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word~river literary review (2009)

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Editor’s Note

Our first issue of wordriver is finally in print and we are all very excited. As the editor, I envisioned, like the title of the journal, a river of words flowing through the part-time instructors’ world and out onto the larger academic plain. This river, I hope, will have positive effects on how the part-time instructor is viewed within the context of that academic world, changing not only the scenery, but also the flow of ideas.

As this is the first issue, some thanks are in order. First, and foremost, the staff and I, and by extension the contributors, would like to thank Douglas Unger, the Interim Chair of UNLV’s Department of English, for his support of us from the beginning idea to the end product. Without his support this river of words might not have flowed at all. We would also like to thank Susan Summers, Budget Technician for our English department, for her constant help and input. She has taken on a great deal of the technical burden of this project; and we are very grateful for her support and friendship. Olivia Montgomery must also be singled out for a special thank you. As the student assistant assigned to input the data, she has done an exemplary job; and her ideas on how the journal should look have been greatly appreciated. Lastly, we want to thank Megan McDonald, who volunteered for us this year, creating the cover design for our initial issue and the website for the journal.

For myself, I would like to thank everyone who has contributed in any way to this issue: the readers, the staff, and the contributors. We have all worked together to create a unique journal and we should all be very proud of what we have done here.

Your editor, Beth E. McDonald
Spring 2009
Non-Fiction
Rhodes Tower, Room 1801

The adjunct faculty office has six desks in it, but there are never more than two of us using the office at any given time. The room, while windowless, is not bad; however, the building is named for James Rhodes, governor of Ohio in May 1970, at the time of the Kent State shootings, and though some make the case that if it weren’t for him, our Cleveland State University itself would not exist, I cringe every time I say, “My office is in Rhodes Tower.”

Still, at times, good fortune has come my way in Rhodes Tower. Three years ago, Nancy McMahon and I met and became friends when we shared Room 1801 on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. In our first weeks together our talk was desultory. We’d work at our desks for a while, then one of us would say, “Take a listen to this,” and read a passage aloud from an anthology or a student essay. Then one day, she came over to my desk and handed me a paper, “Would you read this and see if you think those sentence-level problems interfere to such a degree that this student ought to get a ‘C’ on this paper?” We examined the essay, identified the pattern of sentence-level errors, marked them, and struggled to understand their cause. The young writer had skill, too, and we noted the sophisticated vocabulary and an authentic voice. Best of all, Nancy and I discovered that day that we were alike—we could never get enough of grammar and rhetoric!

When Nancy went back to her desk and took down her stylebook, the Fourth Edition Allyn and Bacon Handbook,
I wanted to see what she was doing, so I looked over her shoulder. “Jennifer, see pages 248 to 255 in our Allyn and Bacon,” she was writing in an endnote to the student, “and especially look at Section 12b, about dependent clauses, because that’s going to help …” I was impressed. I’d never thought about taking the time to look up exercises that exactly matched student errors. But Nancy? She was that kind of teacher. She tailor made the advice to each student, and her written comments were both useful and kind.

We spent a lot of time in our office. Every morning, at 6:30AM, we’d come in from our commute from the west side of town through Cleveland’s urban streets. With the office door closed and locked, in the light from the green banker’s lamp, we’d sit, companionably, and grade papers or polish our lesson plans. An oversized, grim portrait of Dame Edith Sitwell dominated one wall, looked down over us; it was always good for a laugh. The campus was quiet. Janitors polished floors in empty hallways. There was a hint of coffee being brewed in the kitchenette down the hall.

When we took a coffee break, our talk drifted to the personal. Nancy kept a gallery of snapshots of her grandchildren pinned up on the bulletin board, and we’d stand near there, coffee in hand. “Look at that,” she’d say, pointing to a snapshot, “the twins, Xavier and Curran, the eleven-year-olds. Jo, they are alike, because they are both so handsome and personable. But they are so different. Let me tell you what they did last week …” and she’d tell me a cute story, usually involving one boy being mischievous, and the other not. She’d talk about Josie, the little one jumping up and
down in her crib; about Victor, the grandson from Mexico and how grown-up he looked, dressed in a blazer for school; and about Shannon’s wedding, her first grandchild to marry.

Every spring, Nancy would take down the photos and rearrange the bulletin board to make room to post one poem, “Spring,” by Gerard Manley Hopkins. The first time she posted it, three stanzas prettily arrayed in black type against a picture of a blossoming fruit tree, I was delighted. Here was a Hopkins poem that I was not familiar with. I told her I was glad she’d introduced the poem to me, and recited my favorite lines aloud, with verve, “What is all this juice and all this joy?” We laughed. I waited every spring for her to post that poem.

In August 2007, together again, we started fall semester. She photocopied her syllabus, organized her desk, lined up her books, and posted the latest snapshots. One day in late October, when I offered her a coconut cookie I’d baked she turned it down, “I’ve got to have a test at the doctor’s and can’t eat solids. Sorry! I arranged to have someone cover my classes tomorrow and Monday so I can take the test.”

“Oh, I’ve had that test,” I said. “It’ll be fine.”

Nancy was out on Friday and Monday as planned. But then she wasn’t in on the following Wednesday or Friday, or the week following that, or ever again, and it wasn’t fine. The test told Nancy she had cancer. Following surgery and chemotherapy, less than three months after she left our office, after Christmas, after New Year’s, and after saying goodbye to her family and friends, she died.
I had felt so honored when her daughters invited me to visit Nancy one day a week before her death. I held her hand and talked for a while. I reminded her of the Hopkins poem that would have to be posted in the spring. “Oh, yes, it’s in my desk,” she whispered, her eyes closed. I recited the lines I liked, and, with a smile, “There’s no one like Hopkins,” she said.

At the funeral, there were bagpipes. Xavier and Curran were the altar boys. Her sons carried her casket.

After, I sorted through Nancy’s desk, knowing that the family would want her books and her notes, the student evaluations, and her grade books. I boxed it all up for them. All the snapshots. Her book about feminist literary theory. The grammar textbooks. Folders with lesson plans. Her coffee mug with a Joyce quotation and illustration on it. The totes and carry-alls for her books.

Finding the Hopkins poem, I hesitated. Then, I kept it. It stays in Rhodes Tower, Room 1801.

##
A Thimbleful of Sky

Who would have thought a down jacket would become my most prized possession in the Peruvian rainforest? The only reason I had it along with me in the first place was because it wouldn’t fit in the large suitcase I’d left in the headquarters of Posada Amazonas in Puerto Maldonado. I’d laughed as I bunched it through the handles of my duffle, bemoaning the fact that I had to carry it along for a week to be spent in 90 degree heat and like humidity, but this morning, as our canoe chugged up the Tambopata River, I huddled deeper into its luscious folds, blessing it for its warmth as a bitter wind blew rain onto my drenched and shivering body. Just yesterday I had cursed the mosquitoes that forced me to wear long sleeves and pants in the sweltering heat, yet today, here I was, freezing beneath a down coat. Was this Global Warming gone wild?

How I came to be in such a situation is another of those weird workings of the universe that I’ve never been able to figure out. To begin with, I’m not much of an outdoors person. I don’t own a tent and, if someone mentions the word “camping,” I ask how close the nearest lodge is. I don’t like the idea of bugs or other crawly things creeping along my body or creatures of any kind who regard me as some kind of exotic smorgasbord. So when I heard about Rainforest Expeditions, I was surprised I found the possibility of such a trip alluring. Maybe it’s because a lot of my friends had been to the rainforest, coming back with stories of sleeping in trees and communing with lizards the size of donkeys (as well as
bug bites the size of saucers) and I didn’t want to be the only kid on the block who hadn’t been. Or maybe I just wanted to challenge myself to go beyond my “comfort zone,” to learn from an experience both dark and dangerous…

With visions of Ernest Hemingway, at his adventuresome best, dancing in my head, alongside images of wilds pumas, hungry caimans, and vicious mosquitoes, I had planned my trip. I thought I had prepared pretty well. I’d read up on rainforests and had dutifully sprayed my clothes with something so toxic I was assured mosquitoes would drop dead of apoplexy before ever actually setting their stringy little legs on me. And I came with a supply of DEET to slather on areas not protected by clothing. I was a walking toxic waste site and should have been wearing a sign to warn the innocent.

And this was how I came to be riding along in a motorized canoe thirty-five miles up the Tambopata River in the midst of a late winter storm that had swept down from Argentina. I couldn’t wait to soak up all the rainforest had to offer. But what would this great unknown have to teach me?

In the spirit of adventure, I had jumped on board the canoe that would take me to Posada Amazonas, the primary field camp for the eco-tourism project co-owned and developed by Rainforest Expeditions and the local community of Infierno. (Tip #1: Never ever jump into a canoe, as they are not as stable as they appear and tend to rock precariously back and forth when weight is suddenly thrown on one side.) Having avoided a precipitous swim in water as thick as molasses, I settled back to enjoy the sojourn up the river and felt rewarded by the sight of a caiman sunbathing near two
turtles napping on a log while a flock of yellow butterflies, each the size of my hand, swarmed alongside our canoe.

Dense foliage that rose from the banks of the river glistened in the morning sun. My sodden socks hung on a hook next to my lunch, which consisted of chicken and rice wrapped in a banana leaf and tied with raffia tucked snugly, although a bit damply, inside a cloth bag. I kept checking my feet to see if they were turning blue, but, fortunately, frostbite had not set in.

When the canoe docked, our guide, a young Peruvian woman named Caterina, led us up a flight of rickety steps that led us into the damp lushness of the rainforest. Usually entering something so dark and potentially rife with hungry critters sends me into a paroxysm of anxiety, but maybe it was the smell of the loamy ground or the calls of birds not far away, but there was something so vibrant that it immediately felt, well, welcoming, as if it were in and of itself pulsating, with a hand held out in invitation.

Our lodge (no tents, thankfully) was unobtrusively nestled into the rainforest and set on stilts. On the lawn, hammocks swayed in the breeze and a double row of Wellingtons lined up on the sprawling veranda suggested people were waiting out the heat until the cool of evening. (Tip #2: Always travel with smart people.)

As I followed Caterina down a polished mahogany walkway (the entire lodge and environs are constructed from local mahogany, keeping the impact on the natural environment to a minimum) that led to the rooms set up for tourists, I looked up to find a sky obscured by a canopy of
green so thick the sun could squeeze only the meekest of rays between broad leaves and tangle of vines. Monkeys jabbered in some nearby trees and the whole experience suddenly seemed surreal, as if I had entered Jurassic Park, and I realized that too many rides on Disneyland’s Jungle Cruise had formed my image of anything even remotely tropical.

The “door” to my room was only a light cotton curtain that lifted in the breeze whispering down the sidewalk. As I stepped onto the rough wooden floor (the polishing apparently ends at the doorway), past the twin beds draped with mosquito netting, and the hammock—feeling as if I’d entered a world somewhere between Graham Greene’s and Gilligan’s Island—I discovered something both tantalizing and a little unsettling, to say the least: my room’s “fourth” wall was a three-foot tall, slatted beamed railing opening directly onto the rainforest. My roommate went into something of a panic at such proximity—and, in her mind, vulnerability—to the wild. But to me, it felt like camp. I liked looking out across the small yard into the thickness of jungle, wondering what might be lurking there, gazing back at me. My roommate pointed out there was a reason the entire place was set up on stilts and I responded that since it was, there was no need for worry. Right?

As the sun was beginning to wear itself out from blasting its heat on fair-weather tourists, we hiked down a narrow path that wound its way deep into the rainforest. An ironwood tree, appropriately named as it is the hardest wood in the world, and also one of the slowest to grow, loomed overhead. How long had it been around? What stories could it
tell? Does a long life come from a thick skin, one not easily punctured by the sting of emotion? We carefully skirted three-foot tall termite mounds—yes, you read right, three feet tall! Talk about high hopes. I wondered whether a 50 foot tree would suddenly come crashing down, a million happy termites giddy from a great meal scuttling off. The walking palm, a tree with an exterior root system that makes it look like it could just start storming through the forest whenever the urge struck, made me wonder if this was where Tolkien got his idea for the Ents. I’ve always loved trees and the idea of this one marching through the rainforest to settle elsewhere when no one was looking made me smile. (Maybe that’s why people get lost in the forests of the world: the trees move, destroying their landmarks!) There were also vines that snaked their way up and down trunks, except for the chirona tree, one that lacks any sort of hospitality, as it actually sheds its bark to prevent vines from attaching themselves. A parade of leaf-cutter ants toted leaves a hundred times their size on their heads (I have trouble enough keeping a hat in place!) crossing the path of a baby bird that had fallen from its nest onto the trail; she glanced about in wide-eyed panic as her mother called from nearby, begging her to please, please, please find the courage to spread her wings and get off the ground before some hungry predator came upon her. In keeping with Posada’s policy of non-interference with nature, we stepped over the baby bird, leaving her to her fate, though it was almost unbearably painful to do so. It seemed so cruel not to offer some kind of help when it would have taken so little, but Caterina said that even if we moved the bird, we couldn’t guarantee its safety
and, indeed, we might even inadvertently put it into greater peril without knowing it. This seemed far too rational and wise, even if painfully so, so I focused on my own inner workings as a diversion, while emotions such as fear and compassion grappled with the idea of trusting some invisible force and letting the consequences work themselves to their own natural end. Though I’d watched such an event on countless documentaries, never would I have imagined myself in a situation where I had to trust nature to take its own course, which, in this case, meant abandoning a chick to her almost certain death. This was so contradictory to my instincts of compassion and desire to alleviate suffering that I trudged on in a state of wretchedness, deeply disturbed by what the rainforest was teaching me.

Night comes down fast in the rainforest, like someone drawing the curtain after a show, so we retraced our steps carefully, using flashlights to light the way. After dinner I returned to my room to find that someone had lowered the mosquito netting so it covered the beds, carefully tucking it beneath the mattress so I could sleep in my own little mosquito-free cocoon.

When you’re miles and miles away from any kind of “manmade” light, darkness is like black velvet. Kerosene lanterns glowed from niches in the walls, providing the only source of light other than candles propped into enormous Brazil nuts halved to serve as holders. Along with the darkness, silence fell. A silence so profound I could hear my own breathing: in and out, in and out, slowly, steadily, with tranquility that seemed to match the pace of the jungle now
fast asleep. The flames quivered in a soft breeze that wafted through our “fourth” wall, mesmerizing me with their little haloes of light.

But before I could climb into my cocoon, I just had to look at the night sky. After all, I had come a long way to see things that didn’t exist back home. I scrounged through my bag until I found my flashlight and an astronomical chart to help me locate stars in the southern hemisphere, then padded out along the mahogany sidewalk where a swath of sky was visible between the trees. Gazing up at the night sky, jittery with the excitement of seeing constellations I had never seen before, I was stunned to find that the sky was so littered with stars that anything remotely familiar was impossible to find. I stared at the star chart, adjusting for time and place, locating the constellations that should be right overhead. But when I looked up again, I still could find no connection between the stars overhead and those on my chart. Even in the Andes I had found Scorpios and the Southern Cross! But here, there seemed to be an equal balance between twinkling lights and darkness, which was so overwhelming I felt disoriented. Stars randomly swimming without any discernible pattern? How could this be? And have there always been that many stars? And how is it possible that so very few can be seen in the northern hemisphere? Even in the desert or on mountain peaks? Struggle as I might, I could not get my mind around the immensity of what I was seeing. It was, quite simply, mind-boggling and, ultimately, ineffable.

Tears blurred my eyes when I raised them once again. This time I did see one thing more clearly than ever:
The Milky Way, which spilled its glow across the heavens like a timeless river. I thought of the story the Greeks told of Hera whose breast milk spewed and created the Milky Way, and of the Celts, who referred to it as The Sky River with the constellation of the swan swimming across it as the seasons passed. And it suddenly made all the sense in the world that early people would project a sense of sacredness onto the night sky. How could they look at such a spectacle and not see divinity within it? And I mean *awesome* divinity; there is no way the power of such a sky could ever be doubted. I made silent obeisance to whomever it might be that ruled such a domain before tiptoeing back to my room.

Not yet ready to abandon the night, I lit another of the Brazil nut candles, setting it in my lap so I could clasp my hands around it, running my fingers over its rough and lumpy shell, then sat in the hammock, where I could gaze out at the jungle, wondering what all those beasts out there thought of the stars. Cicadas sang a chorus and I hoped their message was carried directly to the deities. Their song was broken by the intermittent shrieks of night birds. As I sat relishing this moment, a bolt of lightning suddenly flashed, crackling between the leaves and fronds; clouds began to swirl, obscuring the happy twinkles. Distant thunder boomed as if the deities were in dire need of placating. Someone swished down the walkway, silently extinguishing the kerosene lanterns, which left only the flicker of my candle. When the rain started, first just drops pelting the earth, then a full-scale downpour, I decided it was time to crawl into my netting.
Beneath the railing, plants rustled; some creature diving into its own shelter, I supposed.

At 4:00 am Caterina knocked on my wall. From the distance, I could hear macaws already rising, greeting the day, and I wondered if they ever slept. But then the eeriest sound I’d ever heard began to rise behind those shrieks, creating the kind of symphony Edgar Allen Poe would have written had he picked up the baton rather than the pen. Howler monkeys, whose cry is aptly named, called from about a mile away in a low, elongated whisper that I first took to be wind rushing through the canopy. The eerie cry rose in intensity until it sounded like a distant train roaring through a tunnel; reaching its crescendo, it slowly dissipated before beginning the cycle again. I shivered. What causes howler monkeys to howl, I wanted to know. Nothing, apparently, or so Caterina told me, as she pointed the way with her flashlight. It’s just the sound they make to wake each other and welcome the day. With such a haunting cry, I wondered what kind of day they envisioned.

This morning we would go in search of macaws at the clay lick. Apparently, dawn is their time for breakfast and they do eat and run—or fly, as the case may be. We crossed the river by our now way-too-familiar canoe to the clay lick, arriving just as the sun began to rise, peering over the horizon, as if checking to see whether it was worth the trouble. Oh, yes, Mother Sun! Here I am! Ready to bask in a day of your warmth, oh Divine One! She must have heard and been impressed by my devotion, or maybe I’m just more powerful than I think because the sun suddenly crested the horizon,
splashing a honey-colored warmth across the clay cliff that towered over the far side of the grassy field we were now crossing. A scarlet macaw swooped down to land on a branch not ten feet from where we stood. Her eyes darted, searching for predators; she began to squawk. A pair of blue and yellow macaws appeared, slicing the sky with a swath of brilliant color, to land on the cliff and join the chorus. Soon two dusky-headed parakeets soared for the clay, followed by a dazzling duo of yellow-crowned parrots. Within moments the cliff was alive with a vibrant rainbow of feathers as birds flew and dove, perched and nibbled on the minerals found in this, the world’s most diverse clay lick.

If a sky littered with stars took my breath away, then watching over 200 parrots and macaws feast but a good “stone’s throw” away brought it back, peacefully, gently, coaxing it into the rhythm of birds enormous and majestic going about their morning routine. The colors were so sharp that the reds were vermilion, the blues iridescent, and the yellows so bright I feared the sun would be jealous and disappear once again. As if orchestrated, the birds swooshed down to eat, then rose again, each calling with their own unique sound and cadence. We sat in silent awe, not daring to interrupt, realizing how truly privileged we were to witness such an event. Once the ritual ended, the flutter of wings was replaced by an uncanny stillness as the birds suddenly departed, as if some magical alarm clock had told them breakfast time was over. Once the last macaw had disappeared, I wondered if any of what I had just witnessed had actually taken place on the same planet as freeways and
high-rises. And I was reminded once again of the sacredness of the natural world. Its cycles of life began way before we humans became aware of them and have been serving them well ever since. Is it possible for humans to place ourselves within such harmony, to become a part of the rhythms of the natural world rather than trying to force them into ours?

Later, we visited a 300-year old kapok tree. Caterina told us the story of the kapok: a warrior fell in love with a maiden, but was killed by his rival; the warrior then metamorphosed into the kapok, which became the Amazon, with its branches the Amazon’s tributaries. The tinamou bird’s cry, which sounds like both, “Where are you?” and “Donde esta?” (the Spanish version) is believed to be the maiden’s as she searches for her lover. It’s light and lyrical; maybe the sweetest melodies are born from loss. I hope she finds him, though it would be a pity to lose the lovely song of the tinamou.

Finally, the time arrived for me to leave the rainforest. The next morning would be my last one here. As I sat in my three-walled room and gazed out into the pitch black of the rainforest, I wondered what, indeed, it had taught me. Had I seen myself in the determination of the leaf-cutter ants, the tough-skinned ironwood tree, or the walking palm? How about the chirona tree that sheds its bark so as not to become entangled in anything that could strangle the life out of it? Or the little bird that cried for its mother while she remained unseen, encouraging her daughter to learn to fly? An environ that seemed so exotic, so beyond anything I could ever truly imagine was whispering to me, urging me to wonder, Are the
experiences of life universal? Oh, yes, I thought. Yes, yes, yes again and a thousand more yeses!

Yearning for one last look at The Milky Way, I peered through that tiny window to the sky. And again I trembled in ecstasy at the wealth of stars that could be squeezed into a circle so small I could capture it by simply putting my finger and thumb together in a circle. Stars without a pattern in a thimbleful of sky. A million tiny mirrors? (Tip #3: Maybe we don’t need a large canvas to enrich our lives; perhaps a small, richly saturated one will do.)
A Daily Adventure: A School Boy Walks Home through Memories 30 years Ago

It was 1978 and I was a 5th grade student at Ruby S. Thomas. Thomas elementary school was only a mile from our apartment at Mark Twain. But in that short mile was an adventure every day waiting for a 10-year old latch key kid making his way home each afternoon. Both Mark Twain Apartments and Ruby S. Thomas are still there but most everything between has changed albeit some rare exceptions. Tucked into the neighborhood behind the Boulevard Mall, Thomas was where I first excelled having returned from overseas as a military brat.

I remember many of my classmates, even my teachers, Ms Johnson, Ms Arkell, Ms Bozarth, my principal, a larger-than-life figure, Kirk L. Adams Sr. And the layout of the playground, especially the monkey bars and jungle gym in the sandbox. I don’t remember the portable classrooms that sit there today. And it was those math fact sheets that challenged me and where I focused my academic skills – 70 addition ‘facts’ in 56 seconds! During lunch, I collected school lunch pretzel sticks and re-sold them a dime apiece on the playground. But it was the journey home that left me with my most unforgettable memories of people and places.

As the bell rang out each afternoon and we ran outside, noisily and full of unfounded enthusiasm, we quickly left the school grounds. It was a few hundred yards first down the street, then
up the road through the massive Oleanders to the back of the Boulevard Mall. Today, it is blocked and filled with dirt to extend the mall parking lot even further. It was the first of three areas to navigate in my path home, either it was the Boulevard Mall, Boulevard Market area or Maryland Square, some days, it was even two.

My first decision homeward was whether to go through the Boulevard Mall, specifically what was Broadway Southwest. It’s where Macys now sits minus the expansions over the years like Dillard’s and the second mall corridor. And only then through the backside entrance next to what was Freeds Bakery which now thrives a few short miles away. The pastries smelled delicious but it was the pet store directly across from it that always peaked my interest. Woolworth’s lunch counter, Orange Julius and the humidor at the old Tinder Box Cigar shop breathed enticing aromas down the single mall corridor each afternoon. Some of that was offset by the JC Penney automotive center, long since closed, as was the Sears automotive center years later. I usually exited near The Vineyard, no longer in operation but where my dad would take the family to celebrate important occasions like our birthdays.

But each day it was the silver-haired guard whose name I never knew that scooted the kids out, everybody except for me it seemed, that dictated my routes. At age 10, I didn’t realize that some children pilfered but he knew, and he always did his job professionally. Sometimes I wondered through Broadway Southwest on the escalator, innocently intimidated passing the
women’s lingerie on the second floor and then onto the third floor and televisions. But there were no toys there like at the bottom floor of Woolworths, no longer a department store nor is there a bottom floor, or the basement of Sears, now filled with everything but toys, or better yet, Toy Paradise which lay in one of the other directions home.

Nestled between the Boulevard Market, where my dad would buy the square pizza at the deli for us on payday, and the Parkway Theatres, Toy Paradise was aptly named with all of the toys a boy could dream of: models, mechanized die-cast metal tanks, Cox fly-by-wire planes, remote controlled cars! Star Wars had just come out at the Parkway Theatres, where Marshals and Circuit City now stand. I saw it 12 ½ times. I rarely ventured 500 feet south to the Mann Boulevard Theatres next to the Flamingo Wash channel which later evolved into a BookStar and much later, razed, and now yet another strip mall anchored by Jason’s Deli.

The vast, open desert field – at least in the eyes of a 10 year old - bordered between the Parkway, Twain and the apartments still hadn’t been developed into the Mervyns-Service Merchandise-Vons strip yet. It has evolved into its latest incarnation as Vons and Molasky Neighborhood Park. And so it didn’t offer any grand adventure walking home like some of the other paths except for the occasional spotting of a lizard.
Today, Maryland Square Shopping Center doesn’t exist; it’s an elementary school adjacent to several empty shells of former buildings, shops, and that old marquis. In 1978, it was the centerpiece of much of my world. I would cross over from the Boulevard Mall, sometimes enter the 7-Eleven, one of the few things still remaining, slip behind USS Fish and Chips, now a taco shop, and run through a 100-foot back alley filled with cooking oil and debris. First though was avoiding the drive thru traffic from the bank that once existed. Then exiting right next to the Baskin Robbins - Jamoca was my favorite courtesy teaspoon sample - and making my way to Kens Coins and Shelleys Stamps as it was still on the Southern side of the Square. One of the two would glance through the window and buzz me in the security door. I’d save up to buy old ‘wheat’ pennies and ‘steel’ nickels from Ken. At three minutes a day, he must have spent hours that year teaching a kid about coin collecting. I couldn’t even pronounce numismatics properly for at least another decade.

Crossing over and walking up the Northern side of the Square through all the parked cars – the Novas, Monte Carlos, AMC Pacers, and the bean stalk light poles, there was Al Phillips the Cleaners but more tempting was the pastry shop at the tail end of the concrete walkway. The ladies working there would let me buy donuts from the bottom, far side of the display case for pennies, always letting me have it for less – whatever I had in my hand was good enough it seemed.
But it was WonderWorld where I most frequented, where I played and once tilted the pinball machine near the café counter that caught the attention of a store manager. Passing by the bins of two dollar cloth sneakers my mom would buy me and with a fenced in liquor store within the store, I searched the toy section looking for plastic ‘army men’, 100-count, in plastic netting, and the latest board games. When I was done there, I would cut through the inside gate to the adjoining Smith’s grocery store where the change lady Gerri worked. She knew my divorcing parents. She’d let me sift through the coin sorting machine as it turned every so often, looking for old coins just so long as I sat on the stool on the far side from the single row of slot machines.

And over the months and year, my path took me across what used to be Oshmans Sports which is now a state unemployment office, and Stop N’ Go, which is now a fenced in Boys and Girls Club, even the Untouchable Sub Shop, now a small grocery mart, where a few years later I first played Space Invaders. In yet another variation, it was McDonald’s, now rebuilt and re-positioned 50 feet to the North in what used to be the old parking lot, and across from the old Big Boys restaurant, now IHOP, which offered – and I collected and brought home – 72 of those yellow, promotional ‘ring things.’

Rosie the Crossing Guard signaled the end of my journey as I waited to cross under her safety. I only knew her as Rosie. But she was always there on Twain Avenue, past the old veterinarian’s office, and the Big and Tall clothes store
display, both gone as well, and past what was called Roman Villas but now Park View apartments. I only had to pass by the abandoned, partially built apartment complex on Twain, now also a strip mall named Twain-Swenson, opposite of the formerly named Apple apartments, now renamed as Pinewood. Across the street, what was another open field and where I often shot my Crossman BB gun, yet another strip mall, Twain Center.

At the end of the afternoons near hour long-adventure was an empty apartment and a television with five channels. As the afternoon movie hosted by Gus Guiffre ended on Channel 5, Ultraman, Speed Racer and Get Smart all waited for me at home. When those ended, there were Lego’s.

A lot has changed. I miss the people, the places, and my daily adventure home when I was only 10.
Letters to Keats

Seniors at Addison Academy were allowed to take two quarters of electives, and since the only subject I showed the slightest bit of promise in was English, I decided to take a literature class. Being a reputable college preparatory school, Addison offered a number of senior English courses with provocative titles designed to lure students - “Literature of Exile,” “The Dark City: Detective Fiction ,” “Ex-Patriot Literature: Paris in the 1920’s,” “Family in Crisis - American Drama.” And although they all seemed enticing, I suspected they required a good deal of work, and I, for one, preferred to take it easy my senior year. So I signed up for a class simply titled, “The Romantics,” without bothering to read the course description and having no idea what was in store for me. The name, “The Romantics,” appealed to my adolescent and girlish sentiment. I’m embarrassed to admit it, even now, but I had images of shirtless men with bulking chests, leaning over swooning women with small waists and cascading hair - a genre course in Harlequin paperbacks. What could be better, I thought. And whether we were going to read them seriously or critique them ruthlessly, I was in. I remember being a little surprised that none of my friends had signed up for the course, but I held out hope that it would be a fun elective.

The class met at the conference room in the school library, which was a good ten to fifteen minute walk from center of the campus. It was an afternoon class, and after spending lunch break with my friends, I found myself running up the path to the library in an effort to be on time and to leave a good first-day impression on my teacher. I was a few
minutes late. When I walked in, the room was silent, and there was no sign of a teacher, and only two other students -- Jeff Moore and Eric Wagner - sat at the conference table in the center of the room. They seemed relieved to see another student, especially a member of the opposite sex. I, on the other hand, was rather surprised to see boys in a class about sappy romance novels.

We sat patiently for a good ten minutes, tapping our pens, listening to the soft buzzing of the florescent lights, waiting for our teacher and the rest of the class to show up. No one else did. Finally, about fifteen minutes into class, the door opened and our teacher, Elaine Fisk waddled in, panting and barely visible behind the large cardboard box she was carrying. She slammed the heavy box on the table, looked at us, and managed a smile.

“Well, I’m glad the three of you are here,” she said as she took off her jacket. “In case you haven’t noticed, it’s going to be a small class, but I prefer small classes. Don’t you?”

No one responded.

Small indeed! I was used to having “intimate” classes of ten to twelve students at Addison. After all, one of the attractions of the school, and one of the reasons many parents were willing to spend fifteen thousand dollars a year for tuition, was the small classroom size - the pampered attention their child would receive. But three students? That seemed ridiculous, even for Addison.

