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A word meaning
to perceive, understand, realize, come to know;
knowledge that has an inception,
a progress, an attainment.
The recognition of truth from experience.
To my dark heart, gods are.
In my dark heart, love is and is not.
But to my white mind
 gods and love alike are but an idea,
a kind of fiction.

— D H Lawrence
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Cody Kitsap
Those who understand impermanence
use dust and sand and leaf.
Their sculptures are the mesh
of hand and fragment; the swirl
of motion that is undone again
with their full acceptance.

They have learned from headless marble
the folly of making their mark;
they know – we see dimly –
the moment is eternal as nothing else is.

The rasp of a sand funnel leaves red and gold loops
slow motion ripples, condensed symbol
called into Now, to be swept away Then.

They point to the moon; we see the finger,
we who covet unchanging things.
Our every breath a denial, we carve initials
on gold, on granite, willing them
to carry us to infinity. We are already there.

—Catherine McGuire
Not Quite Born
Phebe Davidson

After Jason Shinder  
For Eliot Davidson

I have only this skin
that has spent its time in great longing.
Inside it, I am waiting.
I cannot tell when hands touch and scatter
their atoms of flesh. Some
accidents of light bring sparse warmth
and vermillion footsteps on the slab of floor
sound as echoes that follow each other away.
All I have known is lost in the dark,
and this crossing made at night.
Aubade in Autumn
Phebe Davidson

Short trunks and limbs. Cherubs, Iron gates. Cemetery weather, sure enough. October wind is turning dank and rough. A month or two and we will see what waits

in winter’s shorter days and bitter nights. Our mother’s stone is worn, the dates are dim and hard to see. There is a skim of frost this early in the day, the light

at play on death’s markers, bright glittering Distraction till that small ice melts. I try to imagine what she might have felt, dying at home with the leaves all littering

the ground. I can’t of course. So much is gone. But still I walk this path and touch this stone.
Tree, Woman
Monica Mody

With her teeth she cleaned its fruit for birds and worms, dipped her head and swabbed exposed surface roots with her cheek, cooled her lips against the leaves, blew air into the bark until her lungs were filled.

In the dark of the hollow she stroked her songs awake, stretched to cup silence in branches and practiced her first speech, wrapped her belly around the trunk, scattered bird droppings on grass until they were home.

When the lopping first started she cracked right through, propped herself spread-eagled along construction sheets and waited, the sun was bare above her head, until they picked her up and dropped her in a fish bowl.

Green through her window – a shut shadow.

She moves inside guzzling glorious newspapers that publish pictures of it naked.

But long ago, a few days back, just before the sun came up this morning, I’ve heard even now, she blew air into the tree bark.
aroma. like a mixture. of voices.

some laughter. as movement of a more. like a broken faucet. or. to die. is to quit. quite suddenly. archival footage. in black and white. nor surprises. enjoyment. outside. whenever the wind. aggressive. like a thinking. about loss. or the phone interrupting. contract. an otherwise memorable. occasion. a kind of rose. blue. when he was a child. you never recognize time. only change. earmarks. my lover. the artist. throws acrylics around canvas. spiral like loss of control. anger brutalizes. she uses a chainsaw. writes ferociously. word chips. cover them all. in brown. in hazel or green. the runner sweats profusely. her slim body. a must admit. a don’t want this. with you. again. rather. to move out. of predictable. like a sudden head rush. but more constant. dialogue. ice cream. out of the closet. a last night. reverberates. like a to last. her beauty a standard ploy. learned. leave it all unsaid. elegant. project back into the mirror. reflect meaning. locate her hips. walk away. enormous relief. casual. ring for important. unhappy. resident advisor.
he is lost. i am lost. in amazement.

an old woman. with an older man. bent in youthful energy. bent toward each others lips. a lisp falls effortlessly from his side. she giggles. as he wraps her virginity in his disinterest. desire stays warm. inside. he is lost. as am i. as you go down on him. on my knees. i watch. alert. amazement mounts. a lisp falls from his side. while she hardly bends to reach the floor. i take it all in. as you do your lover. as i do. the couple looks still at each other. she reaches farther than her dream. where he flees into a forbidden. he hates me. he hates that i stand in amazement. that i might understand. that i do. you take him deeply. your mouth. a sudden reflex. to understand the old mans reticence. how he still resists. dreams of a rocky shore. a rock strewn love affair. i am lost. as is he. the amazement factor. our bodies. his and mine. she remains in frustrated silence. to prove her strength. she takes his face in her arms. rocks back and forth. unequivocal she understands. what she pretends is at stake. after so many years. so many lies. words now flood the room. where we stand or kneel. in a moment. one more movement. he is lost. my mouth surrounds him. she weeps in willow threads. amazement follows after us. bites at our ears. tries to sway direction. now necessary.
you find it impossible to understand.

why he finds your black and white photographs haunting. as if he cannot retrieve what is already lost. what has always been lost. in the mirror he mimics your pose. to see how close you can be. yet he always frustrates the moment with language. words spill around his naked body. my lover sleepwalks through the day. to awaken his desire for me. he drinks slowly. inexpensive red wine. that is all i remain to him. inexpensive red wine. domestic. she envelops your day in laughter. two women speak closely about art and rage. their husbands abandoned to thoughts about themselves. my lover writes on the walls of canvas acrylic dreams. where my absence floats. as if above a festive parade. or a row of black sedans. funereal. parade. the man has died suddenly. music diminishes. thwarts understanding. kneeling in front of the mirror he envisions her photograph. loves himself thus abstractly. my lover lies beside me. his hands stroke my body. covers it with bruises. encroaches memory. a piano listens from an adjacent room. pillows fall to the floor. you take him into your arms. hope to ease despair. his losses weigh heavily on your shoulders. your bare skin. i turn to look into my lovers face. count the beautiful brown eyes. equilibrium. you wave your camera in the air. accidental shutter speed. he peels a grin back to reveal a nothing as large as your body can bear.
she speaks with a child's voice. maturity delusion.

both breasts missing. mass. he wanders through the room. call it monday. gray. sub-tone of spring. rain. misery. wake him up with your hand. decide. instantly. upon a show of warm need. flick the smoke. into the street. feel the patient wheel. to return. could either have known. how long. long legs. white mini. common pursues even into wilds. charm a smile. break out. the skin. a memory. like muscle. she becomes more. in her absence. real. the writer worries over any word. remembers articles. every one counts. she said it would be nice. to cook a meal together. he waits. aside the dark cut. there may have been. a time. now many revoke. opening doors. today. saturated in words. clamoring for attention. nouns. to cover form. step outside of yourself. tomorrow gray hues. still life.
tonight i am writing into you.

as if in conversation. the voices mingle. sound alike. you are broken hearted. alarmed by the flood of feelings. despair. i can only hold you. comfort. wrap you onto the page. prevent more danger. but it’s already too late. suddenly i find only my voice. have lost yours. have not been careful enough. can not feel. do not notice you pulling away. how fear leads you off. chained. blindfolded. tonight our bodies feel warm together. and then it’s over. timeless. terrible and awake. not even fear. that moment before memory. you watch as his image shrinks in the rearview mirror. or is erased. behind a dozen houses. but gone. remains. and a never again. to prove it. to ride it out onto the roads asphalt. a sidewalk maybe. of a woman whose look into a mirror will regard forever differently. the camera. a piano. a color. say blue. say brown. hazel. you dream your lover and you dance. in front of everyone. even strangers. and because you are in his strong arms. safety. outside she wonders. the writer folds hands. maybe thinking surrender. maybe wondering how quickly ink dries. dies. my lover follows the canvas as it leads his imagination. or maybe he drinks. the solitude of red wine. with all the windows open. with a whispered breeze. or maybe like you. my lover forgets. more truly cannot understand. how permanent departures are. i look at the black and white photo. and you look back in astonishment.
It happened the week after I chopped down the hawthorn.  
A knife-slip, a welter of blood, and time shifts.

Woollen clothes, straw prickling my skin, I moan  
in a smoky half-light.  A beldame crouches at my feet,  
encouraging me to breathe.  (This is the time  
I die in childbirth.  My husband is a woodcutter.)

A hundred years later, my brother is taken by fairies.  
Mother and Father talk in whispers through the night,  
and Mother cries.  My best enemy, Jennet Clark,  
tells me he’s run off to sea, or to London—the story  
changes with each telling; the important thing is  
he doesn’t want us, and that it hurts—but Father  
hangs horseshoes, and buries a witch-bottle under the threshold  
for good measure.  When the next baby is a girl,  
and she deformed, even Jennet is silenced.  Father  
cuts down a stand of thorn in revenge.  I go to town  
to be prenticed, and the house burns.  I am shunned  
as bad luck.

Later still, I take to dancing  
in fairy rings, bedecked with ribbons and the witching smile  
of youth.  Lovers and swains—I leave no hayrick  
undisturbed, no bed of moss untried.  The man I marry  
is understanding, perhaps more than I deserve, and we wed  
in May, with blossom everywhere, before I start to show.  
The child is healthy, but I suffer the wages of sin.

(That time, it’s plague.) Hardly any rest  
before the world spins and I remember Paris  
in all its tumult, its shame and glory.  We cheer Madame  
in the square and plant thorn on the graves to keep  
the bastards quiet.

Britannia rules the waves.  
A Navy wife, I wax and wane with the  
fortunes of the sea.  Guilty, he throws trinkets over his shoulder to appease:  
gewgaws, curios, fetishes, anything ornate that takes his interest.  
I don’t know what half the carvings are, but I suspect,  
especially when a visiting professor coughs and refuses to take tea  
in the front room.  Superstition spreads like wildfire.  My husband  
turns merchant, transfers to India.  I go with.  Cholera.
Now there is the hum of white lights and pungent antiseptic. Voices murmur, then chitter, and I open my eyes. My neighbour found me on the floor, summoned, she says, by an “unearthly shriek.” I’m in a thick fug of morphine. My words come out mutterings, imprecations, poetry.

No one knows plants like I do. Sometimes a ball flies into the marjoram, and the kids dare each other to fetch it. Before they do, I come to the gate. They shuffle. I could offer flowers, pearls, cookies, but they want only one thing. I point down the road with the fingers I no longer have, shout, and hurl the ball past them like a curse. Delighted, they scatter. A cat weaves around my legs, cementing the effect. I go in. I make tea. Night comes.
A Quiet Day
Vineetha Mokkil

Ameena opens her eyes to a foggy morning. She tiptoes out of the room, taking care not to wake Ammi. Her mother is snoring gently and the sound of her breathing fills the cramped space. Ammi’s room is meant to accommodate a single person. She moved into it after Abba’s death ten years ago because she couldn’t bear to go on staying in the bedroom they had shared. Everything in that room reminded her of Abba. Every minute she spent there after he was gone was torture. So she shifted rooms, bringing all her clothes and sweaters and her grief with her, hoping the ghosts chasing her would find the new room less hospitable than the old one. Ammi had not stirred when Ameena crept into the narrow bed with her last night when the chill in the air was at its worst, the snow pouring down from the sky, the blizzard burying the streets of Srinagar in white; the temperature plummeting, the cold biting into her flesh; a cruel winter, more brutal than any Ameena had seen in the last thirty-two years.

Ameena stands by the kitchen window for a while, staring at the sea of white outside. A woman dressed in a parrot green pheran walks down the street, lugging a sack along. Her shoulders are stooped. A young woman, inching across the snow with an old woman’s gait. She’s grown old before her time like the rest of us, Ameena thinks. Who knows what loss she is trying to make her peace with. Who knows how heavy her heart is… Ameena lingers by the window till the woman disappears out of her sight. Then she turns around, fills the kettle with water and sets it down on the stove. It takes her several tries to light a match. She notices the nervous tremor in her hands when she strikes a matchstick against the box.

Finally, after many botched attempts, the stove’s blue flame leaps up. Her eyes wander to the calendar on the wall stained with kitchen fumes. A month ago, when the team leader had set the final date, she had drawn a circle around December 15, Saturday, marking it in red. Not because she was afraid the day would slip away without giving her a chance to do what she had been rehearsing for over a year. No, she hadn’t circled the date to ward off forgetfulness. The mark was just an affirmation of the truth, like a signature on a document guaranteeing the authenticity of the writer’s intent.

She had waited for the team leader’s confirmation before making the mark on the calendar, holding on till the last minute to make sure the date was set in stone. The team leader – Aftab, a boy from next door who she had gone to school with; now a solemn, bearded man – had suspected the Prime Minister’s office would juggle his schedule around. But the visit had gone ahead as planned. The PM had flown down from Delhi to Srinagar on December 12th and he was attending a lunch hosted in his honor at a hotel overlooking the Dal Lake on the afternoon of December 15th. No change of plans. Not on his part. Or hers.
She drops two cubes of sugar into her teacup. ‘Diabetes runs in your family, Ameena! A sweet tooth is your fatal flaw, jaan,’ Bilal used to joke. There was also a sher he liked to recite, a rhyming couplet comparing her love for sweets to her love for her husband, the first romance by far the more passionate than the second. She has forgotten the words of the poem. But she remembers Bilal’s wicked grin while he recited it, the sound of the words tripping off his tongue, the rise and dip, the easy flow, the pleasing lilt of his voice. Poetry had brought them together at college. Keats and Shelley and the pantheon of Romantics, Neruda’s fiery grace, Ghalib’s anguish, Iqbal’s revolutionary cries. They had sat next to each other during lectures, walked down the musty corridors of the English Department (holding hands when the place was deserted), her heart fluttering in her chest when Bilal recited a poem from memory. Ammi and Abba loved Bilal almost as much as she did. They had welcomed him into the family fold as if he was their long lost son.

She wipes away her tears with the back of her hand and sips her tea. The house is very quiet. Ammi is asleep. The whole city is lost in sleep like her. There is no sound to be heard, not a whisper, just the snow falling quietly, mountains of powdery dust piling up on rooftops and the branches of the chinar trees lining the streets. She closes her eyes and leans against the wall, tea cup in hand. She can hear voices – Bilal laughing, baby Razia whimpering like a kitten, Bilal humming a lullaby to put her to sleep, Razia humming along with him and then slipping into a stream of baby talk, an excited babble only Ameena can decipher. She hears their voices ringing out in the silence, clear, crystal clear. She feels their warm breath on her skin. She can reach out and touch them if she likes. They are in the house with her, Bilal and the baby, bundled up in her fluffy blue blanket. Her husband and her daughter are home. They are happy and warm, well fed.

Not for them a snowy grave. Not for them the winter’s bite.

She opens her eyes and their voices fade away. She empties the dregs of her tea in the kitchen sink, rinses the cup, dries it and puts it back on the stand next to the refrigerator. She wants to leave the kitchen in order, spare Ammi the trouble of cleaning up. She will not leave a mess behind before stepping out of the house.

*****

In the Fall, the chinars in Kashmir turn burnished gold. The streets are lined with chinar leaves. A carpet of rust is unrolled. The crunch of footsteps on the carpet makes a decent melody. On an October evening, Bilal had walked under the chinars, holding Razia in his arms, rushing to the chemist’s before the store closed for the day. He would have liked to slow down and let Razia enjoy the orange blaze of the chinars. He would have loved to set his daughter down – she was wearing shoes that day, a pair which squeaked with every step and made her laugh – let her run free, watch her face light up. But that would have to wait for another day. Right then, Ammi was running a high fever and if he didn’t hurry, the chemist would lock up his store, leaving Ammi to
spend a sleepless night. So he sped down the street, whispering, “hurry, hurry, hurry,” in his daughter’s ear. “Hm…hm…hm…” she sang back. She can sing in tune, he thought, even if she’s just a baby. His heart swelled with pride. “Hm…hm…hm…” she sang in her clear voice. She’s going to be a singer, this daughter of mine, Bilal decided. A singer-songwriter. A poet. Or both.

Father and daughter reached the crossing where the road forked into two. The sky darkened. There was no moon or stars overhead, just an inky black expanse. Bilal turned left. The chemist was just a few blocks away. He would get the medicine and hurry back home. Ameena would be back from her friend’s house, probably cooking dinner, making the dum aloo dish she had promised him in the morning. His wife stuck to her promises as a rule. The thought of her made him smile. Razia stiffened in his arms. Something had scared her, he realized. He patted her on the back and kept walking. He heard a shout from afar, but he didn’t slacken his pace. He heard the sound of an approaching vehicle – a car or an army jeep – it was hard to tell. He saw the lights of the market twinkling in the distance – the butcher, the chemist, the grocery store – the comfort of familiar places, just a few steps away.

Razia was crying now, her face buried in the crook of his shoulder. He whispered in her ear to soothe her. She wouldn’t stop crying, wouldn’t stop trying to wriggle out of his arms as if safety lay elsewhere. He raised his voice at her and his shout was drowned by the roar of an engine. He turned around and saw an army jeep hurtling towards him. His first impulse was to scream and the next to run, run as fast as his legs would carry him, clutching Razia to his chest. She was screaming and he kept running, his insides knotted in terror. He ran, his eyes fixed on the lights ahead, as if the market was a beacon leading him and the baby to safety.

The next morning, a few minutes after sunrise, Bilal’s neighbour Aftab found the two corpses on the street, father and daughter felled by bullets, their lifeless bodies sprawled in the dust at the edge of the market.

******

Should she take a shower before she leaves the house? Ameena hesitates at the door of the bathroom, wondering if she should bathe. Of course, this is a trivial detail. She knows it will make no difference, no difference at all, if she steps out unwashed. Her success does not hinge on personal cleanliness. Or its lack. If she were a believer, she could have comforted herself with the thought that the blood on her hands would be cleansed by Allah, and that her actions would transport her closer to him, ensconce her in heaven for eternity. But she has no such illusions. She had lost her faith the day a bullet pierced Bilal’s heart. Faith was meant to be unshakeable, faith left no room for doubt. But her faith was not fortified enough to withstand the horror of burying her baby and beloved husband, not strong enough to keep on believing in a god who stood by, watching innocents die.
She splashes ice-cold water over herself and does not feel the chill. Her body is numb to the cold. Her mind too. All she can think of is the instructions the team leader gave her the last time they met: the address she must go to, the exact time she must walk up to the gates of the hotel where the PM will be lunching, the gait she has been practicing for months now which gives away no clue about the bomb strapped to her belly. She goes over the instructions over and over again as she changes into a fresh set of clothes. Ammi is still asleep, curled up like a child under the bedcovers. Ameena decides not to wake her. She will leave quietly, without the fanfare of goodbye. She crosses the threshold and steps out into the falling snow, shutting the door gently behind her.
The spirit of creation is the spirit of contradiction.

It is the breakthrough of appearances

toward an unknown reality.

— Jean Cocteau
How Easily Hair Catches Fire
Jeanette Geraci

What were her eyes before she was born?
A pair of stars.

Her mother will beg Orion, blow out her birthday candles year after sorry year.

[The heart thumps on in spite of its murmurs -- but only if one's constellations come blessed.]

I imagine shadows closing in around her eyes, tenuous as skin, daylight, promises.

I imagine her molting fistfuls of long, brown hair -- how her beloved might have expected to plunge his hands in it for decades.
Aviary
Pamela Clarke Vandall

You were a boy on a bike
pedalling through
Mothers flowers.
Wicked grin, peacock eyes
and the call
of a mourning dove.
I watched;
knew my mother
could wring your scrawny neck;
snap it like a blue birds.
She told me to stay
but I flew the coop--
took flight in a field
and let you
have your way.
I can hear you
whistle
through a maze
of corn stalks.
A song
that melts
in the cold shriek
of Mothers hands
in the aviary.
I don’t remember her name. But I know she was seven, that she lived in a half-way house for released prisoners, a place where the front door had been boarded up long ago, where people slept on mattresses without sheets, where there were few dishes, too little food, too much competition for the everyday needs, for the one toilet, for the three cups from which all were expected to drink. And yet I know some things were abundant, copious, viral, silent. She slept under the only entrance these men knew, these men who came and went through her bedroom window in the nights and in the days. There were rumors of meth, but no one could prove it, not the social workers who came by sporadically to peer in the windows, in her eyes. Not the teachers who went to bed, our warm beds, sick at night. We could prove what the now-free men once did, but that was of no consequence as bonds had been paid, prison doors unlocked. We knew she slept under that window at night feeling their feet step over her head, their breath stinking, their clothes rank, their needs sharpened. The rest I cannot confirm. But I know. I know sometimes one would bend down over her, touching her in the way he had longed to touch a girl during those long years locked inside the metal corridors of Belmarsh, Holloway, Wormwood Scrubs, Latchmere: places with the sounds of leeches, of lives that don’t count, names not remembered, names recorded, then erased. And he was lonely. And he knew no one would ever know him, know this, or care.
And so she lay there, knowing this man wouldn’t say her name, didn’t know her name, didn’t care, knowing she would be back in school in a few hours, her hair in her eyes, her attempt to hide, to disappear, wanting no one to remember, to see, to search, to know. And so she stopped speaking, drew inside an imaginary world where a playground still existed, where friends shouted her name from across the street, where a pretend mother called her to dinner with a pet name she alone owned, and a make-believe dad put her to bed with a kiss, a goodnight kiss, whispering her name, a name hesaved for her alone: sweet girl, sweet girl, sweetheart.
Elephant ear patterns of holding,  
of keeping upright, of fires not yet lit,  
of not using perfectly good legs  
to move into places I don’t want to go,  
or can’t go, am too terrified to go.  
I am foothold to reams of undone business.  
I hear the piano upstairs and wonder  
how wood can make such a noise.  
Me—I stand silent. Waiting.  
Waiting for the movement of pens  
to scratch my surface, telling me  
that timber was not felled in vain,  
that hatchets have a right to hollow and gut,  
that boats have a right to pull trees down rivers,  
that those boats were not disappointed  
or dog-tired by the act, that they didn’t deliver  
murdered but resurrected copses, reformed corpses,  
that could be shaped into useful boxes  
for itemized bills and unwritten memoirs  
and a thousand household chores  
that wait for a match to scratch  
the surface of this parched, briquetted forest.
The sturdiness of dreams,  
of this dream,  
makes me wonder where I’ve been,  
where I will go next.  
The answer: nowhere.

This is the dream of being grounded,  
sounmoveable that the earth  
bends toward you, not you toward it,  
the moment when the flowers eat upward  
along your bark, the dirt muddies the shins,  
the long roots scratch their way from your shoes  
into the earth below,  
until you are so deep,  
so tall that you cannot but  
sway in the beauty of staying  
put.
Self-portrait, oceans

Andrea Witzke Slot

Deep, driving, full of your poisons, but you are unforgiving. No, that is not fair. You are unthinking, not ready to believe what I tell you.

I care for them the best I can, but they swim in radiant light. And I tell you to care, I tell you to be there, to watch what the earth yields to me. I tell you to think.

I tell you to be there for the star-like fish, for the whales that I swallow whole, for the slick dolphins, who pull waste along in their wake.

You think they are unthinking: they know not. They know. They know. They know.
Eye Witnesses

Eye looked out at the sea
and saw a new plan. Eye saw the
sea asking for new water, for hair
wrapped in stockings,
that a she once slipped on a pair of legs,
another fetching idea to stop
the spread of disease.

But eyes don’t see a ship,
an Exxon Valdez.

Ah, knowing what is there: a matter of trust.
Knowing what is not there: a matter of form.
Knowing what is there but pretending it’s not:
Their travesty. Yours. Ours. S/he swims in a sea
together, toppled from the same overturned boat.
Engulfed.

See, first eyes ignore.
Second eyes admit a little bit of spillage,
black ooze pouring into our coastal mouths.
Third eye sees horror,
the helpless, the oil-slick small birds and fish,
swimming in what some call black gold,
what these eyes call sewage,
what their eyes call death.

But no one can see the change,
until underwater cameras let us
see a minute-by-minute sea.
Their cameras, their directors, their positions,
their cameos, their photoshop ops.
Ideology oozing past us, swallowing our feet,
pouring black liquid into our ears.
To sea. To sea. To sea.
II.

Eye looked upon the sea.
Admitted s/he didn’t know what s/he saw.

But I was told I could see it,
was told this is what I should see,
would see, would be me.

And so eye believed that we s/he saw,
s/he knew, s/he see, w/s/he be.

III.

Down the street, another eye or two watched
his/her mother/father/sister/brother looking down
as s/he was tucked in bed.

Goodnight, goodnight, goodnight
sounds the same in every language.

Surely meaning is the same: Good. Night.
Sleep well in the dreams you are given.
Write with blood,
and thou wilt find that blood is spirit.

— Frederic Nietzsche
Baptism
Dane Karnick

Aquamarine enwraps a brown chair in the back room of McClane Church where she enters draped in white an apparition of devotion she takes a seat in consecration that swallows her offering with the ease that water acquaints her body as the priest covers her face with a towel dunked in memory of Saint John and tilts her head back in a swirl of cloth drowning heaven and earth as the savior blesses from the dark breathless in an exodus of religion as a bush burns without us her beginning of all things.
Residence
Dane Karnick

Below the dunes
that pursue
Sangre de Cristos
a shelter flakes
off sentiment
disregarding
its posture
of lumber
losing loyalty
to strata
while bare walls
loiter in sunlight
waltzing on sand
that wanders
the kitchen
and creeps in
the living room
to pile against
the bedroom
dirt powdered
over thousands
of years to rest
inside this house
that mimics home
dwelling in me
a burial of
significance.
VISION
Stuart P. Radowitz

My hand brushes against your cheek.
Your hand barely flicks away
a long thin strand of brown hair.
Leaves rustle as I touch you.

Branches snap as we talk in soft whispers.
A sunburst of light opens, finally
I can see you again
Smooth white legs wrapped around
a bicycle, draped over handlebars,
tangled in vines and picnic baskets.

My hand nearly brushes against your cheek.
Your lips tell me why my eyes
look into your soul.

I see your heart and almost touch it.
Your fingers spread across my back.
I roll over in the grass.
All our time together floats
on the back of a dragonfly.
Monterey Park
Ryo Baum

We drove to your childhood town. We drove fast, probably broke some laws on the way. You took the exit on Atlantic then turned left. I saw the city streets dancing with Chinese letters reflecting their brush stroke paradise against the red Motel signs. They were glowing like fireflies in the summer of your senior year. "Behind this fence are patches of dead grass and empty bleachers with broken lights." You told me as we drove down the desolate street planted with slumbering houses. "That's the football field I graduated from." We listened to our breath splatter against the air and extend white webs of condensation across the early November dawn.
This Rain
Nickie Albert

No-one has written about the rain
falling outside my window.

There’s no description of it pelting my garden,
drenching the nasturtium, the marigold.

Who has described the fine, gray line
on the distant edge of this storm?

That mark on the horizon
promising a dry, western wind.

Thunder erupts over the mountain -
now a burst, a low rumble.
Snowflake
Nickie Albert

I spin and spin
like a dervish
like a top
a snowflake
on an endless
journey
from cloud
to tongue
with only
the cold air
to travel on.
Miles and miles
of it, scenery –
the tour of a lifetime.
Prize Kite
Nickie Albert

Tall beach grass wave
a thousand hands in the wind.

The sand is fine and bright
as the sun yields its iridescence.

It is your day today
and my day to remember.

So clearly, you walked
on the beach with your kite

like a boy. Belly overflowing,
legs like spokes of a wheel.

Together we would walk up and down
the shoreline with Walter, your prize kite.

I see now how you envied him
his freedom, as I now envy yours.

When I walk Nauset Beach again
should I bring Walter?

Will he accept an unfamiliar hand?
Will he struggle to find you in the sky,
as I struggle to find you here
on the page?
The Color of Wind
Nickie Albert

The end of his fingertips are pressed tightly against his eyelids, praying for a color, a pink, a deep blue –

he knows nothing of pink or deep blue. He knows the smell of watermelon

on a hot, humid day. A seed gets spit onto a paper plate.

He knows the feel of seersucker against his legs – that soft, corrugated cotton

moving with the breeze. A bell rings on a quiet porch.

The wind blows an easy hello while he makes his way through the living room.

Sitting on a chair in the shade he listens to the bell chime

for his sound heart and his telling tongue.

The wind greets him across the morning through the wildflower fields

filled with the deep reds of poppies the purple of flowering saliva.

Previously published in Burning Word
Almost
Joan Maki

The girl is at the county fair. Her belly expanded. She is fifteen, maybe sixteen. She stops at the elephant ear booth, her hands beneath the enormous belly.

“Any moment,” she told Seth again and again. “Any moment it could burst right out of me.” Now her gray face, waiting. The man appears from out of the dark of the booth. She counts change, her mouth moving. She cannot count in her head. Never has been able to. She drops the change into his hand. She looks up, briefly, at a place in the sky. *Nothing.* The man in the booth hands her an elephant ear on wax paper. He does not smile at her. She knows this by now. She is learning. People are not so kind. *No one ever smiles, anymore. You’d think everything wrong in the whole world was my fault.* She turns and eats the elephant ear. She watches the people passing by. Children with balloons advertise real estate and Avon and Jesus. *What do they know about anything?*

Later she stands with her boyfriend Seth and her hands are again beneath the massive belly. Seth points out into the twirling things. At games he wants to play. At prizes he wants to win. A gold fuzzed print of a cheetah. His arms are boney and white. *If I would have noticed this before,* she thinks, *I would have never –*

But they don’t tell you these things. There’s no one to ask. Even now. Where would she have gone? To just get rid of it? But now she can’t get rid of it. It’s like a planet inside her. “But you’re just a girl,” her father said. Standing in the doorway to her bedroom. She’d written him a letter. She didn’t know how else to go about it. “I don’t understand,” he said. He had touched the pink lampshade. *I don’t understand how this –*

“See them?” Seth asks now. “See them?”

Someone would have to have driven her. That was the only way. She didn’t even know where they’d go. So it just happened. You reach a point and it’s pretty obvious. *I should have figured something else out,* she thinks now. *Someone to take me. Sign for me or whatever it is you do. It couldn’t be that bad. Quick. It would have been so quick.*

She does not see what Seth sees. She rearranges her hands beneath the planet. She can feel the planet on its axis. She wants another fry bread. Butter. Warm, sugary things. A sugared universe. She can feel the planet, tilting. It’s always moving. Red. Burning. Around. The girl does not look where Seth looks, but up at the Ferris wheel. At the colored carts going around. The wheel stops now and there are two girls up high. Not much younger than herself, maybe. The cart swings a little and they grip the silver bar and one of them laughs. The laughing one she recognizes. The other she does not.

The cart tips forward, like some invisible hand is behind them. Giant. From out of the sky. *Maybe it’s God,* the younger girl thinks. The older girl laughs. The younger girl wants to laugh but she only looks down at the smudges of people below now. The twirling canopies. She grips the silver bar. She feels sick with the smell of vomit and
grease. The carnival man below them is trashy in his red stained polo shirt and his heavy-lidded eyes and his sick way of looking at them. *She doesn’t even notice,* the younger girl thinks now. *She’s so stupid. The way she is with everything. I told her I didn’t want to ride.* But the older girl yanked her by the arm. “You can’t be scared of everything,” the older girl said. And now the older girl is rocking the cart. And the younger girl grips the bar. The carnival man kicked their cart once with his heavy boot after he smashed the bar down on them. He grinned at the older girl in her tiny white shorts. *It isn’t okay,* the younger girl thinks now. She holds on tightly. The cart creaks. *If it swung too far, I’d slide right out. There’s nothing holding me in, not really.* She glances at the older girl. The sunburned face. The cart creaks. The younger girl feels a slight drop. A shift in space. She grasps the metal bar. *Why would it matter? If it falls it will come down either way.* She feels sick. They are at the very top. When she looks down she can see the line of people, waiting. *We’re going to fall. We are. We’ll break apart through the metal.* Her nerves now are electric. Her hands soaked on the metal bar. The older girl laughs now and thrusts her giant woman’s body back against the cart and the cart creaks, rocking. The younger girl sees a glimpse of what’s beneath them. The heads in the green cart, beneath. The smattering of them all on the wheel. On the ground. *Quit,* she thinks. But she is too scared to say anything. Scared to move. Scared to breathe. Her nerves, electric. Her skin, soaking. The younger girl glances at the bolts about to come out. Above. Below. *God. God, please.* She looks over and there are the bare legs of the older girl, like reddened marble. In the tiny white shorts. She feels sick. She might be sick. Another shift in space. The wheel jolts and then moves, dropping. *Closer now. Closer.* She grasps the bar. Wet. Finger markings. And then down. *Closer. Closer. Almost.* The man in the red polo shirt opens the bar for them. Shaking. Electric. They stand. The older girl smashes down the metal steps. *You don’t get it,* the younger girl thinks. She braces on the metal rail, following. *You don’t get what almost happened.*

“They could’ve fallen,” the pregnant girl tells Seth now. “Who?”

The pregnant girl looks at the Ferris wheel. She had seen a picture in the paper. Once, before. The cart had broken. The people in the broken cart had to hold on, just hanging. They lived, sure. But that was only because they held on with everything they had in them. Just dangling there. They couldn’t get the wheel to stop, either. It just kept going around. They had to hang there that whole time.

“They don’t make those rides good,” the pregnant girl says. She’d never ridden in them. She could see where the big, painted bolts were about to pop out. She wasn’t an idiot.

A year later Seth is gone. She sits in the car outside the Safeway store while her own father passes the lit windows. “Which aisle is it now?” he asked her. “How many?” And now she watches him, back and forth. Searching. And she can hear the whole godforsaken universe in that car with her. The sound like something about to break free.
A flock of starlings swoop across a cloudy Kentucky sky. I watch them dart in and out of the window frame, tossed by winter weather, and wonder how long the cold will last. Vernaza might as well be in another universe.

