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In this issue:
David Axelrod • Angela Ball • John Gallaher • Mark Halliday
Michelle Hoover • Tracy Pearce • Jonathan Penner • Emily Sinclair
Jeneva Stone • Keith Waldrop • Elizabeth Willis • Sam Witt
& Joan Leegant, winner of the 2011 Nelligan Prize for Short Fiction

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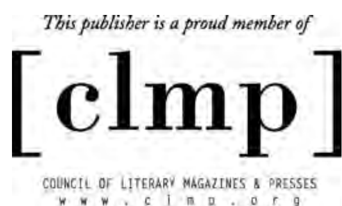

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EDITORS' PAGE

Eight years ago, with encouragement and sponsorship from longtime supporters Steven Schwartz and Emily Hammond, *Colorado Review* established the Nelligan Prize for Short Fiction, in memory of Liza Nelligan, a Colorado State University alumna who became a gifted and beloved editor of literary fiction. The prize celebrates Liza's life, her accomplishments, and her many contributions to the literary world by recognizing the work of an exceptional short story writer. We are very pleased to feature this year's winner, "Beautiful Souls," by Joan Leegant, selected by final judge (and new *CR* contributing editor!) Ron Carlson. Of Leegant's story, in which two American girls on vacation in Jerusalem spend an afternoon on their own and find they're not the sophisticated travelers they believe themselves to be, Carlson says, "I admire the way the writer keeps the tension in the current scene while lacing in the weird, politically correct pressures coming from the parents. Structurally well-made, cohering to the overarching story of the day, the story moves toward a sobering revelation and a dangerous confusion, leading to real damage to the saucy adolescent confidence with which the girls started the day." Like "Beautiful Souls," the three other stories in this issue also deal with frustrated expectation—characters put themselves in situations and discover that things are not quite the way they had anticipated. In Tracy Pearce's "The Polish Bride," a young woman is courted by her former chemistry teacher, with whom she's long been in love, and begins to see another side of him, strange and flawed. The precocious teenage narrator of Jonathan Penner's "Belize" juggles work, life, and love in the adult world into which she's emancipated herself, navigating a terrain more complex than she had perhaps bargained for. And having become the übermothers they'd set out to be, the women in Emily Sinclair's "Then, We Knew Everything" question their accomplishments when one of their own defects.

Michelle Hoover leads off this issue's nonfiction with her haunting essay "Our Little Bertha," braiding together questions about loss and grief, the legacy of family history, and connection to place. And through a beautiful meditation on snow, Jeneva Stone explores her experience as the mother of a child with a disability in "Winter Kept Us Warm."

Finally, we are truly delighted to announce—in addition to Ron Carlson's joining our staff of contributing editors—one other change to our masthead: Steven Schwartz is our new fiction editor. A widely published faculty member in the MFA programs of both Colorado State University and Warren Wilson College, Schwartz is the author of the short story collections *To Leningrad in Winter* and *Lives of the Fathers,* and the novels *Therapy* and *A Good Doctor's Son.* His fiction has received the Nelson Algren Award, the Sherwood Anderson Prize, the Cohen Award from *Ploughshares,* two O. Henry Prize Story Awards, and has appeared in over fifty magazines and anthologies. He is also a recipient of the Cleanth Brooks Prize in Nonfiction from the *Southern Review.* We are very fortunate indeed to have him onboard.

Welcome, everyone, to the fall issue.

—STEPHANIE G'SCHWIND

All writing is occasional writing, whether the occasion be a given day or window, a political reality that inspires rage, or the poetic voice that conjures elegy, prayer. The sufficient forms of imagination make their way in time, marking the hours and seasons with their own passing. At this writing, disobedient citizens are occupying Wall Street, the aspens of the Colorado mountains are burning electric yellow, and John Zorn is catenating my Pandora. A sense of pleasure in the gathering of poems here, a sense of the ongoing occasion of the world. I hope you will find such resonances in the diverse contents of this, the latest issue of *CR*. I am particularly struck by its range: mordant humor, flinty prayer, fog bank attention, bomb meditation, volcano scour. There's a thingness to the poems, and a sustained address.

Indeed, one of the pleasures in putting this issue together is the happenstance of receiving long poems. There's excerpted work (David Axelrod's "Song of Accord," Michael Robins's "Match"), serial work (Noah Eli Gordon's "The Answer," the last five entries from Stephen Ratcliffe's thousand-page "Temporalities"), and an extraordinary sequence from Keith Waldrop. His "Marginalia" gathers the page to the scraps of speech and character and humor that make up our days: "to guess the truth // to despise Ruebens, to inter- / rupt succession, let temporalities / overlap // long road, lapse / of time." Such dwell among his fragments. May you enjoy these all.

—MATTHEW COOPERMAN

JOAN LEEGANT

BEAUTIFUL SOULS

Winner of the 2011 Nelligan Prize for Short Fiction, selected by Ron Carlson

They were two American girls, Abby and Jennifer, best friends, sixteen and not entirely naïve, wandering in the Arab shuk in Jerusalem's Old City. Good girls, not rebellious types, they had left the hotel early that morning with their earnest parents, Susan and Phil, Barbara and Steve, to sit through the interminable Saturday morning services at a crumbling, ancient synagogue off a winding alley, just as they had dutifully trailed along to all the tourist sites the entire week, and now this, an afternoon alone in the shuk, was their reward. No adults, just the two of them. They could go, the parents said, as long as they promised to stay together and be back at the hotel by four. Because at four thirty it would be almost dark.

Now it was three, and they were hungry. Starving. They had fled the hotel as soon as allowed, skipping the buffet lunch, walking down King George Street to the Jaffa Gate exactly as their fathers had shown them on the map. Their mothers, in the lobby, waved them off. *Buy something special! For the holiday!* Because, yes, their school vacation coincided this year with—amazingly—Hanukkah! They would be in Jerusalem for Hanukkah, their parents had exulted months before, in Cambridge, showing Abby and Jen the glossy photos of enormous clay pots of burning oil on top of the Old City walls—no ordinary menorahs there!—just like the pots from thousands of years ago! The parental gushing was startling, weird, finally annoying. Because despite how the six of them looked tromping around Mount Herzl in the rain at the grave of the Father of Zionism or staring at the terrible pictures of the camps at Yad Vashem—and Jen and Abby knew exactly how they looked, four wide-eyed adults and two gum-chewing teenagers—the trip wasn't an attempt to instill ethnic pride in the two girls. Rather, it was because Susan and Phil and Barbara and Steve, friends since college, suddenly wanted to get into the Jewish thing for themselves. A *hole* in their endlessly reexamined lives, they told their daugh-

ters when selling them on the travel plans. *Hole?* Abby thought, rolling her eyes at Jen in Jen's parents' living room, a fire going in the fireplace, the first crisp days of autumn upon them. What were they talking about, these flaky quasi-grown-ups who had decided to investigate yet another potentially life-altering *ism,* just like their prior love affairs with shamanism and veganism and humanism and feminism and who knew what else? Jewishness—or Juda*ism,* as Phil and Steve, who knew a little more about it than their wives, corrected—had occupied a zero place in either family's existence, though the girls received the usual holiday cards from the grandparents in Florida and had managed to attend a couple of friends' bat mitzvahs, kids whose families had given up on their heroic attempts at urban child-rearing in virtuously peeling triple-deckers in Somerville or Central Square and had slunk out under cover of darkness to the embarrassing suburbs. But that was it for tradition, religion—any religion—deemed collectively and unanimously by the four adults to be primitive, regressive, lethally divisive, the scourge of humanity. It was a tenet by which they'd all lived, Abby and Jen had been told ad nauseum. Which made the recent turnaround irritating, to say the least. They were exhausting and confusing, these parents. Abby, for one, wished they would just lighten up and be more concerned with their daughters' PSAT scores and insufficient wardrobes instead of their eco-conscious, human-potential, progressive, egalitarian, spiritual health.

All week their parents had talked with them about the plight of the Palestinians and the failed leadership on both sides and the irrational hatred of the Other.

