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"Tea by the Window"
By Ekta Aggarwal

Ginosko (ghin-océ-koe)

To perceive, understand,

realize, come to know;

knowledge that has an inception,

a progress, an attainment.

The recognition of truth by experience.

Language,
the home and receptacle
of beauty and meaning,
itself begins to think and
speak for man and
turns wholly into music,
not in terms of sonority but
in terms of the impetuosity and
power of its inward flow.

Then,
like the current of a mighty river
polishing stones and turning wheels
by its very movement,
the flow of speech creates in passing,
by virtue of its own laws, meter and
rhythm and countless other relationships,
which are even more important,
but which are as yet unexplored,
insufficiently recognized, and
unnamed.

— Thomas Merton

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Feral

Michael Cadnum

Most of the year, the riverbed is empty.
Feral dogs race along the gentle slope,
and this is where we abandon refrigerators,
obsolete computers, and half-burned mattresses,
and, if we have nothing, this is where we live.

The mop drying on the side porch, the blouse
hanging on a clothesline: things like
the way they are.

A pony in the cul-de-sac,
trudging around in a circle:
you can rent a ride and clop along
the sawdust strewn around the street-end.
It's a journey like many others, a word written

on glass. You parked under my window,
your new four-door a box of a solitude.
The speck of your cigarette
was all you were. Not simply all
that could be seen. This was
you, feeding yourself the dark.

The Misfortune of Shallow Sight

Ernest Williamson III

she slid through the sackcloth
like a silkworm
gracing the sweet softness
of aching movement
of slender shaved legs
and her hair was blessed
with a kink
golden brown
fresh
clean
like the liking
to a week old kitten
her hands were
sweet perfumes
penetrating the dermis
with intent on making man smile
without reason
but her eyes were darted and gray
uneasy to my own sights
yet her scent
the vitality of her ways
made me a bit greater than a man with common sight
her lack was no metaphor needed
for this iteration
I give you
in fact
my eyes are now dribblets for hawks
carrion for foolish men
who seem to eat
with their eyes
I am blind
and so happy to confess
to all of the noisy permutations
of ogling formalities
proud beings
with tearless eyes

WHITE TREES IN THE DISTANCE

Lyn Lifshin

a white wind of
petals, maybe snow.
The longest I've
been so close to
you on the sheet
of paper. Like you
death, these poems
about you, a wild
surprise. The last
page in the note
book, still I think
I'll need another
notebook before I
can let you go

Late

Mary Stojak

Time was nothing when I gazed into your eyes. Tiny hazel umbrellas that contracted and expanded as clouds moved across the summer sky. Stories of light passed across them faster than my vision into their questions and answers. I had to run for the bus, I turned and saw you watching me.

I banged on the closing doors because I was late. Didn't you know that I couldn't wait for another bus? When the bus driver moved the lever spreading the black-gummed mouth wide, I tried to smile, to act like everything would be okay. Unbalanced, I grabbed a silvery pole, looking back at you once more.

My timing has never been good. How many times did you ask me if I wanted a cup of coffee before I said yes? If I hadn't been bored that April day, I would never have gone with you to Xandos; I would never have gone to your apartment.

I know you've taken this bus route before when we've gone to see the O's. Full green trees and those Baltimore facades of brick and stone you like, moved past until a red light stared down the bus and we had to stop. I glanced at my wrist, I didn't need to look, I guess it's a habit, knowing I'd be late for work again. I knew there was nothing that I could do. The bus was just another excuse I would add to my repertoire.

When the damn bus finally started up again, we drove past tangles of refuse and sad buildings where people erupted from the scarred doorways. Who would think that anyone could live in such a place? A patch of green was fighting the death all around it near the corner, right before you cross the bridge. A Black-Eyed Susan was growing out of the broken cement.

Not long ago, words of love would spill from your mouth each time you saw me. Only a year has passed and already you're silent like these crowded people on the bus. I was still trembling when we crossed the bridge above Highway 83.

One, two, three times the bus stopped downtown and people tumbled out onto the hot sidewalks and I joined the faceless walkers the fourth time. I couldn't help but look at my wrist again as I fell into step with the crowd. You don't know what this feels like, you're the one who sits at your desk for hours on end, working as you call it, reading term papers and gazing off into space.

Did you know that your constant talk once annoyed me, interrupting me when I was reading, stealing my attention when I'd given myself to the touch of your skin against mine? I imagined the groomed faces reading my thoughts about your silence today when I told you how I felt. Don't you love me?

On the fifth floor, the swarm of employees, the ones I knew had talked in the aisle only a few minutes before, maybe even about me, were already seated in their squares of rose-colored panels. I did what I always do, threw down my briefcase on the gray desk as if I don't give a damn. You probably don't even remember what sounds your

computer makes when you turn it on. Those welcoming tones marked my late arrival and I imagined them looking up, smug in their own sense of time. When I clicked on my email, I knew what I'd find there, a note from the clock-watcher.

I've never felt as alone as I did when I walked to her office; the only sound was the muffled strikes of my heels on the tightly woven carpet. I knocked softly on her door and then took my place in the inquisitor's chair, sitting straight in the cloying black leather, watching her gray-rooted head bent over an open file. You would have been proud of me, how I kept my hormones in check. When she spoke, I didn't need to hear her words because I've heard it all before. The bus, I said. There's no reasoning with a bus or traffic. Yes, I should take an earlier bus. Yes, I won't be late again. Except I knew I would and could tell she saw it in my eyes. I tried to smile and thought about you leaving me.

I walked back to my desk in silence. As the office relaxed, the soft clicks of keyboards, the rustling of papers returned and I cursed my bad timing. My imagination was going wild, I wondered what I would do, me on my own. Would I lose my job?

Why couldn't you say anything before I went to work? You act like I can read your mind. Yes, yes, I know. If I hadn't been so upset, I would have known that you still love me. Please, just say it one more time.

fleshbone, what might have been

Sarah Dawson

Autumn
leaves of treachery
have fallen on soft, wet earth.
Trampled into an umber pulp of fleshy dirt in salty rains.

Under,

a bog,
a lonely skeleton stripped of veins
remains,
just sharp bones broken.

in the dark,
wait for reason.

There is so much winter before the next change of season.

What she had given him, delicately, was death. She had made sex finite. Always, until now, it had been too much, bigger than all system, an empyrean as absolute as those first boyish orgasms, when his hand would make his soul pass through a bliss dense as an ingot of gold. Now at last, at forty, he saw through it, into the spaces between the stars. He emptied the condom of water and brought it with him out of the bathroom and in the morning found it, dry as a husk, where he had set it, on the bureau top among the other Christmas presents.

from "Transaction" by John Updike

Moments

Christopher Hart

31 Minutes of Life

They rested their bodies against the crumbling walls of the interior courtyard, exhaustion pressing their shoulders downwards in the midst of a suspicious and screeching silence. Sarah's two male companions straightened their tired, aching backs, exertion visible through the slowness of their movements. Knuckles red and worn from exposure to the elements, the men simultaneously lit hand rolled cigarettes.

Death remained a permanent fixture in the soldiers' daily lives. As inconspicuous as an elephant, it could not be missed. It enveloped, diffused through, and floated within the air. It was smelled in the grass, was felt in the cold smoothness of rifle butts, was tasted in the drinking water, was heard in the beating of birds' wings, and was witnessed when a comrade succumbed to its advances. And it was clever. By remaining ever so still, it could convince unsuspecting soldiers that their feelings were illusionary; that it was a behemoth that happened to have perished while standing, bones crumbling into dust. This was its magic: it lulled its victims into complacency, causing them to forget that Death could not be defeated, nor escaped, but was eternal.

Without fail, soldiers crossed the demarcation between reality and Death's realm. But the entry was never immediately perceptible. A temporal fluctuation, a realignment of reality's fabric, was not something that occurred instantaneously. Instead, victims resided for moments in this nether-Realm, transfixed by the beauty of the location, until a mini-tremor reframed their surroundings. Shifting, reality's edges shook and bulged against their constraints, and settled into a new conformation: beauty transformed into ugliness, love into indifference, happiness into pain.

28 Minutes of Life

The smoke curled up lazily, resting in a grey cloud above their heads as the artillery bombardment began. Momentarily absent, then present, the wind alternated between powerful gusts and pitiful whimpers. The sun irradiated the crumbling courtyard walls surrounding the men and woman. Traces of moisture visible on large pieces of reddish green stone that composed the walls of the courtyard indicated the gelid temperature for the particular time of year. The verdant green grass in the courtyard moved in rhythm with the explosion of bombshells, ruining the silence, while in the far corner a grove of pink crabapple trees swayed in the wind.

Sarah dreamt of glorious childhood occurrences, small remembrances cocooned deep in the brain, impossible to forget. Before hunger, before the emotional numbness accompanying war, there was: dark blue water at eye level; surfacing from the depths of

Charleston Lake; crawling onto a floating dock; cannon balling into water; falling into darkness; darkness transitioning into pinkness; sliding through pinkness upon a tarnished piece of sheet metal; emerging onto a mountain with a panoramic view in all directions, trees and stones as far as the eye could see; a man speaking -Sarah, are you glad we've made it to the top of the mountain? Answering –Yes Daddy, thank you for taking me; more speaking –Peanut butter or ham and cheese? Responding murmurs – Ham and cheese; more mumbles –Are you tired? Cold? Anything sore? She answering –No, I feel fine; at home, enveloped by the heat emanating from the arched fireplace, warm bed sheets surrounding her feet; a strongly built young man climbing through her window; the man sliding into her bed; a child's toothless smile gazing from the crook of her arm.

Then the dream tilted imperceptibly, its edges spasmodically convulsing, trumpeting the arrival of an entity wholly unpleasant. Innocent memories suffered the broad brush stroke of disease and terror: hideous caricatures of her most private memories emerged from dark recesses, like unseen spiders escaping from orange rusty drain pipes in the darkness of night. Once immutable scenes became altered, the fine details of special memories morphing, though they retained a similarity to their precursors, an additional torment.

Her screaming surfaced from the depths of slumber, until she convulsed on the green grass beside her companions and woke herself. Her friends gaped at her, frightened but not quite so – appearing more pitiful than scared – as grayish tinged skin, dirt covered fatigues, and thinness reflected from them. She reciprocated their stare, wordlessly communicating the multitude of emotions rushing through her mind, and the men understood innately, having suffered their own nightmares.

Breaking the silence, Sarah quipped, “I hope this siege ends soon.” The men continued to smoke their cigarettes, and Sarah soaked in the lingering effects of her nightmares.

12 Minutes of Life

Their silence was punctured by a bomb shell landing squarely on top of the grove of pink crabapple trees in the courtyard. Brown, crusted, rippled pieces of bark launched into the air, hurled in arcs from the epicenter of the blast to the corners of the compound. In all directions, mangled apple pieces sprayed outwards with blazing hot pieces of metal; pink leaves materialized in every corner of the compound, slowly drifting from the sky.

Sitting in stunned disbelief - soaked in apple juice and covered with tree remnants - the three soldiers watched as the pink crab apple leaves descended from the sky. A dreamlike quality enveloped the scene - the edges appeared to be blurred and fuzzy like a dream sequence from a cheaply produced movie, but perhaps this smudging was only

illusory. From the corner of the courtyard, a giant crater winked at the soldiers, who lay opposite the inverted protrusion, and from the sky the pink leaves tumbled like confetti at a young girl's birthday celebration. "Close call," Sarah said.

The soldiers stood upright; heads held towards the sky, they observed the pink leaves sway left and right with the wind and descend upon their army fatigues. "Have you ever seen anything so beautiful?" one of the men asked.

6 Minutes of Life

His query remained unanswered. Instead, as a sense of wonderment simmered through them, the soldiers linked their hands and walked towards the remnants of the grove of crab apple trees. They studied the charred remains as they arrived where the grove of trees had been, their faces containing a puzzled, inquisitive quality –like a child's face when a new experience presents itself. Black, charred soil surrounded the blast perimeter in a fifteen meter radius, pieces of wood lay strewn about, and stumps of trees stuck up from the ground at random spots. Pink leaves lay upon the grisly scene, contrasting starkly with the dark earth.

Perhaps sensing that they would soon share the same fate as the trees, the soldiers bowed their heads in prayer. Sarah ran her free hand against the crumbling blocks in the wall, feeling the moistness, the coolness, the grittiness, the ridges of the stone. As the men began to cry, sensing the passing and mourning the loss of life, a gust of wind billowed through the courtyard.

0 Minutes of Life

Entranced with the majestic scene, the soldiers heard not the ominous whistling of the shell that would end their lives. Few final words were uttered, or grand gestures made. Sarah continued to feel the contours of the walls, picking at a piece of green moss. Kneeling, the men picked up handfuls of pink leaves, released them, and watched them flutter to the ground. "There is symmetry in everything, even on this forsaken piece of land," Sarah stated. Her companions weren't quite sure they understood, but they nodded in agreement.

Sarah's final thought was of her husband; one man focused on the trajectories the fluttering leaves; the other man thought of nothing. Then a searing heat ran through their very cores, and the three soldiers felt and became nothing. The moment which every person hurtles towards reached its final destination for the soldiers.

From a distance the scene appeared a grisly parallel to the shell landing on top of the grove of crab apple trees. Pieces of bone, skin, and body parts sprayed across the entire courtyard; an arm, part of a head, and a foot made arcs into the air and fell to the ground; metal hurled in every direction; instead of pink leaves, tiny pieces of Sarah and

the two men appeared to materialize over the courtyard; and the walls of the courtyard were covered with specks of red.

The scene, which moments ago had possessed a hazy, beautiful, dreamlike feeling, had morphed into a nightmare: as though the passage of time between the death of the crabapple trees and the death of the soldiers had never happened; as though there was a seamless connection existing between the events; as though one had been experiencing a pleasant dream, when the dream had suddenly morphed into a night-mare. Such is war. Perhaps the pink leaves were only an illusion and all along had been blood and entrails.

I walk over to him, take the case out of his hand, and lay it down next to the wall. “It’s too late,” I say, but he furrows his brow and stares at the case. It is a good sign when a trainee doesn’t understand how a job can fail. I remind him as we head for the door that a heart, once removed from the body, will last only twenty-four hours. There is nowhere left for us to drive. At the door he turns away from me, looking for the silver case, which a nurse is carrying down a long yellow hallway. I give just a light tug on his arm, but he won’t turn around until the nurse has disappeared down another corridor. I understand this is the hardest part of the job; there is no way for me to explain how we could have driven all this way with a heart for which, in the end, there is no life.

from “Driving the Heart” by Jason Brown

Emprison Her Soft Hand Robert Wexelblatt

Or if thy mistress some rich anger shows,
Emprison her soft hand, and let her rave . . .

Keats, "Ode On Melancholy"

Fernlicht was sitting in the mall's security office holding nothing but his temper. Though nearly all the adrenaline had seeped back where it came from it left him shaken. On the other side of an undersized metal desk sat the head of security. He wore navy double-knit trousers and a gray shirt with epaulettes and two pockets. An American flag was sewn on the sleeve, perhaps, Fernlicht thought, in case the captain crash-landed in Ikea or Benetton.

Fernlicht spoke slowly, as if to a dull child.

The enraged driver of the black pickup had coveted Fernlicht's parking space. The local police, called instantly by the two rental cops, had hauled the man away. "Whoa there, Joey. Calm down now," the officer had said. They were on a first-name basis.

Fernlicht hadn't even seen the hulking black truck pull up behind him. The driver got out and started right in. Simple as that. Two vehicles and one space. Joey wanted, apparently, to fight for it. Maim or kill for it. Luckily, Mall Security's white SUV pulled up before blood was spilled.

The real police told the mall patrol to let Fernlicht go. But the security men insisted they had to have a statement even if the police didn't, that they had an obligation. "Records, you understand," one said pompously, "incident report."

So Fernlicht was still seated in the office when another guard, who looked all of sixteen, brought in a woman of about forty. She was well dressed and fed, evidently well cared for too. Fernlicht estimated her hair at roughly eighty dollars, blouse about the same, shoes twice as much.

The teenaged guard stood at attention before his captain holding up two sweaters, one pink, one white, both cashmere. Fernlicht took it for granted that the woman had already denied everything.

"Shoplifting, Captain," declared the boy. "These." He gave the name of the boutique and waited at ease. The Captain nodded once and dismissed him.

The woman, still standing, ignored the captain but turned toward Fernlicht, looking down on him. She probably supposes I'm a plainclothesman, he thought, or a criminal.

"I offered to pay," she said to the captain but still concentrated on Fernlicht.

"You always do—when we *catch* you," the captain observed. "What is it, darling, six times this year?"

Fernlicht rose self-consciously and offered his chair.

“Gallant,” she whispered, sat down softly and crossed her legs, which were exceptionally good ones. Then, to the captain, “Will you be bothering the police?”

“They’re already here, thanks to this gentleman.”

Fernlicht was surprised by the bluff. The police and Joey must be long gone by now.

“Mr. Fernlicht here,” the captain said, “was attacked in the parking lot.”

Her expression of concern was nearly convincing. “Oh. Were you hurt?”

“Not a scratch to face or ego,” said Fernlicht. Impulsively he added, “Excuse me. Will you be needing bail?”

She gave a little giggle. It was musical. “Will I, Captain?” The captain made an unintelligible sound. Turning back to look up at Fernlicht she said with a kind of amazement, “You’d really do that? Bail me out?”

Fernlicht admitted that he would.

“That’s interesting. Really.”

The captain spoke irritably to Fernlicht, dismissing him as he had the teenager. “We’re finished here.”

Balancing the laundry basket against his hip, Fernlicht flipped the switch at the top of the basement stairs.

