slightly and said, so no one else could hear, "Don't worry. Things'll get better." Amid the grease pops and humidity, you could almost see his brain turning back to an obstinate set of figures from one of the European markets, and you could not be completely sure which one of you he was trying to convince.

WHATEVER YOUR regrets, you finally understand that Skip must leave. He is two feet taller than you now and opens his wings to their full breadth only if he stands diagonal to the living room, tips pushed into the corners. You have caught him staring out the window, not often, but enough to realize that when dragons stare out of apartments they do not worry about the cars and pavement below them, only the sky. It is the first thing to distinguish them from people. As you embrace, you feel the tautness of the muscles that envelop you. His skin is shockingly soft, like cured leather, and not at all what you once expected scales to be. Inside, you can hear

the strong bursts of his heart, and you think back to a story that you're almost certain you remember about a knight who used the heart of a dragon to cure his ailing love. You go to bed, and when you wake sometime after midnight, he is gone, no smoke or smell or scuffs on the windowsill, as if he evaporated rather than fled. Outside the world seems like an illusion, not a place you're in so much as a scene flowing past you, a movement that is some comfort in its best moments, the city so warm that it creates the sensation of touch even when no one else is near. But then the opposite is true as well, something about loneliness in a crowd. And all you remember are Skip's wings like blankets as you close the window, lock it, then stop by the bathroom on your way to bed to collect a Percocet, for which there is no metaphor.

THERE SHOULD BE a moral to these men, this dragon. But finally your life is no tragedy: no one dying of AIDS or cancer, no coma, no street crime. Just a voice in your head asking why you should be so sad. Too young for nostalgia, you still wonder what happened to love, if it's somehow your fault. The pictures pan across your computer screen, a gallery of unspoken stories that persist even when the machine is off. It makes you wonder how much unhappiness, however slight from each person, can parcel together into a catastrophe. Or at least an epidemic—a novel where every character is achingly normal, where the final page is less an ending than a cessation of ink. Only then, because you want to feel special, do you consider the possibility that Skip might return one day. You will round a corner to find him waiting, and he will raise his wings slightly in what might be the start of an embrace or else the start of a question that he would ask you if he could. Of course, you're not sure what that question would be, but you imagine answering it anyway—the right answer at last, whatever that is, like a dark jewel you can hold. In your mind you will always see it this way, your voice a momentarily palpable thing before it dissipates into the city around you, and the sound of everything else returns. ■

Justin Courter

You Can Have the Jam

After months of a rigorous bombing campaign and night and morning hand-to-leg combat, it seems wiser, finally, to attempt some sort of compromise with the cockroaches. Look, I say to the one who appears to be their leader, We're both reasonable organisms and I believe we have a mutual interest called survival. I'm willing to share the apartment if you and your folks agree to keep to the crumbs and climb back into the woodwork prior to my turning on of the light. Why don't you put down the baseball bat, he says. In the periphery, the others scutter this way and that, forming a shifty circle around me. I will, I say, as soon as you put down that bag of chips and get your feet off the table. He leans back, rests his carapace against the back of the sofa and lets his feelers hang limp on either side of his head. He twirls his hairy legs, occasionally dipping a delicate foot into a jar of jam and then sucking it clean. Do you realize how many lives you've squished over time? he asks. Well, what might you do, I plead, if you witnessed another species walking off with a bag of your groceries? I feel a couple of stiff legs wedge themselves under my arms and a couple more grab my ankles as I'm hoisted horizontal and aloft. My squirming and writhing is useless. Dozens of hairy black legs pin down my chest, pressing my back flat against the top of a small marching band. You can have the jam! I shout at the leader. Please, just tell them to put me down. Oh, they will, he says. I twist my neck to see where I'm being taken: toward a window being raised by one who's reared up on his back legs. ■

Dean Young

Space Is Not Consistent Increment nor Continuous

Neither is time which is why clocks
and watches are useless except as ornament.
Lunch-hour gone in a snap just as the interval
between 4 and 5 après dawn is time enough
for everything to fall apart, wither and grow
forlorn, leaves dropping from the mulberry tree
so no more cocoon raw material, and the silkworm,
exposed to frost, dies, never to metamorph-
osize into a sex-crazed moth. And when
you are asleep, however long you doze,
be it through an empire's rise and repose
or a single gasp between a puppy's yaps,
always the same amount of time has passed.
Amazing we ever find each other other than
by accident but here you are at Electric
Pizza just when I'd hoped to meet ya.
The banana's life is running out while
hardly have I gotten myself unsoused
after carrying on like someone much younger.
A special quality of youth is how rapidly
it grows old, if I did as fast as that lad
turning 11 (an increase of 10%), I'd be
55 the year after hitting 50 oh my god!
An hourglass could give a better indication
is not only sand but rocks and boulders
trickled through its constricted waist.
Is there time for everything? Guzzling beer
somewhere in the mountains, pregnancy,
bonkers theories, trash collection, skedaddling
after pounding on the mysterious stranger's
door, revising your will. Sure, just don't try
figuring out how by a chronometer. Look within.

Condo Rat Lab

My neighbor is selling his cubicle
and I know if I behave myself
I'll be able to sell my own
at an obscene profit which is what
this is all about I guess, me
taking a day off from my arsonous rage,
from dragging my mattress
onto the landing to sweat out
my hangover and get a start
on the next. Should I take down
the Beware of Boa Constrictor signs?
They represent a sincere desire
for a boa constrictor to beware of.
Currently I'm volunteering
at the shelter to calm the condemned
while someone else injects them
so I feel deserving of my few
divertissements, odd-angled enthusiasms,
my lobster telephone,
my monkish lathers.
I have an innate rapport
with infants learning to walk
by pulling vases down on their heads,
frogs consider me an ally,
clouds have picked up
my form of conflict resolution.
My wife is an expert exporter of cheeses,
small ones warped with ash and wrapped in leaves.
Oft she is frustrated with me
so I turn my hearing aids off
and consider our marriage a model.
Have you ever noticed a blind man
crossing a bridge alone and gone up
behind him and screamed
to see if, in his reaction,
he throws himself off the bridge?
Don't do that. For a lifetime
a cataclysmic moment radiates
forward into the future but also

irrationally into the past
so one was never not the way
one has just become.
Bill Clinton must feel this way,
so too the Easter Bunny,
so too all of us
the moment we are born
and go on being born until
dot dot dot period,
the end-stopped ellipsis being Death's
favorite form of punctuation.
Personally I prefer
the question mark,
a sort of exclamation point
scratching its head. As a child
I filled pages and pages
with question marks.
Dealing with a pencil
the size of a mule's leg,
paper like roofing material,
that meant about three a page
but still I was obviously
headed for a life of inquiry,
not piano tuning or heart repair
which could have provided me
with a steady income
as was regularly pointed out
by my father, the astronaut
who may have been the first human
to urinate on the moon,
a quiet, personal achievement.
He kept in his sock drawer
a bullet in a small box
which I never figured out
how to ask him about,
not being allowed in his sock drawer.
Now I am the age at which he died,
yellow and spotty as a banana,
source of fiber and potassium,

an extremely unstable atom
so tell us the Geiger counter
wandering amongst the fruits.
Electrons fly right through us
constantly. And gluons and photons
and won tons. Hercules's labor
of the won ton was actually three labors:
the preparing of the filling, the wrapping
for which won ton gets its name,
and the preparation which begins
as frying and ends as steaming
just as revolutions begin as madness
and end in advertisement.
At the heart of all food preparation
in conversion, so too religion
and arson. Sowing, changing a tire,
buying a short, selling your cubicle.
So why should death be any different?
Or marriage? So tell me why
I don't deserve a boa constrictor,
generally calm, reflective creatures
not prone to snits, talking too much,
alcohol abuse, tax fraud, hiding
a bullet in a box, tailgating,
tattletaling, using environmentally
unsound cleaning products, urinating
on the moon, burning up in the atmosphere,
arriving in the terrible disarray.
Just once a month or so,
the sacrifice of a rat.

Rookie Nookie

She was way way over my head by the second second
so I went back to inventing a hole in the wall
with an implement supplied to me
for another purpose impossible to understand
due to instructional plenitude.
I forgot my cell in the sleigh.

Inner picture:
monastic butterfly-fish die in droves
in confusion in pile-ups in shrimp nets
like they've been snagged in a foreign religion
impossible to believe anyone believed
until its goddess plugged one one good
then hoisted you into elements you could not breathe.
Not in a bad way.
I knew my cell was vibrating.

Suppositions:
some things may be truly glimpsed
only from a distance, like Russia.
Others, for instance the human heart
must be chewed apart thank you very much.

My mistake was in ever washing
my seersucker suit. She was soft
as the moon if the moon had velvet
zippers and bit you. Cahin saw zypher.

Bliss blizzard in scummy honey.

Later we turned into scorpions.

Anselm Berrigan

Gesticulating bestiary summit

Free cell!

What the tissue tells

educated into ownership

tremulous fate awash

with direct mail bullets to yr heart.

Some drooling toddler

in some fought-far-away-for mansion

is being trained to rule me

and now I feel attachment.

Chris Ransick

—Second Place Poem—

How I Swam to the Bottom of the Ocean

I did it on a dare; my friend was smug
about my inevitable failure, saying
"You know you'll never make it." So I
stripped my clothes right there, left
pants and shirt and shoes right on the sand
and waded into surf, the frigid water
snapping my testicles to attention.
I wanted to not look back but I was
weak at that moment and so I turned,
looked over my shoulder to where he stood,
arms folded, grin on his face; he waved
a little wave as if to say "Go on,
I will comfort your woman."
Then, the moment of truth. The water
swelled and my body left the firm
footing beneath; I was afloat.
I breathed my deepest breath and dove
down, down, down, salt stinging my eyes
when I opened them to measure the
fading light. I thought I'd see
sharks but at first it was only
tangled mats of seaweed clinging
to my arms and neck. Oh for a machete
I thought. Just then, a yellow fish
kissed my forehead. In shock,
I opened my mouth and out came
all my air. But the kiss had freed me.
I could breath the water like she could
breathe the water, gills suddenly
flapping beneath my jaw. The pressure
in my ears subsided. I propelled myself
down where organic bits swirled
as dust motes float in sun shafts
of abandoned rooms. Shapes emerged
to left and right, coarse heaps of rock.
The deeper I went the darker it got,
until I swam not by sight but by feel,

seeking thicker water, colder, more black.
Things brushed along my sides, smooth
and muscled creatures, checking out
my size and shape. I felt welcome,
unafraid. Finally, I found the ocean floor,
silt so soft I burrowed in a foot, my face
embraced by a cool palm.
I would have stayed, I swear, but knew
my friend was already on his
cell phone, calling the coroner,
arranging for flowers to be delivered
to a church I never visit. Coming up
was harder; the light above
flowed against me like current,
buffeting me with all the things
to which I would return: my desk,
my car, tax forms, a pending
prostate exam. Still, that's where I
belonged. When I emerged again,
it was night in a foreign land.

George Higgins

Chops

I can barely play the melody to Doxy
despite five thousand dollars spent to learn
the fingerings, the embouchure, the orthodoxy

of technique that's so hard to master, no proxy
can perform it for you, mastery must be earned.
I can barely play the melody to Doxy

or intonate the nagging paradox
that even with the lessons I can't discern
the fingerings, the embouchure, the orthodoxy

of a "natural." At least the Sonny Rollins boxed
set I bought will be on the shelf when I return.
I can barely play the melody to Doxy.

The phosphor ghosts inside the glowing box,
my sedative, distract me from this stern
admonishment: the fingerings, the embouchure, the orthodoxy

take all the time I haven't left. Hard knocks
not money are required, the days and nights already burned.
I can barely play the melody to Doxy,
the fingerings, the embouchure, the orthodoxy.

Furred Cup

How often does your sister write
an e-mail note about your mother
who's been wandering at night
for hours lost a block away: another

incident. If she is mine it is the third
in just about a month. The suddenness
of change reminds me of a furred
surrealist cup, and the imaginary mess

I fantasize could now coagulate
inside its tangible abstraction.
The beaver pelt the artist glued and cut,
the follicles of hair are lots of fun,

except for the thing that's skinned. Astray
and wandering another ordinary day.

Susanna Lippóczy Rich

[Confess] Caress the Dragon: *[Writhing]* Writing Memoir

I am *[riddling]* **struggling** with *Dragon NaturallySpeaking*, a voice-activated word processing system. I am jabbing at the telephone redial button to the *Dragon* help-line so I can *[writhe] [right]* **write** this *[hex]* **text**. I am desperate for this to work because my hands are *[devested]* **devastated** by computer-generated carpal tunnel syndrome and other injuries too frustrating to *[settle] [sell]* **spell** into this program. How to *[race]* **trace** the roots of this injury? How to recover myself?

Inevitably, this *[shames]* **shapes** itself as memoir. *Shame*—nice typo—I am ashamed of my Hungarian family. So I try to superachieve: prove to the world that I am a writer and not my divorced mother off with a *[oracular]* **Dracular** boyfriend named "Béla"; prove that I am a *[infest her]* **professor** and not the grandmother who concocted gypsy hair-and-chicken-heart potions in coconut shells to counteract menopause; *[groove]* **prove** that I am a computer wiz and not Uncle Frank, who, in religious self-flagellation, bearing and atoning for family guilt, walked the cold streets of Paterson—*[hare foot]* **barefoot**. A novel, dissertation, textbook, two thousand poems, and a stress management manual—I've been willing to write anything. Anything but *[festering]* (good one, *Dragon*) **fessing** up to my truth. The more I achieve—the more I *have* to achieve—the less worthy I feel—the harder I work—the more my hands hurt.

THINGS—BIZARRE and uncanny—are happening: I want to write "first we" and *Dragon NaturallySpeaking* records *Father died*. How did it know I was, just then, thinking about my father's death? *[Death.]* When I first started to train *Dragon NaturallySpeaking* and paused to think, and forgot to turn the microphone off, the program made words from my breathing: *death*, *death* it wrote; *death* in lights; *death* and *death*. I started wondering, what *[wounds]* (there it goes) what **words**, what subterranean messages will be lost once the system is fully trained (or I actually read the instructions on how to position the mike). Someone should do a study of what it is that a voice-recognition computer can pick up from our breathing. What is it we say under our *[breasts]* (yes), under our *[births]* (do it), under our **breaths** when we are not articulating words that are safe to say?

[First nation]. **Frustration.** For every word I will onto the screen, there's *[carpal the Coke, global the Coke, girl the Coke, bottle the Coke, quarrel the Coke]* **garbledegook** to pay, a mouse to slam with my already injured *[Fester test vest]* **fist**, the need to hoist the CPU and monitor to *[Old Old]* **catapult**

at a barking dog two acres away. I am struggling not to speak down to the level of *Dragon's* conventional vocabulary, not to use *[speaking in me]* **simpler** words than I mean, not to edit what I need to say even before I say it so that those who might hear me—will. I stutter. All this is a perfect metaphor for the blocking of my true *[writhing]* (yes) **writhing**.

THE THING WITH writing *[new are]* (renew?) **memoir** is, of course, saying that which others have not or will not hear, that which I cannot, yet, hear myself saying under my *[best breast birth]* **breath**. When I first dictated an early title to this essay, instead of the "Anything But" I thought I said, the computer recorded *[fist]* "**Fifth and Anything But**." (Even now it's taken five tries to record the mistake when I want it to.) Taking the *[death]* **fifth** is to refuse to speak that which might *[intimidate]* **incriminate** me. Suppose I told what is darkest, truest, most deadly and intimidating about our family—the spiritual deaths that Jerry Springer's guests are really hiding behind their yahoo exhibitionistic transgressions? The story that doesn't fit into neat plots between commercials—that must be experienced slowly and in layers; in pain and, perhaps worse, in unaccustomed *[boy]* **joy?**

John *[brag show]* (nice going, Dragon!) **Bradshaw** recommends we heal the so-called "inner child" by exposing family *[the Nile's]* **denials.** But the family is a self-sustaining sloshing organism—like a massive amoeba that glops and drags along as a unit—absorbing all attempts of *[my toe con drear]* **mitochondria** to err. What's good for the family *[tell]* **cell** is often bad for the individual and vice, yes **vice,** versa. The worst thing that could happen to most families—Bradshaw and brag shows notwithstanding—is to forsake denial. Families thrive on rafting *[denial]* **the Nile**.

Denial. To take the fifth on my life <u>is</u> death. As novelist Patricia Hampl says, "The version we dare to write is the only *[trees]* (family tree, tree of knowledge) **truth,** the only relationship we have with the past. Refuse to write your life and you have no life." Our memories are our treasures. The Dragon sits on them unless we can…something—take the **fist.**

ANYTHING—TRY everything to write, to re-member what was dis-(re)membered. Must have spoken to every Dragon *[timber]* (*Timber* is the dog howling on top of his doghouse two acres away)…must have spoken to every Dragon **tamer** at the help-line: Keith, Lynn, Jim, Paul, Joe, and the young woman who spoke so unclearly I couldn't decipher her name. (Does she embody the me I cannot hear?) So here *[I am the Dragon]* **I *have* the *Dragon*** *NaturallySpeaking* headset clamped over my telephone headset, one black-sponged wand coming from the right, the other from the left ("Put it a thumb's width from the edge of your lips," they tell me) making me look like some fly with high-tech palpi—those arm-like appendages that serve as touchers and gropers, feeders and feelers. With this, Morticia Addams

would have accessorized! I'm speaking from the left side of my mouth to *Dragon NaturallySpeaking* and from the right to the Dragon tamers: *Open this*. *Close that*. *Go to*. *Right Click*. *Left Click*. (As if I had hands that could function with a mouse.) "Get rid of your virus shield," they tell me. Go defenseless, no less.

Dragon NaturallySpeaking is dragging. It won't take simple commands such as *Go to End of Line*. Instead, it records *good underlying* (That's hopeful—something good underlying) ...*coach of line* (Who, but the writing itself, is the coach here?) *content of line* (It would be nice to be content of line, especially for a poet) ...the louder I yell at it, the less it records what I intend. And, of course, it won't recognize curses. What kind of self-respecting dragon doesn't breathe fire? As I await the next *[locked]* the next *[block]* the next **thought** to come, I'm holding my breath for fear that the system will record the *deaths* it hears from my expiration, or, more thrillingly, it will reveal something like the Dragon version of a session at the *[weird]* (good!) **Ouija** board.

I YEARN TO KEY in the words, as I used to, eight years ago, before I ruined both my hands dandling a Zenith laptop. To have again the almost mystical experience when I typed my first novel, based on "Cinderella," into *[arrested]* **a rented** Smith Corona, and the rudimentary memory took in the words, delayed, and—almost as if inscribed by a Michelangelo hand from a cloud—the words would appear on the page. All that was necessary was that delay, that disconnection for a moment, to make it seem...*[all mine]* **divine**. Reminds me of the hand of God writing on the wall in the Book of Daniel—*God has numbered thy kingdom and finished it*. *Though art found wanting*. *Thy kingdom is divided*. Tell me about it.

GO TO END OF *Line*. *Scratch That*. *Correct That*. *Go to the Bottom*. *Go to Sleep*—what if I become so trained by this system that, when I teach, that's what I'll say to students? *Scratch That*. *Scratch That*. *Go to End of Line*. Joe at Dragon Central tells me to talk "authoritatively, no hesitations, no pauses—word, word, word." But writing is all hesitation, and pause, and going back, back, going, backhoe-ing...

THE FIRST PROBLEM, the Knights of the Dragon decree, is that I don't have enough RAM—random access memory. No kidding. So I send my beleaguered husband, Mort, freshly surviving another of my throwing-things tantrums, down to the local computer nerds with the instruction to "ram in as much RAM as you've got."

"But you don't need—" Bob at RT Computer Solutions starts to say on the phone.

"Give. Me. All. You've. Got," I say. Authoritatively.

Then my Dragoneers tell me I need to defrag—misused programs and prompts scatter in the system like a dropped box of Scrabble tiles that need unscrambling. As if I didn't know. As if I needed a faceless stranger to offer me a metaphor for my unrecollected memories. As I watch the rows of rectangles on the monitor change from raving red to indifferent white to craven yellow to truly blue, I deconstruct the word "Defrag." "Fragment." "Frage." Most Hungarians speak German, as my father and stepmother always did when they didn't want me to understand what they were saying about me. In German, "frage" means "question." My memoir would be more a matter of questioning than telling, of *[unworrying]* (good) **unwording** such things as "Crazy Hungarian," "Wacky Grandmother," "Poor immigrant," "Alien," "Catholic school dropout."

CARL JUNG CLAIMED that every part of a dream—whether the avalanche or the person running from it—is a lost aspect of the dreamer: the avalanche of strong feeling that can no longer be *[damned]* **dammed,** the runner who resists. To embrace the whole dream as oneself is to be freer, defragged, at-oned.

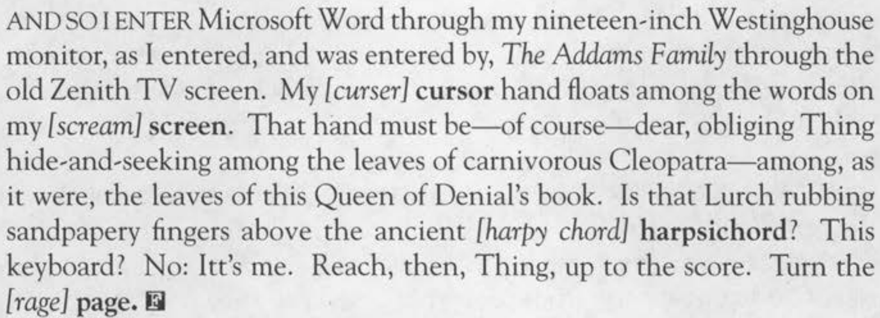
I, as so many first-generation television orphans did, replaced my disappointing family with the dream families that flickered within the safe confines of our first eleven-inch Zenith television set. Even here, now, at the computer, I stare at a tube vibrating light. I know that the loss of my hands is only a later manifestation of a family who, losing the Hungarian homeland, fragmented itself. And then the loss of my hands embodied family history.

My adoptive and adopted television family was *The Addams Family*—they tamed *[breath]* **death** (writing is the taming of breath)—by embracing the bizarre, the ghoulish, the scary. But above all, they loved and adhered to each other. In one episode, "The Green-Eyed Monster," Gomez and Morticia suspect each other of betrayal. To soothe and collect herself, Morticia strokes a smoking Chinese dragon figure on their mantelpiece. Gomez finds her there and delivers my favorite Addams line: *The hands that should caress my loving feet now caress the dragon*. The hands that should, metaphorically, sit at the patriarchal foot, now stroke (or, rather, *stoke* (Where are you *Dragon* when I need you?)) the fire-breathing genie on the mantel. The Dragon is the traditional Chinese symbol of power, inner growth, passion, generosity, society, and luck—all that living one's truth means.

Stroking the Dragon of my despairs, as if it were a genie, I might discover the sultry Morticia in me; and the Grandmama of magical powers; and to realize myself as Itt, a woman so veiled from herself that she has become the veil itself. For to dream my *give-me-anything-but* family as strange is to be separate from myself as well. To embrace—to *[confess]* **caress**—my Dragon,

my family, would be to unstrange and defrag them. It would be to reclaim my hands that, like disembodied Thing, have too long been severed from me in my immigrant quest for the perfect American self.

"WAKE UP! GO to sleep," I yell into the headset to turn the microphone on and off: "Wake up! Go to sleep." The microphone icon erects. It flops. Erect. Flop. *[Carry your yoke]* **Karaoke** for the soul. "Wake up!"



AND SO I ENTER Microsoft Word through my nineteen-inch Westinghouse monitor, as I entered, and was entered by, *The Addams Family* through the old Zenith TV screen. My *[curser]* **cursor** hand floats among the words on my *[scream]* **screen**. That hand must be—of course—dear, obliging Thing hide-and-seeking among the leaves of carnivorous Cleopatra—among, as it were, the leaves of this Queen of Denial's book. Is that Lurch rubbing sandpapery fingers above the ancient *[harpy chord]* **harpsichord**? This keyboard? No: Itt's me. Reach, then, Thing, up to the score. Turn the *[rage]* **page.**

Rajeev Balasubramanyam

The Story

i

In the worst village in the country, from which no good will ever come, certainly not now, a young woman was suffering from a terrible sadness. It was the worst kind of sadness, filling her with hatred, killing everything it touched.