In the afternoon, a sliver of sun streams through my gold curtains, and the living room briefly glows like a sanctuary. I close my eyes. I'm in Italy, before the war, walking along the Bay were colored boats bob up and down, and side to side, nudging, bumping and playing with the sea; sitting at the Café D'Angelo at an outside table, feeling the onshore breezes on my face. Life feels miraculous as it always does when one is young and beautiful.

"When are you going to get married, Cecilia?" Papa D'Angelo asked me every day. "Where you going to fall in love?"

Such a silly question. I was in love, with my petal soft skin and my long brown hair that hung in ringlets down my back, with my full breasts and round hips that the men followed with their eyes. I could feel them longing for me as I sat back in one chair and rested my feet on another, so my skirt hung over my legs and showed off my thighs. I removed my straw hat and let the shade creep over my shoulders as dusk chased off the afternoon. By the time the moon hung over the bay, I was on the balcony outside my bedroom painting at my easel. Or trying to. It was difficult to concentrate when young men would pass by and call me. "Cecilia. Cecilia. Bella Cecilia." Beautiful Cecilia. I thought I would be beautiful forever. That life would be beautiful forever.

First came Mussolini, then Hitler, then the Americans. I hid myself in nuns' robes, behind black iron convent gates. I didn't want to be raped. That's what many of the girls said when they had babies by the soldiers. "I was raped" when "I was foolish," was the truth.

But hiding was hard. I scrubbed floors, and plates, and coarse black habits. I polished candlesticks, and chalices, and the wooden pews. I dug for turnips, and grew tomatoes. Mother Matilda said I would be ready to marry when the war was over. If this was what it was like to be a wife, I wanted no part of it. When Italy was liberated, I ventured out, finally being able to breathe air clean of incense and dust. And I met Leo. My Leo. My love.

"Come with me to America," Leo said. "Come home with me."

"You will love America," Papa D'Angelo told me. "The land of the free."

But not free to walk down the street with my husband. Leo, with his petal soft brown skin and tight black ringlets, hunted down like a wild boar because a beautiful woman carried his child and had no convent in which to hide. Now I paint starlings and dream alone.
phenom

Kenneth Kesner

or is this you or who can
tell

of written fate released somewhat

myth of meaning

all that he's left

sightless so silent

and half again never to be imagined

imagined

impossible color

her eyes

created to recall

by sound

lobes

all not believe

since

while hearing speaking same
raum       Kenneth Kesner

i am accused
to window worlds
i've
i have
where to go
i the winds
tempt
release
they time me
legend shares
to shadow
ebru      Kevin Kesner

come and
	off

to a nearing

we’re to leave

let

disappear

as so soon

all but from
Call yourself alive? Look, I promise you
that for the first time you’ll feel your pores opening
like fish mouths, and you’ll actually be able to hear
your blood surging through all those lanes,
and you’ll feel light gliding across the cornea
like the train of a dress. For the first time
you’ll be aware of gravity
like a thorn in your heel,
and your sholder blades will ache for want of wings.
Call yourself alive? I promise you
you’ll be deafened by dust falling on the furniture,
you’ll feel your eyebrows turning to two gashes,
and every memory you have—will begin
at Genesis.

— Nina Cassian
Life is black, she said, crying into her hand. Her brother knew the wine burned her throat. The rasp on the edge of her voice gave it away, her head slumped on his left shoulder, the bones of her skull bearing into him sharply. Black absorbs all color, he murmured and she laughed, kissing his ear as she sipped the dregs in her glass, his already empty. They huddled on the floor, the wood pressing into their ankles like penance. After an hour, he sighed and stroked her hair as she slipped down, pushing her face into hardness. Love is black too, he whispered and poured more to drink. She tried again to pray, looking up past him as though the ceiling were an altar, the purple shadows of one a.m. making wings of the rails on the hospital bed. Outside, the eternal bright of streetlights pierced his vision like righteousness. She finished the rest of her wine, giving up clarity, and he held her tightly as she fell into herself. The sudden quiet unnerving when he shut off the monitors. He felt dizzy and closed his eyes, opening them to find angels perched on the chair, the end table, the small cabinet in the far corner that held her meds. It hurt to look at them and he grabbed his sister but she didn’t move even when he kissed her cheek, damp with tears. He closed himself against that divine purity, their brilliant calm faces, but could still hear wings brush against the dust as they moved forward. Black-tipped feathers chafed his arms and he shuddered, trying not to see as they came closer, placing his hands on his sister’s, folding back the roof as though the house was not made of stone. Then the wind and the fear of flying, his sister nestled near his heart. The stars glittered over them but flicked off as the darkness receded and he held her tighter, remembered her praying, muttering about love and the absence of color. The angels did not stop as he let her go, did not try to keep him from falling back into the world.
Áine

Christine Klocek-Lim

— _goddess of protection, prosperity, name means “bright”_

The musty apartment was filled with books, stacks and shelves everywhere. She didn’t want to come, hated the cracked spines and yellowed pages, everything suddenly antique. Corpses rather than literature, now her grandmother was gone. She pulled one down, hardly caring what it was, and a hundred dollar bill dropped to the floor like a dead bird. She sneezed, eyes stinging. The money fell from a fifth-grade primer with a small angel stamped at the beginning of chapter three, wings spread art nouveau fashion, rays of light etched around a pretty face. She set it down in exchange for _Leaves of Grass_ and found a twenty, the chapbook’s spine cracking into dust as she peered at another angel smudged on page twelve next to the words: “Thy body permanent.” Shakespeare’s sonnets spit out three hundred dollars and two angels. Neruda had a five, the angel printed half-atop a love poem as though her grandmother had stuck it there while tipsy, just missing the margin. Webster’s held a fifty and an angel in the As, left wing pointing to _afterlife_, spots of ink set into the thin paper like blood. The Bible dropped three silver coins from Matthew, thirty angels thick atop the words so they couldn’t be read. By now she was crying from dust but kept on, shoving the money aside, she had to be certain. The last book was an anthology of fairies, center hollowed out like a box. In the hole an old rubber stamp, end stained, the angel inside-out, a mirror image of sorts. And a note in her grandmother’s hand: _dear Siobhan, it’s not the book that’s important, it’s what’s inside. Love, A._
Zadkiel

Christine Klocek-Lim

— archangel of mercy and benevolence

She could hear people laughing when they left the bar and she hated them, hated their joy, how dare they with this freezing temperature, these abandoned benches. She shook off her husband’s hand, stopped near a streetlight, inspecting the crushed snow beneath the trees. She touched her useless pelvis, disgust on her fingertips. She pretended she was alone, her husband dead. She wished she could walk backwards. She tried, stepping carefully into her own footprints, but couldn’t get anywhere. The vertigo made her trip into some child’s snow angel. When she got back up, she saw there were hundreds of them, all over the park, scattered like fallen birds. She tried to leave but slipped on the wings, the pressed outlines of heaven nearly damaged until she caught herself against a bench. Wind moved through her as the cramping continued. She should have had more vodka, but guilt felt better. She didn’t understand why there were so many angels, why couldn’t she move forward without trampling something beautiful and she cried as she imagined kids reaching out until the entire park was covered with flying creatures, fantastic beings full of God and how unfair when she couldn’t count anymore, how many babies she’d miscarried. She fell again, closing herself against the brittle sky but when she tried to sleep, warm hands rearranged her arms in the snow. Then he pulled her up against his heart. She struggled, already the drink had worn off, but he made her look—a fresh angel flew beneath their feet, carved into the snow, so pristine, as though anything could be forgiven if only she pressed hard enough.
“Where are we going?” she whispered, but he wouldn’t say, kissing her into silence. He led her down the stairs to the cavern, helped her into the boat. She smiled as she looked around, shivering a little with the damp. In the dark, the cave felt strange without the tourists, their noisy children and flash photos. The green water below so still that carp came near the surface, red-gold bodies flying and diving, more spirit than flesh, mysterious and random. He unhooked the oars and handed her the lamp, gently pushed them into the river. Above, minerals in the stalactites glittered like stars and she grinned as they slid into the limestone cave, her face blithe as an angel. In the largest cavern, he stopped and flicked on the lights, almost laughing as her mouth opened, lips curved just right for another kiss, but he didn’t move, not wanting to break the delight. She stood anyway, laughing as she wobbled, the boat unsteady despite his care and her arms flew out, scarf catching the light like silver wings. He held on tighter and her shadow flew on the walls all around them as she made her way to his side, leaning down to kiss him. He closed his eyes, savoring the vertigo, but even in that solitary dark he could feel their spirits fly together in the depths, extravagant with freedom, wings suddenly bursting loose from their insignificant flesh.
I start writing with an image or a voice,  
but I don’t know anything when I start.  
The only thing I know is that I’m starting.  
    And I learn it as I go.  
That’s why it’s so hard, you have to learn all over again,  
because each one is so different.  
... you are using the side of you  
that looks out your eyes  
when you wake up from a nightmare  
and for an instant  
don’t remember what species you are.  

— Richard Bausch
symptoms (of madness)

patrick fealey

down by the nightmare, the smell of burnt leaves hangs over the bank. it’s yesterday spoiling our dreams. the dead are never fully digested, just as the beautiful are never fully ignored. i was staring at the starer. the starer stared back. the wall was the best. it was blank and white and hurt less than colors and wallpaper patterns. i was pretty sure this meant i was insane.

YEAH, IT IS FUNNY HOW A MUSTACHE ISN’T ALWAYS WHAT ONE EXPECTS. I SAW A BARE-FOOTED BLACK HONDA STRETCHED OUT IN THE TREE-TOPS. I TOOK SIX SHOTS BEFORE I REALIZED IT WAS DEAD AND I COULDN’T EAT IT. AND HERE WE GO, THE HEDGER IS AT IT, ALWAYS AT IT WITH HIS SHEARS AND DUST MASK. ROBBING THE TREES OF THEIR LEAVES WITH A LITTLE HELP FROM BLACK & DECKER AND THE ELECTRIC COMPANY’S IN THERE TOO, IN ON A PIECE OF THAT AESTHETIC OF STRAIGHT BRANCHES SQUARED AND FLAT LIKE THE WORLD BEFORE COLUMBUS. I MUST LIVE ON A REGRESSIVE STREET. WHERE ARE THE ANGELS WHEN INSANITY ABIDES LIKE THE SEA? ROLLING COMING. ROLLING GOING. BUT NEVER GOING GOING.

the artist i had met in san francisco, malakami, and a girl from the villa spaghetti, shared our space on the east side of providence. it was the third floor of an enormous house. when malakami saw me staring at the wall he bought a plane ticket to hawaii. he was afraid of me, he said later. he was my friend and had been drawing art to go with my short stories. he was a skateboarder and skeptic, read h.p. lovecraft and was a pinball wizard. malakami was one of those beautiful people who acts harmless. malakami abandoned me, but he’d been working on it for awhile.

when i’d taken him in at the villa spaghetti, we were a pair of nocturnal heathens. i wrote and malakami drew. we went to bars and we broke open the night. then we moved to providence and he became a contrarian and took a step back. he disagreed with me so often it was impossible to talk with him. his patent response to everything was a deflective “really?” and that’s all he’d offer. no thoughts to follow it, just the hanging dismissal, which got to sounding idiotic in its repetition. he didn’t believe anything. “malakami, i saw your girlfriend on thayer.” “really?” “it’s starting to rain.” “really?” “the narragansett police got busted for looking at child pornography – in the police station.” “really?” “i think i need some new shoes.” “really?”

i supposed he thought i was a sell-out to be working as a newspaper reporter. it was too mainstream. he never said it, because he was reluctant to reveal himself, but i sensed his disdain. malakami was ten years younger than me and was a part of that generation which emphasized to everyone that it had given up
before it had started. It had dropped out before tuning in. He never said or asked anything about my work. He got me wondering if I was a bigger asshole than I knew I was, not that I could do much about it. I don’t think Malakami and his unfriendly slacker friends understood what I was writing. And it seems to me Malakami should have known. He’d read my short stories and knew my sensibility. Maybe he did know I was accomplishing more than I would have as a slacker, working as a newsroom iconoclast, pushing boundaries and fighting to get stories into print. Maybe he didn’t like me chasing corrupt mayors out of town.

I expanded the paper’s vocabulary to include words the readers used and appreciated seeing in print. You know, words like “boobs” (Barbara Eden) and “shit” (Norman Mailer). I hurt a fascist police chief so bad he traded nine millimeters for .45s and built a moat of silence to keep me out (didn’t work). I had the distinction of being the only reporter dragged into the publisher’s office for a whipping in the last 100 years. I received fan mail and had beautiful stalkers sending perfumed letters and following me to meetings. I won more journalism awards than anyone in the state, awards judged by the Maine Press Association, the Arizona Press Association, and the Connecticut Press Association. These are just the facts. But the publisher didn’t care any more than Malakami. I was waging war on his class, his golf buddy who was paying kickbacks to get city contracts. His friends meant more than that during my first year on his paper, circulation went up 30% on my beat. Editors said kind things, but to the publisher I was the antichrist. Some co-workers who were better telephone operators than writers were jealous, though content in the cowardice that meant job security. They sat at their desks with their noses in their computer screens and their ears to the telephone while I was out in the air with the man on the street – a practice I was bitched-out for countless times. Actually, I was bitched-out for hanging with the man in the street for eight years. I nearly lost my job twice because I believed the man in the street knew more than the mayor. Newspapers were killing themselves and I felt headed toward extinction.

Malakami was the voice of youth and reason in that house. He gained most of his wisdom from comic books. He broke up fast with a sweet, humble and funny, and gorgeous blonde to go out with a self-centered egomaniac who called herself Nova. Nova came from Santa Cruz to study sculpture at Rhode Island School of Design. She had a full scholarship. She quickly started a band for herself, called “slippery pork.” Malakami was the bass player. Nova once asked me “What are your views on art?” She ambushed me with this at 6 a.m. as I was on my way to the toilet. I was not awake and hadn’t noticed her sitting on the kitchen couch. She scared the shit out of me and I nearly threw up on her. Malakami stopped coming into my room and avoided me well before I was staring at walls. Maybe he was afraid of me in general. Maybe he wanted to deny me. I never believed he envied me, but he had an attitude. As artists, we were opposites. He was very controlled, conscious, and obvious, whereas I was barely involved.
once we were on a pabst kick and i bought him a 12-pack before leaving for the weekend. when i returned, the 12-pack was still there, untouched. he had to have drunk beer during those two days and i’d told him that beer was for him. the pabst sat for almost a week and then i drank it. within hours, he bought a six of pabst and placed it like a condemnation in the exact same spot in the refrigerator. he didn’t want anything from me. i saw less and less of him. when i got sick, he vanished, then he bought that plane ticket home. i can’t blame him for being afraid now, but at the time i didn't understand. the truth is a lot of people are afraid of those with an illness, especially mental illness, even people who love what the sick create – which makes them hypocrites.

PEOPLE ARE EASIER TO SEE THROUGH THAN BLINDS AND I HAVE SEEN THROUGH THE INTERSTATE WITH GLASS EYES. PEOPLE ARE EASIER TO JUMP OVER THAN BUILDINGS AND THO I HAVE YET TO LEAP OVER A BUILDING IN ANY NUMBER OF BOUNDS, MY SKELETON IS THE KEY TO EVERY SOUL. MY GIFT IS FINDING LOVE AND EXPOSING ARROGANCE. I CAN MAKE A MAN HATE ME OR FLEE IN ONE MINUTE. I MAKE MEN APPRECIATE ME IN ONE MINUTE. I CAN INSPIRE GENEROSITY AND GENIUS AND SOULS WITH MY EARS.

i considered doctors and hospitals in the yellow pages and then closed the book.

one day i left the house and walked up to college hill. brown university chicks were looking out the windows of cafes. the cars seemed fast and loud. i didn’t like passing people on the sidewalk. i felt them reading me. i wanted to be alone, but i endured the world because i was on a mission. i went into the army-navy store and picked out a down sleeping bag. the guy there asked me where i was going with it and i told him the catskills. he said i would freeze to death. he tried to sell me a warmer bag. i didn’t want it. spring was coming. i wanted the old down one, not the newer synthetic one. i threw it on the fire escape to air out, grabbed a beer and drank down some percocet. i went into my room and closed the door and played my guitar. i chose the 12 books i could live with for the rest of my life, which would go down in a tent in the new york mountains. there was one woman. marguerite duras.

we had a cat named stew who made a night game of sneaking into my room and getting as close to my nose as possible. when my eyes popped open, he’d run - with a copy of balzac’s *seraphita* close on his tail. stew was my primary source of humor and entertainment. in the morning he would be standing outside my doorway, the line we had agreed upon, trapping me into a game before i made coffee. we had french roast, columbian, sumatra, kona, cabernet, chianti, bordeaux, pabst, bowmore, johnnie walker black, glenlivet, pernod, absolute, tangueray, newcastle, jim beam, and a bowl of percocets and vicadins. we did not have budweiser.
i was writing for the boston globe, the narragansett times, and reuters. i was making enough to pay the rent, put gas in the car and have a car, have a girlfriend, and indulge my weaknesses. which did not mean i could slack because once you’re in, you’re in, and if you stop for a minute, you’re out. i was caught in a never-ending race to produce bird cage liner. i was manic, and i did not feel strong in the head. i was interviewing all manner of humanity, from presidential candidates and actors to the guys lumping fish heads. they were all the same and none of it mattered to me anymore. my thoughts were fractured. i poured booze on the psychic pain and my thinking became scrambled. my way of life was my life and it was failing. a letter came into the paper, critiquing a story. it was hostile and, for the first time in six years, correct. i had written 1,600 stories and had been impervious. i was slipping.

in this third-story flat, stew was reading the tick and malakami was playing his bass before he headed to work at the laundromat. the chick was on the phone. always on the phone. malakami had argued that we take this chick on to lower our rent. i had argued against it because i knew she would be ignored. when we had found the place, malakami and i were close, partners in a nocturnal cabal, and the chick had really wanted to move in, so i let it go. she didn’t like living with us and i didn’t care. she was a good chick, but she was taking up space with her need to be fucked.

i had started back on my horn and was sitting in with a local jazz band. my hearing had become so acute that i started seeing things: i saw the notes when i closed my eyes, c, eb, f, f#, g, bb, c, displayed like a map to possibility. notes flashed while i played. i followed them. i had been playing 20 years and this phenomenon changed everything. i was in an altered state, but i was unaware. i saw these visions as a blessing, not a sign of impending hell.

home from a gig, buzzed, i’d find the globe on the machine wanting shit at 10 p.m. we need all you can get on a vietnamese murderer from providence. we want you to go to his house. do you know vietnamese? do you know anyone who speaks vietnamese? how about a professor at brown? oh, and we need it in 45 minutes. i run out the door and track down a street walled in by graffiti and lit up by shattered glass. i find the house the killer had fled from. there are lights on in the kitchen and basement. i knock. i look through the windows. the place is empty. i interview a neighbor walking his rotweiller near the abandoned house. “haven’t seen him in two days.” back home, i call in a description of an empty house and a guy walking his dog – likely a cop.

NOBODY LOSES HIS MIND, HE LOSES THE ABILITY TO WARD OFF INVASIONS. YOU LOSE SIGHT OF THE MURAL WHILE YOUR HANDS FIGHT THE ABSTRACT INVASION. YOU BECOME A MONSTER AND AN ISLAND. IT IS THE REPLACEMENT OF THE INDIVIDUAL BY THE ALL, A MARTYRED FLIGHT TOWARD THE SOURCE, LOSING ONE LIFE TO BE A THOUSAND.
i had time to work on the short stories i had written in san francisco two years earlier, which was when i first met malakami. then i had been with jess, who was now a year in the past. jess had worked at an insurance company while i stayed home and typed. she made those short stories possible. malakami was a friend of our neighbors’. he visited them one night while jess and i were there. he was with his girlfriend. malakami was dressed sharply in a long black wool coat and did not say a word to jess or i. actually, he did not look at us despite coming through the front door into a living room where there were only four people, his two friends from hawaii and us. he talked to our neighbor, who was sitting on the couch next to me, but did not look at jess or me. they didn’t stay long. my first impression was not good, but i learned he was an artist. jess and i left california and broke up. malakami and his girlfriend broke up and he came east in a tail-spin. our villa spaghetti days began.

jess was now living in newport. i had run into her twice. it was strange to look at her as somebody else’s girl. at an outdoor flea market i watched a new guy demonstrate golf clubs to her. i had never thought of that. one time i saw her and i missed her. we had been through everything together and no other girl would know that journey. the memories seemed wasted without her. i was now with layne, the tall r.i.s.d. student with long black hair. layne was almost a normal chick. at first, her pedigree and family history seemed to have corrupted her very little. she was irish and she drank well and laughed a lot. her body and her sense of humor made me happy in the beginning. she was also one of the best photographers i had ever met and i brought her out on a story where she compassionately captured peter wolf’s pallor and decay for the world.

her long arms and legs moved the bed. under the sheets i was rigid in the sunlight, watching her sleep. she crawled on my floor, through my clean laundry, looking for her panties, the sun burning lace patterns on the pine. in the back alley, a dalmatian named spot barked at saturday morning ghosts. layne’s eyes were the dawn. her eyes blue like havana, speckled with gold flakes. blue and gold when she opened them. her eyes in the morning sun, i never wanted to leave them. when she closed them, i wondered what she meant. is it still night? i was alone, watching, waiting. if she was blinking, i was a fool. a fool, i fell into her breasts. i was just a man in the summer of his life, writing poems on her back with her beautiful face in my eyes and her blood on my fingers.

layne revealed herself to be very conservative for a liberal democrat. she was a liberal not in favor of proving it: the poor deserved to suffer. i was a-political and didn’t vote, but i knew there were more nobles among the poor and nobody deserved to suffer. layne’s family were millionaires and she had an allowance. she began to live in restaurants and bars. she had been studying art in italy.
before we met, had lived on wine and bread and simple foods. six months back in america and she was covering herself in bed. she was aware and it seemed to make her eat more richly. i was not nice near the end, but i was losing my grip on niceties. she was naïve in many ways, young and bourgeois. i could not educate fat.

layne used to scream. if people were talking in the kitchen, i’d laugh. i’d laugh until i remembered i was fucking her. the neighbors looked at me like i was slaughtering women in my apartment. layne fit the times. we were together for a lot of wine and a lot of laughs. she had a taste for fire escapes and abandoned buildings and met her father for breakfast every sunday morning. she dyed her red hair black and favored black skirts. she was affectionate. her grandfather had been governor and her father attorney general, so she could talk shop if i had to. she was 21 and her father was trying unsuccessfully to push her into politics. her father seemed wary of me. he knew the disappointment his daughter had coming. i saw that he saw and he saw that i saw him seeing it. what were two gentlemen to do about a scoundrel? i liked her face. i didn’t care for her naiveté, but her instincts were good. our break-up came along after we were having problems. i was losing interest in sex. she didn’t understand. she was young. no sex meant it was over. this was leading to when i cracked up and didn’t want her at all.

i left providence and resigned from the newspapers. a couple months later i called layne from a payphone near the villa spaghetti, the big white rooming house by the beach where malakami and i had lived. i had returned to rest. i was on lithium and other meds and was alright. i was writing and doing what i had always wanted. we talked and she sounded like she believed in me. we made a date for her to come down the following week. she would be in newport over the weekend for her brother’s wedding, so i’d call her monday. when i called layne on monday, she was changed. words like flippant, superficial, indifferent, distracted came to mind. she was not coming down to visit. a weekend with the attorney general had cleared her head. it had been important to him that i was a journalist. now? i was a nobody and worse. shit, i was now a member of the deserving poor! or maybe she had met someone at the wedding? her doorbell rang while we were talking and she went to answer it. i heard a guy. she talked to him for awhile, laughing, talking, a bit too long before she came back to the phone. she said she had to go. there was no warmth. i could have been selling a knife set. it was okay. i was no longer the same. i was reaching out and back for the life of a man who no longer existed.

malakami didn’t stay in hawaii. he flew back to san francisco and got a position at one of the largest banks in america. he rose fast in this bank. he told me about playing football with the bank’s vice-presidents. the skate punk was very satisfied with himself. two years later he got a half-million-dollar house on portrero hill and married a young girl with money and a pretentious name. he’d stepped into the
upper-middle class machine and was dazzled by the insulation. one day i asked the artist how usury was treating him and i never heard from him again. i had believed in malakami, but i think i was just believing in youth.

Let us destroy mountains

To warm ourselves. Shear off dogwood, hemlock. Shave mayflower, twinflower, bristly rose, topsoil. Like block towers toppling, alphabet glee. Dynamite, collapse peak into wound-rivers, rumble boulders loose careening, flatten. Dust cloud blind. Scrape hollow, bear coal, mountain guts. Rumble trucks. Slurry black waters, any old dam, poison. Burn coal gridded to charge toothbrushes, city fountains, vacuums. Shave our heads for pete’s sake with mountain guts. Compute it. Make doom our food, let it bloom in our guts. Shake mountains insensate, crumble them, heat us, charge us, doom any old earth lungless.

Tropical dying

In Quetzaltenango the dead are buried in living color. Crosses, crypts and gravestones bloom yellow, aqua, coral, periwinkle, crowd each other like flowers in an extravagant garden. Spent roses dangle from wreaths.

Rosa María sighs, turns gingerly on her side. The shelf is narrow, but when she can manage to face east a chink in the concrete opens a view. This stripe constitutes her world. By a certain cast of shadow she discerns late afternoon. The birds, which had been drowsy in the midday heat, are starting to revive; they necklace green song across the bright cement and stone. As they cross her ribbon of light, wings brush her hair. The air softens, carrying scents of hibiscus and orange blossom. Rosa María closes her eyes and dreams of a gaudy resurrection.
dreaming in blossom

dreaming in blossom

so many times i saw you bend down to smell a flower your eyes closed your forehead
smooth your body suspended in
    anticipation at first the first years you lived with me
i’d always laugh in delight seeing you this way like an ecstatic ruby throated
hummingbird
    i always loved taking you to gardens to plant nurseries loved to see you with books on
flowers reading about flowers telling me about flowers because of you i learned their
names
stargazer lilies and cyclamens and ixora hyacinths
hydrangeas irises birds of paradise peonies calla lilies
    how many times did i ask you their names and you were always patient marigolds
petunias daisies african violets begonias lantana azaleas poppies carolina jessamine
wisteria
    you named them every time we drove past them like incantations like poetry you never
tired of hearing like poetry that fed your soul it fed mine too paintbrush nightshade rain
lilies yucca pink primrose mountain laurel winecups
    decades with you were not enough i miss you every day wish i could speak to you
every day forgive me i’d want to say forgive me for never bringing you enough flowers
forgive me for the time it took me to find us a house and build you a sunroom forgive me
for all the times i didn’t listen forgive me for all the times i hurt you
    and i’d want to ask you did you know you were the blossom of my life the sweetness of
my life so fierce and truthful you were so brilliant to talk with you was to touch
iridescence
    thank you i’d want to say i never said it enough thank you thank you thank you you
made me stronger than i was you still make me stronger than i am
    you taught me the language of orchids of epiphytes phalaenopsis cattleya vanilla
epidendrum dendrobium and the patience of flower spikes their careful buds and their
long-lived leaves
    i speak to you all the time waking and sleeping i think of you every time i see a flower
blooming any of a thousand colors you speak to me in blossoms you speak to me in
sunshine i am never alone you are with me always infinite and leafing
blossoming
poem for the wind       ire’ne lara silva

you are my first teacher you taught me how to breathe how to fill my lungs how to hum i was still a child
when i’d stand and raise my arms and invite you to take me up i wanted wings i wanted to leave the earth i wanted to soar instead you sent my hair into my eyes pulled at my clothes and made me stand strong against the force of you

i opened my mouth and you swept in and took all of it away my fear my anger my doubt my loneliness you made me an instrument i never made the decision to sing but one day i opened my mouth and there you were and there was a song

wind there are many days when i forget you live inside me too many days when i allot you a miserly space within me it’s been years since i gave you hours each day and my heart grew strong beating against your howling tempests and my eyes grew clear and filled with light like a creature of the wilderness because you lived inside me

wind you never cease and even when i am silent i know you are whirling inside

i will always be your instrument
i. world

i see them sometimes
sometimes
i hear them
all the birds inside you
a thousand feathered shades
of every color
fluttering inside you
and all the
cooing whistling warbling
singing humming hooting
chirping cawing calling
they were drawn
to the haven
inside you
where nature itself
takes refuge

daily you cultivate
an entire interior world
and all the leaves and blossoms
of the world have come
to you
before they disappear
from the outside world
poor and polluted
and here you nurse them
bless them cleanse them
find them sun and shade
a place in your fertile
soil

waterfalls inside you
and at dawn
the sky is pink
ii. spider

i lost my breath
when i heard her say
the spider is my mother
i thought
she must know
lovepainmemory’s
dimensions
know them
without words
in silence
know them
with her hands
spanning
the distance between ear
and the tip of her nose
she shares
our language

in your name
i would erect massive
monuments
of wrung glass
glass the color of sky
one massive breath
of your creating
thunder lightning wind and rain
in your infinite embrace
iii. refuge

you are silence
and the thrumming
of a thousand hearts
you are what
i have learned of
forgiving
healing
evolving
remembering

you are stronger
than i will ever be
wringing beauty
and creation
out of pain and loneliness

tenderness for
green life and small creatures
pouring from your scarred hands

forgiving hurt
and the memory of hurt

the world sings in you
skyspider
brotherspider

and
like
a
hummingbird
i
take refuge
in you
The rain stopped and suddenly the sun emerged. Students idly noted how fine dust in the air near the ceiling captured long amber slabs of afternoon’s uncommon radiance between six tall windows and the opposite wall. A greenbottle fly, sparkling in the glow, circled aimlessly between wide mullions, the faint droning of its wings interrupted whenever an errant orbit briefly broke as a soft tap against glass. Just outside, lusty sparrows squabbled and mated in the greening branches of the elms. Although no one could know, a fat red tabby lounging in the shadow of the building yawned and stretched. From a dark corner of the room, Trumbull’s Washington looked out serenely from a ramshackle frame while under his arm, saddled and ready, a nervous Blueskin endlessly fretted. The clock’s long minute hand jerked forward one tick. Matthew looked up. A large map showed the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The teacher leveled a long blond pointer. She directed everyone’s attention to Sarajevo. “Here is where all that began,” she said. Her modest dress smelled of cigarette smoke and Yardley’s English Lavender.

It was 1963. Summer was beginning. Everyone had become alert to the change. Since 1904 teen-age children had watched for the first hints of June through the windows of this room, and each venerable desk was bolted to the floor. Matt knew he sat where Mark sat in 1946 and where Luke sat in 1937 and where John sat in 1914 for they had all inscribed their names near the hole where the ink bottle once sat. He turned his attention back to his carving. Bright panels of sunlight moved slowly across the chalkboard. After a time, the room became uncomfortably warm, so the teacher drew down all the top sashes with a long pole. As she worked, she saw the tom, intent on his brute pursuits, lope smoothly out of view.

Sunrise after rain—

In the warming earth, each seed’s small detonation
Jeff Streeby

That pale buscadero, his own trail long cold even before the beginning of things, 

throws down on us and we 

stop 

suddenly as a renegade’s tracks at the river. Our gates open and the catch-pens and pastures of our impressions empty, every maverick memory, notion, hope, emotion loose and drifting into the malpaís. Our unguarded herds of speech dwindle and stray, our brand on all those dough-guts only another indecipherable skillet of snakes. Our gaze lets go the gather too, rolls its hen skins and hightails it over the border. One last rattling breath carries awareness away like longhorns in cattle cars went rattling east behind those black locomotives.

All the routines around us ran like clockwork. Her shift over, the night nurse left. My dying father smoothed his hair back with his hand again and again like a bashful cowboy on the porch his first night courting. I caught him in that last act of preparation soon after he knocked. A little sheepish, I think, he looked at me: This will be a cinch was all he said. Then game but wary, he stepped through the opening doorway, hat in hand, his rowels and spur chains bravely jingling.

A jump or two behind him, just a morning in June, a hot sky white as milk above these dried-up hills, and our little posse poised at the river’s brink, wondering where we all go from here.
Jeff Streeby

In rivers, the water that you touch...

“In rivers, the water that you touch is the last of what has passed and the first of that which comes; so with present time.”

Leonardo da Vinci

My vintage Shakespeare unspools hot under my thumb and its spinning delivers up a racket. Sound unwinds, a thin mechanical wheeze, a sleek burr of ratcheting gears, all their pawls let loose. The line guide in its travel glides smoothly back and forth. Speeding through the rod’s eyes, heavy test briefly bellies round far downwind and lightly pays past sandbars near the flood-cut bank. Tethered to the black arc, a wire leader freighted with lead and split shot carries along on the swivel a treble hook with its ball of strong blood-bait. Among farthest eddies that mark out suck and drag of undertow, weight, hook and bait splash in, sending up a fluid collet and a spray of pretty brilliants, a hundred unstrung silver beads of water. Tackle breaking the slow surface sends back its single frothy tone like the peal of a liquid bell then drifts all the dark way down to settle among snags.

After that, there’s no more art. Between cast and catch everything seems to take forever. Nothing for it but to take up slack and wait.

_From hornbeams on the bluff, dove’s call to sleepy dove._

What a surprise it always is that even so small an inspiration can resurrect her—

_Minnesota. Coming home from the air show in OshKosh, the sparrow we hit that cracks the windshield. The old grousing truck stop mechanic who makes me rent a tire tester. She laughs at us both. That roadside park with the lake._

She was never tender or delicate.