He set the basket down and tried again, pushing the switch slowly this time, getting the feel of its uselessness. Something was indeed broken or cut or split. These switches can work for years and go just like that, thought Fernlicht who, to put it mildly, was no electrician. With electricity, as with life itself, there’s seldom a warning. It’s there and then it isn’t.

Though he was an adult in possession of the facts, for Fernlicht electricity seemed perilous in a way that, say, plumbing wasn’t. Make a mistake with the plumbing and you get wet; one goof with the juice and who knows? Fernlicht preferred taking electricity for granted to thinking about its mystery. But the switch was kaput. It was a moment of truth. Fernlicht, five years a homeowner, decided to pick up the gauntlet.

He carefully removed the plate and inspected the wires in the half-light at the top of the stairs. It was going to be complicated. There were three outlets, two next to the switch and one underneath. He gave himself a pep talk. Sure thing. All he needed was to find a new apparatus exactly like the old one and attach the wires in the same way. But first he had to find the right circuit breaker and this would be hard since the basement light couldn’t be turned on or off. He decided to attach a lamp to one of the outlets. Whatever breaker made the lamp go out would presumably be the right one.

Fernlicht had a quick vision of himself twitching wildly then sliding slowly down the stairs. How long before someone would come to look for him? He made a note that, should he decide to kill himself, he ought to alert the police first.

Fernlicht fetched his desk lamp, plugged it into one of the outlets next to the light switch, then turned it on. It worked. Then he went for his flashlight. Amazingly, it worked too.

The telephone rang when he was halfway down the stairs. He stopped. *Thou shalt always answer a ringing phone.* Like all powerfully conditioned responses, this commandment dated from childhood. His parents had taken a religio-moralistic view of the telephone. On the one hand, the network was made up of everybody who had signed the social contract, a tacit clause of which declared that, whenever society rang, you had to answer. Morality depends on revelation, telling the truth, the whole truth, on demand. Locked in our bags of skin, in our private chambers of imagery, our first duty is to manifest ourselves. When he was growing up, the phone in Fernlicht's home was never permitted to ring more than three times. *Macht schnell.* Even more indelible was his parents' reaction when the phone rang after nine o'clock. This evoked fear and trembling, like Samuel being summoned by a ferocious God, and was doubtless a vestige of conditioning by a still earlier generation for whom telephones were reserved for emergencies. *Someone's dead, someone's dead,* tolled the insistent receiver. Ask not for whom.

Where telecommunications were concerned Fernlicht's parents were a transitional generation. Thus his mother combined the panic of nighttime calls with the nonchalance of morning chatter. Fernlicht had suffered from both.

He could remember sitting on the floor in his parents' bedroom. Morning sun criss-crossed the beige carpet. He picked at his corduroy overalls. His mother was running through her list of confidantes, head cocked, gossiping as she applied her make-up. In the corner of her open closet, behind the rows of shoes, lurked the big blue Kotex box. He felt ignored and resentful. The telephone can be worse than a younger sister.

So it was with mixed feelings that Fernlicht stopped on the stairs and went to the kitchen to pick up the phone.

"Hello, Mr. Fernlicht. My name is Ted Fredericks, from Bulloch and Wiseman, investment counselors. We're offering free consultations and would be glad to go over your portfolio with you."

"No, thank you."

It took a moment for Fernlicht to recollect what he had been doing. The stairs, the switch, the circuit board.

Flashlight in hand, he was turning breakers on and off when the phone rang again and he had to go upstairs. This time it was a woman's voice, soft and enticing. "Hello, Mr. Fernlicht?" she breathed. "This is Diane Tunbridge. From the Couples Club? I'm sure you've heard of us. We're a discreet organization dedicated to serving single people like yourself—"

"Forgive me for interrupting, but how do you know I'm single or, for that matter, what I'm like, Ms. Tunbridge?"

“Well, Mr. Fernlicht—*Alexander*, you see, we—”

“No, thank you very much.”

Heading back to the basement Fernlicht realized that he had attained the second stage of hermithood. More than half the phone calls he received were of this sort. Change your long-distance service. Accept our credit-card insurance. Buy our bonds. We’re doing a survey. Enrich your alma mater. Save the homeless veterans, harp seals, children. Like everyone else he detested telemarketing but it had never occurred to him to do anything about it.

Ms. Tunbridge was the right straw. In that instant the long cord of telephonic obligation was as broken as his old light switch. He would get an answering machine, an evasion unknown to his parents and one that would have horrified them. Yes, when he went for his new switch he would buy an answering machine, a baffle between him and the world.

And that is how Fernlicht came to be at the mall.

After leaving the security office Fernlicht stopped at Radio Shack and bought an answering machine then, in the hardware section of Sears, found a match for his defunct light switch. It had been an eventful foray for a September Saturday: a dab of electrical failure, irritating phone calls, a dollop of parking rage, interactions with two species of police, an unsettling if flattering scrutiny and something like inchoate flirting with an attractive shoplifter who had impeccable taste. On the way home Fernlicht thought not about the woman but about the lives of mall security officers. One summer during graduate school he had worked as a watchman for the Burns Detective Agency. The interview had been a laugh. Did he have a police record? No? Excellent. Did he want to be issued a sidearm? No? Okay. The pistol was optional, but the white shirt and black tie were mandatory. It had been nothing like mall security. He had been alone in laboratories, factories, a conservatory of music; he had studied European history between his hourly rounds, and phoned the woman from whom he was now divorced. He felt for that kid who came into the office, imagined him failing to maintain his dignity in a hive of harassed shoppers, to pass ungiggled-at through a herd of high school girls. Fernlicht’s heart went out to the poor boy. It couldn’t be pleasant to have such bad acne, to have to don an ill-fitting pseudo police uniform, and, on top of that, having to arrest a spectacularly classy woman for concealing cashmere. And not just any woman, but one who was *soignée*, voluptuous, older but by no means old. Adolescence was bad enough without all that.

The answering machine lay snug in its Styrofoam cradle. Fernlicht did not care to press his luck with things electrical. Not only had the house not been reduced to cinders or his heart fibrillated into quitting, but the new switch worked better than the old one. It yielded a decorous, almost inaudible click when flipped, more feeling than sound. There was even a little pinpoint of light to show where it was should he be

fumbling for it in the dark. This perfect repair had been carried out with only one more telephonic interruption, and that was a wrong number. Fernlicht loved wrong numbers. He couldn't be polite enough to people who had no intention of speaking to him.

The profound complacency of successful home repair was upon him as he set about preparing his dinner at seven o'clock. He felt like a stout and competent homeowner, a bit like Mr. Badger in *The Wind in the Willows*.

The phone rang shortly before eight, while he was clearing up. Had the answering machine been set up Fernlicht could have screened the call, which still felt like an evasion of moral responsibility. He could have ignored it anyway, let it ring; and, had he been doing anything the least worthwhile, he would have. He had done it often enough before. In his opinion, enduring the pain of importunate ringing set the moral scales aright.

"What are you doing home on a Saturday night?"

"Who's this?"

"The lady with the cashmere. And the legs."

"Pardon me . . . how. . . why?"

"*How?* Oh, easy. The security cop mentioned your name, didn't he? As to *why*, there are too many reasons, none good enough." She ended on a little upbeat.

Fernlicht didn't hang up. Not yet.

"Why did you offer to bail me out of jail?"

He hesitated. "Slip of the tongue."

"Fair enough. So, how would you describe yourself?"

"Defrocked professor."

"Professor of?"

"History."

"Why defrocked?"

"Just not given tenure."

"I used to think tenure had something to do with a decade—ten *years*?"

Fernlicht waited.

"You're divorced, aren't you?"

"It shows?"

"Mm. And I'm a kleptomaniac, if you haven't guessed."

"One of the rich ones who always pay?"

"My daddy used to write the checks, now I do. But I'm asking about you. *All* men like talking about themselves, in my experience. But professors talk for a living."

"Not in my case. Not any more."

Up to a point, Plato taught, it is profitable to think of a person as a country. Useful questions can be asked. What are his topography, resources, economic prospects? Who are his allies and enemies? Is he well or badly governed? Where does he fall on

the freedom/security axis? What is the condition of his defenses?

Considered as a nation, Fernlicht is neither large nor backward. He is an unassuming country, advanced in the sense of having achieved a relatively high degree of cultural and political development without quite reaching the point of sclerosis. Long ago his aristocrats were humbled and gave up their hereditary pretensions. Long ago his militarists came to their senses. His peasants are few in number and prefer being picturesque to starting insurrections. In him it is the professional or middle class that prevails and constitutes the center of political gravity. His capital is a bourgeois town. He is democratic and law-abiding.

The tidy land of Fernlicht is large enough to boast both a mountain range and a littoral, for it is impossible to think of him as a flat, landlocked plain. Fernlicht's economy is moderately productive with scarcely any indebtedness. The country is not greedy. It dominates no markets. It imports less than it exports. He always prefers to treat with other nations—like the land of thugs in pickups, for instance—in peaceful ways. While not unprincipled, Fernlicht resists the moral chauvinism under which some neighboring states like to drape their envy or self-interest. Though not behindhand in grasping his own interests, he is generally prudent in pursuing them, preferring even to sacrifice an advantage to avoid unpleasant complications. His neutralist tendencies have more than once won him the position of mediator, though just as often he has been dismissed as lukewarm. Believing firmly that self-government is the best constitution, he will not readily conform to the policies of others, even those of the so-called international community. He is wary of the occasional surges of populist sentimentality within his frontiers and is too patriotic to be a nationalist.

What rescues the land of Fernlicht from being a stupendously dull place, a spiritual Switzerland, is an instinct for play and a culture of continuous self-criticism. There are also significant tensions among the populace. For example, his mountain-dwellers are stern and ascetic, given to inward anguish and spiritual aspirations worthy of their snowy crags. Those who occupy the cities of the coast, however, though neither lazy nor gregarious, prefer a more easygoing existence and resent being made to feel that their lives are superficial. There is friction not only between regions and social strata, but within them. For instance, the intelligentsia is divided against itself, some doggedly serving the status-quo, others despising it; some experimenting with imported cultural novelties, others jealously preserving everything that could be called Fernlichtian tradition; some hammering out bleak or bright visions of the future, others caring only to establish the meaning of the past; some eager to say *we*, others incapable of saying any sentence that does not begin with *I*.

Plato's analogy is strained when it comes to history, where the personal seems quite unlike the national. The teaching of history was once Fernlicht's profession, so what was it he taught? He taught that history means inquiry and that this inquiry is never-ending, that no nation can be certain of its own history, or free from the periodic shocks

of revisionism. Only dishonest and dangerous states that have substituted myth for history will confidently claim an unambiguous past.

Fernlicht's history falls into three crucial epochs. These would be the sudden death of his father, his aborted academic career, and his failed marriage. What these three momentous episodes have in common is, of course, loss. In the history of any nation there are events which the people take for turning-points because they appear to end definitively. But this is a misapprehension. Some do not end at all but resonate through every moment that follows. This is pre-eminently true of losses. As everyone knows, the sour taste of defeat lingers far longer than the sweet tang of victory. Triumph stands with its legs spread wide and walks forgetfully into the golden future whereas defeat freezes the past into an indissoluble block of granite against which the present, so to speak, hones its knife.

Self-reliance is the land of Fernlicht's national obsession. Having fought for its independence, it stands alone, uncosseted and uncared-for, but self-reliant and free.

But of course Fernlicht didn't say anything remotely like this to the woman on the phone.

"History," she repeated. "It isn't the same thing as *fame*. I can understand people wanting to be famous. I mean you can wear just about anything. Tell me something from history," she begged.

Fernlicht cleared his throat as he used to do at the start of his lectures. "Prince Klemens Wenzel Nepomuk Lothar von Metternich died in 1859 at the age of 86, never once in his long life having lost his head. He might have known Beethoven. Beethoven was almost Metternich's antithesis. Beethoven said, 'Only the pure in heart can make a good soup.' Metternich was the kind of guy who couldn't make any kind of soup at all. He was a natural despot, a plotter and a schemer who loved his secret police, the kind of durable operator who's eventually called a statesman. In 1810 he escorted the teenage Austrian Archduchess Marie Louise to Paris where, thanks to his machinations, she married Napoleon Bonaparte. Poor Josephine was put aside. Metternich did this for reasons of state, which is a phrase of which he was particularly fond. You should know that just a few years before Metternich had done everything he could to tie complicated knots around Napoleon, but the Emperor sliced through them at a stroke at the Battle of Austerlitz."

"Austerlitz? Do you know that was Fred Astaire's real name?"

They were both silent for a moment, stalled.

"So," she began again, "you like this picture of Metternich taking the poor virgin to Napoleon?"

"They made babies together. But no, I don't care for the picture."

"Then what?"

Fernlicht had a cordless telephone. He walked around the house as he talked to the woman. He went from the kitchen to the study to the living room to the stairway.

He flicked his new light switch at the top of the basement stairs.

“After Waterloo Metternich pretty much arranged Europe to suit his taste and ideas. Five powers, balanced like a chandelier, laissez-faire economics combined with repressive politics. If you weren’t at the top you were badly off and it got worse every year. Yet Metternich’s chandelier hardly trembled. Then, in the month of February 1848, rioters in Vienna, including university students, overthrew the Prince’s regime and he had to flee to London where he was stuck for three whole years without a bite of genuine Wiener schnitzel or Sacher Torte. What I *do* like is the picture of Metternich trying to keep down overcooked roast beef.”

She made a little encouraging noise. “I suppose you prefer those rioting students?”

“They had their problems, too.”

“As do we all, as do we all. Take me. I’m divorced and rich yet I steal things. I was rich even before I got divorced but now I’m richer. It wasn’t the kleptomania, by the way, as you might think. I mean that caused my divorce. No, he knew all about that to start with. He said it was what was *behind* the kleptomania.”

“What *is* behind the kleptomania?”

“Look. Aren’t you going to take my side? I’m perfectly prepared to take yours.”

“My wife just went away. To tell the truth, I think it was a level-headed thing to do.”

“Was that *before* or *after* you got defrocked?”

“During.” Fernlicht said, still playing with his new light switch. “Tell me,” he said, “aren’t you ashamed of stealing things?”

“Actually, at the moment I’m feeling quite proud of myself. I made it through the whole summer with only one suicide attempt. How many can say the same?”

Fernlicht, now circling the kitchen table, realized that she must know his address.

“What sort of things do you steal,” he asked, “beside sweaters?”

“Oh, small things, gadgets, stuff that *folds*. It’s really just shopping, no different from using a credit card.”

“Unless you’re arrested.”

“Point taken. I think you should know that I’m on the boards of at least half a dozen charities. Philanthropy are us. You have to give as well as take. And that’s not all. Some people have claimed to *love* me.”

He laughed. “Would you be one of them?”

“Oh, you *are* clever.”

“Not any more.”

“No? But you knew all that about Metternich and Beethoven and soup. I’m just bubbling over with questions. Take the phrase ‘the whole nine yards.’ I know what it means, sort of, by why *nine*? Wouldn’t *ten* make more sense? And the Pledge of Allegiance, that’s always puzzled me. I mean is the *country* one nation indivisible

under God or is it *God* who's indivisible while the nation could split up any old time? But if God's officially not divisible what about the Trinity? Just the other day I was wondering what's so wrong about hermaphroditism? I know you're not a physicist but could you possibly tell whether light's made of waves or particles? You're an historian, so do the times make the man or vice versa?"

Her questions weren't innocent, weren't even really questions. To Fernlicht this interrogative flirtation seemed a way of feeling the sweater to see if it was worth boosting. She was acquisitive but not hungry for knowledge.

"Do you collect men?"

"Pardon me. Collect?"

"Or just telephone them?"

"*Men. Them.* All these plurals are so *male.*"

He still didn't hang up.

"Why *do* you steal things?"

"I told you. I can't help it."

"Kleptomania is to theft as melancholia is to sadness," Fernlicht mused aloud. "Compulsive taking, a need to possess. A psychiatrist might say it's due to ungiving parents."

"One likes to feel the world's goods moving through one's hands like water through a trout's gills. It's not unpleasant."

"I'll bet you've had a lot of shrinks."

"And each one comes up with a novel theory. But originally I wasn't shrunk for kleptomania. I mean that came later."

"When did the kleptomania come?"

"Like most deformations, in adolescence."

"And are there side-effects?"

"Getting arrested, that's one; meeting strange men, that's another. By the way, what were you doing at the mall today?"

"Buying a light switch and an answering machine."

"Why an answering machine?"

"Telemarketers."

"Can you imagine calling complete strangers one after another? Can you imagine dealing with all that *rejection*?"

He strode into the living room. "You called me. I might have hung up on you."

"Went right across my mind, zip, like a comet."

"How exactly did you become a kleptomaniac?"

"Good of you to ask. All right. I was twelve and royally screwed up. So I went to Miss Dawes, my favorite teacher, the one who made me love Emily Dickinson. You know? *I'm nobody, who are you? Are you nobody too?* So anyway, I told Miss Dawes everything that was going wrong and asked her what to do."

“What did Miss Dawes suggest?”

“Stealing.”

“What?”

“Well, it made a kind of sense really. A lot of us have demons we can’t get rid of, Miss Dawes explained and said we have to trick them. She suggested stealing might divert mine. Her point was that, instead of doing a *lot* of bad things, I should concentrate on just *one*.”

“True story?”

“True in a way, not true in a way.”

“What *really* happened?”

“Oh, it was such a long time ago. Are you going to use that answering machine?” Her voice rose a little. “This is my letter to the world.’ *Get lost*. See? Even to stop speaking to the world you have to speak to it. As for me, I’d like to have someone in my life. Other people seem to. Now, pay attention, ex-Professor Fernlicht. This is *extremely* important. Do you think we’re compatible?”

