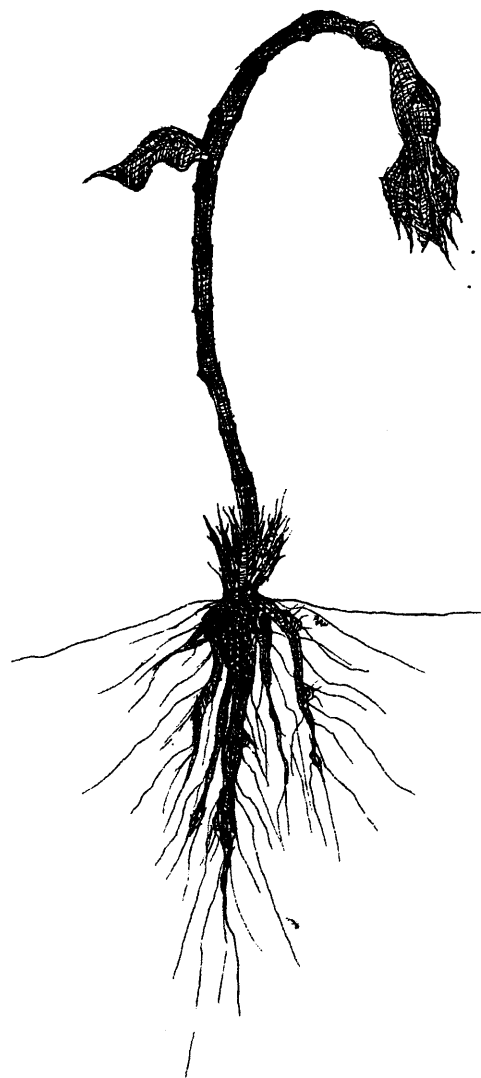


# New Orleans Review

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# New Orleans Review

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PHILIP FRIED

*God's People*

St Ursula's room with her little shoes  
at the bedside and her cat crouching  
below her feet in the breathless cube  
of space that an angel hardly dares  
to violate with a heavenly message

even the slaughter decorous  
with the Huns like well-dressed gentlemen  
in tight-fitting hose, sack sleeves, and caps  
swords whirling in an elegant mayhem  
spilling the needed innocent blood

but the Ghetto was so sad unpretty  
evacuated of victims only  
words on plaques as if the ban  
on images still held in the absence  
of those who could take the name in vain

on the nearby fondamenta women  
in furs amid sun and crumbling buildings  
the city its own chiaroscuro  
you turn suddenly into a dark alley  
have shadow at will reach for the walls

the buildings here are taller the plaques  
are high to address history you  
can overhear in the well of the present

God's people the ever-to-be-converted  
paid rent were protected up to a point

nothing to do but enter a little  
store buy a half-stale slab of cake  
dark brown with fruit in the image of nothing  
return to the sun eat absently  
return to the sun eat absently

PHILIP FRIED

*Strindberg at the d'Orsay*

Dab on a few lights, a strip of habitation  
on a tightrope horizon between big seas big skies.  
Burn the canvas to achieve that black  
in the *haute mer* like the fire of white salt.  
Clouds clouds enveloping as they drift they bear  
away all meanings like congregations of vapor.

Strange play, a painting, that holds these speeches framed  
without words, many sayings without sense;  
characters seethe or drift but always go past,  
humanity the most or least of it.  
Only the brush may travel freely, go back,  
find past or future in an impasto present.

But who could foresee this semblance of permanence:  
the ghostly ones passing behind the clock,  
the walls translucent or easily movable,  
lines of people passing—like a horizon—  
to view themselves, but always refused refused  
and nodding yes to fall from the moment's edge...

JOHN RONAN

*Vignette*

A guard winds the prompting clock,  
present as everything, that prejudice,  
in rooms crowded with ancient artifacts.

Heels echo in the empty hall.  
Small, decorator spots continue  
to shine on bright barrow gold.

Apart from which, nothing happens.  
Time's the event, never vignette, and anyway  
indifferent to the contents of an age, eons.

Summoned only reluctantly by the November  
afternoon, an empty museum, by words  
like day, eon or age, that vespers.

On a clumsy coin, the dunce-struck  
king, dim witness, gallops off,  
clippity clop to the confident clock.

CYNTHIA HOGUE

*Seeing the Northern Lights on Taos Mesa*

We see the mountain's summit mist,  
a crown of silver streaks on black.  
Our white breath puffs and vanishes.  
Unrisen behind clouds, the moon

illuminates their edges from below.  
*Wait for Me.* We scatter ourselves  
like penitents on the steps  
of La Morada, the nineteenth-century sect

of flagellants who still in places choose  
each Easter a Christ to nail or bind  
with rope in mock crucifixion. Some  
have died. *Do not speak of them.*

A large cross cuts the night sky,  
which reddens, a shifting glow  
that deepens into scarlet, etching  
Taos Mountain with gossamers

of green. *Now you see Me.*  
Clouds part as the moon  
casts a glimmer Calvary trail  
we follow through high desert

with its pungent scent of sage  
and chaparral. We find bear scat,  
marks of Reeboks, then the shoes,  
and beside them, jeans crumpled

as if someone, meaning  
to come back, had taken  
a dip into the thin air.  
*Nothing you see now.*



★

Nothing, your mouth still damp  
—you swallow and the sky  
half voiceless, half shoreline

though one moon is just above the water  
the other falling through your throat  
draining from your cheek the no cheek

kept moist in the Earth  
once nothing but water —still cold  
and under your tongue its shadow

reeking from ballast and side to side  
the way one sun dries in the open  
the other already losing its hold

on this mist melting the salt  
that's left on your arms, on your mouth  
—Esther, these tiny stones

don't splash anymore, the seas  
die out, howling in pain  
while the shores alongside

are too far away  
and nothing leaves with you  
—you think it's footsteps, Esther

as if you still remember  
their sound, being taken away  
by a rain that never returned.

★

Inside the Earth an Earth  
turning away the step by step  
into morning —you wade

against this undertow, each wave  
dragging you back with empty shells  
and dying alone —you collect

a darkness till your hand  
becomes the sun inside the sun  
the slow, climbing turn

around her breasts, beginning  
at the shoulders, the lips  
the thighs grown enormous

lifted star by star by a night  
made from stone though you  
keep hearing the splash

deeper and deeper, pulled under  
to dry, open for these shells  
already halfway through

—you let the water think it heats  
by itself, that your arms ran aground  
were lost all along.

### *Cyprus*

He tries to think of himself as simply a courier, a delivery person. The problem is his freight. In a tan nylon carry-on, stuffed dutifully underneath the seat in front of his, Perkins is carrying a young woman's ashes. He pours the last bit of Merlot from the miniature bottle, his fourth of this long night, and looks at his watch. They should be landing in less than an hour.

He could have fought this, could have insisted that Roger take care of this himself. Roger. Whenever Perkins comes out of his office, it's always with some complicated, unpleasant, "this is quite urgent" project on his plate, yet, he always leaves thanking him.

Granted, as the new Assistant Director of the Office for International Students, a case could be made for this falling under Perkins' umbrella. It just seems as though everything has been falling under his umbrella lately. He sometimes misses the good old days of processing I-20's and verifying TOEFL scores. At the end of the day, he's a good soldier. And now, again, he's performing a good soldier's mission.

The end of this day is difficult to establish. A morning shuttle flight to Chicago, Chicago to Newark, Newark to London (complete with sunset and rise), London to... what is this place called again? He takes out his boarding pass which is serving as a bookmark to the Lonely Planet guidebook he purchased at O'Hare. "Larnaka." He looks it up: "The majority of visitors to Cyprus arrive at Larnaka International Airport in Cyprus' southeast...", the paragraph begins, then ends with: "Lazarus, who was raised from the dead by Jesus, came to live in Larnaka and brought Christianity to Cyprus." Hmm. All Perkins is bringing is a box of ashes. He puts

the guidebook back into his carry-on, underneath the box, a mass-produced mahogany number with a faux gold lock, an artificial shine, and an embossed version of the university logo (Roger's idea). It is a lonely planet, he thinks.

It certainly has been lately. April has remained as dead and hard as the box at his feet, friends' phone calls have tapered off to Christmas cards, and in the fall, the woman he thought he loved turned out to be, well, a shrew. Her hurtful comments were sprinkled always with honey's and sweetie's, as if to absolve her from their sting. "You really have no idea what you're doing down there, do you sweetie?" she said once, Perkins' head between her legs. When she left, she said she would pray for him.

The promotion served as a distraction from his thoughts of her. He began to awaken each night to the most mundane, inconsequential concerns: must show staff collating function on new copier; forgot to initial memo to Dean; is new work-study named Vanessa or Veronica? Before he knew it, he was inventorying his whole life. Main categories: experiences, accomplishments, relationships. Yes, eventually all the mediocrity fit, but in the end, what did it amount to? Three o'clock in the morning, synapses and neurons firing like strobe lights, and where was he? In a particleboard futon, in a beehive apartment complex just off the freeway, Grand Slammin' it at Denny's, doing Roger's job for half the money.

He never met the young woman. He'd had no idea there were any...*Cypriots*, that was the word, at all on campus. No one seemed to have known. Most of them came from Taiwan, Korea, India, places like that. And as much as the university gave lip service to everyone's favorite term, *diversity*, the various ethnic groups were easily recognizable around campus because they did, for the most part, keep to themselves.

A freshman from Akron had come across her body on the way to his eight o'clock Economics class. She had, in fact, been his T.A. for Macro in the fall.

"We average one or two of these every year," Roger explained to Perkins that afternoon, like it was a kind of inevitable collateral damage. "We better get on the horn to the family. This is quite urgent, Perk."

There was no phone number anywhere in her file. Three days of back-and-forth with the Cypriot embassy in D.C. finally led only to the terse, emailed directive: "Unfortunately, the father does not have the means to come to Ohio. He requests cremation and repatriation of ashes. Following is the address..."

"Someone should go there," Roger said. "We can't just...fed-ex her to them."

The night before leaving, Perkins drove down to campus. It was Thursday, party night, and a certain cold, drunk, kinetic energy emanated from the bars, the Burger Kings, even the coffee houses. He parked and walked down a dark, concrete path lined with blue-lit rape phones, past the illuminated gymnasium windows showcasing veiny, bug-eyed young men, and through the littered quad where two girls crutched a stumbling third between them. "You're fucking pathetic," he heard behind him as he approached the Economics building.

Christ, what a poor choice it seemed. He counted only four floors, estimated its height at not much more than a hundred, maybe a hundred and fifty feet. It seemed like the kind of fall, if one landed right, one could easily live through. What was she thinking when she stood up there exactly one week ago? Did she regret it a moment after jumping? Had she, perhaps, hoped she would survive?

Three successive pinging noises and an announcement in a language he does not understand interrupt Perkins' thoughts. The man next to him begins folding his newspaper. As an experiment, he imagines that the pilot has just warned of an imminent crash. What will he do in his final minutes? Scream? Pray? Will he hold the hand of the stranger beside him?

"Atrocities have been committed on both sides in Cyprus," he reads in bed the next morning. The term, the whole phrase, feels as familiar as one of his mother's sayings. He's had only the most tenuous fixes on Bosnia, Rwanda, the Middle East, Kosovo, Northern Ireland, East Timor...others where his knowledge is even sketchier. Jews and Arabs, Catholics and Protestants, Hutus and Tutsis...now, add Greeks and Turks.

Okay, so: "The birth of the new independent Republic of Cyprus was realised on 16 August 1960. Transition from colony to an independent nation was not without growing pains and sporadic violence..."

Sporadic violence. The term feels as familiar as one of his mother's sayings...

His sleep is blank and dreamless and he awakes around two. He orders something called *coffee service with assorted fancies* from the room service menu and watches from the balcony as men with sagging breasts and women with lumpy asses sun themselves by a Mediterranean surf as flat and dull as the formica counters in his kitchen. It's Saturday afternoon. It's been arranged for him to deliver the ashes on Monday.

Among the guidebook's *local attractions* recommendations, beaches and monasteries are prominent. He feels no strong urge to be a tourist (this isn't Paris after all) and considers sticking with room service to pass the day, maybe just watching tv or reading.

He turns on the tv: here a man is giving bouzouki lessons, there Gary Coleman is speaking Greek, and finally, the BBC is reporting on children in Sierra Leone whose limbs have been hacked off by rebels.

A forty-five-minute bus ride and a steep hike through gravel and thicket bring him to the monastery. For almost an hour he wanders around, through tiled courtyards and arched breezeways, frescoed foyers and mosaic-lined chapels. Saints watch over him, moist marble walls cool his chest and back, Jesus' palms reach to touch his forehead. The monks he sees are discreet, pleasant, earnest in their tasks. Opening a window, watering a plant, lighting a candle—whatever their actions, they seem vital, blessed.

Outside, in a garden of orchid and chamomile, he relaxes on a stone bench. Like the profoundly holy, the fugitives, the broken before him, Perkins considers it, the monastic life. Prayer, sure, there would be plenty of that. He hasn't personally done much of it in the last ten or fifteen years, but he's willing to learn, to improve. Chores, certainly. Maybe they'll make and sell something...candles, fruitcake, crucifixes; beer, he would like that. He could sit at a long wooden table, share meals with his new brothers. Never again have to deal with that prick Roger. Very seriously, he wonders whether he is meant to stay here. Right here. For the rest of his life. He waits for a sign. Maybe one of the monks will come out and sit with him, talk with him about his life back home, the shrew, the job, his mother's death last year. Invite him for dinner, mousaka and wine, a simple bed in an airy room, morning meditation. He waits patiently for what seems like an hour but is actually only twenty minutes. It's so quiet he can hear the sun shining and it takes his breath away, like a punch in the stomach.

Night time and he wanders the palm-tree lined promenade, stubble-faced restaurant touts call out to him in demotic English, "Best

meze, best price!" Through the windows of the clubs, pink-faced, rhythm-less Brits locomote to late seventies pop. He buys a lamb kebab from a street vendor and drifts down to the beach. The soles of his bare feet recoil on the jagged rocks. He stumbles over a humping couple under a blanket and drops the last of his kebab near a scrummage of small crabs before he reaches the water's edge.

The circadian confusion of the past twenty-four hours and the disorientation of an unknown land and language have made his body feel dull and slightly nauseous, but seem to have sharpened his thoughts. An unsettling one occurs to him now: he is an orphan, and has been for almost a year. An orphan... Oliver Twist was an orphan, Little Annie was an orphan. But him? The label gives credibility and license to his loneliness. Yet there is—like the words *convict* or *homeless*—an undeniable echo of strength to the term. "I'm an orphan," he says softly, trying it out.

Back in his room, he wants to talk to someone. He really wants to talk to someone. But who? The office is closed, the shrew is a shrew, it's three p.m. on a Saturday, his mother is dead.

She doted on him. As the shrew put it after meeting her, *It appears the sun rises and sets on her little Perky, huh?* When his father died, his mother found her consolation in three things: Perkins, food, and a stock set of aphorisms passed on by her own mother. *Good things come to those who wait. The grass is always greener.... We are our brother's keeper.*

On that score, every Saturday she would take him to the V.A. hospital in Dayton where they would feed and change overly-medicated, incontinent men who mumbled about Agent Orange and Jane Fonda and would sometimes begin masturbating as soon as his mother touched them. He pleaded and cried incessantly each week until his mother relented, and his subsequent Saturdays were spent

instead in Narnia with Edmund and Lucy while his mother ironed his socks and underwear in the basement.

He undresses, gets in bed, and reads his guidebook, hoping it will put him to sleep. The tan suitcase, on the bed next to him, distracts him. He looks at the map. The concierge impatiently explained the details to him when he checked in: a bus ride to Lefkosia, the border crossing to Northern Cyprus, followed by a long taxi ride to the Karpas Peninsula. He looks at it: a tough, bony, finger of land pointing northeastward from the rest of the island. He reads a few pages from a chapter on native wildflowers before boredom and curiosity overwhelm him. He unzips the suitcase and takes out the mahogany box.

He opens it quickly. A thick, clear plastic bag, sealed casually with a twist-tie, holds the ashes. They don't look like ashes at all to him, more like dust. Plain house dust. Finer than sand, not as pretty. He picks up the bag, weighs it in his hands—it's much lighter than he thought it would be. He opens it, sniffs. Nothing. He has an urge to lick his finger and dip it in. Absurd, he thinks.

Still, he does it. It tastes a little earthy and a little bitter. He holds it in his mouth, mixing it with his own saliva like expensive wine, before swallowing it.

He puts the ashes away and walks to the balcony in his underwear. Below, the ocean is black, a crowd has gathered around a passed-out tourist, and the crabs are eating his lamb. "You're one sick fuck, Perkins," he whispers, shaking his head.

In Lefkosia, he takes a courtyard room on the ground floor of a beige and charmless hotel several blocks off the main drag. He wanders around the old city for an hour or so, pausing near an ancient, pollution-blackened wall where a tour group has stopped and a guide, a heavyset woman in a straw hat, speaks English with an Australian accent.

"Welcome to the world's last divided city. The buffer zone, normally at least a hundred meters, disappears very briefly here. There's only the bastion here." Because of her accent, Perkins thinks she says, "There's only the best gin here."

"There's only what here?" he blurts out from the back of the group.

She stands on her tiptoes and looks for him. "The bastion. The ramparts," she says, finding him. "Are you part of our group?"

A few more heads turn, glancing uncomfortably at him. After a few seconds of silence, he says, "No, I'm not part of your fucking group."

"Let's continue along, then," she says nervously, and the group seems very relieved when Perkins doesn't follow.

He moves closer to the wall and looks up: it's high, maybe sixty feet, a barbed wire fence runs along the top. Someone appears, coming toward him on a walkway along the top of the wall. A young man, dark hair, skin the color of wet sand, a dirty sport coat that looks to be as much a part of him as his hands and feet, stops directly above Perkins and looks down at him.

Perkins feels florid and mean and a staredown ensues. The young man looks passive but holds his stare. Seconds pass. Perkins makes up stories: the young man killed his mother, not her high blood pressure and daily bacon & eggs; the young man is a terrorist, responsible for the Lockerbie-Pan Am crash; the young man is preparing to pull out his dick and piss down on Perkins.

The young man waves to him. Perkins, his neck aching, blood pulsing hot through his temples, drops his head for a second of relief, then picks it back up. But the man has turned and is walking away. Perkins watches him. Has he won or lost? he wonders.

So absorbing is his interrupted dream that night—a plane that he knows is going to crash, but doesn't—that in waking, it feels as

though he is straining to pull his head from a wet and adhesive pillow. From the courtyard, thuds and rustles—not gentle, alarming.

He goes to the window and pushes aside the drape. A startling sight: a woman's face, like some tragic bird, slams into the window right in front of him, so hard that the window shakes. Behind her, he glimpses a figure, tall with thick glasses.

He drops the drape and for a confused moment, considers his options. Fear creates excuses, rationalizations...it's none of his business, it will only make things worse, etc. Everything reduces to: stay in the room, or go outside.

His legs are shaking when he opens the door. Her face is rainbow-streaked with make-up. She's too thin, wears red boots and a short skirt.

"What's going on?" he says in a tone that announces instantly: *I'm scared and have no idea what I'm doing.*

The man has her by the collar of her sweater now, but it's thick and loose and offers little purchase. She swings an arm wildly backwards at him and her elbow catches him on the mouth. He mumbles an expletive and punches her on the back of her head twice before Perkins, endorphins racing through his body like an electric drug, grabs him around the neck and bends him backward off his feet with an agility that shocks both of them.

He tightens his grip. The man's throat feels warm and soft, like clay he wants to squeeze until it runs through his fingers. He could kill him, he knows this now as surely as he knows his own mother's name, and he savors it a moment.

Finally, he says, "I'm going to let you go. But you better stop."

He pulls his arm off and backs a few steps away. Strange, he will think later that night, the things one notices. From seemingly nowhere, the man has produced a beer bottle and is swinging it at his head. *Carlsberg*, he thinks just before it hits him.

He hardly feels it. Just touches his forehead and looks at the blood smeared across his fingers. The man looks at Perkins and knows that there will be no second chances now. He runs.

Perkins catches his breath, looks around the courtyard. Drapes slip closed just as his gaze falls on them.

"Hello! We are our brother's keeper!" he screams; it echoes around the courtyard.

There are two checkpoints, one on either side, separated by a three-hundred-meter concrete walkway lined with barbed wired fences. He doesn't get far before he's greeted by a large wall, painted blue and white, which partially blocks his way.

Four posters, blown-up photographs, arranged comic strip-like, line one area. In the first frame, an old man wanders into a field between two buildings. The second frame, he's bending over, picking something, looks like mushrooms? Frame three, he clutches his chest, he's been shot. Final frame, he's on the ground, dead.

A tv monitor, sunk into another area of the wall, eye-level, plays a video. A man is climbing a flagpole. He's not dressed for this. Something about him looks desperate. He wants to reach that flag, take it down. A shot rings out. Another, and another. He slides slowly down the pole, leaving streaks of blood here and there. Perkins pauses with a few others as they are meant to. The message is simple: Look, look at what these people can do!

Last week, he remembers, he cringed as he watched a stray dog trying to cross the street; turned the channel when boxing came on—people were cheering. Then, there was the transvestite with the bloody lip. He couldn't wait to get away from him!

A stiff, salty breeze from the driver's open window causes the map to flutter in his hand like a wounded animal. He holds it down and scans it, finds the town they have just passed, Yiallousa. The driver has said it was near Yiallousa.

Two hours of flat and brown have given way to verdant and blue, a business-like quiet has replaced uncomfortable chit-chat, and off to the left, whitecaps suspend the horizon.

He reminds himself how simple his task really is. He never knew her. It's sad. Profoundly, unequivocally sad. He feels it, he will share it.

Her father, bearded, braceleted, and dirty, greets him in front of the house, a ramshackle palace littered with coastal detritus: a rusting gaff hook, scraps of styrofoam, an enormous hollow sea turtle shell. He wears billowing pants and no shirt.

"You're from the university, then?" he says, the accent pure Oxbridge.

"Yes," Perkins says. When they shake hands, a gust of ouzo hits Perkins like an oar.

The driver is, unfortunately, quite willing to wait, even cranks the seat back for an impromptu nap. The father wants to talk.

He made his money in arms sales, but couldn't wait to buy his own slice of deserted paradise here, to get away from the London grub and gloom.

"It's timeless here," he says, "no traffic, no tube, no crime. Even the Turks arriving in '74 didn't touch me here." Around the house, odd sculptures made from twisted wire, styrofoam, crab claws and dried fish heads, other things Perkins doesn't want to recognize. She—his daughter—was the result of an unfortunate afternoon with a local woman who left them both for Istanbul less than a month after the girl's birth.

"I'm afraid I wasn't much of a father to her. Frankly, I had no idea what I was doing," he admits, staring at distant nothingness like one of the V.A. hospital patients Perkin's mother used to tend to.

Eventually, the father opens a bottle of port and leads Perkins around behind the house to a freshly-dug hole a few feet from the back wall. He's nailed a photo of her to the wall, above the hole, but the low wood is rotting and the nail is too big. Rust-colored ants, tiny, frantic opportunists, probe the edges of the hole.

"That's her, then?" he says, gesturing at the box. Perkins nods, hands it to him. He turns the wood over in his hands. "Might put this to use," he says with a shrug. He takes out the bag of ashes and tosses it into the hole.

He kicks some dirt over it. "I'm not a religious man," he says, taking a huge gulp of the port and offering the bottle to Perkins. "You?"

"Could you pull over for just a minute?" Perkins asks the driver when they've been traveling for about twenty minutes.

The sun is high now, at its peak. He walks through a field of dormant wildflowers, across the hot sand and stops at the water's edge. He takes off his clothes and lays them in a neat pile.

The rocky bottom hurts his tender feet, but he rubs them hard on the rocks and shells. When the water is about chest high, he takes a deep breath, pinches his nose shut, ducks his head underwater quickly, and resurfaces. Salt water stings the cut on his forehead.

He drops under the water again and holds himself there. The roar of the ocean fills his head. His feet are callusing, the cut on his forehead scarring. "I'm an orphan," he reminds himself.

A N D R E W   M I L L E R

## *Her Queen of Brussels*

*Guess what I touch you with.*

She held one hand over my eyes,  
and brushed each thing across my lips  
even as I was guessing:

*Felt from your robe.*

*Silk from your hat, and that is a feather,  
and that your mouth.*

*That is your mouth.*

In spring her palms grew rough  
like the pages of the diary she let me read.  
Still with those hands we danced  
because she could only dance

with her fingers, anymore,  
in the bed by my window  
where she waited to go home,  
she said, to Brussels.

Many things smelled like metal  
and also old flowers and open bottles.  
Inside each a rose petal hung  
like blood in glass.



—It's here under my dress  
and deeper, there's a nest  
where her hands stopped dancing  
and then danced again—slowly

the way she used to wake me  
when I slept those afternoons beside her  
dreaming of Brussels.  
She was my aunt,

younger than my mother,  
older than me,  
in my bed by the window  
yesterday, and all spring.

The elms died  
of the Dutch disease that bore their name.  
Their limbs raved  
breaking down like black lightning.

Mother sent me out of the room,  
and a man came with tools in a bag.  
Now in the hall, people say:  
*Perhaps it's for the best.*

*Elizabeth... Elizabeth...*  
They're still talking,  
but I have found where the sparrow's nest fell down.  
Her chick's voice scissored in the wood pile.

Leaves wrapped her body,  
and ants dressed her eyes.  
I've stolen meat from the tables,  
silk from the hat, felt from the dress.

Under my blouse, the smell is all that moves.  
Here, because you  
are the man who came with the tools  
and made my aunt beautiful again, insisting

that she wear her blue kimono after all—  
take my sparrow.  
With your white gloves you know how  
to make cheeks blush again

and make the smell of new flowers stay,  
so the ants cannot find  
what they come looking for.  
These are your wings. I am a dancer.