The woman's name is unknown. Not long ago, she was the most famous woman in the country, but now no one remembers her existence. She had three children and a husband. A kind, gentle man if the story is to be believed, which it must, if I am to continue. Slowly, of course, her sadness was making his life the worst kind of hell and some years later he hanged himself, a tragedy for which only she can be blamed.

It began on a dark October morning when the woman carried a chair, a tiny desk, and her favourite fountain pen to the village square. She assembled them, chair first, desk in front, pen on desk, with great care, and then, realising she had forgotten something, returned to the house to fetch paper. After three deep breaths, she began to write.

—I was born in the worst village in the country from which no good will ever come—

As she wrote each word she would recite it in a voice which surprised her. She hadn't realised she could speak so loudly.

—My childhood was a miserable one, though some say it was happy. My father—

Her description of her father continued for many hours, in which time half the village gathered to witness this display of lunacy. Lunacy was a rarity in that village, one of the many things that made it, as the story goes, the worst village in the country.

In the early evening, her father, on learning of his daughter's behaviour, arrived at the square. His first thought was that she must be cold. She wore only a light sweater, and her legs were bare. His second thought was to chide himself for his first thought. *To hell with cold*, he told himself, *she is making a spectacle of herself*. Drawing closer he stopped when he heard his own name recited in that unnatural voice that filled his mind with dread.

—My father was a lazy man who forced me to marry the wealthiest man in the village who, though kind and strong, I did not love.

That was untrue, her father thought, or unfair. But she was entitled to her point of view. *She must be cold*, he thought, his concern resurfacing. *I should fetch her a blanket*.

—He was a small man with a frail, whimpering voice.

That, her father thought, was nonsense. Since his youth he'd smoked only the roughest tobacco; his voice was like nails.

—He was unable to satisfy my mother, she continued, then paused, her first pause in seven hours.

That couldn't be true, he reflected, although, now he thought about it, he had never thought about it before.

—My mother grew to love him, but I always saw him for the mean, cold-hearted bastard—

—Stop, the father shouted. Come indoors, child. You're making a fool of yourself with these damn lies. Come inside, I tell you.

He was astonished by how weak his voice was. His daughter didn't seem to have heard him, and continued.

—It was no surprise to anyone when, at the age of thirty-four, my father died from a debilitating disease that left him in such agony that he was unable to speak and could only jerk his head from side to side like a horse.

And, with those words, her father vanished, disappeared from memory and existence. That is to say, everyone remembered his death, but from many years ago, when he was thirty-four. There is worse to come.

ii

BY LATE EVENING, the woman's husband had arrived. He had come home from work, fallen asleep, then been woken by a friend. He rushed to the square. For months he'd been suffering deep anxiety over his wife's condition, and it was with tears in his eyes that he watched her chanting in that alien voice. Not one person, he saw, showed any concern. They looked *amused*, in fact. He threw himself at his wife's feet.

—Come home, he said. The children are all by themselves. Even if I mean nothing to you, he said, glaring at the crowd who pushed closer to hear his words, but think of them.

But she barely heard him.

—After my father's death, she continued, my mother became happier. She met another man, a better man—

—*Please*. If it's something I've said or done...tell me what to do and I'll do it.

—In 19— I met my husband. He was a good man, and when I began to hate him, it wasn't his fault.

He flung his head in her lap, sobbing freely.

—But in 19— he was struck by a terrible disease, she said, and at this her husband looked up and she saw, for the first time, that there was nothing in his eyes but love. But he recovered, she continued, and was healthier and happier than before. When I began to write he would bring sweets and milk to the square for me.

And she smiled at him.

—That's enough, the husband said, standing and snatching the paper away. Let's go home and pretend this never happened. We have to *live*, don't you see? We have to live as best we can.

—But then, she said, tearing the paper away from him and pushing him onto his back, eight years later, he hanged himself. No one knew why. It was a terrible tragedy.

The husband picked himself up and began to walk home. He returned, an hour later, with sweets and milk which he set by the desk. She did not look up, although, some hours later, writing by the light of the moon, she drank some of the milk, and nibbled at the sweets.

iii

SIX WEEKS LATER, the village had grown. There were no hotels, so visitors paid families to house them, and when they could not pay they slept on the streets. Some families let strangers sleep for free, but not many. There was a madness about the visitors that was unwelcome.

The woman hadn't left her chair. She slept no longer than five minutes a day, during which her husband would stand guard with a gun. No one challenged him. There was love in his eyes, the sort that kills without hesitation.

The crowd was bigger than ever. And the police had arrived, though they were identifiable only by their uniforms. They watched, as fascinated and fearful as anyone else.

In front of the woman, there was now a microphone connected to a single speaker. She didn't need it—her voice had not flagged—but she didn't push it aside. She had filled sheet after sheet with her handwriting, and they lay on a separate table, neatly bound and dated. In front of her were three spare pens, and a pot of ink. Filling her pens was a job her husband had chosen for himself.

The story had grown. The woman no longer referred to herself, except in passing. She told stories of anyone who came to mind. Old women became young; lonely women, sometimes miles outside the village, found happiness when strangers arrived to take their loneliness away. But if only that were all.

Families who had lived in the village for years found themselves on the other side of the earth, unable to get back. One man awoke in jail for debts he hadn't incurred although he remembered, with brutal clarity, those wild spending sprees that had cost him his liberty. A young, beautiful woman, much desired by the men of the village, was attacked by wolves who left deep scratches in her face which became infected and oozed pus.

For others, nothing changed, but they couldn't sleep without visions

of terrible things to come. As the woman wrote on, her story wound its way into the future. Dozens learned that they would die, which came as no surprise, but also how and when. Some sighed with relief that they would pass into the next world—and there was a next world, she told them—with their loved ones beside them, their peace made with god. Others were not so lucky. A young man's hair turned grey overnight (though she'd said nothing about his hair) when he learned he would be torn limb from limb by bandits. He took to bringing her gifts—warm clothes, flowers, chocolates—in the hope that she might change his fate with a stroke of her pen. But not once did she look at her finished pages.

Her children often came, sitting by her side, or on her knee. She didn't brush them away, as her husband had feared. Sometimes she would stroke their heads, though without ever taking her eyes from her works. Very infrequently, she would break her narrative and the story would leap into the fantastic as she made up tales to amuse them. It is well known that a good storyteller must include children in the story, if she wants to entertain them. And so the children would suddenly leap to the moon and return with buckets of cheese. Centaurs would canter into the village and the children would ride on their backs and cheer. Giants lumbered into view while the ground shook, and fairies fell from the sky, waving wands.

All the children in the village clambered under knees to reach the storyteller. They sat beside her, waiting patiently, and when she gave in, which was rare, it made them so happy they smiled for days. They were perhaps the only happy people in the village.

As her fame grew, people travelled greater distances to see the storyteller and the ever-increasing story. They brought gifts—cars, video cameras, compact disc players, the latest inventions from abroad—and whispered their names in her ear, praying for her to be kind to them. When this practice became frequent enough to annoy her, the storyteller ended it by gazing hard at one such supplicant and writing a single terrible sentence. He was never seen again.

Months went by, and it became clear that the village, and indeed the world, would never be the same. The storyteller began to write of far off lands while the course of history shifted, slowly, heavily, like the plates beneath the earth which cause continents to leave their neighbours and head out into the sea.

The chief of police arrived from the capital, and then the secret police, and then the army. The area around the storyteller was cordoned off. Ministers held emergency sessions that continued for days. It was impossible to kill her, they realised. It was written that she couldn't die (volume three of the story). It was impossible, too, to control her. She had more power than any man or woman alive and, while some begged her for favours and some trembled at the sound of her name, others met in secret to share

their anger.

And that's where I come in.

iv

I CAN'T TELL YOU my name or where I was born or who my parents are. All I can say is that I used to live in our nation's capital. I was a lawyer by day, and a revolutionary by night.

My comrades and I were rationalists, intellectuals, though we did not shy away from action when the time was right. Remember that bomb blast at the southern end of the old city...but why betray old friends? Suffice to say, we were young, growing older, angry and growing angrier.

At first none of us believed it, but we had to admit that something was afoot. The newspapers spoke of little else. In fact, our clandestine press was the only one who ignored her. All that mattered to us was the state, and its destruction. However, when the news reached us that the storyteller had turned her attention to the capital, we became uneasy. People were disappearing, and so, at long last, my comrades and I gathered around my kitchen table to discuss the question of the storyteller.

—Damn the story! I remember saying. I can't speak for reactionaries, but she can write what she likes about me. Nothing will happen, comrades. Words will never hurt me.

They pretended to agree, but I knew what they were thinking. They were going insane and I could see it. They were worried that she would hear of my insolence and that I would disappear in mid-sentence, my memory erased from their minds. I was the only one who saw the truth, and I saw one world, a world gone mad.

We should draw straws, I urged. Whoever drew the shortest would seek the storyteller out, find her, and kill her. If the army killed him, then so be it. He would die a martyr.

I waited. Not one eye met mine. I stood, put on my hat and my overcoat, and, packing a knife and my gun, left for the railway station.

v

THE JOURNEY TOOK three days. On the second, my train was almost derailed by a goods freighter and stopped, halfway down a mountain, for several hours. I stepped down from the train and stared at the valley beneath us. I remarked to a young priest beside me that, were it not for the famine, those villages beneath us would have been idyllic. Of course, I explained, it was the state's fault. They continued to export grain and let the traders into the valley where they fleeced whoever had any money and left the others to die. The young priest nodded, but seemed uninterested.

—Do you know which is the village of — he said.

I looked at his face. It was rigid with hatred.

—You are going to see the storyteller? I asked, quietly.

—Of course. I am going to kill her.

He sounded bored.

—So am I, I replied, without hesitation.

He nodded and said no more, but when we returned to the train I joined the priest in his carriage. We spoke little, but it seemed he felt his mission to be a divine ordinance, though I suspected the storyteller had also killed someone dear to him.

When we arrived at the storyteller's village it was evident that it was no longer a village. There were hotels and restaurants on every street, museums and amusement parks devoted to the storyteller. Young children hawked souvenirs, mostly scraps of parchment said to be fragments of the story. The priest and I ignored it all and found a hotel some distance from the centre. It was late. We spoke little but drank a good deal of brandy before falling asleep.

vi

THE NEXT MORNING we rose early and loaded our weapons. It was easy to find the square; the whole world, it seemed, was going that way. The hawkers were already up, and there were signposts on every street.

The young priest looked pale. He had clenched his fists as we left the hotel, and they remained clenched as we walked. I was not afraid. The gun is mightier than the pen, I told myself.

When we reached the square I could not help but be astonished. Never have I seen so many people in one space. It seemed senseless, I felt—what could they see?—until I noticed the enormous video screens mounted on scaffolds from somewhere in the centre of the crowd. The screens were sectioned. One half showed the storyteller, typing with terrible ferocity into a computer, and the other displayed each letter as it was typed, in bold capitals. From speakers, mounted on every side, the storyteller's words resounded into the crowd. It was a synthetic voice, generated by the computer, a truly bizarre sound.

—Born in 19—, she was saying, in the village of —. Died in 19—, from cancer of the lungs.

A scream from someone in the crowd.

—In 19— the village of — was razed to the ground by the army of —

I rubbed my eyes. This woman was evil itself. I had not realised she had gone so far.

—During the earthquake of—

—The famine—

—The civil war—

—The invasion—

—The massacre—

I stood, transfixed, until the priest grabbed my arm and pulled me into the crowd. He, the resourceful fellow, had brought a pin which he pushed into bodies that refused to move. We made steady progress, but still it was half an hour till we found ourselves blinking in the light, pressed against the rope that separated us from her.

I was surprised. I had heard she was young and beautiful. Instead, her face was wrinkled and her hair was white. Her eyes looked opaque, as if she did not see the crowd. We watched for minutes, and not once did she look up. Her fingers moved so fast they were difficult to see, and I noticed that with every word she typed, her lips moved, as if repeating the word aloud.

The soldiers, standing behind the rope, faced us. They wore guns around their shoulders. They weren't there to protect the storyteller; she didn't need protection. They were to protect us from ourselves. I wondered how we would ever pass them.

The priest must have been thinking the same thing, but neither of us spoke. I checked that the gun was still in my belt, the knife in my jacket pocket.

When I looked up, I noticed the priest staring away to the storyteller's right. A man was standing there, one hand in his pocket, the other holding a child's hand. The man's eyes were fixed on the storyteller without blinking. Her husband. I have never seen a man look so unhappy.

As I was thinking these thoughts, the priest took his pistol from his overcoat and pointed it at the storyteller's husband. Before anyone could react, he fired. The husband did not move, and the bullet missed him. He could not have been more than two metres away.

The storyteller did not look up, but the soldiers rushed towards the priest. I stepped aside, taking advantage of the confusion to slip beneath the rope. I decided, in that instant, to use the knife. To make certain.

I was so close to her I could have touched her, but before I could move she turned around. I froze, recovered, and drew my knife while she turned back and typed a sentence. My knife was raised, pointing at her throat.

—The assassin raised his knife and slit his own throat, dying instantly.

I watched as my hand pivoted and the knife turned, pointing towards me. I tried to raise my left hand to protect my neck, but couldn't move it.

The mind, I remembered. This is about the mind.

This is a story. Only a story.

only

a
story.
—He slit his own throat, she repeated.
Only a story. Only a story.
The knife had stopped. Everything was frozen.
—He slit his own throat.
Only a story.
—He died, instantly.

Fear. I saw it. There was fear in her eyes. It was like a wall of ice shattering around me. I felt the strength in my muscles, the clarity of my thoughts, the heat of my blood, and I plunged my knife into the storyteller's neck. Blood arced upwards, into the air. Again and again I stabbed her, until I felt a blow against the back of my head. Before I lost consciousness, my final thought…A happy ending, at last.

vii

BUT THE STORY goes on.
She is dead, but the story goes on.
…who is the storyteller?
who else?

Here I sit, wrists chained to the keyboard. On either side of me are watchers whose eyes never leave the screen. They hold remote controls.

Attached to my temples are electrodes. One false *word*, and my brain will die in a thousandth of a second. Enough electricity to power a city, I was told.

I've thought about it. Let them kill me, was my first impulse. But they've outsmarted me. Not even the president knows of my existence. No one but the Brotherhood of the Story, as they call themselves, who control us all, and always will. It was they who suggested that, as I had defied the story, I would have the power to tell it. I was kept in solitary until one day I was blindfolded and a man entered my room. He explained their decision to me.

I would write, all day, every day. Once a month I have a half-day holiday, which I spend in my cell. I write what they tell me to. Nothing more, nothing less. If I refuse, they will torture my comrades and kill them, then choose twelve villages from my province and burn the inhabitants alive.

I answered that they would do this anyway, but the man said no, it was not so. With the power of the story at the Brotherhood's disposal, there would be little need for violence.

I would rather die, as they well know, but dying is not an option. So I agreed, and here I am.

I cannot tell you my name or where I came from. I was told to tell the story of the story, and you will never know if it actually happened, if we only think it happened, if it happened and was rewritten, or if, after all, it is only a story. Perhaps no one will ever read these words. The most I can say is perhaps. They will kill me otherwise.

It is late. I need sleep. I will finish now, with their permission. Finishing is a ritual. I type the final words and they unshackle me and take me to my quarters. At the end of each day, I write the same two sentences while they watch, fingers on buttons. Here were go.

viii

AND THE STORY GOES ON. IT WILL NEVER, EVER STOP. ■

Katherine Taylor

We Will Go On Like This

At the opening party for an exhibit on 57th Street curated by John's mother for a young sculptor whose boyfriend had died of an overdose the night before, Lily met Howard Cap. She liked him immediately because he was so ugly he was gorgeous, with severe high cheekbones and wide gaps between his teeth, and he had the remnants of an accent she couldn't place.

"Who's that?" John asked while Howard fetched two glasses of champagne. He and Lily stood at the edge of the room, watching everyone but each other. The gallery was packed that night with mature collectors, the adult children of mature collectors, film stars, and the more attractive elements of New York's younger art set.

"He owns a gallery in Greenpoint."

"What's it called."

"The Greenpoint Gallery."

"Creative."

"I like him."

"I don't like when you talk to handsome strangers."

"You keep telling me to talk with people."

"You should talk with people, but with my friends, not with handsome strangers."

THAT SUMMER IN California, for the third consecutive summer, the peaches didn't grow. The leaves of the peach trees wilted and curled and sprang pits with no flesh. The bank Lily's family had used for over seventy-five years finally did as it had been threatening and took half her father's acreage. Her parents sold their home on the river and moved into a small pink house in a gated community at the center of town. Her mother described the new house with almost hysterical enthusiasm, the new cabinets that still smelled like the factory, the refrigerated drawers in the kitchen, ceiling fans in every room. Lily pretended not to notice that her mother spoke too quickly, took too many breaths, used the word "streamlined" again and again. Lily pretended not to notice when her mother told her three times that the skylight in the bathroom came open at the easy touch of a button.

"But you're doing well there, you don't want to hear about us," her mother said over the phone.

"Yes I do."

"You can imagine your father. All those years with that bank, and now what they've done to him, you can imagine."

"Yes."

"But you don't want to hear about us."

The last of Lily's things left in her old room at the house on the river next to what had been her family's ranch in California were sent to John's address in New York. In the few months since graduating from college, Lily's priority hadn't been finding an apartment. Those first few months in New York, Lily hadn't planned on staying for longer than six months, or then longer than a year, or then longer than a year and a couple months. At first she lived in Jersey City with a relative of a family friend and then, after she got the job at the paper, with a girl from school in a studio apartment in Park Slope and then, by accident, because it was easiest, with John.

THAT FALL, LILY and Howard began to see a little bit of each other. He was often at the galleries on 57th Street and her office was just a few blocks west. They ate weekday lunches and, occasionally, if John had a squash match or a golf game, took long Saturday walks in Greenpoint. She helped Howard paint the gallery walls after a show came down, she held wood in place while he built himself a counter in the front room. Weekdays, she never had gossipy lunches with the people from her office. When other girls went downstairs together for salads or sandwiches sold in little clear boxes, Lily went by herself to meet Howard in one of the diners near Grand Central or, occasionally, the Oak Bar, where they wouldn't have to bother with anyone but tourists.

Howard became very successful that year, selling art to the president of a Swedish car company and contracting the design of their new London showroom. He bought the building that housed his gallery and ran a series of parties that would, with appearances from members of a sometimes reclusive rock band and an almost weekly mention in Lily's increasingly popular column, become legendary even beyond New York.

"I hope you're not a whore to celebrity," Howard said. They sat at a table in a corner of the Oak Bar, next to the window looking out at the carriages lining the park. They ate grilled cheese sandwiches and shared one martini.

Lily shrugged. "I don't know what I'm a whore to yet. Maybe."

"No."

"I'm a whore to anything I find very interesting."

"I don't believe you find rock musicians interesting."

"What do I find interesting?"

"Rich boyfriends and their old family chateaus."

She almost ignored him. "His family doesn't have a chateau." She paused. "You must be thinking of old Napa money, and I've never liked those types."

There was a long pause, during which she waited for him to change the subject. Howard enjoyed the topic of John too much.

"I'm going to sign Pilar Peters," Howard said.

Pilar Peters was the young artist whose boyfriend had killed himself the night before her first 57th Street show, the opening where Howard and Lily had met. Pilar Peters was too famous for Howard, too successful. "She won't sign with you."

"I know her from before. Don't write anything until she's already signed."

"I'll be very proud of you, Howard."

He took her hand. She had long lanky arms and he could take her hand in his without coming too dangerously close. "You're the only one who really likes me." This was true: the years he was being fabulous and famous in those small elite underground ways, when he was still naïve enough to be threatened and impressed by money like John's, when he didn't know who he was until after he got dressed in the morning, Howard was right, Lily was the only one who really liked him.

THE FRIDAY NIGHTS that Howard threw his famous parties, John refused to go to Brooklyn.

"I don't go to Brooklyn. I am very happy never to have been to Brooklyn."

"I'll go by myself then. Again."

"It's dangerous," he said. "You shouldn't be walking around Greenpoint." He spoke to her while watching himself in the mirror. He watched himself remove his cufflinks.

"It's not dangerous. It's a populated area."

"Exactly as I fear. Next you'll ask me to go to the West Side." He leaned in and checked for grey hairs. He admired the muscular line of his posture. She watched him do this every morning, every evening.

"You're afraid you might actually enjoy yourself and not have a good reason to patronize my social life."

"I don't like you walking around Greenpoint. And who knows about this Howard. Who knows what he would do."

"He's my friend."

He turned to her, unbuttoning his shirt, and looked at her for the first time this evening. "You know absolutely nothing about friends. You can hardly speak to anyone you're not sleeping with."

PILAR PETERS WAS unrelentingly gorgeous. For her entire life she must not have realized how gorgeous she was, because she had developed a personality and a talent equally superior to her face. She had the long graceful fingers every girl ought to have but few actually do. She had legs that went on and on and hair that fell over her shoulders like honey and the complete perfection of her made Lily unreasonably happy.

Howard had invited John and Lily along to the vernissage for a group show in Chelsea. Chelsea was awfully far west, John complained, "But at least I'm not being asked to leave Manhattan."

The two of them didn't know anyone but Howard, who hustled and bustled through the crowded room, making exclamations and introductions. John and Lily leaned against the wall, drinking white wine from plastic cups. At John's mother's shows, under no circumstances was wine ever served in plastic cups.

"Did you see the artist?" Lily whispered to John.

He nodded. She doubted he had seen the artist. If he had, he would still be looking at her, as he had the last time, the night Lily met Howard, when John could not keep from staring at Pilar.

Pilar Peters had the inverse coloring of Lily: dark haired and light eyed. She wore a flimsy shirt that kept slipping off her shoulder and a worn-out cardigan tied around her waist. Her body was like a curved board, smooth and straight but rounded in the places it should have been round. She was impossible not to look at. She didn't say much, but when she said something she was quick and smart and surprisingly articulate.

"Would you like to meet her?" Lily asked John.

"Who?"

"The artist, John." Lily pointed to Pilar.

"It doesn't matter."

"Oh, you're such a liar."

Lily and John stood at the edge of the room, watching. One reason Lily stayed with John as long as she did was that he always joined her at the edge of a room, he enjoyed watching as much as she did.

"I've heard of you," Pilar said to Lily when Howard finally introduced them. "I've read your column."

"I was at your show in June," Lily said.

John nodded. Lily waited for him to interrupt with the information on who he was, who his mother was, but John did not interrupt.

"I was medicated that night," Pilar said simply. "Otherwise I'm sure I'd remember you there."

THAT NIGHT, neither John nor Lily wanted to sleep. They each lay awake, aware that neither was sleeping. "We should have a dinner party," John said in the dark, "with your friends this time."

"You hate my friends. My friends irritate you."

"I didn't say that." He turned on the bedside light. He put on his slippers and went into the kitchen. She followed him.

"You said they grate on you."

"Jesus, Lily, it was a generalization."

"I don't have friends anymore, John."

"Then your friend Howard and some of his friends." He put on water for tea.

"You are so predictable."

"But predictability is so reliable."

She nodded. She took mugs down from the cupboard.

"I just thought we'd have a few of your people round."

"And maybe Pilar," she said.

IT WAS VERY EASY that autumn, for the people Lily knew, to be young in New York. There were lots of jobs for people who didn't feel like doing much. There were always new important people no one had met yet. No price was too high for real estate, and still everyone had money to buy houses at the beach, in the country. A lot of John's friends paid what might turn out to be too much for lofts in TriBeCa on streets that would turn out to be a little too noisy. One night of cocktails would easily cost a third of what a journalist made in a week, but even the journalists had stock in their companies. The summer had eased into autumn, and the autumn was warm and promising and no one thought his luck would end.

"Pilar likes you," Howard said that Monday at the Plaza for lunch, the first cool afternoon of the autumn.

Lily shrugged. The idea of Pilar made her feel, in a way, optimistic, as if good news were coming. "I liked Pilar. I liked her in that way when you realize you really want someone to be your friend."