Fernlicht, back in his study now, sat down at his desk and stared at the brown blotter and weighed her question.

“No. I think we’re almost completely incompatible.”

“Almost?” Again, the hopeful rise at the end.

“I can’t stand Metternich and you’re clearly a princess. I never steal and you do it all the time. I can’t join things while you join everything. I’m intimidated by telephones and you dial up total strangers. You sympathize with telemarketers; I hang up on them. All we have in common is disappointing our spouses and ourselves.”

“That’s about the sorriest speech I ever heard. The saddest.”

“Sorry.”

“Sad.”

“No, *I’m* sorry.”

There was a silence. Fernlicht wondered which of them would hang up first.

“So,” she resumed briskly, “you’ll defeat the telemarketers, pledge nothing to the Sierra Club or the Democratic Party, bar all the intruding strangers. You’ll live in the desert like that saint the angels fed. You’re Greta Garbo? You *vant* to be alone?”

“I wish I didn’t want to be.”

“Well said. Every shoplifter respects honesty.”

“And I admire a thief who pays for the things she doesn’t want.”

“Now, Professor, how are we supposed to know what we want until we take it?”

“Maybe the things you take don’t want to be taken.”

She hummed a bit of an old tune, *Someone To Watch Over Me*. “What would you do if you got a message on your answering machine from *me*?”

Fernlicht put his elbow on his desk. “Listen to it, I suppose.”

“Yes, but would you call back?”

“I don't know.”

Her voice was suddenly harder. “No? You really don't? You're determined to be impossible? Okay, tell me one more thing.”

“What?”

Everybody's trying so damned hard to be happy. Mobs of happiness-seekers all over the damned place. Pursuing like mad. Good Americans all. So, Fernlicht, why aren't *you*? What's the matter with *you*? Emotional constipation? A soul made of frozen water? Indifference turned into an universal principle?”

“I, I couldn't say.”

“Couldn't say,” she was mocking him now. “With you even gallantry is a wall, isn't it? You're just *bristling* with ground-to-air missiles, aren't you? Well, I'm *sick* of your type, Fernlicht, and by that I mean the tepid, the timid, the . . . sociophobic. You remind me of that old joke, the one about how a single woman can get the cockroaches out of her apartment. All she has to do is ask them for a commitment.” She didn't stop with the cockroaches. She was off and running.

Fernlicht thought of refuting her denunciation, insisting on his camaraderie with shoppers seething through malls, even with thugs prepared to fight for a parking space; he considered saying he too looked forward to coming home from work to a roast and TV dreams, was not above fantasizing about lottery windfalls or even the lightning-bolt of love; he almost declared that he shouldn't be mistaken for one of those who believe themselves happy in their unhappiness, that it wasn't he who'd given up on the warm embrace of his fellow citizens but vice versa. Yet the spark of self-defense guttered the moment it was struck. He found he had no wish to argue that the Land of Fernlicht was in its way a tidy, hospitable country, an estimable little kingdom not unlike Denmark, where melancholia, if endemic, is nonetheless picturesque, where children aren't beaten or permitted to starve. He thought of telling her that the chief lesson of history is that any past that can't become a present is pointless, mere dead weight, or that the original sin is our belief that it was committed against us. Instead he fell silent, enduring her invective. What could Fernlicht say when the language of his Land is unintelligible to all who don't live there? And as her rancor swelled, as curiosity curdled to resentment and rebuke turned to aggression, as this woman, who couldn't help stealing even what she could afford, began to damn him, he let her go on, attending almost with a kind of compassion to what she said, aware of how well defended his frontiers were, yet wishing he could hold her grasping hands and somehow find the switch that would light the dark country where she lived.

Proof of Sex

Reine Dugas Bouton

I was born with twelve fingers. They were taken off when I was a baby and now only the slightest bumps exist to tell the story. This detail of my life was irrelevant until I shook hands with someone the other day, and I felt his hand pull away almost imperceptibly. Were my hands sweaty, did I squeeze too hard, not hard enough--then I realized, he thought I had a wart. That's what they look like—a dome-shaped, smooth wartish bump at the end of each hand. Oh, that's where I had a sixth finger, I tell him. He becomes interested in the story.

It's a story I don't like to tell because it eventually leads to the probability that my great-great-great-great-great grandfather, somewhere in Sicily, probably screwed his sister or cousin. There was inbreeding at some point, and that's where the genetic mutation—the extra fingers sprouted. I'm a little embarrassed about that part, because then, people know that somewhere in my family tree, freaky sex was going on and we were punished for it with our extraneous digits, better known as polydactyly. I don't like people thinking about incestuous sex in my family tree, even several generations back—it reflects badly on me somehow.

The same thing happened when I was pregnant. As my baby bump began to grow, I felt a prickly unease at the idea that now the whole world knew that I had sex. Actual sex. The baby was proof. Doesn't matter that I had been married for two years, and let's not discuss before that, when I had lots of sex because everyone knows that's what you do when you're young, foolish newlyweds. But nobody really thinks about it much. When the baby comes, though, it's tangible evidence, an announcement to society: *I have had sex*. The whole world knows with certainty that you have had sex at least once . . . It's worrisome—people knowing something about me that's supposed to be private. Not so private anymore, thanks to the bump.

I'm no prude, but my business is my business. If only there wasn't the goddamn proof. It'll get you every time. And not just a hickey that can be covered with a strategically-tied scarf—there's no hiding an enormous pregnant belly under a pashmina. A bulging pregnant belly that shouts to the world, "I'm the product of two people getting it on!" God help you if you've had trouble getting pregnant, which of course would be me, because then people imagine even more sex going on. Baby-making sex—desperate basal body temperature, it's time honey, maybe this time sex.

I'd like sex to remain a mystery—ancient, ancestral, freaky sex, even more so. I'd like to think that people don't imagine each other doing it. Actually, physically doing it. But I'm not naïve. This clearly isn't the case. People can imagine all the bumping and grinding

they'd like—just keep me out of the picture. Now I'm divorced and not dating, so I'm safe again. Safe from scrutiny and supposition. I've finally found that privacy I'd relished before. Now, there is evidence of nothing. No bumps, no proof. What I do is for me to know and no one to find out.

... I do not for an instant believe that these writers spent much time in the moment of creation, that moment of passion and joy and sorrow and opacity and understanding that is the moment of creation. I may be wrong, but I am willing to venture that it was through their faith in the indescribable and unteachable moment of inspiration—and by this I mean both that moment of divine guidance or influence exerted directly on the mind and soul of humankind, and the act of drawing air into the lungs—that these writers proceeded, as carefully and thoughtlessly as we each of us breathe in and breathe out, with words chosen, seeing those characters they had created no longer darkly, but in the firm and brilliant light of truth.

—Bret Lott, *Before We Get Started*

The Beggar Woman

Rina Ferrarelli

She was weird even for that mountain town
still medieval years after the war:
all the crazies and dummies out in the open,
hearing voices and talking back,
chasing dogs and pinwheels, ribbons and pretty girls,
or chased themselves like stray dogs,
and a sad procession of cripples
came begging at the fairs. But all these were men.
Spun out of the home into the chaos of the street,
a woman her husband had put aside.
I heard she slept in the tunneled passageway
outside the jail, next to the church, the rectory,
lying in her clothes on the cobblestones.
What did she do when ice and snow
covered the ground, when the north wind
bit to the bone? We didn't see her then.
She came around in summer, a large woman
laboring up the street, the stairs, knocking on doors.
When she reached our house, I watched my mother,
still in her twenties then, invite her in,
treat her like a friend, like company, and she
refusing, *No, no, not like this*, filthy,
I thought she meant, the dirt ingrained in the skin
of her wrists, her ankles, stuck between her toes,
a stink I couldn't name coming from her.
No, not like this, she said again, her hands,
palms out, taking in as well, (I see it clearly now),
the taint of her scandalous position.

First appeared in *5AM*

invocation

devin wayne davis

rain. on
encumbered,
hung
-over, days
i cannot stand; smoke

—like i don't
know you're there ...

injured worker,
leaning against

an aspen, or it's birch—perhaps,
sycamore ... again ...

but, to happen upon
this late-afternoon sunlight ...

a prayer ...
stops everything.

salt

devin wayne davis

white
ice is blue inside ...
it crashes
into the sound ...
white
ice swims ... it floats
to land,
and away ...
white
ice, as it breaks
apart, looks like
a bear's paw ...
white ice
tires ...
it
turns to water.

By using her bones like the sails of a ship, the old woman passed outside into the street. She carried the liver as if it were victory to the bottom of a very steep hill.

She climbed the hill and being very old, it was hard on her. She grew tired and had to stop and rest many times before she reached the top.

At the top of the hill was the old woman's house: a tall San Francisco house with bay windows that reflected a cloudy day.

She opened her purse which was like a small autumn field and near the fallen branches of an old apple tree, she found her keys.

Then she opened the door. It was a dear and trusted friend. She nodded at the door and went into the house and walked down a long hall into a room that was filled with bees.

There were bees everywhere in the room. Bees on the chairs. Bees on the photograph of her dead parents. Bees on the curtains. Bees on an ancient radio that once listened to the 1930s, Bees on her comb and brush.

The bees came to her and gathered about her lovingly while she unwrapped the liver and placed it upon a cloudy silver platter that soon changed into a sunny day.

from "The Weather in San Francisco" by Richard Brautigan

PARIS STORY

Stephen Busby

You meet her in Paris. You're 23, a beautiful age, and you're waiting for the people and the place and someone with whom you'll fall in love to change your life, and you haven't realised that every day, every second, your life has just changed, but still you go on hoping. Then one day, when you've had enough and have given up the job you found in desperation, someone at the school where you were working says that they know somebody who'd take over your little studio flat. This is the little place high up on the sixth floor under the roof, one skylight and a hot-plate where you warm your soup, which the French call a maid's room, next to what they also call a toilet but which is nothing more than a hole in the porcelain floor. This little studio is the place where you've slept and lain long in bed in hope and intense sexual longing, and where you were once ill and feverish and wondered if you were going to make it, if in weeks to come someone would discover your festering remains – what a waste of a young and beautiful life they would say, next to the toilet not far from the *Champs Elysées*. This is the place where you open the door to her: this young woman who's come to see the studio, this unworldly incarnation, this tall apparition all the way from Africa whose skin shines and glows with a dark warmth that you've never experienced before, who moves and breathes in her body in a way which takes your own breath away, who is clothed in bright colours that you've never thought before could be worn or at least not in that way, who smiles at you and looks at you in a way which had escaped your overworked imagination, who now steps into the little room and declaims its beauty, who says she will take it, immediately, but not before asking after you: who you are and what you are doing here, why you are leaving and what is your life, and what did you think of this book on your shelf that she too has read, and so you too - she says - like this same view in the print in the wall that you have both bought at the *Centre Pompidou*. This is the woman who straight away says simply yes to your suggestion that you both go eat somewhere so that you can tell her about the landlady, the sunset through the skylight and all the things about your life which you have never told anyone before. So you take her to your favourite restaurant, the one that will demonstrate how much you have succeeded in penetrating the Parisian culture, where there's a waiter who will recognise you and where you'll have the opportunity to say something knowledgeable about the local *cuisine*, where you sit together in a little corner and the waiters in their long white aprons serve you the snails which you would never have ordered if you'd been eating alone. And you look across the small crowded tabletop at each other and talk and smile and she keeps laughing, at nothing in particular, in a way that is so contagious and light of life and wonderful and new that there is no problem when you both return up the little staircase for another drink and sit together on the floor against the bed because there are no chairs, and why would you not lean against each other and go on laughing, and

drink to the mystery of all the infuriating and inexplicable things about France which you have both noticed and therefore share and have come to feel some affection for, this place, this land and country and culture which now you are leaving and which she has only just begun to discover, and where she is studying, at the *Sorbonne* of all places, and reading literature of all things before she has to go back to Africa in a year's time, of all countries, and where no doubt she is bound to fall in love, probably with an idealistic and dashing yet inadequate young Frenchman, you are relieved to speculate with her, who will not make her happy and may not be the great lover that they all profess to be. So you turn to her and kiss, with your heart beating hard and your body trembling and she welcomes this, she responds with a passion that takes you aback, in your slightly alcoholic haze, as, befuddled, you help her remove the ravishing colours to reveal another one beneath: one that glows with a polished golden-brown hue and which burns and breathes when you touch it, like warmed satin, when you taste, stroke and caress it, when you kiss it, enter it, drink deeply from and adore it all that night long. And the most astonishing thing is that although you are not all that much experienced in love, there is a gift which comes to you in that little studio under the skylight that night, and the gift is a spontaneous kind of confidence and authority along with your self-consciousness and shyness, and another gift with it, which is her smiling acceptance and ease with just how everything is, along with her intentness and then the whole explosive mysterious business of a woman who offers herself up freely to the whole fire within her, and which stuns you, never have you witnessed the force of something so akin to total abandonment, never have you dared surrender yourself in the way that she does now, how many men have, how many can? When you wake in the morning under the skylight which is still there, you know that you have to leave because there is a plane ticket and a new job that is waiting for you, but that something has at last slipped away from you: a kind of control and predictability which was shed somewhere in the night. It leaves you breathless with unknowingness and uncertainty and you know that you must give yourself up utterly to it, up to love and impetuosity and generosity, to not necessarily knowing what the next day will bring. So you do this, you separate later that day at the station where you take the train to the airport, while you are still wet, numb and glowing from love. You kiss again before turning to the train but you are so dazed and exhausted now that you hardly know what is happening, just that you will come back here, or she to you, or the world will make you meet somewhere soon, in some other cocoon. She sends you a black and white postcard of an unmade bed streaked with sunlight with the word 'memories' written beautifully on the back. You both murmur down the phone all the things that you would now like to do for and give to each other, all the inconsequentialities of your respective days, all the longings of your long nights. And when next you board a plane for Paris so early in the morning it is in order to arrive at her door, which was your door, with flowers and *croissants*, and to tumble quickly into bed. The weekend slips by and leads to others: in London, Venice and once more under

the skylight, then in a couple of months to two whole weeks off together in the south of France, where you brave the still-chilly Mediterranean and bask in warm nights on bad beds in *fermes-auberges* in the mountains, and where, at last, you dare to broach a possible future, beyond the dreams which up until now you have shared with each other: about living in grand style, or even in poor style, in all of the world's four corners, as if nothing would ever stop you, never could. But this time you realise there is a kind of barrier, one that you might not be able to breach simply with your dreams, little jokes and longings. This barrier is the great continent of Africa, and, more specifically, there to where she is soon returning: to a family, an inheritance, and to a man who will marry her, a man to whom she has been betrothed since childhood so that two great tribal families will come together and this for many other reasons that you find you are unable to hear. To your dismay a part of her seems resigned to this future and not even in a negative way. Yet because she loves you, or perhaps knows that she must test you, she decides to risk everything and to leave half-suggested in the air one evening that if you were to marry her then there might be a chance. You astonish yourself by instinctively recoiling at this possibility, for it seems to you, despite the largeness of your love, or because of the fear you suddenly feel welling up in you, that marriage would not, could not, should not be an option. The word is too large, too awful, too final; it would involve your own very very white family, explanations, commitments, no going back. The word doesn't smack of the frivolous and fantastical way in which you would have travelled the world together, in utter freedom, but instead would mean that your passion - which up until now has been the sole private preserve of two people - becomes the common property and the concern of others, who might not look upon it with unconditional acceptance but rather would subject it to their own judgement and expectations, and which would surely kill it until it were quite dead. And so you hesitate, prevaricate for a few moments, which is long enough for her to pick up the spirit that is less than whole-hearted in you, the voice that is after all cautious and fearful, the smallness which could not honour the scale of the risk that she might have been prepared to take. Yet because she is stubborn or still perhaps hopeful, she has you meet her father, one evening, when he's visiting London, unless she had him come over especially to see you but this you will never know. The evening in the little restaurant in Soho does not go well although the man is polite to you: he is a wealthy academic, you are tongue-tied and awkward; you try to describe to him who you might be but without much conviction, and you no longer know which result you're hoping for, unless it is that this powerful African leader should - in the middle of Soho - magically make everything easier, should reach into your soul to help you find there some resolve, courage and purpose and help you to demonstrate it clearly, something which even 25 years later you are still not sure you know how to do. This is how, in a kind of desperation, you and she come to live out your last days together in London and you learn at least that it is possible to love, in a way, even while knowing that it is finite: that one can make love, in love, in the knowledge that every

time each kiss might be the last. One day near the end you go with her to one of her family's apartments where some of her brothers or cousins are staying, where you cannot understand all the relationships between them, where the rooms have begun to resemble what you imagine is Africa, and especially where the Oxbridge English that you are used to hear coming from her is suddenly transformed. The sounds are still recognisably rooted in your language but are so steeped in something foreign, so utterly other; and this you realize is the beautiful, holy and long-limbed brown body upon which you have lavished so much of your attention and spent so much passion, this is the version of Africa whom you had thought you knew: this confidante, this sister, mother, once slave to your race and now saviour, this person who was never going to be able to deliver you sufficiently from yourself; here she is, with you, this woman, and yet here she is not; no she is not. And so you separate, finally, from each other several times, thinking each time the last and hoping that it is not. One day you even encounter each other with astonishment and dread on a busy train platform and so wander for the afternoon in Kew Gardens near the great Greenhouse where you admire the orchids and cacti and continue to touch and excite each other, hopelessly, because you think that the longing will never go away. And you are sitting at work one morning when the phone rings announcing that she is downstairs in the lobby, and you just drop the phone and race away, to the astonishment of everyone in the office, then walk entwined together in Green Park, silently, and finally, yes finally, she turns at the Park gate, will not kiss, and walks slowly away. You watch her go, the tall figure in its insolent hat and bright colours, wondering, knowing, she will not turn back. And all the years you have told yourself this story: different versions of it, no doubt to suit your moods and needs of the moment and according to what you suppose constitutes your memory of it, but you are no longer sure. Looking back you realize that it may not have happened, that something did – but what? You have long gone through the stage when you needed to keep much of it very alive in you, for there have been others, though none you think so profound. Sometimes you wonder how much of yourself you left behind at the gates of Green Park that day: some parts that seem, sometimes (so other people tell you) steeped in a kind of sorrow or regret and yet other aspects which you intuit you are right to cherish, and which honour the passionate heart of that 23-year-old who loved then with as much conviction and courage as he knew how.

