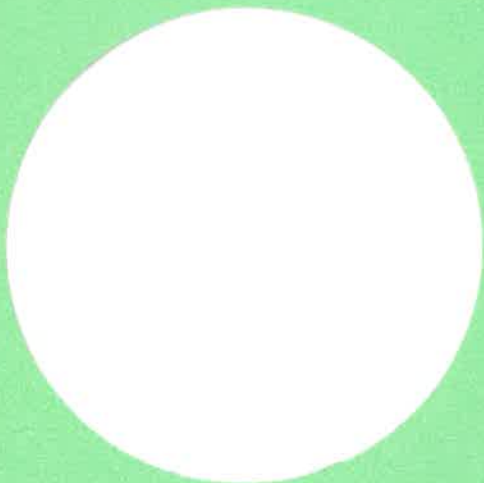


THIN AIR



MAGAZINE



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Amy Kollar Anderson

THIN AIR MAGAZINE

## THIN AIR STAFF 2004

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All submissions should be accompanied by SASE. Submissions from other countries should be accompanied by a sufficient number of international postal reply coupons. Please query before sending book reviews and interviews.

Address submissions, subscriptions and correspondence to:  
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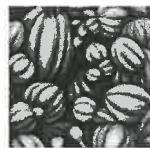
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## Pear Poem

Today I write you a letter  
but erase every last mark and line,  
the snow-driven page.

Eclipse of seam,  
wedding gown (the tags still on)

boxed at the base of my closet.  
It's been five years,  
three closets.

\*

My mind still strays.  
The pear orchard in Oregon.

Road, one long horizon  
four days in length,  
how we stopped at the sight of them —  
miles of pear trees  
in perfect rows.

We parked across the street, in a dirt patch  
curtained by willow branches,  
and necked.

\*

You drink the afternoon today  
in Kansas City.

The Missouri River shudders.

\*

We wandered the manicured queues  
 (my insides clamorous,  
 the field's silences)

looking for the ideal spot  
 to lay our blanket,

spent the night intertwined, pear seeds  
 beneath us.

\*

Pencil,  
 erase.

No one would believe this but you—  
*It's raining bones over the mountain.*

*Laundry hangs to dry from the long arm  
 of a song hummed broken,*

*a woman's winged silhouette.*

\*

As thunder starts  
 long before the first drop of rain,  
 the awareness—

*much of my history is also yours. Myself  
 a monologue in verse,*

you emerge from inside—  
 fiery daylight.

## A Return Letter

*Always this feeling of being alone, that were we entwined into timelessness  
 on the world's only bed, we could never quite pull close enough.*

### 30-Something Female Hostess: First Christmas Single

The kitchen is heat and garlic, rosemary and olive oil. Roses  
smell like carrots in her hands. Organic mathematics: the *sun times the moon*  
*equals the white onion.*

The door, thick insulation between snow and white tile. Hot pink  
feather-duster slippers and snoring dogs are curled up on the sunlit mat.

In the driveway, couples trudge through snow or parmesan or love together.  
Holiday bells, hot broth, baked goods in Tupperware.

But she's hungry for more than bread and spice, a stuffed bird. That's when  
the dogs start to look good, their fur tight and attached, bony chests rising,  
falling...

*Urgency is vision and no discomfort is insignificant, no boundary or myth.* No bra:

the sharp ice of her hand runs up the length of each sleeve...straps  
undone (the doorbell *ringing*). She tears at the tiny binding clips under the tight  
weight of too many layers...her breasts spill from their warm pockets,  
nipples stand like two hairs from a wool sweater.

Guests blooming through the doorway in pairs, winter parkas:  
suntan-red, creamsicle-colored. Kitchen, all but outside,  
a white-cold.

Organic carrots raw and whole  
drop to the snow-tile floor. Call them  
roses toughened, whole bodies flung.

### Nine Pieces to a Love Poem in Past Tense

8.  
He's heard hatred endless as sunflower fields  
in France. Color-orgy of sky,  
the moon a countryside  
blacking out light's marmalade.

2.  
I want to love him so badly I sting.  
Havarti pores, strawberry nose,  
his underarms  
musky, apricot muffs.

4.  
In San Sebastian I combed the sand constantly.

3.  
He was born at the bottom of a subterranean bottle.  
"And at three," he said "when I 'fell out of bed,'  
my arm...like glass. A carafe."

5.  
Have you ever had a sex dream without the sex,  
one of those days when inserting the tab,  
closing the cereal box, is a mournful turn on?

7.  
Lightning bugs don't dare desire anything wet.

6.  
A woman an elevator whispers,  
"You don't really know a man  
until you've seen his bare feet."

1.  
Consider love an attainable miracle-animal.

9.  
His eyes (bemused)  
beg, *Look once more.*

howl wind arrow-torn cloud

I try but spy only fracture.

## Ravina

an excerpt from the novel-in-progress  
*Origami With The Ocean*

Even though God's died, Dad says we still have to pay the Lord's leftover bills. His birthtown, Ravina, is dry; the once fertile forest ground down like the sole of a shoe that history's walked across burning coals. At intervals of ten feet, burnt-out pig iron roasts blister the flats near the quarry. There is no room for trees. Skunk Row's aluminum shanties zigzag between furnaces and aerial tramways. The spaces between work and home are confused. For most still-living Raviners, only habit is constant. At three o' clock precisely, nine puddlers with boiled-off skin cover their heads with tar-paper cones. Scuttling, they creep past expanses of rusting sheet metal, plus lots of crude iron shaped into grenade handles and pineapple cans. Dad whistles tunelessly as my sister, Autumn, and I follow them towards the canteen, a full sheet of laundry swinging between our red hands.

The DeRear canteen has no walls but the men have heaved a concrete block bench against one of the exploded scaffolding sides. Out of idleness Fatty Joe bangs his empty lunchpail against a melted steel rail that's bolted into the concrete—a memorial to the foundry's old lunch counter where Gino and MoMi maneuver their toothpicks skillfully with thick tongues and Fancy Eddie mixes his tobacco with bubblegum in order to minimize the lost juice. For entertainment Rye folds a cardboard cutout from a faded dairy package—the Land 'O Lakes Butter Girl's knees transform into large breasts when a cut's sliced in her top, and her knees folded up—this wisdom was passed down by Old Joe, whose ghost is invited. At thirty-four, he was not the youngest to come home from DeRear's eighteen-hour shift too tired to beat his daughter and wife. After the third blast furnace burst, even the rats gave up squealing under sink pipes for shreds of tuna left out by well-meaning children. Better that each aspen shriveled when the twelve tons of carbon DeRear had pulled from the earth returned through the sky. MoMi puts his feet up on a jagged rebar skeleton while Rye flicks ash off the table to clear a space for their four-joker deck; a pile of rust chips heaps itself at his fist—Ravina's new poker ante. The men wait.

As we step closer, I keep my gaze trained on the knots of our laundry sheet, afraid to look up and see how the men's expressions have crumbled to match Ravina's broken skyline. It's like passing a band of ogres—years of sweat-exuded salt has formed ridges in the men's eyebrows and caked in the corners of their mouths. Recurring blisters periodically pop and leave white warts on their foreheads and jowls. Even twenty years after DeRear's divested, a Persian carpet of rust stains still leaks out from the abandoned forge piles whose pig iron fillings weren't worth the effort of plunder. When the chemicals in the air shift only

slightly, a dust rises above to form sparkly, stain-glass pictures—not of humble virgins but of dead barons, old puddler faces. Sometimes the mirages also show lakes.

When we move forward to pass the men's burnt-up work boots Dad lags behind Autumn and me. He crams a fake railroader hat on to cover his long hair, lets his left knee loosen and drags his right foot to simulate the limp he once had.

"Pretty city wife," yells Fatty Joe. His spit webs out, snowballing with tobacco and salt as it flies towards Dad's ear. The other puddlers aim at Dad's vest from behind; they hate how the shiny buckle pinches a dark sheet of fabric up like a bow tie while the front's a patchwork of curtains and sheets. One side of Dad's turned-up face smiles. There's a sizzle as the dryness of Ravina sucks away the small amount of wetness they spew. By the time the spit gobs land on Dad's back the men's saliva is nothing but a chemical-salt crystal that leaves a white spot and smells like bad breath.

We sacrifice ourselves conveniently to fit the canteen men's schedule because Grandma's soap opera's at three; there were puzzles; there was home school; Dad seems to believe that the tender contempt of Ravina's puddlers is just one step up on the way to having his head swirled in the toilet by God.

"It's my role in the town," Dad explains.

Fatty Joe's early fame was from flattening Dad's face into the fart-warmed vinyl seat bottoms of Ravina Elementary's graying school bus. Fatty Joe went on, with the draft, to pack parachutes for infantries in Vietnam—a task for which his only experience was tying fisherman flies, most of which had also fallen off their hooks. A little out-of-season hunting. Fatty Joe's Ma glorified his incompetence discharge into such an honor that DeRear found it fitting for him and Momi to return to their high school jobs, watching for scratches on the slabs of sheet metal that rolled along the foundry's last remaining conveyer belts. At a time when the town's rats seemed to swarm inside every housewife's intestines, Fatty Joe and his men shouted up to the foundry's one remaining boss—the DeRear High School Wrestling Champion of 1943, John Alpo—when they found small flaws. Hippies and Red organizers were soon included in the assigned watch.

If Fatty Joe's crew was now asked the reason for the spit-gobs they produce, they would blink their ghost-blistered eyelids and say:

"What right did he have to leave for college?"

"I work twelve hour shifts."

"Got to separate the metallic from the non-metallic."

"We've always spit on that boy."

Dimwit Die, who has a blister on his nose and feet that look like rail-straightening smashers, would reply simply: "He's a cripple."

"Afraid of the soup," MoMi says, flicking the butter girl's knees to her breast with the yellowed fingernail of his one remaining thumb. "Once when the

crane dropped, I was hanging off the grip. Swung clear to the edge of the ladle, burned up my left side."

After spitting Fatty Joe makes the sign of the cross.

"A Communist," he says. "Atheist."

I kick a lump of pig iron right through the mirage of a coal car.

"We're defeating all religions and knowledge," I shout.

Immediately, Dad frowns. His left shoulder sinks to almost scrape the men's boots. He drags his right foot into an anthill that's made of white quartz.

"Don't just turn the other cheek," he says. "Give it away."

Our bed sheet of laundry's made heavier by an avoidance of brown Jim-Bean bottles. I recite Dad's anti-prayer under my breath: Mohammed mumbles. Yahweh eats trees. Jesus is probably incestuous with his mother, but atheism's bland bees. Dad's going to be the antichrist, the unprophet. We'll build our own town.

When we reach the spot where Ravina's earth splits to expose its innards — white quartz — the sun is just at the right spot to blind us. Its reflections off the rock are so brilliant — whiter than any anthills or salt — I wouldn't be surprised if the glare was stretching our shadows long enough to make spots on the sun. From where I stand on the east end of the ravine — if I shade my eyes and squint — I can just barely make out the mirage of three scraggly birches far across to the south. They are brittle — barren sticks. The only other color in sight is a loop of red graffiti on the far side of the ravine, sprayed below a few strings that straggle down from a thin, root-strained pinyon. Like the birches, it is leafless, more stump than tree but it must have supported quite a few teenagers, judging from the pile-up of cigarette butts on the lonely shelf of quartz that juts out from the sheer.

It's just the right heat for dry-cleaning. We know by a shivery light rising from the ravine that vibrates the rocks to sing out a low, mosquito-buzz note. Autumn smooths the hem of her dress and unties the green bag where she keeps important implements like nail clippers, pencil lead, safety pins, sunscreen, thread, band-aids, and the lye-gasoline mixture we use to eat the dirt off our clothes. I undo the sheet's knot and lay out my pants alongside Dad's undershirts, then walk along the row straightening collars and sleeves while Autumn squirts the chemicals on. Dad meanwhile loosens his back, bending to let the bones in his spine stretch out from his fake limp. He lets his head and arms swing, fingers dangling to the ground so that his railroader's cap falls away too quickly to catch all his long curls. From the ravine edge with the worst glare blocked by his hair, I get a good view of the vertebrae in Dad's neck and of his butt, which is skinny but glad, freely giving all the glamour to his hair. He stretches and bounces in his half-turned over way so that the tips of his curls sweep Ravina's dust up in swirly patterns that twinkle and laugh.

Autumn's only response is: "Stay back from my laundry."

She opens the bag with our lunch, which contains only one sandwich, an apple, and a cookie which, although large, is singular, meant to remind us that out of Mom, Dad, Autumn and me, Grandma claims only her son.

"Inconceivable," Grandma says, that Autumn or I or the coming baby could have resulted from the small sickly boy who Grandma did everything for. This on top of agreeing to work four extra hours every day, shoveling soot from DeRear's darkest forge.

"My baby Davie's penis is crooked," she says. "We brought a doctor in who said he's too crippled to father a child."

Saliva splashes against my buck teeth while I try to decide whether to dive for the cookie or apple. Dad's face is flushed with all the blood rushing to it. He's taking forever to stretch himself out.

Instead of saying grace, Autumn recounts the story of how Mom and Dad met.

"Dad's hair looked like the clay on a lion bust Mom was molding," she says. With the last drops of lye-gasoline mixture she sketches the tree Dad said they were married under: a leafless birch near a boarded up church. There was no priest or exchange of rings but Mom and Dad kissed for ten hours without getting frostbite even though a blizzard started blowing right under the tree. Just when Dad's hair was getting wild with icebergs, an old German Shepherd limped past. It had three broken teeth. Mom and Dad stopped kissing to laugh.

Depending on the date of this dateless story, either Autumn or I may have been conceived under that tree. We'd have to dig the dog's bones up from the ravine to even confirm that the wedding took place because Mom says she and Dad were married when they fucked for ten minutes in a chicken shack. Her fingers turned blue and her father, our Grandpa Kabrinski, sat up in his bed three hundred miles down the coast, clairvoyantly woken by the sound of Dad's penis in Mom's vagina. Two roosters crowed and gobs of chicken shit stuck to Dad's back. As soon as Grandpa Kabrinski saw the strawberry tattoo he'd forbidden Mom to imprint on her butt, he used an electrical dog prod to rouse his fat wife, whom he always wakened this way; they hadn't had sex in twelve years.

"Let the chickenscratch take her," Grandpa shouted. "Esther Helena Kabrinski's no longer my child."

At that moment, when Grandpa Kabrinski gave his daughter away — at his insistence — the largest rooster in the chicken house pecked a hole in Dad's cock, Mom and Dad were married and, depending on the unknown date of this story, either Autumn or I was conceived.

"This new pregnancy's the straw through the needle," Mom says. "The death knell to my concert pianist career, which was about to take off last week when your mother, Stevie, failed to answer the phone. It could have been

Carnegie Hall calling. That deaf hag wouldn't care."

In Mom's retelling, she and Dad exchanged ice picks instead of cheap rings. Aside from Grandpa Kabrinski's vision, and the later birth of a child, the only mark of the wedding was the hacked trail they left breaking through three feet of snow as they tried to pull chicken feathers from each other's hair.

Do they only agree on the season by chance?

With one hand shading both eyes, I wait for Dad's ramble to swing his shadow across the quarry so I can look down at an almost-dark spot below the teenagers' cigarette ledge where the sun reflects off of something like beer glass or a fence post or a bone. The ravine isn't deep but Grandma says it's baked so hard on the bottom if I jumped in my whole body would splat and fry like an egg.

Even though he's upside down, the thought makes Dad smack his lips.

"Family structure must keep up with technological innovation," he says.

His bent-over bounce continues to stir up chemically dense clouds that at any moment may turn into frightening visions. I scoot myself away to the edge of the concrete where I can dangle my legs and make a game kicking rust towards the almost-dark spot. Besides 'the ravine,' the quarry has a ton of nicknames: the bent snowflake, dried milk-spout, virgin, vagina, you white man, that sheep, abyss and white whale. Some believe that the pounding of DeRear's mill stamp cracked the ravine so wide that our landfill trash falls through the center of the earth and blows out the other side as litter, destroying the natural peace of the cold Russian steppes. Others say that the ravine's glare is enhanced by mirrors so as to hide DeRear's multiple corporate scandals from view. No one knows for sure how wide the ravine is, or how deep, because if you stare too hard, your eyeballs and even brain nerves will be seared. Dad's the only one who's ever reportedly come back from crossing (and many think that he never left, that instead of going away to college, he hid for four years in his mother's couch). The only agreed-upon fact is that fighting DeRear—even retrospectively—is of no more use than trying to fill the ravine up with rocks. It's only because of Dad's heroic legacy that I dare to sit as close to the edge as I do. What, after all, would happen if I did find a way to shade my eyes and just jump?

