

Under The Sun

UNDER THE SUN

Volume XVI, No. 1

Summer 2011

An essay is a short piece of prose
in which the author reveals himself
in relation to any subject under the sun.

J. B. Morton

A journal of informal essays sponsored by the
College of Arts and Sciences
Tennessee Technological University
Cookeville, TN 38505

Website: www.tntech.edu/underthesun

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–LITERARY MAGAZINE REVIEW

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Under the Sun is published each summer by Tennessee Technological University. Address all orders, submissions, and correspondence to The Editors, *Under the Sun*, Department of English, Box 5053, Tennessee Technological University, Cookeville, TN 38505 or to hweidner@tntech.edu. Please visit our website at www.tntech.edu/underthesun. Unsolicited submissions (creative nonfiction only) are welcome but must be accompanied by a SASE. Manuscripts are read August 15-January 2 of each year.

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ISSN 1091-3866

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FOREWORD

Dear Readers,

Our response to any text is personal (never mind New Criticism); it is bound by the place we are in, both physical and spiritual, and by the years we have spent living and reading. Each time I put together an issue of *Under the Sun*, I become acutely aware of this truth about words.

As always, certain essays in this volume pull on me forcefully and in ways that may be entirely different from the way they speak to you. For example, Rachael Peckham's careful examination of memory in her essay, "Apple, Daydream, Memory," took me back to some of my most vivid daydreams, which were or are often surprisingly "real." Likewise, as I try to juggle the busyness from my last semester of teaching with the dreams I have for retirement, I am especially open to Jan Shoemaker's discussion of Gerard Manley Hopkins's poem, "Spring and Fall," and her exploration of the "the end in my beginning, the beginning in my end."

Joan Connor's "In Dingle," reminded me painfully of my failed experiment last summer to recapture the essence of "my" Germany after more than forty years in the United States. Just like Connor's Nell, I tried to go home to the place I thought would never change. But instead of being a visitor who spends a few days in anyone place, with family or friends who were only too glad to interpret the new Germany to the expatriate, I rented an apartment and, as military people say, lived on the economy. It was, to say the least, a daunting, eye-opening, and changing experience from which I have not recovered yet. Why else would

I keep postponing my annual pilgrimage to the Dingle of my youth?

Last year, my gracious middle sister lent me her car to let me battle German traffic and German drivers on a regular basis. No relative or friend cooked for me: I had to shop and cook for myself. Instead of being visited, family and friends were encouraged to visit me. There was even room for them to spend the night.

While I understood that my childhood and teenage haunts, the lanes and paths through the woods where I used to pick wild raspberries, had grown over and become infested with burning nettle, to the point where I could barely manage them, I was lulled into the romantic notion that little else had really changed. After all, the village itself was almost the same as forty years ago, German building codes being what they are. Yet, living the daily lives of its inhabitants told me quickly that the people were no longer the same. They showed worrying signs of having become American colonists—busy, preoccupied, seduced by processed and fast food. Was it possible that my children and I in the United States are more German than the Southern Germans? That we are the only ones who still hand-make Spätzle, the noodles which are a staple of each Sunday meal in the South? It was. Now one can buy them dried and neatly packaged in the store. And what had happened to those gatherings after a meal, those hours spent in endless conversations, spiced by more food and drink? Was it possible that my extended family only managed to break away for a measly two hours in a beer garden, on a work day, to celebrate my visit? It was.

Of course, the essays I singled out are not the only pieces that speak powerfully to me. In fact, I believe this year's journal is a particularly strong issue in the history of *Under the Sun*, and I am very happy with the choices I made for 2011 with the help

of my hard-working associate editors. I hope you will fully agree with me and enjoy another year of *Under the Sun*, another great reading experience.

Yes, last time I said good-bye, thinking that I would step down from being an editor. This year, I am grateful to be still here, to be able to choose pieces from such outstanding submissions, to know that the future of *Under the Sun* is assured—at least until we have completed the 2012 issue.

Thank you, dear authors for writing. Thank you, dear readers for reading.

Heidemarie Z. Weidner,
Editor

Noli Me Tangere

Jackie Bartley

My mother and I are in the living room. I am playing with a set of wooden puzzle blocks on the floor in front of her. Early morning, a peachy glow to the muted April light. She sits on the sofa reading a magazine. From time to time, I say, “I love you.” She replies, “I love you too.” It is a mantra of mine, a way of keeping in touch with the world we live in together, accomplices in the moment. But, this time, an urge for more overtakes me. I crawl up into her lap, hug her shoulders, reach to touch her face, kiss her cheek. She pulls back: “Watch my glasses. Don’t touch my face.” Pushes me away.

In addition to that sharp reprimand—the first of many—I remember the feel of her flesh, the skin on her neck, porous, sticky-soft, like the rubber pillows on our beds inside their cases. For years, I would unzip the corner and run a finger over the edge of my bed pillow at night and imagine I was touching skin.

A later scene: We are in the living room again. Behind me, the cabbage-rose-flowered living room drapes my mother sewed are drawn against the late afternoon summer sun. She sits on the sofa, squinting over some mending. I sit beside her, alternately on the floor at her feet or on the couch—I am an especially fidgety nine year old. She puts the fabric down on the arm of the sofa and says, *I want to tell you something*. I turn my attention to her face. She looks straight ahead, not at me. Her voice drops to a whisper. This is serious, an important secret, one I may even have been expecting, that will make some sense of the world I am coming, reluctantly, to know. That world she’s already told me bits and pieces of, that’s explained both casually and mysteriously in *Growing Up and Liking It*, the pamphlet she handed to me last week and told me to read.

A family secret I am never to tell anyone: When she was a teenager, they put her father in the county home because he'd been diagnosed with syphilis. She remembers, years before that, when she and her sister and brother were small, walking down city sidewalks, crossing the streets to get to the local clinic where a man took blood from their arms and tested it to see if they had contracted the disease. None of them had. I am mesmerized. The idea of a family secret excites me, though I'm not sure why she's told me or how I am to think or feel about it.

I stare at the framed print that hangs over our heads above the sofa: a serene, cobalt blue bay, a small fishing barque moored at a dock beneath a cliff-side villa in what I imagine to be Italy. Lush vegetation and blood red roses smother the creamy stucco walls and pillars, climb up to a terrace atop the house where I've dreamed myself living dozens of times. I've stared at that picture, been the beautiful woman, someone's paramour, lying on starched white sheets behind those doors, the sea's cool breeze fluttering the curtains as I slept, through hours of stomach aches, measles, mumps, ear infections as I lay on this couch.

As my mother speaks, I follow the dirt path along the shore, guessing at where that hillside path leads, remembering our conversation last week after I'd read the pamphlet. You do this thing, she told me, and you're not a virgin anymore. If you do it before you're married, it's wrong and you might get pregnant.

"But how do you know?"

"The man touches you."

"So touching is bad."

"Certain kinds of touching."

I was baffled, unsure how to put my confusion into words. Touch was bad? Hugging, kissing, or just bare skin exposed to other bare skin—the way flesh exposed to the sun turned red? She told me not to worry, and to remember "safety in numbers." Going out alone could be dangerous, but going out with friends protected you. Alone, you might accidentally touch what you

shouldn't; in a group, you'd have others to remind you, stop you. Did this mean the end of all my solitary walks—to the old farm across the road, the apple orchard, the woods that filled with violets in the spring, yellow jewel weed, touch-me-not, in early fall? An only child, I was accustomed to being alone. When this thing, this menstruation thing started, would I never be allowed to go out alone again?

Now, she tells me one more thing about her father:

When she was sixteen, she visited him in that awful place where he'd been committed years before. A man at the entryway took her purse, rifled through it with big, clumsy hands, handed it back so disrupted it wouldn't snap shut. He pointed to a room down the hall on the left, the men's ward. She entered, passing men in a long row of beds. Some called to her incoherently; others only leered. At the end of the row, he lay reading. They talked for five minutes—pleasantries, small talk. He seemed dejected, fatigued. She left, quick-stepping down the hall, past the guard, down the wide stairs, her heels echoing flatly in the stairwell, down the drive, out the wide iron gates to her trolley stop on the corner, back to Homewood. She never went back, never saw or talked to her father again.

I imagine those men lying in their beds, what they looked like, what they said, how I would have made it past them without showing how scared I was. A *men's ward* sounds like prison to me, rows of condemned prisoners, men with sneering faces, hairy arms and rough hands—trolls waiting to grab you when you walk by.

She makes me promise never to tell anyone what she's just told me. My grandfather's syphilis, his confinement, how she visited him only once and never went back. I am old enough to know these things now. I will keep this secret forever. It would kill her if I told anyone. I promise never to tell.

A cold, still winter night. At the junior high, the outdoor basketball court has been flooded and frozen for skating. Fires burn in barrels at either end, and teenagers skate in a circle around the court. My best friend and I sit on the worn wood benches to tie up our skates, peel off the rubber blade guards and step onto the ice. The boy I like, who sent me notes all week in our eighth grade classroom at St. Bart's saying he likes me too, stands at the opposite end of the court, under the lights. has come with his friends, both of us knowing the other would be here too. Gretchen shoves me toward him and his skinny sidekick pushes him toward me. "Safety in numbers," I say to myself as we touch, sweater to sweater, glove to glove. I hesitate, but Gretchen's look says *skate*. We circle the course. "We are touching," I think. I am cold and warm at the same time, feel my cheeks flush to the color of the pink roses on my quilted parka. Can I get pregnant from this? Worrying at the risk wears me out, and after a few times around, I say good night. He seems glad to be free again, though all night we watch one another, aware of exactly where each is on the ice at every moment.

* * *

I am older now, home from my first year at college. It is a hot July night. The boy I dated for three years, the boy I believe I love, has told me he does not want to date me anymore. We have spent most of the night arguing together, worn each other out with our longing. At my door, we part, me still swearing my love, he wishing me peace of mind, a good life. One light left on for me in the living room, my parents are both asleep. But I, beside myself with grief, go and stand in the doorway of their bedroom, become the child I was a decade ago. "Mommy . . ." I say. I whisper it loudly. She wakes. My father goes on snoring. In the hallway I tell her, "We broke up." She says just this:

"Would you like me to lie down with you?"

"Yes, please."

We lie down together on my narrow bed. She holds my hand through these last few hours of the night, dozing, sometimes snoring. I watch the curtains blossom with light as morning comes.

* * *

It is not difficult to recall these scenes with my mother. What I cannot recall is when my father stopped giving me his home-from-work bear hug. Somewhere in those years when we each became aware of the other's physicality. Those years when touch became a complex code, a language we no longer shared. When I was small, we wrestled on the living room floor, sat side by side on the sofa. He hugged me and kissed me and sometimes even sang me a song at night before bed. From my father, I learned that physical intimacy is a counterpart of the spirit, a natural extension of any loving relationship. He did not talk much, though. After I matured physically, we hardly ever spoke to one another. My mother did all the talking. He died the week before my wedding. That last time we embraced, he had knocked on my bedroom door and asked to come in. He'd been struggling for weeks with the fact that I was not marrying in his church, but in my mother's. As a Catholic, he believed it would be a sin for him to walk me down the aisle. That day, though, he promised he would. He loved me and he wanted to be sure I understood. Two days later, he was dead.

* * *

My mother had one brother and one sister. Each of them had one son. I grew up seeing my aunt's son, Bill, three years older than me, once a year at his mother's annual Christmas open house. My aunt married and divorced three times. I never met any of her husbands. My mother and my aunt did not get along.

Lee, my uncle's son, was born much later. I met him only once—at my wedding—when he is seven. My uncle served in the Navy in WWII; he attended his Navy reunion faithfully every

year, and visited us once every year or so when I was growing up, passing the evening by telling us war stories. He married in his forties and lived in California. He and his sister and my mother did not get along.

Yet my mother, my aunt, and my uncle all praised their mother. Each of them said it with the same tone in their voices, as if defying anyone to challenge: *My mother was a saint*. We attended my aunt's annual party because, as my mother would say, "*I'm doing it for my mother*." When I lived three states away, and my mother began to grow senile and needed help, my aunt brought a friend along to help her to clean my mother's house and said, "*I'm doing it for my mother*." Both my mother and my aunt called my uncle, behind his back, "The Admiral" and made fun of his serious demeanor. All my life, I wondered how, if their mother *was* a saint, she ended up having three children who hated each other so much.

* * *

My mother died first. Three years later, my aunt passed away. Bill, whom I hadn't seen or spoken to for twenty years, called just after his mother's death. He'd received a letter from our uncle who'd given him permission to read part to me:

Maybe your mother told you that, when we were kids, our father was diagnosed with syphilis. Shortly after that, he was put in the county home and I never saw him again. Now, our mother was a simple country girl, so who knows whether she really understood what the doctor said. Nevertheless, what she took away from their conversation was that people became infected through contact; that is, "by touch." So, from the time the three of us were small till she died, she never embraced any of us. From that day onward, none of us ever touched one another. She had to go to work and was barely able to support us. She was a saint. I did my best to help out, but we were always poor. And I was always ashamed.

The moment Bill read these words to me, the whole cosmos of the past suddenly shifted and settled into audible harmony.

The strange repulsion I'd begun to feel at my mother's physicality as I grew older. The times, when I was young, when I would "go too far," wanting to be held, embraced, comforted by her touch or, later, by the boys I dated. The odd way she had of jerking her head back when I came too close, the thousand subtle and myriad coldnesses I could never put my finger on.

When he finished, Bill was crying. "Don't you wish you'd known that growing up?" he said. We discovered that each of us had always felt sorry for the other. I grew up believing his mother irresponsible and flighty, though she raised a son alone in the fifties, held a steady job, and managed to buy a house for them both in the suburbs. He had grown up believing my mother bossy, even a bit cruel. It was as if, in that moment, our mirrors unfogged. Things were not what they seemed, though the relief of this new clarity stung us with its chill.

That night, I hardly slept. I lay close to my husband, clinging to his arm, holding his hand, needing to touch—not sexually, but in a way that reassured me of the flesh, the warm fact of his body next to mine in the darkness. How many times, I wondered, had I turned away from him, retreated from his patient, tentative approach to make dinner, do the wash, finish just one more page of a book. Or, like my mother, crouched over a sewing machine guiding layers of fabric between presser foot and feed dog, oblivious to his presence.

I thought of Jorie Graham's poem, "*Noli Me Tangere*," the line about Mary Magdalene's encounter with Jesus at the tomb, "her longings all stitch work toward his immaculate rent." How they might just as easily describe my mother's devotion to sewing, touch transferred to fabric, but withheld from my father and from me. Was I like that too?

I never heard from Bill again. I have an address, a post office box, if I need to reach him.

* * *

Last year, my uncle died in California. His son Lee called me after the funeral, which I did not attend, to say his father had spoken to him on his death bed about things he'd never told Lee before: the shame and anger he felt as a child after his father was diagnosed with syphilis. He told Lee about the days after he'd returned from the war, gone to college on the GI bill, and prepared to move away from home for good. His mother begged him to visit his father, whom he had not seen for eighteen years, but he could not bring himself to do it. My own imagination has filled in the gaps of that day when my uncle accompanied my grandmother to the home:

It happens in black and white. A cold, damp April morning in Pittsburgh, the sky as gray as sidewalk concrete. My uncle and my grandmother drive to the hospital, pull up beside the high, wrought-iron gates. Charlie gets out of the car and walks up the street, head down against the wind, hating the stiff crabgrass growing from the sidewalk cracks, cursing the wind and damp of this dreary day. He stops where an elm tree's roots have heaved up a block of concrete, turns to see his mother moving beyond the gates. He waits, paces back and forth, looks up the street, looks down.

Now he turns toward the hospital's dark brick wall, then quickly turns away. At a window in the center of the building, three floors up, a solitary figure looks out. It is his father. He does not want to look up for fear their eyes may somehow lock, though Charlie would not be able to tell if they had. His vision has blurred. From cold, from anger, from a place he cannot even find, tears well up in his eyes. This was the last time my grandfather saw his son, the last time he saw any of his children.

According to the coroner's report I requested decades later, my grandfather succumbed to a heart attack at age sixty-five. The report says, "The patient had received anti-luetic treatment

for syphilis previous to admission," and notes "morphinism" and "convulsive seizures" as well. I will never know exactly what all this means, or how it came to be. If he did, in fact, have syphilis or was a biological false positive, as happened frequently with the earliest test versions. If other pains led him to morphine and addiction. If the seizures were due to drugs, syphilis, or some other physical imbalance. I only know a little of the shape that diagnosis took in his children and grandchildren's lives.

In the end, both my mother and my aunt developed Alzheimer's, living inside the narrow confines of animal mind, the senses. For years my mother did not speak. She watched whatever came before her on the TV in the nursing home, nodded to the music of commercials. Like a baby, she reached to pluck the stuffing from pillows, put it in her mouth; pinched at the cotton bindings tied to the chair that held her upright. When my husband and I visited, she grabbed my hand, tried to pry the gold wedding band from my finger, slide the wristwatch off his arm, wanting only to touch every small thing as if she could never have enough, as if she couldn't believe anything was real.

Early yet, before dawn. Mary Magdalene is the first to see the risen body, in transition between the earthly and the divine. Forbidden territory. When Jesus appears next, he allows the apostles to touch him, allows Thomas to put his finger in the wounds. But Mary Magdalene remains physically isolated. That physical gap between them, between this woman and this god-man, the negative space between their bodies becomes an image that consumes artists through the ages. Giotto, Titian, Caravaggio, FraAngelico, Poussin, Holbein, even Kahlo: all paint the single scene we know as a *noli me tangere*—touch me not.

Laura Dead Thirty-Nine Years

Jane Bernstein

When I returned to Pittsburgh at the end of the summer, I saw the memorial attached to the metal fence that surrounds a playing field—a wreath, a banner that said, “We will never forget.” I didn’t recognize the name beneath those words, didn’t know if it was a college student or a child, car accident, disease, drug overdose. Each time I rounded the corner, I found myself wondering who had died and how. Then the semester started; papers began to pile up and email filled my box, and I stopped thinking about it.

Two weeks into the term, in the middle of a dozen work-related email messages, I was startled to see one that said: “About your sister Laura and David Mumbaugh.”

My sister Laura, my only sister, had been dead thirty-nine years almost to the day, stabbed to death by a stranger named David Mumbaugh.

The sender, “N,” was writing to say that she’d known David Mumbaugh. At the time of the murder, they’d worked together at the Arizona Highway Department. Their drafting tables were side by side. “David was interested in me. No, he was obsessed with me.” She’d rarely spoken about this, thinking no one would care, but she knew in her “heart of hearts” and the depths of her soul, that she was his “intended target.” There was no doubt in her mind about this. “My life was spared, and ... Laura was killed instead.”

The story, which she remembered “keenly,” was a lot longer. If I wanted, she’d be happy to set it down in words. N, a diplomat serving at the American Consulate in India, had attempted to reach me once before. When I hadn’t responded, she had assumed it was because of India’s poor delivery system and slow bandwidth, so she decided to try again. “I am legit,” she assured me.

Below her full name was her mailing address. Then, in italics: *My goal is to retire alive.*

I sank back into my chair, heavy with sorrow. Then I opened the link she’d included to an American Foreign Service Newsletter that contained a small feature story about an award she’d been given for outstanding performance. The blurry photo yielded no information. Nor did the article, no matter how long I scrutinized it.

For a while I couldn’t move. The email and the promise of N’s unsettling story hadn’t upset me as much as the sudden awareness of how little I thought about my sister these last years, how infrequently she came to mind. I didn’t like the idea that a stranger clung to her memory, that someone who had never met her used her name—Laura—at a time when I had stopped speaking it, when it no longer rang in my ears.

* * *

Two nights before N’s email, on the first evening of Rosh Hashanah, I had gone to a small Reconstructionist service a couple of miles from my home in Pittsburgh. Toward the end of the service, when it was time for the mourners’ kaddish, I rose. My knees quaked. It was hard for me to stand. I felt conspicuous, tall and alone. My knees quaked. I murmured the few words of the Hebrew prayer that I still knew. *Yis’ga’dal v’yis’kadash sh’may ra’bbo* and read the rest in English. It occurred to me that I gravitated to this service, when I was otherwise unobservant, unaffiliated with any congregation, because of a deep need to stand in my sister’s memory once a year, a desire that never made itself known until the moment I rose. At this service anyone who had lost someone, no matter what time of year, could stand for *yiskor*—remembrance. As it happened, Laura had been murdered in late September, so no matter when the Jewish New Year fell, it was always close to the anniversary of her death.

Yet standing, burning with emotion, which still, thirty-nine years after the murder, filled me with shame, my tears were not because of Laura herself. Loss is what I felt. Anguish. In an often-quoted letter, Franz Kafka wrote to his friend Oskar Pollack that a “book must be the axe for the frozen sea inside us.” The email from N made me think that perhaps standing at this service was one of the ways I was driven to break the frozen sea inside me.

* * *

Laura and I were almost four years apart and as little girls fought brutally and played with as much intensity. When our parents moved from a garden apartment in Queens to a house in New Jersey, we still wanted to share a room, and slept in beds separated by only a night table. That’s what I remember of my childhood—listening to my sister breathe at night. Also: having vicious hair-pulling fights, sitting beside her in the back of the car every Saturday when we drove to Brooklyn to visit our grandparents, and playing endless rounds of games—board games, card games, and car games, some of which, like “tunnel” and “gas station,” we made up.

Laura left for college when I was fourteen and in her sophomore year fell in love with a boy named Howie from Skokie, Illinois. When he enrolled in a graduate program in Phoenix, she transferred to Arizona State University to be close to him. In those days, young unmarried couples rarely lived together, so she rented an off-campus apartment for the four months before their December wedding. The small motorcycle she’d gotten for an engagement present was still in a shipping crate in my parents’ garage, so she borrowed a bike to ride to class. One evening, at around dusk, while chaining it to a window grating outside her building, David Mumbaugh stabbed her to death with a switchblade knife. She was one month short of her twenty-first birthday.

I can’t say exactly why crying over my sister’s murder filled me with such unbearable shame, only that it did, and that I’d

learned not to cry or to speak of her. I learned so well that I struck her from my life. This took little effort, since at home her name was never spoken, and a year after her death I left for college, where I shucked off everything that made me uncomfortable, including my first name and much of my history. I didn’t feel my yearning for Laura or my grief over her death until I was twenty-four and she returned in nearly nightly dreams, banal, domestic ones, in which we played games and slept beside each other again, dreams in which I heard her voice and woke each morning, stunned, devastated to find her gone. At forty, I went to Arizona for the first time to look at microfilms from the local newspapers and learn the details of her murder. This was the start of a decade-long investigation that culminated in the publication of *Bereft*, a memoir that I had imagined at the outset would be about Laura and instead was far more about the long-reaching repercussions of her murder.

In that ten years of writing and not writing about Laura, I recorded my dreams in a notebook and unearthed letters she’d sent me. I interviewed her old friends and flew to Kansas City, where I’d found her fiancé, married to a woman much like my sister. I talked to detectives and attorneys. The cycle was always the same: first, the painful excitement of hearing a stranger speak of my sister, then the hard work of polishing and shaping every anecdote and memory for possible use. I kept digging, writing, and revising, long after it was necessary for the book itself, as if I might again experience the initial thrill I’d felt during the interview.

I gave a number of readings after *Bereft* came out. Afterward, someone inevitably asked what I thought of as the catharsis question. Had writing the book been therapeutic? Had it helped me work through my grief? Often literally: “*That* must have been cathartic.” Sometimes a kind person, a woman, would take my hand while I searched for a response, but all that came to mind were the years I’d spent submerged in this “project,” the

countless drafts. I found myself trying to explain that maybe in the beginning it had been cathartic, but mostly I'd been trying to get the story to work, to write something meaningful and engaging. It felt cold to say this, my hand in a stranger's, as if something essential had been ripped out of me long ago.

When the email from N arrived, it occurred to me that the process of working with this "material" had wiped Laura out of my consciousness altogether, that in fact it had been cathartic in the way everything was purged, leaving me with no authentic memories of my sister, only manufactured stories, from which I felt utterly detached, and an occasional spasm of intense grief which I felt when I stood during *yiskor* or upon reading the email from N. Or at other odd times—watching young athletes compete in the Olympics often brought me to tears that related in some puzzling way to Laura, though she, herself, had never been interested in sports.

* * *

Hours after I wrote to N to say I'd be interested in reading her story, a retired police officer in Knoxville, Tennessee emailed me. Suzie hosted a forum called *True Crimes and Beyond*, where people discussed "true crime, etc." In researching the "cold unsolved murder of Valerie Percy," the twenty-one year old daughter of a senator from Illinois who was murdered at the same time as my sister, she came across a reference to Laura and wanted me to know that a "thread" concerning "my sister's case" had been started and that readers would be interested in Laura's story and mine. She was issuing a warm invitation for me to "drop by." She, too, ended her email by assuring me that she was "legit."

"That's bizarre, Ma," my daughter Charlotte said when I told her about these two messages. Charlotte, who was twenty-eight and had in her Brooklyn loft a table Laura had made with bright mosaic tiles, sometimes asked me about my sister—where I thought she'd be living; whether I thought she'd

be an artist. I liked that she always said "Laura," and not "your sister," and that her questions gave me the chance to wonder aloud how my tumultuous sister might have gone through the cultural upheaval of the 1960s. Would her gentle fiancé have steadied her or would she have been too young and unsettled to appreciate him? Would she have struggled to forge a career or found happiness raising children? Conformed and later rebelled? Remained in the West? Stayed faithful to one man? It also pleased me that Charlotte saw herself and Laura as being part of a chain of testy, opinionated women that went from her grandmother to Laura to her, the three of them, officers in an organization I invented on their behalf called the "Ministry of Strong Opinions."

Now though, Charlotte was outraged. "That woman is a sociopath," she said.

Her anger surprised me, and made me wonder if my own response was stunted, and I asked her to explain.

"What kind of person would contact you to say your sister shouldn't have been killed? It's sick. Don't answer her. I want you to promise you won't write back."

I couldn't promise: I had already written to N, and she had replied by saying she looked forward to formulating her thoughts and putting her story to rest at last. Now I wrote again to N to say I wondered why she had gotten in touch with me after all these years. I confessed that my daughter had raised this question, and that I now found myself wondering the same thing. What in her memories was so troubling that she needed to contact me? Why now, after so many years?

* * *

Do people really turn to each other in grief? After Laura's murder, I spun in my own circles. I experienced my parents' quiet anguish, was twisted and reshaped by it, but I could not fully fathom their loss until I had my own daughters. Only then did I see them as individuals, and not a single entwined unit with

one stance and one heart. I began to understand that it was only my mother who could not bear to mention Laura, and that my father would have been grateful to talk of her. By the time I was able to listen, he had begun the long descent into Alzheimer's, which demolished his memories so completely that once, at a holiday dinner, he looked at me from across the dinner table and asked, "Wasn't there another one?" It had seemed like a good thing that he'd forgotten Laura.

He died the day the first copy of *Bereft* was mailed to me. My mother saw it on my kitchen counter and asked if she could take it home. Earlier, when I'd been working on the book, she'd said, "You know I won't read it," so when she asked if she could have it, I suggested she wait.

She slipped it into her purse.

Two days later, on the drive to the huge cemetery in New Jersey where my father would be buried, she told me she read the book.

"And?" My voice quavered. I wanted badly to talk about Laura and was still afraid.

"You got some things wrong."

"What things?" My heart was pounding.

"The Schwartzes were not at the airport when we flew home from Arizona. Only the Liebermans were there."

* * *

Many years had passed since I'd last been to the cemetery. I was shocked to see that there was only one stone for family members, and only a marker, flat on the ground, for Laura. I was studying it when my childhood friend—the only one of my friends who'd known my sister—put flowers on Laura's grave. No one else at my father's service thought to do this. Her kindness brought me to tears. Also the flat marker and the dates that reminded me of the brevity of my sister's life.

Laura Ellen Bernstein 1945 – 1966.

A marker, not a stone.

* * *

On the ride home from the cemetery, my mother told me there was no room for me in this family plot.

"No *room*?" I had never before thought about my post-death wishes but this news shocked me. How was this possible that even after death, I would be apart from my sister?

"We expected you'd be buried with your husband," she said, though by then I'd been divorced for several years.

* * *

When mother moved to an assisted living facility five years later, she brought her framed photos of my father, and baby pictures of Laura and me. Each time I visited, she told me she talked to my father's picture. "We may have been the battling Bernsteins but we had a good marriage." Of my sister, all she said was, "What a waste." Once I asked in a tentative way if she ever thought with pleasure of Laura as a baby. "No," she said.

As a mother of daughters, I can only glimpse the impossible depth of her loss. Yet her words upset me deeply. A waste. As if Laura's truncated life—dead before her twenty-first birthday—counted for nothing. I wanted to argue, to say it felt like a judgment against my sister, but I could not bear to wound my mother further. It reminded me that some of the years I spent writing about Laura was a defense, of sorts, a way of insisting that she had mattered then and now, when my own memories were as frozen as those baby pictures. Hadn't I written that her love was the only love I trusted, that she never withdrew her affection for me, even when we hated each other? Hadn't I speculated that when my love for my own daughters bloomed so naturally, the body memory of Laura's steady love was my foundation?

I did not name my daughters after her. At the time I'd thought that to do so would connect them with pain. Besides, two of my cousins had named their daughters after Laura many years before my children were born. Laurie, small and thin, does not remind me of my small, thin sister. Nor does red-haired Laura. Nothing about these cousins brings back anything real. Certainly not as real as this sudden image that returns. The two of us, little and naked, sitting sideways on the toilet seat, trying to pee together.

* * *

"Gee, so many wonderings," N wrote in her next email. "I thought you might be interested, after all it strangely touched both our lives, and we were both so young. That is all, nothing more, no hidden yearning, no agenda, no nothing." She wished me the best, declared the story "closed" and signed her name.

There it was again, beneath her address: *My goal is to retire alive.*

* * *

I was stunned. Whatever N had wanted to tell me would make no difference. Laura would still be blameless. She would still be dead. I wanted to hear the story anyhow.

I did not have to ask her to send it. Fifteen minutes later, another message arrived. "Thank you for giving me this opportunity to recall this event in my life," N wrote. "Believe what you want. It is all true."

* * *

They had never been pals. N was twenty one, a newly divorced mother of a year-old baby, and David Mumbaugh an awkward "chatterer" of eighteen, with acne and a bulbous nose. It was just that they sat near each other and often hung out with the same office gang. At first she tolerated his attention, though she found him to be odd. Then he started following her to the

cafeteria, or when she went to use the ladies room. He never called her at home or showed any interest after work, "but 8 – 5 his eyes and attention was on me. His way of showing interest was clumsy. He'd say, 'Have you ever played tennis. Well, let me buy you a tennis racket and I'll teach you.' Tennis was only one example: it was the same for hockey, baseball, roller skates, badminton, karate." He would buy her the equipment. He would teach her. This went on for weeks.

One Friday, a week before Laura's murder, David asked if N would go to the river with him. He'd find her a babysitter so it could be just the two of them. River rafting was popular at the time, but she had no interest in going out with him, and told him so bluntly. They had nothing in common. She was too old for him, with a baby, and a lot of responsibility. He needed to leave her alone. "He was visibly rejected, but I had had enough and it seemed to be the only way he listened."

When they returned to work on Monday, David told her he'd gone rafting with the others. He hadn't needed her to come, he said in an angry way. He'd only invited her out of pity.

Three days later, Laura was murdered. When N saw the headlines and read that David had been the only eyewitness, a chill went through her.

For a few days after the murder, he was out of the office, and when he returned, he was visibly shaking from head to toe. He asked N to lunch. He said he was desperate and needed to talk with her alone. They went to a Mexican restaurant nearby. He was fidgety and kept telling her that they needed to go to Tovria's, a restaurant by the canal.

"As you know, when the police tricked him into confessing, he told them he'd tossed the knife he used into the body of water behind Tovria's."

N went into shock when she read this, convinced he had meant to kill her.

“I am sorry for your loss,” she wrote to me. “I don’t understand life and why it turns out the way it does. I am sure you have spent much time trying to understand the same.”

Then it occurred to her: “Maybe the reason why I wrote to you was because I have been so lucky with staying alive these 62 years. Maybe what made me special was that I survived and others have not...”

* * *

I closed the message and read it again the next day. The descriptions of Laura’s murderer, the knife thrown in the canal, the confession obtained by dubious means—I knew all of this. I knew, too, that outside of work, David Mumbaugh had been the kind of “good” boy everyone liked, the Eagle Scout who played touch football with the neighborhood kids, who had a switchblade knife and a belly full of rage. Maybe he had wanted to kill N and not Laura. More likely he needed to kill, and my sister, small and defenseless, was there when he could no longer contain the murderous urge.

I did not return to N’s story because it contained any revelations. Nor did I find myself wondering for more than instead why she’d imagined I might care about her good luck. That mystery did not intrigue me in the slightest. I was searching for something else in her narrative, for a detail I might have overlooked, an image, a turn of phrase.

Before I knew what was happening, I found myself once again caught in that impossible, familiar place, between an investigation that promised the possibility of returning something of my sister to me, and the act of writing about her, which ultimately extinguished any brief flicker of memory. In the end, there was only loss.

* * *

The wreath is gone from the fence around the field.

Oh loss, I thought when I first saw it. It is my theme. Running beneath all the joys I have experienced since Laura’s death,

all the pleasures she never knew were mine, all the rich things I’ve tasted, the cups raised in celebration, the people I’ve been lucky to love, is a dark river of grief.

Even now, all these decades later, I keep rising, flushed and quaking at the knees, still expecting that I might find her.

Linked In

Rosemary Booth

“No one, he said, need grow old, if he willed earnestly not to do so, if he would but keep his soul from falling asleep, his heart open to all rejuvenating influences and shut to every breath of senility. The delight of soul in soul, he said, was the great rejuvenator; it re-created both lover and beloved...”

The Patagonian god-man in *Last and First Men* by
Olaf Stapledon (1931), p. 81

It strikes me that when you're old enough to be what my mother-in-law used to call a senior citizen, sharp emphasis on the first syllable, all the supports need to be in place and working for Olaf Stapledon's marvelous advisory to be realized. I mean, on every level.

Physical, for instance.

The rubber strips you get to practice “resistance training” exercises after an injury, for example, must be soft and flexible, free of the tiny, lacy perforations they are apt to develop over time, like pockmarks on a lunar surface. At the age of sixty-five, I've accumulated three of these stretchy bands. A loose orange one, recognized by everyone at the outpatient physical therapy unit of my hospital as a sort of infant device, barely able to challenge an atrophied muscle or tendon yet for that very reason a welcome aid when you first begin to recover from overuse—or underuse—of said powers. A stiffer lime green band, this one usually offered timorously by an invariably youthful, invariably smiling workout guide. And the brilliant blue length, bestowed without question at the end of your allotted P.T. sessions, a kind of graduation honor you can drape around your neck, like an improbable, skimpy academic hood.

Beyond the physical though it's the intellectual supports I fear losing, as I get older. Like the university library card available free to people like me, married to an institute employee, that will like Cinderella's coach vanish at an appointed hour, in this case the instant my spouse declares a retirement date. Likewise my use of his university's writing centers, its instructors, its spaces, its coaches. *Emerita, ephemera!*

Once I've lost my eligibility for these so useful privileges, it will be harder to keep up with reading and research, let alone to complete written work. Technology could be a help, but I've found its returns diminish as you get older. An electronic reading device, for instance, if you can afford the downloads, presents a challenge. The screen is harder to read than a printed page, especially as one's eyesight worsens (see previous paragraph on physical supports).

But the author of *Last and First Men* speaks of the power of openness to all rejuvenation, as though such a force could operate unassisted, as though simply opening one's stiffening heart would be sufficient to work the charm. Of course, the lines are spoken by a youthful god, a god who as I recall boasted eternal youth, at least until the Patagonians and their species, Second Men, vanished, and he with them.

Maybe younger adults—and Olaf Stapledon was no more than forty-five when he published this book—see openness as an act of will while those of us two or three decades older recognize how dependent the exercise of a person's will is on circumstances, and support. How open can you be to discoveries from the mountaintop if you are too arthritic to climb? Is an elder's view of flora and fauna via the Internet enough to keep her enamored of the beauty and grace in the natural world?

I suspect it is directness that will become harder to find, the hard, immediate evidence that sparks creativity, or even curiosity. After all, the real world is the true rejuvenator. Once a person is reduced to a housebound life, how is her experience different from that of Plato's cave dweller, who sees only shadows?

Such a scene is tantalizing perhaps, but incomplete, and dark. Stapledon, the writer and peace advocate, knew this. He spent his later life traveling the globe to preach the adoption of spiritual values, especially the notion of person-in-community, his message not science, not fiction, but reality, and maybe his lasting legacy.

In Dingle

Joan Connor

In Dingle the shopkeeper, Cathleen, asks Nell, asks all of her customers, to sign the petition to ward off the developer. Cathleen weaves right in the shop. The developer wants to force Cathleen out because he can make more money on the property by transforming it into a condo. Condos now ring the village of Dingle. Does Dingle really need another? Nell clicks through the hangers on the rack, Cathleen's imaginative interpretations of traditional knits and weaves, the re-thought designs, brilliant.

Nell has not been to Ireland since 2000 when she, her father, and son went to the old homestead in Meelin to visit with the ever-diminishing family. Ireland is much changed since, part of the greed culture now—avaricious development, ambitious houses springing up in the countryside. Nell is ambivalent; sad about the changing countryside, elated at the prosperity for a people, her people, with such a benighted, impoverished past. She has returned to visit Great Blasket Island, about which she has been reading, Great Blasket, once home to Tomas Criomhthain and Peig Saiers. Nell does not yet know why she must go there, but she must.

Nell signs the petition for Cathleen.

"Oh," Cathleen says, "and look at this now, our excellent coverage in the papers." She rustles the newspaper and points to the article. "We even got up a little protest, we did."

"That's terrific." Nell nestles a hand-woven nubby cotton sweater with a tatted lace hem on the counter. "This is lovely. How much are you asking for it?"

"For you, love, forty Euros." Cathleen tosses her ringleted red hair. Pinned with New Age ornaments—fairies, angels—it sparkles.

"I couldn't accept it for that. It's too generous." Nell strokes the sweater.

“Get on with you now.” Cathleen shoos her, “Sure and shrouds have no pockets.”

Nell laughs. In some ways, perhaps, Ireland has not changed at all. The people. “Thanks.” She turns to select a sweater for her son. No longer a husband to buy for.

Cathleen returns to her weaving, the intricacy of it a form of magic.

On Great Blasket Island, as Tomas O Criomhthain recorded, when the rent collectors arrived, the village women assembled on the high escarpment and hove rocks, of which there was a plentiful crop on the island, down on them until they retreated. Cathleen’s shop should be safe for the while.

Before heading back to the B and B, Nell strolls up Green Street, past Dick Mack’s—*Where is Dick Mack’s? Across from the church. Where is the church? Across from Dick Mack’s.* She steps off the narrow sidewalk several times to let the other tourists pass. She prefers O’Curran’s to Dick Mack’s which is trendier, O’Curran’s with its snuggeries, like confessionals, on either end of the bar.

She had stopped in at Dick Mack’s for a pint yesterday. The men were giving her the Irish treatment, the jokes as ancient as Dunbeg Fort.

“Got a little Irish in you?”

“Yes.”

“Want more?”

“Got a little Irish in you?”

“No.”

“Want some?”

Patter and flatter.

“Oh, you look just like Mary Black.”

“Oh, no, Padraig, she’s much lovelier than Mary Black.”

Ar mhaith leat deoch? Would you like a drink?

Nior mhaith.

In *Ryan’s Daughter*, which was filmed in Dingle, Tim O’Leary says, “Talk, this whole cursed country will capsize with talk.”

Nell stops in instead at O’Curran’s on Main Street with its bright red sign and orders her pint. No one bothers her. A snaggle-toothed woman sings accompaniment to the guitarist, a dwarf behind her providing harmony to the lugubrious air. In the snuggeries, a man hunkers over his whisky. Folded blankets, wool caps, warm shirts bedeck the shelves. “I’d like a shirt and a shot, please.” It was that sort of place, but it had its logic; both warm you. Part of the vanishing Ireland.

A fellow at the end of the bar is watching her, bashful but curious. She smiles at him.

“You from the other side?” he asks.

She nods.

“I moved there in the eighties. No work here then. Boston. But I moved back in the nineties. More work here now.”

“Times are tough right now in the States,” Nell says.

He shakes his head. “George Bush. Ay, that’s your burden to bear.”

Where is Ireland? Across from the States. Where are the States? Across from Ireland.

She heads back to the B and B, on the harbor across from Eask Tower, erected during the famine as a navigational aid. Once the Irish emigrated to the U.S. to escape starvation; the direction has reversed. As she strolls, she watches the gray heron fish, the tide here never varying much from mid-tide to high. Yesterday she managed to enrage the owner of the B and B by suggesting that perhaps somewhere back in time she was related to one of the houseguests, a writer from Pennsylvania named Tara Shea. The tiny woman vibrated, her wiry hair sparked, as

she said, “No. O’ Shea. I am O’ Shea. Read the sign. She’s Ni. Ni Shea.” O’ Shea tilted off as if her legs were temperamental stilts. Nell thought it might be best to skip breakfast in the morning.

She and Tara Shea had agreed to take the ferry together over to Great Blasket Island in the morning. Tara’s husband lacked interest in the side trip. Tara Shea was going because of her interest in Peig Saiers, the storyteller, and the other Gaelic writers once there. Nell wasn’t certain why she was going, something to do with heritage, the Gaelic purity of the island.

As she walks, she notes the sign on a storefront: Seachain an Cheim. Mind the step. She loves the sign. She thinks about some intellectually challenged American—as they say in P.C.-speak on the other side; Thick Mick it would be in P.I. –speak here on this side—standing before the door, waiting eternally for the command that never arrives: enter, begone, raise your foot. Mind the step. Seachain an Cheim.