“However,” she continued, “if any one of you decides to drop this class, it will be canceled. Three is the
minimum. And if it were canceled, it would be a shame. A real shame,” she repeated as she shook her head in disappointment. This was a bad sign. I wanted to run. There had to be a reason for the small class size – something the rest of the school hadn’t shared with the three of us.

“I suppose the Romantics must scare a lot of people” Ms. Fisk said, laughing.

Eric, Jeff and I looked at each other. I could see the panic on their faces, and they must have seen it on mine.

“Let’s get started, shall we?” Ms. Fisk said as she began to take books and other course material out of the box.

Elaine Fisk was a relatively new teacher at Addison, and I had only seen her from a distance, but did not know her by name. She was middle-aged, extremely short, about 4’8” and stout -- as wide as she was tall with a disproportionately large chest. Her middle button – the one that went across her sizable breasts - on her polyester shirts seemed always to be on the verge of popping. It was distracting, but not in a sexy way though. Yet we couldn’t resist looking down through the gap, and at her dull-colored, highly functional bra, waiting for the last thread holding the button to give way. She had short gray hair, sprinkled with course black hairs. When she turned her head to the side, one could see wispy grayish hairs, hanging gently over her lips and covering her receding chin that was indistinguishable from her neck. Her general appearance was gray – her hair, her outfits, her complexion, her teeth. And to be honest, as a young and mostly shallow girl of sixteen, who spent a great deal of time consumed by my
Homeira Foth

outer-appearance, I was appalled. I had never seen a woman who cared so little about her looks.

Ms. Fisk settled into her vinyl swivel chair, leaned back, and put on her reading glasses as she pulled out the roll sheet. My name was always first.

“Ho-mi- er-ah. Abi-di… wait…Adi-bi -zaa-day!” she read with some difficulty.

“That’s me,” I mumbled. I had gone through this ordeal my entire life.

“What a beautiful name! How do you pronounce it in your language?” she said with her head tilted down, peeking over her reading glasses.

I hated it when teachers did this to me. Why would they assume I wasn’t American? I wasn’t, but the question annoyed me. “Homeyra Adeebzaadeh,” I said it with an exaggerated Farsi inflection.

“That sounds Arabic – is it?” She seemed genuinely interested.

“Yes. But I’m Iranian.” I didn’t want to elaborate. I was still a little sensitive about the whole American hostage situation, even four years after the fact. I wanted her to move on and thankfully she did.

“Well, welcome to the class, Home-a-eeyraa.”

After taking roll and handing out the book for the class, a thick Norton Anthology of Romantic Literature, (which I still have, held together by a frayed yellow rubber band), she asked us what the word “romantic” meant to us. The boys remained quiet, staring down at their sneakers.
“Love?” I whispered.

“Hmmm…” she replied as she rolled her eyes upwards. Clearly, I was wrong. I knew I shouldn’t have said anything. But with only three students in the class, I felt burdened by the eerie first-day-of-class silence. “Well,” she went on “that’s definitely what we nowadays associate with the word romantic, like a romantic movie or a book. However, the word romantic comes from the word ‘roman,’ which finds its origins in adventure, fantasy, imagination. Not necessarily just love in the sense of a love story.”

She continued with her lecture, as we fumbled through our backpacks in search of a pen, and quickly began scribbling down notes.

“So, I hope none of you was expecting a course in trashy supermarket, bodice-ripping novels.” She laughed a smoker’s laugh that turned into a coughing fit, all the while looking right at me with glistening eyes, as if she knew that I had mistakenly signed up for a course I thought would involve lusty romance novels.

“No,” she went on, after she cleared her throat.

“Romanticism was an artistic and philosophical movement, developed in the 19th century, as sort of a counter-reaction to the rigid confines of Neo-classicism. It mostly focused on the importance of the imagination and the emotions. A favorite subject among the Romantic poets was Nature; they viewed it as a reflection of their inner emotions and sensibility.”

The more she went on, the more I wanted to run. I should have been with my friends, who were at that very moment sitting in the Detective Fiction class, having the time
of their lives, with the new “young and cool” scarf-wearing English teacher, Ben Radford, while I was stuck in a class taught by a she-beast. I was convinced I was not going to survive an entire semester of reading poems about trees, rocks, and the English countryside. I knew I had to drop the class.

I stayed. Initially, because I didn’t want to be blamed for the class being canceled; however, as the weeks went on, I found myself slowly, and secretly, enjoying the class. I soon came to realize that I wasn’t the only one that looked forward to her class. Eric and Jeff, my fellow classmates, also delighted in Ms. Fisk’s crazy, animated, but always enlightening lectures. In fact, the three of us would often hang out together before class discussing, of all things, Romantic poetry. We soon started to perceive ourselves as sort of a special or elite literary group, not unlike Miss Jean Brodie’s “Crème de la Crème” club. Ms. Fisk had cast her spell on us. After all, it was no easy task to excite surly teenagers about the revival of folklore in 19th century poetry or Shelley’s use of the Terza Rima in “Ode to the West Wind,” but Ms. Fisk always infused her lectures with unforgettable stories about the poets: Byron’s sexual escapades, Shelley’s tragic drowning in Italy, Coleridge’s drug addiction, and Wordsworth’s inflated ego. I specifically remember Ms. Fisk telling us how Wordsworth, in his poem “The Leech Gatherer,” attempted to write about the simple and dignified life of a common man – a leech gatherer, no less, but ended up writing mostly about himself, pontificating on the life of a leech gatherer. Years later, I took a course in college on
Romanticism and was sorely disappointed in the professor’s lack of colorful anecdotes.

One day, Ms. Fisk came into class with a wide grin on her face, exposing her gray teeth.

“Guess whom I had tea with last night?”

“Who?” we asked in unison.

“John Keats!” she said proudly, as she looked out at our confused faces.

“Well, not literally, of course…he’s quite dead,” she said, laughing and coughing. But this time the coughing turned into a full blown fit. We waited. She finally cleared her throat and continued, “I had the craziest dream that Keats and I were sitting in – what I assume was – his patio, overlooking this beautiful garden. And we spent what seemed like hours talking about everything from poetry to philosophy, politics to Fanny. It was wonderful. I was only too sad to wake up before we had finished our talk.”

The three of us sat there staring at her. We didn’t know what to believe. Had she really dreamt about Keats? It didn’t matter. She was mesmerizing. Ms. Fisk had transformed before our eyes: her moustache and her receding chin were no longer visible, and what we saw before us was no longer a mythical she-beast, but a mythical beauty, a Helen of Troy. I wanted to be her, and I desperately wanted her whimsical bohemian life. I imagined her house with red walls and a purple sofa, bookshelves everywhere, with books piled in every corner, even lining the shelves in her bathroom. I imagined Ms. Fisk having exciting dinner parties with her poet
friends from Berkeley, smoking opiates, and getting into heated discussions over whether Blake could truly be considered the first romantic poet. I wanted her life.

Like many teenage girls, I kept a diary throughout high school, but the content of my entries seemed to change around this time. What had once been entries on problems with boys, friends, family, had now taken on a strange turn. Instead of addressing an imaginary “dear diary,” I was now writing letters to John Keats, a dead poet. A strange hobby for a seventeen year old girl, I realize, but it comforted me. For some reason, out of all the romantics, I had connected with Keats the most. His poems moved me. And one of his poems in particular, “Ode to a Nightingale,” spoke to me and for me. Like many teenagers, I was self-indulgent, in constant emotional turmoil, and believed that no one could possibly understand my woes. So I had this strange notion that if I wrote letters to Keats, his spirit would somehow listen. I saw Keats as a young fragile soul who was in pain, like me. And even though our struggles were not alike -- his issues centered around more serious matters of death and the mutability of life, while mine primarily focused on unrequited crushes -- it didn’t matter. We both suffered. I was convinced we were one soul, separated by time and space. What on earth did a seventeen year old Iranian girl in California, in the 1980’s, have in common with a sickly, genius poet from the 19th century? Not much. But I was thankful for Ms. Fisk having introduced us.
A few years ago, while I was in London, I decided to visit Keats’s house in Hampstead Heath. I got a late start and managed to get lost in the neighborhood, (although if you’re going to get lost in London, I highly recommend that neighborhood). I finally made it to the house, right at sunset. When I got there, the curator, an older English woman, informed me that the museum was about to close for the day. I pleaded and bargained; I even lied about going back home to the U.S. the next day. She felt sorry for me and allowed me to take a quick look around. I rushed through the creaky house, cherishing every object in the musty rooms – Keats’s writing desk, his deathbed, and his collection of distressed looking leather-bound books. I thought a lot about Ms. Fisk that day. Somehow I sensed she had been there too, and that she had probably looked upon the very same objects that I had seen. On my way out, I remembered there was just one more place I had to see, so I snuck out to the patio. As I stood out there, I couldn’t help but imagine Ms. Fisk and John Keats drinking tea and sharing tales. I thanked the curator and walked back out to the street, which was now completely dark.
Evolution of a Reader

As a pre-TV child (television arrived in Calgary in the early 50s, about ten years after it appeared in the U.S.), radio dramas fed my imagination: Boston Blackie; Suspense Theatre; and The Green Hornet come immediately to mind. Though they provided the plot and dialogue, I was able to supply the images myself; far more dramatic than what any TV director could create. In my young mind, Boston Blackie was the white knight in spite of a name that implied otherwise. Evenings spent shivering in front of a radio, shivering from glorious fear and not cold. The room crackling with drama—suspense. And I was an important participant: the program needed my imagination to give it life.

At some point in those early years, someone sold my parents a set of the Books of Knowledge. My grandfather, a Scots’ school-master, must have urged my mother and stepfather to buy the encyclopedia since neither of them were determined to develop my intellect. Mother had only finished high school; my stepfather had dropped out of school after the eighth grade. They didn’t have money for extras and never touched the books themselves that I recall, so there was no reason for them to buy the set.

Those fat books with red covers were truly gifts from heaven, however they were acquired, and I soon discovered an illustrated section of fantasies, fairy tales, and rhymes in the middle of each volume, waiting for a child’s imagination to give them life: “Humpty Dumpty,” “The Woman Who Lived in a Shoe,” “Hansel and Gretel,” and much, much more. I can
only guess at what subliminal level these works were operating in my psyche. I only wanted to be entertained.

That’s why I turned to my mother’s limited library of magazines she picked up at the newsstand. *True Confessions, True Romances, True Story* were just the place for an inquisitive girl to find out about life, especially romance, something *all* women hungered for. How I identified and ached with every adopted or illegitimate child, and for every young woman pressed into a shotgun marriage. Each confession—far from scaring me—left me eager for the day when I could experience some of the same agony.

Three other genres consumed me during those years: mystery stories, such as the Nancy Drew series or the Hardy Boys, stimulated my desire for adventure, as did the millions of comics I waded through. I would walk miles in sub-zero weather with my stack of comics so I could trade with a friend. Or I’d haunt the second-hand book stores, sniffing through the piles and piles of frayed and musty comics for the ones I might have missed: *Archie and Jughead, Candy*, the supernatural thrillers—but best of all, *Wonder Woman*, my heroine. She inspired me, even at that age. Surely if she could bust free of the mundane world, I could too.

The other genre that fascinated me was film. Every Saturday I’d be first in line anywhere that had a double feature. Some days, if I could scrape together another 15 cents for admission and popcorn money, I hit two double-feature theatres in one day. I wasn’t fussy: westerns (*The Lone Ranger; Annie Get Your Gun*), adventures (*Tarzan; Bomba,*
Lily Iona MacKenzie

the Jungle Boy), horror (Frankenstein), tear-jerkers (Bambi). As long as images interacted on the screen, I was satisfied.

I must admit that again I found a heroine: Annie Oakley. Not only could she out rope, outride, and outshoot every man in sight, she was pretty and could cook! And since I grew up in cow country, such a heroine was entirely plausible for me...even more so than Wonder Woman.

Though I don’t regret these questionable “literary” beginnings, I must admit that as an adult my view of things was slightly distorted. Annie Oakley might outshoot, outride, and outrope every man on the screen, but in actual life I didn’t see any woman with this kind of power. If anything, it was the opposite. Women were the second sex, a position I unquestionably assumed.

I spent years trying to make my childhood fantasies a reality, caught up in illusions and desires that could never be fulfilled. I’d become one of the young women I’d read about in the true confessions’ magazines. A high-school dropout and pregnant at sixteen, a mother just after turning seventeen, and a single parent by the time my son was six-months old, I clung to the idea that I’d meet my prince charming one day and live happily ever after.

Later, when—like my favorite childhood character Humpty Dumpty—I experienced my own fall and had to pick up the pieces, I made contact with similar victims: Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Doris Lessing, and all the others who had the courage to tell their stories, whether in poetry or in prose. But my introduction to real poetry—not the Rod McKuen-type
doggerel—didn’t happen until I’d entered university in my early 30s.

At first I rejected poetry, pushed it away. Too raw, too painful, too close to my personal experience, it was like staring into a mirror, unrelentless in what it exposed, forcing me to admit my own rage so I could get on with my life. The novels I read also peeled me as if I were an onion. *Sister Carrie* was my story, the young girl who leaves the country and seeks a new, exciting life in the big city. I also was Caddy in *The Sound and the Fury*. Though my youngest brother wasn’t mentally retarded, he was permanently disabled by schizophrenia; I felt a strong mothering urge towards him and some responsibility for his condition. Like Caddy, I also used sex at an early age to fill up a hole inside, and I married young, though I didn’t find the wedded bliss I’d hoped for.

Each poem or novel I read uncovered another forgotten part of me, much as dreams will dredge up inner images that represent aspects of our personalities. Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* had a powerful effect on me. Jack, the main character, was not just a black man trying to make sense out of a nonsensical world. He was Everyman and Everywoman, black or white, in our society. His invisibility was mine: how many blind, blank eyes had I bounced off of, eyes that had no souls, no sense of self, belonging to people who were walking dead, automatons: glazed eyes—no windows to the soul. Since it takes a presence to see another presence, it’s difficult to become a self when one can’t be seen. And prejudice was not just an abstract problem for Blacks. It was *my* problem, too.
The thing is, most literature stirs, if only tiny ripples on the surface, while serious literature—the kind that takes us into our subterranean cells and breaks down walls, challenging and subverting cherished beliefs, replacing iron bars with unlocked doors—awakens. In a Psychology Today interview, Jerzy Kosinski says, “I think literature is the last surviving awakener, the last form of art which still requires a profound effort from within.” Whether we agree with this observation or not, it is true that literature confronts us. It presents us with the human condition directly—passions, unrecognized thoughts, blindness, folly. It asks us to feel, to be involved.

In the early 21st Century, we live in an upside-down world: it’s increasingly difficult to find religion in a church or drugs in a drugstore, and white rather than black represents evil (The Invisible Man). At times modern life feels like a wild rodeo ride, and we need writers who can help us understand what we’re going through. As Arthur Miller says, “One has to write because other people need news of the inner world and without such news they would go mad with the chaos of their lives.”

I’m grateful for all those writers who devote themselves to translating our lives into literature, guides to the inner world Miller refers to. They not only have helped me to appreciate what language can do when used in the service of the intellect, emotions, and imagination, but they have caused this reader to grow in ways that otherwise would not have been possible.
Bad Girls

At Seventeen—Spring 1957:

If you stick out your tight-sweatered breasts, spread scarlet lipstick on your mouth, and look boys straight in the eye, as my older sister Margo used to do, or dip your head down a little so your eyes look up like steamy Lauren Bacall, then the boys will swarm around you and you’ll get them for sure, their mouths, their arms, their hips. But you could get hurt. They could suddenly jerk your bra up around your neck, mash your breasts with their big hands, kiss you so your red mouth smears like a clown, and rip your clothes crooked. They might grab your wrists and press you flat onto the cracked leather back seats of their cars or the cold sand of Blackfield beach. And make you do it.

It could happen. At least I’m afraid it could.

The fear is in the 1950’s air. It’s in me, at seventeen.

It started, perhaps, when I was twelve, before Margo left for college. Back then, when my parents were away on their spring cruises to Cuba or Curacao, and our sitter had the night off, I’d ride my bike home at dusk to find strange cars parked every which way in the driveway of the large stone house we’d moved to on Dogwood Hill Lane in suburban Connecticut. Our back yard was strewn with high school boys, lying on the grass in the shadows of the beech trees, their arms locked around girls, one of them Margo. Or I’d find her in our darkened living room, her body spread on the lap of a boy who lounged in my father’s red leather chair, his beer can soaking one of my father’s psychiatric journals, his cigarette dropping
ashes on the Oriental rug. Margo’s arm would be flung around the boy’s shoulder, her breasts in her tight sweater pressing against his chest, her bright red lips brushing his ear, whispering words I couldn’t hear, didn’t want to hear. Other couples lay with their limbs enmeshed on the two matching couches my mother had just bought. Liquor poured from silver flasks, and I worried they’d spill their drinks, throw up, or do things I didn’t want to see.

Sometimes a few stray boys cornered me in the kitchen or dining room, grinning, shifting their slim hips, emptying their beer cans and crunching them in their hands, while they tilted their heads and quizzed me—Margo’s little sister. What was my name? Did I want a beer? A swig from their flask? I was scared of what these thick-muscled, electrically-charged boys would do, scared that sex would burst out from them and smother or stab me. I didn’t question why I felt this way. I was, simply, unsafe.

But now, years later, at seventeen, I too want these electric boys. I want to smell them, put my nose in their sweet hair, and press my face into their white T-shirts. I want to rest my palms on their tight forearms, interlock my fingers with theirs. I want their thick arms around my shoulders, their hands in my hair, thumbs on my cheeks. I want their lips.

But I must draw them to me with great care. I will be a good girl. I will wear my sweaters loose, my lipstick light. I will not be like Margo, cannot be like Margo. For she has now crashed, broken down and dropped out of college. My parents
whisper words I cannot hear, and my mother rushes up to her in Boston. No one talks to me about Margo, or explains what’s happened. But I know. Somehow, it’s about her wildness, her sexiness in the world.

I will not flitter my eye lashes for the boys. I will not dip my head down like Lauren Bacall. I will not push out my breasts like a pin-up girl. If I act like a good girl, I can get a boy and still be safe.

I’ve been practicing with Carl Gunderson. I remember the day a few weeks ago when Patsy, Gail, and I leaned against our lockers at school, watching the boys go by, our blue canvas notebooks, piled high with books, held in front of our chests. I wore my favorite emerald-green tweed suit, buttoned over my cashmere sweater. The three of us talked about our Science Project and the digestive organs we’d been molding out of clay in Gail’s basement. But I was waiting for Carl, the football captain. He wasn’t a college-bound boy, but he was cute, and I’d heard he was clever, funny. His hair was in a zip, not like his friend Jim Zalbo’s, a hood with a motorcycle, which had a slicked back DA like that sleazy singer Elvis.

When Carl sauntered down the hall, I didn’t turn my head, but followed with my eyes. The world (my friends) would not see this. “How will we get the damn intestines to stick on the poster board?” is what came out of my mouth. But inside I shouted, “Carl, Carl, look at me!” When he bent at his locker, spun his combination, and stared clean at me, I gave him the tiniest of smiles.
The next week Carl picked me up for a date. He rang the bell and entered through our front door with the massive lion-head knocker. He looked so good in his sharp white T-shirt, his Marlboros rolled up in one sleeve, that I didn’t care when he shook my parents’ hands and said, “Nice t’uv met yuz all,” a phrase my father would mimic three times the next day while my mother stood by, mute. This popular, football-captain boy had chosen me even though I’d used only my good-girl ways. No one had seen me ask. I told myself that would make all the difference.

Yet despite my cautionary ways I feel bad. I have not escaped. On Saturday mornings, after my Friday night dates with Carl, my father corners me by the refrigerator, his tight, curled lips asking, “What time did you get in last night?” His tone implies that even if I’d stayed home knitting socks, it would not have been enough to satisfy him about my good girl-ness. I stare at his angry mouth. My face burns hot. Yet I’m afraid to answer back, to tell him I am an OK girl, not a bad girl. He will yell at me, so sure he seems of my guilt.

In truth, I’m not so sure about my purity. There is that photo of me, snapped a few weeks ago by my neighbor, Paulie Zucker. It’s the photo I hide in my green padded diary I lock with a tiny key. It’s the photo that falls out from the pages onto my blanket some nights when I open the diary to write. And I grab at it; terrified my father will walk through my unlockable bedroom door and see my sins. There I am, on the bar stool in Paulie’s basement rec room. My right hand holds playing cards, my left, a cigarette. And I am dirty.
My small breasts are hidden behind the cards, under the heavy wool sweater with the sports stripes on the upper arms. My white blouse underneath is buttoned tight at the neck. Yet I might as well be a bare-breasted stripper. My shiny clean hair is smoothed into its neat flip, yet the careful effort it must have taken to produce this perfect curl is evidence enough of my impure intentions. Even my white skin seems too dark—(surely I’ve never looked as dark as I do in this photo)—further proof of how bad I am. A dark Jewish girl. No Christian friend of mine would look like this. My blond classmates, Sally Clark and Candy Wilson, would emit white light in such a snapshot. That I look straight into the camera, flaunting my cards and my cigarette, is most dangerous of all. I show myself—without apology. Like Margo.

I hate the photo. But for some reason I don’t understand, I won’t throw it out. I hide it and remain fearful my father will find it.

Do I think my father will know by this snapshot of his brazen dark daughter what else has gone on in Paulie’s basement? It is often there, right next door to our house, that my friends and I have parties on the weekends. Can my father see through the photo into the days past, see behind the cards, see through the smoke how I slow dance some Friday nights to Paulie’s 45’s of Johnny Mathis and Nat King Cole, so close to Carl that I can feel the rod-like skinny part that presses against my belly or my hip, that erection that none of us ever mentions, that I never touch, that I’m not expected to touch?

Perhaps my father can see what it is I do want on those nights when I’ve had several beers, when Paulie has
turned the room dark, and Carl and I sit in the pine-paneled corner, kissing. Or even more, when I go out parking with Carl at Blackfield Beach or on dead-end streets. I like his tongue in my mouth. I like when we’ve kissed so long in the front seat of his car that my lips are sore, my ears ring, and my breath is hard to catch. It is then, when I’m gloriously lost in the air, my brain drugged on the kissing, my underpants soaked, that I let Carl put his hands on my breasts on top of my loose sweater, and when I am very daring, crazed, let him succeed at unhooking my bra and putting his eager hands, sometimes his mouth, on my skin, my nipples.

But I let this go only so far. Sometimes Carl lies on top of me in the back seat of his car and rubs his whole body against mine, (his pants closed), kissing me harder and squeezing my breasts. I grasp his head, my thumbs rubbing hard, unconsciously, against his bristly crew cut. But this is when I know to say, “Stop Carl. We have to stop.” He protests, “Aw, come on!” but it’s only show. He knows the rules.

I feel guilty, sure I’m giving Carl “blue balls”— what we girls think happens to such poor fellows. But I can’t go the next step or even imagine what we’d do next if we kept going. Exactly what would go on below the waist is fuzzy—like the blurry glass placed in front of people’s faces on TV to protect identities. In my mind, the same wavy blur rests over all our high school genitals. I know the technical facts, of course, but how the boys’ parts will fit with mine and how this will feel is a mystery I’m happy to solve in the future. For I am a good girl.
Burning Man

The Palmer’s 15 acres overlook a long, deep valley in the Northern Utah foothills. Across the valley you can see the little town of Paradise, and in the foreground, the checkered patches of small fields of alfalfa, barley and wheat. While cows graze in the adjacent hills, the Palmers’ twenty-odd sheep munch the grass in their own lush fields. Ben, Maria, Robert and I are seated at the Palmer’s long teak table beside their picture window while Kelley Palmer is scraping the remains of cooked meat off of his grill and his wife Samantha is loading the dishwasher. We have just eaten Kelley’s dinner of beef and shrimp shish-ka-bobs and dill-and-pinenuit risotto. Our teenage children are playing Wii downstairs in the study.

Outside the Palmers’ house there had been stacked a huge triangular mound of rough-hewn firewood—as high as a person—and above that a wooden pole that was buried in the stack and an effigy of a man made out of soft wicker. The man had a tube shaped head, surrounding a simple cross-frame and interlocked woven torso with attached arms and legs. Kelley had stuck one of his Winchester cigarettes into the hole made for the mouth, and a baseball cap on his head with the inscription, Meeker Classic Sheepdog Competition. No one knew who had made the statue; Kelley’s wife Samantha had picked him up for ten dollars at the local thrift store. He was called ‘Burning Man’ because, when the last light had died out of the Summer Solstice sky, we were going to set fire to him. (Reader, I know that you are going to assume that we were enacting a cheap imitation of the official Burning Man ritual.
begun by a San Franciscan named Larry Harvey in 1986, but this is not the case. Neither Kelley nor Samantha, who had bought the effigy, had heard of the yearly event in Black Rock City, Nevada, and only my husband Robert and I had ever watched the 1973 movie, The Wicker Man. Just as Larry Harvey himself claimed ignorance of the ancient Celtic rites explored by Sir James Frazier in *The Golden Bough* when he tossed the match on his first massive conflagration, so we were enacting our own ritual burning without prior knowledge of those other Burning Men. I suppose this kind of coincidence can only be explained by the idea of fire itself, which is archetypal, and effigy burning, which is featured on TV news at least once a week. In the field of biology it’s called convergence.)

Margarita glasses before us, four of us sat around the table, with long-haired Kelley and blonde Samantha popping in every now and then, and we were discussing the worst smells in the world. This is typical of the conversation that we as long-time friends have when we get together as a group. The requisite topics for this group are sex, religion and politics; the only taboo topic is how to raise children properly. So far we had identified the worst smells as rotten onions, the body odor of certain childhood friends, and our own children’s vomit. I noticed that the men in the group were strangely reticent. They were listening to Maria.

Maria has a beautiful olive complexion, a thin but shapely body, and long dark hair that falls in waves about her shoulders. While thoroughly cosmopolitan, she has retained some of the piquancy of her itinerant culture, as well as the
habit of pronouncing the hard “g” in words like “thinking,” and all these things made her the darling of our group, especially to the men.

Maria was telling us about how as a child in New Mexico she woke to the horrible odor of her relatives cleaning up after a cow slaughter. Every part of the carcass was saved, she told us. “I would wake up and—I’d have to bury my head in my pillow. Have you ever smelled the inside of cow intestines? My mother would open both the stomach and the intestines and scrub them over and over. After this she would boil them for hours, and my grandmother would chop them up and then serve the steaming plate of it to us for breakfast. There was no way after smelling the preparation that I could eat any of it. I would rather starve.”

“You never even tasted it?” asked my husband Robert, who was sitting to my left. He ran a hand through his thick salt and pepper hair.

“No. But my father and my uncles loved it. They scolded us for being spoiled. They fought over the stomach because that was always the first thing served.”

“Did they really like the taste or do you think that was just their memory of it?” Ben inquired. Ben was proud of his beautiful wife, and always encouraged her stories.

“The memory of finally having your belly filled, I suppose,” she said.

We all sighed, knowingly. We were all comfortably situated, upper-middle class couples, with a lot of education between us, and, except perhaps for Maria, at least a generation ahead of feeling the kind of hunger she was talking
about. Maria’s husband Ben was an Air Force captain with training as an engineer, and they lived in an exclusive neighborhood in the nearby city. Maria was an elementary school teacher. The Palmers, as well as Robert and myself, taught at the university. Despite all the PhD’s amongst us, we always deferred to what we considered the common sense wisdom of Maria.

“Now here’s something that smells pretty great. It’s Anne’s pie!” Samantha announced as she cleared one set of desert-gem colored dishware from the table and replaced them with my glazed pie plate with its terra cotta dome. The margarita glasses, half-filled, remained on the table.

“Who makes pie anymore?” asked Kelley. “Let me kiss the cook!” he said as he walked in from the deck and planted a kiss on my left temple.

“Gonna make a pie, gonna make a pie, gonna make a pie with a heart in the middle,” sang Samantha, swaying her hips in her tight jeans and making stirring motions in an imaginary bowl.

“Where did that come from?” asked Maria.

“It’s from a movie” said Samantha. “About a woman who makes love with her gynecologist.”

“She makes love and she makes pies,” said Kelley, “What a woman!”

“That’s the kind of woman I got,” said Robert, putting his arm around me. In executing this gesture Robert was doing two things—he was giving a nod to one of our requisite topics and making a proprietary gesture towards me.
Because of the moral looseness of the conversation generally, conjugal bonds must sometimes be reinforced.

“I never made a pie,” said Samantha. “Neither did my mother for that matter.”

“You don’t cook at all,” said Kelley.

“And according to Kelley we’re all happier for it,” said Ben, his face reddening as the military man was unused to making fun at other people’s expense.

Samantha tossed her blonde coif and headed for the sink where she began to fill the coffee pot.

“This is true,” said Kelley. “But let’s hear from the master. Why don’t you tell the secret of pie making, Anne?”

He took another long swig of his margarita and sat down at the end of the table.

“The key to pie making,” I said, “is the willingness to make a mess. First, you have to use your hands to texturize the flour. That leaves dust everywhere, and sticky dough between your fingers. I take off my wedding ring when I make piecrust, and I never take it off for anything else.” I paused to lick another line of salt from the rim of my glass.

“Do you take your clothes off, too?” asked Ben. “I mean, with all that dust…”

“How come I missed out on that?” asked Robert.

“This is a serious ritual I’m talking about,” I said. “It goes back to childhood, and my mother’s kitchen. I remember it like Maria remembers hers. My mom always used a certain type of apple for her pies—Granny Smith—and my dad and I sat down together to peel them. We’d each have a knife and we’d try to see who could peel the entire apple without
breaking the strand. Then when mom had all her apple slices, we would eat the peelings.”

“Because you were hungry and had nothing else to eat,” said Robert.

I gave him a dark look. His green eyes were dancing in his long, chisel-cut face. “That’s what my parents did during the Great Depression,” I said.

“There’s that hunger again. How do we survive without it?” said Kelley.

“Very nicely, thank you very much,” said Maria.

“We have the stories of our parents’ hunger in our heads to keep us from getting smug,” said Samantha. “Do our kids need the same thing?” She was standing over the sink scraping the leftovers off a jade-colored plate.

“They say our children will be the first generation to Americans to experience a decline in the standard of living,” said my husband. “They’ll learn deprivation first hand once they get out on their own.”

“But will they be prepared for it?” I walked over to help Samantha.

“Take away their Ipods and they will,” said Ben.