_Hot and humid. Wildflowers a vivid rinse of colors. Green canopy’s bright edges. She does not move but for the slow, steady breathing of sleep. Damp downy curls at her nape. A generous scattering of freckles. Candid angle of sun-marked hip and thigh. After all that ardor, her heart clamoring behind its heaving fence of ribs; after all that hunger, sweat beading on her face, her flanks; after all that ecstatic breath spent and earned, she drowses on an ordinary quilt, orchard grass a comfortable pallet among the black elm’s burly roots._
Never any forewarning, this reverie. Something encountered suddenly, always without preamble. And always a little startling, considering there is no new motive, nothing more at stake. Every time, it makes me think of that lost postcard you sometimes read about, the one only now arriving from the distant past.

Of her absence, here the record—

tattered receipts under junk in kitchen drawers,  
a forgotten mascara in the bathroom  
cabinet, old grocery lists folded in jacket  
pockets, keys abandoned on a cuphook  
(What shut  
locks and hasps rust where?)—

among nameless  
faces passing, in a reflex smooth as instinct  
moving a few  
steps in the noisy mall toward  
her voice that still haunts my hearing—

unexpected  
ceremonies— meeting  
people she knew, eating  
alone, returning mail—

These infrequent reconsiderations-- they are not regret, you know, though they prompt me to sober self-address. Even so, I think I am quite certain it can’t have been at all as I remember.

Just upstream, the river purls where it beds in shallows. In the shade of cottonwood, hackberry, oak, a mudhen bobs among cattails. Troubled by current, wind, or desultory bite, my practical arrangement of rod and reel braced in a forked stick trembles the whole drowsy afternoon.

In March, winter breaks. Rafts of growling ice crowd downstream. Flushed along by cold runoff, the richer smells of slurried earth flush every dull palate.

By August, the turbid flow subsides.

By August, drawn down far below spring’s crest of brittle debris,
the river slows. It swelters and renders here in its sluggish bends that fragrant musk.

Then eager
bass and sunfish, sometimes
rainbows rise hungry to hatch of flies, to worms’ glossy
textures, to minnows, salmon
eggs, to steely bite of hand-tied bits of hair, to deadly feather
counterfeits and maddening lures.
Gar and sturgeon, too, other old
rough fish come.

On the bottom, where the irresistible force of water abrades ancient mud, always the
tender dead arrive. Catfish greet them with firm kisses.

At dusk, from moss-grown stone jetties,
from stands of giant weeds tangled in green riot at river’s edge,
from willowed marges of low islands riding midstream,
mosquitoes out for blood rise in clouds,
one shrill sigh of wings crisp as cellophane to hiss down the sun.

Clouds slide toward the edge of the world. The sky goes red. All these hours and no fish
strikes. Reeling in, I am not surprised to find an empty hook polished bright by grass
carp’s greedy fry.

I would have guessed that after so many times I would be used to it. After all, I am
so much older now. Yet when it comes out of nowhere, like that sense of falling
just before nodding off, my dislocated senses fill precisely as they filled that day—
same apprehension, same conceits, same damp palms, breathlessness—

her perfume faint but sweet over more literal odors of the
sweltering grove.

There is, of course, nothing more to discover in it-- the cicada’s hum I hear never
changes pitch, the grass
continually declines and recovers in identical degrees,

it is late spring and a robin offers his airy music, every note a
bright coin turning heads and tails.

She sleeps.

Though I have never counted, I know her eyelids flutter exactly the same number
of times before I look away. Except for this net of intimate tensions that closes
around me, I might have recalled some tender sequence from a film.

_Upstream, a thrush out of shaggy brush in a dither of wings._

Those days will not return for me, I know. The familiar stars continue to slowly rearrange themselves over us all. But what does it matter, anyway, what we remember? Everything resolves to old lists, mysterious keys, useless junk in drawers, a few neat stacks of old photographs, faded and yellow, layered like sediments— the simple formula of seasons working itself out as loss. In the end, like that ominous footfall behind us in the dark, this, her presence, is only another small ordinary thing. Unexpected, yes. Distracting, yes. Unsettling in the instant, yes, but easily explained: she is that sense we have that we must have misplaced something valuable, she is the comprehensive regret we feel for every imperfectly realized aspiration. She isa sudden desolation that comes over me, a periodic crisis of doubt, part history, part wishful thinking. She is a memory—

_smooth skin that stipples and grows taut at my cold touch, her voice light with laughter—_

one that measures itself like a sad ballad against the featureless noise of here and now.

I gather my gear and head for the car. The shining water moves south, smooth as a mirror.
Of course, one may still approach from the sea. Near the end of a pleasant voyage, travelers would first see in the distance those curious traffic ways. Then an extraordinary sun would pick out for them an unexpected plexus of catwalks binding together certain derelict works whose arrangement suggests nothing so much as the dried husks or vacant hives of industrious insects. At the neglected wharf, a dismasted antique listing in its moorings, settling by the bow. Marooned in a silt-trammeled mole, other brittle hulls—careened, cracked open there and emptied. And framing all, a white arc of beach, a running tide its ragged ruffle, its blue wrinkled skirt.

Just beyond the waterfront, a clutch of blunted outlines, their stark silhouettes quaint enough to suit a stereoscope — roofless insulae, a tumbled wall, its gateless barbican—places a golden jackal might easily materialize then suddenly vanish behind the curtain of heat. Rough outlines of Imperial boulevards lead a short way into the desert where they disappear under saltbush and yellow flowering thistle. Loosely aligned hills of rubble. The imposing façade of the proconsul’s library. Latin inscriptions. Graffiti from a dozen centuries. A ruined agora bounded by remains of market stalls. Pigeons often alight there near the well. In the scorching afternoons, dust devils array themselves in local golden grit and ascend for a time like minor princes.

Even so, we have been assured by those in authority that here all the ordinary things happen every day in full view of everyone. We have been made to understand by the inhabitants that one’s companions might sometimes grow listless and stray— that this is the way of things. After all these years, natives have come to expect the familiar shimmering at the limit of vision will lift the horizon.

Visitors who approach by land must traverse broad sand sheets and serirs before they round a steep horn of the great barchan. Here they encounter the irrepressible vitality of date palms. By now, the veiled women of the caravans will have noticed the sea, rough hem to a sky hung as sheer blue backcloth or drape. Behind them, routines of their unremarkable lives cluster as long chains of family names and before them, those august shapes, every one a mystery of architecture, as pavilions of incandescence that hesitate at the verge of apprehension. The camels tread tirelessly on. Shadows grow long. The terraces of the Asclepeion come into view, the broken columns of the xysti, the massive foundation stones of a vanished palace. Eventually the wind rises and the tang of humid salt-scent rinses the back of every throat.
At the head of the column, a blue sheik notes with interest the sudden drama of pigeons circling above the distant square.

His horse is restless under him and capers a dainty pirouette.
Come and watch him, sitting on the gray blocks he calls a stoop, smelling of heat, and swirling the saliva in his mouth and occasionally letting it fall past his lips and onto his dark skin lingering like air bubbles from unseen fish waiting to be popped.

Notice him staring at the girls across the street, jumping rope slowly, floating slender shadows moving through the wings of birds and the loud, ferocious yelling of car horns.

Hear him enter his bedroom where the framed faded photographs and scattered baseball cards seem to melt and mix with the sweat leaping off his neck, disappearing before they can even hit the floor.

Smell the leather suitcase he pulls from under his bed, old and worn, a fading memory of green bus seats he would hide under and watch the other passengers as their feet breathed and danced in place.

Feel the clothes he lays into the suitcase, moving at his touch, the blinking of fabric like the bathroom curtains that would sway as his mother took a bath, her hair pulled back and smoking a cigarette, delicately exhaling the scent of lavender soap.

Read the letter he places on top of the clothes, his father’s handwriting like ancient calligraphy, symbols and characters acting out the night and taste of New Orleans, voices that sound sweet, and hands that are cracked like his and might be nice to hold onto for awhile.

Wipe the dust from his hat, brown and blending in with the surrounding, open-mouthed buildings whistling as he walks past, stepping and creating music that the old men can’t hear, but that the children chase after, raising their hands that seem to be the only cool from the heat.

Stand in his footprint, textured magnificent designs that write his name on every street he comes to, the brightest of them all, a blowing pebble still visible in the all encompassing dirt.
Nothing prepares you for the dust. Through the many years I’ve imploded structures, the dust – the way it billows and corkscrews and muscles its way everyplace – still surprises me.

From my very first implosion the dust impressed me. I had just started at Thompson Implosion Specialists. Until then I’d been office-bound, typing up forms and working the phones. Rick Thompson – Rick senior, this was – one day cocked a thick, white eyebrow and asked, knowing I’d be delighted, Would I mind joining the crew on site?

The company was bringing down grain elevators on what was once a farm in Missouri. The farm had been started by a soldier returning from the Civil War. His descendents kept the farm going as long as they could, while the incoming tide of suburbs lapped closer. A crowd gathered to watch the implosion. I hadn’t expected that.

I learned spectators are part of the process, like permits and forms.

Rick explained how he’d set out the explosives around the grain elevators.

“There are ground level charges at each end of the grain elevators. We’ll set them off first.” Rick’s voice quickened with anticipation. He never spoke like this in the office.

“After a two second interval, a set of charges will take out the internal steel supports, halfway up. Gravity does the rest. It should drop straight down, into its footprint.”

The footprint, I already knew, was the base area of the building.

Rick pushed a small button and it all played out precisely as described. There were pinpricks of light at the base of the grain elevators as the dynamite went off, followed by crumppping sounds inside. The building fell in on itself and collapsed directly downward.

Then came the dust, a living thing it seemed, tunneling upward and outward.

The spectators clapped and yelled their approval. For a few moments the dust, like a magician’s scarf, hid the crowd from my view. As the dust thinned, I spotted one man in the crowd watching in sullen silence, before turning away. I knew, somehow, he’d been the owner of the farm.

After we filed the paperwork in Kansas City, Rick treated the crew to dinner at a luncheonette. In the heedlessness of a twenty one year old, before leaving home the morning before I’d insisted to my girlfriend Claire that, no, I wouldn’t need a heavy coat. It was mid-December, dark and brutally cold. I felt both ravenous and frozen. The luncheonette chili I ordered was the best I ever tasted.

I’ve thought about that dinner often through the years, how the chili was so good not only because it filled and warmed me up, but because it tasted of beginnings. Much later, though still some time ago now, I had a layover in Kansas City. I cabbed from the airport to where the luncheonette had been. It had become a movie rental store. The cabbie asked did I have the address right and what exactly was I looking for? I could answer his first question, but not the second.
A couple years after that I was in charge of my first implosion. We brought down a five story parking garage in Cleveland. The garage had been built by WPA labor during the Depression. It was early March, but more winter than spring, the wind knifing in from the lake.

An electronic glitch delayed the implosion. In the downtime, I got to chatting with a man in the crowd that had gathered. Without any prompting the gentleman volunteered he’d just turned 75. For thirty three years of workday mornings he parked in that garage.

“Not sure I miss the work,” he told me. He had the deep, booming voice of an old style radio announcer. “Still, it never occurred to me this garage wouldn’t always be here.”

With the wiring problem resolved, I pushed the tiny button, my first time for that. The implosion was textbook: the concrete floors shattered in the middle, their weakest point, before slamming earthward.

In my excitement, even before the dust stopped swirling I called Claire from a phone booth. She was feeding our daughter Paige, then two. After tolerating my no doubt rambling description of the implosion, she put our daughter on the phone.

“Unga kelp,” Paige profoundly announced. For some time afterward my wife and I would greet each other with, “Unga kelp!” Not long ago I said that to Claire, who looked up from the laundry she was folding.

“Remind me,” she said, and once I did she remembered, but I’d had to remind her.

I became a specialist in public housing projects: Akron, Youngstown, Philadelphia; Detroit kept me busy. I was in Detroit when I learned Rick senior had pancreatic cancer. Six months later he was dead and Rick junior took over the company.

One gorgeous spring morning we brought down Seale Homes in Chicago: twelve stories and as long as a city block. Big, raucous crowd, multiple TV crews covering the event live. The housing project had been abandoned years earlier, a poster child for the failures of urban renewal. Every piece of copper piping had been ripped out. Graffiti was everywhere. In my walk throughs I spotted three different sets of bullet holes.

I did stand ups for three TV stations that morning. I’d been interviewed enough by then it was routine. While a news crew was setting up for the last interview, I listened to comments from the crowd on the far side of the wire fence we put up.

“Glad it’s gone,” was the consensus, but there was one woman, grandmotherly, wearing this massive church hat, who insisted, “You don’t understand. Was a time living here was good.”

Her voice was tear-choked but she spoke with comforting warmth. Once the dust scattered enough, I looked around for her, but she was gone. I wanted to ask how she could accept time’s slipping away with such grace. The question would no doubt have puzzled her. Those in the crowd around her would only have laughed.

You can watch the implosion we did of an Atlantic City hotel on YouTube. This job was a bit tricky. Not one hundred feet from the hotel was a new casino. On the other side of the hotel was a parking lot. I set the explosives on the parking lot side to go off five seconds earlier than the rest. It was a last week of August afternoon, one block from the beach. A crowd had grown large enough vendors were working it. And, this being Atlantic City, there were bets on which way the hotel would fall.
I did the TV interviews wearing a hard hat, since I’d been informed the light shining off my receding hairline distracted viewers. The interviews were filmed in front of the hotel, its white paint long faded to the colorlessness of dead skin.

I was nearly reaching for the button when my assistant Gregory, performing the last walk through, emerged on the run from the hotel, frantically waving his arms at me.

“Someone’s still inside. She won’t leave the lobby.”

In the lobby I found a woman staring vacantly at some point behind me. I have no skill for judging the ages of the elderly, but I figured she was past eighty. She wore a baggy house dress and over that, strangely enough, a fur coat reeking of moth balls.

“Have you seen my Jeff?” she asked.

Gregory replied, “Ma’am? Maybe he’s outside. Why don’t you come outside with us and—“

“Who’s Jeff?” I asked, which yielded an understandably confused glance from Gregory. I surprised myself with the question.

“Jeff’s my husband,” she replied, and her eyes lost their emptiness as memory flooded into them. “We honeymooned here: a three day pass before Jeff shipped out to the Pacific. We had our picture taken right here, beneath the chandelier.”

The chandelier was huge, but most of the amber-colored glass prisms had fallen off or been stolen while the hotel sat empty. The woman did not glance upward, which pleased me. The chandelier looked like a rotting carcass.

Gregory was glaring at me, impatient to resolve this delay. This was his first implosion. I waited for the woman to continue, as I knew she would.

“My Jeff returned safe from the war. We raised five perfect babies. He’s gone now. I wanted to see this place before it was gone too.”

She resumed staring over my shoulder. She’d needed an audience; she’d had me. I led her out of the lobby and to the other side of the fence.

The implosion went flawlessly, as the six story hotel tumbled into the parking lot. The dust that followed, caught in the sea breeze, hung, time-defyingly, before settling to the ground.

I called Claire on my cell. I tried to describe the dust, how it seemed to will itself to stay aloft. She listened dutifully, but I could tell her attention was elsewhere. Morgan, our youngest, hadn’t come home until three the night before. There were more pressing concerns than dust.

* * *

I still work at Thompson Implosion Specialists. I still enjoy the job. My voice still quickens with anticipation as I set up the implosion. I’m not certain retirement is feasible anyway. Morgan’s a single mom who’s moved back home.

The dust continues to astound me: the structure is standing; there’s the implosion; the structure is gone; and then there’s the dust, and a chunk of someone’s history is now rubble. Time, I’ve come to accept, cannot be held on to any more than running water can be held in your hand. Eventually, dust is all that’s left.
Room 237
Sheri L Wright

As patient as stone, she waits
for the next breath to come
slipping through her lips,
threading hope into her pulse
that still keeps her time to this world,
one that is no longer
of clear definitions-
light and dark,
life and death.
All she has now is
the rise and fall of her chest
that grinds her focus
into points sharp as thorns
with each terrible breath.
And the only softness
is the nurses' voice
muffled through the closed door,
disembodied, echoing down the hall
until it sounds like mother
calling her in
for a glass of lemonade.
Storm sky in August. Gusts of hot wind. Black clouds. Yet in the East a delicate, transparent band of blue sky. Impossible to look at it. Its presence is a torture for the eyes and for the soul, because beauty is unbearable, drives us to despair, offering for us for a minute the glimpse of an eternity that we should like to stretch out over the whole of time.

— Albert Camus, *Notebooks*
The Storm
Brenda Rose

In the darkness, a spring rain tap-danced on the tin roof of our country house, giving drink to the parched soil of southern farmers. With the soft rain-dance overhead, sounds of my mother’s wheezing drifted through the opened window of her bedroom to where I sat alone on the porch. She pulled every breath from a hidden place deep inside her throat, a place where despair grew and spread like mold, suffocating my mother and everything around her.

As I listened, panic rose, storming inside me, twisting my stomach with fear. *Would she die this time? Should I go to her bed and tell her I love her?* Death’s footsteps had stalked my mother for as long as I could remember. At any moment I expected him to reach out a thin, emaciated arm and seize her, placing his phantom lips on hers, sucking out her last wheezing breath. I lived out my childhood in a house that was an opened coffin, and I remained constantly vigilant, knowing the lid to that coffin could slap shut at any moment.

The wind increased; it came from the west, caressing my face with cool raindrops, whispering through my long, red hair. With the storm approaching, I walked into the house to face the woman who was either sick or angry in every memory buried inside me. As I sat on the bed beside her, my face damp and cold, I asked, “Do you want a glass of water?”

She squeezed my hand, surprising me at the strength of her grip, a remarkable vise for a dying woman. Her wheezing vanished. “I’m going to die this time, and your daddy doesn’t care.” She moaned and moved a hand to her chest. “If he hadn’t moved me into this damp house, I wouldn’t be sick.”

I whispered, my voice quivering, “I thought you wanted to move here to be closer to Grandma and Grandpa?”

She released my hand, pushed it away and said, “You always take up for your father. I moved here because we didn’t have money to rent a better place.” She glared at me through brown eyes, the exact shade and shape as my own. Burnt sienna. “You always side with him. Oh get out of here! Nobody cares about me.”

Tears leaked from my eyes and slid over my lips, leaving the salty taste of sorrow on the tip of my tongue. I wiped my nose on the sleeve of my dirty, faded shirt. “I don’t want you to die. Daddy doesn’t either.”

“Then why won’t he take me to a hospital?” She threw her hand up and shouted, “Get out and let me rest!”

As I left, the wheezing returned, resurrected from the silence. I closed the door softly, and walked away from my mother’s tomb, walked away from my mother’s anger, walked away from my mother’s malignant love affair with death. I walked, padding barefoot over scarred wooden floors, imagining the soft footsteps of death creeping closer to my mother’s bed, his cold breath rasping over her angry face.
I found my father in a chair on the front porch, listening in silence to the rain. Its tempo had increased, bringing an elaborate, roaring tap-dance of a million droplets to our tin roof. Tap. Tap... Tap... Tap... Tap... Tap. Then, faster and faster. Tap. Tap. Tap. Tap. Tap. Fasterfasterfaster. Taptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptap.

Daddy took a draw on a cigarette and blew a smoky ghost into the damp night. His voice was gentle when he spoke, his words elastic, stretched with long, slow syllables. “Don’t let your mama tear you to pieces like that. She ain’t gonna die.”

“I don’t know.” I wiped my tears. “She says she’s really gonna die this time. Why can’t we take her to a doctor?”

My father took another draw on the cigarette. I watched the smoke exit his mouth, curling into hazy shapes of nicotine ghosts. “What’s she dying of tonight?”

Taptaptaptaptaptap. The rain danced. “Asthma.”

“And how many times have we taken her to the doctor?”

I whispered, “A lot.”

He took one last draw, dropped the cigarette on the wooden slats of the porch and nailed it with the tip of his brogan. He twisted the butt, extinguishing its amber glow. “Your mama’s been to dozens of doctors and ain’t none of ‘em found a thing wrong with her.” With rugged hands, he pulled a pack of Winston from his shirt pocket and tapped one out. “Just leave her be. Let her play her games.” He lit the cigarette with a match, and puffed once, pulling the flame to the tip. “If your mama was gonna die, she’d have died by now.” And with that, the discussion about my mother was over.

As the storm exploded before us, my father and I sat on the porch, in front row seats, watching a thrilling symphony of rain, wind, thunder, and lightning, each celestial musician playing with unbridled passion. The wind whirled and whistled and stripped fragile, pink blooms from the mimosas, scattered twigs, pine needles, pine cones, and broken limbs across our yard, and robbed the pecan trees of a thousand green leaves. The storm eventually died, but the bruised trees outside my window continued to weep into the night, still shimmering with dewy tears when the sun came up the next morning.
sight

mid-winter; here,

an early spring ...

so much taken,

with interest ...

my eyes:
intrusive,

are remote,

focusing on strangers, and

this neighborhood. isolated, in

their dimsighted faith; no longer

blissful, which is

my true nature.

scary, how blind i

am. how old. how

mortal ...
paranoid. with a gaze aching
... to be relieved from its shift.

involved.
no denial.
bargaining ...

sharper ... 
peripheral vision,
warped--double image:
people bearing extra arms.
everywhere seems
too far off
for walking ...

sick. off
balance.

i’m thinner.
taller.
the last time i
was able to see,
clearly, summer
had just begun
--june, 2006.

it's colorless
... mostly
petal-less
--even leafless,

now ...
some tight buds out
(a few loose); birds; bees;

but, a lack of volumous clouds
(they're either solid gray,
or high & wispy).
metal
guts

Roger Real Drouin

_I turn from you, and listen to the wind,
Which has raved unnoticed_
– Coleridge “Dejection: An Ode”

Ducking the rain, dark sky, stairs down to the garage. I dreamed through the dust, right through the dust and corrosion. The missing doors. The engine block, stripped down, hanging on the mount. The rust eating through the frame. Breathe. Let it transform you. Metal and bolts + imagination. _Think back to how many times you changed shape—like Proteus, from a lion to a serpent to a tree._

We’d been staying here for a week at my uncle’s house. When a threat hangs over a boy’s home—mom with her back against the kitchen wall—a storm brews that can swallow all light. I slept curled up with my uncle’s big lab mutt Pugsley. He shed fur all over me. I could feel his heart beating, the only thing that calmed the storm.

In the garage, from the heap of steel and sheetmetal, I built the machine new. The dog lay, white paws stretched out on the cool concrete, and watched patiently as I worked. Metal guts and bolts + imagination.

I wouldn’t let anyone cut my hair. My uncle said I looked like Ringo Starr, without the mustache. _Think of the Eagles blaring from a paint-caked boombox and a 66’ Charger, in pieces._

If you drag bearings, carburetors, and brake calipers while the world argues and stares back violently you’ll replace your sadness with hope. _You’ll hold on._

I built the machine new. It was cream white with red interior, 17 and-a-half feet long, a sculpture low to the pavement. I turn from all other sound, and listen to the engine purr.
Her Flat Was Dry
Haim Isaacs

Her flat was dry. There was air. She didn’t need anything else. No dogs, no cats. She barely managed to water the plants she’d inherited from the last tenant. Opening the front door at night after work it was the air that she greeted. When she’d lived in another city, years ago, her sister had refused to visit - too much floating space. It had scared her.

Near her bed, at the foot of it, stood a statue: half man, half tree. The head was a branch opening out to the sky, the body paper-maché: cells and cellulose. The tree-man sat on a pile of books and watched over her every night.

In bed, under the covers, she would listen to her cells stirring: sometimes just above her front teeth, sometimes on the underside of her tongue, or down into the esophagus. She could feel the chambers of her heart. Sometimes they released an emotional charge - a sigh or an unexpected image, sometimes a phrase or a sentence surfaced. She was happy and her dreams were filled with stairways, basements, rooms added, rooms removed, long hallways.

She started writing a story about this joy, but of course there was no intrigue, no drama, in fact there was nobody else in the story. ‘Am I dry? Am I like the first sentence in this narrative? A cactus amid endless sand… and happy?’

Then one night the statue spoke to her in her sleep. ‘My name’s Gurn and I’m having problems with memory - can you help me?’

‘What?’ she said.

‘What what?’

‘What do you want me to remind you of Gurn?’

‘My name. When you wake up tomorrow morning remind me of my name please.’

‘Ok, Gurn.’

‘What’s your name?’

‘I don’t have a name in this story.’

‘I’ll call you Kassey.’

‘Do I deserve that?’

‘I deserve to give it to you. That’s all that matters.’

‘Ok, Gurn. I’ll see you in the morning. Good night.’

The next morning Kassey awoke. ‘Good morning, Gurn.’

The statue stood stock-still and gave no inkling of recognition, but that didn’t disturb Kassey. She dusted the branches and started reading the print on the crumpled up paper that was the body of the man sharing her room night after night.

Where I was born there was no privacy. Men crowded around my mother. They wanted to take me away. She held my little body but they hit her and ran. They hid me in a tree. Sap nourished me and my pipi and caca nourished the tree. I grew to prefer bark and branches to flesh and bones.
‘Daddy’, I said as I climbed into my tree at night.  
‘Sleep my child Gurn’, said the tree, and I slept.  
‘Wake my child Gurn’, said the tree, and I awoke.

Kassey came to a fold in the paper and stopped. She liked the silence surrounding Gurn. Dust particles in the air played over his branches, his shoes seemed to barely sweep the floor. There was no rush about him. She was tempted to dampen a cloth and give him some care. ‘No, maybe he doesn’t want care. Maybe he’s good like this.’ She knelt down and read.

I ran for cover higher and higher into the tree as I grew. The men could no longer reach me. They hollered from below, threw stones, but I didn’t move. At a certain point they could no longer distinguish me from the leaves and branches. At a certain point I could no longer distinguish myself from the leaves and branches. Sap filled my mouth and shit and piss landed on the men underneath. It was war.

Then the real war came and they cut down the men and they cut down the tree and I ran in frantic circles and they caught me and cut me down too. Now I am here and quiet until your house burns down. Call me Gurn tonight when you sleep and I will answer you.

That night Kassey couldn’t sleep. She was terrified. She opened the windows wide and let the moon in. She sat on her balcony and smoked. She went back in and laid the half man, half tree on her bed.  
‘Sleep well.’

She sat on the floor and watched the moonlight cross her room.  
‘A bit of solace before the next war erupts. Sleep. I’ll watch over you.’ Who was addressing whom she didn’t know anymore, but she could not sleep. He was waiting for her and she did not want to be found.

Three days later she dropped into a torrid slump. Gurn was waiting, towering over her. She leaned against his trunk. ‘Gurn.’ There was no answer. ‘Gurn.’ Sap dripped from the boughs. She opened her mouth and drank. She gorged herself on his thick stickiness and became satiated.

‘Thank you Gurn. You give me more than any man has ever given me.’

‘I’ve watched you for so many nights Kassey; the little convulsions that ripple through your body as you sleep, your insomnias. I overhear your cells talking to you. Now listen to mine.’ She put her ear to his branch. Like crickets, a field of chirping filled her lobe and migrated into her brain.

‘Now move your ear down my body.’

Her ear slid down to his chest. It beat like a typewriter. Letters pounded against her eardrum and spoke to her of the love that Gurn had harbored in his heart for so many nights.

‘Stay. War will be on us soon. Stay like this until they break the door down.’
Kassey woke and cried. She spent the day cleaning her flat, opening the windows and taps. Water and light flooded every corner. She unplugged her phone and pulled out the fuses in the electricity box and breathed.

‘Love. Love has come. Let’s celebrate.’

She went out and filled her refrigerator with food. She cleaned her stove and cooked and baked. She changed the bedding and turned over the mattress and aired out the blankets and pillows on the balcony. She bathed and lit candles.

And then war came and soldiers knocked down her door and burnt the half man, half tree and carried her away. Kassey fled to the forest looking for a tree to climb.

‘Gurn. I will wait for you here. I am remembering you. Remember me!’

And she lived on the sap and let her waste fall to the earth and nourish the tree in return and when soldiers passed she hid among the branches and the leaves and held her breath.

One day a soldier stopped underneath her. He sang and she recognized Gurn’s voice. She called out to him.

‘Gurn.’

Gurn looked up but didn’t recognize her. He was a soldier now and he did as soldiers do: he lifted his rifle and took aim. And then the tree did as trees do: it sheltered her and hid her from the bullets until his regiment arrived and Gurn went off with them.

‘My name is Kassey, tree. The man who shot at me is the man who named me. Now you harbor me. What is your name?’

‘Beck. That man that shot at you was once my son. Then he was a statue, then he was no more and now he’s a soldier. I will burn soon and be no more too. And then…’

‘And me? What about me?’

‘You will burn too. Then you will be nothing. Then you will be a rifle in my son’s hand. You two will unite once again. He will clean you and oil you and sleep next to you and shoot his vigor through you into the world.’

‘And you?’

‘I will be his boots. He will tread on his mother and I will tread on the earth and you will blast the earth with holes.’

‘Now I am here and will stay here till the fire comes.’

‘Yes. Until it comes. Or until you go looking for it.’

‘Do you see the men?’

‘I’m not looking. I’m caring for you now. You cradled my boy in your arms and he never forgot you until he forgot you. He never forgot me until he forgot me. Soon I will be a boot and forget you too. When we cross paths in the battlefield I can promise nothing. Maybe I will save you, maybe I will be the cause of your destruction.’

‘I’m going to sleep.’

‘Sleep. Let us dream of each other.’

Kassey dreamt of Beck in birth pangs. She felt Beck’s womb expanding and contracting - the lips of her vagina thirsty for life - to give it, to take it.
Beck dreamt of Gurn as he emerged and stalked the forest, stripping it of its foliage. She was his boots as they sunk into the mud and the mud sunk into them. He became clay. The clay hardened and turned to a statue. Other soldiers came and broke him with their rifle butts.

Kassey awoke and peed. The tree laughed.
‘Pee girl! You’re tickling my roots. Shit girl! You’re warming my trunk. Sing girl! You’re swaying my leaves. Leave me girl–’
‘No! I will never leave you.’
‘Leave me girl–’
‘No.’
‘Leave me girl–’
Kassey peed and shat and sang and gripped her mouth to the branch to suckle the sap. Beck was happy even as the fire approached.

Tree. The miracle of amnesia.

Fire. The miracle of amnesia.

Soldier. The miracle of amnesia.

Earth. The miracle of amnesia.

Bedrock. The miracle of amnesia.

Lava. The miracle of amnesia.

Tree.

Fire.

Soldier.

Earth.

Bedrock.

Lava.
Her flat was dry. There was air. She didn’t need anything else. No dogs, no cats. She barely managed to water the plants she’d inherited from the last tenant. Opening the front door at night after work it was the air that she greeted. In bed, under the covers, she was happy and her dreams were filled with stairways, basements, rooms added, rooms removed, long hallways.

She started writing a story about this joy, but of course there was no intrigue, no drama, in fact there was nobody else in the story. ‘Am I dry? Am I like the first sentence in this narrative? A cactus amid endless sand… and happy?’

The morning before her father died, she’d gone to a 10 a.m. cinema showing. It was a futuristic film set thirty years from now: the desert had crept north and covered Paris. Dunes submerged the first three stories of buildings - camels wandered about. The film fit her. She stepped out and bought two cast-iron pots to cook in - one pale yellow, one dark red.

When she got home her mother called, asked how she was, what she was up to and then said that her father had just died - a few minutes ago.

It was Friday. The next day was Shabbat. She got on a plane home and Sunday was the burial. At the cemetery her father was on the floor lying quietly. She was so happy to have a few minutes alone with him. She touched his bare feet, his cool skin. Her brother came in and the three of them sat together. Then the rabbi tore their shirts and blouses.

When the body was lowered into the ground she took a shovel from one of the gravediggers and covered him with dirt. Then they sat for seven days. At the end of the seven days she went back to the cemetery wearing the torn blouse. The earth was still fresh except for the outer crust that had dried in the sun. She sunk her fingers into the soil and ploughed midway up to her elbows. She sat there bent over and happy. The gravediggers were far off. She slept for a while. When she awoke her hands had come out of the earth and her blouse was gone - she was bare-chested. There was a hole at the foot of the grave. She stepped into it. A bird landed on her breast and milk dripped from her nipples. She sneezed and leaves sprouted from her moist armpits - bark erupted. Pee and caca dribbled down her legs and roots hooked into the earth. The air was dry. There was air. She didn’t need anything else.
AFTER THE TRAUMA

Donnelle McGee

I touch her hands and know this much

compassion rescues a body from chaos

and so this story goes truth call me in to let her breathe
Yesterday the white horse appeared to me for the first time before I fell asleep; I have an impression of its first stepping out of my head, which was turned to the wall, jumping across me and down from the bed and then disappearing. The last is unfortunately not refuted by the fact of my having begun the story.

... 

If I am not very much mistaken, I am coming closer. It is as though the spiritual battle were taking place in a clearing somewhere in the woods. I make my way into the woods, find nothing, and out of weakness immediately hasten out again; often as I leave the woods I hear, or think I hear, the clashing weapons of that battle. Perhaps the eyes of the warriors are seeking me through the darkness of the woods, but I know so little of them, and that little is deceptive.

... 

A heavy downpour. Stand and face the rain, let its iron rays pierce you; drift with the water that wants to sweep you away but yet stand fast, and upright in this way abide the sudden and endless shining of the sun.

— Franz Kafka, *Diaries*
Dear Mary,

Sorry for the break in communication. As you can imagine, the circumstances here aren't the best. Besides, it's always the same routine and there isn't much to write about -- get up in the morning, breakfast at seven, morning activity (woodcarving, leather work, etc., sometimes they let us out on the grounds, especially now that the weather is improving, but this depends on how many merit points you've earned). In the afternoon, I see Dr. Schwartz. By the end of the day, I'm really drained.

But then you haven't written for more than a year, as I recall.