"Did you like me in that way?"

"I liked you a lot," she said. She smiled. She touched his face. There was no risk in touching Howard's face in the Oak Bar at the Plaza.

"She's leaving her gallery," Howard said.

"She's had a hard year, I guess."

"Anyway, I think we'll all make very good friends." Howard was at that point where it's still possible to think business makes for real friendships.

THERE WAS A cocktail party given by one of John's friends, a trader of soft fruit and drupe. Lily could never bear evenings at the fruit trader's house. There was never a thing to eat but grape salad and apricot slices and nectarine salsa.

"I cannot drink another bellini on this man's terrace," Lily said as they left the car in front of the building.

John didn't respond. He continued into the building.

"I'm going to throw myself off the terrace," Lily said.

"Then throw yourself off the terrace," John said.

"I know fruit people, John; there's no reason we have to eat grapes on sticks every single time we come."

John stopped before getting in the elevator. "Do you want to get

something to eat?"

"I'm not hungry."

"All right, Lily."

"I mean I'm not hungry right now."

The fruit trader had a beautiful, petty blonde wife called Claire. Gavin and Claire had two little girls and they ignored their younger daughter. Lily knew Gavin promoted fruit from Florida and South America and tried very hard not to dislike him for this, but liking him was difficult, particularly during evenings at his house, particularly as the farmers in California had suffered last year, particularly when he ignored his younger daughter.

A college friend of Claire disliked Lily immediately. "Who smells like vanilla? Someone smells like vanilla, it's making me gag."

"It's Lily," John offered.

"You smell like a sweet shop," Claire's college friend said. "I hope I don't have to sit next to you at dinner."

"Are we having dinner?"

"I mean, if we were having dinner."

"It's my soap, I think."

"Don't let my husband near you, he'll try to eat you." She bit Lily on the arm, hard. Lily pushed her away by the forehead.

"I'm just joking," said Claire's friend. "You don't have to get violent."

Lily took a grape wrapped in ham on a stick from a man passing a tray. A grape on a stick has already been punctured. There's not the pleasure of that small explosion when you eat a grape already put on a stick. "I don't suppose Gavin trades olives," she said to the man passing the tray.

At the fruit trader's house, John didn't stand against the wall. He competed for cleverness with his roommate from school, an angry archaeologist called Win whom Lily thought was probably gay. With his own friends, John tried extra hard to be charismatic. He played the piano, which everyone was always vaguely surprised he did well, and insisted the six-year-old sing a particular duet from *Annie* with him. The fruit trader's younger daughter started to scream when the singing started, and the nanny was told to take her away.

Later, Lily overheard Claire's friend say to Claire, "That John's girlfriend is violent."

ONE AFTERNOON after two martinis, Pilar signed a contract for Howard's gallery to represent her, and overnight Howard became very famous. Journalists besides Lily wrote articles about him, did interviews with him, wrote reviews of the current show at the gallery.

"I didn't know you started out by selling paintings on the street," Lily said after reading one of the pieces.

"He was a particularly thorough reporter."

"I'm sure you just never told me that."

Howard shrugged. "They weren't paintings, actually. They were posters."

"Why did you say they were paintings?"

"I wanted him to like me."

JOHN AND LILY had eight people to dinner to celebrate Howard's signing Pilar.

"We should invite Gavin and Claire," John said.

"I thought this was going to be a dinner for my friends."

"But darling, who are your friends? Gavin and Claire might actually buy Pilar's paintings." He stood in the corner of the room, checking his messages on the telephone, which is always what he did first thing when he returned to the apartment, as if he were always waiting for news that might have come.

"She's a sculptor, John."

"Anyway, artists always like to meet people with money."

"She doesn't just want people with money, John, there are plenty of people with money. She wants people with the right collections."

John turned very slowly from where he had been standing, checking his messages at the telephone. He turned very slowly to Lily and stood there for a moment and then spoke calmly, quietly, so that Lily had to listen. "Don't you dare tell me about art," he said.

THE NIGHT OF THE dinner party, John wore a button-down linen shirt buttoned a little too far down. Though it was hot, Lily wore suede, a vintage suede one-piece pantsuit her mother had purchased in the late 70s in Milan, one of the years her father had a plane, one of the series of years peaches and nectarines had done well. Lily had filled the loft with high, white tulips, and placed candles in all of the twelve windows.

It happened to be Claire's birthday, which both Gavin and Claire failed to mention until phoning on their way over.

"They said not to worry," said John.

"Then why did they call to mention it, if we're not supposed to worry?"

"We can have the grocer send up a cake."

"I cannot serve a cake from a grocer, not tonight, not in front of Pilar."

John had carved the center out of a lemon and was carefully slicing twists for the cocktails. "Call Le Cirque then."

"I will," said Lily. "I am calling Le Cirque." Lily took the car and just before the guests arrived, drove uptown to Le Cirque, wearing her mother's

suede pantsuit and matching suede stilettos, and spent a quarter of a week's salary on an entire chocolate cake, sold to her separately piece by piece.

Lily made a point that night of not serving any fruit. Any other occasion, Lily would have served baked peaches sent from her father's ranch or Greek yoghurt with honey and raisins and California pistachios, but tonight she wanted to drive a point home to Gavin, to show him not everything is built of fruit. Also, her father had no peaches this year to send.

That night to dinner, Win brought a man. "Luke and I are in a relationship," Win told John in the kitchen while Lily poured cocktails.

"What sort of relationship?"

"A relationship," Win said, "of a sexual nature."

"Good," John told him, "good. I'm happy you found someone who makes you happy."

"Well," Win said, "I don't know whether he really makes me happy."

"Well," John said, "I'm happy you found someone to bring tonight anyway."

"YOU NEED A PIECE here," Pilar said, pointing to an open space in John's apartment, an open space that Lily had previously liked but now thought twice.

"It's waiting for something of yours," John said casually, and turned away.

"I'll give you something, then."

"Don't get too generous," Howard shouted from the kitchen.

"On loan," she said. "But you need something in this space."

For one evening, Claire shut up. Even Gavin managed not to bore on about fruit. It was exciting to have Pilar around, a minor celebrity but the sort of celebrity very fashionable in New York, renowned for her talent and intellect, but famous for the shape of her face. No one mentioned to Pilar they had heard of her before, no one acknowledged they had read the profiles and articles and weekly mentions in *Page Six* or the *New York Observer*. Everyone pretended Pilar was no cleverer than anyone else; everyone kept up the facade that they were as important in New York, at that moment in New York.

Lily felt happier than she could remember feeling in a long time. The promise of Pilar felt very similar to the promise Lily felt when, on a commuter flight from Boston to New York, she met the editor who would eventually give her the job at the paper: a promise that everything good was about to happen. Lily had a talent for finding exceptional people, and John would have to recognize that. John had all the same friends he had when he was fourteen. His social circle hadn't changed in twenty years.

"I told you about Win a long time ago," Lily said to John while they were alone in the kitchen, the galley door swinging behind them.

"So you told me."

"Well. Acknowledge I have an instinct."

The guests were drinking more than anticipated, and John sliced the last lime very thin, trying to stretch it. "It didn't take a witch doctor to see Win was gay, my darling."

Lily smiled at him. She was overcome tonight with the happiness of this narrow kitchen, this loft, the food they had prepared together, the attractive group of friends they had assembled, this life Lily could see the two of them were about to build. "You didn't know," she said.

"Of course I knew. We all knew."

He did this to her, he made her feel obvious. "John," she said, and touched his wrist, "why can't you be honest?"

He nicked his forefinger with the bar knife, releasing a sliver of blood. "You caught my wrist," he said.

"I'm sorry."

He sucked the wound. "You made me cut myself."

"I know."

He shook his hand out. There was really not very much blood. "Why don't we sing happy birthday," he said.

Lily arranged the candles, one on each individual slice of cake.

LATER, WHEN everyone had left and the last bit of scotch had been poured and Lily and John and Pilar were good and drunk, after Pilar had assessed the empty space of John's loft and all the compliments for the dinner were done, after the elevator had been called and as they waited in the living room for the lift to come, Pilar said, "I am going to kiss one of you good-night. Who will it be?"

Lily and John stood together, smiling, half laughing.

"Me," Lily said.

Pilar kissed Lily on the mouth, long, open, until the elevator came and John took Pilar down to hail a taxi.

"DID YOU KISS her again?" Lily asked that night in bed. The windows were open to the street and an occasional car swooshed past. From the corner you could hear people shouting goodbyes.

"What do you mean, again?"

"On the sidewalk, did you kiss her again?" The damp summer heat was just beginning.

"Don't be ridiculous."

"You could say yes or no." They lay still next to each other, as if they were speaking to the ceiling.

"Lily, you are the one who kissed her."

"You walked her to the corner."

"Yes."

"And did you kiss her?"

"Please don't ruin a nice evening. You ruin everything."

"Nothing has been ruined. I want to talk." She sat up. She looked at him. He kept his eyes closed and did not move.

"You want an argument, not a talk."

"You want to save the feeling of that kiss."

"A kiss is not a disaster."

"What is a disaster, then?"

John looked at her. He whispered, "Your father's peaches."

She was quiet for a long time. "What's a kiss mean, then?"

"Don't try extra hard to be complicated, Lily."

TWO WEEKS LATER there was Pilar's opening party at Howard's gallery.

Outside the gallery that night of the party, John couldn't find a place to park. They drove around and around, past warehouses and crooked brownstones, circling farther and farther away from Howard's building.

"Well, if we can't find a place to put the car."

"We should have taken the subway."

"The subway. To Greenpoint. There is no subway to Greenpoint, my darling."

They put the car in what looked like an abandoned driveway with the number to John's mobile phone in a note beneath the windshield wiper. There were delivery trucks parked up and down every curb. The sidewalks seemed to have been upended by strong roots, but there were no trees anywhere.

Lily kept getting her heel caught on the uneven pavement. For all the cars, there seemed to be no people anywhere. She got the feeling the neighborhood and the darkness made John nervous. Their clothes were wrinkled from the car and sweat seeped through John's shirt beneath the arms. Neither of them said anything and the three blocks to the gallery seemed like very long blocks.

When they arrived, the gallery was closed and there was a sign taped to the inside of the glass door: *The Gallery Has Been Completely Vandalized. Howard.*

Lily laughed.

"I don't think it's very nice to laugh," John said.

"It's not very nice to laugh. But what else can I do?"

They peered in through the door—the gallery had been, as the note said, completely vandalized. Spray paint and torn canvases, Howard's desk smashed into shreds, chairs turned skywards, the glass case in the center of the room shattered into tiny diamond-like pieces of blue. Pilar's sculptures had been tipped over, some broken into large pieces, some painted over

and defaced.

"Is this meant to be art?" John said.

She turned to him. "Don't be a grouch."

"You're the one who couldn't stop herself laughing."

"You're a grouch. You don't like Pilar anyway."

John threw his head back and laughed. "Oh, I don't. Is that your theory this evening."

"I knew she wouldn't sign with Howard."

"This is a very good reason to go elsewhere, if you ask me."

"This must be part of the show." She turned back, and pressed her face against the window to see every bit of what had happened.

"Yes. In your small world, everything is always just part of the show."

"I mean, part of her show, like the tragedy before your mother's opening."

"I see. Pilar arranged her boyfriend's suicide, did she?" John leaned against the building, away from the window, as if he had seen everything he needed to see.

"I knew she would never sign with Howard."

"You think this is an elaborate publicity stunt?"

"I do know some things, John. I do know about papers and publicity."

"She wouldn't do this to her own work. It's too valuable."

"I think she's very destructive," Lily said.

They turned away from the spectacle of the gallery and walked on to the car. "Do you want to kiss me?" Lily said.

He continued walking. "What is this about?"

"It's just a question."

He looked at her. "You're upset about the gallery."

"I don't know," Lily said. "Maybe Howard was in on it, too."

John nodded. "That would be Howard. You have quite a respectable group of friends, my darling."

We will go on like this for a long time, Lily thought. We'll go on like this because we look very nice together and we like the idea of things the way they are. She stopped in the street and looked at John. Her heel was caught between cobblestones. Suddenly she was stuck. For all the violence of the evening, the neighborhood was entirely silent but for the two of them. "You make me feel very happy," she said to the back of him. She was thinking of her parents in their new pink house with the new cabinets and everything opening at the touch of a button. There was no choice but to be happy with where you were.

He pretended not to hear. He kept walking. "This is the last time I will ever, ever come to Brooklyn," he said, walking, talking to no one. ■

Melita Schaum

—Third Place Essay—

Restraints

The week I decided to be true began with one of those perfect California days—blue sky, cosmetic sun, breeze scented with wok oil and sunscreen drifting in from the direction of the Bay. I was sitting at an outdoor table at my favorite crêperie on College Avenue; all around me palm pilots and reflector Ray Bans shimmered in the sun. I had one hand slipped around the stem of a perfectly chilled glass of Chateauneuf-du-Pape Blanc, the other palming my cell phone, on a call to my accountant, who was busy putting me through a proto-tax-audit.

"But why do you have to *be* in Berkeley?" he was insisting, playing judge to the write-off of six months' studio space I was preparing to itemize for this year's taxes. Despite the sky, the crêpes, the karma, it was a question I'd been asking myself lately, too.

As a writer who travels half the year, my taxes had long been the bane of hometown accountants, half a dozen of which I'd raced through in the past five years. The optimists among them told me gleefully to write off *everything, absolutely everything*, since they figured eventually I'd write about it all. The pessimists grumbled, unwilling to stand up beside me in a court of law, and suggested I choose between a real job or a new accountant. This latest one seemed on the fence.

"If it comes to it," he droned, "you're going to have to *prove* that this essay could not have been written anywhere else. Can you do that?"

I contemplated this while I ordered a second glass of wine and waited for my salad to come. I thought of all the places I'd found myself in over the last ten years—Scotland, Paris, Venice, Seattle, Hell's Kitchen, Prague. I knew that I had to be there—artists follow these calls, as real as if the phone were ringing—but how, in an audit, could I logically connect my piece about a colleague's suicide with a rainy November night in Skye, or a cold April in Montmartre with memories of childlessness and a love I knew was doomed? "Your Honor—" I imagined myself beginning, but after that, a blank.

My food arrived, and as if on cue the phone beside my napkin began once more to bleat its tinny rendition of Pachelbel's *Canon*. Like somnambulists, everyone within thirty feet of me reached for their bags. It was my partner, Jim, calling from his office where, as Boss Architect and Big Kahuna, he is shackled into fourteen-hour days, at the mercy of his employees who wear cutoffs and drift in after 10:00 a.m.

"How's your day going?" he asked amicably.

"Lousy." I stared down at my glistening salad of infant greens and miniature organic vegetables, edible Bonsai in a rainwater-and-aged-virgin vinaigrette. "I've been trying to write all morning. I can't stand it. I'm giving up. I'm finding other work."

"Why not just be my sex slave?"

"I am already, but it doesn't take up very much of my time." Last week again he'd put in eighty hours. "I still need a day job."

I heard him laugh, though levity—that kind—was not exactly the response I'd been hoping for.

"Did you pick up the cabin key?" he asked.

A client of his had offered us a condo in Tahoe for the weekend. My man knows he needs a vacation, and he's agreed to go, provided I make the arrangements. Pack road food. Fill up the tank. Spelunk into closets for ancient ski equipment. The key in question, like most pleasures, came with its own long list of instructions. Frozen pipe repair. Hot tub cover storage. Dishwasher quirks. Already the vacation was beginning to sound like something we'd need a rest from.

I heard his second line ringing in the background. No one else in his office seemed to be in an answering mood.

"Gotta go. See you tonight, but I may be late again. I've got a meeting at 7:00."

I hit my "END" button and looked at the salad, the wine, the silverware, still as perfect as they were five minutes ago. Eden before the Fall.

I'd had a third call that morning, from my gynecologist, a crusty woman with a no-nonsense attitude and a figure like a folded-up fire hose. She had phoned to discuss the outcome of a pelvic ultrasound, a procedure involving something called a probe, to which I hadn't been properly introduced. The results had come back mixed. They had found a couple of fibroids, benign tumors, which might be the cause of my irregular, increasingly uncomfortable periods. Then again, she said, it might just be the onset of perimenopause.

"Peri—what?"

"The period before menopause, when your body's gearing up to stop. Could last five to ten years. Hormone swings, irregular periods, it hits all women differently. These fibroids now—"

I'd been standing on a streetcorner in Rockridge, trying to hear her over the blast of buses and schoolkids taking over the supermarket parking lot. *Kiss this, Yolanda,* some kid with big pants was shouting five feet away from me.

"If they get bad we can always bring on menopause."

"Bring it *on*? Why not just dye my hair gray and buy a walker?"

A car alarm began to wail. Between siren yelps I heard the word *hysterectomy*.

"—there's less blood loss. Ask yourself: what *do* you need your uterus for?"

I found myself entering a crosswalk with a passel of twelve-year-olds, deafened by rap music and bus brakes, one hand involuntarily clutching my abdomen while a woman's voice at my ear tried to talk me out of my female organs. I did what she said. I asked myself what I needed them for.

At forty-five, I know the odds of my having a child get slimmer with every passing half-hour. I know that my lifelong ambivalence hasn't helped much, and I'd be lying if I said my uncertainty about motherhood had magically disappeared. But my partner and I had been contemplating what would happen if I did get pregnant, and although we both agreed life would be fine without a child, the more we discussed it, the more we found ourselves smiling. We had decided to leave it to fate—*qué será* and all that—and since then I'd been riding a mild roller-coaster of eagerness and gentle panic.

These last couple of months, though, had thrown a wrench into things. My body seemed to be working on a schedule of its own and, as if to tease me, had started juggling my cycles in a maddening way. I'd even woken a few nights bathed in sweat, wondering if I'd picked up a tropical fever of some sort. When I mentioned this to my agent, a woman of fifty-six, she'd laughed and laughed, called that the best joke she'd heard all year.

"Well, think about it," my gynecologist barked. "You don't need to do anything right now."

It occurred to me that this attitude might be precisely the one that had gotten me *into* my present dilemma. Sitting at my table on College Avenue, I stared at my salad and contemplated my three phone calls, like Gatsby's trio: accountant, lover, doctor. Each one in some fashion calling in the chips.

THE ONE CALL I hadn't gotten that day was the one I'd been guiltily, though not very certainly, waiting for. The one that made me prickle with excitement. The one that, when I thought of it, made me a little faint with anxiety and self-blame.

My friend Nadja had been teasing me the evening before. "You have to practice saying, 'It's only a drink after all…'" At twenty-four, Nadja was not the most reliable consultant. A pretty young thing from Romania, she'd been carrying on for the past year with three men—her graduate advisor, a young Russian filmmaker ("poor, but with image"), and an investment banker from Walnut Creek in his sixties, who took her to restaurants where an appetizer cost a day's wage. "He's old and rich," she'd shrug. "And I'm young. And beautiful." A fiction writer, she was a bit prone to exaggeration.

I'd taken Nadja to a literary reading in San Francisco a few days earlier,

one that I hadn't wanted to attend alone. I've been sketching the design for a course on Men and Intimacy—a little Hanif Kureishi maybe, some Ondaatje and Dubus—so when I saw the announcement of a reading by a debut Mexican novelist whose book had been hailed as lyrical and erotic, it struck me as worth checking out. The bookstore flier called it "a sexual tour de force"; one reviewer had praised it as having "lots of pussy and short chapters—what more could you want?" I called Nadja and she agreed to go, provided she didn't have to shake his hand afterward. "Who knows *where* it's been," she muttered.

The Tuesday night reading was a small gathering, a few rows of folding chairs crammed into the widened aisle of a Latino bookstore in the Mission District. Nadja and I sat midway between the podium and the door, at about eye level with a shelf of scholarly works on the Day of the Dead. The audience was all women, except for the store owner and a man who wore a trench coat down to his ankles and smelled of Romeo and Juliet cigars. Nadja yawned—literary events other than her own bored her—and she occupied herself by admiring her ankles, dejected that their youthfulness was at that moment being wasted on a room full of women. A hush fell when the store's publicity manager, a bottle blond trembling on high heels, took the podium and introduced the novelist from Coyoacan.

He wouldn't have won any beauty contests. Dusky skin, long hair, slender fingers weighted with rings. His main appeal was that smoldering Latin look, almost a cliché, and the fact that he moved through the room like a cat in a cage. He was all *noir*—boot-black hair, eyes without irises, black silk shirt, black jeans so tight you could hear them creak. As he moved past us up the aisle I imagined I could smell ash and fire, a kind of incense made up of half-smoked cigarettes and city fumes.

He made a few indiscernible opening remarks and then began to read in a sultry, unaccommodating accent. The language surprised me—it was gorgeous, incendiary, extreme. I found myself sitting up very straight, my thighs melted to the chair. His prose made heat rise all over my skin. My doctor had warned me I might experience something like this. Feeling flushed at inappropriate times. The impulse to throw off my clothing. He read passages about sex, power, intimacy that left the air crackling. He read it all in a voice as quietly electrifying as a hand slipped into a woman's blouse.

I couldn't stop staring at his features, shadowy in concentration, then his hands holding the book's splayed spine, the pages spread before him like open white thighs tattooed with words, and how he turned each one when he was finished with it, raising his index finger to his lips, wetting the tip on his tongue, then dipping it to the edge of paper that rose and arced in response to his moistened, delicate touch. Beside me, I could feel Nadja as she watched me watching him.

There's a story by the Argentine writer Cortázar called "To Dress a Shadow." In it, the narrator plays an erotic game of separating one shadow from all the rest, dressing it to reveal a human form, then while it resists, undressing it in intense excitement to unveil the shape that he's created out of chaos and confusion. Maybe in the erotic we always invent, then want our invention to have preceded our desire, to be unveiled as real. At the podium stood my Pygmalion, a phantom in black who smelled of smoke and alleyways. Where had he come from?

Over drinks after the reading, Nadja leaned towards me, conspiratorial. She'd been grinning ever since I stumbled forward to exchange a few words with the novelist after the applause, and then, at his request, business cards. I'd dropped mine, twice. It seemed we had a couple of acquaintances in common, and he made a point to say he'd be in touch.

Nadja smiled mischievously.

"I will never guilt trip you, my dear," she purred over a vodka martini, although I hadn't said a word. She smirked, dipped a perfectly red-nailed finger into her glass, brought it up mock-thoughtfully to her lips.

"But do you notice how much brilliantine he puts in his hair?"

Nadja, Nadja. Twenty years my junior, laughing up her sleeve at my folly.

IT ISN'T THAT I don't love the one I'm with. Let me count the ways. He's a sweet man, handsome, a blue-eyed Scandinavian. Decades ago, his college girlfriend's family nicknamed him Adonis. Now, at fifty-five, he's built a bit more like an Eastern deity: a few extra curves and folds that I love to cuddle. Silvery hair and beard; a strong, timeless grip on the things he loves. His eyes are still divine, vivacious, starred with laugh-lines, and with the exception of angled glances at co-ed midriffs on Telegraph Avenue, he seems to be aging fairly gracefully.

He's a loving man but a workaholic, spending nearly all his hours in a deafening, über-chic architectural office he renovated from an Oakland warehouse. I see him nights, weekend mornings. The rest of the time I find myself living in a beautiful, strange house—his, designed five years ago—adrift, tethered, longing for some illusory freedom. I confess, I'm jealous of his labors. I'm struggling to catch the rhythm of a new writing project, and it's just not coming. In the meantime, I've weeded half an acre of garden and begun baking muffins; the other day I found myself turning on daytime TV.

I love him, but as I sit with my blank writing pad and watch the squares of sun move across his stained concrete and copper floors, across the high-tech Maplewood and steel kitchen island, across photographs of Bolivia and Turkoman rugs, I miss my single, unrestrained life of travel. The days of flipping a coin, landing a finger on the map, before appointment books

and coordinated schedules began to tether me to home. I think somehow that movement, novelty, adventure might help me come to my words, or to my senses, again. I'm caught between the poles of love and freedom, home and journey, youth and age—pacing a pretty cage and chewing my pen.