“I don’t think kids need deprivation to be good people,” said Kelley. “That’s a lot of crap religious folks feed you from the time you’re a baby.” Robert and Samantha, owners of the Wii downstairs and parents of teens exquisitely skilled in its execution, bore no ill will toward contemporary culture.

“How about let’s eat Anne’s pie,” said Samantha, giving her husband a thumbs-up.
“Here’s to Anne, the consummate pie maker!”
“Here’s to making a mess,” said Robert. Everyone clinked glasses and took a swig.
“What about coffee?” asked Kelley. “The pot’s ready.” He got up to pour espresso for those of us with our hands raised.
“It’s getting dark. After pie, who wants to burn ‘Burning Man’?” Ben’s plate was already empty.
“That’s the plan,” said Kelley.
“This pie is delicious,” said Maria, “Not too sweet.”
“The filling is Robert’s mom’s recipe. I don’t add as much sugar as she did, but I cut the apples the same way. Crossways instead of lengthways.”
“This pie represents the blending of two families in holy matrimony,” said Kelley, holding up a piece and shoving it in his mouth.
“Save the speech for ‘Burning Man,’” said Robert.
“Maria’s the one who’s giving the speech,” said Samantha.
“Do I really have to?” asked Maria.

In the Palmer’s front yard, we all crowded around the square cement pad on which the pyre had been erected. Our kids stood around the periphery in a faux-disinterested manner cradling their soft drinks. What idiots these adults are, you could hear them thinking. Kelley was squirting lighter fluid over the logs and without fanfare he tossed on a lighted match. One of his sheepdogs barked as the flames rose up.
“Speech, Maria!” yelled Samantha.
Maria stepped in front of the cement block, her body turned slightly sideways to monitor the progress of the flames.

“Here on this Solstice evening,” she said, “as we welcome in Summer, we have an opportunity to toss off the superfluous junk of the last year into the flames.” She made throwing gestures toward the bonfire. I followed the movement of her hand and noted a pair of Nike sneakers that had been tossed there. “We are so grateful for the friends we have here, as our families are scattered all over, that they are such generous, giving people (here she made guttural the last “g” in “giving”)…”

“Yeah to our hosts, Samantha and Kelley!”

“And even in the last year some of our dear ones who were lost to us…”

“Well done, Maria,” said Ben, pulling her from the limelight. “I couldn’t have said it better myself.”

“Yeah, Maria,” we yelled.

“But I’m not done,” she said. You could see the pout forming on her beautiful lips.

“But we don’t want to miss the burn and you’re blocking it.” Her husband’s frame towered over her.”

“Are you going to cry?” asked Samantha viciously.

“No,” Maria said, tearing up. “I didn’t want to make this speech anyway.”

“The ‘Burning Man’s’ not burning,” said one of the kids. “He must be flame retardant.”

“Be careful with that,” I said, as Kelley tossed liberal amounts of lighter fluid over the statue.
“There he goes,” said Kelley. By then the adults had all formed a tight little group.

“Cormac McCarthy said that the first fire is all fires,” said Samantha, putting an arm around her husband.

“What does he mean by that?” asked Robert.

“I think he means that once early humans had a way to capture fire, they became like us.”

“That’s food for thought,” said Ben. He looked gently down at Maria, and she smiled back up at him. It seemed that she forgave her husband for cutting short her speech.

“Look! There’s a green color coming out of ‘Burning Man’s’ torso! Do you see it, Paul?” I said to my son.

“That’s food for thought,” said Ben. He looked gently down at Maria, and she smiled back up at him. It seemed that she forgave her husband for cutting short her speech.

“Look! There’s a green color coming out of ‘Burning Man’s’ torso! Do you see it, Paul?” I said to my son.

“Not really,” he said.

The flames were creeping up the wicker man, yet the post to which he was attached remained intact. I could see an occasional green tongue of flame leap out from the statue and thought it might be the hat, but the hat had not caught yet. I was a bit uneasy about the danger, but even so, strangely captivated by it. I couldn’t help thinking, what if this statue was truly flesh and blood? As it was being devoured by the fire, I noticed that the post started to list away from us and soon had fallen over the far wall of the pad.

“The grass is going to catch,” I yelled.

Ben grabbed a marshmallow roasting stick away from one of his kids, and rushing to the side of the pad, he righted the effigy. Soon all the body, head, and hat were consumed by the flames.
“You saved the Palmer property, Ben,” I said when he returned to the foreground.

“It was a little hot over there.” He smashed the end of his stick in the dirt.

“That stinks really bad,” said one of Ben and Maria’s sons, moving away from the pyre. “The worst thing I ever smelled.” By this time the Nikes had caught, and the odor of burning plastic had overwhelmed the scent of alderwood and aspen.

“This is all vegetative,” said Ben, who apparently had not seen the shoes. “You’ll experience a lot worse smells in your life.” Then he put his arm around his son in a patronizing manner. Was Ben referencing his military experience, I wondered. I remembered getting an essay assignment from a G.I. recently returned from Iraq. I had a hard time reading it. But I seriously doubted that Ben had the smell of burning flesh in his mind while embracing his son on this blue-black evening.

Some of us continued to watch the flames, transfixed, while others including some of the kids, moved on to other activities such as loading sticks with marshmallows and constructing S’mores. At one point, an explosion erupted from the center of the torso, sending a shower of embers in all directions. Robert moved around the pad and started stomping out the sparks.

“Good thing it was a wet spring,” someone said. It was dark, and difficult to pick out the speakers in the flickering light of the bonfire.

“I hope you have good insurance, Kelley.”
“Do you think they’d pay off on something stupid like this? I can just hear you guys saying, ‘The source? Well, it was Summer Solstice and of course we were out burning our ‘Burning Man’....’

Everybody laughed except the kids who were now throwing marshmallows into the flames and watching them explode. Their figures were illuminated in bits and starts, and they looked like native dancers from some ancient time.

“Where’s that pitcher of margaritas?” said Kelley, who turned his back on the flames and went into the house in search of the one thing guaranteed to add more merriment to the festivities. Maria and Samantha had their arms wrapped around each other and looked like two goddesses, each from different myths. The cows off in the distance were quiet now, the dogs had disappeared, and the sheep had formed into a knotted little bunch, ready for sleep. Some of the kids had already climbed into the family vans getting a head start on their night’s repose. (The half-moon had risen over the mountains by this time, and one could believe that the moon, and you, too, my gentle reader, are grinning on the valley beneath it and on all its revelers.)

“During the Great Depression,” I said, “according to my dad he would sit down with his dad, peeling apples and eating them. And then afterwards eating the peelings. The cores, too. Minus the seeds of course.”

“Why didn’t they eat the apples with the skins attached?” asked Robert.
Section One:

To a hypochondriac, dreams are vivid.

The American Dream: Oprah daily at four. Pay attention to the commercials. They tell you what you want. Check. I would like to have a wardrobe like Oprah.

Or.

I could lease the new Pontiac, Whatever.

Or.

That whirlpool Jacuzzi would look good on the new deck. Check.

Or...

Everybody in talk show audiences dresses up like they are the ones being interviewed. Like they are Maya Angelou, or Tom Cruise, or...whoever. I hope I wouldn’t go shopping to sit in O’s audience. Maybe I would.

Why am I like this?

Do aspiring authors pray to the altar of Oprah’s Book Club? They do these days.

Advice follows:

If you go see a talk show, make sure your make up is perfect. And if the camera pans over you, smile just like your life is perfect. Get your teeth capped. Check. Your teeth should be perfect. Could you imagine if you were on national TV and you didn’t look thin And pretty And rich And...

Check.

Wouldn’t that be horrible? My teeth are yellowish.
Watch the de-evolution of America and its Dream everyday at four. Tell all your friends and remember Zevon said “It’s hard to be somebody, and it’s tough not to fall apart.”

Check.

To a hypochondriac, everything’s immediate. Everything’s right now. Tomorrow is as distant as the uneven cement between old red bricks in Charleston’s historic district, frozen gray and pustular. The burning sun is stopped in its path.

Not that it moved to begin with or anything.

I make “to do” lists. I call them “too due” lists because sometimes they rule me and I teach English and such wit is expected of English Lecturers.

Self-loathing is not expected of English Lecturers.

Check.

I have little crumpled, labeled pieces of paper that tell me different things: Go to store. Clean bathroom. Mow grass. Go by bank...check. Print off lecture notes...check. Go by church...check. Douse self in gasoline...check. Pick up toilet paper...check. Walk dogs...check. Check all four dogs for fleas...check. Light self and jump off building in the middle of downtown at about twelve-fifteen p.m. Check. Pick up cat food...check. Be sure to catch fire before jumping for maximum effect.

Check.

Use your mind and determination to make your fat and grease sizzle and pop on the asphalt for maximum effect.

Check.
Nothing lets me know how quickly life can suck like a list.

Have billions of years of human evolution come to this...come to lists?

Has it all come to Wal-Mart late at night because it is less crowded?

Check.

To saving for retirement and self-loathing?

I’ve never found anyone just like me, or even remotely close like me. I don’t know if I’d want to.

I bet no one does. Late at night I lie on my car and watch the skies for UFOs. I am certain they’re out there.

Beam me up, whoever.

This is true. Does that matter to you?

A poet said there’s a hell of a universe next door. I’d like to go and see. Our sun has another five billion years of hydrogen fuel left before it gets really white and tiny and then goes nova.

Plenty of time.

In a snow globe, heavy snow is always warm and inviting. See the plastic trees and the cabin full of family warmth and closeness? See the precisely uniform snowflakes? Out in the woods, in real snowstorms it is cold, and hungry, and bitter. People in snow globes never get their faces chewed off by wolves.

**Section Two:**

Hypochondriacs know a mole is never just a mole. It’s lurking melanoma or a simply cherry angina just a few
hours from metastasizing. That red spot in your mouth? It’s soft tissue cancer or an oral manifestation of AIDS. If you’re a hypochondriac, you need a fine and patient doctor. You’ll probably become good friends with said doctor. Sudden inexplicable muscle soreness with no obvious causality? Why that’s internal bleeding, bone cancer, or something rarer, more elusive, able to elude the normal physician’s battery of tests...you probably need to seek a specialist. As one of this club, you’ll know the PDR is the Physician’s Desk Reference; you will have the latest copy and know how to use it.

Can you imagine living like this, having this horrible companion called Hypochondria? I did for years. It permeates you, makes you learn which mirrors are best for specific examination angles. It makes you write in the second person.

It’s a terrible, persistent lover.

It whispers at night, bent on your possession, bent on owning your life. And if you’re like me, you know it has its claws deep in you and you’re determined to rip it off, regardless of what hunks and chunks of you come off in the bargain.

Check.

So.

A strange result of this Hypochondrium is that is has made me less fearful. Most hypochondriacs are obsessively cautious, but some, like me, develop reckless habits. I’ll explain.

It is amazing the number of masks even an honest man wears.
Confession number one: I live far more recklessly than my loved ones know.

So is it dying that a hypochondriac is afraid of? Not for me. I’m not afraid of death, per se; I’m afraid of a slow, drawn-out, cowardly death sneaking up with dull weapons of hospital beds, nursing homes, and debilitating disease. I want it to walk up out of the blue and rip me to pieces under a brilliant sun, a radiant dying star.

That’s what we are anyway, beacons in the void plodding toward novae, or supernovae if we’re really special, looking for a place and some people to hold close to us along the long, dark way. Our brightest moment is our doom.

Radiant dying stars.

Listen.

For me, it’s the slow leak of hydrogen with plenty of time to contemplate and regret and think that keeps me up at night, not premature annihilation. This mindset, coupled with a stubborn independent streak is a potent recipe for a reckless hypochondriac.

Consider: I wrote this first page while driving about 85 miles-per-hour in heavy interstate traffic while listening to blaring opera. Not a safe, responsible driving decision. Have you ever tried to write with one hand, drive with the other, and watch the road and your words at the same time?

Wait.

Let me back up.

I am much better than I used to be. What I mean by better is that I take far less chances than I used to. But I still yield to the compulsion more often than anyone knows, more
often than your typical bookish-looking college English instructors do.

That’s my job.

Consider the first two sentences of the most recent piece of fiction I am working on: “The early sun found me with the butcher knife in my hand and my head in the oven. It was a bad night, last night.”

I teach English.

So, is this simply a nod to Plath (whom I do not care for), or would any psychotherapists like to take a shot at those two sentences?

My students (most of them) love me.

What would a graduate program in psychology tell me about the knife and the oven? Does this mean something is wrong with me? Are they archetypes dealing with my dead father, the Good Reverend? Something lurking in the old Id or Ego waiting to burst forth with fangs bared?

I’m not sure if my boss likes me.

I’ll let you know how the story turns out. Maybe someone will publish it, but probably not. I keep getting “not what we’re looking for” or “superfluous violence with no real underlying meaning.” How am I supposed to provide real underlying meaning? Don’t these editors know that’s what I’m looking for?

I’m not sure how long I’ll keep my job.

To a hypochondriac, patterns appear from chaos.

Prolonged worry over a non-existent impending death coupled with the absolute fear of a lingering, prolonged death leads to a reckless life, or at least some reckless hobbies.
Mike Jaynes

Trust me.

Full time University
Lecturers are supposed to know
some things.

It also lead me to a complete inability to be startled at all when I look down while driving, drift into oncoming traffic, look up and jerk the wheel back just in the knick. Most people, like you, react with a gasp (at least), or a curse, or even a need to pull over to the side of the road to catch their breath.

Not me.

I experience neither the slightest twitch nor increased pulse. I have the detached air of an android. You’d think I’d studied Tai Chi Chuan for decades.

My students write essays to Intelligent Beings.

Perhaps some receptor center deep in my brain meat classifies the situation as possible swift death, which negates the slow future disease and forever repeating nursing home days. So the brain fails to elicit the services of dendrites and neurons to create the typical –normal- fear response. I employ neither fight nor flight nor fright. I am not startled (most of the time). I catalog the situation and go about my drive, happy in the long slanting sunlight.

How can I be a teacher when I know nothing?

Consider:

Near traffic fatalities, rock climbing and reckless mountain biking doesn’t scare me, but a weird spot in the mouth brings me to my knees. Panic. It’s embarrassing to admit. That’s why I live alone in my head. You can’t come in,
but I’ll check and recheck the spot fifty times in the mirror over the course of the night. I don’t know what I’m looking for. I know I’m selfish. I hope I don’t keep running off people I love. What do I look for in the pink lining of the cheek and gums? I jump out of airplanes.

*I thought of my professors as such wise creatures*

To a hypochondriac, *selfish* is a relative term.

Stop.

Don’t get me wrong. My inner core, my sanctum *sanitarium*, is both turbulent and tranquil, so don’t think the turbulence is all there is to me.

I am happy more often than I am sad. And just like you my life will be brief. I refuse not to live it.

Listen

Live is a transitive verb, both an action and a four-letter word

*Were they as confused as I am?*

What writer alive today needs the painful therapy of writing to deal with the good stuff? If you have underlying meaning, why do this in the first place?

*Were they as lonely?*

Hesse said one can learn a lot from a river.

I said the best thing about summer in the south is the fireflies. But that’s another essay that may or may not matter to you.

In the winking magic of fireflies, it’s easy to forget that today the television showed me how a Mexican pig farmer got his ten foot transport truck stuck under a nine foot
bridge and the police came and freed the terrified, cramped pigs from their underpass. The pigs were jammed together in the crates and shook as the Jaws of Life cut the top of the truck off. Pedestrians cheered as the panic-stricken pigs and their death wagon were freed from the underpass. The announcer told me the pigs made it safely to the slaughterhouse.

_I always have glowing student evaluations except for the one or two I really piss off._

The pigs made it safely to the slaughterhouse.

Gandhi said you can tell how advanced a society is by how it treats its animals.

Check.

_It’s really strange, they are always phosphorescent._

The pigs made it safely to the slaughterhouse.

_I always wear jeans and tee shirts to teach and I hope my boss is okay with that._

Deep in the woods, in the South, in the summer, it’s easy to forget that we live in a world where people will cheer as pigs are safely released from the bridge and sent on their way to the slaughterhouse. Fireflies remind me that there is good in the world, but it may or may not be found in humanity.

The pigs made it safely to the slaughterhouse.

If that’s not a feasible defense against hypochondria, what is?

_My students wonder why I sometimes scream in class. Some of them understand._
Mike Jaynes

Maybe they’ve had a night that they woke up after with a butcher knife in their hand and their head in the oven.

Section Last:

I had a list of other confessions, but I think I’m done. There was confession number eight: Rich people annoy me. And Confession number six: I’m often lonely. And Confession number twelve: Thomas Pynchon’s really a spotlight hound.

Maybe next time.

I decided Confession Number Sixteen was far too embarrassing to admit.

Maybe next time.

I hope a cure for hypochondria is found...a cure other than death, that is.

If I could choose my own death, I’d pick the Gulf of Mexico. Think about it. A cool jeweled death far from crowds to entertain, students to teach, people and animals to disappoint, societies to better, roles to play and early warning signs of diseases to detect. It would be relaxing far way, down among the superior saltwater world and its brilliant silent colors, fading to gray the deeper I sank. Imagine drifting down, slowly spiraling among the wise silent fish with gently moving mouths and the forever flow of the mighty Gulf Stream.

I could think of worse ways.

Like how Silas Evans died. Now there’s a great person.

And I’m in too many pieces to concentrate...too many pieces to be great.
Poetry
A Caravaggio

Light slices
down the room from above, right, across
with lunar intensity
as if an interrogator
were necessary
and yet everything
about the question has already been decided;
all that was ever needed was the confession;
the truth is something extra.

Here, then, is the scene:
one dead Christ
in the way
in the arms
of an apostle
held lovingly,
tenderly
expressing the love
that does not speak its name
uninformed
unrevealed
spent, and yet
the artist knows
this god will re-arise
Resurrection will be hard
and phallic
It eliminates, illuminates
Allan Johnston

saints, poses, the dead god
    the light, the paint
a platonic complaint
against the dramatic artist
    the actor
    who feels
gods are more real
in the artifice of slicing light.
In the near monochromaticity
    complicity
leeches or oozes in the mannered style
    of passion; Raphael
could not accept these orgies of extremes
yet we get dreams
    themselves weighed with light, with sex, with power
and the brief flower
    and long decay of piety that might stem from this:
A last kiss given to the posed, dead god, whose life
cuts like a knife
    across the centuries in all its height
to die in this dissection: the science of light.
Night Piece

The fan clicks rhythmically
on the ceiling as the lamp
braids the long hair
of darkness: on the dresser,
remnants of a girlhood:
a silver Celtic knot
on a chain with a broken
clasp; a bottle of pomegranate
lotion, three-quarters
empty; abandoned letters
to boys who died at war.
Dialectical Materialism

Between the two of us, love swells and retreats
like measures of the tide that sweeps
and rolls debris, helpless shards of crustaceans,
foam cups, yesterday’s newspaper.

One of us reaches out to brush crumbs
off the other’s chin just so we can touch and reap
busy pheromones pelting against skin and nervous system—
but the other is moored behind forced smiles.

And then he leans in, walks his familiar fingers
along the long S of the once-willing spine, rolls
the flowing silk blouse into tight creases. Underneath,
that which once flamed, lingers in cooling waves.
The broken heart of the road kill

The still-beating heart of the road kill.
In the fleshy, frustrated, February rain, the body
of a deer, palpitating.

I turn away from it as I always do.
What kind of people stare? Or sip their morning coffee under
blues skies instead?

I slow. The road to my house has become a map of the world
of lies and wars. I name the carcasses so to appease Gods
whose names I was never taught. I name them after great
families who built cities in ancient, Saharan locales unlike this
small road winding around a suburban American town. Here
there are no great granite sarcophagi; here only tree limbs
bend tediously over the asphalt, their tired fingers pointing
toward dead unburied, left to rot.

I want to name all of them. Other continents are strewn with
the golden epidermal parchment, their pillaged skies rain
blood and I obsess over squirrels flattened on the road where I
live.

Can I tell you how long I have known about death?
How I knew, as a small girl, the rabbits skinless bodies were
not a charm, but an omen hanging in the market of my
childhood, their only song the chimes of their bone and muscle
against the butcher’s window?
Here, forty years later, I am the coroner still.
Is it that my family plundered their way through the world; is that the gene that winnows its way to the surface of all of my deeds?

There, in the worming wound of that animal,
There is a heart that beats long after the stain is washed down to the creek by another insidious and cleansing rain.

Can I make my way into the gully? Can I call out to the fur and the flesh, bring my balm of winter-dried leaves, matted with useless and abundant tears--
smooth the bent bones back into their original skin,
the Shining Coat luminescent with hope--
or will I ride on through the early morning rain?
One Way to Pound’s Grave in Venice

From the heights of the crematorium
they pipe in Pachelbel’s Canon
for the grass and the headstones and the empty paths
and the lizards throbbing on the tombs.
Heat, flowers, flies, sweat, heaps of names!
Too many names
too many crosses and bugs,
graves helpless with life
in a garden bereft of tourists . . .
Eight months since that day.
Eight months since the day
of my father’s funeral.
Five people showed up
and it was over in a few minutes.
Father
who shipped out for America from Hamburg, 1939,
with a big J stamped on his papers
and branded with the name “Israel”
Father
who isn’t speaking to me anymore.

I’ll write him a postcard tonight.
I’ll say I’m doing fine, mostly.
What does the post office do with mail
that bears no stamps?
“You’d love the Carpaccio at the Trattoria Garibaldi,
you’d love the rooftop bar of the Danieli,
though you’d hate the service and yell at the help. . .”
Without a father
I’m afraid.
Heat, flowers, mosquitoes, heaps of names
and the Rough Guide accepts the tears that come
and the map the guard drew for me
so I could pick my way toward Pound:
this too gets smudged and wet
because I walked into that hospital room
(“PLEASE SEE NURSE BEFORE OPENING THIS DOOR”)
and he—kindly, quiet, white in his bag—
would not speak or answer me or anyone.
The rabbi—she was a good young rabbi—
wept because I wept
and he lay selfish and disposable in his bag,
and indifferent,
where is the fire where is the fireplace?
Strangers have taken over our home
it’s wrong, it’s unnatural, a son without his father
a father who could fix anything
with pliers or a little wrench.

Heat, sunlight, cypresses, no flowers
at Pound’s grave
except the ones I bring.
Three pigeons are fighting over crumbs—
then four, then seven, then none.
Shrubs, grass and a name,
some Americans are taking snapshots
of a name.

“Charm, smiling at the good mouth,
Quick eyes gone under earth’s lid.”

At Sinai, after I bought the coffin,
I asked them when my father would be just bones
and they said it takes about a year.
Ruins (to Dad)

Whether by man,
Lightning, poor planning, or
God,
Your Gothic glory was
Not good enough, condemned
To crumble.
Christians cried.
They sobbed in despair, then
Rebuilt, repaired,
Recreated. But
On the old stones
Grow
Ivy, fern,
Wildflower, and
Weed.
Girl at the Window – Salvador Dali (1925)

She has a secret,

a hiding place

where time disappears,

an empty room of free space,

the intangible benefit of the austere.

The ecru wall

opens itself to a stunning view,

a miracle of light, a breath of air

that entrances her,

draws her away from earthly despair.

The sky and the sea

reflect their placidness onto each other,

offering a performance

of harmonious sound and motion:

the water dancing

to the rhythm of the attuned waves,

to the melody of the soothing breeze,

inviting an enthusiastic sailboat

to follow her steps

and enjoy her ease.

The wide mouth of the Cadaqués bay

opens to a small town,

as if to warm her cool immensity

with cordial greens and calid browns.
A few white houses
with tawny roofs
blend with the landscape
of gray slate and olive grooves.

Lost in contemplation
she finds her true self.
She is part of creation,
as flawless as her view,
light as the air that swells her lungs
with a saline current of renewed life.

Her warm skin
shares the tan of the earth.
Dim gray spiral shells
cover her head,
floating on the curvy bright sea of her clothes,
dancing with the waves of their indigo blue stripes
and the light jaunty drapes.

She becomes the earth, the sky, the sea.
She has merged with nature
and she is bathed in bliss.
Eulogy

It wasn’t the eulogies that finally
made me love them, this couple

that died within a week
of each other, old friends

of my husband. Nor was it
the ceremony at the cemetery

of placing their ashes
in the ground, each

in separate cheery colored urns
their son bought in Chinatown.

We joined the handful of family members
and friends on folding chairs,

San Francisco’s hills limned
in the distance, regretting

that these two would never see
this scene again and musing

on our own demise.
Nor was it the verdant grass,
so lush there, fed it seems by remains,
or the hush surrounding us, broken

only by an occasional passing car,
a plane, or a grandchild’s cry

of joy. It happened later,
at the memorial service,
in that crowded living room.

I saw the faces of all
who came to pay

their respects to them—he
a gifted child psychiatrist, she

a noted author. And I realized
I was encountering the dead

in the mourners’ eyes. At last
I could embrace them myself,

something I couldn’t do
in life, each too self-

absorbed, the final protracted illnesses
devouring whatever remained.
Should I Try

I could beam
typed text to the stunning
half-Hawaiian woman
who replaced the girl I knew—
transported from her father’s vigilance,
the tree house that overlooked
her backyard’s high fence, the self-imposed
isolation—transformed—
as everyone knew she would—
into the sun. I am afraid
my old self would shamble back,
opening a vent on the ocean floor
with every step. I can note

what I want to sing,
but singing came before notes.
Before singing came guttural sounds
from deep in the lungs. Before ears
there were shells and tidal pools.
Lava cooled in waves.
Ode to Love

Elusive thing.
Satire.
Igneous trap.
You never play it safe, do you?
I offer my hide,
You parch it.
Spread it on red rocks.
On rocks made for passion—
Made for tangled arms and legs—
For words of steam—
Words he will deny
Or worse, pant in other ears.

Leave me.
Or just lock me in an urn
Carved or painted and sung by Keats.
Oh, that kiss never kissed is honey!
You whip me on,
Strip me of thought,
Grip my guts
And send me into seismic tremors
Mighty enough to turn pacific tides—
Or mine.

Selfish impostor—
You
Make me want him—
Want him
Want me.
He whispered your name
Against my thirsty ear
And I whispered it right back.
You made us
Forget
At 50
We are old
Beginners
Tired of wheeling,
Tired of
Drenched, lonely sheets.
You braced us together
but you
let
him go.
You are fired.

But when you reapply
My sheets will be ironed
My lithic bed scrubbed--
We’ll feast on pomegranates
And sip creek water
From our cupped hands
Before I ignite
Again
Nightingale

“Already with thee!” *

That’s the difference
his nightingale, my TV.

Been there done that
night of the soul

Snooze of reason
deadly dull

Loopy summer reruns inside my skull
desperate housewife out of control
nightingale’s song somewhere forlorn.

Was that bird really
out there in the tender night?

I heard the last one blew away.
up, up and away,

From Superdome to Astrodome.
“Fled is that music.” *

Already with thee.

*John Keats, “Ode to a Nightingale”
BUGS

My mother had come to pray;
her one function,
her only thought.

My mother made the 3
hundred mile ride to
smooth vegetable oil—taken from her cupboards—
on my forehead, legs, arms,
in the shape of a cross.

My mother circled our
building 3 times (84 units to
save), mumbling

Jesus Christ,
Jesus Christ,
Jesus Christ. Save them.

My brother had come, too;
my mother insists she’s too old to
travel alone.

My brother wore a Celtic cross
medallion ‘round his neck, and while
my mother still prayed
he swung it tantalizingly before the eyes
of my cat.
My brother and my mother left, yesterday, in the midst of a preternaturally humid September afternoon.

God bless you! God bless you!

I shut the door.

...

It’s been 3 days.
The bugs are gone.

And I tell myself

it was my meditation.
Some squirrels don’t eat acorns in the park

There’s a portly squirrel
Clumsily perched atop a sapling,
Gorging himself on what looks like a
Frito,
His dorsal fur so bushy and lush,
A terrier’s delight.

How clever he thinks he is—
Balancing himself in the midst
Of an Autumn swell
While shoving two-fisted another . . . is it a Dorito? . . .
Plucked greedily
From some fourth grader’s cast-off lunch.

He clings to the very tip-top groove,
Toes curled, jaws at the ready:
Whirligig,
Gyroscopic,
Jack-in-the-box.

Fuzzy bastard.
Wisdom of the Page

The page is always here.
It never fails me.
It never tires of keeping company
    or lending an impartial ear.
It knows highs are never high enough
    to balance out the lows,
Makes no judgements however conversation goes,
Accepts me without friendship,
    unfazed by risky thoughts.
True wisdom knows it doesn’t matter
    if love is here or there.
The page is not concerned if it is really anywhere.
I cover the page,
Try the margin,
Stand
    at
    the.
    edge.

The page does not hold its breath.
Two Days before Spring Equinox

The magpie visits
Pecks at invisible worms
On the vinca

Black and white
Diligence against ever-
Green tangle

Our eyes meet
Through the kitchen window
In need of washing
Sonata

1.
Where are we, I ask, delirious
from sleeping in the car, my neck
crooked and sore. It’s raining;
She’s driving. A pause comes
in the sound of rain pounding the car
as we pass through the gate of an overpass.

2.
In Hell, she answers,
at first, then takes back.
I’m with you, my love,
so this must not be.

3.
Hell is where I’d be with
someone else.
Drunk in Colima, Mexico

Katie kicked the curb too hard
so I plucked,
sliced and squeezed a lime
over her broken bare toe
nail gone.

The tip of her toenail cracked before the base,
by the cuticle. The plate splintered
along the nail’s free edge, sticking for a moment
to the cement, loosening the nail bed’s customary hold.

Katie’s foot was red.

Katie’s big toe was a puddle

dirty with swallows and loam.

Katie’s fingernails tore at my back. We screamed.
The grit was washing away
from her toe in pink froth. Five more blue mountains
Count them five more red chasms and we screamed.

Katie and I screamed
and cried
bled on one another.
Hairs sweaty
we clung.
This is how her hands emerge to birth sonatas
  tangled, scandalous as daybreak.
  “I hate waiting for him, and the knots.”
She’s learned to sway, sway, watching strife from windows,
  trying not to count the hours—“No one beautiful here at all”—
  amidst the tasteful blue of a Parisian etiquette
  made from too much fuss and cutlery,
  too much freezing. “No one’s called, Madame.”
She goes over to her harp
  as if to pray.