But now, regardless of the grown-ups' starry-eyed wonder—Susan and Phil and Barbara and Steve planned to spend the afternoon reveling in the transcendence of their first-ever fully observed Jewish Sabbath—Jen and Abby would have their reward. Once inside the shuk, they'd moved with the tourist crowds down the labyrinthian alleys past the spice vendors and trays of sticky pastries, past the silver shops and the men selling carved olive-wood tables and nargilahs. At one stall, Jen had

made Abby stop so she could examine a wide-necked peasant blouse with embroidery, but within seconds a sweaty, middle-aged man with a thick mustache appeared from the back and began pressing them in accented English. Only one hundred shekel. One hundred. How much did Jen want to pay? Ninety? Eighty-five? He'd give it to her for eighty. Or dollar—did she want to pay dollar? For her, a special rate. Twenty dollar. Eighteen. Take. Try. See how nice it goes on you. He swept the blouse off the hanger and held it up against Jen, brushing her breast. Abby saw the hand touching Jen, keeping it there too long. Was he really doing that? Putting his hand on Jen's breast? Jen quickly mumbled she wasn't interested, thank you, and pulled Abby out to the alley, and neither said anything because they were supposed to not be afraid of the Arabs or think poorly of them. All week their parents had talked with them about the plight of the Palestinians and the failed leadership on both sides and the irrational hatred of the Other that was everywhere in this world, responsible for so much suffering. They'd met with nice, reasonable Palestinians who wanted peace, and nice, reasonable Israelis who wanted peace, meetings arranged by their guide where the parents were given envelopes in which to mail checks, and where Jen and Abby were given tea and cake and were ignored.

And so neither girl said anything after the experience with the man with the mustache. Maybe he hadn't touched Jen for so long on purpose, or maybe Jen looked pale and stricken because lately, being around any males, Abby couldn't help but notice, seemed to make Jen uneasy. Like Jen was turning into some kind of prude. She didn't used to be that way, but Abby had been noticing. So they said nothing but anyway didn't have to; they knew each other so well they could read each other's minds. That's how they'd been since they were four years old. Best friends who knew each other's thoughts. They walked fast and turned a corner and fell in behind a large German couple, tall, blond people with wide shoulders who could have been alpine hikers from an energy-drink ad. When the couple turned into a shop, the girls followed and bought six tiny painted teacups for hardly anything, three dollars apiece, which is what the Germans paid.

And now they were ravenous. And cold. They'd refused to

wear their winter parkas, the coats so ridiculously *American,* they told their mothers at the hotel; they were from *Massachusetts,* for goodness sake—a little brisk weather never bothered them. But it turned out that sweaters weren't enough. The city shivered under a constant damp chill, December, the stone buildings barely heated. Even two sweaters weren't enough. Over identical white turtlenecks Abby wore Jen's black wool pullover, and Jen had on Abby's powder blue. It was the powder blue that the man with the mustache had touched.

They spotted the restaurant at the same time. It was next to a bakery; later, they would say the smells had lured them over. That even though it was past three and they knew they should head back to the hotel, the yeasty, sugary scent had enticed them. That's how they would explain it. They turned into the dark entry, the place on closer inspection more a bar or café than a restaurant. They knew it would be patronized by Arabs. In particular, Arab men. Their fathers had warned them, quietly, on the side, while showing them the route on the map so that Susan and Barbara wouldn't hear and get overprotective and retract the agreement to let the girls go. *When you go to the shuk, you have to be careful around the men. It's not because they're Arabs. Of course not. It's because, in some places in the world, men are different from what you're used to. It's a cultural thing. When they see young women alone, they think they're available. Their daughters don't go out by themselves like ours do.*

And so, yes, there were men in the café. The girls waited at the door and looked in. A handful of tables, all suffused in smoke, two or three men at each. Which, if Abby thought about it, was a little thrilling. If she was going to be totally honest. The mustached shopkeeper had shaken up Jen, but the men in this café, as far as Abby could tell in the shadowy dark, were a whole lot younger and a whole lot more attractive than the man in that shop. And there was something else: she didn't want to go back to the hotel. Didn't want to listen to their suddenly worshipful parents who were replaying every moment of the trip, going on about the amazing resilience of the Jews, and the holy aura of the city, and the miraculous building of the country, all of it so inspiring, how could they have ignored their heritage all these years, not just ignored but—dare they say it?—been ashamed

of it, what had been going on with them, had they been sucked in by simplistic politics or rebelling against their parents? Was that what it was? How free were they, really, when their so-called liberation was prescribed in advance by developmental psychology or the rigid agenda of the left? Endless talk, hours of it, over every meal, at every tourist site, during every ride in the tour guide's van. The parents processed and processed, and every now and then one of them would toss Jen and Abby a sincere look and a probing question. *How are you finding this experience, girls?* Which neither of them would answer. So no; no parents right now, please. Abby looked into the dim café with its smoky low-hanging haze and knew she didn't want to go back to the hotel.

Later, Jen would say she didn't want to go in, that Abby was the one who started it, but now neither of them protested.

A man slowly got up from one of the tables, came their way.

"Yes, mademoiselles?" he said, and Abby felt herself blushing. *Mademoiselles.*

"Is it possible to get something to eat?" Abby said, taking charge, because Jen was still too upset to talk and anyway she was shy, and Abby heard herself sounding different. Sophisticated. Like she was acting in a play. *Is it possible.*

"Possible?" the man said, smiling, waving toward the back, toward a curtain of beads. "Of course. It would always be possible for such lovely mademoiselles."

They followed him deeper into the room. At the table nearest the front, two Israeli soldiers in olive drab smoked and sipped from tiny cups like the ones they'd just bought. Except for the uniforms, the Israelis looked no different from everyone else in the cafe—black-haired men also sipping, smoking, watching them pass. The girls moved down the narrow center aisle. Their fathers had been right; there were no women. But it would have been rude and awkward to change their minds and ask to leave, even if they'd wanted to. Later, Jen would say she didn't want to go in, that Abby was the one who started it, but now neither of them protested, and they took seats where the man directed

them, at a table for four in front of the curtain. Then the man vanished behind the beads.

They put their purchases on the empty chairs. Then they folded their hands. They pretended not to notice the half dozen men openly staring. They were young, these men, twenties, early thirties. And handsome, Abby thought. All the men she'd seen on this vacation were handsome. Dark and sort of tough, tight jeans, sunglasses, or in cool bomber jackets like the soldiers. Some were even close to her age. They were nothing like the boys at home—nice, sensitive Cambridge boys who were too polite to ever try anything with Abby or Jen or their friends, afraid of offending. Afraid of their own shadows.

Someone lit a pipe; a musky scent filled the room. That was another thing: neither Jen nor Abby looked over, but it certainly could have been hashish. The whole café could have been filled with hashish. Because this was, after all, the Middle East. They weren't that sheltered. They weren't totally naïve.

"I'm glad we got those teacups," Abby said, clasping her hands, pretending no one else was listening.

Jen nodded morosely, mumbled she was glad too.

Were their parents crazy or what, with this whole Jewish thing, Abby said, lowering her voice, not wanting to say the word too loud, just in case. *Jewish.* Well, they had only a few more days of this, and boy, would she be glad to get home. Jen murmured that she would be glad too, and Abby said at least this was better than sitting around their apartments in Cambridge the whole school vacation, plus dealing with New Year's Eve, wasn't it lame that Caitlin's parents wanted Caitlin to have a girls' sleepover at her house so they wouldn't be tempted by the drunken brawls in Harvard Square. But the talk between them was just air, meaningless words skittering on the surface, because both of them were wondering what they were supposed to do now. No one had come to take their order, and no one was eating at any of the other tables; they were just watching. And listening. Sipping and smoking and listening.

And then suddenly the man who had seated them came back from behind the curtain, beads swinging, with a tray he began to unload. Plates of hummus and chopped tomato salad and olives. Little bowls of oily red peppers and cauliflower and beets and other vegetables they didn't recognize, dense with lemon

and garlic; a plastic basket of puffy, hot pita; two glasses of steaming tea.

"For you," said the man. He swept his hand across the table. A minty scent rose up from the hot glasses. "Please to enjoy," he said, then walked away.

They looked at the plates. They hadn't ordered it. Still, they weren't stupid; they'd learned a few things in their lives, including that restaurants here might do things differently from what they were used to. They both knew this without saying. Maybe you didn't always order; maybe it was like eating at someone's house: you ate what they put in front of you. They had done this on the eighth-grade class trip to Washington, D.C., where they stayed in people's homes. Jen and Abby were paired up, of course, and for three days they stayed with an African-American family named Jefferson—*after the President*—who served them grits and black-eyed peas and collard greens and cuts of pork they'd never heard of, let alone tasted, and they had politely eaten it all without question because that's what you did. You were sensitive to the culture of others, which was the point of the class trip, and besides, you were their guest. But here Abby wondered: how much would this cost? They had American dollars and some shekels, but what if the man kept bringing dishes and they didn't have enough to pay for it?