I've long wondered why writing for me is inseparable from motion. It's as if my words are forever fleeing just a little ahead of me—only to be caught over the next rise, around the next curve of road. Travel through the world—like a line of narrative—holds out such infinite promise, a thousand different endings, and in between the assurance of countless delightful complications. A turn in one direction opens limitless avenues to follow; a turn in another, and nothing in the plot is ever again the same. The allure of that which is always within reach but beyond grasp.

There's a scene in the Mexican novelist's book where the narrator makes love to a woman in a hotel room. A mirror over the dresser reflects their bodies. She is on top of him, sweating, swaying, dripping with red wine he has spilled over her breasts and licked from her skin. He watches himself in the mirror reaching, grasping her. Watches her undulate, clench her thighs, clutch his flesh with her fingernails. Watches himself watching.

He can't decide which arouses him more—the woman or the image of the woman, the body above him or the phantasm moving in the glass. He goes back and forth, cheating on one with the other, unable to decide.

Maybe that's me—torn between substance and reflection, what's here and there, suspended in a mirror game of infinite regress of possibility and choice.

I AM NOT GETTING older. I am not getting older. I am not getting older.

"None of us is," my best friend remarked. "Inside we're all twenty-one."

He was on the phone from Maryland, our weekly postmortem which has been going on for twenty-five years, give or take a few months when he's been climbing in Nepal or hiking the length of the Seychelles Islands. He believes in eternal youth. He thinks everybody's life should be a constant series of raptures and alarms, and he's always been my one-man cheering section whenever I sacrifice safety for unrestrained foolishness. He loved it when I spent an autumn herding sheep in the South of France. Loved it when I dropped everything one June to hike the Arctic Circle above Stockholm. He had just spent a half-hour crowing at my story of the sexy novelist.

"But nothing is going to happen," I backpedaled into the telephone.

He chuckled. "You've said that three times."

I scrunched further down into the sofa, kicked aside a woven pillow.

"This is moronic. I'm way beyond the sexual adventure stage."

"Right."

"What does *that* mean?"

"Nothing."

"That's right, *nothing*. Because nothing's going to happen."

"Four. It's all in your timing."

I was holding the phone in one hand and a bottle of Ibuprofen in the other. That day I felt like aging was the grand escapade, a roller-coaster ride of chemical floods and ebbs, creaks and aches, pricks and stabs and groans. My breasts felt like someone had inflated them with a tire pump, my legs were throbbing, my tear ducts had been going haywire. And it was just mid month.

"Why can't I just conceive at forty-five and call *that* an adventure?"

"Having a baby isn't an adventure. It's a life sentence." Father of three, he didn't miss a beat.

I discharged a sort of needling, dissatisfied sound, a sound that made windowpanes vibrate and dogs begin barking, another uncontrollable development of age. He went on.

"It's twenty years of miscommunication and relentless sacrifice, and that's if you're lucky."

"So why did *you* do it?"

"Biological imperative. I wouldn't have missed it for the world."

Do I need to mention that being childless and hearing someone lionize parenthood—however backhandedly—feels a bit like swallowing glass?

"Timing," he reassured me. "It's all in your timing."

His timing, of course, had been impeccable. Since I'd known him as a medical student, he'd been on track in everything—career, family, public life. He also stayed in Dorian-Grey-like shape, a fifty-year-old who looked thirty, a runner and mountaineer, skin tanned, body muscular, hair glossy. In his field of genetics, it was small wonder his primary interest was longevity. I feared sometimes that he might age into some crank with a home juicer and a late-night infomercial spot on cable.

"I *hate* getting older," I bellyached. "I hate feeling like my body is some alien thing that's taking over. I hate being moody and anxious and unattractive."

"You're beautiful."

"Inside and out?" I griped sarcastically.

"Nope. Just outside," he laughed. "Inside—face it—you're turning into a real wreck."

YOU HAVE TO believe me when I tell you that, for a completely unrelated reason, I found myself on the Internet looking up sites on Tantric sex.

I had just read Octavio Paz's book *Conjunctions and Disjunctions* for an article I was researching on Mexico and Buddhism, and I found myself intrigued by his discussion of that oblique, ascetic cult. Tantrism is about

infinity both beyond and within limits. Transgression for them was a ritual that left behind all taboos—not by rising above but by indulging—and stripped them of power. That included *all* taboos—unclean sex, eating human flesh, consuming excrement, in rare cases even murder. Pushing the limits of the decent, of the "human," in order to transcend humanity.

And yet Tantrism was also about restraint. In most Indian versions of the sect, they practiced intercourse without ejaculation. That energy was turned back inward, aroused but not expended, summoned and redirected as the ultimate discipline. To these devotees abridged desire was a form of immortality. It occurs to me that sex and death are not opposites, as Freud thought, but siblings. The body in rapture is still the body that will one day decay.

A complicated concept. It turns me to the Internet, that teeming ether. My first mistake. What swarms into view is a congregation of soft porn sites. *Unleash your sex! Unbridled sex! Deeper, Harder, Longer! Sonia's Tantric Secrets!* Despite their inappropriateness, none of them even seems especially erotic—what, I wonder, is so exciting about the "unbridled"? I think back on the novelist's language; what intrigues and arouses is its element of reluctant confession, almost unwilling intimacy. The scintillating thing about Cortázar's shadow is that it resists. These sites seem to have missed all the points of rule breaking and restraint, not to mention their more arcane omissions. I envision new websites: *Cannibalism for Couples! True Tantric Transgressions! Unleash Your Bowels! Join the Movement!*

Meanwhile, my own body breaks all the rules. Today again it surges and swells, as if for a moment it remembers youth, then suddenly relents and propels me back into midlife. Sex. Death. I recall the clock beginning—the first menses, at twelve or thirteen, marking that wondrous, terrible entry into time. For the next forty years, your body ruled by moons and cycles, tides that rise and fall. And now this reversal back into timelessness—a less than graceful exit, I confess. The phase of change is always chaotic, unpredictable, defiant, shattering everything we think we know, everything on which we base our lives.

I stare at the pneumatic breasts and caricature cocks on the screen. Small wonder the Tantrics wanted to escape this carnival.

But were they right? That the only way out is through?

WE HAVE A CALENDAR on our wall whose squares, orderly as a chessboard, fill up each month with a scrawl of notes and symbols. Ultrasound on the seventh. Pick up tax forms on the tenth. Fourteenth ovulate. Twenty-third arrive Madrid. Life lopes on. Jim and I have planned a trip to Spain in May. Much like hitting the slopes for the weekend, it's a rest for him, a break. Mortar between the tiles of work. For me, right now, I'm hoping it's a way to corral my wayward thoughts.

I dutifully page through guidebook photos of white towns, Moorish vaults, fortresses and vineyards, but I find myself thinking that tourism might be just another way of fleeing time. I read up on the local art of *flamenco*—that dance of passionate restraint. But Seville is the city of Don Juan as well, restraint's apotheosis, dragged for his sins and excesses into hell. There's a lesson here. I remind myself that the land of the Alhambra is also the home of Don Quixote, Prince of Fools.

In spite of the handbook's glossy fakeries, I'm feeling the nip of travel again, that fist-clenching, sensory excitement. My partner can only afford two weeks off work, but I'm ravenous for more. Hill towns. Mountains. Cliff-lined coasts. Places away from tour guides and itineraries. I find a Benedictine convent in Lebrija that takes single women guests for six dollars a night. It could be a perfect place for me just now. My finger lands on the calendar's May first, Day of Misrule.

"How about I go to Spain a few weeks early and you join me there?"

He's barely listening, wedded to his laptop, mesmerized by its blue glow. He has deadlines bearing down on him and has begun bringing work home evenings.

"Maybe. Can we talk about it this weekend?"

I envision so clearly the convent yard, the sunny town square just outside the gates, a fountain burbling in languid noon heat. Me crossing the plaza gracefully in a sheer, strapless dress and heels. *O Mary Mother of God pray for us sinners*. Why is it a man in black I see leaning against a wall, looking up at me from under the brim of a sombrero?

I reach over and play my fingers over the back of my lover's hand, competing with the keyboard. "How about I go upstairs. And you join me there?"

"In a bit. I have some elevations to finish."

I refrain from the obvious double entendre and head up to bed. By the time he comes up it's past midnight and I'm asleep, dreaming of white porticoes and windmills. I surface just long enough to hear him hit the pillow, my loyal Sancho, and begin to snore.

THERE'S NO PHONE call, but as Nadja guessed, an e-mail arrives from the novelist, asking me out for a drink. He says something clever about writing and hunting, something obliquely flirtatious with a Latin inflection. I'm not sure how to respond, either to the witticism or the invitation. I sit for a long time doodling with the keyboard, staring at the screen.

What do I imagine might happen? I certainly don't want to get involved with this man. For a moment it occurs to me that I don't even really want to have sex with him. What I'd really like is for him to read to me in Spanish, naked, his black hair draped like a mane, while I sip on an enticing, full-bodied Rioja and smoke a cigarette right down to my

knuckles, something I haven't done in over ten years in deference to the health-Nazis and my impending age. I'd be wearing something filmy, and nothing would happen. Well, okay, *something* might happen. Well, sure, probably something *would* happen, but my fantasy—at least at the start—has to do with the Spanish, the Winstons, and the wine.

Liquor. Smokes. Transparent lingerie. Why do I suddenly see my gynecologist in the corner, arms folded, tapping an orthopedically shod foot? And my accountant, what's he doing there with his sheaf of useless receipts?

I must be losing it. I decide not to do anything for now, and logging out to the computer's forlornly adenoidal *Goodbye*, I shake myself from reverie and head out for a walk.

Berkeley is a strange place in which to grow old. The streets are filled with gray-haired eccentrics—faded hippies wearing hemp shirts and Birkenstocks, grizzled Earth Day leftovers with bicycle clips around their ankles and peace patches from the '70s still sewn onto their jeans.

But this is also California, Land of Eternal Summer, the Young in One Another's Arms. On Bancroft Avenue near campus the creamy-skinned kids with blond dreadlocks hang out, dressed in faux bondage, Doc Martens, and chains. Middle-class girls and boys strut, brocaded with tattoos, those sexy tribal markings the novelist wrote long and hard about. Neo-primal. He found them irresistible, decadent, compelling.

Intrigued, I check out a tattoo studio on San Pablo, in a gritty part of town made up of sari shops and bail bond outlets. The homeless on this block look tougher than the ones downtown; the stores have bars on all the windows. I pass through the nondescript white storefront from daylight into gloom—until my eyes adjust and the dusk fractures into an arcade of colorful designs. Every wall, every surface, displays images of body art, as if the room itself has been tattooed from crotch to collar, floorboard to molding. In back, a guy with a black ponytail and a needle is bending over a massage table behind a half-closed curtain. Someone is lying face down and motionless, while the buzzing instrument inscribes what looks like a bat's wing just over the hipbone.

"Be with you in a minute."

"I'm just looking."

I drift around the store, its carnival of images. Daggers and snakes, a pair of dice, a hula dancer, a naked woman posed on a cross over which a scroll reads *Rock of Ages*. There's a Chihuahua face with lowrider flames flaring from either side, speared roses, Celtic bands, portraits of Moses and Lady Luck. I examine an intricate rendition of the Sistine Chapel, in which Adam looks a bit like Mel Gibson, complete with *putti* and Italianate clouds. The guy and his client are busy talking about fuel cell cars. The needle hums and dips like a dentist's drill.

I continue browsing this gallery of human canvases. What would I choose if I were to brand myself? Two dragons guarding the pubis? Jesus on the Mount? I trace an emblem of a couple, limbs entwined, heads thrown back, no bigger than a half-dollar. I can see how this could be seductive. The Japanese in the Edo period believed that tattoos were talismans for immortality. When pierced enough times, glands die and the patterned skin turns sweatless and cold, a mild rigor mortis. *Irezumi*, the mortification of the flesh, is like inoculation: just a little death—a superficial death—will keep the rest at bay. A taste makes one immune. *It's only a drink after all.*

I pass a floor-length mirror where clients can examine their art in stages and give myself a casual once-over in the glass. You could say time is the artist marking me, but in this light his designs are still pretty faint. I run, have always been athletic, a blond with only a few white strands so far. I can brag that a few men over the years have thought me attractive—though as Denis de Rougement quipped, love *is* the greatest act of the imagination.

What fells me, standing there, isn't the gradual, surface decline we expect aging to be. The silver in the gold. The graceful onset of character-lines. What throws me is the turbulence inside—these unplanned upheavals, flash floods and brush fires, my body capsized, abandoned to its moods and furies, its teary, misdirected desires. On the wall is a Polaroid of a man's back blooming into a devil's mask. A point between my shoulder blades begins to crawl.

I tell the guy thanks, but I'm still thinking about it, and, jingling the mom-and-pop bell above the door, I translate myself from this world of shadow and image back into daylight. The last figure I see is a boy's dream pinup, a cartoon woman with huge breasts and miniscule cutoffs outlining the V of her crotch. She's holding up her fingers in a peace sign.

IN THE NOVELIST'S book all the women are tattooed. Inscribed for him, scripted by him—indelible ink. Is narrative another immortality?

I'm thinking about this as I lie beside my partner. We're reading before sleep, nested in the marvelous mess we call our bed. Pages of the *New York Times* are strewn about, along with copies of *ArtNews* and *The New Yorker*. I wonder sometimes why, living in California, we seem so interested in the doings of New York. Is it, as a wag once said, Rome to our Empire, whether we like it or not?

"The decadent end of imperialism"—that's what the novelist called one of his women: the seductress, power-hungry masochist, the one into sex clubs, bondage, whips. The one who liked to be restrained in corsets and handcuffs. I peek over "Talk of the Town" and see her, dressed in a maroon thong and pushup bra, drifting through our bedroom, fingering our things. She holds up a pair of my lover's briefs. *Naughty*, she laughs, touches the

conservative white cotton with the tip of a finger, then pulls back jokingly, as if she's been burned. She riffles through my jewelry box, my stockings, my one or two nylon camisoles. Nothing to her taste; everything in this household is *way* too pastel.

What is she doing here anyway? Did I summon her; am I now responsible for inviting chimeras into our home? She's sitting on the window ledge, examining the metallic black polish on her toes. A death's-head moth is etched above her ankle. She throws a glance at me—kohl-smudged eyes, dangerous, red-lipped leer. *Bored?* She growls. It suddenly feels immensely crowded in here.

As if in a *tableau vivant* by Gustave Doré, other figures arrive—old lovers, one-night stands I'd thought were long forgotten, attractions ignited but never pursued. There's the handsome Italian I saw through my train window in Milan, who blew me a kiss from the platform as I pulled out. A stranger who followed me through the exhibits at the Louvre, and whatever it was about him—his face, his tenacity, the way he held his body—that made me weak-kneed with desire. The hungry eyes of a beachcomber in Hawaii years ago as I walked by—in those days tanned, fit, my hair bleached ocean-blond, wearing the only thong bikini I've ever owned.

Perched everywhere are the apparitions of might-have-been, specters of once-was and never-again, conjured by the novelist's prose and his sexy Princess of Darkness in her purple underwear. But it's not just the ghosts of lovers who appear. It's my own younger, wilder self that fills the room—past incarnations that moved through this world strong and willful, unconstrained.

"Honey?"

My lover is perusing *Consumer Reports*, his glasses drifted to the end of his nose, the bedside lamp spilling a small puddle of light on his silver chest hairs.

"Can we talk?"

Wimp, I hear the red-lipped apparition mutter. I glimpse a pair of fangs tattooed above her thong-line.

"About what?"

"Me. Us."

He smiles, rubs his eyes. "That's a pretty broad subject."

The Princess of Darkness is stretching, all long limbs and libido. *Loser*, she mouths at me. My basketball star college boyfriend is watching her, spellbound. *Coward.*

"What would happen"—I slip my hand through my partner's arm and move in close—"if we found ourselves attracted to other people? If I, for instance"—I feign indifference, brush something imaginary off the pillow—"was attracted to another man?"

Princess smirks, digging her nails into the shoulder of the boy I had a crush on in tenth grade.

"It depends." He's thoughtful, but unalarmed. "I suppose we'll always have superficial attractions. That doesn't mean we'll act on them."

Consumer Reports is perched on his chest, touting its centerfold of refrigerators and mountain bikes. I hear a sound and look up to see him yawning. A spell shatters and the girl in the velvet lingerie vanishes, trailing a ménage—or menagerie—of my old flames. I feel a strange sense of relief and loss.

"I'm bushed." Jim kisses me, then smiles at the look of bafflement on my face. "Look, we're going to the mountains in two days. Can we talk about it then?"

EVERY PATH YOU take will lead to countless others. Behind the door that reads "The Novelist" a whole new world could be waiting. I can't resist. I go online again. Not to the fibroid information site or the perimenopausal chat room—a group with a newsletter called *Hot Flashes*, complete with liner jokes about limited circulation—not to the overcrowded site on Tantric Sex, but to a story the novelist published last month in a Spanish language e-zine. There it is. My Spanish is bad, but it looks so sexy. I can almost smell black leather and smoke emanating from the page.

I hit the bullet that reads "Translate This Page" and settle back for an hour of escape. After this, I tell myself, I will decide. After this, no more restraint.

The computer masticates a while, then swallows, regroups, rescrolls. What comes up makes me stare, then gape, then laugh.

The ass of pelirroja that beb'a single in the bar was not nothing else round and shiny like an apple of Washington.

It's gibberish. The hilarity of the erotic translated by machine, made literal.

The woman hab'a opened the legs to show to him that she did not take panties. She said, without no titubeo, I do not like to waste the time when I decide that I want to go to me with somebody.

It's sad and funny in the same way mechanical sex toys are funny and sad, imitating us with such innocent, robotic purpose they miss the mark entirely.

The long legs were supported in the cross-sectional support of their own bank; the skirt slid until the superior part of the thighs; naked sex parec'a to dismiss a fragrance of which it wanted to fill the lungs.

Maybe the erotic is always gibberish when viewed in the light of day. I'm still laughing when the phone rings. It's my accountant.

"So," he drones, "have you figured out your defense?"

IT'S STRANGE TO see icicles in California. Outside our condo windows we can watch the gondola's silver pods carry skiers to the summit. Blue skies beyond. Snow-dusted pines. Somewhere beyond, the big gray lid of Lake

Tahoe, flat as a Nevada accent.

We've come off the slopes early, sore from the exertion but happy, settled in for an afternoon in front of the fire. Skiers' tans reddening across the bridges of our noses, we look like old prospectors in our long underwear and rag wool socks, steaming cups beside us. My love pulls me close, wraps his arms around me.

"Now," he says, "tell me."

He's caught me off guard, but I find myself opening up, taking a first few steps down the gangplank of risk and disclosure. I describe how a house closes around me, how the tighter the cinch the more I struggle to be free. I open up to him my longing for a child and my fear of parenthood, my terror at the squares of sun moving across his floor, my dread that a blank page will mean a blank existence. The novelist is left far behind, forgotten; my story has its own momentum. I sketch the life I've given up by being here with him; I dress it in such glittering detail I nearly convince myself—a mirage of travel, impulse, independence. I fall in love with my own words, aroused by this chimera I've created of freedom, youth, desire.

"So why should I stay?" I ask him finally in loving desperation. "What can you give me?"

His arms have been around me all this time, holding me steady through this torrent of words. Now I can see him thinking. Kind gaze, strong hands, pensive smile. He feels as real to me as time.

"Roots," he says simply, and the look in his eyes is a map to an astonishing, uncharted place.

"YES, IT'S A write off," I tell my accountant, "I'm sure of it."

"No," I say to my gynecologist, "I'll stick with what I've got for now."

I would say the same to the phantoms in our bedroom if I could conjure them, but they seem to have disappeared with only the slightest trace—one of my earrings gone, a pair of briefs Jim can't seem to find.

It's evening and we're in our spaces back in Berkeley—I'm reading in a deep chair by the living room window; he's at our dining table working on designs. Yawning, I close the novelist's book that's dog-eared now, and accidentally on purpose drop it behind the bookshelf where it may or may not be found someday, may or may not be missed. In another life I cross a courtyard, see the glisten of wine on skin, live in the shimmer of an endless mirror. In another I drift the world with words for maps, alone, fulfilled, transcendent. In yet a third I watch myself cross over to where my love is working and with one hand trace my fingers through his hair, across the laugh lines of his eyes. From my deep chair by the window I observe—hidden in the space where I live all these lives—as I gently close the laptop, turn the calendar to the wall, and lead my Adonis, *mi novio, mi hombre muy guapo*, up to bed. F

Sandy Longhorn

In Her Mother's Country

In her mother's country, she's a green seed
humming—sub-acoustic sound—the husk

about to break open, revealing the first root.
She stirs to the song the women sing when they dig

the shallow holes and toss in the unblinking eyes
of potatoes saved back for planting, tamping

the mounds of black dirt with their heavy feet.
In that far north country, land of aurora borealis

and the remnants of glaciers from another age,
where her mother was born in the bloomtime

and named for the sound of petals unfolding,
she will arrive early with her two eyes open,

one fist clenched, the other hand a flat plain,
and they will struggle to find her proper name.

Sonja Livingston

Mendicant

If this bottom-dwelling heart be altar
    —and there is nothing sadder than the crack of marble
    nothing deader than cool yellow stone—
But you insist, insist upon your altar, must have
Harness for your head, pebble under the knee, water for the finger.
Well then, thumb this relic and say your beads,
Spit mouthfuls of prayer into this chalice,
Pour pennies into my purse
    have your holy-mary-mother-of, now-and-at-the-hour-of,
    and why not push palm to forehead and call to the east,
    since you're in a mood for calling out?
Or else, or else and much better still, stand before me now
    oil-eyed crow
Spit back blue-black feathers, step into this pot boiled over,
    lower yourself
Into crawfish and stew, toss soft shell, soft shell, up and over, and over
    till I cannot tell
    whether you take or give—
    grease your lip, dip and rise, dip, spit back those feathers,
    wet your face on what remains, break beak to bone,
    pry it loose, pry it loose
Take this water, eat this stone,
    make it biscuit and honey, salt and marsh, sassafras and roux,
And pray, on this roadside, sweet beggar,
To find altars high enough for you.

F. Daniel Rzicznek

Primer

The white crane
hooks backward through town

to a pond reddish with soot,
wraps broad wings

around its pumping body,
eases to the bottom's murk

silent as snowmelt. Bells
of ancient air collect

in the ears of the man
thought long dead

who emerges now
from his ramshackle house,

who steps lightly
through the rusted gate

to which feathers
have been stapled as a warning.

Joanna Osborne

Biography

The solid moon hides under daylight while Grandma smokes
the wallpaper into questionable shades of beige.
Stains permeate the walls, paint my childhood a jaundiced house.

I think of yellow's other similes: the instilled mannerisms
of prairie dogs that sleep in shallow holes and only rise
to check the wheat's length after rain (their repetition is perfect, like a
tide)

or leaves that paste the side of the barn in an October protest.
They hold themselves against the wood as if trying to listen
for the decay. Then the less familiar shades—

when barley grows instead of corn in an unplanned square of field.
I spend all day trying to remember the word *saffron*.
And if this was really my home

I'd name the blades of grass like pets or dolls,
instead it only grows to be mowed, only calls itself flaxen in the
gloaming
while inside, the predictable utensils tarnish, plea for their practical use

as I trim her cuticles with paring knives and pile her dead skin
in patterns on the nightstand: smoke signals no one can smell.
This isn't what I imagined in the picture, only what I found.

John Gibler

The Anthropologist

By the moon of some eviscerate hunger
He places his instruments before him.
In other rooms women tear at the hours
With their teeth.

Beside the collection of metals and ink
The children wait.
He hums as he winds and ties
Hums as he observes and calculates the heat.

Here they do not call him doctor—
The one who documents
The drip and bloom of wanting
On the bodies of their children.

Jacqueline Jones LaMon

Going For This It

I was like, And I should not even be this pierced
by the casual glance, but it's the grazing
yes—eyes to skin to solid mass—whoomp—transference
blowing me—whoosh—from here to queendom

come. Morse code tapping inside my head
making me go :*hey*: if presented with one slip
of a glimpse of encouragement and shiver of opportunity

I'm sure as shameless shaman
going for this it.
                    You see where I'm coming from?
And I'm like, Don't act like you don't know
which way the accordion folds so it makes a wild noise

(Okay, it might be corny but you know you like that sound)
You gots to push this button to take that elevator down.