Act II

Such whiteness and such waiting knotted into hatred!
She hates him for his beauty, she hates the waste
  of beauty, knotted arms, student thighs.
And she plays on:
  andantes give her parlor hands a thing or two to do
  before they’re bruised and sore with overplucking.
The butler ushers in the “gentleman” and sighs, retreats.
  Fabrice, fresh from his masked ball at Countess C.’s! Fabrice,
  sullen and plebeian, rushes to undo her etiquette completely,
  scoops up—from deep beneath the snowscape—the chalice,
  the full cathedral, of her cry.
Moonlight arctic as a harp recital:
what a waste of hatred, what knotty wasted hands,
eyelids fragmented and grandmotherly
that receive the florid apathy of walls and portraiture,
last arpeggios, gems.
“He told me he would come back.”
Now her life is voices from another parlor,
doors that lead to steps that lead to snow mist,
silk and nothing.
A church clock claims it’s midnight:
in her mind she climbs and climbs. Where possible
she plays in C-sharp minor, a key of steam and steep religion.
Bits of him are dripping from the chimes.

"Massenetique" is an adjective used to describe the lush, old-
fashioned, romantic style of French opera composer Jules Massenet
(1842-1912).
Mozart knows nothing of my life,
the way my teacher places my hands
on the right keys, the way I fight him,

and the pointlessness of correcting mistake
after mistake when my mind refuses to learn.

The winter light is so clean it stings
a few hours after dawn. The fountain
brims with ice. The birds are trembling.

In six weeks, I guess, it will be spring.

My sister tells me that in my sleep
my fingers move, and I sing a little.

In the morning her bed is empty,
the pillow gone. Nothing can be right
until it has been wrong.

It is almost spring—almost—and
the flowers will open to the sound of March,
if I can hold out that long.
I know what a poem isn’t

I know what a poem isn’t:

Hard rhyme sucking the ink
from the lines
dark emotion oozing, eddying
into the stanza
like a vengeful tsunami
lovers, laughter, crime
pizza-boxed, daytime television.

Poetry is never a catered affair –

it is always crumbs, leftovers,
the cold, blank stare of the empty refrigerator
it is hunger and
the hunger for hunger.
Give me some lines, I say. He freezes, too
careless to speak, and grips

the wheel, watching the Grand Tetons slip
past, the car and our lives on cruise

control. The Snake River snakes
through lodgepole pines, and lupine

thirsts by the side of the road.
We enter Yellowstone, seeking

Old Faithful. “Wyoming’s so poor
they can’t afford road signs. They don’t want you
The whole country’s here.” We pass

a section of burned-out trees, trunks
stripped bare and listing, resembling

abandoned teepee poles. Some seem
like trees on stilts. Others appear
to be wearing skirts. Steam hovers
over the land—a ghost’s breath, a dragon’s
plume. And then Old Faithful bursts
from the ground, sputtering and gaining
force. Finally it surges high above, conic
shape hovering before sputtering
to an end. The photos we take catch
its motion. But they don’t reveal the feeling
we had watching the geyser erupt,
close to longing, the ability
to burst free of all restraints and soar.
Flat in the gray light, the dome of the museum stands like a turret reflected in a window.

The rain everywhere has suggested that there is no history,

and yet the building stands there, grim as shoes that have failed to get anyone anywhere. Inside it, god knows, everything everyone tries to remember has been housed. I know I have touched the graying busts, heads on august columns,

and I have placed a finger on the glass behind which someone has reproduced an idea, painfully considered, of what Australopithecus might have done on a summer day before summer was invented, perhaps even before taking the interesting stone in hand when the fellow wounded his first kid
or scraped out the bones of the dead jackal
to plunge his face in the vital waters

of aging blood — our museum
leaving out the smell of the keen

and rotting flesh, the real joy in death
that fathers this unfinished story of man.
“They probably publish everything that comes across their desk.”
Her first husband said when she showed him her byline.
He harangued her for spending money on typewriter ribbon (with erasure features),
and for passing college English
until he found his second wife.

“I guess it’s good since I can’t understand it,”
the Ph. D. said of her Christmas poem.
He laid his glasses on Page Two
and watched her wrinkled forehead
wait for his approving kiss.

“I’ve got thank-you notes to write,”
her mother said, as though the book never arrived.
She bragged about Rosemary and Ann, and Beth
who was always good at hemming her pantsuits and giving haircuts
and seasoning fajitas.

“Thank you for glorifying me,”
God said in the morning glow.
In the noonday meal
in the calm of the night
in the muse He magnifies forever.
Birth Mother XXIII

Torn is the belly
like an animal knifed clean in rain.
where blood explores the filth
of happenstance and spade, and covers the garden
with yearning.

A birth mother does not kiss.
With iron heart and easy petal she flees
from the raw tongue of want
toward a hazy blue and winter planting,
and a soft drink.
She does not tremble
when from an old car radio
the breeze blows “Yesterday” and reaches her
and will not reach her,
she just strokes the cat
and fingers her dress, and smokes…

Tattered is the shadow of the girl
while the woman limps miles through her sleep,
an elaborate picture of rust,
of stiffening visions and parts.

No embrace.
Her milk was drunk too meek, too frantic,
to sweat the ice away.
Downtown Bound

It's mild, in morning.
After one final frantic fight
For five more minutes,
I've got a seat. I've beat
That cursed clock.
It's seven thirty.
I jolt, passive, past
Curled cats in suburban
Curtained windows, and
Porches purpled by sweet pea...
Puffy people with
Damp hair stare, and stretch.
Their pants are pressed, and
Nylons still intact.
The pings of pulled
Stop strings
Mingle in a dream.
Here rides transition.
Reality taps its pointed toe
At First and Madison.
Division

We sit on the frozen stone bench at the corner
of the cemetery and spy on the evening city bustle below.

Red, blue and white lights connect like dots to reveal
the tight grid safely out of our touch. We hold hands,

away from the intersections that hold tight traffic and
thought. A blue pine breathes on our backs, its heavy

fragrance pricks our necks, awakens the last
pine-flavored kiss. From behind the cemetery, Bear Range

guards our secrets, our trespasses, our waking bodies.
The city-lights vibrate in the whites of your eyes.
A Thousand and One Nights Before

I dreamed you a thousand and one nights before
only to find the dawn had extinguished
that silhouette which was yours—
a sad, savage loss left only on the doorstep
of fantasy; I sleep to dream you

I searched to remember you, imagined you
quietly undressing inside your trench coat,
looking sensual as jazz set loose on the
fingertips of eternity; imagined you
extravagant, avant-garde in broad daylight

And in my thousand and one nights
you walked the corridors of my mind,
your tiny footsteps, your image,
your back, the skyline of infinity
like a bonfire beneath starlight

Your shadow, moonlit vines
bringing me your words,
ripe, like wine in a glass,
intoxicated in your language

I dreamed you a thousand and one nights before
as you pass through this nocturnal door,
and there you stand,
silent as jade amongst the rocks,
moving across a sea of jasmine
carrying your cargo of kisses

I searched but no one else had your lines,
the blooming stalks of your frame;
no one else had your dimensions, your
proportions; the refractive color of your
body, whole and exact, like slender towers
of wheat bending in a south wind

I dreamed you a thousand and one nights before,
and now—at last—you stand before me,
full-fleshed, full-earthed, crown of light
queen of my soul, rebuilding our lost Eden
one blossom of love at a time…
Bella Flor

Voicemail reluctant,
appropriately sad.

It wasn’t shaking or tearful,
wasn’t scared of steel fenders,
a jaw crushed, wasn’t scared
of shattered glass, vomit & piss,
of dirt & dirt, dirt dirt.

A woman was decapitated
crashing her SUV. Her friend’s husband
saw it happen. His wife found him still
inside the car, belted, in the garage
screaming.

In Cry Baby Johnny Depp
drinks a jar of his own tears.

Jam was on the counter. I threw it.
Jam was on the wall, clinging
to shards of glass on the tile floor.

I called Z at work.
Saying it made the bed’s feet shift.

I searched online for details
but only found sterile news:
Katie was driving through Blue Mountain when the driver of a pickup truck lost control of his trailer, which smashed into the side of Katie’s car.

I want to know which bones broke, which tendons tore, which organs ruptured. I want to know when she died. I want to see a photo of her banged-up bloodied face.

How many jars can I fill with gut flora?
No Word

No words can sift my rage right now
I’m unfiltered, raw
skinned flesh from bone
and the bones are scraping
up fire
lighting new caves
of grief
I’m losing
I’m preverbal
middle brained
shaking with tremors
in the dark

If there’s a stairway, a door
a dark hallway
I’ll take it
I’ll take it

Show me your stairway littered in glass and
your sealed, steel door
your hallway an endless labyrinth
I want to try

To find the word to light the way
Birth Mother XXVIII

Hills of "Eternity"

People talk nicely by the grave because the sun is breaking through
Neckties dresses sprinklers Sunday scents
“Hard to say what the market’s going to do”

Hair and limb and hearing-aid
I found her in a bag Who put her that way?
“Have you seen her teeth? Where are her teeth?
Where is her cane?”
Her watch is still ticking her forehead cold
My mouth to her forehead when it was warm
and when it is cold
Head limb speechlessness

Are those swallows or swifts?
My birth mother and I together we’re sliding to light

Fauna and gasses frantic within her expanding her blackening
“I need to go up” she said “Help me”
The specialists looked cheerful and they strapped her in
“I need to go up” “Help”
From her bed she tried to hail a taxi spotted JFK on the ceiling drifting by
How she shook and shook O my flesh
bleeding from her amputation
Nurses specialists cheerful
Maggots now moving as a maggot mass
I sat on her bed and held her hand
good warmth of her urine spread to my leg
She said “Don’t go” “Never” I said Never

Mold and fermentation Many changes
Sprinklers neckties “Hard to say where the market’s headed”
“The house could use a little sprucing up” mouthparts moving
Generations of maggots blooming

Fauna gasses rabid till the structure just collapses
Beetles mites birth
of a monster everyone’s face always
there is life always gasses
around the wounds eggs hatching always there is life

What flew over us?

An attorney strokes his beard Orchids Dresses Light
I hold her glasses and her cane “I need to go up” Orchids Uplight

Mist lifting now lifting now lifting
When we were freshmen,
a girl who lived down the hall
died while driving back to school
from Florida, spring break.

Our RA, a gossipy pre-med,
gathered us in the hallway
outside her door.

I picked at the looped polyester carpet
under bare ankles. Some girls cried.

When the RA finished
a few girls hovered
in my small, shared bedroom.

Katie spoke first:
“It’s not like she was nice.”
The Business of Poetry

The Poet doesn’t write poems.

The poet shakes hands at local readings.
The poet stays in the poet-loop
for fear other poets will forget about her.

The poet sends out work.
The poet self-addresses envelopes and
discovers new literary websites.

The poet’s budget is small, so the poet writes for
newspapers for extra cash. The poet writes
*about* poetry.

The poet writes thank you letters and cover letters;
the poet takes workshops.

If an out-of-state poet is coming, the poet
cancels her plans—
for won’t those other poets be there, with
their business cards and
offers to share wine?

The poet enters poetry contests
so she can add the word *recipient*
to her bio.
Heather Trahan

The poet’s last poem was one year ago.
Message

I have something to tell you, but I don’t want to follow the thread. I follow you to bed. Tree branches scrawl their shadows on the hallway carpet. I love your steps between the letters. Don’t let me

miss you disrobe, compose your hair in a bun so it won’t entangle our mouths while we kiss. I adore your wrists. A message scrawled in green beneath your skin: Lovely to trace.
For Show

The dryer whirs with my clothes.
They are the outside of me.

Only a fool would try to be something he is not.
NASCAR drivers die sometimes, but their sons keep doing it anyway.

If you take away diplomas, house, car, and clothes, I am stripped.
Whatever’s left would bare the daylight, frightened, yet relieved.

But my Chihuahua is a simple creature.
Yet she stares at me and my fear and shakes.

A person who is torn will never be happy in all of life.
I’ve gone on sixty-seven first dates in three years.

Xanex for anxiety and Wellbutrin for depression are great friends.
My parents never went to college and I stayed too long.

A $90,000 Mercedes is unconquerable, black and sleek.
Even it loses its splendor with age.

This above all, to thine own self be true.
NASCAR drivers die circling a track sometimes.

Business suits and boardrooms stress the elite, the competitive, and the successful.
I wonder if it will matter in a hundred years.
Erin Kelley

My Chihuahua lives for food and sleep.
I don’t remember what I had for lunch and slept four hours last night.

I cry, but after a while, I don’t even know why.
I just detest my diplomas and am always late to work.

But yet I wake up in the morning and put on my best suit.
It is on the outside of me.
The Lives Of Objects

We share our home with carnival mirrors
and tarnished silver; amulets
in the shape of abacuses and African
masks; dolls with molting hair and cracks
around the cheeks where too many times
they had been kissed by little girls;
curios painted creamy white to cover half-finished portraits of ladies named Opal
and Francesca in their pearls, shrunk
to the size of babies’ teeth; a cold Clair de lune
rounding the blackened sylvan-scape
on the far wall; moose heads with graying nostrils
and sentient marble eyes that fix me
with disdain; a flock of dead pocket watches
sunk into a drawer like chandeliers
in Triton’s ballroom; stacks of magazines
long out of print, which still hold
an interest for the transient, the lover,
those who exist outside of time.
Linda Maxwell

Limited Licensed Partnerships

Tommy (who needed some dental work):
“I want to sell my company and buy a house on the Cape,”
he announced as a preface to his proposal
that she spend a week with him in Orlando
as though they had been meeting for lunch on Thursdays
instead of that one hot Friday
last summer.

Dominic (who never called again):
“I want to sell my companies and sail around the world with the woman
I love,”
he articulated, as though he had memorized “Romancing the Stone.”
He’d hire a captain, a cook and a cleaning service, too,
and buy bracelets for his love’s seasickness
and find on-line graduate courses for her dissertation plans.

Nathan (who might possibly someday have a company if all of his
dreams come true):
“My friends say I’ve never worked a day in my life,”
he bragged under the red light at Mill Street,
holding the wheel of his Suburban,
as fiercely as he clung to the title “Entrepreneur”
which he misspelled on his Applebee’s application.

Adela (who now spends Saturday nights alone):
“Due to a deluge of disappointments, I’ve decided to keep my own
company,”
she wrote on her silvery square monitor with the Dell components
that saved her words
and phrases
and sentences
into stories: wise, faithful, sincere,
enduring,
like love.
Razor-faced, necktied, & lost

grey mornings are like an opium inducer
we stare—fierce—against the light,
afraid of losing something sacred
we thought we once had
but is now as liquid
as the rain from
the night
before

it’s like a sort of state of denial
as if I had boarded a plane
the day before and set off
for Kuala Lumpur or La Paz--
razor-faced, necktied, & lost

couldn’t lust. lust must not.
lust must not prevent the inevitable.

always the glance, the opulent look behind,
lovers sweeping the doorstep, switching off
porch-lights between the dirty intervals,
sweeping affairs under the rug, not living,
not dying, save her newborn innocence

but how culpable is she—really—I mean?
grey mornings put it all into perspective:

salvage what’s left you—
chemical fairs
nuclear affairs
active radio leaking love….
Time to Marry

I.

Love in the style of yoga. obliteration, trust. A thousand knives, and every one of Stephen’s dark riders (bearing nightmares) could not steal our love to any dark place.

Love: rapturous miraculous dependence—

for we are two trees,
in a garden of two.

Love, we are what Linda calls “twinsouls” …when I met you—you met me—I found—you found—that part that had been missing, since birth, behind your eyes—my eyes.

II.

Time to marry.

Let us meet with our cherished ones.

Let us profess:
So they can be sure.
So we will remember.
Sunday at Six

Terpsichore stirs and she dances in me.
My hands think in music, and immortally
Cry, “Polyhymnia!”
She rises in song.
Eternity’s throng thunders booming and warm,
Distant, but present, attendant
And swarming in all of my soul.
I am not alone. The keys are
Enchanted. Time is no barrier;
The Voice is my carrier.
Vibrating strings bring me visions,
Illusions, Fantasia, dissuasions,
And I am at peace.
My mind becomes free, and appeals
To God, Whose ageless hand rests
On my shoulder.

Down the hall the Super Bowl is in progress
And Fritos litter the new carpet.
Lily Iona MacKenzie

Tutankhamen

His mummy
wrappings fall away
and he stares

at us in all his imperfection
—jutting buck teeth, elongated
head. Not so different from you

or me, except he goes back

hundreds of years. The light
of science erases illusions
we had about the boy

king. CAT scans purred
as they invaded his world
and reconstituted the man,

though they couldn’t resurrect
his brain, thoughts

and memories frozen. Only the ax

of art can tease them
out, the artist imagining
what Tutankhamen felt
before succumbing, that last
fatal moment when he remembered
his two stillborn sons

and his own short life
reared up in relief.
You float…

You float, two turtles in a Mediterranean storm.
You cling to each other
and battle the kinetic Reka, in full flood.
You burst through subterranean caves
to the other side, to Italy
where the waters turn serene,
where the winds become calm.

You glide now, with grace,
until suddenly, here you are
on a sublime beach,
beckoning and finding and reaching
your own place to rest.
Grief Knows

Grief knows every shadow,
a simple stalling of the sun behind a harmless cloud
gray corners of rooms without the radiance of affection
dusk on the day of a loved one’s death
a disilluminating love that fails to become an expected soul mate.

Grief, unlike the wind of change, settles dead end like a chilling draft
in the dim pockets of life
and takes up personal acquaintance with darkness.
Erin Kelley

Floating On an Inner-Tube in the Guadalupe River

Waves. They gently massage my dead beat back and
the breeze murmurs my name. I lay my head back.
What does the breeze want? What does it matter?
Even the rocks. Respectfully, so dangerous.
They can rip my ass if I don’t pay attention.

One finger dips into the cool madness, swirling.
The waves are tiny little hurricanes within themselves.
Too bad for an ant or a black bug. So soothing,
yet so dangerous.

I know if I fall in, I will see a face, if only for an instant.
That face will be you.
The Sculptor

It may not look like much
--its grey chisel and green plastic case—
Yet the object possesses the power
To sculpt sticks into inspiring instruments.

Slivers of the wood drop
Into the casing
Sharpening the dull end
Making the wood useful.

The artist cradles the wood in her hand.
Its tip glides on the page
Leaving words or sketches
To soothe and inspire.
Fiction
Three

We waited till dark and then took it out behind the house and put it in the center of the bare spot in the yard where the old swing used to be. While me and Sanders was fixing it in the dirt DeWitt kept looking back at the house.

“What if your old lady sees it?” he said. “What do we do then?”

“She ain’t going to see it behind the garage,” Sanders said. He was smoothing the dirt around it so as to make a bed for it. When he figured it was good enough he stood up and me and DeWitt followed him back to the corner of the garage. DeWitt kept looking back at the house.

“Who’s going to light it?” he said.

“You are,” Sanders said.

“Not me.”

“You watched us making it, didn't you?”

“So? So what?”

“So you're going to light it.”

DeWitt just stood there.

“I ain't going to do it,” he said.

“Then go on home,” Sanders said.

“I ain’t going home.”

“You want to see if you're going home?”

“Your old lady's going to see it. If she don't see it she'll hear it sure as hell.”

“She ain’t going to hear nothing,” Sanders said. “She’s watching television. Now are you going to light it or are you going home?”
“Look here DeWitt,” I said. “There ain't nothing hard about it. All you got to do is light it and run.”

“Then why don't you do it?”

“Because it ain't his turn,” Sanders said.

“Well it ain't mine either.”

“Here,” Sanders said to me. “Give me the matches.”

I got out the matches and gave them to him.

“So long DeWitt.”

DeWitt just stood there.

“So long DeWitt,” Sanders said.

“How's come I always get the shit's end of the stick?” He had his hands in his pockets and was looking down at the ground, moving his foot around in the grass. Sanders was just about ready to do something when he finally looked up and reached out his hand. “Here, give me the matches,” he said.

Sanders gave him the matches and then me and him waited by the corner of the garage while DeWitt went up to it.

“Go on,” I said. “It ain't going to do nothing till you light it.”

DeWitt squatted down beside it and struck a match and his face came into view. He held the match to it at full arm's length, with his head pulled back from it as far as he could get it.

“Come on, come on,” Sanders said.

The match went out and DeWitt struck another one and his face came back into view.

“It won't light,” he said.

“It'll light if you hold the match down to it,” Sanders said.

DeWitt struck another match and re-situated his squat beside it, and held the match down closer to it, the flame jiggling a little just above where his hand was. He held it like that for quite awhile, until
the flame of the match got so low that I figured it must be burning his
fingers, and then all of a sudden he yelled “it's lit!” and he jumped up
and came running back down the yard to us and almost slipped on the
wet grass when he got to the corner of the garage.

“I lit it on the good end,” he said, breathing hard from the run.
“It should go all right.”

We all stood there and watched it for awhile, and pretty soon a
tiny bubble of flame came up on the end of the paper and twisted and
dipped around it, trying to sit.

“That should catch it,” Sanders said. “With that paper it'll take
awhile.”

The flame fluttered and dipped around on the edge of the
paper, and then gradually it started to droop, getting smaller and
smaller the more it tried to stay on top, and then finally it went down
behind the edge somewhere and we couldn't see it any more.

“It’s out,” Sanders said. “You’ll have to light it again.”

“It ain't out,” DeWitt said. “Lookie there.”

There was still a faint glow on the edge of the paper where the
flame was, but it didn’t look like it was going to last. We all stood there
and watched it while the glowing got fainter and fainter, eating slowly
away at the edge of the paper as it went, but then finally it faded too
and we couldn't see anything any more.

“It’s out,” Sanders said. “You'll have to light it again.”

“Hell,” DeWitt said, going back up to it. He squatted down
beside it the same way as before, reaching at it, with his head pulled
back as far as he could get it—like it smelled or something—and still
be able to see what he was doing.

“Make sure it’s lit this time,” I said.
“It's lit!” he yelled, and he jumped up and came running back to the corner of the garage, breathing hard and laughing.

“Oh, that sucker's going to blow this time,” he said, laughing and coughing, blowing into his hands. He rubbed them together. “Watch it now.”

“I don't see nothing,” Sanders said.

“It's on the other side there. Lookit!”

A flame came up and waved minutely on the edge of the paper, and then it went down again.

“It’ll go,” DeWitt said. “Give her time.”

We all stood there, looking at where the flame was, but nothing happened.

“It's out,” Sanders said.

“It ain't out,” said DeWitt.

We all stood there and watched it awhile longer, but there was nothing, not even a glow.

“It's out,” Sanders said. “You'll have to light it again.”

“Hell with it,” DeWitt said. “I ain’t going out there no more.”

“You didn't light it right,” Sanders said.

“The hell with it,” said DeWitt. “I just ain’t going out there no more. It’s dangerous. What we need’s a better fuse for it. Hell—"

There was a hard rushing hiss and a glare of light and then thick white swirling clouds of smoke that you could plainly see even in the darkness rose up like a great ballooning sheet past the top of the garage and past the tops of the poplar trees that lined the back of the lot.

The smoke hung over the dark yard for a long time. It looked like fog, pale and thin in the darkness, not seeming to move at all. Then
finally it receded, dissolved into the damp night air, and then you could begin to pick up the thick, sweet, acrid smell of the gunpowder.

Sanders and DeWitt were laughing. Sanders was up against the back of the garage trying to keep his laughing down, and DeWitt was crouched in the grass laughing and holding his stomach and saying, “Jesus Christ, Oh Jesus Christ,” over and over again to himself.

What was left of the paper burned quietly, tossing shadows, dancing fingers, over the bare spot of ground where the old swing used to be.

“All right,” I said. “That was all right.”

**************

We was all out on the back porch before noon. Besides me and DeWitt, there was Sanders’ older brother Nate, Tom and Jimmy LaFever, Bill Schenefeldt, Frank Klima, and a new kid by the name of Howie McClellen who DeWitt brought over.

We was all just sitting around on the porch when Sanders came out the back door carrying the rocket. He didn't say anything to us, he just stepped off the porch and we all got up and followed him out to the back yard and watched while he set the tripod down in the middle of the bare spot and fitted the rocket into it. The tripod was my idea. It was one Sanders used down in his lab to heat things on, and it was a perfect fit for the rocket: it sat straight up in it, with its bottom fins resting on the ring.

While Sanders was getting it ready everybody kept milling around it, whispering to each other about it. They'd never seen anything like it. There used to be a kid over in Bresson named Ducker Fairburn who built himself a rocket one time and got his picture in the paper for it, but it wasn't the same as Sanders', because everybody knew it was really Fairburn's old man, who worked out at Kress Electric, who did
all the work on it; Sanders did all his himself. He spent over three months on it, working every night down in his lab in the basement instead of doing his school work; but it was worth it. I figured it was worth it all right. Seeing it sitting there in the sun straight up in its tripod, pointing toward the moon like that, with all them kids milling around it, never seeing anything like it before, talking to themselves in whispers about it—I didn’t have no choice but to figure it was worth it all right.

Before we all took our positions Sanders’ older brother Nate went in and got a camera. He said he had to get some pictures of it for time immemorial. He took some of the rocket by itself, sitting up in the tripod, and then he took some of Sanders alone with it, with Sanders kneeling down beside it with his hand behind it like he was holding it up; then Nate took some of us altogether with it, with all of us standing around in a semicircle behind it, and with Sanders kneeling down in the grass in front of us with his hand on the side of it. While Nate was taking one of us altogether, I noticed that Mrs. Sanders was looking out from one of the upstairs windows. I mentioned it to Nate and he stopped in the middle of taking the picture and waved up at her.

Then we all took our positions. Nate and the two LaFevers went over and stood on the edge of my yard, and the rest of us grouped up about fifty feet on either side of the rocket, with me and Klima and Schenefeldt going on one side of it, and DeWitt and that McClellen kid going on the other.

Sanders got ready to light it: I could tell by the way he moved up to it that he was a little on edge about all those people being there, especially about that McClellen kid. I don't know why DeWitt ever brought him over. As far as I knew he was never real good friends with
him. Unless it was about them cigars. That was it: he brought him over because it was him who had the cigars.

“If it goes in the trees be sure and see where it hits,” Sanders said.

“I'm watching,” Nate said. He was standing on the edge of my yard, and the two LaFevers was behind him, sitting down in the grass with their backs up against the trunk of the crabapple tree.

Sanders moved up behind the rocket and bent down and lit it, and then he straightened up again, slow and smooth without breaking his movements, and backed away. The fuse caught right off and burned up, slow and bright.

“Oh, that sucker's going to blow like hell,” DeWitt said. He was sitting down in the grass on the other side of the rocket from us, with his back up against the fence. That McClellen kid was sitting right next to him, just like he was, with his back up against the fence.

“Watch out in case it veers off to the side,” Sanders said.

The fuse started smoking a little, burning brighter as it rose.

“It ain't going to come over here, is it?” Schenefeldt asked me.

“I don't think so,” I said.

The fuse burned on up, throwing off bright sparks and thin whiffs of blue smoke as it climbed. Just before it dissolved into the bottom of the rocket you could hear a faint hissing sound, and the sparks got much brighter. And then, for an instant after the fuse was gone, nothing happened.

“Is it still lit?” Nate shouted.

There was a hissing noise, and smoke started coming out of the bottom of the rocket in thick, white strings. Suddenly the hissing got much louder, and then bright sparks and smoke started pouring out of the bottom of the rocket, and through the rising billows of white
smoke I could see that the rocket was starting to wobble in the tripod. For a minute I caught a glimpse of the flame, clearish and wavering inside the smoke and the continuous hissing, like it was hanging out of the bottom of the rocket from an invisible wire. 'It's burning itself out,' I said to myself. 'It's just going to sit there and burn.'

And then it was gone, in a quick, smooth, sucking sound, like when you let something go up one of those air tubes they have in department stores, and when I looked up it was a good ways above the telephone wires and already on its way down. It came down and hit and bounced in the grass just in front of the bare spot, not ten feet from where it took off.

“Did you see that!” Nate shouted. Him and the two LaFevers was running across the yards towards us.

“Man,” Klima said.

“Man,” Schenefeldt said.

The rocket was laying in the grass, still smoking. DeWitt and Sanders was standing over it, and DeWitt was laughing and slapping Sanders on the back.

“Did you see that!” Nate shouted, laughing and breathing heavy from the run.

“I thought it was going to blow up,” Jimmy LaPever said.

“Don’t touch it,” Sanders said. “It’ll burn hell out of you.”

“Let me get the camera,” Nate said.

“How far up did it go?” asked DeWitt.

“It was above the wires,” I said.

“I thought it was going to blow up,” Jimmy LaPever said. “I was covering my head like this…”

Nate came back across the yards with the camera.
“Let me get a picture of it,” he said, motioning for us to stand back from it.

“Hell, it was higher than that,” DeWitt said.

“I said it was above the wires.”

“Look at that thing,” Sanders said. He was turning it over with a stick. It was black around the bottom edges where the flame was, and on its side, about halfway up, there was a black, jagged hole.

“How far up did it go?” DeWitt asked. “Did you see it Howie?”

“Get back from it now,” Nate said. He had the camera ready.

“Did you see it Nate?” I asked.

“Get around it: Henry, you get beside it there, and the rest of you guys group up behind him.”

“Come on Howie,” DeWitt said.

“Naa…”

“Come on, man.”

McClellen got up slowly from the fence and came over with the rest of us, walking heavily, like his legs were asleep. Then Nate took some pictures. He took some of us altogether and some of Sanders alone with it, and then he took some close-ups of the rocket by itself, just as it lay in the grass in the attitude of coming down.

“I seen it,” Tom LaFever said, after we was done with the pictures. “It was above the wires.”

“Did you see it Nate?” I asked.

“That's thirty feet,” DeWitt said.

“That's more than fifty feet,” Nate said, winding the camera.

Sanders was kneeling down beside the rocket, turning it over with his hand now.

“Man,” he said. “Look at that thing.”
“You got them cigars Howie?” DeWitt asked.
“I got three.”
“Well, come on then. Hen, you bring the rocket. Let's go in and have a smoke.”

Nate went on in the house and the rest of us went in the garage. Sanders had a place fixed up in the back where he'd made sort of a room out of one of the corners by hanging big pieces of canvas over the two open sides. Inside there was a pot-belly stove that he used to heat metal in, a red rocking chair with arms and a high back, a bench, an old clothes trunk, and in the back wall a window that looked out to the yard.

After we all got in DeWitt moved the rocking chair around for Sanders to sit in, and then he motioned to McClellen for the cigars.
“How's come you only got three?”
“It's all I could get,” McClellen said.