Gaelic pronunciation eludes her. Some word like G-A-L-E pronounced chuck, or lissome, or some such. In the morning she and Tara depart for the island from Dun Chaion, pronounced Dun Quin. Duncan.

She pauses to admire the gorm and bui, cobalt blue and daisy-eye yellow boat moored in Dingle Harbor, the blue along the hull as if a sure hand had dipped it halfway. Nearby a gray heron fishes, solitary, elegant. Its silhouette, a calligraphic stroke, a sinuous lonesomeness. She is similarly solitary.

Dingle changed, became a tourist destination, after Lean’s filming *Ryan’s Daughter* here in 1970. As Nell stares at the boat, the scene becomes a movie set. Despite critical disclaim for the movie, the tourists inundated Dingle. Dingle became a movie set for itself.

She and Tara ride the ferry across the bay, Tara’s black Pre-Raphaelite hair unfurls in the sea breeze. Rare sun sparkles. Imsher woih, fine weather. Swooping, sweeping, the kestrels and

gannets, with their black-tipped wings, soar. The ferry pitches as they cross. High winds. Seals bob following the ferry. The passengers disembark into an inflatable boat which drops them at the landing. The incline is steep. The Road of the Dead, the path down which the islanders carried the coffins for passage to Dun Chaoin for church burial. The ascent is nearly vertical. What prompted a people to settle here on a rock-encrusted island, blasted by cold ocean breezes, sided with cliffs?

The island is treeless, dotted with grazing sheep, and the ruins of evacuated lives, huts and houses built of fitted stones, the small white schoolhouse, a round, stone clochan for grain storage, the well where the women gathered and gossiped.

Tourists sit on the grass either side of the path, pausing to catch their breath. Tara heads to the right to explore the lower village where the artists lived. Nell keeps climbing.

It is difficult to believe that on so small an island the people had a need to discriminate. Upper village and lower. She passes the weaver’s cottage and thinks of Cathleen’s battle with the developer, his efforts to evict her. Ireland’s history was a history of evictions—even here. Eviction and evacuation.

Even the fields had names. Tobar an phuca, Pooka’s well. An duimhe bhocht, the poor dune field. Port an eidhneain, ivy bank. And the water. Screallach an ghoba, scree of the gob. Cuas an scannail, shameful creek. Cuas na bpreachan, crow cove. Cuas na Ceannainne, the cove of Ceannainne, the magic cow. By naming, we inhabit.

Nell explores each abandoned cottage, some littered with the detritus of squatters. Wine bottles and moldering blankets, a battered kettle, the charred remains of campfires. One of the abandoned houses has a newly painted yellow door. Nell peers through the window and sees pots of paintbrushes. Candles. Someone still occupies the house as a studio. The door is pad-locked. In another window, lace curtains, more candles jammed into wine bottles.

The islanders burned seal oil for lamplight, furzewood for warmth, entertained each other telling stories in the evenings by their glow, stories often continuing for weeks. Spinning, weaving like Cathleen only with words. Shrouds have no pockets. Telling stories because we die. Telling stories to ward off death.

Nell hikes to Peig's cottage at the crest and sits on the bench. Three donkeys regard her, one a pretty blonde whose mane looks styled. The blonde nickers, approaches and nuzzles her hand. She pats its muzzle and scans the village and sea below. On a summer day, it is easy to imagine a lovely life here. The smell of wet rock and sea salt, the rolling air, the easy talk at the well, the comfort of knowing one's neighbors. The fields storied with stones. The music—pipes, fiddle, and accordion—the singing, and dancing of an evening. And the telling of stories. Synge came here in 1905 to meet the island King, Pádraig O' Cathain. Telling the stories so that we don't forget them.

But a tough life, too, bringing livestock over in the naumhoga, shearing sheep, carding the wool, weaving, always the weaving—cloth and baskets—seal hunting, lobstering, hauling seaweed to mulch the potatoes, fitting rocks, stretching the hides on the skeletal boats, the naumhoga, and the roofs of the stone houses, tarring them, fetching water.

And the darker side of the island in the winter, the cold and wind, the starvation. The road of the dead. A tale on the neighboring island, Inis Tuaisceart, the Sleeping Giant, preserves the story of Peig O Cathain, the wife of Tomas, who lived in a clochan, a prehistoric stone hut, isolated by storms for six weeks. Tomas died, and Peig, weak with starvation, was unable to carry him from the hut, so she dismembered his rotting corpse and carted him out piece by piece. A sheep devoured an arm. Some accounts maintain that Peig ate him. When rescuers arrived, she was mad.

Some tales are grim. Tomas O Criomhthain wrote: For it was inside that all the magic was, the kind of magic that only a

person raised by the water's edge can understand, who spends his days looking out across it at the base of the sky. But this magic quickly disappears when the depths of winter return, and one realizes that it was but a summer's dream that did not last.

The dream that did not last, the cycling discontent. The pettiness of interior lives, to always be among the same people, to never escape the past of one's deeds, the mortal claustrophobia. The eagerness to write, with the black ink of the gannet's wingtip, the language of flight.

Perhaps one travels to discover the complex of one's own longings. The longing for company, for community, and the dread of it. As solitary as a heron, she stares at the sea below. She spots Tara, surrounded by sheep, lying in the sun, a pose of repose, down on the escarpment above the strand, gorgeous in her apartness. Nell has visited long enough with Peig. She rises and heads for the strand across the transverse field. Rabbits gambol ahead of her and pop into their warrens in the banks.

The soft sand makes headway difficult. She removes her shoes and ambles to the sea's edge. There seals bob, staring at her like curious periscopes, nine of them at attention. One small one, spotted, with a whiskery white face follows her progress along the strand, popping up, alert, big-eyed. Seals: selkies. If a woman sheds seven tears in the sea, a male selkie will come to her. If a farmer can catch a female selkie sunning and can capture her shed skin and hide it, then he can force her to marry him, keep his house, bear his children, unless she finds the skin, dons it again, and abandons him, returning to the sea. Shapeshifters.

She is one herself. A shapeshifter within, seeking continuity with her ancestral past, an Ireland that no longer exists, a shed skin. She knows why she has come.

But the place that you go to is gone. The home that you seek is no more, the connection a flimsy velleity. The past, like the stone huts here, tumble back into the land from whence they originated. Unraveling, unweaving stories. Cathleen will

drop her rocks on the head of her landlord, and Nell wishes her well. But the world is changing, and, as it does, story becomes history, history slowly unweaving. How many stories are lost among these stones?

The final evacuation occurred on Tuesday, November 17, 1953. Peig ended her days blind in a hospital in Dingle, after years of service to a rough farmer.

St. Brendan mistook the back of a whale for an island. When he landed there, he discovered Judas Iscariot in exile. We all live in a treacherous exile.

A note from the Taoiseach's office, dated August 6, 1947, read: They are dying out and perhaps it is better for them so.

No church, no priest, no doctor, no school. A diminishing community, starving and begging de Valera for help. None arrived. Only boats for the evacuees. Some later made the crossing, settling in Springfield, Massachusetts, neon shamrocks on their local tavern windows, plastic leprechauns. There is no Tir na Og, no mythic land of youth, only a life lived in reverse, until it, like the story, ends.

We are all dying out, and perhaps it is better for us so.

Thomas O' Criomhthain wrote: the like of us will never be again.

In Dingle hedges bloom with fuchsia, heather springs from the rocks. Cathleen weaves.

Slan agat. Goodbye.

Nell has arrived in Dingle to learn that she will not return.

She cannot return. Rud ar bith. Nothing. The place that you go to is gone. *A summer's dream that did not last.*

Ta se cathru go jee a kuig. A quarter to five. In the bay the ferry waits.

Manual Labor

Gary Fincke

Woom! Ball

In early May, 1964, during Hell Week, we played Woom! Ball. We formed a circle at three a.m., just before the two-mile run, fifteen pledges who slammed a football broadside into our neighbors' guts. Woom! we said, then cupped our hands like running backs to keep ourselves from harm. Woom! The ball traveled clockwise because all of us except Cal Mroz were right-handed, and we were expected to take and deliver pain from the strongest side.

Woom! Finally, we were five days into Hell Week, a half hour of sleep and six and a half hours of proving ourselves per night. We were nearly finished with Woom! ball, one more night, but after six rounds there were pledges who moaned. They were the pussies that night, pledges who doubled up, clutching themselves, and stayed that way instead of only wishing that half hour gone. Those that didn't stand up straight again were pulled out of that circle to watch our war like women.

That night the pussies were given brooms or dust mops or bottles of window cleaner with rags. They were told to do women's work. They were told to be something other than useless until there was only one man standing.

Woom! I stayed upright, but near the end of the half hour there were older fraternity brothers who joined, shouldering in among the tough guys like Jim Ulsh and Dave Mazur and Cal Mroz, the pledges who never showed fear or pain.

Woom! We had our chance to fire back, driving that ball into the stomach of seniors just returned drunk from Friday night bars, juniors who insisted Woom! ball used to be worse, that every pledge test had been softened for the likes of pussies like us. Woom! Until Jim Ulsh took that ball point first and looked to have come apart inside. Woom! Until Dave Mazur

cracked a rib because that ball thunked wide. Woom! and I was left standing beside Cal Mroz, who, because he was left-handed, finally reversed the direction and screamed Woom! like a sound could take the air out of me.

Woom! I shouted, using my right hand, the ball stuttering between us four times, neither of us knowing Cal would die in a war that was as small, that night, as our skirmish. Woom! he screamed, but all those friends of ours who were cleaning women were being herded up the stairs and outside by the PledgeMaster, Cal and I following to where, from the parking lot, we broke for the road that ran into town. It was a mile out, a mile back, and Cal ran beside me that night, matching my strides as if I'd earned something for accepting and returning fire, the two of us watching for lights in windows at quarter to four, guessing whether whoever moved there was coming home from trouble or waking into a day that, starting this early, had to promise nothing but work and pain.

Centering the Newlyweds

At five a.m., seven Friday nights later, my father told me he was closing the bakery he'd owned for fifteen years just outside of Pittsburgh. Since eighth grade, until I'd left for college, I'd worked beside him every Friday night from ten to five-thirty for a dollar and then a dollar and a quarter an hour, supplementing that by mowing lawns from April to October to earn any money I expected to spend on anything but what was necessary.

That last night my father baked for customers, he marked the early hours with the same scheduled hand-work as always—bread and sandwich buns, coffee cakes, sweet rolls, and the deep-fried doughnuts that were finished during the late-June dawn while my mother readied the display cases where cookies and cakes and pies were already waiting for their last opportunity to sell. He took his time with cream puffs, the custard, in mid-summer, with a shelf life of hours, and that afternoon, in

the day's full heat, there was one wedding cake, three tiers, the bride and groom standing in a white gazebo that needed to fit inside a circle of sugar roses and loops of icing.

For once, my father ordered me to drive so he could balance that beauty nine miles, three of them to avoid the cobblestones of Cabbage Hill to the Cherry City Fire Hall where fat women were preparing golabkies, pierogies, and kielbasa, sweating in the windowless small kitchen. He retouched those swirls of icing and laid that white gazebo just right, erasing the dot of icing that reminded him which part of those circles faced front, smoothing until it looked as if those newlyweds had been centered by the right hand of God. Those women praised the cake and offered beer, Iron City on tap, but my father waved his spatula until one of them knew to hand him cherry pop cold for children, and I, about to turn nineteen, swallowed the same, able to wait two hours to drink myself stupid with a girl I planned never to marry, allowing my father to take his time with the end of baking, standing beside the cake until he decided to drive back to the bakery where my mother, near closing, was offering everything for half price, clearing the perishable.

Housework

The last day of Hell Week, a Saturday, pledges did housework for eight hours. We dusted and swept and mopped. We polished shoes and washed cars. We changed records from the Supremes to the Beatles to the Miracles for a room of beer drinkers, or made sure, in another room, to lift the needle and replace it exactly on time so that "Suspicion" by Terry Stafford played fifty times in a row without more than five seconds between plays during a two-hour stretch in mid-afternoon.

We scrubbed until a fraternity brother dropped cigarette ashes and then we scrubbed again. I learned to buff a pair of shoes until they nearly reflected my face. I made sure to rinse every trace of soap film from a glistening car. And I learned to

watch, without comment, a fellow pledge eat half a cigar for leaving a scuff mark in a corner, hating, during those final hours of Hell Week, every fraternity brother I wanted to live with for the next three years.

What we didn't do were the public spaces—the bathroom with its gang shower and multiple sinks and toilets, the lounge with a single television. Cleaning women did those first thing Monday morning, erasing all the public signs of stupid weekend behavior. They cleaned up vomit and broken glass and litters of pizza crusts. That pledge who ate the cigar was sent outside to puke in the weeds beyond the parking lot because no one wanted vomit in the bathroom until late Saturday night.

Factory Work

The summer after my father closed his bakery, I wore the Heinz company's washed boots. I jammed my hair inside my hat and pinned it like an old woman first to arrive at church. With an oversized spatula, I scraped a shift's worth of spaghetti with hot dogs from three huge kettles.

In sterilizing, during July, I worked for three weeks beside enormous cylindrical pressure cookers. I did the simple things, loading cans and helping to roll a filled truck-load along the tracks between the rows of cookers, shoving it inside one of them on cue.

Someone else set the temperatures and times. Someone else checked the pressure and the seals. Those two men told me they'd each been doing their jobs for more than twenty years, and I was glad to hear it because a mistake would likely kill us all. And when they showed me that leaning out an open window into the ninety degree heat was a way to cool off, I moved to those windows every time there was a lull.

In August a boss sent me into boxcars where bags of dried beans and flour roiled dust around my face while the forklift driver waited for me to reconstruct the shifted pallet loads. If

there were split bags, he handed me a shovel and a short tub to fill while he smoked outside on the loading dock.

Another foreman made me kneel in watery blood to unclog a set of drains because three pairs of men, including me, had spent half a shift hoisting frozen beef slabs, one hundred pounds per lift, and all of us were sick of wading ankle-deep. "Use your fucking fingers," he said, how I was supposed to yank half-thawed meat and fat from dozens of drain holes.

"Good," he said at last, the blood swirling down, and I got back to my feet and gripped the next crate, waiting for my partner, who'd been standing on high ground, to put his hands under the box and nod.

Townies

Six o'clock on a Saturday, the winter before we first heard of the word Tet, Cal Mroz and I were sober because we'd worked since eight a.m. as part of our fraternity's punishment, collecting trash and shoveling snow to give us the humility the Dean had said we needed as if under age drinking was a sin of pride.

Because it was February, we'd returned our tools in near-dark and stood, for once, among men who worked weekends at jobs they'd never foreseen as boys, laborers who did what was necessary, the work we wouldn't be repeating, not if going to college meant something. Those men huddled inside cars they idled toward warmth, windshields clearing from the bottom in rising moons. From the back of campus, it was two miles to where our friends were already lively with beer and music, and whether it was the twilight cold or the simple solidarity of work, one car door opened as an offer, a man who said, "Where to?" and nothing else.

Cal and I crowded beside him on a bench seat, the heater full-blast upon our feet while Cal guided the driver. "I'm thinking to myself you boys must be townies," the driver said as we turned into the half mile stretch that would take us to the frat house.

“Yes,” Cal said at once, and the man nodded.

“You get along here?”

“Good enough,” Cal said, true, at least, for him, since his family really did live in town, not, like mine, a hundred miles south near Pittsburgh. “Right here,” he added, and the man stopped his car three blocks from the frat house where small houses lined the last quiet street before weekend noise took over.

“I have to admit I thought you boys was card burners and the like this morning. It’s all that seems to be here nowadays, the ones who think Vietnam is somebody else’s work to get done.”

“I’m enlisted,” Cal said. “The Air Force first thing after graduation,” not speaking for me this time so I kept my attitude to myself.

“Now them’s some words for sore ears,” the driver said. “You boys take care,” and he reached across Cal to shake my hand, then Cal’s as I opened the door. “You worked good. Maybe college won’t change you.”

“Maybe not,” Cal said, and then he grabbed my arm before I started to walk in the lingering snow. He went to the mailbox and opened it. In the rear view mirror, it would look to that driver as if Cal was checking for mail. There were no footsteps in the six inches of snow on the walk from the front door of the nearest house to that mailbox. The car turned around and came back toward us. Cal reached in and pulled out two envelopes and waved them at the driver, who honked his horn.

There was a car in the driveway, so I thought whoever lived here was old, afraid to walk in the snow. If there had been a shovel, I could have done the walk in a few minutes. The snow was light because of the cold. The sidewalk wasn’t even half as long as the one in front of my parents’ house.

Cal returned the mail to the box and headed down the sidewalk to where it was shoveled down to the cement. “A beer is what we both need,” he said as I caught up.

“I’m townie for a day,” I said. “We should have boilermakers.”

Cal punched my arm near the shoulder, hard enough to make me skid a quick side step to keep my balance. “How does it feel to be loved?” he said, the near-future of his death so close it was already unwrapping its greasy package to add the consequence of his casualty heart.

Subsidence

That summer it wasn’t the atomic bomb, it was subsidence that brought disaster. Not the end of the world, but the shifting of foundations, the cinderblock cracked where corners of houses keeled over like drunks. It wasn’t fallout, the despair that covered homeowners in the helpless housing plan built over the long-closed, anthracite mines. It wasn’t a firestorm that ruined their roads, not a shock-wave that created refugees.

It wasn’t my father inside the fire hall huddled with his neighbors, but it was his hands that straightened the map where his modest street showed so large he believed it was a river.

It wasn’t cancer in every family. It wasn’t decades of dying, nobody returning, not ever, not even to the half-life that they endured, measuring themselves by mortgages that outlived them. It wasn’t the apocalypse. It wasn’t news, watching while my father walked his hallway, measuring slope with his body and telling me men had given their working lives for the houses that were ruined a quarter mile away. That they’d put their hands to work and now look what that had got them.

Ben Hur

During Hell Week, two hours before Woom! Ball, we played Ben Hur, fifteen galley slaves seated in two inches of water on the fraternity house basement floor. “Row,” the PledgeMaster commanded. “Row.”

Our oars were the wooden cases glass soda bottles were delivered in for the machine in the small weight room that shared the basement. Empty, they seemed light, at least for a few minutes, but soon we were rowing faster and being sprayed with water from a hose, the floor puddling deeper around us.

After a few more minutes, that galley seemed worse than any that Ben Hur rowed on during his slave years. The fraternity brothers we wanted to live with became impatient. They started to handicap the race by placing empty bottles in the cases—six for the stronger guys, three for some, none for the ones who looked to be ready to drop out. I was glad to get three. An empty case meant guaranteed loser, a weakling.

“Row. Row. Row.” There was a chorus now, everybody who’d stayed up to watch us struggle yelling out the rhythmic command.

Somebody dropped a fourth and then a fifth bottle into my case as the first galley slaves collapsed, dropping their cases. “Flat on your stomachs, face down,” they were told, a kind of dead man’s float because that’s what they were now, bodies tossed into the sea.

“Drop it and drown,” I heard. It looked plausible. A sixth bottle settled into my case. A seventh. An eighth.

Dave Mazur and Cal Mroz were left when I collapsed. Face down, I discovered there was enough water to keep me from breathing if I exactly followed directions. I lay there gasping while I wished for those two stalwarts to quit or one of my weaker pledge brothers to drown for real, anything to end Ben Hur.

For that night and four more, to prove our brotherhood, we dropped on our stomachs and drowned. And then we rose and cleaned up that flooded basement, sweeping up the ocean until there was no sign of a battle except a stack of heavy oars.

Sentences Full of If

College down to its final semester, I vowed this was my last winter of having to walk. Terrible weather was for men without cars, and I meant to have one.

Those mornings when I slogged through snow, I listened to every part of my body for weakness and hoped I could hear myself in the near future of beating the draft, shuffling from the army’s physical with the joy of a small, unacceptable flaw.

In Florida, where I planned to drink and chase girls in early March, three astronauts were killed on the ground, inhaling the toxic smoke of a flash fire, something as impossible as a friend crushed by a jeep during basic training, all the danger of his part in the war still months away.

That weekend, stopped by the swirling lights of ambulances and police, I learned that Linda Harbison, who had, a half hour earlier, said goodbye to me as a party had wound down, had died in the car she’d picked to go home in, that whatever else she’d meant to say had been hurled through a windshield.

Like she could have been, I was riding with Cal Mroz, and right then, just after one a.m., Cal and I shared expletives before we began the sentences full of “if” and the paragraphs stuffed with stories meant as consolations for what seemed impossible—to die so fast surrounded by rescue.

On television, January shutting down, were tributes to Grissom, Chaffee, and White. February’s news filled with responsibility speculations—frayed wires, oxygen level, a hatch too difficult to reach—and I told myself I wanted to hear what Linda Harbison’s driver, a sophomore, had to say about speed and ice and drinking because even after a dozen beers I had known enough to rely on the judgment of Cal Mroz the way I relied on somebody every night when what I wanted was more than two miles from where I stood.

I rode in five cars a week, half of them driven by soldiers-to-be, without saying a word about the test flights we were taking

to decide what was worth it, what was not, turning up the radio so impossibly loud a siren couldn't slow any of us who believed we were learning quickly enough to live.

Maintenance

My father, now a janitor for the school district, got me hired for the summer after I graduated. "Remember who you want people to think you are," he said as we walked into the school I'd graduated from four years before. By 7:15, I held a putty knife and lay down to scrape the underside of the high school gym's bleachers. "This will take you a while," the foreman said, and left.

I'd sat on those bleachers a hundred times. I'd stuck my share of boogers under my seat during ninth grade, giving it up when the longing for girls drove me to manners. In three months, I told the foreman, I was beginning graduate school. "Well, until then," the foreman had said, and I understood this scraping was the kind of job summer help got stuck with—unskilled and awful—what the full-time janitors would never do as long as there was a budget for summer work. I thought of urinals and toilets, what might be caked under the rims of each and how I would be instructed to clean them.

Summer, my father had told me, was when schools recovered from injuries, but all morning the job carved its initials in the air, spray-painted the *eat-me* and *fuck-you* of contempt. In the supply closet, I found the extra-duty cleaner and a couple of rags because tiny obscenities were inked in the spaces between the wood slats--three ways to enter Courtney, a name I couldn't match to a face; five ways to kill Mrs. Craddock, an English teacher I'd had as a senior, and the one thing a printer wanted to do again and again to Miss Kane, who'd been a student teacher during my last semester.

I was making the assertion that Robbie Kirkland was a faggot smear and disappear when I heard the foreman shout my

name. I was on my feet before I understood it was my father the foreman was talking to. "Get the fucking lead out," the foreman said, sounding as if he was in the adjacent lobby, but I couldn't hear my father's response. "What am I looking at here?" the foreman started up again. "Tell me so I can treasure it."

Nothing else. The foreman's voice shut off like a radio.

At lunch, an hour later, my father looked the same, eating his sandwich and his apple, going to the fountain once for a drink of water. "How's it going?" he finally said.

"I can see why the teachers never wanted us to chew gum."

"That job is everybody's first day," he said. "In a few days you'll be on your feet like the rest of us."

All afternoon I lay flat on my back, soundless, scraping gum and snot, erasing wishful thinking. Ten minutes before it was time to punch out, the foreman showed up to inspect my work with a mirror on a stick, grading like a dentist. As if he'd scouted, the foreman went right to where the obscenities had been printed. "See you tomorrow, kid," the foreman said, tapping the mirror against my chest before he said, "Go and clock out. There sure as fuck's no overtime on this job."

My father and I punched out with the rest of the crew, the foreman following us through the lobby toward the main door. The foreman, smiling, said "Another day older" to my father, then "See you tomorrow" to both of us.

"Wait for me by the car," my father said, but I opted, after a minute in the full sun of June, for the shade of the front door's overhang. Through the glass I could see my father kneeling to take scuff marks from the lobby wall. Before I could be seen, I walked back to the car and stood in the sun.

I waited for eight minutes, my back turned to the sun that shone over the roof of the high school from a cloudless sky. "That wasn't so bad, was it?" my father called from what sounded like fifty feet away.

“What wasn’t?” I said at once, but when I turned, squinting into the sun, my father’s expression was fixed as if he hadn’t heard.

“Ok?” my father said, closing up the distance. “You ok?” and I laid my bare arms across the car roof and gave him a thumbs-up sign with both hands, holding it as long as I could against the heat.

Manual Labor

That last summer of manual labor was three sullen months when I worked with my back and hands among men who were difficult to know. Because I was strange with the speech of education. Because I would leave in September, and needed not to return. At least I believed so, ignorant of their private sadnesses. I followed them, some evenings, into bars where they hurried past joy into anger. One man who cleaned rooms where children were taught said he wanted to fuck every teacher, even the ugly, so they would know him. A man with whom I worked unloading school supplies from a truck wished Hitler a resurrection. And I drank, one night, with a man from maintenance who listed capital punishments as if they were familiar names of football teams.

He began with the commonplaces of firing squad, hanging, the electric chair. He said breaking, beheading, boiling, gas. Which is worst, he asked me, crucifixion, impalement, being pressed by heavy stones? And I started to say drawn and quartered, the unraveling of your guts as you, still breathing, recorded their bloody length with your eyes. “No,” he said, making me think I’d insulted his question, but I heard, then, a man and woman wearing some other working-with-your-hands uniform arguing from six stools down the beer-soaked, ash-strewn bar.

At last, there were no more obscenities to use, and they started the long exchange of fuck-you, toos, the man silencing her with his fist, a short uppercut under her chin so she fell back

and slammed her head on the wooden floor, and the man with whom I was drinking stood and started forward while I sat like a fool or worse, someone who watched like the doctor hired to witness the planned death of prisoners, a man who laid his fingertips to the throats and wrists of the executed, who bobbed his head and read the hands of a prominent clock. Or someone who stayed in school while Cal Mroz, the sturdy and reliable, exploded in the sky over Vietnam.

In Search of Rest

Jacqueline Kolsov

REST

The original sense seems to be a measure of distance from the Old Norse *rost* “league, distance after which one rests”; Gothic *rasta* “mile, stage of a journey.” The meaning “support, thing upon which something rests,” is attested from 1590.

It feels appropriate that rest finds its roots in movement, for I have driven three hundred miles for this self-described ‘rest cure or retreat’ in a boxcar-shaped casita just a few miles outside of Santa Fe. Tonight marks my seventh and last night away from home, the longest period I have been apart from my two and a half year old daughter, Sophie. The other three times involved only one or two night absences to teach a workshop, and once I went away to receive an award for my novel. This absence is dramatically different. The aim of this trip has been a complete detachment of self from the responsibilities of child, family, household.

Tonight, as I sit at the kitchen counter which doubles as a writing desk, sipping tea and looking out at the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, purple-gold in the twilight of a thunderstorm, the hum of the refrigerator the only sound, I understand that despite the two hours each afternoon that have proven a real struggle—a fight with an emptiness akin to the wind blowing through the trees up here—I have rested. Late morning has usually found me lingering among the many pillows of the double bed which encompasses nearly the entire bedroom, a book or a manuscript open before me. Each evening, I have stood at this same kitchen counter chopping vegetables for a salad or stir fry as wild rice or orzo cooks on the stove. I’ve recalled that long-forgotten pleasure of adding herbs, savoring a single glass of wine, and

listening to the evening birds perched in the mesquite trees just beyond the beds of foxglove and primrose.

Seated in yoga’s lotus pose on the flagstone porch, an upturned palm resting on each knee, eyes closed, or flowing through a series of sun salutations, I’ve indulged in recalling my wandering thoughts and focusing on my breath as I’ve waited for peace to fill my lungs and soften my belly. And in the process, I have begun to embody that late sixteenth century meaning of ‘rest’: I have learned, out of necessity, to become my own support.

When I began nursing Sophie, everyone—from the lactation expert at the hospital to my daughter’s pediatrician to my chiropractor—urged me to do it for as long as possible. The benefits to the child are well-documented: stronger teeth and a heightened immune system being chief among them. And there are profound benefits for the relationship between mother and child: the intimacy that comes with nursing, the profound feeling of attachment. I told myself I would nurse Sophie for two years. When, at two and a half, she was still nursing, and I was having difficulty weaning her, when she grabbed my shirt at dinner parties, and once tugged at my breast in the swimming pool, insisting I nurse her in the water (which I did not after something of a scene-making battle), I knew I needed distance to be able to implement the process. Weaning a toddler is not like weaning an infant. You can set an infant down. She might cry and kick her legs, but a toddler can run after you. She can press herself against your knees and scream. She can shout, “Nurse, Mommy, nurse” until she’s blue in the face, and you—or should I say I—give in.

ARREST

“To cause to stop,” 1375 from the Old French *arester* “to stay, to stop.” From the Latin *ad* “to” + *restare* “to stop, remain behind.” “To catch and hold the attention” is from 1814.

It is no exaggeration to say that the essential part of me, and certainly my marriage, were in a state of arrest before the morning I packed up the Volvo and drove to Santa Fe. Three weeks earlier, my parents had come to stay with us. We had just moved into a new home, which we had begun to paint and furnish and surround with a garden. The school year had ended. I was finishing the rough draft of a new novel and had been awarded tenure that spring. My husband Bill had begun what will be a seven month leave. He and I should have been relaxed.

Instead, on the day of my parents' arrival we were exhausted and tense. Sophie had thrown up the night before, around two a.m., I think, and woke fussy at the precariously early hour of five thirty. Neither one of us said aloud what we both must have been thinking: the fact that we couldn't send Sophie to her playgroup if there was a chance she was sick. So we had to surrender our individual goals for the day, goals that seemed even more important because for the next week we would have houseguests, my parents, and Sophie would stay at home.

On the second day of my parents' visit, having put Sophie down for her nap, I decided to do the same, for we'd just returned from a remarkably successful outing to the new university pool where my seventy-six-year-old father recovered his own child self as he floated down the Lazy River. "I'll take care of Sophie when she wakes up," Bill said before I closed the bedroom door.

I trusted Bill with Sophie, but when she woke crying for Mommy, and would not stop after some fifteen minutes, I went into the living room.

"What are you doing?" Bill said.

"Just give me Sophie."

I nursed her, and she instantly quieted. Did I revel in the ability to soothe her in this way? Not anymore. But I still did it because I could, because I thought it was more efficient.

"Don't you see we're right where we started?" he said, when I returned Sophie to his arms, and she immediately began to wail.

Which one of us said 'Fuck you' first, I no longer recall, but within a matter of minutes, we were shouting at each other as my parents hovered on the periphery, repeating our names, and trying to return us to reason. Instead, Bill packed up his laptop and an overnight case and left. My parents, Sophie, and I ate dinner at the kitchen table where we struggled to make conversation.

After I put Sophie to bed at ten, she threw the kind of tantrum I have never experienced before. She screamed for nearly an hour. Desperate for an escape, I took her out of her crib and made my way to the garage with her in my arms. "What are you doing, Jackie?" My mother asked.

"I'm taking Sophie for a walk."

My seventy-five-year-old mother tried to barricade the door, her face a frustrated grimace.

"Let me through," I said, Sophie in my arms.

"In sixteen years, Sophie will be on drugs, and you'll be in an insane asylum," my mother said.

I pushed past her, put Sophie in the stroller, hooked the dog to his leash, and walked, the adrenaline surging through me as if I were some sort of addict. And in fact, my body had begun to overreact to small situations that no longer seemed manageable because, with a daughter who treated bedtime as if it were punishment, I'd lost control of my daily life.

Walking, I settled a little, trying to talk to Sophie about the moon and the stars and the fact that it was way too late for her to be up. Clutching her teddy bear and my own childhood blanket, Sophie was remarkably calm and looked back at me through the large blue-green eyes that are uncannily like my own.

Half an hour later, I put her back in her crib. She cried for ten minutes, then fell asleep.

I did not fall asleep until nearly five a.m. This was my first foretaste of the panic attacks that would plague me during the days that followed, attacks that continued until I left for Santa

Fe, lingering on here (but thankfully occurring in the afternoon and not at night).

At eight a.m., I called Bill's cell phone. He told me all the hotels were full. The night before, he wound up driving around for forty minutes and finally checked into a motel off the interstate. The man in the next room, he said, was homeless. "What's happened to us?" I cried. "I miss you. I miss us."

"So do I," he said. He was crying too.

PANIC

From the Greek panikon, "pertaining to Pan," in the sense of "panic, fright" short for panikon deima, from neuter of Panikos "of Pan," the god of woods and fields who was the source of mysterious sounds that caused contagious, groundless fear in herds and crowds, or in people in lonely spots. The related FUNK dates from 1743 and means "depression, ill humor," from the Scottish. Earlier, it appears as a verb, "panic, fail through panic" and is possibly related to the Flemish fonck "perturbation, agitation, distress" and the Old French funicle "wild, mad."

On the drive up to Santa Fe, I listen to Garrison Keillor profile Iris Murdoch who, in her later years, suffered from Alzheimers Disease. While she was well, Murdoch defined happiness as absorption in one's work and in one's daily tasks. To be damned was to be unable to find this peace; worse yet, to be damned meant to be preoccupied with self. When the panic sets in, according to Murdoch's definition, I would have had to count myself among the damned.

After the five-hour car trip to Santa Fe, during which time I do not once lose my way, I arrive at the casita, which is ringed with Black-eyed Susans, foxglove, hollyhocks, and other flowers. A deep blue hummingbird shirrs the sky. When I open the door, I find clean tile floors, large windows, and two cozy rooms. Why, then, do I tune in only to the absence of sound? Or more

precisely: why do I hear only the wind rushing through the pine trees, and hear it not as a reprieve from noise, but as a hollowness echoing the feeling within me? So distraught do I become within the first twenty minutes of my arrival that I begin to sob, face down, on the bed. I sob until I understand I have to go out. My dog, Eddie, is my traveling companion.

I put him back into the car and drive, by feel, towards Santa Fe, navigating the winding, hilly Old Santa Fe Trail. Somewhere along the way into town, I second-guess myself and my sense of direction, self-doubt having become a rather too frequent companion. It is only now that I pull over to the side of the road and telephone Bill. "What's wrong?" he asks.

"I'm lost."

"Okay." His voice is calm, professorial. "Go back to the casita, turn on the Internet, and google directions on Mapquest."

"Right," I say, abrupt, dismissive, alone.

I do drive back to the casita, find the wireless connection up here, and realize my intuition was right. I was going the right way, but I didn't believe it. I check my email, find a message from Bill. "Don't you see that getting lost is a sign? This is a test, and it's up to you to find your sense of direction. Only you can find your bearings."

SURRENDER

"To give (something) up" from the Old French surrendre "give up, deliver over" (13th century), from sur- "over" + rendre "give back."

Despite the fact that I am predisposed to look for signs in this life, at that moment I do not see getting lost—or second-guessing my sense of direction—symbolically. I see it as frustrating, not to mention potentially dangerous on the hilly, winding roads outside of Santa Fe. This seems like the right moment to

distinguish ‘rest’ or a ‘rest cure’ from ‘surrender,’ a word—and an experience—I have come to associate with this space of time.

The rest cure originated with Silas Weir Mitchell in 1873 and was his standard treatment for the feminine malady of neurasthenia, a condition characterized by the individual becoming “thin, tense, fretful, and depressed.” Among Mitchell’s patients were women of extraordinary intellect and privilege, such as Jane Addams and Edith Wharton. Mitchell’s rest cure involved a patient’s entry into a clinic for “a combination of entire rest and excessive feeding” and supplemented by “passive exercise...through steady use of massage and electricity.” For six weeks, the patient was isolated from her family and friends, confined to bed, forbidden to do any intellectual work, visited daily by a physician, and fed and massaged by a nurse. Mitchell understood that the boredom and sensory deprivation of the rest cure inevitably compelled the patient to gladly embrace the order to rise and resume her life. It’s no wonder Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper,” narrated by a woman confined to her bed with no distractions other than the obsessive pattern of the room’s wallpaper, transformed the rest cure into a recipe for hysteria.

Feminists such as Barbara Sicherman have pointed out the similarities between the rest cure and infancy, as both involve dependency, one enforced and highly unnatural, the other part of the life cycle. What distinguished my own rest cure or retreat from Mitchell’s included several factors: I could read and write, I could exercise, and, equally important, I was responsible for my own cure. *It’s up to you to find your bearings.*

This brings me to the idea of ‘surrender,’ a word commonly used in yoga, and often in relation to ‘the breath of surrender.’ Emily, a teacher at the studio here (which I finally found after twenty-five minutes of searching), talks a lot about surrender. “Surrender to the breath,” she says, likening the breath to a wave. The phrase could have been cliché, but given my own re-

cent and still raw experience, her words resonate as truth and as a gift—as a way to help myself through this experience. In coming to Santa Fe, I acknowledged that I had, to some extent, given up. “You need a break.” “You are exhausted.” “You could have a nervous breakdown.” Friends and family said precisely this to me in the days before I left.

The experience of yoga places surrender in a different context. Surrender becomes a giving up but not a defeat, for it is only by releasing tension in the body that one can begin to experience the benefits of a pose. Child’s pose, a posture in which one tucks one’s legs underneath and stretches one’s arms and torso out along the floor, most completely embodies this sense of yielding. Child’s pose asks one to return to the posture and to the being of a child, to the sense of discovery, to the beginner’s mind.

Over the course of the week, I attend two of Emily’s classes. Both times, I find myself weeping, not uncontrollably, but there are moments—during each hour—when tears stream down my face. The music and the dim lights camouflage my emotions, though I don’t think they would distress anyone. In releasing tension from the body, yoga inevitably releases old hurts as well—old memories the body and the spirit have held onto. Emily lights incense at the start of each class. She says a prayer at the altar and directs all of us to face that way. She uses words like ‘surrender’ and ‘vibe’ and ‘there’s no competition in yoga, no best’ easily and naturally. Every once in a while, she rubs someone’s back. Intuitively, I understand that yoga is a very necessary part of her journey—who knows where she began?

I am comfortable with Emily.

David, the other teacher with whom I take two classes, is another story. With his long blonde braid, his equally long neck, and his aura of distance, David seems other. I find myself imagining him sitting on a rock and very slowly turning his head, a micro-movement—his own term, so as to observe

you. Whereas Emily fills her class with sound, David relies on silence. He, too, teaches vinyasa, but for him, a synchronized sequence of movements can be painfully slow. He will have us hold a balancing pose, or a lunge, until our muscles tremble, and more than one person loses her balance, or assumes the pose of the child, or falls.

Tonight, my last night here, I choose to attend David's class and not Emily's, despite the fact I know I would derive more pleasure from Emily's class. Her class lasts an hour. She keeps us moving. She plays fabulous music. David's class runs for ninety minutes. The only sound in the class is his quiet, precise voice and our breathing. We move, yes, of course; but with David, it is about moving into stillness. "Quiet the mind," he says tonight, words he almost certainly used at the last class. But it is only tonight, on my last day, an exceptionally difficult day to get through as I so wanted to be home and am simultaneously nervous about the drive back and what will follow, that I hear him. "Quiet the mind."

For the first time in my fifteen years of practicing yoga, I pay almost no attention to the people around me. Not that I'm not aware of them. But much of the time I keep my eyes closed, in part because it's the only way for me to stay with a posture and breathe, my focus entirely inside. I breathe so that I can find a way to become a little more comfortable in a posture. I give up the chatter of my mind. It's like child's pose, only better, because much of the time I'm balancing on one leg with my arms extended to the sky; or I'm in a lunge, my hands joined together above my head, my neck and spine arched.

WEAN

"To accustom" from the Old English *wenian*. The sense of weaning a child from the breast in Old English was generally expressed by *gewenian* or *awenian*, which has a sense of "unaccustom."

Writing is a way of creating order, building a structure around what could otherwise be chaos—or panic. Tonight, before I am able to climb into bed and rest before tomorrow's three hundred mile journey home, I feel compelled to confront the latent goal of this trip: weaning Sophie from the breast, a physical separation or break in a pattern begun only moments after she emerged from the womb and, with umbilical cord still attached, nudged her way up my belly and latched on to nurse.

In its original Old English usage, to wean a child was to unaccustom her from the breast: de-familiarize her. The meaning of the action itself embodies the fact that the breast, the body of the mother, is what is most familiar to the child. Well, of course—one doesn't need to be a rocket scientist or a pediatrician to understand that for the newborn and infant and toddler, mother—mommy—is home. The body of the mother is safety and nourishment. "My mommy," Sophie will say to anyone in earshot. "Mine." And haven't I reveled in being so absolutely essential, so necessary, to the development of another human being, one whose life began within my own body, whose heart-beat was once joined to mine?

What made the first, sleep-deprived year bearable, a year defined by nursing Sophie several times during the day and at least once during the night, was the profound intimacy, one like nothing else I have ever known. A friend, her own child, now in his twenties, spent many evenings with us during those first months. That friend spoke with something more than nostalgia of that time. She even told me her own breasts ached when Sophie cried. I was not surprised. An old Russian saying defines the only true form of love as that between mother and child. Having slept with Sophie's face pressed against my breast, I physically understand this saying.

Giving up such closeness, such absolute need, is profoundly difficult. Besides, it is immensely affirmative to matter so much, so viscerally, to someone else. And if I'm honest I will confess

that there is no better excuse for an unfinished novel, a haphazardly taught semester, a chaotic home, neglected friends, than a child. “Sophie needs you more right now,” my mother said, just a year ago when I let Sophie stay up later because she wanted another story or a walk around the block or—. “She’ll appreciate and benefit from this time later. You both will.”

Yet there comes a point when Mommy must begin setting boundaries, when she—when I—needs to de-familiarize herself/myself for her/my child, so that the child—Sophie—can go to sleep without Mommy/me. How else will she learn independence? How will I?

RENDER

“To repeat,” from Old French rendre “give back, present, yield); from the Latin redder “give back, return, restore.” “To represent, depict” dates from 1599.