"This looks great," Abby said, trying, and Jen murmured a mostly inaudible *yes,* probably worried about the hour, three thirty already, but what could they do, it was too late to make it to the hotel in time. Their parents wanted them back by four so they could all stand outside in a circle and hold hands and wait for three stars to appear in the sky, signifying the end of the Sabbath. *Separating the sacred from the profane—isn't that beautiful?* Their mothers had heard there was a special dance or song for this; they were going to learn it that afternoon. The men at the other tables were still watching as the girls began to serve themselves, small helpings, tentative. Abby broke apart the soft bread. They didn't talk, probably the first time they'd ever had a meal together where they didn't speak, because everything would be overheard. They couldn't even switch to a foreign language because Abby knew Spanish and Jen was taking French. Anyway, maybe people always watched the customers eat there. Maybe they wanted to see if the customers liked

it. The truth was, Abby didn't mind. So what if some good-looking men were watching them? She ate carefully, tipping her head just so, flexing an ankle. It wasn't the kind of thing she ever did in Cambridge.

After a minute, one of the men got up and came over to their table. He pulled up an empty chair and sat down next to Jen, opposite Abby.

"You like this food? The food here is good, no?"

He was maybe twenty-one, slim and dark, in a black leather jacket. A gold chain glittered on his neck. "Yes, very good," Abby said.

"You come back again. Bring your husbands, your boyfriends."

Abby blushed, went for the tea. Jen stopped eating.

"What, not here with husbands? Boyfriends? I don't believe, such pretty girls like you." He inched up on his chair. Jen looked like the air was going out of her. She looked frozen. The man was sitting very close to her, and Abby guessed his knee was probably one inch from Jen's leg. His hair was slicked back, too wet, but he was good-looking. Except for his teeth. They were yellowed and crooked. Still, he wasn't afraid to smile. "Where you girls from?" he said. "New York? California?" The way he said "California," he emphasized the *for* and separated the *nia*, so it came out Cali-*FOR-neeya,* which for some reason made Abby a little weak in the knees. Jen kept her eyes on the table. Or maybe they were from Philadelphia? *PhilaDELfeeya*.

"No. Boston," Abby said. She could feel the other men watching. Maybe they were jealous; maybe they wished they'd gotten up first and beaten this one to it.

"Ah, Boston." A yellowy grin. "Paul Revere and the Freedom Trail, yes?" He inched closer and, from the way Jen was shifting in her seat, Abby was pretty sure his knee was now against Jen's thigh. It was hard for it not to be. "You know this film *The Verdict?* Paul Newman? Is made in Boston. Great film. You see this film?"

Abby shook her head. Jen stared at the table.

"No? Maybe you want to come to a film with me and my friend? Very many good films here. You like movies? Ice cream and movies?"

"I like movies," Abby said. She glanced at Jen, but Jen wouldn't look at her. "And ice cream."

"We're here with our fathers," Jen said, her eyes fixed on the plates.

Abby stared at her. Their fathers? What was she talking about?

"They're right outside," Jen said to the plates. "Waiting for us."

Abby kept looking at Jen, but Jen wouldn't look up. Abby knew exactly what Jen was doing. She was hoping it would frighten this guy off if he thought their fathers were outside. Or he'd take pity on them, girls with strict parents who watched their every move, like the daughters in his family. Their fathers had told them at the hotel. *Girls in Palestinian families are supervised very closely. It's a conservative culture, very traditional. Not that we're criticizing. Just comparing.*

A chuckle erupted somewhere in the shadowy room. The man smiled again, showing his bad teeth. "So where are such fathers that they let two beautiful girls eat by themselves? They don't come join you?"

"They're not hungry," Jen murmured to the table. "But they're right outside, a few steps away."

Abby kept looking at Jen. It was a stupid lie. Any one of them listening—and they were all listening—could just get up and open the door and see there were no Americans loitering out there, no middle-aged men waiting in the alley for their reckless, stupid daughters.

"Such pretty girls, I don't blame a father for standing guard." The man had moved his hand, was resting it next to Jen's tea. He had on a big, flashy ring, a blue stone set in gold. His nails were cut square across.

"I think we're finished now," Jen said, glancing around the room as if the waiter—as if there even was a waiter—might instantly appear. She was pale and wouldn't look at Abby, which wasn't right; that's not how they operated. They always checked in with each other, even if they couldn't talk. They'd do it with their eyes. Jen scanned the room, ghostly, and said, "We need the check. How do we get the check?"

"The check?" The man waved the ringed hand. His jacket shone a little in the dim light. "There is no check here. This is not America, not Boston. Here we take our time. Here everyone

is like family. You eat, you drink, you make new friends, and then later, when it’s time to go, you worry about paying. But not now.” He pushed the plates closer to Jen. “You haven’t touched the salads. What, you don’t like this food?”

“We have to go,” Jen said, still looking for a waiter, for anyone. “I’m not feeling well.” Abby kept looking at her, but Jen refused to make eye contact. Maybe she really was feeling sick. Maybe she’d gotten so scared she was physically ill. She looked bad enough. But it irritated Abby. Jen was becoming a real Miss Priss. What was the big deal? A handsome guy comes and talks to you—what’s so terrible about that?

Her friends would be shocked to hear she’d sat at a table with an older guy, a foreigner, who was smoking; it made Abby want to take a puff.

The man clucked his tongue, *tsk tsk,* and opened a pack of cigarettes and lit one. “Such a pity,” he said. “Afraid to talk to a friendly stranger. You should have a coffee. Tell me about yourselves.”

Somewhere, a chair scraped tile. Abby had never seen Jen like this. Did she truly not like boys anymore? She used to like boys. She used to be fun. A tall man in sunglasses walked by, lightly rapping the table as he passed. The man at their table glanced up, waved the other man away, dismissive, then took a long pull on his cigarette. The sunglasses man disappeared behind the bead curtain.

“Well, I suppose we’re kind of late,” Abby said, deflated, because what else could she do? Jen looked like she might get up and walk out, and she couldn’t let her do that. “I guess we should go,” Abby said. She watched the man slowly inhale, then make an O with his lips to let out the smoke. No one at home smoked. It was practically illegal in Cambridge. Smokers there were treated like criminals. Her friends would be shocked to hear she’d sat at a table with an older guy, a foreigner, who was smoking; it made Abby want to take a puff.

Jen wrapped her arms around herself, hugging herself in the blue sweater, and stared at the untouched salads.

"You're cold," the man said, looking at Jen.

Jen shook her head, but then she shivered, a real shiver, like she had the flu. Another chair scraped the tile.

"Yes, yes, you're very cold." The man put the cigarette on the edge of the table and took off his jacket and put it over Jen's shoulders. He had on a tight black nylon shirt. The gold chain hung down like a perfect horseshoe. He was very muscled, and Abby thought that in another place, her high school, for instance, he'd be considered a real stud.

Jen shook her head. "Please, no, I don't need your jacket."

"Yes, you do, you're very cold." He moved his arm around Jen's shoulders to keep the jacket from slipping off, but then he left it there.

Jen shook her head again, more firmly now. "I'm fine. I don't want your jacket."

"*Ma zeh?*" A loud burst of staccato Hebrew. The two soldiers from the front, long guns hanging off their shoulders. They were standing at the table. "*Ma zeh?*" one of them spat out again. "What's going on? He is bothering you?" he said to Abby. "This man, he bothers you while you eating?"

Abby stared at the gun, a huge appendage like a burnt tree branch, then looked at the soldier. Twenty, twenty-one, wearing a green army beret and rimless glasses. He kept a hand on the weapon, agitated. "He bothering you?" he said again and didn't wait for an answer. "Get up!" he said to the man. "Now!"

The man got to his feet. He was shorter than the soldier and seemed to Abby smaller than when he was sitting, as if he'd suddenly shrunk. He was almost petite, despite the muscled neck. There was something even dainty about him. The tight shirt, the jewelry, the lacquered hair. The Israeli poked his gun into the leather jacket sleeve, which was still hanging off Jen. "This your coat? You put on the girl?"

"She was cold," the man said.

"Don't tell me cold! Don't give me this bullshit! I saw the girl shake her head!"

The other soldier grabbed the man by the arm, pulled him away from the table.

"We come in here to get a little tea," the soldier with the glasses said, "and we find you bothering the tourists! What's the matter with you?" He gestured with his chin for the man to

go to the other side of the room. The other soldier pushed him toward the wall.

"You okay?" the soldier with the glasses said, turning to the table.

"He didn't hurt us or anything," Abby said, looking straight at him. She had seen a lot of these soldiers, and usually they were really attractive in their uniforms. But this one didn't seem attractive at all. She could tell he was good-looking, would be good-looking in another place, maybe her high school or sitting in her parents' living room. But not here, in this café. Here he looked ugly. Ugly and mean and not desirable at all. "He was only talking to us."

"Only talking? Only talking? What are you, exchange students? Kibbutz volunteer on *chofesh?* How long you in Jerusalem? Two month? Three?"

"Five days."