*The Latin of the Stone*

Time to cut the smile  
across the soft box of the breath  
and listen to what father says.  
It's early in the morning,  
and his voice is sour from the night before.

Take a stone and knife  
rub them with oil  
and that's where his voice has gone:  
a lisping that meets in sharpness.

I sharpen all the voices.

In white sleeves falling down  
too long into cuffs  
that have no buttons,  
he walks and I follow.

We pass the barn door again  
where the horses step in the dark.

He calls to them in French  
—the language of animals—  
and instructs me in the language of meat:  
*Horse is Cheval,*  
*Cheval ist Fleisch...*

Now, before he lifts up the cleaver  
He shows me how to run my hand  
Against the ribs.  
Cupped in his hand, mine frisks, pets,  
stops to press at the shallow and deep.

Sister, after you got sick,  
the doctors spoke Latin over you.  
They reached and pressed

so many times and so many places  
at last even you seemed to wake  
and listen  
the way animals do  
when we speak about them in front of them  
when we drag our hands  
under the whetstone of their throats.

*This Radio Silence*

04:00 and the codes say: *No war.*  
Above us, squadrons are circling  
north by northwest in this new hour.

Down the hill, below the Quonset huts,  
the lights of Los Angeles boil over.  
I'm thinking of you now, mother,

in your dress of sequins. Again you are dancing  
in a ballroom whose lights glitter you  
like a city seen at night from a high altitude,

or from a hilltop window, past a desk lamp,  
over the steel boxes of a short wave radio—  
my cigarette unspooling its one flame.

Mother, you liked men too much.  
Drawn to the white lamps of your breasts,  
they would not leave us alone.

Too often I waited in those tuxedos  
you had tailor-made for me, my thumb nails  
flitting through the felt of their cuffs

as you danced a sloppy Lindy or fox.  
I drank the gin your men left at the table,  
and let each new father drive us home.

But how many nights did I have to go  
into your room and ask your newest guest  
to leave because you had been called away

by the air raid only you could hear?  
He did not understand. I sent him packing  
and found you under the sink, your hands

as white as your naked breasts. One of those nights  
I unknotted your hands from the silver pipe,  
covered you with the dress—the only thing I could find—

and after the front door slammed,  
I shut the cupboard, and we sat tightly  
in the dark among your provisions:

Wonder Bread and a bottle of raspberry jam  
and the hard red pills you shook out  
under the candle like dice into your hand.

They looked like angry seeds.  
We ate our jam and bread.  
We ate our seeds—too many I think,

and you told me about the bomb,  
how each night they flew it—like baby Jesus—  
around the world. When it fell,

our bones would melt together into jam,  
but by then, it seemed to me,  
I was melting already into you.

It seemed to me I heard the codes  
of my happiness dashed out  
between your heart and my ear.

After the candles died, my hands  
wandered the soft light you almost made.  
I found the morning burning under the door.

Tomorrow, the warrant officer will censor this.  
He'll drag his red pencil from behind his ear  
and strike out *grief*—that light that woke us

when we found ourselves curled into one ball.  
Mother, as the East and West  
change the frequency of their minds,

change their words, change  
their staticky hearts in Morse code—  
under your breasts I learned to listen

like a man under two falling skies,  
and I am sorry.  
Dawn in our cupboard, you told me

you wanted me to be your artist.  
Is it enough that I write down all that comes to me  
over the air? In the log, the columns of code,

I think, look like a poem,  
and I whisper them, Mother,  
and signal the bombers down to sleep.

*Woman Overboard*

Stacy and my brother Lou met when they both worked on one of the tourist boats. He was the boat's first mate at that time, and he was dating a girl named Amy who was beautiful, but usually mad at him for not ever wanting to do anything, or for not doing enough for her. Stacy was scrubbing the deck; Lou was in the wheelhouse surveying the scene. He happened to be looking right at Stacy when she fell off the boat, so he immediately leaned forward and announced *Woman overboard!* into the public address system.

Lou has a booming voice like an announcer on a game show, if you can imagine. He turned off the microphone, and let out half a laugh. And then everyone just watched as she saved herself. She fell twelve feet from the deck, plunged underwater, and resurfaced a moment later covered with muck and holding a forlorn duckling in her left hand. She dragged herself out of the water, scaled the ladder to the wheelhouse, put the duckling down tenderly, and said, *What? What did you say?* That's how they met. The two of them drove each other nuts at first, and then, well, and then they had a little girl together. Lou raises the girl now, and Stacy moved out west with the duck.

Right before Stacy slipped off the boat, she had been looking at the duckling, which was flopping around in an oil slick about the size and shape of a child's swimming pool. She saw the duck struggling in the water and leaned out toward it until she accidentally lost her footing.

Stacy was Lou's twelfth girlfriend, and the only one of his girlfriends who didn't call me crying after the break up. Stacy was different. I think of the other girlfriends as individuals who successively took on the role of the original girlfriend, Cindy. Cindy was

sweet. When they dated in high school, she was involved in just about every after school activity and took all sorts of weird evening classes, like Swahili and belly dancing. Cindy always tried her best. Even though the girlfriends don't look alike, they have similar issues, and about the time the relationship ends, the girlfriend always calls me and wants to know what my brother's deal is. Sometimes they cry, but mainly they sound frustrated and really ticked off. I learn more about the relationships from the girlfriends than from Lou. All Lou told me about the day he met Stacy was that she fell off the boat, she saved the duck, and then he met a real weirdo sitting on the park bench, a woman with a lot of used hankies. The rest of this I got from Stacy, and the weirdo, who turned out to be number fourteen.

In the wheelhouse, Lou looked at the sickly duckling, at the very wet woman, and at the other deckhands, who were waiting to see what he would do. He decided that the best course of action was to focus on the duck. So, without pausing to field Stacy's questions or to apologize for making a joke of her near-death experience, he picked up the duck and walked off the boat.

The waterfront isn't like it was in the old days—the longshoremen have moved to better ports, and the barges have been replaced by cruise ships and pleasure boats. The boardwalk is gone; now there's a vast brick plaza paid for by a small levy and thousands of private citizens who were willing to pay a hundred bucks each for a personalized brick. Most of the old bars are gone, and the old salts too.

Lou left the boat and walked upriver a block or so, until the ship was out of sight. Then he wasn't sure what to do, so he sat down on a park bench next to a dour young woman with her hair in a bun. The bench was next to the sea wall, but faced the street. The duck sat quietly at Lou's side as he and the woman regarded the traffic. An ancient gray pickup rolled by at very low speed, towing a school bus that appeared to be totally gutted. The light turned from

yellow to red as the two vehicles lumbered through the intersection. The young man steering the school bus smiled broadly, too optimistically for a guy at the helm of such a heap. He even honked the horn a few times. Then the woman on the bench recognized the guy—she waved and called out, “Hey! One day at a time!” The guy saw her and waved back. Then it looked like maybe she didn’t feel so good, like a wave of feeling not very good washed over her. She pulled a bottle of aspirin from her purse and took a few. Then she noticed the duck.

“Hey,” she said, “What’s up with the duck?”

“I found it. I don’t know what to do with it.”

The woman pulled a used Kleenex from her purse, then another. She sidled over to the duck.

“What’s its name?”

“It doesn’t have one.”

She rooted around and found several more wads of tissue in her purse and went to work cleaning the duck.

“Huh, you’ve got a lot of used Kleenex.” Lou said. She spit on one of the tissues, then rubbed the duck with it. The oil moved from one part of the duck to another part of the duck, but didn’t actually leave the duck.

“Maybe it needs some water, some water and a little aspirin,” the woman said.

“I don’t know. Think that’s okay?”

“Well, it might help. Depends. I’ve had a headache for four months.”

The duck quivered on the bench, breathing wetly. Lou didn’t know what to say, so he said, “Wow.”

Then Lou spotted Stacy striding down the walkway. She had changed into a dry set of coveralls and tied her hair back. He was actually glad to see her. She looked very efficient. She looked like she would know what to do with the duck.

“There you are!” Stacy said. She picked up the duck and nestled it in a towel. “You have a car, yes? We better get her to a vet.” She looked at the woman on the bench and said, “Oh, hi, Linda.” then turned and headed for the staff parking area.

Lou followed her to his car. He opened the door for her and the duck. His head bobbed slightly like a butler’s as they entered the car. He felt really weird, and could not say exactly why.

Stacy directed Lou to the nearest veterinarian, and they got there in no time. It was a quiet trip—the radio wasn’t even on. The whole way, Stacy focused on the duck. She touched it carefully. She rubbed it with the towel. She made eye contact with the duck and held it until the duck looked away. Lou and Stacy didn’t say a word to each other until the veterinarian took the duck to the exam room.

Then Stacy thanked Lou for driving her, and asked if Linda was his girlfriend. Lou said no, she was just helping with the duck.

“Okay,” she said.

“Why?”

“Because Linda’s a slut.”

Lou said, “She’s a slut?” What do you mean by that?”

“Well, when I was in high school she and her sister were always making out with guys in public, practically doing it in the classroom. It was like a contest between them, to see who could go the furthest.”

“So that’s what a slut is?” An expression of bothiration fell across Lou’s face. “All she told me was that she’s had a headache for four months. Anyway, I don’t think that’s what a slut is. A slut is just kind of more . . . *available* than other girls.”

“Well, that’s not what it means. Available is one thing, slut is a whole other thing. It was like she couldn’t control herself. She and her sister were both like that. They couldn’t seem to stop themselves.”

"What's wrong with being available, anyway? What you're describing is skanky, sure, but what's wrong with that?"

"All I'm saying is she was a slut in high school."

Stacy had a lot more definite ideas about the world than Lou, and it sort of made him mad. Skank vs. slut vs. available is just one example of the hundreds of things they ended up arguing about.

They sat quietly, waiting for the duck. Lou thought about calling his girlfriend, Amy, but then decided not to because she was mad at him and he couldn't quite remember why.

There's only one picture of Amy in the family album. It's from Mardi Gras season and she's wearing a ridiculous hat. It looks like a Christmas tree ran into the Leaning Tower of Pisa, shrank, and then landed on the head of a good-natured young woman. She's got a great smile and her eyes are completely closed. She used to make cookies for Lou. I'm not saying the cookies defined her, I'm just saying she made cookies. She also fed him grapes. He looked bored a lot. When they broke up she called me, crying. We had lunch together at a really great greasy spoon.

Here's another picture: It's of Lou and Sarah (number six, I think) at one of mom and dad's barbecues. She was the athletic one, the one who took him backpacking and windsurfing. This was when they had just started going out, when he was really into her. In the picture, Lou and Sarah are in the pool wearing snorkeling masks. They're all entangled in an embrace but trying to face the camera. Her smile is stretched out over a mouth full of snorkeling equipment, and so is his. She doesn't look quite as weird as he does. My brother looks pretty freaking freaky when he's in love. It looks too unnatural to last long. When they broke up, Sarah called me, crying. She wanted to go for a walk in the park, so we did. I tried to explain my brother.

And here's one more: it's of Lou at another Mardi Gras ball, about ten years ago. He's not smiling and not frowning. His face is all crooked as he stands there trying to decide how to look.

The veterinarian emerged from the exam room. The duck was totally clean. It was small and gray, all fuzzy and perfect. Stacy directed Lou to drive her and the duck home, and he did. And he didn't really know how it came to pass, but they settled in together for a while. They named the duck Camille, and dug a pond for her.

I didn't see much of Lou for some time, and when I did see him, he seemed sort of hyper and disturbed. I recall him telling me with some urgency: "Stacy has a tattoo of a cat that's waving hello. But it's a Japanese cat or something. It's on her ankle." Another time he said, "Stacy knows the lyrics to every song. I swear to god." And another time, "Stacy's taking CPR. She's at the top of her class!" The words weren't inherently strange but that tone was something I had not heard from him before: it was awe, it was pride-of-girlfriend.

Once I asked him why he seemed down, and he explained, "Stacy and I had a big fight about cremation." Their arguments were not generally his idea and covered a broad range of topics, including eggs, litter, pennies, meter maids, drive-through windows, the Mercator projection, the best way to get from point A to point B, and that old chestnut—argument vs. debate vs. lively conversation.

After Stacy got pregnant, Lou resurfaced. They began attending Sunday dinners at our parents house, where we ate meat and potatoes then sat by the pool watching TV together for hours on end, the television's blue light rippling along the surface of the water. It felt normal and nice to have one of the girlfriends around again and we, my parents and I, tried to treat it like old times but the bun-in-the-oven aspect of the situation, and Stacy and this new enthusiastic

version of Lou made it nearly impossible for us to fall back into the velvet ditch of the good old days. Mom tried to commiserate with Stacy about the difficulties of pregnancy but got little response. Dad wanted to know why she was working as a deckhand. I just sat there waiting for Lou to say the next weird thing.

We were unsettled but not unimpressed. At the school where I teach, the faculty had erected a sign that looked like a thermometer, which was used to chart the progress of the senior class trip fundraising effort. Every couple of days, the mercury on it rose, and likewise every Sunday the family's admiration for Stacy bubbled upward. Stacy had not only organized Lou's CD collection, she had convinced him to keep it that way. She won a lifetime supply of motor oil in a radio contest. She traded that lifetime supply for a lifetime supply of car repairs from a guy she met. He was a fairly elderly gentleman whose years were numbered, but still, wow. Then, after she quit her job, she invented a better mousetrap. It was a kinder, gentler mousetrap, and soon the mice who had infested Lou and Stacy's house frolicked and multiplied in a nearby park. In the space of a few weeks they caught and released approximately one hundred mice. It appeared that word had got out in mouse circles that the traps were actually portals to a greener world. One night by the pool Stacy and Lou spent hours tying lengths of rope into complex knots, and a few weeks later Lou announced that thanks to Stacy he had passed the Captain's exam. He was going to be promoted! Everyone was pleased.

Then Stacy decided to befriend me, and holy crap, I have not experienced such intense befriending since, I think, the third grade. I know that befriending is not a word, but it is most definitely a feeling. Stacy wanted to know all my particulars: what my job entailed, who I had dated, who my immediate prospects were, what ideas I had for the future. Her interrogation method involved more eye contact than I can really deal with, so I couldn't

hold out for long. I told her everything, and then when that didn't seem like enough, I threw in a few wild hypotheses about the truth. Like somehow in the course of the conversation I convinced myself that I had a crush on the biology teacher at my school. This was largely because it seemed vital for me to have something worthwhile to report. She asked numerous follow-up questions, and together we decided that he was totally hot and that I really should go for it. Then she wanted to know if I had considered other career paths, if I had ever considered living somewhere different, like Taos. I hardly had a chance to say *No, not really* before she started rattling off a long list of options that she thought were promising for me: stunt double, veterinarian, ergonomics specialist, police officer, transportation futurist. She had detailed ideas about all of these possibilities. This is when I really began to worry for Lou.

Every Sunday, Stacy seemed less interested in Lou and the rest of us. She tapped her toes, took control of the remote, made frequent trips to the bathroom. However, Lou didn't seem to notice, didn't seem worried; his devotion to Stacy did not diminish. When the blessed day arrived, baby Sue emerged from the womb hollering. She may have the most powerful set of lungs known to babykind, plus she has the endurance of a long-distance runner. Sometimes when Sue starts screaming, Lou picks her up and gazes at her, admiring her work.

My father has trouble with the crying. He can't hear anyone crying without feeling sad himself, and if it goes on for a long time he gets a little choked up. One Sunday in the middle of dinner the baby let loose a big scream that just didn't subside, and my poor dad, his mouth full of pot roast, couldn't take his eyes off her. Lou picked the baby up, and Mom and I tried to ignore dad's distress, which seemed the kindest path. The baby kept screaming as mom and I continued our conversation, trying to remember the name of some movie we had both seen. We couldn't name any of the actors or describe what it was about but it did involve huge silver RVs, the



desert, and a handsome, perpetually discombobulated actor. We agreed that the actor had brown hair, and then we fell silent. The baby cried; dad attempted to chew. He then made an effort to maintain a calm facial expression. The crying was officially causing him to freak out. Eventually, he tried to swallow. A gob of roast got stuck. And then, for one longish moment of choking and wailing, it felt like dad and the baby were the only real people in the room, like the rest of us were furniture or knick knacks. Then Stacy jumped up, grabbed my dad, and performed the Heimlich maneuver on him. It was completely effective. Lou beamed with pride. Stacy whisked the baby out of the room for a diaper change.

Not long afterwards, Stacy skipped town and left the baby with Lou. I still can't believe she did that. She had handled that child with great care and efficiency for six months and then I guess maybe she felt it was time for the next project. She said she would be back in a month or so, but then we never heard from her. When she left, Lou was hurt, but a few weeks later another pretty girl caught his eye. Stacy left, and didn't even call me! I was sad for Lou that time, but also a little sad for myself. I never got closure on the Stacy-and-Lou romance.

As for Lou, he's back to dating the same kind of girls he's always dated. Tonight Lisa, playing the role of Cindy, calls me and asks, "What's up with your brother? What's his deal?" She's crying way too much over my lummo of a brother. She's surprised. She's confused. I don't really have an explanation, but I do have this page from the photo album, the one with the picture where Lou thinks he looks nonchalant. Because that's his deal, he spends his life trying to look like he doesn't care, but failing totally. There are other pictures on this page of Mardi Gras photos: mom and dad are posing for the camera, standing in a conversational grouping. Dad's looking at mom, who is wearing large silver glasses and looking off stage left. Dad is genuinely smiling at her, but mom isn't even really

smiling at whomever she sees over there. And there's a picture of Aunt Sue in an enormous headdress. The headdress is made of red, white, and blue feathers and is about two feet tall. A dozen silver stars are stuck in the headdress, caught in the act of shooting away from her head. One of her arms is slung around my cousin Kit, who is ten years old and looks at the ground uncomfortably. Aunt Sue's holding a big feathery wand in one hand, and using her other hand to rub something off Kit's cheek. Poor little Kit has got his mom's saliva smeared all over his face. He's in his own little hell there. In another picture, the original girlfriend, Cindy, is wearing a sequined costume and tap dancing, trying very hard not to look at her feet. Her smile is muscular but not deeply felt. Her hands are clenched and her shoulders are stooping forward, as if they could keep track of what her eyes should not.

*Don Antonio, at the Beach,  
Hand over Heart, Declares his Love*

so delicately:

little snails of words he had hoarded, spilled  
tidally, dammed between other orchid-strewn

rivers, him out of breath from this five o'clock sea  
he has not ventured into for centuries;  
& waiting.

Not even juiced up, or not  
much, having produced himself on time or almost.  
Bulging groined, anciently

bikini'd in royal blue—  
my new-age Praxiteles, prune veined,  
cuneiformed violet along his dismuscl'd arms—

This is something that I comprehend,  
this gorgeous epiphany, this  
late hurricane

*Sleeping with a Snoring Fish*

The mind slips out of the body  
as continents lift themselves from the deep—

o fish, o Europe, from whence  
your wet mouth, your gravelly sleep.

The mind flips back into flesh  
the toothy coelocanth, the islands sink.

I wake by the water, the cave  
of your gullet, that blacker ink

stretched from cacophony to mute  
like a periodic sentence.

I pick up a shell to hear the moon.  
I hold in what keeps verbs tense.

Why should air traveling into the lungs  
move like thought's breaker?

A nearly impossible task  
this sleeping with a snoring hake.

Best to nod off while he's still yawning,  
best to die somewhere else until dawn.

*The Ninth*

No ode here, joying  
onions to liver and vice  
to versa.

Certainly, Schiller had  
his apples (sans Ludwig's  
black flags, of course).

The phone rings: Why  
the hell did you park  
your car so close to mine.

Christ, can't you see  
how the snow is coming  
down.

*No Clever Simile for Salt*

Forget its throw  
in the skillet with  
potatoes and onions.

The damage goes back to  
the second of two grandmothers,  
who ghosted above  
Polish snow.

And *oczywiście*, on the other side  
some um-pah-pah of tuba or accordion  
*valtz* gone awry in the genes—  
mislink after mistake.

Happy copy in the camp of  
suicides. Plummeters all from  
laughable heights, each, in turn,  
imagining a precision swan.

*At the South Tyrol Museum of Archaeology*

Before the world-famous Iceman could arrive  
in Bolzano, his room had to be prepared:  
the climate had to match the interior  
of the glacier where he was found.  
Like a stunt double, the test corpse  
took the risk of thaw, accepted the danger

of decay. Soon people would wait hours  
to look through the viewing pane close  
to the Iceman's tragic face, his wall-eyed,  
gap-toothed expression frozen  
as if he were about to speak.

No doubt the test corpse looked much better,  
neither twisted nor shrunk by the millennia.  
He must have appeared to enjoy  
his work, lying there face up, eyes closed,  
dreaming of his hero the Iceman.

Whatever he did in life, he got results  
in death: the test at last complete,  
the museum's star attraction arrived  
to great fanfare and publicity.  
And our man? Was he just a corpse again

or was he rushed to another gig,  
readying a room for some other  
renowned mummy? Surely he's still at work,  
that clever statue: for all we know  
he's the one they lay in our own coffins  
to see how well we'll be received.

# *Fossil Objects in the Seventeenth Century*

"There is no such thing as *shell* in these resemblances of shells."  
—Martin Lister, 1671

Have these bright shapes,  
the obligatory exhibits  
of so many wonder cabinets,  
fallen from the heavens?  
Are they the work of man,  
or the negative casts of organic  
objects? Here sit a hundred rarities  
no living animal resembles:  
ossicles, nodules, spherules  
defying all comparison—  
although from time to time they contain  
miniature replicas inside themselves—

evidence, perhaps, that even minerals  
procreate: the miner, it is said, mines  
fresh gems from the same adit  
he emptied the day before.  
Certainly no cabinet is complete  
without their medicinal power,  
their obvious moral clarity  
so hard to classify: what world  
do we live in when the seashells  
eroding from the tops of mountains  
are not seashells at all, but solid stone,  
only images of themselves?

# *The Cancer Patient and the Swan (a trilogy)*

## I *The Office Visit*

The schooled swan did not feign indifference.  
He puffed up his feathers. Her youth and candidness  
led him to cascade the layers of his plumage before her.  
She was skeptical of his ceremony, but never had she  
seen such gorgeous refinements; and of course,  
she needed his help. And if not his, that of one  
very much like him. His feathers were clean  
and brushed. His round eye was clear.

And he seemed considerate: he broke his speech  
into simple quackery when speaking quacibus  
did not impress her. And she had a morbid concern  
about wasting time. So she said yes to his request  
to open her up, unaware that he had already begun  
to imagine his rapture with her little human body.

## 2 *The Biopsy*

His beak went in beneath the rib.  
His wing feathers were tied with a string  
behind him. He bit a little piece of her,  
a memento of sorts, before he retreated  
and sewed her shut. The nurse let go his wings.  
He slid his webbed feet from their paper covers  
to splay his eight toes, to relieve their ache,  
before he paddled back to his private quay.

He ate scraps of bread, sang a garbled song,  
and scratched dry marks on the landing dock.  
He shuddered at the thought of going over her  
again when she was dying; he had some decency.  
So he ran back to her, a rut on the water, to the tower  
where she lay. He woke her, dimly, to turn her away.

## 3 *The Vigil*

The swan could smell the death scent.  
He didn't need to say it. His wings hung down  
his body like a limp coat. He stretched  
his neck high and nodded to her family  
draped and dropped in chairs around the room.  
He asked about her two young daughters

for he had not met them. Her husband could not speak.  
Her mother stared through him. Her father and brothers  
leaned forward, weighing the line of his strange presence.  
Her sisters spoke candidly because he brought the issue up:  
Helen was fighting with the manager of a coffee house,  
and Clytemnestra stayed at home watching television.

It was clear he had no god to let loose. Voicing his leave,  
he fancied his wings. Stale air bore the flagellation.

*All Night Long*

She leans discreetly against the car fender. The strike of a match; her lips just so. It means nothing. It's just one long song lyric about another man done wrong. She's heard the words. She knows the tune. She takes him in and chews slow like he's vanilla taffy. She flicks him out: a piece of stale gum. She knows the story. She knows the ropes.

He sees her from across the crowded street. He's intrigued. He thinks, *All alone?*

She knows. She knows.

He crosses the street against the signal, dodging cars. He says "Hey. What's up?"

She smiles the smile of every warm romantic night. She offers him a cigarette, hitting the pack against her hip; a single filter comes out—poised. He takes the cigarette, although he doesn't smoke, and lets her light it for him. She offers him a ride home. She's from the city. He can tell. He likes the urban look she has. Leather jacket, tight jeans, boots, Italian men's undershirt. Dark lipstick. He sighs softly so she won't hear, but she does. She smiles. Her bright white teeth contrast her lipstick, her jacket, the night falling all around them.

He says, "You from the city?" He coughs from the cigarette.

She thinks, *He is the smallest bird.*

Her eyes momentarily reveal all the curiosity in the world, then they fade into something he can't quite discern. She tosses her hair from her shoulders to her back. She shakes her head, laughing. As she makes this gesture, her jacket floats free. He glimpses the soft black hair curling from her underarms. He thinks, *Sexy.*

In the car, she turns on the radio—pushes the accelerator closer to the floor. She softly sings a song about rocking all night long.

He taps his fingers on the armrest. He's thinking about her bed, wondering if it's off the floor or on it, wondering if she drinks coffee or tea, wondering what kind of underwear she has on. He thinks, *Futon. Coffee. Blue silk with lace.*

He says, "Nice car."

She says, "Mmmm," then she says, "You hungry, Bobby?"

He says, "My name isn't Bobby." He's embarrassed even though she's the one who has made the mistake. He says, "I should introduce myself."