Brandel France de Bravo

—Third Place Poem—

Apricot

A sarcastic Egyptian always speaks
of apricot season, which comes and vanishes
faster than dreams over morning coffee.
Oh sure, he'll take care of it—in apricot season
which falls between mañana and the cows coming home,
a time so fleeting, ephemeral,
it might as well be never
or what we cannot recover:
the buoyant forever when we held our noses
underwater where no one could see
and touched tongues for the first time;
the certainty that certain transgressions
meant no turning back.
It isn't innocence we miss
but the thrilling moment that we let go,
a stem splitting from the branch, fruit in free-fall.

Cecilia was the first among us to ripen,
breasts at eight, and shortly after
rendezvous with boys in the bushes.
No one called her "slut."
She floated above us
like Mary in a procession,
her wooden robes fluttering in the breeze.
We supplicants longed for a guilty glimpse
of her panties, her early bloomers,
named for Amelia Jenks Bloomer,
who like Cecilia was ahead of her time.
While others fought for suffrage,
an end to slavery,
she dreamed of simpler underwear,
a garment so free, it might as well be nothing,
loose as an apricot,
that precocious apple,

Lolita of a peach.

Robert Boswell

The Heyday of the Insensitive Bastards

In memory of Jim Amick

Assignment 1: Happier Time

As much as anything really happens, this really did.

It was late spring. I was in that drifting age between the end of college (sophomore year) and the beginning of settling down (the penitentiary), and I had taken to the mountains where my friend Clete said the air was so thin you could skip the huffing and absorb it directly through your pores. Clete was living out of a green VW van that had broken down at a scenic overlook a few miles outside the Colorado ski town of Apex. He had taken the tires off the van to keep it from being towed. Perched on the cliff, it looked primitive and vaguely prehistoric.

The Greyhound driver pulled over for me. "Don't get too close to the ledge," he warned. Evidently I hadn't concealed the fact that I was stoned.

Clete sat on the metal railing eating a combination of trail mix and Alpha-Bits from a plastic pouch. He was a big guy with brown hair in bangs across his forehead, a ponytail in the back. His body had an imposing quality, not just because of his size but owing to the confident way he moved through the world. "I've got a kilo of shrooms," he said by way of greeting, leading me across the highway and up a muddy path.

In the shade of pines, he moved a fallen branch and dug up a bag of psychedelic mushrooms. He kept them separate from the van in case some law officer decided to search his home.

I spread my coat over the grass. The coat was blue and bulky but light—insulated by air—made of a petroleum product impossible to stain. It had so many pockets I'd forget about some for months at a time only to discover an old joint, a dime bag, a novel I was halfway through. The coat dated back to my last visit home. I got distracted on the way, a six-hour drive from the university, and arrived three months late. My parents still had my Christmas presents wrapped in elf and reindeer paper. The whole time I was there they complained about their lousy holiday. (As you know, I haven't seen them since. A person can only apologize so much.) The coat was one of my presents. A man could cross the Arctic in such a coat. It had become my organizing principle. And it was all the luggage I had.

Clete and I plopped our butts on it. "I recommend this much," he said and passed me a handful of mushrooms. It was a hot day, and we stretched out in the shade. Through the trees, we had a view of the highway, the

beached van, and the green gorge beyond the railing. Clete and I have been friends for fifteen years. We first met when we were seventh graders. My mother had grown tired of driving me to school when the bus stop was just down the street. Clete was on one knee when I arrived, his chin in his hand. "Spermatozoa are living creatures," he said, "and we make them." I did not know his name, and he didn't know mine. We'd seen each other at school, but we'd never spoken. "They swim, they wriggle, they *seek*."

"Is this where we catch the bus?" I said.

"That means we have some sense of God in us," Clete said. "I feel it." He put his hand over his crotch. "It's like a bright, tickling light."

We've been friends ever since.

"They're kind of gritty," I said, referring to the mushrooms.

Clete shrugged. He had spent the morning in a wildlife center watching a film on lions. "One." He counted with his fingers. "They sleep twenty hours a day. Two, the females do the hunting while the males snooze. Three, when pursuing prey, they attack the smallest and slowest in a herd—the baby wildebeest, retarded zebra, gimpy antelope. Given this evidence, what do you think the movie was called?"

I pointed to a couple of girls in short pants bicycling past the lookout point, but Clete couldn't be discouraged. When he got philosophical, there was no stopping him.

"*Lion, the Noble Beast.*" He paused to let the irony sink in. "Then I got to thinking how kings just lie around on their royal furniture and tax the peasants. Maybe lions *are* nobility after all." Clete had never been what anyone would call a good student, but he could be specific in ways most of us couldn't. "Take lime popsicles," he continued. "Do they taste anything like actual limes?"

"Have you been eating these all day?"

"I sampled while I was harvesting."

"You *picked* these?"

"They grow," he said. "Right out of the ground."

"Mushrooms can be poisonous, you know." I studied the remaining mushrooms in my hand, torn between the idea of a bargain high and the possibility of dying.

"I took a library book with me," Clete assured me. "They're perfectly safe."

"So," I said, eating another but chewing more slowly, "you've got a library card."

"Everything we have, even the rain, comes from the earth," he replied. "Except for meteorites and certain toxic gases." He returned the bag to the hole and used the branch like a broom to disguise the topsoil. "I know where there's a party," he said.

We hiked down to the VW. The van had no side windows or seats in

the back, just a long floorboard he had covered with foam rubber and shag carpet. I tossed in my coat, Clete locked up, and we headed towards town on foot.

"Where are the tires?" I asked.

"Hidden." He needed six hundred dollars to rebuild the engine. He didn't have a job but was saving money anyway. "Walking back and forth to town is good exercise," he said, "which saves on doctor bills and money that would have gone toward gas if the van was running."

"We're making a profit just walking along," I said.

"Picking mushrooms saves on drugs and groceries."

"How much actual cash do you have?"

He stuck his hand in his pocket and counted the small wad of bills, plus a few coins. "Twelve dollars and forty-eight cents, but this is a buffalo nickel. I'm saving it."

"Twelve forty-three then," I said.

I felt the most inside our friendship when we walked together as we did that afternoon, making plans and bumping shoulders, eating magic mushrooms from our fists, hoping we wouldn't get poisoned.

"I've got about fifty bucks," I told him. "I'd have more but I gave this woman a necklace when I broke up with her."

"The one with the parrot?"

"How was I supposed to know it wouldn't come when it's called?"

"Parrots don't know what they're saying," Clete said. "They just copy sounds. Humans are the same. We talk in the vague hope of finding out what we mean."

When we reached Apex, he showed me the library and a bakery that set out day-old pastries in their alley. "Fires are good for forests," he said.

I smelled the smoke then. The flames were fifty miles away, but the box canyon that held the town had a roof of smoke. It had a purifying odor. I began to feel tall and rubbery and ready for the next thing. We walked a long distance. At some point, it turned out to be evening. Stars swelled from the dark center of the sky to the toothed ridges of the mountains. All the heat fled the air and I thought to ask, "Where we going?"

Clete pointed to a dark house up the hill. A girl named Val was dog-sitting for a family spending the summer in Scotland. It was her party. The house had a peaked roof and plank porch. The windows showed a waffling brightness like the memory of actual light. Some kind of Mary Chapin Carpenter warbled inside, and I had a momentary fear of live music.

Clete didn't knock. The front room held maybe twenty candles. A boombox sat on a high table, its cord connected to an extension that trailed along the floor, out a window, and across the lawn to a neighbor's outlet. Clete ejected the tape, which drew applause from guys lounging on the furniture.

"I have 'Texas Flood' in my coat," I said.

"You're not wearing your coat." Clete lifted tapes from the scatter on the table and held them by a candle to read.

I wandered into the kitchen. A bone-thin woman, who turned out to be Val the dog-sitter and hostess, was mixing a drink by flashlight. "Thirsty?" She handed me the drink she was making. "Whiskey and ice is my specialty, and it's all we've got." She dipped into a plastic cooler for more ice. "These glasses are real crystal," she added, "but they're monogrammed. I'm afraid to sell them. It's a small town."

"I could sell them for you," I said. "Nobody knows me."

"That's so sweet." She'd spent the upkeep money the family had left on dope. Once the electricity was cut off, she sold the appliances. She was down to the blender and Toast-R-Oven. "I have to keep the phone on for when they call from Dundee," she said. She had trained the dogs to bark into the receiver. "I got screwed on the refrigerator." She had traded it to a guy at the bakery for a cooler of sandwiches. "Never do business when you're hungry," she advised. Her mouth was small and almost circular, like a split cantaloupe. She noticed me studying her mouth and kissed me on the cheek. "Who are you anyway?"

I told her I was Clete's friend.

"Thank goodness," she said. "I need his help." She took another crystal tumbler from the cupboard and filled it with whiskey. "Clete doesn't take ice for some reason."

"He doesn't want to get spoiled," I explained.

She took the drink to Clete and grabbed his arm, leading us to a room with wood paneling, leather furniture, and no windows—a den. People sat around in candlelight studying a guy in a big chair who was staring out of eyes as distant and hollow as those tunnels that go under bodies of water. Val shone a flashlight on him. He didn't blink.

"What do we have here?" Clete asked. He knew the guy, whose name was Stu.

A bunch of them had snorted PCP, but Stu had done twice as much as anyone else. Now he wasn't moving.

"Someone egged him on." Val turned a nasty gaze on a guy sitting cross-legged on the couch. His head was narrow in the middle like a partially imploded can. He spoke. "From now on he's not Stu, he's *Stewed.*" His laugh was sniggering and ratchet-like.

Clete asked Val for his name, as if he weren't right there. She answered with the single word "Barnett." Clete leaned in next to me but spoke loud enough for everyone to hear. "We may have to teach that one a lesson."

Barnett quit laughing and drank from a tall glass of something green.

Clete addressed the entire room. "Who, if anyone, knows what PCP is?"

A guy with a headband said he thought the active ingredient had something to do with the manufacture of fluorocarbons.

None of us liked the sound of that.

Clete wanted the full list of Stu's symptoms.

"He's grown really quiet," the headband said. "*Pensive*, I'd say. And he doesn't move."

They all looked at Stu but didn't know what they were seeing, as if they had entered a cult and weren't permitted to understand what was staring them in the face: an unconscious man with his eyes open, sitting upright and rigid in an armchair.

Clete wanted to know how long he'd been like this.

Val checked her wrist. "Oh," she said, "can it really be ten p.m.?"

"It's ten to twelve," I said, showing her. (She had confused the hands on her watch.) A murmur made its way around the room. Several people counted with their fingers. Stu had been comatose for six to nine hours, according to which of his fellow travelers you trusted.

Knowing the time earned me credibility in that crowd, but it made me wonder how long Clete and I had walked. I was certain the sun had been up when we started.

Then I asked, "Is there any of that stuff left?"

Barnett answered. "Stewed sucked up the last of it and licked the tray."

"He doesn't smell so good," Clete noted.

"Is there a hospital in this town?" I asked, adding, "I'm new."

"There's an on-call doctor," Val said. "He doesn't like this kind of thing, though."

Clete held a stubby candle right up to Stu's face, staring hard into the wanky eyes. "Wilt thou be made whole?" he said. It got the ratchety laugh from Barnett, but Clete was dead serious. One time in Oregon he asked a highway patrolman who had pulled us over for driving without lights whether he didn't "relish the dark world." We spent what they called a cautionary night in jail, but everyone was very nice to us.

Stu made a sudden shuddering movement with the top half of his body. He raised one arm from the chair and held it aloft. Pointing to our hostess, he said, "V-V-V."

Val, as if to encourage him, tugged at her short skirt, wiggling her butt against her leather chair. The place had great furniture.

A tremor passed through Stu's arm and made his hand dance, as if he had discovered something miraculous or gotten electrocuted. His face contorted with the effort of speaking. "V-V-*Val*," he said at last. His eyes settled on Clete. "Cl-Cl-Cl-*Clete*."

"Cluck like a chicken," Barnett yelled.

Clete turned to him. "You should get down on your knees."

A girl in a tube top and cut-offs called out, "You insensitive bastards!" We waited for her to follow up, but she just crossed her arms and pulled her feet up onto the couch.

"She can't mean us," I said to Clete.

Stu's trembling finger indicated one person after another, moving around the room, naming the witnesses. He included the dogs, the big blond retriever, Ruff, and the yappy white terrier, Ready. When he came to me, who he didn't know from Adam, he said, "K-K-Keen."

That's how I got this name I still use. To call it an alias is only technically correct.

Eventually I went off to explore. The candlelit house had wild, watery shadows on its walls, a fickle stream of bouncing light and insistent waves of dark, like scales of light on an actual stream. A breeze would agitate the candles, and the walls became the wide chopping sea. Human forms at the base of the wall, their heads upturned to watch the dreamy business, seemed to be praying. Some of them touched my shoulder or the soft places above my hips and said forgettable things about the brilliant, rocking light.

Later, I got hungry and found a jar of maraschino cherries in the cupboard. I filled my mouth, sweetness trickling down my throat. I thought I might hunt down a bed. In the stairway, I came across the body of a dead girl and swallowed one of the cherries whole. She lay on her back, her head higher than her feet, staring through an open skylight. There were no candles on the stairs. I had to let my eyes adjust. She was dressed in a green tube top and nothing else, but the body seemed innocent, her skin as soft as the cherries that pressed against my tongue.

The soles of her feet were black, and a trickle of blood ran over one pale thigh. I couldn't decide whether she had fallen down the stairs or given up on the climb and taken a seat, only to die in the process. Her face may have been in moonlight, as it was impossibly white. One thing was clear—she was not supposed to be looked at like this. I unbuttoned my shirt and draped it over her.

"Thanks," she said. I jumped back and tumbled down the stairs to the landing, hitting the back of my head. When I came to, she was gone and Clete was kneeling beside me. Other people were stepping over my torso to go upstairs or come down.

"These creatures have strangely human qualities," Clete said, "like recuperating ghosts." He lifted his eyes to follow their movement. Even in this situation, he and I thought of these house squatters with a combination of condescension and ironic pride, owing to the van and our independent living skills.

"How many people are at this shindig?" I asked.

Clete didn't answer. He waited for the landing to clear. Then he leaned close and whispered, "Wilt thou be made whole?"

It was time to go home.

—

COMING DOWN FROM the mushrooms, I realized how high we had been and how long it would be before we were fully grounded. Along with this realization came the tedious desire to have never taken the stuff. With psychedelics, there was always a lingering descent, during which time you were not high but could not sleep or relax, like a hangover that begins while you're still drinking and spoils the whole evening. It comes with a bottoming-out feeling. The designs you imagine and the new light that you shed on your life grow dim and dull and disappear as you nosedive. Your mind strains to retain some sense of what it was that had you smiling and optimistic, but you can't touch it. The dream of the high, as well as the high itself, vanishes, and the asphalt's cracks remind you that you're no kid and less young with every plodding step. Hallucinating has taken you no closer to understanding what it is you mean to do with your life.

Clete and I marched down the wide street to the heart of the little town, the bare streets and dark houses clucking disparagingly at us. In one window, beyond gauze curtains, an orange light licked at the dark world and dim figures crossed and re-crossed the floor. A cold wind taunted the domestic bushes along the street and made my skin prickle and bump. I had lost my shirt to the approximately dead girl and longed for shelter, my nipples turning to squat little stones.

"I should have brought my coat," I said maybe a hundred times.

"We're at ten thousand feet," Clete said. "The nights are always cold." He removed his shirt and handed it to me. He was wearing a wife-beater underneath. The shirt was several sizes too large. When we turned on Main to head out of town, the sleeves rippled like a swath of skin separating from my body.

Morning arrived. The sun should have heated me up, but my body held tenaciously to the cold. We stopped at a diner on the highway and ate eggs. Clete told me about the party, as if I hadn't been there. Stu had come around enough to have several drinks and pass out. "His essential movement is to seek unconsciousness," Clete said.

Our booth had bad springs, which put our heads close to our eggs, a handy convenience this morning. A scrambled bit of egg escaped my mouth and hit the plate. Its brief contact with my palate had turned it an unnatural red, the color of maraschino cherries. "Do I look funny?" I asked Clete.

Clete shrugged. "I've known you too long to say."

The food sated something in me deeper than hunger. Three walls of the diner were made of plate glass that needed cleaning, and we spent a long time watching a smeary light shift over the pines and aspens and wide

stretches of high grass. The waitress had big eyes and narrow shoulders. Her nametag read "Kale." She knew Clete and would talk only in his ear, which made me a little paranoid.

"I'd introduce you," he said, "but she doesn't like talking to strangers."

"Is this really the right line of work for her?"

She went from table to table, listening and nodding, pointing to the menu. She'd whisper to one person, who'd speak to the others.

"Her legs are nice," I said.

"Every man in here is half or more in love with her," Clete said. He got her to scrape leftover eggs onto our plates.

"This guy's omelet has a weird spice," I said.

Clete forked a bite and savored it a moment. "Cigarette ash," he said.

We stayed in the diner until the eggs and coffee wore down my chill. Clete paid the shy waitress, and we hit the pavement again, happy for the heat of the sun. He carried a white paper bag bearing the diner's logo—a possibly cross-eyed elk. Inside were packets of salt, pepper, ketchup, mustard, and non-dairy creamer.

Twenty minutes down the road, the peak of a tall black construction crane appeared. We watched it a long time before we got close enough to see the van. At the end of the crane's long metal wire was a big round magnet, which snapped onto the van's roof. Tireless and thoroughly defeated, the van rose up into the air. We joined the others—a crowd had gathered—in applause when it was set down on a flatbed truck. This was a terrible loss for us, but it was a great spectacle.

"We can kiss that one goodbye," Clete said.

"My worldly possession is in there," I said.

There was nothing to do but get the bag of mushrooms and hike back to Val's.

This series of events—losing my coat and the drugs and other secrets and luxuries of my life, along with being given a new name by someone mumbling out of a coma, and encountering the not-quite-naked-or-dead girl to whom I gave the shirt off my back—combined in an almost scientific way to make me swear off drugs. I was twenty-eight years old and wanted to change before I hit thirty. Clete and I developed a plan for me as we ambled back, a plan that would work all that summer and beyond. Even after I left the mountain, it stuck. The plan had four parts.

One: I would not get a job. There's always some guy with a goatee and great weed to turn you on during a break, or some friendly braless girl tired of washing dishes or mowing the graveyard or sweeping up the pencil shavings in Rosa Parks Elementary School who lights a joint or drops a line and offers to share. Work was a haven for drug users and I couldn't risk it.

Two: I'd use willpower and the help of friends who, even if high themselves, would discourage me from joining them.

Three: The mushrooms, being organic and free, didn't count.

Four: In order to be realistic and give the plan half a chance of working, I would stay drunk as much as possible.

A few people—including you and the therapist they assigned me when you had the flu—have since pointed out that as many people are done in by booze as by any drug or family of drugs. But Clete and I saw it differently. Being drunk was a momentary lapse into happiness, like drifting off while listening to a song about sex, whereas the drugs I craved were symphonies. They played at that low level just beneath the timbre of thought, a mattress of sound you could sleep on for days or a lifetime. Liquor relaxes the brain and lets the fool in you rise up, while the drugs I loved kept me still inside myself, permitting me to reside there in something like peace.

That's a hard thing to give up, and it's easier if you're drunk.

We moved in with Val and lived in the dog-sitting house three months. Without rehab or an arrest to keep me in line, I became Keen and did no drugs.

You asked for a happier time. That was it.

Assignment 2: Considering Others

A LOT OF PEOPLE lived in the house that summer. It was hard to say who did and who didn't on any particular day. I had the boy's room, and almost nightly I had to kick strangers from my bed, which was made to look like a sports car.

Our regular lineup, however, included only a few of us.

Stu: Except for Val, Stu had lived in the house the longest. He had the teenage daughter's room and a job at the library, which lent out videos as well as books. He stole tapes he thought we might like. (The big-screen television was gone, but we had a portable hooked to the extension cord.) He had a nervous habit of chewing his toenails with his teeth, the indecent fragments littering the carpet like exactly what they were—little scraps of us we no longer needed. When I complained, he claimed I was jealous.

"Of what?" I was genuinely stumped.

"I can put both my feet all the way behind my head," he said.

I shrugged. "I can wiggle my ears."

This comment earned his contempt. "You can't pick up girls wiggling your ears."

The obvious question occurred to me but I was shy about asking.

Stu went on, his voice dipping confidentially. "Your ears are not your best feature, Keen. You shouldn't draw attention to them."

Lila: She was the girl all the boys wanted to fuck. In any community

of a certain size, there is always such a girl. I once worked in a landscaping crew, and we all wanted the foreman's wife. She wasn't beautiful or even particularly acceptable, but she was present and we liked the way she carried her tools.

Lila was pretty, but something about her life kept her discouraged and a little sour. She moped about the house from room to room as if looking for her keys or purse, too preoccupied to respond to the typical direct address. Her body was bottle-shaped, but not Coke bottle. More like a flask. Yet every guy there wanted to get her square butt in bed. It might have been her slutty eyelids and the dark eyes they hid—eyes the color of bark but with a luster her attitude seemed to deny. I had a powerful sex drive in those days. My brain, bored without drugs, let my body have full reign, and it demanded Lila.

Another Lila fact—her first language was German, but she quit speaking it when she started kindergarten. Now she couldn't remember any of it—a whole language lost inside her. I thought maybe that was what she was looking for when she meandered about the house—the language she'd been born into.

After I'd lived there a month—and only then because she showed up in the green tube top—did I realize Lila was the dead girl.

The dogs: Ruff, the golden retriever, was always happy to see you and generally optimistic about life, the way a dog ought to be. Ready, the terrier, reminded me of my third-grade teacher, who had her nose in our desks during recess, looking for something she could use to dim the day. Ready barked at the mailman. He barked at the neighbors. He barked at every single one of us who lived in the house. He barked at the sound of the toilet. A red hummingbird feeder in the backyard sent him into mad barking convulsions. Let in the house, he did laps around the kitchen, sniffing out disorder.

Ruff would wait by the tub when I got out of the shower and gently lick my legs, but Ready would sniff my toes, bark, and occasionally gnaw my Achilles tendon. Many evenings he would latch onto a pant leg and growl while whatever chump who got nabbed—often me—swung his leg back and forth, the little dog careening.

Val: a familiar kind of sweet-hearted addict who couldn't say no to anybody. She loved heroin because it let her remain kind. Her junk-sweet heart opened the house to any loser who came along. Clete summed her up best: "Her dilemma is that she's alive."

One day she and I were in her room (the master bedroom, which seemed only fair), running a chisel around a window that wouldn't open. Without electricity, we relied heavily on breezes. After we got it loose and propped up a ski pole to keep it open, she told me she had learned the secret of masculine behavior.

It sounded like something I ought to know.

Her ex-boyfriend, a Mexican guy from Oklahoma, had told her that some nights he'd say anything to get a woman in bed and other nights he wouldn't fudge the truth at all. It could be the same woman, and he could be feeling the same desire. "You're all bastards *and* saints," Val explained. "It's just a matter of luck which day matters—the one when you're being good or the one when you're bad."

I found out the guy had confessed this after breaking Val's nose in an argument over something stupid like who did the laundry last or what kind of vegetables are okay to feed a dog. The confession was his way of apologizing and letting himself off the hook.

When she finished her story, she went to the drawer in the nightstand where she kept her junk. She cooked the stuff in a glass tube over a Bunsen burner (the boy had a chemistry set). "I'd offer you some," she said, "but Clete says I can't give you drugs."

"I don't shoot up anyway." I'd only ever snorted heroin because I had a stubborn and wholly genuine fear of needles. Val listened to my explanation while tying off with a paisley necktie from the closet, smirking only slightly and trying to hide it. I was touchy about this subject. As a teenager, I'd driven a hundred miles an hour in residential neighborhoods to prove I wasn't afraid of dying, just needles.

I helped her slap her arm and hunt down a vein, but I couldn't watch the needle go in. She still wasn't convinced. Even when the rush hit her and she fell back on the floral bedspread, the look she gave me had near equal parts of ecstasy and doubt.