"Five days!" The Israeli laughed. He turned to his partner. "You hear that, Lior? They're in the city five days, and they know everything! They think this guy, he's a perfect gentleman! Tom Cruise!" He turned back to the table. "You think he's Tom Cruise? Leonardo DiCaprio? This is what you think?"

"I didn't say he was Tom Cruise. I just said he didn't do anything. He was only talking to us."

"If he was only talking, why your friend here look like she going to be sick? You want to tell me?"

"She's got a cold. She didn't feel well all day. That's why we came in here. We thought maybe she'd feel better with some tea."

"This isn't America. You understand?" the soldier said to her. He had lowered his voice, was trying to calm down. She could see he was trying to steady the situation. The other one, Lior, was on the other side of the room talking to the men there in another language. Arabic maybe. "You can't go around all the time with a *yafeh nefesh*. You know what means this, *yafeh nefesh?*"

"No."

"Beautiful soul." The soldier paused. "You know what this is?"

"No."

"Bleeding heart. In English you say *bleeding heart*." The sol-

dier watched her. "You can't be like that here. Maybe in America. But not here."

Abby turned away. Jen was leaning over the table, her forehead in her hand. Abby didn't want to look at her. Abby never wanted to look at her again. She turned back to the soldier. "He was just talking to us. I don't know why you're making such a deal out of it. We don't need your protection. He was only being friendly."

"Why you think no one eats in this cafe? Why you think there are no customers except five guys drinking coffee all day?

"Friendly?" The soldier leaned toward her. Behind the glasses his eyes were very blue. Maybe he wasn't twenty; maybe he was eighteen, or seventeen, practically her own age. If she lived there, she'd have to go into the army, she'd have to go next year. The black gun was swinging by his side. It looked like it was made of plastic, like a toy. Though Abby knew it wasn't a toy. "Friendly?" the soldier repeated. "Why you think no one eats in this cafe? Why you think there are no customers except five guys drinking coffee all day? Thousands of tourists in the shuk and not a one in this place. Why you think?" He looked up, gestured with his chin at one of the men at the other tables. They were smoking and sipping and listening. "Hey, Mahmoud, you want to tell her why it's empty here? Where the owner is, your uncle? Your cousin Hassan?"

Silence. The other man blew smoke, looked away.

The soldier turned back to Abby. "Last week a bomb blows up fifteen people at a bus stop. You want to know who drives the bomber there? Who helps him blow himself up and fifteen more? Seven little kids on the way to school, all waiting for the bus? You want to know where the owner of this place was last week, where his son was?"

He stopped. He was getting red in the face and was trying to control himself. He didn't want to be yelling at her. The room was a tomb. Jen wasn't moving.

"But do we shut them down?" the soldier said. "Close up his restaurant, burn it to the ground? No. Because the Americans will say we starving East Jerusalem. The Europeans will say

we're criminals. Anyway nobody comes in here. Because the whole shuk knows. The whole East Jerusalem knows. So only the family comes in here." He waved at the smoking men. "Just them. And us. Because now we have to protect them from their new enemies. Because some people here are not happy that we know all about it. They wonder who told."

The soldier straightened up. He seemed exhausted. He gestured for Lior to come get the leather jacket. It was still hanging off Jen's shoulders and looked to Abby like a person, a dead person hanging off Jen. Then he told the girls they needed to leave, that he would escort them out.

"We can't go yet," Abby murmured. "We haven't paid."

"Paid?" The Israeli laughed.

"I want to pay. It's not right." Abby stood, unzipped her fanny pack. Her hands were shaking. Had the owner really driven a suicide bomber to his target? Did all the men there know it? Were they glad? Jen had told her that Palestinians in Gaza danced in the streets when Israelis got blown up, she'd seen it on TV. Their parents would never tell them that, but it was true. And what about the man who came to their table? Was he glad? He was standing by the wall, but she couldn't look at him. If the men knew she and Jen were Jewish, would they want to kill them too? Maybe they already did know. She rummaged through the pack, hands sweaty, unable to think. There were no shekels, where were the shekels, she couldn't find the shekels. She pulled out an American twenty and put it on the table.

"Twenty dollar?" the Israeli said. "Are you crazy?"

"That's all I have, I don't care."

The Israeli swept up the bill, shoved it into her pack. "Don't leave that."

Jen was getting herself to her feet. She looked like a ghost. Abby hated her. She was her best friend, and she hated her. Jen unzipped her fanny pack, pulled out three twenty-shekel notes, put them on the table.

"That's too much," the soldier said.

"I don't care. That's what we're paying," Abby said.

Lior waved them ahead of him with his gun. The soldiers would walk them to the Jaffa Gate, the one with the glasses said, and after that they would walk them to the hotel and explain to their parents that it was dangerous to let two young

American girls wander alone in the shuk. That they had no idea what it was like in this country. Did they think it was Disneyland, some Middle Eastern theme park with cobblestone alleys and exotic foods? Did they think everyone in the shuk was a friendly, colorful merchant like from a tourist video or a Hollywood movie?

They were at the door. It was already dark. “The start of the holiday,” the soldier with the glasses said, pointing his weapon at the pots high up on the walls. “They’re lighting now. The first one. Look.”

Abby looked. Sixty feet up, a giant flame *whooshed* into the sapphire sky. It licked the air, furious, the pot a fiery cauldron like something out of a nightmare, like what ancient civilizations threw babies into in order to appease their ferocious gods. Behind them stood the men from the café, watching the flames, but Abby couldn’t turn around. Couldn’t look at Jen or the man with the leather jacket or the other soldier or anyone. She could only stand there and watch as the flames rose higher and higher while somewhere across the city their parents whirled and sang and danced in the darkness and wondrously counted the stars.

TRACY PEARCE

THE POLISH BRIDE

As Ania Szul weighed kiszka behind the counter at Mielczarek's Polish Bakery and Deli, she recognized Gene Hopkins, her former chemistry teacher, at the end of a long line. Heat instantly rose to her face and a feeling of numbness came over her body as if she were frozen.

Ania had worked at Mielczarek's on Waveland and Central Park since her high school graduation in June. On Saturdays the lines were long and Ania found herself working on the level of doing and not thinking. She had cut several inches from the kiszka and placed it back in the refrigerated meat display. The smell of cold garlic and spices lingered after she slid the door shut.

"Next," she called, realizing that Mr. Hopkins was slowly inching toward the counter. Her voice sounded like she was speaking into a large hole as she took the next order. She considered pulling off her hairnet, but she knew Janek Mielczarek, her boss, would yell. She wondered what she would say to Mr. Hopkins and why he had come to Mielczarek's. Most of the customers were Polish-born. Americans, even of Polish descent, seemed to shop at chain stores like Jewel and Dominick's.

As she served the next customer, she stole a glance at Mr. Hopkins. The fluorescent lights made the Vitalis in his black hair shine like an American movie star, and his dark tweed coat looked brand new. She imagined placing her nose in his coat, taking in its clean fibers.

While a student, Ania had found out that he was in his late twenties, the youngest teacher at her high school. She had told all of her classmates, which unfortunately only made the other girls believe they were in love with him too. But Ania felt she was the only one who really knew him. Unlike the other girls, she appreciated his no-nonsense style. Before she had graduated, she wrote him a letter. She wanted to tell him that he was a great teacher, that he had influenced her life, and that, because

of him, she was going to nursing school. Ania told her older sister Ewa about the letter, but of course Ewa refused to even look at it. It seemed beneath her to get caught up in Ania's crushes. Later, Mr. Hopkins returned the letter to Ania and used red ink to correct her mistakes. But instead of feeling embarrassed, she was touched by his tough love. In her heart, she knew that he had taken the time to read and consider her thoughts, something no one had ever done.

Ania heard Irena Mielczarek, Janek's wife, coughing in the back. A week earlier, Irena had sworn to Ania that she had a tooth stuck in the lining of her throat. Ania wanted to tell her that she smoked too many cigarettes, but let it go. Now Ania could use Irena's help. She ran from the meat counter to the register, filling orders while trying to look at Mr. Hopkins. Janek was at the smokehouse behind the store preparing smoked butt for the Sunday crowd.

Before taking the next order, Ania excused herself and ran to the kitchen in back. Irena was attaching blue plastic rings to the ends of liver sausage. Ania stopped at the stainless steel slop sink and turned on the cold water. She dipped her hands under the faucet and patted her face lightly. She imagined that her own hands were Mr. Hopkins's, that he was touching her face. She imagined their first kiss. He would touch her face first, then pull her chin toward him and their lips would suddenly meet.

"Ania, you need my help?" Irena asked.

"You mind?" said Ania, dazed. Irena nodded and threw a clean apron over her head. Ania continued to take orders next to Irena without looking at Mr. Hopkins. But he finally made his way to the front of the line.