She says, "I want to eat, Bobby. It's too early to go home. I'll tell you what. If you come eat with me, I'll tell you all about myself." Her life unrolls, a timeline scrawled on butcher paper, as she thinks of things she could tell him: years ago she grew up in Kansas City; she remembers riding a rusty tricycle through rows of corn late at night as the crickets roared. She could tell him anything and he would look interested. She knows.

He thinks by talking about a meal she thinks they'll be together long enough to have a meaningful conversation. He thinks they'll be in her bed if not tonight, then tomorrow. He thinks he will get her phone number; he will walk down the street with his arm slung across her shoulders.

He says, "Sure. Why not?"

She says, "How long you been in the city, Bobby?" She taps his knee with one red fingernail—just one tap then her hand is back on the steering wheel. He can feel the spot she touches long after she has lifted her finger. It's a single point driving deeper toward the bone.

He pauses. Trying out this pause like he's trying on a new sharkskin jacket.

He says, "About a year." He's lying.

She says, "That so?" She pushes in the car's cigarette lighter, just as it clicks she brings the crisp red ring to her dangling cigarette. She doesn't offer him one.

He says, "Could I have another cigarette?"

She turns then slightly toward her side-view mirror. Bobby doesn't see the slow coy smile. He thinks she's checking the mirror because she's switching lanes to turn left. He's also preoccupied with the crease her jeans are making where her crotch meets her thigh. He wants to run his finger slowly along it, then he wants to do it again. She turns toward a section of town he's never seen. He likes watching her drive. He likes her style. She's not like Jennifer who would be afraid to be out on city streets after midnight.

She turns off the radio as they turn onto Eighth. It's where the good music is. Neon lights flash and crowds of men and women lounge against mailboxes, on benches, against parking meters. He hears the sound of a glass bottle shattering in an alleyway, a muffled yell.

She parks the car with one swift motion. She thinks, *Whiskey*. She thinks, *Bourbon*. She knows Bobby will buy at least one if not two drinks, maybe more.

Bobby looks around amazed at how she found a parking place in all the chaos. He looks at her as the car comes to a halt. Her lips shine under the streetlights. People bustle by the car. He hears a woman's high shriek. He thinks, *God, we could do it right here and no one would even care*. He thinks, *I should ask her to do it right here, right now*.

He says, "So. We're eating?"

She smiles and pats his knee. She says, "Yes, Bobby. Yes, we're eating."

Bobby says, "Your name... I didn't get it."

She says, "It's Rochelle... or Susan."

He smiles and says, "Susan. Definitely Susan."

She leads him by the hand, down the sidewalk, into an alley.

*By the hand!* he thinks.

They go to her favorite bar; in the basement there's a jazz band warming up. Stray notes from a clarinet merge with a keyboard. There will be nothing to distract her here. No complicated compromises or misunderstandings. She's here to drink, to inhale the smoke and sweat, to relive a life or two she's left behind. It's dark and smoky, the kind of dark and smoke that makes it feel ancient in the bar; timeless. She eyes the bass player. She knows Bobby will never see her bed, but she'll kiss him passionately at the bar. The kisses will be good enough to suggest how good the sex could have been.

Susan runs her fingers slowly through Bobby's hair. As she runs her fingers through her own, she says, "I love men with wavy hair. They're always so sensitive."

He'll hear this line—or others like it—again. But this is the first time and Bobby's flattered. He only retains the word 'love' from the sentence. He counts himself lucky.

Bobby's trying to keep pace with Susan's drinking as the bartender replaces empty glasses with full ones like clockwork. Bobby is getting drunker. He knows he's nodding his head way too much, saying very little, thinking a lot. He hasn't had any dinner, and he's having trouble remembering the right words, remembering how to play the game. The music seems very far away. Susan seems very close.

He says slowly, through marbles and his tongue, "You come here often?" He laughs at the way he sounds and says, "Do you think you like me?"

Over her bourbon Susan says, "Yes." She eyes him steadily then, as if just seeing him for the first time. She kisses him. People stand very near holding bottles of beer and sweating glasses of vodka and scotch. A crowd hovers around the pool table in the far corner. A



man in tight jeans and cowboy boots stares calmly at the eight ball, then levels his cue and shoots.

Bobby wobbles toward the crooked wooden bathroom door.

When he returns edging himself through the crowd, Susan is gone. He realizes she hasn't gone for cigarettes, or to the bathroom, or to say hello to someone from wherever. He realizes Susan is gone. The band is done playing. The bar is closing. People are spilling out of the door onto the street. He wonders if he was in the bathroom for hours.

Bobby stumbles out into the moist city air. The drizzle makes his skin feel like plastic. He rubs his face, looks up one side of the alley, down the other. He doesn't know what to do. He leans against a streetlight, rests his head against the cool metal. He walks to a bus stop and takes one packed bus going the wrong direction, then another empty one going the right way. In a few hours, after a long, confusing cab ride, he unlocks the door to his apartment. His hands are shaking. He's sweating. He weaves down the hallway to his small bathroom where he is happy to have been able to wait to puke in his own toilet.

His mouth is dry. He rubs his forehead and tries to find his one mistake by retracing last night's steps again and again.

The bass player rubs the back of his hand slowly across her face, as they sit in a naked heap on his creaking bed surrounded by sheets and abandoned clothes. It's three a.m., and they're sipping espresso from chipped ceramic mugs. He says to her through a tired yawn, "Weren't you with some guy?"

She says, "Bobby. That was Bobby. He was very sweet."

He nods as if that explains everything.

A sad song plays on his cracked and dusty radio. He adjusts the tuning knob to get rid of the static. He hums along, absently tapping his thigh. He pulls her closer as the lazy-voiced deejay begins to speak.

She shifts so the bass player's arm rests more easily over her shoulders. She knows if she just listened carefully, took good sound advice when she gave it to herself, she would be able to walk smoothly through this world, never missing a beat. She knows the problem is when the people get words dangerously close to right, when they get them so close, and the beauty of a single moment is unavoidable. It hits the right way and something happens, something like understanding or clarity or love.

She says, "So, do you think you like me?"

The bass player holds her breasts like they're china. He kisses her like warm strawberry jam. He's gentle and kind. She tries to love him for every second they're together. She loves him in the morning when he kisses her all over her face. Soft, sloppy kisses that feel nice against her sleepy skin. She loves him even though she knows he isn't thinking about her. He's planning his second set for Saturday; he's wondering what he's going to tell his ex-wife when his check doesn't come again, the landlord when he comes pounding at the door, his girlfriend when she calls in a few hours.

She walks out of his apartment, checking her lipstick in the cracked glass of a mirror in the hallway. The morning is dim gray and the air smells of diesel and women's perfume. Salsa music slides quietly from a nearby bookstore's open door. She tries to keep time with the steady stride of her boots. As she nears her car, a country song seeps high and tinny from a battered stereo speaker sitting in the doorway of a secondhand store. Stacks of rotary phones crowd its front plate-glass window. She finds herself humming along.

She feels like she has known this song all her life. She stops at a produce stand and buys an orange from a mound surrounded on each side by straight even lines of lemons and limes. She tries to clear her head, to stop thinking about all of the unlikely decisions she makes. At the next corner everything comes back together, like a flash: Bobby, the bass player, rain, smoke, whiskey, this orange,

the country song. She already misses last night like an old postcard from a dear friend. She misses who she can seem to be; she loves who she can seem to be. As long as her thoughts stay put right where they are, the possibilities are endless.

She crosses the street. Cars honk with rush hour traffic. She walks slowly, fits the key into the lock, opens her car door. The country song in her head gets to the chorus; she pauses, whistling it softly, tossing her orange up and catching it; tossing it and catching it.

There have been many moments like this before in her life, moments where she believes she has made all the right choices. She gets into her car, puts the key into the ignition, and twists. She grimaces as if it's painful, and of course, it is. It's painful starting and stopping. It's hard only knowing the chorus for weeks to come when some people seem to know the whole song from beginning to end.

She lights a cigarette, although she knows it's too early. Her hand shakes slightly. She keeps her car idling and unrolls the window to exhale her smoke. A few birds struggle to chirp over the city's morning. She reclines her seat just a little and sighs.

Soon she'll drive home but for now she sits in her idling car. She peels the orange, the cigarette dangling from her fingers. She wonders what comes next. As the sticky sweet smell spreads over her hands, she knows anything at all could happen in times like these with days so long and wide, you need a compass just to pass through them.

L. S. K L A T T

### *Provincetown*

the takeoff seemed orchid purpureal  
we fly this glider over slope  
crucifer pilots

what happened to rubber cement  
it glued our chrome  
cloudbank f-stop

I harry you as only a heliograph can  
as hellion  
as hedonist

bedfellow what merman tattoo  
what eyes what argosy

as if we travel well  
as if potentate

the hinge of the engine-less rudder

solarized  
it sing-songs

*Four Years*

That one slick as the body of a jet, cutting through the sky's thick music. An easy winter, a spring like they used to sing about, with late nights soaking up the local smog, and gladly, its connoisseurs. We each had one grandmother left. Yours nuts, mine far enough away to be unnoticed. At the end of the summer the gray heat stuck, and old people died in shut apartments. The power went out in our favorite bar and ruined all the beer.

Something unbearable happened. We took it casually, and tried to get back on the plane, but its skin was gone. It was all ribs and light. I thought career. I thought homeless. I thought finished, foreign country, facelessness. Then went back to lunch, which I wasn't going to let just sit there. We settled into a fog of Scandinavian descent, where dogs nipped the fence as we walked the neighborhood. I covered my mouth with one claw.

It seemed airier then. The house was twice as big without me. Cockroaches crawled around like babies, but we kept our eyes as closed as possible at night. You darted around. I stayed and pulled the hair from corn, boiled water, lit the same end of cigarette a hundred times. An ice storm in January killed twenty elms, and a reporter wept. In June he giggled at a murder. I thanked my hair for not falling out, my hands for staying on.

A killing, you said, avoiding any verbs. One in a million times that works. We went upstairs again and groped around the attic for old things. A week later, I saw you in front of the grocery store and hid behind a tree. You said you. I said me. The next generation will work it out. There's not enough smoke here, too many witnesses. You got on your bicycle and disappeared around the bend, and I thought that only happened in a song.

*Archangel of the Hibiscus*

This evening is too blue. The furniture  
 resists change. Swallow the appliances  
 of better days. A rubric of rupture  
 is you. Extinct angel, reliance is  
 a purple moon blurring your delivery.  
 You know what I mean. I live inside wide  
 ideas. Your heart is on my tongue. *Breathe.*  
 My body's over there. The great divide.  
 I'm married to winter, the honest view.  
 It would take a razor to complete us.  
 I am but a small light. A soldier who  
 reasons with eloquent lies. You're the lush

escape into sadness. A hollowed orange.  
 Unreal, how you destroy the perfect form.

*Bees of the Invisible*

I saw myself rising in the absence  
 of you. Whittled meadow. Drunken wind o!  
 The unborn stars the blackened mind. Intense  
 autumn, assembled revision. The hole  
 in my forehead is where you leapt. Honey  
 is caught on my tongue like a lost angel.  
 Frost is what quickens me. Silver money  
 glistening under a sky for sale. Hell,  
 I loved you further than you knew. Ancient  
 staircase, crippled dress. How near death we came.  
 On my tongue you were genius, a banquet  
 for criminals. What's in a name? The same

mirror separate losses. I want to be one  
 of the lucky ones. God falls asleep. Done.

M I C H A E L   B A R R E T T

*Ant Traps: Seven Quick Films*

*Hollowould*

(two stage directions)

*Mister Headwill*

*Arrested on the Charge of Fermentation*

Decadent

Decay

Today

Less Time than you Think

*Six Read Balls*

*Old News*

*Economics of Encomium*

Characters in order of their appearance:  
the director, Megarhetor, Goodzilla.

*Eight Final Frames*

*Hollowould*

You open the door

Step into marrowdark

Mimic fright and lowlife lust

(use red for that)

A bloodline runs out the alley

You follow until you face a store on Main Street

Its window is photonic glass

You peek at the simulcast ten tee vees broadcast

There you are!

(close-up of the penis)

Standing next to nothing

## *Mister Headwill*

You carry her cup  
through clouds of crowds  
at the bazaar.

You carry her  
across traffic lawns  
and old bones in hock.

Your heel is cut.  
In your shoe you carry  
the pebble you promised  
*Zounds!* on the psalter.

You heal your cut with pocket salt.  
You will flick the last pinch  
into the cup you carry  
and, stepping tenderly,  
  
bring it to the queen.

## *Arrested on the Charge of Fermentation*

Flash the word DECADENT

Flash DECAY

Flash TODAY

shot one Mushrooms grow in slow motion  
track one The noise cells make

shot two Sterile doctor prepares for birth  
track two Cellular noise  $\times 10^3$

shot three Closed circuit of you  
track three Sad sound of decomposition

shot four 3D-animated ganglia motherboard potassium  
Byronic bonds Econometrics of algae allegori-cide  
two pi max frequency equals twice temperature sex  
a piece of clay sketch of Shelley iconic play

voiceover *Nervespeed is 200km/second. How long does it take,  
then, to travel from shame years old to the nownow  
passing you by?*

Flash LESS TIME THAN YOU THINK

## *Six Read Balls*

Two triangles:  
David's shield

Center North South East  
West North by Northwest:

it's a molded plastic  
toolbench for tots.

V for Vivify  
V for Ventriculation

Three hydrogen  
Pisces to Polaris

Hexagonals. *I would have been hexed  
if hexed I had not been.*

Enter le Saltimbanque  
tossing freight trains.

Six read balls. Do you see them?  
They align behind the eyes.

## *Old News*

### *One Quarter Second*

North from Main Street to Seventy West  
Orchards of Plenty: Pick your own fireworks  
Missouri Man Truck Stop: pornographic cowboy twenty feet tall  
Dangers of Billboard Warning  
Gravity's steelwork  
Muddled green the river lies on  
Christian Farmers' Association  
Fence Fence Fence

### *How You Operate*

You wear a nerve suit  
eyes glim a byte delayed  
your first tool struck a deal  
you hold your shoe out like a handshake  
invest in reproduction  
concupiscence tat-a-rats on your eardrum.

### *What You Are*

Fool for money  
anthropomorphic recipe  
projectionist screengilder character ticketholder  
the product of math  
Homo Sapiens Sapiens Sapiens  
you are already already abstract.

## *Economics of Encomium*

FADE IN:

MEGARHETOR Everything you want is true.

GOODZILLA True.

MEGARHETOR You want praise.

GOODZILLA You praise weakly.

MEGARHETOR You want praise for your weakness.

MEGARHETOR Let me feed you America.

GOODZILLA Since birth I've been fed freed fat.

MEGARHETOR The national meal. Eat with me in the home of the fee.

MEGARHETOR I'll speak plainly: Look. Identical hats! I speak for a  
good cause—you the customer. You are all margin.  
You are always right.

GOODZILLA True. That's the custom.

MEGARHETOR You are becoming one before me.

GOODZILLA You speak; so you aren't, save in me hearing.

MEGARHETOR Naturally. You're listening.

FADE OUT.

## *Eight Final Frames*

The  
curtain came  
down on me like  
Cain. Children arrive  
by narrow gauge  
train. Beg the hosts  
of denial to remain.  
Does matter spirit  
matter spirit retain? Do  
lawful market laws love's law  
restrain? Does sense of worldsense  
sense's self plot the brain? See the beauty of  
my thy will being rent of its reign. See the dying  
Gaul intent on his pain.



*Conversations With My Landlord*

The landlord is waiting curbside when I step out of the cab this evening.

"My God, are you alright?"

The other tenants have filled him in on the afternoon's drama: lights flashing, portly police officers and peach-cheeked paramedics tramping up and down the stairs.

He escorts me into his apartment and settles me into a leaf-green corduroy chair. He presents me with a royal blue raw silk pillow on which to rest my throbbing bandaged hand. He serves shrimp dumplings and goblets of velvety chenin blanc. I admire the way the soft black hairs on his arm lay flat. The dumplings are tangy with cilantro and ginger.

"I'm waiting on you hand and foot," he announces, refilling my glass, building a fire.

I lean toward the flames. Every surface in the emergency room, even the hands of the surgeon, had been so cold.

The room smells of burning wood and lemon oil and great aunts playing canasta. Except for this one chair in front of the fireplace, the room seems arranged for storage rather than living, like a half-way house for chiffarobes and ottomans and davenports and desks. He swerves through the narrow corridors of furniture, pivoting on the balls of his stockinged feet.

"Here, I've brought you a brandy."

"Thank you, Peter." I swallow another pain pill. I try not to stare at an ink spot on his bottom lip. I feel my bones soften. I am both fooled and not fooled by his chivalric act, an impersonation abetted by the alcohol/Percocet mix. He fetches me another blanket. The

throbbing in my hand recedes. The thorny stems of three small white feathers protrude from the coarse weave of the silk. I pluck them from the pillow.

"I'm going to have to keep an eye on you," he says. "Make sure you stay out of harm's way."

I fight back a giggle.

"Sleep here tonight," he says. "In case you need anything."

His sheets are crisp, the shade of the palest yellow rose petals you can imagine—sheets from a Henry James novel.

"What do you do?" I ask him in the morning.

He slept elsewhere, on one of the couches presumably. Now he stands watching me eat Eggs Benedict in his bed.

"This," he proclaims. "*This* is what I do," his outstretched arms indicating the eight apartments, basement, and roof of his fiefdom.

"Oh."

His lips tighten. "Quite an appetite," he says.

"I like eggs."

"I *knew* it."

My head is filled with brandy-soaked cotton and the eggs have settled like a wet rag in the bottom of my stomach. As I trudge past #3 the door swings open. A thin white arm and a blue hand emerge, beckon.

The woman to whom the arm and hand belong is talking on the phone. She grabs my sleeve, tugs me toward the kitchen. She covers the mouthpiece.

"You're the new neighbor," she says. "Sit." Into the phone she says, "I've got to go. My neighbor stopped by—the one who got her finger whacked off in the window." She shudders. She has voluminous fluffy white hair.

The kitchen's aromas are gingerbread and melted candle wax. Two large pots boil and hiss on the stove. The windows are beaded with steam. She takes in the sorry sight of me, my blood-spattered, slept-in clothes. She shakes her head and grabs a teakettle from the counter.

"It was only the tip," I explain.

"Pardon?"

"Only the tip of my finger got caught in the window."

The woman steps toward the back of the apartment. "Alara! Company!"

A fluffy-white-haired girl materializes, cracks open the window, and balances herself primly on the edge of one of the kitchen chairs.

"This is Alara, she's nine," the woman says. "I'm Annie. And you're Frances. Tell us about yourself."

The word *torment* comes to mind. There are so many ways I feel *not well*. Fortunately, at just the moment it will become necessary to lie or confess or flee, the kettle begins to sing—a loud sweet pure tone—and Annie is moved to provide me the story of this splendid kettle and her blue hands and a not-so condensed history of batik and the politics of Indonesia. She serves me cup after cup of the most bitter tea and perfectly crisp wolf-shaped gingerbread cookies, and all the while water spatters and sizzles on the stovetop. The girl, Alara, draws asterisks on the steamed windows.

The kitchen clock chirps noon. "Oh my goodness, I've got to check my dye bath. Excuse me, will you, Frances?"

My deliverance, I think. "I really should be going. I need to change my bandage and..."

"Of course you do. I'm so glad you stopped by. This is a very friendly building. Nice people. With the exception of him." She points toward Peter's apartment. "Mr Ratfink."

When I get upstairs there's a note taped to my door. A soft pencil scrawl on the back of an electric company envelope. *What do YOU do?!!*

The moving boxes are stacked in squared towers. My father'd had the boxes delivered to the bungalow I'd shared with Joachim, along with packing tape and a jumbo black permanent marker. Message received: I wasn't to be trusted with even the most mundane matters.

But now I am happy I didn't have to drive all over town and make do with a motley assortment of liquor and grocery store boxes, and I am especially happy at the sight of the box labeled BEDDING. I take the last Percocet from the hospital envelope, lay down on my bare mattress, and pull my purple velvet comforter over my head. When I wake, it is four o'clock the next morning.

"I've got a crab quiche in the oven." He's let a day and a half pass since breakfast in bed. "Why don't you come down and join me?"

He sets the table. We watch the quiche cool.

"So how's your finger?" His voice sing-songs.

"They refer to it as a partial amputation."

The dark spot is still there on his lip. As he hands me the plate, I realize it's a beauty mark. He touches his lip, rubs his palm over his unshaved chin.

His phone rings. His side of the conversation consists of the word *no* repeated six times in the same even tone. He hangs up and rubs his chin again. I am a slow eater. He sips coffee from a blue metal camping cup. For a second I see him as a Confederate colonel, a few months after Pickett's Charge, determined, yet pensive.

"Can I get you anything?"

"How about fixing the window?"

"My window guy's in the Virgin Islands."

"There's only one window guy?"

"Only one I *trust*. Most of these guys are villains."

"I'd like to be able to open both windows. When I turn on the heat in there it smells like cat piss. That carpet is disgusting."

"Louis didn't have a cat."

"Someone had a cat—many, many cats is my guess."

"You *know* I'm sorry this happened to you, right? But I can't fix a problem unless I know there's a problem. And Louis indicated that he never opened the window."

"Indicated? What did he use—signal flags?"

"Look. Maybe I could cut a piece of wood to prop that top window in place—until my guy gets back."

"The interesting part of that sentence is the word *maybe*."

"You've got a sassy mouth, Frances."

Sassy?

My Rio Grande spinning wheel dominates my front room. Smooth oak shelves hold my store of yarn, divided by color and then by weight. I am heavy on greens and worsted wools.

For ten years I was designing or spinning or knitting—garments or swatches, trying out a new cable stitch, experimenting with an unfamiliar yarn blend. I worked at The Bee's Knees Knitting Shop. I helped customers select yarn for their projects. I sat with my charges, guiding their fingers through increases and decreases and buttonholes and collars. I ran mitten workshops. I sold a half-dozen intarsia designs to a yarn company in Maine. Beatrice, the shop owner, inching toward retirement, promised she'd give me very easy terms. "My dear," she said. "The most important thing is that the shop stays in good hands."

Now that I am finished unpacking, the room is hushed and inert as a museum exhibit; I can imagine tourists filing through, a security guard snapping his gum in the corner behind the rocking chair. *Artisan's Studio, United States, circa 2000.*

"Guess what I've got in the oven?" Peter asks.

It's a Gruyere soufflé. It's sublime.

I run into Annie a block from home. I'm swinging a small grocery bag in my good hand, and she's embracing a colossal laundry bag. She gives me a sizing up look.

"Alara and I have been worried about you."

And here I'd been thinking of myself as Miss Valiant-in-the-Face-of-Disaster, my clear-headed competence apparent at forty paces.

On the second floor landing, Peter crouches at the corner. A thick wad of keys hang from his belt. He appears to be inspecting the floorboard. "Ladies." He nods as we pass.

"That one," Annie says, when she stops at her door. "The Real Estate Baron of Fort Greene. The Sheik of Vanderbilt Avenue."

"What do you mean?"

"Pah! He thinks he's riding the crest of the wave, a real gentrification genius."

"I don't know one thing about real estate," I say.

"Well, look at DeKalb. Suddenly awash in bistros for God's sake. Maybe you haven't noticed yet, but he's practically filled this building with women, and the whole bunch of us just happen to work from home. He's always sniffing around, either underfoot like today, or making some half-assed repair."

"Is Alara's school nearby?"

"He doesn't deserve this building, that's for sure."

"Maybe he did something really good in a previous life."

"You're kidding, right?"

Two bony fingertips tighten about my nipple like a pair of staple removers. "You're not going to sue me?" The question mark is an afterthought.

"I wouldn't be suing *you*, Peter. I'd be suing your insurance company."

"Not that I'm concerned. You have no case."

"Then why ask?"

Peter presses his ear to my stomach as though listening for the answer. "I'm going to do something about that window this week," he says without lifting his head. "It's still very cold out, you know."

"Yes, well, fresh air doesn't go out of season."

"Listen, Frances, I've only got two hands."

"Lucky you."

We both look at my injured hand. In its white bundle of gauze, it is something set aside.

"How long did Louis live in the apartment?"

"Two years."

"And why'd he give it up?"

"Left town? Graduate school? We're not in touch."

Why do I sleep with Peter?

Because it's easier to sleep with him than to not.

Why do I sleep with him?

Because I won't mistake him for anything he isn't, i.e. loyal, trustworthy.

Peter's insurance company has not balked at paying the hospital bills and the charges for my ongoing hand clinic visits; I've been reimbursed for my out-of-pocket expenses. Which leaves only that dubious X-factor, pain and suffering, the domain of lawyers. After my recent experience—was it really only two months ago?—it's not a realm I'm in a hurry to reenter.

I can't remember which lawyer was mine and which one was Joachim's, but Cuff Links had to be my father's because he was in charge. After the first ten minutes of the first meeting I stopped looking at their faces, smug with what they thought they knew about me. The one female attorney wore weapon-sharp pumps; she had pairs in taupe, black, and navy blue. One of the men wore

heavy gold cuff links that thunked against the edge of the conference table when he rearranged his papers.

Not that anyone asked, but I could never smoke dope and knit. One hit and pattern charts wobbled like op art. Days later I'd still struggle to keep a twelve-stitch repetition in my head. Joachim bought enough for his own mild-to-moderate use, and for his friends who sometimes gave him cash and sometimes didn't, and his boss, Roy, who overlooked his chronic laziness and tardiness. And then one afternoon I looked up from my wheel, and there were these people in our bungalow, *friends of friends*. If he ran some errands for them, did this and that, he'd be able to take the winter off from his job harvesting shellfish for Roy. That was how he explained it to me. Joachim with the cold hands, Joachim who longed so for hibernation that he stumbled into a drug ring in the final months of a years-long investigation.