They say I'm improving, Mary. They say maybe in another twelve months or so I can go home, go back to work, begin my life all over again. How long have I been here now? Five, six years? Do you remember? Except for the turning of the seasons, you'd never recognize that time was passing in this place.

I think of you often - your little apartment overlooking the ocean, those lunches we used to have over in Venice - the Rose Cafe, wasn't it? - the museums downtown, the galleries - are they still there? It all seems like a fairy tale, a dream where I wander like a ghost - no substance, no reality. How I long to be free, to see the world again, especially you if you're willing to risk it. Or is that why you've stopped writing?

Funny how easily we took freedom for granted. I know we constantly talked about it, theorized, pretended - yes, pretended - to be its stalwart defenders, but did we ever appreciate it? Did we ever know what it meant? Who would have thought it would come to this, Mary? And right under our very eyes. But I'd better not speak like this, not now, not when I'm on the verge of recovery.

Outside my window, I can hear the birds singing. I wish you could hear them, Mary. They sound so beautiful. They must be nightingales. When was the last time you listened to a nightingale, Mary, tried to understand its message? Do you remember that scene in *Romeo and Juliet*, or is that still forbidden? Mary, it's as if they come especially for me. Every once in awhile one enters through the bars and perches on my windowsill, examining me, my surroundings, like a curious spectator at a zoo or a freak show. Then just as suddenly, he flies off, leaving me alone to my confinement.

Did you notice I used "he?"

But I'm good now, Mary, I really am. I *want* to be cured. Not like in the beginning when I resisted, defied them every chance I could. Though I think they still restrain me sometimes. It's all a fog to me, as if I'm on a cloud, floating helplessly, at the mercy of the winds, and the winds have no mercy, believe me. Yet I remember struggling, screaming, pleading with them, begging them to believe me. I told this to Dr. Schwartz today. Silly of me, really. The response was predictable - still paranoid, part of my condition.
This letter has gone on too long. The shorter the better. Trust me. Remember that when you write. Anyhow, it's time I went to sleep. They're good about that here. When I'm in my room, locked away from the world, I'm free to do as I please. Not exactly the way I thought my life would ever be, but one learns to savor these rare moments of freedom. Yes, freedom. Because no matter what the circumstances, there is always an element of freedom. I've learned that. You just have to recognize it, seize it, enjoy it to the fullest and let it compensate for everything else.

Mary, it's been so long. Don't get me wrong. I'm not blaming you. I understand if it's become a problem. It's just that things are difficult enough here, and worrying about you makes it even more so. Please write.

Jack

Dear Mary,

I forgot to tell you something when I wrote the other day. Dr. Schwartz says I'm full of denial. That the reason I don't know why I'm here is that I've disavowed my crime.

I asked her point-blank what my crime was. She said she didn't know, it really wasn't her business, and even if she did, she wouldn't tell me, that it was something I'd have to find for myself. It's part of the healing process, she said.

Why is it I remember things from my childhood as vividly as if they happened yesterday?

Mary, what did I do? Why can't I remember? I trust your judgment. You know me better than anyone. Of course, there's Danny, but how much can he have learned about me in a place like this, even if we've known each other since the day I arrived. You know, Mary, he'd been here once before, and I remember he told me, one day, in the beginning, when I first arrived, he said trust only what your eyes see, and then only after you've analyzed it thoroughly. Disregard everything else as a trick on your existence.

Anyhow, I had to tell you this before I forgot.

How are all our friends? How's Bob? Is he still seeing that actress? What about Sharon? Tell them all I said hello. God, I can't believe it's been five years. Five years!

Jack
Dear Mary,

Something rather strange has happened. Danny hasn't shown up to woodcarving class. It's been three days now.

Last week, he had a visitor. That's strange enough around here. They rarely allow visitors, and then only under certain circumstances - you're terminally ill and about to die, or you're nearly cured and about to be released. Then they allow frequent visits to help in the readjustment.

But Danny was neither of these, and this visitor - they said it was his brother, but when Danny went to the reception cell, he didn't recognize him, said he had never seen him before. Well, whoever it was, he smuggled in a small radio, about the size of a credit card, he said. The next day, we're outside on the grounds, working in the flower patch, and he pulls me over, whispers to me, says we're at war. He says the cities are being destroyed, he says the security forces are slaughtering the people like rats.

Mary, believe me, I tried not to listen. I thought to myself he's crazy, suffers from delusions. How can you believe someone like that? Besides, I don't want to get involved anymore. I just want out. But he kept talking, wouldn't shut up. He said he hadn't wanted to take the radio, but the man insisted, assured him no one would ever know. When he got to his room, he hid it under his bed, swore he would never listen to it. Then as the night wore on, it started to gnaw at him, the thought that an opportunity had come to see what was really happening in the world - not what they tell you Mary, not what they want you to know.

And now he's disappeared. I mentioned it to Dr. Schwartz today, thought for sure she would have seen him - three days, Mary, three days he hasn't shown up - and she dismissed it as my paranoia again, never told me whether he had come to his appointments or not.

Mary, I'm afraid. I don't trust anyone here. Especially her.

Jack
Dear Mary,

They found Danny this morning. After all this time. Dead. Impaled on one of the fence posts that hold up the barbed wire. Except it's not plain barbed wire. It's got lasers at the top, or so I hear. As if they want to encourage you to try, bloody yourself up, get your hopes high, so that just when you think you're going to make it - poof.

And that's what they said about him. An escapee. Did it to himself. But Mary, I know it's not true. Danny had no intention of escaping. If he had, I would have known about it, believe me. And besides, he was impaled, at least that's what everyone is saying.

Mary, do you think they killed him? To make an example of him? I know I'm not supposed to talk like this anymore, but I can't help it. I can't stop wondering what they may have done to him. And to think we've let this happen. But I will not fight them anymore. Even if he was my friend. I want out. I want my freedom. Even if it has to be on their terms.

What's it like, Mary? What's it like to be out there? I've forgotten. The pleasure of picking up a newspaper, a book. To read a poem, a story. To feel the paper brush against your skin, to hear the crisp sound of the pages as they turn. Even those slick advertisements we used to denounce seem so attractive now? Or to go to a restaurant, to dine, to indulge in a bottle of wine. What's the latest in cuisines, Mary? What do the restaurants look like nowadays? I'm starving, Mary, and you're my only source, the only one ever willing to risk writing to me. Why don't you answer? Why do I wait and receive no letter?

Jack
Dear Mary,

A new phase in my incarceration has begun. The warden came to see me today. Imagine. As if I'm that important. Do you think it's a test? Do they always start this way? After all, they keep saying I'll be going home soon. Do they want to trick me? Make me slip when I least expect it? Put me at ease, or perhaps frighten me, so that either way my defenses will be down and they'll get inside of me, find out that I really despise them?

Mary, what should I do? How should I behave? Should I go along with him, and if I do, how will I maintain my guard? And if I don't, what will he do to me, what happens to my release? Will they cancel it? Will they keep me here forever?

There was a time I learned to accept my situation. Being locked up, dealing with Dr. Schwartz. Things went along smoothly, things never changed. Somehow I've got to figure out how to deal with this turn in events.

Jack

Mary –

Dr. Schwartz is an agent. I'm convinced of this now. She works with them, she informs them of everything I say. I know this as clearly as day from night. I'm not surprised, of course. But I thought she followed, however minimally, her oath of confidentiality. Don't they still take an oath like that? Or have things changed that much?

I tested her, Mary, I fished with her, so to speak. I told her Danny was alive, that I had seen him. She said I was deluding, of course. We all know he's dead, she insisted -- but it was the way she said it that got me, the stony look in her eyes, the cold, flat tone of her words, as if it were not true, yet still essential that I believe it.

Well today I was called into the warden's office again. There were a few preliminaries, a few niceties, the kind of behavior you don't expect in this context. And every so often, he mentioned Danny -- wasn't it a shame about him, he would have been a free man if only, etc., etc. Then he set his eyes on me - hard powerful eyes that seemed to bore through me. You'd better be careful if you know what's good for you, he said to me at last, his voice suddenly callous. And then he dismissed me.

How do you suppose I'll have to pay for this mistake?

Jack
Dear Mary,

Last night I had a horrible nightmare. I dreamed that they took me from my room -- the warden and two guards. They led me away, through long, narrow corridors that seemed to go on and on. They were dark and creepy, and the lights flickered every so often as if the electrical system were being overburdened. We were in a maze of tunnels that twisted and turned and seemed to be leading us down, deep down. I could hear groans and screams and the sounds of men laughing.

Eventually, we came to an iron door that the warden unlocked with a set of heavy keys - the sound as he forced it open rushed through me like a knife --you know how metal sounds when it grates against stone. I wanted to cover my ears but I couldn't. My hands were tied behind my back.

It was dark inside, but I could hear someone breathing rapidly, as if resting after a long, strenuous ordeal. Soon, my eyes began to adjust and through the darkness I could make out a figure standing in the shadows. It was Danny. He was alive, except he was somehow different, not the Danny I had known. He had turned into some kind of vengeful monster. In his hand was a blowtorch. It was unlit, but I immediately detected the smell of burnt flesh, and then I noticed a man strapped to a table, naked, his body blackened with burns.

Danny turned to me. He smiled -- a wild, insane smile, filled with sadness and fear, as if he had gone to hell and returned with the knowledge of survival. Suddenly, he lit the torch and applied it to the man's body and, as he did so, he grinned at me. The incongruity jolted me, but it was purposeful, as if he wanted me to understand the horror his life had become. The man made no sound, though his body was shivering like he was freezing instead of being burned alive. The warden and the two guards laughed, as if the scene had suddenly turned comic, and the sounds reverberated violently through the dingy chamber.

I woke up in a sweat. It was morning. I could hear the birds outside, and the light was filtering in gently through the trees. But I couldn't move. I felt groggy, mentally and emotionally drained, my eyes were heavy. It was as if, despite what my senses were telling me, I was still there in that room with Danny.

Later that morning, I was invited to the warden’s office. Again. This time I was treated like a king. They offered me breakfast -- eggs benedict, gourmet coffee, fresh orange juice -- none of that artificial stuff they feed us everyday.

I ate heartily. I didn't want to, but it's been so long. You remember how food has always been my weakness. While I ate, the warden watched me, relishing each bite I took as if he were eating for the first time. He made small talk, like we were two friends meeting at a restaurant -- two free men, associating by choice, not by edict. How did I feel this morning? I didn't look well. Perhaps I hadn't slept during the night.
What frightens me Mary is that this encounter was more a dream than my nightmare was. What do you suppose is happening to me? I refuse to discuss this with Dr. Schwartz. I refuse to discuss anything with her anymore. The problem is what to do during our sessions. Silence will indict me. And since she knows what's going on, I can't escape not talking about it. I've got to learn to play their game, only I'm not sure what it is.

Jack

Dear Mary,                                                                                                 September 20

Dr. Schwartz has asked me to keep a dream journal. Do you think it's just a coincidence? I know it's a common practice in therapy, but the timing is uncanny. Moreover, she's been skirting around the subject for two days now - as if she knows something.

She asked me about Danny again - not directly. She asked me if I had had any other hallucinations. Of course, she was referring to my little lie - I refuse to tell her about that dream I had. Yet, it's as if she knows.

Mary, do you think it's possible for them to induce dreaming? Do you remember the LSD experiments back in the 60's? Could they have refined it, developed it to a point where they can make you see what they want?

Now that I have to keep a journal, my dreams have become vivid - vibrant as if I'm living them. But I don't write about them. Not exactly. I tone them down, sometimes I even make them up. But somehow, I think she knows.

Jack
Dear Mary,

The warden can be a kind man. I learned this during a medical emergency that took place today. We were out on the grounds. It was a crisp, fall day, the kind that can only take place in this part of the country. The Northeast, Mary. There's nothing like the Northeast, especially in the Fall. Clear blue skies, dotted with clouds, the leaves crimson and gold, the smell of nature in its last glorious burst of life.

Anyhow, we were out tending the grounds when suddenly Mark - I don't believe I've told you about him, he's former CIA, relatively new here, from what I gathered from our short conversations, they picked him up planting bombs at government installations - anyhow, he had a fit - he's an epileptic. The warden happened to be out on an inspection when this occurred, and he immediately ran over and assisted him. He's a medical doctor by training, and he treated Mark with such skill and care, looking at me and smiling in a kindly way.

Things have calmed down, Mary. No more visits to the warden, no problems with Dr. Schwartz. It's as if they've let everything pass. As if it were all a test. Perhaps I'm learning to play the game.

Mary, I'm not going to ask you to write anymore. In fact, I've stopped waiting for your letters. I ask only one thing - please let me continue this correspondence. Leave me at least that.

Jack

---

Dear Mary,

My dreams continue to get stranger. Last night I dreamed I was writing to you. It was as if I really were. And what I was writing about was this very same thing - that I dreamed I was writing to you about this dream. And here I am writing to you - except I feel like I'm dreaming. A sort of double deja vu.

Mark came back from the infirmary today - this was in the dream too. He lost his tongue. They said they were too late in getting to him. How did I know that would happen?

Jack
Mary,

Dr. Schwartz knows about you. Don't ask me how, but she does. Everything. Your friends, what organizations you belong to, where you work. She even described every detail of your apartment.

I remained silent during our session today. This is my new tactic. Don't say a word. Avoid all encounters, all confrontations.

But she looked at me with her miserable brown eyes and started to spew off all this information about you. She must have seen my reaction -- my eyes must have reflected the hatred I feel for her -- because she stopped suddenly and came over to me, shoved her severe little face in mine.

You think you can hide things from me? she said. You think I don't know everything about you -- what you like and don't like, your sexual habits, the way you like to fold your shirts in threes?

She stood up and walked triumphantly over to her desk -- that's the only way I can describe it, as if she had conquered me by telling me this information. Then she opened the drawer and pulled out a photo album.

You know what these are? she said. She opened it up and showed it to me. And inside were pictures of me -- all sorts, Mary you can't believe it. There I was skinny-dipping at Jones Beach, dining, dancing, speaking with my associates at the party and -- at the very end – you.

We know who she is, she said, because you're the one who told us. And she picked up my file and proceeded to tell me when I had told her all these things about you -- she quoted specific sessions and told me what I had said in each one.

You want her to remain untouched? she said finally. Cooperate. It's as simple as that.

But what am I suppose to cooperate with?

Mary, you've got to run away, go into hiding. Please, Mary, I'm begging you.

Jack
To Mary,

November 24

Thanksgiving. I have some visitors. Even as I write these words, they are watching me.

Danny has been here for about two hours. He's been sitting with his blowtorch and his horrid grin, staring at me in silence. It's as if he wants to tell me something but can't. As if he wants to congratulate me. Don't ask me how I know that. It's just a feeling. I don't know why he has the blowtorch or what he intends to do with it. I've been trying to remain calm.

Dr. Schwartz arrived about half an hour ago and immediately asked what the problem was. No one answered. She looked coldly from me to the warden, as if we were responsible for ruining her holiday, then glanced over towards where Danny was sitting, without acknowledging him, as if he were some kind of ghost whose presence she was aware of but refused to confirm.

Suddenly, the warden asked me how I felt about my impending release. I told him I wasn't aware of it, but that when it was granted, I was ready to return to society to lead a productive life. He seemed pleased with this, but Dr. Schwartz immediately objected. She insisted I wasn't ready. The warden brushed her off, as if she were a fly on his lapel, and pulled out a picture from his jacket pocket as evidence of my cure. It was grainy and unfocused, but it seemed to be of a woman, naked, with large black blotches all over her disfigured body, the bare bone just evident. On the bottom was the initial "M."

But I had no time to react because Danny, who had remained silent up to this point, walked over and took it from the warden to examine. Then he turned to me.

"Nice job," he said, smiling at me, a big, proud smile, the smile of a master pleased with the work of his apprentice, then went back to inspecting the tip of his blowtorch as if it were a gun that had just been shot.

Now I'm writing this letter. I don't know why or how I came to be doing this. It's part of the process, Dr. Schwartz says. My farewell to malady. What does she mean? They're all waiting around silently - Danny with his torch, Dr. Schwartz with her cold, expressionless face, the warden with his kind smile which makes me feel unsettled. It's as if they want me to write to you, as if this is the reason they have come.

Because I am writing, and they are watching. Because they are allowing me to.

Mary, what have I done? Mary, please, you've got to answer me. Tell me you're alive. Tell me you're OK. Tell me why they're here, why they've been standing around, staring at me for so long. Tell me, Mary, why suddenly they're now gone, vanished, like ghosts, as if they had never been here at all. Have I gone mad? Have they managed to take total possession of my thoughts? Mary, tell me why I now find a big fat turkey on my table with all the trimmings, why there's music, why they have tapped into all my weaknesses, why now I discover, on a bone china plate, under a polished silver server, a tongue, freshly cut, steeping in blood, and beside it a picture I took of you when we were in college. Tell me why I find myself suddenly immune, as if it doesn't matter, why I find myself instead preparing to dine, carving the turkey, laying each slice neatly on the gold-trimmed plate they have provided me, serving myself mashed potatoes, candied yams, arranging the cranberry sauce neatly on the dish. And the wine, Mary. They have
provided me wine. Pinot Noir. My favorite. I pour it, savor its aroma, let it linger on my palate and completely forget about you. As if I no longer have any feelings. As if they have torched them away, carefully excised them and left me numb and helpless as only they can do.

Lobotomy, Mary? Remember? *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*? Only this isn't physical, Mary. This is much more sophisticated. We are, after all, at the dawn of a new millennium.

And now, as I get ready to enjoy my first real Thanksgiving dinner in five years, one I have apparently earned, I pick up the radio from which come strains of Tchaikovsky's 1812 Overture -- oh, how glorious, Mary, complete with canons and fireworks -- a tiny radio I never had but which has been prominently placed on my table -- a small radio, like the one Danny was given a few months ago, with rich, magnificent sound -- and I find myself changing the station, searching for the BBC or some other independent source of information, and I am at last in heaven. I am at last, for a while at least, enjoying life as I imagine I will upon my release.

I'm sorry, Mary. Please forgive me. I want to enjoy this moment. I want to relish every nuance, every second.

Jack
December 2

I'm crying, Mary, I'm crying and I can't stop. Mary, they've broken me. I thought I could play their game, but you can't, Mary. Or maybe you can, but you can never win.

Mary, they've ripped out my tongue. After all I did for them. Why? I couldn't have told anyone even if I wanted to. Don't they realize that? Why don't they let me be? Or kill me, get it all over with? But this is prison, Mary. This is, after all, punishment. For going against them, for defying them. No, death would be too easy. Too quick. Too merciful, even if they tortured me until the last weak breath left my body.

I was a fool to think they would ever release me. Instead, today, I am scheduled for amputation. An "operation," they call it. A "slight correction." Only it will be my left hand. The one I write with. The one I used to draft all those treatises to expose them, to draft all these letters to you. Not so slight, after all, is it?

Mary, I don't know what to say and have so little time to say it. Forgive me? You were a willing partner, after all. Wish you well? Hardly. After all, we do what we must to survive. Do you detect a little Darwin in me? Does that surprise you? I mean we all have our weaknesses and fall so easily into them, allow them be exploited. When push comes to shove, as they say.

Mary, I know you will never read this. As I know you've never read any of my letters. It's the way things are. I know that. So believe me when I tell you I was only doing what I thought was right.

Jack
Hurricane
John a Grochalski

i was a hurricane of a man,
he tells me,
i used to pull a lot of women
back then
when i worked sanitation
but i never got over her
we dated five years
five years and all i did was
cheat on her
i never felt bad about it
until last weekend, though,
when i saw her
i was with my buddy
we were dropping his daughter
off at college
and there she was
she’s the dean
of the biology department now
she hardly looked any different
from when we were together
she looked good
when i got home i looked her up
on the internet
i paid some money and i got
her address and phone number
i have her email address too
the computer said she had two kids
i found out that she was divorced
i have five kids myself from three
different women
i have to say i never loved
any of them as much as i loved her
i’m thinking of getting in touch
but i don’t know what the proper way
to do it is
i wanted to write her a letter
but i’m no good at writing or emailing
i figure maybe i’ll just go up there
show up at the biology department
but i probably won’t get to see her
because things have gotten
so damned fucked up since 9/11
they think everyone is a criminal
or terrorist now
i don’t want to cause a scene
at the school
my buddy’s daughter goes there, you know,
i think causing a scene would
send the wrong message
i think i’m just going to show up at her house
maybe i’ll buy some flowers
see if there’s any spark between us
after all of those years
i wish i never let her go
she was a good woman back then
the best
but i was a hurricane of a man in those days
i blew through love
i just didn’t think it would
get as bad as all of this.
CAMBRIDGE, OH
Erren Geraud Kelly

i attempted to
look up maureen's number
and call her
for old times sake
i wasn't going to say anything
i just wanted to hear her voice
that always told me to " gimme that love "
before she came

that voice i didn't hear
the last week we lived together
in separate rooms

at the bus station
in cambridge
the sky lives up
to her last name
Portland, Maine
Erren Geraud Kelly

two days. And I didn't
notice the world
i carried on my back,
or the music gravel makes
i was glad to get away
from it
her two teenage sons
who screamed
"nigger,"
everyday until it
became my name

walking on the beach
with her
did little to delay
the inevitable
in old orchard beach, where things
moved slowly
i moved faster
than time
this wasn't a disney movie
and an educated black man's word
against a common white ( even a lowlife
like her soon-to-be ex-husband )
was no armor against reality
and about as valuable as shit
i told her in bed
my leaving was
for the best
she gave me a look

"you're going to give in to them?"

one day i grabbed my world
walked from scarborough
saw the morning star on a metro bus
and rode it to portland
a girl old enough to be my daughter
sleeps in front of me
we're both getting away
from bad experiences
one night a guy
threw her in a dumpster
and tried to rape her
she broke his jaw and escaped
her body is proof
milk does it good
but i just want to talk
2 days ago in san francisco
a mexican kept hitting on her
until she became a bitch
she complains guys only talk to her
because she has boobs and butt
and i think of all the times i've been hit on
she's only 2 dollars to her name
so i give her a 5
so at least she could eat
in the midwest
the sky is the ocean
for people like me
who want adventure
and for people like sara
who never had a childhood
Polaroid
Erren Geraud Kelly

my father owned several polaroid cameras
before they became the property of
pawn shops
he'd pull out the pictures
like the cops or the coroner
at the scene of a crime
a film develops: my mother.
a pretty brown woman on a doorstep
1561 north 47th street, baton rouge
married my father, so she could be free
another, my sister, before she went to
seven day adventist school, one morning
my daddy took pictures with a polaroid
camera
with a lens
that came out like an accordion
clothes and boots, caked with cement
tall and smiling and handsome
took pictures of my mama
he wanted to let people know
how pretty she was
I lay with my head on the great collie’s curved, sleeping body, and she didn’t mind at all. Her name was Duchess; she belonged to our neighbors, the Bauer family, and I loved throwing my schoolboy arms about her, petting her, or lying as I was that day right next to her on the floor.

The grownups were all watching television. A man was picking up little balls with numbers stuck inside them, breaking them open, and reading their numbers aloud. It was a boring show, and I might have forgotten about it completely if I hadn’t sensed a complete mood swing in the room when the man read Bubby’s birth date on national TV. No one said a word. I looked up. Ray Bauer, Bubby’s father, was shaking his head. Bubby, I learned, was going to war.

That was in early December, 1969—a few days away from my birthday. There was a war going on somewhere on the other side of the world. In fact, Sister Mary Hope had mentioned it to us. That was where Bubby was going. I also learned (by eavesdropping) that two of the teachers at my school—men—did not have to go to war like Bubby did. I had mixed feelings about this, because I partly wished that they would go and come back to tell us about their adventures.

The only real connection I had with war was my dead uncle’s photograph hanging in the pink hallway of my grandmother’s house. He smiled, and said he “really wasn’t far away.” He had died in a really big war while fighting the Japanese on an island somewhere. But neither my mother (his sister) nor the rest of her family ever said much about it.

We received a small check from the veterans office monthly, and I knew that had something to do with war too. My father had been in a little war before marrying my mother; that was in Korea. Once a year a little flag appeared mysteriously beside his low, slanted gravestone, stuck into the ground on the side opposite the red votive candle.

In my little boy’s world I thought wars were inevitable, natural occurrences in the course of human activity. I didn’t know we also had the power to prevent or stop them. Then came junior high, and I began hearing more and more about that faraway war that had been sucking some of our neighbors away (though Bubby, I found out, had ended up in Germany instead). Our president, Richard Nixon, was going to end the war for us. He was bringing all the guys home. But those people over there in Vietnam were not so lucky. We were killing them.

I wrote a little editorial, typed it up neatly so that my handwriting wouldn’t give my age away, and mailed it off to the Pittsburgh Press. I wrote that I didn’t think it was good for us, the Russians, and the Chinese to be involved in that war. We were causing more death and destruction than those poor people would have brought on themselves without anyone’s help. The Press printed it. I was thirteen years old.

Outside of history classes, my friends and I in high school didn’t speak much of war. There was no History Channel at the time. A few wartime classics, such as Bridge on
the River Kwai or Stalag 17 surfaced in TV programming occasionally. But mostly war was not on our radar. It was nothing remarkable to know someone currently serving in the military, and war veterans (especially from Vietnam) seemed to have descended into a class of untouchables. My only real interest in war came by way of literature. Hemingway's A Farewell to Arms, as well as Tolkein's Lord of the Rings trilogy stirred me deeply: one for the force of love surfacing among chaotic destruction, and the other for the enticing, ageless contest between good and evil. I also came upon All Quiet on the Western Front and, somewhat later, William Wharton's Birdy. I cared very little for war stories eulogizing tactical moves, victories, or conquests. The stories that held my attention were the ones that revealed the indomitable human spirit. After all, wars are not much different in their objectives and means. In the end, they appear to result from the greed and selfish concerns of a very few in power. But the stories of selfless heroism, of individuals overcoming insurmountable odds just to survive these artificially-induced catastrophes—these kept me up at night. I learned of the bone-chilling struggles of entire cities during World War II: Leningrad, Warsaw, Nanking, Stalingrad, London. Likewise, I boggled at the courage of masses of soldiers embarking on two of the most dangerous and unpredictable offensives in history: Normandy and Iwo Jima.

In 1986 I traveled extensively in Eastern Europe: the Soviet Union, Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary. In Russia I slept in a quiet room overlooking a small medieval Orthodox church, which I noted shining in moonlight through my lace-curtained window. In Poland I looked up friends of friends of friends, who sheltered me and showed me sights in town and country. In Prague I drank the best beer I had ever tasted, a pilsner tapped straight from its aged oak barrel. I had been coaxed to the bar (rather easily) by an acquaintance from Yugoslavia I had met at the train station. The two of us, along with a Spanish girl, had found an inexpensive room for three in the Old Town. “Mark,” said Nebojsa, “in Prague you must drink lots of beer.”

Neb and I kept up a correspondence for a few years after my trip. My wife and I even saw him during our honeymoon, which we had elected to spend in beautiful, autumnal Yugoslavia. We traveled in a wide circle from Zagreb down to the coastal cities of Split and Dubrovnik, then back towards Zagreb by way of Bosnia. It was in Sarajevo, Bosnia's capital city, that we met up with Nebojsa. In the fall of 1987 we found Sarajevo old, polluted, multi-ethnic, and completely fascinating. Our hotel room (for $25/night) was a suite as large as the main floor of my parents' house, with a grand marble bathroom, balconies overlooking the main street, and honey-colored art deco furniture. In the lobby we had a breakfast of poached eggs in elegant silver holders and Turkish coffee, surrounded by tall windows shrouded by dark red velvet drapes.

Neb would not hear of us staying another night in this hotel, much to our chagrin. We must come directly to his parents' apartment, where his mother had already determined sleeping arrangements to accommodate us for as long as we might stay. For the next couple of days, then, Neb led us through the crooked streets of Sarajevo's Old Town, with its bazaars, cafés, and minarets. We drove up to the mountains, passing the ski jumps of the 1984 Olympics; we met an old beekeeper and a group of Serbian men distilling slivovica, a fiery plum brandy, by the side of the road. One evening we went out...
to a bar with Neb and his friends. Seated around the table with us were Croatian Catholic, Serbian Orthodox, and Bosnian Muslim natives—virtually indistinguishable as ethnic types. “You see,” Neb explained to me, “we are all different, but we get along.”

Years later, as is now evident, that would not be the case. A few months after the Yugoslavian war broke out I received a phone call—out of the blue—from Neb. He was safely in Toronto with his wife and baby girl. He spoke of his harrowing work as courier for the United Nations, during which he drove for miles around the city, as bullets either flew past or made holes in his car. One had made a hole in his father, who was, thank God, recovering. And what of his friends? Most of them had found ways to leave. The city had suffered an intellectual brain drain. And who, I asked, was responsible for this war? The older generation, he said, had implanted these crazy nationalistic ideas in the heads of the young. It had been going on like this for hundreds of years, just as I’d recently read in Rebecca West’s memoir of her travels in Yugoslavia, Black Lamb and Grey Falcon.

I invited Neb and his family to Pittsburgh for Christmas, where my wife and I celebrated every year with our families. I drove alone to Toronto to fetch them, and Neb and I sat talking in his twenty-first floor temporary apartment overlooking the city—provided gratis by the Canadian government. From the window I could see Lake Ontario curve all the way down to Hamilton, where mills let out a thin smoke on an otherwise clear day.

We spoke of the war. I had little to say, baffled as I was over the whole thing, and sensitive to the fact that Neb was a Serbian: the international scapegoats of this conflict. He said that the atrocities we’d heard about were being committed by all three sides—Croats, Serbs, and Bosnians—but that we were only hearing about what the Serbs were doing. “You have to understand,” he said, “that the Croats have always had Western Europe, the Catholics and the pope behind them. The Muslims had the Ottomans, but the Serbs—who do we have? The Russians, but they are far away and not interested in us any more. The Muslims were once Serbs who turned away from their religion rather than suffer under the Turks. So they were rewarded with social status by their conquerors for being traitors. The rest of the Serbs, those who didn’t surrender themselves, have never forgotten this. But they have remained mostly poor and stupid…”

I listened intently, my head aching. It was hard to sift through media propaganda on any issue, but I felt that I was at last getting a grip on the complexities of this war through this intimate contact of mine who had actually been living it. Neb’s wife, Dajana, an attractive Croatian woman, offered me Turkish coffee before we bundled up their baby girl and headed for Pittsburgh, where we stayed with my wife’s Croatian-American family. There, during the annual big Christmas party, my wife’s grandmother (who could still speak some Croatian) looked deeply into Dajana’s eyes as she recounted their story. She squeezed Dajana’s hand and lapsed into English: “I’m so sorry, honey.” Dajana smiled back across the language barrier.

My only other bit of wartime intimacy came in the form of a letter. I found the letter in my grandmother’s basement, along with a purple heart medal, after she’d died. The
Dear Mrs. Kubiak,

Received your most welcomed letter this morning, and was very happy to hear from you. I am answering right away as I have the time at the present. Your son was under my control along with two other boys, and that made us four in total...

The letter goes on to say how her son was killed at Iwo Jima: …he was behind a rock loading his weapon after having fired, and I guess he didn’t notice there was a crevice right where he was at. …All of a sudden he first seemed to slump to the ground… All of us there said he didn’t suffer at all. I read and re-read the letter in astonishment, for this was the real thing. No battle hymn playing in the background, no flowery official language, no pomp or throat clearing, just the words of a comrade and friend describing a cold, heartless death. I’ll send you a snapshot [of me] if you wish, and I’d like you to put it right beside your son’s. I would like that very much.

How many letters like this one reached the households of Americans during World War II? How many gold stars in their windows attracted the stares of passers by? And what of the families of the 20 million Russians who lost their lives in that war? Did each loss ripple through each local neighborhood, each community, until a vast sea of loss threw its mighty waves up against whatever terra firma may have survived in the hearts of the living?

Eleanor Roosevelt spent several weeks in the summer of 1943 visiting the combat troops and injured of the Pacific Theater. Maintaining her customary cheerful exterior, Eleanor went from bed to bed in each army hospital she visited, holding soldiers’ hands and bringing word from the president of his faith and pride in them. At Guadalcanal she saw a cemetery full of orderly white crosses, some of which had inscriptions crudely carved into them by living buddies, or mess kits hanging off them. Back home in Washington following this grueling and dangerous trip, Eleanor often sat quietly, eyes lost, in a seeming state of depression. She had seen too much. For her, there were no more numbers, only individuals fighting this war. Eventually she channeled her shock and deep concern for these soldiers into an effort to ensure that war veterans were able to make a smooth transition to civilian life. She urged the president to see to it they had health care, a college education, work, and respect.

It takes a great deal of energy and preoccupation to plan for war. You must first of all live life according to the premise that you may some day be attacked; therefore you must never live too much in the present, and your faith and trust in fellow human beings must necessarily be compromised. It’s best to start young, and so we have military academies devoted to molding young people into believing that war is both inevitable and win-able.

Arguably, academies such as West Point can produce very fine individuals. Some of our nation’s greatest leaders studied there: Eisenhower, Patton, MacArthur, even Lee and Grant. Admission to the school remains “extremely competitive” according to their
literature. To apply, you must not only have a high grade point average and notable standardized test scores, but also a letter of nomination from no less than a member of Congress or the Department of the Army. Once admitted, the academy focuses on four areas of development: intellectual, physical, military, and moral-ethical. These are referred to as the “West Point Experience.” As for the moral-ethical part, emphasis is placed on “the important values of the military profession.”