It is with a root of ‘surrender’ that I come to rest, for now, supported in this week of repetition. Mornings I have woken early, made tea, practiced yoga, read and written. I have run before ten, following the same route each morning, my legs carrying me over a distance of nearly seven miles. Afterwards I have returned to the casita to eat and work. Mid-afternoon, sometimes as early as one, that panicked, alone feeling would set in. Inevitably, I would cry or just sit very still. It didn’t so much as pass as I would yield myself up to it, believing I would move through it, and each day, much to my gratitude, I did. Sometimes, I practiced yoga or meditated. Other times, I drove into Santa Fe, usually with Eddie, who always surrendered his own work on a hole with doglike equanimity. In town, we would go for a long walk, and then I would stop at the coffee shop for tea. Evenings, there was yoga and then a carefully prepared dinner which I ate outside on the porch. Except tonight.

Tonight, for the first time, it rained for two hours straight, a soft drizzle that quickly became an earth-quenching downpour that silvered the branches of the surrounding mesquite trees and silenced the bright yellow chatter of the chickadees and sparrows. The sky, for a time, took on the iridescent quality of a late Rothko, the shimmering bands of color occasionally pierced by lightning that seemed to release that tightly-wound knot within me as well, so that I breathed more freely, even though my poor dog trembled at my feet. Long familiar with his fear of storms, I comforted him.

Every activity of this week, at some point, I have undertaken with heightened attention, from the practice of yoga, to listening to the rhythmic sound of the mourning doves to simply sitting and watching a series of ravens skim the tree line, marveling at the range of greens—from chartreuse to emerald—contained in a hummingbird’s feathers when it came to the feeder. Despite the way my heart has raced at times, I have slowed down here. And remarkably, the panic that was always a part of my nights at home has not troubled my sleep here. As if by some gift, the panic, since I’ve been here, has always been a daylight companion, and that has made it more bearable.

‘Sanctify’ is linked with ‘render’ in the etymological history of the word, for it means “to render holy or legitimate by religious sanction.” A less known meaning of sanctify, “to render worthy of respect,” dates from 1606. I have come to respect myself more this last week, and the time I have taken—to prepare a meal, to wash in the shower, to stretch—has taken on a kind of sanctifying, ritualistic action. At home, I would have rushed through these activities, aware, always, of time. Since I’ve been here, alone with the exception of yoga class, or while walking around Santa Fe, time has acquired an elasticity or perhaps the proper word is a fullness—at times a heaviness. Here, I have had to focus on myself. The rest cure/retreat has necessitated that.

Tonight, then, on the eve of my return, I want to sanctify—by some ritual—what has come to pass. It is with hands clasped, thumbs pressed to my heart, that I bow down and say simply, thanks, asking for the strength to continue to rest in myself, even when that rest—that support—is buffeted by panic; believing, always, I will reach, I will arrive, at the other side.

Half-Deaf, Half-Adjusted

Judy Kronenfeld

I lost the hearing in my left ear, suddenly, on an agonizingly dizzy morning seven years ago, and it became clear, after ten or so days, that though the dizziness had begun to resolve, my hearing was not coming back. (Thus I didn't have "labyrinthitis," which also can cause a bout of close-to-unbearable dizziness but does not ultimately cause loss of hearing). With all aural information from the left side of my body abruptly blotted out, I went into a period of anger and utter dislocation that I'm sure is involved, initially, in any bodily loss. The anxiety was compounded by uncertainty about the diagnosis. Did I indeed have "sudden hearing loss," a medical term that was woefully indicative of how little doctors knew or could do about this condition, but which was likely to be a single, albeit somewhat rare event, with no statistical implications for the hearing in my other ear? Or might I turn out to be the extremely rare case—the person with "sudden hearing loss" in both ears? (Would I have to learn sign language? Would my family agree to learn it as well? My daughter promised she would.) Or did I possibly have some form of Menière's disease, another inner ear disorder, which often affects *both* ears, and involves recurrent and unpredictable attacks of dizziness that are accompanied by partial, albeit usually temporary loss of hearing? Menière's attacks can be mild and infrequent, and even go away on their own, but they can also be so frequent and debilitating as to make it impossible to work, indeed so severe the sufferer suddenly drops to the floor (as I almost had, on that first day of what turned out to be three days of agonizing vertigo, when the floor of my own bedroom tilted up 45 degrees). The mere threat of having to "adjust" to what can't be adjusted to—the totally random—made my heart race. The doctor, having, of course, seen many worse afflictions, shrugged; neither Menière's nor "sudden hearing loss" was

Cancer. Be happy. The audiologist, verifying “profound” loss, explained, when asked, that a conventional hearing aid was out of the picture: *the amplification required would be so great, your head would shake off your neck.*

All I could hear out of my left ear, after the doctor’s belatedly administered dose of prednisone—which sometimes arrests the inflammation that is perhaps due to a virus and thus saves all or some hearing—was the highly distorted bass note rumble of the occasional truck, almost worse than the nothing I heard before the prednisone. Nevertheless, I opted for “sudden hearing loss.” Yes, that was the one I wanted. The more I read about other possibilities on the all-too-available Internet, the more I almost longed for definitive “sudden hearing loss.” Ultimately, I would become grateful that it was “sudden hearing loss” that I had. But first I had to get used to having it, had to let the body and brain and mind begin their adaptive processes. When the body one takes for granted plays a dirty trick, six weeks—I’ve come to the conclusion—is the minimal time it takes before one stops feeling totally “abnormal.”

For at first, during that rage and dislocation, the altered body feels simply insupportable. It’s a little bit like having water in your ear after you’ve gone swimming, or having a popcorn kernel in your molar when you come home from the movies. You keep on shaking your head, or your tongue keeps trying to extricate that annoying bit of grain. You can’t be comfortable until the water or the kernel is gone; you can’t be *yourself*. You want it *out*. Making my awareness of abnormality that much more unavoidable was the *tinnitus*—apparently often the result of inner ear disturbances—I had in the affected ear; it felt like an enormous noisy conch shell was clamped to my head. The sound invaded silence and would not let me sleep at night. I remember feeling as if I would jump out of my skin; I wanted to shake myself out of myself. I raged against the universe and my husband, because they couldn’t *do* anything, and ran out of the house and raced around the block, as if I could run away from

my body—barely prevented by remnants of social inhibition from screaming.

It is a slow process by which the afflicted, estranged body once again becomes *one’s own body*. Or, perhaps, the affliction, gradually accepted, becomes part of a reconstituted self. I bought a “white-noise” machine and was grateful for the mechanically generated sound of waves or rain (mostly I chose rain since waves were too much like what I was trying to blot out) that allowed me to sleep some at night, to escape from the “not me” that pursued me, until, as I finally learned would happen, the brain or mind somehow adjusted to the tinnitus. I no longer hear it, unless something makes me think about it again—as writing about it does now. It’s there, but not usually foregrounded in my consciousness.

At first, in spite of the over-the-counter anti-motion sickness drug I was taking on the advice of the doctor, I had to hold on to the walls as I walked in the buildings of my university, forcing myself to make my way to the classrooms in which I taught. The doctor encouraged me to wean myself from the drug, which I soon accomplished; he was right, the brain somehow compensates for the damage to the balancing mechanism the inner ear disorder has caused. But even though my brain’s adjustment meant a lessening of my dizziness, it was shocking and distracting to my mind to hear nothing on the far left side of my classroom unless I turned my head, to feel that students speaking from the last rows of a long room were in a silent movie, to pick up no student whispers that allowed me to gauge the reactions in the room, to have to fully look up when students spoke in order to understand them, and thus not be able to glance down at my notes at the same time as I listened to what they said. A constant meta-discourse of split-second decisions played in my head, e.g. *do I ask this mumbling student to repeat his comment for a second time, so I can be sure I got it, or did I get it well enough to move on to the next student’s comment which might*

refer back to his? My teaching rhythms were discombobulated. If I didn't watch myself, I would become completely and irrationally absorbed by the silence on my left side (as if focusing on it might actually yield faint sounds), or by the chatter inside my own head, and completely miss what my students were saying, or fail to plot my own comments to keep the conversation going. And when a student spoke when my head was down—since I no longer had the aural equivalent of binocular vision—I couldn't locate the source of the sound, and that in itself threw me off track. *Who said that?* Soon it became a joke I had to foster: "If my head flails about trying to locate who said something, please raise your hand!" There *was* something comic about the way I now interpreted sounds I couldn't locate in space; it seemed odd, for example, that my dog was barking *very* rhythmically in some other part of the house as I squeegeed clean my glass shower door after showering—until I stopped squeegeeing and the "barking" also stopped.

But this deep dislocation, the abnormality of my physical self and my sudden mental self-consciousness in an environment to which I had been acclimated for decades, was exhausting. It made me look for refuge to situations that felt as close to the "normal past" as possible. I was happiest, once I began to get over the rage of my initial response, when I was working in my own quiet study, attending to my own thoughts without having to deal with any inputs of sound except for the close clicking of the computer keyboard, the purr of the hard drive, the various beeps and bells. Or when I sat in our small den, watching TV or a movie. When I was in this quiet room, by myself, listening, the volume adjusted to my needs, I could forget that my body had been changed.

Not so outside where beeping horns, rumbling tires, cawing crows refused to locate themselves, or snuck up on me. Especially not so in any remotely social situation. Several times, I was studying the shelves in the supermarket, my cart in the aisle,

when someone behind me jounced the cart or made a pissed-off sound or remark I finally heard—irritated that she couldn't get by and had been trying to get my attention for half a minute with no success. Not the place to explain one's personal health history, usually. All too easy to feel poutingly sorry for one's self, falsely accused! Since hearing loss is not in any way "visible"—and that's a blessing *and* a liability—even the most well-intentioned people forget that one has it. Just a couple of weeks after that strange morning of sudden loss years ago, when the tinnitus was still an unignorable roar in my ear, I was shopping with a good friend in a department store in San Francisco and we got separated. I could not hear her call me, and I wandered about in an increasingly panicked haze until stumbling into her by accident. "You really *can't* hear, can you," was her comment.

The bigger the group of people, at dinner parties or barbecues, or restaurants, the greater the din of background noise, the more intimidated I felt. Inviting more than a couple of people to dinner at my house, or throwing parties of my own, not to mention going to other peoples', began to feel more like a chore than a pleasure. The only person I could have a real conversation with was the person on my right and I would have to lean in really close, which conveyed a seriousness of focus, a gravity of purpose, that was dull and heavy and not befitting my self-image as a witty conversationalist. And even then, there was bound to be a certain amount of phatic smiling and nodding when I didn't have a clue what the last thing said had been, since breaking into the rhythm of someone's conversational riff to ask for a repeat, is so often like making a completely wacko metacomment (e.g. "Do you know that the eyeliner on your left eyelid is three times thicker than the eyeliner on your right?"). When I did ask for clarification from some of my dearest friends, it was as if a lightbulb went on in their heads and they began to talk *v-e-r-y* slowly and **VERY** loudly and both of us were suddenly debilitatingly focused on the medium and not the message.

And ah, eavesdropping—at the student commons or the local grill—that wonderful source of the information we all crave (and writers especially crave) about the mysteries of other lives, was a goner. And it was so clearly no longer possible to listen to two conversations at once, when I could hardly hear all of one. How I missed the social dance of picking up a ribbon of someone’s conversation and minueting with it, then minueting away with a new ribbon and partner. I felt, rather, like I was trying to drop into a conversation by hoisting myself onto one of those thick ropes we had to latch onto for “fire drill” in my college dorm decades ago. By the time I gathered the courage to grab hold, and started my awkward descent, the drill was over.

* * *

Now, seven years after the onset of my “sudden hearing loss,” I am at a dinner after the first day of an academic conference; my husband is a visiting professor at the University of Oslo for a couple of months and I’ve come to Norway because we have always done things together in our long married life, and because a couple of months in a new setting seemed like an ideal time and place to write. A tagalong, I kind of hid out at the conference, sitting at one end of a long table, since the speakers were all connected to the social sciences, and I am not. I was careful to insert my “cross” hearing-aid (consisting of a device that transmits sound in my left, non-hearing ear, and a device that picks up sound in my right, close to-normal-ear) before starting out for the conference, though I don’t wear it very often—partially because I spend a lot of time alone in my study still more comfortable in silence with my own thoughts than straining for others’ words, whether at home in California, or now, in Norway; partially because it doesn’t help that much. It amplifies only very slightly (on the theory that the wearer’s good ear doesn’t require amplification); in a relatively quiet situation, it gives a bit of the illusion that I can hear on my left side, helping me to talk to friends prior to a lecture in an auditorium,

for example, where there is only a low buzz of other conversation, and helping me to hear the speaker a bit better, once the lecture has begun. Marginal utility. At the conference—which was conducted in English—since the room was quiet, I could hear a fair part of what was being said. But occasionally, a speaker’s Norwegian accent was thick enough, or his voice low enough, or he spoke down into his neck, and I was shocked again, as if for the first time, by how quickly the phonemes of English became unrecognizable and failed to combine into words, breaking up, instead, like a pixillating picture, by how easily missing bits of acoustic information turned the flow of words into sludge. There was one conference speaker who used a cane somewhat laboriously to get to his seat and whose voice was especially low and slurred. His arm and hand seemed a bit wobbly, too; perhaps he had suffered a stroke. I could not make out *anything* he said. My husband seemed to have a little bit of difficulty, too, but, clearly, the whole talk was not a wash, for him.

It is this gentleman who sits down next to me, on my left side, at one of the tables, in the too-warm, noisily buzzing dining room, after the conference is over for the day. My husband is on my right, actively engaged in conversation with a man across from him. The man across from me is actively engaged in conversation with the woman on his right, directly across from the wobbly gentleman. The voice I hear and comprehend most completely is my husband’s, directly on my right, if I attend to it. The acoustics in the room are probably pretty bad for everyone; what I hear is a deafening (ha!) roar that grows worse when I focus on it, and has the emotional affect of approaching rapids towards which my lone canoe is swiftly accelerating. This gentleman on my left introduces himself and offers his hand; I turn completely around to my left to take and shake his hand, and introduce myself. His hand is lax; ah, he *has* probably had that stroke. It is somehow comforting that he offers the affected hand; he is already revealing something about himself, an imper-

fection—no effort to hide it—and that may make it possible for me to reveal my own imperfection, which is probably going to be something I *have* to do, anyway, because I cannot eat, which requires facing the table, and hear him, which requires swiveling my head on my neck a full 90 degrees to my left (the hearing aid clearly of very marginal utility), at the same time.

It is not socially possible to suggest that we switch seats, which would also require that we switch our already touched food-laden plates, silverware and napkins (even though doing so would ameliorate my difficulties). What an awkward imposition that would be on a complete stranger who is also clearly physically vulnerable (and perhaps the other guests who knew him and his condition would raise their eyebrows!). So here I am, turning my head 90 degrees towards a dinner companion, shaking his wobbly hand (later I will find out he has multiple sclerosis, and not stroke-induced weakness), in my hale, mutable, reconstituted, already beginning-to-be-exhausted-from-the-effort self.

Looking at him, I understand again, intellectually, and briefly, that returning to “normal” is temporary, that “normal” is a very moveable feast. Our bodies will betray us; we will become grateful for less and less. I tell him, very soon—something in his demeanor besides his disability seeming to make it fairly easy—that I have no hearing at all in the ear closest to him and am wearing a hearing aid that doesn’t really help much. He says he has hearing problems, too, but refuses an aid, which I take to mean he can hear me a lot better than I him, and maybe also, alas, that he doesn’t fully comprehend the extent of my loss. (Clearly it is *way* too late to suggest trading places, were I even able to overcome my inhibitions about such a suggestion.) There are swatches of conversation that go by when I nod and smile, quite uncertain what he has said. My neck is becoming sore from my constant turning of it. Yet we do talk, about Norway, about Japan—in which he has a special interest—and about politics in the U.S. I am hungry and would like to take some more bites

of my chicken, but am afraid to lose the connection if I look at my plate. Sometimes, as I turn back to him, after daring to take a bite of food, I have to put my left hand on his shoulder, to soften the request that he repeat what he has just said, the acknowledgement that I haven’t really heard a bit of the train of sentences he has just uttered. He asks me what I do, and then what my inspiration is. I tell him about my various chancy, could-turn-out-any-way habits of courting the muse, about how much revision is involved. “Nothing is easy,” he says, his hand shaking as he tries to wipe a crumb of bread from his mouth. “It’s that way for me, too.”

Reverting to the Primitive

Naton Leslie

The preview at Cherry Tree Auctions can be challenging. Proprietor Mike Smith usually assembles a good selection of antiques of all types. Laid out in a barn on the Washington County fairgrounds, a sale at Cherry Tree begins with silver and jewelry on the left wall, followed by tables covered with box lots. Smith will group small things together to sell for one price—a box of advertising tins, for instance, or a lot with two hand-carved wooden spoons, a match safe and three canisters of a four canister set: flour, coffee and sugar. The wall behind the box lots will be crowded with paintings, prints, empty frames or mirrors, which he labels as PFM. Overhead might hang a chandelier or two, wires dangling.

More paintings hang in the back of the hall, but here also begins the cluster of furnishings: chests of drawers and wardrobes; bedside tables and drop-front desks. This cavalcade will continue down the right side of the hall, with dining room chairs set on top of each other, and rocking chairs and sideboards lined up in no particular order, except perhaps value. Better furniture is nearly always positioned in the back. This serves two functions. First it allows Mike and his staff to keep an eye on it, as the registration desk is there. It also cues Mike to auction off those pieces earlier in the sale when more buyers are present. Cherry Tree is one of the few auction houses that does not accept absentee bids. To bid you have to be sitting in one of the folding chairs set in tight rows in the middle of the hall. On the night of a good sale these can be hard to get, and some attendees will stand along the sides, waiting to sidle into the rows when a chair empties. I always leave a notebook or jacket on my seat when subjecting myself to a hot dog or fleeing to the porta-pottie.

Second, any furniture on the sides will also be used during the auction—people will lean on tables, sit on chairs, and

anything which might be wobbly or loose is sure to be more so after a couple of hours of fidgeting and lounging. You always hope the furniture for sale can hold up to a little use—still, a true antique has a few miles on it, and repair or bolstering is to be expected. That's why previewing is important, and why previewing at Mike Smith's auction can be tough. He sells over three hundred lots at a time, filling the hall. Sometimes it's hard to examine a side chair which is displayed behind a row of box lots or standing on top of a chest or dining room table. However an auction cardinal rule dictates that you should never buy a piece of furniture until you've scrutinized it on all six sides. If not, you might get home only to watch a just purchased hutch precariously list to starboard because you didn't notice the shims under its legs. Lamp sockets can fall out of bases; door hinges can wiggle loose, and latches can fail to catch on drop-front desks. If you plan to buy a piece of furniture with a drawer, pull it out, all the way, and look it over. Is the bottom bulging or cracked? Does it stick because it has warped or worse, may not even be original to the piece? Tops of tables can be "married" to alien table legs and mirrors can be perched on low chests of drawers, creating vanities where no vanity ever existed. I've seen pedestal plant stands made out of sawed off porch posts and cobbled together tops and bottoms. The old saying, "Caulk and paint will make it what it ain't" really holds true in the antiques business.

Despite my natural inclination to cast a jaundiced eye, I have a deep affinity for old things, and really look forward to Mike Smith's auctions because what can be found there is usually authentic and of high quality. He gets good estates, and even handles the contents of antiques stores when they close; among this scavenging tribe, it doesn't get better than when a member is divesting. Just walking into Smith's hall is a moment of high anticipation if you are on a quest for some great item. The hall will meet you with the dusky patina of brass, the robust

textures of wood, the laughter of crystal and the nostalgic nudge of old milk paint.

The latter was what had been fueling my scavenging urges for some time. I have traversed any number of phases in my compulsions for what I generically, and gleefully, refer to as “junk.” Once I was attracted to Mission furniture; unfortunately, this was right after it was embraced by collectors as a less expensive alternative to Shaker antiques. The Shakers, a celibate religious sect which has all but vanished, were known for their simply and elegantly designed furnishings and other handmade items. Everyone has seen Shaker knock-offs: round wooden boxes; ladder-back side chairs; and turned-peg coat racks. Mission, created by Gustav Stickley and others in reaction to what was seen as the design excesses of the Victorian and Edwardian eras, recaptured simple lines and honest joinery. Exposed dovetails and hand-wrought hardware give the furniture its stalwart, no-nonsense appeal, a style the contemporary Stickley furniture company still uses with great success. However, when prices rose into headily inflated zones, I grew tired of the mania and quit collecting.

I next began acquiring Victorian-era stuff. For the Victorians, nothing was ever fancy enough, gaudy enough, wore enough velvet or silk, carving or gilt, the latter lending Mark Twain the term “The Gilded Age” for his first book, a work of social satire. This collecting digression, and clearly I am a digressive personality if ever there was one, was instigated by the ill-advised purchase of a Victorian house. Well, not quite. It was a Victorian house later revised to be a turn-of-the-20th-century colonial revival, with a wrap-around porch supported by Ionic columns replacing the filigreed front porch. Still, enough of the original Victorian tart remained, with high ceilings and brass hardware engraved with butterflies and vines, to beg for appropriate accoutrements. Henry Higgins had tried to remake

Eliza Doolittle with more success than those who tried to make a stately colonial out of this house.

I found a settee and side chairs. At a moving sale I bought a golden oak dining room set with lions’ heads on the pedestal legs of the table, carved fruits dripping off the sideboard, and ornate chair backs. I restored brass lighting fixtures with hand-painted globes. I got lace, porcelain and crystal. My ex loved all these things, and when we split up, I got the house and she got the furnishings. All of them. I was sick to death of the beauties of the age of empire.

Now I have a new fixation, and a new relationship to match. My wife Susan and I have been collecting American primitive furniture, and nothing could be further from my previous attractions. I am a recovering refinisher. I used to strip everything down to bare wood, I suppose in imitation of my parents’ aesthetic: new is better. When I took the aged finish off a set of chairs, I was trying to make them look as new as possible, to prove that buying an antique was *as good* as buying new furniture. Likewise, I was convinced the grain in a piece of wood had to be exposed and enhanced, and refinishing allowed me to remove dark stain or take off a layer of chipped paint to find the swirls of figured chestnut or the bright flashes of oak. Some of the furniture I refinished truly needed it. The lamp stands covered in black oil paint in the 1970s or the armchair painted orange in, you guessed it, the 1960s, were hideous, but some pieces should have been left alone. I dry stripped everything with a sharp knife—at least I eschewed chemicals—but when I was done, the dresser top would glisten with a fresh coat of polyurethane and the brass pulls on the drawers would gleam. I stripped and sanded and polished, a slavish attention to detail I would never bother with today.

Now I want patina. Maybe middle age is driving me toward this new aesthetic, but I tend to attribute most changes in my life to my steadily advancing years, and that’s too easy.

Still it makes sense. As I get older, I am more accepting of the effects of time, the flaws and wear. These things remind me of the toils and trials, and the scars and scuff marks which result, and reassure me of the universality of these things. Everything which endures must change, and that is one of the lessons of aging. That a brass knob might show the touch of the hand in where it remains shiny and where it has dulled, reminds me that a drawer has been opened many times, that a door has been passed through. This way others have gone, and have left traces.

So I no longer polish metal. I've learned the creamy green coating on aged copper is a separate beauty, and blackened iron has a heartiness bright steel cannot match. I am also enamored of old finish on wood. Darkened varnish speaks in a way clearer, new finishes, for all their wood-grain enhancing qualities, do not, and its voice is dusky and familiar. A worn finish on wood is also wondrous and charming, showing the place where an owner's hand lifted a lid on a box, or how a chair received the human body at rest. These spots are not only bright but silken from the oils in the skin—nothing quite enhances wood like use. Now when I look at the desk I've been using for thirty years, I don't see a project. I rescued the piece from a basement when I was in college, and had planned to refinish it. Now I see my own life in the wear patterns; the desk was old when I acquired it, but my use has claimed it from its previous owners. I haven't damaged it—the top does not have water marks or coffee rings—but I have given it the signature of years. For instance, the place where my wrist hits the edge of the desk as I write has a smooth, slight indentation—and the decorated edge of the top has worn away there. I would never refinish the desk, though it does need some slight repairs; two drawers push in crookedly and need adjusting. Repair is different from renovation. The former makes something function, the other changes its very essence.

Neither is the natural condition of wood sacrosanct to me. Paint, specifically old paint, is as decorative as the finest of

Victorian curlicues. However, not all paint is equal; it is a matter of intent. Some things were meant to be painted. Old pine furniture was painted because pine is soft and porous; paint both decorated and protected it. Indeed, stripping such pieces does great damage to the wood, and denies the function of the paint. Luckily, most pine furniture built by hand in the late 18th and early 19th centuries was covered in a milk-based paint, long the bane of people who wanted to remove it. While not as vivid as today's acrylic, oil or latex-based paint, it soaked into the wood and became part of the surface instead of lying on top of it. All of the chemists at Corning or Dow have yet to devise a stripper which will remove it. The finish is dull, and acts more like a stain than a paint, but that dusty subtleness has spawned a whole generation of "colonial" hued modern paints.

Painted primitives, like jelly cupboards and work tables, look embarrassed and foolish if they are reduced to bare wood—even milk paint cannot stand up to a devoted refinisher with a belt sander. Dealers in such furniture say that a piece has been "scalped" when all traces of its age have been purged. Untouched surfaces are the hallmark of the best primitives, and while some collectors and dealers use tricks to augment a finish, it is important that a piece have "a great look." The definition of "a great look" is nebulous—it's something between what an item would look like if abandoned in a barn for a hundred years and what it would look like if in continual, hard use for two hundred—but everyone agrees when something has it. It takes an educated eye to recognize it, and from what I can tell from visiting dealers' shops, not everyone develops such keen vision. I believe it takes earning a certain approach to life itself. The eye alone cannot judge a good aged surface; the heart and head must be involved. Unlike when collecting Victorian or Mission, appreciating primitive furniture requires more than simply knowledge. It is associative and poetic. It is collecting from the gut.

Learning to love primitives is also a great relief. In refinishing, I was attempting to remove every ding, restore every edge, indulging a perfectionist tendency which had been nurtured and encouraged. When young, I was the kid whose bookshelf was alphabetized. I enjoyed collecting because I could lose myself organizing. Nothing pleased me so much as order, and the very nature of primitives whittles away at that notion. Order is crucial, for sure, but it can be a crushing mandate if taken to the extreme. I was never obsessive about order, but I am certainly the person who walks into a room and straightens a crooked painting—my eye has been trained to search out imperfection and error. Primitive furnishings, by definition, are imperfect and flawed, and in fact these contribute to the whole. Once you've embraced that notion, a new approach to the world becomes possible. Everything can't be perfect, you realize, everything can't be square and straight, painted and polished. Sometimes you simply have to relax and let things show the years they have existed. We cannot erase time.

So the sense of order at Cherry Tree Auction appeals to me. I like knowing how and even why the house chooses to display things; it gives me more information, and some notion of how the experts working there judge what they are about to sell. I don't have to know everything about antiques, as long as I am able to pick the brains of experts by observing how they react to the things which turn up in the trade. The location of things in the auction house gives me information which even Mike himself might not volunteer. For this reason, and others, when I saw the blanket chest in the back of the hall near the auctioneer's podium I knew there was something special about it.

The Victorian always commands Mike's attention, fine silver and dishware, for instance. Unless a piece requires wall space, like a wardrobe or hutch, and has to occupy the back because all of the other walls were taken, a primitive normally would sit on the right side, among the last things up for auction. After all, if

something has old chipped and cracked paint, it can't be harmed by a few lounging auction attendees sitting or leaning on it. The blanket chest could have served as a seat for at least two buyers, and was stout enough to endure even the broadest among them. Yet Mike had it secured in the back, almost beside his podium. Why would he guard this piece? Perhaps it was only because it was the best place for it, but I had other notions, even suspicions.

We had long searched for a blanket chest, and had passed up any number of them in antique shops and auctions. There was always something wrong with each of them, and in hunting down primitives, intuition is the final discriminator. And details reign. Price is always a consideration, of course, but getting the right chest is primary. We wanted an "early" one, as they say, which usually means one which is a true antique, handmade before the 1850s. We also wanted a chest with hand-forged iron hardware, and hopefully an unfinished, original painted surface. It should be sturdy enough to withstand some use, and not too small as to be unable to hold much—we wanted a useful chest as well as a decorative, historical one. We also wanted something unique, something most other blanket chests did not have, but we would only know what that was when we found it—after all, what's the use of having a handmade chest if it's like nearly every other one? So it was a paradoxical quest—we had to find what we were looking for, and at the same time find something about it we *weren't* looking for, but which pleased us all the same. No wonder we had been looking for years.

The chest in the back of Mike Smith's was a good candidate, though. First, it was large, bigger than most by six inches. This might not seem like a lot, but when something is larger in length, width and depth, the increased volume is a matter of multiplication; this chest would hold several blankets, and more. Second, the hardware was all original: long, tapered strap hinges made of hand-forged iron; hand-made bails on the handles on the side; and it was held together with what appeared to be

square, handmade nails—the cupped, hammered heads were a dead giveaway. Third, the wood was all hand-smoothed with a two inch plane, the narrow grooves speaking of a wood-worker without the benefit of sawn boards, one working from raw logs. That made the age of the chest among the oldest we'd ever seen.

I say the nails “appeared to be” handmade because it was difficult to be certain. The chest had been painted. That would have been fine if the paint had been applied when it was made, but this was new paint—new latex house paint, to be exact. Someone had decided to “redo” the chest by using some left-over white paint on it; I could tell it was latex because the raw iron hardware and nails had bled through, rusting in reaction to the water-based paint. The iron straps on the corners of the box were orange with rust, and were another reason why the box interested me. Dovetailed joinery was usually used on the corners of blanket boxes, and is cited as one of their attractive features, even though these humble boxes are hallmarks of primitive Americana and dovetails are normally associated with the finest of furniture. Why did this one forgo such niceties? Likewise, on one side the face plate to protect the wood from the swinging bail of the handle was missing—yet another flaw which could discount the price.

These flaws would be particularly damning for fine furniture—missing hardware, crude joinery—but that's one of the points of buying primitives. These drawbacks can actually be a bonus. The white paint was the real killer though, but not for me. As a former refinisher, I knew it was less of a problem than it appeared. Standing over the chest, I glanced around to see if any of the auction staff were looking; then I scratched the chest on the side with my fingernail. The white scraped off easily, leaving behind the green milk paint. With enough patience, I could probably remove it with a sharp knife or single-edge razor blade, restoring, rather than refinishing, the surface. Although primitive collectors make loud noises about “untouched” or original

surfaces, some tweaking is acceptable, including the removal of later barbarisms. When such actions cross the line is a matter of great debate.

We took our seats in the crowded auction hall and waited. Mike had a slow night. Unfortunately for him, but fortunately for us, the deep pockets had stayed home or were sitting on their hands. Good pieces were going for fair prices, but nothing was getting what we'd grown to call “stupid money.” Mike growled and passed on a few items when he couldn't get the kind of openers he wanted. We were tempted to get into the bidding on several items, but the old chest had spoken to us, and we had decided to save our limited resources for it.

Two runners held the chest up, and Mike's banter commenced. “This came out of a house in Brunswick,” he began. “I've looked this over and I'm sure this is eighteenth century. The wood is all hand-planed and it's full of rose head nails. If there ever was a candidate for refinishing...,” He trailed off, then began a streaming call for \$400, not getting an opener until he dropped to \$20. Then he worked his way back up: “twenty-five if you be, thirty if you will, thirty-five if you care to...”

This short bidding duel ran the price to eighty-five. Mike, like many auctioneers, will only recognize two bidders at a time, allowing another bidder to jump in only after one has shaken off Mike's urging for another raise. We got in at \$85, and the counter bidding continued.

When the chest topped \$100 I hesitated. Blanket chests in good condition routinely sell for \$200-\$400 in shops. We had always aimed to buy one for under \$200; as a general rule we always try to get some sort of a deal. However, I was less sure about one which would need work. Not only is refinishing not a part of the primitive aesthetic, this would require a kind of refinishing with which I was unfamiliar—taking off *one* layer of paint, but leaving one underneath. So when the price went to

\$125, I did not immediately respond; my wife, however raised our numbered card by propping up my arm, bidding \$135.

“All in and all done?” Mike Smith asked. “Sold.” I had a momentary dollop of buyer’s remorse, but I shook that off. We paid the bill, and a runner, a lanky, white-haired fellow who reminded me of Festus on Gunsmoke—every auction house appears to locate, and hire, a Festus—was able to get it into the back seat of our Camry by pulling it in as he crawled backward out of the opposite door, a deft maneuver I wouldn’t have imagined. In this business, there are experts at all levels.

We got it home, put it up on saw horses in the barn, and got to work. We received lots of advice about how to remove the white paint. “Try hot water,” said Jack Metzger, an antique dealer I know with loads of experience with primitives. Others suggested soaps, vinegar—all of which worked to some degree, but none very well. In the end, gently peeling off the white paint with single-edged razor blades did the trick. It took hours, more than I’d like to tally, to get all the paint off four sides—the back and bottom had never been repainted—and worrying it out of cracks and nail holes. It also gave me lots of time to examine every millimeter, intimately, and to think about the origins and the probable early life of the piece.

The crudeness of the chest was both enticing and puzzling. The planks were not pit-sawn—there were no saw blade marks—nor were they sanded nor was any effort made to finish them—though the front and rear edges of the lid had been lightly decorated with a single, shallow grooved line. The nails were actually of two kinds: rosehead nails, and unusual hand-made brads with a dime-sized head holding on the hinges and latch hardware. This told me the chest was without a doubt from the 18th century, as did the tear-drop shaped hinges, also called strap or rat-tailed hinges. These were long, tapered and surprisingly delicate. On such a crudely carpentered chest, it was a bit incongruent to see examples of such fine blacksmith-

ing. Most blanket boxes come with a till or ditty box inside, a smaller compartment with a lid which, when lifted, propped up the larger one. This box did not have one, and no marks inside which indicated that it ever had—they are sometimes removed.

The chest also had no feet. Traditionally, either the front or side boards are extended and cut out to form feet, but this box rested on its bottom. Close examination showed that the feet had either been sawn off or had broken off, and newer boards nailed to the bottom to reinforce it—even these had been secured with rosehead nails, so this repair was very old. In recognition that the box should be elevated, someone had stuck castors on the bottom, wooden-wheeled, nineteenth century contraptions. Only two of them remained, and I pulled those out.

These details aside, the rabbeted corners reinforced by iron straps were the strangest detail. I was unable to find a picture of any other chest with the same joinery, save one: The Brewster Chest. Displayed in the Pilgrim Hall Museum in Plymouth, Massachusetts, the Brewster Chest is not so much a blanket box as a sea chest. It was made of Norway pine in Holland for the Brewsters as storage for their worldly possessions on the voyage to the New World in the 17th century. Our blanket box was perhaps much older than we had imagined.

The iron straps were key. Not intended to be a piece of fine furniture, the Brewster Chest was made quickly and designed to withstand rough handling in the belly of a ship on the high seas. This helped to explain yet another feature I had noticed while I scraped off paint: nail holes on the front of the lid. The chest had been nailed shut. At first we had speculated that the chest had contained some sort of secret item which the owner did not want others to see—Susan had even come up with the colorful interpretation that the box had been a hope chest which a bride who had been left at the altar had nailed shut in anger and then stored in the attic. The real reason for the nail holes was much less dramatic, but equally telling. It had been nailed

shut to keep the contents from spilling when tossed around aboard ship. After it arrived on this shore it was pried open, the nails removed (and probably reused), and the box became a blanket chest.

So how did the chest get here? It was not truly a pilgrim piece, though its construction methods showed it was made in Holland, as was the Brewster Chest. This chest had been found in Brunswick, New York, a town in the colonial Van Rensselaer Patent, a large Dutch estate run like a private fiefdom by Kiliaen van Rensselaer, a wealthy diamond merchant. It is likely that the chest was brought here by a Dutch settler indentured to van Rensselaer, a commoner without access to fine traveling trunks or later, finely made furniture. While blanket chests from the early 19th century are common finds in auctions and 18th century ones are especially prized by collectors of primitives, I never expected to find one quite so old or historical. The thing which made this chest unique, that singular quality we did not know we would find, was not the iron straps at all, but its origins as a New Amsterdam chest from the early 1600s.

Acquiring American primitives is a meditative enterprise, and fits the quieter, later phases of life. It is also an intellectual pursuit, requiring research and a great deal of arcane knowledge. But perhaps what most appeals to me is how the mind must be employed. Collecting primitives is a lot like storytelling, though the tale has to be teased out of the details. Beyond simple deduction, understanding a primitive requires more than a detective's eye or a researcher's doggedness—though those talents come in handy as well. The wear on a piece, and the signs of the construction methods, can tell you some of what you might want to know of its use and origins, and examining the parts, the hardware or wood, can reveal its sources—here the parts are indeed greater than the whole. However, in order to truly appreciate a primitive, you have to step back and take it in from a wholly different perspective. In order to rescue something which has survived

perhaps for centuries, has endured against all odds, you have to know how to *see* it. And likewise, in order to understand what you are seeing, you have to use your imagination.

The blanket chest, now freed of its ill-suited latex paint and glorious in its scarred and worn original green, sits in the foyer of our house. It is surrounded by suitable findings, hanging brass candle sconces, an oil portrait, a mirror. Every time I pass it I marvel at some portion of it: the nail holes, the iron, the rippling wooden planks, and think about the sea-tossed journey, the years languishing in a barn or attic, which the box has endured. I doubt the carpenter working in Holland knew how much we'd appreciate his handiwork 350 years later, but I like to think the blacksmith had stood back and looked at his work a little, proud of having shaped red hot iron into such long lasting hinges, a tad too elegant for a simple storage chest, but ones which would do the job for a long time to come.

* * *

The Perfect Raincoat

Mel Livatino

Against all reason I have spent the last half-century mildly longing for the perfect raincoat. I have owned three raincoats over these years, but never the *perfect* one. My current raincoat I bought twenty years ago for \$109 at J. C. Penny's. I chose this particular raincoat because the sleeves actually fit me, a quality lacking in every other raincoat I have ever tried on. I have exceedingly long arms, thirty-seven and a half inches to be exact, and all the other raincoats, even those marked Tall or Long, needed to have the sleeves lengthened. My previous raincoats taught me that this would leave an unsightly crease where the sleeves once ended, marking me instantly as a country bumpkin. Though my present raincoat has no creases at the bottom of the arms, it has hung in my closet virtually unworn for the twenty years I have owned it—because it was not the raincoat of my dreams. A trivial wish, you may think, but here I am at seventy still longing for that perfect raincoat I first encountered when I was twenty.

When I was twenty. No sooner do I utter those words than I begin to hear lines from A. E. Houseman and the strains of Percy Faith's "Theme from a Summer Place." With good reason, for that summer I met a beautiful girl of nineteen, and I knew almost from the beginning that she was utterly beyond me. She was a sorority girl, a second-year university student, and I a mere helper on a printing press, a factory worker.

My father had not allowed me to go to college. He wanted the money I would turn in for room and board, so he got me a job in the same printing plant he worked in. For the five years I worked full-time in that plant, I thought of my life as a dark tunnel from which I would never escape. I dreaded each of the fifteen hundred days I climbed the cement steps to the second floor of that plant. I wanted instead to be climbing the steps

to a college classroom in a building covered with ivy. Many years later, after I did in fact go to college and even became a professor, I saw that my dream was both substantive—I really did want the life of reading, writing, and reflection that college promised—and a dream as airy as a cloud. The ivy walls that rose in my imagination, what were they, after all? When I was twenty—they were everything.

Her name was Mary Lee. We met in the summer of 1960, the summer that all the radios everywhere were playing Percy Faith's "Theme from a Summer Place." For a summer home my parents kept a mobile home—the phrase was "house trailer" in those days—in a mobile home park—"trailer park"—on the shore of Lake Marie, one of a chain of lakes an hour's drive north of Chicago. One afternoon, when I had nothing else to do, I stopped at the local Dog 'n' Suds. The carhop had long tan curvy legs and a radiant smile. I asked for her phone number and we had five or six dates before she went back to school.

On the last of those dates we went out dancing at the most popular bar on those lakes. At the end of the evening we returned to her family's summer home on a nearby lake and changed into swimsuits for a midnight swim. The moon was full that night. On the walk down to the lake I turned to look at her and in that light realized for the first time that she was beautiful in just the way I wanted a girl to be beautiful. We walked into the lake up to our waists and stood facing each other, holding hands at arm's length, and making the nervous talk that people make when they don't really know what to say. At that moment Percy Faith's orchestra began playing on a radio or phonograph across the lake. The far shore, where the sound was coming from, was dark, but the moon was shimmering across the water from the direction of those violins—and I knew I was in love.

For some reason I have never understood, a few weeks after she returned to school, she wrote me a letter inviting me to come down for homecoming weekend three weeks later. The letter

came in a blue envelope and was handwritten on blue stationary. It was scented with a Channel perfume (a fact I would only learn sixteen years later when I detected the same scent on a woman seated in front of me at a concert and asked her). It was four in the afternoon of a September day when I read her letter, and sunlight was streaming in the windows of my small bedroom.

I bought a new suit, corduroy sport coat, and loafers—far beyond my limited budget—and at six on a Friday evening I pulled into Champaign-Urbana in my \$35 car with a bashed-in door. The air was laden with wood smoke, and the late sunlight was deeply slanting onto the ivy walls of the university buildings. I drove slowly past sorority and fraternity houses, ogling their lawns covered with homecoming decorations and looking into their windows already lit up for the evening. I was, finally, in the magic kingdom I had been dreaming of for two years and would continue to dream of for four more years—and I was head-over-heels in love.

That evening and the following evening Mary Lee wore the first perfect raincoat I had ever seen. Though I can no longer tell you the color, it was just the right hue (somewhere between beige and taupe), and it had just the right body (slightly stiff), and the collar shaped around her neck in a way that made her seem like royalty. Until that weekend, I had never given raincoats, perfect or otherwise, a single thought.