"Well, hello there," he said, and a sudden sense of calm poured over Ania, as if it were an ordinary day in his classroom. "How is nursing school?" he asked.

"Mr. Hopkins, I didn't get in. They say my written English wasn't good," she said. A lie. She had not even bothered to apply. She had watched the deadline come and go after telling everyone that nursing school was her lifelong dream.

"But your English is fine," he said, seeming genuinely surprised.

"It was the written part," she rushed. "Maybe next year." She shrugged her shoulders.

"We'll have to get you some tutoring," he said, looking into her face.

"We? Who's we?" She smiled, feeling waves of excitement in her abdomen.

"Me, myself, and I," he said. His lips were full and spread into a smile, revealing perfect, large white teeth.

The following Saturday, Ania waited outside of Mielczarek's. Mr. Hopkins had offered to give her English lessons at four o'clock. As she stood in front of the metal accordion gate at the store's entrance, she could smell sausage from her coat and wondered if Mr. Hopkins would notice. She tightened the collar around her neck. The cold wind pressed against her scalp as she looked eagerly down Waveland Avenue.

How dreamlike it felt to be surrounded by such strange sounds. English sounded much softer than Polish, almost like a soft gurgling from the back of the mouth.

She watched the wheel of Mr. Hopkins's car hit the dirty rainbow puddle next to the curb in front of the store. But instead of being tutored in English, Ania was driven around the city. They drove up and down Lake Shore Drive listening to Wagner and looking at the skyline.

"Music is very important to me," he said as he turned up the volume. He spoke to her as if he had prepared the words in advance. Ania looked at the shiny dashboard and took in the smell of leather seats. She thought about her family's farm in Rymanow, the outhouse, the piles of wood she and her sister would cut with an axe over a tree stump. The American girls in her high school seemed far too delicate for such a task. When she arrived in America, she realized she had to pretend to be like them, as if she were going back in the stages of her life, like an adult becoming a child again.

As a freshman, she could not speak English. The first day she and Ewa went to school, they were nervous and afraid. She remembered how dreamlike it felt to be surrounded by such strange sounds. English sounded much softer than Polish, almost like a soft gurgling from the back of the mouth.

Ania felt exhausted recalling that first day of school. At lunch, she and Ewa were released from the counselor's office and allowed to eat with the other kids in the cafeteria. They sat at a table near the open doors against a wall. The boys looked tall and healthy. Ania noticed the crisp folds in their pants and the canvas sneakers they wore. The girls were even more mesmerizing. They looked like miniature adults. Their brightly colored dresses and purses matched and their hair was rolled. And they wore lipstick, something her father completely forbade. How ugly she felt, sitting there in her gray wool skirt and braids.

Later that same day, she learned that she and Ewa would be placed in all of the same classes even though Ewa was a year older than she. The school counselor believed that the girls could help each other because the school was not equipped to deal with Polish-speaking students. Ania was not relieved by this news. Ewa had been an honors student in Poland and had a mind like a sponge. It was only a matter of time before she had the entire school eating out of the palm of her hand.

Ania watched her sister while the volunteer mother who translated for them explained their schedules. Ewa looked straight ahead. She appeared ready for the challenge. Ania could see the wheels were turning in her head. Ewa would pick up the language. She would win over the girls in the cafeteria; she would have the boys fawning over her. She would turn her foreignness into something exotic, sexy, and smart.

It was late evening by the time Mr. Hopkins pulled up in front of the apartment building where Ania lived with her parents and sister.

"My mother will wonder what we did all evening," she said, laughing. She wondered if he was going to kiss her. Had they been on a date? Was he really trying to improve her English?

"Sightseeing. Sightseeing is lesson number one in English tutoring," he said. He walked her to the large double doors at the front of the building. He pulled his hand out of his front pocket and held a folded piece of plastic wrap.

"May I kiss you?" he asked. He spoke at such a low volume that he sounded like someone else. He coughed into the hand that was not holding the plastic wrap and wiped his mouth.

"Yes," she said, but wondered what the plastic wrap was for. She looked away as he unfolded it. She did not want to embar-

rass him. Then she realized that it was about to happen. She could feel her pulse quickening in her neck. It was a moment she had dreamt of many times. In his classroom, she would watch his lips move as he gave lab directions from the board.

He took a step forward and puckered his lips in an exaggerated way, like a child. He then placed the small sheet of plastic over them, turning his lips a bluish white. He closed his eyes. She was not sure what to do, so she hopped up on her toes and gave him a peck against the plastic. She wanted to believe that she could feel him under it, but the kiss was so quick—like it never really happened.

"Thank you," he said. He put the plastic back in his pocket and took out his keys. He glanced toward his parked car.

"Mr. Hopkins, I had a nice time," she said.

"Yes, yes," he said. He gave her a crooked side-smile as if he were embarrassed, although he offered her no explanation. "Should I come by the deli again? I'd really like to get some of that"—he paused—"that brown stuff." He began nervously shaping his hands into a roll.

"Kiszka?" she asked. "Pasztet?"

"Yes, the second one. I think." They stood for a moment in silence, then he patted her lightly on the shoulder like they were pals. She had not realized how short his sleeves were, or perhaps it was the length of his arms.

As she marched up the steps to her family's third-floor apartment, she did not want to think about the plastic. It could stay in a distant corner of her mind. It needed to stay there. She wanted to be in love, to daydream and think romantic thoughts. She had kissed Mr. Hopkins, something all of the girls in her class would envy her for. She thought about the times she would look through the glass window of his classroom door and see him quietly grading at his desk. He was young and smart and American. He had been to college and people respected him.

She wanted to tell Ewa about her evening with Mr. Hopkins, that she had been in his car and that she had kissed him. She knocked on the bathroom door.

"Ewa?" Ania heard her blowing her nose. "Ewa, are you there?"

Ewa opened the door. She had been crying. She held a letter in her hand. It was another letter from Piotr, a boy she believed she was in love with back in Poland. Once a week, she would

receive a letter from Piotr. Ania would search Ewa's drawers for these letters and read them secretly. She remembered one in which Piotr had written of his longing to hold Ewa's hand in a dark place and his dream to one day caress her smooth body.

"From Piotr?" Ania asked. Ewa nodded, looking down at the shag carpet that led to the hallway. A long strand of hair fell over her face. Even after a bout of crying over the sink, she was still attractive. She had thick dark hair and olive-colored skin, like an Italian. Her eyes were large and blue with an edged pattern of green around her pupils. On her right cheek was a rather large mole, which she wore with pride, as if it were a mark of her exotic nature. Like Ewa, Ania was petite, but her face was as round as a frying pan and framed by straw-colored hair; she was plain and looked like her father.

It satisfied Ania that Ewa knew she and Mr. Hopkins had been out together, that she knew Ania was moving forward and experiencing something she had not.

"How was your tutoring lesson?" asked Ewa, smirking.

"Fine," Ania said, trying to hold in her smile. She finally had something that made Ewa curious. She remembered Ewa and Piotr going for long walks in farmers' fields. She had once found them in a barn loft on a rainy afternoon, swinging their legs and laughing flirtatiously. She had seen the fancy underpants that Ewa had bought and then hid from their parents.

"Ania, tell me what's going on," said Ewa. "Come on." She always expected Ania to be an open book, one that she could shut with a single remark.

"We're just friends," said Ania. She knew she couldn't get away that easily. "He likes me, okay?"

"Likes you? You better be careful. He's all grown up," she said, nodding her head. It was just like Ewa to offer advice, to be the experienced one even though she was barely a year older. Even so, it satisfied Ania that Ewa knew she and Mr. Hopkins had been out together, that she knew Ania was moving forward and experiencing something she had not.

Mr. Hopkins continued to pick up Ania from the deli every Friday at four o'clock. He maintained a strict regimen of sight-

seeing and still referred to their outings as "tutoring sessions." They drove past the holiday displays on Michigan Avenue. He discussed the precision that went into hand-carving the wooden puppets in the windows. On another outing, they drove through Oak Park to look at Frank Lloyd Wright homes. He pointed out one home in particular that was white and boxy and built around a large oak tree. Another time, they drove through the boulevards of Logan Square, and he explained how Frederick Law Olmsted, one of the designers of New York's Central Park, had come to Chicago to beautify the city with boulevards.

But one outing was clearly not a tutoring session. He told her to wear something dressy, so she wore a skirt that morning to the deli. But after eight hours of slicing meats and taking orders, she no longer looked fresh. He wore a tie when he picked her up outside the deli. She felt embarrassed from the moment she entered the car.

They went to see *Madame Butterfly* at the Lyric Opera House downtown. Ania had never been to such a fancy place. But instead of enjoying it, she felt like his Polish maid as she walked behind him.