I told her about waiting in line at a county clinic to get a vaccination. I was maybe six and watched each kid ahead of me burst out crying. They give shots better now, but back then it was just swab and stab. When it was my turn, I lost it, kicking the doctor in the head and eyeglasses. "I blacked out. My mother had to tell me what I'd done."

It had taken a while to tell the story. Val had sunk into the lowest parts of her reclining body. She had to turn her head to make her lips work. "It's not fear," she said, "just weakness." She meant it in a nice way, trying to defend me and doing such a lousy job of it that she pulled me on top of her and let me screw her.

While we were fucking I thought how this junkie friend of mine from high school died shooting pool. He fell onto the table after making the three ball. I think he was dead a couple of shots earlier, but his body kept on eyeing the cue ball and following through. He hit face first, breaking a tooth, which I found and stuck in my pocket. We took his body to his parents' house and left it in the yard. I memorized the address, put the tooth in an envelope, and mailed it to them.

That experience let me see how weakness (we'll call it that for now)

can be strength. None of that crowd went to his funeral but me. The family tried to have me arrested. "He was a friend," I told the cop. I didn't mention that mainly I wanted to see that tooth, which, sure enough, they'd glued back on. I know that sounds cold, but I couldn't really see his death as a tragedy. Not for me, anyway. I did almost cry a little, but the sunlight on his coffin had a spunky kind of brilliance, which made me happy to be alive and weak and wearing a suit.

I didn't tell Val this story while we were screwing, but I may have been distracted because when she couldn't come and could barely, for that matter, stay awake, she said, "Just go ahead. Don't wait for me."

A minute later, the ski pole slipped loose and the window slammed down with a bang, and I came so suddenly I didn't manage to pull all the way out.

"Don't worry about it," she told me. "That was really great."

Clete: some months before Clete moved to the mountains, he and I went to our ten-year high school reunion and found ourselves at a party in somebody's crowded house. Twelve framed photos lined the dinner table, one for each of the dead in our class—all from drugs, or driving stoned into the giant saguaro by the post office, or drowning in a bathtub (that was about drugs, too), or falling over face first onto a pool table. These were people we thought of as friends or at least people who wouldn't screw us over when we were too high to know better. They were all dead and it was a dull party.

Someone called Clete's name and then mine. It was a guy who'd had a nickname in high school—the *Flirge*—because he was a liar and he'd smoke your pot without ever bringing his own or offering to go in on some. His family had a swimming pool, so we'd put up with him but no one liked him. One time we were in the pool (on acid but that doesn't have anything to do with the story) and the Flirge starts in all nonchalant about raping a girl, like it was this thing he did and he wasn't going to lie about it.

Clete gave me a doubtful look, then said, "Where'd this happen?"

"A parking lot," the Flirge said. The girl had passed out. He leaned her over a hood and did it to her from behind.

"What kind of car was it?" Clete asked.

"Black Mercedes," the Flirge said.

"That has a hood ornament." Clete is the kind of person you can't slip much past. "You wouldn't bend her over a hood ornament."

"We were on the side by the driver's door."

"Too high," Clete said. "You'd have to fuck on your tiptoes, which is fatiguing."

My point is, the Flirge was the kind of guy who lied about whether he had raped a girl, and he didn't chip in on drugs. You know the type. He found us in this crammed full room and said, "I've been looking for you

guys." I was thinking, *Let's flee*, and giving Clete *let's flee* looks. But Clete was thinking, *People can change*, and he gave me a look that said, *If even the Flirge can shape up…*

The Flirge said, "I got married last night." He wanted us to meet his wife. "Wait right here?"

Sure, we said. The Flirge knifed through the crowd, so excited to introduce us to his wife that I was willing to believe Clete was right. We started enjoying the party more. Clete and I talked to a girl who'd had a thing for me in high school. Her husband had just got a job with NASA, and their firstborn was walking but not talking except for "muh" and "duh" for "Mom" and "Dad," and she had another bun in the oven right now. All the time, I was recalling how crazy she was for me and how that baby could be calling me "duh" and how that could be my bun in her oven, and it seemed like somehow I'd even given up a chance to be an astronaut. I was straining to figure out why I hadn't liked her back when, but then I realized she was still talking and I remembered: she had a big mouth. Was it worth not walking on the moon to avoid this fat mouth for the rest of my life? Without question. But it was a sacrifice, too. It seemed like I'd given up some portion of the heavens in order to have integrity and look for true love and avoid endless small talk.

About then the Flirge reappeared. The woman with him wasn't beautiful, but she had on a sweater that fit in a certain way, short happy hair, and a face you'd always like to see. I could tell she wasn't a big mouth by the way she smiled at people and walked close to her husband, and I thought, *What a weird honeymoon.*

I was also thinking the Flirge had made out all right. He'd turned a corner and would never pretend he'd raped a woman again, even if maybe he might bring cheap wine when you invited him to dinner or make waitresses figure separate checks. What's the big deal about that? In my head, I was commending Clete for recognizing this and thinking what a rare friend he was and how I'd like to screw the Flirge's bride. I wanted to marry her. You can tell sometimes. Here's the unbelievable part: I was happy for the Flirge. I felt a wide-open kind of gratitude that rarely descends on a person. I've been that happy maybe three times in my life. It thrilled me that such a loser could turn it around.

He led her right to us, but at the last second he looked away. He bumped into us as if it were an accident. Right then, I knew. He was still the Flirge and about to prove it. "Hey," he said. "I want you to meet my wife." He leaned in close to us, made a quizzical face, and said, "What's your names again?"

Without even a second to register this, Clete moved his head right past the Flirge to his wife. He said, "You've just made the biggest mistake of your life."

She smiled for less than a second, less time than it takes for the television to come on after the remote is punched—that's how fast the human brain is—and then her features made tiny complicated twists and small turns. We left them like that.

I could tell you about a thousand other nights like that one, but the point is always the same: Clete is the kind of person who knows what it is to be alive and the knowledge causes him no shame. How many people in your acquaintance can you say that about?

The others: Many people did stints in the dog-sitting house. A guy we called Skins slept on the couch without a sheet for a month and turned it brown. When he left he stole Stu's boombox, a weedeater, and two decks of cards. One guy—I don't remember his name—pretended to be an opera singer and made voicey proclamations about art. Another one—we called him Heller, which might have been his name—tried to prove he could levitate by sitting on the bathroom scales and showing us how his weight diminished the longer he meditated. Clete saw through the act. "His butt is sliding off the feet marks," he told me, but we didn't say anything to Heller, who had only that one trick. Another guy who insisted we call him Hawk liked to argue about whether the world was flat. "What?" I said. "It's a big conspiracy?" He explained: "Put a level on a field and that shows it's flat. That's what flat is. Sure, the planet is round, but the earth is flat." There was a chunky girl I won't name who went down on every guy in the place during her week-long stay. Some of us tried to like her, but she had her own agenda.

Assignment 3: Family

MOST NIGHTS WE sat on kitchen chairs in candlelight immersed in some form of inebriation and talked. The roof over the back porch had a leak that should have been fixed, but we liked to sit on the softening planks and breathe in the odor of the rain-sweetened wood. The morning sun dried it out, and the afternoon rain softened it again. The porch was like a great dark lung that would, days before the end of our summer, collapse.

One night on the porch has stuck with me. Clete got us going. "This man has to raise a boy who isn't his own son but his brother's, and the brother died because of this boy in a boy-caused auto accident or house fire or poisoning incident that kills the parents but not the boy. The man who has to raise him one day gets the hiccups and to get rid of them he drinks water upside down."

"Standing on his head?" I asked. I wasn't sure what kind of story it was.

"Like this." Clete got a glass and demonstrated, bending at the waist and drinking from the opposite rim.

"That really does get rid of hiccups," Lila put in. Several of us were on the porch.

"The boy sees him drink this way. And you have to understand that the man hates the kid because he's ruining his life. He doesn't want some diaper-needs-changing kid hanging around. Also he blames the death of his brother on the kid. He doesn't act outright mean to the boy, but it slips out.

"He sees the kid drinking this way and he encourages him. 'That's the way to drink,' he says. The boy goes around all the time drinking upside down. The man thinks it's funny to see this kid drinking upside down. He takes a mean pleasure in it."

"Insensitive bastard," Lila said. Stu and Val and some others were there, too.

"But what this does," Clete said, "is give him an outlet for his anger. It lets him get to know the boy. He feels sad for his brother and for the boy. When the kid is old enough to go to school, the man tells him, 'I was only fooling about drinking that way. You don't have to drink that way.' But the boy says, 'I like to drink this way.' The man says, 'Kids will make fun of you if you drink that way.' The boy says, 'I know, but this is the way we drink.' He raises a glass of water in toast and they bend over and drink upside down together, and the screen goes black."

"This was a movie?" I said.

"He's kind of a smart kid for kindergarten," Lila pointed out.

"They could be in some remote place where school starts later," Clete said.

"It's a beautiful story," Val said. "It's perfect just the way it is."

"It *is* a good story," Lila agreed.

Lila's respect for the story made me want to tell one of my own. I was drunk enough to just start off and see where it would go, but right as I opened my mouth I remembered a girl named Eve I used to know. She was a pal's girlfriend—beautiful girl with hair so pale we used to say it was the color of spit, and who was diagnosed with brain cancer and given six months. I visited her in the hospital after her surgery and she asked me to be one of her pallbearers. It's a hell of a thing for a living person to ask, especially a pretty girl no older than you with bandages on her head. "Sure," I said. "Doesn't look like you weigh too much." That got a laugh out of her.

But she didn't die. Instead, she dumped my friend and got together with a guy who robbed convenience stores. They put together some money from their various robberies, and when she finished chemotherapy they moved to Alaska. I saw her once long afterwards at that same high school reunion. Her hair had never grown back and she wore a scarf over her head, but she was still beautiful and married to the robber, who sold cars now and they had a summer cabin on the Oregon coast.

"What a time we had for a while there, huh?" she said to me.

We wound up sitting in her car and somehow started kissing. We had never done that before. I pulled my head back just a millimeter or so and spoke softly. "They said you were going to die."

"Disappointed?" she asked.

We kissed some more. Maybe she wanted me to take her to bed, but that didn't happen, which led to my story petering out in a non-dramatic fashion.

"I remember her," Clete said once he was sure I was through. "She never did die."

"That's a lovely story," Val said.

"That robber guy," said Lila. "He thought it was just an adventure with a dying girl. But it was his whole life."

Anybody can go to a bar and hear some character complain how the world has never lived up to his potential and how his own nowhere life is everyone's fault but his own. All you have to do is sit on the wrong stool. To get to the good stories, you have to make an effort. You have become a regular part of someone's life and keep mostly to yourself so when you offer a word or answer a question she can see you're giving up something to talk to her. She starts to trust you, even *owe* you. You can't just sit next to a woman and expect this stranger to unfold her life like a shirt she's asking you to wear.

What I'm saying is, this was the first moment I thought Lila might like me.

Stu started in on a dream he'd had about deep water, a dental assistant, and walls in a room that flapped like the loose vinyl roof of an old car. I have opinions about other people's dreams. They tend to be like paintings by surrealists who don't have any goddamn imagination.

The dream ended badly (by which I mean it was tedious). He tried to redeem the story by wrapping his feet behind his head, which reminded me that he wanted Lila as much as I did. He didn't even have to get up from his chair, and just sat like that.

In situations like this we relied on Val to have a kind word, but even she couldn't comment. She did save him, though. "I had a boyfriend who could bend his thumb flat against his arm," she said. "Like this." She bent her thumb flat against her arm.

Lila touched her nose with her tongue, inserting the tip in either nostril. We had to hold a candle up close and must have singed her hair. There was that burnt hair smell.

I told them about my idea of what makes a tragedy and how there really weren't many. A death (you can't have a tragedy without a corpse) could qualify only if it didn't once make you think: *I'm glad it's him and not me*.

Val disagreed. "We're all tragedies," she said. The assertion made her

stand up and cross the porch. She sat on the ice chest, right across from me and patted my knee. "But you told it really beautifully."

Clete took it a step further. "The real question is, 'What would you kill for?' What would it take for you to claim the life of another person?"

"I'd never kill anyone," Val said. "Not for anything."

"Then that's who you are," Clete said.

"I tried to strangle my boyfriend when he wouldn't quit whistling," Lila said.

"Well," Clete said.

"That *can* be irritating," I put in.

"You weren't really trying to kill him," Val said. "You were just upset."

"It felt like I was trying to kill him."

"Then that's who you are," Clete said.

Stu spoke. He was sitting normal again. "The guy I get dope from sticks a gun barrel in my mouth every time I buy. To remind me what he'd do if I rat on him."

"*Every* time?" I said.

Stu nodded. "Some people won't deal with him for that reason."

"Bad business practice," Clete said.

"It tastes like oil," Stu said.

Our conversations felt like more than talk, as if we had made ourselves into a crew held together by something greater than happenstance or geography or the luck of free housing. I had the feeling we mattered as a group. Only to us, I guess, but I was happy with that. I was happy.

Assignment 4: Accepting Responsibility

I FOUND A METAL detector among the kid's toys. Since I couldn't work and needed booze to stay sober, we hit upon the idea of combing the run under the ski lift for coins. The first day Clete and I found over nine dollars and barely made headway up the mountain. The lift was running, taking summer tourists up for views. Some of them tossed change down to us. We actually got most of the cash that way. The remainder of the summer was defined by this mountain we had to sweep. It gave us a goal and a direction: up.

We came home that first day tired and exuberant, bearing a frozen pizza (the oven was gas and hadn't been sold) and a six pack. Screaming started as soon as we entered. We found Lila towel-wrapped in the bathroom screeching at the tub. Ready was bouncing his long nails on the porcelain, yapping. The terrier had carried a mouse into the tub where it couldn't escape and tortured it to death. A mouse head lay by the drain, and Ready's bloody paw prints made the tub a crime scene.

Clete got toilet tissue and picked up the mouse remains. "Good boy,"

he said to the dog.

Lila was too grateful to complain about our ogling her thighs and a portion of her hip where the towel parted. She even agreed to watch a movie with us after her shower, one of the videos that Stu had stolen from the library. Clete went to hook up the extension cord, and I hunted for the tape. When I couldn't find it, I sought out Stu. He was sitting on the cooler on the back porch smoking a joint, wearing my old coat.

"Where'd you get that coat?" I asked him.

"The Goodwill store behind the fire station."

"Find any drugs in the pockets?"

He eyed me suspiciously and then began thrusting his hands all over.

I didn't want the coat back. It was an important part of the life I'd left behind. While he was searching, I asked him about the videotape.

"How did you know?" He'd found one of my trademark blimp-shaped joints.

"Never mind," I said. "Where's the movie?"

"I took it back," he said proudly, still rummaging. "Sneaked it back in. They never knew it was gone."

I suppose I pursed my lips. "You know how a library works at all?"

"There's a fucking book in here," he said, meaning the coat.

Lila suggested we go to a bar. We didn't have any cash left from our day of detecting, so I took the elaborate Mickey Mouse clock from my room—which didn't work anyway without electricity—and we headed down to the second-hand store and then on to the Blue Board Tavern—a splintering hardwood bar that used to be a laundromat and still had a wall of dead dryers in the back, each staring out with its one enormous eye. The clock brought seven dollars.

The tables in the Blue Board were the blue of ballpoint ink. We claimed one and started talking.

"I moved to this town because it's too small for me to turn tricks in," Lila announced. "People would talk."

"A sensible plan," Clete said.

"I live in fear of becoming a whore."

"Everyone with any judgment does." He then described my plan for self-improvement. I could sense myself rising in her esteem, but she directed the conversation back to Clete. She wanted to know why he had come to this place.

"It's beautiful here," he said. "Haven't you noticed?"

She gave him a look and maybe I was giving him the same look because she seemed to think of me as an ally. She and I got up and marched out into the street. A shower had passed over while we were drinking. The streets were slippery and glistening. The air was fresh and free of smoke. Without any warning, she took my hand and we walked to the middle of the town's

empty thoroughfare, our eyes on the mountains.

Her hand in mine opened a window in my head, and a damp wind blew right through it. Above the paltry row of buildings, a forest ascended the mountainside, the trees green and vibrant. At the open end of the box canyon, the sun had dropped out of sight, but sunlight spotted the high trees, lit a distant waterfall, and colored the rock faces. What had we been thinking? The sky was shot through with turquoise and the last yelps of sunlight, like a gaudy stone on a gold band.

"He's got us on this one," Lila said softly. She clung to my hand as we went back into the bar, aware that we had been mutually grazed by the speeding, startled sensation of what it was to be a living creature.

"We won't forget again," I said as we made our way to the table.

"If we ever fail to look at those mountains," Lila said, "without realizing they're there, we should have to cut off our arms and legs and gouge out our eyes."

"You'd have to change the order," Clete said. "The arms shouldn't go first." He had the bag of mushrooms on the table, dividing them into three equal parts.

"Doing this in a public establishment doesn't trouble you?" I asked.

"I picked these this morning, while you two and the rest of the mortal world was asleep," Clete said. "Anyone watching will just think we're earthy types."

We ate mushrooms and washed down the grit with beer. Lila surprised us with money of her own and bought pitchers. It occurred to me that Clete couldn't be sleeping much, as early as he was getting up. "I sleep inside myself while I'm awake," he explained. That pretty much got him rolling. He declared and philosophized, his mouth full, his brain brimming with thoughts and theories, observations and sidebars. We all talked excitedly for a while and then settled down to our communal swallowing and a happy gulping silence. The conversation, even after it was over, kept a good feeling swinging among us like the movement of a rocking chair after the person is up and gone.

Then Clete began afresh. "People want you to believe you treat a disease by identifying it and then killing it off with the right poisons," he said. "That requires a belief that the sickness and the person are two wholly separate entities. That's like thinking the clouds don't belong to the sky but are just happenstance passing through."

We nodded or made appropriate grunts. Now and again I'd realize that Lila and I were still holding hands.

"People who think about the world aren't usually violent, which leads me to assume that violent people don't consider the world around them," Clete said. "I knew a woman who liked to pretend she was the star of her own television program to the extent that she wouldn't swear because

there's no swearing on television. She'd only have sex with the lights out. Everything she did took her to the next episode, and she'd think about how the show should end, editing her day down to its hour format.

"My point is, she may have been sick but she wasn't violent. As long as she imagined an audience and the Nielsen Ratings hinging on her actions, she had to behave. Is that sickness separate from who she is or the product of who she is?"

I started in on this teacher I had in high school, a delicate young woman who spoke so softly you had to strain to hear any portion of her speech. It was work to catch a single word. She walked around the room while she talked, and every head would follow her. She was easily the best teacher I ever had. After the winter break, she came back with a microphone and a speaker that hooked to her belt. We didn't have to strain to hear her, and it didn't take but a couple of class periods to understand she was no better teacher than the others. It was the quality of our attention that had been different.

"I was in that class," Clete said. "We read *Macbeth* and *Catcher in the Rye* and watched that *Romeo and Juliet* where Juliet does partial nudity. Miss Axelrod. You sat directly in front of me, and one day you had a condom stuck in your hair."

"Was it a Mr. Microphone?" Lila asked. "I had one of those in middle school."

"Another one of our teachers used to confuse me for my father," Clete said. "He was old and I don't think he was ever very bright, and he had taught my father. Now and then he'd call on 'Everett,' as if I had become my dad. Which makes me think about that feeling of being transported, and how the weirdest thing—a kid like me sitting at a desk—can transport you thirty years, back to when you were young and had a brain and most of the time a hard-on, likely as not, for some junior girl in a short skirt you were supposed to be teaching."

This reminded me of the girl I dated when I worked construction who liked to call me Daddy while we were in bed.

"I remember her," Clete said. "Her family raised minks."

"What's your real name?" Lila asked me. "It can't be Keen, can it?"

"What does 'real' mean?" I shot back.

"What does 'name' mean?" Clete put in.

"What does 'mean' mean…mean?" Lila said.

What a night that was! We swept out of the bar and up and down the lighted streets, our arms linked in a Gene Kelly fashion, smiling and shuddering with the joy of being the people who got to inhabit our very own bodies. Nighttime rinsed the light out of the sky, and we found ourselves on the bank of the dark little river that cut through the side of town opposite our house. "Fish know water," Clete said, and we entered into a somber and

wondrous bout of nodding. Lila and I may have wept a little. Then we one by one began to add to the river from our own churning stomachs.

"I had no idea I was getting sick," Lila marveled. That set the tone for our happy retching. "Don't worry about hurting my feelings," she said. "If I'm pissing you off with this puking, just say so."

Clete found a tree we had to look at, a big winding thing with branches and leaves and a miraculous balance. "It just erupts out of the earth," Clete said. "It goes up. What it means to be a tree is to send limbs up and roots down." He dropped to his knees and touched the base of the tree. "This is the center, right here. Touch the tree's heart."

We got down and fondled the bark.

"I had a boyfriend," Lila said, "who had a dog and pony show with a guitar at this café on weeknights. Not real singing but funny talking kinds of songs about getting a life into which some rain must fall or fixing your car with chewing gum and spit. I took him for granted so much he wrote a song about a girl who cuts off her own nose."

"To spite her face," I said.

She shook her head. "To make her breathing holes bigger so it's less work to inhale."

We followed a crooked path that ran along the river, which was a shallow and fast-moving affair that made a gorgeous noise. We began hearing things in the river's music, voices and shouts and engines running. The rush of water seemed to give off sparks, which meant we were hallucinating but it didn't feel that way. It seemed instead that the river must always spark into the night air but usually we fail to see it. We were witnessing the daily miracle of moving water on a planet that was moving itself, spinning through the dark marvel of space.

We came upon a sandy bank often used as a party spot, and an actual voice called to us. "*Pussy*," the voice called. "Here, pussy, pussy." Ratcheting laughter followed, and Barnett stumbled onto the path. "You're all pussies," he said, "especially him." He tried to look over his shoulder and nearly fell. Stu lay on the bank, flat on his back, either sleeping or passed out. He was wearing my coat, which made me feel oddly proud and responsible, a little jealous, possessive, and nostalgic. I was feeling a lot.

Clete stepped off the path to put his ear to Stu's chest, while Barnett did almost the same thing with Lila's breasts, thrusting his face against her chest and clacking his teeth. She pushed him away and I took a swing at his chin, smacking him on the side of his head. He collapsed in such a complete fashion that Lila and I burst out laughing.

"He respires," Clete said of Stu. "But we're going to have to carry him home."

"What about this one?" I pointed at Barnett.

Clete bent over him and slapped Barnett's cheek. Barnett didn't rouse.

Lila gave him a sharp kick to the ribs. He jerked and moaned, but he didn't wake up. "He's the one who kind of raped me," she said to Clete and at the same time took my arm. She was explaining why I had slugged him, as if I'd known all along and acted out of gallantry.

While we were contemplating what to do, a crescent moon appeared above the dark line of the mountainside, and a coyote loped by on the opposite side of the river, pausing to stare at us while we stared back at it and then continuing on.

"Was that a wolf?" I asked.

"Coyote," Lila said. "I used to see them by the side of the road every morning when I worked at a bakery down valley. I've never seen one this close to town."

"It might have been a dog," I said.

"Or a vision of god," Clete said.

"I got fired from that job for stealing éclairs," Lila said. Then: "Why would god stare at us like that?"

"To remind us we're human," Clete said. "And he's human." He nudged Barnett's face with the round toe of his boot. "We can't leave him to the elements."

"Sure we can," Lila said, "especially if god's got his eye on him."

She didn't want to wait alone with Barnett for fear he might come to. She hefted Stu's feet and Clete gripped him under the arms. They carried him off. I stayed with the inert Barnett, watching the stream, listening as its noise receded and a deep quiet settled in, a silence like I had never heard before. I couldn't even hear the thoughts in my head.

Clete tapped my shoulder, waking me. It seemed like he had just left, and he had. Stu had woken up before they reached town. "Lila's staying with him in case he doesn't remember where he's going," Clete said. "You think we could wake this one?"

Barnett's body sprawled unnaturally on the sand, one arm trapped beneath his back and the other crooked over his neck, his face as white as porcelain, his mouth spread wide, the tongue not pink but the red of hard candy. "I've got an idea," I said. I was inspired by the need to pee.