Atonement
Black Rock City, Nevada
Suzanne Roberts

Blue scatters the red horizon,
washes the earth with dust.
Women worship in the sun.
Men sail from the sky. The beat
of drums rolls across the desert.
Sand paints the sky into my eyes.
A girl hangs a photograph of her dead,
falls to her knees. I struggle
with not touching her.
Clouds trace wispy shadows
across a burnished sea. The loss—
an afterimage of the sun
burned onto the retina,
blinding but necessary.

Surreal Landscapes
Suzanne Roberts

After I toured your studio, viewed
the enormous oils—the canvases swirling
with gray domes of granite, yellow spokes
of aspen, the green sway of pine,
and cloud-spangled skies—
I dreamt I crawled past the threads
of canvas and layers of oil,
entered the meridian of your painted
world. The mountains melting
in the liquid terrain of your body.

The Urn

Suzanne Roberts

She wanted to know where Grandma went,
was shown the cold ceramic urn and told,
Grandmother is here. Wasn't she sent,
the girl asked, to Heaven? Where is her soul?
She watched the urn move from place to place—
a shelf, the mantelpiece. The parents never finding
the suitable spot. That night, the quiet was replaced
by sounds of jagged glass interrupting
the dawn. Beside the window, the mother found
her daughter sitting in early morning light.
Each leg bent beneath her, each formed
the letter V, a small wren posed for flight.
She looked to her mother, suddenly shy,
 fragments of bone catching light from the sky.

She draws. She draws a door. On the windowpane in breath.
Breathes on the glass and draws. A door, an O spells polio. Six
years old. She dreams. Walks with her father again. River of
glass. To the river of glass collecting bits of this and that to
examine later under the microscope. To hold. Insects, plants,
stones. To draw. All is.

Votive: vision.

Drawn to the swirling. Live your life.

And her beloved papa photographs her and she makes love to
the lens even then.

Live your life.

Embrace the life you've been given.

Your grave image. Even then.

Votive: vision.

from "Votive: Vision" by Carole Maso

A Place for Waiting

John T Hitchner

Before his wife died, Eben Sheldon had been a man of routine. In the summer following her death Eben changed his daily routine very little. He began his day before first light. Dressed in khaki trousers and long-sleeve khaki shirt, he ate breakfast and, while he sipped coffee, read the morning paper that had been tossed onto his front porch. Preferring quiet as he read, he kept the kitchen radio turned off. As Eben read he sometimes mouthed, whispered words as if to reinforce their meaning. Afterward, he washed and rinsed the breakfast dishes, placed them in the strainer on the counter, and pushed in his chair at the table. He then was ready for his outdoor rituals.

Walking through the mud-room off the kitchen, Eben removed a single key from a nail eye-level beside the back screen door. He let the screen door thack shut behind him, walked to his garage and opened the double doors, the sun warm on his neck and the aromas of metal, oil, and wood as pleasant as Virginia's soft voice. From a row of garden tools arranged on hooks along one wall, he took down the three-pronged claw and the grass shears and walked to the garden in the side yard, where he loosened soil, pulled weeds and trimmed grass grown too close to marigolds, miniature roses, and tall zinnias and irises. He carried the clippings to his vegetable plot in the backyard and firmed them beneath tomato, pepper, and cucumber plants. The sun on his shoulders, Eben studied the blossoms of each plant, smiled at early fruits smaller than marbles. He watched bees hover around the tomatoes' yellow blossoms, the white of green peppers, and the yellow-orange blossoms of cucumbers, and he tried to gauge when blossoms might transform into fruits...Late July, early August. Before leaving them, Eben bent closely to the plants and touched their leaves, soft as Virginia's hair, and he breathed in their aromas.

By mid morning he heard noise from nearby yards: mothers warning children; children yelling, screeching, as they rolled and skidded on their carts and bikes; dogs yipping, barking--all irritable sounds thankfully cushioned by the wall of lilacs, forsythias, and hemlocks he and Virginia had planted the year after they bought the house, the bushes and trees pruned but now tall and wide enough as decisive borders.

"They're just kids playing," Virginia had gentled him, her hand on his shoulder, whenever he had complained about the noise.

He understood children needed a place to play, but he liked--he *wanted* calm and quiet around him now that Virginia was gone. Two months now.

When the sun glared on his back, Eben brushed dirt from his hands, returned the garden tools to the garage, locked the doors, and sought the house again.

In the kitchen he poured himself a glass of ice water and then closed the back door and drew the curtains on the east side of the house. On the dining room wall next to the set of triple windows was Virginia's framed watercolor "Summer Irises," the one she had

done two?--No, three years ago after their week in Cape May. He stood in front of the painting, again, and remembered...

A Saturday afternoon: They had sat on a bench across the street from a church. A wedding party paraded down the church steps. Smiles and laughter, the groom holding the bride's hand as they ran down the walk, stepped into a horse-drawn carriage, and rode away waving to the guests' congratulatory cheers.

"Isn't that nice," Virginia had said, her hand gentle on his arm, and he had agreed.

Walking back to the old Victorian style bed and breakfast where they had stayed, she pointed out purple irises at the base of a white, cross-thatched archway entrance to a yard. The next day she came back to the yard and took photographs: a close-up of the latticed entrance and a long view of the yard through the white arch. Home, she sketched the scene in pencil once, twice, and then after mixing and finding the colors she wanted, she painted the scene, the long green leaves and stalks and violet petals in a kind of attendance to the white archway, the green yard waiting.

Virginia had captured the life of those images, as she had captured the stark landscaped life of "Winter Valley," the watercolor that hung in the living room: white birches and wooden fence posts in the midst of snow, ponds of snow, it seemed, with blighted grass stalks jutting through the crust; trees, posts, snow--all looming toward a distant mountain ridge. A still life, yet a life in quiet motion.

He cleared the constriction in his throat and looked away.

As summer continued, Eben began to change his routine in the early afternoon. Without the need to care for Virginia, and rather than stay in the house, he took walks. He was a tall man, an inch over six feet, and in spite of his seventy-two years of age his strides were confident. He varied his route day to day but invariably rested in Memorial Park in the center the southern New Jersey town where he and Virginia had met, married, and stayed together forty-eight years. The park's oak and maple-shaded walkways and wooden benches provided a pleasant setting to watch the town's summer activity: traffic on Broadway, brown-skinned and white-skinned young people in their turned-around caps and baggy pants as they hustled and swaggered to whatever they listened to...Did they know where they were going? Perhaps they didn't want to go anywhere. Perhaps they wanted to stay right there on the sidewalk and listen and swagger to their voices and music for the rest of their life.

But they must want *something*, don't they?

Perhaps, he considered, he didn't understand children at all. Perhaps he didn't have time or desire to understand them anymore.

Thank goodness Dorothy and Jim, his own children, had never lacked direction. Thank goodness they had not drifted from the importance of good grades, direction, and family he and Virginia had impressed upon them. Even though Jim's medical career had taken him to California, and Dorothy preferred the dry climate of Arizona to the close and humid summers of southern New Jersey, they still called him once, maybe twice a

month. He cherished those calls in the same way he cherished the flowers and vegetable plants in his gardens. They were something to await, to care for today and remember to care for tomorrow. Tomorrows were still important.

It surprised Eben one September afternoon that the empty bench on which he usually rested was occupied by a man who looked the same age as he. Eben approached the bench, slowed his pace, nodded to the man, and continued on.

"Eben Sheldon?"

The man wore rimless glasses and was dressed in brown trousers, long-sleeve white shirt with the cuffs folded back, and brown and white wing-tip shoes. He rose from the bench and extended his hand.

Eben did not at first recognize the stranger and was at first hesitant about but accepted his hand.

"Henry Vandergriff," said the man.

Yes, Eben thought, as the man's face, voice, and name came into focus. Here was the usher who had welcomed Virginia and him at First Methodist Church the handful of times they had attended Morning Worship... Yes, the gentleman who had invited them after the service to the social hour. They had accepted the invitation only once. "Too stuffy for me," Eben had confided to Virginia afterwards. "Handshakes like soft bread."

"They meant well, Eben. Give them another chance sometime."

He didn't.

Now Henry Vandergriff said, "I've seen you come by here afternoons lately. Sit for a minute?"

He recalls his first meeting with Henry Vandergriff as timely. At home, the still window curtains and empty chairs and the closed front door had created a nearly overpowering melancholy in him, an emotion he had not fully realized until he met and began to talk with this relative stranger: a man who, like himself, was retired, lived in a house with too many rooms, some of which he did not enter for days at a time. "No reason to," Vandergriff had said during their second meeting.

Eben Sheldon understood the imposing presence of empty rooms.

He looked forward to his afternoon meetings with Henry Vandergriff the same way he had welcomed the sound of Virginia's footsteps on the stairs when she came down to breakfast: the comfort of familiar sounds; with Henry, the comfort of unhurried conversation and silence. When it rained the two men shared a table at a bakery across the street from the park. They sipped coffee, talked of their past lives--marriage, jobs, travels, children. Henry and Helen Vandergriff's two sons had graduated from Lorrence High School a few years ahead of Dorothy and Jim and lived out of state, too. "You raise your kids to leave home and survive on their own," Henry Vandergriff said tapping his fingers on the table. Eben agreed, and cleared tightness in his throat.

They discussed the state of the world and its problems they could do nothing about, except "get our two cents in," as Henry put it one afternoon over coffee.

"The more you live, the more you realize there's very little you can control, so you just take care of what you have," Eben said, surprised he had articulated a point of view he had seldom expressed to anyone, only to Virginia, their conversations filled so often with daily plans and tasks.

He sipped his coffee.

Henry Vandergriff pursed his lips, scrunched one eye, and said, "The more I hear about this war over there, these suicide attacks, the more I think you're right. Where's the sense of caring for the order of things?"

Eben shook his head and restrained a smile. "Maybe only at this table," he said.

"But I *don't* understand it," Henry said. "All these years, what have we learned? First sticks and stones, then muskets and rifles, now bombs and missiles. I don't understand it."

On a mild Indian summer afternoon, Eben accepted Henry's invitation to dinner. Henry and his wife Helen met him at their front door, where Helen thanked him for the gift of yellow chrysanthemums and made a place for them on the dining room table. Helen was a tall woman who wore her iron gray hair pulled back in a single long braid. She told Eben that she had seen some of Virginia's watercolors at the annual Spring Art Walk. "I could almost feel the texture of her lilies and irises," she said.

Eben stopped by the next day and gave the Vandergriffs a framed watercolor he had stored in the attic the week after Virginia had died. The painting was of a white Cape with black shutters and with lilies and irises growing beneath a set of French windows. In the lower right corner Virginia had written "Summer Hope." It was her last painting.

Before he left that afternoon, Helen said, "Come have Thanksgiving with us, Eben." He accepted.

He recalls the days between Thanksgiving and Christmas as some of the most comfortable of his life. With his good friend he observed the people of the town prepare for holidays. As a man now watching, he thought of himself as someone who had done everything in life he had wanted to do; now, walking through Memorial Park or sitting in the bakery, he could watch others go about their lives and still feel satisfaction toward his past and present life. When you are old, he would confide to Henry Vandergriff, you better understand how things and events and people connect to each other, even if there doesn't seem to be much reason or order in the world. "There is here," Henry said, waving toward the park and the people on the street and, finally, to Eben. "There is."

A fine snow fell Christmas Eve day. Slow at first, it fringed rooftops and lawns and sidewalks, but by an ashen twilight the snow blew heavy and thick: a dense cloud, Eben thought, watching the storm from the Vandergriff living room window.

"They say it won't stop till tomorrow morning," Eben said.

Helen Vandergriff sat with an open book on her lap, a lace bookmark along the pages' inner seam. "We'll have to get our neighbor boy to shovel our walk tomorrow," she said to her husband who poured sherry at the dining room table.

"Nonsense," remarked Henry. "Nobody, 'specially a boy, wants to work Christmas morning."

Without turning from the window, Eben said, "I'll do it. I don't mind shoveling snow. You don't have a long sidewalk. Besides, I like being out in snow."

Later Eben refused Henry's offer of a ride home and instead walked. He smiled in awe and appreciation of the swirl of wind and snow against him as he recalled past winter nights when he and Virginia lay in bed, their hands touching, and listened to wind whip snow against the house like sand against glass.

That night he fell asleep listening to the wind and snow, and awoke Christmas morning when it was still dark. He made himself hot cocoa and then, bundled in layers and boots and hooded jacket he swept his front steps and shoveled a narrow path down the front sidewalk. The snow was well over half a foot deep, the bottom a crust of slush and ice.

Carrying the shovel, he trudged the six blocks to the Vandergriff house. The windows were dark; they reminded him of rectangular open mouths. He saw no lights inside. His back to the house, Eben cut into the snow at the base of the front porch. His rhythm was slow, deliberate, the only sound on the street in gray morning, the coated trees and roofs like figures in one of Virginia's paintings. He rested every few minutes, leaned on the shovel, watched his breath come from his mouth like a white ghost and heard his heartbeats kick like a dancer.

Helen opened the front door and called to him. "Eben, come in and have some coffee. Our neighbor boy's coming over in a little while. He'll do the rest. Come on in," she said, almost pleading.

He waved and replied, "In a minute."

He turned away and cut the next block of snow. At the corners of his eyes burst bright waves of light. Thinking it was sunlight glaring off the snow, he looked at the sky but it was still low and gray. His breath came shorter. He thought it strange because he had not scooped the snow, and now he felt perspiration trickle down his face and inside his undershirt. His heart felt as if it was clamped in a vice.

Then, he collapsed.

He often speaks of his recuperation in the hospital and at the Vandergriff home as a lifeless period, an experience like none other in his life. His area of existence was a confining place, brightened only by flowers and voices outside the rooms. Yet, he saw these comforts as entities of a greater loss, but even as he regained strength to climb stairs, walk around the block, and eventually take care of himself at home, he looked upon such activities as less than ordinary, wastes of time, and he yielded to waiting.

Without his knowing, the Vandergriffs notified his son and daughter of his illness. Jim could not take leave from his practice until the spring. He requested weekly updates from the Vandergriffs.

Eben called him the night Helen and Henry brought him back to his house.

"How are you, Dad? It's good to hear from you," his son said.

"As good as can be expected with this sort of thing, I guess. I'm home, and it looks like I'm going to be here for awhile."

"Well, that's good. Listen, I'm sorry that..."

Eben paid little attention to his son's apology. The tone of Jim's voice was like the color and texture of woodwork around Eben's front door: smooth, defined, clear-grained. You could pass it by without seeing it and yet remember how it was and how it felt when you first ran your hand across it.

"...as soon as I can get away," Jim said.

"I expect to be here," Eben said.

Of Dorothy's appearance in his front doorway, Eben says he did not at first recognize her. The sun bright through the windows and the door made her a silhouette. When she said "Hi, Dad," he immediately recognized her voice, and as she stepped closer he saw that her blond hair looked hard and tinted the way some nurses colored their hair, and she held her mouth in a grudging smile.

She put down her suitcase and took his hand.

At the breakfast table the next morning Dorothy poured tea for him and for herself. She set his cup and saucer in front of him. "There you are," she said, but something in her tone annoyed him, reminded him of the condescending nurses who had assumed he was deaf when they greeted him: "How are we today, Mr. Sheldon?" they had shouted, and he had shouted back, "Good enough to hear you!"

Dorothy sat across the table from him now. "Dad, you trust me, don't you? I mean, if I were to do something that involved you, you'd know I would be doing it for the best, wouldn't you?" She sat back and curled her arm around the top left spindle of the chair.

"I think I know what's coming next," Eben said, "and the answer is 'No.' 'No!'"

"That's what I thought you'd say. But—"

"Don't treat me like one of your clients, Dorothy. I'm not moving to some place I don't know anything about and don't *want* to know anything about."

"Dad, listen: I can easily find a living arrangement for you close to where I live. It would be your own place, you could take care of it the way you want, nobody looking

over your shoulder and telling you what to do. Not even me," she smiled. "Nice neighbors. *And*, a healthy climate..."

"Dorothy?" he said, and held up his left hand to stop her. "No."

He wrapped his hands around the mug of tea and bent over and slowly brought the mug to his mouth. He felt the warmth of the tea on his lips before he sipped it.

She looked at the cabinets and the floor and smiled.

Days passed. He read the newspapers she brought home from the supermarket. They watched TV together after dinner, talked about the fighting in Iraq. "Wheels within wheels, fire within fire," he said. "Nothing seems to change. I don't understand it."

"Neither do I, Dad," Dorothy said.

She restocked his refrigerator and kitchen cabinets. He heard doors open and close, and after she went upstairs one morning he heard the vacuum whir over the floors and carpets in the rooms he had not opened in weeks, maybe months. He opened the door to the mud-room, took his jacket from a peg, slipped it on, and walked through the house to the front door.

Dorothy came down the stairs. "Dad?"

"I'm just going to stand on the front porch, for God's sake." Feeling her eyes on his back, he controlled an urge to slam the door.