My initial intuition proved correct—Mary Lee was way beyond my lowly station. We wrote letters for the next two years and we saw each other when she returned home for Thanksgiving, Christmas, and spring break. But my pretense at confidence finally gave out and I stopped calling. For a year I did not call or write, nor did she, though I thought of her every day. Then one June evening in 1963, I called her from a bar I hung out at. It was early and my friends had not yet arrived. Her mother answered the phone, and when I announced who I was, her voice became tentative; then she put Mary Lee on. We made small

talk as best I knew how, which wasn't very good; finally I asked if she'd like to go out. "I'm engaged," she said.

I can still see the black walls of that bar and the way the early evening sunlight came slanting through the big picture window at the front where the word Tammy's was inscribed across the glass. I can still see the black phone on the wall and still hear her voice. It's as real today as when I was twenty-three years old. So is the perfect raincoat she wore that homecoming weekend a little over fifty years ago.

Of course I bought my own sometime during the year after I met her. I regarded my purchase as a necessary accouterment to wooing her and as an investment in the status I hoped one day would be mine. But it was never more than a pale \$19 imitation. I wore that raincoat for years, even after a cigarette burn did in the collar. By then I was married and had begun having children. The perfect raincoat seemed a foolish wish I no longer needed or could afford.

When I was thirty-five my wife and I divorced. It was the saddest time of my life, and the sadness went on for years. I did not think about raincoats, perfect or otherwise. As I slowly came out of mourning, however, I noticed that I was once again paying attention to raincoats. Mary Lee's had been single-breasted. Now I was under the spell of a very different raincoat. It was the raincoat Bogie wore in *Casablanca*.

Everyone in the Western world remembers this raincoat. In the last scene of the movie Rick (Bogie) tells Ilsa (Ingrid Bergman) that he will not be getting on the plane with her, after all, that she will be getting on the plane with her husband. When she looks up at him with those crystalline eyes, she is the most beautiful woman in the world. He is giving her up for the sake of the war effort and because she would regret staying with him. "Maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow," he tells her, "but soon, and for the rest of your life." It is a lie, of course; they both want each other desperately, but the cynic has become a

romantic hero, and will not take no for an answer. The tarmac is shrouded in fog as he watches her walk toward the plane with her husband.

That raincoat was the one I now wanted. It is double-breasted with a belt not buckled but tied at the waist. It has body and fullness. The lapels and collar are huge and frame Bogie's face perfectly. It is the epitome of the stoical romantic hero. It was this raincoat I now wanted.

Perhaps you will think me fickle, but we change with time. I was now forty or so, not twenty, and the earlier perfect raincoat—which I never did find—was no longer the perfect raincoat. Now it could only be Bogie's raincoat.

Ah, if it were only as simple as that. Over the ensuing years I looked everywhere for this raincoat. I looked in every store in the Chicago area that carried raincoats. Every few years I looked again. I have lost track of how many times I looked in Burberry's and Brooks Brothers. Every time I passed those stores on my infrequent trips downtown, I went in and looked again. I was willing to pay any price and tried on raincoats that cost well over a thousand dollars, but none was the raincoat I was looking for. Each time I patiently explained to the clerks what I was looking for. I described the large lapels and collar, the coat's stiff full body, how Bogie looked wearing it. Each time the clerks told me they did not have such a coat. Sometimes they understood; other times they seemed slightly amused.

Over the years I saw the raincoat on other romantic heroes, especially in *films noirs*. I particularly remember Lino Ventura wearing this same raincoat in Jean Pierre Melville's *Army of Shadows*. Occasionally on *60 Minutes* even a contemporary, Mike Wallace, would be wearing what appeared to be that same perfect raincoat. Surely it exists, I would think. There it is on my TV screen. But it was never in the stores. Sometimes I felt like poor Akaky Akakievich searching for the long-desired overcoat he has been robbed of and which can no longer be found anywhere.

So my \$109 J. C. Penny's raincoat, a thoroughly serviceable raincoat if all one wants is to stay out of the rain, sits virtually unworn in my closet. I wear waist-length jackets in the winter, spring, and fall, and I carry an umbrella when it looks like rain. At seventy, perhaps it is time to give up such a small and futile dream. Maybe it is enough merely to stay dry.

But each time I consider this notion, a sadness settles inside me, and I remember other small lifelong dreams. Nearly all my life I have wanted to sing on key, to speak French fluently, and to play the piano. For more than fifty years of singing alone, my voice has wandered flat and sharp, but in the last year, for no reason I can think of, I am usually on key and have even begun singing in front of others, even asking them to join me. After more than forty years of longing, I finally studied French during the last two years of my teaching career, when I learned the French teacher was going to retire at the same time as I. I excelled at the grammar, learned a good deal of vocabulary, and even developed a fine ear for pronunciation. Two months after the last course ended, however, I discovered that my classroom French was of little use on the streets of Paris. But my dream still manifests itself as I sit before a screen echoing the speech of characters in French movies and speak French words out loud when I come across them in text. On the piano I can only do what I learned to do a few years after I met Mary Lee—pick out the first nineteen notes of "Theme from a Summer Place," which, fifty years on, I still do every time I find myself in the same room as a piano. I shall never do these things well, but I shall always keep them as dreams. And I have decided I will not pass a Burberry's on foot without inquiring about my raincoat. It is not enough in this life merely to stay dry.

Six Meditations on Sailing with John

Neil Mathison

I. Sailing Directions

Before my son John was born, I wrote him a letter— *sailing directions* is what I called it. I wrote that I wanted him to find the doors to open in his life, to always see magic in each day, to learn how to make choices, but that he'd have me to captain him though his childhood storms.

John's mother Susan avers she kept a copy of the letter, one she intends to present to him after he departs for college. My copy is locked in the disk drive of my first laptop. I don't want to read it, evidence as I now see it, of my hubris back then, my certainty I could navigate any storm.

II. Corrected Time

The months before John's birth we lived in Hong Kong and the trip we made to Toys 'R Us in Kowloon's Ocean Terminal several weeks before his birth seemed unreal, not connected to the life we led. That day we purchased a crib, a stroller, a baby monitor, baby bottles, and blue baby blankets. It felt as though we were stocking up on survival suits while still sailing a tranquil tropical sea. Nevertheless, we felt a thrill, similar to how a chill morning quickens your blood. What would change? Who was this child—our child!—going to be?

Before the start of a long-distance sailboat race—the Transpac, the Newport-Bermuda, the Fastnet—there's a similar moment when all the competitors elevate to an ephemeral equality. In Newport-Bermuda the boats will race 450 miles as the rhumb line goes, the fastest finishing in less than four days, the slowest taking more than a week, but, because all the boats have a handicap, a "corrected time" owed them by the fastest boat in the fleet, every boat from the club racer to the professionally-crewed "maxi" has a chance to win. This faith creates excitement

and it burns with equal intensity on a humble forty-footer as it does on a thoroughbred maxi. So it is, I think, with the birth of a child, especially your own child. Who are you bringing into the world? A Babe Ruth? An Einstein? An Attila the Hun?

III. Swamped

The night Susan's water breaks she is showering in our flat on Stanley Beach Road, in Hong Kong, on the South China Sea. It's a full-moon August night, only a month and a half after the massacre at Tiananmen Square. That afternoon we'd sailed in the New Territories, anchoring in Jade Bay, where Susan hauled up a forty-pound anchor. Later, back at Stanley Beach Road, we listened to the sing-song of Cantonese picnickers on the beach below our flat and we smelled the charcoal of their barbecues, and if these things were familiar to us, even reassuring to us—by then we'd lived at Stanley Beach Road for five years—our world was about to change. We aren't ready. We didn't expect John's birth for four more weeks. We weren't ready for John any more than the People's Army is ready for Liberty rising in Tiananmen Square.

"Something," Susan called from the shower, "is not right."

Susan hadn't packed her "getaway" bag. We hadn't made a dry run, as our birthing class recommended, to Matilda and War Memorial Hospital. We'd never even motored around Repulse Bay and over Jardine's Lookout and up through Magazine Gap and onto Victoria Peak where the hospital overlooked Aberdeen Harbor with its teeming housing estates rising like salt-white crystals from the rocky shore and its typhoon shelter with its live-aboard junks and its neon-red floating restaurants. Even so, when the sun came up, we found ourselves in a pre-natal Eden, walking the Matilda Hospital grounds, "walking Susan into labor," as Dr. Ho, Susan's obstetrician, instructed us, amid purple bougainvillea and white butterflies whose touch, we later

learned from the *South China Morning Post*, could sear your skin like poison ivy.

But neither walking nor oxytocin brought Susan to labor.

Eden ended early in the morning, August 7, 1990, with a caesarian delivery and a still unnamed John swaddled in an incubator.

Susan retreated, exhausted, to a Matilda Hospital bed.

I drove home to Stanley Beach Road not appreciating the moonlight glittering from Lamma Channel or the dragon-back silhouette of Lantau Island, feeling as battered and flattened and swamped as if I'd survived a dismasting at sea.

IV. Lessons in Fog

It's August, 1996, the week of John's sixth birthday. I've decided to teach John to fish, to give him a taste of his maritime forbearers: my family's Yankee whaling captains; his mother's Viking raiders. Two hours earlier, on Washington State's San Juan Island, John, his nanny Vilma, and I watched the fog steal past Brown Island, slide into Friday Harbor, slip between the harbor's rocks and docks, mask the rail fence in front of the trees and a trio of Adirondack chairs on the front lawn and a pair of oars we forgot to store last night in the garage. We listened as fog muted a loon's laughter, softened an eagle's cry, hushed the whir of a hummingbird's wings. All the while we rigged salmon rods, clipped dodgers to leaders, strung leaders and hooks, carried rods and nets and downrigger weights to the boat, the weights round and heavy and black as pirate-ship cannonballs.

The fog thickened. Should we cancel our fishing expedition? An hour later it lifts. We decide to go.

Now the fog has returned.

The current rips through Cattle Pass at the southernmost entrance to the islands. Our boat, a twenty-foot, wooden run-about, veers left and right, caught in the tide's thrall. A sour, guano-scented breeze blows from our starboard beam. Goose

Island? We can't see it. I idle the engine. Gulls keen. We hear the soft, hissing whistle of guillemots, the slap of a seal's tail.

The Global Position System, our electronic lodestone chirps, an urgent, irritating admonition. I have faith in the GPS's binary tenacity, faith it will decipher the mandala of satellites and compute our position and compare it to the track I've entered into its memory. The GPS will guide us, guide us as I hope the values we're teaching John will guide him. In a way, Susan, Vilma, who is John's nanny from the day of his birth, and I *are* the GPS of John's life. And just as the GPS irritates me, I'm certain we irritate John. But the GPS discerns only approximately, only within a radius of three-hundred feet. Closer dangers require other signs to be read.

We are in the Strait of Juan de Fuca now, crossing Salmon Bank. Despite its calmness, a latency lies within the Strait—we feel it in the long period between swells, in the northward press of current; we feel a potential for breaking seas, high winds, and tidal over and under falls. But today fog stills the wind. And without wind, the fog will linger. I follow our track on the GPS. We hug the western shore of San Juan Island, trace an arc north by northwest. The fog's composition becomes less resolute: we pass from gauzy, sun-glowing fog into dense clots. When the fog parts, the sun warms us. When it closes, we feel its touch as if it were a Valkyrie's icy kiss. The island materializes, dematerializes—clay banks topped by sun-gilded grass; the flagpole above American Camp; the glint off a summerhouse window. The island vanishes, reappears a mile or so later, transformed to a different topography. Where are we now? How far have we traveled? Is the GPS right? How much faith do I really have in electronic talismans?

For some minutes now, we've heard horns—shrill steam-whistle horns, hooting air horns, horns low-pitched and ominous as if we are surrounded by a gaggle of sea monsters. The horns sound from all directions—forward off the bow, on our beams,

dead aft, dead ahead. The horns fall silent for a minute. Then another blast. A sonic groping in fog. We pound through a wake. Our salmon poles, upright in rod holders, whip back and forth like saplings in a gale. What caused the wake?

A report shatters the fog. A firecracker? A rifle shot?

We hear a metallic clatter dead ahead.

I grab the air horn and trigger five frantic blasts.

Ragnarok erupts. Diesels roar. Windlasses whine. Exhaust and dead fish tang the air. A shape looms from the fog, low in the water, casting a wake whiter than fog. I spin the wheel. What is it? Battleship? Behemoth? Berserker? A necklace of white beads trails the apparition—net floats. Sunlight yellows an aluminum hull—it's a commercial fishing dory. The dory coxswain, shrouded in rain-slicker black, salutes us. Other apparitions appear: more dories, more nets, the raked bows of seiners. We are lost among milling boats, caught in a web of nets, piloted by fisherman who cannot see us, or who choose not to see us.

Ten minutes. Thirty minutes. We dodge left, steer right, back down, accelerate, weave among the fishing fleet. The crews of the purse seiners bend to their nets. The fog thickens and thins. We make our way to the shore, to shallow water where the seiners won't follow. When we look back, we see half-gilded by sun, half-hidden by fog, a half-imagined armada—ghost dories trailing ghost nets through a golden, ghost sea.

As we rig our poles to the downriggers, as we swing the downriggers out from the boat, as we check the dodger's zigzag action behind us, I tell John that the gun we heard signaled the start of commercial fishing and that the fishing lasts only an hour or two and that the fisherman will fish regardless of fog or high wind or contrary tide. But the fishermen, I say, are good seamen like my son's Viking ancestors were good seamen. I tell him how his ancestors sailed dragon ships—fragile clinker-plank ships, not much larger than our own boat—from Norway to Iceland spending weeks in the fog. I tell him how they read

signs—the shape of waves, the period of swells, what species of birds flew overhead, what fish swam beneath them, what wrack drifted in their wake. I tell him the Vikings sang sagas of those who preceded them and in this way they remembered the signs. The Vikings were heroes, I tell him, but heroism, I warn, never supplants judgment. It might have been wiser had we not gone fishing in the fog.

He nods, half listening, his gaze fixed on the rod tip, watching for the bob, twitch, jerk that signals a strike, that signals the certain salmon he knows he'll catch.

V. Knockdown

For the first eight years of John's life, Susan and I grew complacent in our skill as parent-navigators. Life jackets and car seats and webbing woven into sailboat lifelines; inoculations against measles and typhoid and polio; rain slickers patterned in Day-Glo tape; swimming lessons; admonitions to walk on the left, to always face traffic, to look both ways, to *never* accept gifts from strangers. We were lookouts listening for the breaking wave, lighthouse keepers warding off shipwrecks, sentries forestalling invaders that might storm the beaches of John's life; all the while unaware how many times we stumbled a step or two away from disaster. We had not quite learned that parenting is a perilous passage, even for a healthy, "normal" child. How much nagging was too much nagging? What number of leaps yields too many falls?

As John passed from toddler-hood to boyhood, he be-deviled us with the helter-skelter of his mobility, the sudden changes of course that left us a step behind, until, in a minute of complacency, in a minute while John and I were sailing together on our sloop *Allurea* on a June morning when the decks were slick with Puget Sound drizzle, I went below to light the galley stove only to hear a crash, a howl, and, upon rushing topside, to

find my eight-year-old son crumpled over the cockpit combing, his face crimson with blood, *blood that would not stop bleeding*.

During the next two hours I tried to stanch the blood. I swathed John in blankets. I piloted *Allurea* to the Everett marina where a friend I'd called on my cell phone waited to race us to the doctor. I tried to assuage John's terror all the while unable to assuage my own.

Even now, years later, my stomach heaves at the memory, as if John's fall, as if John's unquenchable bleeding happened only yesterday, a test I faced and failed, a test I will always have failed.

I could not stop his bleeding.

VI. Spinnaker

You see them on summer afternoons on lakes and seaside bays—bright-colored bubbles of fabric, floating on the horizon like soft balloons. They are spinnakers. No aspect of sailing thrills me quite as much as flying a spinnaker, although for most of the last sixteen years, with young children onboard, it's a pastime I rarely indulged. The term "flying" is no misnomer. Unlike the triangular sails, the Genoa jib, which is hanked onto the boat's headstay, or the mainsail, which has two of its three sides fixed to the mast and boom, the spinnaker is floating free, fastened at only its three corners. The spinnaker generates so much additional speed and heel and "lift," as sailors call it, that in even a moderate breeze, a large boat can be whipped about like a dinghy. What's more, if you need to change the boat's course, to avoid an island or another boat, you may need to change the side of the boat that the sail is flying from—this is called "jibing"—or you may need to "douse the chute," which means to take it down. Each of these evolutions requires a degree of crew skill and crew coordination and, although not strictly necessary, crew good humor because there is much that can go wrong. I have such a weakness for spinnakers that on our boat, *Allurea*, we have four

of them, despite the fact that we sail so short-handed we have never even flown the two racing chutes.

Since we've owned *Allurea*—now almost ten years—we spend Augusts sailing in British Columbia. When John was younger, during the weeks when business called Susan back to Seattle, I recruited other adults to sail with us. But later, once John was fourteen, we've crewed *Allurea* on our own. In 2004, the summer John turned fourteen, without other crew, we flew one of our spinnakers. We hauled the sail up, still in its "chute tube." Then, with me on the helm, John on the foredeck, he hauled the tube-halyard up the mast while I trimmed the sheet aft. The sail unfurled, its panels snow white and royal blue and aqua, like a blue butterfly spreading its wings. We flew our spinnaker on that blue and silver morning down Malaspina Strait, between Texada Island and the British Columbia mainland, the blue and white summits falling astern one after another and we flew it for a distance of twenty miles and we flew it for three hours and in the flying it I realized a dream of sixteen years duration, that one day my son and I would, in good humor and in harmony with each other and with strength and confidence in each other, fly just such a sail on just such a day in just such a boat as *Allurea*.

But I know now what I didn't know. My time flying spinnakers with John is brief, he has his own course to sail: soon I must sigh, wish him Godspeed, prepare for his goodbye.

Origins

John Nizalowski

“You may calculate a comet’s orbit or the dive of a hawk, not a man’s mind.” – Robinson Jeffers

I first spotted Comet Holmes on All Saints Day. Through binoculars it resolved into a fuzzy white sphere with a bright, pinhead core.

The next night, November 2nd, I trained my telescope, a four and quarter inch Newtonian reflector, on it. The comet filled the field, strange and unnerving, a ball of light with a brighter spot in the center, the comet’s nucleus. The object seemed especially exotic because it was so large it could cover the moon, and yet it had no tail, unlike most comets when they come close enough to be seen in a small telescope like mine.

The third night, I simply observed it with the naked eye. It was a blue-white dot with a barely visible mist around it, like a star surrounded by a nebula. I was impressed by how far it had moved through the constellation of Perseus. Only the moon, the inner planets, and comets move that quickly against the night’s fixed background of stars.

During those three days, I knew very little about the comet, not even its name. I had not even known it was up there until the afternoon William Brown, a fellow English professor and amateur astronomer, called out to me from across the campus quad asking if I had seen the comet. I replied in the negative, so he shouted, “Look in Perseus,” before I dashed away to my mythology class. I was late, and there simply wasn’t time to pass along a name.

Coincidentally, the subject for that session was the slaying of Medusa by Perseus, the hero king of Mycenae.

* * *

In ancient times, when Perseus’s tale was a living myth, philosophers believed the heavens formed a perfect creation. Looking up at the night sky, they observed symmetry and uniformity—crystal spheres nesting inside more crystal spheres, with the earth at the center. No wonder comets utterly disturbed our ancestors. Appearing from nowhere, comets were rogue forms that violated the ecliptic, the path of all the other naked eye celestial objects that move across the stellar background—the sun, moon, and planets. Comets became harbingers of doom, predictors of earthquakes, pestilence, and the fall of emperors.

Examples abound. According to Carl Sagan and Ann Druyan in their book *Comet*, the oldest reference to these mysterious celestial objects is found in a 3,500 year old Chinese text that describes a comet which appears in response to King Chieh’s wrongful execution of his loyal counselors. Centuries later, the Romans claimed that comets appeared in response to both the war between Pompey and Julius Caesar and the poisoning of Claudius Caesar. The comet of 1066 C.E., which many believed foretold the fall of England’s King Harold to the Normans, is celebrated on the Bayeux Tapestry. European Catholics believed that the great comet of 1456 predicted their decisive battle against the armies of Mohammed II at Belgrade on August 6th. The Aztecs of pre-Columbian Mexico also considered comets ill omens, and it is said that two fiery comets appeared over Tenochtitlán just before Hernán Cortés razed the magnificent Aztec capital to the ground in 1519.

Unlike the ancients, we live in an era when science, not mysticism, explains what appears in our skies, and yet this comet filled me with unease, almost as much as it would have a temple astronomer of vanished Babylon. First, there were its odd shape and its enormous size. And even though I know that comets are balls of ice and dust that have detached from the vast, spherical Ort Cloud 100 billion miles outside the solar system, and that they can fly in towards the sun from any direction, comets are

rare enough that it is still disconcerting for a casual sky-watcher like me to see an object move so quickly from night to night and not be on the ecliptic.

The comet's strangeness triggered memories of a reoccurring dream I had when I was in my late teens and still lived in my parents' upstate New York home. In the dream, I would awaken at three a.m. and slip out past the white pillars of their 19th century neo-classical house. Beyond the lawn lay the hay fields, wet with dew, that rested before a wooded hill stretching out in the darkness like a long, sleeping snake. Thousands of fireflies flashed in the dark air above the singing crickets. A set of railroad tracks divided the hayfield in two, and as I crossed over them, anticipation would overwhelm me, forcing me to look up. There, above the point where the hill tapered off into the dark northern horizon, hovered a turquoise colored planet, about the size of large glass marble held in one's palm. Gazing at the unexplainable object, I would feel a curious mixture of joy and fear, a stronger version of my reaction thirty-five years later peering up at the November comet in the high desert night of western Colorado.

* * *

The morning after my third observation of the comet, my daughters needed their schoolbooks. Since my divorce, my daughters split their time between the home I share with my partner, Brenda Wilhelm, and their mother's place, several blocks away. So, after a quick walk through chilly residential streets wanly lit by a morning sun, I arrived at a simple, single-story ranch home with the heavy texts tucked under my arm.

Immediately, I became inundated with questions about alchemy. Evidently the girls—Ursula, 15 and Isadora, 13—had spotted a pendent made from the seven-pointed alchemist's star at a local new age shop, and now they wanted to know all about this medieval discipline. I did my best with the twenty minutes available, explaining that alchemy was the predeces-

sor to chemistry, but that its concepts were more mystical than scientific. For instance, the famous transference of lead into gold was a metaphor describing the transformation of the body into spirit, and the main vessel in which alchemists did their experiments, a regent called the *vas Hermeticum*, was a symbol of the womb. Then, there was the philosopher's stone, the *filius philosophorum*, a supreme agent of change, and its discovery was foremost amongst an alchemist's goals. Many modern scholars of alchemy, including Carl Jung, associate the philosopher's stone with lapis lazuli. Found primarily in the Himalayas, it is similar to turquoise and is sacred to Tibetan Buddhists.

After a promise to explain more about alchemy in a few days, when they would be back at my house, I began my walk home. I thought about the blue-green color of the *filius philosophorum*, and realized, with some surprise, that it was the same color as the mysterious planet from my reoccurring dream. Considering those dreams came to me in my late teens, the blue-green planet would be, according to Jung, an archetype, a transformational symbol aiding my passage from adolescence into young adulthood – the same stage that Perseus was living through when he beheaded Medusa and escaped the Gorgon's den using his winged shoes. This set of associations led back to the comet and made me even more anxious to see it again. What changes, I wondered, did it signify?

* * *

When I next studied the comet, it was my week to have Ursula and Isadora, and we peered up at the dark skies together. The evening was cold, clear, and moonless, perfect for viewing, and now and then meteors would grace the sky with their nearly subliminal, yet startlingly brilliant streaks of light. We spent a few moments observing the fuzzy white disc of the spiral galaxy in the constellation Andromeda, named for Perseus's wife, whom he won by killing a sea serpent sent by Poseidon to punish

Andromeda's mother, Queen Cassiopeia, for her sin of claiming she was more beautiful than Amphitrite, goddess queen of the sea. When I look at the Andromeda Galaxy, I often ponder that I am studying billions of stars so far away that they appear as a vague white cloud, nearly invisible except for a telescope. This massive galaxy is indeed so distant, that the very atoms of its stars have no connection to ours. For, everything on earth is made from heavy atoms formed in the nuclear furnaces of a star that was ancient before our sun was born. When that parent star went nova, it spewed its atoms across space in a nebula rich in carbon, calcium, iron, and the like. From those atoms, along with the ever abundant hydrogen, our solar system was formed. Thus, modern astrophysics has confirmed Whitman's assertion that "a leaf of grass is no less than the journeywork of the stars," and we know that many stars in our home galaxy share atoms created by the same elder stars and nebulae. But when we look at the Andromeda Galaxy, we are studying a place so distant that its very atoms, while the same in form, are alien to our flesh, connected to us only by the primary birth in creation's fiery big-bang. To take another Whitman quote, when peering at the Andromeda Galaxy, we cannot say, "Every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you."

Still, Comet Holmes, by virtue of its being an object both new and strange, was the center of our attention. By now I knew its name as it hung there—a tight, bright core within a more diffuse, softly glowing translucent sphere. Ursula called it a "cotton ball of light," an image that caught its odd beauty nicely.

We spent about an hour out there in the cold night taking our turns at the telescope's black lens, discussing the mysteries above us.

* * *

That night I had a troubling dream.

Beside my bed, on the wall next to a closet door, there hangs a photograph taken by Todd Henry, one of my former creative

writing students, of an entrance to the Ta Prohm temple at Angkor, the famous Cambodian ruin that was once the administrative and religious center of an empire that stretched from Viet Nam to the Bay of Bengal. Built in the late 12th century by Jayavarman VII, Ta Prohm was a Buddhist temple dedicated to his mother. The visual power of Angkor, especially the crenellated towers of Angkor Wat and the ruinous decay of Ta Prohm, attracted Max Ernst, the surrealist artist who visited the site in 1924, and whose paintings of crumbling structures—including *The Entire City*, *Day and Night*, and *The Eye of Silence*—were inspired by Angkor. *The Eye of Silence*, with its rotting green landscape, its hookah pipe towers, and languorous female in the foreground, especially captures Ernst's fixations on the unconscious, desolation, and entropy. Spherical jewels embed the verdant shapes, their turquoise shade matching the color of my dream planet and the philosopher's stone.

In the photo on my bedroom wall, the temple doorway, one of four at Ta Prohm, dominates the piece, a great black rectangle past which all is darkness. Intricately carved pillars frame the door, and the lintel holds six bodhisattvas in meditative posture surrounded by two massive stone snakes. A stone lotus, symbol for enlightenment, rests at the door's base. The tangled trunks and branches of a great silk cotton tree cover the entire structure in a living matrix of silver colored wood. It is an arresting photo, filled with melancholy and mysticism.

In my dream, my closet door became the temple doorway, complete with vines and branches and bodhisattvas cast in stone. I knew, somehow, that it was the gateway of death. Beside the door, stood a wingless angel dressed in a gray suit, with a white shirt and silver tie. He was gesturing towards the door, and with his gesture, the pillars of Ta Prohm transformed into the pillars of my childhood home in upstate New York. I awoke just as I was getting out of bed to answer the angel's summons.

* * *

Soon after this dream, I discovered that the comet was dying.

Again, I passed by William on the way to classes. This time I wasn't running late, so there in the quad, amidst the modern buildings of brick and glass, he explained that the comet, traveling out from the sun, was breaking up and rapidly expanding as it disintegrated. This was why it had leapt from a +17 magnitude object, so dim it could only be seen through a telescope, to a magnitude of +2, ranking it with the second tier of brightest stars. A number of ideas were circulating concerning the comet's behavior. One proposed that either an asteroid or a rocky satellite orbiting the nucleus had struck the comet, causing it to explode. A second, less dramatic concept blamed the solar wind for the comet's disintegration. But the leading hypothesis postulated that the sun's heat had formed a crust on the comet, and as the ice beneath the crust turned to gas, it built up pressure until the crust exploded, spewing debris to form a vast illuminated sphere larger than the sun.

Regardless of which theory was correct, Comet Holmes was expiring, flaring out in the distant sunlight as it went through its final weeks of life, paralleling my dream of the Ta Prohm temple. Back home, when it grew dark, my daughters and I decided to take out the telescope so that my partner Brenda, who had not yet looked at Comet Holmes, could encounter the rare sight of a dying interplanetary object.

Brenda and the girls went outside while I entered the garage to retrieve the telescope. As I passed through a back door, cradling the scope like a baby made from steel, mirrors, and lenses, I could just make out the three slender forms and elfin faces of my fellow sky watchers – Ursula and Brenda nearly as tall as I, and Isadora a foot shorter. Their blond hair, Brenda's collar-length and neatly cut, the girls' shoulder length and rather untamed, seemed to shine in the vague blue-white glow from the alley's occasional street lamps, the collective light diminished by

intervening houses and storage sheds. The night was noticeably chill, so Brenda and Isadora wore sweatshirt jackets, and Ursula a big, floppy sweater, the fabric nearly colorless in the dark. Scattered at the edges of the yard lay various pipes, tangles of wire, and snapped boards—the detritus from the construction of a recent addition to our single-story ranch style home. I set the telescope gently down away from the debris, faced it towards Comet Holmes, and aimed its main steel cylinder by using the smaller, black spotter scope. Setting a lens in the eyepiece, I turned the focus knob until the stars surrounding the comet were sharp points of light.

The comet, still the apparent size of the moon, had become so diaphanous that you could see stars through it. Despite its faintness, the comet appealed to me because it was, in the words of Joseph Conrad, “an extravagant mystery.” My oldest daughter, Ursula, agreed. However, the hazy disk of the Andromeda Galaxy held more fascination for Isadora. Gazing at a system comprised of billions of stars two million light years away was more compelling to her than a dying comet. Brenda, too, found more delight elsewhere in the sky—the Pleiades open star cluster in the constellation Taurus, a group of young stars recently born from an interstellar cloud of gas and dust. I couldn't blame her for her preference, for in the telescope, the Pleiades, vibrant and alive with their dawning nuclear energies, shine like tiny blue flames.

After about forty-five minutes, the cold had settled into our bones, so we all went inside. I returned the telescope to its corner of the garage and covered it in a white, shroud-like sheet. Normally after a night's astronomical viewing, I like to study star charts for a while, contemplating new interstellar objects to search out. But this time I pulled out a book on Max Ernst, turning its glossy pages until I found the reproduction of *The Eye of Silence*. At first, as I contemplated the painting, I kept focusing on the central green structure, with its hookah pipes,

snake shapes, subliminal face, and blue jewels. Finally, though, I meditated on a small white circle cut high into the yellow tower at the painting's left frame. White clouds roiled behind it, and like the comet, it evoked both the ephemeral and the eternal.

* * *

That Saturday morning, I visited William Brown in his wood-frame one bedroom home. A star chart displaying Perseus, Andromeda, Cassiopeia, and other nearby constellations—black dots on a white field—covered a small wooden table in his cramped living room. A sheet of translucent tracing paper obscured half the chart. The table also held a draftsman's triangle, a protractor, and a mechanical pencil. Beyond this stood piles of well worn trade paperback books—Melville's *Pierre*, Pynchon's *V*, Dick's *Valis*, *The Portable Jung*, *New Directions 26*, *Finnegan's Wake*, with its Joycean plunge into the dream realm, and numerous others. A new turntable, the kind made to look like a 1930's style box radio, held a vinyl copy of Utah Phillips' out of print album *All Used Up*, silent in its motionlessness. Beneath it were stacks of DVD's, including *Obsession* with Orson Welles, *Ace in the Hole* with Kirk Douglas, Hitchcock's *Rope*, and Martin Scorsese's study of Bob Dylan, *No Direction Home*. Above the turntable, hung a portrait of John Lennon. Whenever I enter William's realm, with its creative chaos and bachelor energy, I always feel like I have returned to my graduate school days.

As he made tea, I studied the chart and its accompanying piece of tracing paper. On it, an arc of points bisected Perseus, orbital mechanics rendered in pencil. "I'm charting the course of the comet," he said when he returned with two cups of steaming herbal tea. Nodding, I glanced out the wood framed glass doors at his six-inch reflector telescope, muffled in a royal blue blanket embroidered with golden suns, moons, and stars and enveloped by the wan silvery light of a cloudy November morning. The scope stood in the midst of the dead and dried husks of his patio garden. The brown vines and stems reminded me of my

Cambodian temple dream and its death angel, so I turned away, settling into the low slung armchair to stare at the star map, the fireless TV, the copy of *Moby Dick* on the floor—anything but that dead vegetation outside, the torn veils of Persephone gone for the winter.

William, a round-faced, broad shouldered man in his sixties, brushed back his straight, graying hair and settled into a small folding chair. As we sipped our tea, we talked about many topics—James Joyce, Jack Kerouac, and Thomas Mann; Leonard Cohen, Fred Neil, and Arthur Lee; the progressive movement and the collective unconscious; his days of driving a cab in Manhattan and my days of wandering the green hills of upstate New York, searching for red salamanders beneath the spring-fed fir trees. We finished our tea, and William made more. He put away the precious copy of *All Used Up* and started up an original vinyl pressing of *Bringing It All Back Home*, side two, and soon Bob Dylan was singing about the Gates of Eden. The gray light, seeping in through the windows, illuminated his book shelves, from which he would now and then grab a volume to illustrate a point.

It was one of those wonderful Saturday's when work is far away and the mind runs free to explore the universe. And as the hidden sun climbed towards noon, the living talk drove away my dreams of mortality.

* * *

That was the day Norman Mailer died.

I didn't know until the following morning, when I made the short drive across Grand Junction to a coffee house that sells the Sunday *New York Times*. There, on the front page of the November 12th edition, a headline read, "Norman Mailer, Towering Writer With a Matching Ego, Dies at 84." Just as Halley's Comet had signaled Mark Twain's passage from life in 1910, it seemed that Comet Holmes had fulfilled a similar symbolic role for Mailer, a figure who—along with Vladimir Nabokov,

Henry Miller, and Anais Nin—had loomed large in the literary pantheon of my undergraduate circle. As I read the *Times* article, its mention of Mailer's Brooklyn Heights home brought back an experience from my college years.

During the long, hot summer of 1978, just weeks before I started graduate school, a group of friends and I visited our comrade and fellow English major Dougo Mann at his Brooklyn home, a third floor apartment with nearly undecorated dull yellow walls which he shared with his partner, a lean, darkly attractive woman studying to become an opera singer. About an hour after we arrived, we decided to head out into the warm city night. The opera singer departed on her own business, so that left four of us—Dougo, Arlene, Nancy, and me. We had all been housemates in college, and Nancy and I were in a relationship, so the bonds between us ran deep, built as they were upon years of living and working together. Yet, I sensed somehow that this Brooklyn sojourn would be the last time all four of us would be together at the same time.

The pavement was still warm as we walked through shadowy streets like asphalt arroyos surrounded by six story brick and brownstone canyon walls. Overhead, the starless sky was a haze of light the color of rotten lemons. Dougo lived in an Italian neighborhood, and many of its dwellers, seeking relief from the heat, were sitting on the front stoops, from street-wise kids in t-shirts to dignified women elderly enough to have been from “the old country,” as my Belarusian grandfather used to say. They all watched us pass with wary looks. I'm sure we made a strange sight: two gangly hippies with long brown hair accompanied by two women—one short, blonde, pale complexioned and rather heavy, the other tall, slim, and dark-haired, with compelling eastern European face and features.

After maybe four blocks, we stopped in a neighborhood tavern. The place had just room enough for a few tables and a bar with seven stools. The lighting was low, and the walls were

the same faded yellow as Dougo's apartment. A few middle-aged men were drinking beer and silently watching a baseball game on a small black and white TV mounted above the tiers of liquor bottles behind the bar. Otherwise, the place was empty. When the three of us stepped up, the fat bartender, dressed in white shirt and apron, smiled broadly, greeted Dougo by name, and reached back for the Wild Turkey. The barkeep asked us what the rest of us would have, and we all joined Dougo in double shots.

After we consumed two sets of doubles at the tavern's holy altar, Dougo announced he had a surprise for us. We paid up and launched on a vigorous sojourn through block after block of Brooklyn streets. Dougo led the way, leaving Arlene, Nancy, and me to form a kind of phalanx behind him on this mysterious quest.

As if in a dream, rows and rows of brownstones passed until finally the East River burst into view. Street lamps lined its shore, a ship moved stately past the nearby docked vessels, and across a river as black and bottomless as the Styx, Manhattan's fantasy towers blazed, rising into the yellow stained darkness. From here we plunged into a block of narrower streets and smaller tree-fronted buildings, two to three stories high and made from brick, stone, old glass, and dark wood frames. Turning onto a street named Columbia Heights, we stood in front of a multi-story brownstone, a single lit window on its third floor.

“And what is this?” I asked very quietly, an intruder standing there in the street staring up at some stranger's apartment.

“That, my friend,” Dougo proclaimed with his characteristic grin, “is Norman Mailer's home. And that lit window is his study.”

Except for Nancy, we were all aspiring writers, and with Dougo's announcement, the night had indeed become a pilgrimage. One of our heroes was up there, so we stood for thirty, forty minutes, gazing up, waiting for God knows what. Perhaps a silhouette of the great man would move against the shade. Maybe

Mailer himself would emerge from the front door, heading out for cigarettes or a midnight deli run. But no one ever showed.

At last, we drifted back to Dougo's apartment, had a few more shots of bourbon, and turned in for the night, Dougo on his bed, the rest of us on various couches and bedrolls.

Today, I know from biographical texts that during the summer of 1978, Mailer was revising *The Executioner's Song*, his masterpiece about murder and retribution in Utah. He may even have been working on it that night behind the solitary lit window. That was also the summer he started living with Norris Church, the hauntingly beautiful art teacher who would later become his sixth and final wife.

Years later, after graduate school, I taught Mailer in a number of my classes, usually *Armies of the Night* or *Miami and the Siege of Chicago*. But as the eighties gave way to the nineties, Mailer's work seemed less and less relevant. Finally, I dropped him from my syllabus altogether. And while I kept reading his books, particularly enjoying *Oswald's Tale* and *Portrait of Picasso as a Young Man*, I never did meet him, much less return to the streets of Brooklyn Heights and wait for a glimpse of his heavy, troubled visage.

And my feeling that we four on that Brooklyn adventure would never again be together as a quartet turned out to be true. I met up separately with Dougo or Arlene perhaps three or four times afterwards, and I broke up with Nancy a year after our evening's vigil outside Mailer's brownstone dwelling. For me, everyone associated with that magical night in 1978 has vanished into the lost America of drifting time.

The night after I learned about Mailer's death, the sky was white with heavy clouds. There would be no comet. For a time I opened the front drapes and studied the heavy black silhouettes of the Siberian elms against a sky blazing with reflected city light. Despite reminding me of that night we stood outside Mailer's

brownstone, it was a still peculiar sight, especially to one who had grown up in rural upstate New York, where the only time the sky even remotely looks like this is when there is a full moon behind high, thin clouds. But that is nothing compared with this cave of light produced by low slung water laden clouds and the clustered lights of the modest sized city of Grand Junction.

This feeling of dislocation often comes to me when I peer out our front picture window. Since my pilgrimage to Mailer's brownstone thirty years ago, my life has tumbled through a kaleidoscopic series of relationships and abodes. In that time, I have lived in twenty places in five states, to finally land in Colorado's desert west, a long ways from my childhood home with its clover fields, deciduous forests, and dreams of turquoise planets. And while all this movement is a fairly common condition for my generation, it has left me consumed by a desire for stability.

However, unlike the front window, the high, north-facing windows of our newly built bedroom help me with that need for stability, for through them, at certain times of the year, I can often spot the bright, blue-white star of Vega in the constellation Lyra. This star creates a continuity with my rural childhood, for they do not deviate from their yearly cycle, regardless of what happens in our lives.

Still, on that night after Mailer's death, there was nothing out of any windows but the white void of illuminated clouds.

By the time the skies cleared, the expanding comet was becoming almost invisible, a faint puff of light with a fading core. Unlike before, I could see many stars through it, not just the most luminous ones.

It was in those final days of the comet that it became linked for me with two Meso-American myths.

In *The Book of the Hopi*, Southwestern author Frank Waters describes the Hopi Indian belief that there have been three pre-

vious worlds before our current one. The creator and principal deity, Sun Father, destroyed each of these worlds because humanity failed to follow the true way of life as revealed through his teachings. The first world, called Tokpela, he consumed with fire because the people became too selfish with their prayers, invoking power and blessings for themselves instead of for their communities and the planet. The second, Tokpa, he covered with ice because of the people's outrageous greed fueled by trade and commerce. The third, Kuskurza, he drowned in a great deluge due to sexual misconduct. Each time, however, a small band of people remained true to Sun Father's path, and thus survived the catastrophe to emerge into a new world, which was always a realm of higher awareness, higher consciousness.

We are currently in the fourth world, Túwaqachi. Ultimately, there will be seven worlds, and in the seventh humanity will join with the Sun Father in a great all-inclusive unity, not unlike the final, universal enlightenment of Mahayana Buddhism. According to some Hopi elders, there are signs, one of which is the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima, that our world is nearing its end and the fifth world is about to dawn. When the final days of Túwaqachi arrive, a mysterious blue colored star will appear in the sky. Then, a manifestation of this object, a sacred being named the Blue Star Kachina, will dance in the plaza of Oraibi, an ancient village on the Hopi Mesas, said to be the oldest continuously inhabited village in North America. When he does this, the world will end.

In late November, I received an email from Julie Strasburger, a friend from my Santa Fe days who now lives in San Diego, explaining that many people in the New Age community were interpreting Comet Holmes to be the portentous blue star of Hopi prophesy. As to what the Hopi were saying about this, her sources were silent. But the claim that Comet Holmes was the Hopi Blue Star did remind me of centuries past when comets were seen as portents of vast transformations.

The other mythic connection came to me through a college lecture.