"Something wrong?" he said in the lobby during intermission.

"I'm just a little tired," she said. She was about to explain how she felt underdressed when she noticed a startled look in his eye. He immediately put down his cup of water and ushered her toward an exit door.

"Where are we going?" she asked. He was still looking behind them.

"Just need some air," he said nervously. They stood in a concrete stairwell with iron railings.

"Did you see someone that you recognized?" she asked sheepishly. He seemed out of breath.

"An old colleague of mine." He paused. "I wouldn't want him thinking there was anything funny going on."

She noticed that he would not look her in the eye as they waited. She wanted to confront him, to ask him why he had been pretending to tutor her, why he could not be seen with her, and why he'd kissed her through plastic wrap. She counted to fifty in her head as they stood in silence.

"Mr. Hopkins, what are we doing here?" she blurted.

"Doing here?" he said. "What does that mean?" He squinted at her. For the first time, he seemed agitated. His expression was so convincing that she wondered if perhaps she was crazy, as crazy as Irena for thinking there was a tooth lodged in her throat.

"I didn't mean anything." She could hear her voice trail off. He did not speak to her on the car ride back to her apartment. Ania realized that she did not want to lose him—or perhaps did not want to lose the idea of him. He had occupied a space in her everyday life that she could not part with, as strange and mysterious as he seemed at times. The truth was, she was flattered by his attention, and her fantasies of their relationship had taken on a life of their own.

When they reached the apartment, he turned off the car. "I'd like to pick you up next Saturday, if you're interested," he said. He looked down at the floor mats, waiting for her response.

"Saturday would be fine," she said. "More tutoring?"

"Why not?" he said, smiling. The tension from earlier had dissipated. "There's a great new exhibit over at the Field Museum. We could run over some terms of prehistoric animals." He began digging in each of his pants pockets, then slipped a hand in the side pocket of his sports coat. She wondered if he was looking for the plastic wrap to kiss her with. She leaned over and pecked him on the cheek. He seemed startled but did nothing.

"I'll see you next week," she said, slowly closing the door behind her.

Mr. and Mrs. Szul, Ania's parents, knew that she was seeing Mr. Hopkins. Her mother seemed suspicious, but her father kept quiet. To Ania's amazement, they suggested that Mr. Hopkins come to their apartment for dinner.

That evening, Mr. Hopkins sat at the head of the table in silence. Ania's father sat at the other end. Her parents did not speak English and rarely had guests. In the kitchen, Ania's mother stood at the stove with a dish towel over her shoulder as she stirred a large stew pot. Ania wished that her mother looked more like Irena Mielczarek. Irena had her hair done every Saturday and even at the deli wore colorful dresses and makeup. But Ania's mother wore her salt-and-pepper hair

pulled back in a severe bun and no makeup, a wool skirt down to her ankles with wool socks and black shoes.

Ania looked in at her father and Mr. Hopkins at the table. It was titillating to see her parents having to make an effort, as if she were suddenly an adult they had to reckon with.

"This man," her mother said quietly in Polish. "You like him?"

"Yes, I do," Ania retorted, almost defiantly. It was just like her mother to judge everything she did. She was not perfect and beautiful like Ewa. Her mother clearly favored her sister and always had, as though she couldn't believe that someone so beautiful had come from her own body.

Her mother clearly favored her sister and always had, as though she couldn't believe that someone so beautiful had come from her own body.

"What about Ewa and Piotr?" Ania's mother pulled a steaming pot from the oven and placed it on a burner. She had it stuck in her head that Ewa would get married first; she was stubborn, and Ania's relationship with Mr. Hopkins was tearing apart her sense of order.

"Piotr is in Poland," said Ania, rolling her eyes.

"Yes, but he will get a visa, soon," she said, pointing at Ania. "He will get a visa and they will get married." Ania did not want to hear any more about the Polish prince. Her mother had a way of making her feel like she did not have a place in their family.

Ania returned to the dining room, where the two men sat in silence. Mr. Szul pulled out two tiny crystal glasses with snowflake impressions. "Vodka," he said and pointed to Mr. Hopkins, pantomiming drinking from a glass.

"Oh no. No thank you. No vodka for me," he said. "Tell him I don't drink." But before Ania could translate, Mr. Szul placed the vodka in front of him. Mr. Hopkins did not touch the glass or even pretend to drink it. Ania knew her father longed for a son or another man in the house that he could talk to, drink with. The untouched glass on the lace tablecloth made Ania sad for her father.

Ewa came in from school, stripping off her backpack and

coat. She wore a pink skirt that came far above her knees, even though the weather outside was frigid.

"Hello, Mr. Hopkins," she said, shaking his hand. Ania remembered how her sister had received an A in his chemistry class, a class Ania had had no business taking and had barely passed.

"Taking classes I see?" said Mr. Hopkins.

"Yes, Mr. Hopkins." Ewa smiled. "Truman College, but I plan on transferring to university after next year," she said. Ania felt oddly thrilled that Mr. Hopkins did not move his eyes from Ewa's face to notice her tan legs.

"Community college. Great place to start," he said. Ania wondered if he thought her sister was smarter than she. But he had chosen Ania. He had come to the deli for her, not for Ewa.

At the end of the night, Ania walked Mr. Hopkins to the front of the building. He seemed distant from her, but perhaps he was exhausted from the stress of the evening.

"When am I going to meet your parents?" she blurted out.

"My parents. Well, I'll have to make that arrangement one of these days," he said, as if he were going to hire actors to play his parents for the evening. He still seemed so mysterious to her.

The next day at the deli, as she cut krakowska at the meat slicer, Ania wondered what would become of their relationship.

Irena grabbed a napkin and coughed into it.

"It's tooth again," she said, placing a hand over her chest. "I wish it come out already." Janek pointed to Irena's fancy cigarette case on the table, using the three remaining fingers on his left hand. "I tell you. It's cigarettes. She don't listen," he called out as he walked toward the backdoor.

Irena waved him off with her free hand. "It's tooth," she scoffed. But Ania did not believe her either, even when Irena dramatically described her lodged tooth as a silent pain deep inside of her.

After her coughing fit, Irena stood at the window and watched people walk past the store. She was still beautiful, thought Ania, after all she had been through. She was tall with high cheekbones and startling blue eyes. Some of the Polish people referred to her as a *zepsuta,* or a broken woman, because she'd had a child out of wedlock long before she'd met Janek.

"In Krakow, I used to be live mannequin for department store," she said, still looking out the window. She kept a stiff robot pose as if she could not move her bent arms, then turned slowly into the next pose. Ania clapped with delight.

"You flatter," she said, grabbing a cigarette from the case.

"Why did you stop?" asked Ania.

"Work camp," she said. "Five years of my life taken." Ania wondered if the work camp had broken Irena down enough to marry someone like Janek, who had a large protruding belly covered by a thin T-shirt full of grease and bloodstains. Given his temper, he could fly off the handle at any moment.

"Does Janek make you happy?" asked Ania. She knew the question was forward, but she could ask Irena anything. They would spend hours in the kitchen talking on all subjects, from cockroaches to men.

Irena looked straight ahead. "He's warm man in my bed." She lit her cigarette and exhaled. "That's all. It's simple." She laughed.

"But do you like him? I mean his face? His body?" asked Ania, readjusting the slicer. Irena looked deep in thought, as if it were a philosophical question. Her pause surprised Ania. No, Janek wasn't an attractive man, but Ania did not think it would take his own wife so long to answer the question.

"Sure," Irena paused. "Yes," she said tentatively. "He's warm man," she said and laughed. "For me, it's okay." She winked at Ania, taking another drag from her cigarette.

Mr. Hopkins picked up Ania from the deli on the following Friday.

"I have a surprise," he said.

"Are we going downtown?" asked Ania.

"No, but would you like to meet my parents?" An instant wave of panic rushed over her.

"Of course," she said, but wondered if it was too late to change plans.

They drove through streets lined with brick bungalows. He lived on the North Side of the city with his parents. He held her hand for the first time as he walked her to the front door. His hand felt warm and large wrapped around hers. She felt like a gift he was showing off. She imagined them dancing up the steps to the front door.

They were met by his mother and father, Dorothy and Frank, who appeared to be waiting for them. "Come in, come in," said Dorothy, who wore a slightly lopsided reddish wig. She looked Ania up and down with a large smile, and then grabbed Ania's hand, leading her to the couch.

"Sit. Make yourself comfortable," she said, dabbing out her cigarette in a wide, rectangular ashtray. "You want a beer? A glass of wine?" Ania had never been offered alcohol before.

"I'll have a glass of wine," she said. Ania scanned the walls as Dorothy pulled glasses from a cabinet.