The day was bright. Sunlight glinted off the snow, and the snowmelt dripped from the edge of the roof. The scents of water and snow and something else--Grass, dirt? No, too early--drifted in the air. The sidewalk path that Dorothy had cleared was not as wide as the space he would have made. One block away the mailman bent toward the front steps of a house.

A still life, he thought, but one with quiet motion.

Eben telephoned Henry Vandergriff when he went back inside. "Come over, will you?"

He says that Dorothy understood his reasons for wanting to stay. The day she left to go back to Phoenix she said, "I'll worry about you," and then put her hand on his arm and kissed him.

"That's your prerogative," he said. Then: "Tell your brother I'm all right."

"I'll tell him more than that." She hugged her father and, keeping her arms around him, said, "I'll call you when I get home."

He says the house seemed suddenly quiet and neat, too neat after Dorothy left. He found newspapers stacked in an orange recycle bin in the shed off the kitchen, and the lamps and end tables appeared angled differently, closer to the chairs than he wanted them to be. He smiled, and adjusted their position.

In the living room he looked again at Virginia's painting "Winter Valley," at the snow that, even in stillness, seemed to move toward the mountain, and he thought how right and natural is that journey.

She is Captured

Susan Niz

The sun sets behind her
She stands there like a windmill,
arms outstretched
No cares of the world hang in her profile
or her illuminated murmurs
of russet hair

A hedge of sumac blazes coolly to her side
a smattering of tinted wicks

Her long dress brushes the browning grass,
toes hidden in their coolness

She has dirt on her hands,
dust of crumbled yellow oak in her hair,
and the fallen torch of a maple between her fingers

She is captured

She blocks the setting sun
She quenches all memory
of sorrow with her bold, accidental nature

As if she could change the whole world,
there in the yard
amongst the discarded papery leaves

Her gaze collides with the fresh inferno of fall
reflecting only wonder and happenstance
with a glow

As if she could change the whole world,

She just did

The sun slips low

Trophies

Kelley Jean White

She seared shoulders. She pooled
blue ice at his feet, grew green
tendrils of bittersweet
up his spine, draped his back
with smoke: she stung our waiting eyes
with smoke, lily of the valley and lilac,
sweet into those bitter berries, her eyes,
moving, always moving, to the tango tap
tap of sharp heels across polished floors, swallowing
the music, Suzy Wong escaped
from Shanghai but wanting home.

She was powerless. He charred
her pretty dresses, singed
her beautiful bones. Light enough
to lift and toss aside. Her education.
Her mind. Nai Nai. Her very brilliance
brought her down. The short straw drawn. His,
but he used it against her. Her beauty
a death. Black eyes true, black hair false,
eyebrows drawn on, eyelids tattooed, always
the carefully smoothed smile. Kwok. No kwok.

Empty blue willow bowl of defeat.
Impoverished pearls. Gave this little white demon
her diamond, watched her swell and bloat
with its powerful curse. Forgave her,
but wouldn't take
it back, couldn't forgive
herself. Lost the day it could pass
from her son to his to a great great grandchild
of the governor of Szechuan. Desperate silver
bars. Dancing lightning in an empty room.
Yee uhr san suh. Seven dresses
embracing, sealed in plastic on a drycleaning
rack. A dozen dozen trophies. A lost ticket.
A stranger with little English at the door.

Sunny's favorite exhibit is the snow leopard. It is strange that a zoo in a tiny town should have such an animal. They are so rare. She reads what the snow leopard eats, mammals and birds. Its social life is solitary. How long does it live? Twenty-five years. Not quite long enough to see its first record go platinum. And it isn't really asleep on the green slope behind its grid of bars as much as it is simply turned away. Perhaps it is thinking about the past, and on its lip is something that isn't quite a smile. Or perhaps it is simply listening to birds.

from "Pagan Night" by Kate Braverman

Linked

Lisa Harris

Humidity held the air low to the ground by 4 P.M., right about the time the magenta Four O'clocks bloomed. The humidity held the fumes from the paper mill close enough to the ground that rich and poor, white and black, male and female, young and old had burning eyes, itching skin. If Tessie were to reach out, she could grab a handful of humidity—thick as cotton.

Tessie sat in The Bee Hive and watched layers of grayness distort the horizon, and interfere with the scents of gardenia and juniper, wisteria and roses. The smothering scent of flowers and the acrid scent of pulp seeped into The Bee Hive and made the air in Miss Jenny's shop even heavier—too thick to breathe, too sour to swallow. Hair spray and bleach filled the air. Tessie watched the clock waiting for five o'clock to arrive so they could leave, go back to the trailer park and hear what Mr. Earl had to say.

She had been able to help out during the day. In fact, she could not imagine how Miss Jenny ran the shop without her or without someone else doing all the things she had been doing. She loved watching Jenny work: she watched with such interest that she forgot for minutes at a time how screwed up her life was. Miss Jenny greeted everyone with a smile that showed love and compassion. Then she got whoever it was in their seat, fastened on a pink smock if they were a woman and a manly black smock if they were a man. She let people look into the mirror for a minute or two, as if she wanted them to remember who they were, before she asked what they wanted to have done. While she talked with them, she kept her eyes on their eyes in the mirror. She kept a real smile on her face. After she listened, she said, "I think we can do that for you." Then she did it.

At quitting time, Jenny said, "Close up the curtains, honey. We're going home." Tessie closed the curtains while Jenny closed everything else down. "Thank you for all your help today, Tessie. I don't know what I would have done without you, sugar. I want you to close your eyes once we are in the car and just try to rest. Can you do that?"

"Yes, m'am, I can." It was as if Miss Jenny was a mind reader. All Tessie had been wanting to do for the past three hours was shut her eyes. Even with her eyes closed, she couldn't shut out the fact that Ray had been arrested and that Laura Jean was still in Milledgeville. And everybody in the legal system was so busy being pleased with arresting Ray that no one remembered he had a daughter whose mother was in Milledgeville, a mother who had been there, off and on, for three years, a mother who lasted on the outside, as it was called, only briefly; in fact, a mother who hadn't even been able to stay a full day at her trailer in Little Bit the last time they sent her home.

"We home, Tessie, and so is Earl. Let's see what he found out."

Tessie and Jenny hurried into the trailer. Earl sat at the counter drinking a Blue Ribbon. His face was screwed into a pout and his ear lobes were bright red. That always

happened when Earl was mad.

“You want me to talk in front of the girl, or no?” Earl began.

Jenny waited for Tessie to answer. “I want to hear the truth, Mr. Earl,” Tessie said.

“Well, it ain’t good news, Tessie. They gonna keep him for a while—maybe up to five years.”

“Damnation and chicken feathers.” Jenny slammed her fist on the counter, which knocked over Earl’s beer.

“Don’t worry,” Earl said, “I got me a twelve pack in the cooler.

So for a while Tessie split her time between her trailer and the Conroy’s. Tessie helped out at The Bee Hive, and in exchange, Jenny Conroy took care of any trailer expenses, feeling that that was the least she could do for the daughter of her friend, Laura Jean. Later, when Tessie stayed at Annie and Josie’s house, nearer the swamp—the house Tessie had envied, the house she knew could be home—Jenny promised to keep an eye on the trailer until Ray came home.

Tessie accepted the offering, joyful to have adults helping her. Josie cleaned houses for money and raised an all year garden for vegetables. She caught and skinned catfish, butchered hogs, and sold the best cuts of meat to neighbors. She kept the chitlins for herself and Annie, and Josie always shared her food and her love with Tessie Sipes.

Josie liked living away from other people. She liked her old white frame house with its red tin roof. She didn’t want to live among drinkers and yellers, mill workers and bartenders. She wanted as few people around her as possible; she wanted to be near the swamp and the trees, the cottonmouths and the frogs, the lightening bugs and the river. So Josie lived on land that had belonged to her family for as far back as blacks could own land, because no one wanted to own the swamp, and she lived far enough away from the river not to get flooded, but close enough to be able to fish and shrimp, close enough to walk down at night and run her hand in the water, stirring up the phosphorous, and watching the iridescent green shine in the moonlight.

Tessie loved Josie because she was connected to the earth. The times Tessie stood beside Josie, she felt thin and tall. Josie had the strength of a man. She had to cut the three quarter inch sleeves on her blouses that were store bought so that her muscles weren’t impeded when she cut wood and double dug her garden. Her big cheekbones rose out from under her eyes like little shelves. And although she was shorter than Tessie and heavier, she was magnificent in her life. “I swear your mama has a halo over her head, Annie.” Josie overheard Tessie say this while Tessie was hoeing the garden and Josie was making a foot high rock perimeter around the flower beds.

“The only thing holding my halo on, Tessie, are my short little horns hidden under my Afro.”

Josie was, after all, Ol’Dolly’s daughter. She knew about laughter and loving and the magic of stones. Josie was also the daughter of Fuddah Osaha, the `Geechee witchdoctor and trader. When Fuddah was without clients and without raccoon furs, he

worked on Ray's boat. In fact, he showed Ray where the shrimp ran when everybody else's nets were coming up empty. Fuddah worked long enough to get the money he needed, and then he went back to his hut in the swamp. Now there wasn't going to be any more work for Fuddah on Ray's boat, not since Ray had been sent up.

Over supper one night at the Conroys' Miss Jenny broke the news, "I can't keep paying utilities and all at your trailer anymore, and God knows Earl and I love you as if you were our own, but he and I talked and we think it is best if you stay over at Annie and Josie's for a spell. We just need a little couple's time, if you know what I mean." She winked at Tessie who was relieved, in a way, to be gone from the Conroys' trailer—not because she didn't love them, too, but it was all a little too close and she had been starting to feel in the way when they were both home with her, and a little uneasy when it was just her and Mr. Earl. After all, she had been staying with them a lot over the past four months while Ray was getting sentenced.

Tessie went to Annie and Josie's house within a week of the conversation with Miss Jenny. She kept herself clean and silent at school. She seldom associated with Annie at the integrated junior high school. She didn't want either of them getting in to trouble with the white kids or the black ones, and she didn't want the department of social services realizing that she was no longer staying with her "aunt" and "uncle." They stayed away from each other to protect themselves. But after they got off the bus together at the end of the day, and the bus had pulled out of sight, the girls shifted their books to their outside arms and linked hands, skipping down the dirt road, back to Josie's.

No doubt Annie had a father, but she didn't know him to see him. And the facts Josie gave her were sparse. "You got his nose, girl, coz you sure don't have mine!" Annie had a long narrow nose that looked nothing like Josie's flat one. "You must be someone else's child to have such straight teeth." "Where'd you go to get them long legs, girl? T`other side of this town?" Josie would laugh and pat Annie on the arm. "I don't care what kind of nose you got, and I 'd love you even if you had crooked teeth like mine. Hell! I might even love you more because of them."

Josie had lovers, but no one stayed overnight. She hung a wrought iron sign outside her door that read: "Dogs preferred to men." And if that wasn't enough to keep undesirables away, the fact that she was Ol'Dolly's and Fuddah's child who kept a big brown hound right inside her front door, kept anyone afraid of magic far away.

When the people from Family and Children's Services called the first time, one black person asked questions, while a white person wrote pages and pages of notes. But when the outcome of their report came back to Josie, Annie, and Tessie in the hands of a Chatham County Sheriff, it was fairly simple. He delivered it and then stayed to read it aloud, sure as he was that all three of the females present were illiterate.

To Josephine Osaha who resides on the east side of Swamps End Road,
November 17, 1969

Be it known that this residence is not acceptable for foster care. Code 70358 has been violated in the following ways: unvaccinated hound; unacceptable septic system; source of well water—unknown; no known source of income; head of household—single unwed female. Elizabeth Sipes, a thirteen-year-old white female, may no longer dwell at this designation, and will be removed forthwith by County of Chatham Family and Children Services on November 18, 1969 by five o'clock (5:00 P.M.), Eastern Standard Time.

I have set my seal invested with the power granted by the State of Georgia herewith.

Judge William Frank

When the sheriff finished reading, no one spoke. Then he did. "You'll need to sign where the X is, Miz Osaha. If you can't write, just make your mark." Josie picked up his pen and in well-formed letters signed, "Josephine Aija Oasaha." After the sheriff left, Josie put her arms around Tessie and Annie and they cried together, making the soft sounds of rain and wind, called forth from their souls.

Josie spoke first. "I ain't gonna let them take you for very long, and I ain't gonna let them take you very far. You hear me, Tessie?" Tessie didn't hear her, instead she heard the sheriff's voice saying as he read "this residence is not acceptable for foster care," and she wanted to scream, "Why—too much love here, Sheriff?" She didn't register his departure any more than she registered Josie's words. And Josie knew Tessie was in trouble because her deep blue eyes shifted around the room—unable to light on anything—just like Josie had seen Laura Jean's do the day they came to take her away.

"Tessie..."

"Tessie!"

Tessie heard Annie's voice—off in a distance. So she began to look for her and found herself as her eyes began to work again, found herself still at Josie's.

"Mama and I are right here. And we're going to figure something out, aren't we Mama?"

"Yes, baby, we are. I don't give one good goddamn about the judge and the court. But we got to be careful," and Josie stopped herself there. The Chatham County Sheriff had narrowed his eyes at Josie. He had taken out his notepad and pencil, and he looked like he was going to write down anything else she said. "We'll talk soon, Tessie. I promise." White, drunk and white, stupid and white would win over black and female,

black and love, black Annie believed in her mother's strength and the power of her love for Elizabeth Sipes. Surely Family and Children Services couldn't be so blind to think that Tessie had to be with a white family who didn't know her over a black family that loved her.

The next day Family and Children's Services sent a woman from the orphanage with the same police officer. No one pretended anything, which meant no one spoke. Tessie hugged Annie and Josie goodbye and then carried her old blue suitcase filled with the objects of her life down the three stairs. The officer loaded the suitcase in the trunk, loaded Tessie in the backseat behind the cage, and drove away. Tessie felt like Ray looked when they arrested him.

In the backseat of the sheriff's car, Elizabeth Sipes looked about four, felt about ninety, her spirit aged zero. She was trapped and ready to run. Her heart kept beating the questions, "Isn't being thirteen supposed to be about being protected and free?"

Family and Children Services placed Tessie in a foster home with a white family on the other side of Route 17 where she had to go to a different junior high school. The first thing she did after she was shown to her room and the people left her was to unpack her bag.

Tessie took the three cobalt blue jars that Laura Jean had bought for her for Christmas when she was 9. Laura Jean had wrapped each of them separately and put them in a box. She selected the most magical paper Newberry's had—white tissue with tiny red, green, and cobalt blue stars. She tied one with a red ribbon, one with a green ribbon, and one with dark blue ribbon, and then she placed them on under the Christmas tree. Tessie shook the boxes, but the only sound she heard was a thump. On Christmas morning, Tessie untied each bow, unfastened the tape, and folded the paper. She kept her face fixed with a smile, but the jars didn't make any sense to Tessie. After breakfast, Tessie asked her mother to help her iron out the wrinkles in the ribbons and the creases in the paper so it could be used again.

"Don't you like the jars, Tessie?" Laura Jean asked.

"I do, Mama. I just don't know what I am to use them for."

"To put pieces of the things you love in them, honey. That's what they are for. You know, like the feathers and bones, trinkets and broken glass you find."

"Maybe, Mama. I just don't like putting beautiful things away. The lids on the jars seal everything in too much, don't they, Mama? I love them, though. I love the blue glass. What color do you call that blue?"

"Cobalt, Tessie. Aren't they lovely, darlin'? They made me think of the river, the rain, the sky, and your eyes. And they are all for you. You can put anything your fluttering heart desires in them, fill them with magic potions or gather salamander eggs from the still water. Whatever you want. If they were mine, I'd leave them empty and hope they'd be filled by fairies while I slept. I'd leave them empty and try to fill them with my slippery dreams."

Tessie remembered hugging on her mother's neck that Christmas morning. She circled her arms around her and kept them there. She watched the pulse and smelled stale Evening in Paris perfume and old cigarettes. Laura Jean sang, "Hush little darling, don't say a word, Mama's gonna buy you a mockingbird." Tessie remembered asking her to sing *Greensleeves* or *Silent Night* instead, since it was Christmas, but her mother had kept on singing the other song.

Tessie's sadness was cobalt blue as she set each blue jar on her dresser. Her eyes, almost the color of the glass, considered the puzzle of three empty jars from her mother, three cobalt blue jars bought empty, wrapped empty, and now sitting empty on her dresser in a foster home.

Respire

Ruth Maassen

The wind has torn the crimson leaves I waited for all year
off the Japanese maple, leaving me bare and forgetting
to breathe, though the wind keeps showing me how,
whipping around the house, heaping dessicated leaves,
fragile drought-starved leaves, curling long-pointed leaves
around my door so when I walk out to breathe air
that has moved fast and far, rousing the waves and sending
great clouds on their journeys, my feet set the leaves
to whispering about the tree reaching with all its twigs
for the air that shakes it but with no leaves left to breathe.

Cold Snap

Ruth Maassen

The Japanese maple leaves have shriveled and faded
to drab maroon. Last year the wind ripped them down
too soon, still in their crimson glory.

So many ways of losing:
a slow drift apart,
a sudden wrenching away.

All the trees are letting down their leaves.
They teach resignation. I want to hold on.
I want to see red leaves with the sun shining through them.

Autumnal

Ruth Maassen

The ancient terror of the sun
turning away: the blue scrim
of sky rent by a giant claw:

immense darkness leaking in.
These nights the veil is thin:
the dead dare to come close.

Leaves dim to rust, copper,
ocher: colors of the earth
they'll fall to: every leaf

dying into beauty. Ragged
asters flutter lavender. Sumac,

blood red. The ancient terror.