I unzipped and pissed on Barnett's face. His head rocked to one side and he puckered his lips expressively, but he didn't come to. After a while, it got pretty redundant but I hadn't peed all night.

"You could damage your bladder holding it so long," Clete said.

"Now what?" I asked.

"You were on the right track," Clete said, "just thinking too small."

He grabbed Barnett's hands and I took hold of his feet. We rocked him back and forth a few times to get some distance and hurled him into the river. He made a big splash. His body dipped below the surface, then bobbed back up. But he didn't stand. The current pushed him downstream.

The reflection of the moon played over his body.

Clete and I scrambled after him along the river's edge, and then we each waded out in the icy water after him.

Barnett eddied briefly near a wide spot, twirling face down, but the water was deeper there and Clete and I each fell trying to reach him. By the time we were on our feet again, the current had reclaimed him. We tromped through the water, high stepping and flailing. Clete dived for him, but the river kept him just out of our reach.

I gave up at the footbridge, climbing up to watch his form slide away, shivering in the night air, not at all sure I had the strength or warmth to make it up the hill to the house.

Clete, though, kept on, ducking under the bridge and skipping down a little rapids, somehow remaining vertical. I heaved myself off the bridge and trotted along the river's edge, my legs aching and wobbly.

At a bend in the river, Clete fell and when he got up the current knocked him down again. I went in after him and dragged him out. Barnett was out of sight.

"I don't feel so good about this," I said.

Clete agreed. "It's some consolation that he was an asshole," he said, "but we really shouldn't have killed him."

That was the full extent of our eulogy for Barnett. How and whether we were going to make it home was playing with our minds. We crawled along the riverbank, debating whether it might be warmer to remove our wet clothing.

"I don't see how it could be colder," I said.

"Point taken." Clete laid himself flat on the high river grass to undo his belt and jeans. The river had taken his shoes and one sock. I had both my shoes but only one sock, which was puzzling.

"You're not a careful dresser," Clete said.

We left our clothes in a pile and worked our way across town and home. A few people pointed. They were the only people on the streets. Fortunately, Lila was on the back porch with Val when we came in. We dried off and dressed and were standing beside the open and roaring kitchen oven for warmth by the time she realized we were home.

"Stu's fine." She offered me her hand and I took it. "Where's the jerk?"

"He slipped off," Clete said somberly, stepping away from us. He left the kitchen.

"Is something wrong?" she asked.

I kissed her and shut off the oven. "I need to lie down," I said. We kept kissing and holding each other, bumping through the house. It sounds heartless and insensitive to say I forgot about Barnett drowning and drifting downstream like a log, but kissing Lila combined with my own near

drowning incident to erase it from my head. I sank back into the night as it had been before we killed him. Lila and I rambled through the house holding hands so deliriously that we became one creature and stumbled together into the bathroom to pee. Stu was on the toilet, wholly conscious and masturbating by candlelight. "Don't you ever knock?" he said, turning the page of a comic book: *Daredevil*.

That was the last little push we needed. Lila followed me to my bedroom and climbed between the sheets of my car.

"Promise me..." she said.

I waited for the rest of it a long while. Finally I just said, "I promise."

Assignment 5: Understanding Mistakes

THE SAME NIGHT that Clete and I killed Barnett, Lila and I became lovers. The next day she retreated a little. I found her in the kitchen writing in a notebook—her diary. She glanced at me and went back to her penmanship. I said good morning in an overly jolly voice. She lifted a hand without looking up. When I went to the faucet to get a drink of water, she hunched over the journal. All I could read were the words "right mind."

Clete and I worked the slope that day with the metal detector, but he was not his usual self. We discussed what he called "the slaying" in undertones. "Stu remembers almost nothing," Clete said.

"We should have told Lila." I waved the metal detector and Clete searched wherever it beeped.

Clete shook his head. "Then she'd be a party to it. She'd have to turn us in or accept a portion of the blame. I went this morning and got our clothes. They're on the back porch drying."

A couple on the ski lift called out to us and threw down coins. We waved to them and walked to the spot where the change had fallen. "I went back to where we tossed him in," Clete said. "I wanted to look for footprints and so on, but people were camping there. They must have come in the middle of the night."

"My pee is there," I said. "Can they use that to convict me?"

Clete didn't think so. "I'm more concerned with what Lila will want to do once the body is found. She's the only one who can point a finger."

"She may be having second thoughts about being my girlfriend. She wasn't what I'd call affectionate this morning."

"She's not a morning person," he said. The detector beeped and he fingered the grass. "The other thing is the coyote. We were given an omen, and we still screwed up."

"I guess I really shouldn't have pissed on his face."

"Look at this." Clete lifted a hotel key from the grass. "This is another sign."

"The guy just emptied his pocket," I said.

Clete straightened and held the key up above his head. "We're being given another chance. We aren't lost yet."

We showed the key to the lift operator, and he let us ride to the top of the slope. It was not the top of the mountain but a ridge several hundred feet above the town. Clete spotted our couple standing at the overlook. I let him talk to them. I hadn't been up this high before and wanted to take in the view. I located our house and the library, the bakery, the hardware store, the diner, the piece of road where I'd first held Lila's hand, and the sandy spot by the river where we'd killed Barnett. It seemed to me that I was getting to know this place.

Clete took his time returning the key. For a terrible moment I thought he might be confessing. I decided to sweep the area near the lift's exit. I found a nickel right off. Then nothing for a long time. The platform was wooden and slatted, and I got a beep at the edge. It could have been a nail, but I got on my knees and worked my fingers between the slats. I came up with a gold band—a wedding ring.

Clete returned waving a twenty-dollar bill. "I told him good deeds were their own reward, but he tossed the bill on the ground. He goes, 'You scavenge for coins, don't you?' I figured he had me."

I showed him the gold ring.

"There's *your omen*," he said. "Figure out what to do with it."

—

THAT EVENING, Lila sat beside me at the kitchen table while the three of us ate the frozen pizza that we had brought home the day before. It had thawed and it cooked funny, but we ate it. A fly fisherman had found Barnett's body two miles downstream. The news was all over town.

Lila asked us exactly what happened. "Don't lie to me," she warned.

We told her the truth, although I left out the part about pissing on his face.

"How hard did you try to save him?" she demanded.

Clete led her outside where our ravaged clothes were draped across the porch railing. "If Keen hadn't saved me, I would've wound up with a liquid grave myself."

"The current took him," I said. "We couldn't catch up."

She squinted thoughtfully. "He had the kind of body that looked like it would float."

I understood this was meant to corroborate our story. "We couldn't just leave him there," I said.

She considered this calmly, which reminded me that she'd hated Barnett and had tried to kill her ex-boyfriend for whistling. But when we

returned to kitchen table, she said, "Why didn't you just carry him up the hill?"

Clete and I sat on that one for a while. Finally I said, "Given the advantage of hindsight, that does seem the better plan."

"There it is," Clete said sadly. "What it would take for us to kill a man. We didn't want to carry the little weasel up the hill."

Lila said, "He didn't have the kind of body that looked like it weighed much."

Clete agreed. "We're guilty of something."

"Something ugly," Lila said. She stood abruptly, knocking over her chair. "Don't tell Stu," she said. "Or Val."

We agreed. She took my hand and led me up to my bed. "Human life," she said.I didn't know whether she was talking about us or Barnett dying. We crawled onto the single mattress together. We fucked and fucked and fucked.

—

I WISH I COULD say Barnett's drowning was the end of our association with death. Clete would later argue that tossing him in the drink had pried open mortality's door. That's maybe why we both felt responsible a few days later when Val woke up dead. She let out an otherworldly grunt that somehow each of us heard—Clete on his mat in the hallway, and Lila and I in our narrow convertible. We all jumped up, me in nothing but a T-shirt and the morning erection, Lila in my boxer shorts, one of her pale arms across her breasts. Clete was fully dressed. We followed him to the master bedroom. The smell was identifiable and unpleasant—excrement on flesh. Val's mouth and eyes were open. I thought of the first night I had met Lila, seeing her dead on the stairs, which made me unsure.

"Anything we can do?" I said.

Lila cried, "She's dead, you moron!"

Clete touched Val's cheek, and then said, "It's up to us to care for the dogs."

No one wanted to redeem the sheets. We wrapped her in them and toted her down the stairs and out to the porch, where we ran into Stu, who had been up all night smoking dope and watching the backyard. He was wearing my coat. "Is that real?" he said, meaning the body.

"It's Val," Clete said. "Help us get her over the rail."

I wound up with Val's head. Stray hair sticking out from the wrap bothered me in a way I can't describe. Clete hefted the midsection, seemingly oblivious to the damp, unhappy odor. Stu carried her feet. Lila fetched a shovel. When we stopped to rest, I tucked Val's curls inside the sheet, careful not to glimpse her face.

Clete guided us up a difficult makeshift path in the hazy light of dawn. We switchbacked through an aspen grove and picked up an actual trail, which guided us up above the trees. We left the path and scrambled to Clete's mushroom patch. We set Val down carefully. It seemed almost inconceivable that this unpleasant-smelling lump was our friend.

We took our time picking a spot with a good view of town and the rim of mountains on the other side of the box canyon. Clete had each of us lie there to get a feel for it. We huddled together on the ground and stared at the cloudless sky, the entire world busily getting on with creation all about us.

Perhaps, here, I should mention that our burying Val without an official ceremony or license or even a coffin is a crime I have not, technically speaking, confessed to. I'm leaning on your (legally binding) pledge of confidentiality, and acting on your encouragement to be frank. The truth is, none of us even considered calling the authorities. A heroin overdose encourages questions and inquiries and search warrants, which would have opened our lives up to a form of scrutiny we did not covet.

The digging was hard. Stu went first and accomplished almost nothing. During my turn, I threw the shovel back like an axe to swing it down against the unforgiving earth, and I hit Clete in the forehead. He staggered backwards. "Sister Christ," he said. A moment later, he added, "I'm all right."

I apologized and kept digging. The hole did not look like a grave. Its sides were jagged, the walls far from perpendicular. But Val's body was small and fit nicely. We filled in around the body and patted down the dirt. She didn't make much of a mound. We covered it with plugs of grass to combat erosion.

"One of us should say a few words," Lila suggested.

The job fell to Clete. "Val," he began and hesitated. None of us knew her last name. He was bleeding. The shovel blade had opened a wound directly above his nose. Blood and black earth marked it. "Dog-sitter, landlady to the lost, junkie, snorer, a former honor student. A woman who fed dogs. Who gave them their heartworm pills." The list was long. Spread out beneath us lay one of the wealthiest small towns in America, peaked roofs covered in real shingles, rambling condominium compounds, satellite dishes, green lawns, and the shining windows of main street, which looked like forgotten pockets of brilliance, the spare change of some lazy god glistening in dawn's slanting light. Those windows radiated intelligence, a careless and irreplaceable genius among the ordinary stucco and frame. They made me think of the discontinuous luster of Clete's splendid brain. "Lover of sadness," he was saying. "Keeper of the damned."

I was so grateful to have him with us.

Thunder sounded, which seemed appropriate but didn't please us. The

rain began. We stalled, feeling we ought to say or do more and yet eager to make our way down the mountain. We were united in the essential embarrassment of needing to go on living.

"I can't believe this is happening," Lila said, weeping. "Who dies?"

The sky rippled with light and split open like a walnut.

—

A FEW WEEKS LATER, after a flood of guilt and worry and actual rain, I returned to Val's grave, which was now covered with mushrooms. I ate them. I'd consumed enough to know the ones to avoid. Sitting by her gravesite, recalling her generosity with me from the moment I met her, I thought maybe I should have done a little better by Val. I felt sick about it and then I understood that I was actually sick. I'd eaten poisonous mushrooms and was dying.

I lay down over the grave. We, Val and I, were neighbors again. I rocked against the moss and earth to get comfortable, the two of us together, lying as if in bunks, shipmates in the hold of a great vessel. My body would melt into this ground and sink down through the soil and through the bones of Val and on down to the rock, where it would pool and be re-absorbed into the planet. And it meant nothing. All we thought about and did, whether we behaved well or badly, the hard days when we could barely stand up straight and the good days when every sound and shade of light seemed a gift—none of it mattered. Val and I were the waste any kind of life leaves behind, the proof of imperfection that everywhere marks this world like the wounds on this very mountain left from the mining days. I had done not one thing with my life that had real consequence for anyone but the many people I'd disappointed and the one person I'd killed. I lay there, knowing that for a few minutes more I would see the sky, hear the minor havoc created by the breeze, smell my own rank and dying body, and the world would not take any notice. I meant nothing.

"Feeling morbid?" Clete appeared above me, huge as the sky. He had that talent you can't teach—how to be wherever it is you're needed most. He'd come to harvest the mountainside but saved my life instead.

"I ate poisonous mushrooms," I told him.

He slipped his hand behind my neck and made me sit. He inserted his other hand in my mouth, which made me gag and vomit. "You're fine now," he said, and he was right. I'd taken a short journey in the direction of death and I'd come back.

Assignment 6: Mental Health

I RAN INTO BARNETT in a bar later that summer, a couple of weeks after

his body had been mailed off to his miserable parents. He slouched on the next bar stool. I didn't know what to do.

I decided to ignore him and drink my beer. A tap on my arm made me turn. Barnett slugged me on the cheek. I was knocked back but didn't fall off my stool. Even in the afterlife, he wasn't what you'd call brawny. He kept pushing with his fist against my cheek. The drunk on the other side of me threw his arm out to catch me. For a moment, Barnett's fist pressed my head into the drunk's embrace and held it there.

The bartender nabbed Barnett by the collar. It was a workingman's bar and they were quick to take action. Barnett was identified as the offender and hustled out the door.

"You know him?" the bartender asked, setting a free mug of beer before me.

"Kind of." I didn't want to reveal that I had recently killed him.

The man who'd caught me, a guy with tiny eyes like they'd been pecked in his face by a medium-sized bird, said, "Maybe he doesn't like your face."

"That would explain it, I guess." I understood then why killers so often poke a hole in their best-laid plans by yapping about them in a bar. It isn't to unburden the soul but to prove your superior knowledge of the subject matter.

I finished my beer and hiked up toward the house, meeting Clete and Lila and Stu coming down. They were taking the dogs for a walk. Since Val had died, Clete had taken over their care. He conversed with them. He had told them about the source of the water that came from the tap and now he wanted to take them on a hike to a high stream fed by a deep snow pack so they could see it. "They should know this stuff," he said, inviting me to join them. He had begun reading to them: the Bible, newspaper articles, a book on UFOs, and *Harry, the Dirty Dog*, which was their favorite.

I didn't talk about my encounter with Barnett until we'd passed through town and started up the trail on the other side of the river. They were understandably skeptical.

"He hardly had a personality," Stu pointed out. "No way he's a spirit."

"It was Barnett," I said, although having to put the story in actual words had made it sound unlikely even to me. My jaw hurt, though, which was comforting. "Somebody or thing popped me in the jaw," I said. I'd identified him as Barnett before he punched me. Why would a stranger hit me? What are the odds of that? Ghost seemed more probable.

"So you're the kind of person," Lila said, "who sees a creature from the beyond and just goes on and drinks his beer?"

We were on a trail that took us out of the city and into a mountain canyon. A stream bisected the canyon. It had been loud and fast earlier in

the summer but was little more than a trickle now. Time was passing. The summer would end. The people who owned the house would come back, wondering where their house-sitter and major appliances were. We'd have to move on.

Clete said, "Seeing Barnett is another sign. A major one. Could be you created it with your own brain, but it doesn't matter."

"My brain bruised my jaw?"

"The mind is a powerful instrument."

That set Stu off. "That's nothing. Someone's mom in Singapore or Taiwan City lifted a bus to get it off her kid. Her brain squat-lifted a bus."

"Other people in the bar saw Barnett," I said.

"Nobody ever lifted a *bus*," Lila said. "A taxi, maybe. Were there passengers?"

"I made a girl call out my name one time," Stu said, "just by using my mind and wishing her to do it."

"You were about to sit on a burning log," Lila said, turning to us. "He was warming himself at the fireplace and forgot."

"We ought to make a fire tonight," I said. "It's cold enough."

"I wasn't talking about you," Stu said to Lila. "You're not the only girl on the planet."

"If it was a real ghost," Clete began and paused to think.

Stu said, "Why would Barnett's ghost want to slug you, anyway?"

A conspicuous silence ensued. Clete quit walking. "Who are we to speculate on the motives of the newly dead and/or undead?" He reversed direction. The dogs had got ahead of us on the trail and we went back without them.

Assignment 7: Educational and Financial Plans

STU WORE MY COAT all the time, even in the warmth of daylight. Clete called him "the old you." As in, "You're ready to sell the dinette set, but what's the old you think?" Or, "If I left it to you and the old you, the dogs would starve." The old you got caught selling library books at the used bookstore and was fired.

"I've enrolled at Colorado State, anyway," he said. "I can get seven thousand dollars in student loans. Add that to my savings and I can be a student for a year."

We had a party to say good-bye. Each of us did an imitation of him coming out of his PCP blackout. We listened to Stevie Ray Vaughn and the warbling female singer who had been on the boombox when Clete and I first entered the house. She was Lila's favorite, and we were a democratic crowd.

Six days after he left for college, Stu came back. "Snafu," he said, taking

off his shoes and socks in the living room to chew his toenails.

I wasn't quite sure whether he meant some mistake had forced him to drop out, or it was a mistake for him to even try college. I wondered and wanted to ask, but he had locked onto one of his big toes and the time didn't seem right.

"We kept your room just the way it was," Lila told him.

We were tougher on wayfarers than Val had been. Usually there were only the four of us, plus the dogs. Clete explained to the dogs the hazards of running off versus the rewards of travel, and then nightly he opened the door and shooed them out.

"They'll never learn otherwise," he said.

Ready continued torturing mice in the tub. Clete had determined that the dog climbed from the wicker basket next to the toilet, up onto the toilet seat, up to the tank, and then down into the tub. It was an impressive stunt with a mouse in your mouth.

One morning I found Lila on her hands and knees in the bathroom wearing white panties and the shirt I'd given her on the night we met, when I thought she was dead. She was cleaning the tub with the dish sponge. We'd been lovers more than a month. I liked her butt a lot—the whole bottom half of her body. For that matter, everything from the neck down. "That's the kitchen sponge," I pointed out. She wasn't really getting up the blood, anyway. Ready had slung this one around decisively. He was a weird dog and this had become his pathetic ritual of self-worth. We'd hear the frantic scrambling of the mouse and then hateful paws against the porcelain every third or forth night. Stu had commented, "The bathtub is always changing colors," but we were generally content to toss the dog out of the tub and let the blood wash down the drain while we showered.

Lila liked baths and was not content, but she wasn't really cleaning the tub, either, just moving the blood around.

"You need to run some water," I told her.

"There's an idea," she said, scrubbing no harder. Since burying Val we'd had tension in our relationship. Lila would grip my arm in the night and say, "We should have called for an ambulance. What if she could have been revived? What if we buried her alive?" I didn't have a good answer because I had the same fear. All I could do was remind her that Clete had been with us. "He was stoned," she said, "and he doesn't sleep." I didn't have an answer to that either, but it comforted me that Clete had been with us.

You really couldn't do a worse job with mouse blood in a white tub than what she was doing. "That's my shirt, you know," I said.

Without facing me, she whipped it off, buttons pinging off the porcelain. She tossed the shirt in the tub and used it to direct the blood toward the drain. I was torn between the glancing view I had of her hanging breasts and wanting to plant my foot in her behind. We each reminded the other

of what was completely wrong with us and couldn't be fixed. It made me hate the sight of her and also seek her out.

"You want to get married?" I asked right then. I still had the ring I'd found with the metal detector. It was in my pocket.

Her head swiveled around. A glare from the girl in the panties. She went back to the blood. "I guess," she said.

Assignment 8: Emotional Support

THE WEDDING obscured the fact that the dogs had gone out one night and not come back. Clete's faith in their intelligence kept him from worrying initially. Then we were busy setting up a ceremony. Lila, I discovered, got checks general delivery from her parents. She paid for the license and the justice of the peace, who did the official business, but I asked Clete to say some words.

"We are gathered here to unite in marriage Lila and Keen," Clete began. "Others may be seated." Stu and the justice of the peace sat down.

"Anytime people gather to witness the joining of man and woman in wedlock," Clete said, "certain questions come to mind. A: What do we know about these people? B: Why have they decided to make this commitment of a lifetime? C: How in this age of divorce have they found the courage to make the leap of faith it takes to marry?" He paused, as if to field answers. No one raised a hand.

"A: About the bride and groom, we know nothing. We may know details of their lives, but none of us knows what lies in their hearts. This marriage is a pledge of each to the other, that he or she will plumb the depths of her or his heart. We do not marry because we know the other. We marry because we desire to know the other.

"B: Also a mystery. The commitment is the function of marriage, not a prerequisite. Let's zero-in twenty, thirty, or, health-permitting, fifty years from now. These two will have discovered their answer. For the moment, theirs is not to wonder why but to answer the wild demands of their hearts and loins.

"C: More mystery. Consider that the bride didn't know the groom until two months ago. Consider that the groom's behavior over the summer has been less than ideal. Consider, too, that both the bride and groom are dropouts and unemployed. You might think it's an absolutely stupid time for them to marry." He paused.

"But the problem with 'why' is that love knows no why. Love knows only '*yes*.' Only '*I must*.' Only '*this is and must continue to be*.' Only '*now*.' If Romeo and Juliet had been willing to put things off a bit, they could have run off successfully. They were stupid not to. Yet their love wouldn't have been the great thing it was. Is it better to die for a great love than to live in a

tepid one? Love—" He hesitated. The office door was open, and a couple of secretaries and one marshal had stopped to listen. He waved them in. They joined the ceremony. Clete picked up where he'd left off. "Love demands of us not sacrifice, because nothing matters but the beloved. It demands of us not promises of fidelity regardless of health or wealth, because neither money nor physical suffering matter in the face of that love. Love demands only one thing: our stupid willingness to give over to it. It's a dumb thing to do, and it's the thing which, more than anything else, ennobles us.

"Do you Lila take Keen with all the stupid and hopeless love that you can offer?"

Lila said that she did.

"Do you Keen take Lila with that same dumb, blind love?"

"I do," I said.

"By the power vested in this man over here, who will speak presently, I afford to you the rights and privileges and chores accorded to all brides and husbands, partners and lovers, sweethearts and pals."

Clete kissed first the bride on the lips and then the groom (me).

The JOP kept his part short, and we were out the door.

Assignment 9: Decision Making

WE SPENT OUR wedding afternoon in the master bedroom, which we'd moved into after Val's passing. The honeymoon ended after ten minutes of sex and an hour nap. Clete stuck his head in and called my name. Sweat dotted his forehead. He had the dim, scared look of a survivor.

"What's with you?"

"We have to go to the dog pound," he said. "We need money."

Ruff and Ready had lost their collars long before Clete and I arrived at the house. The pound had already held them beyond the normal three days. Charges had accrued, $135 each to free the dogs. If they weren't out by five p.m., they would be destroyed.

Even after the ceremony, Lila had $112. Clete had spent his money on our wedding present (an antique ceramic sculpture of a Greek orgy). I'd spent my money on a haircut and a clean shirt. Stu had not properly registered at Colorado State. His student loan had been denied. He'd spent his savings on the trip over and back. He owed all of us money. We had enough, in other words, to save only one dog.

"This is damnation territory," Clete said.

His words were like worms in my ears. I had to literally shake my head. "Which one do we save?" I said this many times on the walk to the pound. Clete wouldn't answer.

The pound guy's nametag read "Carl Dernl." He wouldn't budge. "Some people shouldn't own dogs," he said.

Clete put his arms around me. He slid one hand down and stuffed the bills in my pants' pocket. "Pick one. Whichever choice you make, I'll support it." He took a big breath and left me with the lolling, trusting tongue of Ruff on my palm and the jittery nipping of Ready at Carl Dernl's institutional pant leg.

How I decided on my wedding day which dog would live and which would die I can't entirely explain until I admit that Barnett probably had redeeming characteristics that I had failed to evaluate or notice at all. Lila, I should add, often decided that someone had "kind of raped her," a way to forgive herself for crawling into bed with guys she didn't really know. Stu liked drugs, and it wasn't entirely Barnett's fault that Stu had no common sense and snorted so much PCP he toasted his brain. For that matter, Barnett never did anything to me or Clete. He wasn't a good person but we should have been more careful with his mortal package.