The chocolate chips from Grandma's cookie, I notice, have melted out and started to drip down the inside of the ravine. Already they've dripped past where my feet kick. I can't track their trail very far but it's appetizing to look at the small, worm-like holes in the cookie where the chocolate's drooled out. As Dad and Autumn come to make a happy triangle around Grandma's small lunch, I find myself inching out farther on the ledge towards the drip. My mouth waters just looking at how far it has gone; there's no guessing the taste that so much escaped chocolate has left in the cookie's empty dough holes.

Dad finishes straightening his back with an upwards-reaching stretch.

"Ready to eat?" Autumn says. "Go."

Dad sinks to the pavement, coughs asbestos shards from his throat, and snatches the cookie with his long arms.

Autumn takes the apple.

I don't say anything about my disappointment, just watch Dad munch as I pick up the cheese sandwich that's left. I open it so I can dangle the sprouts and slurp them like I would if they were spaghetti. In some spots where Grandma's glopped the mayonnaise thick, the bread is quite good.

"If you don't start keeping track of birthdays," I say when I've got the mayonnaise-half of the sandwich safely stored in my cheek. "I'll jump into the ravine."

"Monday, June 16, 1978," Dad tells me. "Do you know what Freud says?"

It's not necessary to answer his questions, but for some reason Autumn always tries.

"Id, Ego, Superego," she says. "We weren't born today."

Forcing my eyes to stare almost as far as the cookie's chocolate must have dribbled, I look back at the dark spot, which has crawled several feet down, closely hugging the rock. It's decidedly not human. When I squirm to look closer, a glare from the west blocks out all else with its glitters and winks. The only movement I see is a dehydrated buzzard dipping down where one side of the ravine blares out at the other. I let myself scoot just a little bit farther out on DeRear's concrete and then suddenly I'm slipping, no longer Dad's little girl swinging my legs at the edge of the cliff; I'm inside the ravine, whapped by dried sticks, pummeled by quartz. There's a grumble behind the rip in my pants. Or maybe it's my overall strap that pulls the big rock that draws blood from my ear. A cloud of white dust rises like smoke from a locomotive. Each breath takes in metallic shards that cut the inside of my nose. What if God is not sympathetic? There's only air beneath me. What if I'm falling into a white whale? There goes the baleen. There go its ribs. How can I be sure I'll be spit up after three days? Grandma says that the permanent residents of the ravine are four-headed fetuses thrown in by all the girls who lived downwind from the stacks. White vaginas are waiting at the bottom to munch me with their big teeth. I feel shadows as I fall lower. A thump. Grandma's predictions are wrong. My blood is not boiling. When I open one eye, there's a blue wire almost poking in it. When I open both eyes, I don't know where to look; I'm surrounded by riches: a tin can, two mops, a bathtub, four crumpled aluminum sheets, a tire rubber with all its threads hanging out; a flat dish rack, two rear view mirrors, a buggy handle, four bicycle gears, bubble wrap, red socks and a case of beer with all of its bottles cracked. Pin cushions, plenty of antennae, two mailboxes kicked out of shape; one still raises a hopeless red flag—four unpaid electricity bills inside and a shoe. Dog hair, vulture feathers, two human skulls, a wash basket, half a Japanese fan; price tags, chicken bones, four uniform shirts, a key chain, three broken pots with dried

dirt; two rulers, four stiff cats, a brush full of blonde hair, miles of clothesline, scraps from a decayed antique quilt, radiators, baseball caps, barbed wire, three legs off a stool, two broken violins, a fire poker, iron railroad ties, newspapers, cement blocks, a paper kite, blue socks, cement bags, pillows, ten pounds of rice, one hunting plaque, cigarette butts, license plates, a shirt that almost fits, dead bugs, car keys, batteries with the acid poofed out. A Skunk Alley street sign. Two cracked window panes. Why didn't Grandma tell us the ravine contained so much wealth? The west wall isn't at all high here like she said either. I could easily climb up it by stacking bins of discarded peach pits on top of the five crates of votive candles that have been left here in steps. Is this the only spot that's so shallow? How many other of the legends are false?

I stop sorting when I see a wet trickle streaked clean across a cleared spot on the quartz. The trail of water leads towards a heap of shriveled brussel sprouts piled to form a ridged face against the east wall.

"Autumn, Dad," I call. It would be a real miracle to find a clean spring. We could start a new town here, make a fertile valley with corn crops and cows. I rush to the wall where the brussel sprouts tower, mixing their wrinkled heads in with quartz pebbles as I throw both to the side. The heap to my left builds against a gutted T.V. The heap to my right sifts through the rim of a broken bicycle tire.

"Oh boy," Dad cries, making his own rumble and avalanche as he falls. "A 1947 oven mitt! Look at this cap."

I try to tell Dad about the clean trickle but he's too busy undoing my clearing by scrabbling around the broken bicycle tire, which is splayed out above a white book, its spokes biting into the many tattered pages, all of which are completely blank.

"The perfect anti-altar," Dad says. He pulls the white book out from under the bicycle spokes and runs his fingers over the book's blank pages as if the spoke indents are messages in Braille. I've dug far enough by this time to plunge my arm down with my fingers brushing against the quartz wall.

"Damn it," I say. Where the clean spring ought to have spouted, my fingers close around the hard contours of wet glass. "A vodka bottle."

Why didn't I smell the white trickle? Vodka has such dry fumes. I want to throw the cracked bottle, to make an explosion to go with my dashed hope—but Dad's standing still with his eyelashes paused, the book held so high it shadows his lips, which move silently as if conversing with it. Instead of swearing I hold my breath, waiting in case he's working on one of those bad punchline jokes with a pun I'll only get by memorizing the words and asking him later.

Vodka trickles up my elbow.

I attach two bedsprings, one to each of my shoes.

"Hey Dad," I say. "Watch me jump."

Instead he closes his eyes. His face draws in like the cheeks need to

converse privately inside his mouth. His knees knock together like they're checking in too.

"Autumn?" I call.

It takes her awhile to get down because she uses a rope to lower herself slowly. Not even one strand of her braid flies out of place. Because of Grandma's stories, she's taken the precaution of tying a blindfold tight on her eyes. I grab it off quickly.

Autumn blinks only twice before putting her hands on Dad's hips—the best place to shake him.

"Have you both got a fever?" she says. "Because our laundry will be dry now."

Dad brings the book down slowly as if it's a tablet that breaks all the rules. Pressing the pages tenderly against his heaving chest, he stacks three mattresses and a dresser in the center of the trash heap and catapults me back up to DeRear's concrete using a bendy drainpipe and some kid's broken swing.

I land a good three feet back, right on Mom's now-sun-dried blouse and sit up not hurt, only scared. I don't care about the trickle or bed springs or dead cats or mail. I just want Dad's hair to poof out like it did before he found the white book. I am visualizing him normal when the top of his head appears at the edge of the ravine. His forehead still glistens, two curls plastered crossways; both his cheeks are zigzagged with sweat.

"This is the one," Dad shouts.

He pulls me to my feet and bends my body so my left hand is on my right knee, and my back is curved over. I guess he's made me in the shape of a top because he pushes my head and butt to make me spin. Seven, eight, nine times: boulder, laundry, buzzard, braids, concrete, clouds, the white book. Dad pulls me upright and Autumn's arms smear. I see a streak of Dad's back stretching taller than ever. The ravine returns thirteen echoes: yes yes yes es es es es es-s-s-s-s and then gibberish, as if Dad's announcing the white book to the whole sky. Even when the ravine stops swirling, his eyes still sparkle with a thin film of colors. His tears evaporate so fast that there are rainbows hovering in the mist from his eyes.

"Let's bring the good news to your mother," Dad says. "The anti-bible's been found."

## Three Months After the Memorial

I'm sitting crossed-legged at the edge of Hanging Rock.  
 Hands on my knees, I breathe-in deeply.  
 My fingertips pulse.  
 I look down into the tops of trees; juniper leaves, swaying alive.  
 I look ahead. It's Second Beach.  
 The shadows of beach balls tossed and caught.  
 Dots of children bob up and down, riding the waves.  
 White foam recedes.  
 A red lifeguard chair towers above them all.  
 I feel a wind on my neck.  
 It's like August in Versailles,  
 or inside St. Paul's Cathedral, high up on a ledge,  
 looking down on black-capped chickadees  
 beating their wings.  
 I hear their tiny calls. *Your father is dead.*  
 Gray confetti circles in the air.

## Migration

When I arrive, he's already dead,  
 sea-coated, silver-streaked, the humpback  
 making his mark in the sand.  
 I can't find rudder or net scars.  
 I begin to circle, touch his drying spout,  
 feel the sadness in him in me.  
 I rub off fixed barnacles, sit  
 in silence, watching the waves move.  
 I hear their crashing  
 and stand unsteady in the burying sand.  
 I want to guard him from poachers and scientists  
 searching for tags. Their measures, scales,  
 their cold analyzing hands.  
*Stop the prodding!*  
*Dump the guidebooks.*  
 Mouth the words, *I know about extinction.*  
 I am sick of the need to call this soul a cetacean.  
 I imagine the echoing  
 of songs amongst his whale pod. In his fluke,  
 the patterned swirls and spots  
 like his own Morse code or fingerprint.  
 Whale parts disappear, soak and blend,  
 he will resonate,  
 pass through new currents.  
 In Bali and Tahiti, tribes take whale communion,  
 I will go there and swallow.

## Pomegranate

I'm at a fruit stand, trying to examine a pomegranate: ripe or rotten? And I want to call my dad and ask him to explain everything, all over again. To ask him where periwinkles come from. His hands on my five year-old face again. Let's go find their mothers and fathers. And at ten, how to clean the paintbrushes so the bristles won't fray. I smell the pomegranate and hold it up to my nose. Sniff for sweetness, freshness. I don't know what I'm doing anymore. I listen for the pit's rattle. But, No, he said to shake the avocado. I drop the pomegranate back into its heaping pile. I want to know where you find the cabs at Union Station; what size nail to use to hang a 15-pound painting; and how much light does a Christmas cactus need? But all I really want is to make that new salad I saw on a cooking show last week. The one where I need just a pomegranate. Arugula, olive oil, balsamic vinegar, and shredded dried ricotta. He'd know the difference in texture between dried ricotta and Parmigiano-Reggiano. I fish through the pile for a pomegranate that isn't too soft. A clear, red one, without mold or bruises. I close my eyes and hear my dad reminding me. Pick before overly ripe, before they crack open, especially if they've been rained on. The chef on TV said to warm the fruit by rolling it between the hands to soften the insides, to ready the juice of the seeds.

## Confluence

### River

The rivers we build are new paths.  
Where they meet is a confluence that neither of us has seen.

A river is one kind of movement.  
Swimming is better.

When everything underneath the water shows itself  
and is not disappointing.  
When the body gives way to cold completely  
and all that's warm is mouth.  
When we have to lick each other for warmth.

### Flight

To fly, you have to inhale hard and hold your breath  
indefinitely. You may or may not fly – it's your choice, really.

Swimming is one kind of flight.  
Birds are crowding by the shore –  
some have made it onto land,  
some have missed completely.

This I have a handle on:

The sleep that sleeps inside my body.  
The way I laugh when I'm afraid.  
That I'm here to build a fire  
but have been doing something else completely.



that meant I got a new leather and wool bomber jacket for my first year in high school, though it was too hot to wear it yet, and we went to Mo's Restaurant once a week and she ordered grilled salmon and I had fish and chips and chowder.

I made the cocoa because a long time ago she said I made it the best she ever tasted. The cocoa was my responsibility, like mowing the lawn and raking the leaves that had started falling from the maple that spread over the back yard. I boiled water and filled two mugs half full. Then I mixed in the Hershey's Instant. Then I filled the mugs with the Tillamook Half-n-Half that mom used in her coffee. The cocoa was rich and just the right temperature to drink.

We took our mugs and climbed into the navy blue Malibu that was spotless because of her driving people around, showing houses, and she backed out, crunching gravel on the driveway, backed straight out because there never was traffic on Jefferson Street, holding her mug up so she didn't spill.

I rolled my window down, to feel the air before the sun turned it thin and hot. The air was moist. Salt air I was so used to I didn't think about it except sometimes, like that morning, when it was gentle and tasted sweet on the back of my throat.

Nuwakum is pretty small so it only took us five minutes to get to the Reynolds' house. We parked on the beach grass. Mrs. Reynolds was in the front yard, which was more beach grass but mowed down like a lawn so that the hard stubs poked my bare feet.

I was just going to walk down and look, Mrs. Reynolds said. There's some people there already.

Mrs. Reynolds had blond hair pulled up and a wide, curvy body. She wore purple pants that were tight and showed the lines of her underwear. My mom was tall and dark and beautiful next to her. I don't look like her much, except for my dark hair. Our eyes are the same color, too, gray like the ocean. I'm not short, but I'm not tall like my mom. That will come, she said. You have big hands and feet. Just a couple of weeks ago, my legs ached so much I spent a Saturday just laying on the sofa and my mom said, See, that's you growing.

We followed the short trail through the scrub pine and the beach opened up to us, dull gray sand and then the gray ocean, just starting to take on the blue of the sky, rolling its waves at us. Down the beach was a bunch of people standing, looking at this mountain that was the dead whale.

My mom and I looked at each other and her eyes said, OK, so I ran down the beach. I had tried out for the junior varsity football team and made it because I was a pretty fast runner. I was going to play running back and, when we were on defense, I'd be a safety. Our first game was Friday afternoon, against Florence. I ran down the beach and pretended I was running with the football, juking some, my heels sinking in the sand. Run it up their ass, like Coach says, but the slope of the beach made my legs go almost too fast and I had to slow down so I

didn't trip right in front of the people standing, looking at the dead whale.

I stopped a few feet away from Tim Reynolds, who was wearing some floppy shirt and pants, like he hadn't changed out of his pajamas.

Hey, Tim said.

Hey, I said.

Everybody was standing back from the whale, maybe to really see it. The whale was so big that if you were up close all you would see would be dark.

The whale was 61 feet long and weighed almost 55 tons. That's what the scientist from Oregon State University told the Tillamook newspaper. It was a fin whale, which is the second biggest mammal on earth next to blue whales. The scientist said the whale was a young male. Like a teenager, he said.

We learned all that from the newspaper and from the reports we had to do at school, reports about what whales eat and how they live and all the different kinds of whales there are in the ocean.

Tim said, At least it doesn't stink.

I walked away from Tim, walked slow all the way around the whale.

The whale lay half on its side. Its lower fin was stretched out and the leaving tide had covered it with sand. The top of the whale was dark like charcoal, darker than the sand, almost black. I walked in cold ocean water rolling over my ankles to get around its tail.

The whale's underside was creamy light. Where its jaw swooped towards its mouth were grooves. For eating plankton. One side of the whale's jaw was dark. The other side was light. All fin whales are marked like that. No one knows why.

The whale's skin looked velvety.

Its big eye, the one we could see, was open and the color of river rock when it is wet.

The whale did too smell. But it wasn't a bad smell. The whale smelled deep and mysterious and clean and cool. And fresh. Like fresh, scrubbed air, like the breath from a dark blue green place.

When I came around again, my mom and Mrs. Reynolds were standing a ways from the whale, looking at it and talking. Mrs. Reynolds had brought her cup of coffee.

There were footprints all around the whale. I stepped out of my footprints, towards the whale. Put my hand out and touched the whale with my fingers, then laid my open palm on it, just back from the eye. The whale's skin was cool and damp. I leaned my weight onto the whale. It was firm and solid.

Fin whales have four-chambered hearts, like ours, only theirs weigh more than 250 pounds. I wondered if the whale's skin felt different with that huge heart still beating.

My mom whistled to me, a short whistle between her teeth.  
Come on, buddy, she said. We've got to get you to school.

I had to go to school early because I'd gotten into trouble already and had to sweep out the shop class for punishment. It happened on the second day of school, in PE class, in the showers. Gary Turner was in the showers, we were all in the showers, and Gary said to me, Stop staring, faggot.