Dr. Edward Barnhart, the director of the Maya Exploration Center, gave a presentation at our campus on archaeoastronomy, a branch of archeology that applies astronomical knowledge to the study of ancient relics and structures. During his talk, Dr. Barnhart described a Mayan creation myth. In this story, the universe sparks into being from a flame on a turtle's back. The turtle, which nests between three stars, has been identified as the Orion Nebula, a vast, illuminated cloud of interstellar dust and gas located in the three stars that make up Orion's sword. On a superbly clear night, this nebula can be seen by the naked eye, and does indeed appear to be a wisp of blue flame. As I listened to Dr. Barnhart's talk, the image of a blue flame in the sky inevitably brought to my mind the comet, that mysterious blue-white ball of light that I had spent many nights studying.

The myths of the apocalyptic Blue Star and the Turtle at time's dawn—evoking the cycle of death, change, and rebirth—focused the various images, dreams, and memories that enveloped my impressions of Comet Holmes. In the Hopi prophesy of the Blue Star, the fourth world will be destroyed, but a new fifth world will emerge – bringing with it a higher consciousness, a better understanding of our relationship to the cosmos. In the Maya creation myth, after the turtle's spark creates the universe, a crisis arises when the Fifth Sun of our world cannot rise, being prevented from doing so by the power of the Lords of Darkness. But when the twin sons of the Fifth Sun slay the Lords of Darkness, the new sun rises, and with him, our world is born.

In the Tarot deck, the Death card depicts a sunrise as two children and a bishop bow to a black armored skeleton mounted on a horse. Beneath the horse's hooves a dead king lies. The old gives way to the new—without death, there can be no birth. In alchemy, the flesh decays as it transforms into spirit. Turquoise, the color that symbolizes this metamorphosis, came to me as

a dream planet as my adolescent self died so the adult could be born, just as the sixteen year old Perseus slays Medusa, so that he may take his rightful place amongst kings. In my youth, Norman Mailer inspired apprentice writers like Dougo, Arlene, and me, but since then other literary luminaries have risen to be today's mentors, bringing with them new creative worlds, new suns. The lush summer growth perishes in the autumn, goes underground through the winter, and is reborn in the spring—Persephone's eternal voyage to Hades and back.

And beyond Mars a comet dissipates into interplanetary space. As it dies, it creates a mysterious, glowing ball of particles the size of a star. But one day, when our sun goes nova and spreads itself and its planets across space to form a nebula, the galaxy's own *vas Hermeticum* in which it shapes its new children, those particles will help build a new solar system, and perhaps some of the comet's molecules may flow in the bloodstream of a sentient being who billions of years from now will gaze at the Andromeda Galaxy through a telescope and wonder about origins.

Kaleidoscope

Morgan Lyn Oldacre

It should have been hard, or stiff, like a good leather purse, or the kind of doctor's bag they used to carry back when doctors still made house calls, back when she was a girl. My grandmother's face, adorned with lines—adorned, that's the right word, as if she were decorated, not as if it had just happened to her one day—should have been hard, or at least thick, to the touch of my lips every time I kissed her good-bye. But it wasn't. It felt more like velvet, as if the lines brought out the softness inside, the softness she kept for herself, and to herself. I remember it felt good.

She went by Mae, but her name was Mary. It was a good enough name, not stylish or fancy, just good enough. The Weavers picked good names, nine children, nine good names. Clifford, Wilford, Alfred, John, Mary, Laura Echo, Maude, Harry, and Nelly Jenny, in order. Sickly from birth, Harry caught rheumatic fever when he turned two. He went blind. My grandmother told me the doctor came over one day, she wasn't sure why, and removed his eyes. They kept them in a jar of formaldehyde on the mantle, I guess as a reminder of what could have been, or maybe as a conversation piece for the kids. Harry would die young, they all knew, so when the last baby came along, he wanted to name her. He was only four, and he couldn't have had much of a repertoire of names from which to choose, so he picked Nelly Jenny, a name fashionable to a four-year-old, but needless to say, Nelly Jenny officially changed it to Peggy Jean when she could, after Harry died. She changed her hair color, too. And Maude went by Kitty.

Mae Blanch Weaver Rudder was my grandmother, but she is my constant companion of late, now that I am a new grandmother myself. I spent months of summer days with her and my grandfather, Johnny, but he remains another story, other

bits of glass to solder together into a nice window panel for the sun to pour through. It seems to me, as I keep remembering Mae, that those summer days had been decidedly precious to me, well worth remembering and keeping. She had an ease and simplicity to her life, peacefulness, even goodness, and though she lived in south Knoxville, my summers with her were country summers, not city summers.

Mae's house was a country house, too, built on the side of a great hill. I'm not sure why Johnny ever built their house there; by today's standards it would be quite an "unbuildable" lot. They constructed the house in a level spot cut into the side of the hill, with a long meandering path with flat stone steps in places, leading up to the garage, winding past the dog pens, past the lower garden (with hot peppers and herbs she could grab for dinner), past the upper garden (with corn and tomatoes and beans, always beans, all kinds of beans—shelly beans, green beans, runner beans, pole beans, hybrid species and varieties of beans), past the cherry trees and the blackberry brambles, finally ending at the cinderblock garage, right next to the Holiday Inn—not the hotel, but the connected row of dog houses my grandfather built for his Pointers and Gordon Setters, and their puppies. This was my favorite place. If I couldn't be found, they knew to look for me in one of two places—somewhere inside the Holiday Inn, in the straw, with a long line of puppies, or maybe in the garden, watching it grow.

The front of the house—again, I must say that I'm not sure why they ever built on this particular hill—the front of the house could barely be seen from the road. The bank—"yard," at this point, would be an unfair choice of word—went straight up. Not twenty feet separated the house from the street, but it certainly seemed like half a mile by the time we, my brother and I, ascended the stone steps, straight up, as the goat climbs, pulling ourselves along with the aid of honeysuckle vines. I've often wondered, to this day, how they ever moved furniture into

the house. In fact, the hill presented such a problem that when the neighbor on the far side of the house mowed one summer day, about mid-morning, he lost his footing in the dew and slid down the hill and under the mower, losing a few toes and a sizeable chunk of foot in the process. I never got to see the damage, but apparently it was a bloody mess, judging by his screams; Mae wasn't surprised when she heard about it. She often said he should've tied the mower by the handle with a rope and sent it up and down the hill on its own. I'm not sure that would have been the best method (he probably should have mowed sideways, or planted a ground cover on the hill to eliminate the mowing situation altogether), but it seemed practical to her, and she never mentioned it again—except to tell me never to mow in fresh dew.

The house had two front doors, one to the living room, and one to the bedroom. That never seemed like a good idea, especially since Mae had a fear of being locked out of the house, which, in itself seemed odd since she rarely locked the doors, neither one of them (and if she did, the spare key hung on an outside nail right between the two doors). Wait—that's not true exactly. She locked the doors when my grandfather took her to Cas Walker's Grocery or to the White Stores, both being about two or three steps, maybe four, below Food Lion in quality (and Food Lion is certainly no Fresh Market!), but they were cheap and close by and she knew Cas Walker, though only by reputation, which wasn't very good (he was known for changing the "sell by" date on his meats, and putting red lights over the butcher case to make everything look fresher, which often led to quite a surprise when we got home). I preferred White Stores because I could take whatever puppy I'd fallen in love with, wrap her up in a blanket and put her in the seat of the buggy, and only one old busybody ever said anything about a dog being in the grocery store. Mae told her it was a seeing-eye puppy in training (it wasn't) and that she hoped the woman would never need one,

like the pitiful little blind child it was going to after we trained it not to be scared of loud people and loud noises, and to leave her granddaughter alone, as she continually did good deeds in the world, like help little blind children.

Mae quickly put her groceries into the icebox or the deep freeze. She called it the icebox, or the “frigid-air,” but she didn’t mean the brand name *Frigidaire*, because she got it from Sears and Sears only carried *Kenmore*, but she’d heard *Frigidaire* somewhere, I think when my uncle got one, and she believed that was the new name for an icebox, like the new name for “automobile” was “car.” She had heard it—she hadn’t read it; she couldn’t read very well. She held the newspaper up in front of her as she saw other people do. She could make out some words if she studied about it or sounded them out, but mainly she asked me the big words, like “mayor” and “committee,” because after all the time it took to sound them out, she would have forgotten the first part of what she was trying to read. Mae had to quit school in the 3rd grade, back in 19-aught-9, as she said, when she turned seven. She was the oldest girl of all the children, not the oldest child altogether, but the oldest girl, and, as such, her mother (my great-grandmother, whom I never met) expected her to help with the younger children. Mae’s teacher said it was a shame, not about helping with the children since that was the right thing to do, but a shame that she wouldn’t get to go to school anymore, she wouldn’t get to learn about history, or ciphers, or be able to perfect her penmanship.

Country cooking was the norm in Mae’s kitchen, and cornbread was her specialty. I wish I could say I had the recipe, but Mae never wrote it down; she just grabbed this and that, pinched a few things, and mixed it by hand. Nowadays, most cornbread serves merely as a vessel for butter, but Mae’s cornbread was famous. She cooked it in an old iron skillet that she never washed. *You never wash an iron skillet; if you do, you ruin the “seasoning!”* To clean it, just wipe it out and occasionally, perhaps, rub some

cooking oil or lard—Crisco, if available—in it and set it under the broiler for a few minutes to kill any germs, but, honestly, we didn’t worry too much about germs then.

For someone who believed her stove had only two usable settings, *HIGH* and *OFF*, Mae thought she had quite a way with cooking, and I will say that there were a few items she outdid everyone on, like cornbread, biscuits, creamed corn, and home-made jelly, but a lot of things ended up as—well, as ceiling ornamentation. Mae had a pressure cooker and she liked to use it. Pressure cookers were the fashion then, like espresso makers and microwaves are now. But pressure cookers are dangerous—ask anyone who’s been around one. Many were the times I came into her kitchen and heard the rage of the steam coming out of the pressure valve on top of her cooker perched on the glowing red burner, the little regulator rocking furiously back and forth, like oak leaves in a winter snow storm. I just knew nothing good could come of it and many times that pressure cooker proved me right. Beets exploded, and the ceiling turned a dark shade of pink. Turnip greens exploded, and the ceiling transformed into a lovely turnip-green, overlapping that dark pink. That ceiling displayed a virtual kaleidoscope of colors overhead. Quite often we could tell what Mae had cooked for dinner by what we saw on the ceiling. Mae was proud of that ceiling, too, and she looked upon it as a medal. *Look what I cooked for supper today, and survived.* Evidently there’s a reason no one uses pressure cookers anymore, and it’s most likely that people grew weary of painting their ceilings. She never painted that ceiling, my grandmother, not that anything would have covered it if she had tried. If that old house still stands there, and I’m not sure it does, as I haven’t been there in years, I imagine the ceiling still wears Mae’s medals. And I imagine that old yardstick still stands in the corner, within easy reach, her tool to retrieve the regulator from its landing site when that old pressure cooker jettisoned it into the ceiling plaster.

As for Mae herself, she was a striking woman. That's what people say about me, too, and I never know how to take it, so I try to take it well. Not the tallest of her sisters by any means, but she was close at 5'10," second only to Laura Echo, who stood six feet tall, in flats. I wouldn't have called Mae pretty, more plain than anything. Somehow it wouldn't have seemed right for her to be pretty. She had high cheekbones that told her Cherokee heritage, dark skin with the look of years, years in the garden or gathering raspberries along the side of the road, her shirttail permanently stained with pink juice, years of smoking Raleigh cigarettes, and only quitting when Johnny, my grandfather, wouldn't get them for her anymore since she wouldn't learn how to drive and get them herself (not that she could have passed the written test). Her hair never turned grey; it was always dark, straight, thick, and shoulder-length. Occasionally she noticed a grey hair, but she immediately had me pull it with tweezers. Then she told me two would grow in its place, and I felt bad. Mae's eyes were hazel, or brown, or green, depending on which of Johnny's old shirts she wore. She wore capri pants, before everyone called them capri pants. She said "pedal-pushers," and she always fastened them with a safety pin, never a button, and, God forbid, if she ever lost her safety pin or didn't have an extra one pinned to her shirt or her brassiere somewhere. Mae bragged about how long she could keep a pair of underwear, too. She sewed and sewed, patching them together, until there was nothing left to patch, but then she would use them for rags. She had a lot of rags. Mae never bought clothes for herself, preferring hand-me-downs and cast-offs, or she sewed clothes for herself or me on her old peddle-driven Singer sewing machine, made out of oak and iron—it was a heavy piece of furniture that needed to stay wherever it was put. She never owned a dress that I know of. Even when Johnny died the year she turned 78, she wore pants to the receiving and the funeral, but they were full-fledged pants, not pedal-pushers, though I never knew where they came from.

Aside from the garden, canning her summer bounty, and making chow-chow (I still have no idea what chow-chow contains, or more to the point, why anyone would want to eat it because just smelling it sent my sinuses into spasms) and jelly, my grandmother loved to take me fishing, trout fishing in particular, to the Tellico River in Monroe County. Mae set our clock for 3 A.M., the best time to head to the river, before everyone else got there and so we could get her favorite fishing spot. Mae packed peanut butter sandwiches for me, sardines for her and Johnny, niblets corn and goldfish for the bass. Goldfish, not the crackers, but real goldfish, the ones she kept in the bird bath in the summer—it was my job to make sure their water stayed clean and never got too hot for the fish and to be guardian to keep the birds from swooping down and eating them before the trout in the Tellico River had the opportunity. We always stopped at the Tellico Market to get a loaf of white bread to make dough balls. *Dough balls, illegal as they are for trout fishing, are the best for catching the big ones—just don't let the game warden catch you using them!* I don't really believe Mae and Johnny went fishing just for me, because, truly, I rarely caught anything and preferred to play with crawdads or snakes or bugs, and on the off chance that I did catch something, I always threw it back. I hope they went for themselves, or at least that's what I choose to believe now. In fact, they made friends with a gentleman who ran an orphanage in Knoxville, the William Tarleton Home for Boys. An orphanage is a wonderful proposition for the children it benefits, but, more importantly to Mae, this particular orphanage was located in a valley that had a sizeable freshwater stream, and in a freshwater stream, one was apt to find fish. This stream was loaded with bass, ripe for the picking, and pick, she did. She and Johnny liked the man, but they really liked his stream.

Mae was rarely sick, a testament to the stock of the American Indian combined with, as she liked to say, a "Scotsman." She did, however, come down with pneumonia once, requiring a

lengthy hospital stay. I remember smelling peanut butter when I came into her room and thinking, *I don't really think she should be eating peanut butter when she's having such trouble breathing*, but I didn't really smell peanut butter; it was the smell of sick, the smell of a tongue coated with layer upon layer of pneumonia expelled out into the world, and it ruined peanut butter for me for a long time. Eventually, Mae recovered, but she was never the same. She was weakened, barely having the strength to hold my son when he was born.

* * *

So many expectations present themselves when your child is about to be born. You don't plan for it to happen; it just does. You decide whom your child will favor, you know his career path before he chooses it (since he will be just like you), and you know what will make him happy. You know you will have the answers to any question he has. You know where he will go and what he will be, who he will be. He will never go too far away, and he will always come home. But you never see the unexpected savior's coming.

* * *

My son is a father now, a fact that is troublesome to me, troublesome not in the sense that he will not be a good father, because I have faith he will. He is such a child himself, at times, that he knows what it takes to make a child happy. It troubles me in that I watched him grow up, and I still see him as my child, a status he vehemently disputes. He reminds me that he is a man now, all 27 years of him. He reminds me that he has his own family now, his own responsibilities, his own religious beliefs, beliefs I do not share, and that lack of sharing makes me, somehow, lesser, in his mind, perhaps. But I remember. I remember the child at Christmas in 1984, when he was four years old, who came running out to see what Santa brought, screamed, "*HE CAME!*" and promptly peed in his pajamas. I remember when he rode

the elephant at the Knoxville Zoo, clinging onto the elephant's bristly back, like I clung to the honeysuckle vines to climb the stairs to my grandmother's house. I remember when he broke his leg when he turned seventeen, and all he could do was yell at me, push me away, and cling to me, all at the same time.

I didn't know if my baby was going to be a boy or girl until that day in April when he arrived. We didn't know that kind of thing in 1980. We just took what we got and went on accordingly. Now we know the sex practically at conception, have the room ready with gender-appropriate colors, have all the accessories needed listed at Babies-R-Us in the gift registry, and just sit back and wait for the big day to come and fulfill our expectations. Where has the wonder of it all gone? I truly hoped he was a girl, but I knew inside he wasn't. I truly hoped (s)he looked like me, with dark, curly hair and green eyes, but he remains the spitting image of his father, right down to the dimples, the straight, light-colored hair, and the blue eyes. He wanted to become a professional singer all through school. He performed in every concert, every play, and every musical that Central High School, my old alma mater, produced. He sang in Bobcat Company, the school's theatrical troupe. New York Academy of Dramatic Arts offered him a full scholarship. He was destined for Broadway. When he sang *Amazing Grace*, the hair on my neck stood up. Just thinking about it still makes my hair stand up. But he found a religion, a religion that divides us, and a savior who washed him away from me.

He is charismatic, evangelical, bathed in the blood of Jesus. He no longer speaks without preaching. Who is this man before me? Where is my son? Loving God is now his life's purpose, according to the doctrine of his church. He wishes the same for me, prays for it, in fact, on a daily basis. I could care less. Family has been redefined, and I am excluded. *God is my priority, followed by my wife and child, then the church*, he says. I am family, I am his mother. *The church is my family now*, he says, *and my church*

family has priority, priority over everyone and everything else. I pray every day that, no matter what comes your way, you will know the love of God as I do. No matter what anyone does to you, or says to you, no matter what hurt you may feel, it won't matter because you will know God loves you down in your heart. That is my wish for you. What of my wishes? Does he remember them?

* * *

His daughter, my first grandchild, was born two weeks ago. He and his wife named her for his favorite city, London, the city where he sang for the queen. I have spent some time with her—not as much as I would like, but as much as possible without overstepping, as much as possible with only a thin welcome. I look into her eyes and wonder where the little girl I thought she would be is. I don't see anything familiar. I didn't imagine her as a newborn. I didn't imagine her as helpless. I saw her as my companion, but she stares at me, at the contrast between my hair and my face, then she looks away to some other contrasting image. She is blonde, and fair, with blue eyes. But where is the London I imagined? Where is the dark, curly hair? Where is the inquisitive little four-year-old who wants to play in the creek and examine every pebble, or watch the garden grow, or lick the ponies just to see how they taste? Where am I in her? Am I there? Anywhere?

London's parents will rear her as they see fit, not as I would, not as the beloved child of God in whom He is well pleased. She will be humble, a trait greatly valued by these evangelicals. They will teach her that she lacks worth, that she is not deserving of the world's bounty, and they will teach her to value humility, both in herself and in others. Her parents will not see this as arrogance, as being less than what God created.

I wonder how well she will learn the lessons they teach. I wonder if she will accept it all on blind faith, or if she will have

a speck of her grandmother somewhere in there, the speck her father threw away, a speck urging her to question.

London will not know Santa, as her father did. *Mom, Santa is just a story, a lie we tell children to keep them in line.* She will know the story of Jesus, which is all well and good, but she will know nothing of the delight or the flavor of the Christmas season. She will know nothing of fishing, or cornbread, or kaleidoscope ceilings. She will never climb the bank to Mae's house. She will never see hot peppers planted where daisies should be, and she will never stay at the Holiday Inn. Maybe she will know me, her grandmother; only time will tell, as I will continue to have high hopes. I know one thing, however. I know that whenever I spend time with her, I want London to call me Mae.

Apple, Daydream, Memory

Rachel Peckham

My older sister, Sarah, is the mother of an eighteen-month old girl, a precocious curly-haired toddler who shows less interest in carving a pumpkin than she does lying down in the grass beneath an apple tree. *Claire was definitely showing signs of her Aunt Rachael this afternoon*, Sarah debriefed in an email last week. *She was in her own world.*

I remember my *own worlds*, my daydreams. They appeared on the way to school, to weekly piano lessons, church every Sunday. Always in the car, because we lived in southern Michigan, Amish country, landlocked by corn and twenty miles of back roads to the closest grocery store. I spent a lot of time dreaming out the window, looking at freshly tilled soil but seeing a dance floor, waxed to a perfect buttery sheen.

My mother enrolled me in ballet at five-years-old. I quit at age six because it interfered with Saturday morning cartoons—my biggest regret to this day, as I loved to dance when no one was looking (and even more so, when someone was). I remember Sarah at thirteen, with a boxy video camera as big as a suitcase propped on her shoulders, recording my impassioned moves to Eddie Rabbitt’s “I Love a Rainy Night.” *I love to hear the thunder/ Watch the lightning/ When it lights up the sky.* But more than the lyrics, I remember Sarah’s laughter at the mis-timed summer-saults, at the words I got all wrong, no matter how many times she played the song, wrenching the record player’s needle back and back and back again, until I’d collapse out of breath.

The record player long gone, we watch the VHS tape now—nearly extinct itself—happy to have this memory, this scene, forever locked in place for our amusement again and again. But, how peculiar, to have the memory of the daydream of dancing and the memory of dancing itself and, finally, the memory of pushing *play* and watching the dancing—what psychologist

Douwe Draaisma calls an “artificial memory,” this preservation of “image and sound”—a labyrinth of memories all dancing together.¹ And how peculiar, to have a *metaphor* for memory—a labyrinth—which Draaisma takes up in *Metaphors of Memory: A History of Ideas About the Mind*. He chronicles the way we’ve literally thought about memory throughout the ages, and how those metaphors themselves are *metamorphic*, with the advent of technology and “memory aides,” such as the tape recorder, video camera, computer. Perhaps Draaisma is right about the artificial memory; perhaps memory resists aiding, as the second it’s represented, its meaning changes.

So, too, my daydreams changed with the current events. Mary Lou Rhetton introduced the phenomenon of gymnastics to me and, with it, the feel of the beam’s taut skin, the smell of chalk on the high bar, the padding of feet across the mat. Sometimes a vault led to a disastrous landing that gained me sympathy and concern; other times, a euphoric climax that left visible goose bumps on my arms and legs, the dream manifest in the body’s response.

I didn’t want to be famous as much as prodigious. Certainly, someone would part the stalks and recognize the tiny genius overshadowed by all that corn and cattle. Certainly the entire town of Reading, Michigan would marvel at the child who entered the first grade at three years old—no *two*, already reading and how appropriate for the town’s name! *Here she was, right beneath our noses.*

But I didn’t read at two; not even at five, when I really did enter kindergarten. I quit ballet at six. I never stepped foot on a balance beam, and couldn’t read music for the first four or five years I took piano lessons, much to my teacher’s frustration. “You’ve got to find a new teacher,” Doris declared after the last note of a particularly strangled sonata. “Or else, learn how to read. I’ve taken you as far as I can.”

I made a decision that afternoon, crying quietly in Doris's foil wall-papered bathroom, to stop playing by ear. No one understood or appreciated this talent except my mother, a music teacher herself, a supporter of the imagined; of improvisation; of playing by ear. She knew all along I couldn't read the notes but subscribed to the belief that a child gifted with *an ear* might lose that ability at the cost of learning to read music. It wasn't that she trusted her ear more than her eyes; rather, in all her years of playing and teaching, she saw that almost anyone could learn to sight read but very few people could listen to a tune once and then play it back. I liked to imagine she challenged my piano teacher—once her teacher, too—on this point: *Now Doris, we both know gifted children are the hardest to teach.*

But, somehow, that message never surfaced over talk of community choir practice.

I did learn to read music, finally, in band class, quickly abandoning all pretense of the phenomenal ear at the risk of getting a *B* in Sight Reading. As it turns out, I was not so bad at reading notes. In fact, I was quite good, eating up everything Doris set down before me—sonatas, fugues, tarantellas, an occasional waltz. *Boy, that pep talk really worked,* I saw her thinking. We started to bond. We played duets. When I told her I wanted to be a poet or a professor of children's literature or maybe a columnist, Doris said I could *do it all*—just like her daughter, Michelle, the prodigious apple of her eye.

* * *

I am thinking of Frank O'Hara's poem, "Why I Am Not a Painter":

I am not a painter, I am a poet
Why? I think I would rather be
a painter, but I am not.

I am not a painter. I make a poor poet and even poorer pianist, though at certain points in my adolescent life I wanted desper-

ately to be all three *par excellence*. So I relied on imagination to remember a future I would never see. Only much later in my adult life, after reading O'Hara, did I realize the meaning in "Why I Am Not a Painter," or a poet, or a pianist. I am a personal essayist. A daydreamer by profession, taking up all things without *being* any of them at all.

Still, it's a strange thing to remember a daydream, to recall what I imagined could happen—and not what did happen. Could these remembrances of a wish be considered *memories*? Philosopher Avishai Margalit, who studies the memory of mood, might say so.³ Or historian David Gross, who suggests that memory can recall more than experience and past events—but also feelings and desires; duty and identity; and something I'm particularly interested in, a "remembering forward" to an imagined destiny.⁴

That's not to say my daydreams destined me to become a painter or pianist—I'm hard-pressed to even remember a single minor scale—but perhaps those childhood imaginings forecasted my future as a writer, as someone whose imaginings and desires are inextricably linked to her memory. As someone who is desperate to make meaning out of memory—desperate to recover sense and mood and feeling, if not date, time and place, desperate to *play by ear* on the keyboard of her computer, the only instrument she plays now.

That's not true. I still play piano, but I can't play from memory anymore; instead, I play from memory every time I sit down and write creative nonfiction. If writing is a kind of music, then perhaps I learned how to play when we got our first computer circa 1986, an Apple II GS. The "GS" stands for Graphics and Sound, which my mother used to arrange songs for her elementary music programs.

"You type like you're playing Hanon."⁵ To this day, she likes to lean over me as I work, marveling at fingers in flight, the steady clacking. When I was growing up, my parents kept the computer in their room—I don't know why. What I do recall is

the Apple's novelty. It was quite a sophisticated computer, unlike our first one, which came from Radio Shack and was used as a "test project" by Michigan Farm Bureau so that farmers like my dad could check the market daily. Sarah, always the technology guru, figured out how to make her name flash continuously across the screen, a blinking marquee in my parents' bedroom.

"Mom, do you remember the first Apple we ever had?"

She is chopping an onion at the kitchen counter. I want to imagine here that it's an apple—so convenient for this essay's project—but it's an onion. I can almost smell it on her fingers, as I could every time she zipped my coat up before school, every time she played piano and the scent of onion clung to the keyboard.

"Of course I remember. Your dad and sister drove all the way to Adrian to pick it up."

With that Apple "picking" I became the first of my friends to get a computer, and for years, all I had to do was drop the word in a context outside of fruit and a classmate was lured to my house for a play date. This was no easy feat. We lived in the sticks, the boonies, or as my teenage friends would later say, *B.F.E.* (which I'm horrified to translate). For any friend to ride an extra hour on the bus just to play on the Apple II GS communicated a serious desire.

Sometimes I think I enjoyed the long trek, the solitude, as much as I did the play date. Five years after the purchase of the Apple, Sarah would attend Adrian College on a basketball scholarship. We drove to her games every Wednesday and Saturday afternoon, one hour each way, one hour to script my daydreams. Usually they starred *me* at 6'2", playing center for the Bulldogs. My mom would videotape from the stands, balancing the big box on her shoulder because Dad was too "keyed up" to do anything but twist the program into a tight tube every time I took the baseline. Those four years, I made my fair share of three-point plays, lay-ups with the fowl shot to tie the score. I

won the game time and again with a last-second three-pointer. One time, I even twisted an ankle on the way down from an intentional fowl, got up, and still managed to nail the free-throw with one second left.

And that is how I appropriated my sister's college basketball career.

One thing I could never do was spin the ball on my finger tip the way Sarah did constantly, her tongue clamped between her lips in concentration. She'd spin the ball until the tip of her finger burned and we'd yell *do it again, do it again* and she would, the same way I danced for her as she ripped the needle across the record and Eddie Rabbit began his song all over again; the same way Doris had me do those Hanon exercises, up and down the scales, over and over until my fingers burned a body memory. *Don't think, your fingers will remember.* The same way I am typing these sentences without looking down. My fingers know where the *r* is and the *e* and the *m-e-m-b-e-r*. And suddenly I'm playing by ear again, intuitively feeling my way along the keyboard toward the memory of a daydream but I am back to where I started; what does it mean to remember a daydream rooted in memory?

I ask my husband Joel, a poet, if he can make sense of it all, and he says something mystical in a typical poet fashion: "Daydreaming is really the language of languid desire. The withheld fruit dangled at the end of the outstretched arm." He runs his finger along my arm, and I roll my eyes. "We enjoy the daydream because it is not reality," his voice trails off in a yawn. "Just deliciously out of reach."

Reading his words makes me reach for the O'Hara poem again, yet another appropriation:

I am not a poet, I am an essayist
Why? I think I would rather be
a poet, but I am not.

Why can't I write *the withheld fruit dangled at the end of the outstretched arm*? Instead, I want to analyze it, turn it on its head, say wait a minute, what's "deliciously out of reach" here?

Perhaps the daydream isn't a reaching but a *meeting* of reality and desire, not deliciously unattainable but *defensively* out of unconscious reach so that what does become conscious is expressed, as Freud suggests, "in ideal terms."⁶ The daydream's desire finds meaning in the remembrance of what I am *not*: poet, pianist, painter, gymnast, basketball star and ballerina. I remember wanting to be all of these things as a child. If Freud is right and repressed desire is disguised in the ideal terms of childhood memories, then perhaps my daydreams beg a closer reading of my memories.

* * *

At four years old I am sitting on the living room floor in cereal. I have spilled the box of Cheerios and am picking up each O off the brown shag carpet, studying it briefly before popping it in my mouth. Sarah is baby-sitting. "Tell me a story, Rach." She has the video camera again.

I look up at the TV expecting to see myself staring back and instead see my profile. A confusing visual concept. If I look straight at my sister, my face stares back on the TV monitor. But I want to see my face, so I look up at the TV—and again, that damn profile.

"Rach, look at me. Tell me a story."

And just like that, Narcissus gives up on catching her own reflection and starts to narrate: *Well, you see, Jemmifer got sick. She frew up in the car and I said, "It's okay, Jemmifer."*

The story, as I watch it now on VHS, wanders for some time because the child-me pauses every few seconds to eat a Cheerio. The narrative concludes with carsick *Jemmifer* being sent to bed happily with a red popsicle—a treat I associate to this day with

an upset stomach, though it doesn't take a psychoanalyst to point out its phallic implications.

What occurs to me now about this home video, though, is that the story is couched half in truth, half in imagination. *Jemmifer* was the name I gave to my imaginary friend, but *I* was the girl who got sick in the car. The girl who didn't mind staying in bed if it meant she got a popsicle.

The *Jemmifer*-story, like any daydream, is constructed out of truth but literally fed by desire. I wanted a popsicle, not this bland O-shaped cereal. (Of course, we know how Freud would interpret this, too.) My point is this: If I couldn't imagine a story independent of reality, then is it really (so deliciously) out of reach to suggest that my childhood daydreams are what Freud calls *screen memories*, the meeting half-way of fantasy and memory?

Screen memories is a particularly apt term—almost a pun—for a discussion of a computer that entered the family scene and never really left, at least in our minds. At six years old, I am already aware of its service to us. My mother will use it to compose music. My father will use it to check the hog market. My older sister will finally test out some basic programming functions she learned at computer camp. She teaches me how to make my own greeting cards on the Apple using a software program called *Print Shop*. I am hooked. I love that I can make a card for any occasion—Christmas, birthdays, Valentine's Day—making editorial decisions about the graphics, font, color, and most importantly, the message, always in the form of a poem: *I cannot miss/ a kiss form you/ You must like blue/ Your hart is a part what is true.* And to illustrate my point, big apple-shaped hearts adorn the cover.

Who was the lucky recipient of this card? I ask Sarah if she knows, and she says she does. "There was one where you wrote, *I love you Sarah. You are the bist,*" she laughs. "It was in the shape

of a heart that you cut out. And another one,” she adds, “where you wrote that I was a good basketball player.”

Of course, I remember these love notes to my sister. If they weren’t in Print Shop form, the letters were scribbled on lined notebook paper, folded in tiny squares I stuck in her coat pockets and under her pillows. Was it not enough that I snuck peaks at her *real* love letters, the ones from boys she’d later date in high school and spoon with on the couch after our parents went to bed? Was it not enough that I daydreamed about her basketball career, stole clothes from her closet, tried on her bras? It seems I wanted to *be* Sarah—in addition to everything else.

Now my sister is a mother. And she made me an aunt, fulfilling at least one of my daydreams. “When I watch Claire I immediately think of you, Rach,” she writes. “I can hardly wait for her to have her own *Jemmifer* and hear the stories she’ll tell.”

A little daydreamer, a little story teller. I get a bit drunk on this thought, though the narcissism is not lost on me; I am still that child trying to catch her reflection in the TV monitor, still the subject of her own stories, except now I write essays. And mostly, I read them. David Lehman writes in *Poetry Speaks*—a poetry anthology that comes with a CD full of all the poems read aloud in the authors’ voices; a fitting project, I think—that Frank O’Hara “found a way to write about himself and his trials that make his wounded narcissism—‘the catastrophe of my personality,’ as he put it in a poem titled ‘Mayakovsky’—seem ‘beautiful’ and ‘interesting’ and ‘modern.’”⁷ And I wonder, am I deconstructing my own daydreams, psychoanalyzing my own memories so that my “wounded narcissism” might seem more “interesting”? But you have to admit, the family romance here is a little interesting, no?

Well, then, let me add my first naked-dad-sighting to the mix.

Again, that Apple in my parents’ bedroom. I spend a lot of time there, crafting homemade cards for my sister, playing

Carmen San Diego, coloring seascapes with a software program that makes coloring outside the lines a moot point. No wonder it took a surprised parent, fresh out of the shower, to pry my eyes from the pretty pixels.

What comes next might very well be what Freud calls “the objectionable element” (i.e., the fantasy part of the memory), but I seem to recall my dad making quite a scene out of his embarrassing exposure, which didn’t seem so embarrassing as he danced around in his birthday suit, chanting an old fraternity song whose lyrics I am relieved I can’t recall. How well do I remember the hilarity of watching that flaccid piece of flesh moving to and fro as he hopped from foot to foot? Do I remember thinking it was funny, or is humor the guise, the screen dividing the repressed experience from its conscious version?

Even now, in examining the experience critically, I think it was genuinely funny. While my family members are modestly Midwestern and traditional in most of their attitudes (pre-marital sex is bad), when it comes to the body I was raised to embrace it (masturbation is good) with a certain amount of candor and humor. My mother still teases me about “Lulu,” the name I apparently gave my vagina when I was a toddler. I tease her back about the time she removed her slip from atop the organist’s bench and handed it to my baby brother in the middle of a hymn. (She had left his blanket at home.)

Still, I suppose it’s possible I’ve somehow traded in the real naked-dad-experience for an idealized one, one I can analyze in its Edenic symbolism, right down to the “apple” responsible for the sudden awareness of my dad’s penis. Either way, I can’t help but feel a slight shudder; after all, the driving force behind one of my earliest memories was a popsicle. And I danced until exhaustion while my sister video taped. And I wrote her love letters. And I enjoyed the smell of onion on my mom’s fingers. Collectively, it all sounds a little troubling.

But as for *trouble*, there wasn't much. I had a daydream-filled childhood, with parents who are still in love and who raised a symmetrical family of two girls/two boys (the pattern repeated on both sides of the family) on acres and acres of land where both my parents were among the area's last students to see the inside of a one-room school house. Not exactly the stuff of trauma. In fact, sometimes I wish for a little grit in the rear view mirror, the stuff of compelling memoirs.

Instead, I daydream, I imagine, I appropriate. This is not to say I *fictionalize*, however. There is a difference, I remind students, between wondering about the truth and wandering from the truth. I am conscious not to wander, but I do wonder about the wandering of memory from truth in screen memories, and of the wandering within the wonder of daydreams. Lost in the labyrinth again.

A labyrinth, unlike a maze, has more than one solution, more than one way out. That's why it's my metaphor of choice for memory (why does this sound like an advertisement for laundry detergent?). I realize it's not original to suggest that memory has a multiplicity of meaning in the way we think about memory and in how we express it; this is not the work of a genius but of someone who still finds herself daydreaming she is the pianist playing "Clair de Lune" in the background. Someone who is filled with the same curiosity and awe of a child approaching a wild kitten hiding beneath a barn. There is wonder, not just in the daydream but in the daydream's relation to desire, and of desire to memory.

* * *

. . . My poem
is finished and I haven't mentioned
orange yet. It's twelve poems, I call
it ORANGES.

Frank O'Hara's poem, "Why I Am Not a Painter," is less a defense of why he is a poet as much as it is a wondering, a daydream about the visual arts and its ability to inspire the poet to write just as much as "mainstream literary influences," Lehman proposes. Perhaps my daydreams about ballet, piano, gymnastics, my sister's basketball career, have less to do with the repression and/or the desire to be these things, and more to do with the discovery of a muse. Of what moves the mind to play, dance, write. *There should be so much more, not of orange, of words...* O'Hara, you are right; there should be so much more here, not of apples but of *words* about memory and fantasy—the apples and oranges of our art, Dear poet.

So here are the words, for I'm seeing a stage out this car window, full of floodlight before an audience so dark you could dip your hand in it like a warm pool. It's good that it's dark; I won't be as nervous this way. I enter stage left, not to dance or tumble or play "Clair de Lune" but to read some words I will write, the only words that get to fill this space, this moment fixed and not fixed—the memory of the daydream of wanting to write, and who was it who said *we don't want to write; we want to have written?* This is why I dream of the reading and not the writing; this is why I don't dance but envision the production; don't practice but imagine the concert. It's so much *to experience without possession, to bask in its presence without eating of it.*⁸ I can write anything, mean anything I want over and over again: the red popsicle, the basketball quivering on the fingertip, dancing Dad in the middle of the bedroom, juggling apples as he exits the garden. *Tell me a story.* I look at the monitor and this time, I see my reflection in the tilt and nod of every faceless audience member. Take a bow, the car is in the driveway, the curtain is dropping.

Endnotes

¹ Douwe Draaisma, "Introduction," *Metaphors of Memory: A History of Ideas About the Mind* (Cambridge University Press, 2000):2.

² Avishai Margalit, "Emotions Recollected," *The Ethics of Memory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002): 109.

³ David Gross, "Varieties of Memory," *Lost Time: On Remembering and Forgetting in Late Modern Culture* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000): 16.

⁴ Method books for piano designed to teach speed and accuracy in fingering.

⁵ Sigmund Freud, "Screen Memories," *The Uncanny* (New York: Penguin, 2003): 16-17.

⁶ David Lehman, "David Lehman on Frank O'Hara," *Poetry Speaks* (Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks, Inc., 2001): 289.

⁷ O'Hara, Frank. "Why I Am Not a Painter." *Poetry Speaks: Hear Great Poets from Tennyson to Plath* (Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks, Inc., 2001): 289.

Walking the Wings

Catherine Reid

Fear nags like an itch as I imagine how it felt when a rickety biplane circled above and a slender woman slid out of its small cockpit and onto the wing. Or when she did a handstand while several hundred feet above the ground, or hung by her knees from a rope ladder while waving, upside down, at the crowd, or when she braced herself, upright, while the plane she was standing on somersaulted through sky. In exchange for putting her life in the hands of a pilot, she got to be part comet, part bird. I'd like to think that, had I been there, I would have watched without turning away; I'd like to think that I would have wanted to do the same thing.

Instead, I sit inside, eighty years later, and watch video clips of wingwalking women, who seem to wear gladness like a parachute pack, thrilled at the strength of their grips on the stays, in love with the air and the wind hard against them.

Almost everything about their pleasure makes sense: The art of flying was barely twenty years old, they were heady with the newness of planes, and walking wings was a job where they had to wear pants. They also knew about the limited options for women on the ground, and here were people willing to pay money to watch death-defying acts in the realm of wild geese and storms.

I watch the films because I have long dreamed myself in flight, soaring over fields and seas, my body level to the ground, my arms stretched to the sides. I watch because I, too, want to know what it means to feel airborne, though not packed alongside strangers in a pressurized cabin, but in a way that allows for wind and sun and the bite of icy air.

My first time in the small plane, the details are almost too much. Speedometer, altimeter, tachometer, and compass; two fuel

gauges, two spark plug switches, and a level that measures our balance. Also: a pedal under each foot, a control stick between my knees, and a headset to adjust so we can hear each other speak. As soon as our voice check confirms the volume, the pilot switches on the ignition and we taxi down the runway.

The ride over grass is rough and fast, like a tractor through a field at full throttle. I realize then that there were no forms to fill out, no requests for my address or next of kin or method of payment, no questions about whether I'm litigious or not. The pilot simply shook my hand, confirmed I wanted the introductory flight and then described how we would spend the next hour.

We taxi and turn and then we're in the air, five seconds and we're clearing the trees, another and we bank to the right. The patchwork of woods and fields takes shape as we rise, though it's less outline and more texture in this place where big jets don't linger, where wide rivers become snakes within minutes of take-off. Here even our shadow has substance on the ground, and then we're at hawk height, barely buffeted in the clear air, the cars below defined by some other world of noise.

The pilot points out landmarks that he says will help get us home—a barn, a cemetery, a church, a water tower—but the details blur like a ride with Google Earth, though not for lack of shape; it's the perspective that takes me longer to adopt, despite all those years imagining a raptor's point of view. And then, just when I think I could long occupy this space, we begin the descent to a close airstrip, a fast lesson in the coordination of throttle and pedals and lift and angle. How fast we approach the earth! How bumpy the landing! And how thin the fabric stretched over these narrow wings.

Lillian Boyer wasn't the first person to walk on a plane. That distinction belongs to Ormer Locklear, a military trainee who had an excuse—something needed adjusting or had to be repaired—which meant his supervisors let him get away with the

dangerous move. (His real reason was probably the fact that it might be possible, and then again it might not, as was the last stunt he performed while piloting a plane for a Hollywood film, which ended in a tailspin that took him straight into the earth).