Backyard in North Scituate

Ruth Maassen

Let the sound of wind in the trees
calm you, troubled heart.
The birds, do you hear them?
The sparrow in the grass—
her precision, her gaiety—
isn't that enough? Let me leave
these clumsy words behind
and utter the moment as the oak leaves do.
Make me empty as the breeze
that carries the birds' chatter and cluck.
Make me as open to the sky
as the marsh visible through the trees,
as the curved arm of blue water.
Teach me, grass wavering
on your tall stem, seeds held tight,
bird whistling high in the red oak,
ant scrambling over a weathered board,
daisies in your daisy commune
bobbing your June bourrée—
make me know everything I desire
is already here—the fluidity
of green leaves lifting,
the ferocity of light, of stone.

Sahara

Ruth Maassen

When she is skeletal as a dried-up wasp
caught between dusty panes of glass,
when she is flat as an old sheet
under the strokes of an iron,
how can she find a resting place?

She becomes aware of her breath
patiently repeating, of her heart
stubbornly beating on.
She imagines a meadow,
a stream running through it,
large trees standing in groups.
A lake holding the sky.
She imagines touching a boulder,
touching a tree. Imagines
large spaces surrounding her,
no ambush possible.

She is touching the hairs on his arm
and hears as if from far away
a rumble of sounds. Words.
He wants to be her place of safety.
She is not alone, he is breathing too,
she can feel his chest move up and down.
His skin is better than a tree to touch.
A dam lets go, water surges, she feels
Niagaras towering behind her eyes.

FRANCESCA

Yelena Dubrovin

The train was meandering around the hill, like a snake around the body of a sleeping traveler. There, behind the hill, the sunset was slowly falling and only its reflection pinked the air, painted it with soft strokes from a warm pink to a cold lilac. Further, beyond the hill, a broad plain sprawled before my eyes. Some shallow curved bushes stuck ugly out of soil, completely indifferent to that unusual palette of colors. Their aged yellowish ends were drowned in a lowering sky. Around the corner, the colors have suddenly disappeared and the plain plunged into the dense grey twilight. Then nothing could be seen. The sky fell down on earth, dissolving in a dark night mass that swallowed the world and added some mystery to the landscape that was just recently so tenderly colored with the pink and lilac hues.

There was no reason for me to stay any longer by the window and I entered the compartment. The light went on and the faces of my fellow travelers that only some time ago, under the daylight, seemed to be so attractive, suddenly looked gloomy and tired. There were only four of us in the compartment: a young woman, about 35 years old, who immediately attracted my attention by her strange behavior; a young, good-looking man; an old man with a sallow face and wolf-like penetrating eyes; and I.

The woman seemed to be very nervous, constantly, unconsciously fixing her long hair or opening and closing her purse that was resting on her knees. Sometimes, her wide-open dark eyes seemed aimlessly looking into space. She was dressed simply but elegantly – a black silk dress outlined the slimness of her voluptuous figure and an expensive necklace made her look very festive. Everything was unusual about her. On one hand, you were tempted to look at her, talk to her, to learn more about her. On the other hand, you wished to run away, hide from her, and avoid her fixed inquisitive gaze. I had a feeling that I had seen her before, maybe in the painting of Amadeo Modigliani, a woman in a black dress with the arms crossed on her knees and eyes full of sorrow, loneliness and hopelessness.

The young man definitely felt uncomfortable under her inquisitive look, but was sitting straight, not moving, as if he were afraid to scare off her thoughts. I noticed that there was nothing special about him, except his black curly beard, covering his longish face, and his small but lively eyes. My intrusion into the compartment definitely disturbed her. She looked at me without seeming to show any interest to my persona and turned her head to the window. The reflection of her face appeared on the window glass. The train was passing the already invisible in the darkness settlements, villages and landscapes. Beneath the windows the scenery was obviously changing and, only on the window glass, the outlines of her face remained steady.

I stretched out my hand and introduced myself. The young man was the first to reply. “Gustav, nice meeting you” and he moved, making a space for me to sit. The old man,

next to the young woman, seemed to doze. His wrinkled grayish face with the eyes halve-closed remained absent. Now, I was sitting across from the woman and the old man. She turned her head lazily away from her reflection and introduced herself: "Francesca." In her melodic voice I have noticed some slight accent. Probably Italian, I said to myself.

Suddenly, she started the conversation, obviously catching my accent. "Are you Russian?" Her eyes rounded in a surprise.

"How did you guess? I was puzzled. I was taken away from Russia when I was just a child and catching my accent would only occur to a person who herself spoke the language.

"I am half Italian, half Russian. My mother was a Russian, an artist." And she pronounced her name. I had heard about her mother before; she lived in Paris, studied art at the French Academy of Fine Arts, and was quite famous in her time. It was known that she befriended a great painter, Tamara De Lempicka, also of a Russian origin, but, unexpectedly left everything behind her and moved -- nobody knew where. I vaguely remembered her story. Once, I was interested in fates of the Russian artists living abroad at the turn of the twentieth century, particularly in Paris. I didn't say anything to Francesca because I just could not recall more facts about her mother's life.

"My mother died young," said Francesca, not addressing in particular anybody. The train stopped abruptly. From the sudden lurch, she fell down on the sleeping old man, but he continued dozing, not moving or showing any signs of life. Only once, when I suddenly looked at him, did I notice the movement of his eyelashes. He definitely was not sleeping. The conversation had died. We could hear people walking along the corridor, probably getting ready to go to bed. A dim light with its yellowish blinks put a thick make-up, a seal of the weariness, on the already tired faces of my new acquaintances.

Several times, Gustav tried to restart the conversation but in vain. He stepped out of the compartment, suggesting to its inhabitants to get ready for bed. I was too upset by parting with my family, so I knew I would not be able to fall asleep and therefore, I too had left the compartment. Gustav was standing by the window, looking at his own reflection in the shadowed by the night glass. Seeing me, he friendly moved aside, creating a space for me next to him.

"I know Francesca." He announced without any introduction, as if he wanted to shock me, and not allowing me any time to express any surprise from his unexpected remark, continued:

"My whole adult life I have been looking for her. And now, when, at last, I found her, I couldn't even gather my strength to start the conversation. Please, help me; I beg for you, help me!" He feverishly grabbed my hand. His nervous, refined face expressed some sincere concern. Only his eyes, frozen, as if they immersed deep into his soul, were looking there for an answer.

“The truth is that this vile old man is her husband. Do you hear me? Her husband!” He sharply turned to me and fell into a silence, waiting for me to reply. His eyes looked straight into mine, searching for help or support. I could not understand what was going on, what he wanted from me or what I had to do with Francesca’s husband and this young man. I got scared, I was afraid to go back to the compartment, but even more, I was loath to remain here, in this corridor, at night, with this strange man who, God knows why, tried to tell me the story of these unfamiliar to me people.

Gustav signed deeply, probably coming to his senses. He stared at me again and said in a very quite voice: “What a strange evening! I have been longing for this moment for so many years, and now I am losing time, so precious to me. Maybe today, my fate will be decided and I am afraid. Afraid again, like many years ago. For the past sixteen years, I lived with the hope of seeing Francesca. I had not been able to live my life knowing that I have destroyed hers. How often we take steps, following our momentarily emotion without thinking about the consequences. Before, I always thought: ‘Take a moment; it will never come back’ till one day such a moment had changed my whole life.” Noticing that I am listening to him, he continued:

“I met Francesca in Italy. She was seventeen, and I was twenty-seven. We were both studying art. She was a very quiet and reserved girl, always submerged into her own world without any friends or acquaintances. While sketching, she was completely focused on her work, often staying long hours after classes, never revealing her work to anybody. She answered sharply to any questions, trying to quickly get rid of the unwanted conversations. I watched her from the distance. Something wild and frightening was in her gestures.”

“At that time, I was seeing a woman much older than I. She was a very unusual woman, striking not only by her beauty but by her talents too. Liana was also a Russian and belonged to the Russian nobility that moved to Italy from Russia at the time of Alexander III. Their family always carried Russian traditions and remained true to their motherland, though nobody in the family spoke their native tongue. Liana was fluent in many languages; she could express herself in French, English, Spanish, Russian and Italian. In their great old mansion, there were many beautifully executed portraits of her ancestors and a remarkable in its taste and knowledge, collection of the early Italian art. Liana did not paint, but knew art as well as music, like nobody I had ever met before. We often had wandered along the streets of Florence, discussing different subjects close to our hearts, but never actually elucidated our relationships because it was just obvious to both of us that we were in love. I had never thought about moving in together, - in spite of her youthful looks and childish spontaneity, she was fifteen years older than I. I only knew that Liana had never been married and that she had always avoided discussing her past. She was rather discreet about it. We were happy with the way it was. At least, that’s what I thought at the time. He made a pause then looked at me questioningly: “Am I boring you?”

“No, not at all.” I had been listening to his story or to his confession very attentively. Now I was completely awake. It looked like that the light went off in our compartment. There was a mysterious nighttime silence intensified by the rapidly moving train and the melodic rhythm of lullaby it created.

“Are you an artist?” The question suddenly escaped me.

“Yes, I am a portrait painter. I am deeply fascinated by the human face and the person that lies behind it. While painting, I feel how my brush strokes penetrate into the human essence, stir the soul, split it into different tones and if the material is shallow, I finish the portrait by using my own imagination. Sometimes, I see such an interesting face, but as soon as I start painting, I find the work will not go anywhere. I am seeing just a mask; there is nothing underneath it, no emotions or any hint of them, no depth. Then I begin to invent the inward world of a sitter and the face on the canvas suddenly becomes somehow spiritualized. The person can't recognize himself, too much of unknown for him in this face of a stranger.”

“I know that you want to ask me if I ever tried to paint Francesca's portrait. Her face was so remarkable; it expressed such a loneliness and detachment. Often, returning home from classes, struck by the beauty of her face, I tried to paint it and could not. I tried to invent her soul, but the face on a portrait was not hers. I was carried away by the mystery surrounding her. In our art classes everybody knew everything about each other, but nothing about Francesca. Once, Liana, being in my house, noticed the drawing. Her face unexpectedly flashed. ‘How do you know her?’ Her hands were shaking.

“Unfortunately, I do not know her”, I sighed. “We are in the same art class. Why does it excite you so much?”

‘Because of her I was left by the man I was going to marry.’ For the first time during our relationships she spoke about her past. I tempted to hide my emotions and my curiosity, afraid to scare her away from her sudden desire to talk.

‘Francesca's mother died when she was still a child. We were friends, her mother and I. She was a great painter and belonged to the Russian nobility as well. Two years ago, Francesca's father passed away and left her in the care of his best friend. At that time, I was involved with Carlo and we were planning to get married. He was unbelievably wealthy and extremely well educated. I could not have dreamed of a better husband. Maybe I even loved him. It was my last chance. But when Francesca moved into the house everything had changed. I saw how his eyes melted when he looked at her. His whole world was now focused on her. Last year, he broke our engagement, and as soon as she turns eighteen, he is planning to marry her. The rumors are that shortly after moving into his mansion, she had become his lover. This innocent child calculated her chances very well. Soon, she will become the richest woman in Florence.’

‘Pity’, suddenly escaped me.

‘Pity what?’ Liana paid a surprised look

'I feel pity for her,' I repeated automatically while thinking about something else. Only now I understood her strange behavior. This unhappy girl would soon become a wife of an old man. All of a sudden, I felt a breath of the medieval times. Now, as never before, I was desperate to talk to Francesca; she did not seem being so distant from me anymore, in fact, now I knew her secret.

After this conversation my relationships with Liana had drastically changed. She became more demanding, impatient and passionate. She was afraid of losing me, and I knew it, and was frightened by her sudden impulsive behavior."

He stopped talking, probably not being sure if he had already revealed too many intimate details of his life. It became chilly. I felt the cold shiver on my skin and yawned.

"If you are tired we can continue tomorrow." He turned to me. Under the dim light of the corridor's lamp, I saw his face, lurid and twisted with pain. I could not interrupt him now. He was desperate to talk, pour out the anguish, think about the past and make a final decision.

"Please, continue," I said with the determination and turned my head to the window, ready to listen.

"Anyway, there is not much left to tell. Shortly after my conversation with Liana, I decided to stay late in class and finish the work I had previously started when, suddenly, I felt somebody watching me behind my back. I rather guessed than knew that this was Francesca. Afraid to frighten her away, without turning my head, I asked: 'How is your work going? Not really well?'

'No.' I heard her weak voice behind my back. 'Not what I want, I feel like somebody else is moving my brush. I don't know why. Probably I am not an artist at all.'

I turned around. At this moment, her beautiful face that was so dear to me had been covered with tears. Overwhelmed with emotions, unexpectedly, I took her hand and touched my cheek with her palm, as my mother used to do when I was a little boy and needed comforting. Francesca froze for a minute, her eyes opened widely in surprise.

'Come with me, Francesca' I whispered, carried away by the gushed feelings. 'Don't you want this? Don't you?' She obediently put all her drawings in a folder and, trying not to lag behind, followed me.

It seemed to me that I had never been happier in my whole life. My parents divorced when I was only twelve and I grew up withdrawn from the world around me. I often felt very lonely. I read and painted a lot and lived in my own fantasy world. The shared comprehension of loneliness drew us closer to each other. We felt each other so deeply, so profoundly, as if we had lived together forever. I could almost read her mind, her every thought, and she – mine. And how well she understood and knew my work, read my soul, my heart and my moods by just looking at my drawings.

It lasted for almost a month. She visited me every day after classes, pale, mysterious and silent. We would have tea with sandwiches and talk about art, discussing her work and mine. Her paintings shook me to the core of my soul. She had

a rare gift, a great sensitivity to colors with her own wild vision of the world. The violent palettes on her canvases were like her own wild inner despair. Deep unfulfilled passion, hidden emotions, she expressed by using slant brush strokes, vivid wild colors and her own strange tragic vision of the universe. She talked a lot about her childhood, about her mother. But if I just tried to mention her trustee, her face would express anger and tears would cover her face, until I promise never ask her again, unless she, herself, chose to talk about it.

Only once, just once, I told her how much I needed her and how much I cared about her. Francesca bent her head and sat silently for a while, thinking, then she looked at me and I saw how her whole face became radiant, brightened by such an unusual inner light, as if illuminated by sunbeams. 'I love you. I will love you as long as I live. You are the only one that I trust. We are now like one person, you and I.'

I was overwhelmed with emotions. I was afraid to drive away the light coming from her and my sudden sense of happiness. And then, everything came to an end.

The next day, Liana stopped by to discuss again and again our relationships and our future together. I had been alone waiting for Francesca. The fact is that I had not yet told Francesca about Liana. I did not know how to start this confession. I was afraid to hurt Francesca – Liana was a close friend of her mother.

Liana rushed into the room as a gust of wind, cold and biting. When I had to reveal her the truth she cried, blamed Francesca again. We did not notice when Francesca entered the room. She appeared suddenly, lurid and withdrawn; she stood by the door for just a moment and, then, abruptly, as she appeared, disappeared from my life forever.

I had no chance to explain anything to her. She did not attend classes anymore and all my attempts to see her failed. In a week, I received a phone call from Liana. Francesca had married Carlo. That was the end of my happy life. Shortly after that, I left Italy and went back to Germany where I continued studying art. Since that time, there has not been a moment in my life when I have not been thinking about Francesca. I ruined not only her life but mine too. I could have saved her, but instead, pushed her deeper into the abyss. She trusted me and I betrayed her trust. I tried many times to call and write to her. Several times I visited Florence, but she refused to see me. Only yesterday, this coincidence brought us together again." He lowered his voice. Now, he almost whispered, and finally, fell into silence.

The train began to lose its speed, probably approaching a station. He spoke once more. This time his voice seemed louder and his whole appearance more relaxed, but he could hardly control his feelings. Then his voice gained some strength and from this moment, it seemed that he spoke just with himself.

"First, I saw her at the train station at the ticket line and, then I looked for her on this train going to Florence. She did not even show any signs that she knew me. I wish I could have such self-control. I am going now to Florence, to visit my daughter. Are you

surprised?” He looked directly into my eyes.

“I forgot to tell you that just recently I received a letter from Liana. Soon after I left her, she moved to Paris where she gave birth to our daughter. The girl is now sixteen, but I did not even know she existed. Liana told me that she returned to Florence because the girl had a remarkable gift and was studying art with the best Italian painters” He looked at me again. His eyes expressed tremendous pain.

“What should I do? What will I do? Tomorrow, Liana will be at the train station with our daughter.”

What could I say to him? He had just one night to make his choice between a woman he loved and a daughter he never saw. In making a right choice we must rely on our intuition, on the logic of our mind and our thoughts, or the move of our heart and our soul. I have always followed my inner voice, the first impulse, and they have never failed me. However, whenever I try to analyze a situation and think carefully about every detail, then I was usually a loser, because I could not predict or foretell everything that might happen.

“Rely on your fate, trust your intuition,” I said in a very cold manner, trying not to show him the uneasy feeling that overwhelmed me. Wishing him a goodnight sleep, I opened the door to the compartment.

The place was dark. Probably everybody was sleeping. Soon I too fell asleep and so deeply that I did not even hear when Gustav returned. In the morning, I was awakened by Francesca. She looked like yesterday, unsmiling and withdrawn, only her dress, instead of black, was now of a red color. The morning sun lightened up the room with the warm beams. We were approaching Florence. I got up and quickly packed while the men were somewhere outside.

It was Gustav who first entered the compartment. He was deadly pale and looked very tired. “Probably he had not slept.” I thought. He did not even notice me. He immediately stared at Francesca with a look of a man who had just decided to end his life. Her eyelashes moved and without paying any attention to my presence, she stretched out her hand, wrapped in a red material, in his direction. I don’t recall how long they were standing like this, embracing each other with their eyes. Her face had brightened with such the unusual inner light. Suddenly, the door creaked and the old man, like a mouse, skipped into the door of the compartment. His yellowish eyes stared straight into us, but, somehow, I managed to block the view of Francesca and Gustav. I quickly initiated conversation about the weather forecast, the upcoming rain and a bad weather this summer in Italy. He did not listen to me, trying with his eyes to move me away to the side, as if I were a screen that was blocking and hiding from him the unknown secret.