This leads me to wonder: what are the values of the military? I am unwilling to go back to school to find out, but I can imagine these values to include duty and honor, as well as serving your country. In fact, these are the values named in West Point’s motto. The first two, duty and honor, I agree are timeless. And I can imagine that throughout history, when the lines of communication were often nonexistent, spare, or distorted across borders, masses of people were uneducated, and reigns of terror were more the rule than the exception, that devotion to one’s country was paramount to every individual’s survival. But what does it mean to be loyal to one’s country today, when the world, with all its man-made boundaries, in shrinking before our eyes? Economics, not kings or armies, is the new force that binds us. We are mixing; we live anywhere, among ethnic groups that may be very different from ours. The big cities are getting bigger all over the globe; they are homes to people from all over the globe. Once, America was the melting pot. Now that melting pot has spilled over to London, Rome, Shanghai, Dubai. What does it mean now, to be loyal to one’s country?

Lines we once drew in the sand are washing away, leaving only the lines we draw in our minds. Some of those lines can be ugly, and because they are psychological, they are not so easy to erase. In America, we have struggled with the racial line, seriously accepting at times that racial variation is significant enough to merit condescension or, worse, separation. We have extended this line of thought, unfortunately, to ethnic groups as well. But the situation has improved, and now some other countries (such as France) are caught in the struggle of whether or not to accept such psychological barriers.

Worse, we now find religious barriers rising as a result of ill-conceived propaganda which distorts the fundamental teachings of our religions. Where these religions exist to be inclusive, they are being presented as exclusive, even to the point of employing violence as a means of sustaining this exclusivity. These new religious boundaries are not in line with current political boundaries. Those who distort religious ideals to selfish and violent ends are no different than political leaders of the past who did the same. But if we wish to defeat the exclusivists, we can not look to political boundaries to help us, for these false religious boundaries exist only in our heads. Their perpetrators may live in your backyard; they may move freely from country to country, carrying their ideas with them. They are not loyal to any political entity.

Our relatively new economic affluence also crosses political boundaries world-wide. With it, of course, comes economic devastation and chaos for even more people than the sizeable number who are benefiting from affluence. The Haves set up camp anywhere they choose, while the Have-Nots struggle for human rights—including shelter, medical care, freedom of conscience, and food. Though this situation is nothing
new, we are more keenly aware of it now, and therefore bear greater responsibility for its
existence. Karl Marx saw these inequalities exacerbated by the industrial revolution, and
therefore wrote his prescription for a classless world, one in which both political leaders
and boundaries would eventually become useless and disappear. Well, it hasn’t quite
worked out according to his wishes. However, it does appear that economic factors, as
well as the psychological boundaries outlined above, are outweighing political forces in
establishing a new world order. Political boundaries are losing their significance for the
very reason Marx abhorred: the spread of capitalism. Thus we have the North American
Free Trade Agreement, the European Union, the Asian Pacific Economic Cooperation,
and of course the World Trade Organization. These are only a few of the vehicles
driving the contemporary world economy. Today, a Pole can go to work in Ireland if he
chooses. Why not? He will still yearn for Polish cuisine and sing Polish carols at
Christmas time, but if he stays in Ireland for another couple of generations, will his
grandchildren wish for the same? Will they ever want to fight and die for Ireland?

Gone, for good, is the planet that saw the advent of World War II, when people
fought one another, and their systems of government, mainly along ethnic lines world-
wide. These kinds of conflicts remain, but they are local, and the international
community has a stake in seeing to it that they end quickly. They are not convenient for
a world economy.

The United Nations is still the best thing we have to deal with local fires. More
powerful nations, such as The United States, China, France, Russia, and others, also
bear a great responsibility to help put them out. However, any nation that acts
unilaterally as world policeman runs the risk of not only alienating its partners in
maintaining world stability, but, much like religious fundamentalists, it may be blinded by
its own unique, fanatical ambitions. These ambitions, far from discouraging world
conflicts, may indeed exacerbate them. The contemporary world community can only
survive on democratic principles, on the fruits of checks and balances. Every nation, no
matter how rich, powerful, or influential, may benefit from frequent reality checks, much
the same way that family members with wildly different personalities and interests can
live under one roof only if they keep one another grounded and willing to compromise.

Such idealism is no longer optional or worthy of debate: it has become necessary for
our survival, as necessary as miracle drugs, space satellites, air travel, and the Internet,
all of which may have been dismissed at one time as incomprehensibly idealistic.

Human rights know no borders. The willingness to uphold them is fast becoming a
global commitment. Armies have the right to defend their borders if attacked, but the
attackers will get no sympathy. So what will be the future of armed forces? It is likely that
they will work in concert with the forces of other nations, under treaty, nations which
agree on the principles of human rights.

The horrors of World War II are still within sight, but the seeds of that war lay in the
isolation of the peoples who incited it. The Internet will no longer allow that. The free
movement of peoples across the globe also now makes it less likely to become
brainwashed by a misguided ruler in your home country. But, just as good and trusting
people move about freely, so do those with evil intentions. Today we call them terrorists. They have no country; their only allegiance is to chaotic destruction, and they will use nations as pawns in their deadly game. Therefore we cannot fight them with armies. We can only fight them with coordinated intelligence and special forces, forces working together across borders. We may weed them out, but we will not make them disappear until we meet them with hope, courage, and common sense. We must win over their fledglings by showing them an alternative, not by maintaining a world-wide police state which fails to address their paranoias. Above all, we must not be hypocrites, preaching democracy and human rights in one corner while turning a blind eye to shortcomings and abuses of these in another. This is precisely the kind of unethical behavior that lets terrorists justify themselves as liberators of sorts.

It has been reported recently that the number of armed conflicts currently holding in our world is fewer than ever before, this despite the attention we call to the ones that are occurring. And in the midst of media blitzes and official propaganda dedicated to these armed conflicts we see things like giant tsunamis and killer hurricanes popping up between body counts, offering devastation on a new scale. Who would be better trained and equipped to deal with these natural disasters than the armed forces? And if we are to see more and more of these high-magnitude events, it would make sense for nations to coordinate their relief efforts by offering the services of their highly disciplined and trained elites. Imagine having respect for armies and navies not for the death and destruction they cause, but for the death and destruction they prevent.

There are nations today with the most bellicose of histories (for example, Scandinavia) who now commit their energies and military personnel to maintaining peace. One of them even sponsors the most prestigious prize on the planet: the Nobel Peace Prize. Would it have been as highly regarded five hundred years ago? We are still evolving.

Just this past week I met, through the Internet, some of the men who served with my father on an important peacekeeping mission in Korea. They were the DMZ Police Company, a select group of marines whose job it was to patrol the newly-designated demilitarized zone following a cease-fire between the embattled Koreas in the mid-1950’s. They patrolled in sub-zero temperatures, skirting land mines, bullet-riddled helmets, even corpses of Chinese soldiers who had died only weeks previously in the fighting. Occasionally, they would catch North Korean infiltrators and have to question them. They were and still are proud men, and my father was one of them. The world has largely forgotten them, but their mission was exemplary, mandated by the United Nations to set the course for future peacekeeping missions all over the globe.

The shadows of past wars still pass over us, dimming hope and compromising our courage in building a peaceful world. Some of us take refuge in old thinking, glorifying conquest and battles won as if we had no opportunity to do away with a mentality that is rooted in the concept of “us” against “them.” The quantum leap in judgment, if there is to be one, must come from all of us, in every artificially-bound nation, all over the globe. There will always be bad apples among us, but let us recognize them and deal with them for what they are. We can do this cooperatively, not exclusively, across borders.
Let our armies battle not whole defined territories filled with innocent bystanders, but the naturally occurring disasters that will undoubtedly increase as a result of our negligence in caring for our planet. Let us use our cooperative intelligence in combating terrorism; let us use our cooperative compassion in restructuring the landscape where terrorism breeds. As Abraham Lincoln said, “There is no humble way to kill, no gentle way to destroy. There is nothing good in war. Except its ending.” We may not see the end of conflict in our lifetime, but we certainly can see to it that the wars of nations are done. Our new allegiance will be to each other, and to the blue-green planet that bore us. Like the Internet, it is simply something waiting to happen.
But there is the imperfect joining of the carnal world and the world of courage and other spiritual matters. I seem, after half a lifetime, to have made no progress, unless resignation is progress. ... There is the light or the rainfall, some ingenuous symbol by which one returns to the visible, perhaps mature world. There is the euphoria, the sense that life is no more than it appears to be, light and water and trees and pleasant people that can be brought crashing down by a neck, a hand, an obscenity written on a toilet door. There is always, somewhere, this hint of aberrant carnality. The worst of it is that it seems labyrinthine; I come back again and again to the image of a naked prisoner in an unlocked cell, and to tell the truth I don’t know how he will escape. Death figures here, the unwillingness to live. Many of these shapes seem like the shapes of death ... I say to myself that the body can be washed clean of any indulgence; the only sin is despair, but I speak meaninglessly in my case. ... I do not seem able to call up, at will, the sweet flavor of compassion, but I think I can conclude that life, as it passes before our eyes, is a creative force—that one thing is put usefully upon another—that what we lose in one exchange is more than replenished by the next, that it is only us, only our pitiful misunderstandings that make for crookedness, darkness, and anger.

— The Journals of John Cheever
AFTER THE WAR ENDED
Peter Barlow

After the war ended—after the contents of the house were loaded into a moving truck and directed to a place three states away—the first thing Bill did was take off his coat, lay on the living room floor, and soak in the quiet. He watched it go to make sure, stood at the curb and witnessed the truck pull out of the gated community, turn left onto the main road, and disappear. When it didn’t come back within five minutes he knew it was gone, and proceeded with the undressing and the soaking. He let the quiet consume him. The last time it had been so still was in the days before Jamie and Bill moved in. Even Jamie had been quieter in those days. Not completely quiet, but certainly when she spoke you had to be in the same room with her to hear what she was saying. Now merely being within a city block was enough. The only peace and quiet connected with Jamie Randolph was when she slept, when she had just a hint of a snore, and the house was as peaceful, if not as empty, as it was now. That was where it had gone wrong, he thought. That was where the marriage fell apart. Too much noise. Not enough quiet. The furnace came on, responding to the outside temperature, adding another unwanted layer onto the quiet. Bill got up, shut it off, and lay back down on the carpet.

Jamie would never have approved. A man should look proper at all times, she said. A man should look respectable, and that begins with the current attire, head to toe: well-groomed hair; complementing shirt, tie, and slacks; matching shoes and socks. The clothes make the man, influence who he is, how he behaves, how he carries himself. A well-dressed man is respected by his peers and admired from the moment someone meets him. She’d been spewing out little bits of garbage like that for years. That she’d been saying it at volume ten only made the present silence sweeter. Bill, for the life of him, couldn’t figure out how wearing a jacket and tie would make him a more efficient worker, for example, or feel any better or different about himself.

He lay there for ten minutes, then an hour, and by dusk he was contemplating the mostly virgin walls, kept white at Jamie’s insistence. She didn’t want anything as trivial as wall color distracting from her selected furnishings, and she refused to install a piece in a client’s home that didn’t look good in her own. The living room became a rotating display of various sofas, chairs, and assorted sundries. If a particular fabric didn’t work on a particular sofa, that was Bill’s fault, wasn’t it? He had designed both the fabric and the frame for Thompson Furniture, hadn’t he? Never mind that the sofa simply didn’t look good in a room painted white. Or that it had been provided by the company below cost. Or that when she insisted on returning it—which she did more often than not—Bill lost a little bit of face in the company, with everyone from the factory workers who wasted their time on a returned sofa up to his boss, the owner of the company.

There was no furniture in the living room anymore, and the white walls brought out the true personality of the room: this was a quiet space, and it lulled Bill Randolph to sleep.
Sitting on Bill Randolph was the thing to do. If a person entered a home and saw a Bill Randolph in the living room, ready and waiting to conform to the contours of his or her backside, one could be assured that the home was among the finest in the community. Mothers would redecorate entire rooms in Bill Randolph for their single daughters—everything from the wallpaper and paint trim to the sofa to the glass vase with molded plastic water and fake flowers on the end table—hoping that said daughter would bring home a boyfriend, who would see the Bill Randolph and think, “This is an amazingly together woman. I have to get to know her better.” A home without Bill Randolph among the upper classes was a home steadfastly avoided. People had ways of finding out. Mailmen talked. E-mails were exchanged. Without any Bill Randolph, one might as well belong to the bourgeoisie.

John Thompson, owner of Thompson Home Furnishings, Inc., wanted nothing more than to own the largest furniture manufacturer in the country. When he interviewed Bill fifteen years previously, it was obvious from the sketches and drawings provided that he had talent. Almost immediately, John started having visions of grandeur. Since inheriting the company from his father, it had done little but lose money, slowly at first but more steadily as time went on. What the company needed was an icon, a brand name that consumers could latch on to and canonize if necessary, and right here in front of him was someone who could help it happen. So what if Bill Randolph wasn’t an established name?

John signed Bill to a contract, set him up in an office, and gave him the nearest thing to carte blanche in the company: come and go as he pleased, work at home if he felt like it, but the quality designs had to keep coming. Within two years the company started making a profit on the Bill Randolph line of upholstery. Over time, the line expanded to include fabrics, paint, wallpaper, decorative accessories, general home goods (bath towels, placemats, and flatware, amongst other things), and, in stores that very day, his and hers perfumes. All that was missing was a cooking show on the Food Network and perhaps a hip-hop record, something upbeat and drenched in synthesizers, something that the daughters of his target audience could get into.

What John found puzzling—John and the rest of the Board of Directors—was Bill’s absence from the launch party for the perfumes the night before. Humility and shyness were two of his known traits—Bill typically worked with his office door closed and rarely ventured out into the offices or the factory—but not turning up for a product launch was unlike him. He couldn’t possibly have forgotten the date. It was a tradition; every product in the Bill Randolph line had debuted on that date. At that moment, six business days after the contents of the Randolph house pulled away in the back of a moving truck, John Thompson, owner of Thompson Home Furnishings, Inc., was on his way to the office of William Randolph—“Bill” to his friends—to get an explanation for his absence the night previous.

Even if there was one to be gotten Bill wasn’t there to give it. Judging from the amount of interoffice mail stacked in his in-box, he hadn’t been there in several days, John guessed. Had Bill taken that vacation John had been pressuring him to take for who-knew-how-many years? But surely he would have said something to that effect.
Perhaps not, John rethought, but surely it wouldn’t have scheduled over the debut of the new scents. Had he called in sick? John would have asked Bill’s supervisor, but that was himself, and he’d just came back from a month-long trip to China, trying to get the billion-and-some people there interested in the joys of Bill Randolph, and perhaps line up some cheap labor.

Maybe something was wrong at home, or within his family. That he could understand. Maybe whatever it was was so urgent that Bill had to leave right away, and hadn’t had the time to tell anyone where he was off to. John gave Bill another day to check in or make an appearance, and then he would get hold of Bill’s wife.

Bill was drifting off for his hourly nap, this time in the third upstairs bedroom, the one that overlooked the driveway at the side of the house, when the doorbell rang. Each room had its own sound. The design of the room, the textures of the floor, walls, and ceiling, whether or not the main and closet doors were open, all of this contributed to the overall personality of the room as expressed by its ambient sounds. Jamie hadn’t noticed that, but then she wouldn’t have. Jamie was too busy making her own noise to pay attention to what was already there. Empty of furniture and empty of Jamie, though, the natural personality of each room blossomed into maturity, giving the new and exciting personae. Bill opened the windows, and let in the outside world, enhancing the texture of the sound, two calms coming together to create one as perfect as a heartbeat. He slept on the floors of the various rooms of the house, taking his pillow and blanket to a new location each night like a nomad, dozing off to the unique sound each room had to offer.

But now he heard the doorbell.

It was fascinating lying there on the floor of that bedroom with the window propped open, listening to the sound of the asphalt below. It had been lain a decade earlier; he could still remember the two days it took to put all the asphalt down, how the smell of fresh tar invaded everything in the house from the bedclothes to his underclothes for weeks afterwards. Now the sound of it, still settling in the early evening sun, drifted up and in to this bedroom that saw little use when it was full of furnishings, where Bill was preparing to ignore the doorbell until it rang again. “Oh, good Lord,” he said, pulling himself up from the floor and starting toward the front door.

The man on the other side of the door shivered into his three-piece suit. It had been a mild winter, if not a bit chilly, and people that left their homes without their coats on wished they had remembered to take it. The man kept his hands in his pockets, jingling his pocket change like he was waiting for the right bus to turn up. The first two things that came to Bill’s mind were “encyclopedia salesman” and “religious zealot,” but then this man had always given off that impression. “Bill,” John said, trying to sound cheerful and failing. “You’re home. Good.”

Bill pondered what effect leaving the front door open all the time would have on the sound of the living room. He watched as John jingled his pocket change again, realizing there wasn’t going to be a handshake offered.

“We were concerned about you,” John went on. “You haven’t been into the office for a few days, and you missed the launch party for the perfumes two nights ago. I thought
I might check in on you, make sure everything’s— okay—”

Bill forced a smile that felt like it belonged on a circus clown. Some time later, he supposed the smile had made him look like a maniac, and that it may not have been the thing to do.

John was peeking over Bill’s shoulder, into the empty living room. Bill brought the door closed enough that the opening wasn’t quite wide enough for his face. He hated nosy people. Them and gossips. People who have so little going on in their own lives that they feel the need to ask you and yours about every little detail, every little thing going on in your life. He thought Jamie might have been one of those people had she not found interior decorating. She was one of those people, come to that. She only started designing a room after long talks with the client about his or her life. There would be nights she would come home from an appointment and go on and on and on about every little detail of a family he would never meet. “I’m fine,” Bill said.

“Good,” John said, “good. I’m glad to hear it.” He took a few steps back and started down the steps off the front porch. “Well, I— thought I’d let you know we— miss you at work. And if you could— let me know what’s going on and when you’re coming in again—”

“I’m fine,” Bill said, and closed the door. He reopened it as soon as John had driven away. This room sounded better that way, and then he wondered: what does the third upstairs bedroom sound like at dusk?

“He’s mental,” John said at dinner. “That or he’s hiding something.”

John loosened his necktie, the stuffed bell peppers were so hot. Ellen, still basking in her promotion to Chief of Thoracic Surgery at County Hospital outside of town, was so backed up with administrivia and learning her new job and working seven-day weeks she barely knew coming from going, and was engrossed in paperwork at the other end of the table. In only three weeks on the job, the black rings under her eyes had become permanent features of the landscape. Her hair, once full of bounce and life, now needed twice the amount of hairspray to keep its form. So tired and engorged by her job, the heat of the dinner was completely lost on her.

“I’m sorry, what?” she said, closing one over-stuffed manila folder and opening another.

“Bill. Bill Randolph.” John’s voice was sullen, dropping half an octave in an attempt to hide his anger. He was used to people paying attention to him, including his wife. Especially his wife.

“Oh? What about him?”

John rubbed the bridge of his nose. “He was all funny today when I went to his house looking for him. He hasn’t been in to work for days, but all he said was, ‘I’m fine.’ He didn’t come outside. He closed the door so far I couldn’t see his whole face, but dear— I think the house is empty.”

Ellen didn’t respond, eating the rest of her dinner like a vacuum cleaner pulling up so much dust. John wondered if anything he’d even said had registered. He was surprised he’d been able to get her attention at all, a small victory in comparison to most of the dinner discussions since the promotion. Those victories were getting fewer and farther
between, inversely proportionate to the thoughts that this marriage of career-minded people had gone as far as it was going to go. He filed the thought away to discuss with his therapist in their next session.

“I think you should go over there,” he said.

“Where?”

“The Randolphs. I think you should go over there and talk to him, find out what’s going on.”

Ellen looked up at him over the top of her reading glasses. “It wouldn’t do any good. You know him better than I do.”

“It’d do more good than if I went.”

She blinked at him.

“The man’s worked for me for fifteen years, been the only designer our company’s ever had, and we’ve never talked outside of work. He’s an island unto himself. Sometimes he’ll strike up a conversation with my secretary, but most of the time he stays locked up in his office. He’s never talked to me about anything personal, and, you know, maybe you’ll have better luck at it than I will. I just can’t shake the feeling that something’s horribly wrong there, and somebody needs to talk to him and find out what it is.”

Ellen sighed.

“I’m asking you to do this one thing for me, Ellen. Please. Just go and talk to him.”

“All right,” she said. “All right all right all right.” She drew in a deep breath and let it out. “Just let me relax, will you? For just one minute. Can you do that? Let me finish my supper and I’ll go. All right?”

* 

This woman reminded him of Jamie a little. Very little. But enough. This woman was singleminded like Jamie. She wasn’t loud, or particularly overbearing. That was the difference between them. But both women were determined. When Jamie started on a project she kept working on it until it was just so, complete, finished, perfect as only Jamie Randolph could make something. Bill could see a lot of that in this woman as well. She had come in and introduced herself—Ellen Thompson, John’s wife, they’d met at one of the company Christmas parties, remember?—and started right in on the questions: why were all the windows and doors open, was Jamie all right, why was the heat shut off, when would Jamie be coming back, what had happened to all the furniture. She had taken her time getting to that question, but Bill had been watching her shift her weight from one leg to the other from the moment she walked in the door, so he suspected her leg cramps had something to do with her desire for a chair. Her knee-length skirt, her pantyhose, and her modesty kept her from kneeling or sitting on the floor. Or maybe it was her professionalism. He wasn’t sure he cared. She hadn’t taken off her coat either, after Bill made no move to close the windows and doors.

“I can’t pretend to know what you’re going through, whatever it is—”

Her voice reminded him of Jamie, soft, melodic, confident beneath. That was the old Jamie, the one he’d fallen in love with in college. They were both design students then,
an isolated pair in a school full of business and pre-med students. They had every class
together out of necessity, and their study dates became just dates after a couple of
months. He’d courted her for two years before proposing. It was only after the wedding
that she became so demanding and undesirable. And loud. What did this woman know
of that?

“What is important, though, is that we keep living, keep being who we are, make
our own lives go forward—”

Forward. That was a funny one. Forward to him in college had been a wife, kids, a
modest house, and a career in design. There weren’t any kids, and the house wasn’t
really all that modest—none of them in the gated community were anything short of
“spacious”—but otherwise things had mostly gone Bill’s way. Forward to Jamie was
supposed to have been the same thing, except that her career as an interior designer
had spluttered at the best of times. Every now and then a client would be completely
satisfied with the selections Jamie had made for them, but more and more frequently it
hadn’t gone nearly so well. She started complaining more often right around then,
started wondering why people couldn’t see her genius, started getting angrier at Bill and
his rapidly expanding lines of homewares, started talking louder. Forward to Bill now
was peace and quiet.

“And some day you may learn to love again—”

Bill only knew Ellen Thompson by reputation. He’d seen her name in the paper a few
weeks back in connection with County Hospital—she was running some part of it now or
some such—but not otherwise. There may have been a meeting or two at the product
launches, but certainly not at the holiday parties. He didn’t go to those. All that ever
happened was a bunch of drinking and loud music, and since he enjoyed neither one
there wasn’t a reason to go. And now here she was, lecturing him about getting on with
his life, prattling on about emotional recovery like she had a clue. She couldn’t. To her,
all of these feelings, this recovery she kept on about, wasn’t anything more than
conjecture. John was still married to her. John hadn’t left her a goodbye note without
so much as an apology.

Bill saw the first few tentative snowflakes fall from the sky. That had to be a
wonderful sound: snowfall. He walked over to where the front door stood open. “Get
out.”

“It’s all for the beg your pardon?”

Bill jerked his head in the direction of the front lawn. “She’s gone. Glad she’s gone.
Better that way. Get out.”

Ellen blinked a couple of times then took her purse from the kitchen counter. “But
Bill, there’s nothing here. No furniture, no heat, no nothing. Just bare walls and
carpeting, Bill.” She’d been walking towards him across the living room floor. “You can’t
really want that.”

For the first time since she turned up, she stopped talking long enough for Bill to hear
the house. That was what had been missing from the scene. “Hadn’t noticed.”
“He. Kicked. Me. Out.”

There were more words than that. John could hear them all perfectly well, but those were the four most often repeated. Those were the four that every other thing she said was supposed to support. Her rant more than tripled the duration of the original five-minute encounter, examining it from every angle that seemed to favor her. Bill Randolph, she said, had been short with her, obtrusive, abrasive, ill-tempered, terse. He was obstinate, obdurate, adamant. He hadn’t listened, hadn’t cared, hadn’t heard a word she said, and, as she’d been saying from the moment she opened the door from the garage, he had, without warning and/or probable cause, told her, in no uncertain terms, to get out.

She finished, her face the red of a bullseye, and stomped toward the bedroom. Through the front window, he could see the snow falling faster, the first signs of accumulation showing on the lawn. The roads through the gated community would start to ice over presently, if they hadn’t already. John contemplated going to Bill and asking for an explanation, but it would have to wait until morning.

By dawn eight inches of snow had fallen, topped by a half-inch layer of ice. The city and everything in it would be staying home. The plow company hired out by the Community Planning Board might and might not get the snow cleared from the roads before noon. Through the front window, John could see that the crews had made a valiant attempt at keeping up, but the bigger of the two deluges, the one that came an hour before dawn, with all the freezing rain and ice, had proven too much for them. John and Ellen were snowed in.

He found Ellen in the kitchen, sitting at the counter, splitting her attention between half of a grapefruit and the morning newscasts. “You see the snow?” she said. “Weatherman says it’s supposed to get worse. Another four inches today, more ice on top of that. Windchill’s supposed to hit ten below.”

Instantly, his thoughts went to Bill. Bill had had all of his windows open when John was over there, and yes they were still open when Ellen left, she’d said. He walked into the front hall, pulled his coat and boots from the closet, and walked out the front door. He doubted Ellen even noticed.

It took him fifteen minutes to make the normally five minute walk to the Randolph house. As John had guessed, the windows were all open as wide as they could get, and the front door was propped open by a two-foot deep snowdrift. The entire of the front lawn was pristine, the ice covering the snow, creating a slick, glistening surface. Where exactly the front walk was under it all was a mystery.

“Bill?”

Each step across the front lawn was an exercise in how high John could lift his knees. He didn’t walk up the front steps so much as he climbed up the drift. Once he got inside the front entry he kicked as much snow out of the way as he could and closed the door. Some of the snow was still inside, but he doubted Bill would mind.

“Bill? You there?”

John started with the ground floor: living room, dining room, kitchen, half-bath, two offices, den, garage. Empty. No Bill, no furniture. A door that probably led to the basement, a stairway up to the second floor, a doorwall with snow drifted halfway up the
closed half, a screen door that looked like a sieve with snow piled through it, and no footprints anywhere near it. John went up.

Bill was beneath his simple blue bedsheet in the smallest of the upstairs bedrooms, curled up fetal against the wall opposite the open window, teeth chattering, skin blue, wide awake. “John,” he said. “I—”

“It’s okay, Bill. We’ll get you warmed up in no time.” John was already taking off his coat.

“I heard it, John.”
John stopped where he was, arm nearly out of one sleeve, and made eye contact.

“I heard the snow falling. I heard it.”

William Randolph—“Bill” to his friends—was admitted to County Hospital an hour later. After the 9-1-1 call went through, a plow party was organized, and within minutes a path had been cleared from the front of the gated community to the Randolph house, giving the ambulance a way to get through. John watched from the hallway as the EMTs cocooned Bill in flannel blankets, and then piled the bundle of Bill onto a stretcher, into the ambulance, and away. John watched it go to make sure, stood at the curb in the same spot Bill had watched the moving truck go, and when the ambulance turned left onto the main road and disappeared John started the long walk home. He would get Ellen to pull some strings, have Bill put under psychiatric observation, preferably hers.

John worked well into the evening the next day. There was some minor damage control to be done, members of the press asking for clarification on the Bill Randolph situation, what was he in the hospital for, was there a situation at all, did he have a statement and such. John hung up the phone on the last one well after dark. By the end he was performing by rote, the answers coming before the questions were finished.

He pulled up in front of the Randolph house on his way home. It was dark except for a light from an upstairs room. Must have left a light on, he thought. He shut the engine off and walked toward the house. He would turn the light off. That’s all. Make sure the house hadn’t been tampered with. Then go home. Right? Right. Everything would be just fine, and John could go home and sleep. Nothing to worry about. Nothing to see here.

He stopped at the front door and looked back toward his car. He just stood there, listening for any activity from within, signs of life that shouldn’t be present. There was a light breeze that night blowing through the trees, making the small sound like air coming through a hole in a bicycle tire. Somewhere, maybe half a mile away, he could hear a salt truck rumbling down the main road. The sound of it vibrated through the trees and reached him there on the front porch. He cleared a spot in the snow, sat down on the front steps, leaned his head against the wall, and listened. Through the siding he could hear the inner rumblings of Bill’s house, all speaking in one voice as hollow and rumbling as an earthmover. And when morning came, and someone jostled him awake, and a woman’s voice said his name, “John? John? What are you doing here?” it didn’t matter to him who the voice belonged to. All he knew was that it was too loud.
He who bends to himself a joy
Does the winged life destroy;
But he who kisses the joy as it flies
Lives in eternity’s sunrise.

— William Blake
The Boy with Fire in His Mouth
William Kelley Woolfitt

My father called to say that my mother had died in her sleep, unexpectedly but peaceably, had been cremated, according to her wishes, and that now he could eat, drink, and make merry. My father was a manufacturer of security gates that trucks of bandits could not ram through.

He said my mother had died holding one hand over her eye, the other arm held out, three fingers extended. *Tell me if you see the letter E*. An optometrist’s gestures. She had crusaded against river blindness, the plague of groundnut and plantain farmers who lived near rivers, where bred the tiny black flies that deposit larvae in human tissue, causing lizard skin, leopard skin, and at last, irreversible scarring of the cornea.

He said he hadn’t been allowed to buy an imported cigar or a fancy steak in many years.

I hung up the phone. I wished that I could have seen my mother again, given her a final chance to tell me if there was anything that I could do to make her happy, that was within my powers. Though she didn’t believe that she should be made happy, or that I had any useful skills. It could have also been a chance for her to rant once more that I was a selfish middle-aged nobody, no wife, no child, no spine, no guts. My job was take-it-or-leave-it, my company nondescript, my church cozy and predictable, my apartment a rental.

I thought that I could at least comfort my father.

I flew to the country of my childhood with a suitcase of eyeglasses.

My father kissed my cheek at the airport. He almost killed us a dozen times as he drove, overtaking trucks on blind curves, veering around bicyclists, pedestrians, and stray cattle. He ate a different meat at a different restaurant every night for a week. He drank so much waragi and banana wine he could barely walk. A woman with aquamarine fingernails slapped him for whispering in her ear. Perch, goat, crocodile, gizzard, liver. “Maybe you should take it easy,” I said. On the seventh night, he collapsed while dancing at a disco on the roof of a hotel, wracked with spasms, eyes rolled back, coughing up blood. There was nothing peaceable about his death from food poisoning.

I had him cremated. I opened the can of my mother’s ashes, poured his ashes on top, and mixed them together. I turned to comforting myself. My father would have recommended excess; my mother would have prescribed stripping away. Their house was full of light, and air, and not much else.

In the market, I walked among piles of bananas and shoes and sweet potatoes. Children asked me to buy sodas, batiks, skewers of meat, live grasshoppers to snack on.

A small crowd gathered around a performer. He was a beautiful boy, tall, thin, with arms that moved like birds, perfect teeth, scabby hands and blistered lips, long
eyelashes. He put a torch into his mouth, pulled it out, and the fire was gone. A meat vendor brought him a coal from her brazier, and he pretended to swallow it. He rubbed his throat, patted his stomach.

When he spat out the coal, his tongue looked black and swollen.

After his performance, the boy went to a booth of jerrycans. I followed him. He traded places with the man working there. I continued to watch, but there was nothing fanciful about him when he was selling. He did not toss a jerrycan to make it spin through the air before it landed in the hands of a customer, or juggle the change, or sing the virtues of his wares.

* I left the market at dusk. A procession of children passed by. They walked in formation, three across, girls in pastel orange dresses, boys in pink button-down shirts and khaki shorts. Too many children to count, and one more on the hip of the woman at the back, a scrawny little boy with stick-legs and stick-arms that swung as the woman walked. She gave me a paper slip with an address printed on it, said that the children made greeting cards and bookmarks from recycled paper and magazines, I should stop by. I decided I would attempt to communicate. I said, what a big family you have. Or at least I tried to; I was still rusty with her language. She said that her children were orphans and reformed street beggars, they slept in the basement of a church now, her organization could do more good if it sold more cards. Her name was Ruth. I asked her if she wanted me to carry the boy on her hip. She said that he would attack a stranger, and I said, with what, and she said, with his mouth, he was a biter.

I mailed postcards. I read any novels that I could get my hands on. I bought strange vegetables, choosing them for bright colors or unique textures, chopped and threw them into a skillet of peanut oil, and dined on stir-fry.

My father would have bought ice cream for Ruth’s children, and yoyos, jacks, and rubber balls. And cap guns, tin badges, feather bonnets, bows, and arrows, because he thought all children liked to play cowboys and Indians.

My mother would have organized donations, provided them with vaccines, vitamins, mosquito netting, ink pens, and writing tablets.

* I went by minibus to the Kasubi Tombs, nodded to the guards who stood at the gate, took off my shoes, and entered the round wattle-house roofed by a great dome of thatch. The ground beneath my feet was covered with palm leaves. The granddaughters of the royal kabakas were old women now, and they were sitting on mats and animal skins, weaving baskets from grasses. They were lingering near their familial dead, buried just beyond the red barkcloth curtains. I eavesdropped on a whispering tour guide, who said that the bodies of the kabakas had been dehydrated on drying racks, and that the curtains concealed not just another part of the house, but a great forest, the home of the spirits.
My mother had said that if a thief broke into her house, she would give him her rings and fix him a meal. She shaved her head, wore sack dresses and canvas sneakers, cooked carcass soup and matoke that was bland as paste.