Lillian Boyer, on the other hand, was a waitress; she hadn't even been in a plane until the day she went out on a wing. But she wanted to fly; she said so to customers, and two of them managed to arrange it for her. What went through her mind next is anyone's guess—perhaps that where there was pleasure there was often pain; or that terror was a familiar so this would be nothing new; or that standing on a wing might be a way to access heaven. What is known is that, once airborne, she crawled out of her seat and onto the plane's wing. She left no known memoir and no one quotes her experience. In the handed-down story, she simply did it, perching without rope or parachute on the wooden ribs of an early biplane, and then teaming up soon afterward with a daredevil pilot, and with him she began to create her own stunts.

In one photograph I find of the time, she dangles beneath the plane, holding a rope in one hand, looking cheery and amused, as though it's an easy and natural thing to do high about the ground, the grip of her hand alone keeping her from an endlessly long fall. In another image, she stands on the upper wing, both arms raised high in the air, no rope or harness in sight. The houses far below look like Monopoly pieces, the sky a misty element that couldn't possibly contain her.

Another wingwalker, Ethel Dare, raised the risk level even higher. She positioned herself on the edge of a wing while the plane flew within easy view of the crowd, a tricky enough move for anyone to pull off. And then she let go, falling backwards into space. As little girls cried and grown men felt faint, a rope would snap her up short, and then she would climb, hand over hand, back to relative safety. In another, the "Iron Jaw Spin," she twirled below the plane, her contact with it merely her bite

on a special mouthpiece, her body spinning in the propwash that swirled all around her.

And then one day she plummeted into a river after a parachute failed to open, searchers hunting for days without ever finding her body. Or maybe she wasn't killed at all—the newspaper accounts from the time differ dramatically—but instead was banished from flying because she successfully performed a trick right after a man died trying to do the same thing.

But in her heyday she stunned crowds with moves that had to hurt—the snap of the rope, the pound of blood in her head, the burn in her arms as she fought the wind on her return climb—and always there was the possibility that a piece of equipment would fail, a knot might give, her jaw might break. Part of me thinks, *masochist*, or *an inability to feel pain*, though somewhere I know that fear and pain are not always linked, and that fear is an early step toward mastery.

I settle into the door-less plane, glad for the heavy sweatshirt that this time I knew to wear. The sky is clear; the wind speed between four and eight mph. We climb slowly—about 300 vertical feet per mile—until we hit a comfortable cruising speed of 55 mph.

“Do you have the plane?” the pilot James asks.

“I have the plane,” I say, in our one rehearsed line of the day.

Below us the ground is warming up, with patches of heat easing into our small cabin. We detour over an abandoned lithium mine, the pit so deep below the earth that our shadow looks tiny inside. I make the mistake but once of leaning too far out the door, where the wind whips hair into my eyes and pushes the helmet hard against my skull.

Further south, the black lines of an interstate and a state road run perpendicular to our path. They seem innocuous enough, another part of the landscape like pastures or railway

lines. But as soon as we reach them we lift and then sink, lift and then sink, reacting to the columns of hot air that form above the dark pavement. I check the tightness of my seatbelt and re-check our height above ground. The lack of doors only occasionally alarms me.

We hit more rough patches—“clear air turbulence,” says James—and I remember the story of a friend who was once on a jet flying over the Rockies when, without warning, it dropped 3000 feet. Flight attendants and food flew through the plane, everyone roughed up and unnerved by the tumble. Afterward, her seatmate remarked that about 90% of the people on board might never fly again, as such turbulence is so terribly unpredictable. In her case, he was mostly right, as it took years before she could board a jet again.

To our small craft, with its 30' wingspan and 65-hp engine, the heat that rises from every surface not covered in vegetation—meaning every parking lot and industrial site, every city block and roadway—causes us to lift until we pass through it, and then drop, the amount of fall dependent on the differences in temperature.

Approaching the one mountain that rises from the flat land, we circle close enough to see hiking trails and rock faces, and then get distracted by several vultures soaring to our right. “Watch this,” says James, as he retakes the controls and banks into a spiral, chasing one of the birds as it coasts through the thermal. We make one complete rotation but the vulture is far more agile and it lifts a few feathers and puts a half mile between us.

James stays at the controls and lands us at a grass runway, this one owned by a man who also runs a pet crematory. We taxi to the end, right next to the big furnace, which on burn days is a heat source moving large columns of air. As though to confirm the regular presence of hot updrafts, a dozen buzzards

and a pair of red-tailed hawks soar above us, and I know it can't be soon enough that I'll float easily among them.

A bit of searching turns up a YouTube clip of another wingwalker, Gladys Ingle ("a plane-change specialist, who also shot arrows at a target from the top of her wing"). The carefully staged stunt—with a cameraman in close range—is of a mid-air rescue of a plane that has lost a wheel and thus won't be able to land without a terrible crash. The stunt requires no iron jaw or fall through space; Ingle simply has to use every muscle of her body to maintain balance, while she crawls atop the upper wing of the plane, a replacement wheel strapped to her back. And then she *stands up*—the part that's important to replay—she *stands up*, leaning forward as she does so, and then, as the second plane nears, she climbs on, stepping from one plane to the other, a trapeze artist meeting another's wrist mid-air. Only there's no one to catch her, no one to reach a hand, as both pilots are too far away.

But the stunt isn't over; she still has work to do, and after walking to the cockpit, she lowers herself onto the axle, all lithe and agile despite the clumsy load on her back. She then slips the replacement wheel in place and tightens the lug nuts, while hundreds of feet above the earth, the plane moving at a speed that can make breathing difficult. She has no ropes or helmet or parachute. She doesn't even opt to take a seat when the rescue work is done. Instead, she stands between the wings, her legs absorbing the shock as the plane returns to earth. "Come watch," I tell my partner. "You've got to see this trick." But skeptical of the whole venture, she chooses to keep her distance.

My grandmother once suggested that I would be happier if I were part-bird, though not *Siren* or *Harpy* or other hybrid from myth. I imagine she envisioned something along the lines of a great blue heron, which lived in a lakeside cabin and had meaningful

work nearby. She seemed to sense how loosely connected I feel to the earth, though neither of us was ever pressed to explain what that meant. All our shared life we shared birds, which gave her considerable pleasure and relieved me from a frightening homelife, and when I was little she was safe and she took me on adventures, and that's probably all a child needs to attach to a person and a passion.

As for the wingwalker Jessie Woods: The passion in her early life was music, not flying or wingwalking, though she soon became famous for both. Her downfall was the handsome barnstormer who had landed in a nearby field; within weeks they had eloped and she left home for good. Unlike the other stuntwomen, however, Jessie Woods went out on the wing because the man on whom she had staked her life insisted she do so. The two of them were broke and hungry, he thought it was a good idea, and a woman, Woods would later write, did as her husband bid.

"Nothing I had ever experienced," she says in her memoir, *On the Wing*, "was like the terrifying blast of air that slapped my body... As I pulled myself cautiously out of the cockpit, air tore around the edges of my helmet and my goggles went askew. At 114 pounds, I was no match for that wind. My hand blew backwards as I reached for a wire, my shirt flapped, my eyes teared, and the sound that filled my helmet was deafening."

She thought she would die—as did her husband, who hadn't calculated on the terrific drag created by her body—a certainty relived again and again throughout her career. And yet she persisted, she and Jimmy forming the Flying Aces Air Circus, the longest running of all the early air shows. Over the course of their nine-year run, she learned how to fly and parachute and repair aircraft. She survived stunts that went terribly awry, suffered a miscarriage after one messy crash, and at various times in the subsequent years broke both ankles, a leg and four vertebrae in her back, and one by one all of her fingers and

toes. (“I wondered how many came to [our shows],” she writes, “and went home disappointed that we *lived!*”)

Yet she also admits to a kind of elation, a reason of her own that kept her taking to the air. As she says in *Wings of Our Past*, a film made after her induction into the Aviation Hall of Fame, “It used to be you could go out at dawn, untie the airplane and knock the dew off of it. You could climb in and take off and it was just YOU. There wasn’t anyone else there. Just you and God and sky and the airplane.”

It’s a feeling I too want to know, though for now I’ll settle for the other sensations she describes—the smells from the open cockpit of gas and grass and the wet earth below, along with the cold morning air and the sun on my shoulders. And though fear may take hold, as when we circle to the left and I wonder if my seatbelt will hold (only once has it popped open when in flight); or a dog darts toward the runway just as we begin our approach; or a downdraft hits the plane as we’re yawed at a hard angle and for a moment our precarious balance goes awry; still, when we’re level again and the horizon’s a distant line, it’s the image of the wingwalkers’ balance and blown bodies that serve as my bridge to the joy of this air.

PIANO LOVE

J. E. Robinson

There are no words for it. I cannot help you; I am safe here, where Memory cannot find me. I hide from it, and dare no one to come. I am as lost as when I am doodling poetry, and, really, I do not wish to be found.

I could see myself in a dive. Cigarette smoke mists as easily as the mildew. I have a seat near the toilet. When someone must go, their crotch brushes against the table, disturbing my drink. They mouth a “sorry.” That’s okay. In these dives, mob-owned, all cocktails are water, mostly.

Like almost everyone, though, I am not there to drink. I am into the music. The stand-up bass fills my gut. I tap my toes to the drummer’s beat. But, that piano—my! That piano!—the piano bids me to sing.

This is American café-society at mid-century. Unlike its French father, neither politics nor philosophy is debated here. Or, perhaps both are. Perhaps, between the sets, the conversations run from cool to hot, comparative debates about West Coast and bop. These are the last purveyors. Soon, bills will drive them to pop music, to Los Angeles or to Detroit (or, maybe, just down Broadway), because poppers made an easier living. But, the fans are still here. For decades, we will frequent this dive and keep it open all hours. And, each time, it will be the piano bringing us back. Piano man! Play!

If the truth be told, my mother’s ambition was that I play the piano. It justified purchasing a spinet. When I was six, she took me to piano lessons with Mrs. Penny, a teacher who lived on a dead-end in Little Mexico.

I don’t know how old Mrs. Penny was. She seemed ancient, with grey naps braided down her forehead. Her eyes were a peculiar color, a sort of blue tint with clouded, red whites. Mom

said that was from glaucoma. “You can get that, when you are old,” she said.

I thought she was funny looking; I knew she was frumpy. She had a formality that would keep any child in check, including me, because I had the habit of flinging my hands off the keys when I played. I had seen Liberace do that on *Batman*.

“You needn’t do that,” Mrs. Penny said gently.

I said nothing. I had practiced. I must.

After that, I practiced even less.

He had spun around, smiling, when I asked my question. He had yet to know that question was my standard pick-up line. Instead, he thought it kismet that he would walk the priest’s dog before that house, just as I returned with my week’s laundry. Perhaps he thought I was clairvoyant. Really, he was too young to suspect it was all of the above.

“How did you know I like music?”

His question is still with me, sixteen years later. Sometimes, I tell myself that telling him the answer would have made him stay.

About this, there is little debate. The nineteenth century was the age of the pianist. Beethoven began it. His mastery brought Viennese society to its knees. Brahms did the same, when he played. Edvard Grieg was considered by many to have been among the finest of his generation. That is saying something, for his generation featured Clara Schumann. Clara Schumann, the queen of the piano.

No one doubted the king. He was Franz Liszt, Superstar. He was superstar long before Webber and Rice brought the name to Broadway. “Superstar,” in the proverbial “rock star” way. Dark featured, hypnotic-eyed, Liszt’s touch devastated more than just the piano, and, we are told, his appearance made mortals swoon. Of the same patronage that “created” Franz Josef Haydn, Liszt

entered the stage before the nineteenth century had reached postgraduate age, and held it until the century was in its dotage.

Recorded sound had begun by then. Have we any of him? We do, in the piano pieces Liszt composed for himself, whose technicality confounded almost everyone. Sweet, perhaps, it would have been, to have heard Liszt play just one of them. Had we, then, easily, we could have slept in happiness.

But, as much as Liszt was king, Frederic Chopin had majesty. In a tender way, his compositions reflect his long, supple fingers caressing the keys, making the piano sing. Yes, Liszt, like Beethoven, beat the piano into submission as if they beat a drum, but Chopin emphasized the piano’s less percussive elements, the elements that turned it into the human voice’s rival. Lovely, at Chopin’s hand, almost as a lover.

About this, there is even less debate.

On an early date, he put on *Man without a Face*, then stepped out. Why did he do that? Was there something he had gleaned about me that commended this Mel Gibson tale? Somehow, it seemed to have been his way of relating, of saying we, too, were of that protagonist’s family, as if he had read the book in his childhood, but couldn’t bring himself to admitting such.

I sat and watched the movie; I, too, had been scarred by a private school experience. Just as I began wondering if my date would ever come back, I heard his music emanating from an adjacent room.

It was also a spinet. Its cabinet was key black. My date played the thing easily, a thing that had melded into his hands.

His playing transported me to half-life. I remembered a ten year old, when I was fifteen, talking about Chopin while we were paired for golf lessons. He, too, had glasses and a strange nose, just like this guy.

“What Chopin do you like?” I asked then, playing the little adult.

“I like his nocturnes,” the boy said. “I can play it for you some time.”

Yes, I heard his Chopin nocturne as an adult. I abandoned the Mel Gibson.

My date anticipated me coming. Like the Pied Piper, he looked up and raised his eyebrows, asking whether it was any good (or, perhaps saying, years later, “I told you I would play for you.”).

“Do you know this one?” he asked.

“Chopin, Ninth Nocturne, number one.”

“Yeah, but do you know which opus number?”

I smiled. “Let’s not be that big of a shit.”

Smiling as well, he recapitulated. “Why not?” Well, at least he was not offended. “Sit down. Let me play some more for you.”

I could be entranced by so many things, such as poetry, but a piano in the hands of a person bent upon seduction is real seduction, indeed. I can ask for nothing better. Knowing it to be so, I ought not seek anything worse.

I heard Vladimir Ashkenazy dance in the Schubert piano trios. He sounded as though he were having the greatest fun. Ashkenazy’s playing is like that. It strides forth like a saucy child leading a parade. His thump in the bass is a clod-step upon that stride. His trickle in the treble is as tickling a puppy’s stomach. Yes, I could see him smile. It is a nice smile, like Puck.

Jazz is replete with pianists. Listeners marvel at that odd logic dominating Thelonius Monk’s compositions. On recordings, Count Basie was good for the well-placed “plunkety-plunk” whenever his band played, so nondescript that they were the elements of genius. Oscar Peterson had that quality; often, he soloed, though.

No slouch, especially when accompanying himself, Fats Waller entertained piano fans from the time he hit New York to

his early death. He was a large man. Still, he had a dainty sound. He could be comical at the keys, almost as funny as his singing. Between the two, Fats Waller entertained his audiences, until a superior artist entered his presence.

“Excuse me, ladies and gentlemen,” he was said to have said once, “but God has entered the room.”

In the world of jazz pianists, Art Tatum *was* God. He was a tall man with a tall sound. I have heard it in recordings: did that man really have only ten fingers? He sounded far more proficient. It had the grandeur reserved for sunlight filtered by trees.

For my money, however, I enjoy Bill Evans. Lyrical, his playing emphasizes tenderness, not power, most enjoyable for the quiet times the turbulent, such as I, crave. It soothes my wild rages. It is pleasantry, really, just right for patience.

I listen to Bill Evans often, especially on Miles Davis recordings. He is a splendid contrast to John Coltrane’s jitting saxophone.

My date looked up from the keyboard as he tried his hand at a new piece. It seemed innocent enough, but not really. The truth was that this could also have been seduction. Would I have minded? Really, I didn’t. I had never minded being seduced by such an enticing young man.

At his hand, I could have succumbed. I could have allowed this piece to have been a *bolero*, the way Duke Ellington allowed remade directions to change into his signature tune at the hands of Billy Strayhorn. For my date, seduction may have crossed his mind. I would like to think that he thought about it a couple of times, planned it over and over in his head as he practiced the piece, then went to bed thinking I would follow—I *must*, if dreams could turn real in this world.

“Is this good, John?” he asked.

His smile, his look, suggested things (I am sorry, but I let my mind wander here, and modesty dictates that I leave you engaged by the piano).

“You play well.”

“Good enough to play professionally?” he asked.

“Well—“

He shook his head. “Not good enough to play professionally. I’m just a plunker, that’s all. Need to practice more. I just don’t practice all the time.”

With that, he reverted to Beethoven. There was the sound of moonlight glittering from the keys. I returned the pipe to my mouth. The bite was gone completely.

We do love the piano. For almost two centuries, it has been music lovers’ most popular instrument. Perhaps it is because it speaks to the soul, like the voice of a lover, a voice that whispers in a phrase, that rages and quiets, that coos. In the hands of a master, the piano makes love to our senses. And we recline with its sound, steadied and still, and enjoy the heat of a beloved’s body blushing our cheek.

Drops of Water

Adrienne Ross

When I was twenty-three, I knew more about first strike capacity than I did my heart’s desires. It was the early 1980’s. The world was filled with terrifying inventions of death. Trident submarines. Pershing missiles. Cruise missiles. Neutron bombs. Like many, I feared the Cold War’s escalating hostility between the U. S. and the Soviet Union would spark a pre-emptive “first strike” of nuclear warheads that could eventually engulf the world. England and Western Europe were reeling with protests and peace encampments over America’s missile deployments against the Soviet Union. In America, the nuclear freeze movement was spreading. One night, driving home along upstate New York’s country roads, I pulled my Dodge Dart over and stared as I mistook a meteor shower for falling missiles. And so, I helped create an Albany household dedicated to opposing Knolls Atomic Power Laboratory sites critical to the Trident’s development: a GE laboratory in Niskayuna and a Navy site in West Milton where sailors trained to operate the submarines. It seemed petty to hear my half-voiced dream of becoming a writer. Believing I had no story worth telling, lacking the experience that births voice, my silence felt more immovable than changing the world.

My housemates and I lived with cars parked in front of our house, the motors left running, and men wearing sunglasses sitting inside scribbling notes. We organized non-violent civil disobediences, teach-ins and concerts, shared ideological battles and broken hearts over dinners of barley mushroom soup and tofu enchiladas. I remember black-bearded Clay’s hands stabbing the air as he praised pacifism. There was Nancy, home after an arrest at the Pentagon, her brown curls bobbing as she canned tomatoes. Cate had married, divorced, and traveled much of Australia before joining our house and organizing battered women’s shelters. I remember Siobhan’s blue eyes, ready

laugh, and amazing ability to bake cheesecakes from scratch. Pony-tailed Reuben filled his room with teddy bears and had a political meeting, affinity group, or organizing committee to attend almost every night. Mike slept on the floor alongside books by Thomas Merton. And myself.

I grew up in bone dry suburban boredom where I saw photographs of Martin Luther King, Jr. looking off at a mountain top while standing on a Memphis balcony, evening news shots of body bags shipped from Vietnam and stacked on glimmering tarmacs, Bobby Kennedy's open eyes watching his death. My father was becoming paralyzed from Parkinsons Disease. I watched in terror over the injustice done to him, in guilt and anger over my powerlessness, and in hope that there was something I could do if not for him than for the world. After college I was adrift, eager for experience, lonely and failing at jobs. And so, I joined a community dedicated to peace and non-violence. I wanted a refuge of friends, an identity, and a more passionate life than one I thought capable of creating. I couldn't hope to call myself a writer, but even then I knew when I needed raw material.

* * *

We worked as graduate assistants, community organizers and human service workers, and filled our home with golden pothos, posters of Nelson Mandela and Steven Biko, second hand sofas, bickering cats, and creaking bookcases filled with well-thumbed volumes of Marx, Millet, Zora Neale Hurston, and Martin Luther King Jr. We turned the backyard into a garden of sweet peas, cauliflower, cucumbers, a lifetime supply of zucchini. A calendar hung on the avocado green refrigerator, its date squares showing who pulled chef's duty and each night's non-violence training, war tax resisters' potluck, affinity group meeting, draft registration counseling session, teach-in, or disarmament meeting.

Every Monday, Nancy or Siobhan used the onion scraps, carrot peelings and other remnants of a week's cooking to make

a brown, bitter soup served with cornbread. The money saved by Simple Meal was donated to food banks or shelters. We knew that being white and middle class made Simple Meal a choice not a necessity, yet like growing our food and turning off lights, it was a way of replacing the fear of nuclear annihilation with a daily life infused with meaning. Even small actions could disavow the insatiable materialism driving America's need for a military capable of securing third world resources. Yet instead of guilt, a calm fell over the house on Monday nights. As we sat crossed legged on the dining room's wood floor, our chipped plates atop a door-sized board laid across cinder blocks, our voices were softer, our jokes less rapid, our political disputes silenced. I never felt the sustenance of matching principles to action. I just felt hungry.

Tuesday nights we gathered for house meetings, never to be interrupted, especially by the tapped hall phone. It could be days before a workshop, demonstration or civil disobedience, and the black rotary phone would start ringing, only to go dead if we picked it up, and once the receiver was set down, start ringing and ringing and ringing grating on nerves stretched from in-house romances gone sour and the inevitable clashes of seven iconoclastic people. Listening through memory, as though still sipping ruby mist tea and sitting cross-legged on the wood floor, I can hear how we argued whether we should have a Thanksgiving dinner with its celebration of imperialism (and if we did, should we have a turkey?), whether we should squish the cabbage worms chewing holes in our broccoli or follow St. Francis and let all creatures share the bounty, whether violence was justified even after Nancy and I were attacked in a park. Siobhan would darn socks as we tried to determine if it was ethical to work in an economic system where the bulk of our tax dollars went to the military. Yet how could we reach the Knolls sailors and scientists if our lives were so different from theirs?

Right and wrong answers stalked whether I walked snow-covered streets or carpooled to a meeting, whether Malvina Reynolds croaked *We Don't Need the Men* or *Walls to Rose* played on the stereo. There was never a moment I could be myself (whoever that was) rather than a reflection of my politics. Call it raising consciousness. Or idealism. Or self-censorship. I bellowed certainties where every 23 year old deserves to have questions. Poems and stories withered. Journal entries rambled into angry, unfinished paragraphs.

Thursday nights were quiet. At 5:30 a.m. every Friday, Siobhan and I drove north on highways and back roads past dairy farms and apple orchards. We reached the West Milton site in time to leaflet sailors starting their morning shift. Meanwhile, Reuben, Clay and Cate gathered with other activists to leaflet the Niskayuna site's physicists, engineers and office workers. At our height, we were leafleting 450 – 500 sailors or Knolls workers weekly.

Siobhan and I took our places along an intersection of white houses and trimmed lawns. Atomic Project Road veered into a dirt road ending at a chain link fence and barbed wire. A guard would drive up, exchange "hello's" and weather forecasts, write down our license plate number and ask for a leaflet. Some weeks Siobhan selected articles on disarmament or US – Soviet relations from *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*. Other weeks it was writings from Martin Luther King or Andre Sakharov, news clips or reports on economic conversion to a peacetime economy, radiation safety, or fact-sheets ("At the moment of an explosion of a medium sized nuclear bomb the initial wave of radiation can kill unprotected human beings in an area of 6 square miles...") With a wave and "See you next week" the guard would drive away.

In summer, I shivered in the dawn. In winter, I shook under long johns, blue jeans, a green wool sweater beneath a

tan wool sweater beneath a beige wool sweater, a double-lined coat, and a wool hat. Siobhan would be muffled under layers of long-johns, Icelandic wool sweaters, and a black muffler, her blonde braid swaying to the knees of her corduroy pants as she stamped booted feet on icy ground. I heard her laugh with the joyful grace of doing one's proper work.

Sailors drove up on Harley's, in red Fords or blue Chevy pick-ups. They would take a leaflet with a soft-spoken "Thank you, ma'am," or flirtatious invitations for a beer at the local bar. I heard flat mid-western voices, southern drawls, New Englanders' elongated vowels. "We're all going to die one day, sweetheart," said one beefy, middle-aged lifer as he patted my hand while taking a leaflet. "It's nothing to be afraid of." Other sailors were disillusioned, and Clay and Siobhan helped several secure conscientious objector discharges.

I was desperate to leave after twenty minutes. I returned every week for almost three years. I loved the morning's first light gleaming against the trees, the unmoving donkey in a pasture of ice-frosted grass, the squeals of children in snowsuits running to reach the school bus. All could be gone in a flash. No matter how loudly I grumbled during the morning drive, I never questioned that each leaflet's message was more important than sleep, warmth, putting my pen to paper.

I trusted the power of other people's words. What significance could my words have compared to saving the world? But did the world want to be saved? I didn't understand that saving the world is like doing the housework: dust is always gathering in the corner; another shirt is always dropped on the floor. I learned (eventually) to be reasonably good at leafleting, meeting, phoning, organizing, planting and picking kale. I respect its importance thirty years later. But was this the work I was meant to do? What if I had something to say that had nothing to do with what I was supposed to believe? What if I had lessons to learn about power, evil, and idealism that had everything and

nothing to do with social change? And what was the point of saving the world, anyway, if all it brought me was a nagging itch left unscratched: my life as a writer.

I thought speaking truth to power would magically change the world and me along with it. What I know now is that social change, like writing, requires the daily work of moving beyond inspiration to finishing the imperfect attempt, practicing craft, revising, coming to the imperfect conclusion and using that as material to try again to create something beautiful. Those West Milton mornings were an initiation into honoring the difficult, necessary dream. They remain a sustaining grace when I send out an essay or story to an inevitable volley of rejections and a rare, vital publication.

Siobhan would have the heat on full blast when we drove home comparing sailor's comments, or the controversies and romances coursing through the peace and justice community. Some days I never lost a chill beneath my skin.

* * *

Eventually the house ripped apart. Arrests at the Pentagon. Arrests at Knolls. Court appearances. Broken romances. The gut-kick of Reagan's Presidency. The exhaustion of organizing rallies, concerts, civil disobediences, teach-ins, the weekly leaflets, the next series of meetings. Slowly, we went our own ways, and when we did, others arrived to take up leafleting and other actions at Knolls well into the mid-1990's.

For the next decade, I lobbied legislators, staffed information booths, and slammed bulging files atop calendars scribbled with meetings. Sometimes a beam of light would break across my cluttered desk. I'd glimpse in the shimmering gold and silver motes the halting first lines of a haiku, a sestina, a short story. Instead I wrote newsletters, position papers, grants. What was my life in the face of disarmament, violence against women,

other struggles? What did I have to say? I banked my small stories like embers between black coals.

Exhausted by thirty, a cross-country road trip gave much needed solitude. The only voice I heard was mine as I drove under western skies or up a foggy coast. Writing classes eased out meetings as I settled in my new Seattle home. Then the legislature passed a law I'd fought for that created funding for battered women's shelters and stricter penalties for abuse. I was 34, and a black and white suit with shoulder pads had long since replaced blue jeans by the time I attended the Governor's bill signing ceremony. But a rebel pounded within my heartbeat.

The next Saturday I sat in the armchair of a Whidbey Island retreat center. I wrote down every lecture series, concert, phone bank or rally organized, every information booth staffed, every politician lobbied, every political action I could remember from 15 years as an activist. I wrote through a rainstorm, cups of tea, and a croissant and yogurt lunch. By late afternoon I looked at my list. I had changed the world. Not completely. Far from it. Perhaps hardly at all. But just enough. In that newfound freedom was one last barricade to topple. I gave myself permission to write.

Gingerly, I took up my pen. Afternoon darkened to evening. A crescent moon cut the rain clouds. British grandmothers sipped tea as they shared stories of spirit guides. Silence fell as strangers went to their beds. I stayed in my chair, my fingers sore as I wrote.

* * *

These days I live a few hours from a Trident base. Sometimes when I cross the Hood Canal Bridge I see a submarine gliding dark, silent, deadly. We are both still here. Did those long-ago meetings and leaflets matter? I keep my faith in the small, cumulative acts of ordinary people. Without those soft, persistent drops of water upon a stone the world would be far worse.

I've not given up trying to change the world. I turn off lights in empty rooms, eat low on the food chain, vote in every election and volunteer at get-out-the-vote drives, write elected officials, and make a living raising money largely for environmental and social change organizations. I can't attend political meetings without becoming claustrophobic. But I don't see my politics as being opposed to my writing, as if each was located on the Grand Canyon's opposite rims. After decades navigating both landscapes, I've found a wild, shared river carrying the power of imagination and the capacity to transform. If politics flows downstream to an estuary of agendas and answers, then creativity flows upstream to headwaters of questions. These days, I try to keep my creative writing close to my blood and bone. I trust that unseen ripples of change flow from my words.

I'm sure the woman I was then would be appalled by the woman I am now were we to meet in a ground beyond time and space. Perhaps I would envy her passion while abhorring her certainties. Perhaps she would abhor my commitment to creativity while envying the freedom that comes from growing a true self rather than being a correct one.

On my writing desk there's a note that reads: *Do the work you were meant to do, no matter how small and humble, no matter how exciting someone else's work, no matter how glamorous the work you could be doing.* I don't know who first wrote those words. Sometimes I wonder if I did.

Anonymous Told Me So

Patricia Schultheis

Eight months and eight days into widowhood I experienced one of those bouts of sleeplessness where the Great God Insomnia snatched me up and rattled me awake. This particular reentry was especially brutal: nothing felt familiar. Not the fan's shadow on the ceiling. Not the touch of the sheets to my skin.

We members of bereavement groups know the Great God Insomnia is wickedly cruel, and our best hope is to outsmart him. And sometimes we do, having discovered that if oblivion is sleep's objective, then oblivion by any other name is television, the internet, or, my personal favorite, reading.

Like the bedside books of many insomniac readers, mine are a schizoid jumble of incongruities: *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* on top of *In Cold Blood*; a catalog from a cosmetics company named Bliss on the Bible; a thirty-five cent paperback potboiler by Harold Robbins on *The Last Days of Socrates by Plato*. And then there's Kierkegaard's *Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing*, a lying title if ever I read one. I willed and willed my husband's cancer gone, but still Bill, like sleep, was snatched away, leaving my only purity a heart burning with a rage that rendered me fit company only for books.

Although an hour with any of the above titles surely could have triggered that vague shift in consciousness signalling me it was time to mark the page and close the covers, I opened, instead, *The Spiral Staircase* by British writer Karen Armstrong. Of all the books on my bedside table hers alone had a singular distinction: it had come from a library.

I believe a library brought Bill and myself together. New to teaching and to Baltimore, some forty years ago, I had noticed at lunch how a funny history teacher flirted with the Baltimore Colt cheerleader and ninth-grade math teacher beside me. But then I had let drop an idle remark about how I had just visited

Baltimore's esteemed Enoch Pratt Free Library, and how its magisterial main hall and massive collection had thrilled me. And suddenly the funny history teacher turned from the cheerleader and noticed me. Oh, yes, he did.

For forty-one years, Bill had been an ardent and utterly egalitarian bibliophile. His detailed lists of titles and authors totalled more than a book a day some years. Such a passionate reader needed a library nearby, so once, twice, a week he'd sail off to our local branch bemoaning its shortened summertime hours, or how its new releases were only weak reflections of Harold Robbins at his most mediocre.

Me, I read much more slowly and, even with easy renewals, I prefer to own my books. (Also, I'm something of a snob.) But sometimes I'd go along with Bill and sniff among the shelves, remarking that they didn't hold a single copy of *Little Dorrit*, but two of *The Lipstick Jungle*.

In May of 2007, Bill was hospitalized, near death, although, at that point cancer was merely suspected. Once he became stabilized and the definitive, fatal diagnosis was given, what he railed against was not his disease, but how his weakened state had reduced his concentration so severely he couldn't read. Deprived of reading he couldn't recognize himself; he had become a stranger to his own mind and saw no clear path through his final days.

Then, thanks to chemotherapy, he rallied. His concentration returned, and he read first the newspaper, then magazines, and, then, by mid-June, books. Off we'd sail to the library, oxygen tank in tow. By mid-July, his cancer had responded so favorably he no longer needed the oxygen and went to the library by himself. All summer and fall he'd sit on our patio, a cup of coffee at his elbow and a book before him.

As winter came and the new year began, and chemo became less and less effective, books, the respite and relief they gave, became ever more critical. In the first four months of 2008, he

read fifty-five. Gregory Pegg's *The Holy War* was the last title entered in his journal. The date is April 6, 2008. One month and one day later he died.

And so, eight months and eight days afterwards, bowing to The Great God Insomnia, I groped for Karen Armstrong's book. It appealed to me for several reasons. First, both Armstrong and I carry the indelible stamp of Catholicism. Secondly, she is refreshingly candid about her epilepsy, a disease my oldest grandchild has. But more than anything, widowhood has taught me what Armstrong refers to as her sense of isolation from what others regard as life.

A former nun, Armstrong tried and failed to find her niche. But not academia, not teaching secondary school, or a television career was a fitting home for her learned mind and questing spirit. Remaining on the periphery of life, she observed it, feeling herself, as we in bereavement groups say of ourselves, adrift.

We know well that sense of bifurcation. Our internal, broken-hearted lives, our real lives, are always more vivid than whatever the rest of the world sees us doing. Going to cookouts, getting our tires rotated, having our teeth cleaned, we seem like real people, but those are only our outer husks. Our real selves are buried deep inside and weeping.

The fall after Bill died, partly because I noticed myself avoiding places especially associated with him, and partly because buying books seemed like an indulgence on a widow's income, I went to our neighborhood library. Having heard an interview with Armstrong on the radio, I got her book. I must have handed my card to the librarian. Maybe I even thanked her. I don't know. I wasn't there, you see. My real me was seeing Bill the last time we had come to that library. There he was, slumped in a chair by the window, too weak to search the shelves himself. My real me was hearing him say, each time I bought him a new release for approval, "Nothing too thick. I can't hold them."

The night I reached for Armstrong's book, the Great God Insomnia had tag-teamed with this acute sense of isolation, making me feel that I was the only person awake. Anywhere.

And so I read on toward the final chapter where Armstrong, her television career and her association with her literary agent ended, resolves, in a Damascene moment, to write a book about God. Liking herself to a knight questing for the Holy Grail, she embarks into a dark, unknown landscape, her only certainty that the well-traveled paths that had ended in success for others, had led to disaster for herself.

The stillness and the night grew denser, until, on page 271, in the demi-darkness I discovered . . . a miracle. A pencilled message. On a common Post-it note. But a miracle nonetheless. From Anonymous.

On one of those commonplace little squares Anonymous had written three words: "This is true." And, then, so there could be no mistake, he'd drawn an arrow pointing like the finger of God to Armstrong's words: "In the past my own practice of religion had diminished me, whereas true faith, I now believe, should make you more human than before."

What an act of faith on the part of Anonymous, that having no certainty and only thin hope someone would read his note, he had posted it anyway.

Of all God's creatures we humans alone have this singular ability to read and write. Separating us from all other animals, it connects us one to another. On papyrus, on paper, on Post-it notes, we make hatchmarks, little more than lines and loops, really, and execute a private transaction between two minds. We humans alone can obliterate the barriers of time and space to connect to one another. And to what's most human in ourselves.

I'd like to say that reading the note by Anonymous was a transformative moment. That I was inspired to shove my widow's weeds into tassled saddlebags and ride off to slay The Great God Insomnia.

But life is not fiction. The work of widowhood is more akin to Armstrong's own struggles when she resolved to write her book about God, and in so doing knitted together her inner and outer selves.

Finding your authentic self after your spouse dies is not easy. But it is not remarkable either. In every marriage, some one will do it. Their only hope will be to grope their way forward, finding guideposts wherever they can. As individual as their marriage was, so will be their guideposts.

Mine are books stacked on my bedside table, the memory of a good man's abiding love, and the bravery of people like Anonymous who leave breadcrumbs that sparkle like diamonds in the darkness. At the moment, as I stumble down this treacherous path, I have no certainty my severed selves will reconnect, or that one day I will emerge as a newly authentic me. But, if I am to live, my only way is forward. This I believe. This is true. Anonymous told me so.

Summertime Stars

Jessica P. Shelenberger

After making it through ten years of marriage and at least five different houses, Mom and Dad decided to make their first serious attempt at cultivating vegetables during the summer of 1991. Like the fish in an old man's big catch story, the garden just kept getting bigger and bigger. First it was just for a few rows of corn and tomatoes. But by the time growing season was well underway and the fireflies and mosquitoes were as thick as the humid mid-summer air, it had grown to include rows and rows of beans and peppers and onions and zucchini and watermelon and squash. I was eleven then, and I remember the garden was twice the size of the living room in our white two-story farmhouse.

During the week while Dad was on the road, Mom, my little sister Lizzy and I would spend a lot of time weeding and watering the fertile plot, which was wedged between a chicken coop and another barn, both which housed rusting farm equipment and tools. The nearly two-acre homestead site on State Route 294 near Bucyrus had ceased to be a working farm long before our family moved into the rented home. But the house, barns and dandelion-dotted yards were situated in the midst of flat farmlands; corn, bean, and wheat fields surrounded all sides of the property. They were fields that stretched to the end of the earth, fields that were interrupted only by occasional clumps of woods and by other farms that were miles away.

The weekends were reserved for serious work in the garden—the kind of stuff only Dad could do. Even if such “manly tasks” needed to be done during the week, they always waited until the weekend when he got home from his over-the-road trucking job. One particular weekend of that vegetable-garden-summer stands out in my memory. I don't remember what big task Dad had to do in the garden that Saturday. He might have spread manure from a neighboring farm on the already black-

ened soil. Or he might have spent the day wielding the new tiller or spraying pesticides from the giant yellow and green plastic bottle. He might have even just spent a few hours watering the garden and meticulously checking the leaves for bugs, especially the plump, green tomato worms that made me shriek and run from the plants in fear. I think he secretly loved finding those worms, just to see me squirm and scream.

Whatever it was he did that muggy July day, Dad was spent by the time our regular summer barbeque dinner of hamburgers, corn on the cob, potato chips and macaroni salad was finished, just as dusk set in.

“Shit, I'm tired,” he groaned, rubbing his broad forehead, nose and dimpled chin in one long stroke that carefully bypassed his bushy red mustache.

Lizzy and I sat beside him silently on the cement back stoop. We were tired, too, from any number of our summertime activities—splashing each other around the red and rusty hand pump atop the well; exploring the dusty loft in the big white barn that reeked of moldy hay and decaying rodent droppings; or gathering “pig farm flowers,” at the neighbor's house up the road, the simple tangerine-colored daylilies that were a constant in our summer scenery.

In the space between the stoop and the garage, the smell of the charcoal barbeque hung in the air, and it mixed with the smells of dirt, Dad's sweet sweat and his just-finished can of Old Milwaukee. Our skinny, sunburned and scratched legs stretched out beside Dad's, which were covered in a pair of stained Levi's. In fact, most of his body was covered, despite the day's heat. All the sun saw of his body that day, and others like it, was his hairy forearms—unevenly tanned, the “trucker's tan,” he calls it—which stuck out from his plaid button-up short-sleeved shirt.

Dad fished a lighter and a pack of Salem Lights out of the breast pocket of that shirt and with a quick flick of his wrist, lit the cigarette and inhaled deeply. Lizzy and I compared the mos-

quito bite scabs we had on our arms, while Mom labored away in the kitchen, cleaning up the dishes from dinner. The clank of silverware in the sink rang out through the screened windows.

“Let’s go out back and check out this sky,” Dad said abruptly, standing up. Eager to be spending time with our father, Lizzy and I leapt up to follow him in his grass-stained tennis shoes, back beyond the stoned driveway, beyond the chicken coop and garden, back to the beginning of the farmer’s lane, which ran in between a corn field and a bean field. It was the grassy lane along which we had discovered a den of foxes only a few weeks before, when we were poking along with Dad in his red Chevy pickup.

We settled on the ground behind the big white barn after Dad made sure to pick just the right spot—a slight rise in the yard leading up to the foundation of the barn, where there was a natural hill perfect for reclining. There were fewer fireflies in this part of the yard. The orange glow from Dad’s cigarette provided a little bit more light in the increasing darkness. But I wasn’t scared to be there. I was with Dad.

When he stretched his arms up to create a pillow behind his head, Lizzy and I mimicked him. We laid there, lined up in a row with straw-like grass poking our arms. We stared up at the clear violet-black sky. None of us said a word for what seemed like twenty minutes. It was likely just two or three.

“That looks like the big dipper,” Dad said, breaking the silence.

“Which stars, Dad?” I asked. “Aren’t there other ones, too? Mrs. Stocksdales at school said...”

I didn’t finish my sentence. I wanted him to point out the constellations to us. Even at eleven, I knew that it was a special moment with my father.

In a rare moment of patience—spending the week alone in a semi never encouraged the trait—he pointed out which stars connect to make the rectangular shape that is part of Ursa Major. His giant hands loomed above us as they aimed at

the sky. Then he fell silent again, continuing to stare up at the thousands of light seeds.

* * *

“D’ya remember looking at the stars at the house out on 294?” Dad asked me last week, during our weekly Thursday morning cell phone call.

I was driving to a women’s Bible study in town. Dad was on the road, too, heading toward Atlanta, his big rig pulling a load of washer parts.

“Yeah, we leaned against that hill behind the barn,” I offer, curious as to what his expression is. I can picture him gripping the tire-sized steering wheel with his right hand while holding his leather-encased cell phone in the left. “Funny I call it a hill, though, Dad. It was more like a bump. Nothing like the real hills out here.”

A couple of months before, I got into the habit of calling him once a week after Mom, exasperated at being the messenger for all family news, said to me, “Why don’t you talk to your father yourself?” I chose Thursday mornings because I always had time to call him on the way to my Bible study, and Dad was usually nearing his destination after a long night of driving. The morning call often helped to keep him awake during those last miles to the truck terminal.