The train had come to a stop. It created the usual chaos of arrivals. Everyone hurried to move to the exit and find those who were waiting for them at the train station. The old man picked up a small suitcase and accidentally pushed Gustav to the exit.

Gustav was now the first in line; I was behind him, then, the old man. Francesca followed after him, happily and mysteriously smiling. I thought that during these last few minutes the young people had decided their fate.

The platform was not crowded. I noticed a beautiful refined woman and a tanned slim young girl who rushed to greet Gustav. They both surrounded him, feverishly grasped him with their strong hands, as if it were a chain that he would never be able to break. As for him, lost and crushed, he tried to escape from this hoop of promising happiness and embrace the other woman that he had just found after so many years of misery, searches and hopes. I froze. All passengers had already descended from the train; the platform was almost empty. I turned around. The train slowly began to gain its speed. It looked ominous on the canvas of a dark sky that had just began to lose its color before the heavy rain. At this very moment, I saw Francesca's faded face and, then as if a gust of wind lifted her from the platform, her red dress, the color of blood, flashed in the air and disappeared under the wheels of the departing into the tunnel train.

The visit below

the very elderly
ready armed with death
the air near them
stirs without motion
in camouflage

a flight for accent, yes
that's a rill that drops
on polished oak boards
then cold dank concrete

on which gray domes
furrowed with a dull top

no, like upper torsos
that defy letter and hope

whose force gyrates
just over the dead

An affair

what Bedouin caress
holds open this pitched tent

her phantom self glows
never not dark enough
to hog light his way
to her every horizon
where but else could she

Acolytes

choir of naughty boys
give not a grunt
void when the siren calls
to open holy books

for isn't it short of joy
for them to prefigure
tender truth to come

— David Appelbaum

Dear Isaac
April M. Oswald

I think the day I crashed, we crashed. I remember you standing over me to block the sun from my face. I couldn't see and it seemed that I would never stop throwing up blood. You carried me, you said, to a safe place. I thought my eye had popped out so I kept asking you where it was. In the ambulance I couldn't see you, but you held my hand. Maybe, that memory is wrong. Maybe, you met me at the hospital.

They stuck needles into my face to numb the pain, and I threw up again. The doctor told me that he was going to sew me up. I could feel him tugging at the skin around my broken cheek bones, obliterated nasal cavity, and the gashes around my eyes. I asked him where my eye was, and then I asked for you. You answered and said it would be alright. My eye was sitting on the table. At the time it calmed me to know that my eye was safe. I realized later you had been kidding. I had not lost my eye.

You wouldn't leave me by myself. I was so grateful to have you near me. I was so scared. It wasn't darkness that I saw when my face and identity wrapped into itself, but a pure white, like a blank piece of paper, or freshly fallen snow. Like comfort. I remember that whiteness perfectly. I stared into it for four days.

The small hospital in Monticello didn't have a functioning MRI machine, and they couldn't stop the bleeding. I would need to be transferred up to the University of Utah Hospital via small airplane. I was completely terrified at the idea of flying. I begged you to fly with me. I wanted you to stay with me ... I felt safe with you. You told the medical flight team that you wouldn't panic no matter what happened. They reluctantly let you on board.

I only remember waking once during that flight. When the airplane dropped in the air and I flew up out of my bed, or whatever it was I was lying on. The EMT, with a hook for a hand, strapped me down telling me that everything was fine. He had a gentle voice. I passed out again minutes later. You admitted to me that you were panicking the entire time, but they never saw you flinch. You said that we had flown through a major storm and the small airplane could barely handle the weather. I laughed when we talked about it later.

My parents were waiting for us when we arrived in Salt Lake. I don't remember the helicopter ride from the Salt Lake Airport to the hospital, but only remember being grabbed by a new team of doctors who then rushed me into the emergency room. I could hear them complaining that the other hospital had waited too long to bring me there.

Strange hands began to examine me. Poking at me and prodding at me. They removed all my clothes. I called out for you and then for my Mom. Their fingers and hands went into places they shouldn't have. My face was shattered nothing else. I tried to speak to them, but they weren't listening. I don't remember how many there were.

Sometimes, I don't think you understand how much I relied on you during that time. I wish I could explain how whenever you left my bedside I felt lost. Anxiety would completely take over my body and mind. I depended on your strength. I was in the hospital for ten days. It was the comfort of not knowing what I looked like that brought my spirits up during that time.

You asked the nurse to wash my eyes. They had been glued shut from blood and mucus, and nobody had taken the time to clean them. I guess doctors don't do that kind of stuff. Gently, the nurse, Emily was her name I think, rubbed them with a soft cloth for an hour and a half, until I could open them without pain. Your smile was the first thing I'd seen since the accident. I smiled back at you. You had tears in your eyes and your hands were shaking. We gave the nurse one of the many bouquets of flowers that adorned my room.

They had to repair all the broken bones in my face and we were told that it was a standard procedure. I didn't know how traumatic it would be for me. I have always felt so strong and independent. I guess that changed then. I learned to rely on you. I learned to let go of the need to control everything, and just trusted that you would handle things. I knew you wouldn't let anything bad happen to me. I have not felt that since with anyone else, that vulnerability that had consumed me and opened me to you.

I looked into the mirror for the first time that night, while you were in the bathroom, and cried. You didn't see that because there were no tears that fell from my swollen eyes. My face was distorted. It reminded me of a Halloween mask. It was purple and green. I had to get close to the mirror to see myself. So close that my nose was almost touching the glass.

My heart dropped and my legs felt weak. My identity had been taken away. I didn't know who I was anymore. I didn't recognize that person staring back at me. It had taken me thirty years to feel okay about who I was and now I'd have to start all over. I'd have to get to know myself again, this new face, this new person. I wasn't scared because you were with me. We were going through it together and you never left my side. I will always feel obligated to you for what you did.

Right before being wheeled into the operating room I remember you touched my face like it was still beautiful, like you loved me. I believed in you so much.

I wasn't alright after the operation. They couldn't wake me up. When I did finally come out of being under they couldn't stop the horrendous pain in my head. A tube had been left inside my skull to help the blood drain and to keep my brain from swelling. When I moved my head even slightly it was like a giant nail being driven deeper and deeper into my skull. I was screaming for you, but it was only a whisper to them. I begged them to let you in. I needed you by my side. They wouldn't and tried to calm me by telling me that I would be fine.

I told them I was bleeding, but they didn't believe me. They didn't understand that I meant down below. I had started menstruating. *Please, I asked them, I think I started my*

period. I was crying and embarrassed. Finally, the nurse checked and gave me a pad. I could hear myself whining like a small puppy. I felt alone. The room was white and sterile. It was so cold in there.

Again, I asked them to let you into the room, but they said I couldn't see anyone while I was in so much pain. I didn't understand that. I needed you to hold my hand. I needed you to tell me that the pain would stop, that I'd be alright. I tried my best to slow my breath and bring my heart rate down. The way I had when I first crashed the ATV, and had to wait for you to get help.

I had talked myself out of passing out while you were gone. I had been looking down at myself from above. Watching my clothes fill with blood. I made my mind stay awake to calm my body. I tried to do this in the post-operating room, but it only made the nurses more worried that I wasn't recovering. They thought my heart rate was too slow.

I cried and cried to them to please, please let you in. I became hysterical and tried to sit up, but the nurses held me down. *Okay, we'll let one person in at a time,* they said to me. You were standing next to me holding my hand, again. I felt calmer. My breath slowed.

When you touched the bed I cried out and threw up. I'd never felt so much emotion and physical pain. It was as though a vice were wrapped around my head and closing steadily in on me. I stopped breathing and you called out for help. I must have passed out then because I don't remember what happened. They had to reduce my pain medication because my breath kept stopping. I did my best to smile and stop the crying so that they would let me go back to my room. I wanted to feel your arms around me and sleep.

You had to keep waking me because every time I fell asleep I stopped breathing. You were afraid for me thinking I might not make it through the night. So, you sat by my bed until morning. I heard you cry once, but you didn't let go of me. I wanted to tell you I was fine, but couldn't find the strength. All I could do was put my hand on your head and stroke your hair. It was tangled and wild. I found you beautiful. I had never felt so in love with you.

In the morning I awoke and found you were gone. My heart raced. I called out for you, but you didn't answer. I had an anxiety attack and had to buzz the nurse. I threw up again. She told me that you were in the other room sleeping, and that she would go get you. I felt so helpless. You were my strength. When you came back I was still crying. You were so apologetic and promised you'd not leave me alone again.

We left the hospital on a Sunday. You wheeled me out to the car and drove us both home. We stopped at a drug store to fill my prescriptions. That was when you broke down and cried. I cried with you, and told you it was alright. I was sorry it had been so hard on you. I hugged you.

It has been two years since the accident. I am all healed on the outside. Except for my nose that turns up a little more than it should, and the scar across my head, I look like

nothing ever happened.

Afterwards, things were not the same for us. I was wrought with depression and pushed you away from me. I truly believed at the time that you would leave me because of my looks. I wanted to feel sorry for myself and you wouldn't let me. It made me angry to be around you.

You left me on a Saturday, three months after we left the hospital. I remember watching you sleep the night before knowing that it would be the last time you were in my bed. I felt your distance that night, but couldn't find the words to tell you how sorry I was. I never really asked you to stay. I felt only resentment and told you that you should leave. I didn't feel pretty anymore. I didn't think I could handle you looking at me and my smashed face day after day. It was just too hard. You always told me I was beautiful, but I knew you were only being nice.

My family seems to think the loss I feel for you is because of what we went through together. I tell myself that a lot to try and convince my heart that I am only suffering from the loss of self, and not the loss of you. Maybe, they became one in the same, I'm not sure. I'm not sure of anything that happened during those moments.

You briefly came back into my life, and I wanted only to share with you how much you had helped save me from myself. I was lost before our crash, but I found my heart through it, through you. I couldn't say the things I wanted to that night you came back. I could barely look at you without feeling my throat clench up. I wish you understood ... I wish you could see me again ... as beautiful.

Now I get up every morning and hope that you are safe. I look in the mirror and see a different person. I see a person who is alive. I am happy. I had forgotten what it felt like to love myself for who I was inside, and God reminded me through a tragedy. I am a good person. I am a beautiful woman. I will always be in your debt. You not only saved my life that day in Moab, but my soul.

Thank you, Isaac, for coming into my life and for leaving me to find myself. I will love you always.

The Witch Doctor

Olga Abella

One day Aunt Neida
ripped the clothes
from her body and ran
through the streets of Havana.
Her brothers and sisters
chased her between
the outhouses and pig pens.
When they caught her
they wrapped her in a blanket
to cover the shame.
They had to tie her to the bed
because she dug her nails
into her arms and legs
and kept trying to run away.
Days passed. She would not eat.
After a week three of them
dragged her to the witch doctor,
to the hut with its dangling beads,
black feathers and chicken claws.
My mother crossed herself
before she pushed
her crazy sister inside the door.
It took only ten minutes.
They were not allowed to see,
but Neida was fine after that,
except, she never spoke again
and always hung around the children.

The Ways of Dogs

Olga Abella

Dogs used to be squares for her,
tables with four legs, or chairs.
She drew dogs as parallelograms
with heads that had corners.
On mornings going to work she saw
her neighbor Sam walking
a brown rectangle dog around the block.
But those were the days she didn't
think about insides,
living only on the surface of her face barely eating
breathing only because it happened.

That was before she met a dog and learned its name,
discovered he liked chocolate covered raisins,
to put his head on her lap and sleep with her.
She noticed dogs had round parts like paws and eyes,
that they could bend as they ran in circles
or curl next to her while she drank coffee.

Then she realized she was hungry, that she liked
the taste of kiwi and Oreos after dinner.
She moved inside her bones and saw how long
her arms were, how her hands were strong enough
to nail shingles on roofs, how her feet did little jigs
when she walked the dog around the block
and met Sam walking Charlie,
who liked peanut butter cookies.

At night she dreamed of dogs
carrying her on their backs through forests and deserts
while she gripped their fur in her fists
and shielded the wind with their ears.

The Scab

Olga Abella

Sitting on the front step, she bends over her knee,
her neck a slow curve of curiosity.

At the slight rising of an edge, she slips in her fingernail
gently, lifting slightly, thin wedge under skin tugging

like a wood carver unfurling wood, the chisel
urging the delicate layer of curl.

Little by little she raises the round crust,
a single spot of blood
bloomed into a perfect dry circle

and slips it onto her tongue.

Crunchy flake between her teeth, sticky salt
dissolves piece by piece quietly

back into her body, back beneath her skin.

The Dream
Olga Abella

sometimes when the night air
comes in with
mucho cuidado as if
it were trying not to make itself known
i think it is you traveling from the dead
on a blanket woven
like that orange cloud i saw once just
above the ocean where i used to imagine
you as a sailor when you were my father

before you died i turned you into
a stranger because *era mejor asi*
much better than trying to shape love into
something i could hold in my hand
that could burn like the orange in
that cloud above the ocean spreading
hot and thin below the top layer of my skin
so that i would never be able
to be me without you, to let go
of the heat waves of anger, the body waves
of hard touch

always the night air becomes too much to breathe
as i try to make you go away

A Conversation with Jane Daggett Dillenger

by John Handley

For many, the name Jane Daggett Dillenger is synonymous with the field of art and religion. And it should be. Author of numerous books on the subject, at 92 she continues to teach and write in the academic field she pioneered. She has lectured all over the world and worked in some of the nation's most prominent art institutions. Recently I had the opportunity to visit with her in her Berkeley hills home.

Long before Jane Dillenger decided to be an art historian, or a theologian, for that matter, she was herself an artist. After visiting the Chicago Art Institute at age 17, she later went on to study painting under the American painter Grant Wood. Only later would she conclude that painting was not her ultimate calling. But that decision is beside the point. What is so compelling in Jane's observations is that she sees art through the eyes of an artist, and as such, her inclinations come from that place within her. This is what continues to inform her scholarship, and what continues to give her that uncanny insight that so often defies her students and colleagues, her comprehension of art from the perspective of an artist, and not a critic alone.

Here is our conversation.

John: Over the past sixty or more years, you've worked at some of the nation's most prestigious art institutions, like the Chicago Art Institute and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

Jane: Yes. Several others—but those are the most illustrious.

John: What is especially memorable about your experiences in those institutions?

Jane: Well, the first museum in my life was the Art Institute of Chicago. I was only seventeen when I made a trip by boat from Milwaukee to Chicago to go the World's Fair in 1933. Everybody else went to the World's Fair; but Jane went to the Art Institute. I had never stepped in the door of a large museum. That encounter, of course, was soul-changing. It was a moment of ecstasy, being in the presence of great art. I remember on the wall was a small etching by Picasso called *The Bath*. In it you see the very delicate line that Picasso used—it's a very early work—and a young harlequin lounging against a piece of furniture, and at his right, a beautiful woman, kind of a Madonna-like, bathing her child. Now that's not religious subject matter, but what happened to me was really a religious event. It was an ecstatic moment, when I was no longer myself, but was in that scene. The break between reality and art had been broken, and I was present in the Picasso piece. It was, as I say, an ecstatic moment, something even now that makes me shiver when I think of it.

That was my first great event with art, but I've had successive ones since. I think it was seven years after that moment that I entered the Art Institute of Chicago as the assistant to the curator of Prints and Drawings. I was able to hold that same Picasso in my hand, and study it carefully.

Because the Art Institute was built over a railroad track, it was thought to be a target for a raid, prior to World War II. And so we were evacuating the collection. That was my task, to sit with the curator as he took each print in hand and determined whether or not it would go to the salt mines or remain at the Art Institute. We went through the entire collection that way, and he, fortunately for me, was very chatty about it, speaking about all of his inner observations and experience of each work—it was such fast learning for me, and so thrilling, to be in that position.

John: Because you combed through the entire collection?

Jane: Yes, the whole collection. It's enormous and very valuable. To be in it physically was so important. That has been true for me throughout my teaching and my museum work—the physical contact with a work of art, it's a very important and a soul-stirring thing to be able to put your nose right up to a work of art and examine it with care.

So, that was one important event, that early Picasso print, being able to see it again in a study situation. It seems to me that my life has been so filled with these coincidences. I don't think it is coincidence at all, but a web that each of us builds in our own lives. Opportunities and accidents occur, and we seize them in some way, so that they begin to mesh together and unusual opportunities occur, thanks be to God. That's one of the riches of dealing in the arts, the human spirit that resides in those works of art that we have access to, if we're prepared to see and do.

Later on, when I came here to California, I was hired to do the first catalog of the collection at SFMOMA. Under my hand were, not only what was on the walls of the museum, but also the vast storage areas. I went through them all, examining the works of art—looking into the provenance and all of that kind of material.

Also, after I got my M.A. from Harvard, I was the head of the art collection for the Boston Athenaeum, too. That is probably a name that doesn't ring with familiarity?

John: No, I don't believe so.

Jane: It doesn't for most people. It's a private library and art collection, owned by the Brahmins of Boston, and it was founded by Thoreau, and Emerson, and the transcendental group. It was strictly membership in those days. The collection was interesting. At Harvard I had worked in 17th-century drawings, as well as medieval research. The Boston Athenaeum was all American art, and a very fine collection of art books. I remember applying for the job, and the director asked me what my preference

would be if I worked there. I said, "I would like to be curator of 17th-century drawings." She roared with laughter, and she said, "We have no 17th-century drawings, we only have American art. Do you still want the job?" And I said, "Yes, I do!"