Frank didn't say much. He stood at the opening between the kitchen and the living room, wearing a mailman's uniform. He did not even introduce himself. Perhaps he was suspicious of her. She looked young, and he may have known that she was one of Mr. Hopkins's students.

"Don't mind him," said Dorothy. "He's just a fusspot over all the coloreds they hired at the post office." She seemed rougher than Ania had imagined. Her voice was deep and raspy, perhaps from smoking for so long.

"Here you go, sweetheart," she said, handing Ania a juice glass of pink wine. "Gene has told me all about you." Ania felt nervous and took a large sip from her glass. It was sweet and hot at the same time. She wondered if Mr. Hopkins had been telling his parents about her, or if Dorothy was just trying to be nice.

Gene sat on the couch with his arms folded over his lap. He let his mother do all the talking. "Gene tells me you work at a bakery. Do you bake cakes, sweetie?"

"I mostly work the deli. I'm more of a helper." Ania wondered if she sounded like some kind of servant. "I'm still planning on going to nursing school, though, eventually." She took another gulp of wine.

"Yeah, Gene was tellin' us," said Dorothy. They seemed to know everything about her. "You want to see Genie's awards?" she asked. Ania had not thought of Mr. Hopkins as a Genie. It sounded like the name of a child.

"Ah, stop. She don't want to see no awards," said Frank, placing a cigarette above his ear like a pen.

"Ah, you," said Dorothy. "Keep your trap shut." She led Ania over to a mantel above a fake fireplace. Her hand was cold and frail like a bird's claw. She picked up a framed certifi-

cate. “Genie won this at the science fair,” she said. “What were you in, seventh grade, Genie?”

Mr. Hopkins nodded. “Seventh grade,” he said. “Don’t forget the picture behind it, Ma.” Ania was surprised that he did not seem embarrassed.

“Oh, and this you’ve got to see,” whispered Dorothy. It was a photograph of a young Mr. Hopkins wearing goggles and working in a laboratory. Young Mr. Hopkins was carefully pouring a small tube of liquid into a larger one. There were chemicals in glass beakers, a Bunsen burner, and other instruments that Ania could not identify. It reminded Ania of one afternoon in Mr. Hopkins’s classroom in which he explained the concept of a centrifuge. She remembered studying his face, trying to listen. But she could not understand whether a centrifuge separated substances of different properties or dissolved them into one another, so she decided that it must do a little of both.

“Gene was going to be a scientist,” said Dorothy. “That’s our Genie.” She wiped the dust off the glass over the picture. She seemed so proud of her son, who, in the picture, was wearing pants that seemed much too short for him.

Ania looked over at Gene. He was glowing, taking in all the praise his mother was willing to dispense upon him.

After the introductions, Mr. Hopkins led Ania down the basement stairs. The basement wasn’t entirely finished, but some walls had paneling. At one end there was what appeared to be a bedroom and, at the other end, a laundry area with a utility sink. In the bedroom area there was a single bed, an entire wall of record albums, and a phonograph. On the floor was an elaborate Lionel train set with Christmas trees and a little conductor.

Ania sat on a folding chair. The basement was clean and organized. The blanket and sheet on top of the bed were perfectly tucked underneath the mattress.

“My mother can be, well, shall we say, eccentric at times,” he said. “She means well.”

“I like your mother,” said Ania. She finished her glass of wine and placed it on the cement floor next to her chair. She could feel her face flush as she spoke. A wave of warm looseness rippled inside of her.

“I’m going to play you something,” he said, sliding a record

from its sleeve. He sat next to her on the cold floor. He put on "Pomp and Circumstance." It was the song that she'd heard at her graduation.

She sat next to him, listening, saying nothing. She remembered the melody of the song, the horns and strings. She thought about all she had gone through in high school, feeling so out of place for so long. She thought about the frustration she'd felt in learning English. How she had trouble stringing simple words together as her sister had told her to do. How one day she found herself surrounded by American friends, wearing their clothes, using their expressions, drinking soda from a straw. She thought about the first time she tried a hamburger and how the meat and bread tasted so sweet in her mouth that it made her gag, but she pretended to like it because it seemed like she had to. She remembered dancing in a friend's living room to a forty-five with a boy who tried to shove his tongue in her mouth and how he called her a Pollack when she pushed him away. It was strange how the very word made her feel. In her country it was a word of pride, the name of her countrymen, but in this country it was an insult.

It was strange how the very word made her feel. In her country it was a word of pride, the name of her countrymen, but in this country it was an insult.

She could feel a tear on her cheek as Mr. Hopkins grabbed her hand and pressed it tightly.

"Did the song move you?" he asked.

"Yes, it did," she whispered. She wanted him to believe that she loved music as much as he did. He took a small spray bottle with the word "mint" written in black marker from his pocket and squirted it into his mouth. He swished the liquid lightly in his cheeks and swallowed it. He moved shakily toward her with his lips puckered. He placed his hand at the back of her head, like he had been practicing on a doll. His mouth tasted powerfully like mint and his tongue was slow like a reptile. She wanted to make herself excited. She tried to think of her fantasy version of him. She imagined him at the board in his lab coat, at his desk, through the small sliver of window in the teachers' lounge.

He held her hand. She looked about the room, trying not to think of the spray bottle. There was an easel or a camera on a tripod next to her, some structure with a clean white sheet over it.

"What is this, Mr. Hopkins?" she asked.

"Telescope," he said. "For stargazing." He looked at the floor and back at her. "Listen, Ania. I'd really like you to begin calling me Gene. It may take some getting used to, but I think it would be more acceptable for everyone."

"Gene," she heard herself say. She wanted to laugh. Ania and Gene, she thought, as if she were all grown up.

"I have to ask you something," he said. The tone of his voice filled her with worry. "I'd like you to get a physical exam," he said.

"Why?" she asked. Did he think she had a disease? She was a virgin; why would she need a physical exam?

"I'll get one too. I think we should both get one. I'll make the appointments," he said. "It's just that if we're going to get married, I'd like to be sure." *Married*. It was a word she did not expect to come from his mouth. Not yet anyway. She had just called him Gene for the first time. But marriage to Gene Hopkins was a fantasy she had carried around with her. It was a dream that many of her classmates had had. But now the girls from school seemed so far away, and she could no longer hear their voices in her head.

The next day, Ania arrived at Mielczarek's in the dark hours of the morning to help Irena make paczkis. The kitchen was hot from the ovens and hazy from Irena having dropped a large bag of flour on the floor. Irena swept up the flour in piles and dumped them in a metal trashcan.

"Where's Janek?" Ania asked.

"Who knows? He come home, three, four in the morning. My God." She shook her head with disgust. "He don't care about bakery." She bent down to pull out an industrial-sized cooking sheet from a low shelf and began a heavy fit of coughing.

Ania opened a jar of concentrated plum jelly and scooped it into a bowl. She watched as Irena continued to cough with one hand against the wall and one hand over her mouth.

"It's tooth," she said between fits. Ania said nothing as she

thinned the jelly with water. But Irena's coughing became quieter and more labored as she squatted on the floor. Her face turned purple and ripples of veins showed in her temples. Ania ran to the faucet and poured her a glass of water.

"Irena, drink," she said, as she rubbed her back. Irena let out one last heavy cough. She moved her mouth in a chewing motion and spit into her fingers. She opened her hand.

"It's tooth!" she screamed, almost in tears. In her palm, she held a bloody molar. She rinsed it at the sink and put it on a white plate.

"I tell you," she said. "It's tooth." The two women sat on stools and looked at Irena's tooth, a tooth that had been lodged in her throat for years. A tooth that no one believed existed. A tooth that made everyone question her sanity. But it was real. The root had cracked from it, yet its four cauliflower bumps were still intact.

Ania picked up the tooth and looked closely at its surface. It was tan with tea stains and pocked with tiny black holes like the surface of a strange planet. She looked into the tooth, as if she could see her own future. She thought about her daydreams in Mr. Hopkins's classroom, of all the girls vying for his love, of how he had chosen her. She thought about her mother baking cakes for Ewa's wedding and how Ania would wither like a dying flower on that day. She thought about her time in the deli and marrying a Janek, his stained white T-shirts and odor of smoked meats. And somehow, she knew she had chosen Gene, as if the current of the universe had pushed them together in a kind of centrifuge.

JONATHAN PENNER

BELIZE

Sweet Ones," Matthew said, which I've asked him not to call me, "let's snatch Mrs. Jimson's dog. We'll hold it for ransom."

His head was tilted way back and I was kissing him under the chin, a place you rarely get to. It's a boring spot. Down where his collarbones almost meet, in the cup below his Adam's apple, the skin is saltier. Around the corner of his jaw it's stubbly, like licking thumbtacks.