She said that you could never be robbed if you knew how to let everything go.

I walked into the yard of my parents’ house. I counted the banana and date palm and umbrella trees. The high cement wall around their property was topped with busted bottles, jagged-side-up, and a coil of barbed wire. I thought that if I looked carefully enough, if I listened long enough, then surely I would be spoken to. The clouds were so pale I almost could not see them. The sky was blue as a whisper.

I went to the market to look for the fire-eater. I had been thinking about the sores on his lips. I did not know the words for “petroleum jelly,” but I could hold up the tube I had bought, and the bottled water, and I could say, can I give these to you.

I wanted to take his picture, to drop coins in his cup.
i came to seduce the artist. under the pretense of buying his art. around the corner at Citarella, i handpicked more than a dozen strawberries. sixty-five a piece, they were strawberries on steroids richly covered in dark, milk, white chocolate, glazed with a gold thread, on a bed of gauze tissues they looked like Faberge eggs. i handed him the gift box in the doorway, for the great maestro, his atelier - a closet without windows, beds or chairs, stale smell of farts, cigarettes and paints, miniature refrigerator in the center doubling as coffee table. among unfinished watercolors, framed prints, rolled canvases like carpets, i heard him remark he hated strawberries, hated chocolate even more, that this was the most unfortunate combination. yet he gobbled them one after another, juice spurting down his chin, chunks of chocolate like pieces breaking off an iceberg, falling to the floor, he picked them up, put them back in his mouth, complaining how costly Citarella was, how he only went there as if for a gastronomical fashion show. i bought two prints i did not need, tramped home through Bryant Park tugging at my disappointment like a new garter belt
they sat at the dinner table with flaming eyes and the courage of a thousand soldiers cleaning their bayonets, and going off to war. my cousin leaving behind a wife six months pregnant and a two-year old son, catching three connecting flights to Johannesburg and one locomotive with sheep and industrial plastic. my brother, a Wall Street workaholic faking a hip injury to work from home, storming the basement, locking himself inside what he will later call "the sports center" barring women, children and babysitters. my father abandoning the library, the synagogue, the swimming pool in favor of the couch and a flat screen TV. World Cup 2010. thirty-two teams, sixty-four games, three games per day, ninety-eight hours, five thousand eight hundred fifty minutes, two-hour break to go to the bathroom and get food. i took pity on the three men in the kitchen and offered them my brilliant out-of-the-box idea, instead of suffering through all these games why not watch just one - the finals... i left quietly, a misunderstood Joan of Arc, but on my way out, hovering in the living room i saw my mother and sisters-in-law give me a very secret enthusiastic thumbs-up.
COYOTE
Lyn Lifshin

I think of her up
all night in the studio,
think of the one she
held now brushing out
a brood mare's tail.
If you don't feel her
aloneness, don't feel
how close to the
bone and skin and eyes
you can get and still
feel so alone,
you don't feel.
Some nights scorch
memory like her
farmhouse burning
down. I'm in my old
house where a dead
love's hand print
on the gray wall under
layers of paint
still sucks on me.
No matter those ghosts
had a woman at
home, another down
the highway. Too
many go for these men
no one can tame
with their pills and
powder, holding on to
your scent while
beckoning another
SOMEBODY IN THE MIDWEST
Lyn Lifshin

a man can almost hear
the wind cracking.
Frozen cornstalks.
When he lets the cat
in, cold glows around
the silver fur like
those rings around the
moon that mean some
ting's happening.
He hums a blues tune
in a cold room full
of paper. This could
be Madison or maybe
Red Granite. He could
remember a woman
he held on night with
hair longer and blacker
than it was. If he decides
she's just a traveling
lady, he puts down the
cold as hers
where she hears
the frost etching
the moon out too
phone, listens to
branches, doesn't write
what he feels in a
room as
MURDERED INFANTS USED TO TRANSPORT HEROIN ACROSS THE BORDER FROM THAILAND TO MALAYSIA

Lyn Lifshin

A wind blowing thru
dark elephant grass,
blood sun over the
rice fields. A man

holds an infant underwater,
black hair snakes, the
child gurgles, then
doesn't. a plastic rattle

bobs on the water like a
head. Before the water goes
from blood to wet bark,
the child is slit,

emptied out like a trout
or a hen stuffed taut
and plum with small
bags of heroin

and before the moon is
a pale grape in the
musky night a woman paid
as well as the dead

child's mother, will wrap
the corpse in a shawl,
hug it close seeming to
smooth the damp

hair into place as if
snuggling a sleeping
baby, getting the
goods over the border
THAT FIRST DATE WITH THE DEAF MAN
Lyn Lifshin

you don't enunciate
he said, I can't read
your lips. He said his
father used to take them
out on Sunday, tell them
to make each syllable so
clear nothing ran to
gether. But your words
are like leaves in a
storm soaked together
so you can't pick one
up without the other,
or blown so fast birds
couldn't catch up. We
are eating hamburgers
in booths a little too
bright. My mouth fills
with feathers, the birds
in me wanting to fly,
wanting to weave
pieces of colorful
threats and branches
into a nest warm as
thighs tangling around
mine where no lips
need to be looked
at to be read
THE OLD HUNCHBACK IN THE CHICKEN HOUSE
Lyn Lifshin

out here I got lots,
the things I brought back each
trip to the dump: broken
bicycles, pieces of a radio.
You see this Ronson I

just brought back and put
a bolt on the bottom? Good
as new and this Frigidaire
almost makes ice cubes.
See this pack of liver-
wurst? I didn't eat

much before I had that field
of apples. Oh I do feel glad
you came, let me show you
how I sealed the wind out
and the dolls I found in
the ashes. The last Supper
over his bed, scissors,
Coco Cola girl cut out
and tacked to the door

I never married.
This time of year the
apples start. I pulled the
sumac and nettles from
that whole hill, every

ting I need is in this room.
You got to look where you
wouldn't expect, it's
easy for me, bent over as
I am. I don't miss much
THE EAST IS UNDER A DARK CLOUD
Lyn Lifshin

the mad girl is pacing
in her room. Her head
is full of the darkest
weather. There's

a hurricane under
her skin, that old
going in different
directions blues.

She can't read her
own lines on the page.
The wind is increasing.
It's freakishly cold

for this time of year.
Someone in Ohio
is uncertain. The
New York lover

knows something is
threatening, feels
the shutters rattling
down his back bone
FOR A MAN WHO LEAVES IN THE FALL, WANTS YOUR FIRE BY DECEMBER

Lyn Lifshin

leaves with the wife of a man who came
Sunday to rent the room, says he was
driving north, needed a drink in another city,
won't come home until he's bored or alone.
Sick of bars in Saratoga, he says the women are
dumb chicks, hates sex.
A man like this wants to keep you crying. He will pay the rent as long as your eyes are swollen shut. He never wanted you to see much. When you start walking he'll pour ice on the stairs, drop in at 3 am, keep you up with his talk of dying. He doesn't want anyone else to warm your bones tho he'll never do it, never could and he knows. He hates your singing, your poems, will tolerate you sick, phone you drunk and say he wants to. Listen, put a cactus in your honey place, another in your heart, hang up the phone. He will go again, turn you into a desert nothing can live in but touch things that are hard to touch
THE KNIFE THROWER'S WOMAN
Lyn Lifshin

I think of other things.
Once, I itched so in the
middle of a throw but
I thought of words from
something in an old hymn.
I know the shape his
fingers take when
the steel slips thru
them, think of them
outside my clothes and
then unbuttoning and
stroking and sliding. We
never talk about be-
ing afraid. His
sweat isn't from any
heat. I step away
from the knife handles
like a snake shedding
its skin. It's not
me he sees. I am
the space, his snow
angel, shadow in the snow
where something has been
Lizzie
Donna Walker-Nixon

Of the rows on rows of books, Lizzie wants the one on the fifth shelf up from the bottom, and she can’t quite reach that high. Mama says that she’ll get whatever book Lizzie wants, but Lizzie wants to get the book herself, so she pushes the ottoman up to the shelf and reaches high above her head. It takes several tries, but Lizzie gets her book every time. Mama comes into the room and says, “Why, Lizzie, you did this all by yourself.”

Lizzie can’t tell whether Mama’s surprised and happy or upset that Lizzie pulled a few books out from where they belong. Sometimes, you just can’t understand Mama. It’s called being an adult—growing up and understanding huge, large secrets that children can’t possibly comprehend. Lizzie sometimes wants to grow up and have a husband who’s a doctor and it won’t cost her a whole lot of money like it does Mama every time Lizzie and her little sister Lana get sick. Everything costs money, and Lizzie wants to have lots and lots of that because Mama says that’s what makes the world go round.

Sometimes, Mama acts like she wishes she’d never gotten married and had children. Other times, like today, Mama hugs Lizzie and says, “I remember when I was in college.” She points at a picture and says, “That’s Shep. See he signed his name.” Lizzie can sometimes read print writing, but not the cursive writing of Shep when he signed his name. “Mama, who’s Shep?”

“The most popular boy in school. He came back to school after serving in the Korean war. All the girls wanted to date him.”

“Mama, was he your boyfriend?”

“Oh, no, but all the girls loved him.”

“Did you?” Lizzie waits for Mama to tell how she and Daddy dated when she was in college, how he drove two hours through the rain and a bridge that had been washed out to pick her up one night and take her back to Fort Worth, but Mama doesn’t tell that tale. Lizzie thinks it’s because Mama doesn’t love Daddy, not in the way they show in Love Me Tender with Elvis Presley, who Lizzie thinks Daddy looks like. Mama looks like a movie actress, but Lizzie’s not sure which one. But there are other kinds of love, and even as a child, Lizzie almost knows that.

Mama named Lizzie after Elizabeth Taylor and her little sister after Lana Turner. Mama nods her head while Lizzie traces pictures with her left index finger of Shep, the boy voted Most Handsome, and of the girl across the page with the long dress and gray fake pearls beaded across the bodice. Mama says the pearls were soft blue, but Lizzie can’t tell that in the black and white photograph. The Most Beautiful Girl’s dark hair swoops down her neck. She doesn’t have bangs, not like the high school girls Lizzie sees everyday as they walk past her house on the dead end road next to Meacham Field. “Mama, where are you?” Lizzie asks and places her fingers on the girl’s sweeping curls that look sophisticated and yet innocent. Lizzie senses the ambiguity that precedes full adulthood in the girl that looks so old and so much like what Lizzie wants
to become.

The girl poses at the foot of a large staircase that Mama says is not real, but it looks real to Lizzie. “Where are you?” Lizzie asks again. Mama thumbs through the pages of the yearbook and stops at a page full of small headshots of rows of boys and girls. Mama points at a picture of a girl in the top front row. The picture looks like Mama with coal black hair that flows to her shoulders. “Your grandma wouldn’t let me get a perm until after my freshman year in college,” Mama says. “She said girls wanted to grow up too fast, and she didn’t like the fact that we had a ten o’clock curfew, which she thought was too late for decent girls to be out.”

Lizzie doesn’t know what a curfew is, but she doesn’t ask because Mama holds her close like she did before Lana was born. “I was an only child,” Mama explains. Lizzie liked it when she was an only child, before she had to share Mama with Lana. Now there’s another baby on the way, and Mama says she wishes Daddy would quit trying for his boy since she loves her girls. Lizzie wants to name the new baby Lucy, but Mama’s decided that she’ll have a girl and name her after Grace Kelley. Just in case, she’s talked Daddy into naming a boy Jimmy Stewart, or maybe Stewart Grainger. Mama hugs Lizzie while Lana finishes her nap in the other room.

Mama points to a picture of a girl with black cat-rimmed glasses and curly light hair. “That’s my friend best Gerrie.”

“She’s coming to see us,” Lizzie repeats what Mama’s said for the past three weeks. Mama’s excited about the visit since Gerrie moved to Huntsville, Texas, right after she married her college sweetheart who became a prison guard for the State of Texas. Mama served as a bridesmaid, but never liked Gerrie’s college sweetheart because he’d boss Gerrie around and tell her what to wear. He didn’t like her sweet pink plum lipstick. He told everyone that her naturally curly blonde hair looked like overcooked scrambled eggs fried in a cast iron skillet. “Now what kind of man would say things that mean!! Certainly, not your daddy.” With those words Lizzie thinks her mama and daddy might have an almost *Love Me Tender* kind of love.

“Yeah, Daddy wouldn’t do mean things like that,” Lizzie says. In this time before Lana wakes up and spoils everything, Lizzie wants Mama to pull her close to her body so Lizzie can bring into her own being the clean smell of the white scooped-out boat-shaped bar of Dove bath soap that means Mama and no one else in the house even though Daddy, Lizzie, and Lana all use the same soap when they take a bath each morning.

Instead, Mama shuts her eyes and shakes her head. “Lizzie, don’t talk about adults. It’s not nice.” Lizzie doesn’t understand the difference between Mama saying words and her saying the same thing and getting in trouble.

When Lizzie cheeks puff out, Mama says, “Here let me show you pictures of Gerrie’s wedding. It was her dream-come-true.” Mama pats her belly and says she feels the new baby kicking, and when Mama said she was having a new baby, Lizzie asked how she knew. Mama said, “Jesus tells you.” Jesus has never spoken to Lizzie, and she thought it must be another one of those things that adults know, like when to talk about people and when not to.
Mama takes Lizzie into the bedroom and opens up her hope chest that will become Lana’s when she grows up. Lizzie will get her grandmother’s hope chest. Mama’s never shown Lizzie pictures of her own wedding, but every so often she’ll open up her hope chest, take out a large yellow envelope, and tell Lizzie and Lana about Gerrie’s wedding. Right away, the first time Lizzie recognized Mama with her pouty red lips, ruby red cheeks, dark brown eyes, and black curly hair. Lizzie remembers every detail that Mama told her the last time they looked at the pictures: with her arms bare and the ballerina length dress, Mama looks exactly like the actress Lizzie was named for. Mama and the other girl who stand next to Gerrie in another picture had ice blue shoes dyed to match their dresses. Just like she’s seeing the picture for the first time, Lizzie echoes, “Mama, you’re beautiful.”

Like the times when they looked at these pictures before, Mama stares at the picture of the bride and groom in front of the cake. “Gerrie wanted something different. We were home ec majors, and she read about wedding cakes in England.” They scattered on the top of the cake something called marzipan fruits, and Lizzie has heard Mama talk about England because of Gerrie, but doesn’t know what it is. The word marzipan sounds funny. Lizzie tries to say it after Mama but gets tripped up, and Mama hugs Lizzie and corrects her. The fruits looked like cherries, peaches, and oranges, Mama says. They sat on top of the fruitcake with its royal icing and silver trinkets—horseshoes, leaves, and little flowers and hearts.

“You’ll get to meet Gerrie, tomorrow,” Mama echoes a fact that Lizzie has heard for weeks.

Lizzie thinks that Gerrie’s coming to visit her, to become her best friend like Karen down the road. They’ll trek out to the house trailer that Uncle Phil stays in when he works at the Gulf station on North Main, and they’ll play dolls. Lizzie’s doll has black hair like her own and pees real water, not that Mama ever uses that word, but it’s one Lizzie’s heard before. She just can’t remember where, but Gerrie will get to take Lana’s doll with the blonde hair because Lana’s a baby and will have to take a nap, but Mama will say that Lizzie’s big enough that she can stay up. Maybe, though, Mama and Gerrie will look at pictures of the wedding with the cherries and fruits on the top. Lizzie doesn’t know exactly what will happen when Gerrie visits, but she makes plans.

***

Gerrie smokes cigarettes. She inhales quickly, holds her breath for what seems like a real long time, then lets out all the stored up smoke that whirls around her head. She smells bad, but Lizzie wants smoke to circle round and round in front of her own head. Lizzie breathes in, then out, and pretends to hold a chalky, sweet Lucky Strike candy cigarette like Mama buys her sometimes.

“Lizzie, stop that!!” Mama says.

Lizzie’s cheeks turn red like Mama’s painted on cheeks in the wedding picture, and Lizzie hides her face. “Stop being a baby!!” Mama says. Lizzie bites the sides of her cheeks, and Lana ducks under Mama’s arm while her baby fine jet black curls catch the light.
“Why, Elaine, she looks just like a movie star,” Gerrie says.
“I’ve always called her my little actress,” Mama answers. “But people say both my girls are beautiful. Lizzie’s a little I Love Lucy girl.”
Which makes Lizzie feel left out and alone, she can’t explain it so much in words, but there’s something that says Mama doesn’t like Lizzie as much as she does Lana, and Lizzie doesn’t know why.
“Since both girls names start with l, will you name this new baby Lucy?” Gerrie sucks again on her cigarette.
“No, I was thinking maybe of Grace.”
“Like the princess?” Gerrie asks. “You always were a dreamer.”
“And you’re not?” Mama answers.
Lizzie can’t explain it, but Mama’s eyes change. Something Lizzie feels about the way Mama talks, the way she hangs on words and turns back to the time she wore a pale blue dress and danced until midnight with a boy in college who Lizzie never knew but only heard about in short elliptical phrases when Mama held her yearbook and touched photographs. Now, Mama’s in the past, living there, trying to grasp that moment. And Lizzie wonders if she’ll return or stay there with Gerrie, and Lizzie wants her mama back, but she knows when she grows up, she’ll also hang on to her own moments. She’ll turn into her mama, and that’s the way life should be: or so Lizzie thinks.
“We lived to dream,” Gerrie says.
“And dreamed to live,” Mama echoes words that don’t make sense, but they sound pretty and soft. Lizzie loves this mama and wishes she’d never leave. Never have to wash dishes, never have to clean house, and never fuss about how long housework takes and how the job of a wife never gets done.
Gerrie doesn’t talk about her old husband, or the wedding cake covered in royal icing and marzipan figures of apples and cherries and oranges with silver trinkets on the side. Nothing about the time when cameras flashed and the pictures in the yellow envelope were taken.
They don’t talk about the years after the pictures, but Gerrie says, “My life’s gotten better. Lots better.” Butch, her little boy, will have a real daddy he can look up to because boys need good daddies. They’ll move to California and live in a city bigger than Fort Worth and Dallas combined. “You can come see us and bring the girls. We’ll go to Disneyland.”
Even at age five, Lizzie doesn’t like Mickey Mouse. She sometimes dreams he lives in the attic and that he’ll come down into the real house and kill her, her daddy, Mama, and Lana. Besides, little kids who don’t know better like Mickey. “And we’ll go to Knotts Berry Farm and take pictures of us riding in a wagon.” Lizzie likes that idea since it’s kind of like moving west in a wagon train like in the long TV show that Daddy likes. Mama curls up next to him after she’s washed her hair.
When Gerrie leaves, she says, “Come see me now. We can get back the years we’ve missed.”
“Yes,” Mama says. They hug, and Gerrie leaves. Lizzie smells the cigarettes for days afterwards, but Mama doesn’t seem to notice.
Lizzie and Lana sit with their legs splayed backward in front of the couch, taking turns trying to play jacks on the warped wooden floor. Mama’s too big now to sit on the floor and play with them, but after the baby’s born, she’ll teach them twosies and threesies. She’s just finished watching her soap opera “Secret Storm,” and the phone rings. Mama gets ready to tell Grandma all the bad things Julian did that day on the show. But it’s not Grandma on the phone.

Mama’s voice changes: “Oh, I see.” She repeats details: a hairpin curve. They found the bodies. Gerrie, her little boy Butch, and her new husband. No one knows exactly what happened. “Oh, I see.” Mama repeats the words she said at first with deep pauses, and then she cries after she hangs up the phone, after Lizzie and Lana have put away the jacks and the red rubber ball in their crisp vinyl bag.

Like the preacher in church, reassuring old people who have seen their lives march before them in endless repetition, Mama recites from memory: “Death where is thy victory? Death where is thy sting?” Mama wipes her eyes with a soggy Kleenex, and quotes words she learned in Sunday school: for everything there is a season, a time to live and a time to die. When Gerrie came to visit, Mama’s words did not make sense. Lizzie inhales the hollowness of the sentiments that people express and want to believe, but then just can’t. Lizzie understands with her inner mind, and that is all.
Doll
Chris Ridge

We wanted to dance and would settle for somewhere else.
    I looked dead, for a good boy,
    and you worked me over
Don't move. Don't move. Don't move.
dyeing in suppressed words and small adjustments,
    until I looked good, for a dead boy.
You sat and swung your boots above the floor,
    while I dealt with your hair,
even, steady, hey you can trust me.
    You yelped, I kissed you sorry,
asked you if it was good enough.
Out into a warm February, out into sleek dark,
    out and around and down a flight of stairs
to a pulsing vein of our thawing city,
where mama meat and sister shred took our money and told us not to drink too much
    if we planned on going on the rack.
And then it was all moves,
in every instant of darkness a tiny change,
    in every flash a new pose.
    (off) I (off) you (off)
Later, trying the weights of whips,
I broke my own pose, touched your bare back for just a second,
    where you stretched cruciform before me, wrists locked tight,
eyes tied shut, deep inside where the new warmth had not yet reached,
    hey, it's okay. Trust me.
Displaced    Alexandra Simpson

Most nights, confusion: the front yard instead of the back—crabapple trees, cicadas’ screech, and birds raining louder than traffic. Small bodies hit your window in moonlight, their wings splayed, darkened, mocking attitudes of flight. Glass as weaponry—red, red, every red spot glows, a tart fruit in night bloom. You need the oxygen tank to breathe and you can’t climb the stairs. We have moved your mattress down to the guest bedroom where there is one long window to scrape out the darkness, a deep privacy to share with the outdoors.

When I check on you, your hours belong to someone else. You are sleep’s enemy, hands flatten pillows, legs search sheets and you gaze out at branches, and tell me: Shhh, birds, listen, their song begins out of nowhere. I am almost with them.
Toy Room Lullaby
   Alexandra Simpson

   for my daughter to be

He will take from land, frozen beach; only one direction can be reclaimed. Hooves will kick up sand in white lines and his legs will skelter to vinyl play, filaments of jazz, blurring with the slap of your girlish braids. Your escapade of land-lost will open to the yielding of breaths turned white, pelvic-cleave.

And lacquered in drizzle, you will choreograph—thighs pressed on rough saddle blankets, hitch of straps on flesh. You will grip, rely on his lambent eyes, relic of hooves’ clatter, bone-chimes, and reminded of my funeral ringing against the earth. You will go back, southbound, interloping to fruit country, topiary gardens, an ancient sight where you will hone, you will move against massive stars until their dense firebodies blink, until pausing to rest your racing hearts, reclaim, reclaim, rock yourself, wooden with sleep.
In Private Places
Alexandra Simpson

She is here, I said.
I said, she is here.

Mama’s come home.
Want to see?

She is below the sharp pieces,
red-chilled shapes, thin mirror

in my chest. It’s she. Didn’t she say
she’d always love me in my heart?

She’d always live inside me?
Well, I want her out.
Moonlight Sonata No. 14: On Repeat
Alexandra Simpson

Chord One
Her hug smells of salt; catheter rests in her side.

Chord Two
She closes the silverware drawer with her right hip: a knife, a spoon, cotton swabs for two.

Chord Three
Small sips of tea. One hand guides her lip, smears threads of spit across the glass.

Chord Six
I wonder what she tucks in those deep front pockets of her robe. Her pills already hidden in her throat.

Chord Seven
Her low, contralto voice dips into her mug; its small walls echo two, four, six, eight.

Chord Eight
She places the needle back to what she wants to hear—listen, she says. She sets her plate on the table.

Chord Ten
In my milk there is a drop of red.

Chord One
A low white count. An easy bruise. Any old tap hurts, although she can’t feel—

Chord Three
It’s that easy.

Chord Four
She explains what she saw in the late dark—four bats fly in circles. The fifth at her side patterns out driblets, iodine.
Chord seven
She leaks at her side, excreting
blackberries. Bat spit.

Chord Two
It makes me sick.

Chord Five
A dizzy height, breakfast.
We ride on air. She pulls
my arms to her hips.
Fermata hum, collapse of song,
a prurient lull.

Chord One
What dwells, hides
in tubes behind cotton.

Chord Two
The breast of half a grapefruit
stares back, happy eye.

Chord Three
She smiles. Her fingers curl over a fork
to orchestrate with her words:
This is a gift and we need to start thinking about Jesus.
REGARDING A DEAF CHILD  

Lolette Kuby

Your face
lies open
like a field

of flowers
like a sunflower
indescribably

patient

like a sea
anemone
floating

in a deep tide
where only eyes
answer

Can you hear sunlight
pour
and the moon
slide

the way
you hear the pulse
in your throat?

the way
as in Vermeer
sunlight and piano

are silent

are music?

I envy
at times
a world

where no bullet cracks
and towers crash silently
as civilizations
Your world
   I think
       is more mysterious
for me
   than mine
   for you--

A symphony
   miles long
   and every permutation
   listened to with hands.

Your words
   point
   to heaven

link
   word and flesh
       as nowhere
       but in heaven

You drop your words
   into the grail
       of your palm

ten Delphic birds
gather round them

Your words skirr
   above your head
       saying sky!

What is your silence?

For me
   silence is sound
       that comes
       between sounds

The silence
   moves upon the waters
       and it is good.

Hear it?
PAS DE DEUX       Lolette Kuby

I am your Word
I made you, dancer
I made you of breath
of shadows and sunbeams
of boundlessness

of folding out and in like wings
of risings and risings from the gravity of things

I am your Word,
without limb or leaving

I am the circles and spirals your body carves from air

your twirls and leaps toward heaven
when you most love the earth

I was before you and will be after you
I am the center and the circumference

I am within and within and within and within and within

I am your Dancer
I am the leap and the twirl
I am the point on the line
I am brief and desirable
I eat oranges and watch the Northward flight of geese
My being roars like oceans
I rock myself in the cradle of myself
I rock the world like my baby
I kiss the air like my lover
here and here and here
I embrace the world
I am your Dancer
I am your eyes
your mouth
your star
your tree
and something else
I am sand, river, feather, grass, moth
and I am something else
and I am something else
and I am something else

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PART ONE: LUCID DREAMS

I

The Association for the Study of Lucid Dreams summoned me to the Hotel Paradiso to participate in a study in which I was to sleep and be awakened while I was dreaming and was to maintain my dream and then to convert it into whatever dream I wished it to become.

Lucid dreams are more vivid than common dreams. Inscape is energized, so that the world of the dream is like that of Hopkins or Van Gogh, pulsating, dynamic, vital. Such imagery is said to be the manifestation of cosmic holograms, and if I can convert them, I can convert my life, like a wizard, turn it into what I want it to be, or wished it were or had become, bring time back with what and whom I loved, set a new course for myself, and embark.

II

I saw white gulls arise, upon arrival, from the emerald maze in the huge garden surrounding the Hotel Paradiso. White gulls. Don’t they always arrive with a ship, following for her flotsam and jetsam? And that night I dreamed I saw an instant, which was a dewdrop in my dream, yes, a dewdrop and a stellar instant, like that of the wild gulls, pulling the air with their wide wings, an image, a vision of heavenly flight—an ascent, a transcendence—
a nano-second and a shimmering drop,
or, shifting, a shimmering shield,
hovering in space, and what looked like
a moonbeam crossed the dark,
the silver dark of a swirling dust mote,
a hazed, illumined, impossible dark,
fingered, like a laser, touched the instant,
the drop, the Lilliputian planet,
with the most tender touch imaginable,
angling this way and that, so that
with each angle an entire eternal history was displayed,
with all of the mass and multiplicity of life.

It seemed in my dream that there was no death,
but a cottage-coziness everywhere, and of us
and of the mountains and the waters, seemed
that all these are projections of personality,
(what I see I see because I am I)
spiritual manifestations, tilts at the dewdrop,
incarnations and aspects of the All-in-all,
the anomalon itself, yes, and even that sheen,
that spark, on the oriflamme of time; seemed
that we are the one hologram of life,
and that the family portrait
is the portrait of all who ever lived,
with mountains and waters and creatures
wild and domesticated; seemed that
the holographic plate is angled
for this simulacrum, this three-dimensional portrait
of a universe-apparent, which portrait
is not a memento mori but a glory
in a turning in time, a journey around a star.

My dream suggested that behind my waking back
a deeper reality existed;
not the reality I saw before me,
amazing pattern that it is,
a life-long complicated quilt,
tangible, deep in its seams,
full in its bosomy pads; but another,
finer, more heavenly, fabric, a cloth-of-gold,
glorious, gorgeous, radiant beyond imagination
with a light unknown here, waves
in an intensity beyond experience,
yet that do no damage to the eye,
light that seems to love the eye—
and that is the Word, I thought,
with new insight: Love—which is
expressed in its star-stuff, its human
potential, but never for good and all,
for there is more, we feel certain, we who
are the stars singing, the vibratory expression
of matter, tuning fork to tuning fork,
the template of interference-patterns making
concentric intersecting rings until
with perfect pitch achieved
the magical-appearing universe
leaps into view—until the great music
is made tangible and a table and chairs
and a world and a universe, full of stars
to look at, from a cottage
in an enchanted wood,
where I sit, appear.

When, like a man with warlock vision,
I watch the wilted wonders of my past
parade in phalanx, I dream
that I can change my present state
by intervening there,
where those wonders are and now parade,
multiplicities of self, time-separated,
rude and naked strutting fools,
but now, with a maturing vision,
refreshed with vivid hope,
their formation ordered,
their banners held high,
becoming what they might have been,
myself in time where time must be to make a memory,
and invested with new direction,
can have them at command fall out
or turn about or right or left,
know they are free in paradox,
not locked forever there, in constant error—
yet go on, the same, as if my will
required my life—perhaps
some missing faith, perhaps some expiation.
Again perhaps the wonders are mirage
and I was born this very instant, 
tilted to a history and told a fate.

These reality fields are open for inspection, 
like model homes, and, in an augenblick, 
we are visiting an infinity of them. 
They are where you are, 
you need not go to see them: 
no agent is necessary. Intersecting 
concentric rings are vibrating 
everything into view. The reality fields 
present glories and horrors to behold: 
they are moral reflections, purifying 
the spirit, cleansing the dewdrop, 
keeping it clear and clean, all 
that I love borne with me 
through time and back out of it, 
the lovelight never out, always tilting, 
becoming a new vision!

III

But a Bodhisattva, 
or even a Beverly Hills guru, 
might say, might well say, did say: 
“Dead flesh is mad with flies. 
The world is mad with lies!”

When you are about three feet tall, 
the gray streets of Philadelphia 
in winter are very long and tiring 
and slowly climb uphill toward a dark sky. 
His mother pulled him along. 
Where were they going? 
Their arms were empty. 
Not shopping? 
Was there no money? 
Why were they walking, walking so far? 
He was beginning to get very cold. 
Then, on the deserted street, 
a stranger appeared before them. 
His mother knew the man, 
yes, and they laughed together, startling laughter, 
too high above him for him to have any idea
what was funny, but something obviously was, for their laughter tinkled down upon him like sprightly snowflakes, like tinsel and sequins, a glittery sprinkling of fairy dust. He tried to get under it, between them, where it fell. His mother pulled him back and away, toward her own back. Then the man seized his mother in his arms and dipped her back toward where he waited, and kissed her hard and long. It was wrong, wasn’t it? Because this man was not his father. His father was up ahead somewhere, somewhere at the end of the long gray avenue, somewhere up several flights of stairs, in a small flat that looked down on the avenue, drinking. It was wrong, wasn’t it? Because his mother did not struggle to be free. Instead, she simply held him behind her, away from them. He thought he might cry. The man seemed to lift his mother off the pavement and to place her back on it, her high heels firm. She pulled him from behind her and around to her side, her other hand held out to the man as he stepped back, back, and turned and went a little way, and stopped, and turned again, and waved, and blew her a kiss, and turned once again, and went on down the long slowly sinking avenue. Who was that? he wanted to know. His mother pulled him forward up the hill. “Who was that man?” he asked. His mother climbed on, pulling him along with one hand and wiping tears from her eyes with the other. “Mommy, who was that man?” His mother ignored him until he shouted his question at her. The question and its answer had become imperative, like the bearing down of traffic at the intersection.
Finally his mother said, “What man?”
He looked back and saw the receding figure
of the man who had kissed his mother,
no more than a dot now, a dot in time.
He tugged his mother half around and pointed—
“That man,” he said.
“I don’t see any man,” his mother said.
“I haven’t seen anyone since we began our walk,
and neither have you.”
He looked back again, desperately,
but the man was gone, only eternity,
only infinity remained to see. “You see,”
said his mother, “there is no one
on the street but us.”
She was lying, wasn’t she,
or could he not believe
the evidence of his own eyes?
From then on he struggled
to keep his hand free of hers.

Memory, or lucid dream?
This hologram-like universe
seems solid, appears to have parts, can be
taken apart—(I, too, am like a child and
love a stack of gears)—so we take it apart,
emotionally, mechanically, mathematically,
take it apart as children will a watch,
begin to conceive of it as a watch, as Voltaire
did (and generously gave it a Watchmaker),
and become convinced that it is a kind of watch.
We lift out structures, sequences, relationships,
and rearrange them, and they become to us
what we have come to believe they are—
ballbearings unto infinity.