So I was *enthroned* at the Boston Athenaeum, right next to the Park Street Church, the oldest church in Boston, which had the Liberty Bell that Paul Revere responded to—history, history, history, was all over there. Now, you might ask, what does this have to do with religion? Yes, that is certainly a legitimate question. I must say that as an art historian, I have always believed that great art is an expression of the Holy Spirit, as well as the individual artist.

John: How did you come to that awareness?

Jane: I think probably through the depth of my own response to art. I had always been—and never at any point a rebellious or questioning—Episcopalian. And somehow the *Book of Common Prayer* is also a part of my being; in my writing I'm often in the rhythm of it. Somehow in my depth these came together without any question at all. And I've experienced so much as a teacher, being able to create that experience that I had with the Picasso print for my students, while in the presence of the actual work of art. If the art was physically present, and the students were there, I could draw them to the moment where this barrier between the exterior reality and the interior reality disappears, and all of a sudden you're in the presence of the artist's vision—it's not the artist himself, but it's somehow the artist—his soul, his spirit. That's a holy moment, and you recognize that as a holy moment, and somehow life is never the same after this has *once* happened to you. You want it to happen again, and you help it to happen. I think something analogous happens with great music, and it doesn't have to be a Requiem, or a Mass, you know. The concertos of Bach, or the sonatas of Beethoven, have this power in them, if you are able to bring yourself into this communion. Does that make sense?

John: It does. It makes perfect sense. And, I think what drives me in my own work is trying to get to some of those very moments, and to understand them, and so often, they go beyond our understanding.

Jane: Yes, they do, they do. And, articulating it is difficult—words are not adequate, and in a way they minimize the moment, or the closer they get to it, the more they seem constricting. The wonderful thing about that moment is its fullness, and all that it has to give you, and this kind of palpitation, as long as it lasts.

John: Who were some of your early mentors, and what did you find interesting about their work?

Jane: Well, I started out with studio arts, painting, and in my sophomore year in college, I studied with Grant Wood, at the University of Iowa. That was a wonderful experience. For an art historian who was going to be born, it was wonderful, because, for example, I went through all of the procedures to make a fresco. I was one of five of Wood's assistants, and he was making a fresco for the state of Iowa at the Capitol Building. It wasn't until I went to the University of Chicago, which was for my third year, that the head of the art department, Ulrich Middeldorf, looked at all my records and said, "Well, we don't have a very good creative arts department here, but we have a very fine art history department, and I think you'd make a good art historian." And I said, "What is art history?" And he said, "Come to the Art Institute of Chicago Saturday morning, at ten o'clock, in the Flemish gallery, my doctoral seminar meets there, and you'll find out." The gallery had a wonderful Bouts painting of the Madonna Weeping, and we were grouped around it. There were all these doctoral students, and of course they were flaunting all of their terminology and their ideas, and I had never heard any of them. I staggered to try to comprehend it—but what did come through was that it was history, and it was art, and that somehow there was a power there that was very appealing to me.

So I hung in there, and he admitted me to doctoral seminars, right away. I learned very fast. And, I learned what art history was, and began to see that structure of history that is necessary, and what I so believe in. It is the backbone—that each artist is the heir of the artist before him, and that there is something almost holy about this. It gives us a genealogy, and in the same sense, maybe even more so than our personal genealogy, it links us to all the great minds of the past, and great experiences of the past. All of that came in while I studied there.

Middeldorf was an extraordinarily fine *teacher*, sensing what you needed. He really began the whole thing for me. And then it turned out I went to Harvard during the war. We lived right around the corner from the Fogg Art Museum, so it didn't take me long to become enrolled there. And, I studied prints and drawings there.

I also studied medieval art with Wilhelm Koehler. He was their great Carolingian scholar, at Harvard. The next phase of my education was under *his* hand. He was a brilliant lecturer, and even after I left Harvard, we had a very steady correspondence. He was a person for whom the spiritual content of the work of art persisted, in a way that was rather wonderful, because he was so *into* the work of art itself; no theories or generalizations—it was a very intense *looking* that led you into that spirituality.

It was the era of reform in education, the New Criticism, and at the University of Chicago there had been a belief in the power of the individual work of art as absolutely controlling everything. So you didn't read biographies, or histories, or anything like that. You simply zeroed in on the art. In literature, it meant that you'd read *everything* that the person had written. I took a course in John Donne, and I read all of his sermons, all of his poetry—

and no commentary. What it meant was that you'd learn to look, and you learned to *read* in a way that made you feel innocent of those abilities before that time.

John: And you really learned to *look*. Over the years, you've made some startling discoveries about artists, and the spirituality behind their work. For example, your book, *The Religious Art of Andy Warhol*.

Jane: Yes, you know, people who knew Warhol well were startled when that book came out. But before I wrote that book, I had known Barnett Newman. Even when he did that series called the *Stations of the Cross*, he was already typed as *the* Abstract Expressionist who made frameless, huge paintings with "zips" of color on them. All of this was completely *new*, so people were baffled by them. And when he finished *The Stations of the Cross*, the title was puzzling to everyone because they were just white paintings with black lines running vertically across the canvas. They were exhibited at the Guggenheim Museum, where I first saw them. And I saw them repeatedly. I found them very hard to get into—to comprehend. When I was writing my second book, *Secular Art with Sacred Themes*, I wanted to include the *Stations of the Cross*. But I felt that, as a Christian writing about a Jew dealing with the *Stations of the Cross*, I didn't want to, in any way, trespass on what *he* felt about his work. So I asked the Guggenheim for his telephone number, and I asked him if he would be willing to read the chapter I had written. He was a darling person—you know, kind of a portly gentleman, and he *always* looked like a gentleman, in a full suit with a vest, and elegant looking, and a walrus mustache, and a twinkle in his eye, quite other than I expected. He was very pleased about what I had written and invited me to dinner. So he and his wife, and I and my husband, met at a bar in New York—ah, we had a wonderful time. The bar we met at is famous because it has a mural, you know, like the one we have here in San Francisco by Maxfield Parish. We met there and went on to dinner. I remember we were getting out of the cab at 2:00 am, and were friends forever after that.

Jane: Oh, you asked me about people. Should I mention Mark Rothko?

John: Well now, it's interesting you bring him up because I was going to ask you about him. But before we discuss Rothko, I want to ask you about two popular terms that seem to be thrown around today: "spirituality" and "mysticism." How would you differentiate the two in terms of their influence in art?

Jane: Oh, these are tricky terms, both of them, and as you say, they are so thrown around now, without definition. I'm not sure that I use the term *spirituality* very much, but I'm bold enough to use the expression *the Holy Spirit* in regard to what happens for the artist and for the viewer at that moment, the moment when the vision of the one is joined with the aim of the other. So, as I say, I'm a little resistant to that term. *Mysticism* is another of those big words, and I tend to use instead the word *mystery*. But, you

know, there are moments that we can't account for, that have power in our lives, and we tend to *feel* that they are given to us rather than being initiated by us. And, for these moments, I use the term *mystery*. Does that make sense, John?

John: It does, and *especially* your idea that they're a gift to us, these moments. I like to say that they're God-initiated.

Jane: Well, that's what I mean by the Holy Spirit, of course.

John: And that brings me to Rothko. As I was driving here, I wondered if you would classify any of the artists you have personally known as mystics. And, of course, I wondered about...

Jane: If Rothko was a mystic?

John: Well, yes.

Jane: No, I don't think that I would call him a mystic. Every artist I know—Stephen de Staebler, and Barnett Newman, for example, are two people who've been friends of mine for years. I knew them both as artists, but as people, too. And, it seems to me in so many ways that they're great realists, because they have their feet on the ground in a way that is quite wonderful. When an artist works, they are *intently* into that work in a way that is fascinating to see. I don't think it's a kind of intensity that academic people, for instance, ever experience, or seldom anyway. Because, as I say, it's gripped into reality, every instinct and every learning of their life is in that, too. Rothko did say some things that might be interpreted as, you know, an expression of mysticism, or certainly spirituality, however.

John: Give me an example?

Jane: When I went to Rothko's studio, I was writing about his work for the future Rothko Chapel in Houston. He was working on those paintings, and he had never been to Houston; he'd never *met* the commissioner. He had about eight paintings finished (there were 14 in all included in the chapel). His studio was an old fire house that had been abandoned, in New York City. The only light was from a skylight, and a very *grimy* one. It was late afternoon, and with a grimy skylight, and overcast skies, it was rather darkly mysterious in his studio; it was lovely, it was *the* light to see these paintings for the first time. And I was just overpowered by them, and I remember walking over to one of them, and looking very closely, you know, moving along, looking closely, stepping back, and so forth. Then I turned to Rothko. He just sat there, didn't say a thing, and watched me. I said, "Oh, I wish my eyes had fingers, that I could but touch the paintings" Truly your fingers were so appealed to by these beautiful surfaces, and—you don't touch, you know that, you can't touch. And he smiled at me, and he was very pleased at that

reaction.

I asked him about the chapel, and whether he had thought of it in terms of *The Stations of the Cross*, and he said that he knew about Newman's *Stations*—and that he had purposely not gone to see them. He wanted to finish his paintings first and see what happened without any influences or suggestions. I asked him if there were any religious thoughts or ideas latent? And he said, “My relationship with God isn't really very good.”

John: But—and here I'm going to use one of *those* words—his paintings are so profoundly *spiritual*.

Jane: Now look at what you just said: you said *but*. You should have said *and*.

John: And?

Jane: Do you see what I mean?

John: I'm not sure I do.

Jane: Well, you're saying that he says his relationship with God isn't good, *but* the paintings are spiritual. As if he had to think *God* while making them—that is, consciously think about God. I don't believe that is necessary. I believe that it's something deeper than that, something that happens.

John: I see what you mean.

Jane: At least, that's my viewpoint. Now, some of my colleagues would think that this isn't enough—you *know* that. I mean, the religion-religion people, they want something more—

John: Concrete and factual.

Jane: Yes. It's not our think mechanism that is involved. So we have to be very careful of this treasure. Again, you know, our theologians, they will not be satisfied with this.

John: But Paul Tillich was.

Jane: Oh, Tillich *was*! Now, Tillich was a friend of mine.

John: He seems to have bridged that gap better than some.

Jane: I think he did. He was a person of immense sensibility, as well as intellect. And I remember, when I was teaching at Drew Theological Seminary, I of course followed everything that was happening in the art world. In *The New York Times*, John Canaday wrote an article about this professor at Union Theological Seminary whose students had arranged for a gallery to do an exhibit of modern religious art. And he had written this statement about art and religion, about the four categories of the relationship between

art and religion.

And I read Tillich's four categories and I thought, "What nonsense!" But how *interesting* that a theologian would be in the art pages of *The New York Times*. And since I was teaching at the rival seminary, I thought, "Mmm, I have to meet this guy." So I telephoned him, and he invited me for lunch. And that was the beginning of a lifetime friendship. Back at Drew, I proposed that he be the speaker at one of our special faculty lectures. My colleagues sat there open-mouthed because I had had lunch with him! And I obviously knew nothing about him, you know, that he was the great man at Union Theological Seminary. It was so funny.

John: Because he was fairly famous by then.

Jane: He *was*, but you see, I was an art historian—I didn't know he was famous! All I knew was that he was in the art pages of *The New York Times*. And here was my opportunity to get my students more involved.

John: Now Tillich had had what some would say was a mystical encounter with Botticelli's *Madonna and Child* after the war.

Jane: And that was so fascinating. I saw that in the newspaper and it was so fascinating because it made an absolute denial of his four categories of art. The category that Botticelli would fall into was non-religious style, and religious subject matter. And that was a big bucket that *all* great works of religious art of the past fell into! The only thing that Tillich saw as good was religious style and religious subject matter. Things like German Expressionism.

John: I have to confess I have never really been able to grasp his categories.

Jane: That's good.

John: I do recall liking his ideas about the prophetic hope that is found in art, which I connect with George Segal's Holocaust Memorial; Art that presents a prophetic hope that looks beyond reality to something better. But it's been a long time since I looked at his work. I thought that one of his four categories addressed this.

Jane: Well, that would be the German Expressionism and so forth. It may be in this that he also talks about the *Guernica*, by Picasso?

John: That rings a bell.

Jane: Though it's filled with horror, it's still...

John: Yes. It's a protest piece that's filled with hope, that we can have something better than we currently have.

Jane: Yes. That's him talking about Guernica. That reminds me about the first course I ever taught at Drew Theological Seminary, in religion and art. I had been a museum person up to that time. I had proposed to Drew that they take me on and that I teach art and religion. My first course was called "Religious Art from the Catacombs to Guernica." Guernica was hanging in the Museum of Modern Art, so Drew hired a bus and took us all to it. We were in the presence of that painting which is just an extraordinary, just magnificent painting.

John: Were you the first professor then, in the United States, to offer coursework in art *and* religion?

Jane: I thought it up. Then I wanted to get a PhD when I realized that I was going to remain in teaching. I tried to get a PhD at Princeton, or NYU, or Columbia, and each one said, "Oh, we'd love to give you a PhD in art history," but they wouldn't do it for both.

John: So you earned an MA in art history from Harvard?

Jane: My MA is from Harvard, and my BA is from the University of Chicago.

John: And your PhD was from?

Jane: No, you see, that was the one I wasn't able to do. No, I never got a PhD! I suppose if I'd gone to the Graduate Theological Union. I did receive an honorary PhD from the Dominican School. Margaret Miles spoke at that occasion, it was lovely.

So I decided then, I will write my first book and make that my credentials. So I wrote *Style and Content in Christian Art*. When the GTU was founded, then I thought, "Hurrah, I can do for other people what I couldn't do for myself." So the GTU was—and I think we still are—the only place where a PhD can be done in Art and Religion. So that was very satisfying for me: what I couldn't do for myself I could still do for others.

John: What are your current research projects?

Jane: Well, you mentioned the Andy Warhol book. That was something like eight years of my life, because I began on it very shortly after Andy's death, and none of the materials were available. I was traveling all over interviewing and gathering information, and seeing the paintings, actually *seeing them*. That book was called *The Religious Art of Andy Warhol*, and subsequent to that, I had wanted to do *The Religious Art of Picasso*. I have two lectures published already. I would need to interweave them together, and add some additional material, and I would have a nice monograph on him—again, most people think *religious art?* Picasso? But I have the evidence.

I hope that this theme will be a series of monographs; that if I could do the Picasso one, then somebody else could write on the religious art of John Lafarge or the religious art

of John Singer Sargent; the religious art of Paul Gauguin; of Vincent Van Gogh; of Henri Matisse—these are artists that people don't think of as religious.

My teaching and my writing have been inspired by the first-hand study of art. When we confront a painting, it is not a matter of a few moments of visual contact in those few moments of temporal time; our entire lifetime of visual, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual experience is being drawn upon and stimulated. There we, like the painter who creates the work of art, endow with significance the forms of our daily visual experience, and we become artists in our seeing of the world about us.

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Untitled

Kaber Vasuki

He held it sacred in his hand,
and fondled it with finger love.
Twisted it madly, almost wrenched,
the colourful plastic cube.
He held it close to his ear,
heard it click beneath his fingers,
smiled at himself while scrambling it again
"I like this" his announced.
"It's a puzzle" I said, and asked:
"Shall I get you one in braille?"
He held it in front of his vacuous eyelid,
"I think it is more fun this way"

It was an evening of clearing weather, the Park showing green and desirable in the distance, the last daylight applying a high lacquer to the brick and brownstone walls and giving the street scene a luminous and intoxicating splendor. Trexler meditated, as he walked, on what he wanted. "What do you want?" he heard again. Trexler knew what he wanted, and what, in general, all men wanted; and he was glad, in a way, that it was both inexpressible and unattainable, and that it wasn't a wing. He was satisfied to remember that it was deep, formless, enduring, and impossible of fulfillment, and that it made men sick, and that when you sauntered along Third Avenue and looked through the doorways into the dim saloons, you could sometimes pick out from the unregenerate ranks the ones who had not forgotten, gazing steadily into the bottoms of the glasses on the long chance that they could get another little peek at it. Trexler found himself renewed by the remembrance that what he wanted was at once great and microscopic, and that although it borrowed from the nature of large deeds and of youthful love and of old songs and early intimations, it was not any one of these things, and that it had not been isolated or pinned down...

from "The Second Tree From the Corner" by E B White



From above it is not bright;
from below it is not dark:
an unbroken thread
beyond description.

It returns to nothingness.
The form of the formless,
the image of the imageless,
It is called indefinable
and beyond imaginations.

Stand before it
and there is no beginning.
Follow it
and there is no end.

Lao Tsu

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Lyn Lifshin has written more than 125 books and edited 4 anthologies of women writers. Her poems have appeared in most poetry and literary magazines in the U.S.A, and her work has been included in virtually every major anthology of recent writing by women. She has given more than 700 readings across the U.S.A. and has appeared at Dartmouth and Skidmore colleges, Cornell University, the Shakespeare Library, Whitney Museum, and Huntington Library. Lyn Lifshin has also taught poetry and prose writing for many years at universities, colleges and high schools, and has been Poet in Residence at the University of Rochester, Antioch, and Colorado Mountain College. Winner of numerous awards including the Jack Kerouac Award for her book *Kiss The Skin Off*, Lyn is the subject of the documentary film *Lyn Lifshin: Not Made of Glass*. For her absolute dedication to the small presses which first published her, and for managing to survive on her own apart from any major publishing house or academic institution, Lifshin has earned the distinction "Queen of the Small Presses." She has been praised by Robert Frost, Ken Kesey and Richard Eberhart, and Ed Sanders has seen her as "a modern Emily Dickinson."

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