At first the calls were awkward. In my twenty-five years, I’ve never spent any considerable time talking to my Dad about anything important. In fact, I often felt like he was a stranger to me, this guy who showed up on the weekends, made a mean barbeque, changed the oil in the cars, gave us a quick squeeze, and headed out again with an insulated coffee mug in one hand and his suitcase in the other. Growing up, I was often angry at him for missing academic award banquets and choir performances and countless other events. Now that I’ve learned to manage my own finances and some of the ins and outs of being married

and having children, I see that while Dad's job allowed him to provide for us, it also pained him to miss out on so much of our growing up. Dad's never expressed this to me; his inexpressive demeanor provides a textbook case for male communication patterns. But I've not explored my feelings with him regarding his absence, either, so we're both to blame for the uncomfortable emotional gap that exists between us.

During the mornings we've talked, with both of us focused on the roads before us, Dad has been nostalgic once or twice, evoking memories of times we spent together as a family. His stories always surprise me and instantly prompt a longing in me for my Ohio childhood home, with its flat fields, big white barns and ever-present pig farm flowers.

When we talked last week about stargazing, though, I noticed that longing for home was a bit stronger—likely because Tim and I had just purchased our first home in his small Western Pennsylvania hometown.

"Ya know, Dad, Micah isn't gonna grow up with an appreciation for home like that—farms and cow manure and flat corn fields that go on forever," I say, almost daring him to say something emotional in response.

I glance at the hilly landscape around me and continue.

"My little boy is going to be a small college-town kid, like Tim, a kid who won't know what it's like to ride a lawnmower or have a bonfire in his backyard."

A silence follows, but I expect it after offering an emotionally charged statement like that to Dad. He just doesn't share his feelings easily; he's the kind of guy who says "I love you," only after you've said it to him first.

"Well, ya know, everybody has a place that's home, that they consider to be home," he says. I imagine him rubbing his face, trying to invigorate his sleepy eyes or relieve a headache. He might even be scratching his mustache, I think, though now the red puff is speckled with white and grey hairs.

"Kinda like Nevada will always be home to me, even though it's a dumpy little burgh now," he adds. "It's just about where you grow up. I have all kinds of memories there."

I think about Nevada, Ohio, Dad's hometown. Nevada, like the state, only pronounced with a long "a" in the middle. It is a no-stoplight village with three churches, a bank, a bar and a grain elevator. Popped in the middle of acres and acres of farmland, it is a forgettable place. But not to me; Nevada is a town of my childhood, too. Though I never lived within the village limits, it's where we visited Grandma Betty and Aunt Jane and Uncle Jim. It's where I, just like Dad had years before, attended elementary school, trick-or-treated and played little league baseball.

"We used to ride bikes all over the place, me and Ray," Dad continues. "We'd go out in the country. If you went out County Road 55 about a mile, there was the Brokensword Creek. An old iron bridge was there. We'd fish there a lot."

It is unusual to hear Dad go on about his childhood, so I ask about the other houses he and his three older sisters lived in with Grandma and Grandpa. He recalls a time when steer got loose at night and his dad and Mrs. Huggins were trying to round them up. We both laugh when he tells me about using the outhouse at his grandparent's farm—"It was my favorite place to pee; it was soooo handy," he says.

His voice is smiling. I know that his dimples are showing on his whiskery face, and that the deep laugh lines are crinkled on his forehead and around his eyes.

"You girls probably each have different places you call home, I figure," he says, alluding to the fact that we moved from rented home to rented home during my childhood.

"Yeah, I think the house out on 294 is the place I'd call home the most," I reply, thinking not only of the stargazing night, but of the big cookouts in Dad's favorite garage. And of the rope swing he hung on the giant maple tree in front of the house. And of the riding mower driving lessons he gave me in

the big barnyard, with the help of a cement block that tricked the safety system, holding down the seat with enough weight to keep the engine running. And of the giant dead mouse—or was it a rat?—I found in the basement under the wash basin the afternoon Dad asked me to fill up a bucket of warm water for him to wash the car.

“Yea, I really liked living there,” Dad says. “I know it was just a rental house, and some things needed fixed up, but I think I’d be happier living there

He stops in what seems like mid-thought. I know since they moved to Bucyrus ten years ago, Dad’s been put off by living in a housing development—“in town,” he always says with disdain. Never mind that Bucyrus, Ohio, is only a stone’s throw from Nevada and is little more than a farming community boasting a good bratwurst joint and a Super Wal-Mart. Mom has told me about Dad’s many complaints about their Melody Lane home. Since he had finally been able to buy a house after so many years of hard work, a small plot he could call his own, I never considered that he wouldn’t feel at home there. Though he might be proud to be a homeowner, he isn’t satisfied with a house that has less than a half-acre yard with no room for gardens and bonfires, a house that is closed in by city laws. A home, for Dad, is a place where he can be close to the land. Home is a place where he can smell sweet manure on the field adjacent to his yard throughout the entire day it takes him to mow the grass. Home is a place where the starlight is brighter—and more inviting—than the artificial orange glow of the surrounding street lights.

“You didn’t have anyone living on top of you and I had that big garage. I just liked it better—there was a bigger kitchen and the yard.” Dad pauses. “I guess I would’ve liked to be a farmer.”

His comment catches me off guard. Dad’s always been a truck driver. It’s hard to imagine him doing anything else, even though I know he would’ve changed jobs a million times if he could’ve made the same kind of money he did on the road.

“You don’t have to go anywhere to go to work,” he explains. “And, well, I guess I like the smell of dirt. I like to see stuff growing. All those smells and stuff on a farm.

“I’d still do it now, but you just don’t become a farmer. It’s something that’s in a family...”

His voice trails off. I picture him rubbing his free palm against his blue jean-covered thigh, another nervous habit he has. Maybe he’s stopped at a traffic light at the end of an exit ramp.

I’m conscious that he won’t go on. I’ve run him to his limit of emotional disclosure. Still, I want him to say something else, to actually admit that he missed out on so many things when we were growing up. I want him to tell me that he thought about us all the time he was being jostled about in an air-ride semi seat. I want him to tell me that his favorite memories are the few minutes we spent picking produce out of an over-ambitious garden or lying on a hill behind the barn looking at the big dipper.

I consider prolonging the conversation, but I know that this moment, too—this one phone call during which we traveled years and years of memories—is a special moment with my father.

He makes excuses for needing to get off the phone—he’s nearly reached his destination and he’s tired from driving all night. We say goodbye as I watch my destination come into view as I crest a steep hill and see the church tucked into the valley. The sunlight is filtering through the clouds, producing beams of dusty light that drift over the landscape. That light beckons to me.

Later, while listening to women at my Bible study share memories about their baptisms, I dwell on the connection I have to my childhood home—that place “out on 294,” the rural land of North Central Ohio. If my father, who spent most of his time away from that place during my childhood, can teach me to appreciate it the way I do, with painful tugs each time I

see a green wheat field or smell manure in spring, so too, can I teach my children to appreciate it. Even though Micah will have a natural inclination toward his home here in the hills of Pennsylvania, in the quaint streets and quiet college campus in New Wilmington, I will make sure he is filled with joy by jumping in the prickly softness of a hay loft. I will make sure he is inspired with dreamy thoughts by an endless horizon of soybean fields. I will make sure he discovers a plump green tomato worm in a garden he has helped to cultivate. I will make sure he rides his bike for hours, searching for and gathering the never-changing pig farm flowers. And I will make sure that with a bit of help from his Grandpa, my child, during the silence of a humid Ohio night, will gaze at the crystal summertime stars, all secure in a spilled ink sky.

In My End

Jan Shoemaker

Walking through the crisp and ruddy autumn woods this morning, my husband and I and our ecstatic labs came upon a series of crude twig dwellings, temporary structures of fallen branches cannily placed, we surmised, by 7th grade Thoreaus from the adjacent middle school. Constructed as a class project, we vaguely recalled from an article in the local paper, they were vacant on this Saturday morning. The first two were low and densely timbered like snug sweat lodges; entering would have meant crawling on the damp ground, and the risk of dislodging insects that had dug into the bark seemed high. Prissy and suburban, I am not one for rousting a sleeping beetle.

But the third dwelling, lofty and circular, was altogether inviting—an atrium of loose, whorled limbs reaching for the sky which leaked through them in flashes of brilliant blue. Of course, all structures—even the pyramids—are temporary in the end, but this one, which was unlikely to make it through the first heavy snow, wore its impermanence gleefully on its rough sleeve. Inside it, where earth met sky, the labs and I did a little spinning joy dance and knew our meaning perfectly, wordlessly—without all the fuss of Babel. I wondered if this softly creaking teepee had made those shrill and sulky, hormonally miserable adolescents, driven into these woods by their intrepid science teachers, as glad as it did me.

I had vowed to write this morning, to sit down at my old desktop computer with its giant monitor sitting opposite my nose, projecting a big, friendly font that I can actually see. In an effort, I am chagrined to concede, to feel sleek and modern and 23, I had tried hunching over a laptop, but all that fiddling with the angle of the screen and slouching in my seat to beat the glare is not likely to have produced the extravagant illusion. Also, it made writing a chore. Or more of a chore. I haven't done

much writing since my mother died. So there at the top of my Saturday list I'd scrawled, *write*.

But the morning we awoke to was golden; October transfigured the light like a topaz. So after breakfast when Larry took the leashes down from the closet shelf, thereby activating the labs, Gracie and Tess, who bolted in a flurry of crumbs from beneath the kitchen table to the front door, shouldering each other to edge outside, I threw on a sweatshirt and went along.

Five minutes later, Gracie exploded out of the car, which we parked in the school lot, and tore down the grassy path into the woods. Tess, who is more of a slow looper, "a sloper," we said, ambled in the vicinity of our knees and made shorter forays among the collapsed ferns and the crackling bracken.

"Think they'll find a body?" I aimed for breeziness, but the tiniest part of my question was morbidly sincere; the day before Larry had thought he'd heard a woman cry out among these trees, but when he'd ducked into the woods and jogged once around the trails, he'd discovered nothing. We both had an eye out for the stray shoe—black and white, in my mind, with frayed laces—lying just off the path. And we both envisioned our dogs snuffling like mordant truffle-hounds along an exposed ankle that jutted from beneath a few old logs. We were walking the copses of too many English mysteries, where labradors inevitably turn up a corpse. We half expected to find Morse's racy little jag parked beside our old van when we came out of the woods.

As it happened, our girls turned up nothing, which on Gracie's part, at least, was not for a lack of ambition or scope. Gracie, who is blond and muscular with beautiful planes and angles to her face, had come to us a couple of years earlier from a rescue group in Detroit. At the time, we were still grieving the loss of Atticus, our old golden retriever, and we named our energetic new two-year-old Grace believing, as we still do, that dogs provide the most potent fonts by which grace gushes into the world. It only occurred to us later that, with her small, perfect features,

her narrow (of all things) waist, and her aloof response to our slobbering affection, she is one silk scarf and sporty convertible short of passing for Grace Kelly. If subsequent incarnations ever visibly resemble previous lives, we may be living with Princess Grace. We certainly defer to her as if it were true.

Tess, our lumbering brunette, joined us a couple of months ago, when I answered a desperate email plea from our local animal shelter which was full up and anxious to save lives. She is big-boned, long-nosed and Roman looking—the ungainly and affectionate daughter of an Italian count—"the Chocolate Contessa!" Larry blurted out when he saw her. She takes to the couch with the soulful satisfaction that Gracie takes to the field, and together they take up the better part of our bed where they snore among our contortions—our arms and legs twisted to secure their comfort—servile accommodations we make for the privilege of sleeping with royals. Our final goodnights inevitably include vows to "buy a bigger bed."

Out on the trail, mulching last summer's leaves under my feet as our path narrowed, I sniffed the sour scent of rot and wondered—as I always do in autumn and in spring—where it all begins and where it ends, and at what point I had entered, to consider again, the cycle of seasons. Like Wendell Berry, I hear in "carrion... the songs that are to come," and while I cannot for the life of me find the beginning of things, I sense it quickening in the cells of the dead. I hunt for it obsessively along the trails of our little woods every April and October, recognizing among the fiddleheads and acorns I turn up with my toe, a narrative that is shockingly personal. Summer and winter, in their iambic predictability, are less compelling. To their credit, in the way their weeks simply repeat one another—a quick scan and you are absolutely sure of the landscape—they do afford *a momentary stay against* [the] *confusion* of our churning lives, for which I'm as grateful as the next person. Nothing beats the respite of a lawn chair in the shade or a seat by the fire for repairing our

psychic nicks and tears. But compared to the urgent upshoots and free-falls of spring and fall, which disturb the air and alter the earth, the steady seasons have less to offer of revelation.

My students are reading Stephen Batchelor this week, and to provide a little first-hand demonstration of *sunyata*, the very abstract Buddhist principle we were grappling with the other day, I corralled them along our high school's math corridor, out the back door, across the soccer field, and onto the cross-country trails that weave through a pretty patch of woodland. We had about thirty minutes to consider the dynamics of impermanence as we stepped among the crumbling corpus of what had recently carpeted and festooned their 16th Summer.

Sunyata translates roughly as the *fertile void*; it's a depiction of reality as a sort of cosmic blender in which nothing has any lasting form and everything is in the process of becoming something else. "The leaves under our feet," I called out as several of them wandered off the path, snapping the brittle stalks of milkweed and Queen Anne's Lace, "where are they going?"

"Into the ground," Nick answered, separating a walking stick from a downed limb and testing its strength.

"Where they become..."

"Umm...minerals, maybe? Plants?"

"Which are eaten by..."

"Deer, I guess."

"And a hunter kills the deer," Josh, a burly philosopher, called, lumbering up from the rear.

"And gives some of the venison to his cousin, Jasper," I prompted.

"Who feeds it to his daughter..."

"—A cellist," Ellen chimed in. "And she flies to Italy—to perform in the Colosseum!"

"So you're telling me," I jumped back in for the big finish, "that the atoms in these leaves under our feet will eventually perform Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*?"

"Yup!"

I vacillate between relief and despair when I consider the Buddhist rejection of anything or *anyone* as ultimately discrete and imperishable. Just the thought of eternity sends me reeling with vertigo; when I follow that up by imagining the burden of bearing my own company *forever*, I am grateful for the Buddhist insights into the vanishing nature of our separate selves. Still, the specter of non-existence is sobering and it saddens me to know that the consciousness I enjoy and identify as *me* will soon be extinguished and the world will carry on without my witness.

Driving home this morning with the spent and once again ravenous labs, we passed an estate sale sign in front of a house down the street from our own. So after we corralled Gracie and Tess through the front door and filled their food bowls, and still reluctant on such a day to sit down at my desk, I headed off to snoop through the dishes and linens of a woman whose heat had dissipated into the autumn air and whose atoms had gone back into the earth to be recycled into future forms. I'd never met her.

"Marion," the estate agent told me when I'd pushed through the crowd in the living room and asked for the name of the deceased.

"Did she have children?"

"A grown daughter, who couldn't be here today—it's too much for her." He reached beyond me for the twenty dollar bill that a man with a crate of old bottles was thrusting over my shoulder, and I turned from the cash box and made my way to what had been the most intimate room of the house, to Marion's kitchen. There I found the cupboards disemboweled, their doors flung open, their stunned shelves stripped bare. Cups and bowls and unmatched mugs, depression ware pickle plates and sugar bowls crowded the counters and Formica table, stickered with prices the market would sustain for the homely remnants of a life.

Picking up a butter dish, I recalled sorting through the contents of my own mother's house, which my sister and I had emptied in a single, stricken weekend to prepare for renters, after Alzheimer's had made it impossible for her to live on her own. Among the many things I grieved after she died, was the brutal efficiency with which we had swept her house clean; I'd kept next to nothing from our family home. Now Marion's juice glasses—sturdy and practical—broke my heart. I turned from the kitchen and made my way down the hall and ducked into a bedroom.

Eventually, I left with a couple of books: a Farmer's Almanac for the current year (which predicted it would be a little warmer than usual and sunny the week Marion died) and a slim, faux-leather bound "vest pocket" dictionary, "1937" scrawled inside the cover. From subsequent inscriptions, I traced Marion's journey from Manhattan Beach, California to Canton, Ohio to Okemos, Michigan, where her trail had so recently disappeared as she slipped back into the fertile void, leaving the plain and solid furnishings of her incarnation to the haggling of strangers. In his poem, "Spring and Fall," Gerard Manley Hopkins argues that we misidentify the wistfulness we instinctively feel in autumn as sympathy for the poor trees—their raucous red and yellow leaves flung like so many mittens to the ground, doomed to be mulch under our feet. It's not that we're incapable of empathy, but this is personal, he says. In this yearly devastation he sees, "the blight man was born for," and he corrects his young listener as she grieves for the "goldengrove unleaving" by explaining, "It is Margaret you mourn for."

Walking home with Marion's books in hand, I conceded Hopkins the better part of his argument—we at least think we'd like to live forever and, self-absorbed by nature, intuit our own death every autumn when it's the apocalypse all over again. We are, of course, all Margaret.

In his book, *What Narcissism Means To Me*, Tony Hoagland describes himself in the poem, "Social Life," as standing outside, listening to, "the hum of insects in the field / letting everything else have a word...because silence is always good manners." Good manners—and sometimes the relief of yielding place, and the simple peace that comes with it. And it occurs to me how infrequently I leave off talking, whether I'm speaking out loud or not. It's *I think, I want, I know* so much of the time, and maybe good manners—which always begin with regard for others—and their ensuing peacefulness, requires enlarging the understanding of the *I* that Margaret and I find threatened. Maybe peace comes with seeing myself as part of the fluctuating world rather than as a special guest in it.

From the leaves under our feet: a cellist at the Colosseum. My high school juniors figured that out. And from that cellist, and from the rest of us listening in the hard, cheap seats...well, who knows? In each of us a lens opens onto the universe and blinks; then how quickly—before we can perfectly understand the nature or purpose of our lives—we are subsumed back into the fertile void, into what Batchelor calls, "the tumult of the sublime."

Back at home I set Marion's almanac and dictionary on an old farm table next to a pile of triangular stones I picked up one day at the beach because they were shaped like India—a land where the endless recycling of spirit through matter is accepted as a fact. And it seemed possible that I might someday put aside the conceit of the separate self, that all-compelling *I*, which gives us each an evolutionary edge but which makes our individual ends—by age or accident—so terrifying a threat. Perhaps someday, I reasoned, settling onto the couch between the labs with a mug of tea and a muffin sliced up for three, I might find and celebrate the end in my beginning, the beginning in my end.

Something to Tell

Marcia Aldrich

Kay had to squint when she looked me in the eye because the afternoon sun after the rains in the courtyard of the Hacienda de las Flores couldn't have been brighter. All over San Miguel de Allende the bells chimed the quarter hour. "From the first day," she told me after the bells had quieted, "I said to myself, now there's a woman with a secret."

Her words had some kind of menace in them as if she were putting her thumb on my eyelid and threatening to pop it.

She hardly knew me. But then, Kay was a poet, and poets are Cassandras, born with the gift *and* the curse of seeing into the heart of things and we avoid listening to them at our peril. She had seen into the heart of me just like that. She didn't know what had happened to me, just that something had. Who was she, turning the tables on me like this. Who was this Kay? I'm the one who sees into others, works right down into them, breaks things open and sees how they work; I'm not the one others see. I want to know what people are made of, if and how they love, whether I can believe them or not, how big the gap is between what they say and what they do. If the gap is too big, and usually it is, I have no use for them. You have to have some secrets yourself to see that in others.

I didn't protest her assessment and I didn't ask her what she thought my *secret* was. Not a murmur of dissent or deflection. There was an agreement between us and we left it at that. Like a great poem, the exact meaning was elusive and the statement hung in the air between us as it should. I just knew that her diagnosis was spot on.

Something had happened to me (I used to think things happened to everyone, but now I'm not so sure) and I never did deal with it head on. I had never said or written about it directly. (But then, not dealing with things directly was generally what I

did, what I do.) It became a secret in the absolute sense of the word, not a secret I shared with a select few but a secret I shared with no one. I didn't even allow myself full access to the truth. Every once in a while something disturbed the memory, a smell or image made the memory dislodge and rise to the surface from the bottom of my consciousness where it had become buried, never as a complete memory or scene, always in fragments. A shard of memory had the power to derail me from whatever I was doing—sleeping, riding a bike, brushing my hair. Suddenly I was awake and shivering, I was heading my bike down a hill straight for a tree. I had submerged the whole under so many layers of sediment in an underwater cave that when pieces reemerged I wasn't sure what they were attached to or how to reassemble them. It was like finding a hand floating in the water and wondering where the rest of the body lay.

I told no one. I keep returning to this fact, trying to fathom why. (This not telling has become part of who I am, not just something I do). My family was good at keeping secrets. If we excelled at anything, it was this. My parents preferred to think certain things never happened. (My mother had kept her first marriage a secret for longer than most would think possible. I'm telling you, she was good at withholding. I learned at the feet of a master.) I didn't tell my mother as she was poking the roast to see if it was done and I didn't tell her when I went to bed shivering. I never told her. (Maybe I thought that if she knew me at all, she should have sensed something.)

I didn't know the words to speak.

And even if I could have pieced words together, no one would have believed me for believing me would have required taking action and no one wanted to do anything of that sort. Even at

seven I knew that. And I knew things would be worse for me if I told anyone.

Maybe that's what Kay saw, that I had learned things would be worse for me if I spoke. And so I didn't, at least not directly. I thought and felt certain things, but I didn't say them.

I blamed my mother. Of course I did. Girls have always blamed their mothers for what befalls them. Daughters angry at their mothers, now there's an old story. We do not think about the secrets our mothers keep, and their mothers before them, going back and back to the first woman who stood in the cave drawing shapes of catastrophe on the wall. It was much later that I thought about the secrets my mother kept and why, what she sustained and what she survived. But at that earlier time I knew my mother would break and shatter if I told her. So I didn't. And I knew she would blame me just as I blamed her.

I remember the house I grew up in as a shiny edifice, eternally cold. Lights were tucked among the evergreen shrubs, frosted lanterns strung all along the walkway to the front door, where two more lights shone. My father is reading the newspaper in a heavy armchair in the overheated living room. He is falling asleep. My mother is in another room, the wood-paneled den down the hall. She is playing a hand of Klondike, smoking a cigarette and drinking a cup of coffee. Now and then she snaps her cigarette into an ashtray. The cards flick onto the table, the cup clatters back into the saucer. Down the hall, my father snores.

This is what I remember. Everyone fixed in a space that no interruption can break. A house in mourning, and no one yet dead.

My secret burrowed far underground and became untraceable by ordinary means. A specialist, a poet, would be needed to track

the underground caves of my secret life, searching for what has not been told to her, the dark receding chambers where it lives, and moving to another room she did not know existed.

When others looked at me they saw me as I was, unchanged, or if they noticed some new hesitation in my manner or a tendency to fall silent, they didn't discern the cause of the change they observed. I had become a person who had a secret, and it would not be my last.

At the time of Kay's utterance I wasn't convinced she meant I had *a* secret. And I'm still not, but maybe that's because I'm uninterested in laying my secrets bare for fact checkers to track and verify. I don't want folks digging around in my past and asking questions that can't be answered. That's not where the real story is anyway. A secret is not about an event that happens, bracketed and contained and named. It is the crossing over of a threshold never crossed again.

And besides, we can't go back and establish a factual account. Not possible. My mother is dead, my father is dead, key characters in the incident are dead. Dead. There's no one left but me and I'm not telling, and not just because I'm temperamentally opposed, but because I remember some things and not others. As I said, my memory is a bunch of body parts sticking out of the snow. I couldn't even tell you what time of the year the thing took place. I might have slushed home through winter snow in thick rubber boots. Or it might have been early spring, the season of mud. Something makes me think it was late fall because the momentous in my life occurs in the fall, as if I were standing on a precipice looking out over a world of red and gold, just about to fall. Certain details have become unhinged from the narrative, taken on a life of their own in memory, like myth. I remember a laugh—that I was let go at the end, spinned out and back to

the world. Not a laugh that said *look isn't this funny*, but a laugh that said *look at the power I have, no one can touch me*.

Afterwards I began to see that the dominant human impulse is to simplify, to white wash, to not see, to erase. I don't think I knew this before.

The more time that passes I think Kay was telling me that I am a woman who has a lot of secrets, not just one, but layers and layers of secrets, frilled and ruffled in my breast. One secret begot another like a living, breathing thing. She was saying that I am a woman who keeps much of herself to herself; I have something I could tell but I won't. Some chatter; some listen. I listen.

I wanted to ask Kay how the story would end. Is my secret my strength or my weakness? Or both? Our strengths are our weaknesses, our weaknesses are our strengths, I can hear her say, looking me in the eye the way she does with that hard squint.

When my father died, I inherited a painting that my parents had bought from a library lending service to hang over the couch in the living room. A winter landscape, it has no human figures. A road follows a river around a bend in a parallel curve; the river is not yet frozen but the road has filled with snow. No animal lurks in the brush between the river and the road. It is a road that has relentlessly composed itself to be at the mid-point. There is no concentration of blue beckoning beyond nor is there a clearing of light behind. There is just the silence of snow and a road that repeats itself every day. Midway in the painting's snowy road, lies a dark flap, something not snow, something lying in the snow, erupting out of the snow. For the life of me I can't see what it is. A scarf, a hat, a piece of cardboard, a suitcase, an arm—whatever it is it's indecipherable.

Now the painting hangs above the fireplace in my bedroom directly across from my bed. I spend many hours pondering the dark spot in the snow in the middle of the road. Is it a mistake the painter never fixed or an intentional spot of genius? Did some instrument slip and accidentally nick the canvas, marring the painting's innocence? When I inherited the painting, my sister suggested I buy some white paint and plaster over the spot. She was sure the mark was a mistake that should be corrected, but I think I'll leave it alone. The painting is more interesting for the darkness in the middle of the road that can't be named or explained. It simply has to be accepted.

Mandolin

William Siavelis

“Federal law forbids smoking in the washrooms, and if you try it, we’ll flush you out. We have our ways. Enjoy your flight to Nashville.”

James Bond would never have flown Southwest, I thought, but that didn’t affect the cloak and dagger mood I was in. I glanced up again to the overhead bin as I had ten times since boarding. James would have chained the case to his wrist. But you can only do that if the government gives you your own plane. There was valuable property up there—manna from heaven. That it belonged to Aunt Stacy didn’t dull the adventure. In less than two hours her treasure would be safe in Nashville.

The engine noise, at first intrusive, became calming. A fruity Merlot and the ever-present Southwest peanuts kept me busy and happy. It all started, I remembered, with the phone call from Kosta, Aunt Stacey’s financial advisor. “Your aunt’s used up all her principal and she’s in debt about six thousand dollars to some people who make me nervous.” Uncle Spiro had been in the numbers racket in Akron as far back as the fifties, so I had an idea of what worried Kosta. “I had to talk to somebody,” he said, “Stacy suggested that I call you or your sister.”

“Where did the money go, Kosta?” It couldn’t have run out. Stacy and Spiro Stevens were our only rich relatives, the exceptions to the family rule that with the death of any member, the others inherited debts, not assets. Over the years Aunt Stacy and Uncle Spiro consistently avoided us during hard times in the fear that we’d try to borrow money. They knew how to hang on to their cash.

“You know, Bill, she dresses very well, and ... well, she always picks up the check and then there’s the lottery.” I chuckled at that one because when we were kids, Aunt Stacey always answered, “He’s in the lottery,” when we asked her what Uncle

Spiro did for a living. My mom and dad used to laugh behind her back about that pretension, but these days half of the state budgets in the country are funded the same way that Uncle Spiro paid for his wife’s frequent shopping sprees.

“What do you think we should do, Kosta?”

“I’d say come and get her out of Akron quick.” The idea was jarring. Get her? Maybe. What to do with her. That was another matter.

I recalled the residue of her rare trips to the Windy City. Several Aunt Stacy-isms came to mind.

To my niece, Debbie, as she considered a new boyfriend: “For God’s sake, don’t marry a school teacher. You’ll starve.” This was in front of me, a history teacher.

To my father, during the recession of 1958 when he had lost his business and his health: Tasso, you need to manage your money better.” This from the wife of Spiro, the numbers baron.

To my niece, Linda, as she combed her hair: “You’re the beautiful one, honey. You can marry anyone you choose and get anything you want from him. Forget these losers you go out with.”

Where did a person start with this woman?

On the other hand, she was eighty-one and kind of cute. And she still played the coquette, albeit to a more limited audience. I suspected that my sister Elaine was at the end of her rope with Aunt Stacey. I hoped that my cousin Gina had something left in her heart for the old girl. I did know, however, that eventually a family consensus would emerge that we had to do something. It was a Greek thing. I gave Gina a call.

“Gina, news from Akron. Aunt Stacey is in hot water. She’s broke and she might owe money to some scary people.”

“What happened to all of the money Uncle Spiro had, Billy?”

“Her money guy, Kosta, says it’s all gone.”

“Where did it go? Is there a track in Akron?” Horse playing was a family obsession.

“Yeah, Thistle-down isn’t far. Kosta thinks we need to go and get her. Bring her to Chicago.”

“Can we trust this guy? You think he ripped her off?”

“She trusts him, Gina. What can I say? He sounds okay on the phone and he did take the trouble to call.”

There was a silence. “Aunt Stacey? ... Here?”

“Yep.”

Cousin Gina was in the real estate business, a rental agent who knew everything about Oak Park, a prosperous suburb west of Chicago, with a reputation for generosity to the aging and the indigent, two adjectives that described Aunt Stacey, in addition to cute. Gina managed to find a two-room apartment for her that was virtually free, given her total monthly income of three hundred, ninety-six dollars from Social Security, the result of Uncle Spiro’s contributions to that system. Even the felonious need security.

After half a day on the Indiana-Ohio toll road, Gina and I pulled up to Aunt Stacey’s apartment building. We parked our car around the corner on a side street because a gigantic moving van filled the four parking spaces on Market Street. We leaned into the cavernous van and saw that the moving job had barely begun. Only a hutch and a few other large pieces were on the truck. The elevator took us to the fifth floor where we found our way to apartment 503, a short distance down the finely carpeted hallway. After Spiro’s death, she had sold their big white house and moved into a six-room rental unit, thus missing out on the inflationary, real-estate friendly seventies. Perhaps her economic slide began with that ill-advised move.

She was teary-eyed when she opened the door to Gina and me, but she looked spiffy, like an aging forties movie star, dressed for an outing to Marshall Field’s. Her pancake makeup would have been perfect except for the tears that had passed through it. Her auburn hair nicely framed her sad eyes. She wore a chocolate-brown fitted skirt with a tan silk blouse. A rich

paisley scarf around her shoulders brought the outfit together with a flair. “Oh, Bill, Gina, I’m so glad you’re here. What am I going to do?” She blinked two more tears down her cheeks.

It took only about eight hours to drive to Chicago, but we had to spend a day and a half beforehand packing all of Aunt Stacey’s possessions. The moving guys, with our help, needed about four hours just to pack the china, the silver, and the crystal so the stuff would arrive safely. Each little, fragile item required its own bubble wrap case. The burly movers looked so silly working at the task that Gina literally took it out of their hands. On the evening of the second day, with everything loaded on the van and Aunt Stacey ensconced in the car, we took off for the big city from which Aunt Stacy and Uncle Spiro had fled when the Kefauver Commission began to look too closely into organized crime. In a weak moment during the drive west, Gina and I promised our tearful aunt that when she died—God forbid—we would return her body to rest next to her beloved Spiro in the cemetery of the church of *Aghios Yiorgos*, Saint George, in Akron after celebrating her life in an appropriate Greek funeral.

Roughly a fifth of what Aunt Stacey owned fit into unit 9G of the Pleasant Towers Apartments. She distributed the remainder among the relatives, with the proviso that all would be returned if her living situation changed for some reason. I suspected that she had thoughts of remarriage. Because the building was attractive and well maintained, she never realized that it was subsidized housing, so perhaps she expected a proposal from some wealthy neighbor and a move to his country home. Of course, she would never admit to that fantasy publicly because of her devotion to Uncle Spiro, a phenomenon she referred to at least once in every conversation.

She asked me to take care of her crystal, saying, “Billy, why don’t you take the glasses. You drink a lot.” Gina got the beautifully carved oak dining table; she was the only family member with a space big enough for it. The dishes found their way to

Elaine's storage cabinet to await the unlikely day that she would invite twenty-four people to a five-course dinner.

With the help of small monthly donations from Gina, Elaine, my cousin Barbara from Pasadena and me, Aunt Stacey's life fell into a pleasant routine. Once a week I shared it with her. When I arrived at eight in the morning, she had already put on the coffee, lit a filtered Parliament, and spread her clothes and jewelry on the bed. She was in the last phase of applying her makeup in what I estimated was a forty-five minute process. As she exited the elevator to the lobby, she acknowledged the many good mornings offered by those who passed their days in its leather chairs. In no time, she was a star of Pleasant Towers. She was so cute. With a smile and a wave, she returned their greetings and pushed the oversized button that automatically opened the double doors to Pleasant Street. Several neighbors had invited her to coffee, but she was never available. "The people here are nice, Billy," she said, "but they're not like us."

We cut through a park path that was a shortcut to Marion, a street that, after two blocks became a delightful pedestrian mall. Her promenade continued to Lake Street where the Cozy Corner restaurant stood across from Bank One and Barbara's Bookstore. That it was a Greek-owned restaurant—a family business—made it more acceptable to Aunt Stacy. When she appeared at the door, the hostess, Thalia, took her by the hand and led her to the smoking area and her regular table. She addressed Aunt Stacey as "*Theia*," Aunt, rather than "*Yiayia*," grandmother. Thalia might have used the latter for other Greek women in their eighties, but she knew better in Aunt Stacey's case. The non-Greek waitresses loved Aunt Stacey as well, despite the fact that she let her toast sit for twenty minutes as she smoked a cigarette and then sent it back because it was cold. The pleasure of seeing her in the outfit of the day outweighed her occasional imperiousness.

Just down Marion Street, back toward Pleasant Place, was Mahdu's drug store where Aunt Stacey stocked up on cigarettes and bought her lottery ticket. Mahdu was making most of his living from the lottery since a large Walgreen's had opened two blocks west and gradually decimated his prescription business. Aunt Stacey played the same number every day, 108. That was her address in Akron, 108 Lancaster, although it shouldn't have been. The house that she and Uncle Spiro built sat squarely on Independence Street at the corner of Lancaster, but that wouldn't do. At that point in Aunt Stacey's life, she dreamed of being accepted at Akron Oaks Country Club, even learning to play golf if necessary. She thought that an English address would help. That, coupled with the transformation of Spiro's suspicious sounding surname, Stavros, to Stevens should have put club members who were not enthusiastic about Jews, other Middle Eastern types, and dark-skinned people in general, at ease. It all went up in smoke when an *Akron Daily Journal* headline announced, "Black Luke Probed in Numbers Payoff to Pols." Everyone knew that Luke was the brains of the business and that he was Spiro's brother. The "black" part of the headline probably did more to end Aunt Stacey's country club dream than the "probed" or the "numbers payoff" references. Both Spiro and his brother were rather swarthy and remained so despite the name change.

As we left Mahdu's, Aunt Stacey asked me if I would mind waiting for her while she had her hair done. I went back into the drug store to buy a *Sun-Times* which had its best crossword on Friday's. Lettie's Beauty Salon was directly across the street, another place where Aunt Stacey was a star. Looking up from my puzzle, I could see that it was great fun for the cheerful Lettie to do the little lady's hair each week, like prettying up a doll. Aunt Stacey was quite specific about how the job was to be done and demanded that the boss and nobody else do it.

The constant beauty shop talk was easy to ignore until it was interrupted by a shrill announcement. “The color’s right, Lettie, but the shape is terrible. It’s got to frame my face. I told you that.”

“I’ll be right with you, Mrs. Stevens. I’m busy here just a second.”

“You need to finish what you start, Lettie. This is my time.”

Lettie shot an apologetic glance to a middle-aged brunette, her hair in foams of soap, who nodded her acceptance of the situation with a roll of her eyes. The beautician shifted her attention back to Aunt Stacey, anticipating half an hour of petulance followed by a miniscule tip in retribution. Cuteness wears thin. The damage repaired, Aunt Stacey and I walked up Marion Street for her to cash a check at Bank One, after which we found our way back to Pleasant Towers and *Inside Edition* followed by *Jeopardy*. I left her after “final jeopardy” which left the winner with \$14,400 and a chance to win again on Monday. After Aunt Stacey’s shows and a nap, she usually touched up her makeup and readied her clothes for the evening trip to Cozy Corner.

With a bit of strain to our own finances, we four cousins were able to cover Aunt Stacey’s expenses for two years when, for some reason, her checks started to bounce. A combination of inflation, two packs a day of Parliaments, lottery tickets, and who knew what else brought on yet another financial crisis. The woman was high maintenance. That we had just celebrated her eighty-third birthday explained to some degree why she was getting a little flaky. With the prospect of her decline in mind, we recalled our promise that her final trip would be back to Akron. A bit of research revealed that keeping our word would involve a costly one-way plane fare and the expense of a pricey funeral, one up to the standards of her Akron friends. They would know how much we spent. We couldn’t embarrass Aunt Stacey with a cheapie. It was not long, however, that Uncle Spiro, in his way, came to the rescue.

Because Aunt Stacey’s days were not very lively, I got the idea that she needed a pastime beyond the lottery, the beauty shop and her occasional flirtations. Somewhere in my memory was the idea that she had once played the mandolin. Part of our family’s history on my mother’s side was the story that before the Great Depression set in, my grandfather’s four daughters and two sons comprised a small orchestra. Uncle John played the violin, my mother and Uncle Pete the piano, Aunt Persephone the flute, Aunt Bessie the guitar, and Aunt Stacey the mandolin. To inspire her, I brought my mountain dulcimer, a distant relative of the mandolin, to her apartment for one of my weekly visits. I chose the dulcimer at age fifty-five because I had heard it played at sixties’ folk festivals and fell in love with what was its truly dulcet sound. To be honest, my choice was also affected by the realization that not enough of my life was left to spend five or ten of declining years playing scales. Some of the best players in the hills of North Carolina and Tennessee, I was told, couldn’t read music. A mountain dulcimer was for me.

“You know, Billy, you ought to take my mandolin. I bet you could play it. You play that ...”

“Dulcimer, Aunt Stacey. It’s a mountain dulcimer.” That Aunt Stacey didn’t remember the name of my folksy instrument was not a sign of her decline. Hardly anybody remembered what to call it. People referred to it as a zither, a ukulele, a banjo, rarely a dulcimer.

“Listen, Aunt Stacie. I’ll get the mandolin tuned where I take lessons. We can play duets. What do you think?”

“It’s too long ago, Billy. I don’t remember anything.”

“My teacher says that the fingers remember. Your fingers probably have a good memory.”

“I hope they remember better than my head does.”

A week later Jim Craig, the tall, soft-spoken owner and spirit of Hogeeye Music, reached behind the counter for the rectangular case containing the mandolin. He grasped the

instrument by its bridge as he gently lifted it from the green padding in which it rested. Placing himself on a tall stool, he rested it on his lap and strummed a chord and then picked a simple melody. “1929 Gibson. That’s a good instrument, Bill. Take good care of it.”

“It’s not mine, Jim. It belongs to my eighty-three year old aunt.”

“She’s a lucky lady. It’s mostly professional and collectors who own these.”

I didn’t think much about Jim’s evaluation until a week later when Aunt Stacey quickly dismissed the idea that she would ever play her mandolin again. Stroking its strings while it lay across her lap, she said wistfully. “I guess my fingers forgot.” She smoothed her nail-polished fingers over the wood. “Your uncle Spiro paid a fortune for this thing. And that was a long time ago. I wonder what we could get for it. Would your music guy know?”

“I guess so. He certainly thought it was something special. I’ll ask him.”

When Jim handed me the formally worded appraisal letter, I skimmed past the “Gibson mandolin with case” and the “1929” down to the “estimated value \$24,000.”

“Are you saying that my aunt could get that much for the mandolin?”

“Depends.”

“On what?”

“Well, most likely someone would pay twenty-four thousand dollars for it, but you’d have trouble finding that person. You probably need a dealer to do that. You could try to sell it yourself if you’re willing to work at it and you have lots of time.”

“If we used a dealer, what would he charge us?”

“He shouldn’t take more than one-third.”

“Could you sell it?”

“No, that’s a bit out of my range. I know a couple of people who could, though.” Two nights later I drove to Aunt Stacy’s apartment with the story that I had concocted. I had conferred with Elaine and Gina about the appraisal, and we agreed that we were not about to drop \$16,000 in Aunt Stacey’s checking account, considering her recent fiscal shenanigans and her mysterious record in Akron. On top of that, there were other signs that Aunt Stacey was starting to slip. She began telling me that she had not seen Gina for days when I knew that Gina had been there only hours before my visit. And then she’d say to Gina how nice it was that she visited because Billy certainly was never around. More significant than her lapse of memory was the poodle skirt.

“Gina, I took Aunt Stacey to the Cozy Corner yesterday, and she had on this full skirt with a big felt poodle on it. That didn’t look like her.”

“A poodle skirt?”

“I guess.”

“Jesus, that thing would be almost as old as I am. She’s really losing it.”

“It did look kind of cute on her.”

“We’ve got to talk,” Gina said, looking worried.

We did, and part of the conversation consisted of writing the script for my next visit to Oak Park.

“Aunt Stacey, my music friend says that he’ll give you two thousand dollars for your mandolin.”

She was in the final stages of preparation for her breakfast at the Cozy Corner. As she reached around her neck to click on her diamond necklace, she pondered the “offer.” Then, all doubts apparently cleared up, she put her hand on mine and looked me directly in the eyes. “Listen, Billy. This guy’s probably trying to take you for a ride. If he offered two thousand, he’ll give you three. Tell him he can have it for four.” That settled, she handed me her mink—it was the middle of July—so that I could help

her get it on. As I did, she said, "I'm glad you're here, Billy. No one has visited me for weeks."