Sanders stood the rocket in the corner and moved the chair over and sat down beside it. DeWitt came over and handed him a cigar.
“Let Henry light up first,” he said. “Then we'll all pass them around.”

DeWitt struck a match and held it to Sanders' cigar while Sanders puffed, flaring the flame on the end. Sanders sat back in the chair, puffing on the cigar and looking over at the rocket in the corner.

DeWitt came back and sat down on the floor with his back up against the stove and lit up. Then McClellen lit up his. DeWitt puffed, looking up at the ceiling, stretching his neck, the smoke from his cigar rising around him in big, slow billows.

“Yessiree Hen,” he said finally, holding the cigar in his teeth and laughing around it. “Someday you'll be showing them pictures to your grandkids.”
But Sanders didn't say anything. I don’t think he even heard him. He just sat there in the chair, puffing on his cigar and looking over at the rocket that was standing up in the corner.

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He must have been coming around the corner of the garage just when Sanders threw it, because right after it blew and before the smoke had time to clear we heard a “hey!” and turned around and there he was heading down the driveway towards us.

“What was that?”

“Nothing,” Sanders said.

DeWitt picked up a shred of tin foil that was laying in the driveway.

“What've you been making here?”

“Nothing,” Sanders said. “Just something my old man gave me.”

“It's just something we made today,” I said. “Sanders’ old man just brought him the stuff for it.”

“Like hell,” DeWitt said, turning the burnt end of the foil over in his fingers. “Your old man wouldn't be giving you this stuff.”

“He didn't,” Sanders said, and then he smiled. “Watch this:”

He took another one out of his pocket and threw it down hard against the driveway. It made a good BOOM! and a nice cloud of blue smoke came up and we all stood there and watched it while it lifted intact down the driveway and out into the street.

“It's a torpedo,” Sanders said. “You don’t need a fuse or nothing for it. All you got to do is throw it. I made it myself.”
But I think DeWitt knew all right. Sanders didn't have to tell him. I think he knew as soon as he walked down the driveway that me and Sanders had been making them torpedoes for a long time without letting him in on it.

That's why he came over the next night again with that flash bomb of his.

“Something I made,” he said, coming in the garage.

It was just an ordinary flash bomb, like the ones we quit making a long time ago, but the way he was acting with it you’d have thought he just invented it.

“What are you going to do with it?” I said.

“What do you think?”

Sanders had told him a while back what chemicals to use if he ever wanted to make one turn different colors, and I guess DeWitt did that—but otherwise, the only thing different about it was the way he had it fixed: he had it tied to a stick with a hole drilled through the center of it, and he figured that by stringing it up between two of the big beams in the back of the garage he could get it to spin.

Me and Sanders went along with him on it. We sat down on the bench and watched him while he got it ready, doing the best we could to go along with him on it. I guess we actually felt kind of bad about him discovering the torpedoes that way.

He ended up having to string it between the damper on the stove pipe and one of the nails in the back wall—the length of wire he brought with him wouldn't fit between the beams.

It looked stupid when he got done with it, like a piece of rag hanging from a clothes line.

DeWitt stepped back from it, so as to look at it from a distance. Then he went back up to it again and tried spinning it around
a couple of times with his finger, making sure it would spin all right. You could tell he really thought it was something.

“You don't have to light both ends,” Sanders told him, after it looked like he was done with the trial spins.

“Yes you do. You need something pushing on both ends of it.”

“Try it with one and see,” I said. “That way if it works it won't burn up so fast.”

“Yeah, and if it don't then I'll have to make another one.”

“Go ahead and light one end of it,” Sanders said. “It should spin all right.”

So DeWitt lit just one end of it and stepped back, and me and Sanders stood up and we all watched it. It started smoking and fizzing a little, sending off thin, fraying strings of smoke as it burned, but it didn't look like it was going to spin.

“Here, give me the matches,” I said.

I went around behind it and crouched down and struck a match and held it up to the unlighted end. It looked like the other end had quit fizzing, so I struck another match and held it around, and then it blew, flashing up yellow, and I heard DeWitt laugh and then there was nothing but the smoke and the yellow flash in my eyes and I couldn't feel anything.

Then I was outside, running—hurrying across the yards in the darkness, holding my arm against my front and knowing and not believing it really happened like in a dream and I'd been lifted outside myself and could see myself as I ran and I knew it hadn't really happened and that soon I'd be let back down again and everything would be like it was before, and then I saw it was a mistake to think that way, and when I reached the edge of my driveway I could begin to
feel my arm again and was very afraid: it was like the whole underside of it was moving—like gills—trying to breathe.

And I quit after that. There was no more fooling with bombs and chemicals for me. I figured I was doing good getting out with what I got: a fried arm.

Not that it wasn't nothing, though. It was bad enough. Bad enough to go to the hospital for, and bad enough so I had to keep going back and forth to the doctor to have him look at it and everything, and change the bandage.

They put a big one on at the hospital. It went all around my fist and down my arm more than halfway to my elbow, and by the time they was done with wrapping all the gauze around it looked like I was wearing a big white boxing glove with a long sleeve.

The kids at school got a bang out of it. The first day I walked in with it they all came up and crowded around me wanting to know what happened and how it happened and all that, and even the teacher herself was interested. In fact, after the bell rang and everybody got in their seats, she had me get up in front of the room and tell the whole class all about it. It wasn't bad, actually, standing up there in front of the whole room telling everybody all about it, with all of them sitting there in their seats listening real close to everything I had to say—it wasn't bad at all. My arm didn't hurt me at all any more, and after I got to thinking about it, what with the whole school it seemed like taking an interest in it (it got so that the whole day I couldn't even walk between my classes without somebody coming up and asking me about it) I started to figure that maybe the whole thing might have been worth it after all.
All I really got was a scar out of it. A light, tan, color scar (a surface scar, the doctor called it) that ran along the top of my thumb and down under my wrist a couple of inches: the doctor said it would go away, eventually. It did too. After awhile it just faded right into the skin. You never could have told there was anything there.

And I quit after that. Like I said: there was no more fooling with bombs and chemicals for me. I promised my parents I’d quit and I quit. I figured my luck was out.

Sanders and DeWitt kept on with it, though. They didn't quit till after Sanders' accident. He'd been down in his basement making some new kinds of torpedoes when one of them blew up on him. It happened on a Saturday afternoon while I was away at my music lesson, and my mother said afterwards it was a good thing too because otherwise I would have been right down there with him. I wouldn't have though. I might have been down there, but I wouldn't have been anywhere near close enough for anything to happen.

When I got home from the lesson Sanders' older sister Susan was standing out in front of their house with Mrs. Redding, an old neighbor lady who lived on the other side of them. Susan was still crying pretty bad by the time I got there. All she kept saying, over and over again, was Hen was hurt, Hen was hurt, and then something about Bill Holbrook being there and just then taking off to try and find Nate. Finally Mrs. Redding got her to go on back in the house with her, and then I went around back and sat down on the porch.

Holbrook must have found him all right, because I wasn't sitting there more than a minute or two when I heard Nate turn in and come roaring up the driveway to the back and he had Hack Willard with him. They both got out of the car and walked by me there on the
porch without saying anything or even looking at me and went on in the house and shut the door. A minute or two later I could hear their heavy footsteps going down the stairs to the basement.

Susan had said something about all them being upstairs when they heard the explosion. She said something about a piece of copper tubing too. I wonder how she knew about that? That was what he was making the new ones out of: long pieces of copper tubing that Nate stole from him at work. He’d cut down the long pieces to about six or eight inches and then flatten one end and then pour in the powder and then shake down the powder real good but gentle and then flatten shut the other end. They’d be a lot better than the 30.06 shell casings he’d been using: bigger—they’d be a lot bigger: a new dimension he said over them and the wads of tin foil he started out using. That was his word: ‘dimension’: a New Dimension. The only thing was, though, you had to be careful shaking down the powder: you had to make sure there wasn’t none left near the end where you flattened it with the hammer.

Nate came out on the porch again. He had with him a folded sheet of newspaper, holding it out level. He stopped for a minute and looked over at me, like it was the first time he noticed I was there.

“Want to see something?” he said, smiling, but not smiling really.

“What?”

He started to come over and show me what he had on the newspaper.

“I don't want to see it,” I said.

He looked at me close, and then smiled again—that same thin, tight smile of his that wasn't really a smile at all—and then he stepped off the porch and went over and put the newspaper in the garbage can. Pretty soon Hack Willard came out the back door again, wiping his
mouth with a handkerchief, and then both of them got in the car and took off. I guess they was going to the hospital.

Me and DeWitt went up to see him a couple of days later. My mother said she thought it would be nice if I took him up something, so I bought him a book I thought he'd like called *Prehistoric Mammals of the Earth*. At first I didn't think too much of the idea of getting him a present. I don't know, I just felt sort of funny about it. But after I saw that DeWitt had one for him too, I was glad I did. DeWitt's was one of those miniature chess-checker boards that have their own leather case and everything, and holes in the middle of the squares and small colored pegs for men.

Going up the back stairs of the hospital DeWitt slipped and cracked his shin on the corner of one of the steps, and he yelled out a “Oweeee, Goddamn!” so loud that I thought everybody in the building would be down there, and when he fell he let loose of his present for Sanders and it rolled all the way down the steps to the next landing and when it hit you could hear the pegs inside of it rattle.

DeWitt picked himself up, swearing and rubbing his shin, went back down and got the present, and then me and him went on up to Sanders' floor. Sanders’ room number was 427. DeWitt had it written on a piece of paper his old lady gave him. It was around the first corner as you came out the stairway, and then down the hall about halfway, on the left hand side.

There seemed to be a lot of people around. Nurses mainly, and a few old guys in their bathrobes, walking up and down the hall. Most of the doors to the rooms were open. Inside you could see people standing around the beds, looking out at us sometimes when we walked by, and in a lot of the rooms, sitting on a stand up above the beds, there
was a television on. The whole place smelled like medicine, but after you was there awhile you didn't notice it as much.

Sanders' mother was there in the room when we came in. Sanders himself looked pretty good. They had his bed wound up so he could lay there and talk to us all right without having to strain his neck looking at us. There was another sick guy in the room with him, but they had a curtain pulled around his bed so we couldn't see him. He must have had company too, though, because all the while we was there we could hear voices coming from the other side of the curtain.

Me and DeWitt didn't stay too long. Just long enough to give him the presents and talk for awhile, and ask him how long he thought it would be before he'd be able to come home again. It didn't seem to bother him too much to talk about it. In fact, he seemed in pretty good spirits. One time he even said he felt pretty good about it. He said to his mother that he thought he could feel more inside the bandage than he could the day before. She didn't say nothing though. She just sort of looked away, and tried to change the subject. They had him on the operating table more than three hours. I guess it wasn't till a day or so after we visited him—when the doctor came in to change the bandage for the first time—that he saw for sure how many fingers he lost.

He was in the hospital twenty-one days. By the time he got home Nate and Mr. Sanders had most of the stuff down in his lab either boxed up or thrown away; and I guess it was Sanders himself who finally took down the pictures of the rocket that he had on his bedroom wall.
Let me make it clear from the very start that it was Elsie, not I, who decided that Gonzago must die. On those cold autumn nights when she let me visit her bed, Elsie chased the dog from the house, mainly because she couldn’t stomach the animal’s crude pantomime of our twice-monthly romps. It stared at us while we made love, panting to the irregular rhythm of the bedsprings, swabbing its own genitalia with a dripping, lolling tongue of magnificent reach and precision, growling and gnashing its teeth whenever I clutched the sides of the mattress and unleashed my ridiculous yowls of rapture into the pillow. Sensing a conspiracy, Elsie locked the door and confided that the Great Dane was only playing the part of a voyeur. Its real intention was to carefully observe everything that went on in the house while its master was away on business and then to reenact it all for him upon his return.

I patiently listened to my darling’s fanciful theory and wondered, not without a little self-pity, how the simple perversions of a dirty old dog and the delusions of a half-mad woman, whose bookshelves were crammed with paperbacks on astrology and ESP and self-hypnosis, could continually thwart my modest ambitions—love and frustration, the sad little ritual of a middle-aged man. By then, of course, I’d come to accept the fact that when enormous sums of money were at stake paranoia became an almost palpable thing, as real as a shivering sentinel standing guard outside the door, waiting night and day for signs of a possible invasion.

In the yard, just below the bedroom window, Gonzago began to bark.
“Listen to that damned animal,” Elsie wailed. “He’s laughing at us.”

Despite my protestations, she sat up in bed and pulled the sheets over the surgically altered breasts that she received as an anniversary gift from--or for?--her husband and the warm treasure trove between her legs that I lovingly called Graymalkin. A positively criminal act, concealing those things from me. Elsie’s purpose on this earth was to remain forever naked. Nudity suited her, she was born for it. Sometimes it amazed me that she was the mother of a teenaged son, heir apparent to a vast fortune.

With a heavy sigh I tramped across the room, bare-assed, dong dangling, and opened the window where I watched Gonzago sniffing around the garden and scratching at the columbines and pansies that still grew late into the season.

“They share this really weird form of telepathic communication,” Elsie whispered, her voice colored by panic. There was a small gap in her teeth that made her look like the Wife of Bath--saucy, licentious, calculating. Soft indigo notes whistled from her lips, the lovely aria of a woman, still gorgeous at forty, afraid of being found out. “They each know what the other is thinking. I’m not exactly sure how it works but it’s horrifying. Gonzago gives me these dirty looks. And now Richard knows what’s going on, I’m sure of it.”

Though I had my doubts about what Richard knew, I was certain of one thing: Gonzago’s telepathic powers did not work on Elsie, otherwise the dumb dog would have had the good sense to dash into the woods behind the house, never to return. Maybe like Richard (indeed, like many males in general), Gonzago couldn’t understand the meaning of the heavy crepuscular clouds rising from the long dormant volcano that was a woman’s soul, and certainly Elsie’s soul was more
inscrutable than most; in fact, it was the only modest thing about her, veiled from top to bottom like an ashen-faced novitiate in a nunnery--solemn, unsullied, impenetrable.

“I have an idea,” she said distantly, as though in a trance. “We’ll poison it. No one ever performs an autopsy on a dog.” She assumed the pose of a Buddhist monk deep in meditation, hands resting on her knees, palms facing up so the energy of the cosmos could filter through her fingertips and seep into the claustrophobic confines of her brain where her thoughts blinked and flickered in an interminable Dark Age. I knew her capacities, her limitations. Love had not deluded me that much.

“Why don’t you take Gonzago to the vet?” I suggested, reaching for her pack of cigarettes on the nightstand, grateful as always for her insatiable oral fixation. “Have him put to sleep. Easy. Done and over with.”

“No, the dog must be buried in the backyard.”

“Then ask the vet for the remains after the job is done.”

“You don’t know anything about animals, do you? The vet won’t hand over the carcass because of a city ordinance. Fascist government bureaucrats, they won’t let taxpayers bury pets on their own property.”

“Cremation then. Give Richard a lovely urn when he gets back from Denmark. He can keep his beloved Gonzago in the study, on the mantel below the portrait of his son.”

“Cremation? Never. He’d consider it a sacrilege. I’ve seen elaborate funeral services for animals. Pet cemeteries, coffins, headstones, string quartets playing a dirge. He’ll even round up a priest to consecrate the grave. It’s what Richard would want for his best friend.”
I bristled at the phrase. “Best friend…Well, I hardly think a priest would consent to that sort of thing.”

“You’re wrong. Richard knows people. He has a lot of pull in this town. He financed a new chapel at the Jesuit high school.”

Now Elsie was being deliberately cruel.

“Yes, of course,” I murmured. “Our alma mater.”

As boys, Richard and I sat through many lectures together, fire and brimstone exhortations on Cain and Abel, but while I succeeded at my studies, Richard proved a complete mediocrity, always struggling to earn a C average. To his credit, it didn’t take him long to overcome the greatest obstacle to an American’s sense of accomplishment--how to start off with absolutely nothing and quickly amass an enviable fortune. By the time he was thirty, Richard owned a sprawling estate in Avon with a pool and grotto, a tennis court and putting green, stables with horses that he showed at state fairs, impeccably groomed Danish Warmbloods that whinnied and kicked at my approach as if sniffing out my betrayal; in short, a fiefdom ruled by a petty dictator whose throne could so very easily be usurped. But Richard was a wily fellow. With an almost uncanny prescience, he seemed to know what his rival’s next move would be and devised clever strategies to outmaneuver him.

As his sole confidante, I had nothing to fear. At forty Richard was still very much a child, a sensualist, blinded by the disease of egotism. He never suspected a thing, the fool, and every time he bragged about his peccadilloes in Europe I relayed the information to Elsie, felt it was my duty to do so. I was the best man at their wedding after all, and over the years Elsie offered occasional rewards for my loyalty to her.

Now she sauntered to the window where I stood smoking, sank to her knees, kissed my chest, my ever-expanding stomach.
“Darling, just think of it. With Gonzago dead and cold in the ground we’ll finally know tranquility, spiritual release. La petite mort.”

I shuddered. “Oh, you beautiful woman…”

Eager to pour forth an abundance of my love and adoration, I found myself clutching the back of her head, wrapping her long hair between my fingers. The finish was inevitable, I grunted with the effort of it, but Gonzago, instinctively sensing another opportunity to make mischief, lifted his mud-encrusted snout from the withered violets and howled at us with mad laughter. In a rage Elsie bit down hard, and as I writhed on the floor, squealing like misfortunate Abelard de-cocked for his grievous sins, I resolved through my tears to take a swift and murderous course of action.

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If Richard had one weakness it was that in the process of amassing his great wealth he had grown tired of his wife. While in Denmark or Paris, or wherever he claimed to be conducting his shady business transactions as the manufacturer and international distributor of fine leather goods under the name “de Vere Enterprises” (gloves embroidered with gemstones were his specialty), Richard frequented exclusive bordellos and other high dollar dens of iniquity recommended by the smarmy black market racketeers who offered him a choice of freshly deloused and desperate nymphets imported from developing countries.

Neglected and alone, Elsie turned to her husband’s best friend, a pathetic pencil pusher who for fifty weeks out of the year toiled away in a small windowless office near the airport, writing operating manuals for commercial vacuum cleaners made in China, a man who in his
spare time read and re-read the Bard and Nabokov and who was so utterly incapable of meeting single ladies--why? Because he was just a little too soft in the middle, “portly” some might say, “slovenly” even--that he allowed himself to be seduced by the wrong woman.

Quite frankly, I couldn’t understand what Elsie saw in me. Unlike her husband, I had neither the eye nor the income for shirts with French cuffs, silk ties from Hermes, handcrafted shoes from Milan. In addition to his fancy wardrobe, Richard had his nails manicured once a week and his teeth whitened twice a year. From the looks of it he also had his stiff curlcues and massive swoops of black hair sculpted by Rodin, a great pompadour as intimidating as the Gates of Hell. And because he devoted so much of his time to selfish pursuits, Richard never considered the feelings of others. He teased me endlessly about the coffee stains on my sleeves, the crumbs at the corners of my mouth. He even had the audacity to ask when I was going to slim down and join him on one of his excursions through the labyrinthine streets of some overseas red light district.

“Copenhagen is lovely this time of year. It’s not Amsterdam, of course, but it’s adequate. And the girls are certainly willing. They’re not very picky, no, but they do detest obesity.”

We sat in his study, two old friends, where we smoked cigars and sipped absinthe by the fire.

“Ah, now that’s wormwood,” Richard said, watching the firelight dance along the rim of his glass.

Above the mantle hung a portrait of his son, Laurence, a handsome boy, a bit thin for his age maybe, but otherwise well built, not too scrawny. As a full-time student at the university he rarely came home. Like his father, Laurence was a self-consumed madman, and his only true friend seemed to be Gonzago. Since he had no other family,
no uncles to offer him good counsel, I tried to caution the boy about the evils of modernity, the vulgarity of today’s entertainment. In time my hard work paid off. One day I found him wandering in the garden, wearing a black t-shirt with a leering skull and a pair of faded jeans that looked as though they’d been caught in a thresher. He confided that his ambition in life was to become a bass guitarist in a death metal band. It’s all I could do to keep from laughing in his face. He then went on to say how he’d been stealing money from his parents, using their credit cards to get cash advances to buy pills, dope, a new guitar made of rosewood illegally harvested from the rainforests of Brazil.

This information was too good to keep to myself, but I decided to keep silent for the time being.

Richard poured us each another glass of absinthe and said, “My boy was here for a visit last week. Pity. I was away on business. I haven’t seen Laurence in months. But he tells me that you were here. I spoke to him over the phone.”

“Mmmm, yes,” I said.

“The boy means well, but I think he’s something of a lost soul. He has no sense of direction, you know, and when I’m home all I do is worry about him. In Europe I’m able to concentrate on other pastimes.” Richard regarded me above the rim of his glass. His eyes, black as long stretches of infinite space, sucked in and destroyed light like a singularity. His soul was sheathed in barnacles. “My family has become a terrible distraction. Maybe it’s time I finally got rid of my starter wife. I can only hope someone will take her off my hands…”
Kevin P. Keating

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Before sending me out into the cold October night, Elsie consulted her dog-eared books of black magic and on a notepad in red ink scratched a cryptic formula: (CH3)3SiCN. After murmuring some mumbo jumbo over a glass vial that glimmered in the moonlight, she mixed the powder with a small silver spoon and then stared at me with as grave an expression as I’d ever seen from her.

“You know what to do, right?” Her voice trembled with anticipation. “A few drops will do the trick. The poison works quickly.”

That she kept poison on her nightstand didn’t surprise me much, and I dared not ask how she obtained it--beautiful women have their ways, I was content to leave it at that--but I was a little concerned for my own safety. What if, prior to a night of passion, she accidentally mistook the poison for perfume? Should my rapacious lips taste the deadly distilment dabbed behind her ears and between her breasts and around Graymalkin’s soft coat, I would be sent on a one-way trip to the undiscovered country.

She kissed me for luck and then, like Gonzago, shoved me out the door. As I padded across the vast lawn, my slippers sank slowly into a lumpy pile of shit. Dumped intentionally in a strategic spot on the cobblestone walkway! I cried out in revulsion and despair and then heard Gonzago’s unmistakable laughter, an abrupt bark that sounded like a man coughing into a closed fist. He must have been hiding behind one of the giant ghoul-faced topiaries that ringed the property like the gargoyles on the cornices of a great cathedral.

Sliding behind a tall maple I spied him tunneling into the heavy clay soil like some infernal gravedigger, not to uncover the bones of the luckless squirrels and rabbits he had brutally mangled then
buried with the jittery backward glances of an assassin but to uncover the million subtle odors locked away in the earth, the fleshy green leaves transformed over the years into a brown soup that sent up fingers of steam into the evening air, eons of carnage carefully concealed by the moribund bouquet of nature. I still could not comprehend the fact that one day I, too, would be part of that corrupt odor, my lingering stench the last trace of an existence that failed to leave a more lasting mark on the world. The worms would have at me, my flesh would melt and turn to mush, and ultimately my bloated carcass would make a fine meal for a slobbering beast like Gonzago. For this reason I wanted to be interred in the deepest catacombs of a medieval monastery where despite the anonymity of my jumbled bones there might at least be a small chance that my skull, polished smooth by the dripping limestone walls, would become a memento mori, a paperweight for the manuscripts of some literary genius who decided to smuggle it out of the tomb and place it on the edge of his desk.

Of course it was foolish of me to hesitate, to get caught up in daydreams. Gonzago sensed danger, and before I could lunge at him he pricked up his ears and dashed into the house. In my haste I must have carelessly left the door ajar. If the dumb beast raced upstairs and leapt into bed with Elsie…well, I didn’t want to think about the consequences, the terrible penalty I would pay. Celibacy for one month? Two? Panic-stricken, I scraped the ghastly crap from the bottom of my slippers and scuttled into the dark entranceway.

To my relief I found the dog in the study, panting before an arras that Richard commissioned many years ago as a wedding gift, an ostentatious tapestry depicting a sorceress with meaty shanks sitting before a cauldron high in a castle tower.
I also found on the floor next to the leather armchair a shiny new dog bowl. With a smile of triumph I removed the vial from my pocket and poured the poison—one, two, three drops, as instructed—and watched Gonzago eagerly lap it up like a king drinking from his favorite chalice. To celebrate my victory I went to the liquor cabinet and helped myself to a snifter of absinthe. With bottle in hand, I collapsed in the chair and gazed dreamily at the dog.

“That’s right,” I murmured. “Drink deep before you depart.”

How much time elapsed before Gonzago actually died I could not say, the animal made no sound at all, no strangled cries of torment, but at some point in the night, after I finished my third glass and chanced to look into the mirror across the room, I saw the dog sprawled across the rug, motionless, tongue hanging from the corner of its mouth, eyes bulging from its skull. In that alien silence devoid of the dog’s wicked laughter, I felt the absinthe cascade into the deep fissures of my brain.

“Dear Gonzago,” I choked. “I would never harm an animal, not intentionally at least.”

This was no exaggeration. As a boy I owned a one-eyed cat named Hecuba (my mother was a teacher of mythology), and when the cat died (tractor trailer, rush hour) I barricaded myself in the basement of our Victorian house near the Jesuit school and wept for hours among the stacks of moldering books and crates of neglected term papers. Maybe a good father-son chat would have straightened me out, given me some perspective on this minor tragedy, but Dad was no longer in
the picture, and Mother was so unnerved by my inconsolable blubbering that she insisted I receive professional help.

“Fifteen-year old boys shouldn’t cry when the cat dies,” she said. With her arms firmly crossed and foot drumming against the cold white hospital tiles, she seemed prepared to bully the doctor into diagnosing me with a whole slew of disorders. “He’s not homosexual, is he?” To my ears the question sounded like a rhetorical one.

The doctor, tugging nervously at the tip of his Vandyke beard and wanting to get rid of Mother as quickly as possible, said, “Perhaps he suffers from emotional dysregulation…as the result of low self-esteem?” The standard diagnosis for boys of that tender age, but Mother wasn’t satisfied. She wanted to hear the word “abnormal” and spent the better part of my emasculated pubescence shopping around for a doctor who was not too proud to use it.

Now, as I sat in the study, I turned to the portrait of young Laurence, gazed into his sensitive blue eyes and wondered how he would take the news of his best friend’s passing. There was a distinct possibility that when he got wind of the tragedy he would in his unbearable grief return home, possibly in the dead of night, to dig up the corpse and rock it back and forth in his arms. “Why?” he might whisper, trying to grasp the enormity of his loss. “Why? Why?”

And I would respond: “Yes, dear boy, why indeed?”

Because asking why—why this course of action and not some other—well, those were the kinds of questions boys of his breeding often asked, boys who clung to the understanding that one day they would come into money and possessions. How they abhorred change, these trust fund kids, resisted it, had no intention of ever facing life’s rampant dangers, and when life veered radically from the script they had so carefully plotted they were always stunned, offended, never
realizing that in this world nothing was permanent or predictable. Erosion took its toll on all things, revealing complex rows of strata and substrata below the mundane surface so that over the slow course of time the souls of these sheltered boys, petrified like fossils encased in layers of stone, were finally exposed, exhumed, put on display for all to see.

Change was inescapable, it united rich and poor alike, and Laurence, bowing before the majesty of death for the first time, would soon discover that only by practicing the subtle arts of self-deception--romance, family, friendship--could he hope to insulate himself from the mindless cosmic constant that transformed all things into unidentifiable heaps of dust and bones.

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Though I was not a superstitious man and had always made a friend of reason and logic, I decided that it was probably best to bury Gonzago before joining Elsie in her bed and sating myself on love. To let the dog rot in the open air seemed an invitation to allow its stupid slobbering spirit to haunt my dreams.

After dragging the mangy carcass across the yard and finding a spade in the tool shed, I went to work, digging a doghouse that would last Gonzago till doomsday. I chose a spot where the earth was soft and warm and where the worms looked particularly eager to do their work. I rolled the corpse into the pit and then filled in the hole. Exhausted and dizzy with drink, I tapped down the mound of dirt and staggered back to the house.

Before heading upstairs I paused in the study, took one last look around. The bottle of absinthe and the vial of poison were still on
the table beside the armchair, and suddenly a peculiar feeling came over me. The branches of the elms and maples clattered against the windowpane, the moon drifted behind a cloud, the wind whispered its secrets and then went silent, in short the globe continued to spin in its usual manner, but I had the unmistakable sensation that I was not, and perhaps had never been, the protagonist of this story but was merely a supporting player in a much larger drama, one who appeared briefly on stage to recite a few modest lines before retreating to the wings to wait for the spectacular, dazzling, grisly finish.

From the top of the stairs Elsie called my name.

―Claude, darling, is everything alright?‖

―Yes, everything is fine, my sweet.‖

―Well, hurry up. I’m lonely.‖

―Yes, coming.‖

In her voice I detected something more than mere impatience. I heard an unspoken command to fulfill her darkest desire. Oh, but I was drunk and my heart was racing. Without giving it a moment’s thought I poured three drops of poison into the bottle of absinthe, not enough to do any harm really, just enough to coarse through the sinister alleys of Richard’s soul and make him a little light-headed when he returned home from his business trip.

Quietly, almost reverentially, I put the bottle in its proper place in the liquor cabinet, then in a voice solemn and clear spoke the little Latin that I could still recall from my days as a schoolboy with the Jesuits: “Consummatum est.”
Bleached Bones

For Marta Becket

“The first partner I hired had marvelous thighs,” Madam told me when I interviewed her in Reverie, Idaho. “God I wanted to touch those muscles. So I choreographed a duet. At the end, I kneeled and put my face on his thighs. Very sexual, yes?


Nikolai sat next to her. Every muscle in his body bulged, particularly his biceps and his thighs. Previous to dancing, Nikolai had been a visual artist. He painted the sets for Madam’s ballets, but didn’t stop with sets. There was a lot of work to be done in Madam’s Opera House.

Reverie, the ghost town Madam bought in southern Idaho, was far from La Scala, or any major opera house, but it suited her. The town had a standing theatre with a false front. That was all Madam needed. A place to perform, to dance. To start, Madam painted the walls of the theatre to look like people were sitting in the audience. That way she always had someone to watch her perform. Later, after Nikolai arrived and stayed, he re-painted the people on the walls and added marble pillars and green plants, a lush Italian environment very different from the western edge of the American Rockies.

If I hadn’t seen tour buses pulled up next to what looked like an abandoned theatre, I would have kept driving. The flat valley looked like a modernist stage set. The few trees in the ghost town were limbs of the sky—bleached bones—and the earth its graveyard. A
playbill advertising the show had been tacked on the side of the theatre. I stopped and took the last seat at the front of the house.