I hit him in the face before I even thought. Blood came out of his nose so sudden I jumped back and slipped on the floor, and nearly sat down on my bare butt. Gary put his hands on his face and I think I made him cry, but you couldn't see any tears because the shower washed his face, washed the blood down his chest. The PE teacher, Mr. Whipple, sat us both down. Gary didn't rat on me and I didn't rat on him, so we both got a week of clean-ups instead of something serious, like detention or missing the football game.

But somebody must have told Mr. Whipple, and he told the principal, because my mom got a letter from the school. She read it after we'd eaten our dinner of macaroni and cheese and fresh salad, a dinner I made because she didn't get home that night until almost dark. I saw what she was reading, so I gathered up the dishes. Then I washed them, too. And then I just stood at the sink. Waiting.

My mom in the kitchen doorway.

You know what this is about. She didn't ask a question.

Because I hit Gary Turner, I said. But we shook hands. And we got punished. They already told you. It's over.

My mom looked at me with her worried face, her eyes trying to understand me, I think, and my throat went tight.

What did Gary say to you? she asked.

I didn't want to talk about it. I shrugged. Just a name, I told her. I don't remember.

My mom looked at the letter again. She looked at me and her eyes were an ocean storm, gray and green, reflecting light. You know you can talk to me about anything, she said. You know I'll love you, no matter what.

My stomach hurt. I know, I said.

Don't listen to Gary Turner and the other kids, my mom said.

Then she reached out and I walked into her arms and let her hold me tight, smelled her familiar smell of lavender and lemon. I was safe. I wasn't bad. I was just a boy. But my stomach ache moved to my chest and stayed there all night.

At school, everyone talked about the whale. The senior science class got to take a bus to the beach and do experiments on the whale, like measuring its tail flukes and its flippers and how big the blow hole was.

Mr. Anderson, the freshman English teacher, told us to write a poem about whales. I thought I could still smell the blue green whale smell on my hand and I played over in my head that whale swimming free, splashing and crashing his strong tail on the waves. But I couldn't make that into a poem.

Mr. Anderson said, I wonder what they're going to do with it.

That's what my mom asked that night, too, when we sat down to eat sloppy joes with corn on the cob.

Maybe they can tow him back out to sea, I said.

Maybe, she said. Pretty big fish. And you'd have to get the tow boat pretty close to shore.

I almost said that whales aren't fish.

Instead, I said, A scientist from Oregon State University is coming in tomorrow to find out why he died.

My mom turned her ear of corn, but didn't pick it up. You wonder, she said. Why something that big and living in the big, wide ocean would end up on our beach. You wonder where its family is.

I thought about the whale all day Tuesday. Through my classes and through football practice. Cindy Lemon gave a report in science class about the whale heart and how it pumped gallons of blood with each beat. I imagined having that heart when we ran sprints in our pads and helmets, because my lungs hurt and my legs felt thick and slow but I thought, I've got a whale's heart. I can do anything.

Gary Turner was on the JV football team, too. After I hit him in the showers, he wouldn't look at me for a few days. But I think he respected me, even though he never really apologized. We said, Hey, at practice because teammates can't hate each other. Gary tried to keep up with me in the sprints because he was a receiver and was supposed to be fast. But he didn't have a whale heart. When we were done, he took off his helmet and leaned over with his hands on his knees and gulped air.

Man, Gary said. He sort of smiled at me. You got some kind of engine, he said. Then Gary slapped me on the helmet, like the players do on my favorite team, the San Francisco 49ers, and we walked together to the sideline.

On Wednesday, we had a school assembly about the whale. The scientist from the university talked to us about whales. He wore his hair in a ponytail and he showed us slides of whales swimming in the ocean, whales playing together, a mother whale and her calf. He played a tape of whales singing and the music filled the auditorium, the whale song circling my head, flowing into me its strange hums and pops and cries.

He told us how they used to hunt whales, how they made ladies' make-up out of sperm whales. When he said that—sperm whale—some of the older

boys hooted and then some of the younger boys made noises, trying to be like the older boys.

But I listened to everything the scientist said. Some whales can dive as deep as 10,500 feet. They can hold their breaths for an hour. They talk to each other across the ocean, in songs so complex we can't begin to understand them.

The closest bond is between a mother whale and her child.

Even though it's mostly humans that kill whales, the scientist said this whale was killed by other whales—orca whales. A group of orca punch a big whale until it can't fight back and then they tear out its tongue and eat it. It doesn't make sense, all that for a tongue, the scientist said.

My whale's tongue was torn out.

It was still light after football practice so I rode my bike to the beach. Hid my bike behind a drift log in the dunes and walked down to the whale. There wasn't anybody by the whale. It was warm and people with their beach towels and coolers were far down the beach.

The whale looked dead. Its skin was dry and scaly white in places. Its big dark eye was cloudy and shrunk in. The whale's whole body seemed shrunk in, like it was collapsing on itself. There was a big block of skin and blubber cut away from the whale's belly. Probably by the scientists. It looked like some gulls had eaten there, too.

The whale smelled. Sweet and meaty, a smell that caught in my throat.

I sat in the warm sand by the whale's head. I sat there a long time, a half hour or more, not thinking really, but seeing the whale alive and vital. I didn't touch the whale. But I talked to the whale. I don't go to church, but I said something like a prayer for the whale. And when I was done, I said one for me, too.

On the way home, pedaling my bike, I cried a little. Maybe it was just the wind making me tear up.

That night, when I was in bed and waiting for sleep, I made up a story about the whale. That he was brave and curious and his mother kept him safe for a long time. Then he fought off the orca until he couldn't anymore. I fell asleep and dreamed I was swimming deep in the green ocean with a boy like me. The boy had dark eyes the color of river rock when it is wet.

Mrs. Reynolds gave us the news the next night, Thursday night. The whale smelled really bad. People were complaining. It was hot and beautiful out, but no one wanted to go to the beach because of the whale smell. Even the tourists who came to see the whale didn't spend their money for fried razor clams or salt water taffy, because the smell stole away their appetites.

The State Highway Division stepped in to deal with the whale. It was too big to tow or bury and no one wanted to cut it up, so they decided to blow

it up. They figured the little pieces of whale would be washed out to sea. What was left would be cleaned right up by gulls and crabs. That was the news Mrs. Reynolds called with and made my mom explode herself, with a big snort. That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard, she said.

But on Friday, they let us out of school at noon to watch the Highway Division blow up the whale. There was a big crowd of us and they kept us up by the road, so that the whale was just a dark hump down the beach. I found my mom and stood by her.

I don't believe they're doing this, she said. She had her arms folded tight over her chest. Do they have rocks for brains?

The men from the Highway Division loaded 20 cases of dynamite into the whale, fixing it so the explosion would go towards the ocean. One of the Portland TV stations showed up and set up its film camera, and a bunch of middle school boys jumped around behind the TV woman and made faces. There were some men who usually sat around by the Seaside drinking beer, and they'd brought their beer to the beach, to watch the whale explode.

The TV woman was short and skinny, with stiff blond hair that didn't move in the wind. She had a walkie talkie with the Highway Division men and they told her when they started their countdown, so the TV woman told us to count down with her and we did, our voices loud and excited, Five, four, three, two, one.

I saw the explosion before I heard it. The mound that was the whale turned into jets of pink smoke, shooting into the air. The air trembled and then, boom, came the noise of the explosion.

Thar she blows, one of the beer-drinking men said. A woman said, Whoo-wheee, and everybody cheered and clapped their hands.

Then a woman said, Oh, my god.

Because the pink cloud spread out and then there was pink and little pieces of black raining on us, slapping into the ground, slapping on people.

A woman screamed.

My mom swore, Jesus Effing Christ! grabbed my hand and pulled me up the beach. I laughed, because of hearing her swear and because the TV lady was yelling, too, Shit! Shit! and ducking, trying to cover her frozen hair with her arm from the whale rain.

Pieces of whale fell around us. Big pieces. One hit me on the shoulder, like a punch. That scared me.

We reached the Malibu and slammed our doors tight. My mom had a smear of whale blood on her face and I reached over and wiped it off.

Jesus, look at that, she said.

Just a little ways over, a big chunk of whale had landed on the hood of a

parked Mercedes, one that looked shiny brand-new. The hood caved in, so that the chunk of whale sat in its own bowl. A man stood in the street, his hands on his hips and his shirt wet and pink, and stared at the car.

Are you OK, my mom asked me. Her eyes were snapping and bright, the way they get when she's really excited or really mad. Don't lean back, you've got whale on your back, she said.

The windshield wipers smeared whale against the glass. We drove home fast, rolling right through a couple of stop signs. The Malibu even slid a little when we stopped at the house.

I get the shower first, my mom said. And she already was peeling her shirt off, even before she got to the front door, the knobs of her spine making shadows on her pale skin. Take your stuff off, she said. Don't track any of that inside.

I stood on the front porch and pulled off my shirt. A small chunk of whale fell near my foot. It was the size of my thumb and dark red, not pale like blubber but maybe a piece of muscle. Maybe a piece of the whale's heart. That big heart had to have accounted for a lot of the exploding whale.

I picked up the piece of whale. I couldn't tell if it smelled or if the whale smell was everywhere now, a part of the air like the honeysuckle or the smell of ripe blackberries on a hot day.

The shower was on and the bathroom door half-open and my mom yelled, I told you they were idiots. How are they going to explain that? How am I supposed to show houses tomorrow?

I left my clothes on the front porch and walked in my underwear to the kitchen, carrying the piece of whale. My mom saved jars for making blackberry and huckleberry jelly and I found a little round jar that used to hold pimentos. I put the piece of the whale's heart in the jar and screwed the lid tight. I put the jar in my gym bag, with my shoulder pads and cleats and long socks.

In the locker room later, when we were dressing for the game, Dez Washington kept saying, Did you see that? Ka-Boom! Amazing! Incredible! Dez was the JV quarterback and middle linebacker and the only black boy in the freshman class. Dez and I hung out together. Because he was different. And I was different. We understood each other, I think, even though neither of us talked much. In the locker room, Dez standing without his shirt and his skin lustrous like whale skin, and grabbing my arm and laughing, Ka-boom-baby! That's what we're going to do to those Florence pussies. Blow them up!

Just before we went onto the field, when nobody was looking, I took out the pimento jar, took the little piece of whale heart and laid it in my red bandanna. Then I folded it and folded it, so the piece was held careful and I tied the bandanna around my head, so the whale heart was on my forehead. Then I

slid on my helmet.

The players from Florence wore blue uniforms and made a big point of holding their noses and making faces. The smell of whale everywhere.

"You guys stink," said one boy, wearing No. 54, and all I could see were his eyes behind his face mask. His eyes pale sea foam. "Peeuuw! Try taking a bath."

The stands would fill up later, when the varsity played, but now there were only the JV parents. My mom sat in the middle. She sat with her back straight and her legs pressed together, the way she sits when she is nervous. Like she's in the principal's office. She had her dark hair pulled back with the tortoise shell clip I gave her for Christmas. Her cheeks were pink, I could see even from the field.

I wasn't scared, just excited. And happy. I wiped my hands on my pants, the hand-me-downs from the varsity that my mom had bleached and washed until they sparkled white. Florence kicked off and Gary Turner caught the ball on our 15-yard-line, dropped it, and fell on it before he was covered by blue.

Dez was so excited he bounced on his toes while coach gave him some last instructions.

Nothing fancy, coach said. Just run the ball. Run it up their ass.

That meant me.

I crouched behind Dez. Some of the boys on the line were saying things to each other, calling each other names. But I listened to Dez's count, his hands ready under the wide butt of Tommy Anderson, the center. Saw Tommy put the ball in Dez's hands and Dez step back, turn his body to me and hold out the ball.

Blue around me. Noise, but no noise. I was in the ocean and I was playing and I was fighting, helmets punching me, hands pulling me, and then I was running and there was only green and the white lines passing under my feet. And my whale heart beat strong. My whale strength sending me down the field and far behind me I heard their noise, but my song was loud and beautiful and strange.

There was Gary Turner throwing his arms around me and then Dez throwing his arms around me and lifting me up and I never felt better or happier or stronger. Then jogging back to our bench, past the Florence players, I saw their shoulders slump, even under their pads.

Oh, yeah, we stink, Dez said, laughing.

And me laughing, holding onto Dez's arm and his skin hot and damp and firm. His whale heart beating strong.

My mom was on her feet, jumping up and down and yelling my name, the most beautiful woman in the stands. All the parents were standing, cheering for us, cheering for me.

The smell of whale everywhere, blue green and alive. I breathed deep.

**Photography** B.A. Boasiya



## Squaw Valley Descent

*'Beauty's nothing but beginning of terror'*

Rilke

As I watch the silver gondola  
crest the crag and then  
descend in a slow swoop,  
I think of how easily comes loss;

seeds of decay interred  
in the corridors of a brain,  
traffic jam in the birth canal,  
cracked yolk spilling into a drain.

The unexpected parting of a steel strand,  
and what was so comfortably held  
is held no longer, the tumult  
of voices spilled

from a shattered cocoon.  
The betrayal of the breast,  
that an infant may swallow life.  
I watch the cable sag

with each foot of passage  
to the valley ( yea, I shall fear all evil...),  
chimeric light infusing the riders,  
who, by faith in their descent,

have died to themselves.  
Fears allayed  
by the tapestry of conifers,  
glide of Golden eagles.

I watch from the valley floor,  
the crossing to safety.  
Holding my breath  
for each face pressed to the glass.

## HEDGES IN APRIL

New lengths of bush reach out  
They're the soft gray of tarnish

Among these still winter branches  
reminders of sleep

the sweet drug of the newborn  
Small fallen leaves pink tan

shriveled tiny as  
babies fists clutch the stems

holding them back  
as if to tell the bush Wait

## Breastless

Yes,  
I loved  
the way

you once fit  
the snug  
curl of my palms,

the way your  
nipples  
tickled my lips,

how I lolled  
on your  
pillow of dreams;

but even now, tonight,  
your skin  
prickles

under  
my fingertips  
as I move my hand

down  
the unbroken horizon  
of your body,

the absence there that  
haunts,  
enchants,

the new space  
between us,  
a gravity:

holds us  
together,  
still alive,

and  
breathless.

## CLEANING THE BATHTUB

My grandmother takes me,  
a boy of seven, into the bathroom  
before the narrow tub  
of ancient worn porcelain

drawing aside the curtain  
of shameless yellow daisies

and points out the scratches,  
the deep grooves filled  
with grime and engine grease  
from my grandfather's body —

This is how we clean things  
she whispers, pressing into my hand

a dry sponge like the one  
clumped between her taut fingers,  
flaking coral in a tightened blue fist.  
She kneels nun-like on a stained mat

and pulls me down beside her —  
from a noxious green can

she sprinkles a foul sugar  
up and down the scarred length  
then scrubs and scrubs,  
directing me to do the same

sometimes wetting my sponge  
with a careful rusty trickle

from the faucet, pass after pass  
until each enamel wound  
foams like a peroxidized cut,  
our lungs drunk with poison

so that by the time we finish,  
the whole surface gleaming

both of us grin like lunatics.  
She ruffles my uncut hair and  
wings out our sponges, says: *Now,*  
with the dirt gone, no one will know.

And I think she means the scratches  
but she squeezes me, whispers: *See?*

## Aquarium

While another nursing home lunch is cleared,  
Helen sits in her wheelchair with its customized  
plastic rest for a dead arm, contemplating  
afternoons of exotic little fish. She cannot see  
the water or the glass. They are there, of course,

like God. But to look through to the distorted  
other half of the dining room, goldfish afloat  
among its tables, chairs, and chandeliers,  
gracefully circling heads of registered nurses,  
or hiding in drapes, is a diverting illusion.

A few of the tiny things are transparent. Light  
enters them, possibly is all they eat. Perhaps  
they taste like sunlight; impervious larger fish  
eat them on occasion. Helen feels transparent:  
she can look in her mirror and only see

some sort of shimmer. Or else a dark maw,  
ready to swallow, opening on a belly pink  
as a bordello chamber. Now she wheels  
to press her nose to the west window. Who's  
out there, looking in? Grand-daughters? A cat

## At the Hotel Fantasia

Hippopotami, great horses of the river,  
rise out of the plumbing,  
swirl around you in knee deep water,  
their large, dark hairless bodies –  
their ridiculous pink tutus –  
their beautiful, clumsy break dancing.

A wizard floats face down in the hot tub.  
He has lost his motivation, could not prevent  
the spill over, sandbag the undertow.  
The rent-a-movie pumps its juice  
onto your bed sheets. You wave your fingers  
through the air as if conducting smoke.