"I've got a life," Carl Dernl said. "Make your decision."

The great eye of god saw into me. I felt whatever humanity I'd mustered trolling out of me and filling the room like a sacred and noxious gas. I breathed as much of it back in as I could. I hated Ready and loved Ruff. For that reason I felt I had to save Ready. Otherwise, the decision was too individual, which lacked respect for the size and weight of the decision.

I can't explain it any better than that.

Assignment 10: What I've Learned

ON THE DAY THE family whose house we had trashed, bartered, and partially destroyed called from the airport, Lila and I took Ready with us to the bus stop. Clete said we were obliged. "If there's one dog here, they'll know the other is dead and they'll suffer. If they're both gone, they'll assume Val kidnapped them, and they'll just be angry."

Clete and Stu stayed on the mountain. I don't know how they avoided arrest. Maybe the authorities never looked for anyone but Val. The bus driver was the same one who had dropped me at the lookout a few months before, but he didn't recognize me. Lila and I rode all the way to Las Cruces, New Mexico. Her sister lived there and had an extra room. I still didn't think I could risk working, but Lila got on at a florist shop. She likes flowers. We're still officially married, even now.

For a year, we got by. We heard reports about Clete but we didn't have a way to reach him. About Stu, we didn't hear even rumors. One night Lila and I went to see a band called Sawed Off and Sewn Back Together at a bar in El Paso, Texas, forty-five miles away. Lila's sister was there, too, and went home with a Cuban medical student. We had to take Ready with us and leave him in the backseat. He barked if left alone and the landlord had already given us a warning. I was the better drunk driver and took

the old two-lane home to avoid the highway patrol. The road meandered by small towns and cut through a pecan grove. Lila was passed out in the backseat when I drove her sister's car into an abutment for an irrigation canal. It smashed the front end pretty good on the passenger side but Lila and I were unhurt.

The accident only temporarily woke her up. "I'm sorry," she said to me, "but I can't keep my eyes open." She crawled out of the ruined car and trudged off into the pecan orchard to sleep. After sitting in the wrecked car long enough to count my legs and arms and other important features, I decided to join her. I had to climb over the seat and use the backdoor to get out. I found her lying beneath the limbs of a pecan tree and laid my body beside hers. The stars in the river valley were as bright and numerous as they had been on the mountain, shining down on us without judgment or even interest.

I hadn't thought to see if Ready was hurt. He bled to death while Lila and I slept on the damp earth.

I wound up killing both of the dogs left in our care. But Ready had lived for a year with Lila and me. How can you put a value on that? (Keep in mind that's *seven* dog years.)

I had to deal with the sheriff the next morning, but I had sobered up and claimed a blown tire. He had totaled an El Dorado one time after a blowout and was sympathetic. The tire had actually blown after we hit the concrete but I reversed the order. I caught some flack for my expired insurance, but the incident didn't get me into legal trouble. The abutment was not damaged in any way but the cosmetic, and how good does concrete have to look?

Lila and I got through the towing, the legal papers, and the pet burial. Lila's sister even found an old Isuzu pickup one of her friends wasn't using that we could drive. But Lila kept thinking about Ready bleeding to death while we slept. She was convinced that if she'd stayed awake or if I had a brain, we could have saved him. Before long she quit sleeping altogether, which affected her floral arranging. She told me she had to turn me in for Barnett's death.

"I'd really rather you didn't," I said.

"Not sleeping can make a person crazy."

I couldn't tell whether she meant she'd go crazy or that she already had and turning me in would be the proof of it.

"You keep killing people," she said. Her list started with Barnett, of course, and included Val, which I had nothing directly to do with, and Rough, who technically isn't a person, and Ready, who wasn't even a good dog. Logic, however, had little weight in this argument. We talked for a long time. I made several good points and she agreed to think it over a few days.

But she didn't sleep again that night, and in the morning, an hour or so after she left for work, the same sheriff who had been nice to me in the groves knocked on the front door. "I hate to bother you," he said, "but your wife came by and told me you'd murdered a man."

"I wouldn't call it murder," I said, which I realize now was a slip.

It was a friendly arrest but handcuffs are required in such proceedings, and I was pretty down about the whole episode. I plea-bargained my way into this cell for three years with good behavior, eligible for parole after nine months.

It's been eight months and counting.

It's an irony, I suppose, that Barnett is in this same prison. He's a jackal and you shouldn't give him parole, but he's the closest thing to a friend I have in here—and he's a dead man. He tells me things. Like that Stu moved to West Virginia after he left the mountain. He started a Mexican restaurant, got married to a kind woman, and they have a baby. This was Barnett's way of showing me I'd misjudged him. He'd kept up with Stu while I hadn't, even though I had the advantage of being alive.

When Clete visited, he arrived in the early morning, strolling down the concrete corridor with the rolling stride of a man familiar with confinement only in the abstract. His head was well above those of the guards who led him, and he sniffed at the prison air experimentally. Despite his years in the van, true confinement wasn't an odor he knew.

The white scar on his forehead, where I had hit him with the shovel blade, had taken the form of a crescent moon. His eyes were calm, his nostrils wide and pink. He stood straight, not the puffed-up erection of incarcerated men. There was no fear in his spine. He was tall and poised, a fully developed human male. Clete was an adult. I understood that I had personally been acquainted with only a very few real adults in all my life.

"Even though this place is exactly as I was led to expect," he said, "it's also a lot worse. You must be miserable."

I told him that I was and at the same time that it was okay.

We didn't talk about my keeping him out of prison. Clete is not his real name. I could have gotten less time by divulging it, but neither Lila nor I would do that.

Instead, he said, "You made the right decision saving Ready." He had told me this before. "You picked the hard road." I thanked him for that and he moved to a different subject. "The man's family," he said, and I understood he was talking about Barnett, "has moved to Portland, Oregon. His mom and dad and one little sister. A ranch-style house with an unkempt lawn. I rented a mower and took care of it. I would have trimmed the hedges but I couldn't find rental clippers."

I asked him about Lila.

"She's getting a lot of sun. Her skin is golden. She may move back in

with her mother or maybe with me."

I know you can check the visitor roll and see that I haven't had any visitors whatsoever. I'm not trying to fool you. It's just that there's only so much you can feel. The rest you have to pretend. I felt for the dogs and for Val. To feel for the man, it helps me to have a messy lawn to think about and the presence of my friend.

Clete understands me. He would know that the darkness of this place and the terrifying movement of my life into it have bruised my marriage and maybe even my mind. I hear things through the open window: automobile engines claiming combustion, the human jingle of voices, the shattering of leaves on windy days.

Clete looked me over in these ridiculous overalls, my hair shaved short, and he nonetheless recognized me. He raised his arm and pointed.

"K-K-K-Keen," he said.

—

THIS IS AS CLOSE as I can come to saying what I've learned: You can't know whether what you're doing will have good consequences or bad. So there's nothing to do, I guess, but to obey the law and slough off the responsibility there.

There is one last thing I remember: all the dogs in town barked at us—at Clete and me—when we walked to the party that first night not knowing what we were getting into, that I would meet my wife and think her dead, that we would wind up killing both the pets, that Val would become our friend and die, that we would kill Barnett, that I would get a new name and make a life for myself that I could survive—but it would lead to a drowning, an overdose, pet fatalities, an automotive crash, and incarceration.

The dogs barked and the windows showed their watery light, and we walked fearlessly up the hill and into the best and worst parts of our lives.

Which pretty much wraps things up. It's your choice now.

Am I a threat to society?

I await your decision. F

—Contributors' Notes—

Betty Adcock is the author of five collections of poems from LSU Press, most recently *Intervale: New and Selected Poems*, which was a finalist for the Lenore Marshall Poetry Prize and winner of the Poets' Prize. She teaches at Meredith College in Raleigh, North Carolina, and in the Warren Wilson MFA Program for Writers. She held a Guggenheim Fellowship for 2002-03.

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 2001-04 National Artist for the Phi Kappa Phi Honor Society. His last contribution to *Fugue* was a pair of poems in the winter 2004-05 issue.

Rajeev Balasubramanyam's first novel, *In Beautiful Disguises* (Bloomsbury, 2000), was the winner of a Betty Trask Prize and was long-listed for the *Guardian* First Fiction Prize. He is working on his second novel, *The Dreamer*, based on a short story which won an Ian St. James Prize in 2001. He was also the recent winner of the Clarissa Luard Award and an Arts Council Writers' Award and has published short stories in various anthologies, including *New Writing: No. 12*. He lives in Manchester, England.

Willis Barnstone lived many years in Europe and is professor of Comparative Literature at Indiana University. A Guggenheim fellow and recipient of the Emily Dickinson Award from the Poetry Society of America, he is the author of *The Secret Reader: 501 Sonnets* (New England) and *Life Watch* (BOA), editor of *The Gnostic Bible*, and translator of Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus* (Shambhala). He was recently awarded the Northern California Book Award for his *Border of a Dream: The Poems of Antonio Machado* (Copper Canyon).

Michael Bassett earned an MFA in poetry from Vermont College and is currently working on a PhD in poetry at the University of Southern Mississippi. His poems have appeared in *Potato Eyes*, *The Wofford Journal*, *The Savannah Literary Review*, *Apostrophe*, *Coal City Review*, *The Concho River Review*, and *Product* and are forthcoming in *Poetry Motel*. He won the Joan Johnson Poetry Award in 2004. Pudding House Press published his chapbook *Karma Puppets* in 2003.

Anselm Berrigan is the author of *Zero Star Hotel* and *Integrity & Dramatic Life*, both published by Edge Books. A new book, *Some Notes on My Programming*, is due out by the end of 2005, also from Edge. He is the Artistic Director of the Poetry Project at St. Mark's Church in New York City.

Robert Boswell is the author of the novels *Century's Son*, *American Owned Love*, *Mystery Ride*, *The Geography of Desire*, and *Crooked Hearts* and the story collections *Living to Be 100* and *Dancing in the Movies*. He has received two NEA Fellowships, a Guggenheim Fellowship, and numerous prizes for his fiction. His stories appear in *Esquire*, *The New Yorker*, *Best American Short Stories*, *O. Henry: Prize Stories*, *The Pushcart Prize*, and in many literary magazines. He teaches at New Mexico State University, the University of Houston, and in the Warren Wilson MFA Program for Writers. He resides with his wife Antonya Nelson and their two children in Texas, New Mexico, and Colorado.

Christopher Buckley is the author of thirteen books of poetry, most recently *Sky* from Sheep Meadow Press, 2004. He is the editor of a number of anthologies on contemporary poetry, the most recent being *A Condition of the Spirit: The Life and Work of Larry Levis* (Eastern Washington University Press, 2004, with Alexander Long) and *Homage to Vallejo*, due from Greenhouse Review Press, forthcoming late 2005. He teaches in the Creative Writing Department at the University of California, Riverside.

Justin Courter's work has appeared in *Northwest Review*, *Pleiades*, *The Literary Review*, *The Portland Review*, *Main Street Rag*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Berkeley Fiction Review*, *Crab Creek Review*, *Phantasmagoria*, and other journals. His first novel will be published by Omnidawn in 2006. His last story for *Fugue* was published in the summer 2004 issue. He lives in New York.

Toi Derricotte teaches poetry at the University of Pittsburgh. She has received numerous awards, including a Guggenheim Fellowship and two fellowships from the NEA. She is the author of four books of poetry, one of which, *Tender*, won the Paterson Poetry Prize, and a memoir, *The Black Notebooks*, which was a New York *Times* Notable Book of the Year. She is the co-founder of Cave Canem, the historic first workshop/retreat for African American poets.

Ann Fisher-Wirth's new book of poems, *Five Terraces*, will appear from Wind Publications late in 2005. She is the author of *Blue Window* and *The Trinket Poems*. Her poems have appeared widely and have received awards that include the 2004 Rita Dove Poetry Award and a 2003 *Malahat*

Review Long Poem Award. She teaches at the University of Mississippi, has had Fulbrights to Switzerland and Sweden, and is president-elect of ASLE (Association for the Study of Literature and Environment).

Brandel France de Bravo's poems have appeared in *The Kenyon Review*, *Black Warrior Review*, *The American Voice*, and in various anthologies. She has an MFA in poetry from the Warren Wilson Program and was awarded an Artist Fellowship Program grant from the D.C. Commission on the Arts in 2002. She is co-author of *Trees Make the Best Mobiles: Simple Ways to Raise Your Child in a Complex World* (St. Martin's Press).

Judith Freeman is the author of a collection of short stories and four novels, including *The Chinchilla Farm* and, most recently, *Red Water*, named one of the best books of 2002 by the *Los Angles Times Book Review*. She is the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship in fiction and the Western Heritage Award, and she lives in Los Angeles and Fairfield, Idaho.

John Gibler is a writer and musician. He lived for several years in Venezuela, Mexico, and Peru, studying music and working for human rights organizations. His recent articles have appeared in *Terrain Magazine* and *ColorLines*. His exposé on corruption in California water politics, *Water Heist*, can be downloaded from the Public Citizen California Office Web site. He is currently recording an album with *Los Kung Fu*.

Jeffrey Greene is the author of the memoir *French Spirits* and two books of poetry, *American Spirituals* and *To the Left of the Worshiper*. His new nonfiction books in progress are *Beyond Her Means* and *The Natural Rebel*. He has received the Samuel French Morse Prize, the Randall Jarrell Prize, and the Discovery / The Nation Award and has been supported by the NEA.

George Higgins lives with his wife and two daughters in Oakland, California, where he is a Public Defender. He recently completed an MFA at Warren Wilson College. His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in 88, *Pleiades*, *Aethlon*, *The Americas Review*, and *The Best American Poetry 2003*. He is an avid cycle commuter and is currently working on a collaborative piece with photographer Jim Radke.

Tony Hoagland's most recent collection of poems, *What Narcissism Means To Me* (2003), was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award. He teaches in the graduate writing program of the University of Houston. A book of prose about poetry, *Real Sofistakashun*, is forthcoming in 2006.

Will Jennings's poetry, essays, and works of creative nonfiction have ap-

peared in *The Wapsipinicon Almanac*, *Trapeze Quarterly*, *The Journal for Research in Rural Education*, *Exchange*, and *The River City Reader*. Awarded the *ICON Magazine* Nonfiction Prize in 2000, he is currently at work on *Dead Reckoning*, an investigative memoir examining how incidents of intimate violence transform the public landscape. He received an MFA from the University of Iowa, where he now teaches as a Lecturer.

Marilyn Krysl has published seven books of poetry and three of stories, the latest of which are *How to Accommodate Men* (stories), Coffee House Press, 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. Her last contribution to *Fugue* was an excerpt from her novel-in-progress, *So I Did Sit and Eat*, in the winter 2004-05 issue.

Jacqueline Jones LaMon is a Chancellor's University Fellow at Indiana University and Associate Director of the Indiana University Writers' Conference. She is a graduate fellow of Cave Canem, and her poetry has been, or is soon to be, published in *Crab Orchard Review*, *Natural Bridge*, and *WarpLand*, among other journals. Her first novel, *In the Arms of One Who Loves Me*, was published by One World/Ballantine Books in 2002.

Julie Langsam graduated in 1985 with an MFA from Queens College. Since 1996 she has been an Associate Professor of Painting at the Cleveland Institute of Art, having moved to Cleveland from New York City, where she taught at the Parsons School of Design. Among Langsam's many activities, she is the director of the Kacalieff Visiting Artists and Scholars Program. She has curated numerous exhibitions and is also a member of the Board of Directors at SPACES Gallery in Cleveland. Her own work has been included in many exhibitions, and she is represented by the Michael Steinberg Gallery in New York City.

Molly Lewis is a recent graduate of Wheaton College in Illinois. She has spent several years in the Philippines and now lives in Palm Desert, California. "Centavos Like Stone" is her first publication.

Jody Lisberger teaches at the University of Rhode Island. Her stories have appeared in *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *Confrontation*, *The Louisville Review*, and *Thema*. She won third place in the *American Literary Review*'s 2003 Fiction Contest and was a finalist in *Quarterly West*'s 2004 Fiction Contest. She has an MFA from Vermont College and a PhD in English from Boston University.

Sonja Livingston's work has won an Iowa Award, an AWP Intro Award, a Pushcart Prize nomination, and fellowships from the New York Foundation for the Arts, the Barbara Deming Fund, and the Vermont Studio Center. Her work appears in *The Iowa Review*, *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Whetstone*, *Puerto del Sol*, *Gulf Coast*, *Blue Mesa Review*, *Apalachee Review*, *Brevity*, *The Seattle Review* and others. She holds an MFA from the University of New Orleans and teaches in the UCLA Extension Writers' Program.

Sandy Longhorn's poems have appeared recently or are forthcoming in *Crab Orchard Review*, *Gulf Coast*, *Hotel Amerika*, *Smartish Pace*, and elsewhere. Her manuscript *Blood Almanac* was a 2004 finalist for the Walt Whitman Award. She lives, loves, writes, and teaches in Little Rock, Arkansas.

Tod Marshall was born in Buffalo, New York. He earned an MFA degree from Eastern Washington University and a PhD from the University of Kansas. His first collection of poetry, *Dare Say*, was the 2002 winner of the University of Georgia's Contemporary Poetry Series. He has also published a collection of his interviews with contemporary poets, *Range of the Possible*. He lives in Spokane, Washington, and teaches at Gonzaga University.

Poet and translator **W.S. Merwin** has received nearly every major literary accolade, including the Pulitzer Prize, Tanning Prize, and Bollingen Prize. He has long been committed to artistic, political, and environmental causes in both word and deed; when presented with the Pulitzer Prize in 1971, he donated the prize money to artists and the draft resistance. He currently lives in Hawaii, where he cultivates endangered palm trees.

Joanna Osborne grew up outside of Portland, Maine, and recently finished her MFA in poetry at the University of Maryland. She currently lives and works outside of Washington D.C. and has poems forthcoming in *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *The Oklahoma Review*, and *Willow Springs*.

Suzanne Paola (Susanne Antonetta) is the author of *Body Toxic: An Environmental Memoir*, a *New York Times* Notable Book for 2001, winner of an American Book Award, and one of *Library Journal*'s 2001 top ten best science books. She's also the author of four books of poetry, including *The Lives of the Saints*, a finalist for the Lenore Marshall Poetry Prize, and *Bardo*, winner of the Brittingham Prize. She's received an NEA grant for nonfiction and an Artist Trust grant from Washington State. Her most recent book of nonfiction, a study of neurological diversity, is *A Mind Apart*, from Penguin. She teaches at Western Washington University in Bellingham, Washington.

Iraj Isaac Rahmim, a writer and consultant based in Texas, is currently working on a book of essays on his journey as a Jewish Iranian American. His recent works have appeared in *Antioch Review*, *Commonweal*, the *Houston Chronicle*, and *Reason* (a Notable Essay in *Best American Essays 2004*) and have been broadcast by the *Pacifica Radio*. A recipient of a 2003 Fellowship in Literature (Nonfiction) from the Texas Commission of the Arts/Writers' League of Texas, he holds a PhD in chemical engineering from Columbia University.

Chris Ransick won a Colorado Book Award in 2003 for his first book, *Never Summer*, and went on to publish a collection of short stories in 2005 titled *A Return to Emptiness*. He has lived in Montana, Wyoming, California, and Colorado, working as a reporter, editor, and professor, and was assistant to the editors of the *The Last Best Place: A Montana Anthology*. He is presently at work on a new collection of poetry.

Susanna Lippóczy Rich is Professor of English and Distinguished Teacher at Kean University. "[Confess] Caress the Dragon" is the introductory chapter of *Still Hungary: A Memoir*, other portions of which have appeared in *Nimrod*, *Frontiers*, *Feminist Studies*, and *Proteus*. "Lullaby: Cradle Song" won first prize in *Fugue*'s 2003 Nonfiction Contest and is listed as a "Notable Essay" in *The Best American Essays 2004*. She is a 2004-05 Fulbright Creative Writing Fellow traveling to Hungary.

James Richardson is the author of *Vectors: Aphorisms and Ten-Second Essays* and *Interglacial: New and Selected Poems and Aphorisms*, which was a finalist for the 2004 National Book Critics Circle Award. He is Professor of English and Creative Writing at Princeton University.

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Melita Schaum's poetry, short fiction, and literary essays have appeared in such journals as *Denver Quarterly*, *Colorado Review*, *Notre Dame Review*, *The Literary Review*, *New Letters*, and *PRISM International*, among others. A collection of her memoir essays, *A Sinner of Memory*, was published in 2004 and named runner up for the Great Lakes Colleges Association New Writers Prize. She is currently editing the Pearson/Longman anthology of contemporary nonfiction titled *The New Essay*, forthcoming spring 2006.

Reginald Shepherd is the editor of *The Iowa Anthology of New American Poetries*, published by the University of Iowa Press in 2004. He is the author of four books of poetry, including *Otherhood* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2003), which was a finalist for the 2004 Lenore Marshall Poetry Prize, and *Some Are Drowning* (Pittsburgh, 1994), winner of the 1993 AWP Award. He lives and writes in Pensacola, Florida, where live oaks and magnolias are evergreens.

Karen Gettert Shoemaker's first collection of short fiction, *Night Sounds and Other Stories* (Dufour Editions), was published in 2002. It is being republished in the United Kingdom by Parthian in 2006. Along with publications in a variety of literary magazines, her work has been anthologized in *Times of Sorrow, Times of Grace* and *A Different Plain: Contemporary Nebraska Fiction Writers*. She is on the faculty of the University of Nebraska's MFA in Writing Program.

Ed Skoog's poems have appeared in *Poetry*, *The New Republic*, and elsewhere. A chapbook of poems, *Field Recordings*, was published last year by Seattle's Lit Rag Press.

R.T. Smith's *The Hollow Log Lounge* (Illinois, 2003) was selected by Li-Young Lee as the winner of the 2004 Maurice English Poetry Prize. Smith's other books include *Messenger*, *Trespasser*, and *Brightwood*. He is the editor of *Shenandoah: The Washington and Lee Review* and lives in Rockbridge County, Virginia. He has new poems forthcoming in *Ploughshares*, *Arts & Letters*, and *The Southern Review*.

J. David Stevens teaches creative writing at Seton Hall University in New Jersey. His most recent stories appear or are forthcoming in *Mid-American Review*, *The Paris Review*, and *River Styx*, and his book-length collection *The Death of the Short Story and Other Stories* will be published by Ohio State University Press this fall.

Katherine Taylor has won a Pushcart Prize and the McGinnis-Ritchie Award in fiction. She earned an MFA at Columbia University, where she was a Graduate Writing Fellow. Her fiction and nonfiction have appeared or are forthcoming in *Details*, *Harvard Review*, *Ploughshares*, the *Southwest Review*, *Shenandoah*, *ZYZZYVA*, *Confrontation*, and elsewhere. A collection of stories and a novel will be released by HarperCollins.

Chad Willenborg is from Effingham, Illinois, currently the home to the largest cross in America, but he lives in Philadelphia, where he continues to work on his Scrabble game while finishing a novel called *Seether*. The

novel features some of the characters from "Plowing the Stars," but Elvis Passalacqua lives longer. Willenborg's work has appeared in *McSweeney's*, *The Believer*, *The Aurelian*, and elsewhere.

Robert Wrigley teaches poetry at the University of Idaho. His most recent book, *Lives of the Animals* (Penguin, 2003), won the Poets' Prize for 2005.

Dean Young, who teaches at the Iowa Writers' Workshop, is the author of six collections of poetry. His latest, *Elegy on Toy Piano* (University of Pittsburgh Press), has a purple spine.

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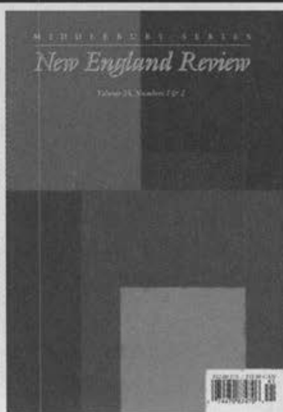

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