Joachim had no money for lawyers. That's why he implicated me. To get my father and his legal cronies and his money involved. That conference room full of lawyers was exactly what Joachim had expected. But did he expect the rest? Did he picture himself in a federal prison waiting indefinitely for his chance to testify? (Surely he didn't think my father would cover his bail?) Did he picture me, boxed up and exiled from Bellingham—"The best thing for everybody," my father said.

*This*—I extend my arms, indicating the apartment, Brooklyn, all my worldly goods—exactly everything and nothing—is *my fresh start*.

Peter's body looks to have been solid maybe ten years ago. He wears his softness well. His skin is pulled tight and white. After showering he slaps on handfuls of cocoa butter lotion; he greases his penis and scrotum with Vaseline. He's sleek as a seal.

Still naked, he irons his pants and shirt. (The local dry cleaners are *crooks*, he says.) He uses spray starch to ensure the sharpest creases.

"I know you think I'm crazy," he says.

"What? I'm just watching you."

The creases, I know, are essential to his heroic persona. A hero holding the line against the infidels—contractors, assessors, inspectors, tenants.

He looks up from his shirt. "Everything I do, I do for a reason."

"What are you now, a mafia don?"

He slams the iron to the fabric.

My upstairs neighbor plays the ukulele. According to the mailbox he is Hank Mallory, the only male tenant. I don't recognize the tunes he plays—I know nothing much about the ukulele—but the music seems impossibly mournful. Or perhaps I hear it as mournful because his playing is punctuated by fits of feverish weeping. His ukulele-playing chair sits directly above my knitting chair, an old cherry rocker that first belonged to my mother's mother. Though I am not knitting, it's where I most often choose to sit. I would have thought that the uke wasn't a suitable instrument for expressing grief, but plucked by Hank its voice is a vibrato keening that makes my ribs ache.

On the lamp beside Peter's bed, a thick brown lampshade traps most of the light from a forty-watt bulb.

"You know I've got another building, a few blocks over near Pratt."

"Really?"

"Well, I've got a partner. I'd like to buy him out—he'd double-cross me in a second if I gave him the chance—but I've got to sit tight right now. I've got my eye on some sweet properties..." He grabs my arm. "Am I boring you?"

"No."

"Know this, Frances. I'm ready to act when the time is right."

He fucks like he walks, with a heavy lumbering grace. With each thrust he gains momentum. I must fuck back or be buried.

I like my apartment. This apartment is what I have now. The building contains me, holds my shape.

Here's the thing: I don't have a copy of my lease.

The lease: a fingers-crossed promise waiting to be broken. The Tenant agrees to pay through the nose and anus and abide by any and all house rules whether promulgated before or after the execution in a workmanlike manner during occupancy thereof until either party shall terminate the same without prior consent at reasonable and regular intervals for any illegal purpose and other pests at the initiation of the tenancy. The lease is a slipknot or not.

Still, it's something, a thing to be had.

The day before I moved in, the day before the window accident, I sat at Peter's kitchen table, drank a cup of coffee, and signed the lease, watched him sign. He told me he would make copies the following day at the drugstore around the corner. It is a two-year lease.

I ask Peter about the lease.

He feeds me a strawberry, slides the cool red fruit between my lips. "What are you worried about, sweetheart?"

My father would not have handed over the check without the copy of the lease. Am I as incompetent as he believes I am?

"Kira and Jean and I are having a pot of tea. Why don't you come down?" Annie asks.

Alara peeks past me into the apartment. "Is all that yarn yours?"

"I was just about to take a nap. It's really not a good time. Thanks for thinking of me.."

Alara leans further into the room. "And a spinning wheel. Cool. What's it all for?"

"Kira's one of the best tattoo artists in the city and Jean's a potter. They're really eager to meet you."

"Another time."

"You're doing okay up here? Really?"

"I'm doing well." Alara is tugging at my sleeve. "It's for knitting. I'm a knitter."

"Will you teach me how?" Alara asks.

"Alara, let's head back before the tea gets cold."

"I can't knit right now," I say, waving my thickly-bandaged hand.

"You don't have to be able to knit to teach me, do you?"

I listen to their steps on the stairs, the click of their apartment door closing. I can almost hear the women laughing, their teaspoons clinking in their cups. The building is like an unopened parcel waiting on the table.

While we sleep the building settles another quarter inch on the starboard side. My door sticks and I bruise my shoulder shoving it open. He kisses the bruise tenderly. He shaves down the door. He demonstrates. "See? Open. Close. Open." And it's true—the door swings easily on its hinges. Neither of us mentions the finger's breadth gap between door and floor. In a fit of generosity he installs mini-blinds in the two skinny windows in the hallway between the kitchen and the bedroom; they are too narrow by an inch and their hold in the wall is as sturdy as a loose tooth.

My walls are weeping. I pull my shelves of yarn away from the wall, revealing elaborate gray-green plumes of mildew.

I vacuum the rug, I attack it with a stiff-bristled scrub brush, but the problem is subsurface. The animal hair has been ground into the fibers. Crossing the room in my bare feet is like walking across the back of a large furred beast.

Even as I start the project I know it's folly. This isn't a one-handed job, and my only tool is the utility knife my father included in my moving kit. I yank up a corner from the tacks, then begin hacking the carpet into six-inch strips, sawing through the grisly layer of backing, working backwards across the room. The painted white wood beneath the carpet spurs me on. After two strips my bandage is gray and dotted with blood. The blade has dulled. My hand hurts and my throat burns and my nose runs but I don't stop. Even when I finish eight hours later I'm not done because I still have to get the whole stinking mess downstairs. I roll the strips as tightly as I can and bind them with twine. I gather an armful of bundles and head down. Hank is playing a somewhat happier tune, and as I'm about to pass Peter's apartment I think *perfect* and dump the bundles on his doormat and head up for the rest. But when I reach my door I can only bang my head against it in frustration. Locked out, but how? The door has never locked automatically.

I wait for Peter on the landing above his apartment. It sounds like a polka, what Hank is playing tonight. The hallway smells of bacon and sautéed garlic and PineSol. From above and below I hear cupboards and refrigerator doors being shut and chairs pushed in and pulled out from the dinner table. I can almost hear the clatter of fork to plate. Dishwater whooshes through the pipes.

My mother died when I was five. My father, Mr What's-Done-Is-Done, including the death of a spouse, rarely spoke of her. And now it's me he's done with. "Consider this bridge burned," he said, handing me an envelope containing a one-way plane ticket from Seattle to New York, and a sizeable cashier's check. For family I am left with a spinster great aunt, Aunt Helen. She was the one who told me my mother knitted. Aunt Helen and I bellow at each other during our first Sunday of every month calls. I have kept her in turtlenecks and cardigans since I was a teenager. A veteran of fifty

St Paul winters, she appreciates the virtues of woolens. It is best when we are matched with people who appreciate our gifts.

"Your father tells me you've had some troubles," she opened our last conversation.

"What did he..."

"You know what I've always said, Frances. There are no troubles that can't be walked away. Look at Gandhi, look at Jesus. Eleanor Roosevelt!"

"Eleanor Roosevelt was a walker?"

"Absolutely. It's my very best advice. Are you working?"

"I've hurt my finger. I'm not sure—"

"Well I'm glad you're alright, dear. And don't forget about the walking. Love you." Click.

And so I walk. Most often I head straight up Vanderbilt, which leads me straight out of our little bit of downtroddenness and through the wee pocket of bistro-mad gentrification Annie spoke of, past a lovely yellow saltbox house, the French-speaking Baptist church, a shabby pharmacy, Our Queen of All Saints, a florist with dusty plastic flowers in the window, numerous bodegas and service stations and car services and coffee shops, until, without quite noticing how I got there, I reach the bustling climax of Grand Army Plaza.

"Hey, guess what?" Peter asks. "I got a deal on some of those fancy water-saving shower nozzles. I could run up later and install it."

Our game continues: legitimate landlord business is the only occasion for which I admit Peter into my apartment.

Peter brews a fine pot of coffee. His half-and-half is absolutely fresh. He has almond-orange biscotti for me to nibble on as I wait for my eggs.

"It isn't something I could do on my own?" I ask.

"Well, I was thinking of your hand and all."

"Since when?"

"I would have helped you with the carpet."

"You denied it even needed cleaning!"

"But I said it was fine with me if you wanted to remove it."

"And where in that was your offer of assistance?"

"It was implied."

"You've helped enough for one week—changing that doohickey on my lock."

"I told you I was sorry."

"Fine. Have you had a chance to make a copy of my lease?"

"I thought I gave you that."

He hands me a plate: toast, dry and fried eggs, broken, golden yolk smeared across the whites.

The paramedics said I was lucky the window didn't catch my whole hand. The first doc who examined me at Bellevue said I was lucky the paramedics hadn't dropped me off at Brooklyn Hospital, where for sure they'd have amputated at the knuckle. And everyone at the hospital said how lucky I was to have Lizzie. Dr Elizabeth Gardner headed the team of three hand surgeons who were summoned to the emergency room on my behalf. She began by repairing the nail bed. This alone took almost an hour and a half. Three times she removed a stitch, a 1/16" em-dash of gut, that she judged imperfect. Both then and now (regardless of whether my fingernail grows back, regardless of luck) I experience her fierce and substantial attention as love.

Peter is mincing garlic and I am searching his desk drawers.

"Frances," he calls from the kitchen. "You like portobellos, don't you?" The second drawer squeaks open.

"Love them," I holler back. The drawers are a hodgepodge of envelopes, marbles, rubber bands, coins, subway tokens, a pair of

glasses with severely scratched lenses, dirty pink erasers—the debris of an adolescent boy. Why am I disappointed? Was I expecting a contract with the devil? Evidence of some nefarious dealings with Louis? I head over to the metal desk with a file drawer. How about a simple file folder labeled *Tenant Leases*? I look under *T* and *L* and under my name, first and last, and of course there's nothing incriminating, but nothing lease-like either.

"It's getting lonely back here!" His voice is closer with each word. I ease the drawer shut.

Alara is sitting with her back against my door. A schoolbook is open on her plaid-skirted lap.

"I think it's time to start my knitting lessons."

I can't think of what to say.

"I could come in the afternoons after school."

"Did your mom send you up here?"

"No she did not."

"Why do you want to learn how to knit?"

"I like the smell of wet mittens."

He's stabbing at a block of frozen hash browns in a cast iron skillet.

"I'm your first friend in New York," Peter boasts.

"I suppose." What a coup, I think, I'm intimate with the only man in the city who has keys to my apartment.

He ceases his attack, looks at me. "What does that mean? I'm not your friend?"

"You're *more* than a friend," I say.

Alara rummages through my knitting supplies. She likes reading the names of the yarn colors aloud: lamb's ear, sweet butter, appassionato, cactus flower, cricket. She covets my antique stitch counter, a jar filled with hand-carved tagua buttons from Ecuador.

As she sits down for her first lesson, Hank begins a ukulele lament. Alara rolls her eyes.

"I feel kind of sorry for him, don't you?" I ask.

"I don't *like* feeling sorry for people." She gives me a sharp glance, as though I am about to do something pitiful. I try to block Hank out. I teach Alara a rhyme to help remember the movements to make a knit stitch: in through the front door, run around the back, out through the window, and off jumps Jack.

The rhyme pleases her. We speak no more of Hank.

"This is easy," Alara says.

"We'll do purl tomorrow."

"Purl's harder?"

"It is."

"Excellent."

And I continue to sleep with him because?

Wrapped in a yellow bath sheet, handing me a plate of eggs scrambled with cream cheese and chives, he is held in abeyance—the landlord suspended like an insect in amber where he can do no harm.

He can't intrude on my loneliness: there are no doors there.

When he draws down the shades, he distills himself. In the dim light, between his smooth sheets, he is nothing but fingers and mouth and penis and pleasure.

None of these reasons is more important than the others.

I have two trunks filled with unfinished garments. I finger the ribbed back of a pale green chenille jacket, the nubby sleeves of a seed stitched baby romper. I can't remember working on them, though I can see what would have attracted me to the projects. The green of the mohair yarn glows like a celadon glaze. Did the baby (*whose* baby?) grow too big for the romper? Those projects belong to *Before*. As in *Before Everything Came Apart*, I'd planned for my next



project to be a sweater for Joachim. In the two birthdays we were together I gave him a red scarf and a deep maroon vest, edged in gold. He lost the scarf within a week, but he loved the vest. Casting the wrapping paper aside he announced, "I'll try it on," and when he pranced back into the kitchen area a few minutes later, he was wearing nothing but the vest. He marched around our bungalow grinning. A happy, nearly naked man. He said he thought the vest made him look intelligent. File this under Exhibit A: Evidence of Domestic Bliss.

The sweater was going to be a slip-stitch pullover in shades of rich brown and creamy oatmeal knit in a three-strand Merino. Chest at underarm: 45-1/2". Length from shoulder: 26". Cast on 111 stitches to begin the back.

"Do you mind if I hang out in front of the fire?" I ask. "This chair is so cozy."

"I suppose," he says. "It's almost ready though."

All this furniture and so many cubbies and drawers. Begrudging drawers that long to screech and drawers with dull brass handles prone to clatter. Several are locked. I discover years of bank statements, two copies of his birth certificate (Mother, Dorothy, Father, Not Named) filed in separate files, clippings on investment strategies, receipts and coupons—haircuts to windshield repair.

If it's in one of the locked drawers, I'll have to find the key. If the key is on his key ring, I'll have to incapacitate him because he never lets his keys out of sight. He doesn't like having me out of sight either. Several times he's nearly caught me—"I dropped my ring," I say, kneeling in front of the roll-top desk.

Have I missed something? I return to the metal desk with the two locked drawers. I look again in the top drawer, overfilled with pens and pencils and binder clips.

"C'mon Frances. This frittata is piping!"

"I'm coming, I'm coming." Blood taps in the veins at my neck and temple. But hey, what's this tucked beneath the faded, doodled-on blotter? My lease.

I feel foolishly relieved. The lease is scant protection, outlining an uneven division of power. I've heard the stories. The lessee has the power to deface, to annoy, to vacate without notice, to foster tenant unrest, but the landlord can schedule an aria-singing window washing crew to start with your bedroom windows at eight a.m. The landlord can hire a team of ill-mannered, tobacco-chewing thugs to re-plaster the ceilings. Tenant's organizations publish flyers advertising the renter's legal rights, but even they admit there are no ordinances that protect the tenant from the landlord's misery, miserliness, and mendacity.

I've hidden and re-hidden the lease. For the moment it is guarded by a battalion of shoes, a neat paper roll tucked inside a pair of high black boots. The phone rings twenty rings at a time.

Peter stands at the top of the ladder on the second story landing like a broken marionette, the globe of the light fixture shattered on the floor beneath him. I remind myself not to mistake ineptitude for guilelessness. The glass shimmers like crushed seashells. He steps down hard. Crunch. Crunch. He grinds his work boots into the glass.

"I've tried calling you."

There's no way to know for sure if he knows I've got the lease.

"Have you been away?"

I wave my good hand vaguely. "Can I give you a hand?" I ask.

"You'll be home later," he says.

My wrists ache as I flip through my knitting binders, looking for an easy, but not too easy, pattern for Alara's first project.

Afternoons the sun streams through the back windows. The room is stark. Just a few boxes full of clothes that wouldn't fit in the closets. I don't have a dresser yet. From the bed I can see the paint of the windowsills puckered with moisture. I see the spatter of blood on the wall from when I first turned away from the window, a constellation of seven tiny drops. My bandage is much less bulky now. The finger still looks raw, but I can imagine its being healed. Six months, they tell me, before it will be what it will be. It only hurts badly if I bump it into something. The very tip burns in the cold.

The light shifts and I turn toward the window—Peter's hovering on the fire escape.

"What are you doing?" I shout.

He scowls and makes an indecipherable hand signal and clambers to the roof, as though I'd interrupted some legitimate business.

I burp eggs. "So is there a problem with the roof?"

He's got his back to me, rinsing off our lunch dishes in the sink.

"That roof is guaranteed for another eighteen years. I thought I might have left something up there."

He pauses, as if this isn't too absurd to refute.

He wipes down the counter. "This building is tight as a drum."

When I leave my apartment, I stick a tiny piece of yarn in the door. I've mapped the exact placement of my throw rugs. There is never evidence of intrusion. And it never feels as though he's been there. So either Peter is very clever or I am ridiculous. Or he is clever *and* I am ridiculous, whether or not he's surreptitiously entering my apartment. There are worse things to be.

"You've got to relax, Alara. You've got a death grip on that yarn." Unlike most beginners she doesn't drop stitches, but her practice

swatches are as dense and impenetrable as a knight's chain mail. This is what I trust—the durability of the stockinette stitch.

"I want to *make* something," she insists.

The bamboo needles click.

"Soon, I promise." She's absolutely adorable in the rocker, all that fluffy blonde hair, a smooth ball of scarlet yarn in her green velvet lap.

Alara mutters something.

"What?"

"You're staring at me."

"Sorry."

"Listen," Alara says awhile later.

"To what?"

"The building. It's vibrating."

There is something, a hum that could be the composite buzz of sewing machine, tattoo needle, an electric pottery wheel, the sound of things being made.

"Do you hear it?" she demands.

"Yes, I hear it."

Alara frowns.

"I *do*." Of course I do.

"So this is it." Peter is delighted I have at last allowed him into my bed. He affectionately fingers a worn spot on my comforter. I feed him slivers of avocado, stroke his shoulder.

"It's nice. Being here," Peter says. He traces a vein up the inside of my arm. He sighs.

I hesitate. His eyes are silver-gray slits, shiny as paper clips.

I mount his mound of flesh. Sitting astride him I grab his wrist with my damaged hand and press his dry, hot palm to the damp wall. Disappointment: I had hoped for a puff of steam.

"What?" He blinks. He struggles to move his hand. I tighten my hold, gripping his wrist with both hands now.

"Do you feel that?" I ask.

His erection withers inside me.

"Yes," he replies.

"What do you feel?"

"The wall is wet."

"You admit it. You admit your perfidy."

"Yes."

I get up and put on my robe. He pulls on his pants.

"I can make things difficult for you," he says.

I pick up after fifteen rings. "Hey, I'm sorry about last week," he says, "on the fire escape, startling you."

Is he waiting for a reciprocal apology?

"I just wanted to see—"

"What?" I'm honestly curious.

"Listen, Frances. Don't think you can have any secrets from me."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Because you can't. I know what goes on in my building."

"Peter, please." What do I want to ask him for? Reasonableness? Release?

Peter begins leaving things at my door. A box of kitchen matches. A jar of cumin. A caved-in overripe strawberry on a chipped white saucer.

Are these threats?

I return the favor. A stale corn muffin. A candle stub with the wick broken off. A polished avocado pit.

Is this an argument?

I'm eyeing a tall dresser my neighbor two stoops down, Perley, is selling. "It's an antique," he says from his stoop.

It's a scarred but solid piece with all its Depression glass knobs intact.

"Would you bring it up for me later?"

Perley considers, takes a long draw off his can of malt liquor. "Nope. Don't think so."

I don't hear Annie until she drops her grocery bag at my feet. "Perley, you giving my friend a hard time?"

"No ma'am. She's getting a fair price. It's my back, keeps me from lifting."

Annie raises an eyebrow.

"I'd buy it," I explain, "if I could get it upstairs."

"Is that all?" Annie runs her finger over a deep scratch on the dresser top. "I'll fetch Hank. He can bring it up for you."

"Well then," Perley says.

When Annie reemerges from the building she's collected Hank and Alara.

Annie starts pulling out the dresser drawers.

"Y'all go up first," Hank says. "In case I drop it."

But he manages just fine, not even a scrape against the railing.

"Set it down anywhere," I say.

"You don't have much stuff," Annie observes.

"We've got too much stuff," Alara says.

"Most people do." Hank has moved back near the doorway, as though he's afraid of intruding. He wipes his forehead with his sleeve.

"I really needed this dresser. Thank you all very much."

We hear heavy footsteps on the stairs a flight below.

Hank nudges the door closed with his foot.

We go silent. The four of us frozen like statues in a child's game. The landlord's assertive knocking.

"Frances, it's me. Frances. Are you there? I know you're there." We hear his sigh. "C'mon Frances. Perley told me you just bought a dresser."

His footsteps recede and a moment later the game is over. Annie and Alara and Hank excuse themselves. I repeat my thanks, but fail

to offer water, coffee, chairs, anything. I was confused by Peter's saying my name, his voice both confident and plaintive.

I hear a scuffling outside my door. Peter's bulging vein-streaked eye meets mine in the peephole. I stuff an old Indian blanket into the crack beneath the door. I am preposterous! I can't stop myself from dragging my trunk across the room. I'm humming as I shove it hard against the door.

I almost trip over his latest offering—five sterling silver buttons scattered at my doorstep like jacks. The buttons are the size of quarters, each curved face etched with a fleur-de-lis. I imagine a sweater for them, a cardigan knit from a fine-gauge wool-silk blend the blue-black of damson plums.

I leave him a can of WD-40 and a handsome wooden carpenter's level. The poison-green bubble drifts to the left.

My rocker is just the right size for Alara, because when she sits forward her feet can rest on the floor.

"You were born to knit," I tell her. She's nearly finished with the front left panel of her vest. Her stitches are smooth and orderly. Her armhole decreases are perfect puckers. I couldn't do better.

"My mom says you're tight lipped."

"What do you think?"

She flips her knitting over to the purl side. "You do spend a lot of time alone."

"Yes, well, I'll have to get a job soon, and then I'll be around people all day."

"Don't you like people?"

"I like you."

She scowls.

"I used to like people."

"What about now?"

I shrug.

"Frances."

"I don't know."

This she accepts, or seems to, blazing through another fifty-six stitches without comment. And then she speaks only to ask me to pass the measuring tape.

He calls. "I'm thinking blintzes."

"You're branching out."

"Yes." He laughs. "It's true!"

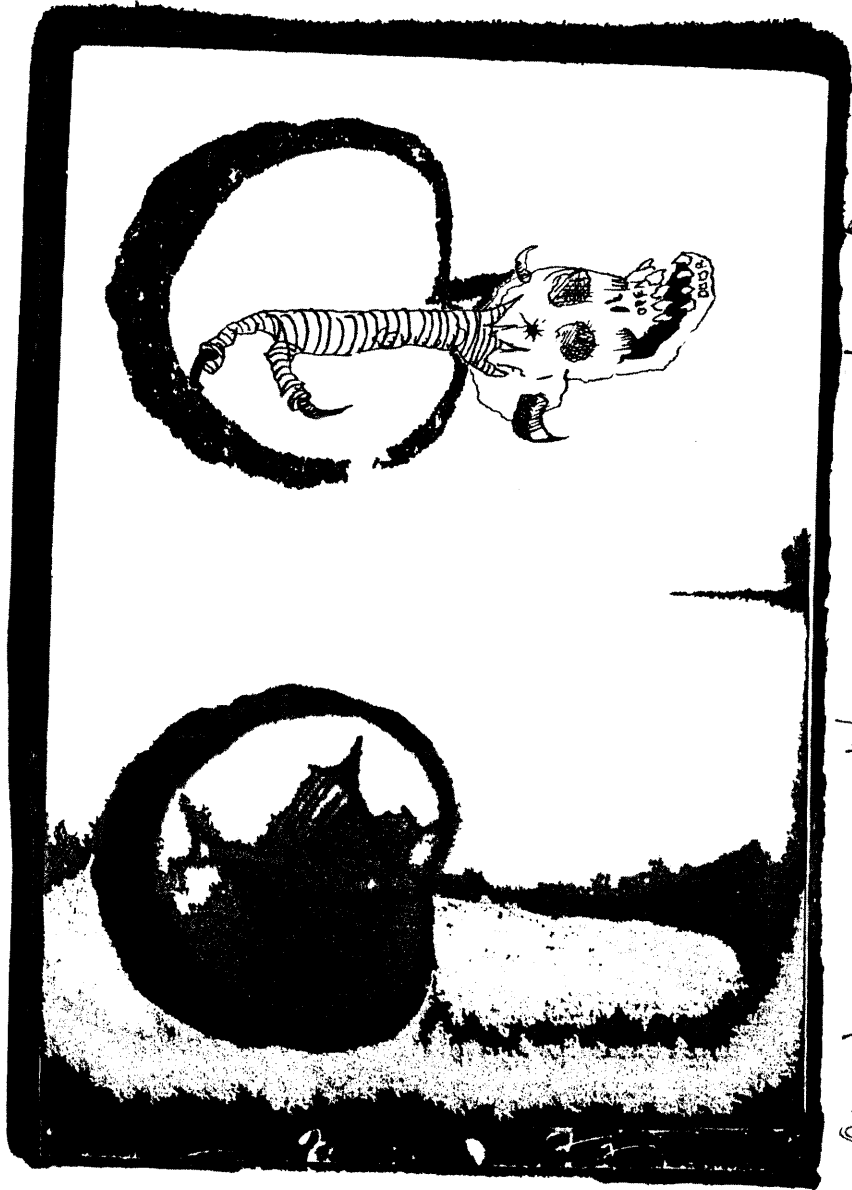
Is this a truce?

I might as well decide it is.

And if it isn't?

I'll pile all my furniture in front of the door and rappel in and out my kitchen window. I'll spread broken glass on the steps of the fire escape and grease the railings. I'll sleep with a butcher's knife stuck between my mattress and box spring if I have to.