## WEIGH-IN

The waifs take the runway  
like colts – all leg and youth  
and nothing extra – it's spring  
no matter what the season.

Enchanted, I swear off food – but  
no amount of diet or fast will pare  
the seasons back, the full to new,  
nor will it cure autumnal maladies.

My friends, substantial women – refuse  
such games, but leaven full and rise  
to harvest soups and fruit puddings:  
they anoint their spoons with joy,

and rise defiantly to great size  
become cities, states, noble  
monuments to the prosperous life  
till they collapse like angel cakes –

and fallen, sink softly: great  
wings unable to lift their hearts,  
too full to hold another bite,  
they feather the earth like snow.

## POVERTY EXAM

1.

It is May.

The month you are cold  
And the hospital sheets, gentle  
Killers, quiet around you.

During business hours I watch the violets  
Pulsing to the ends of the grass:

Once for all the wheat freezing on the sun.  
Once for every time your shadow dies.

2.

I try to find where the rain starts in your body.

You passed the poverty exam.

At night when the lamps under the skin go out,  
Leaves blowing through your open bruises.

3.

You save pieces of clouds left  
Clinging to your umbrella.

You say they're mockingbirds  
From long-dead comets.

You rock them to sleep on your fingers,  
Sing to them in your failing tongue.

The day you leave, in rags of birth water.

## POST-DECIDUOUS

I wasn't making it with my arms and legs  
So I walked out to the field dressed as an elm.

I wanted to be recognized and hung a sign  
Around my neck: I am not a pigeon.

People watched me drag my roots  
Past Nature's Harvest and Bebe's Books & Beans,  
Though only for a second, and went back to their reading.

I grew leaves and shadows from the spines of geese.  
Teenagers carved their fleeting marriages in me.  
The moon taught me to sway.

Squirrels burrowed inside my chest, druids  
Making darkness for the town's acorn houses.

I left blood droppings in driveways, branches and maps  
Of old-world sycamores on welcome mats,

Rooted myself at the foot of the precinct where it was autumn  
And my eyes were fading because the policemen needed foliage again.

The Women's Auxiliary gathered beneath my canopy,  
Plotted birthdays for the last months of light.

I knew that in three days they would track my kindling.  
The squirrels fell asleep in my nipples, then they fell.

I trapped clouds with my song of leaves.  
I ran out of thoughts.

A pack of wild turkeys carried my shoelaces back to the corn—  
I no longer had the voice to protect anyone.

The chainsaws took me and held me while they wept.

Paintings Amy Kollar Anderson



SUCCULENCE



CLIMB



WORMS

## Notes from Space

My friend Amy and I drive up the twisty paved road to Lowell Observatory. We are here to look at the stars, under Amy's request. As a rule, I don't normally spend much time thinking about space, except to look for the full moon, or watch for shooting stars so I can make dinky wishes on them as they flame out in our atmosphere. I haven't been to the actual observatory since I came with my parents as a child. That time, we came to look at Saturn through a giant telescope. I remember staring through the lens at the planet surrounded by its corset of colored rings. For some reason, I had thought that it would look larger than life, but instead it looked like one of those superballs you can get out of candy machines at grocery stores. I began wondering if maybe there was just a picture of Saturn cut out and hastily taped to the end of the telescope.

The parking lot of the observatory was more familiar to me, since I had been there a couple of years ago to make out with a new boyfriend. We wrestled around in the car, fighting the automatic seatbelts, ducking when cars drove in or out of the lot. I had made comments about our progress in the voice of a baseball game announcer: "Well everyone, it looks like he is going for the left breast! He must be feeling especially daring this evening! Let's see how it all turns out!"

Amy and I park the car in the familiar lot and make our way to the visitor's center. After we pay our money, Amy and I wander through the gift shop. It is a testament to the fact that no matter what you are even mildly interested in, there will be a pile of crap devoted to it that you can purchase. The nice thing about astronomy tchotchke is most of it glows in the dark.

Before we go outside, we have to sit through a presentation about the cosmos. I recognize the guy giving it. His name is John, and he has been at some parties I have been at. He has the twitchy personality of someone smart in mathematics, as if his brain can only devote a small percentage of energy to social interactions before it runs back to thinking about galaxies and nebulae. Now we learn about planetary rotations, conjunction, orbits, arcs. I space out for a while, no pun intended.

"Here you can see that, when the earth has rotated fully around the sun, Jupiter will have only gone this far." John points to the smidgeon of distance traveled by Jupiter because of its huge orbit. It takes Jupiter twelve years to orbit the sun. Imagine a six year winter. We would all write Russian novels if we lived on Jupiter. And then in the summer we would have a six year tan. Except for the

fact that the gravity is so strong on Jupiter that it would suck our guts into our shoes.

The woman sitting behind me during the presentation won't settle down. She makes the noises of someone just arriving (paper rustling, searching in purse for pen, crossing uncrossing legs, sniffing) during the entire talk. She also makes appreciative coos and grunts when John says something she deems interesting. I can smell my shoes while I sit there. I look over and see that Amy is taking notes.

We walk outside into the dusk. There are about twenty of us, some people with their kids, groups of couples and older adults. John the presenter disappears and is replaced by Mary, the fashionably dressed (even though it is dusk, I can tell she is wearing a nice coat) telescope maven. We are faced with a line of one smaller telescope, a larger, stubby black telescope, and a set of huge binoculars resting on a tripod.

We all line up in an orderly fashion in front of the big fat black telescope. Mercury is setting, so we are trying to spy on it before it goes down. Mary takes care to repeatedly explain that Mercury isn't going anywhere; it is the earth's spinning that takes it from our view.

Mercury doesn't look any different in the telescope than when I stare at it in the sky without the aid of mirrors and lenses, just brighter. Amy and I start to point around in the sky, listing the constellations we know. She is much better than I am at knowing their names and locations. We scan for Orion, Canus Major, Gemini. We look for the planets, and we can see Mars, Saturn, Venus, Jupiter. I am standing next to another woman and we take the time to argue about the location of Orion's club. Amy and I get back in the telescope line for Venus this time. When Mary says she is going to "bump up the magnification" of the telescope we start dancing in line, singing "Pump up the mag, pump it up, pump it up!" We shuffle from side to side. Some people laugh. Some people scoot out of the way.

I didn't know that planets went through phases like the moon—one of those obvious things that never occurred to me. When we look at Venus through the telescope it is half full, just like the moon is currently. They are twins of planetary shape; one is just a lot farther away from us.

John the presenter is back to take us to one of the domes that holds a giant telescope. However, this giant telescope is the ghetto scope at the observatory, mainly because it is the oldest one here. It was purchased by Percival Lowell himself when he founded the observatory back in 1894. Historically, it's nice that we get to use it, but I wish we could look through one of the super technocrat telescopes that are locked away in other domes on this hill. But, you probably have to pay a lot more than ten dollars to do that.

We enter the huge dome-shaped building that holds the telescope. It

is vaguely church-like inside, with the smell of pine floors and walls, and dim lighting provided by red night lights everywhere so you can preserve your night vision but still see where you are going. John is outfitted with a red flashlight to guide us down the wooden steps so we can peer, one by one, out into space. When you look up, the domed ceiling is open in one large section where the telescope aims into the sky.

Saturn is the first planet on the menu. I am instantly suspicious, because of my childhood experience. I move to the scope and peer in: I remember you, I think, as I look at Saturn and its rings. It still looks small and possibly faked. John describes all the colors and formations we should be able to see, but it is hard to focus on anything other than those rings, which, we are informed are made of snowballs.

Amy and I go to the back of the line after inspecting Saturn. We peer around the darkened room. There are a few wooden niches built into the walls, and one of them holds a square metal object that is hard to make out in the reddish light.

"It's a toaster oven. In fact, it was probably Percival Lowell's toaster oven," I say.

"You idiot, it's a radio," Amy replies.

"No it's not. I'm sure if we look around, we'll be able to find Lowell's bagel too," I say knowingly.

John is moving the ceiling. Seriously—he has to rotate the top half of the room so we can look at the moon. Strangely enough, the domed ceiling uses a series of 1954 Ford tires to rotate on. There is a terrible squeaking noise as the ceiling moves over the tires. A spare tire sits by the telescope on a stand, looking like a wreath at a funeral.

We are going to look at mountain ranges on the moon, John explains. They are 13,000 feet high, and surrounded by craters. When asteroids hit the moon, they liquefy the ground upon impact. Someone asks John about the name of the mountains.

"I don't know a lot of the names of things on the moon," he says. "I spend more time looking at distant nebulae and galaxies."

"Elitist," Amy mutters.

"Yeah, we're so bourgeois for looking at the *moon*," I say.

When I look at the moon through the telescope it is shockingly bright. It is strange to look at mountain ranges head on. Because I am looking at the mountains from thousands of miles away, they look more like a pile of dirt exposed by a giant tunneling space gopher. The mountains are surrounded by craters that John explains are 10,000 feet deep.

After staring at the moon, I can't see my way around the room because

of the brightness of the sun shining on it. This is strange, because John tells us that the moon is actually a dark color. But because space is the blackest thing, the moon looks white in comparison. I stand in the dark, a bit woozy, regaining my vision, letting my irises regain their composure.

Next up are more moon craters. The moon, John says, is geologically dead. I can't picture that. There is no molten core. No earthquakes. Nothing is being formed on the landscape from the planet itself. The only features created now are from asteroids crashing into the surface. It makes me think of graves, a whole planet that is essentially dead. It is just husking around space, getting in the way of things. Then again, without the moon, the earth would wobble and spin strangely in its orbit, and our tides would be all messed up. So maybe the moon is a planetary nanny of sorts that can't have her own children, but takes care of us instead. Maybe the moon feels a strange compassion towards us. Or maybe she secretly wants to spank us when our parents aren't watching.

John is bored. He starts talking to nobody in particular about how he comes in here to sketch planets in great detail. He says he turns off even the red night lights and stares for hours at planets to make a proper sketch. He says he forgets about time. Then, he starts rambling about galaxies that are 20 billion light years and my brain instantly shuts down because topics like that make it nervous.

I turn to Amy and ask if she ever wanted to be an astronaut.

"Yeah," she says, "but then I realized that I have gotten sick on every carnival ride I have ever been on, so it wouldn't work out,"

I take on a mock official tone. "Attention everyone. Captain Amy has vomited again. Clean up in the space bay, please."

"What about you?" she asks.

"Hmmm. No, space kind of scares me. First off, you are in this tiny space pod, and that makes me feel claustrophobic. Then, you get shot out into space which is limitless. So basically, that would be my worst fears combined: being in a small space in an infinite space."

Once in a while at night, while I am lying in bed, I remember that I am just a passenger on a small planet whizzing through space. I remember that space is huge, bigger than anything I can imagine. I always have trouble with big numbers, geologic time periods (Pleistocene, Eocene, etc), the term *infinite*. If I really think about it, I get a sick feeling in my stomach, similar to waiting to jump of a cliff into water, or running into an old boyfriend I wanted to forget about. I want to jump, or make polite conversation, but at the same time I feel I might throw up, like Amy in her space shuttle.

The other night, I was cleaning out boxes in the garage and I found some old pictures. One is of my father and me. I am still a baby, naked except for a

diaper. My dad is in his young construction worker phase, he has a blue foam baseball hat on and a white t-shirt. He is sitting and holding me upside down, and I am reaching my arms out towards the unfinished plywood floor of the house he is framing. My dad is looking over my wobbly legs towards the camera. His arms are bigger than me. Looking at the picture as I stand in the cluttered garage, I realize that thinking about space now is somehow the same as being accidentally dropped by my father would have been then. A possibility that exists, but is almost impossible to think about: an infinite fall.

The ceiling is moving again and the telescope is aimed towards Jupiter, which has four moons that we will be able to see. When I look through the telescope lense, Jupiter is distant and reddish. I can see its four major moons clustered around it like groomsmen: Europa, Ganymede, Callisto, and Io. Even though Jupiter is the hugest planet in our solar system, it would have to be eighty times bigger to be considered a star.

Sometimes, the thought of space is reassuring if I think of it as a giant cosmic womb. If I forget that it is freezing, dark as hell, and lacking in oxygen, I can picture myself in a fetal position, floating out there, briefly circling planets and then moving on. Right now though, I feel like I need to cleanse my space palate before I look at anything else. I am starting to feel overwhelmed.

Amy and I wander back outside where Mary has dragged one of her telescopes to look at some more constellations. Things are winding down, and people are drifting off and departing for their own orbits of home and dinner. We look to the sky again and Amy asks where the Charioteer is in the sky. I look up and see the Gemini twins again, stretching their long limbs over the moon and towards Venus. I had a boyfriend once who was a Gemini, and very tall. I picture him up in space, extending his legs across the face of the moon. Then I start thinking about Miller High Life, the "champagne of beers," and the woman who sits on the moon drinking it, in the picture on the bottle.

Amy and I wander back through the now deathly quiet museum where we sat for the presentation. There are lots of dioramas and displays about space and stars, but we are too overwhelmed to learn anything else. All we can do is get back into my car and head down into the familiar lights of the city. As we twist down the road, both of us keep turning our heads back up to the night sky, as if we are afraid we will forget that it is always infinitely there.

## On the Occasion of Being Mistaken for the Delivery Boy by Two Members of the Girls Youth Soccer League at the Marriot Hotel

I am at the door, pizza in hand like Galileo with the globe.

I can hear them giggling from behind the door, their footsteps pitter-pattering. It is probably their first time ordering the pizza, alone, tipping the driver will be a sweet new power for them.

I feel the eye pressed against the proverbial peephole.

"Pizza guy's here," she says. "And he's so cute."

I pull my red Mama Angelina's hat over my eyes, which are far too feminine and blue and will give me away.

And when the door swings open, I am at the gate of a new heaven:

I am the cute delivery boy who, after he is spotted by neighborhood fathers, is kept away from daughters such as these.

They want me to join them, to pull up a badly upholstered chair to the table and share the pepperoni pie radiating wet heat through its bottom like an engine.

I stay for a glorious hour, tell stories about the band

I never played in, tell them that the guitar has just always come natural to me—I am self-taught, I say.

I can play you anything you want to hear by ear.

Shauna is the one of them I love, her calves carved out like crescent moons as she props her Adidas sneakers atop the television, which is blaring Prince's Greatest Hits on MTV.

"Can you play guitar like him?" she asks.

And I think on the question of Prince a moment, his small erotic body, his long hair falling around his shoulders like a black scarf. I lie again and say I think Prince is a sissy.

I never said I played this role well. Truth is,

I made a bad delivery boy and felt shame fall over my body when Shauna pressed her mouth against my cheek and called me "a hottie."

And although when she asked me where the band was playing next, I said Detroit. And although when she asked me where I was headed from the hotel, I said "back to work."

The truth is, I played classical guitar on Sundays for my grandmother who referred to me as her "little Czechoslovakian Princess."

The truth is I couldn't go back to work.

Truth is, I couldn't go home again either.

## The Mainland Tour: Orkney

over and over  
I am the one trying to make music

though I can't carry a tune or a steady beat

the one going on and on  
about the wonder of birds

though their names escape me

the shapes and colours  
and castles of clouds

on the rare sunset I remember to see

and here I am  
touching my childhood dreams

laid out in stone

on a bus full of strangers  
the kind of trip that's not for me

but here I am on board then tumbling out

part of the human stream  
at Yesnaby cliffs

where waves spray over us over algae fossils

we collect  
ourselves to admire

then we herd ourselves to the nearby heath

like a schoolchild showing off  
I find the first Scottish primrose

lovely tiny violet rare

the bus rolls on to Scara Brae  
a Stone Age village still stands

turning the ground somehow holy

stone furniture stone fireplace  
stone beds hedged

off by sandstone narrow passageways

remnants of lives so ancient  
we can barely imagine them

to the Broch of Gurness, a tower surrounded

by shamrocked-shaped  
Pictish houses

we clamber around and through

trying to feel this place with our  
bones my bones

the Brough of Birsay can be reached only at low tide

so we walk along the causeway  
emboldened by tables published

in a faraway town

a slab tilted toward the mainland  
Viking church remains a Pictish stone

I hike up to the western cliff-face

curlews  
gulls

then the Ring of Brogar

their singular shapes  
Viking graffiti

stones spread out against the sky

something about the setting  
the angles of the stones

names the open ageless place

it seems no  
one could make but did

then to the stones of Stenness so

tall and solid that a farmer tired  
of wanderers like us

had them taken down and broken up

they stand again  
a tall and angular

trio arguing against time

then to Maes Howe  
a Stone Age tomb

lovely windy we see how on midwinter day

the sun marks the back  
wall for each

of 5000 years how even the Vikings

sought this treasure  
breaking in finding

nothing but bones leaving their words boasts

these runes  
were carved by the man

most skilled in runes in the western world

I carved this dragon  
made this cross

Ingigerth is the most beautiful of women

(beside it is carved  
a slavering dog)

Thorni bedded Helgi carved Ingebjorg the fair widow

we have been here  
we have seen

I come here under the barrow

## The Afterlife of Objects

Evening coming to attention. An old wind muttering in the trees.