The old theatre had planked wooden floors and hard wooden seats that creaked. A fan turned overhead. The lights dimmed. The breathing in the theatre was heavy. Madam walked onto the stage. Step, pause. Step, pause. The back leg drawn into coupé position, a half diamond from the knee to the ankle kissing the standing leg ankle, after each forward motion. The walk showed pizzazz, if not power; pathos, if not presence.

Her leading man—Nikolai—leapt from the wings, landed and hopped on one leg, the other brought into a coupé, the ankle of one leg kissing the ankle of the other. It seemed a company trait, this celebration of coupés. Robust, with long flowing hair, Nikolai reached his hand forward, gesturing to his leading lady, who stood motionless downstage center. She stood so still it looked as if she were a wax statue.

“I visited Madame Tussauds,” she told me later, after the Q&A had ended. “I studied those sculptures. Good for the dance, you know. Capture attention with silence, with no motion. Supposed to be a dancer, a great ballerina, but I do opposite. Leave much to imagination. Good to remember in life, yes? All impressed then. Think you can do much more than you can. Good to remember for aging, yes?”

Under the lights, her skin had an oily sheen, the stage makeup too thick for a theatre that sat fifty people. Still, Madam was arresting in the way a vulture standing beside road kill captures the eye. One wants to look because there is something antediluvian about the scene, which contains collective origins but is little understood; however, one
is embarrassed to look, too, as if the bird should simply be left alone to do her business.

I didn’t realize Madam’s wisdom of the theatre until we began our interviews, because the first night I watched her perform, judgment shrouded my vision. The playbill on the outside wall of the Reverie Opera House said she would present a mime scene from the ballet *Giselle*. It was the moment Giselle falls in love with Loys, a mystery peasant in her village, who is really Albrecht, a philandering count.

Standing in the center of the stage, Madam took the male danseur Albrecht’s arm. Albrecht was played by Nikolai as were all male roles or character parts of lesser significance. Madam raised her back leg into a low arabesque. She wore a Romantic tutu with a boned corset. The tutu was calf-length instead of the disc-like geometric style favored by later eras, but her thin legs were visible through the tulle. Her knee was bent in such a way that suggested there was no way the leg could ever straighten. There was no arc to the line of the movement, no sense that the leg could reach any higher.

I put both palms over my mouth. Crumpled into my seat. Tears rolled down my face. It wasn’t the least bit funny. Madam was suffering. I looked at my watch. It was a full ten minutes before Madam let go of Albrecht’s arm, and then, what followed, incredibly, was another full ten minutes of balance. By the end, when Madam lowered her leg and walked off stage, I was no longer laughing. I learned later that balance *sur la pointe* was the only technical feat she could still do in the dance. Each moment she enacted from the great ballets involved balance, as if there were no other interpretation possible. Madam didn’t ponder that when her namesake Giselle went mad the last possible physical action she would realistically do would
be to balance. This was ballet in a ghost town—there was no reason involved, only fantasy; no reality, only ghosts.

Madam had never been a principal ballerina in any company. After buying the ghost town, located between Atomic City and Craters of the Moon National Monument, she formed her own company. She was the centerpiece—a fake, silk flower arrangement of one. Madam brought in her own audiences. Did her own marketing. The abandoned town had been named Reverie by its founder, a failed hard-rock miner who thought owning a town would be better than owning silver, but the meaning was useful for marketing ballet in a ghost town. Reverie made the proposition of art in the middle of nowhere seem palpable rather than scary.

Before Madam arranged for her audiences, she used recordings of applause and practiced her bows to the empty theatre. Later, it didn’t matter that audiences came by tour bus to see her—the freak attraction. She had run a regular schedule of performing to no audience at all.

“Creates discipline,” she explained to me.

The tour buses had been no small feat to arrange, but she tagged onto a group out of Boise who specialized in trips for retired engineers to the Experimental Breeder Reactor-1 near Atomic City and for geologists to Craters of the Moon near Arco. Gradually, Madam built a reputation as a cultural destination in her own right.

Some of the men on the tour buses thought they were coming to see a ghost town brothel; however, Madam insisted on using her appropriated title rather than her given name Giselle. In the world of the fading ballerina, Madam is a term of respect. Besides, Giselle suggested a woman who had gone mad, and this ballerina had an audience to clap after her performances. But a ballerina needs an
audience and a partner. So she hired a partner. Several in succession. She married the last for two reasons: Nikolai was thirty years her junior, and he loved her.

Madam no longer performed full-length works when I met her, so I saw reenactments of single ideas from many great ballets: *Coppélia, La Bayadère, Swan Lake, Sleeping Beauty, Giselle.* Madam’s artistry was formed of mimetic moments. When a hand gestured gently to her leading man and back to her heart, it meant, “Yes, I do love you.” When she inclined her head to the right diagonal and lifted her eyes to God, the mimed motion meant, “Yes, our lives are not our own unless we make them so.”

After each performance, Nikolai gave her the same red silk rose bouquet. Madam pulled one rose from the bunch and gave it to Nikolai. There was sentiment in the gesture, but if Nikolai forgot to clean the flowers before the show a little puff of dust would rise.

“‘I’m a sylph survivor,’” Madam liked to say in the audience during the Q&A after her shows. She was petite. Her toes were all the same length; this explained why she could still balance so well. Pointe shoes helped, but her square toes made the difference. She waited to say her best line until the very end, right when audience members clustered around her to request an autograph before boarding their tour buses. “‘I’m seventy,’” she yelled, with force. Her final moment. There was always a full round of applause; after all, audiences were mostly retirees. Many had bought RVs and left their grown children to fend for themselves. They admired a woman who defied gravity and raised a fist at beauty.

Madam grew up an only child as Giselle James in Bakersfield, California. Mr. James, her father, ran the local hardware store. Mrs. James, her mother, cooked dinner every night. As a young girl in
Russia, Mrs. James—Anastasia—had dreamed of the ballet. By all accounts, Madam should have trained circus poodles, but the Ballets Russes came to town before the Ringling brothers did. When the Ballets Russes came to Bakersfield with Alexandra Danilova as the headliner, Anastasia took her young daughter to see Giselle. “Because of your name, you will be unlucky with men, which is luck itself,” her mother said, “but you will live the life of the dance.”

Her mother turned out to be wrong, though, about being unlucky with men. Nikolai loved Madam. He did anything for her, and she never had to lift a finger or raise her voice. Many of the female retirees in her audience marveled at the aging ballerina and her younger husband. “We should be so lucky,” the women said to each other on the tour bus ride back to Boise.

Giselle had danced, briefly, in the corps of the Nevada Ballet—a Las Vegas based company featuring dancers with breasts. But she wanted her own lights, not the lights of the strip, so she found an old abandoned theatre in a ghost town, bought the whole deal with the inheritance from her father’s hardware store, and set up shop. Her company motto: Credit given where credit due. She listed herself in the program under all possible categories, reserving her given name Giselle for the category of prima ballerina.

Like Madam, I had been thoroughly trained as a ballet dancer; but unlike her, I had never danced in any company, so I had no claim to artistic fame. I had tried to replace my first and only dream of becoming a prima ballerina with a series of men, but if one puts dreams into the heart of another, one finds only emptiness. I proved myself as unlucky with men as I had been with the dance. To recover from yet another of my unlucky choices, a man in form but a rattlesnake in reality, I took to the road in my light blue VW Squareback and drove
around the American West. There are two ways to confront a rattlesnake: 1.) by killing it; or, 2.) by leaving it alone.

At the places I wanted to see, I got out of the car, pulled my hair into a ponytail, lathered on sunscreen: the Grand Canyon, Bryce Canyon, Zion, Joshua tree, Death Valley. At other places, I sat in the car and cried: Four Corners, Monument Valley, and Thousand Palms. I’d seen the volcanic moonscape of Craters of the Moon and never wanted to leave the area. And then I found Reverie.

Madam knew I had been at risk of being pulled forever into the bitter dance of the wilis. She never asked my name. Like all true people of the theatre, she called me “Darling.” She knew I wanted to remain anonymous, a mere cog in the wheel of the stage. She performed three times a week and in exchange for a bed, I became her usher. The uniform, which made me look like a bell hop, fit me.

“When one lives with ghosts, one learns that cracking up is relative. Look at the town here. Its emptiness opens to you, to your heart. What will you do with it?” Madam asked.

Like Madam, her ghost town held me in its dusty embrace. Reverie was a place to shut out the rest of the known world and to let memories desiccate under the harsh sun. I hung out my heart in the desert air. Madam let me stay with her until I could resist the pull of revenge. Over a few months, we recorded her musings on the theatre.

For our interviews, Giselle’s samovar took center stage in the middle of her green room. The heavily-lined, green velour drapes were pulled against the arid southern Idaho heat. “Sometimes,” she said, “I use the samovar as prop.” Giselle took on a Russian accent, asserting it was inherited, but it sounded more fake than real. She used it to effect. When she didn’t pay attention, her accent faltered. She became, simply, nothing special. An aging American with no family, not yet
shut away in a care center, sitting quietly, her dyed black hair in a chignon, with her young husband, in a room with a samovar.

“You know, of course,” Madam said to me, “that Albrecht lies to Giselle about his identity. Pretends to be Loys, a peasant, instead of a nobleman. So when she discovers that he is unavailable to her, she becomes mad. My mother thought I would be unlucky with men because of this part.”

“Then why did she name you Giselle?” I asked.

“Because for some people, Darling, the name is more important than the story behind the name.” Madam could be very matter-of-fact.

“It turned out not to be a curse. You have Nikolai,” I said.

“And you will have your prince. I see it in the tea leaves.”

She leaned over, and Nikolai kissed her cheek. Madam flushed a little, and waved her hand at me. “What ballet celebrates the great idea of love?”

“All of them,” I said.

“No. All celebrate the failed dream. Even Sleeping Beauty,” said Madam.

“I disagree,” said Nikolai. He rarely spoke. “Man gets beauty.”

Madam gestured to her leading man Nikolai. Her knuckles were swollen, and her fingers were crooked.

“Life is harsh,” said Madam, “even to dreamers.”
Happy

He said, “My biggest fantasy is to have sex in a bathtub full of red jell-o. What’s yours?”

I began to contemplate the logistics of a bathtub full of red jell-o as I quickly put a forkful of the dried out, overcooked home fries I had been pushing around my plate, into my mouth. Chewing slowly, I looked over at him. He was waiting for my answer. I chewed a bit, pointed at my mouth, chewed some more, washed it down with a sip of orange juice, followed by a sip of coffee, and then a sip of water. I looked up at him again and he said:

“Well?”

“How can I possibly beat that? I’ll have to get back to you on that one.”

He gave me a look as if I had just confirmed his suspicion that I, in fact, had no imagination, or he thought I was a chicken. I thought I heard him mumble, “Chicken,” under his breath, but his lips clearly didn’t move. He changed the subject.

I realized I must eat more slowly; he had been doing all of the talking and had hardly touched his omelet. But that was OK with me because it gave me time to think. He began to talk about his brother. I didn’t know his brother and therefore had no true point of reference, but as far as I could tell he worshiped his brother. I tried to chew my food thirty-five times per forkful. It was impossible.

And I wondered, how much red jell-o would it take to fill a bathtub? If a single box makes six servings, that’s about six cups. If there are two cups in a pint, that’s three pints, or 1 1/2 quarts. There’s 4 quarts in a gallon so 3 boxes makes a gallon plus. But how many gallons does it take to fill a bathtub? Ten? Twenty? And Jeff has got to
be 6’3” or 6’4”. He couldn’t possibly fit in an average bathtub comfortably by himself, much less comfortably with someone else, with or without the jell-o. And, how much less jell-o would you need with two full-grown adults in the tub? What is the displacement in gallons of jell-o? And how full is a full bathtub anyway?

I looked past Jeff out the window at all the smiling, presumably happy people walking by, and wondered if they were rejoicing in the warmth of the first nice day when they could wear their shorts or sleeveless dresses and summer shoes again. Or had all those smiling people finally realized that the American dream of guaranteed permanent happiness is a myth? That one doesn’t need to buy all that stuff to be happy, and thus they were able to enjoy themselves? Or conversely, maybe they had made that final purchase that would make them happy for a week or two, until they realized what it was they were actually lacking, what they still needed to buy. But for now, they could smile and be happy.

It seemed strange: unlike my blindingly white body, they were all slightly tan. How could that be? Today the park would be towel to towel with men, working on their own tans, much to the chagrin of the dog walkers, and the discomfort of the dogs themselves. Yet, at least half of those guys would be as glowingly white as I am. Maybe the tan skin of those smiling passers-by was the clue. They were tourists.

Jeff changed the subject to his mother, “You know she’s not as bad as Julia makes her out to be.”

“She’s not?” I replied.

“No, she just hates Julia. To be honest, my mother has hated all my girlfriends. I’m pretty sure she hates all women in general. She wants to be the center of attention all the time, at all costs, and I think she feels particularly threatened by Julia. After all, Julia is intelligent,
tall and beautiful. It was fine until we moved back into the area and my mother regained access to me, and my life. So, you’ve heard the stories?”

“A couple.”

“Did Julia tell you about the Christmas mom didn’t invite her to dinner?”

I had heard the story on multiple occasions, but Jeff wanted to talk. I answered, “No.” And he began. I returned to the jell-o. Wouldn’t it be too cold? After all you have to put all that ice in it to make it congeal. I can’t stand the cold and it doesn’t help most men I know. Who wants solid, cafeteria style jell-o anyway? Maybe that warm, almost congealed, just after a few ice cubes state would be best. Red, warm, liquid not-yet-jell-o sounded blissful. But would it fulfill the fantasy? Was the tactile, wet, slippery wiggle, part of the equation? Would the jell-o form around you as it cooled?

Do they make industrial sized packages of jell-o? Can you get, I guess it would be called institutionally sized servings? Does Costco sell monster boxes of jell-o? Cafeterias have to get it somewhere — what if it were government jell-o? Could the average citizen purchase it?

Does it have to be cherry flavored red jell-o, or does color outweigh taste? Would plain, dyed red with food coloring, do? Fairly large boxes of plain are available. And would food colored jell-o turn your body red? What a disaster. If so, could you get it off in time for work? And, what would you do with all that jell-o afterwards? You can’t just stand up and take a shower to wash the red residue away. You have to get rid of the bathtub full of jell-o first. What you would really need is a separate tub and shower.
Do female mud wrestlers ever wrestle in jell-o? I think I saw an ad for jell-o wrestling in the personals somewhere. Could Jeff just go and rent a jell-o wrestler’s pit. Or maybe he could climb in the jell-o pit with one of the female professional wrestlers. But I guess he would end up getting his ass kicked. Besides, there’s no actual sex in the public spectacle of wrestling. Maybe he’d do OK. Jeff doesn’t seem like the kind who would make the mistake of groping the girls, but instead would take the wrestling seriously.

The birds were chirping and the butterflies were out chasing each other around the empty lot turned community garden across the street and to the left of Jeff’s head. To the right of his head stood a very busy ice cream shop. Droves of people, mostly mothers with children, or teenage girls, entered, waited for their double scoop cones, then slowly turned to leave, wrapped up in the ice cream experience. The ice cream man was very cute and I could tell the girls took an extra long time deciding, and sampled several flavors before they made their final decisions. The store owner was a wise individual; his hiring skill had definitely helped the business.

Jeff was pretty cute himself. He could definitely work at the ice cream shop with his clean shaven, boyish charm. Not your stereotypical postgraduate degree in computers type o’ guy, and funny too. Not just a punster. But I guess stereotypes are just that. I took a sip of my coffee.

Jeff isn’t a homeowner, he rents. His bathtub couldn’t possibly be large enough for him, or let’s say it would be a happy accident if Jeff could fit into his own bathtub. Maybe some kind of special, extra large collapsible camp tub would do the trick. That way you wouldn’t have to worry about where to put the jell-o, how to dispose of it afterwards. You could just leave it out in the wilderness.
for the deer and the ants. But what if an army of hungry, jell-o loving ants fell upon the bathtub full of jell-o as the act occurred. What an unpleasant distraction — attacked by ants.

Maybe he could rent a remote cabin with full amenities. Jeff had to have the money; he was a programmer. He could do it, rent a house near Shasta with a stove, a large bathtub, and separate shower, in the woods so he could empty the tub by the bucketful when he was done. But how long would it take to make all that jell-o? You’d have to have a humungous pot.

How about the bathtub stain, could he ever get it out? Maybe a kiddie pool would solve the stain problem, but a kiddie pool would never work for Jeff. It would not be the least bit comfortable. It’s not deep enough, the sides are too low for total submersion, they bend, and it’s not nearly wide enough. Jeff would definitely have a less than optimum jell-o experience even without the ants.

“So, what do you think?” he said, “Will you go with me to this potluck? My mother will be there, but it will be OK. I promise.” I looked up at his innocent eyes. He must have noticed the lines of concentration on my face. “Have you been listening to me? You seem so distracted today. Did you hear a word I said?”

“You want me to meet your mother?” I offered.

“It’s not like that. It’s Julia’s idea, really, you know she’s out of town. It’s a ruse to take the pressure off her. You come and pretend you’re with me. It makes my mom happy because you’re not Julia. There’s a good chance she’ll even be civil to you. And it takes the heat off of Julia for a bit because mom thinks she’s out of the picture.”

I began to wonder if you could drown in jell-o, or I guess it would be asphyxiation. Maybe a short bathtub would be a better, healthier model. Keep your head above the proverbial water.
“You seem distracted today,” Jeff repeated. “Tell me what it is? Is something wrong?”

“Well, I was just wondering, do you prefer plain red jell-o or jell-o one-two-three?”

“What?”

“You know that stuff with three layers, the bottom one being plain jell-o, the top whip cream-like stuff, and the middle something in between.”

Jeff said, “I never thought about the details of it silly, it’s just a fantasy I have.” He leaned across the table and squeezed my hand. “Now, won’t you help me out and go to this dinner with me tonight?”

A lone teenage girl left the ice cream shop with a single scoop cone. As soon as she got out the door she took one lick and the whole scoop of ice cream fell off the cone. She stared at the ground, greatly distraught. A large German Shepherd-like dog, led by a small woman, saw the opportunity, and against the will of the woman on the other end of the leash, slurped up the fallen ice cream. The girl’s despair turned into a smile, and then she cleared her face. No evidence of the smile remained as she turned and walked back into the shop holding her empty cone in the air. The counter guy smiled, his scoop already in his hand.
The Girl with No Name

Living in a small coastal town, there is a girl whose name I can no longer remember, and this girl, this young lovely thing, she thought that if she were born again, she would be a storm over the open waters and she would name herself Helen after the woman who had launched a thousand ships as she herself would send a thousand ships scattering away from her, rushing over the rising waves, scurrying over crests to some harbor and shoreline. She would indeed become as memorable to the people who live along those waters and she would be known and remembered as Helen of ’49, or some other such year, Helen who reshaped the land on which they lived, Helen who reshaped the lives that they led.

But this girl is no Helen, no myth, and she stands with her toes digging into the wet sand as the tide rolls up and floods her ankles. And maybe it is now a Friday, but who can be sure as the names of the days wash away from us, and this girl, this little brown-eyed girl who is young and more beautiful than she could ever know, this girl who should have been a Helen thinks that perhaps it would be best to live under the sea. Her small bare toes step forward and clench for a moment as if expecting to turn to tail and fish scales, and when they don’t, she dives in with her little brown eyes wide open.

In the water, she swims like a young fish in a school, darting and turning with the current, her eyes only slightly stinging from the salt and she looks and waits to find the others who will join her in her swimming and darting and turning. They will come from somewhere along the ocean floor, ready to invite her home, back to their city of people who have decided that they can no longer live above the ever-
rising sea level, unless of course this home, this Atlantis of theirs, has already risen and we have already forgotten that story as well.
The sudden autumn shower danced across the rickety bridge spanning Town Creek at half past five in the afternoon, transforming the dirt yard of the small frame house into a quagmire. The droplets beat against the wooden side of the house with such ferocity that splotches of the peeling gray paint were flaked away.

The sun which had returned within the hour was now slipping away to the west, leaving Kate Stiving’s rotund bulk in the shadows where she sat on the square slab stoop. Her rainbow colored sack dress sang out in sharp contrast to her rattan chair’s dinginess.

Kate dozed. Behind her in the sparsely furnished house could be heard the prattle of her five daughters as they prepared for another Saturday night. Kate dozed, and as she dozed, she smiled for she enjoyed eavesdropping on their conversations.

The boards of the bridge rat-a-tatted. Kate opened her eyes dreamily. A sleek black Cadillac was snaking its way down the damp asphalt.

The car stopped across from Kate’s stoop. The man in the El Dorado lighted a cigarette, and in the flash and burn of the silver lighter, Kate glimpsed his profile. He wore a black tux and a large ring. He had a pencil thin moustache.

The lighter snapped shut, leaving only a glowing ember that bobbed like a firefly in the car’s interior.

Kate’s youngest daughter Angel pushed open the screen door. “Is THAT my man, Momma”?

Kate closed her eyes and wrinkled her nose. “No. Tell Regina her date is waiting.

Tell her to hurry.”
“Yes, Momma.”

Moments later Victoria Regina, the oldest of Kate’s kids, stood on the stoop for her mother’s inspection. “How do I look? This dress is new. Does it make me look fat?

Will he like it?”

Kate eyed her sternly. “Go. He seems to be an important man.”

“Good night, Momma.”

Regina tiptoed carefully across the mud-pitted yard. Her black satin evening dress foretold the coming darkness; the silver sequins on her purse starred the artificial night of her outline. She navigated the slushy yard, crossing to the Cadillac, where she was swallowed up.

Kate dozed. My Frank was so excited, she remembered, at the news that we were having a child. He was so thrilled when she was born. “She is a queen,” he laughed, “so she will have a queen’s name. Victoria Regina. Queen Victoria.”

Yes, Kate mused in her dreaming, times had been good back then. She had been a pre-med student at Vanderbilt, had so wanted a career in medicine, but she had given up all her aspirations for the handsome Frank Worthington the Fourth.

Soon the whump-whump-whump of the bridge announced another young man, a knight who rode a white Fairlane Ford. He turned on the interior light when he stopped so that Kate could see him clearly. He was handsome in his madras sports jacket.

“Is THAT my man, Momma?” Angel asked, peeping from behind the screen door.

“No, he has come for Kayanna. See if Kayanna is ready.”

“Yes, Momma.”

“What is she wearing? Is she wearing the yellow dress or the new red one?”
“The yellow one. She said the red one was wrinkled.”

The night was warm; Kate’s eyes were heavy. She let her thoughts travel to the past again. “Princess Kayanna,” Frank had exclaimed. “We have a queen and a princess.

I have you Kate and two beautiful daughters. How could life be any better?”

Kate had merely shrugged. She was about to say that life could, indeed, be no better, for this was heaven on earth. But Frank had answered his own question. “I wish a son,” he said; his eyes bunched, his body trembled. “A son to blend with our two daughters.

A son to inherit the throne of my little kingdom.”

SHHHHBOOOOM. SHOD DA DA DA SHHHBOOM! Jerked Kate back to the present. A brand spanking new candy apple red 57 Chevy convertible announced itself. The rain had stopped; the sky had cleared. A lover’s moon was up.

Kate could discern three teenage boys in the car. One, of course, was the driver; the other two sat in the back seat. All three were clad alike, from their greasy ducktails to their red letter sweaters which sported large white R’s.

The driver sounded the horn impatiently. Angel ran onto the stoop. The screen door banged behind her. “MY man, Momma?”

“No. They are chums of Fairy Belle, from her school. Tell her to hurry. I don’t like their noisy radio.”

Fairy Belle fluttered from the house. “Well, Momma?” She twirled about gracefully. She wore oxford shoes and bobby socks, a black poodle skirt, and a pink blouse. She had a black scarf tied loosely about her neck. Her hair was pulled back into a pony tail.
Kate barely looked at her. “Go on. You are fine. The noise from the car is making my head ache.”

“Later, alligator.”

Kate poked at the dying embers of her memory. When Fairy Belle was born, Frank had flipped his head to one side. “We have a queen, a princess, and a fairy. Enough girls already. It’s time we had a boy. He will be Frank William Worthington the Fifth, but I will call him Billy.”

A year and a half later Billy was born, but Billy, too, was a girl. Frank had laughed scornfully. “Call her Billy. Call her anything you like; but I’m warning you, Katherine Rose Worthington….I want a boy to carry my name.”

Billy’s man had arrived in a great rattling, sputtering, shaking mass—a beat up farm truck. He wasn’t much better than his plow horse, Kate thought, when he stepped from the vehicle and leaned against its rusty door. He had an unlit cigarette stuck behind one ear, and he was chewing on a toothpick.

He was illuminated by the street lamp. “Oh, Mother Kate,” he called, “why don’t you go out with me tonight? Beat the hell outta sitting on your porch like a scarecrow.”

Kate didn’t answer him. “Angel? Angel?” she spoke over her shoulder.

“Yes, Momma.”

“Is Billy ready?”

“Yes, Momma.”

“Tell her her man is waiting.”

When Billy presented herself to the hayseed, he gawked and whistled. “Now, ain’t you something!” Billy wore Levi’s, a white faux angora sweater, and ballerina shoes.
Yes, Kate thought; Billy, you ARE something. I had enough love for all of you AND for Frank. I loved him with a love that is more than a love as the poet would say.

I loved Frank and I wanted to please him. We had no more children for three years. I was afraid to; but Frank kept asking for a boy. I did what I thought was best.

Kate dozed, but she was soon awakened by a familiar whistling. She opened her eyes and smiled. Randy Brown, burdened with a large grocery sack, was coming down the street. He’s always whistling, Kate mused, and broadened her smile.

Randy was Angel’s age. He was in her homeroom at the junior high. After school and on Saturdays he worked as a “sacker and carry out” boy at the local Piggly Wiggly.

Randy came right upon the stoop. “Look, Mrs. Worthington, I have potato chips, Cokes, pig skins, and Boston cream pies.”

“You have a feast,” Kate laughed.

Angel appeared in the doorway. “Let me have the sack. Did you bring any Fritos? They’re my favorite.”

Randy dug into the sack and held aloft the prize. “A large package, Angel. Just for YOU.”

Angel took the sack inside and returned. She grasped one side of the chair, while Randy took the other. Slowly, carefully, they pulled the chair inside. The chair squeaked and creaked, and its tiny wheels wobbled, but it made the trip from stoop to the kitchen without incident.

“Now, Mrs. Worthington, what do we do first? Do we play Rook, or do we eat?”

“Whatever you young folks desire,” Kate laughed.
“Well, then, I have come to be company to you and Angel.” He took the worn pack of cards from a table near Kate’s chair and handed them to the girl. “Here, Angel, shuffle the cards. We will play Rook after I get us all some drinks.”

Kate allowed herself one final trip back to the past. Thirteen years ago Angel had been born. My gallant Frank, she thought, turned out to be like all men…after whatever nurtures their egos. My handsome Frank, who had never laid a hand on me in our marriage, kicked me in my spine as I lay in bed, my back to him. I couldn’t look him in the eye. It was not my fault, and I think he understood.

“Another damn girl!” he had screamed in a sudden fit of rage. “Can’t you have nothing else?”

He kicked me, and he went away. He left his girls with me, and my girl, my Angel…I will keep MY ANGEL from the streets.

“Mrs. Worthington,” Randy asked, “shall I pour your Coke in a glass or will you drink it from the bottle?”
Felonies for which I was Never Apprehended: Chapter Twenty-Seven.

Two years after my desperate dreydl-spinning mother shacked up with Sid the Psycho Coke Fiend, the latest campaign into her lifelong ambition of chiseling away my soul, she took me away for an insurance sales convention. This spoon-fed mother of mine worked as an assistant to my grandfather her whole life and never even kind of sold a policy. She got the perks though: agent’s salary, company car, free health, and now, San Francisco. Knowing Sid and me would kill each other, she preached the trip as a bonding experience. Sid called it, “Girl time.” We were in the kitchen. My mom faced the open freezer, reading the back of a Stouffers box. Sid did the finger slice across his neck. I mock sniffled. He lunged. I ran. Mom soothed. Upshot: Josh comes with me.

We cabbed it to the Hyatt and the bellman must have shat his slacks when he saw my old girl’s nine suitcases. She tipped him five when he unloaded us in the Penthouse. He gave a martyred snort and bailed. The bathroom rivaled my room at home in size, with a Jacuzzi, three sinks, and free shampoo in a basket with little glass marbles inside. My mom slammed some depression meds and said let’s go to the Wharf. On the trolley I derailed her as the twat she was for not letting me bring my skateboard. The hills were a dream. She barfed out some dreck about safety and said she stood by her decision. No arguments. No litigation. Chin high and nose north. Standing by her decision.

Welcome to my world.
The Wharf blew. We wolfed down some pasty Italian food and spent most of the night at some auction where a bunch of douche bags peddled crap like ten-watt radios the size of trunks, jewelry boxes designed as mini-armoires, and tickets to see Cosby the next evening. Cosby: not crap. I elbowed my mom until she bid. Some Mexican family kept raising us by fifty cents. We shooed them out of the race at a hundred bucks. Our tickets now. Next up for bid: a garbage-can-sized bottle of Jack Daniels. I elbowed the sack of Maniechitzwitz and she gave me the meat face, which is when she elongates her jaw to indicate her disapproval. My dream remains that one day her face will freeze in this state forever.

Box of lox slept till noon while I watched Spectravision. She took another two hours to get dressed and we hit the streets for some shopping. Macys. Nieman Marcus. Lord and Taylor. I felt like a shower. The after-the-rape kind. My first childhood memory: a Miami mall with my old girl and giving her a swift kick in the shins from my stroller for exposing me to this same garbage. When we were heading out with all the shopping bags, which I refused to help carry, for moral reasons, that Helen Reddy-fawning Fig Newton of a mother of mine stopped and guffawed at a bomber jacket in the children’s section. She made me try it on and smiled like she was having her picture taken. I said it didn’t totally suck and saw the price tag. I showed her. She squinched up her lips like she did every time she needed to do some accounting and told me it would sting a bit, but she wanted me to have it.

We waited curbside for a taxi and I checked myself out in a store window. The jacket looked tragically hot on me. Then I saw the store: Skateboard Galaxy. I tugged at my mom’s sleeve.
“Josh. I just bought you a four-hundred-dollar jacket.”

“Fuck the jacket,” I said.