Jim Craig gave me the names of two dealers, one in Michigan somewhere and the other a music company in Nashville. I called the first guy because he was closer to Chicago, but his answering machine told me that he'd be away for the rest of the summer. That wouldn't do. I was too eager to wait that long. Anyway, "Nashville" and "mandolin" sounded good together. I called Gruhn Guitars and told the lady on the line my story. She said that Mr. Gruhn would return my call. He did so within half an hour.

"Mr. Pantellos?"

"Yes, that's me."

"I hear that you are selling an old mandolin. A Gibson."

"Yes, that's right."

"Well, I am interested. I'd like to see it. Can you send it to me so I can take a look.?"

I didn't give that idea much thought. I had hardly let the mandolin out of my sight since I had spoken to Jim. I was sleeping with it under my bed. "I think it would be better for me if I could show it to you in person. Is that okay?"

"Sure. That's great, if you don't mind coming down here. Let me know when you're going to arrive, and I'll meet with you. Do you have the address?" I repeated the data that Jim had given me. "That's right. Give me a day's notice, so I can be sure I'll be available."

* * *

"We are entering the Nashville area. We should be on the ground in about fifteen minutes. We know that you have other choices in airlines, but don't listen to them. We like you more. Thanks for flying Southwest."

We soon bumped down on the ground and the pilot flipped whatever it is that grabs an airplane and slows it down in sec-

onds. There was no need for the flight attendant to remind me to check the luggage bin thoroughly. I hadn't taken my eyes off it except to open my peanuts and unscrew that cap of my wine. Amid the click of buckles, I reached up to unsnap the door and pulled down the instrument case. I cradled it until the passengers ahead of me began to disappear up the row and turn left as they reached the cockpit. My turn came and I was to follow a tiny lady who could barely reach the luggage bin to try to yank here oversized bag out of it. At another time, I would have helped her, but there was no way I'd put down the mandolin. Her glare went from my face to her bag; I didn't budge. She finally got it to crash down on her and throw her back on a seat across the aisle. I relented and offered my free hand, which she refused ungraciously. With that, I waited for her to drag herself toward the exit, making even more enemies to my rear.

I joined the parade to baggage claim where my ancient Samsonite bag appeared from somewhere below and started its trip around to the spot I had staked out from which to reach in and grab it. Nashville's airport was no O'Hare; rather, it was small, efficient, and manageable. I quickly found National Car Rental's green sign under which I was given the keys to a four-door Ford Escort. "Do you have a map of Nashville?" I asked the smiling agent whose precise pronunciation of English suggested that he was Indian.

"Yes, Mr. Pantellos, can I help you with directions?"

"Please. Can you tell me how to get to 400 Broadway?"

"Oh, yes. Very easy. You know that's right next to the Ryman."

"You mean where the Grand Old Opry is?" I had read a bit about Nashville.

"Where it used to be. They've moved."

"Well, I'm sure the place that I'm looking for must be in a music neighborhood."

“Surely it is then. As you exit the airport, take route 40 West and you will come to an exit at Broadway. There you will either turn right or left. I am sorry, I don’t know which.”

“No problem. I can find it from there.”

Car keys in hand, I found my way to the Escort in a nearby lot and followed my Indian guide’s directions the Broadway exit. I turned right and went several blocks to a tired looking stretch of buildings, each, it seemed, containing either a bar or a restaurant featuring live music. Interspersed among them were Nashville souvenir shops. At Fourth Street, presiding over the strip, stood the red brick, four-story Gruhn Guitar building. I drove around the block to its parking lot where a four-story painted wall sign proclaimed that I was about to see a “FINE SELECTION OF VINTAGE USED AND NEW INSTRUMENTS” and that if I had one to sell, Gruhn assured its customers, “WE PAY TOP DOLLAR FOR USED GUITARS BANJOS AND MANDOLINS.” That warmed my heart. In the background, hovering above and around the music store were giant, new, intimidating buildings that seemed to look down disapprovingly at old Broadway.

The showroom walls of Gruhn’s, however, sang out another message. Guitars, banjos, mandolins, fiddles in every size imaginable lined the walls in shining rows, reaching almost to the high ceiling. Sprinkled around the two large rooms that made up the first floor were people of all ages intently strumming, picking or bowing instruments, encouraged by Gruhn’s knowledgeable staff. There appeared to be an intimacy in that process and in the place itself.

As I surveyed the walls looking for dulcimers, of all things, a tall, earnest young man in jeans and a flannel shirt asked if I needed help. I answered, “I have an appointment with Mr. Gruhn at one; I’m a little bit early.”

“No problem. I’ll let him know you’re here.” He walked away toward a small office in the corner of the second room and returned with the dark-haired proprietor, a middle-aged

man with a short, heavy beard and rounded glasses. I had seen his picture on the Gruhn web page. He approached me with a welcoming outstretched hand.

“You’re Bill...” He glanced down at a pink slip of paper... “Pantellos?”

“Yes. Good to meet you Mister ...”

“Just ‘George’ is fine. You are selling an old Gibson?”

“That’s right. I’ve got it with me.” I hadn’t set it down since leaving the plane.

“Come into my office. We’ll take a look at it. Would you like some coffee?”

“Sure.”

He called to a pretty young girl at her desk. “Sarah?”

She rose and turned to me. “How do you like your coffee?”

“Just black is fine. Thanks.”

“Let’s take a look, Bill.”

Sarah arrived with two steaming coffee mugs as I unhooked the case that sat on my lap and opened it, facing my host who had swiveled his desk chair across from me. He firmly lifted the mandolin by its neck, examining it from the words, “The Gibson,” above its frets to the body that began with a graceful scroll that gradually spread open into its rounded form. Its mahogany color was shaded from a bright, lighter center to the darker edges, creating a sunburst effect. For the first time, it occurred to me that it was beautiful.

“It’s an F-5 from the late Twenties.”

“What’s the ‘F’ for?”

“Florentine. This scroll.” He didn’t look up as he talked. “There’s a crack here in the bridge.”

My stomach fell. It was Antiques Roadshow revisited. “Mrs. Jones, your Louis XIV chair is worth \$182,000. But do you see this section here? Unfortunately someone varnished it sometime during the eighteenth century and changed the

patina. I'd say it is now worth \$39.95. But it's a lovely piece. Thank you so much for bringing it in."

"But we can fix that easily"

I exhaled.

"How much do you want for it?"

"Sixteen thousand dollars." People had told me to ask for two or three thousand more than I really expected and then negotiate. Something told me, however, that I was too far over my head to try anything like that. Anyway, I trusted what Jim at Hogeve had told me. Unless I sold it myself, I should expect to get about two-thirds. I waited.

"Sarah, please write a check for \$16,000 for Mr. Pantellos."

It was done, too easy to be true. He called out adding, "A 1929 Gibson F-5. I've got the serial number here. While she's doing that, would you like to hear your mandolin played?"

"Sure, that would be great," I said, even though my mind was on the money.

"John, you got a minute?" A tall, gentle looking man came over to us in response.

"Sure, what's up."

Bill, this is John Hedgeworth." We shook hands. "Do you feel like playing us a tune? Maybe one from the new CD."

He picked up the instrument that looked smaller in his hands and checked its tuning. Under his gentle and sure touch, *Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring* flowed from Aunt Stacey's mandolin and soothed the room transcending the business of the day. I pictured her at eighteen, young and pretty, charming the much older Spiro, creating for a moment a world of their own just as John had done in the music store. This mandolin was a wonderful thing and its life was far from over.

The smiling Sarah appeared with my check and left it in front of George on a table where he briefly examined it and then put his signature on it. He placed it in an envelope, handing it over with one hand while he shook my hand with the other, as

though I were graduating. I took his leave, thanking him for the hospitality and John for the Bach. My flight home was taken up with humming the *Jesu* melody, reaching into my jacket pocket to be sure that the check was there and that it had enough zeroes on it, and, of course, enjoying Merlot and peanuts.

* * *

In less than a year, Aunt Stacey's behavior took a sad slide into full-blown Alzheimer's. One day, reaching into her purse with a cigarette in her mouth, she mistakenly pulled out her lipstick in her search for a light. Staring at the silver tube, she looked up at me and asked, "What's this, Billy?" That she confused a lighter with a tube of lipstick wasn't so serious, but that she didn't recognize her makeup hit too close to home. Our conversations began to repeat themselves. They might have been scripted: "Billy, I'm glad to see you. Nobody's been here for days."

"Do you remember, Aunt Stacey? Gina was here this morning."

"Oh. What are we doing today?"

"Let's go to the Cozy Corner and have lunch."

Her fur coat and beret on, "Where are we going, Billy?"

"To eat lunch, Aunt Stacey."

"Where?"

"At the Cozy Corner."

"Is Gina coming?"

"No, she was her earlier."

We exited the elevator and walked through the double doors. "What are we supposed to do today, Billy?" There was a trace of fear in her eyes.

In a period of only a few weeks, her fear turned to outbursts of anger. She was sometimes incontinent. Her makeup no longer went on right, leaving her with the look of a sad clown. Her

clothes, beautiful though they were, were worn in impossible combinations. In short, Aunt Stacey disappeared.

We put off the toughest of decisions for a few months by hiring a lady named Priscilla to stay with Aunt Stacey for four hours daily. That, coupled with our visits, took up much of her day, but not the nights. Our fears grew at the thought of her alone at home—the coffee pot catching fire, the gas oven exploding, or a neglected cigarette setting the bed aflame. To our surprise and relief, Aunt Stacey welcomed her transfer to a nursing home, perhaps because she felt that she would not be as afraid there with someone always nearby. Then, one afternoon, she suddenly became hysterically angry—we had no idea at what—and died in the midst of a convulsion.

The mandolin money mostly intact, we flew Aunt Stacey's remains back to Akron to rejoin those of Uncle Spiro. She would have been pleased with the affair in general, but some of the particulars might have irritated her a bit. The Orthodox saints looking down on her from the icons of *Aghios Yiorgos* would have made her feel right at home, a source of comfort. That they did so in a nearly empty church would have been a problem. She surely would have expected a bigger crowd, but, after all, she was in her eighties and perhaps most of the Akron group that she wanted so much to impress had died or moved to La Jolla. However, the family of a close dentist friend and a longtime "girlfriend" were there to mourn with our family. After the service, I greeted three strangers, one a stooped man wearing strong glasses who had to be older than Aunt Stacey. He was joined by two equally aged ladies who might have been sisters, each wearing a cheerful dress. Clearly they were not aware of the somber nature of a Greek funeral and the dress code that supported it. One of the sisters spoke for the group. "Stacey was a loyal mall walker. That was how she kept so trim and pretty. So beautiful dressed." She glanced at the other lady. "Made us look like hags." The old man agreed with a subtle nod, intended

only for me. She continued, "We always had coffee afterward, having fun gossiping about the other walkers. We've missed her." That threesome made up for the absentees.

The church service in *Aghios Yiorgos* was lovely, but we were not able to get a bishop, a touch that Aunt Stacey would have liked. The bearded Father Athanasios was sincere and eloquent in speaking of our aunt as a loyal churchgoer and devoted Greek Orthodox wife. He had aged considerably since we had heard him twenty years earlier doing what was, perhaps, one of his first funerals, that of Uncle Spiro. As he spoke over the casket, he was doing a great job explaining that the deceased was a good husband, a generous contributor to the church, and a successful businessman. (Uncle Spiro made even more money trading stocks later in his life.) However things fell apart for me when he described the deceased as a "good citizen." I almost exploded with laughter. Thankfully, I was able to squelch it in my handkerchief, making it appear that I was crying. Aunt Stacey, who was sitting next to me, consoled me.

The mandolin money paid for everything, even the inscription on the giant stone that identified the graves of the last members of the Stavros clan. It read "Spiros Stevens, 1898-1972" on the left and, on the right, "Anastasia Stevens, 1917-." We needed only to add "2001" to complete her story. Uncle Spiro, in his way, had taken care of his little girl to the end.

Skin and Toes, Ears and Hair

Angela Morales

I.

When I was eight years old, I woke up on Christmas morning to find that Santa had left me a new bicycle—a pristine, white Schwinn—complete with a silver-glitter banana seat, built-in handlebar tassels, a horn, and a basket decorated with bubble gum-pink flowers. That bicycle, I would soon learn, would provide me with my ticket to freedom—my first real view of the big blue horizon—no little brothers, no little sisters, no barking dogs—just wind in the face and plenty of asphalt. Roads, then, seemed to symbolize the future. Everything that a person could accomplish lay somewhere on those roads—best friends, good deeds, prizes, dogs, and farther down the road, husbands, children, houses, more dogs. I wondered how far I might go and still find my way back. I rolled down our driveway, rounded the corner, and began my life.

Up and down the blocks I'd ride, cutting through large sections of a map that appeared in my head, first around the big blocks and then slicing them up, road by road. Beyond our street rolled out a grid of more houses, then apartment buildings interspersed with strip-malls, all blurring together mile after mile—suburbs of Los Angeles without clear-cut boundaries, without a common center. I would pedal, pedal, pedal, past liquor stores, past supermarkets, past parked cars, past trees all ablur, unaware of exactly where I was going.

One Saturday I decide to maneuver into a narrow gap in a chain-link fence—a pedestrians' entrance to an elementary school that is not actually my school, but familiar, nonetheless, for its lima bean-green walls and hallways scented ever-so-faintly with vomit and pee. On the empty school grounds I can ride undisturbed through the long, cool hallways without some recess lady or teacher yelling at me to get off school grounds. The cement beneath my tires feels smooth as ice. That day those

hallways become my own racetrack where I can test my speed and agility as I skid around sharp corners, kicking back hard on my brakes. Arcing out onto the oily blacktop playground, I do some figure-eights and then glide back into the hallways, pedaling, pedaling, my leg muscles burning gloriously.

I could play alone for hours, only semi-conscious of the world around me. Assuming that adults and children occupied separate orbits, I believed that I was mostly invisible. In my mind, grown-ups needed to tend to their business, just as I needed to tend to mine. I liked to think that if all the adults should die suddenly in some adult-only plague, I could have survived very comfortably, much more naturally than other girls and boys my age whose parents hovered nervously over their heads, fussing over them, fretting over their every move. I used sharp knives and can-openers, gas-flames, and medicines. I could change a diaper, make a bottle, ride a bus, and push my brothers and sisters in their strollers for miles. I shopped at the grocery store, fed the animals, ate anything I pleased, and finished my homework without a parent nagging me about it. I knew that my life belonged to me and that if wanted a good life, I would have to work hard. This unbridled freedom of mine came as a result of my parents working long hours at their ever-growing appliance store. To me, their store was like an enormous ship, its wheel spinning madly, sails flapping in the wind, and they were the hands on deck, each day, struggling to control it. I knew that they would never get off, not until the deck was cracking apart and the ship was underwater. Meanwhile, then, with my parents predisposed, I could pretty much roam anywhere I pleased, and they had faith that I would return home in one piece.

But enter the man who will jolt me from my half-sleep. That Saturday on the playground I see him riding a moped in circles, and at first I barely notice him, though I must have noticed him; otherwise, how can I see him now so clearly in my mind? But I do remember: He smiles pleasantly up at the sky, looks east,

then west (imagine: Ward Cleaver). His expression is one of a man contemplating another fine day in Southern California as he inhales deeply, closing his eyes, no doubt pondering his good fortune of perpetual sunshine and excellent health. In his Mr. Rogers cardigan, he buzzes around the playground, his moped sputtering, stopping, and then buzzing away again. I see him in the corner of my eye, now in the corner of my memory, noticing that he dismounts his moped to peer at his engine, inspect his tires. I keep pedaling. Nothing about him signals danger. He does not act funny like he's on drugs; he appears to have good grooming habits—a sure sign of stability, in my eight-year old mind.

Then I forget about him. Most likely I'm daydreaming about a crowd of cheering spectators, all of them impressed with my bravery and lightning-speed skills. Over and over, I kick back hard on the pedal, tires screeching to a halt. The applause is earsplitting! In those moments, I am not a chubby girl with protruding front teeth and a tendency to argue. I am sleek and muscular and pretty with straight white teeth and a racing number taped to my back and the people are behind me one-hundred percent.

Next, another lap around, up a narrow hallway, a quick corner-turn, and then: Ward Cleaver appears, no moped, smack in the middle of the hallway, completely blocking my path, legs wide apart, larger-than-life. Moving too fast to change directions, I realize that I'm headed straight into him. He's got that same perpetual-sunshine expression as he gazes deeply into my eyes, head tilting to one side—lovingly, almost—reaching out with one hand. It's like one of those mindbenders that ask, *What's wrong with this picture?* His pants are unzipped and his belt hangs undone, and he cradles something in his other hand—so gently, so carefully—I think it must be a newborn puppy.

But, *What's wrong with this picture?*

Swerving away in a reflex, I nearly lose my balance and crash into the wall. Consider, for a moment, the role of chance,

of tiny adjustments and minute variations. *What if I had crashed into the wall?* When are those moments when we jump across the hidden crevasse, sidestepping fissures without even having realized it?

Pedaling home, I ride as fast as I can, though I'm sweaty and burning hot, but not hot with exertion—hot with shame that feels like I've been contaminated by sludge or badness, and I can't tell if it is my badness or his badness, but it's ugly and I won't tell anybody because maybe they'll call me stupid and, besides, I don't want to discuss it.

I imagine what the adults might say. My father: *What the hell, Genius? Why you out there all by yourself?* Or my mother: *Call the police!* Or my father: *Hell with the police. I'll get my gun.* My mother: *And do what?* My father: *Shoot his fucking nuts off, that's what.*

So maybe telling the parents wasn't the best idea. In reality, nothing had happened. After all, the man had not touched me. He had only touched himself. Was touching oneself a crime? I did not know. My gut told me it should be, but my parents had not warned me that benign-looking men randomly appear at elementary schools, sometimes dangling their dicks out of their pants. Just not something widely discussed. But I told myself to put my chin up and quit being such a baby. I'm sure I believed, even then, that flashers were ridiculous buffoons, guys who tromped around wearing clown shoes and trench coats—social misfits who made banana jokes and drank margaritas and liked to show people their wieners for a good laugh.

Maybe I should have played along. Maybe I should have stopped and asked, *Sir? Do you need some ketchup with your French fry?* And come on, let's face it—I'd been exposed to worse, hadn't I? Scenes from the "R" rated movies that my parents took me to see on Saturday nights left me with images I couldn't forget: decapitated horses' heads, little girls who suddenly cuss in Latin and spit green mucous at priests, and Charles Bronson with his

endless supply of bullets, turning bad guys into Swiss cheese. I decided not to make a big deal out of it. Also, there was this: I did not want to implicate myself in whatever it was I might have done wrong.

II

Years before the playground incident, when I was only three or four, I kept having this dream. The dream would stay with me all day, refusing to evaporate, and all day, I would worry about getting killed. The dream would start off with me sitting serenely on the curb in front of our house, sun in my eyes, squinting at the neighborhood children as they play in the street—ghostly silhouettes that jump and shout and twirl. I hear the swoosh-swoosh of sprinklers and the bang-bang of fathers hammering somewhere, the sputtering-up of a lawn mower, all good sounds—safe sounds. After a few moments, though, a fog begins to settle over the neighborhood; kids and the other sounds would fade away, a growing, heavy silence. Then, just as I wonder where everyone has gone, a humped-up black sedan—just like the getaway-cars from old gangster movies—would glide around the corner, no sound whatsoever coming from its engine. The car would get closer—its white-walled tires rolling gently over asphalt—and then it would stop. Right at my feet.

You'd think I could have predicted the outcome after dreaming the same dream forty times, fifty times—even if I was only three or four years old. But dreams are funny that way. Each time, I would sit there on that curb, new and unformed, a child-amnesiac, happily awaiting my fate. And each time, the plot would unfold in exactly the same sequence: rough hands jerking me off the ground and shoving me into a musty, wooden crate. Each time, the same man would loom above me like a cartoon burglar, slamming the lid shut, then the trunk door. Again and again, the same silvery spider webs of light would filter through the cracks—the last light I knew I'd see on this earth. Each time,

I gasped for air, kicking the walls of the box with all my might, my scream muffled inside my throat.

The dream would end with the black sedan lurching forward with me in it, for the tenth time, the twentieth time, and then, as if sucked into some cosmic hole, I would feel my body begin to tighten and shrink, compressed by extreme gravity, my very existence reversing itself. Just before disappearing into a single, terrifying sparkle, I would wake up, first in a blinding panic, and then gradually comforted to find myself fully-formed with skin and toes and ears and hair. Supposedly safe in my bed, my heart would continue to beat for some time like that, like the wings of a desperate hummingbird.

III.

My mother liked to tell us tales and we loved to hear them because she always promised us that they were *true* stories—not made up ones, but *real* events she'd heard about in the news or something So-and-So had told her about at the beauty shop. We learned that in real life good children were not always rescued and that sometimes good children died because of bad luck or strange weather or stupid mistakes, like the little girl crushed by a refrigerator-size chunk of falling ice or the heroin-addicted mother who dried her baby in the microwave.

When human behavior could not be explained as a stupid mistake or a freak accident, we might have placed them in the category of "Pure Evil," as in the case of a man who snatched a sleeping girl from her bed, played with her the way a cat swipes at a cricket, and then buried her alive. My mother told us about the escapades of Charles Manson, a paranoid little man who hypnotized teenage girls until their eyes went all spiral-y and then brainwashed them into butchering beautiful *starlets* (my mother liked the word *starlet*). And if you thought family can save you, think again: distraught fathers were always going

psycho, including one who set his whole family on fire while they slept (including the dog—*what did the dog do?*).

But how did any of it make sense to young children? What horrors and dark desires lay in the hearts of men? And was death, then, just a random lottery? Even if I behaved nicely and didn't cuss or steal from my sister's piggy bank, who could say that a light pole would not fall on top of me while I was walking home from school? And knowing all this, shouldn't I go ahead and do whatever I pleased? Still, even with all these questions, the stories seemed spun out in a distant land—not distant in miles, maybe, but distant in possibility.

By first or second grade, I must have amassed a whole arsenal of such stories—mostly of lost children, dismembered cats, stolen babies, all of them floating through my mind, all of the lost souls in search of their homes. Before school, while I was eating my cold scrambled eggs, I'd study the milk cartons printed with the faces of missing children. *Where are you?* I'd whisper, pretending to have psychic powers. To the freckled boy with ragged bangs: *Send me a sign.* To the teenage girl resembling my babysitter, hair parted down the middle, gap between the teeth: *Don't give up.* Closing my eyes, I'd touch a finger to their faces and try to *see* them. Try to *feel* what they felt. The ghosts started following me, or so I thought, or maybe I started following the ghosts. Somehow, I felt that our lives had become connected, intertwined. I let myself love them. Who else would remember them? Where were their bodies now? Curled up in some musty old crate? Hidden beneath a pile of decaying leaves, fast-motion worms nibbling at their flesh?

In my mind, the killers got all the attention. Other crimes would remain beneath the radar, safely hidden away in bushes and schoolyards, sometimes wearing their "nice-guy" disguises. Who would notice these men who did not actually kill children but wanted only to possess them for brief seconds, giving to these children a part of themselves, like some bizarre birthday

present? How were children to behave, then, and what recourse did they have, unaware of this weird middle-land?

IV.

Two girls, your age, disappear from a bus stop. It's November, 1977, and the people in the city are in a panic. In Los Angeles, young women start turning up dead near the freeways of Glendale and north Los Angeles. Their bodies, luminous and pale, have been lain out like museum displays across garbage-littered scrub grass and natty hillsides.

Meanwhile, you are eleven going on twelve. You listen to *Peter Frampton Comes Alive*, your very first real album. On your baby record player the music crackles and skips, but who cares, it's the first music that belongs to you—not your mother's Liza Minelli show tunes or the *Saturday Night Fever* soundtrack, to which you now declare: *Disco Sucks!*

Peter Frampton, a skinny guy with haunted eyes, eases the pain of sixth grade, which bores you to death. Your teacher, Mr. Stuebner, talks mostly about dirt bikes and motorcycles and the foot-long metal pin in his arm. Then, when he runs out of dirt-bike stories, he turns on the classroom's television set and dozes off in the back of the classroom, arms crossed, snoring. You sleep, too, waking up with a puddle of drool beneath your cheek. Three of your classmates laughing at you as you try to wipe it up. But this is your life. Keyword: *alive*.

Those days you walk home from school alone, like most kids. There is no such thing as a "Child Drop-Off Line" or a "Child Pick-Up Line," and parents do not have to sign permission slips and contracts every five seconds. In those days, once the three o'clock bell rings, the school doors open, and kids pour out into the smoggy afternoon scattering every which way. A few stragglers linger at school until teachers shoo them off; others loiter across the street in front of the market dropping Pop Rocks on

their tongues and skidding off the curb with their skateboards, but every night, they arrive home safely.

Yours is an easy eight block stroll through a middle-class, tree-lined neighborhood, and three o'clock is a good time where you live. The sun is hot and the shade is cool, and you have survived another day of clock-watching with Mr. Stuebner. It's all uphill after three o'clock. There you go, meandering down Hermosa Street, inhaling deeply of the orange haze, humming, and taking your sweet time. In spots where the sidewalk is covered in shade, beside blooming camellias and man-size Japanese ferns, you pause to fan the back of your neck, shivering as the sweat dries and rolls down your back. Still half-aware, you notice a van parked alongside the curb where there isn't usually a van. Vans could be so groovy then—remember? Wall-to-wall carpeting, porthole bubble-windows, chain-link steering wheels. *Love Mobiles*. This van, though, scraped with rough blue primer, no windows—strictly for transport—isn't groovy. Who would notice it? After all, this is a street, and cars are supposed to park on streets, right?

So here you are, an eleven-year-old girl with a frizzy home-perm and braces with tiny pink rubber bands connecting top incisors to bottom incisors. Most likely you're wearing one of your baggy made-in-India blouses with the snaky embroidery across the chest. (You wear a "B" cup bra already and your attitude toward your developing breasts is a confusing mix of pride and horror).

But here is the van. Then the side door slides open. (Haven't you learned anything?)

(Birds sing.)

You are ten feet away.

(An airplane buzzes overhead.)

You are five feet away.

(A mourning dove coos.)

At the very least, admit your curiosity. Hitching the strap of your backpack higher you keep walking, edging toward the fence. In that van you expect to see paint cans, tools, other equipment, a couple of paint-splattered guys hauling a bucket or a ladder.

But here is what you get: A naked man on his knees, masturbating like crazy, frenzied, a rabid dog, his whole hairy body flexing and thrusting into his hand, his flat, black eyes staring. He'd been waiting for you. No flasher jokes now. This is not funny.

"Come 'ere," he says, breathing hard, his head thrown back. His face, like a branding iron, burns into your memory in a single flash. Do you think you imagine the desperate, dark air that emits from the van—air that reeks of despair, of struggle? Do you imagine the deep, low thrum that resonates from the van, a sound that only you can hear? Don't think, though. Run, now. Pretend you are a track star! Listen how the audience cheers you on. Run as fast as you can!

Linda, your nine year old sister, has beaten you home. Burning hot and out of breath, you slam the door, shrug off the backpack, and run to the window.

"Oh *shit*, oh *shit*, oh *shit*," you mutter, crouching down and scoping the street for suspicious activity. "Did you see him? Did you see that guy?"

"What guy? What are you talking about?" she says.

Dragging the curtains across the window, you tell your little sister about the pervert who was jerking off in the van. Your mother has told you about all the dead girls because their smiling school portraits are all plastered over the *L.A. Times*, but what does this have to do with you? Still, you race to lock all the doors. Your sister is on the verge of hysterics, but she's quick-thinking—she picks up the phone, dials the operator, and repeats the story, naked man and a van.

What are you doing, you shriek-whisper. (Good luck wrestling the receiver away from her; she's strong.) She hisses, "What if he followed you, *stupid*? What if he knows where you live?" Of course, she's right. You're not thinking about tomorrow or other girls or this guy's next move. You are thinking about YOU, and wondering what you've done to deserve this (boo-hoo) and what invisible signals your body is sending out behind your back. Think of your dog Cleo when she goes into heat and how stray mongrels come panting at the gate, hell-bent on getting in the yard and how a part of you despises poor Cleo as she sits panting on the patio, looking up, down, biting at a flea, oblivious, and now how you despise yourself because you can't stop your boobs from growing no matter how many Melba toasts you eat for dinner or how many hundreds of laps you swim. You can think all you want, but don't even try to connect the pieces. Not yet. You'd best just wait it out, crouching beneath the window—no adults needed, thank you very much. You'd just as soon never mention this again and go along your merry way, even though you feel naked and you'll start wearing sweaters every single day regardless of the temperature, buttoned right up to the neck.

Minutes later, though, police cars and a couple Buicks pull up in front of the house. Remember the sound of radios, footsteps and how you wonder: *Why so many cops? Why the hurry?* Peeking out from behind the curtains you glimpse the edges of uniforms, starched navy fabric, gleaming badges, guns, solid and heavy in their holsters. These are the good guys, so you open the door. They sit you down and Linda bombarding you with questions as they scribble into their notepads, pausing intermittently to mumble into their radios. One man, dressed like your father in polyester pants and a chunky striped tie, shakes your hand and says, "Hi, honey, I'm Detective Goodman, and I'll be handing your case." *Case?*

Then your mother arrives home, all flushed and flabbergasted, scared that they'll arrest her for leaving you alone. The

detectives don't give a damn about that. The good guys are on your side. They tell you to drive to the station, *pronto*, to meet with their sketch artist so you can make a picture of this creep while you're memory is fresh.

In the car: *Thanks a lot*, you mumble ungratefully to the little sister. Her blotchy face is streaked with tears. *That man could have killed you*, she insists, sniffing. She's mad at you. *Be quiet! Be glad someone around here has some common sense*, your mother scolds. *How is this even my fault*, you say, all persecuted, and they say, *You should be more scared. This is not a joke.*

At the station, a nervous detective asks you many questions about penises, pantomiming with his hands. *Okay, honey, was this man's, uh... PENIS...uh, erect or not erect, okay...in other words, uh...was it standing up, or, uh, laying down?* He wants to know about the shape of the penis. He wants to know if you understand the difference between circumcised and not circumcised. After that, the sketch artist, armed with charcoal pencils and a white pad, ekes out a fair likeness of the man's face. In the end, the picture looks accurate to you—soulless, empty as a mannequin, and a little bit like Starsky from *Starsky and Hutch*.

V.

Haven't you learned of any obvious signs? You are seventeen years old and you go jogging in the middle of the day. (Yes, you know what's coming). A shaggy-haired-Sasquatch leaps out the bushes, coming at you with his pants down, wielding his penis like it's a Light Saber. But maybe you have learned a lesson: If the good guys have taught you anything, they have taught you that you are not a dumb robot. You are not a dirty girl. You are not as powerful as you thought, either. Things happen with or without you. So. You march straight to the police department, still wearing your running clothes, still sweating. "I want to make a report," you say, out of breath. The detective, a woman, sits you right down. I'm a detective and I'll be handling this

case, she says, holding out her hand. It is strong and her fingers are warm. You describe the man without the slightest trace of embarrassment. You now know words for each body part—you keep a copy of *Gray's Anatomy* on your desk and you got an “A” is biology. You point easily to his face in a photo album filled with other criminals. A week later the detective calls you up to thank you and to tell you that they arrested that *creep* and that he won't be bothering you anytime soon.

Post Script to IV:

Fast forward: You are thirty-something, lounging around and thumbing through the pages of a dog-eared paperback, a book about the Los Angeles Hillside Stranglers, one that you found at some used bookstore, a made-for-TV-book about two cousins and their month long killing spree. Flipping right to the good part—the photos—you see a single picture that makes you forget, suddenly, who you are and what you are doing. The ground tilts.

From where do I know this person, you'll ask yourself. Those flat eyes, the hardened jaw, the branding-iron to the memory, your birthday present.

Of course, you'll need proof. Do the research, check the dates, examine the evidence. But you were there, that November, walking free, listening to Peter Frampton. Forget the stupid jokes you'll want tell your future children, like *Your mama is SO ugly, the serial killer left her on the curb!*

Stop looking at his picture now—enough of him. Instead study the faces of the girls from that November, girls who listened to Led Zeppelin and maybe hated (or loved) the sixth grade, girls who wore Love's Baby Soft Perfume and had Strawberry Lip Smackers stashed in their pockets. Understand that all that light was sucked into a black vortex. Surprise, surprise, one girl looks like you—a sixth grader with brown hair, metal barrettes, half-smile. Imagine her fate, jerked off her feet, pushed

into a trunk...but then stop there. Don't dwell on the ending. Imagine instead the beginning, the middle. Understand that death does not define her, nor does it define any of them. Now think about you. Was it luck? Was it smarts? How did you side-step the crevasse? All you can know is this: You are still here. Keyword: *Alive*. Look up at the sky. You are fully formed: Skin and toes, ears and hair.

VI.

These days, I study the FBI's mile-long Missing Persons list, trying to honor those faces, those stories, reading about the circumstances in which they've disappeared, hoping they'll send me a clue. As for their fate, four real possibilities exist: 1. They fell into a ditch and wedged a head or ankle between two boulders. 2. They got beamed up by aliens (hopefully kind, intelligent wide-eyed aliens like the ones in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*). 3. They are living under an alias, happily-ever-after on a tropical island. 4. You know the other possibility.

As for my own children, I have to warn them about these things, that people can be damaged in ways that I cannot explain with words. I teach them about kidnappers and perverts: Do I have a choice? My children learned words in this order: Mama, Papa, Sun, Moon, Kidnapper. Our front porch is not called a porch but a “safety zone” though, of course, I realize that safety is nothing but an illusion. I tell them about bad guys and good guys, but then comes the gray area. Can a bad guy ever be a *girl*? Can a person who *looks* like a bad guy actually be a *good* guy? Can a person who *looks* like a good guy actually be a bad guy? Can a good guy ever do a bad thing and still be a good guy? Yes, yes, yes, and maybe, I answer, only to be met with blank stares. I show my children the website. We find our map and click on the bubble nearest our house—*behind* our house. A smiling middle-age man appears on the page. His photo captures an expression as though he's just heard a joke and he's about to

beat us to the punch line. “Study his face,” I tell my children, and we do, as though we are looking at an insect through the lens of a microscope.

Contributors

Marcia Aldrich teaches creative writing at Michigan State University. She is the author of *Girl Rearing*, published by W.W. Norton and part of the Barnes and Noble Discover New Writers Series. She has had essays appear in *The Best American Essays*, *The Beacon Book of Essays by Contemporary American Women*, and a wide range of literary magazines. Most recently “The Dead Dog Essay,” originally published in *The Florida Review* was both a 2010 Notable Essay in *The Best American Essays* series and a Special Mention for the Pushcart Prizes. She just completed a book length meditation on suicide called *Companion to a Suicide in Minor*. She is the editor of *Fourth Genre: Explorations in Nonfiction*.

Jackie Bartley’s poems have appeared most recently in *Nimrod*, *Southern Humanities Review*, and *Pinyon*. Her second poetry collection, *Ordinary Time*, won the 2006 Spire Press Poetry Prize.

Jane Bernstein is the author of five books, among them the memoirs *Bereft - A Sister’s Story*, and *Rachel in the World*. Her awards include two National Endowment Fellowships, two Pennsylvania Council on the Arts Fellowships, and a 2004 Fulbright Fellowship spent in Israel, where she taught at Bar-Ilan University’s Creative Writing Program. Her essays have been published in such places as the *New York Times Magazine*, *Ms.*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Poets & Writers*, *Self*, and *Creative Nonfiction*, and her screen work includes the screenplay for the Warner Brothers movie *Seven Minutes in Heaven*. A member of the Creative Writing program at Carnegie Mellon University, she is working on a new novel, *The Face Tells the Secret*.

Rosemary Booth is a native of New Jersey who has lived in Massachusetts most of her life. She has worked as an English teacher, journalist, and organization consultant and now writes personal essays and poetry. Recently she completed a series of essays on the intersection of writing and aging. One essay, “Marjoram, Cinquefoil,” appears in the Imagination and Place anthology for 2010, *Seasonings*, and a poem about retirement, “Crossings” was published in *The Oak*. Her photo essay, “Emergence,” can be found in the April 2011 issue of the online publication, *Epiphany Magazine*. She is a member of the Writers’ Room of Boston and the International Women’s Writing Guild.

Joan Connor is a full professor at Ohio University and a professor in Fairfield University’s low residency MFA program. She is a recipient of a Barbara Deming Award, the John Gilgun Award, a Pushcart Prize, the Ohio Writer Award in fiction and nonfiction, the AWP Award for her short story collection, *History Lessons*, and the River Teeth Award for her collection of essays, *The World Before Mirrors*. Her most recent collection, *How to Stop Loving Someone* recently won the Leapfrog Press Award for Adult Fiction and is in press. Her two earlier collections are: *We Who Live Apart* and *Here On Old Route 7*. Her work has appeared in: *Glimmer Train*, *Shenandoah*, *The Southern Review*, *The Kenyon Review*, *Chelsea*, *Manoa*, *The Gettysburg Review*, *TriQuarterly*, *The Journal of Arts & Letters*, and *Black Warrior*, among others. She lives in Athens, Ohio and Belmont, Vermont.

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Jacqueline Kolosov’s prose and poetry have appeared in journals and anthologies including *Orion*, *The Southern Review*, *Shenandoah*, and *Poetry*. She has published two poetry collections, most recently *Modigliani’s Muse* (TurningPoint, 2009) and three young adult novels. She is currently working on a collection of lyric essays focused on mothers and daughters.

Judy Kronenfeld is the author of four poetry collections including *Ghost Nurseries*, a Finishing Line chapbook (2005) and *Light Lowering in Diminished Sevenths*, winner of the Litchfield Review Poetry Book Prize (2008). Her poems have appeared in many print and online journals including *Calyx*, *Cimarron Review*, *American Poetry Journal*, *Fox Chase Review*, *Innisfree Poetry Journal*, *Natural Bridge*, *Stirring*, *Women’s Review of Books* and *The Pedestal*, among others, as well as in a dozen and a half anthologies or text books including *Beyond Forgetting: Poetry and Prose about Alzheimer’s Disease* (Kent State University Press, 2009), and *Love over 60: An Anthology of Women’s Poems* (Mayapple Press, 2010). She has also published short fiction in a number of journals including *The Madison Review* and the ezines *Women Writers* and *Literary Mama*, and personal essays in the anthologies *France, A Love Story: Women Write about the French Experience* and *Voices of Alzheimer’s*. “Half-Deaf, Half-Adjusted” is her sixth personal essay to appear in *Under the Sun*. She is also the author of a critical study: *KING LEAR and the Naked Truth* (Duke U.P., 1998). She is Lecturer Emerita—after twenty-five years of teaching in the Creative Writing Department at UC Riverside, and lives in Riverside, CA, with her also retired anthropologist husband in the long-ago-emptied nest.

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Neil Mathison has been a naval officer, a nuclear engineer, an expatriate businessman living in Hong Kong, a corporate vice-president, and a stay-at-home-dad. His essays and short stories have appeared in *The Ontario Review*, *The Georgia Review*, *The Southern Humanities Review*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Agni*, *Under the Sun*, - *divide-*, *Bellowing Ark*, and *Pangolin Papers*. Forthcoming are essays in *The Southern Humanities Review* and *The North American Review* as well as a short story in *Blue Mesa Review*. Neil lives and writes in Seattle. Neil's essay, "Volcano: an A to Z" was recognized as a "notable essay" in *Best American Essays 2010*.

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Morgan Lyn Oldacre grew up in Knoxville, Tennessee, and spent summers outside in the care of her grandparents. She continues to write poetry and creative nonfiction rooted in her Southern heritage, and she is currently enrolled in the English doctoral program at Middle Tennessee State University, where she focuses on Children's Literature, Folklore, and Victorian Literature. Animals and nature continue to be her muses.

Rachael Peckham's chapbook, *Muck Fire*, won the Robert Watson Poetry Award at Spring Garden Press and is due out in the fall of 2011. Her scholarship and creative work have appeared in *Brevity*, *Briar Cliff Review*, *Gulf Coast*, *Inkwell*, *Sentence*, *Southeast Review*, *Xavier Review* and several other journals. She currently teaches creative writing at Marshall University in Huntington, West Virginia.

Catherine Reid, a member of the faculty of Warren Wilson College, where she teaches creative and environmental writing, is an editor, essayist, and author of a work of literary nonfiction, *Coyote: Seeking the Hunter in Our Midst*. She's still anticipating the day when she's licensed to fly solo.

J.E. Robinson published most recently "Welcome, Oblivion" in the 2010 issue of *Under the Sun*. His essays have appeared widely and have received the Illinois Arts Council Literary Award in Prose and a Pushcart Prize nomination. His current project is "Bequest," a book-length essay on schizophrenia. He lives in Southern Illinois and teaches history and humanities at Saint Louis College of Pharmacy.

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Patricia Schultheis has had several essays and nearly two dozen short stories published in national and international literary journals. A member of The Author's Guild and a voting member of The National Book Critics Circle, she has served on the editorial board of *The Baltimore Review* and currently serves on the editorial board of *Narrative*. Her pictorial local history titled *Baltimore's Lexington Market* was published by Arcadia Publishing of South Carolina in 2007, and her collection of short stories was a finalist for the 2008 Flannery O'Connor Award and Snake Nation Press awards. In 2010 she was a fellow at the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts and also received an award for literary nonfiction from the NobHill branch of the League for American Pen Women.

Jessica P. Shelenberger, a native of Bucyrus, Ohio, is a writer and adjunct English professor at Westminster College. She has had essays published in *Relief: A Christian Quarterly* and *The Fourth River*. Previously, she worked as a reporter and received several awards from the Associated Press Societies of Ohio and Pennsylvania. She lives in New Wilmington, Pennsylvania, with her husband and two children.

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William Siavelis was born in Chicago's Greek community and grew up on the city's west side. For most of his life, he taught high school history. In his forties, he began to write short stories that, among other things, reflect his life and that of his family in the city. Married with children and grandchildren, he retired from teaching in 1995, giving him more time to devote to storytelling which, like history, chronicles our lives.