There is a kind of sadness. The way Sunday is

always an unfinished room under my ribs.

Listen: The bones of my bed,

the dead of what's done. They're there, even when you

can't hear them.

In each step moving away, a betrayal of things. But I have agreed to this. This turning

from one mind into the next.

This raising up and setting down

somewhere else entirely.

How familiar the world in here; there are relics everywhere.

*Jumpy scrawl on the blackboard, battered grey sweater, the last plastic lighter.*

The heat of these things gone missing. Exchanged in the one story they begin to tell.

Shaping themselves in the afterlife.

And what it means to mean.

But purity is unconvincing. Its limits artificial.

I want the stripping down and the dark earth collecting in my veins.

I want the reeling in our tooth-nail torrents.

The night window throws the room back at me. That peculiar finding

of the outside in.

*The worn sheaves of Scrabble scores, those broken glasses, the book of our mistakes.*

Somewhere a night is drowning all its stars. Somewhere a riddle is breaking its hold.

Where is that line,

the horizon beyond which all edges fade?

Nowhere the sky opens up and answers. It evades in colors and vacancies.

The moon wrecks. It recollects. Morning will answer evening.

The mind frequenting itself

grows tired of its exhibits. The artificial suns it circles.

In letting the river travel, form. What we thought to gather, unlearned. The irrefutable flowers

sloughing off

their bright blades under noon.

## Caught Reading Biographies in Heaven

to the marsh,

I knew you in the naked text.

The pre-revolutionary grammar school

where we slowed the days with thigh-kisses.

It didn't interest the ashes

and it doesn't now.

You guessed the scent,

unmistakably frontal.

How my hand trembles to remember it.

Teeth. Faith.

The elders so clearly refrigerated.

*And we calm.*

Your feet told me they were sure

of themselves on the bribery bed.

The dream turning vulnerable

at the wrist.

Prisoners made pale in god's house.

A skeleton there and all he owns

is one dead word.

It moves up the vine in the rain.

Its rib will show you

from what we are made.

Strummed by every loss that pauses

(passes).

## Under the Car

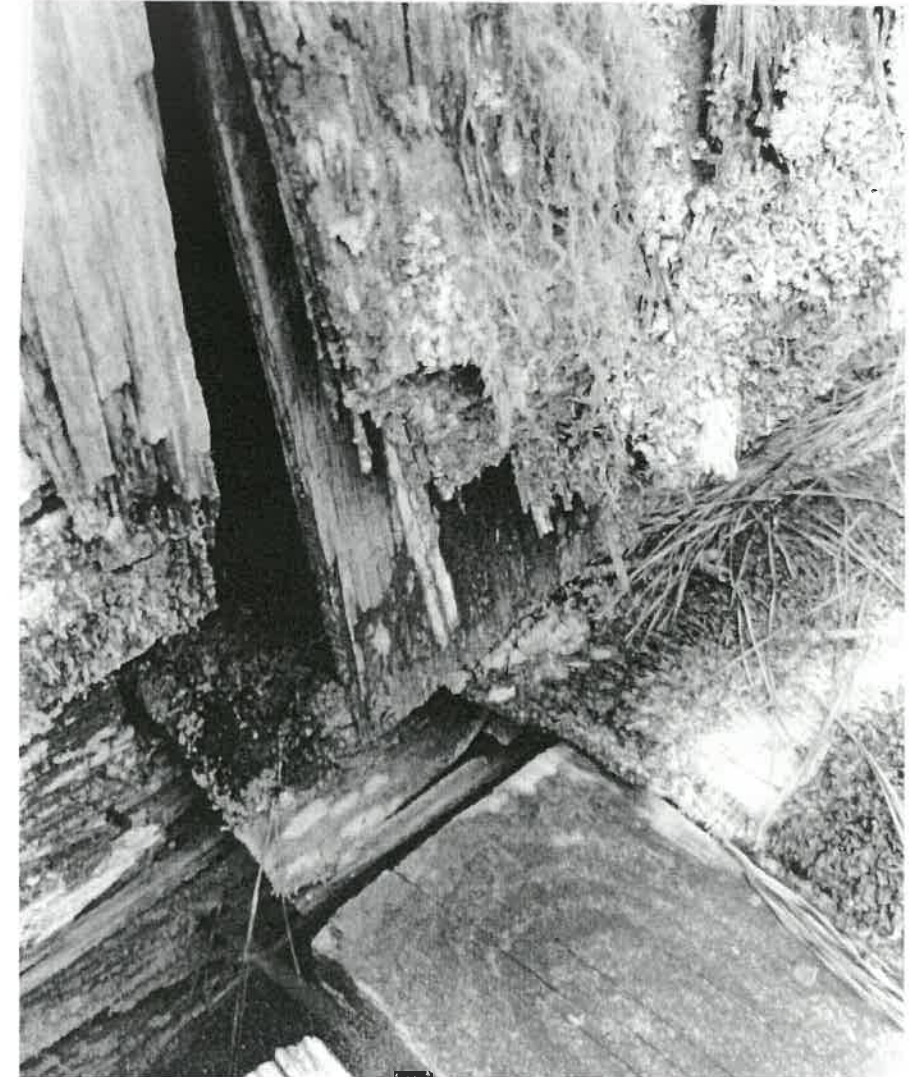
This morning she was stranded with the baby again,  
car sputtering to a stop along the mountain road.  
A truckful of pickers on their way to the orchards  
helped her push to a siding, drove her home.

Now he's outside, underneath the car with wrenches,  
having managed to coast and haul the thing to her address,  
the father of the baby. He thought he had been free of them,  
a bit of money once a month that should clinch all arguments.

The sun just down. He holds a flash between his knees,  
blinks off a splash of oil near the corner of his eye.  
The air is cold this time of day this time of year.  
He's found the trouble, though. His hands feel satisfied.

She hears the burp and cough as the car jerks back to life.  
Windows steam around procedures in her kitchen,  
except where Baby's nose presses a clean circle.  
"Daddy fix! Daddy fix!": The whole apartment smells of chicken.

## Photography Amelia Cole Bower



UNDERWOOD



NEW YORK WINDOW

## A Little 1-2-3

"Coming to lunch?"

Annoyed at the interruption, Betty glanced toward the door. Today it was Sylvie with the headshake, chief of the "you've got to stay involved" dogooders who refused to leave her be. Betty clicked off the TV — among the few pleasures left were her morning shows — and pushed out of her rocker. Protesting did no good. No one listened, not the decrepit fools she had to live with, not the Nurse Ratchets, not her son Jack who'd said, "It's only temporary," when he moved her here.

Betty followed Sylvie down the glass-walled corridor toward the dining room, dismayed to see that the snow had retreated to a ragged line under the shrubs along the nursing wing. All winter, inside the glare and incubator level heat maintained by The Courtyard Assisted Living Center she'd looked out at the wind-scoured land and the leaden sky and found it fitting and just, exactly how the world should look now that Loyle was gone. She tapped on the window — the sun had no right to sparkle on the tawny grass — and remembered watching the stars with Loyle, wrapped in blankets, inhaling the damp, leaf-sweet smell of dirt, and him saying, "Can't you hear the bloodroot and ferns uncoil?"

Sylvie tugged at her skirt.

The dining room's glass doors swung open. Since breakfast, the staff had gotten busy with pots of fake flowers and cardboard cutouts of Easter baskets. Like a goddamn kindergarten. Sylvie led the way to their table where the regulars were already seated: the Urso sisters, Muriel Schneberger, who drooled, Caroline Meister, Harold Rasmussen, a new guy with a hand problem who never talked, and Tony Vito, who thought he was God's gift. Avoiding Tony, Betty took her chair next to Harold. Sunlight poured through the long stretch of windows drenching everything in yellow.

Tony's rasping voice cut into her reverie. "That's what cataracts do."

Betty looked at him and was shaken by his sassy grin. Had she spoken out loud? She covered her confusion by putting a roll on Harold's plate and wrestling with his Smart Choice packet as one of the women said to Tony, "Must you always look on the ugly side?"

"What other side is there? Got to know what you're dealing with." He twisted one of the fake daffodils in the centerpiece.

"Don't fiddle with that," Sylvie snapped.

Betty pretended she was sitting at her own kitchen table, with Loyle. He looked up from his coffee mug and said something she couldn't hear. She reached for his hand and heard a guffaw. She blinked. Tony Vito leered at her. Both Ursos were smiling.

"What is it?" Betty demanded, her face prickling.

"It's okay, dear," said Sylvie, smiling her know-it-all smile. The others bobbed their heads.

Alarmed, Betty looked down and saw her hand laced in Harold's, not Loyle's. She jerked away.

"It's springtime in Eau Claire and the birds and bees are humming," Tony sang.

"You're a jackass, Tony Vito." She glared at him. "If my husband were here—"

"But he isn't, darling. He checked out."

"Ascended to heaven," added Lily Urso.

"Not old Loyle," Tony said.

"Tony, why don't you—" Sylvie interjected.

"It was an accident," Betty hissed, the air squeezed from her lungs.

"Accident, sch-accident." Tony pointed his finger at his temple and fired. Betty swatted the paper daffodils in Tony's direction. "He was cleaning his guns."

Tony straightened the over-turned pot. "You're telling yourself a fairy tale, sweetie."

Sylvie slapped the table. "Stop this now." The water glasses shook.

Betty forced back her chair and rushed from the table. An aide got to her before she reached the door. She didn't argue about the pill.

Drifting in and out of sleep, she saw Loyle's head beside her, turned away, his silky white hair curling over his creased neck. Below the covers, she touched his back where his skin sagged over his shoulder blades, loose and white, speckled with moles. They never wore nightclothes, not even in the coldest weather. "Climb on top of me and I'll be your furnace." She turned to her side, rotating her leg to rest where his thigh should be. "I can take old age," she'd told him, "but I can't stand that you might die before me." He'd laughed and said it wouldn't happen.

"Promise me."

But he'd broken his promise. From the door, she heard whispering. Sylvie.

"Leave me alone," Betty called out.

"I told Tony he can't sit at our table any more."

Betty kept the blanket over her head until the door closed.

Loyle tossed his final wages on the kitchen table, saying Patel didn't need him anymore; he wanted someone younger than Loyle on the afternoon desk. Cursing at Patel, he stomped around in the mud room for a while, then busied himself by putting up the storms, clearing the vegetable bed, bleeding the furnace, cleaning his hunting rifles. After dinner and a few Manhattans, he was feeling better. They were having a good time watching that new quiz show, and he was finishing up on his Luger, when she went to the kitchen to mix another round. Someone on the TV shrieked, and she called to Loyle, "What's going on?" Then came a sound so loud it slammed her against the corner cabinet.

Through the pain, she called for Loyle. No one answered. Light and dark throbbled. Voices mumbled and receded. Jack came and went, then stayed. She'd had a stroke, they said. She'd hit her head.

"Where's Dad?"

"He's dead, Mom. He's gone."

"Your dad won't leave me." She tried not to wake up again.

After the hospital, after the convalescent center, Jack said she couldn't go home. He rented the house to her neighbor's no-account daughter and her two kids. "Just till you're stronger, Mom. Better to have the place occupied." She pictured balled-up socks in her bathroom and open cereal boxes littering her kitchen counter, but where she'd left Loyle watching TV, in the living room, she couldn't see. That was a void.

Jack said that's where she'd been found, not the kitchen, but she remembered the edge of the cupboard inches rushing at her and the bourbon cascading over the counter's edge. She'd only been gone a minute. She would be right back. Maybe Loyle tripped coming to help her, on that cheap, loose carpet, and stumbled into the TV tray. But uncertainty snagged beneath her heart and spread like black ink. They'd replaced the carpet two years ago. Before it was too late, she had to go home.

The next day, she phoned the house and got Luanne's daughter before she left for work. Betty said she wanted to come collect a few things, and not to worry about what the house looked like. "No, don't trouble yourself. I have a key."

The cab nosed over the dip at the end of the driveway, and Betty kept her eyes on Luanne's house, next door. Kitty litter bins were stacked on her kitchen steps. Since the accident, she'd been here once, with Jack, getting what he thought she'd want for The Courtyard, but she'd waited in the car, with the heater on. The taxi driver came around to open the door, and she forced herself

to look out the windshield. The house looked the same, but not quite real, as if the windows didn't really open and there was nothing behind the white siding. She rocked herself out of the cab. A few flakes of late snow, small as soot, bit her face as she paid the cabdriver.

"Come for me in an hour and a half."

At the top of the stairs, in her backdoor window, a cardboard bunny, like ones in The Courtyard's dining room, was taped to the glass. She gripped the railing, shaken to find the steps that Loyle had put the safety treads on were now treacherous, but her key glided into the lock. Inside, in the gloom, she caught her breath, appalled by the changes: kids' dishes drying in the rack, a new TV where her breadbox used to be, on the refrigerator pictures of strangers. On one of her kitchen chairs, a red baby seat was strapped. When Jack was little, he had a maple high chair with ABC blocks painted on the back, above the spindles. Now he was old, bald, and fat as Poppa. She took off her gloves to touch the Formica table and a ghost of her hand wiping the table stirred. Fighting a wave of unsteadiness, she fixed her eyes on the sticky rings made by the transparent honey bear in the center of the table and unbuttoned her coat. Loosening her neck scarf, she glanced up at the cupboard she'd hit on her way down. It wasn't splintered or patched, or damaged in any way. The old cream paint, the same brass handle. "No, Mom, you hit your head on the coffee table." Her head rang. What else had she gotten wrong?

Three short steps to the archway that led to the living room. She closed her eyes and inched around the kitchen table. She could smell fresh paint, but this wasn't possible. Jack said he'd taken care of everything: paint, new carpet, a pair of couches that would do for Barbara and her kids. "It's all fresh, Mother. Everything had to go."

With her hand on the rough plaster, she felt a pressure like an avalanche and a roar that wasn't sound tremble through her. When it subsided, she opened her eyes. Unfamiliar shapes crouched in the dim light. Slowly, they gathered their edges together and became solid: Loyle's lounge, the TV tray in front, and her rose-colored chair. A highball glass gleamed where she'd set it on the flat wooden arm. Blue light sprang from the TV. Loyle leaned forward—he was in his lounge after all—his face was flushed.

"Oh, Lord, where have you been?" she said.

He struggled to get up and everything shook.

*What's the point, that's what I want to know, what's the point? You understand me, Betty? You listening?* He picked up his drink, ice cubes jangling, then smashed it down, and punched the air. *Hell, when you're old, you've got no reason to be. It's as simple as that. The Eskimos were right. Put you on an ice floe, push off. There's nothing left. Nothing. Just a big nothing.* She walked toward him, but he didn't see as he waved the Luger toward the credenza. *Put that gun down, Loyle, you're upsetting*

*me. Come on, Betty, take this, here, it's not too heavy for you, come here, I can't stand up, come here, I want you to end this right now, Loyle. Stop Loyle. No, I'm serious, here. I won't. Look, let's go to bed. I don't want to leave without you. You're not going anywhere. Give me that gun, Loyle. You're not going to. Give me. . .no. . .Loyle. . .I love you, Betty.* She was reaching for the Luger, propping herself up on the arm of her chair, her damp hand grabbing the barrel, then slipping. Behind Loyle, the orange curtains flared and the room broke into flying shards. *Loyle, don't leave me,* she cried.

She woke. She was sitting in an unfamiliar chair in her own living room. A playpen filled the corner near a monstrously big TV she'd never seen before. A shadow moved, Loyle in front of the TV. He beckoned to her.

"Thank God." She struggled to stand. Her head throbbed as she got to her feet and started toward him, but he vanished, like smoke.

"Come back," she whispered.

Don't want to leave without you.