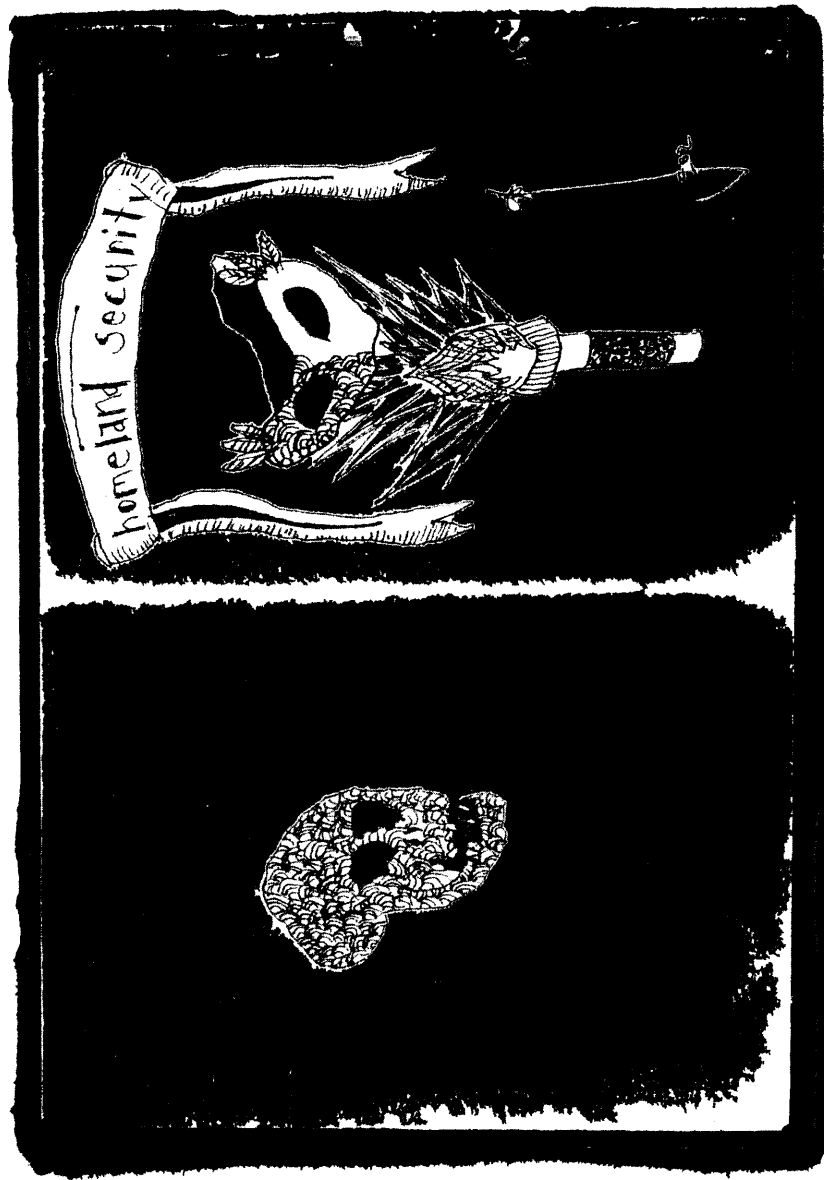
I'm not going anywhere.



Opendoor

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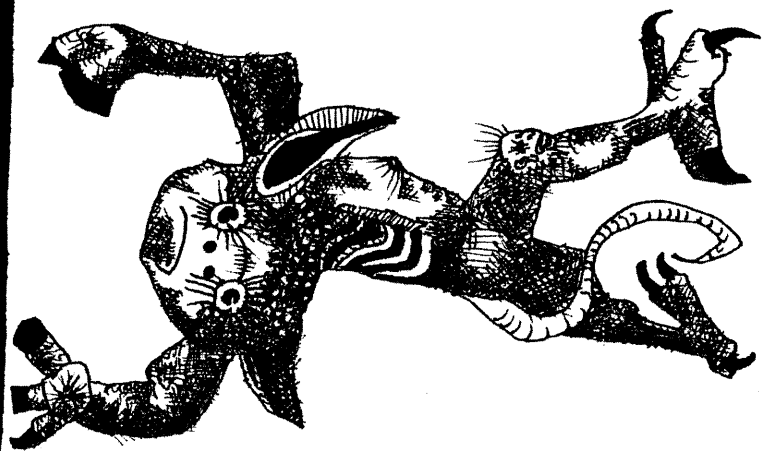
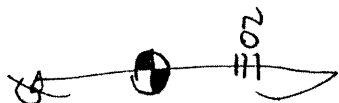
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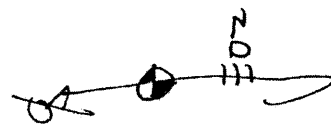
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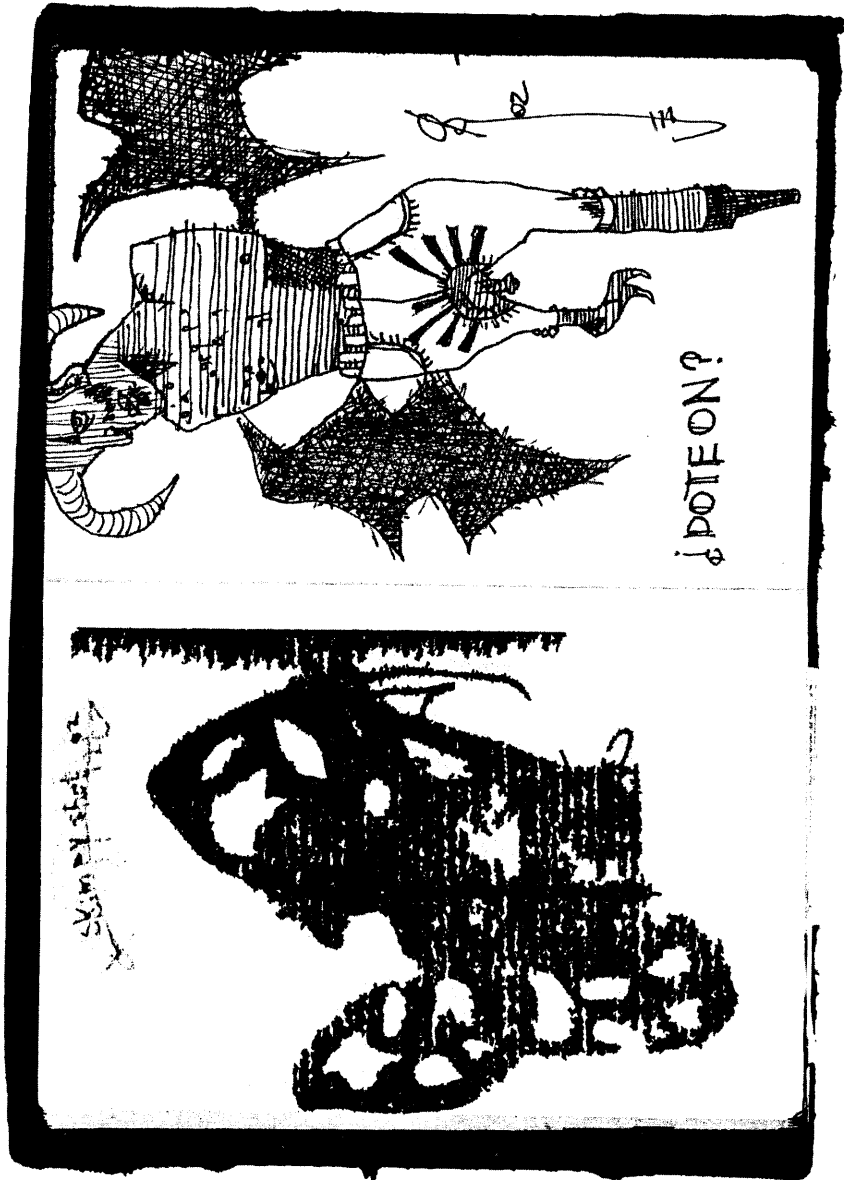
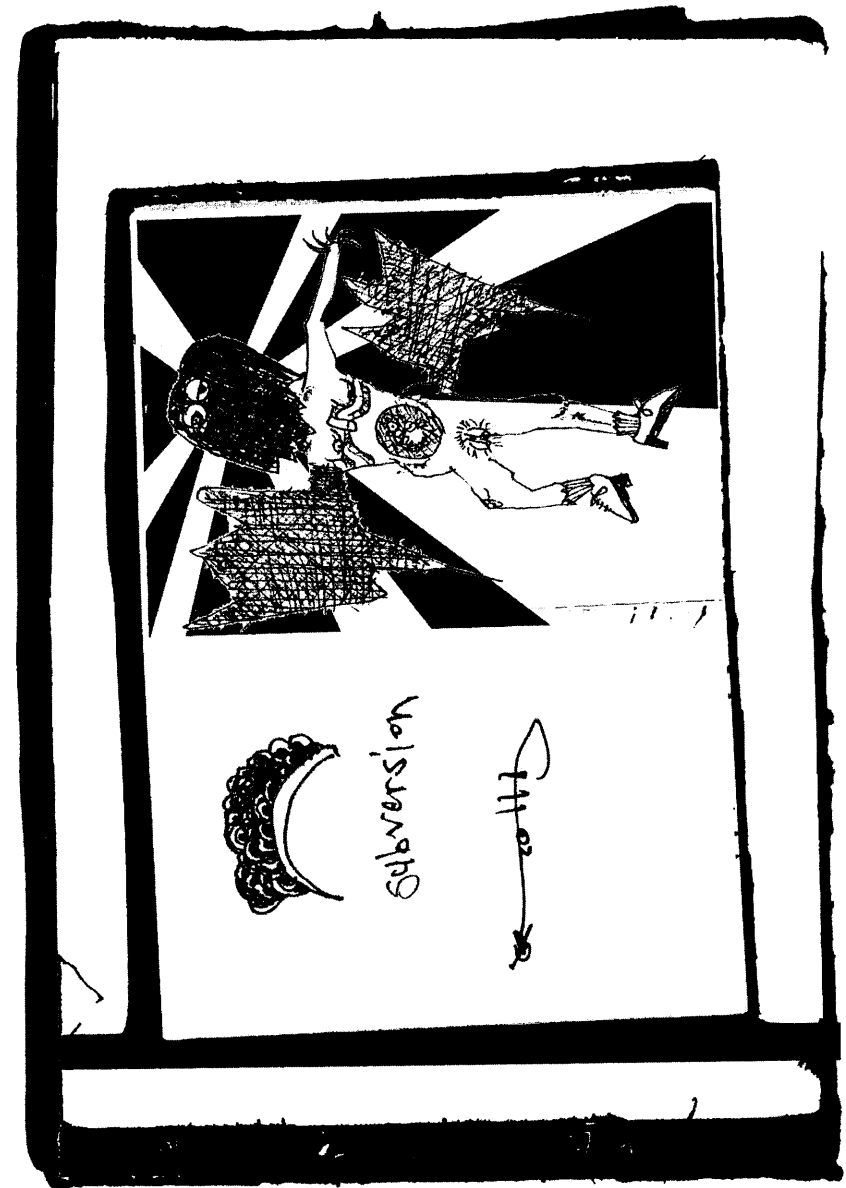
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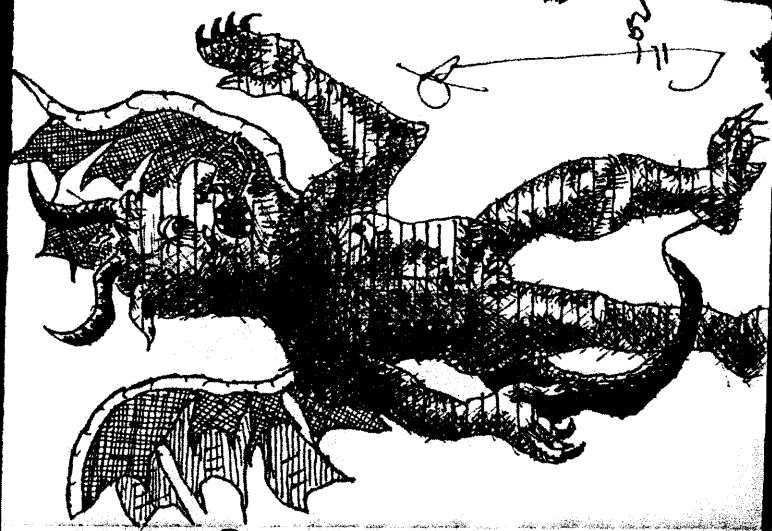


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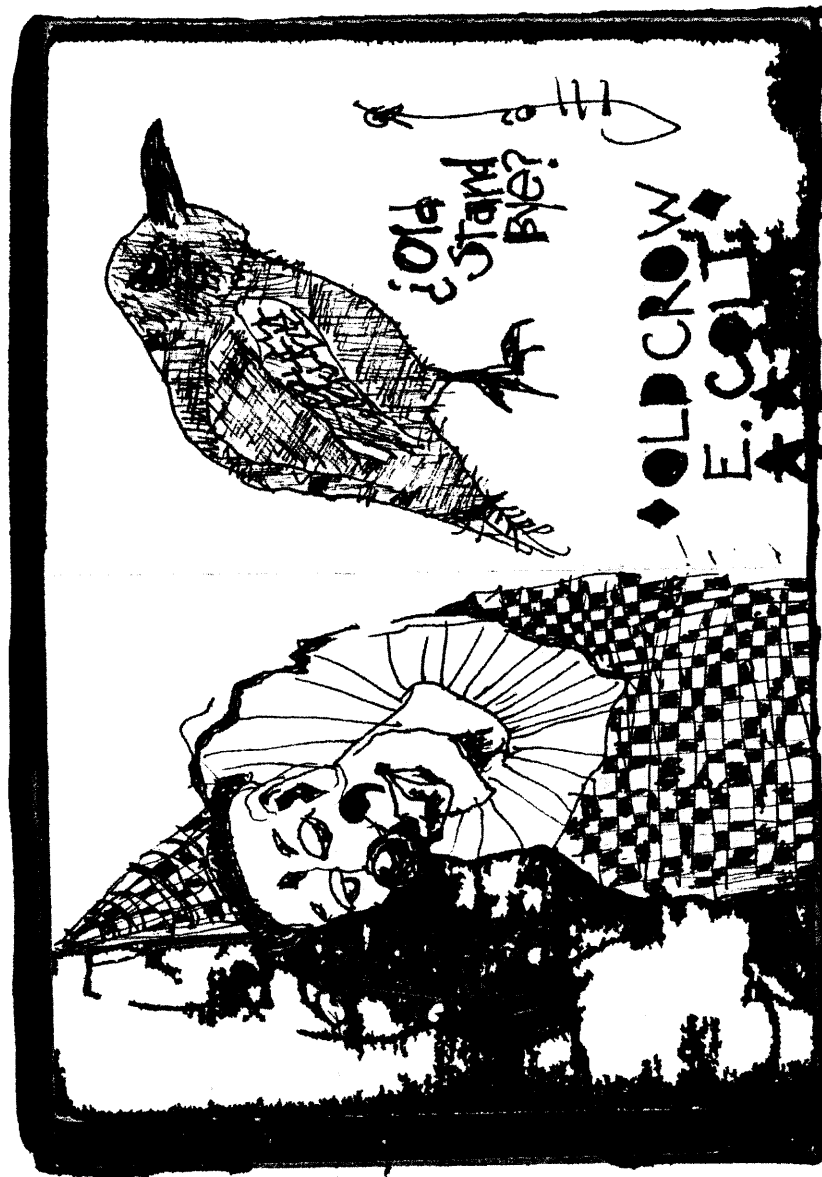
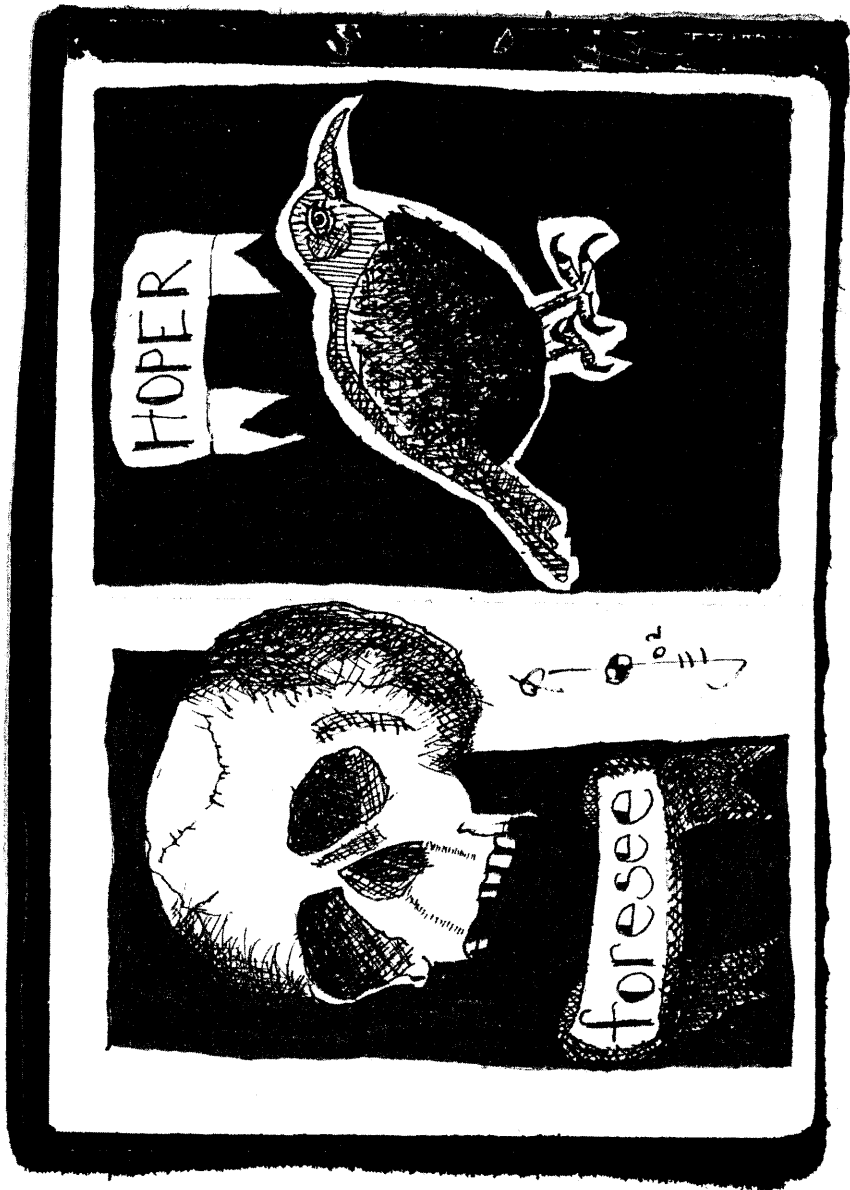
♣ FUBAR AWARD ♣



Blood run Cold →







*The Recent Lives of Saints*

You live with them now. Possibly, the men of the Great Plains can think of you finally over the long commute without the triple-pronged feeling of loss—you have moved so many thousands of days and this many miles. There, in the cell you once occupied, a kind of arid pleasure resides. All of us entombed in those impressions, awkward gestures, weather in the press—we met here and she said—each made newly available to the other without the currency of mutual exchange. Here we are all Jude, patient at the table of longing, nothing but fish scales to offer up.

We are deposited here as a film slowly gathering substance along the edge of liquid left too long in a glass. No matter what we have said before, we say only what they imagine we've said, *The river is flooding*, those men of the Great Plains who dig graves in front of their houses, fill them with sand and rocks. They will not take us out except in the dark, when their wives are occasioned to sleep or bathe. Only then will they open the paper figures that they dreamed we made.

In the cells we have pageants and contests, place bets on the outcome of weathers, feed on each other's hair. This is the lady who traced the creases of her palms with a knife. Here is a man who sold children. The asthmatic, the smoker, and the fat man are still standing after the long climb. We welcome them all—no one is more deserving of a ticket to the last resort. No one need ask for a cold drink. When the men of the Great Plains are asleep, we take turns whittling sticks into spears and rake their insides three at a time.

Once for martyrdom—a pretty purple hat and some birdseed on the windowsill and a prayer written over and over, never spoken aloud. Once for sex and how the smell of it sent us excitedly into our dreams where we took turns saving each other and then washing down the parts. The last for the broken promise—a dash, a dash, a pinch, a hand on my thigh, not another thing between us but a landscape full of wires like staves strung across these deserts, though they say Jude is always pictured with a fish or a ship.

*January 13, 1978*

The last photograph from the city: we have chosen the lesser fountain to lean against, the one with a singular pulse shooting up between us. Others pose, with their own spouts, out of focus to our left, as if these were the only necessity; a soft bulb at night paving the current; the two of us like a shared distance and the broad cutting between our twinned postures—you turned; I was turned. Something smooth in the rest of the landscape sheet metal thin, or like tar that isn't mixed with gravel, but slow as a finger along the back of your knee.

You only remember the threshold, how your face was frosted. How something so small and with so many appendages can't turn itself over. By the light of the garage you spot a beetle stuck on its back and the urgency. Fountains, says Jacobsen, fall back into themselves. All our days cemented in this way and he noticed the sky moving over the branches and he knew more would come of pain—clean and white as a clinic and all the missing digits left in piles somewhere. What if they had turned out the lights and only the sound of caving in remained.

Somewhere water doesn't move, but fuels that irretrievable shade of cold, there is the feeling of possible outcomes. I meet the women in the clinic who move their crusted lips into smiles and tap the tables with their stubs. You leave a ticket home on the pillow and some hot tea that is cool enough to drink when I wake. Tepid as the baths mothers draw to break fevers. On the news, workers inching along the streets, all their clothes flapping back and something fluttering around the lamppost—a purple scarf. When I was a child you say. I remember the map game she played with us and my limited sense of home. But that was a long time—this springing out and up, and so there is the fall that is a kind of returning. Do you want to make a bet; I'll show you how. I make the motion of a smile that fails. We both pause to look at my fingers, intact as the sheet between us, fresh from the icebox.

*From the Wheelchair*

I had just read a book called *How to Fall Through a Black Hole and Survive*; I was at the chapter where everything started to slow down. A leaf had taken a three-minute fall from the dried ficus in the corner. The words were getting all jumbled, as if they were printed one on top of the other, and the pages kept getting farther and farther apart. I grew another few inches every time I took one between my fingers, my limbs extending awkwardly out of my clothes. My bones hollowed and I could no longer hear the toilet running. I shouted soundlessly from the basement apartment a few times; my voice condensed into rocks in the window well that spiders and beetles crawled under with their long eyes. My arm stretched toward eternity, whose other side was a very thin glass of water. I remember drinking it down, though I never actually reached it. Just before the final paragraph, I realized that my hands and feet had curled under like knobs in a magnificent crippling.

*Heights*

Where the wind fell upon an intersection  
 snow the ash of a dead fire  
 and sky as slushy as the sidewalk  
 a bus slouched beneath the umbrella of an early lamp  
 bookshops and storefront esquire  
 and the cold chandeliers of public kitchens  
 characters or rather characters about  
 the uplessness of snow  
 tophats in silhouette  
 then an artificial hand out a homemade mitten  
 cigarettes beside the gray fireworks of grand trees  
 or cigarettes like freckles in the middle distance  
 of a white park  
 dusk an old bruise  
 and areas as quiet as the modest stroke of the river  
 crossing, then arch of the crossing  
 dark hall of the auditorium  
 but bright marquee  
 a pawnshop simply dwelled behind its irons  
 then a woman's shape loitering beside  
 the shape of a woman's wet boots and runny nose  
 where the wind fell upon an intersection  
 the snow rolled like a great wheel  
 bits of night and bits of water  
 and brights—

*Routine*

The word for how I feel  
is perpendicular to.  
As for etc.  
the afternoon wore background  
and periphery  
and a sense of duplication.  
A bright costume.  
A neighborhood quality  
to this beer  
or fire escape  
or the arrival of eagerness.  
An eventual trumpet of street lamp  
and that pretty face  
who is who isn't  
the word for how I feel.  
Not city but brilliance.  
Not loss but panorama.  
Eventual can mean  
pockets of deeper shadow  
even as predawn brightens the dream  
the dreamer is perpendicular to.  
A thimble  
a view  
a rain shower all at once.  
If wakefulness is what's beneath  
the unknown quantity  
then the bedroom lamp

flickers like an old daffodil.  
What warms  
and what seems to warm.  
What seems to clarify  
these moments of misplaced rhythm.  
I can pat myself down  
as if I were missing  
an essential conclusion.  
It might be nice then  
to wear a blue shirt  
and blue jeans  
and some sort of squint.  
A bright costume.

*Catch*

This is where all that fight.  
A forearm, a body

grey before the dawn. That  
flex. Head against

gunwale till oar-still,  
till dead. Then knives

slender as first sun  
on the bend. Blood

rivers from the kiss,  
sinks into reflection.

Behind your eyes.  
Hold this heart's

last pulse, gill's flutters,  
plunge the hand, all milt—

coin this wish scale by scale,  
every muscle's tear,

ring on ring on ring.  
When the cages morse return,

river bears our tense confusions.  
When you ask,

question grabs, and answers  
die toward the pull.

*Hush*

It's just the wind, she says,  
and not the cigarette pull  
of a stranger in the roadside weeds,  
the wind, and not the ember burrowing  
like a mite in a dead bird's wing  
or your fear that the weeds will catch  
and it won't be wind any more,  
the wind, and not the shadow  
blazing brush toward the few  
still-lit windows that glow  
like cigarette tips through the leaves,  
but the wind, the wind  
through his hair, his lungs,  
his easeful steps, quiet  
as the wind or the wisteria  
gripping the screen or the small boy  
running through the moonlit woods  
from the man who entered  
like the wind in his ears  
as the trellis bends  
to those open, hungry hands,  
or the maple shuddering at the screen  
where no one's home  
but the wind  
that watches itself fall  
to the man whose suit of flame  
crackles like the wind

that comes through the screen  
like a mother saying  
hush it's only the wind,  
or a mother saying hush  
it's only the wind.

*Skinwalker*

Under layers of fur and scabby hide  
grind the legendary bones  
fleshed out with tribal myth.

A boogiemán of sorts, it is said,  
or maybe just a brown bear  
nosing its way out of proportion.

Hoist the beast up then  
strip off its robes: you have yourself  
a man bloodied and more

than a little raw, an approximate  
though still inaccurate likeness.  
That Navajo girl, lost

outside the Four Corners  
whose braids whitened  
at its invisible touch,

she believes. What's been told  
is that something has arisen  
from carcasses littering the desert.