Answers generate questions in the mechanical sphere:
the universe expands, more complicates itself.
We are made to ask and so increase
dimension, to multiply dimensions, to make the
picture greater, more inclusive of the non-existent,
to take back the ghosts and reinvest them,
to live again in the mirage, to beat the golden soul
so fine it floats and flutters like a translucent gauze.
The impulsion to think is part of the expansion itself,
and we must think like messenger-angels, in a completeness of service, or we confuse ourselves and take the wrong turn, and miss the point—shall we say the dewdrop—at which courage and intelligence and praise meet, and await us.
Poetry possesses the virtue of being a record, and you can date a poem, if you wish, thus giving it the merit of a worldly fact contained in a system of time, which, admittedly, is a system which is perhaps pseudo-fact itself, or will become so as matter completes its withdrawal upon itself to revisit its origins in a hole in space; and yet, until then, something like a fact, a fact in the sense that Sherlock Holmes is almost real and lives at 221-B Baker Street in a fictional series in a real world that may exist only in a dream that is being dreamed elsewhere, perhaps by God, perhaps by the clever Its of Else in Otherwhere; and so poetry becomes an actual little stab and, poets hope, rip in the black sheet that covers the deserted, haunted mansion.

_in many moods, the poet broods, on dice and swans or old bygones,_
the hurts of a lifetime piling at the poet’s knees, the joys stacking under the poet’s chin, and should the poet be deceived, what of it? The created icons of the poet’s labor remain, untrue perhaps to truth but true enough to themselves, like Doctor Watson waiting for Holmes at 221-B Baker Street, the poems piling like paintings or statuary, marking the poet’s being there, the idiosyncratic spelling the poet’s own, the music the sweet strain of the poet’s soul asking the rhetorical questions of the poet’s life, the unanswerables called eternal questions, the poet insisting upon the attempt, one more human attempt, which the poet was made for, wondering about _new turns of fate in love and hate, or what wild words are sung by birds._
I lie in the darkness and listen into silence sometimes, outside the stream of time where life hums and burns with its moths and flames,
its mechanical tropisms of desire and death;
I listen to the silent voice of the nightingale
with my friend Keats, the dead boy, the poet.

My little rubber doll Mickey melted in the hot trunk the summer
I was five, and I lost my only friend, his brown rubber hair a smear.
    I was very lonely without Mickey so I got a cat named Winkey
    but
    I didn’t know how to spell that so I renamed her Scuttlebutt,
    which I could spell believe it or not because of a character
    in a cartoon in the Sunday funny pages somewhere but I don’t
    know
where we were living then—we were usually on the go.
    I think my father was running from the law or from his first wife
    or both—he drank a lot, maybe he was just running from his life
    —anyway I recall going up and down in the world and to and fro.
Being an only child and being poor with parents who are drunk a
lot
of the time is a good way to develop one’s ability to plot,
    so I began to draw and write a comic strip called Kid Danger,
    about a motorcycle cowboy who was always out to lasso a
    gangster
and who had a magical friend who I believed was a Hottentot,
because I had read something about them in the *Wonder Book of
Knowledge*
(which itself stood me in good stead later when I went to
    college)—
    and he wore the clothing of the black man in the book and a
    turban
    and had more dignity than the other seven or even the U’do
    Urban
and before he had joined Kid Danger he had been king of his
    village.
The plot thickened because the gangster became president of the
US
of A, and Kid Danger and his Hottentot friend, whom he called
    Uziss,
    had to cope with the defending combined forces of the United
    States,
    and in one episode they were forced to storm the White House
    gates,
and I couldn’t get the story straightened out and dropped the whole
mess.
Anyway I was nearly ten by this time and I had to go out and work, and my imagination began to fade away on the streets of Newark and pretty soon I forgot about Mickey and Winkey and Kid Danger and his friend Uziss the Hottentot and what should become of the gangster and after many adventures pleasant and unpleasant I moved to New York. But last night I dreamed of them all again, first one, then the other, and sadness overwhelmed me when I thought of my melted Mickey who was like a brother and my cat Winkey or Scuttlebutt and Uziss the Hottentot and Kid Danger and how I could never show them how finally to catch that gangster, and I sat on linoleum roses again and cried, seeing my poor father and mother.

II

In trying to discover the source of pain, the poet, strange researcher into reality, dipso-dreamer, lover of passion fruit, unhappy hedonist of heterodoxy, explores the familiar territory of the heart—nothing but red caves and periodic floods. He then travels up his plaque-clogged carotid to the brain and comes upon a land of gray clouds capped by a bone-pale dome. Under those electrically-charged gray clouds, he listens as the dome reverberates with the tom-tom beat of “Worship me,” and “Worship me.” I think I am getting close to the source of pain, he tells himself. But it is only a false start, a Lake Tanganyika. This cannot be the source of the Nile of Pain. Here he is attacked by Synapses, who pitch fiery assagais upon him without regard for his gifts; he surrenders and they make him their slave. What to do? He must escape if he is ever to find the source of pain—which is now active in his heart. He gives the gift of full worship to the King of the Synapses, who drinks blood and eats oxygen, and, for the gift of his blood, his oxygen, is set free
to go on looking for the source of pain. He travels over rough, cortical country, dead cells adrift in offshoot rivers and rivulets of his previous life's best cognac, until, at last, he comes to what appears to be a veritable Victoria of a lake, an inland sea, too large to measure with his meager instruments of sound and sense. It is paradisal, even Heavenly, for brightness shows down now from the dome of Sunday. This is indeed the source of Pain, for it is the citadel of sad desire; and it is then and there that he makes his most astounding discovery: to wit, that in leaving this place, pain begins to flow and flows on until it reaches the fell Falls of Destiny, and, undeterred, goes over the falls in a barrel, the inside of which is stained and caked with the lees of the grapes of wrath. He awakens on a Bowery-of-the-mind, in a lake of golden pee, none-the-worse, nor better, for his adventure, but his mouth dry as a marrowless bone.

This makeshift shadowy world is metaphor, which is our chariot of choice, our light-inducting dark-proof vehicle ready to ride the road and river of space and time, to deliver us from evil, which is all that isn’t in the vision of the cloud-bodied hungry soul when it goes through the gate to the mystery of unanswering love, and we see from there how all things flow outward toward wisdom and back upon themselves toward joy and that love is always answering, is the cloud formed into self, which is others and all, at once.
PART THREE: THE SHADE

I

I would rejoin myself, deserted long ago,
that wandering shade somewhere in its separate time.
They say that the spirit hovers above the body while we sleep
and if we awaken suddenly we are dazed until it returns.
I would rejoin my earliest remembrance and start anew.
Travelling warily all roads,
I would be a dangerous companion for the unwary,
a disturbance in the calm weather of thought.
But that shade, transparent as an angel fish,
luminous at night as the moon on a mote of dust,
O, the lost bodiless distant song of that shade!
What wilderness of calm does it wander
bravely seeking the way home to chaos?

II

There was a time when no season prevailed,
when whatever season it presumed itself to be
held no distinction: day and night fell too
into the inconsequential: all units failed,
for they failed in the beholder, the keeper of time:
and all distinctions faded, for the beholder
could not distinguish one thing from another.
The curious will ask how this occurred.
This much we know: that there was love
gone wrong, and there was death, death
of one most beloved—all share the news—
and there was inability produced, nurtured,
by the particular way of the life itself:
but even before these triggers, fast and slow,
were pulled, the life had been filled with walls
within which lurked the known fear
and beyond which lurked the unknown fear.
And the child’s head had been early cloaked
in a liripipe, shut about the eyes
as dark as blindness: and the mind,
in its strange bonehouse, dwelt,
trying to see into and through the dark.
That is the state in which we feel little,
avoid sensations of pain or joy
through the medium of an inner mechanism
not fully understood. In this state
we seem to be neither living nor dead,
but existing without sensation,
seemingly dead, while still experiencing
some state of being approximating to life,
like the dream-state of the butterfly soul
that we experience in sleep, or, say,
the vague state of life of the slug or worm,
and we are sometimes found to be
existing in this manner as the result
of our inability to cope with the life
we have been living. It is as if
the transmigratory process had been
frustrated, leaving the victim in limbo,
neither able to progress nor to regress
to a previous state, like death but not death,
like life but not life as the living know it,
merely a camelopard likeness of it,
cataleptic, painless and joyless. Patience
is called for in such cases. Kindness helps
to undo harm, but the victim
will awaken only when ready.

III

The dying Greek Egyptologist,
my fellow guest and subject of study,
spoke in his hypnotized sleep.
The group, bat-eared, heard
his inner voice, a *cri de coeur,*
from the garden with its green
labyrinth, like a sea-wind.
We were there to understand.
We were there to change our fate.
Where did the parting begin?
Why did the soul of the boy go away?
How has the man made his father and mother?
Why is his flesh like androgynous clothing?
What is the meaning of being oneself?

That voice,
I, too, have heard that voice.
It spoke to me once in lake water among the lilies,
as I drowned. Or was I dreaming?
It is the strangest voice in the world,
the voice of one’s self,
heard only at moments,
only at night,
only in lucid dreams,
only at the moment of the startling laughter.

—The dying Greek says that he cannot tell
the horn from the ivory, the true from the false.
“The world is mad with lies.
I do not think that I shall die.”
Nonetheless, an inner voice said,
and I think all of us heard that haunting voice

I embarked from the black lava beaches of Thira
for deadly sun-jewelled Egypt.

The sirens of the dust,
did they sing me a new song,
did they pied-pipe my heart away?

Yes, Egypt is the only place to die.
There they know how to treat a soul.
There, when you go down,
you go down to go on,
if in another way.

Ask the dunes in the Valley of Death.

Speak to the Sphinx.

Ask at Alexandria.
The Greek has a terminal virus of some kind, a growing vegetation of the brain. A virus has more organized life than a star, though a star has an order of appearance, star in the sky and star on stage. We have a famous film star with us—è bell’attrice—addicted, suicidal. Parmenides mentored Zeno to believe in the unchanging universe behind the changing one. In Rome, the film star could only find a scrolling phantom life, too unsubstantial for her solid flesh. She sought la dolce vita in drugs and now, three times removed from her dream of life, she tries again in the labyrinth of the Minotaur, unaware that she is filming Beauty and the Beast. But I am speaking of organic life, though a star on the stage or a movie star has organic life, more, in fact, than the Greek’s virus. But humans are gaudy coelenterates: my liver heaves, my bowels twist, squirm with excitement and lead their own lives inside me. I need a new part. It flowers, pulsates. It is not my friend, it is itself. But perhaps we can get along, after a time. At first, other parts reject it, but eventually they are tamed. You are all working for me, I cry. We are our own liver, kidney, heart. I am not your heart. You have no heart. Your better half told you that. You have no other half. It is all a golden fiction, inspired by sex. Your sex organs aren’t even your own—they do as they please. As the real estate agent told the homeowner who questioned him about an easement, you don’t own property, you control it. You don’t own yourself, and you barely, for social reasons, control yourself.
One anti-social day, a day my tenure
and my poems almost couldn’t save me,
one mad and drunken day, I stripped
and ran around the campus flagpole,
a proud if pallid paladin. Wirra!

Life is the opposite of what is burning out there
in space, that celestial snow, those flickering fireflies,
which, close up, are all titanic violence.
Life is soft and squirms when you caress it,
and it could rule the night of the stars, if given time.
But I think of Earth as a great piñata, stuffed with death.
Traditionally, at the end of a fiesta,
you take a whack at a piñata and it breaks,
spilling its contents. If you did that with Earth,
the countless dead would be released
and scattered into space,
and, though the geologists
and the astrophysicists
would disagree with me,
I say that what would be left
would be a tenth the size of the present globe,
a wrinkled, raisin-like, bag that no longer had an orbit
or an axis on which to fall toward the sun
or to do its wobbly spin, not the shiny dewdrop that it is.
The dead from Earth’s beginnings to the present,
or what was left of them,
would float off and become pinwheels,
shaped and braced by dark matter,
much as the stars, the galaxies, are floating off,
away from each other, red-shifted,
and growing lonelier and lonelier.
Stand in the midst of life
and look at them go, to bones, to smoke, to ashes;
then rejoin the matter of the universe yourself;
the universe that, if it were capable of hope,
could only hope to live.
I heard the calls again, through the long night,  
material manifestations of the ghostly immaterial.  
Or, if you are not of a fanciful turn of mind,  
if you prefer the psychological explanation  
for every sort of phenomenon,  
it must have been the wind I heard,  
and the hotel settling  
(an ancient building creaks),  
the water pipes gurgling,  
the radiators knocking, the cats  
in the garden, skulking,  
and transformed these in my mind  
into the calls I thought I heard  
that sounded to me like the crying out  
of the earth’s multitudinous dead.  
And what I felt they told me  
of my life’s unmeaning,  
my time’s misuse,  
my soul’s fear,  
out of the vastness,  
the great underdarkness,  
caused me to writhe in my wet white sheets  
and sweat, glistening, like a great, limbed worm.  
I awakened, startled, and, finally, I slept again,  
a victim of circadian rhythm,  
and dreamed of the drab furnished rooms of my infancy,  
the dismal corners occasionally shot with sunlight,  
the fascinating dust swirls that were my first view of the universe.  
O make me at last an Immortal born for this life,  
so hard when the wind like a horse that has eaten of loco weed  
kicks in the shining green meadow of death that is the bright day  
beyond which the galaxies turn in dark matter like great carousels  
with mad imagery rising and falling along their white ways,  
all celestial combustion and anger as if there were truth in the gods  
and I had come from their birth to mine that happened in heat  
in the bowels of the ship of the universe powered by diamonds,  
dead glitters of light burnt in the cones of the sky.  O Heraclitean Fire,  
forgive one who has not known the one pinch of peace  
held in the index and thumb of the chef who concocted this terrible stew,
brew that biology seeks in its crystals that fall like the fall of each phylum
down the great day of time, no matter all time be an infinite cloud,
O Fire have mercy and snuff out the wick of your running black wax
and spare me the waste of beginnings, evolutions, and ends.

STOP, stop, poor soul, for the fire at the center of self is the fire at all distances,
emanation and flow like the oceans of life serve likewise the Heraclitean Fire
though the walking world is of mercury sulphur and salt, sex sun and sand,
yet the fire heats the shards till they melt, reshaping them in their clay and
thereby a new entity is formed bearing the heart’s evergreen name of Hope.
Déjà vu is the constant companion of every twice-thinking poet. One minute I was sitting on a dull linoleum rose, watching the swirling dust motes with my toys, and the next they were utterly lost to me, travelling down the street in a brown paper bag in a grinding garbage truck. My musical sweet-potato was crushed and wheezing in my mouth, and tears were spraying silver on gold in the windowlight for my melted Mickey doll, my only friend. Yes, I am there—here—there! But now I sit in a porcelain tub that smells of chlorine and soap, pouring from a fifth, hearing the Fifth—da-da-da-dum—da-da-da-dum—frowning, frowning, for the bird’s song, or Death knocking—in a tiled room full of steam, with no childhood left, an old man with a gray beard and no toys but a cheap, green cigar.

When first I arrived at the Hotel Paradiso and was elevated many levels and taken back down and led through long halls of many mysterious doors to the suite of the Association, I felt oppressed, and the notion of an open labyrinth came to me, I was so desirous of freedom, of escape, and found myself wandering through such a labyrinth, or maze changeable as a tour puzzle, in the garden, one made of many walls of either hard matter, compressed particles to stop the Minotaur, or something else and softer, miraculously drawn into the continuum, perhaps hedgerows, greens of light and dark hues in hearted leaves and dimensionalized by back-shadows of sunstruck and ever-variable mauve. Beneath my feet were gravity’s flagstones, embedded in endless grains of sand, and above my head mindless undisciplined cloud formations backed by a dream of blue.
The open labyrinth my mind had conjured was not a place to get completely lost in, nor in which a quarantine prevailed. There others step out of nowhere, or seem to, because the labyrinth has spaces for crossing from one side of its elusive walls to the other, with many signs pointing the way out. And yet we remain lost, we remain lost even as we are given exact directions. Why? Why is this the case? Because we do not want to leave the open labyrinth, even though we are becoming famished for what is outside it, which well might be a void. Politely, we listen to directions we are given, then go another way, hoping that wherever we go will lead us deeper than ever into the heart of the maze. And even so, we advise others on how to escape. And our advice is exact, for we know how to escape. We know that we need do nothing at all but wait, with an immense show of patience, here or there, this side or that. But truly we have no desire to leave, for all our hopes and fears are here where we wander, aimlessly, aimlessly but full of purpose.

II

I read somewhere about a wizard with computers, a man who’s made a myriad millions in the field, who lives out in an island’s perfect solitude in order best to think about life’s origins, who seriously thinks our universe is bits and bytes, a program made some cosmic Otherwhere. We make computer games ourselves and love to play them, why then might we not be a game for something else, a smarter It, why might it not be true that we, the world, the universe, are toys played in an Else, a game called Life, or its equivalent in Else, played by the happy children of the clever Its? Truly the Demon of Intelligence must thrive among the happy Its of Else in Otherwhere, but one must notice all the cruelty of the game and think that those in Else have not evolved as yet to that high point that even we, their bits and bytes,
their pawns, aspire to daily in our average lives.

I must look up that article about the wizard and find his name and write to him and ask him how he thinks the whole thing works, and if the software used is durable enough to keep us going on until our progress takes us well beyond the happy its of Else in Otherwhere, who play such cruel games.

III

For breakfast at the Hotel Paradiso
a wrinkled yellow passion fruit is served.
Judging from the taste of it, there’s paradise inside, and juice of it must be the rivers, lakes, and seas of such a place that could produce a native whose perfume turns the head of each new traveller there and makes of him a siren’s hind, a slave of persons of the place, one who is so compelled, entrapped, that that awed visitor would never leave, would think it madness to travel after smelling compelling sweetness on a vivid gust; judging from the taste of it, paradise could be described as what we all most dream of goodness wished for in that safest place the heart can find, where, unafraid of anything, we ask for what we truly want—that which we dare not hint before—and then are more than satisfied, and soonest, and most easily.
O judging from the taste of such sweet fruit, there truly is a paradise and all we wish is deep inside it—the life, the love, the death.

It is this heavenly tale, that the child in one could wish for, that keeps me awake tonight, on the eve of my departure, fearing death and wishing for grace, not knowing what either is, or even if either is, though the unbreathing stillness of bodies has me fairly convinced of the former, and of the latter I have seen so little as to doubt what I have seen as aberrant,
some twist in the air and light that,
so full of desire for the magic of exemption,
I have deluded myself, half knowing I lied,
half believing my own white lie.

But by now I’ve come to believe
that the only grace
is the goodness of the rational mind,
and the only evil
the old instinctive animal brain,
the knob of the cerebellum,
seeking its own satisfactions
of food and sex and selfhood,
the ultimate isolate one,
that yet does not understand
that we are together
in this flowing, amazing hologram,
with or without a creator
that may or may not care;
that, come to consciousness,
we have every right to judge
the nature of existence, for,
however arrived at, our brains
are analytic, not made to hunker down
in obeisance to riddling gods,
nor to any phantom
that hides in a cloud of unknowing.

For we have one another and
have courage and the hope of courage and
the practice of courage, to help us,
and, when the wind is calm,
and the waters lean down for the moon,
we have lonely senses to share
till at last our time has run out.

Now, as I think in the night,
somewhat afraid of the day
that will see me another day older
and that much closer to death,
I mark the speed of time
that has seen me, a moment ago,
a child walking home from school,
or a man going off to harm’s way,
or this or that or the other,
and think of these things that we have, 
of others and courage and love, 
and I think that I’ll sleep and awaken 
less anxious than I was considering 
a heavenly tale, 
for in the realist’s reality, 
the closest thing to the truth, 
there is finally a peace of mind 
that is a grace in a sweet surrender. 
It is the heavenly tale 
that the child in one should wish for. 
It will allow me to sleep 
on the eve of my departure.

But there is no way to sleep off the memory 
of what is forgotten. Only the lemon morning, 
bringing eggs and coffee, can rewind the clock. 
Only the pink, shaved face. Only the white suit, 
the Panama. But memory’s gulls are gone. 
That great wild rising! 
My suitcase, my old Saratoga, are waiting. 
Something should have been done. 
Once upon a time, something that was not done 
still waits in disappointment. Amor fati! 
Ah, sleep, ah, dreams! Adieu!
at the last point of livingness thought spreads itself so thin that the structural element expresses itself finitely. The chemistry of the mind becomes the alchemy of the spirit. . . . the world is always dying and coming back to life. Tide and pulse, and with the turn of the tide a touch of mystery. At thought’s deadmost reach the miraculous seeps back and throws a glow over the wan cadaver of despair. . . . the feeling for life rises as the forms and symbols become illuminated. The stars gather direction in the same way that the fetus moves towards birth. . . . when the identity of all things is sensed and one is at the same time utterly and blissfully alone … the word becomes magic, produces a contagion. And it is through this miraculous virus that the world is poisoned and dies . . . dies over and over again, but the skeleton always gets up and walks.

— Henry Miller
As the shadows lengthen best make tracks toward Lodge and Fire. This is an old story. Four sentinels guard the Shadow World. The Eagle the Wolf the cougar and the Coyote. They are the greatest predators of both Worlds. If a warrior should die on the dark side of the long Shadow Line. Without a weapon in his hands. He must forever walk the mountains of the Shadow World. He becomes a Spirit Warrior. As the Sun sinks in the West behind the mountains. Where the shadow reaches the fartherest. That is the Long Shadow Line.

We chase and track people who are missing. Or have taken things this includes loved ones. I work for people who cannot or will not go to the police. We are good at what we do. We are a team a crew. We love our work and care for each other. You will not find us listed in the yellow pages. Unless someone refers you we know and trust. Forget it no one is in.

My name is John J. Samuall I am a Native American. Some people think my name is Samuel. It is Samuall like three words Sam you all. My great, great, great, great Grandfather’s name was Twolooks of the Howling Wolf clan. It was said he could see two looks away. When we were put on our reservation. The big Wind from back east. Sent a Troop of Blue Coat Pony Soldiers to protect us and watch our stuff. When they left so did our stuff.

Twolooks went to work for the Blue Coats. The officer Twolooks scouted for was a Lieutenant named Robert lee Davis. He had been a major in the Gray Goats during the big tribal war. That war was between the Blue Coats in the north and the Gray Coats in the south. The Blue Coats won the war. They let some of the Gray Coats join their Army. Of course they had to take a place a little farther from the fire. That’s the reason he was just a lieutenant.

The Lieutenant thought that Twolooks should have a Christian name He ask if it was all right to call twolooks Sam. The former Gray Coats have a different way of speaking. They end everything with you all. He would say Sam you all find us a good spot to spread our blankets. Or Sam you all get our mounts. It wasn’t long before everyone was calling Twolooks Samuall. That’s how we came by the name Samuall. We of the Howling Wolf clan adopted that name as one of our names.

The third summer the Blue Coats were called back east. Own Tribal Police replaced them. This was better because the Blue Coats and the Gray Coats were always fighting the big war over again. Every time they told the stories about the battles they would tell them different. So they would end up fighting each other again/. The only thing we knew about the war was. Those White-eyes were rubbing out White-eyes. With all due respect we had no problem that. If the truth were known. We would have encouraged it.

When the Lieutenant was leaving he called two looks. He said Sam you all have to tell me your secret. Why does your coffee taste better? Two looks told him. If you get the water upstream from where the horses are picketed and the latrines are dug. The coffee
tastes better.

The lieutenant laughed and said. Sam you all mean to tell me Yankee horse piss doesn’t make good coffee. That said he gave twolooks a gray hat he had worn in the Great War. Then went on to say you will probably give this hat to, your son. He will give it to his son. The Hat will be handed down generation to generation till it becomes a legend. He waved and rode off whistling that tune all the Gray Coats whistled about Dixie.

Four days later Twolooks traded the hat for a black stud that started his herd. The hat ended up in a place called Medicine Hat. Across the border in the Queen Mother’s land called Canada. I don’t think that is why they called the place Medicine Hat. It arrived on the head of one of my clan. Who just needed a hat. Any how that’s how I came by the name of Samuall.

When I was younger I went to work as a runner in the gambling end of the mobs action. I liked that part of the industry. Not much violence that I could see. Oh you heard a lot of stories. Until you saw it that’s all they were just stories. As a runner I worked for a man named Tobias Ruggero. Tobias was an odd name for an Italian. I worked as a runner for a little over a year. Then I moved up to an Account Manager in collections. I collected Material that is what we called the money we collected from the many Books and Card rooms. In the three states controlled by my crew. I got this job right after my girl Five Angels was sent to Savanna. To attend college. They didn’t like her seeing me. We decided to wait till she graduated from College. She got kinda mad at me. Luca Barsini the big boss said he would make it hard on her if I didn’t stay away from her. I didn’t know then that he couldn’t do anything to her. I’ll tell you more about that later.

Which brings us to how I got started in my present work. As a young man growing up on our reservation. My Mother and Father were killed when their pickup ran off the road one rainy night. After that I lived with my Aunt and Uncle

When the per capita checks came my Aunt always sent me to find my uncle. He drank a little so I had to find him before he got to drunk.

My Uncle had been the best tracker and guide on the reservation. I was named after him. My first name John was for my great, great, great, Grandfather. My second name John was after my Uncle,

My Uncle taught me all I know about the art of tracking. He would tell me. Johnny everything leaves a track you can find a track in the bottom of a puddle. Take a stick and drain the water. A good tracker remembers every track he comes across keep it in a compartment in his mind. You always have to keep scanning till it becomes natural. Never forget a track. Another thing to remember. You don’t have to disappear to be invisible. You just have to look like something you are not. I didn’t know it then but he was training me. While I was looking for him I was tracking him. I was always tracking that’s why I’m called Johnny Tracks.

One of my talents was I saw and remembered everything as I moved through life. So if I had to find something again at least I knew where to start looking. When most people lost things. They just didn’t remember where they left them. Coats hats purses glasses watches and keys. Because I was always looking I was able to point things out. The word got out that I had some big Medicine. It wasn’t Medicine or Magic. I was only being
observant. It didn’t hurt my reputation at all.

Tobias called me into his office one day. I had just got back from doing my route. My buddy Tremain and I were going to Seattle to laugh and play for a couple of days. I thought oh oh I had screwed up and could kiss my trip off. When I came into Tobias’s office. He said sit down Johnny. That was a good sign you never got to sit down when you screwed up.

Tobias lit one of those big Cuban Cigars. The kind you aren’t supposed to be able to get in the United States. He looked at me. Johnny I don’t believe for a minute this bullshit about you having some magic Medicine or power. That you can find lost things and know where people have gone. I think you are very clever and a lot smarter than most of my hired help. What I’m going to tell you remains between us. He didn’t wait for me to answer.

Dutchy is among the missing. Along with the material from his last run. He should have checked in last night. He has been acting strange for a couple weeks now. Since my regular guys are busy right now. Maybe you can find him right away. You get seven percent of what he’s got left. The longer it takes you to find him the less you get. So you better get moving.

On my way out I stopped at the door. With out turning around I ask how much was it and do I get expenses. Tobias hollered don’t push it Johnny. Jesus you must belong to one of those lost tribes of Israel. Get the fuck out of here I was gone like a shot.

In the parking lot I grabbed my cell phone. I called Tremain the computer Wizard. Tremain was called the computer Wizard because he could hack into any system no problem. I told him what we needed and like Tobias I didn’t wait for an answer. I told him I would see him in an hour. Then I drove to the goodwill store on Front Street. I picked out a three-piece single-breasted suit, Shirt, tie and a snap-brim hat. Then I headed home as fast as I could go.

When I accepted this job I knew what I was doing. I’ll relate this to you. On my route I went through a small town more like a wide spot in the road. It was called River Edge. There was a small western wear shop. Owned by a man named James Owens. He carried a type of western shirt I liked.

Across the street was a Bar and Café called the Lucky Spot. On my way down river to cover my route three weeks ago. I stopped to order a couple shirts. While I was talking to Mr. Owens. I saw Dutchy’s truck parked across the street in front of the Bar. I was going to go over and say hey to Dutchy. Then I thought better of it. I didn’t much like Dutchy. He had a big smart mouth. Always making rank ethnic jokes that no one but him thought was funny. So I ordered the shirts said good bye to Mr. Owens. Then I went down river to cover my route. Two days later on my way back home. I saw Dutchy’s truck parked in front of the joint again. I decided not to stop and dove on home.

Going down river the following week. I stopped to pick up the shirts I had ordered. I see Dutchy’s truck for the third time. I had to ask Mr. Owens what the big attraction was across the street. He laughed and said you mean attractions it’s a double feature. The Barmaid is called Honey Dew Melons. If you know what I mean. And he laughed again. Her real name is Susan Gilmore. She came in here last month and bought a silver conch belt. She used a credit card. Since the name on the card wasn’t Honey Dew
Melon. I had to see her driver’s license. Seen her birthday she’s Thirty-Three. Honey Dew is going to be her stage name. She says she is going to be an Exotic Dancer. She told me her new boyfriend had a lot of connections the entertainment world. I never saw many show business people come through River Edge. I wonder how many drive around in a pickup truck. She swears he is going to get her started Dancing in the big nightclubs in L A.

I said she sounds pretty positive. She must be a Virgo. He said she must be a what. I answered you know born in September. Oh no she was born May sixth, I thought people sure give up information quick. A couple Questions and a lot of listening you get it all.

We talked about the weather and some trivia. Then I asked do you know her boyfriend. He got a look on his face like he had a bad taste in his mouth. He told me he had a big dirty mouth. Seems like he is a big bully. I thought that sounds like Dutchy. I wanted to say he was a big asshole but I let it go. I didn’t want Mr. Owens to think I knew Dutchy.

I said my goodbyes and headed up river. As I was driving I thought I did the right thing. By not stopping to see Dutchy. True I didn’t like him but I couldn’t stop thinking he was fucking up. Spending that much time in that joint. The farther I stayed away from him the better.

I shifted my mind and thought about better things. As my mind drifted I thought of how beautiful the gorge was this time of year. You could see all four seasons. Snow on the Washington side. Rain on the Oregon side. I saw a big black cloud. A rainsquall racing up river. The sun peeking through the clouds and a rainbow off towards Portland. The Columbia River Gorge was so beautiful any time of year.

Two days later on my way home. I saw Dutchy get out of his truck and walk into the bar This time I knew for sure Dutchy was screwing up. It was his ass so I headed home. That’s how I knew where to find Dutchy for Tobias.

After leaving the Goodwill store I headed home. Ten minutes later I was banging on Tremain’s door. He lives on the top floor so it took him a couple minutes to open the door. Before he could ask me what’s up. I ask him if he had the stuff we needed. Before he could say anymore I started to explain.

Tremain old buddy we’re going to start a new business. You will be able to do what you love to do. Like hacking into all those systems. I will be doing what I love to do Tracking. The best part we will get paid for doing it. How does that grab you? The first thing out of his mouth was is it legal. When I said absolutely then added well kinda. He answered oh well. Tremain had a little outlaw in him. No what I mean is he had a lot of outlaw in him. He liked to think everything was illegal.

If this is so legal what are we doing with all this ID? What about this phony paperwork? The check and the release form and business cards. I pointed out that nobody but the mark is going to see them. I guess it is pretty crooked. That made him feel a lot better. Tremains great, great, great Grandfather had been a famous outlaw in the old west. Tremain often daydreamed about the good old days.

I checked out the ID, Business cards, release form and the check. The check was made out to Susan Gilmore for nine thousand seven hundred seventy three dollars and seventy-five cents. Tremain had her social security number her Oregon drivers license
number. I had given him her D.O.B. All the paperwork had Heartland Insurance Group printed on them.

I explained the plan to him. Told him I needed a pager with an eight hundred number with voice mail. He was way ahead of me. He already had the pager a cell phone. All the numbers were printed on the Business cards and Letterheads. Tremain would answer the phone anybody calling would think they were calling Topeka Kansas. I was good to go.

I decided to call Mr. Owens. I wanted to order some more shirts anyway. During the conversation I asked him the Double Attraction was doing. That got a chuckle out of him. He told me she had quit her job but hadn’t left yet. She had to rent her trailer first. Then she was going to find Fame and fortune as an Exotic Dancer. I decided against asking him where she lived he might get suspicious.

As I was getting ready to roll. Tremain ask me if the woman Susan had done anything wrong. I told him no not yet. For him not to worry about her. We are doing her a favor Dutchy would screw over her anyway. She wouldn’t get into any trouble unless she took the money. She would be able to get her job back anytime she wanted. Now stop thinking of Prey as anything but Prey. If you don’t you are going to lose. We are in the finding business not the punishing business.

I changed into my new outfit. Grabbed my stuff jumped into Tremain’s ride then headed down river towards River Edge. Three hours later I was rolling down the main drag of River Edge. As I drove by Owens Western Wear Shop I noticed it was closed. I hope he wasn’t in the Bar having a beer. I picked up my cell phone and called the bar. When the bartender answered I asked for Jim Owens. Sorry Jim’s not here right now. I ask who is this He answered this is Delbert. I said Thanks Delbert and hung up. Another piece of data fell into place.

I pulled into the parking lot in the rear of the joint. I got ready for my big role as insurance adjuster for the Heartland Group. I decided to call Tremain once more. Tremain answered hey Johnny what’s up. See if you can find out anything on a Delbert he’s bartender at the Lucky Spot. It’s a Bar and Grill in River Edge. Call me back I’ll wait on you.

Twenty minutes laterTremain called me back. Johnny you might want to wait a half hour or so. The bartender’s name is Delbert Ronald Little. Something came up on him and Susan Gilmore. I’m on it and I’ll call you back in a few you should wait. Tremain we have to move fast on this. I know Johnny but I think this is important. I thought you never could tell where a track is going to lead. I started doing the New York Times crossword puzzle while I waited.

Thirty minutes later Tremain called. Johnny listen up little and Gilmore were involved in a robbery. They took down a mark in a Hotel in Portland. They got Cash Checks Credit Cards and some Jewelry. Little wasn’t so smart he got busted cashing one of the Mark’s checks. He went down for credit Card fraud and forgery. Got the hard time because he wouldn’t give Susan Gilmore up. The Mark said he was to drunk to ID her so she walked. The Mark didn’t want his wife to find out about the Gilmore woman. Little got paroled seven months ago. Be careful Johnny he didn’t have any violence in his
jacket. You never can tell what might happen if he is cornered.