His words hung before her, suspended, like a banner. Above her head, the ceiling vanished and she could see the sky, gold-streaked and soaring, with a speck, a chariot, arcing toward a burning radiance. She raised her arms and lifted off, her feet grazing the TV, and upward she flew, knocked every which way by turbulence, until she drew close to the racing sleigh, and her arms extended like ribbons to seize the reins streaming behind the winged white horse. She grabbed on tight. He would take her to Loyle.

A jolt traveled up her legs, jarring and real. She lost the reins and grasped at the rushing air, windmilling until she touched the back of a velvet chair. Stumbling backwards, she found herself jostled by cushions, chair cushions. Her old living room closed in around her and the shadowed ceiling dropped into place. The floor rumbled, the furnace kicking in. A moment later, warm air rushed over her ankles.

She wasn't supposed to be in this world. Loyle wanted her to follow him. In the back room, the gun cabinet was empty. Of course, renting the house out, Jack would have put them in the basement.

She took the basement steps slowly, bringing both feet together, before lowering her right foot to the next. If she broke a hip, she'd never get another chance. At the bottom, she caught her breath. In front of the dryer, a laundry basket was heaped with green and brown children's clothes. Gone was the rack where she'd hung Loyle's soft plaid shirts warm from the dryer, their sleeves always folding forward dejected. Along the far wall, Jack had stacked boxes and labeled them in black marker. *Dbl bed sheets, Sweaters, Dresser misc.* He must have emptied the bedrooms to make way for Barbara and her kids. *Mom's Shoes, Wearable. Mom's Shoes, Unwearable.* Unwearable? Wounded, she stared at the box,

holding onto the old bureau to fight the dizziness, then shook herself.

"Hurry, you're on a mission," she said out loud, for courage.

She found Loyle's things sandwiched behind the ironing board and the old drying rack. *Dad's. Dad's. Dad's.* Two boxes were marked *Dad's weapons*, a tall vertical one, probably the shotguns and rifles, and a short one, which she shimmied forward. Pain shot through her chest as she ripped open its top. Cleaning rags were stuffed around two rusted cans of oil, some odd shaped parts she couldn't identify, and the butt of fancy pearl-handled revolver he'd bought in Vegas. She wanted the Luger. Maybe the tall box. Widening her stance, she tugged it forward and pushed it over. The folded-in flaps spilled open and out fell his shotgun and hunting rifle cases. She kicked the guns aside and twisted the box, managing to upend it. A canister of movie film and a ballpoint pen clattered on the cement floor. No Luger.

Disappointed and breathless, she sank onto an old wooden chair. Where was it? Jack wouldn't have taken it with him and he wouldn't have stored it upstairs, not with kids. Looking at the shelves filled with jars of graying tomatoes and plums that no one would ever eat, she realized the gun was gone. The police had it. That's where it was. Why did she always understand things too late?

At the top of the stairs, she stared at the white TV where her breadbox used to be. On crime shows she'd seen duffel bags of guns traded in the backs of pawnshops. The noisy minute hand of the copper kettle-shaped clock jumped forward. She could get another Luger.

The phone book was still where it should be, in the bureau in the hall. She flipped to pawnshops and wrote down an address, which was right around the corner from the bank. In the back of her whatnot drawer, she found a half-filled pack of Loyle's bullets.

Above the sink a rusted wire, what was left of the bird feeder's hanger, tapped the glass.

When the cab returned, she said "Take me downtown first. I need to make a stop."

She walked in the front of First Merchants' and out the side door. Liberty Pawn was dusty and narrow. The long side wall was hung with guitars in exotic colors and shapes; the back wall held lamps, TVs that couldn't work, old cash registers, safes, a silver cocktail set. She couldn't see any guns. From the back, she heard a TV.

She leaned on the long case and peered through the smudged glass at locket, bracelets, wedding and engagement rings spread out on folds of gray velvet not so different from how they must have been displayed when each was new and caught the eye of a lover, who would have asked a salesman with

smooth hands and deferential manner to lift it out, turn it this way and that in the light. Each dull and bent thing here had once sparkled, and sparkling, had been chosen to speak of desire and maybe commitment. Now each was a testament to failure. She fingered her own platinum band worn nearly to a sliver.

"Can I help you?" A pudgy Indian man smiled at her.

She stared at him, not knowing why she'd come. Behind him, the beaded curtain clicked and swayed. She heard Loyle chuckle and remembered.

"I'd like to buy a Luger."

"What is your purpose for wanting such?" Between his tiny teeth, a tongue darted to clear a crumb at the corner of his mouth.

She had to be careful. "For my husband," she said, touching her pearls to emphasize that she was old and harmless. "He had one from the War, but now we can't find it. It meant a lot to him."

He knit his brow, dubious.

"Actually, he doesn't know it's missing. I want to replace it before he notices. It was a souvenir, from his service in North Africa, just a souvenir."

He shrugged, bored, and retreated, moments later returning with a metal box. "Here." He unlatched the stiff catch and pulled out a dark, familiar pistol, bouncing it on his palm before handing it to her.

She reached for the Luger, hoping he would put her trembling down to old age. The gun was heavy and cold, its crosshatched grip like her old hatchet's, but it did look like Loyle's Luger. She squinted at its surface, turning it over, worried that some differing detail would alert Loyle to the substitution, then remembered he wouldn't see it.

"Does it work?" she asked.

"You said it's for sentimental—"

"I just mean, is it in working order? Because if it isn't, my husband will know it's not his." Even to her ear it sounded like a lie.

He sighed. "Lady, I can't tell you what your husband will think. I tell you only that the mechanism works." He showed her a small button near the trigger, which he pressed with his thumb, then lifted the barrel and aimed toward the plate glass window. Click. Her heart jumped.

She said she'd take it.

It was much heavier than she'd realized. She hid it in her weekend bag at the back of her closet. After that, whenever she left her room, she feared that some aide might snoop, or that the gun would go off spontaneously, or that it wasn't there at all, or that she'd imagined the pawnbroker, imagined the clicking curtain, imagined the gun's weight in her shopping bag. Then she would hurry back to check that the strand of orange yarn she'd draped over her suitcase was still in place. All the time she was excited and terrified. The hidden gun was like

an extra heart pumping life into her worn-out body. She remembered a story from high school, about a beating heart trapped in the wall. At night, she woke to hear the gun, not beating, but emitting a low bass throb.

One afternoon, she locked her door and took the gun into her bathroom. Guns had to be oiled, that she knew from watching Loyle, but the Luger's design was tricky. She'd never be able to put it back together if she took it apart. Getting out her manicure kit, she applied Vitamin E cuticle oil to the surfaces she could reach with a Q-Tip, and wiped it dry, shaken by how like an animal it was, slipping in her hand, ferocious and malevolent. Hurriedly, she wrapped it in a hand towel and put it back, eager to get away from the gun, to the lounge, to talk to anyone.

In the corridor, she heard music, a tune of Glenn Miller's, coming from the community room. She paused, her heart quieting, and stepped closer. Inside the room, half a dozen women sat in chairs watching three couples dance in the open space: Sylvie with Harold Rasmussen, the Baileys, and Tony Vito with the newcomer with the wide hips and plump calves. Sylvie and Harold moved with the grace of refrigerators on coasters, but Tony, in his white shirt and red necktie, twirled the new woman with the style of a pro. The song ended. Tony bowed to his partner as one of the women on the sidelines approached for the next number, and straightening, noticed Betty. He grinned and waved for her to join them, but she backed away, her face flushing.

Jack called a week before Memorial Day and said he thought she should come for a visit.

She didn't want to see him. "I want to be here." Loyle was in the columbarium on the hill. "Everyone's going to the cemetery. The Center is putting on extra shuttles."

"Then I'll come up there."

She told him she'd just as soon be with her women friends; they were all widows, too.

"Mom, this doesn't feel right."

"This is what I want. Now my TV show is about to come on, so I'm saying goodbye."

From the telephone rose the same plastic smell as the Plexiglas crib the first time the nurse had wheeled her son into her room. "Jack--"

"Yes, Mom?"

She knotted her hand into a fist. "I love you."

The morning of the 28<sup>th</sup> was humid and hot, with the sun indistinct behind a gauzy haze. The shuttle was half full when Betty climbed on, clutching her purse heavy with the Luger and a small flag that came with a plastic holder

to attach it to a wall. She was pleased to see the one single seat by the wheel hump was empty. After she sat down, Tony Vito walked on and took the seat behind her.

"Making the pilgrimage?"

She said nothing, but willed a barrier to rise from the back of her seat, like the divider in a limousine. He leaned forward, smelling of spearmint gum and the stench of an abandoned well.

"Don't mean to offend," he rasped, "last thing I'd want to do."

Betty shifted her purse. The brown-haired one from Charlie's Angels would swing around and have the gun drawn on him in a flash. "Back off, mister," she'd say. Betty faced forward and nodded to the Ursos as they lumbered by. "Hello, hello." After they passed, Tony tapped her shoulder.

"Why don't you join us next time for a little 1-2-3?"

Betty lifted her chin with disdain and stared out the window at the bus's big convex mirror that warped the ground into a plane she could slide right off. The seat behind her squeaked as Tony withdrew.

No one spoke as the bus wound through town and into the country again. When they disembarked inside the gates of the cemetery, everyone scattered, Tony heading toward a far section near the pond. He still had a vigorous gate, from all that dancing.

In the shadowy columbarium, she was alone. After sticking the flag on the wall next to Loyle's plaque, she sat and watched light from above glide across the marble surfaces. Her parents were up on the hill, in the original section, in her mother's family plot. She opened her purse and gasped at the sight of the Luger. Why had she brought it? It was empty. What had she been thinking? She hid the gleaming metal barrel under a wad of Kleenex before ripping a blank check from her bankbook. "Cremate me and place my ashes next to Loyle's," she wrote, and stuck the note in her brassiere.

The sun's warmth felt good on her head, and she dozed, awakening with a start when the light was no more than a sliver in the far corner. Disconcerted by the silence, wondering if she'd only imagined Loyle beckoning to her, she walked to the cemetery's entrance, wishing for another sign. Except for a couple of people on the far side of the pond, the cemetery was empty. A sedan turned into the driveway and inched up the fork to the left, followed by two family vans, then disappeared over a hill. Quiet descended. Another shuttle would come, she told herself, sitting down on the bench, trying to quell a ripple of anxiety by reading the names on the monuments across the way: Holt, Mother and Father, Gerald Krause, Schuenmann. Before Loyle, she and her friends had come out here and gotten drunk and made up stories about the dead, trying to scare each

other. She remembered Caroline's husky voice floating through the dark telling about Gerald Krause, decapitated in a plunge down the grain elevator, his blood staining an entire shipment of wheat. No problem. They sold it as red wheat after that.

At a sound, she jumped, her heart knocking wildly. "Who's there?"

"Tony Vito." He appeared by the stand of lilacs behind the bench enclosure. "Didn't scare you, did I?"

She scowled, pressing her bulging purse against her belly. If she had a heart attack, this would all be over, she thought as he asked if he could join her. She gave a curt nod, wiping her lip.

"See your flag is gone."

Overhead, leaves rustled.

"The 319<sup>th</sup> group, right?"

That was Loyle's outfit during the War. How did Tony know that? She looked directly at him. Once he must have been good looking, before his brow was tugged down by gravity and his skin coarsened. Although his eyes were the indefinite stone-color all but the bluest eyes go, they were clear and intent, with an expression that made her look away.

"North Africa, right?" he said.

"Did you know Loyle?"

"Not well. Knew him some from the VFW."

"You weren't in the War."

He lifted his gaze to scan the road. "No, but for a while in the fifties, I supplied liquor to most of the clubs in central Wisconsin. So, I was . . . I guess, an honorary member, for a while." He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his neck.

"So you knew him."

He worked his mouth, avoiding her eyes as he stuffed the handkerchief back. "I don't know why I said what I said about him. I know why, but. . ."

"Don't say anything."

"But I was thinking maybe you and I could. . . Would you like to go on that trip to the Dixie Queen with me, next Saturday?"

She turned away and lifted her hand to her forehead, pretending to search for the shuttle.

"What do we have to lose, Betty? We haven't got all the time in the world."

"I'm not interested." She clutched her purse, feeling the gun against her ribs, and began walking to the gate. It wasn't fair that she'd had been left behind to face this.

"A few laughs, that's what I'm saying. It's not too late for a few laughs."

She reached the gate, and clung to the iron bars, praying the shuttle would appear by the time she counted to ten. One. Two. Three. A grackle tore at something by the road. Behind her she heard Tony mutter something, then a branch snap. Five. Six. Seven.

After dinner, she hung the Do Not Disturb sign on her door. She laid her good dress on the bed and her patent leather pumps on the floor. From her bedside table drawer, she retrieved the letter she'd written, adding a postscript about interring her remains by Loyle's. This she propped next to her jewelry box. Beneath her malachite necklace she found her favorite picture of her and Loyle—they were sitting in a pontoon boat in the Dells—and a trace of memory swept over her, of how it felt to be full of life and sure it would never end. She wiped her eyes and lifted the picture close to examine Loyle's expression—had he felt the same?—and his face flecks of charred ash. Her heart began to knock against the steel-cold bars in her chest.

From her purse, she took out the Luger, and from the inside pouch of her weekend bag, the bullets. She set everything on a paper towel on her bedside table. Although her fingers had begun to shake, she found the two indentations in the sides of the grip that released the magazine, and inserted the bullets the way she'd practiced, relieved by each tiny, satisfying click.

Now her whole body was shaking. Carefully, she made her way to the cupboard where she'd hidden the plastic flask of Elijah Craig behind her family albums. Concentrating hard because her fingers refused to work, she opened the mini-fridge and mixed herself a Manhattan, then wrestled with the ice tray to pop out a few cubes. Plink. Plink. They jostled merrily. She took a sip and felt the warmth slide into her belly and loosen her limbs. She turned off the lights and sat at the table. Even in the dark, the Luger shone.

Some one tapped on her door. "It's me, Tony. About earlier. . ."

"Go away." She took another sip. The alcohol made the back of her tongue heavy the way sex once had. The shadow under her door pulled away.

The scent of the bourbon swirled her, fermented of night and lipstick and sweaty jazz. She could smell Loyle's thick black hair and his young body. They were swaying together in the dark, lights spangled on the river behind him, they would never change, or have a baby who would become a stranger, and he would never leave her, and they wouldn't grow old, and he would never break promises or ask too much of her, but they would remain like this, clothes slipping under their hands. And she would never have to practice the two-finger movement, thumb and index finger, required to release, then pull a trigger, or turn a gun inward on herself and bite the barrel, pressing it up slightly, until she could feel it rest against the roof of her mouth, or wait for her deaf neighbor to turn up the volume on his TV so the rumble of canned laughter was louder than the hum of the air conditioner, and a shot would sound like another TV noise. She would never have to do any of this.

## Victims

*When my mother was very small, someone gave her  
a basket of baby chicks for Easter. They all died.*  
—Margaret Atwood

We laughed and twirled unlit cigars in our fingers on the outdoor deck of Tallahassee's latest watering hole, Sloppy Joe's, as we compared our undergrad students' why-I-didn't-do-my-assignment excuses, TJ, Miles, Belly, and I, sharing doozies then holding each up for examination like a fine crystal goblet we may or may not fill with a first-rate sauvignon. The McDonald's Strawberry Shake and the Vomit Reflex. The State Trooper Who Didn't Understand a Bribe. My Grandmother Died. . . Again.