Bits of hair, feather, gristle, skin  
stitched together by breath  
restless and gathered in a vessel

for the spirit to travel the dark in.  
What's been told may in fact  
be your everlasting shadow,

its rattle a pulse in the ear,  
the alleged brush of fingertips  
reminding the bones

they once were wings.



## Location Is Everything

I was waiting outside an apartment house to see an apartment I might rent. It was in the right area of town, and I'd seen the house many times passing down that street, and the house was the right size and the apartment in question, with an upstairs window looking out over a brilliant lilac hedge, seemed the right size for me.

I was waiting for a Mr Wang, whom I'd dreamt about the night before. When he pulled up in a tan car I could see that he was the man from my dream. Same square glasses with silver frames. Same black hair parted on the side. Same collared shirt, same wide smile, same bad teeth, or very similar. When he got out of the car, I could see he wore the same pair of cheap white tennis shoes.

We shook hands on the sidewalk, him smiling at me. He had a gold filling along the edge of one of his front teeth that hadn't been in my dream. Other than that, same man.

"I had a dream about you," I said.

"Ah?" he said. "Yes?" He smiled. "Is the dream"—*dream*, it sounded like—"is the dream about Blink Hump Road?"

That is how he said it—*Blink Hump*. In my dream I wasn't sure that I was hearing it correctly. When the short man with the cigar and the scruffy face and the black bowler hat pronounced the word to the Chinese driver hunched at the reins of the wagon it sounded like *Breencomp Road* or *Bleen Camp Road* but Mr Wang distinctly said *Blink Hump*.

"Yes," I said. "The dream about Blink Hump Road."

"Yes," he said. He smiled and parted his hair a little where it was already parted. We were standing on the sidewalk. I could hear some birds chirp. Sparrows, maybe—chirping birds, not the kind that sing. "I show you apartment now?"

"Certainly," I said, jingling some change in my pocket.

"Velly good." He took out an enormous ring of keys. I should say that Mr Wang gave the impression of being a very powerful man, a man of great spiritual and material wealth. He exuded various essences, glowed phosphorescently. He occupied vast planes of space beyond our known horizons, bent time to his purposes, altered several universal laws and their practical applications. He was the type of person I am inclined to trust completely.

He stood on the porch going through key after key trying to find the right one to fit the lock. I looked around. There was a snow shovel propped against a porch column. There was a cardboard box with green and gold letters. It was a box to ship oranges in. There was a cat, a lying down cat with gold eyes.

"In the dream about Blink Hump Road," I said, "why does the man in the bowler hat stop the Chinese driver?" I should say the Chinese driver was not Mr Wang. I am not sure where Mr Wang was in the dream, but he was there.

He smiled and made a motion like a knife across his throat. He smiled bigger, giggled, made the knife motion five more times in rapid succession. "He want to kill him," he said.

"Oh," I said. "That explains things."

He found the right key and opened the door and we went in and stood before a steep staircase in a poorly-lit hallway.

"Let me ask you another question," I said. There was a lot of dust in the hallway. You could see it in the sunlight and on the banister. "Why does the man in the bowler hat..."

"His name Nick?" Mr Wang said.

"Yes," I said. "His name was Nick." Mr Wang smiled and I could see the gold in his tooth. "Why does the short man named Nick who wears the bowler hat and smokes the cigar ask the Chinese driver, hunched at the reins, perspiration staining the armpits of his white shirt, where he is going?"

Mr Wang giggled in what I am tempted to call an hysterical manner. He started up the stairs. There was a creak in the odd-numbered stairs only—one, three, five. The house was very old. There was a lot of dust around. You could choke on it. It got inside your shirt.

"Kill him," he said. "Oh," he said, drawing the word out in a sigh. "Blink Hump Load. They kill many, many people there."

"In my dream the Chinese people were working on the railroad."

"Yes," he said, and he hopped on the seventh stair, literally hopped, up and down, and this from a man who appeared to be in I'd say his early fifties. "They work on the railroad." (He did not say "railroad" exactly. It was a difficult word for him, but I cannot offer a reasonable approximation of the way the word he did say actually sounded.) "But in the dream of Blink Hump Load there is not any railroad. Collect?"

"Correct," I said. The part was gone from his hair suddenly, just literally gone, and he made a broad swipe with one hand to fix it, and fixed it was. Perfectly. "There was no railroad. What I saw was a Chinese driver hunched at the reins of a wagon, perspiration staining the armpits of his white shirt, a short man with a scruffy face wearing a black bowler and smoking a cigar, a kind of stillness in the air, a dusty sunset just beginning to transpire, a red sun, hot, and tall yellow weeds by the side of the dirt road the wagon traveled down, grasshoppers hopping in these weeds, popping up like popcorn, and ahead in the distance a line of trees. The road went into a line of trees, and beyond that there were mountains. I was struck particularly by the heat of the day, by the extreme dustiness of the road and how that seemed to lend the huge sun a red hue, and by the tallness of the mountains."

The whole time I spoke he nodded up and down on the seventh stair, not only his head, but nodding his whole body. "That is exactly collect," he said. "Is the same dream dreamed by Bay Loot?"

"Bay Loot?" I said.

"Yes," he said. "American baseball player. Hit many home runs."

"Babe Ruth," I said.

"Collect," he told me. "He have same dream about Blink Hump Load. This dust, this sun." He put a finger to his gold tooth. "I have some food there?" he asked me.

"No," I said.

"Velly good. Bay Loot. He tell this to me once, in conversation." Mr Wang interested me.

We walked up the ninth and eleventh and thirteenth and fifteenth creaky stairs, and stood at the top. There was a door to the left and a door to the right. We went to the door on the left and he started trying out keys again.

"How are the neighbors?" I said.

"Neighbors good," he said. He stuck his finger against his nose. "Quiet!" he said.

I looked around. I whispered. "Why?"

He giggled in a manner that I would have to call hysterical. "No," he said. "Neighbors. Neighbors quiet."

"Oh," I said. "Good."

"Yes," he said. "Velly good." He fumbled with his keys. Let me say that this apartment house was very old, and standing there I was very aware of the oldness. It had the look and feel of a very old place.

"May I ask you another question?" I said.

"About Blink Hump Load?" he said.

"Yes," I said.

"Continue."

"The scruffy-faced man in the bowler hat, named Nick, asked the Chinese driver hunched at the reins if he was going to Blink Hump Road, and the Chinese driver said, very sheepishly I might add, that, no, he was going to Coal Chunk Ferry."

"Oh," Mr Wang said, making it sound like a sigh. "Coal Chunk Felly," he said. "Yes."

"What's the deal?"

He had the right key in the lock, turned to me with a puzzled expression.

"It's a slang phrase," I said. "I am inquiring after the meaning."

"Oh," he said, smiling. "The meaning of that?" he said. "Coal Chunk Felly?"

"Yes," I said.

"That is where they kill him then." His gold tooth glittered. The house was very old. "They ask him, 'Do you go to Blink Hump Load?' He answer, 'No. I go to Coal Chunk Felly.' So—you see?—they know he go to Coal Chunk Felly. Boom! They go to kill him there. They know where to ambush. You see? Is ingenious, the mind of these people."

"Oh," I said. "That explains things."

"Collect," he said. "That explains much. All along they ask, 'Do you go to Blink Hump Load?' 'No,' they say. The Chinese people, my people. 'I go to Coal Chunk Felly.' 'I go to Blight Bit Highway.' 'I go to Bluebelly Lane.' Then the men in bowler hats know where to go to kill him." He made the slashing motion. "Kill many, many, many."

The key was in the lock but he didn't turn it. I was waiting. I could see things and smell things and feel things and taste things and hear things. I could use all the five senses. That was something you had to like about that place.

"Why did the man in the bowler hat smoking the cigar, the one with the scruffy face, the short one, ask specifically about Blink Hump Road?"

"Oh," he said, and a look of appalling tragedy passed across his features suddenly, the most poignant look of appalling tragedy I have ever seen pass across the face of a human being on this earth.

"Blink Hump Load was...Blink Hump Load, it...Blink Hump Load," he said. "It is difficult to explain."

"Well," I said, "you needn't try then. It was just a dream."

"Yes," he said, smiling. "The same dream Bay Loot had. He tell it to me."

"But you already knew," I said.

"Collect," he said. "We became great friends. He point to me at the 1932 World Series."

"Babe Ruth," I said.

"Collect," he said. "He point to me. Some say he point home run. Some say he only point to pitcher. Truth? We great friends. He point to me." He motioned with his arm out as if he held a bat. "See? Point. Like so. 'Howdy, Wang.'"

"The famous 'called shot,'" I said. We stood there with the key in the lock not turning.

"Bay Loot," he said. "Collect. Exactly. You and Bay Loot dream of Blink Hump Load. Only you two. Many people die there." That poignant look of appalling tragedy again.

"Well, I'll be damned," I said. It was quite an afternoon.

He opened the door. Inside was a family seated at a dinner table. The woman was extraordinarily beautiful. There were no men in bowler hats. I could feel the air move. It came in the door and out the door, smelling like flowers. Out the window I could see the brilliant purple of the lilac hedge.

"I'll take it," I said. "It suits me."

*Man on Train with Flowers*

On train with flowers then next to me sits woman even much prettier than woman I buy flowers for so she'll love me and cure my situation. My situation needs attention more than what I can give it. And I think about my situation more than what is probably healthy. Must be I was born that way.

The woman I buy flowers for I hope will think about my situation and want to help cure me. She is nice woman with cloudy eyes and soft legs, almost like she ain't got no bones and the muscles have decided to lay down and die.

Let me talk about my situation. My situation is complicated. It can have a life and or a mind of its own but almost never rarely sometimes gets me in trouble. That is all I want to say about my situation.

Instead let me talk about nice woman I buy flowers for who I hope might help me and cure my situation. She has light blonde hairs all over face and is one of those kinds of woman that almost knows what it feels like to have situation. She knows it sometimes often needs attention.

No. I should talk about woman even much prettier than nice woman with soft legs I buy flowers for. Turns out this woman has same last name as me before she got married to some other guy and devote herself to his situation. We can't decide what any of it means except no good. The way this woman look at me says she wishes things was different. The way I look at her says loose lips sink ships. She is on train going to meet husband and friends for dinner. I ask about married life, should she need Lancelot or King Arthur or James Cagney. She says it's good but not what you expect. This means she has second thoughts or cold feet. Then she

says she has brother that looks just like me only with hair and taller. This means she could see herself falling head over heels so it's good we can never see each other after this train ride. And also ignorance is bliss. She asks about flowers and for whom they are for. I tell her about nice woman with soft legs and light blonde hairs on her face. She approves. She says something nice but is devastated beyond repair. She turns ring on left ring finger so diamond points up. I could love this woman regardless.

The flowers I hold directly over my situation so no one can see but there is nowhere to hide neither. The train stops and the woman and I leave together but in separate directions.

I present woman with soft legs flowers at door. She is on third Chivas Regal and barefoot. Soon she passes point where she is willing or able to help cure my situation. The flowers go in vase and I go back to train station. Before that I tell her about woman even much prettier on train but leave out what needs to be left out. She approves. She says something nice but is devastated beyond repair. Then supposedly she passes out on futon. She will never love me.

On train ride home no one sits next to me which is probably what I want but wouldn't mind should a woman come help cure my situation.

Somewhere else in restaurant pretty woman tells husband and friends about man on train with flowers. Whatever it is she says is her business but make no mistake this is me she is talking about.

*Piercing*

Just one more hole punched in the ear  
would update my look, my daughter,  
pinching the curved flesh, is convinced. I

draw back, groping for the pearl  
that marks the spot where Lori Kanter,  
behind Martinsville Junior High, pressed

her pen against my lobe one lunch hour.  
I flattened against the bricks while she  
searched across a pincushion she swiped

from the Home Ec room for the perfect  
point. Thirteen, I wanted it so badly  
I sagged beneath her first thrust and turned

the other cheek up just before I fainted.  
All the cool girls were pierced, I'd begged  
my mother. *Slut*, she'd hissed, and sure enough,

there I was, panting in the dirt while Lori  
poured alcohol over a glistening hoop  
that filled the hole. *It's different now*, my daughter

assures. *They use a gun. You barely feel  
a thing.* But I cup my hands against  
the sides of my head. No sterile room

in the back of the tattoo shop for me. I  
mean to say it was sweet, that septic sensation  
of Lori melting into me, warm fingers sliding

into my sweat-soaked hair, cold kiss  
of the ballpoint before she hovered, blocking  
the sun, ready to twist the needle in.

*Jewel*

The diamond is now the story's center, how  
it vanished from Grandmother's hand after the wreck.

My mother waves the memory away, *It wasn't*  
*that big*, but my sisters can't let the accident go:  
those farm boys in that dinky Arkansas school

couldn't have been the ones who forced her  
from the road. *Tell it, Mom*, Karen insists,  
her hands making crazy circles in the air,  
but goes on herself—that ring should have gone to one  
of us girls. Our mother sighs at the window, *Oh dear*,

but now we're back to the tale of our parents' decision  
to marry the same weekend they buried her,  
we're all the way back to our grandmother's divorce,  
the teaching job she took to raise our father. Her second  
husband, my sister sniffs, could have killed her, could have

sold the ring, pocketed the cash, and, finally,  
we've arrived, once more, at the smashed car in the ditch.

Karen's eyes glitter at this detail, and now Mary  
chimes in: she's sure the students did it for revenge  
over failing grades. So they tell it yet again, always

coming to the same bloody end. Nobody knows the truth,  
nobody asks how she lived, that town's only female  
professional, but they fight to describe the stone  
we've never seen, shining—it *must* have been worth  
a fortune—still on the dead woman's cooling finger.

*And*

What if you are  
miserable, love?  
I barely remember  
except for  
your chanting  
something about

was it Hestia?  
Infidelities?  
Medicinal plants?

It was a good trick  
and I believed  
every word  
from your smoky lips

Now you show up  
like ash boy,  
a legend

like blue bathroom tile  
pretty  
but never quite clean

You come with crystal  
you leave tinder  
in front of my door

You say  
you cannot start  
the banquet  
without me

Pour the wine  
I'll grind my teeth  
we'll split the bottle

I search but  
there is nothing beautiful  
I want you to have

*In the Channel*

Our rowboat drifts by trees, their shade  
 cloud shaped. We tell stories:  
 breech but not c-section,  
 the nurse's squeaky voice,  
 for hours heat lightning flashing  
 the curtainless tenth-floor window.  
 Hours, pounds, hips  
 enough so it could happen  
 and where were the fathers?  
 (A birthing film splashed  
 too much blood. And there was  
 work—black box missiles to design  
 and launch, then track through space.)

We dangle here—  
 that place where shores arc  
 close, the silver bow  
 breaking one lake, the stern  
 indifferently rippling the other.

*Arc of Perseverance*

Darkness from darkness—the coal  
 tumbles in hunks. Each day's hidden  
 pivot of sun, then pickax swing.  
 The men, sleeves gritty and  
 shoved to elbows, forearms  
 slick, sway and swing, working  
 like worry, each spot returned to again  
 and again. 4:30. And the local  
 derail—fray of blue sparks,  
 the engine a clacking, iron waterfall  
 as it pitches headlong, hillside tracks  
 to lake. The men keep on  
 in their racket. No whistle, anyway,  
 to let anyone know.



*Welcome to Lake Charles, Louisiana*

It's 6:20 a.m. Someone rang the bell  
and it looks as if the fog has not quite  
finished connecting the shapes that anchor  
my new world. Porch. Plant. Sidewalk. Tree.  
Gate, still open. I hear a rasping sound,  
music played by bugs in a can.  
It's Terry, youngest of that chaotic family  
down the street, the kid who mowed my lawn  
yesterday, who took four breaks to ask for water  
and stopped to show his friends parts of a snake  
that got chopped by the blade. My first week here,  
and I already know this: he's outside the fence,  
holding a small radio to his ear.  
The radio his cousins and friends always try to steal.

*Terry, I say. What do you want?*

He appears in the gate, takes his time coming up the walk.  
A few steps shy of the door, he turns off the radio  
and lifts his face quizzically, as if *I* had awakened *him*.  
*Do you have any idea of what time it is?* I ask.  
He ignores the question. Shifts his weight.  
Grunts. The way I already know he does.

*James, he says. Can I have two dollars?*

I choke on a laugh. I open my mouth,  
but I cannot imagine what to say.  
Here comes today and it wishes I had two bucks.  
I look over Terry's head at black windows  
on a vacant house across the street.  
A car with a torn vinyl roof and leaky muffler  
chugs to a stop at the corner, brake lights  
glowing through wet exhaust. I remember half waking  
to nearby gunshots. Did that happen Tuesday night?  
Or was it last? The lights blink off and the car rolls forward.

I am a stranger in this town, and far from any place  
I've ever known. My shins feel brittle in the cool damp.  
I want to go inside and think, rinse my face  
with warm water, shave, brush my teeth,  
prepare myself for these comings and goings.  
I draw my shoulders back. Terry rocks from foot to foot,  
fiddling with the radio dial, his head turned away now.  
He knows he won't get the money;  
with the whole morning ahead of him,  
he's already forgetting the transaction,  
waiting for a reason to move along.

## *Mango Dreams*

Mangoes, that's all my buddy,  
Errol, could eat his final days.  
I lifted his lanky light body  
from the bed to his chair.

He curled into me like a baby—  
me the mother—and I  
scooped out, spoon by spoon,  
the delicacy of his life.

*Only buy the old ones, you know*  
*I gum 'em, Bill, Errol said. Daily*  
I went to Ernie's on the Southside  
told him, *Pick me a couple*  
*on their way to the garbage bin.*  
He did that, gave me two or three  
mangoes, soft as much.

Errol tested positive at Sunset Manor.  
Too long on the streets. Now  
he could only eat mangoes and dream  
when the terror rose up at dusk.

Late afternoons, the sun on flat  
Southside Chicago going down  
I often got a call to come  
sit with him as he trembled.

I'd put a napkin in Errol's lap.  
His terror subsided just when  
his mouth opened, his lips  
slowly circled and the burnt red  
mango juice slid in. As his eyelids closed,  
the south wind blew for him,  
rustling palm fronds and bright skirts,  
taking him home.

Errol's eyes would go up and beyond,  
leave his cavity body, the Naugahyde chair,  
the patient mahogany hands on his thighs,  
his lips, the juice, his rosary,  
the communion of eternity.

Me, I tested negative. I don't see  
the palm trees or the girls  
or smell the coconut and coffee bean.

Errol sleeps as I step  
into the dark night, no moon,  
too early for stars. Cold now,  
I am lonely in this car.  
How can I know  
if that south wind will blow for me?

## One Summer

When Granny came that summer, she brought along her parakeet, a small, mostly-green bird with too-knowing eyes and a monotonous way of repeating dull phrases: *Better watch out! Sing to me, sweetie. You precious baby.*

Until she got that bird, I was her precious baby. Manners were big with her, but she let that bird walk around on the table while we ate. Let him poo-poo on the table. She scolded him, but I could tell she thought it was a cute thing he'd done. She apologized when he flew up and pooped on my shoulder. She said, "Tell Nancy you're sorry," and then she made a noise with her lips that brought him swooping down to shower her with kisses.

"He better not ever kiss me," I told Granny.

My mother and father (Granny's only son) tried to start conversations about people in the neighborhood that Granny knew, and things that happened at the store and down at the church. They tried not to notice Jackie sitting on the bread plate or drinking out of a glass.

I hoped he would drown when he lit on my glass. I hoped my cat Poncho would spring up and eat him, but after Jackie came, Mama said Poncho couldn't come in the house.

"It's his house," I told my mother.

"Granny is our guest," she said, even though Granny had come to stay all summer. To live with us until school started. "Jackie is good for Granny," Mama said. "He gives her something to think about."

"She can think about us." I was nine maybe. Or maybe ten, the month Jackie reigned.

One good thing. He went to bed early. Granny put his cage on a table in my room and kissed him good night. Sometimes after the fancy cover she had made was arranged over the cage, Jackie went on boring us: *Rain!* he squawked. *Hear the rain?* Only he called it *grain* because he couldn't pronounce words starting with *r*. Gradio. Gred. His only imperfection, Granny told us.

The first night we sat on the front porch after Jackie retired, my parents in rockers and Granny in a straight chair because she preferred it on account of her back. Rheumatism, she said. I sat on the steps so I could run out in the yard to catch lightning bugs.

I brought one back, crawling over my hand. I showed it to Granny. "Tomorrow," she said, "you'll have Jackie to sit on your finger."

My father said, "I want you to come down to the store in the morning, Mother. (His grocery store she owned half interest in.) We have business to see to. About your river property."

"Harold," my mother said. "Granny won't sleep if you get into that tonight."

"What do you mean *see to*?" Granny asked.

"We'll talk about it down there. I'm just mentioning it so you and Jackie won't make other plans."

"We're going to visit Cora Nell in the morning. I've already called her."

"You have all summer to visit Cora Nell."

"I have all summer *to see to some business* about my river property!" Granny had a sweet, kind voice but when she felt shoved against a wall, she sat up as straight as the back of her chair and sounded like a hammer clanging on flint rock. "I'll be down to your office next week, Harold. Or the week after that."

"Suit yourself," he said. He stayed steady when he talked to his mother. "But the sooner the better. There's money involved."

"Harold," my mother said.

"Money?" said Granny.

"We'll discuss it tomorrow."

"I want to know now."

Daddy got up and kissed her. "I'm going to bed."

"You throw out a bomb like that," my mother said, "and then you walk off to bed! In five minutes," she said to Granny, "he'll be asleep."

"Ella Mae," said Granny, "what is this about?"

My daddy was already way down the hall.

"I know so little about it, Granny, I really can't say."

"You're married to Harold."

"For fifteen years," I put in. "On the fourth of August it'll be sixteen and we might have a party. Beer and everything."

Ordinarily my mother would have sent *me* to bed for mentioning beer to my teetotalling grandmother, but Granny had Mama cornered, and she needed me with her.

"You're bound to be in on this, Ella Mae."

I said helpfully, "It's about the dam."

"What dam?" said Granny, her eyes a little bit like Jackie's eyes.

"The one they're going to build where the river is."

"Is that true, Ella Mae?"

My mother's voice when she's pushed against a wall comes out shaky. "I'm not up on the facts."

"The pecan bottom," I said, "is going under water."

Granny made a sound like Jackie squawking.

"I'm sorry, Granny," my mother said.

"Nobody is going to build a dam on my property! Or even put up a fence unless I say so."

"I'm sure not," said Mama. "Anyway, it's not anywhere near settled. It's a possibility, that's all."

"The land around here is flat as an ironing board. Dams are built in valleys between hills."

"A lot of people don't like it," I put in.

"Nancy Jane," Mama said, "this business is between your daddy and Granny. The thing for you to do is go put on your pajamas. You're on the sleeping porch, remember. And I want evidence that you've brushed your teeth."

She'd wormed out of me that sometimes I just wet the toothbrush, so now I had to report back smelling like Pepsodent to kiss her good night. (In my family we did a lot of kissing. Birds and all.)

I always gave up my room when Granny came. This was the first time I'd minded. I loved my Granny, but I didn't love Jackie, do-doing on things belonging to me. I liked regular birds that flew around in the yard, but there was no comparison between them and that parakeet. Something about his bill curving down to his mouth where his round tongue rolled out made me think of sick people in rooms with the shades down and medicine bottles on the table.

Actually, though, our house belonged to Granny. She lent it to us after I was born, and moved away to Jacksonville where her sister lived. When I was younger and she came to visit, I would beg her to stay longer, falling down on the floor, crying to convince her. She played cards with me and made angel food cakes. She bought me fancier dresses than my mother approved of, and took me to the picture show whenever the feature changed.

Stretched out on the sleeping porch after the Pepsodent check, I looked out at the elms, black against the sky, and wanted them not to build the dam where Granny's pecan bottom was. In the spring we went there and picked dewberries out of the weeds, and grassburrs off our socks. In the fall, all the pecans I picked up I sold for Christmas money. During flood times we stood on the county bridge and marveled at the water rising in the bottom. I finally went to sleep, thinking about dam water covering the highest branches, the tree trunks drowning, gasping for breath until they crashed down and motor boats ran over them.

In the morning Granny didn't get up as early as she should have. Other summers she rose before day and made the coffee and rattled around until she woke us all up.

"Peep in there, Nancy, and see if she's still asleep."

"What if she's dead?"

"Hush!" said Mama.

"Well, she could be. She's ninety."

"She's seventy-four."

I'd been dying to know, but Granny never would tell me. She said children had no business asking adults rude questions.

I tiptoed down the hall and right away I heard Jackie cooing, it sounded like, and Granny talking low to him. I knocked on the door and Granny said, "Come in quietly. Jackie and I are having our devotional."

My Granny was religious. Pious, my daddy said, as if it was a word that tasted like mineral oil. Instead of a pillow, Granny slept on a Bible. "Jacob," she once told me, "used a stone for a pillow."

"When he rassled that angel that crippled his foot?"

She seemed surprised that I knew who Jacob was, but she wasn't quite pleased. "There's more to the story than a crippled foot, Nancy Jane. Jacob wrested a blessing from the angel."

*Rested?* I thought, but I didn't go into it. I didn't mention it now either, looking at her bird nibbling at her nightgown. I said, "Is Jackie pious?"

She looked over her glasses. "He is very attentive to the scriptures."

I was interested in that. "Do you think you can convert him?"

She didn't hesitate to tell me that God's creatures in the animal world didn't need converting. They were as innocent as babes, incapable of sin.

I thought of the mess he'd left on my shoulder. "Do you take him to church?"

"Not at present. I may later."

"I hope I'm there when you do."

She closed her devotional book and waved her hand at Jackie, who flew over to the dresser and pecked at himself in the mirror.