She gave me the Meat Face. She gave me the Sad Face. I gave her the finger and ran off. After an hour, I flagged down a cab and asked if he knew the Embarcadero Center, which lay adjacent to the Hyatt. When I recognized the area, I waited until the next stoplight, and then hightailed it back in the other direction. The driver didn’t give chase or anything. I found the Hyatt. I went upstairs. I stood alone on the balcony. I looked down at the Embarcadero Center. The roof constituted four panels of glass, each the size of half a football field. I couldn’t see anyone inside. A long pathway separated the Embarcadero from the Hyatt. This path led to a fountain. Five skaters started from a distance and ollied onto the edge of the fountain, pulled rail slides and truck grinds or even cleared it.

I tried spitting, but it cascaded and evaporated. I went to the bathroom. I dumped the shampoos and grabbed the basket. I dropped a glass marble. It landed in front of a skater waiting his turn. I did it again. I did it a third time. A skater looked up. I ducked. I waited, winged one, and pegged a shoulder. I ducked. I waited. I looked down. One of them had a beard and pointed at me. The others had their boards over their heads. I hurled one at the Beard. They ran for cover under the Embarcadero awning. I put my arm into the next throw. I watched it sail. I watched it sink. My throat tightened. The marble landed. The glass panel shattered, broke, and descended. I ducked and listened to the gasps and glass settling. I hid in the closet and shut my eyes, imagining the Beard breaking down the door, a mother covering a baby.
carriage as shards fell on them like icicles. I imagined the cops explaining to my mom how I’d murdered hundreds with a marble.

An hour later. No cops. I peeked over the edge of the balcony. Some guy with a broom glared at me. I ducked. I sat on the bed. My mom came in with shopping bags. She wore the meat face. She said, “Put your jacket on, it’s time for Cosby.”

Front row seats at an outdoor arena. Cosby must have rocked, because the crowd yucked it up, but scenes of juvenile hall and a crime scene back at the Hyatt was the death of comedy. Then, Cosby stared at me. His eyes watered. Cosby pointed.

“Little boy,” he said, “How old are you?”

“Ten,” I whispered, gasped, heaved, and choked.

“Ten years old,” Cosby went all bug-eyed. I looked at my mom, smiling at me, ear to ear.

“You’ve got a look, son, like you get away with everything. He does, doesn’t he?” he asked my mom, “Little boy gets away with the behavior that bad boys do,” he shouted, squirmed, and convulsed. My mom nodded. My mom applauded. Cosby segued into stories of Ennis and his own parenting ordeals.

At the Hyatt, my mom called her forty-something yenta reject friends and guffawed at how the good doctor singled me out, but never mentioned anything he’d even said. I took the remaining marbles out of the floor space in the closet. I went out to the balcony. The Embarcadero Center sat in darkness with its three glass panels exposed.
I tossed a marble into the fifty-yard gap. Then another. I tossed all but one. I heard Cosby. Not Cosby the clown, not Cliff Huxtable, but a darker, more cunning Cosby.

“You can do anything you want, son. No one will ever get you.”

I exhaled and winged the last marble onto another glass panel. It bounced a few times then rolled to a stop.
Chloe was not impressed. Yes, the wedding reception was lavish. But isn’t lavish just another word for overdone, garish? The whole Bollywood theme, for example – the silk pavilions, the oversized poufs and pillows, the sari-attired waitresses passing around chicken sate and naan crostini with goat cheese and garam masala -- wasn’t that a bit much? Didn’t it seem gaudily inappropriate in these difficult economic times? Even – quite frankly – un-American? It wasn’t like Chloe’s cousin Justin or his bride were Indian, after all. They were as plain-Jane vanilla white as Chloe, and the fact that Justin’s father had outsourced his suddenly bigger than Jesus software company’s call center to Mumbai did not make them any less so.

Plus, it was ridiculously hot. Yes, Chloe could see that the backyard of Justin’s parents’ new Pasadena estate was the size of a continent. Yes, she could see that it fit three hundred people nicely. But did her aunt and uncle really need to prove that by denying people air conditioning? Didn’t everyone else see what she saw: sweaty men holding drinks to their foreheads at the two open bars? Old ladies fanning themselves at the sit-down lunch tables? And was she the only one who felt sorry for the red-faced band members wilting in their tuxedos or the four-foot ice sculpture of the elephant-headed god Ganesh that was melting into a dripping tuber?

No. Chloe was not impressed at all.

Still, when Justin’s sister Morgan asked her if she was having a good time, Chloe said, “Absolutely.” Chloe did not want to appear ungrateful. After all, her aunt and uncle did pay her airfare from Dallas.

“It is spectacular, isn’t it?” said Morgan, and then the girl began to cry.
“Are you ok?” asked Chloe. She wrapped her arm around her cousin and led her to an empty table. Commandeering a saffron-colored cloth napkin for a handkerchief, Morgan wiped large, sloppy tears from her eyes and unwittingly smeared mascara across her cheeks. She was a freckly young thing -- no more than seventeen -- and she had a round face and wiry red hair that rebelled against every attempt to straighten it into a sleek, polished curtain. Kinky wisps orbited her head like flaming comets and bobbed frenetically with every sniffle. She issued a long, forlorn sigh and twisted in her tightly wrapped, sky blue sari, the habitation of which – in Chloe’s opinion – did not do her cousin much justice. “It’s Nothing. Nothing,” answered Morgan. “It’s just…this whole wedding has me so depressed.”

Chloe leaned forward in her chair. She was a few years older than her cousin and was undoubtedly the prettier of the two. She had a button nose and luminous hair that shone like the miniscule cultured pearls she wore round her slender neck. Alighting her pale fingers on Morgan’s knee, she whispered, “I know just how you feel.”

Morgan looked up. “You think that no one will ever love you?”

Chloe had to process this for a moment. “What are you talking about?”

A suddenly rapturous, wild-eyed Morgan said, “I’m talking about love. What if no one ever loves me? What if I’m alone my whole life?” Morgan brushed her cheek against Chloe’s ear and whispered in a raw, embarrassed voice, “Don’t tell anyone, but I’ve never even been kissed.”

Chloe bit down on her lip. She did not want to belittle or dismiss the feelings of her cousin, but, really, this was Morgan’s big drama? Morgan, who got a fricking Saab for her sixteenth birthday and
who just last night revealed her anguish over having to choose between Stanford and Yale. Morgan, who got every fricking thing she ever wanted was now fricking having a nervous breakdown because she’d never had a fricking kiss? Her voice cool, Chloe said, “Morgan, you’re still pretty young.”

“But I’m so fat.” Morgan straightened her back, and it became clear that what until this moment might have passed for a slouch-induced shadow was indeed a bit of a pudge in the stomach. It was not a large pudge. Not much more than the cream cheese on a bagel. But it was something.

“No. You’re not.”

“I am,” sighed Morgan. She bent her chin to her chest and wiped her eyes once more. Her voice trembling as it climbed higher up the treble scale, she added, “I’m fat. I’m obese. How could anyone love someone so gargantuan? You’d have to be a masochist. And no one is that masochistic.”

“Oh, sweetie,” replied the luminous Chloe, her voice even cooler. “Lots of guys are that masochistic. It’s not like they’re all so great. Beggars can’t be choosers.”

Morgan did her own bit of mental processing, and when the dig of the insult finally hit her, she rushed from the table, her fingers covering her face and her legs shifting unsteadily in the tightly-wrapped sari.

Chloe felt a pang of guilt as she watched her cousin disappear into the crowd. It had been a mean thing to say. Chloe knew that. She knew that she should regret it too, but she didn’t. It was like some hidden beast had been unleashed inside her, and it felt good to let it run wild. Still, she didn’t want her snide comment to get back to Morgan’s parents. That would be awkward. A battle brewed within Chloe: To
go after Morgan or to not go after Morgan… In the end, Chloe decided that some consideration had to be paid to her feet, which were trapped in a new pair of wickedly narrow aquamarine five-inch heels and already felt like they were being squeezed through a cookie press. Would it really be fair to Chloe’s suffering toes to tramp around after someone as fragile as a potato chip? Probably Morgan just needed some time to herself anyway.

Chloe picked up her cocktail purse, an impish silver bag with sequins and a jeweled clasp that had cost her two weeks pay – even with her employee discount – and removed her compact. As she sat confirming the soft glow of her dusty pink lips and the still-elegant line of mascara that curled up her elongated lashes, a stranger sat down beside her.

Two years working the Neiman Marcus tie counter had taught Chloe a thing or two about sizing people up. A lot of new clerks judged potential customers by their clothes, but Chloe knew better. She'd known men in threadbare Levis and mud-encased shitkickers who picked out a dozen two-hundred dollars ties like they were a bunch of crullers, and she’d seen men in Italian silk suits and Ferragamo shoes hem and haw before pulling out a Discover card to buy the one thing on sale. Flashy, nouveau riche attire or estates did not make a man, teeth did. Men of consequence, men rooted in generations of authority and wealth, took care of their teeth. This man did not. This man’s teeth were stained and crooked. Plus, he was old. Really old. Older than her father. And ugly. He was short, and he had a withered onion sort of head, all yellow with a few root-looking white hairs sticking out of his chin. He had no neck to speak of. His onion head sat on a little squash body, narrow at the top and bulbous at the bottom. Jabbing a thick, jaundiced fingernail into her arm, he said, “I know who you are.”
Chloe slid her compact back in her bag. She crinkled her nose in an artfully charming yet dubious frown. “I don’t think so.” “You’re blonde now. And much younger. But, otherwise, you look exactly the same.”

She really didn’t want to deal with this right now, and she resented that someone would bring this crazy old man to a wedding and then just let him stroll around bothering nice people. She stood up and put on her best retail airs, a sort of fifth-position stance combined with an inquiring tilt of the head and a throaty purr. “Sir, I was just going to the bar. May I bring you something?”

“Good Lord, that was almost convincing! You haven’t changed a bit.” He gave Chloe’s knee a slap as he chuckled and shook his head in delight. “Yes, sirree, I saw you, and I said to myself, ‘Well, what do you know, the devils back in town.’”

Chloe’s eyes narrowed and she pushed out her plump pink lips. She was trying to decide if she should put the old codger in his place or just leave.

“It must be hard,” said the old man.

“Hard?”

“Being you.”

“Being me?” The words escaped her lips with an exasperated huff.

“You must never get a break. Always working like you do.” She straightened her head and squeezed tight on her purse. “I think I’m gonna get me that drink. And you’re right old man. I’m not getting you anything.”

“That’s ok, dearie,” he said dismissing her with a wave.

“You’re just being true to yourself. But it must feel like thankless work sometime. It must be hard.”
With a roll of the neck, Chloe spat, “Whatever,” and walked away. Determined, purposeful strides that sank into the grass every time her heel met the ground and gave her a slightly unbalanced appearance carried her toward one of the crowded drink pavilions, where she ordered a champagne cocktail only to be carded and given a Diet Coke instead. A good-looking young man – tall with dark hair and honest-to-God dimples on either side of his wide smile – approached her. *Oh, great,* she thought. *Now he’s going to ask me to dance, and it’s like one-hundred-and-fricking-ninety degrees outside. Well, I don’t care how cute he is; I’m not dancing with anybody.*

But the good-looking young man did not ask Chloe to dance. He begged her pardon as he slid next to her at the bar and ordered two frozen strawberry daiquiris, one of which he brought directly to Morgan, who stood about thirty feet away, directly behind a table occupied by two wrinkled grandmother types, one fat, one thin. Chloe watched Morgan blink back tears as she took a sip of the drink and smile up at the dimpled boy. Two other boys and two other girls huddled round them. Every few seconds one of the friends would pat Morgan’s elbow or squeeze her shoulder.

*Great. Now she’s telling everyone that I’m some horrible bitch,* thought Chloe. *Piss and shit. Should’ve stayed home. But no. I had to listen to Princess Morgan, with her “Come, we’ll have so much fun. Come, there’ll be so many cute guys. Come, I’m so rich that my parents are sending me to drama camp in fricking Paris next summer. Well, call bullshit on that. This is the lamest wedding ever.* Chloe strained her ears to try and catch a piece of Morgan and her friends’ conversation, but the din of music and the whirl of the blender made it impossible to eavesdrop. She decided to get closer.
With daring aplomb, she strode over to the table with the two elderly women, both of whom, she was happy to see, possessed full sets of serviceable, if not altogether air tight, teeth.

Chloe had not intended to talk to the women, but then one of them -- the thinner one, said, “My, you’re a pretty girl.”

Well, Chloe did not want to be rude. She said, “Thank you, ma’am,” and she strained her ears to catch Morgan’s voice.

“He’s the groom,‖ asked the other woman, the fatter one.

“Groom,” purred Chloe graciously. “We’re cousins.” She pulled her chair an inch or two closer to Morgan.

“And what’s a pretty girl like you doing all alone? Don’t you have a boyfriend?” said the first woman.

That was a whole other can of worms, the sorry truth of which Chloe did not feel obliged to share with these strangers. “I am focusing on my professional development right now,” she said. She glanced at Morgan. Morgan stood alone with the dimpled boy – the other friends had vanished – and he was guiding the girl’s head upward with one curved knuckle as he smiled down at her mascara-stained face. He kissed her, gently, just barely pulling on her lower lip.

Something snapped inside Chloe -- toward the back of her throat, near her larynx -- something tight and constrictive snapped. It was the wild beast. She could almost taste its dark, bilious skin as it crawled up her throat. An ugly, hate-filled voice came out of her.

Looking back at the women seated next to her, she said, “But I’ll tell you, I think this is about the worst wedding reception ever. The band’s god-awful. The food stinks. The bartenders are all holier than thou. The bridesmaids look like cows. And it’s hot. Africa hot. Mars hot. Center of the earth hot. Why anyone would have an outdoor wedding
in this over-watered desert of a town is beyond me. I hope the happy couple chokes on the wedding cake.”

The two elderly women eyeballed each other with tight, lipstick-stained grins and narrow, gleaming eyes. Then, as one, they glanced back at Chloe and leaned toward her, the wrinkled folds of their necks stretching like Slinkies to better reach her with their whispers. “You don’t know the half of it,” said the thinner woman, her soft voice rasping deliriously with heartfelt scorn. “All this foreign stuff upsets our acid reflux. And, frankly, in this heat, it seems criminal to serve chicken. Why, the risk of salmonella must be enormous.”

“And this heat! We’re just about to drop dead,” said the fatter woman, her voice just as raspy and bitter as her friend’s. “Did you know that the bride’s parents offered to rent The Valley Hunt Club? We could have had air conditioning!”

“Not that our grandniece -- that would be the bride we bought a five-hundred-dollar place setting for -- cares. We came all the way from Montecito, and she hasn’t even blinked at us today. Doubt she’ll even write a thank you note.”

Chloe stretched out her own neck to meet theirs. “I had to rent a car. No one even offered to pick me up at the airport.”

The elderly women’s eyes bulged, and they shook their heads in appalled disapproval.

“And a minute ago,” added Chloe leaning back and pushing her chair out until it was almost directly in front of Morgan, “some crazy old coot called me the devil. I didn’t come here to be insulted.”

Chloe’s newfound friends looked at each other and burst into laughter.

“What?” said Chloe.
The thinner one pointed behind her. “You mean that man there?”

Chloe twisted round in her chair. There he stood. The crazy old man. His ugly onion head just as ugly; his little squash body just as squasy. He was at the bar talking to the bartender. “That’s the one,” she said. “Creepy old weirdo.”

The fatter woman shook her head and said, “Dear, dear. Don’t worry about him. He sat here for twenty minutes and called us ‘vicious mosquitoes.’ Said it ‘must be hard being us, biting and diving at people all day long.’”

Chloe twisted back round in her seat, and just in that moment, that very split second, she saw Morgan smiling down at her. The dimpled boy’s arm covered Morgan’s shoulder, and they looked like they were about to head off somewhere dark and quiet. Morgan’s eyes shown proud and round her mouth hid the twisted beginnings of a smug, triumphant grin.

Chloe’s fingernails dug into her purse. “Hell, I don’t know if it’s hard being you,” she said, “but these days it’s fricking hard being me.” Then, as Morgan stepped past, Chloe stuck out her foot and tripped her.
The Inimitable Doctor Lawson

I thought I had finally rid myself of Cindy Lawson, for better or for worse, when, in a most aberrant set of behaviors, she began dating someone who lived in the same town as we do. In this mobile day and age, a “girlfriend” or “boyfriend” is defined as anyone you have sexual relations with who, and this is the all important clause, lives more than fifty miles away. Cindy, whose sexual appetites were varied and avaricious by most standards, had fulfilled this omnipresent yet unstated clause with more panache than most. During the rather brief time that I knew her, there was a professor in London, a D.J. in New York, and a painter in Providence. She seemed to pride herself, in fact, on the range of occupations and social classes that she dated. The selection was so liberal as to approach insanity at times, especially when it included professional drifters, bloodletters, and fratboys. Anyway, the upshot of Cindy’s incestuous—and perhaps that was the appeal, too finally commit a form of incest after creating a sufficiently heterogamous precedent—romantic choice was that she quit calling me. Sure, it bruised my ego a bit at first, but I guess my unconscious knew that it was only a matter of time before another Miami mystery, dressed in clothes that were one-half neon and the other half nude, would descend out of the sky like an angelic paratrooper.

So, imagine my surprise when I received a phone call from Cindy who, after my inability to give a suitable answer to her question, “What are you doing?,” invited me to go run errands with her. I wish I could develop more agility with the “real-time” lingo produced by the omnipresence of mobile technologies. If I could, it would undoubtedly save me from many an unnecessary afternoon trip, since I have a
complete inability to say no to anyone and have only achieved anything in life due to the fact that few people have taken notice of me in the first place. For those who haven’t read my unpublished Time magazine article, written at the close of the last century, the logic of mobile phones is as follows. Those who first owned one, recognizing the powers of their newfound mobility, always called others when “doing” something, that is, moving about. The natural result of this medium, it seems, is to ask what people are doing at the very moment as opposed to the older questions such as “How are you doing,” “How have you been,” or “What have you been up to today.” Now here’s the catch. Those people who receive these calls at motion-challenged phones are usually disqualified from answering in any interesting way. For, unless you have the improvisational capabilities of a Victorian medium or a free-styling rap artist, you are not “doing” unless you are “moving.”

Going to Target is more interesting than signing the Magna Carta.

A few minutes later, Cindy drove by in her little green Acura (she insists on doing all the driving), dressed in a purple-based outfit that, as usual, was more alluring than her completely nude body, and proceeded to take me on a tour that expatriates of Miami repeated several times a week. Let me clarify when it comes to her outfit. I can say as little about it as I can about most everything she owns. The traditional categories one might begin with—skirt, blouse, dress, pants, etc.—are completely inadequate. Cindy does not so much dress herself as use a variety of sheer materials to wrap herself in a manner that ultimately resembles the early work of Frank Gehry, your friendly neighborhood “cheapskate architect.” Of course, in the case of both Cindy and Frank Gehry, looks can be deceiving. To paraphrase Dolly Parton, “It costs a lot of money to look that cheap.” But, while the droves of people who call Gehry the “architect of the new millennium”
do a disservice to this millennium of which they speak, I do have some justification for stating that Cindy’s naked body pales in comparison to the sexual masterpiece of any given outfit she creates. For I have seen her naked, even if only in mediated fashion. In her house, there is an old videotape of Cindy buried amongst a box of sexual novelties (unopened multiple-pronged dildos and vibrators, Betty Page postcards, neckties with lesbian scenes on the reverse side, pornographic comic books from France, etc.) that is neither hidden nor on display. For three silent minutes, Cindy sits—completely naked except for a copper-colored wig—atop a four-foot high pile of socks, knitting yet another. I’ve watched the tape many times while dog-sitting for her, feeling a certain intimacy with Cindy that I’ve never felt with anyone else. But it’s the sort of intimacy Levi-Strauss had when living with South American cannibals. You see everything there is to see, but it is obtuse and mesmerizing, like a planet spinning on its axis. Her mesmerizing quality, which seemed to extend beyond my own responses to the phenomenological world at large, had got me in trouble on many occasions. Although Cindy almost never called me on weekends (when I was usually watching her dog and her videotape as she visited boyfriends), she almost invariably did so whenever my significant other happened to be in town. This almost always resulted in a bad row because a long time ago my girlfriend had tried to call Cindy about student union business, only to be informed that Cindy couldn’t talk right then because she had to go to aerobics. In female law, I suppose, such an event can lead to permanent enmity. It didn’t help that aerobics garb was probably the least provocative thing Cindy ever wore.

Whenever one of these telephonic convergences occurred, I would carefully go over the week’s conversations, only to find that I
had at no time mentioned the imminent arrival of my girlfriend. It was, if not a hard case of cause and effect, at least a strange attractor of some kind.

One weekend, a perfectly “innocent” phone message from Cindy resulted in me being thrown out of my own apartment. Drunk and exhausted, I knew there would not be a moment’s rest if I tried to reenter. So, I stumbled off to the nice part of town, hoping that I could sleep on a bench there and not get mugged. I woke up about an hour later to a duck nibbling on my toe and the scarlet burning of ant bites all over my extremities. After a brief St. Vitus dance, I stumbled through the darkness and arrived, somewhat to my surprise, across the street from Cindy’s house. The house is pink, of course, and quite shocking to see when suddenly revealed by a motion-detecting lamp. Luckily, her bedroom is armed with blackout shades, those icons of insomnia and illicit activity, which render the motion detector useless to anyone but those choosing to enter. If I was really quiet, I could make it inside and fall asleep on her couch without waking her.

I stood in front of the door, staring at an Ouija board propped up in a window across the street, waiting for the motion light to turn off. Finally, I stuck my key in the lock, thinking about the delicious sleep that awaited me on the custom-made couch that, although undoubtedly covered with all sorts of slick magazines, zebra-skinned dream journals, and spiked costume jewelry, was most likely completely free of insects. The idea was that, walking into her living room the next morning and seeing me asleep on her couch, Cindy would know that this was not a nightly occurrence but instead the last refuge of a most desperate situation. She wouldn’t scream, wouldn’t call the police, wouldn’t even ask me why I was there. Instead, she would feel some sort of vague sympathy for a situation she understood
as little as most observers understood her every waking move. At best, she would simply ignore my presence and go on about her day. At worst, she would forget her addiction to restaurants (over a year’s period, I must have spent half my life savings on “lunch”—and we always went Dutch) and try to cook me some breakfast.

That was assuming I made it to the custom-made couch, which I never did, not understanding the acoustics of old pink houses and the complementary auditory powers of bored canines with full bladders. If a 1970s newspaper headline seriously asked, in one of the earliest scientiffic investigations of spirituality and recording technology, “Does Rufus Hold the Key to the Voices of the Dead?,” I should have known that Cindy’s dog Ruby would rise from the dead at the sound of my key. It was as if, rather than turning the tumblers in Cindy’s lock, I was winding up the nails of Ruby, the wood-floor ballerina. If Cindy were to wake up to this, and she probably already had, the “desperate situation” explanation would be delivered verbally and would appear all the more a subterfuge for designs more perverted than probably even Cindy wanted to toy with.

So I turned around and decided to try my luck elsewhere, even though there was nowhere else, when the door swung open and Ruby rushed to greet me. Cindy was standing there in gigantic pajamas (and why should they be sexy, if there was no one to see her that night?), whiskey bottle in hand. She had figured that anyone awake at that hour would need a drink. She couldn’t have been more wrong. At first the conversation was innocent enough, about her latest battery of STD tests, the desire to tattoo an orchid on the side of her left breast. My evening reminded her of the time she was making out with her extremely drunk boyfriend in a pretty strait-laced Irish pub. She had to stop to use the bathroom, and when she returned her boyfriend was
making out with a German woman who had been leaning near by. Cindy was surprised that she was completely fine with it. She even enjoyed the perversity of taking turns with this other woman as a small crowd began first to gawk, and then to cheer.

But as the whiskey flowed, the conversation, or at least my take on it, began to get weird. She began to explain to me how the Bermuda Triangle wasn’t in Bermuda at all, that Bermuda is only one of the corners, while Miami is another. She couldn’t remember the third corner, but this fact explained why she always felt somewhat lost, drifting through life like a jellyfish until, by electrical attraction, enveloping another soul in her aura. She usually stayed with that person until an almost convulsionary panic attack would short-circuit everything, leaving her drifting once again. She had always wanted to legally change her last name to Valentine, to reflect the importance that romance held in her life. Rather than attempt to feign interest in such an absurd idea, I returned to the jellyfish metaphor, remarking how it sounded like a combination of Sylvia Plath and Jacques Derrida’s theories of dissemination. Well, Cindy immediately turned from Lilith Fair mystic to the Bill O’Reilly of philosophy. She told me that Derrida’s theories weren’t worth the paper they were written on, because he doesn’t believe, like Descartes who had been unfairly pooped on, that there has to be a point of truth, which is God, for there to be any reality at all. She was “constantly amazed” at how people seemed so awestruck by Derrida, since he was after all nothing more than the payment of a debt that existentialism owed to linguistics. And what was up with a Jew being so fascinated with Heidegger and his thoughts on “historical authenticity”? That was the very fuel of totalitarianism, a mechanical monster through the jaws of which Being
itself is destroyed, a machine that literally inscribes the law on the bodies of men who lie in its mouth and are processed for the sake of the “natural” order of the colony.

Although I remember many of the catch phrases now, if not their linkages, at the time all I could do was picture Derrida being kicked out of his own apartment, left to drift the streets like a jellyfish. Cindy didn’t seem to notice as I rose, or at least I didn’t hear any protests. I walked out the door and back onto the humid streets, vaguely in the direction of my home. But I was tired, and when a couple of blocks later I came to a couch someone had thrown out on the sidewalk, as if to please De Chirico himself, I stripped down to my boxers and stretched out upon it. Some time later—it was still dark—I woke up to the silent flashing of ambulance and police sirens. They asked me who the president of the United States was. I replied that it was G. W. Bush but that it should have been Al Gore. They drove me, clothes in lap, to the apartment on my driver’s license.

I thought about these things as I rode with Cindy, whenever we stopped talking so that she could listen to a couple of “measures” of House music that would give Charles Mingus a bad case of vertigo. After an afternoon of drinking coffees whose prices could be their own stimulant, looking at palm pilots that could prevent the sort of episodes I was thinking about, and paying overdue bills to gender ambiguous secretaries, we ended up at the University library. While Cindy photocopied articles deconstructing the false binaries between Sacher Masoch and the Marquis de Sade, I sat down to finish The Stranger, whose main character had interested me of late because he seemed so easygoing, so nonjudgmental. While old men were complaining about their dogs and pimps were asking him when it was proper to take revenge on their women, he demanded nothing of the world other than
it should produce events, subtle changes in the social atmosphere, for him to ponder.

But soon, by decree of the University Library, a sleepiness crept up on me. When I got up to clear my head with the water fountain, I ran into Cindy’s friend Jaimie, who has been calling me by the wrong name ever since she misheard it at a loud party. I thought it was sort of funny because Cindy had been telling me all afternoon that I should change my name, that it was hard to take me seriously with a name like mine. But then I was overcome by a sudden fear of the inevitable, that Jaimie would wander over into the sadomasochistic section of the library and say that she had just bumped into me. Then Cindy would tell her my real name, immediately after which Jaimie would seek me out to make a personal apology about having gotten my name wrong. I realized I couldn’t face that scene, mainly because I would have to feign gladness that Jaimie finally knew my real name and then produce a chuckle over the misunderstanding, so I went outside to wait for Cindy to finish. After a few more minutes of The Stranger, my (by then) ex-girlfriend tapped me on the shoulder. She was in town to do some research at the University Library. She was doing much better lately thanks to several sessions with her new psychiatrist, Dr. Lawson. Before I could finish searching her eyes for traces of irony, she went inside to get to work, saying she might give me a call that weekend. I decided it would be prudent for me to leave right then, not because I feared she would bump into Cindy, but because I was sure there was a reel of film, somewhere in the library, that was ready to combust.
Sleepers Awake: a Cautionary Tale

The hard bottom and straight back of the oak pew could never keep Dick Harbor from his regular Sunday morning nap in the small brick church set on the prairie. The muted anger he felt against the hymn the congregation sang wouldn’t keep him from his habit either. He was upset because the hymn was unfamiliar. The first verse had been enough for him:

Rise my soul to watch and pray;
From your sleep awaken;
Be not by the evil day
Unawares o'ertaken.
Satan's prey oft are they
Who secure are sleeping
And no watch are keeping.

While the rest of the congregation dutifully sang on, he rehearsed what he was going to say against this hymn at the next church council meeting.

When the hymn was finished he continued to do as he did every Sunday as the pastor entered the ornate oak pulpit. He went to sleep, a habit he learned from his father through osmosis. He gained this skill by sitting next to him and feeling the older man's body shift downward as the sermon began, bones settling into a rest position. Like riding a bicycle, this talent is hard to lose once it becomes habitual. In sixty-plus years of faithful attendance every Sunday (plus Wednesday evenings during Lent and Advent), the art of settling in for his sermon nap was perfected to where now he could doze off before the pastor’s first sentence had ended. However, the current pastor, Crickle, was
more of a challenge than others. Not that Crickle was louder, just more animated. Dick's favorite pastors were those who preached with a monotone drone.

   No need to listen carefully, he said to himself as a way of excuse. No need to listen- I've heard it all before, ever since I was a boy. Gentle sleep came upon him as he began to doze through his 3,728th sermon.

   Dick felt wonderfully refreshed since his nap hadn't been cut short by the organist's blasts. A trifle more stiff than usual but refreshed. With his eyes closed he relished the moment until he realized he heard none of the usual sounds. The joy of the nap was shattered when he understood he was completely alone in the church. He sat upright out of his comfortable position and looked to where his wife should have been. Using the pew in front of him for support, he pulled himself to his feet as quickly as he could and looked around, inspecting the dark, paneled walls for signs of life.

   "Where is everybody?" His voice, empty and hollow, resounded throughout the sanctuary. "What kind of joke is this? Did Mildred put you up to this? Or that pastor- that Crickle?" He expected an answer of some hopeful giggling like that coming out of closets at a surprise birthday party. But nothing came back to answer his questions, not even the clock, the one donated by his father, gave its familiar tick-tock. So Dick Harbor plopped back down into the pew feeling very alone.

   "They're gone." Dick's heart's heart grew hopeful. He wasn't alone after all. A voice came from the seat next to him, from the place Mildred usually sat. Looking for the source of the voice, he was surprised to find a little girl sitting next to him, all dressed up in her
Sunday best. She must be new, he thought, for he had never seen her before.

"Everybody?"

"Uh-huh," she said, twisting her brown curls in her fingers and looking up at him with deep beguiling eyes. He felt she was trying to flirt with him.