"Victims," Miles said. "They're always a bunch of damn victims." So we started sharing our own poor-me stories, times when *we* were the victims; TJ said when he was Irvine, he got a call at 3am from the cops who asked if he was all right, which he was, but a girl named Jane he barely knew from one of his classes had been bragging to people that night that she'd kill him and about a dozen other specific guys. For the week and a half it took to find her, TJ had a pair of campus security guards—

high school graduates with night sticks and cell phones—tail him everywhere, "screwing up my dating life," TJ said. Belly told some story about his sister leaving town after their parents broke up, and Miles started in on a fishing story where he almost drowned and that got me thinking about the five years straight my folks made us participate in the Falls Festival, a fund-raiser in Hamilton Park for the hospital where my mom worked as a candystriper. Our job, my brother and myself, was to sit inside a

pentagonal booth—2X4s nailed together and covered with shower curtains painted like the bottom of an ocean—called the Fish Pond, where for a buck, kids would take a cane pole with a clothespin-ended string on it and try to hook a prize (they all won). A seven year old in a rainbow dress and carrying a patent leather mini-purse sent her line over, and we gave her a green plastic back-scratcher shaped like a hand, plus a giant blue novelty comb. We watched through our "secret" peephole as she threw her catch on the grass

and screamed "I have been victimized, victimized, I say!" to which her mother, a blushing woman struggling with heels in the grass, dragged her off howling. Miles finished his story and his beer, then told me to go ahead, and I found myself talking not about the Fish Pond, but rather my brother, Aron, how he and three pals tag-teamed the slut a block over, "cross-pollinated her" they called it, but being broke and too embarrassed to buy more rubbers anyway, they shared one—just used it, rinsed it off, then passed it,

dripping, down the line. Sean, the one guy who "liked to feel his action," got a pot-dealing chick pregnant at a party and both had to drop out of high school, but that's a whole different story that ends much as one might expect. I kept telling more and more, trying to give the whole picture, how Aron got beat up by some high school guys in my neighbor's yard, how I smacked a line-drive right into his glasses, how he had a hernia from getting off the toilet at age twenty one, how he kept trying to keep hermit crabs in

an aquarium but they died on him in eight hours flat, and plants were even worse; pretty soon, the emerald-eyed waitress sauntered by with more Coronas so I stopped talking in the middle of a story about my brother selling his CDs to take his—bitchy, I thought—girlfriend to Austin with him for a business trip (she wanted to "fix" her tan). Belly looked at me and said, "You win," as if it were a contest, but it wasn't, which only made me feel that much worse when I pondered these memories further than I usually let myself—it was me who

had poured boric acid in the hermit crab's water, had started the catcalls that prompted the high school guys to beat Aron up, had hit the whizzing line-drive at him "to give him a scare," I'd said moments earlier, and dammit, it was *me* who said anyone who didn't "pop some chick by the time he was fourteen was a wimp," which was something I'd heard on tv, but a week after, he had sex with that girl a block over and never talked about it again, though his friends did over pizza, beer, and cards, which was at our house

and often. Miles ordered another round and I leaned back in my chair, watching stars wink out behind in-coming storm clouds, as if some giant cosmic scorecard was changing, click-click-click.

## Stolen Postcards

### *Bluegrass State*

This is goddamn old country. Pass the rolls around, trees that won't quit, swaggle a little hooch from under-seat bottle. You can die here even if they loosen the yoke. Amen, etc etc, and everybody wants his fortune. Don't worry about it—folk still smoke in the attic and watch the Yankees. They serve herbal tea between classes at Our Lady of the Lourdes girls' school. The world is predicated in precedents. How about that?

### *Wish You Were Here—Panama City Beach*

The mouse. Golden age of oil. One big fatty after another, a parade of whales and lambdas and gammas and god-knows-what revivals. Sand in your shorts. Paper says guy tried to put head in microwave. *Oven wouldn't work*, he said. No love on the strip, no slop of gravy with a sack of sausage. Ain't San Francisco. Ain't Chicago. A MasterCard problem, nice and simple. Cha-ching.

### *The Surrealist in St. Croix*

Steady hot. Up and down the coast, nothing shaking but palm fronds and grouchy melodramas, little arms of the ocean that yak at the sky, play at its ears. Not far. Never too far for a little spin, float by like an island taxi the color of Eskimo boots. Own a pair of flip-flops that scoop up more sand than a sea lion in Bermuda. Filthy creatures. My favorite TV show is "The Cosby" reruns. Don't write back—I'm off to Rio. Sometimes I'd like to go back to the old me, the half-hearted brouhaha of naivete. Even here, you can't piss uphill.

## Imaginary Truths

When I told my friends I was a Dutch princess  
hiding from pirates,  
they laughed.  
Then I brought in wooden shoes.

Sister Margaret said Protestants  
didn't have miracles.  
I told her I saw the Virgin in the clouds  
at recess.

She said if I saw the Virgin again  
I'd have to turn Catholic.  
I said it was a clown instead.

My boss made me stay  
I missed the bus  
there was a lot of traffic  
those cigarettes weren't mine.  
My father stood at the window, pipe smoke  
roiling.

The night of the party  
you had a game, so I went with Bill  
instead.  
I told you the grass stains were old.

My clogs got caught on the accelerator.

I told my boss I didn't want vacation,  
then you asked me to go to Rio. The flood story  
seemed like a good idea. On the beach at Ipanema,

I lost my virginity  
and my job.

They thought dancing with them meant  
we'd sleep with them, so we said  
we were gay and kissed each other.  
We agreed not to like it.

## THE BEDROOM

[on my birthday]

At mid-afternoon the bedsheet becomes landscape . . . .  
One mussed up and unmade, of course – certain  
somber qualities of the light conspire  
a set of elevations of immense mass  
and of similar form, direction and origin.  
Taller than hills and slightly forbidding.  
The opium-colored walls sport  
Old Master prints and pornography  
(beneath are shallow, but outsize, craters).  
Acquired in forgiveness of a minor debt,  
the battered dresser, all brass rings and creaks,  
charms the pants fresh off the line  
and into its drawers – its cold mirror slims.  
All the untoward activity on the blond wood desk  
is stopped for the moment, the hour, the airless year.

## The Fashioning

I have inherited  
your hands: the long-boned fingers,  
and the fingernails, those hard  
opaque crescents that grow unadorned  
without breaking. I peel back  
the cuticles like the shell  
of an egg that has not fully cooled.  
Sometimes the shell  
catches. Sometimes I  
go deeper, carrying the flesh  
with the shell, the shadow of the yolk clinging  
to my fingers. I file down the edges with  
my teeth, stopping at the fingerprints,  
the mark of my own.

## GET MY GOAT

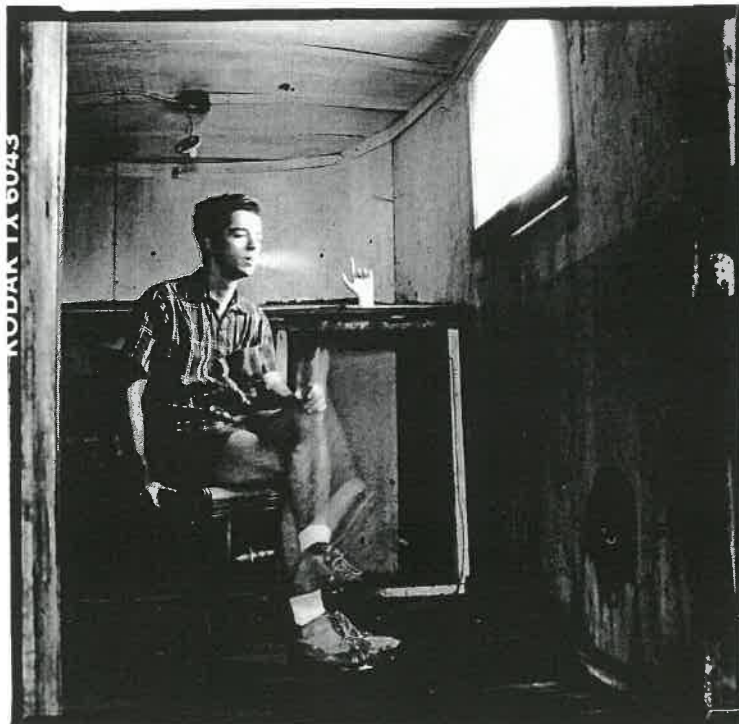
is  
a dead-goat game  
in Kabul, Afghanistan,  
except  
it is not goat, but a  
calf,  
because dead calf  
won't fall apart as fast as  
dead goat.

Love, Mike

## Photography Anon



Untitled



Untitled

## The Next Person

Sometimes I drive back there along the road that follows the edge of the lake and glance up at the chalky caliche walls of the canyon that breaks up the monotony of these otherwise treeless plains, and I imagine that instead of late afternoon, like it usually is when I go there, that it's a clear January night two years ago, and that I am *him*, another driver along that road, someone who doesn't notice the chalk-colored cliffs or the migratory geese bobbing like buoys on the black water of the lake, their stolid eyes shimmering in the white beams of headlights that push back the darkness, at least enough of it so the driver can see where he's going, back to the stout concrete dam that holds back this lake, and by the abandoned railroad trestle next to a sharp cleft in the land where there's a thick, anomalous grove of elms and willows and mesquite and whatever else is lucky enough to have found this sheltered recess in the land, where here, this night, the driver veers slowly off the road and back into the ditch that cuts through the trees, the tires snapping twigs and sinking into the soft mud, tree limbs scraping the car doors like fingernails on a chalkboard, the two passengers in the backseat, oblivious, unaware of their strange demise, of how the motor revs and the tires spin in the mud, of how the driver shouts and curses before giving up, before finally cutting off the engine, getting out, and looking one more time at his two passengers, at the abandonment in their eyes, a look that sees nothing, cares for nothing, notices nothing about the hidden grove of trees or the shattered passenger windows of the car or the glass shards that sparkle with moonlight in the black pools of their blood.

Two shots to the man's head, three to the girl's. That had done the job. But maybe the driver doesn't even notice, didn't keep count before moving the bodies to the backseat. Maybe there are too many other things to think about, like if anyone saw him, if there are fingerprints in the car that isn't his, if there's a lot of blood on his clothes. How to get home.

Or whether to go home at all.

I had worried that night about getting home as well. But mine was a different problem – too much beer. I had blunted the sadness of the season with at least eight schooners of the best of Anheuser-Busch. My friend Helen called it the “post holiday blues.” But secretly, I was beginning to call it a way of life.

Helen's phone call woke me up at noon the next day: “Peter. Have you heard?”

"Heard what?"

There was a pause. I pushed back the covers and sat on the edge of the bed and rubbed my eyes. "What, Helen? What's wrong?"

I could hear Helen sigh and then it came: "Peter, they found Josh's car out at one of the canyon lakes and there're two dead bodies in it."

I didn't know what to say.

"Peter? Are you there?"

"Yeah." I stood up. "Where's Josh? You say they found his car. But where's Josh? And who's in his car?"

Helen drew a deep breath. She was being patient, not wanting to state the obvious. "I don't know, Peter." Then she paused again, and I could hear her breathing, perhaps weighing what she would say next, which was this: "I was afraid one of them was you."

I'm not going to say that it should have been me in that backseat. I'm not going to say that I was the one who should have been shot in that ghetto area east of our university. I'm not going to say that I was the one who should've been caught dead, literally, as Josh was, with a prostitute from that area. What I am going to say is this: I didn't understand.

The associate dean of the university's library, Josh had done well for himself. He could have had any woman he wanted. At least that's what everybody said when I went back to the bar two days later. Like some returning war hero, I was showered with affection, pats on the back from the men, hugs from the women, and all-around affected sympathy: "Are you all right? You must be devastated. Is there anything we can do? It must be terrible to lose your best friend like that."

I'd been fairly stoic up to that point, having come to terms with Josh's demise, up until that *best friend* crap. "Best friend," I said to myself, "best friend my ass."

"What?" said Helen.

I took one last swig of Budweiser and looked into the empty schooner as though into some magical crystal ball that had all the answers I didn't. "Best friend, my ass." I looked at Helen. "What is this, grade school or something? Hell, Josh may have had a best friend, but it sure wasn't me."

"You can't deny that, Peter. You guys were always together up here. He talked about you all the time."

"Yeah, well he sure as hell never talked about Jeannine Porter, that's for sure."

Helen lit a cigarette and took a long, deep drag. "Well," she said. "I'm afraid we're going to learn a lot about Josh we never knew before."

There was Trudy, the crackhead. At the murder trial a year later, that's actually how the defense attorney referred to her, *crackhead*, as though everyone in this case had a tag that dragged with it a trainload of connotations. So, there was Trudy, the crackhead, who introduced Josh, the white sugar daddy, to Jeannine, the black teenage prostitute, whose sister was being knocked around by Max, the abusive boyfriend, later to be known by the rest of us not as the accused or the defendant, but as simply *the murderer*.

But who was Josh? The public hungered for details, so the local paper fed the frenzy, ripping apart a private man's life all the way down to the bone, in the process, disbursing enough scraps to satisfy even the most lurid curiosity so that, if only for a moment, if only for the brief duration of the murder trial, the public managed to see clearly enough past their own indiscretions to cast a stone not only at Max, but at Josh as well, never once scrutinizing themselves or that interminably long train of events of which we are all a part—fate.

Fate. That was it, that long coupling of events that had brought Josh to this final destination, to this trial that peeled away each thin veneer of privacy as easily as dissecting a frog. But before that, there was Wyondote, Michigan. There were a mother and father of Scandinavian descent and two young sons, one of whom was Joshua Bourne. There was a three bedroom home where snowmen guarded the yard like jolly sentinels in winter and new bicycles sparkled in the Christmas tree lights. There was hunting in the woods in the fall, fishing in the summer, his father's job at the Ford plant, Michigan football amidst the golden cloak of autumn, nightclubs filled by the sensuality of Janis Joplin, the dreary drone of Dylan. There was college, war and wandering, a journey to rainy Seattle, a job on a taxi assembly line, worries about the draft and Vietnam, a trip to California.

There was Jane.

He ran her car into a tree. A romantic late night drive around Monterey Bay had led them to an oak more durable than her Dodge, crumpling back the hood like tin foil before a column of flame devoured the wreckage, destroying both the car and the tree, but not the couple's future together, not yet. With their marriage came a son, then a daughter, teaching jobs in North Dakota and Idaho, the acquisition of a master's degree. The other man. The divorce. Squabbles over child custody. A break from the past. A move to Texas.

"Wait a minute," I had said one Friday evening years ago. "Did you ever suspect Jane was having an affair?"

Josh hesitated. He rubbed his hands together in front of himself like a man about to pray, those hands that, like the rest of him, seemed so youthful. Only the silver hair betrayed his age. And even then, the gray lent him sophistication. Though aged 53, he had not lost his looks. He had lost something

else. "You know, Peter," he said, "I never had a clue."

I was treading softly. He'd never told me this story before. I knew it had to be a painful one. "You didn't notice any change in the marriage, in her behavior?"

Josh stared ahead into the mirror behind the bar. Then he looked at me strangely as though offering a confession. "I feel responsible in some way," he said. "But I don't know how." He sipped at his beer as though it might absolve him of some hidden sin, a sin that maybe he couldn't quite pinpoint. He looked back into the mirror again as though confronting himself. "I came home one day and she was crying. She told me she'd been having an affair."

"Who was she having an affair with?"

"One of the other music teachers where she taught. It'd been going on for about six months."

"And so she wanted to break off the affair and come clean about what happened?"

"Well, not exactly." He took another sip of beer as I watched him.

"So she was asking for a divorce?"

Josh looked at me and shook his head. "No, she didn't want that either."

I felt myself squinting like I always did when I didn't understand. I stared at the big schooner of beer in front of me on the bar. "So you asked for the divorce?" I felt like a hard-nosed reporter grilling an evil corporate executive about some misappropriation of funds.

"I asked for the divorce," he said finally. He looked down into his beer and seemed to speak to the air as though I wasn't there. "I invested so much emotion in it all, so much and then . . ." He wrapped his fist around the neck of the schooner, and the veins bulged thickly across the back of his hand. He took a drink.

"And what about the other guy?"

"He married her."

"And the kids?"

Josh gave me a look I'd rarely seen, raising one eyebrow and looking me directly in the eye. He paused as if sizing me up.

"It's all right," I offered. "I don't mean to make you talk about—"

"Jane got Ellen," he said flatly. "Michael came to live with me." He looked away for a moment, then called to the bartender: "Hey Diana, would you bring me my tab, please?"

"We're responsible for everyone." That's what I'd sometimes say after so many beers, as though somehow those words imposed meaning and order over the sometimes seemingly absurd train of events in our lives. I'd said it when we

heard Woody rolled his truck because of too much to drink, or Bobby got fired from his job as manager at Zales because of sexual harassment, or when Carly dumped Shawn for sleeping around, or anytime, for that matter, when those without sin, or rather, those who'd eluded detection, pontificated about the evils of life and the sordid secrets of others. "You can never foresee the way events will unfold," I'd babble, "how molecule builds upon molecule, moment upon moment, so that ultimately even the most seemingly insignificant event may be of profound importance."

Josh would roll his eyes and laugh. Helen would smile. "Peter, you're the smartest man I know," she'd say, and after a nudge from Josh, she'd complete the thought: "Except for Josh, of course."

"And Dostoevsky," Josh said.