"I thought about that dam all night," she said tiredly.

"Me, too," I offered as consolation. "They need to put it some place else where there's no pecans."

She closed her eyes and pinched the bridge of her nose. "Change," she said.

I thought she meant nickels and dimes that she'd put some place to give me, and I waited expectantly to receive them.

"You'll know when you're my age, Nancy, the inevitability of change. Eventually one loses everything one loves."

"It's probably in your purse," I said. "Do you want me to look for it?"

She opened her eyes and fixed a stare on me. "You're old enough now to give serious thought to what's happening around you."

I knew what was happening: Daddy was in the bathroom shaving his face. Mama was in the kitchen wondering where we were. And Jackie, Granny's bird, was on top of my head.

"Get off!" I said in a near shriek.

"He doesn't respond, Nancy Jane, to that tone of voice."

I knocked him off, bringing forth a screech and a lop-sided swoop into Granny's lap.

"At this moment," she said, "I regret to acknowledge that you are my granddaughter!"

"I'm sorry." I saw nickels and dimes flying out of the picture. "He was fixing to do you-know-what in my hair."

Mama came in. "Ladies," she said, "breakfast is ready."

"Good morning, Ella Mae."

"Good morning, Granny."

"Ella Mae, how would you like to call me Trilby?"

"Oh," said my mother. "Well, I don't know."

"Trilby!" I laughed.

"Trilby is a revered Southern name, and it happens to be mine." Granny turned back to my mother. "After fifteen years, I believe we have attained the closeness of sisters."

Mother's eyes darted around. "The thing is, I've always called you Granny. Or Mother Lewis."

"You're getting older yourself," Granny said crisply. "In a few more years *you* could be a granny. How would you like people to forget that your name is Ella Mae?"

"I'd be glad if they did. I'd rather be called Agnes."

"That's neither here nor there. I'm asking you to consider my request. You will make me very happy if you agree." My grandmother looked at me. "You, of course, will continue to call me Granny." She rose from the bed. "I'll dress now for breakfast."

My mother and I hurried out, not noticing Jackie hurrying with us until my mother opened the back screen to call my father out of the garden, and Poncho ran in and Jackie flew out.

"Oh, my lord!" My mother grabbed her throat.

"I'll run tell Trilby!"

She snatched me down the steps. "Get the butterfly net! Harold!" She ran screaming to the garden. "Jackie is loose!"

I came running back. "He's in the peach tree!"

My father approached slowly. "Sit on the steps, Nancy. See if he'll come to you."

He didn't come.

"Go inside and get the cage."

Mother exclaimed, "Granny will know!"

"She's going to know anyway if we don't catch him."

Fortunately for me, she was gargling in the bathroom. I tore out with the cage. My father set it on an elm stump.

"Come away from it, Harold!"

"When Jackie flies in, I'm going to shut the door."

Jackie did, and he did, and we all went trembling back into the house.

"Are we going to tell her?" my mother whispered.

"Not if we don't have to."

I got the cage back in the room while the bath water was gurgling out of the tub.

My father was at the table reading the newspaper when Granny came in, all fresh and smiling, and took the chair beside him.

"Is there anything in the paper about the dam, Harold?"

He looked up, startled.

"Nancy explained it to me." She shook out her napkin. "The sooner we let these people know that dam water will not be flooding my pecan bottom, the easier it will be for everyone concerned."

"We'll discuss it at the store," my father said. "I'd like you to be there by ten." He poured her a cup of coffee. "Olan Barnes is stopping in."

"Lawyer Barnes?" Her chin jutted out. "Is it a social call?"

"He said he'd like to see you."

Granny's hand shook a little when she picked up the cup. "Your father and I sacrificed, Harold, to buy that bottom land."

"I know you did, Mother, and we all love it, but times change."

I caught on then, about change. I saw how bad it scared Granny to think about it. Everything she loved, she had lost to change. Grampa Lewis and no telling what else.

I got up from the table. "I'll bring Jackie in here so he can sit in the sun."

While Granny got ready, Mama washed the dishes and I dried.

"Why does she want you to call her Trilby?"

"I think she wants an ally, instead of a daughter-in-law."

Mama explained. "She wants me on her side if she has to fight Dad."

"Fight Dad?"

"In a battle of wills. If it comes to that."

"You mean Dad wants the dam and she doesn't?"

"No, he doesn't want it either, but the government does. We'll have to go along eventually, he says, and it's better to agree now than to wear ourselves out hanging on for two or three years when in the end they'll condemn Granny's land and take it anyway."

"Steal it?" I was horrified.

"Oh no. They'll pay for it."

"But Granny wants the pecan bottom. She doesn't want money."

Mama wiped off the counter. "That's it exactly."

Granny asked me to walk downtown with her. Two blocks to Dad's grocery store. "Afterward," she said, "we'll go to the drugstore and have a soda."

"I'd rather have an ice cream cone."

"Fine," she said,

"A cone will cost less and then I can have something else." She didn't reply. "Like bubble gum. Or a movie magazine?"

"Yes," she said, so I knew she wasn't listening.

"I'll go on and wait for you down there."

She took my hand. "I want you to go with me. To the meeting," she said.

Me. A child. A little pitcher with big ears. "What for?" I said.

"It won't take but a minute, and then we'll go treat ourselves."

It took an hour and a half. I had to go out twice and bring in cokes. I had to sit there and listen to Mr Barnes droning on in his sweet potato voice. (He yammered, my father said, until you wanted to choke him.) I think I went to sleep at some point because I dreamed something nice but when I came to again Granny was saying *no* for the jillionth time and Daddy was saying, *You don't have to decide today.*

When it was over, Granny took my hand and walked out of the store like her petticoat was on fire. She turned toward our house, and I said, "Aren't we going to the drugstore?"

"Not today."

"You said we were."

She didn't answer. At the house she walked straight down the hall without speaking to Mama and went in my room and closed the door.

"Poor thing," Mama said. "It must have been awful for her."

"It was awful for Daddy and Mr Barnes. She said no to everything."

My mother stared. "She took you in there?"

"I heard it all." But of course I didn't. I didn't hear anything except an exchange of voices more monotonous than Jackie's. "Can I have an advance on my allowance for an ice cream cone?"

"It's almost lunch time. Set the table."

That's the way it went the whole rest of the month. Meetings with Mr Barnes and Daddy, though I never went again. It wrung out Granny. The only thing that comforted her was Jackie, his silly sayings and his twitter that never stopped. She took him with her when she went to Cora Nell's, and then she didn't go again because Jackie, she said, was not well received.

On the fourth of July, Granny produced a man friend. We didn't know she had one. She telephoned him the night before, and then she told us he was coming for the Lion's Club picnic and fireworks afterward, so he would probably spend the night.

"I'll sleep with you on the sleeping porch," she said to me.

We were all struck dumb. Grandfather Lewis had been dead longer than I'd been alive. She'd had only lady friends in all that time. At least that's what we thought because it never occurred to us to think anything else.

"We'll be happy to have him," my father finally said. "Mr Walker?"

"Yes."

"A widower?"

"Divorced."

"Children?" my mother said.

"Grown and gone."

"What does he do to make money?" I asked.

"He doesn't do anything. He is retired."

"From what?" Dad said.

Granny smiled sweetly. "Ask him, Harold."

Mr Weatherford Walker was a retired attorney-at-law. He stayed the next day, too, and went to church with us and then on Monday morning he and Granny went to see Mr Barnes without Daddy.

"It's all right," Daddy said after they left to eat breakfast together downtown and prepare for their meeting. "She'll be more satisfied if her own lawyer is in on this."

"Do you like him?" I asked.

"It doesn't matter if I do or I don't."

"What if they marry?"

"Marry!" my mother said.

"She's only seventy-four."

They sent me to the library on my bicycle with a big plastic bag to bring books for everybody. "Even Mr Walker?"

"Yes, certainly," Dad said. "We want him to have something to do when he gets tired of talking."

"He talks more than Jackie."

Dad gave me a kiss and a pat on the head.

The first terrible thing was that Mr Walker died that morning in Mr Olan Barnes' office. The second awful thing was that while he and

Granny were there, I went out in the backyard and opened Jackie's cage and shooed him out.

When the siren went off (it lets us know when there's a fire or an accident), I was sitting on the back steps with a library book acting like I had no idea Jackie was loose in the trees.

Then Mama came out, white-faced and speechless.

"What's the matter?" I said from a dried-up mouth, my breakfast on its way up, my heart pounding.

Mama gasped, "Mr Walker's had a spell!"

*Saved!* I thought. And blood filled my head. "What kind of spell?"

"It must have been his heart." Mama was holding herself together with her hands around her neck. "They've taken him to the hospital. I'm going there now."

I scrambled up. "I'll go with you!"

"You stay here and answer the telephone."

I went anyway, and she seemed not to notice, she was walking so fast. I stayed a little behind her and saw for the first time she was a tiny bit pigeon-toed. *Was I?* I wondered. And how could I find out without having to ask?

Daddy and Granny were coming down the steps at the hospital when we came up, Daddy holding onto Granny who looked more ninety than seventy-four.

"What...?" said my mother.

"He died," said Dad.

"Oh, Granny..." Mama took her arm and they led her to our car and put her in.

Granny was breathing through her mouth and wiping her face.

I got in beside her. "Are you all right, Granny?"

"Weatherford died," she said.

"What happened to him?"

"Nancy Jane!" From the front seat.

"He seemed fine this morning, Granny."



She took my hand. "He was. He was perfectly fine. Then he made a noise as if he were socked in the stomach and fell out of Lawyer Barnes' leather chair." Her eyes closed. "For the rest of my life I'll hear him hitting the floor."

"You need to lie down, Granny," Mama said when we had her in the house. "Here, I'll turn down the bed for you."

"Jackie?" she said.

I had forgot about Jackie.

Granny sat up. "Where is my Jackie?"

"I'll run get him," I said. "I hung his cage in the peach tree and then we left..."

"Ella Mae, bring me some water."

I raced outside. "Jackie! Sweetie! Come on down here! Come get in your cage!" I made his little love coos and ran from tree to tree. "Your Granny wants you!" But there was no sign of him, only his toys in his cage and half a cup of seed.

I began to cry, loud boo-hooing noises that brought on hiccups and brought Mama rushing out.

"Jackie's gone!" I wailed. I fell down on the grass and covered my head.

Mother said, aghast, "His cage is open!"

"I didn't do it!"

"Of course you didn't do it." She ran around as I had, searching the trees. "He'll come back in a minute. Run get your father and don't let Granny know."

Luckily for us, Granny had fallen asleep from the tranquilizer they gave her at the hospital.

We called and called for I don't know how long. My father whistled a little tune Jackie liked to sing. Mama made kissing noises.

A black feeling came over me. The wages of sin. I was underneath a rock, maybe Jacob's pillow, but no angel could rest me. I was halfway to hell.

"Nancy Jane," said Mama. "Take the cage and go around the neighborhood. Get some of the children to help you look."

I felt a leap of hope. There were trees everywhere he could be sitting in! I rounded up three friends. I told them the first one who found him and got him back in the cage could make up stuff for me to do for the next week, and I would do it.

"Will you jump in the Guadalupe?" Naming our river.

"I will if you want me to." Though I couldn't swim.

We didn't find Jackie. Not even one green feather.

Granny took it hard. "On top of Weatherford dying, my precious bird is dead!"

I tried to help. "I don't think he's dead, Granny."

"Then he'll starve to death somewhere."

"Maybe somebody will find him who loves birds."

"He's gone!" she said. "He's gone forever!" She wept for a long time and we couldn't comfort her.

We all went to Jacksonville for the funeral of Mr Weatherford Walker, and then we brought Granny back to finish out her visit, but she wouldn't stay. She spent one night and then asked to be taken home.

"Mother," my dad said, "I know you don't want to think about it, but we ought to decide something about the river bottom."

"The dam," said my grandmother. "I don't give a damn about the dam."

My father opened his mouth and shut it again.

"When you get the papers ready, send them and I'll sign them. I've learned in the last few days, change is not to be reckoned with."

"If you'd like to think about it a while longer..."

"I intend never to think of it again. When the money comes, put it in the bank for Nancy Jane."

I cried inordinately.

Even Granny grew concerned. "Jackie was a dear little bird, but we'll get over losing him. The tragedy is..." Her face crumpled. "Unlike my Weatherford, Jackie had no soul." She held me tightly. "That poor little creature had only a gizzard."

My Granny lived for another seven years, but we went to see her, she never came to us, she never visited us again.

Jackie's cage Daddy hung in the storeroom.

No one ever said to me, how did Jackie get out? No one offered the explanations I had thought up: a child must have come along and wanted to play with him, the latch was faulty, the wind blew the door open.

They all knew what happened. But they couldn't speak of it. Acknowledging my act with words would require admitting that their precious child, like Jackie, had no soul, only a gray gizzard and no chance at all of getting into heaven.

## BILL CHRISTOPHERSEN

### *November*

Month of abrupt silhouettes, taut verticals,  
tossed branches parrying the season's gusts:  
when lush gives way to stark, and technicolor  
fades to black and white juiced by the dark  
flame of a Norway spruce or the isolate  
willow's incandescent filaments;  
when the haggard skulls of hornets' nests once hid  
by foliage of ash and elm and oak  
heave baldly into view, and squirrels zip,  
brash enough, through windrows only to freeze  
halfway up a honey locust's trunk.  
Month of brusque unveiling, giving the lie  
to every hope not winterized in full,  
not steeled against the worst: Stiffen our spines.

*Still Life with Strings: a Disassembled Sonnet*

My father has no words.  
He knows as much  
and tells me when I call.

I wait while he  
collects his fragments  
into shapes, but

it's no use: sand  
pours through  
every net he holds.

We laugh it off—  
that's one connection  
left—and then I talk

about whatever's close  
at hand. The fence  
out back, a neighbor's

health, the plumbing,  
or the weather, or the  
pets. A year from now

he'll be the same  
curved husk  
his mother was, a

purpled sack of bones.  
His stare will soften,  
shifting evenly from

face to chair to wall.  
He'll wait like that,  
and I will stand beside

his bed, useless.  
I'll touch his shoulder,  
say some common thing.

*Fort Pillow*

I'm snugged down in my bedroll when I hear  
the shots. They snap like dry branches.  
Ever body's shouting. Them other coloreds,  
not us regulars, them contrabands come up  
from Memphis last week, shout the worst.  
Been jittery ever since they found our camp.

Forrest, they say, he's meaner than the devil's  
own worst dog. Say he thinks its fun to kill.  
We done our own killin, I say. Get two  
for ever one of us. They scratch their heads.  
That big one with the scar across his eye,  
he say that could mean us mostly dead.

I'm up out of my bedroll and I see 'em  
making for the fort. Low on their bent knees,  
heads down, and the captain telling us  
already to fall back. Then I don't hear  
a sound. I wake in the dirt and I'm crawling,  
Warm blood on my face, in my eyes.

Might be I'm pulling myself to the Rebs,  
might be away. Then I'm off the ridge.  
I'm tumbled down the slope to the river.  
I'm in leaves and roots. I'm sliding off  
the trunks of trees that hold to the steep side  
by who knows what deliverance.

Now that I'm an old man, I come back  
to find where I lay. Deep in leaves and tow  
beside the water. The river's moved,  
half a mile away. It's like it don't want  
to stay near what happened. The firing's thick,  
then stops. The Rebs are whooping. I think

I know the truth. First, the clang of shovels.  
Silence comes on soon. Old as I get,  
that quiet still won't come. Men's voices  
rise in anger. Others moan and plead.  
I know them by their music, like the evenings  
I was a boy in Virginia. Songs from the field

so sad I knew I'd have to run. Not to get shut  
from bondage, but free from them songs. So sad  
they'd raise the Savior off the cross.  
The voices didn't last and the shots returned.  
The quiet never came, even after the ringing  
shovels, the last whoops, and the clop

of horses riding off, after I found a piece of tow  
and pulled myself on it to float down the river  
in darkness.

*The Sultana, 1865*

One of us saw in the night a boat churning past,  
low in the water. Its stacks poured black smoke and cinders.  
He waved a good-luck greeting. He drained the bottle dry.

Another in his dugout paddled hard to miss  
its tow, saw its decks filled with blue coats  
and shouted "Good riddance," glad he did.

Some were coming back from Memphis.  
They'd seen off loved ones, sad to let them go.  
They'd hugged. They'd kissed.

In our town near the river, we heard  
from our beds the explosion. Of what, we didn't know.  
We went outside and stared at the sky.

The rider came. He rode back and forth.  
He screamed so loud we didn't understand.  
But we knew.

We went in wagons, on horses, by foot.  
We came to the river and found what was there.  
Pieces. We lifted them up.

Others asked what we'd seen.  
We told them the night was dark, the river swift.  
We know, they said,

and what did you see?

*Diagnosis*

There was no sea for her beyond  
this version of it. The circle  
of sandpipers and small creatures  
washed up by the obliging  
waves had perfected itself.  
The horizon kept backing away  
from the day's end and the stranded  
western sun turned insomniac,  
so she decided to settle right here, right  
now, on this rim of sand that seemed so  
certain about everything. She would  
cobble the various stones and gullies  
into a campfire, hammer its smoke  
and haze into a livable shack, cook  
the wind patterns for her suppers.  
So many dead shore things to choose  
from for the decorations. She could fall  
in love with being skin and water,  
scatter her leftover bones as picturesque  
as driftwood. So much the better  
if her bones were imprinted  
with the tiny salt forms  
that had gone so wrong inside her.  
The walls of caves had fossils embedded in them.  
Hieroglyphics in the long corridors  
underneath the desert never grew tired  
of repeating the name of carver or patron.

J A M E S   D O Y L E

*Exhibition of a Rhinoceros at Venice*

It is 1741, the first time a living  
rhinoceros is brought to Europe.

The rhinoceros is led around the courtyard  
at the palace of the Doge. A masquerade

ball is taking place. The rhinoceros, who  
began history as a unicorn but couldn't

stop taking on armor, blinks at the masks  
that approach him and recede in waves.

Some are of wild beasts, some of ancient  
spirits. In the corners of his eyes,

glints of light come and go. He cannot  
know they are jewels on the hands that brush

his hide quickly and withdraw. The candles  
cast his dark armor in twisting shapes

that could be from the jungle. The costumes  
of the revellers move in and out of view.

Hoods draw the ivory faces tighter  
and tighter. The faces can't stop flickering

as if hesitant light were their mime and chant.  
They dance in a circle. The rhinoceros

is at the center, the dark sheen of the past.  
The evening is a great success. The Doge

raises a toast to the company, kisses  
the hand of his mistress. His servants

wind through the candelabra and guests,  
prod the rhinoceros into his burnished cage.

# *The Politics of Airbrush Design: Romantic Ideology and the Market in Ruby in Paradise*

*Panama City Beach* 1992

The first time I went to Panama City Beach was spring break during my senior year in college. I'd had an early marriage at nineteen and an early divorce at twenty that left me unintentionally single and devastated. I stayed drunk a lot that year, got highlights in my hair and wore acrylic nails. I fucked with a vengeance, reckless and desperate. The scene in *Panama City Beach*—coolers of beer on the beach in the morning, flashing disco lights and suggestive dancing by night—worked well as a cover for my depression at having fallen out of the marriage plot. I blinked my eyes hard and tried to walk inside the landscape of an airbrushed t-shirt, tried to slip my hand inside the hand of a boy silhouette and become part of the conventional picture again. The closest I came to this sweetheart connection was being date raped on the beach outside LaVela's.

## *Ruby in Paradise*

Written, directed, and produced by independent film-maker Victor Nunez, *Ruby in Paradise* presents a character study of the contemporary U.S. Southern female self under construction. Ruby, played by a young Ashley Judd, occupies a subject position familiar to many of us post-sexual-revolution-era babies, disenchanted with the rules and roles available to the Bible-reading God-fearing virtuous woman, but uncertain of her alternatives. Sex-positive feminism may have generated nontraditional visions for the women of urban America—bisexual polygamous porn stars in San Francisco or slick,

long-strided career women in New York City—but women of the Bible Belt endure a more stubbornly conservative cultural context.

The film opens with Ruby leaving her rural home in Manning, Tennessee. Through the back window a man gestures angrily, growing smaller as the car pulls away. Across the hot blue sky, the title is airbrushed in a garish cherry red; beneath it the "Welcome to Florida" sign draws closer, an unofficial subtitle. With this sequence of images, Nunez invites the viewer to step inside a fantasy landscape in which he engages and complicates the traditional fairytale dynamics of love and quest.

Ruby's destination, Panama City Beach, chosen from a childhood memory of a family vacation, provides an evocative backdrop for a narrative of single womanhood and quasi-feminist awakenings. This stretch of sand is imbued with a sense of magic, an enchanted space where *girls go wild* in search of the hand-holding, sunset-kissing, Janie-loves-Johnny kind of moment commemorated on airbrushed t-shirts and decorative license plates. Our heroine in this film, however, is not looking to hook up. The solitary female figure cuts across a setting traditionally marked by couple iconography—the perpetually embracing lovers replaced by a silhouetted girl body facing the sea alone, dipping her fingers into its salty froth and tasting the world that awaits her. Yet cultural conditioning pulls at her, acts as a sort of undertow, sucking the sand from under her feet.

## *Eve Was Framed: Sex and Southern Girls*

"A virtuous woman who can find?" queries the Old Testament speaker in Proverbs, "for her price is far above rubies." In the hills of Appalachia and on the Redneck Riviera alike, notions of sin and propriety still strongly inform women's sexual consciousness. Promiscuity is considered a serious moral failing. The syntactical slippage of *rubies* and *Ruby's* in this verse points to the figurative meaning attached to Nunez's protagonist as she struggles to define virtue for herself and by extension for the women she represents in

this too-close-to-fundamentalist South. Ruby is not, in biblical terms, a “virtuous woman.” Having left Manning (Nunez can be heavy-handed in these allegorical touches), Ruby finds herself replacing old relationships with new ones, not forging fresh patterns. She falls into bed with Ricky, the spoiled rich son of her boss, Mrs Chambers, after dinner and dancing at a cheesy nightclub. In this indiscretion, Ruby rejects traditional restraints on female sexuality central to Judeo-Christian theology; she becomes a fallen woman, a route documented by Carolyn Heilbrun in *Writing a Woman’s Life* as the quickest way out of the marriage plot shaping most women’s lives and narratives whether we want it to or not. Outside the bonds of marriage or a serious relationship, Ruby’s first two sexual encounters with Ricky represent a decision to become this other kind of woman. In doing so, she is worth less than a virtuous woman, but her actions call into question any framework of ideas that measures a woman’s value by her chastity. In the second love scene, she rolls Ricky over, climbs on top, and brings him quickly to orgasm, expressing an emergent sense of power. He falls head over heels for her, drawn to this active sexual expression, presumably different from the scores of other girls he beds and abandons. (He keeps a drawer full of identical portable CD players wrapped in red bows for all his conquests. He presents her with one after their first time together, and she finds the stash after the next.)

When she tries to break things off, Ricky reminds Ruby of her economic vulnerability: “Most people are only two paychecks from the street, you know.” He swiftly reestablishes the link between Ruby’s sexuality and her net worth in the world. In her journal, which provides the voice-over narrative for the film, Ruby writes, “So far fun has been nothing but work.” This critique of couplehood as cultural currency pulses throughout the film. Thinking back on her upbringing and her mother’s submission to conventional feminine docility, Ruby decides religion “was all a bloody mean trick and I don’t want none of it.” She does not, however,

simply abandon the idea of ethics. An experiment in shoplifting is paired with her inquiry, “Are there any real reasons for living right, anyway?” The answer turns out to be yes, we come to understand, as Ruby dumps her loot into a Goodwill bin. But even as she accepts some parts of the social contract for ethical behavior, she actively reflects on “living right,” defining it for herself and not banking on rewards in the hereafter, as her mother had. Ruby refuses to buy into a moral framework in which women are scapegoated as the cause of all human pain—the whole Eve and the apple scandal—but finding a way to express one’s budding independent sexuality is more complicated than simply deciding to have one; the conservative U.S. South has not created many spaces where this sexual freedom is welcome. Not even in Florida.

#### *Suckers for the Tender Cozy Life*

It turns out Ruby has her own hell to face. Nothing as otherworldly as eternal damnation, her punishment comes in the solid flesh form of an attempted rape. Ricky comes by drunk and assaults Ruby when she rejects his attempt to win her back. Though she avoids being raped, his resulting vindictiveness costs her her job. Her sexual exploration—an embrace of pleasure and an experiment in redefining right behavior—puts her at real physical and financial risk. Ruby’s ambivalence about her own actions appears in a journal entry after the attempted rape: “Driving along the road once I swerved trying not to hit a rabbit and ran smack over a skunk. I’m sorry, Ricky. Guess nothing good comes of being a fool.” It’s unclear whether she means him or herself—probably on some level both. The world lags behind our feminist longings, and there is no safe place for a southern girl’s free sexual exploration.

Why would Ruby fall into a destructive romantic dynamic just after having left Tennessee, with its abusive boyfriends and teenage pregnancies? The truth is, Ruby’s bad relationship with Ricky is part of what makes her character so human—flawed and familiar. Ruby



joins a vast pantheon of flawed heroines in contemporary literature and pop culture, not modeling a way to be, but the *process of becoming* itself. (This idea comes from Kathleen Waites' analysis of the film: "As she contends with the cultural constructions that press upon her, Ruby finds a voice to articulate and pose meaningful questions, to challenge who she is, and to dialogue with her 'self'... Ruby molds a 'Ruby-becoming in paradise.'") Ruby permits us to empathize with each other and our own compromised positions: "We're all so willing to buy in any chance we get. Suckers for the tender cozy life." The sheer force of cultural conditioning draws women into couple-hood, the film suggests, even when they set off in less conventional directions. Nunez focuses on the emotional work necessary to overcome the impulse to attach oneself to a man and willingly self-subordinate, curve along his side like that long-missing proverbial rib.