"What about your Mommy and Daddy?"

"Don't have any."

Poor little girl. "What happened to them?"

"Never had any."

"You must mean they passed away when you were still a baby."

"Nope. Never had any." She snuggled next to him closely and took his hand in hers. He let her examine his hand, particularly the large ring inset with a cross of diamonds. She started to take it off his finger, but it wouldn't come because the finger had grown fat beyond the ring's original size. Since they were alone in the building, he saw no harm in letting her hold it. He struggled and twisted it off, then playfully slipped it on her ring finger. Being duly impressed, she sighed and ogled over it as he knew she would.

"This is pretty," she said looking first at the ring on her outstretched hand and then up at him. When their eyes met, a deep chill brought shivers for her eyes suddenly seemed far too old and very un-girl like. She broke the spell by turning his attention to the ring on her finger.

"Watch this," she said. She brought her hands together as if in prayer and then pulled them apart. The ring was gone.

"Can you do magic? That's a good trick."

"Some call it magic."
"Where did my ring go?"
"Gone."
"Oh- a good magician never tells the secret. Maybe I should use the magic word, "please" to get it back: please!" He exaggerated the last word.
"No."
"Little lady, I don't know who you are, or who your parents are, but the time for games is over. I want you to give it back to me right now!"
"No. You won't need it anymore. Come on, it's time to go."
Taking him by the hand she pulled him out of the pew and into the aisle. The strength of her grip ached his hand. A premonition of fear edged through his heart. He jerked loose his hand and fell back into the pew.
"Now see here, little girl, I'm not going to go anywhere. I'm going to wait right here until everybody comes back. And just who are you anyway, to be telling me what to do?"
"I thought you knew. To some, I'm an angel of light. To others, a lion roaring out of sight." The shock of ancient Sunday School lessons vividly came to mind.
"This isn't right! It's not fair! My grandfather founded this church. I've been an elder many times over. I've never missed a Sunday- you go and check the records. I've sung in the choir. I led the building campaign to build a new church..."
"Do stop talking about yourself," snarled the little girl. Then she was gone. A more formidable image was in her place. "All of this
jabber of I... I... I. It's so **damnably** tiresome. My patience is gone, and we need to get going."

"Where are you taking me?" his voice wavered in fear as he was wrenched from his seat and pulled to the door.

"Do you remember that hymn you didn't like that said, "Rise, my soul, to watch and pray; From your sleep awaken?" Dick nodded.

"Guess what? Yours didn't."
Deborah Stark

Real

Two chairs, facing each other at approximately a forty-five degree angle, haloed, I think. At least that was the impression. The photo greeted me on my entrance to the photography exhibit at The Museum of Modern Art in Manhattan and has been with me ever since. It was the first of many family trips there from the suburbs, and I always knew that, once there, we were in the borough of my father’s real home, his turf, as opposed to my mother’s.

The photo is all that I remember of that visit to MOMA when I was a child, not anything else we did that day, the interactions among us, or any of the other photographs we saw. The intimacy of the image was what absorbed me, an intimacy that I had not then or have not since been able to duplicate with any of the people that have passed through my life.

Photography, of all the visual arts, has always had the strongest appeal and has most held my fascination from a time even before the chairs first caught my attention. My father was a photographer before anything else, to me, anyway. The group photos of him and his many friends taken by him in the years before he and my mother met, in the years before she commandeered his soul, filled my many solitary childhood hours and taught me, I thought, about the foreigner inside the father I was familiar with. How loose and relaxed he was then, how full of the joy of playful living. There were black and white shots of trips to the country and lively, drunken parties with the
Deborah Stark

group, my father playing tennis in tennis whites (even though it was the Depression and money was scarce for his family of eight siblings) and horseback riding in proper riding attire. And there were early shots of an unknown mother, a dark-haired, high cheek-boned beauty, a glamorous, sensual being in seductive pose. But that was before their marriage and the two daughters that followed. And, having seen the direction my parents chose to take, I wonder, now, if those photos captured the real, or was it the real imagined? I think that’s the draw of photography, the capturing of actual objects in the way our minds choose. So, the effect is that of an accurate representation. The two chairs positioned just so, subtly lit from behind, conveyed an intimacy more powerful than human intimacy and, impossibly, more real.

Photos, then, were my world. They lined the walls of our small suburban home – two sisters, dressed alike, for instance, smiling, the older one, me, with her arm lovingly around the younger one’s shoulder, she looking adoringly up at me -- apparent intimacy, again, though the actual relationship escapes my grasp; and my handsome, majestic maternal grandparents smiling for the camera though they could never say more than two civil words to each other.

When I was a child, from the time I can remember, fantasy held sway over my objective world. It’s what kept me afloat and followed me into adulthood for the same reason. My photographic world was the appealing one. My closest (maybe only) childhood friend was the girl in our den window at night. We had long unselfconscious chats, followed, always, by my inviting her over to
Deborah Stark

play, then, running to the front door to let her in. This nocturnal routine was endlessly exhilarating, but the excitement of opening that door (fantasy though it was) was like no other. How I looked forward to the night in those years and how alone I was until it arrived.

At some point, the girl and I parted ways, and I gradually retreated into the shell that was becoming me. And I watched. No one seemed to notice. I was the family beauty after all, my only role, the outer covering all that anyone attended to. My observation of the family continued well into adulthood, I, all the while collecting mental notes in the form of pictures, hoping to understand the truth behind the surface of our relations and how my truth had come to be separated from me. As time passed, my psychic distance from the family increased and with it my field of vision, enabling a truer view, my version of it, anyway. I could have become the family biographer; only I would have been missing from the story. Well, I was, and that is part of the story.

So, the watching continued even as the shell that was finally me pursued the life assigned by the family, a conventional life, as you may have guessed. I wasn’t very good at it. But, I did my best for almost twenty years. Oddly, they turned out to be productive years, for, at some point, I realized I was emerging, gradually. It began with desperation: I seemed to be dying, only I hadn’t yet been born, and I so wanted to be. There was no choice but to force myself out into the open, come out of the closet as it were. Fear took hold but not the
Deborah Stark

intense variety that accompanied the terminal illness that had become my life.

I was frequently coming into focus even within the family of my origin. Now, I was part of the mental picture though still apart from the other three. We might be around the dining room table, my mother, father, and sister, heads turned toward each other in conversation, me a chair away looking off into the distance. At first they weren’t aware of the change or were denying it, but it didn’t matter, for I was evolving anyway. Then, my mother became angry, therefore distant and cold, not at whom I was becoming (just a distinct individual with her own thoughts and style, not a serial killer, after all) but that I was becoming. My sister became uncomfortable with the sister she hadn’t known. I sensed my father’s approval, though he could only be subtle in giving it (so my mother wouldn’t know it seemed to me based on my observation of the family dynamic). Perhaps in me he saw himself. He, too, within the family, had been divested of distinction, but only within the family, for he was a fully formed adult by the time he met my mother. He still existed, very much so, in that other borough, the borough of artists.

The newer family of my conventional life did suffer collateral damage as I sought my truer self. I knew they would although I was certain that, ultimately, for my children, having an authentic mother as model to follow and/or rebel against was in their best interests, and that thought consoled me. I couldn’t have put a brake on the momentum in any case; no good would have come of it had I been able to.
Funny that last I checked in on the family, (I do it rarely now.) I was, again, not in the mental viewfinder. But, my den-window friend is back. I was finally able to let her in, the excitement attending the moment of actual meeting so much richer than that which had accompanied the much earlier childhood meetings of my fantasy. And, as I write, those two chairs of long ago come suddenly into view -- as a symbol of possibility, though, rather than the goal I now realize they always had been.
Maggie Landess

**Last Supper**

Julia and Ron sat in the usual spot in The Den. Their usual spot, where they usually were when Ron decided to grace Julia with his presence. He was random. Her head told her this would be the last time she would let him do it to her, though it was the same thing she had told herself the last four times. And yet, there she was, back again at that table with the same person she vowed she was done with but obviously wasn’t. She wondered what was wrong with her, but just as when she’d asked herself the same question at least a dozen times before, no one answered. Maybe she was waiting for God to answer, to send a message on a bolt of lightning. She peered up at the painted tin ceiling and waited. Nothing.

Instead, she watched Ron eat. Rare steak, of course. The bloodier, the better. It made Julia sick to her stomach, watching him devour the meat, chewing it with his sharp, white teeth, between his full, ruddy lips. Lips that could produce nothing but lies. Lips she wanted to kiss so badly she had to hold the edges of her seat to prevent herself from jumping over the table at him. The feelings were driving her mad, the dance on the tightrope between loving him utterly and hating him completely. Acknowledgement is half the battle. The other half is the hard part. If she knew she had a problem but she couldn’t fix it because she didn’t know how, then what? Once, she had tried to fix it. She decided to join the Army to escape him. She would be beyond his reach, she reasoned. But then he disappeared for the fourth time, and she didn’t see the point of leaving then. He was gone again, maybe for good this time for all she knew. So she didn’t sign the papers. That
Maggie Landess

time, his absence had been a help. She had no real desire to die over a
guy. What kind of loser would she be then? The worst kind.

“You’re not eating,” Ron said, as he stabbed a piece of meat with his fork and shook it at her.

“Not hungry, I guess,” she blinked and stuck her fork into the bowl of fettuccini and twisted it, around and around and around.

This morning when he popped up on her Instant Messenger screen, Julia felt stunned. It had been a year and enough time had passed that she believed she had gotten over him. She moved on with her life; she started seeing someone else. She felt happy, something she hadn’t felt in a long time. But he must have been able to sense it. Like a wolf, Ron could smell happiness from ten miles away, and he made his way through snowy woods to hunt it down and kill it. Julia’s only hope was that this time, maybe they could just be friends. Naive. How could she have a friend whose only desire was to pick tiny pieces off her flesh until only sun-bleached bones were left? Julia felt suspicious this morning when Ron started a casual conversation, after a year’s worth of silence, and wanted to see her. It had to be one of two things. Ron and Tina had broken up again. Or Ron wanted something from Julia. In her heart, she hoped for the former. Why did she care? Why had she even come? “The heart wants what the heart wants” was her answer. Suddenly, she realized she wasn’t over him and she never would be.

This morning, Julia had decided not to ask about Tina, waiting to see what Ron would volunteer. Ron volunteered nothing. So the dance began again. Julia never asked, and Ron never told. From the beginning, she had decided she could live in uncertainty. She felt a certain comfort there, like walking a tight rope must feel, swaying but
never falling, assured that she would have one of two outcomes, and either way, it would be okay. Julia swayed in the breeze of her own vagueness, assured that she would either fall or wobble her way across. Ron asked nothing from her, yet. Not money, not sex, not to borrow her car for an hour that would turn into three days. So if he didn’t want anything, maybe this time he just wanted her. Maybe this time things would work out for them. Maybe the fourth time was the charm. Things could be different. People can change if they really want to, she told herself. Maybe he wanted to; maybe he wanted to change for her. Julia smiled and took a bite of her now room-temperature food. The food washed her denial down with ease, like a fine Merlot, smooth and intoxicating. She repeated it over and over like a mantra. She believed if she willed it, it would be so.

She watched him take another bite, and he caught her looking. “What?” He asked, smiling. His green eyes sparkled. She glanced down at her plate. He already knew the answer, knew what was in her heart.

“What?” she replied. Julia knew she didn’t need to answer either. Denial silenced the little voice.

He placed his fork on his plate and reached across the table toward her. She reached back, and he grasped her hand in his. A bolt shot up her arm and straight into her heart. Julia swallowed.

“I’m glad you agreed to meet me.” He squeezed her hand. Julia looked up at him and this time met his gaze. “I’m glad you asked.”

“This time will be different,” he said. “I’m not going away again. I promise.”
Julia tried to pull away from his grasp, but he refused to release her. “But you said—.”

He moved his hand up her bare arm, leaving tiny goose bumps in his wake. “I promise. No matter what.”

Julia shook her head, as much a response to him as an attempt to regain her composure. “How can I believe you?” she whispered.

He freed her arm and leaned forward, resting his strong chin on his hands, his eyes boring a hole into hers. “Because. I love you.”

Eyes wide, Julia’s jaw dropped. “What? What?”

He only smiled. “It’s you. It’s always been you.”

She said nothing. She assumed he could hear her heart’s attempt to escape her chest, and that was answer enough, because he reached for his fork and took another bite of steak and smiled as he chewed, saying nothing more.

Shocked, she sat, unable to speak, unable to think, until she heard the far off tinny sound of “Seek and Destroy.” Ron pulled the cell phone from his pocket.

“Shit,” he whispered, as he looked at the caller id.

“What?” Julia asked rhetorically as she looked him in the eye. She didn’t need an answer; she already knew.

Ron turned off the ringer and shoved the phone back into his pocket. “Nothing,” he frowned, looking down into the plate of red and brown.

Not again. Julia twirled the fork in the remains of her Alfredo sauce, jaw clenched. Her knees started to shake, moving the table back and forth like an aftershock.
“Listen, baby...” Ron stammered as he stared at his half-eaten dinner.

“Don’t call me baby.”

Julia stood to leave, her whole body trembling so fiercely she had to clutch the edge of the table to keep her knees from buckling.

“Don’t go.” He grabbed her right arm. “You know, I mean, it’s really hard. I’m just confused.” It was the line he used on Julia whenever he got caught in this scenario. She waited for the other standard. “I mean, it’s not my fault. You’re so beautiful.” Bingo. Right on cue.

Julia threw her head back and laughed. “Screw you!” She jerked her arm away from him. “This time, it’s not going to work. I’m done.”

Did she have the courage, she wondered? Did she mean it? She’d envisioned telling him off before, sometimes fantasized about it in bed, in the dark, alone, when she knew he was in bed in the dark, too, but not alone. She prayed for the strength to walk out and stay out. To leave and mean it.

“It’s not done. We’re not done.” He purred at her. He ran his hand through his dyed black hair and leaned back in his chair. “Just think about the good times.”

“Good times?! What do you mean? The good times when you’re screwing two women at once? Sure is good for you!” Shaking, she looked down at him.

His countenance darkened. Looking like an animal cornered, he grabbed her wrist. “You’re not going anywhere. I’m not letting you
go. I came back to claim what’s mine. Besides, you knew the score. Don’t give me that innocent act.”

He never gave her the score. He left her to assume. And that was her mistake. She never asked because she didn’t want to know. Suddenly, she realized she had known all along, but didn’t want to admit it. Not knowing hurt less. Self-preservation. Now ignorance was gone, and it took its bliss with it.

Shivering, she noticed the fork still clenched in her left hand. Standing outside herself, she watched her hand raise and saw him laughing, not believing she would do it. The laughing stopped as she drove the tines between his emerald eyes. She laughed as she pulled the fork out and threw it onto his plate, a splash of red dotting the white tablecloth.

“Well, baby. Now we’re done.” Julia walked out without looking back.
Notes on the Staff

**Beth E. McDonald** (editor) has an MA in Creative Writing (Poetry) and a PhD in 19th Century/Gothic Literature (University of Oklahoma). She has published numerous poems in several small journals and worked as editor on others. Her book *The Vampire as Numinous Experience: Spiritual Journeys with the Undead in British and American Literature* has been published by McFarland. Since moving to Las Vegas, she has worked as an adjunct professor for UNLV, teaching courses in Composition II and World Literature.

**Sandra Hooven** (co-editor) received her MA from Cal Poly Pomona. Before coming to UNLV, she taught English at Mt. San Antonio College in Walnut California. Currently she is teaching the 101 E/F sequence at UNLV.

**Susan Summers** (editorial consultant) serves as the UNLV Department of English Budget Technician. She is the past Executive Director of a Pediatric AIDS organization, and served as the Nevada State Coordinator of The Adoption Exchange.

**Olivia Montgomery** (student assistant) will graduate this May with a BA in English. She plans to begin her MA with an emphasis in Theory this fall. In addition to being a full-time student and working in the Department of English, she owns two horses and competes year-round in equestrian jumping.

**Megan McDonald** (journal cover and website designer) works as a User Experience Designer, improving site experiences on websites you may know and use. She has held positions in production, graphic design, user interface and information architecture. Outside of work, she kayaks, backpacks, and enjoys travel. She lives and works in San Francisco.
Notes on Readers

Justin E. Kidd (PhD University of Virginia) was captivated by the eighteenth-century masters as an undergraduate at Rice and led by them to study the rhetoric of Samuel Johnson's letters. This focus more or less locked him into the composition courses at Auburn and at LSU-Shreveport. Since 2000 he has taught at UNLV as an adjunct professor of English.

Anthony Guy Patricia (BA, MA) is currently working on a PhD in English at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. His primary areas of specialization include Shakespeare, Renaissance drama, queer theory, and Rhetoric and Composition. He has published a number of book reviews in the journal Popular Culture Review and an article entitled “Through the Eyes of the Present: Screening the Male Homoerotics of Shakespearean Drama” in the recent book collection Presentism, Gender, and Sexuality in Shakespeare. Currently, he teaches courses in Freshman Composition and upper-division English major courses in Shakespeare.

Karen Haggar (BA Creighton University; MA Marquette University) did Post-graduate studies in The Novel at CUNY. At UNLV Karen teaches courses in Composition, Introduction to Literature, and World Literature.

Megan Merchant (MFA UNLV) has been a marketing guru, nationally ranked swimmer, Literature Instructor, yogi, cocktail waitress, poet and translator in her many lifetimes. Her poems and translations have appeared in the Atlanta Review, International Poetry Review, Kennesaw Review, Margie and others. She currently lives in Sin City with her husband Paul, son Max and three dogs.
Sara Goosey has an MA in Creative Writing from Eastern Kentucky University and specializes in Appalachian and Southern literature. In addition to teaching Composition and World Literature, she is finishing her first novel *Shouting Down the Mountain*.

Pam Cantrell earned her BA in Secondary Education (English) from UNLV in 1988, her MA in English from UNLV in 1991, and her PhD in English from UNLV in 1995. From 1996 to 1997, Pam taught as visiting faculty at Bilkent University, Ankara, Turkey. At UNLV, Pam teaches World Literature and Composition II for the English department and Honors 100 for the Honors College.

Regina Dickerson received her BA from Hunter College in New York City, where she majored and minored in English, and her MA at Temple University where her focus was African American Literature. She has taught Composition, World Literature, and American Literature at UNLV and Expository Writing at Hunter College.
Notes on Contributors

Taylor Altman has an MFA in Creative Writing from Boston University and recently left a part-time instructor’s position in English Composition at the College of Southern Nevada for a position with QuestBridge, a non-profit institution in California. Taylor has been published in The Alembic, Triplovia, and Lyrical Somerville, and her first book of poems, Swimming Back, was released this August.

Natalie Carter has lived in the Las Vegas area since she was two and loves the Southern Nevada desert and community. She received her MA from the University of Nevada, Reno in 1997 and began teaching English Composition for the English Department at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas in 1998.

Lee Casson teaches Research and Argumentative Writing and The Experience of Literature at Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU). He holds a BS in Advertising from MTSU, an MA in English literature from the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, and an EdS in Higher Education Administration from MTSU. He lives in Nashville across from the Bicentennial Mall where he walks daily and, yes, watches the squirrels.

Alan Ramón Clinton has work forthcoming in Frank: An International Journal of Contemporary Writing and Art and has recently published work in Exquisite Corpse, Otoliths, Euphony, The13th Warrior Review, and other journals. Ocean View Books has published his long poem “Skeleton Key to the Wilderness,” and his collection of poetry Horatio Alger’s Keys was published by BlazeVOX in 2008.

Adam Cushman received an MFA from Columbia and holds current
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**Renée E. D’Aoust** holds degrees from Columbia University (BA) and the University of Notre Dame (MFA). Currently, she is an adjunct instructor of English at North Idaho College where she teaches online and traditional courses. Her essay, “Graham Crackers,” is a chapter in Robert Gottlieb’s *Reading Dance*, and her prose (fiction and nonfiction) and poetry have been published in *Brevity, Mid-American Review*, and *Redwood Coast Review*, as well as other journals.

**Mark Evan Davis** completed his master's degree at Marshall University and now holds a position as an adjunct English Instructor at Marshall. While teaching Introductory Composition courses, he is applying to PhD programs in Rhetoric and Composition.

**Kate Dougherty** holds an MFA from Columbia College Chicago, where she served as editorial assistant on *Court Green*. Her poems are published or forthcoming in *Action, Yes; The Splinter Generation; Columbia Poetry Review; Court Green; and If Poetry Journal*.

**Martin Dean Dupalo** has taught in the Political Science Department of the University of Nevada, Las Vegas for the past five years but has been on campus since 1974, when he was only seven and his dad attended UNLV. Currently, he teaches Political Science and Civic Leadership and Engagement.

**Stacy Esch** has enjoyed working as a writing and literature instructor for 22 years and is currently employed by the English Department at
West Chester University in West Chester, Pennsylvania. She has published her poetry in a few small online "zines."

**Margaret Finnegan** is an adjunct faculty member at California State University, Los Angeles. She received her PhD in History from UCLA and currently, teaches remedial composition at CSU’s Writing Center. Her publications include *Selling Suffrage: Consumer Culture and Votes for Women*, a personal essay “A Hero’s Retreat,” published in *Salon* and later included in the anthology *Life as We Know It*. Her essays have also been published in *The Los Angeles Times, FamilyFun, American Quarterly*, and other publications.

**Homeira Foth** is currently a part-time lecturer at both City College of San Francisco and San Francisco State University, teaching English composition and literature courses. Homeira is originally from Iran and English is her second language; the piece we have published, "Letters to John Keats," is a personal essay and an homage to an English teacher she had in high school who turned her on to literature.

**Alex M. Frankel** is a writer and teacher in Los Angeles, currently working as a part-time adjunct lecturer in the English Department at Cal State Los Angeles. His poems and short fiction have appeared in journals such as *The Comstock Review, the North Dakota Quarterly, the Gay and Lesbian Review, Cottonwood, Colere, Tears in the Fence, the Temple, Pinch*, and *Beyond the Valley of the Contemporary Poets.*

**Anna Geyer** is a writer and an award winning experimental filmmaker. Her written work has appeared in *Gargoyle, The Underwood Review, Wasted Space* and *Centipede*. She teaches in the Cinema Department at both San Francisco City College and Solano Community College. Her films have screened in many festivals both domestically and internationally.
**Jo Gibson** has taught since 2000 as a part-time instructor for the Department of English at Cleveland State University, Cleveland, Ohio. Prior to that, she worked for 20 years in corporate settings as an editor and writer. She is a regular contributor to *Ohioana Journal*, and her work has appeared in *The Adjunct Advocate*, *Learning through History*, and Cleveland's daily newspaper, *The Plain Dealer*. Dr. Gibson's essay, “The Tapestry,” is featured in the United States Postal Service publication, *Land of Diversity*.

**Kristin Elsie Graef** is an adjunct professor of English as well as Humanities at Aquinas College in Grand Rapids, Michigan. She has taught English composition in various capacities for over twenty years. While the area of the Humanities is newer to her, she finds it equally fulfilling, as she has a passion for the arts, philosophy and world religions. In college at Wittenberg University, her poetry was published in the campus magazine.

**Mike Jaynes** teaches courses in twentieth century American fiction, adolescent literature, western humanities, composition, and developmental writing. His research interests include Animal Advocacy and Ethics, Ufology, the cult of the individual, the embraced rogue, experimental fiction, American fiction, and Tom Robbins. He lectures on these topics across the country and his academic and creative writing has appeared in *Animals' Voice Magazine*, *Farmhouse Magazine*, *Paragon Magazine*, *UFO Magazine*, *Eureka Studies in Teaching Short Fiction*, *Alice Walker: Bloom’s Critical Views*, *ABCnews.com*, and many other journals.

**Rowan Johnson** earned his MA in Applied Linguistics and English Language Teaching from the University of Nottingham, England, but is originally from South Africa. He self-published his first novel, *So Far*
from San Lameer, in 2004 and currently teaches rhetoric and composition at the University of Tennessee Chattanooga.

Allan Johnston teaches literature and writing part-time at Columbia College and DePaul University. His poems have appeared in Poetry, Poetry East, Rhino, Rattle, and over 70 other journals, and he has published one book (Tasks of Survival).

Kevin P. Keating currently teaches English as an adjunct at Baldwin-Wallace College in Cleveland, Ohio. His stories have been nominated for a Pushcart Prize, Story South’s Million Writers Award, and the Ben Hoffer/Best New Writing Award. Kevin’s publishing credits include Brink, The Externalist, Identity Theory, The Stickman Review, Mad Hatter’s Review, Underground Voices, Smokebox, Fringe, Perigee, Megaera, and many others.

Erin Kelley possesses a Master’s in English with an Emphasis in Literature from the University of Texas at Dallas and a Doctorate of Jurisprudence from Texas Tech University School of Law. She teaches English Composition at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas and the College of Southern Nevada in Las Vegas.

Lisa Konigsberg holds an MA in English literature from Rutgers University. She teaches Research and Critical Thinking, English Composition and Literature, Writing for the Humanities, Writing Across the Curriculum, and Multi-cultural Literature as an Adjunct Professor in the English Department at West Chester University in West Chester, Pennsylvania.

Maggie Landess is currently an adjunct in the Department of English at Indiana State University, where she has taught beginning and advanced Composition courses, Introduction to Creative Writing, Fiction Writing Workshops, and American Folklore since 1996. Her
short stories have been published in *Indiana English* and *Creative Kinetics*.

**Lily Iona MacKenzie** is a Canadian by birth, now living in the San Francisco Bay Area where she teaches writing part time at the University of San Francisco. Her works, including fiction, poetry, book reviews, critical and personal essays, interviews, and travel articles, have been published in numerous venues, including *Malahat Review*, *Cottage Magazine*, *Anima*, *Psychological Perspectives*, *B.C. Outdoors*, *The San Francisco Jung Institute Library Journal*, *Poet's Podium*, and *Crazy Quilt Quarterly*, as well as other journals.

**Mari-Carmen Marin** holds a PhD in English and Literature from the University of Zaragoza (Spain) with a dissertation on the cultural images of motherhood in Toni Morrison's novels. She is currently working as an Adjunct Professor of Composition in the English Department at both the University of Houston and Lone Star Community College at North Harris.

**Linda Maxwell** is an evening adjunct at Eastern Kentucky University in Richmond, Kentucky. Her credits include *The Chaffin Journal*, *Appalachian Women Speak: Poetry as Prayer*, and *Western Kentucky University's I to I Life Writing by Kentucky Feminists*. She also is a full time English instructor at Lincoln County High School.

**Heather Momyer** teaches at Columbia College Chicago and Harold Washington College and reads fiction for 'Hotel Amerika' at the moment.

**Susan Nyikos** is a non-tenure track lecturer at the Department of English of Utah State University, teaching Intermediate Writing, Introduction to Shakespeare and other literature classes for non majors. Though born and raised in Hungary, she revels in the mountains of
Utah, enjoying hiking, snowshoeing, or just taking it all in. Her poetry has been published poetry in chapbooks of her local poetry group Poetry at Three, including earlier versions of "Ode to Love" and "Two Days before Spring Equinox."

Lollie Ragana wrote, directed and produced television for 13 years and is an accomplished playwright and award-winning stage director: Her publishing credits include A Woman’s Europe, France Today, the Los Angeles Times, the Santa Monica Outlook, LA West, Trojan Family, Mobius: A Journal for Social Change, and Myths of the World, an audio book. She teaches English at California State University, Los Angeles, writing at UCLA Extension (The Writer’s Program and the Landscape Archaeology Program), and mythology at Antioch University.

Susan Ribner is currently an Adjunct Lecturer in the English Department of Hunter College, part of the City University of New York (CUNY), where she has been teaching writing for the last eighteen years-- ESL, Freshman Composition, and most recently, after receiving an MFA in Creative Nonfiction, Nonfiction workshops. Her publishing credits include two young adult books: The Martial Arts, with Richard Chin and under the pseudonym Rebecca Moon, Right On! An Anthology of Black Literature. "Bad Girls" is a stand-alone excerpt from this memoir-in-progress, Sister Stories: A Memoir of Love and Race.

Thomas Sabel is an adjunct instructor, teaching writing at Indian University-Purdue University at Fort Wayne (IPFW), Indiana, in the English and Linguistics Department and at IVY Tech Community College, Fort Wayne, Indiana, in the Academic Skills Advancement Department. His personal reflection, “The Absurdity of Care,” has been
published in the *Journal of Pastoral Care and Counseling*. In addition to being an adjunct, he also serves part-time as a pastor of a small Lutheran congregation.

**John Shields** is originally from back east, but has lived in Alaska, Europe, Salt Lake City, various places from Connecticut to South Carolina, and, most recently, on an Indian Reservation in northern Nevada. He earned his MA from the University of Iowa and currently teaches English at UNLV. His novel trilogy, *Letters from Alaska*, is available online and he has published other stories in *Scéal* and *The Sewanee Review*.

**Algie Ray Smith** is a retired public school teacher and an adjunct English 101 instructor for Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, Kentucky. Over the years he has written a collector’s column for the local paper and has self-published several books of short stories dealing with people in his home town.

**Anne Stark** has been a lecturer in the English department of Utah State University for seventeen years. She has published several scholarly pieces on her research topic, the female hero, and two pieces of fiction in university publications. She is currently working on a collection of her short fiction as she continues to teach the craft to students.

**Deborah Stark** has been an adjunct lecturer at The City University of New York and at Queensborough Community College for about 28 years, teaching mainly at Queens College in their various ESL programs and at Queensborough Community College in their Basic Skills Department. She recently returned to CUNY after a three-year hiatus during which she briefly lived in Boise, Idaho, then Prague, the Czech Republic, where she did some writing consulting and began to pay more attention to her own writing.
Heather (McMacken) Trahan attends the University of Cincinnati, where she toils for an MA in creative writing, teaches English composition, and serves as editorial assistant for *The Cincinnati Review*. Her poems have appeared in various publications, such as *Word Riot*, *Slow Trains*, and *elimae*. She is married to the poet Andrew Trahan.

Rebecca Grace Williams is in her sixth year as an adjunct in the English Department at Indiana State University, Terre Haute, Indiana, returning to academics after several years working in the business world. She received her BS degree at ISU and an MAT from DePauw University many years ago and spent much of the intervening time in the Southwest, where, she says her heart resides, in the peace of the deserts and mountains.

Brian R. Young graduated from Penn State University with an MFA in Poetry in 2001. Currently, he teaches composition at the University of Akron. His poems have appeared in the Winter 2006 website edition of *XCP: Streetnotes*. 
Submission Guidelines

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