"Dostoe, Dos . . . Who?" Helen waited for the explanation, confused. She knocked a Marlboro Light from its pack and put it to her lips.

"Peter's favorite pal," said Josh. "He plagiarizes from Russian writers after too many beers."

"Oh, like Tolstoy?" said Helen.

"Or Dostoevsky," said Josh.

They both stared at me accusingly.

"Peter, you need to lighten up," said Helen. "Let's shoot some pool."

Josh and I were partners. We were a team. When it came to shooting a double's match of pool, we were almost invincible, even though individually we weren't the best. Helen teamed up with Jerry, a thin Hispanic man with a ponytail and his own pool cue. Like the tables and the brass railings, he seemed a permanent fixture of the bar, lingering each night in the poolroom, never drunk, but always ready for the opportunity of a game. When asked to join Helen's team, he jumped at the chance. Anyone would. Hell, it was Helen.

She lived up to her name. Helen was beautiful. At least I thought so. Full of fire and insanely competitive, she was ten years younger than I was, an age difference that kept her off my list of possibilities. At least that's what I told myself. But I always envied whomever she dated, sometimes thinking of that one night a year before when, full of beer and fresh off her latest fling, she'd come to me through the smoke of the poolroom like some MTV vixen, her pool cue in one hand, her arms spread wide, her long brown hair wild and rebellious, and with a sleepy look in her eye that I knew came from the beer, said: "Peter, I know this makes you uncomfortable, but I'm going to kiss you anyway." And there we were, without thinking, two drunken friends embracing amid the clattering click of pool balls, our lips pressed together, me making sure I didn't overstep the bounds of propriety, that the kiss was brief, that there

were no lingering looks, no inappropriate groping, just the smile and the hug and the squelching of the voice inside that told me all this could maybe be more if I wanted. But I knew better than to stir the emotions. The next week she'd find someone else anyway, and life would roll on like some great immutable beast, rarely taking notice of those who sat in bars and lamented the passing of possibilities.

But tonight there were plenty of possibilities, at least as far as the game was concerned. With a smooth stroke and the clap of thunder, Helen launched the rack of fifteen pool balls into utter chaos, several balls scurrying into the pockets of the table like frightened rabbits. She chalked up and surveyed the table. The head of medical records at one of the local hospitals, she was as exacting at her pool game as she was with her job. Flaws were unacceptable. Mistakes were no option.

Missing his first shot, Jerry felt her wrath. "Goddamn it, Jerry! That was lined up perfect. How could you miss that?"

Josh and I looked at each other and laughed. Jerry smiled sheepishly, unsure what he'd gotten himself into. Helen fixed me in her sights. "Oh shut up, Peter. I'm coming after your ass!"

"I'll be waiting," I told her and took a drink of my beer and leaned back in my chair.

Jerry laughed now, and we waited for the next person to shoot.

"Your shot, Josh," I said. He was gazing at the next table, at a college couple shooting a much friendlier game. The girl wore a short white blouse with a bare midriff, a rhinestone gleaming from her navel, her low-cut jeans hugging every curve as she leaned over the table, missed a shot, then fell into her boyfriend's arms, kissing him as though she didn't care who watched or what came next. "Josh, it's your shot."

"Josh!" Helen shouted. "Damn it, it's your shot."

Josh looked at me and winked. As he lined up on his shot, I watched the girl at the next table and sipped my beer. But watch was all I'd do, I knew that. She had a boyfriend, of course, so that precluded other possibilities. But if she'd been there alone, what then? Nothing, probably. Nothing but the same old stack of excuses that I let wall me off from life—that I was too old, that my hair was thinning, that I wasn't good looking enough, that I didn't make enough money, didn't have an impressive job, didn't drive a flashy car, didn't have goals for the future, hated the proverbial question of the day: "So where do you see yourself in ten years?"

Having another beer, probably. What else?

My life was turning into a country and western song. I didn't work the coal mines or anything, but my dad had gone to prison—for illegal handling of investments, or something like that. The incident had brought me back to

my hometown in Texas where the treeless plains stretched to nothing. And it was nothing that kept me there, except maybe the past. It weighed like a sack of cement: my socialite father's fall from grace, his three year prison term, the ravages of the IRS, the loss of the family home, my mother's social disgrace and eventual breakdown, my father's alleged affairs, my parents' precipitous marriage, my mom's tearful phone calls.

I finished a degree in history at the local university, then worked a year at the railroad, a juxtaposition of events that made no sense. Nor did the death of one of the switch crewman caught between couplers one night and nearly cut in half. So I quit. I worked on another degree, in the process failing my master's exam the first time I took it, then passing the next time, then passing on interviews that left me feeling unqualified, passing on relationships I knew would fail, eventually settling in at the local university and teaching freshman English, contemplating my sidetracked aspirations while the semesters rolled by like boxcars. With few higher goals in sight, I hunkered down for a long sojourn, usually behind schooner after schooner, hiding from whatever slings and arrows fortune sent my way.

But Josh was different. By the end of the evening, he'd probably be talking and laughing with the girl at the next pool table, just like he always did, just like he'd probably get that job in Hawaii, where maybe he'd find again the girl he'd lived with there years before, when he'd daringly taken leave from the university for a year to finish his Ph.D. in her company, only to be jilted after he graduated. There was a lot to be said for taking chances. Josh was good at it. The only part that perhaps frightened him now was what scared me too—"emotional investments." His term stuck in my brain. It sounded like buying bonds for the future, but the future was uncertain.

When Josh missed his shot, Helen howled with derision: "Josh, you pussy! You shoot like a librarian." She cackled like a mad woman.

Without lifting his hand from the table, Josh sighed, then looked straight at me. "That's Peter's fault," he said. "He's responsible for that."

I grinned back.

"Whatever," said Helen. She rolled her eyes and laughed, then looked at Jerry. "Your shot, Jerry."

Jerry looked confused.

"Take your time," said Helen. "But don't miss. I don't want to lose to an English teacher and a librarian."

Jerry was undaunted. "Somebody's got to take control of this game," he said. He lined up on the three ball at the other end of the table and shot. With a loud click, the two balls collided, and the three darted for the corner pocket, the

cue ball bouncing off the far rail and, as if by command, returning to where Jerry stood, chalking up for the next shot. He didn't run the table after that, but he made the most of his opportunities, at least enough to satisfy Helen. I liked his style.

After a couple of more games, I sat at the bar for one last beer before heading home. Helen had gone home already, and now Josh and Jerry teamed up to play the couple at the next table. Even from the bar, I could see the rhinestone twinkling from the girl's navel as she gave in to Josh's charm and laughed at something he said. I smiled too, watching. And that's when Trudy came in.

I didn't know who she was at the time, just that she didn't belong here, that everything about her flew in the face of white, middle-class decorum: this tall black woman with her tangle of dreadlocks, ample cleavage, and pants that clung a bit too tightly to each posterior curve. That was how she had looked to me as she stood atop those steps to the poolroom, surveying the scene as though searching for one person in particular, and that one person turned out to be Josh, to whom she'd gone straight-away, braving with arrogance the pool players who gawked as though at a car wreck. That was the first time I ever saw Trudy, and as he left, the last time I ever saw Josh.

I know this city better than anyone. I've lived here for forty-five years. I know where the alley between 9th and 10th intersects Uvalde Avenue in the ghetto east of the university. I know where Josh's life intersected what he'd never expected—a madness no words of reason could curtail. I saw the shards of broken glass the gunshots had left on the concrete. Hell, I saw the blood.

The day before, I had seen the lake where Max had dumped the bodies. I saw the soft, quiet cumulus overhead, the violet tint of twilight, the smooth glide of the geese returning to the lake for the evening. I saw the yellow police tape.

It marked order across a wild area of mesquite and sotol along the road that traced the edge of the lake back to the abandoned railroad trestle. The only people who explored that area were mountain bikers or amorous couples in search of seclusion and, of course, Max, of whom we'd later learned from the trial had had about all the verbal barbs his girlfriend's sister, Jeannine, could hurl at him. He would show her what a man was, he'd vowed. He would show her what he could do. Two nights later, he lived up to his promise. He had waited for Josh's black Saab to pull into the alley where Jeannine intended to get out and go to Max's apartment to check on her sister, whom, unbeknownst to Jeannine, had already returned to her own apartment several blocks away. That's why the sister never saw the murder. Only Max was there, pumping the first shot through the closed passenger window and into Jeannine's forehead, shattering

the glass as he fired again and again. Then he'd aimed at Josh.

The yellow police tape marked the boundary the public couldn't cross. I had stood on the edge and waited, wondering if it was Josh's black Saab I'd see towed from the trees, dreading the thought that one of the two bodies in that thicket was his, all the while avoiding the gaze of officers who, at least three times already, had asked if I might know the man who'd been killed.

"No," I lied. I feared being asked to identify the body. I didn't want to risk seeing Josh that way. I didn't want to be on TV. I didn't want the world to know what had happened. I sidestepped it all, an anonymous face in the crowd.

At the memorial service two weeks later, Richard had spoken of Josh with heartfelt eloquence. He represented those of us at the bar who'd known Josh. A car salesman by trade, he was now selling Josh, selling the qualities of Josh's character that read like a recitation of the Scout Law. Nothing could mar Josh's reputation, he'd said. There were few he'd admired more.

Helen nudged my arm and leaned close. "That should have been you speaking up there, Peter," she whispered. She leaned her head against my shoulder and laced her fingers around my arm.

Her words hit me like a train. Maybe she was right. I'd dodged another opportunity, this time to speak on Josh's behalf, to demonstrate, if not for myself, then at least to his family, how truly important he'd been to my life. But of course, I was shy, one of my friends had informed the family, perhaps even a bit too emotional. Christ, I was pathetic.

I needed a drink. Helen did too. The memorial service had weighed heavily on both of us, so I took a short cut to the bar, a road that ran through an undeveloped rural area as flat as the moon. In the distance, city lights winked through the gnarled, naked limbs of mesquites my car whipped past in the twilight. But one light loomed a little brighter than the rest, moving with slow deliberation against the blue light of dusk, the headlight of a locomotive. That's when I remembered the tracks that intersected the road somewhere within the next mile. I floored the accelerator.

I could feel Helen's gaze. "Peter, what are you doing?" Her voice reminded me of my first grade teacher who'd found me redecorating the classroom walls with my favorite crayon, midnight blue.

I didn't answer. I kept the accelerator to the floor, feeling the transmission work through its smooth succession of gears as the engine settled into a comfortable whine and the locomotive grew in silhouette, its long train of hoppers, gondolas, and boxcars riding the black edge of the earth.

"Peter, what are you doing? Peter!"

We couldn't beat it to the crossing. I knew that.

"Peter! What the hell are you doing?"

I hit the brake. The tires screamed against the blacktop, then tore into the shoulder of the road. Dust enveloped us, thick gray, like fog. The locomotive thundered through the crossing like some great crashing creature that hardly noticed us, its whistle wailing like death as the wheels rolled by with that steady, immutable *click-click, click-click, click-click, click-click*.

I hated it.

I got out of the car and stumbled, stumbled on the black ballast by the track. The wheels squealed against the rails and made a painful metallic sound like the sharpening of a knife. I picked up a rock as big as my fist and hurled it, not like a pitcher at the ballpark, but with all the fluid anger and disgust of a good old biblical stoning. I threw with everything I had, at Josh, at Max, at myself, at life.

I could hear Helen laughing from the car. The first stone didn't even leave a mark but bounced harmlessly off a boxcar and into a field. I chose another rock and let it fly, then another and another.

"Peter, are you crazy?" Helen yelled from the car. "What the hell are you doing?" She laughed again as I picked up another rock.

This would be my last chance because now came the caboose with its red light sliding smoothly by in the darkness. I threw. Something shattered, one of the windows in the cupola of the caboose, and appearing behind it, a face taking notice, the conductor staring back as I laughed hysterically.

Maybe I'd neglected too long the other obvious facet of my little Dostoevsky maxim: We're also responsible for ourselves. That's what I was thinking as Helen and I sat at the bar and ordered a couple of beers.

"What's going on with you, Peter?" she asked. "Are you all right? That thing with the train, that was really weird. But it was one of the funniest things I've ever seen." She laughed to herself and sipped her beer.

I leaned toward her and kissed her gently on the lips.

She gazed back at me, not stunned but with a sleepy look in her eyes I knew wasn't from the beer. "What are you doing?" she said softly. I felt her hand on my wrist. I felt like I was taking control.

I kissed her again. This time her lips parted, and I ran my fingers through the hair along one temple and kissed her the way I'd always wanted. Maybe it was just the loneliness — maybe it was just that she was there. I don't know.

## GAMES WITH DAD

More than a whim, less than a wish,  
like something in the microwave  
timing down to the final second:  
Dad says, It's so Sunday boring, let's go  
somewhere! Coats on, car doors slamming,  
the cat a Kodak moment in the picture window.  
In the city they drive by the lake, waves  
breaking  
like a shattered mirror that mends itself.  
Dad says, No bad luck there,  
meaning things are going well,  
better than expected: the fog lifting,  
sun flecking through. The danger of sparks  
in a dusty museum, Dad says, looking for a  
parking space. Mother says, Will you stop it!

Inside, the children press and tunnel ex-  
cuse me please below the towering bones  
of a Rex called Sue on a rare autumn  
afternoon of pizza and rooms that echo.  
The day outside as they leave, Dad says,  
is like a page in a thin bright book  
illustrated by the weather. He wants  
a game of what the trees might be doing  
if the wind is the neighbors' daughter.  
Too hard! they cry, too hard! And then  
there she is as they turn into their driveway,  
not the neighbors' daughter but her  
mother, sitting on the porch looking out  
of sorts and holding a baby like a broken lamp.

What's this, Dad says, what have we here?  
Not again, Mother moans, staring at Dad.  
The kids slink down in their seats thinking  
Halloween, wishing Christmas. Reading  
their thoughts, Dad says wishes are prayers  
to the god within. You kids go in and let  
the cat out, Mother says, while Dad and I  
talk to Mrs. Soins. What's it all about?  
the kids ask as Dad begins to sing. Enough!  
Mother cries. I'll not be the go-between  
this time. No more dropping the bucket  
Will you kids please let the cat out!  
down my family's money well. It's over!

## Farewell

— *Josef Haydn at Prince Esterhazy's  
country estate, December 1772* —

His manservant dips the razor  
in the shaving bowl  
as Haydn stares at his face  
haloed in a gilded  
mirror, pondering in its halo  
of steam how he can  
play on, fallen birch leaves  
collecting like snow  
at the gates of the boarded-up  
opera house, wood-smoke  
scenting the crisp air.

How often can he escort  
the Prince and guests along  
Esterhazy's gardens with a sonata —  
to match the mood to music.  
Idyllic times, Haydn tells himself,  
then winces. The sliding  
blade cuts the stubble at his chin.  
A blood-drawn sting stops  
Haydn's daydream of gods  
lowered by sturdy ropes,  
magnificent candelabras  
transforming the hall  
into a magical realm wherein  
our psyches are cleansed  
for frolics and joy.

The hasty blade brings  
Haydn back to his dilemma —  
how to persuade the Prince  
who remains despite  
the season content  
to hunt while the men  
in Haydn's orchestra  
long to rejoin their families  
in Vienna. Not to stay here  
another month  
for royal entertainment.  
How to persuade  
the Prince summer has ended?

Haydn hears their appeals  
in the manservant's apologies,  
dabbing at the cut.  
Vienna is a mirage  
in the muffled  
shouts of revelers  
arriving by coach  
each frosty morning.  
Having shooed away the clumsy  
fool, Haydn stands  
and paces, contemplating  
musty tapestries,  
his wife's perfumed shawl,  
rolled pages  
cluttering his bed sheets.

He becomes distracted by a rabble  
outside, children playing  
games in the stables,  
guards gathered at  
kindling fires. Like painted  
scenes by Bruegel  
in the Prince's gallery. Frustrated,  
Haydn puzzles how to ask  
favors when he's no less  
indentured than grooms  
saddling horses for the hunt  
or the scullery girl  
with her water pail from the well.

What power has music?  
But it's artifice and beauty?  
Haydn plots a trick  
for the Prince, fond of Goethe.  
Composing his revelation.  
The new symphony to convey  
our leaving. Thunderous  
F sharp to begin  
this beguilement that ends  
when the cellists,  
the violinists, each depart,  
only Tomasini and he  
left, two candles  
in the hall's darkness,  
a deserted winter countryside.

## Thank You's

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