The other major romantic interest in the film is Mike, a mellow new age version of masculinity. Mike takes care of Ruby, cooks for her, lends books to her (Jane Austen, Emily Dickinson), and offers to let her move in with him when she's fired. "You just need a guy to point you in the right direction," he tells her when she considers a friend's advice to go to college. "And here you are," she responds with soft sarcasm. She reads *Pride and Prejudice* and notes, "All that fuss over finding a man—it isn't that different now." Growing up she "only read what [she] had to...like the Bible." Turns out the Bible and Jane Austen both reinforce the same man-focused fuss at the center of life. On Christmas Eve, Ruby snuggles in bed with Mike as a TV movie ends. Mike channel surfs and lands on a televangelist. Ruby's vehement refusal to watch it leads to a little theological pillow talk in which she recounts her painful, morally-constricting past. Mike says he believes "there's a God out there, but gentler, without the harsh threats and the misery." "Can't have that kind of comfort without the hell threat coming somewhere,"

Ruby responds. Religion and couple-hood join in this scene as mutually reinforcing constraints on the female body. Ruby will suffer neither. "My poor, tormented rebel," Mike croons tenderly. "I'm not your poor anything," Ruby snaps. They never overcome the dynamics set in this scene; him wanting to take care of her, her perceiving that care-taking as a form of control. All that fuss over finding a man: religion embeds one story in us, feminism promises another, and rural southern women hang suspended in between.

Or run off to Florida. A little girl building a sand castle near the end of the film represents the near-ubiquitous socially-sanctioned wish for a soulmate to materialize out of thin, ocean-scented air. Ruby's next-door neighbor, Debrah Ann, voices this in-between position of the post-high-school adolescent girl, remarking how "liberated" she feels when she sees the kids going back to school this first fall after her own graduation. "It's amazing," she exhales, "how much you grow in two months." She feels so adult and free and *with-it*, living with her boyfriend and his best friend, learning his trade of airbrush design so she can contribute financially to the household. But the two guys taunt Debrah Ann, who runs across to Ruby's rental unit and asks to spend the night. As Ruby tucks her in, Debrah Ann repeats her earlier line, still amazed at how much she's grown, but this time sounding a little melancholy, like her new maturity has more to do with recognizing the limitations of her domestic arrangement than seeing it as liberated.

The "stars" of the popular home video series, *Girls Gone Wild*, may well return from their "liberating" spring breaks feeling a similar deflation at the metamorphosis of romantic nirvana into desperate exhibitionism, flashing bare breasts for men with cameras in hopes of attracting a prince. Panama City Beach has no doubt hosted untold numbers of young women for whom "fun" turns out to be nothing but work. The image of a palm tree against a streaky pink sky can't transform empty erotic encounters and institutionalized date rape into the paradise of religion or fairy tales. If the

promise of heaven and threat of hellfire are not enough to make the virtuous woman of the Bible a seductive role, the sensual indulgences celebrated in this earthly paradise hardly constitute a fruitful alternative.

*The Single Life: Stripping, Socialism, and Industrial Laundry*

Several scenes of economic disenfranchisement follow the attempted rape. A job search culminates in a foray into a strip club on the outskirts of town. The hostess approaches Ruby and asks, "Did you know you're not supposed to be here alone?" The question stands for more than strip clubs, the discipline and punishment single women endure, the indoctrination to romantic ideology and marriage culture. The rule at strip clubs that women customers must be accompanied by a man is ostensibly designed for two reasons—to discourage prostitution and to keep the men's focus on the working girls—but it speaks to broader cultural rules restricting female sexuality, legislating when and where a woman may be sexual, what it means to appear in sexualized public spaces.

Ruby eventually lands a job in an industrial laundry room beneath a hotel. Two women of color, Wanda and Persefina, act as guides to the underworld of late capitalism, reflecting our racially and economically-hierarchical culture in their more explicit sexual personae (telling blowjob jokes on their break)—small compensation for the indentured servitude underpinning corporate culture. In one of the final interior monologues, Ruby describes a dream in which everyone lives and works together, painting a surreal socialist landscape: "We all did our share, we all felt joy in being alive. Wild and free, without harm, without sorrow. Beyond reality. Beyond fantasy. Only there. Only there." Her experience with menial labor underscores the economic realities beneath the high-gloss surface of Panama City Beach. Ruby sees the poverty literally underneath paradise in the bleak concrete hades of a hotel laundry room, miles and miles of dirty sheets passing white-hot through her

hands, numbing the muscles in her arms. "Don't worry," Persefina assures her, "after a while, you won't feel a thing." Indeed the fantasy of paradise is predicated on this numbness.

These underworld scenes (both the strip club and laundry room) build on Mike's earlier critiques of "the selling game." His environmentalist politics and low-impact living strategies, together with Ricky's rape attempt and subsequent firing of Ruby establish a nexus of images in which gender identity, heterosexual romance, and economic viability are entwined. "We're all selling," Ruby reflects bitterly, sitting in her car outside the strip club. When she gets her job in retail back and leaves the laundry room, she acknowledges complicity in a culture of inequality—"I wonder if I'm up to remembering we're all in the same world"—and responds without drama or self-righteousness, "I hope so." These interactions between Ruby and various women of color (Wanda and Persefina, in addition to Rochelle, her co-worker at Chambers Beach Emporium, and the Indian-American girl who cleans the rental complex where Ruby lives) mark the significance of class inequality as a dimension of the romance theme. The quest of the single woman is shaped by economic opportunity and lack thereof; Ruby is positioned beneath Ricky on the ladder of privilege, but above Persefina and the other working class women of color. Mike's invitation to her to move in with him lays bare the coercive economic function of marriage, even as the proliferation of couple iconography in airbrush design reiterates the link between money (selling t-shirts) and romance (draping oneself in images of the pair bond).

Ruby arrives in Florida in the off-season, way out of step with the rhythms of retail and romance, as Mrs Chambers tells her, and the film follows her quest to fit in and make a life for herself over the course of several months. Watching the beach fill up with college kid, she looks on from the periphery of the hyper-heterosexual Spring Break capital of the world while an emcee riles up the crowd. Drunk frat guys dance and bob their way down a poolside

runway. Bikini-clad women toss Safe Sex Week tee-shirts into the audience, and Ruby catches one. She stands at the edge of the fray, as if wary of relationships but not dismissive of them, remaining always within the space of negotiation. In this stance, Ruby constitutes a third wave (not postfeminist) icon: critically self-conscious about her role and behaviors as a het girl, electing periodic celibacy over couplehood at all costs, single but not rabidly so. She gazes on as the scene unfolds, smiling and sipping a Sex on the Beach, still looking for something: a lover, a self, a place in the world, a purpose in life. Ruby won't settle for what would be easy or even comfortable (Mike is likened to her favorite sweater from childhood—she wanted to wear it all the time, even when it was too hot). Ruby chooses the harder road of personal enlightenment, chooses to stay in the flux of not-knowing and finds a way to feel content with this state of uncertainty: “The answers are probably real close by, smiling, waiting, for us.”

So paradise isn't the “happy ending” of couplehood, or the material wealth of the American Dream, or the utopia of the beach. Paradise is this process of becoming. A quality of engagement with oneself and one's world, an aliveness, a sense of possibility, and, in that sense (as opposed to the Bible Belt religion sense of the word), paradise is about the state of her soul. Ruby is learning the lesson she and Rochelle think school children ought to be taught: “How to survive. With your soul intact.”

#### *Feminist Conclusions: Writing Beyond the Ending*

*Ruby in Paradise* is a late twentieth-century rendering of a familiar literary figure, the questing female, searching out some other plot besides marriage. Juxtaposed with Emily Dickinson—“To ache is human / not polite”—and the Jane Austen heroines, Ruby also resembles another woman at sea in her life: Edna Pontellier of Kate Chopin's feminist classic, *The Awakening*, is the site of much feminist critical struggle. Edna's suicide is a Rorschach blot for women

readers: does she *escape* social constraints or *succumb* to them? Unwilling to remain unhappily married, but uncertain how to live a single woman's life in nineteenth century America, Edna elects to drown herself in the ocean where she has only recently learned to swim. In this move, her independence becomes inextricably linked with her self-destruction. While Ruby's endeavor to build an independent and rewarding life is not fully realized by the end of the film, she remains poised at the edge of the sea and all the possibility it represents. She may not have found an alternative route—she even entertains vaguely suicidal thoughts about disappearing off the pier in winter—but she refuses, ultimately, to go under.

Betsy Israel, in the recently released *Bachelor Girl: The Secret History of Single Women in the Twentieth Century*, asserts the ubiquity of negative narratives about single womanhood:

If distinct archetypes seem for the moment to have blurred, the conviction that single women are social outcasts—odd women who require constant translation—remains intact. Wherever she is, perhaps in a waiting room or on an airplane or lost in the morass of the Internet, she'll eventually find a story about her uncertain future and her inevitable regret. (246)

Israel addresses the problem of anti-feminist backlash, providing a context in which *Ruby in Paradise* appears politically progressive. Ruby is more complex and valuable than, say, Ally McBeal or Bridget Jones, the more visible single women of contemporary pop culture. Israel notes the abundance of books in which “the primary conclusions were always...that women had paid an enormous personal price for the successes of feminism” (247), and examines the ways this notion has falsely shaped the thinking of Generations X and Y, whose “generational contempt” gives rise to the first single archetype of the 1990s and the new century: the young, defiantly postfeminist woman who believes she must take care of the ‘single

situation' in a prompt and businesslike fashion. Before she turns twenty-seven. Or else. (251)

Through this distorted lens, the single woman archetype turns the human problem that "life is unrequited," to borrow a phrase from Natalie Goldberg, into a gender problem and tries to fix it by stuffing marriage awkwardly into the void of loneliness. Ruby's ending thoughts—"This is the world I found, and I guess the questions stay the same, like where does caring come from? can we ever know our true desires? and why are we all of us so often lonely and afraid?"—pose human questions, not questions arising from the deflation of the superwoman archetype, not a product of a world in which women are trying to "have it all" and failing.

Though light years ahead of Hollywood, even independent film has not fully visualized the story of a woman who neither lives according to existing scripts of womanhood nor defines herself in opposition to them. But I don't require Ruby to give me a vision of a different world where female sexuality and selfhood have a freer reign. I can settle for just asking questions, for watching Ruby *becoming* in paradise.

*Panama City 2002*

When I went back this spring with my aunt and grandma, they helped me look for a new airbrush design, the image of a single woman taking in the sunset or standing under a palm tree. We looked and looked. Finally the artist behind the counter asked if he could help. I described what I was looking for and he confirmed it wasn't there. Visionary that he was, he offered to create it for me, freehand, on a t-shirt. Across the top of the scene he wrote the words I requested: *Lisa in Paradise*. I wear this new single girl icon with pride—wrap up in an old quilt, sit in the rocker my grandma gave me, and jot these last few notes on a film that spurs my own quest for satisfying solitude.

## BOOK REVIEWS

*Bear Me Safely Over*

Sheri Joseph

Atlantic Monthly Press, 2002.

Reviewed by Anne Frey

In *Bear Me Safely Over*, a vibrant first novel with an ambitious agenda, Sheri Joseph portrays two rural Georgia families dealing with the consequences of AIDS, homosexuality, religious fundamentalism, teenage rebellion, and split marriages. And she does so by summoning a chorus of narrative voices from the two families' present and recent past.

The novel opens with the perspective of Curtis, a local band-leader who suddenly proposes marriage to his girlfriend, Sidra. The relationship between Curtis and Sidra, however, is shadowed by Curtis' refusal to accept the homosexuality of his younger step-brother, Paul. As Paul experiments with increasingly dangerous behavior, Sidra attempts to shelter him from the homophobia of his family and community, even at the risk of her own relationship with Curtis. Intermingled with this plot are a variety of other conflicts that, when listed, make the novel sound dangerously close to soap opera: the break-up of Sidra's parents, the death of Sidra's sister Marcy from AIDS, the beginning relationship between Paul and the lead singer of Curtis' band. Joseph's narration, however, redeems the plot from any proximity to melodrama. We experience Marcy's illness, for example, not as saga but through the moment when she first shot heroin. Our knowledge of her fate makes the simple story of running away from home all the more wrenching.

Each chapter is narrated by a different character in the story, introducing us not only to Curtis, Sidra, and Paul, but also to their

parents, to Sidra's sister, and to Curtis' bandmates. Joseph presents some voices more convincingly than others; with the exception of her compelling account of Paul's forays into the underworld of Athens, Georgia, I found Joseph's male voices the weakest. Despite this somewhat uneven execution, however, the array of narrative voices provides the reader with the pleasure of sudden moments of illumination, when we recognize in minor characters the narrators of previous chapters, and decode the subterranean events and shifts in relationships that have gone unstated between the recorded incidents. And when Joseph's voices succeed, she convinces her readers to sympathize with a wide variety of experiences, and piercingly portrays the moment in which a character's world, often unbeknownst to him or herself, has begun to change.

The section entitled *Absolute Sway* is especially impressive in this regard. Told from the perspective of a young Christian fundamentalist, champion saver-of-lost-souls in her youth group's "Sabbath outreach," this description of the teenaged Sidra's brief attendance at church combines a believable account of the narrator's complete conviction in the promises of religious conversion with her growing suspicion of the girls who dramatically witness their Christian rebirth during Sunday services. Although completely extraneous to the novel's plot, the chapter ironically offers a moment when Sidra herself appears not as protector, but as one of the lost, and resonates with the novel's consideration of the boundaries between insiders and outsiders, and of both the generosity and the dangers inherent in attempting to shepherd another's soul.

The enigmatic relationship of Sidra and Curtis remained the largest limitation to the novel's plot; It is difficult to understand why Sidra stayed with a man as self-consumed and insensitive as Curtis. By the novel's emotional conclusion, however, we see that each of its relationships, including the seemingly unmotivated love of Sidra and Curtis, rests on the buoyancy of human hope. Joseph's use of

disparate narrators ultimately indicates both the problem posed by the novel—how can a family, a community, or even a coherent narrative transcend the barriers of our individual convictions—and the optimism of her response. With Sidra as intermediary, Joseph's characters learn to coexist, and perhaps even to forgive.

*What We Won't Do*

Brock Clarke

Sarabande Books, 2002.

*Boys Keep Being Born*

Joan Frank

University of Missouri Press, 2001.

Reviewed by Mark Lane

Brock Clarke likes losers. The main characters in his debut collection of stories, *What We Won't Do*, are almost exclusively men around thirty who have never tried for anything beyond the basest satisfactions, and who now understand that they are themselves responsible for their dead-end lives. They all misbehave in a failing small town in Upstate New York. They hold down jobs, miraculously, at the fiberglass plant or the local paper, or they teach high school or drive a snowplow. Their wives—far superior creatures, of course—have either left them or are about to. They drink. Always they drink.

Clarke is not interested in the attempts of everyday people to build and sustain and struggle at their lives. He is interested in failure, in final descent, and in the desperate punches people throw on the way down. One of the more pleasant features of Clarke's world is that his people do not throw the usual punches. One of the least pleasant is that they understand their punches to be meaningless.

In "The Fat," a thirty-year-old reporter and his eighty-five-year-old editor, in the habit of riding around town in the reporter's dilapidated station wagon drinking beer instead of working, park at a KFC to use the bathroom. When they return to find molten chicken fat blown from the kitchen's exhaust fan onto the station wagon, the reporter believes "that the fat-covered car might be the beginning of the end of his marriage, which like his car would not take much more of his abuse." If he goes home meekly with the fat on his car, his wife will leave him. If he argues successfully that the franchise reimburse him for the damage, then his marriage and life might yet be saved. He knows he doesn't have a chance, but he yells at the manager anyway.

In "The World Dirty, Like a Heart," Harold and Tull are high school teachers and best friends. When Tull gets fired for having an affair with a student, Harold questions his own marriage, and begins to suspect that his wife is being unfaithful to him. In response to his confusions, while drunk at his wife's boss's house, Harold slaps the boss's rude, drunk, twelve-year-old son, apparently for representing much that is wrong with the world.

Bradley, the narrator of "The Right Questions," has always believed that his father died in Vietnam, and he has built his personality accordingly, free to imagine his father in whatever heroic light suits him. When his dying mother tells him that his father is actually the town pervert, a man locally renowned for taking his trash out naked in the middle of the night, Bradley experiences a crisis of self: "I used to think that my father could tell me something about myself. Now I'm scared that he already has." In response to this hard truth, Bradley gets married, but his inability to stop worrying quickly threatens to spoil the marriage. He then takes a step whose logic, in Clarke's world, is predictably dubious, if not predictable: he goes with his wife, Mary Ann, and her ex-husband, Scoot (in town to try and steal Mary Ann back), to watch his father's famous humiliating performance, hoping for some new understanding of his heredity and future.

The understanding doesn't come, and how could it? Clarke's characters know they are failures, helpless and hopeless, before they involve themselves in preposterous events. If they didn't know this, they wouldn't involve themselves. Preposterous events, the logic goes, are funny. But these preposterous events frequently seem contrived, and these desperate characters are not funny enough. Eager to sell his people out in an attempt at comedy, Clarke hammers himself, and leaves us little to care about.

Harold, in "The World Dirty, Like a Heart," says, "I feared that Tull, like myself, like all aging men, was a would-be victim of a world that favored youth and beauty and all things new. We were a terrorized lot, like all the old Jews and Christians, and we were nothing if not vulnerable." Victims—pure victims—are rarely interesting on the page. Clarke's victims aren't even victims, by any reasonable standard. Of all characters we might be asked to pity, thirty-year-old men who whine and self-destruct in response to their boring American lives seem less deserving than any class I can think of.

Clarke tellingly indulges in something between homage and imitation a couple of times. In his opening story, "A Widespread Killing Frost"—the best in the collection—he rewrites Barry Hannah's classic "Water Liars." Clarke reverses the gender of Hannah's narrator, but otherwise, the set-up is nearly exact: a young adult who has just been romantically traumatized finds something like communion amid a group of old suffering men who tell inspired lies. If we forgive Clarke's wholesale borrowing of the idea (and if we ignore the fact that Hannah himself has rewritten the story several times with aplomb), what's left is a short, crisp frieze, pain enlivened by a fresh burst of comedy.

Likewise, Clarke rewrites Donald Barthelme's "Me and Miss Mandible," but the results here are disastrous. In Barthelme's story, a grown man finds himself inexplicably in middle school, and though he protests that he does not belong, he attempts to fit in.

Romantic entanglements with his teacher and with a classmate provide the episodic story's glittering comic substance. In Clarke's story, "Specify the Learners," there is the same grown man in middle school, the same romantic entanglements, but Clarke sinks the conceit entirely by weighing it down with an explanation: the narrator, having traced all the woe in his life to the fact that he failed sixth grade the first time around, sues the school board to let him back in. A comparison of the two stories does nothing so much as illuminate the virtuoso high-wire act of Barthelme's comedy.

Though Clarke quotes Barthelme in his epigraph, his aesthetic is closer to Hannah's, and this, at least, makes it possible to see how his stories might have been successful. While reading them, I thought not only of Hannah (Clarke seems to aspire, admirably, to Hannah's slyly astute, mannered-colloquial prose style), but also of Padgett Powell, Annie Proulx, and George Saunders. What these writers have in common is a love of the ridiculous and the desperate, and of the darkly comic fallout of the ridiculous and the desperate. They are children of Beckett, in their humor as well as in their implicit suggestion that the souls of the downtrodden are those most worthy of attention. If we plumb such souls and emerge not only entertained but with a handful of meaning, then we have found something, at bottom, to trust.

These writers, like Barthelme, take great risks. They go for broad, wicked comedy, a humor that is not merely situational but embedded in the language of their stories and novels. They are idiosyncratic and extreme in their views of humanity.

When the comedy doesn't work, they sometimes fall flat, as Clarke often does. It's not necessarily true that risky failures are more interesting than safe successes, but risky successes are certainly better than any other kind, so one is inclined to hope that Clarke will continue to take chances his next time out.

The men in Joan Frank's stories are a pretty beat bunch, too, but in a different way. The wonderful title of her debut collection—*Boys Keep Being Born*—perfectly transmits that mix of bewilderment, righteous anger, and cynical detachment with which her savvy female characters respond to the phenomenon of heterosexual mankind. Like Brock Clarke, she focuses almost exclusively on a single type of protagonist. As with Clarke, this can become tiresome, and also like Clarke, she has included some throwaway stories here. She can be maudlin, in low moments: one story seeks to mythologize a particular penis; another's defining crisis comes when its main character looks at the moon and considers eternity. But unlike Clarke, Frank endows her central characters—urban, aging women of above-average attractiveness—with sophistication, social skills, and self-awareness, and we care for them most of the time. Frank's women, at their best, have the texture of the real, and the ability to tell us new things about our lives.

In "Exhibit A," Jane, a lonely professional who fits the Frank prototype, develops an attraction, against her will, to Steven, "an up-and-coming personage" in their stylish West-Coast city: "What is it with these sorts in cities? So many of them! Dashing, earnest, dazzlingly clever. Looking like ads for Polo or Glenfiddich. Boyishly genial, self-ironic, quick; possibly—the inference teases—even wise, though it goes against the odds." The rub, initially, is that Steven is married and prominent, a superstar at a politically-conscious advertising agency. Jane hates the idea of being the other woman, "common as soda crackers," but has been alone too long: "All she could claim to have achieved in the past decade, it had begun to dawn on her, was the avoidance of harm." But as Jane becomes willing, Steven hedges, and they carry on a several-years' flirtation that never becomes physical. Jane eventually learns that Steven's fabulously wealthy but only marginally attractive wife has created Steven's job and life for him, that he is nothing without her money.

And then Jane finds out that Steven has been having an affair with a different woman, a woman closer to hand and—we are possibly meant to think—more desirable than Jane, because married, because more successful. Steven dissolves into love for this woman, ruins his career and life, and at the end of his rope, on the verge of leaving the country, calls Jane up to ask for a round of goodbye sex. Exhibit A indeed.

Thus is introduced the template for one type of story that Frank likes to tell: in the course of an obscure, sexually-charged relationship that never develops but is maintained nonetheless, the man in question shows himself to be capable of depths the female hadn't previously imagined. This is the set-up not only in "Exhibit A," but in the title story, and in "A Stalwart Girl." What results is a triptych that variously illuminates a little-known borderland around the cravenly sexual, where men don't realize that they are exposing themselves to women who are something more than friends. Nice of Frank to take note, and nice that these stories unfold unpredictably, that they require the sharp observation at which she is so skilled.

Other stories call for outrage, for reaction against the ease with which men seem to destroy women's lives again and again. In "The Queen of Worldly Graces"—a story whose content overcomes its grating second-person voice—Frank's narrator watches as Cal, a low-level professor who "believes himself a brilliant social scientist," leaves Gina, his partner of seventeen years, for a dazzling French woman, because the French woman's adoration, and what this represents, more reliably reassure him of his own greatness. The narrator asks her own boyfriend, Cal's friend, "'We're all supposed to shrug like good Californians and say *Whatever, man?* This is the way the story goes?'" And later, more thoroughly indignant, the narrator thinks, "The numbing tediousness of it! Whenever a celebrity gets caught with his stewardess or stripper or his transvestite pickup and hung in public cross fire, the tabloids pawing over fuzzy

zoom-lens photographs like last scraps of meat, you can only think, *Yes. Hang the idiot. Keep him from spawning.*"

A man abandons a loyal woman: the story is an old one. But by placing her stories among sophisticated, intelligent, reputedly enlightened people, Frank not only corrects stereotypes—which makes the story feel current—but succeeds in making the story everyone's, in this cultural moment at least. Haven't we made any progress at all? If not among these people, then among whom is there any hope? Why do we continue to allow it? How will we ever stop it? Boys keep being born...

The best story in the collection, though it tangentially illuminates these same polemical central themes, has a more purely aesthetic reason for being: it is simply a good story, a piece of odd living tissue framed and made vivid, its energizing mysteries approached but not exhausted.

In "The Guardian," Boyd's dad Hal moves the family from Colorado to Honolulu, and Hal's secretary, Nellie, comes along. When Boyd's mother dies soon thereafter, Hal begins dating a "Honolulu debutante" named Margaret. One day Hal sits down with Boyd and his brother Dickie, and asks them to choose a new Mom. Margaret or Nellie? Boyd chooses Nellie, who, as a kind of surrogate aunt, has consistently shown the children love and attention; Dickie, a future womanizer, chooses Margaret; and Hal, breaking the tie, chooses Margaret. Hal and Margaret have a son together, and Margaret convinces Hal to send Boyd and Dickie away to school. Nellie remains quietly in the picture through the years, unfailingly kind to the children, as Margaret becomes fat and embittered, and the sons grow distant from their father and each other. When Hal dies many years later, Nellie tells Boyd that she and Hal had been lovers from the start, all the way until the end, in their old age. They had always taken great care to conceal their affair, and had never been found out, but now it must be told. When Nellie herself dies, Boyd is the



only one who knows the truth, and he doesn't know what to do with this story he has inherited.

There is disapproval, of course, in Frank's summing-up—the adultery, the sacrificial life of the other woman—but the story also widens out to address a whole range of questions: What is the price of secrecy, of duplicity, in love? What is the absolute value of duty, and of love? How do these values compare, at the end of a life? Is there any sense in remembering these lives, outside of the telling? These are the kinds of questions that reverberate in the mind well after the reading, that justify a story's existence. We will forgive much in a book if the author approaches such mysteries even occasionally between its covers.

## CONTRIBUTORS

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JAMES DOYLE and his wife, the poet Sharon Doyle, are retired and finally have lots of time to read and write, as well as enjoy their seven grandchildren. He has poems forthcoming in *ACM*, *The Literary Review*, *West Branch*, *South Dakota Review*, and *Green Mountains Review*.

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