Tremain who gave you all this information. I got a cousin who is an ADA for Multinoma County. I'll tell you more about it later. OK Tremain I'm on top of it.

He was right the operation sure took a different twist. This new twist was good. It made it easier to turn the bartender. He was already bent and still on parole. I pulled into the parking lot and parked. I got out and tucked my hair under my hat. Looked around. Then got down and let most of the air out of my left front tire. Straightened up grabbed my attaché case. Then I walked in the side door of the Bar.

It was like a thousand other small Café and Bars. I had been in a lot of them. This was not one of ours it had no gambling. Just a Pool table in the back. A small dance floor. There was a lunch counter up front. There were a few locals sitting at the bar. I guess they were locals. They all turned around and looked at me. So I headed towards the bar and sat down.

The bartender walked over as I sat down. I went right into my pitch. Good afternoon sir my name is Robert Toland. I am a Claims Adjuster for Heartland Insurance Group of Topeka Kansas. I handed him my business card. He looked at it then looked at me. Sorry pal we got all the insurance we need. I told him I'm not a salesman I'm a claims adjuster. I'm looking for Susan Gilmore. She’s the beneficiary on an old policy. I'm trying to find her and settle it. It’s an old Policy so in two days it defaults to the state. Then it’s to late for everyone.

Now I had his attention I opened a folder. Held it so he got a quick look at the check clipped to the release form. All he saw was the phony check for nine thousand seven hundred and eighty three dollars and seventy-five cents. Then I closed the folder real fast. Now I had his full attention. So is she here does she work here. What makes you think she works here? He was still wary of me. I opened the folder again held it so he couldn’t see it. Says here she use to live in Gresham. That’s a town down by Portland. He answered I know where Gresham is. I continued a lady that managed an apartment house in Gresham. Where Miss Gilmore was living told me she thought she moved up here. She also told me she forwarded some mail up here. Was she wrong or am I wasting my time

He looked at my card I could see he was still suspicious. Still not sure of me. Look I have her social security number her Oregon drivers license number. All she has to do is identify herself sign the release form and the check is hers. I could see he was still bother about this. Look if you don’t believe I’m who I say I am. Here’s my ID card I showed him my photo ID. He looked at it then looked at me. I said lets go down to the other end of the bar.

With our backs to the rest of the bar. I lowered my voice to a whisper. He had to get real close to hear me. I heard that fellow over there call you Del. Do you mind if I call you Del. He nodded yes. Del I get Two hundred and twenty five dollars commission for each claim I settle for the company. This policy defaults in two days. Then nobody but the state gets anything. How does this sound I'll cut up the two hundred with you. I keep the twenty-five for my expenses. Will that work for you sounds like a plan to me. How about it del is it a deal.

Del looked around the bar then said real low. Maybe I can get in touch with her. How
do I know you will pay me my end? She might not want to meet any strangers. Just hold it right there partner. If it will make it easier tell me where she lives. Or call her and have her come down here. I’ll meet her and it will take five minutes max. If you are worried about the money. Watch this I took two C notes out of my billfold. I tore them in half handed him two of the halves. Stuck the other two in my shirt pocket. After it’s over we match halves and go our ways. What could be easier than that? You think about it. I got a slow leak in one of my front tires. I got to go get it fixed. If you think we can make it work call my cell number it’s on my card. Then I walked out the side door.

While I was looking at my tire one of the guys from the bar walked up. Said looks like you got tire trouble. There’s a station up river a couple miles you can get it fixed there. Then he walked on around the Front of the bar. He had one of his buddies check up on me still gun shy. I got in the car and drove up river.

Tremain was sitting in front of his computer thinking his cousin was right. They needed to get a Private Investigators license. When the Eight hundred number rang. He looked at the caller ID read out. It was an Oregon area code. He answered Heartland Insurance Group how may I direct your call. Could you please speak up sir? Who did you say Robert Toland Mr. Toland is not a salesman he is a Claims Adjuster sir. He is not in the office at this moment. Is this an emergency no well can I direct you to his voice mail. No well thank you for calling Heartland Insurance Group sir.

When his cell phone rang Johnny answered Heartland Insurance Group Robert Toland speaking how can I help you. He heard Tremain voice say Johnny your guy just called you got him hooked. Yes I know Tremain I’m waiting for him to call me. Tobias called wanted to know if I had heard from you told him no Boy Johnny this is fun and we are getting paid for it. Johnny you got to be careful these guys do things they wouldn’t normally do. If they think they are getting busted back to the joint. He doesn’t know you are not working for the heat. So easy does it talk at you later Buddy. I drove to the gas station and put some air in my tire.

While I was waiting for Del to call. I thought Tremain sure is a worrier. I wonder where he learned all that jargon he was speaking. Oh well I’m glad he’s on board.

Hey Sue it’s me listen to this. I know I’m not to call you at home. This is important. Will you shut up and listen to me for a minute. Susan calm down that’s better. This guy came into the bar he’s from the Heartland Insurance Group of Topeka Kansas. He’s a claims adjuster Apparently you are the beneficiary on an old insurance policy. Now get this he has a check made out to you for nine thousand seven hundred and eighty three dollars and seventy-five cents. Yes it has your name on it that’s what I been telling you. All you have to do is show your ID sign the release and collect. Will you shut the fuck up and listen to me. Sure I checked him out. I saw his ID. I called the company in Topeka they verified the fact he worked for them. As a claims adjuster No I didn’t give your address up. He wants to meet you here. He says it will take five minutes max. How the fuck do I know whose policy it was. Maybe your old man when he worked for the mill. Shall I call this guy and set it up. For Christ sakes have you heard anything I’ve said? This is an old policy it defaults in two days then the state gets it. What the fuck is your problem. OK be here in a half hour see you.

Heartland Insurance Group Robert Toland Speaking how can I help you. Hey Del you
got something for me. She'll be there in a half hour that's great. I'll be there my tire should be fixed by then. I'll see you in a half hour. I thought this is going down smoother than I thought it would. I drove down river past the bar and parked down the street. Where I could watch the bar. Twenty minutes later a black Honda Civic pulled into the parking lot. Honey Dew Melons the double feature got out and walked into the bar. I could see why they called her Honey Dew. Wow double feature I guess. I waited ten minutes more then called Del. Hello Del this is Bob Toland. Hey Del I'm sorry but I have to buy a new tire. So I'm going to be a little late. Two hours no more just long enough to put a new tire on. They will have to balance it. Ask Miss Gilmore if she can wait or come back in two hours. He heard Del put his hand over the receiver. Seconds later he said. OK two hours not one second later. Oh that's swell Del I'll see you in two hours no problem.

Del this better not be one of your chickenshit scams. If you fuck up this score you will live to regret it Now Del started getting mad. God damn it Sue this is on the level. Harry come over here a minute will you. Harry slid off his stool and ambled or rather stumbled over he had a half a heat on. He slurried yeah Del what can I do you for buddy. Harry you heard part of what that square John said to me. Tell Honey Dew what you heard will you. Harry scratched his head then said. The guy said he worked for some insurance company in Kansas. Said he had a check for Miss Gilmore. That's all I heard then you ask me to follow him outside. He had a tire that was almost flat. I told him where he could get it fixed. At that station up river. Then I came back in that's all I know.

Del motioned Susan down to the end of the bar. He said real low what did I tell you. This is no scam it's on the level. You got nothing to worry about Baby. She looked at him for a moment. Then told him OK we'll see. Then she walked out.

I watched the Double Feature get into her car. She drove out of the lot and down River Road. She was going the same direction as I was parked. So I didn't have to make a U turn to follow her. She drove down river about a quarter of a mile. Then turned left on a Road named Andrew Way. Stopped at a market went in. Came out few minutes later with a bag. Drove down Andrew Way two tenths of a mile. Turned on a dirt road. A short distance up the dirt road. I saw several trailers parked in a row. They were up on blocks going nowhere. She parked in front of the fourth one. Then got out and went inside. Bingo Dutchy's truck was parked in back of the trailer.

I drove on down Andrew way until I was out of sight of the trailers. I had a good signal s I called Tobias. When he answered I told him I found him Boss. Send somebody we got a bout a two hour window. Tobias told me Kid you really do have some big Medicine. Where are you no never mind? Pauly and Sammy are in the Dalles. Hang up and I'll have them call you for directions. Johnny when they get there you get out come home. I don't want you around when they take him down. Is that clear. As a bell see you when I get back Boss. One other thing Tobias I don't think the girl had anything to do with the score. I think she was innocent she thought Dutcky was a mark. Tobias answered what the fuck you telling me Johnny. Nobody is innocent don't go soft on me Johnny and he hung up.

Sammy called me for the directions. I wouldn't have long to wait the Dalles was just thirty minutes up river. They must have burned up the highway because twenty minutes
later they drove up. Pauly ask me what the fuck I was doing in that outfit. You look like an insurance salesman. Thank you very much Pauly that’s exactly what I wanted to look like. Then I pointed out the trailer. Sammy said you did good Johnny we owe you. Now get out of here it’s time for you to go. Toby doesn’t want you around when we take Dutchy down. Nothing personal it’ for your own good see you back home.

I stopped up the road and changed clothes. Put on a pair of jeans one of those western shirts that started all this. Job. Put on my Stetson and started up river. As I drove past the Lucky Spot I thought about Del. The guy really did help us. We couldn’t have done it this fast with out him.

I knew I should have kept going. What the hell why burn a track. With my hair tied back in a ponytail. With my Stetson, Jeans and western shirt. I looked like any other Reservation Indian. I parked in back got out put on a pair of shades. When I walked in Nobody nobody paid an attention to me. This is an example of what my Uncle taught me. About being invisible never look like what you are. In this case what you were a couple hours ago

I sat down at the bar. When Del came over I ordered a beer. He brought it and set it in front of me. Hey Del how’s it going. I got something for you. I handed him the two half C notes. He looked at them then at me. His eyes got big his mouth dropped open. You son of a bitch who the hell are you.

I looked him in the eye. Then I said listen up Buddy. Before you let your alligator mouth over load your hummingbird ass? His Buddy slid off of his stool and started my way. Del tell your pal to sit back down. Or I’ll knock him down. Del told Harry to sit back down. That’s better let’s go to the other end of the Bar. We walked down the bar that’s better. Seems like old times doesn’t it Del.

I said Del you are a lot better off. I’m going to let you have both C notes. Susan and Dutchy have two one-way tickets to L.A. Leaving tomorrow afternoon. I don’t think one had your name is on it. Besides it wouldn’t have gone down like it did in Portland six years ago. Del looked at me started to say something. Thought better of it and kept quiet. I went on Dutchy would have got wise and both of you would be floating down river. If Dutchy didn’t catch on. The people I represent would have. They would have been all over you. Like flies on this one horse town of yours. Because you would have had their material. Get it. Del said who the hell are they. I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. Del have you been taking stupid pills since you got out of the Joint. Del take the two C Notes and keep your mouth shut. I may be able to shove some work your way. He looked at me and said like doing what.

Del you ever think about putting a couple card tables in here. The Old Man who owns this place can’t get a permit. I told him he didn’t have to worry about a permit. Why not buy the Old Man out. We’ll help you get the permits no problem. Then all of a sudden the light went on. Yeah sure OK you say you will help me. I didn’t say I would help you. I said somebody would help you. They will stop by and talk to you a little later. Del doesn’t be too hard on Honey Dew. You are going to need her. She’ll be a bigger draw as an Exotic Dancer. Than she ever was dealing Hamburgers off the arm. Well I’m out of here and walked towards the door. Del yelled hey what’s your name. They call me Johnny Tracks. I headed up river for the second time.
The phone rang and Del answered. He heard Susan sobbing on the other end. Del you son of a bitch you ruined every thing they took Dutchy away. Del answered shut the fuck up Sue it's over. Now get your ass down here and go to work. Silence for a few seconds then she said sure Del I'll be right down.

As I was driving I thought boy this is hard work. We had this file for sixteen hours and made Five Thousand Five Hundred Dollars and maybe expenses. I screamed Oh Yeah right on. A guy passing me looked at me and shook his head. He must’ve thought I was crazy.

I called Tremain he picked up on the first ring. Johnny where the heck have you been. Why didn’t you keep in touch I was worried. Tobias called told me he left a package for you at his office. Hey Tremain that’s great it’s all over I'll be home in three hours. Then I'm going to get some sleep. Johnny you can sleep on our way to Portland. We got a lot of things to do. This is going to be great Johnny. I ask what things do we have to do in Portland. I'll explain it when you get here. Stop at Tobias’s office first we will need some money.

As I was driving up the on ramp to the Freeway. When I saw the big Blue Lincoln Sedan of Pauly’s. Right behind it was Sammy driving Dutchy’ Pickup.

All of a sudden I didn’t feel so happy. I knew who was in the trunk of the Lincoln. Then I remembered what I had told Tremain about thinking of Prey as Prey. I wondered if it had been someone I had known and liked. Would I have felt the same? Then I though what the hell. When you are a free *agent you can choose your own Jobs.

Choose your own Jobs right. I knew that if I was going to do business with the Company. I would have to take the Jobs as they came up. My only way out was to set up my own set of rules. Tell them up front what the rules would be. The main rule would be they we would have to have all the Data. No exceptions we wouldn’t care what the Prey had done. Or how the items came up missing. Just the things we needed to know to protect ourselves. We would do the job so good that they couldn’t get along without us.

Well Tremain and I could put it together when I got back. One thing I was sure of I wouldn’t be making any more collections. I shifted my mind and drifted on up stream towards home.
Catherine McGuire is a writer and artist with a deep interest in philosophy, the “Why are we here?” question that lurks under so much of our lives. Using nature as a mirror, she explores the way humans perceive themselves and their world. She will have a chapbook released by Uttered Chaos in September. It is tentatively titled “Reflections, Echoes and Palimpsests”. She is webmaster for the Oregon Poetry Society and claims her entire garden as her ‘poetry office’.

Phebe Davidson is the author of several collections of poems, most recently Seven Mile (2009) and Plasma Justice (2011). She is the founding editor of Palanquin Press, a Contributing Editor for Tar River Poetry, and a staff writer for The Asheville Poetry Review. She is still a recovering academic, still up to her neck in poems, and still living in Westminster, SC with her husband Steve and their cat Fripp.

Monica Mody is the author of two chapbooks, and her work can also be found in journals such as the Boston Review, Wasafiri, Upstairs at Duroc, pyrta, Lantern Review, and Nether, among others. Her first book, KALA PANI, is forthcoming from 1913 Press later this year. Monica has an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Notre Dame and is currently a doctoral candidate in East-West Psychology at the California Institute of Integral Studies.

gary lundy  i’ve recently moved from southwest montana to providence to live with my partner and concentrate on my writing and life. the move has as i would suppose anyone could guess shaken up at least two lives. in a good way. of course. it’s nice. also. to locate in a community where there is so much art being produced. everywhere.

my poems have appeared in a variety of magazines including: why vandalism? (online); snow monkey; karamu; spout; heeltap; rfd; the tule review; black book press, the poetry zine; timber creek review; elimae (online); aura literary arts review; harpur palate; poetry flash (online); the main street rag; the rockford review; and ditch (online). i have poems forthcoming in pudding magazine; clara venus; celebration; elements; voices israel; and, the bicycle review (online). i can provide you with a publications list should you wish.

Jennifer A. McGowan  Author of the chapbook Life in Captivity (Finishing Line Press, 2011), has published in many journals on both sides of the Atlantic, including, most recently, Agenda, Acumen, and the American Journal of Nursing – the latter being the latest in her line of poetry about being disabled. She holds a PhD in English, and has taught and had her poems used as text at various universities. Her website, with more poetry and examples of her mediaeval calligraphy, can be found at http://www.jenniferamcgowan.com . She lives near Oxford in the UK.
Vineetha Mokkil is a writer and reviewer based in New Delhi, India. Her short stories have been published in *The Santa Fe Writers Project Journal; Cha: An Asian Literary Journal; the Asia Writes Project; "Why We Don't Talk"* an anthology of contemporary Indian short fiction (Rupa and Co, August 2010, New Delhi). Poems translated by her have been published in *Indian Love Poems* (Knopf/Everyman’s Library, 2005). Her first novel is inching towards completion.


Pamela Clarke Vandal resides on Gabriola Island with her two children and husband. She attended the creative writing program at Malaspina University College, and spends her free time writing poetry and fiction. Her work has been published in various literary journals including *Bare Hands, Poetry Bus,* and *Unfold.*

Andrea Witzke Slot is author of *To find a new beauty* (Gold Wake Press, 2012). Her work has appeared in such journals as Borderlands: Texas Poetry Review, Translation Review, Written River: A Journal of Eco-Poetics, The Pacific Review, Southern Women’s Review, and Chiron Review. She teaches at the University of Illinois at Chicago and is an associate editor at Rhino Poetry as well as the book review editor at Fifth Wednesday Journal. She lives just outside of Chicago with her husband, the youngest of her five children/stepchildren, and her crazy West Highland Terrier, Macbeth. Her website is: www.andreawitzkeslot.com.

Dane Karnick grew up by the Colorado "Rockies" and lives in Seattle. His poetry has recently appeared in *Drash, Cirque, RED OCHRE LiT, Montucky Review* and *Curbside Quotidian.* Visit him at www.danekarnick.com.

stuart radowitz Hi, I studied with W.D. Snodgrass, Philip Booth, and Donald Justice at Syracuse University and I have a Masters in Creative Writing from Colorado State University. I am an Adjunct instructor in Creative Writing at Molloy College in Rockville Centre, Long Island, N.Y. The world tried to break me. But I found a road to take me. Peace, Stuart

Ryo Baum was born in Japan but was raised in California. He enjoys writing poems and playing music. He currently is attempting to write a song every week and his songs can be heard on http://sheselectric.bandcamp.com. He also started an online lit mag with his friends called receptacle http://www.receptaclemag.com. He is currently contemplating on moving out of state to mend a broken heart.

Nickie Albert is a poet and playwright. She has had poems published in *Wild Goose Review, The Legendary* and *Burning Word.* She supplements her literary career doing Software Development in New York City. She lives in Brooklyn, NY.
Joan Maki  I received my MFA from the University of Montana and have recently completed a novel that is in search of a publisher. Meanwhile, I’ve been working on a smattering of short stories. I live in a small town in the mountains of western Montana with my husband and one vivacious, yellow dog.

Jenean McBrearty  A graduate of San Diego State University, is a retired community college instructor who taught Political Science and Sociology at military installations and Des Moines Area Community College. She resides in Kentucky and is an MFA creative writing candidate. Credits: Reviewer —social science/history books for Choice Magazine (2006-2008); paid columnist for the Lexington Herald-Leader (2006); published in Teaching for Success, Static Movement. Her short story, “The Prisoners of Gravely Rock”, was published in Main Street Rag 2011 Anthology; “Altered States”, and “Hearts and Trains” was published by Wherever It Pleases (1/2012). “Mexicali Mamas”, EKU English Department’s Award for Graduate Non-fiction (2011) was accepted for publication by bioStories (1/2012).

Kenneth Kesner  a native of the US, has been working under the auspices of the State Administration of Foreign Experts in the PRC for several years now. Some of his recent work is found in The Arabesques Review (ALG), Counterexample Poetics (USA), Essence (SCO), L.E.S. Review (USA), Retort Magazine (AUS) and The Tower Journal (USA).

Christine Klocek-Lim  received the 2009 Ellen La Forge Memorial Prize in poetry. She has four chapbooks: Ballroom - a love story (Flutter Press), Cloud Studies (Whale Sound Audio Chapbooks), How to photograph the heart (The Lives You Touch Publications), and The book of small treasures (Seven Kitchens Press). Her poems have appeared in Nimrod, OCHO, Diode, Riffing on Strings: Creative Writing Inspired by String Theory and elsewhere. Her work has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net anthologies and was a finalist for 3 Quarks Daily’s Prize in Arts & Literature. She is editor of Autumn Sky Poetry and her website is www.novembersky.com.

patrick fealey  is 43 years old and lives in northern california. his literary work and journalism has appeared in one hundred magazines and newspapers worldwide, including the new york times, associated press, and the wormwood review, newport review, artfuck, the booksletters to los angeles (pale house books) and up in smoke (scars publications), as well as an educational book published by simon and shuster. he is the author of 10 unpublished novels, one memoir, and a collection of poems. influential writers have been henry miller, baudelaire, celine, bukowski, hemingway, and rimbaud. his 100-pound german shepherd, sascha, has promised to tear apart all the literary agents who have rejected him (200+) for being "avant garde." "i am not beat," the author says. "i am wasted."
Ruth Goring’s poetry collection Yellow Doors was published by WordFarm (2003); her poems have recently appeared in CALYX, Pilgrimage, Comstock Review, RHINO, New Madrid, Off the Coast, Raving Dove, Alligator Juniper, Verse Wisconsin, Chicago Quarterly Review, the Goodreads newsletter, and elsewhere. She is currently finishing a collection of poems set in Colombia, where she grew up. Ruth is a senior manuscript editor in the Books Division of the University of Chicago Press and teaches advanced editing in the University of Chicago’s Graham School.

ire’ne lara silva lives in Austin, TX. Her work has appeared in various journals and anthologies, most recently in Acentos Review, Palabra, and Yellow Medicine Review. She is the 2008 recipient of the Gloria Anzaldua Milagro Award, an inaugural CantoMundo Fellow, and the author of two chapbooks: ani’mal and ÍNDíGENA. Her first collection of poetry, furia, (Mouthfeel Press, 2010) received an Honorable Mention for the 2011 International Latino Book Award in Poetry. Currently, she is Co-Coordinator for the Flor De Nopal Literary Festival: http://flordenopalliteraryfestival.wordpress.com/ and is leading the Voz te Viento discussion series on diabetes, illness, healing, and creativity: http://vozteviento.wordpress.com/
Poet/writer website: http://www.irenelarasilva.webs.com

Jeff Streeby grew up in Sioux City, Iowa, where he attended Morningside College. He holds an MFA in Poetry from Gerald Stern’s program at New England College in Henniker, New Hampshire. He is a horseman, cowboy poet and performer whose recent work has appeared in Verdad, Southwest American Literature, Los Angeles Review and others.

Matthew Vasiliauskas is a graduate of Columbia College Chicago, where he received a Bachelor of Arts Degree in Film and Video Production. In 2009, he was awarded the Silver Dome Prize by the Illinois Broadcast Association for best public affairs program as producer of the Dean Richards Show at WGN Radio. His work has appeared in such publications as The Pennsylvania Review, Stumble Magazine and The Adirondack Review. Matthew currently lives and works in Los Angeles.

John Sullivan is a lawyer and lifelong Baltimorean. He has written op-eds for newspapers like the Wall Street Journal (which came out of his appearance on C-Span), the Chicago Tribune, Miami Herald and the Christian Science Monitor. His short stories have appeared in about a dozen literary journals, most recently The Alembic and Pinyon. jcharlessullivan@yahoo.com

Sheri L. Wright is the author of five books of poetry, including the most recent, The Slow Talk Of Stones. Her works of poetry also appear in Out of Line, Chiron Review, Clark Street Review, Darkling and Earth’s Daughters, and many others. Ms. Wright also works as a free-lance editor for a variety of books ranging from poetry to fiction. She has been a volunteer editor for This I Believe. Ms. Wright has taught poetry
workshops for Women in Transition, the Kentucky Young Writer’s Connection and The Kentucky State Poetry Society, judged the poetry division in The Golden Nibs for the Virginia Writers Club, for Women Who Write and for Green River Writers writing contest. She is a regional chair for the Kentucky State Poetry society and is co-chair for their adult poetry contest for 2011. Ms. Wright currently is the host of From The Inkwell, a one hour radio show dedicated to all things literary on CHRadio 1650am, live-streaming at www.CrescentHillRadio.com. Please visit her website at www.scribblingsandsuch.com.

Sheri L. Wright’s visual work can be seen in Blood Orange Review, The Single Hound and is forthcoming in THIS Literary Magazine, Prick of the Spindle, Blood Lotus Journal and Subliminal Interiors. More examples of her work can be seen at http://www.flickr.com/photos/sherilwright/. With Ms. Wright’s consent, all work is available for publication, unless otherwise noted.

Brenda Rose is a visual artist, painting in oils, and a freelance writer who lives with her husband and two children in southern Georgia.

devin wayne davis, once called "ink (or inc.)" in an seaside vision, has written well-over 2,000 poems; he likes concise verse. his work is printed in the sacramento anthology: 100 poems; sanskrit; dwan; poetry depth quarterly; dandelion; coe review; rattlesnake; taproot; and 38 chapbooks. selections can be found on-line, at these fine sites: howling dog press; del sol review; wordslingers; perihelion; pierian springs; locust magazine; ginosko; kota press; octavo; lifix; jones av.; pig iron malt; great works; la petite ‘zine; stirring; offcourse; rio arts; wandering dog; poems niederngasse; whimperbang; kookamonga square; wheelhouse; chiron review; eratio; split shot; poetry magazine; poetry monthly; fullosia; new verse news; penhimalaya; wordslaw; aurora review, muscadine lines; toe tree journal; pcm; down in the dirt; soma; tmp; haiku scotland; medusa’s kitchen; spam; and zambomba.

thank you all. Davis has read as a feature poet at major book retailers; he has addressed citizens and lawmakers on the northern steps of the california state capitol, and has read for annual poetry events at the crocker art museum. davis reviewed movies for a best-selling paperback guide; he has written for sacramento, ca. arts & entertainment weeklies, and worked for ups and the state. Davis served in the u.s. army. he visited spain, germany, switzerland, france, and was last assigned to ft. bragg, n.c. as a photojournalist. Davis earned a bachelors degree in journalism and history. davis has hiked mt. whitney 3x. davis has three daughters, and has had testicular cancer. he’s a leo. townee_towne@hotmail.com.

Roger Real Drouin is an MFA student in creative writing/fiction at Florida Atlantic University. His short stories have been published, or are forthcoming, in the print journals The Litchfield Review and Leaf Garden and online at The Smoking Poet, Canopic Jar, Offcourse Literary Journal, Madswirl, and Green Silk. He was a journalist for seven years before coming to FAU in Fall 2009. His Web site is www.rogerdrouin.com. Roger also writes an outdoor blog at
Haim Isaacs was born in New York, grew up in Jerusalem and lives in Paris where he writes, sings and clowns about as much as possible. His stories have recently appeared in The Massachusetts Review and The Mochila Review.


Donnelle McGee is a Jimi Hendrix freak and wishes he could dunk a basketball. He earned his MFA from Goddard College. He is a faculty member at Mission College in Santa Clara, California. His work has appeared in Controlled Burn, Haight Ashbury Literary Journal, Home Planet News, Iodine Poetry Journal, Permafrost, River Oak Review, The Spoon River Review, and Willard & Maple, among others. His work has also been nominated for the Pushcart Prize. You can read more about Donnelle at www.Donnellemcgee.com

Mike Maggio has published fiction, poetry, travel and reviews in Potomac Review, the Montserrat Review, Pleiades, Apalachee Quarterly, The Northern Virginia Review, The L.A. Weekly, The Washington CityPaper, Beltway Quarterly, Pig Iron, DC Poets Against the War and others. His books include Your Secret is Safe With Me (Black Bear Publications, 1988), Oranges From Palestine (Mardi Gras Press, 1996), Sifting Through the Madness (Xlibris, 2001) and deMOCKcracy (Plain View Press, 2007). Forthcoming work includes a poetry chapbook, Haunted Garden (Pudding House Publications) and a short story collection, The Keepers, (March Street Press). He is an assistant adjunct professor at Northern Virginia Community College and a graduate of George Mason University’s MFA program in Creative Writing. He lives in Herndon, Virginia with his wife and children. His web site is www.mikemaggio.net

John Grochalski is the author of The Noose Doesn't Get Any Looser After You Punch Out and Glass City. He currently lives in Brooklyn, NY.

Erren Geraud Kelly’s work is currently featured in Deep South Magazine, Write from Wrong, Ascent Aspirations, The Carter Review, The Minetta Review, and other publications. Mr. Kelly received his BA in English Creative Writing from Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge. He lives in New York City…

Peter Barlow’s work has appeared most recently in *Black Market Review* and *Spindrift*, as well as the *Coming Unglued* anthology from The McCroskey Memorial Internet Playhouse. He received his MFA Creative Writing at Fairleigh Dickinson University, and serves as a reader for that school’s journal, *The Literary Review*.

William Kelley Woolfitt studies American literature at Pennsylvania State University, where he is in the third year of the PhD program. He has worked as a summer camp counselor, bookseller, ballpark peanuts vendor, and teacher of computer literacy to senior citizens. He is the author of *The Salvager’s Arts*, co-winner of the 2011 Keystone Chapbook Prize, which will be published in June of 2012. His poems and short stories have appeared or are forthcoming in *Cincinnati Review, Ninth Letter, Shenandoah, Los Angeles Review, Sycamore Review, Southern Humanities Review*, and *Hayden’s Ferry Review*.


Lyn Lifshin’s *Another Woman Who Looks Like Me* was just published by Black Sparrow at David Godine October, 2006. It has been selected for the 2007 Paterson Award for Literary Excellence for previous finalists of the Paterson Poetry Prize. ([ORDER@GODINE.COM](http://ORDER@GODINE.COM)). Also out in 2006 is her prize winning book about the famous, short lived beautiful race horse, Ruffian: *The Licorice Daughter: My Year With Ruffian* from Texas Review Press. Lifshin’s other recent prizewinning books include *Before it’s Light* published winter 1999-2000 by Black Sparrow press, following their publication of *Cold Comfort* in 1997. Her poems have appeared in most literary and poetry magazines and she is the subject of an award winning documentary film, *Lyn Lifshin: Not Made of Glass*, available from Women Make Movies. Her poem, “The No More Apologizing, the No More Little, Laughing Blues” has been called among the most impressive documents of the women’s poetry movement, by Alicia Ostriker. An update to her Gale Research Projects Autobiographical series, *On the Outside: Blues, Blue Lace*, was published Spring 2003. What Matters Most and August Wind as well as She was Found Treading Water Deep out in the Ocean, In Mirrors, An Unfinished Journey and Novemberly were recently published *Tsunami* is forthcoming from BLUE UNICORN. World Parade Press will publish *Poets, (Mostly) Who Have Touched me, Living and Dead. All True. Especially the Lies.* Texas Review Press will publish *Barbaro, Beyond Brokenness* in Fall 2008 and World Parade Books just published *Desire* in March
2008. Red Hen will publish Persephone fall 2008. Coatalism Press has just published 92 Rapple Drive and Drifting is online. Goose River Press will publish Nutley Pond. Finishing Line Press will publish Lost In The Fog October 2008. For interviews, photographs, more bio material, reviews, interviews, prose, samples of work and more, her web site is www.lynlifshin.com

Donna Walker-Nixon currently serves as a lecturer in the Department of English at Baylor University. Before coming to Baylor, she was a full-professor at the University of Mary Hardin-Baylor, where she founded Windhover: A Journal of Christian Literature in 1996. She edited the journal until 2002 when she left teaching to pursue writing and editing full-time. During the time she was gainfully employed, she also co-edited the New Texas series with James Ward Lee. And during the time she was not gainfully employed, she co-founded Langdon Review of the Arts in Texas, a yearly publication that spotlights artists, writers, musicians, and current happenings in the arts in Texas. She has published short stories in the journals descant, Concho River Review, and Echoes. Her work has also appeared in Red Boots and Attitude, Texas Short Stories I and II, and Writing on the Wind. Her husband Timothy Hobbs writes terrific vampire and literary fiction and has published in several venues.

Chris Ridge "I am a nineteen-year-old New Yorker with a habit of peering down alleys and up flues and peeling loose skin. Bodies and picture-books move me to rapture and I spend a great deal of time up late, moving big and talking loudly to people I have just met. I live in Brooklyn with my fiance and her cat."

Alexandra Simpson received her MFA in Poetry at the University of Michigan. She is currently working on her poetry manuscript, The Art of Feminine Dissolve and a memoir. She is the recipient of the Meader Family Award through the Hopwood Award Program at UM. Her writing credits include poetry in the Pebble Lake Review and The Huron River Review.

Lolette Kuby I am an American expatriate living in Canada since 2000. My poems and stories have appeared in Prairie Schooner, American Scholar, The New Laurel Review, Midwest Quarterly, Poet Lore, Antigonish Review, Grain, Canadian Literature, the Apalachee Quarterly and in many similar journals. A chapbook, In Enormous Water, was published by the Cleveland State University Press. My full-length collection, Set Down Here came out in 2002 (Brandywine Publishers) and another collection, Inwit, came out in 2003 (Pearl’s Book’em Publishers). My short story collection Out of Cleveland, was published in 2007 by Vehicule Press. My first novel, Writing Personals will be released in October. “Pas de Deux” was published as “Duo for Voice and Movement“, in Salome: A Literary Dance Magazine, 31/32 1983. It was choreographed and performed in "Word Moves," a program of poetry set to dance, at the John Carroll University, and adopted into the repertoire of the Cleveland Dance Repertory Company. "Regarding a Deaf Child" was published in my book, Set Down Here in 2002.

Cody Kitsap was born on the Yakima Reservation in 1929. As a young man, along with other members of his tribe, he worked as a metal fabricator on the Hanford Reservation, helping to construct the buildings that housed the first atomic reactor. Storytelling was a nightly event, and Cody is a natural storyteller. The first chapter of Shadow Chasers is his first published work. Cody retired and lives with his wife Mollie in Woodacre, California. He has four sons.