"No," I said, and punched him. "Mrs. Jimson is my god." I shouldn't even have told him about her. But Matthew has this blue-eyed innocent look, and I always forget what an ass he can be. I'd told him Mrs. Jimson was the coolest person I knew, and now he was jealous.

I knew her from waitressing at Geezer Gardens, as Matthew calls it—the old age home, that fat building up the road from McDonald's. Most of the women there are pathetic. "Miranda, this prune juice tastes like sewage!" "Miranda, this salad has only four croutons!" "Miranda, can't you stop twitching?" The men don't talk much, mostly they look. And I think these guys are somewhere else. They're with a girl on the beach, some warm night sixty-two years ago, or maybe in the back seat, parked by the road in a snowstorm.

Mrs. Jimson is a lady of class. She doesn't sneak extra desserts up to her room, like most of them do—crumbling pound cake wrapped in napkins and stuffed into handbags. She doesn't cackle about who lost their license after driving up on the sidewalk, or whose grandson is an addict. She is a lady of class and culture, which sometime before the end of my life I would like to be.

So one night when she asked me to come to her room after my shift was done, I did.

Boston terriers are a hyperactive little breed, sort of like me. Maybe that's why Mrs. Jimson liked me, because I was another

undersized creature that's really affectionate but can't hold still. Willis jumped at me, leading with his tongue, until Mrs. Jimson shooed him into the kitchenette and latched an accordion gate across the doorway.

"Miranda, I've been watching you," she said. Mrs. Jimson has a foreign accent, which makes her sound super smart. I've tried, but I can't imitate it. "You work much harder than the other girls. Those enormous trays! You handle them so gracefully. You're always polite. You're always cheerful. I think I'll call you Sunshine, if I may."

"Sure," I said. "My boyfriend calls me Little Angel."

"He sounds sweet."

"I made that up."

"My dear, the things you say are sometimes so"—she stopped and patted her white head until she knocked the word loose—"unpremeditated. You seem young to be working here. You're living with your parents?"

"Of course." If I said I was staying with Matthew, she wouldn't like me anymore. And if I told her my parents had kicked me out, she'd think it must be my fault, when all I'd done was quit school. My mother said never to darken her doorway, and my father said that henceforth our relationship was purely genetic.

Mrs. Jimson's apartment looked like it came out of a movie. You could tell whoever lived there must be abnormally interesting, meaning the person would probably die before the movie ended. Her pictures were strange but beautiful. People sitting in chariots pulled by horses with wings, with a guy standing up in the back waving a thing like a squirrel tail. One that showed a naked woman washing her hair in a waterfall, and watching her from behind a tree was a man with a blue face, wearing a turban.

Mrs. Jimson smiled and said, "Feel free to look. I've been collecting my entire life. My husband and I traveled to many countries. He was my second husband."

"How many did you have?"

"Just two."

"What did they die of?" But she didn't hear me, because Willis had started barking. He ran to the back door and smashed through a swinging gate at the bottom. I could see him outside

on a blanket-sized lawn, raising his leg against a low picket fence. And when I remembered my question later, I saw it was way too unpremeditated. Mrs. Jimson had gotten up and was making tea, which I can barely swallow. But I knew I'd have to swallow some if I wanted her to talk more.

When I got home, Matthew shouldn't have been there. "Honey, you rat!" I said. "You got fired, right?"

"It was for the best."

"What'd you do this time?"

"Sweet Ones, you always assume—"

I kicked him.

"Ow! It was sorting pebbles. If you had a pebble pathway, would you want them all the same size? That's what it was about, okay?"

He'd been working for a landscaper, barely a week, and I'd known it wouldn't last. Matthew has his own way of doing everything. He'll never hold a real job. He's like an artist, except for the talent aspect.

At least rent wouldn't be a problem. We were staying for free in his cousin's boyfriend's uncle's basement. All around our mattress were moldy boxes, a rusted lawnmower, a bike with flat tires, and dust so thick it held our fingerprints. We were allowed upstairs for the bathroom. "Fine," I said. "Just don't expect me to buy your bananas." We were living mainly on crackers and bananas and warm soda. There wasn't any fridge.

"Sweet Ones, you're too pretty. Let's lie down awhile."

Which we did, as usual. Matthew has hard muscles, hot smooth skin, plenty of energy, and lots of surprising ideas. His lovemaking is definitely unpremeditated. This time I wasn't paying attention, but he doesn't need that. When we were done, he climbed the stairs to the bathroom and I heard him step on the rattly old scale, like he always does, to see if he lost any weight during sex. Then he lay down next to me and stroked my hair and said some very loving things about my face and body and voice and mind and soul and heart. He must have believed it, but I knew he was already forgetting it while he talked, and the next time we made love I would be a new and amazing discovery.

Later we shared a Dr Pepper and I told him about Mrs. Jim-

son. "She was born in Great Slavia," I said, "under artillery fire." I told how her grandfather smuggled her out in a sack of onions, and how she was raised by nuns, and later performed on the cello, and married a German ball-bearing manufacturer. He somehow or other died and left her with what she called "ample resources."

Matthew wasn't interested until I mentioned Willis, and how he went out the doggy door to pee. He said we should snatch the little guy, and I socked him hard. He rubbed his arm and said, "Think about it. I'll go pick up some job applications." So I turned over and closed my eyes. The last thing I heard was the whoosh of a boy stepping into his jeans, one leg and then the other.

"In my youth," said Mrs. Jimson, "I spoke four languages, and when I became an American I wanted to study comparative literature. Mr. Jimson drove me to my interview. I'd met him only a few days before, but the attraction was terrifically strong."

"I know what you mean," I said. "I'm in a similar relationship."

"The dean was a man named Harold F. N. Box. While I was talking he gave short nods, like a pianist telling his assistant to turn the page. Then suddenly he had a coughing fit. He left the room, his coughs got fainter in the distance, and Sunshine, he never returned! Finally I went out to Mr. Jimson, who was waiting in the car, and instead of studying comparative literature I returned to my cello." Then she coughed, and I coughed. "The same will happen to you, Sunshine. Many of your major decisions are made behind your back."

I fall in love too quickly. I know that, and I try to be careful. But it seemed safe to fall in love with Mrs. Jimson.

She told me more about Mr. Jimson, how he played the piano wonderfully, and accompanied her on cello sonatas by Beethoven and Bartok. With the money she'd inherited from Number One, Mr. Jimson took her to art museums and opera

houses the world over. The memories, the memories were ineradicable. I smiled to show I was following, but mostly I was just listening to her voice and watching her face. She must have been beautiful at my age, with a wide mouth and long straight nose and dark eyes. Now her skin was pouchy. Her cheeks and forehead were creased into tiny diamonds, like someone had pressed a window screen onto her face. But she wasn't fat or scrawny or hunched, like the other people at Silver Mountain. I loved her voice, I loved her face.

I fall in love too quickly. I know that, and I try to be careful. But it seemed safe to fall in love with Mrs. Jimson. The feeling I was getting with her, stupid and dizzy and happy, was like what I felt with Matthew. I wished we could go, just her and me, to art museums the world over. She'd explain the paintings in ways I'd understand, and when she got tired I'd sling her bag over my shoulder. I could see it so clearly—the clothes we were wearing, the way she held my arm—it was like I was remembering it, and the memory was already ineradicable.

"Paris, Tokyo, Istanbul," I told Matthew, "London, Bangkok, Rome. She told me so many stories. I'd die to see those places."

"Me too," he said. "I'm working on it."

"She showed me pictures. Did you ever hear of Michelangelo?"

"Everyone's heard of Michelangelo."

"Bernini? He made statues."

"I know all about Bernini."

"You do not."

"Fantastic sculptor. Bernini was a stud."

Matthew's the world's best liar, quick and fearless. I shouldn't be proud of that, but I am. I don't think he's exactly dishonest. For him, the truth is just too simple. "Belize," he said. "Has she been to Belize? I bet no."

He's always had Belize on the brain. He lived there with his family when he was two or three. They were missionaries, which is hard to believe, seeing how Matthew turned out.

"It's the coolest place in the world," he said. "Sweet Ones, we should go there."

I was sorry for him. Belize was pathetic, compared to all the places Mrs. Jimson had been. It was all he had to offer me. He was looking me in the eyes, and I said, "Honey, someday we will."

"We'll live on the beach, okay?"

"We will."

"We'll camp under the coconut palms. We'll get snorkels and swim through underwater caves. We'll be naked all the time." His eyes were shining, his hands were dancing, and I felt like my skin was too tight. In about half a minute we'd be on the mattress. "And Sweet Ones, it would be so cheap. We could do it for a dog's ransom. Mrs. Jimson would *want* you to see Belize."

The next night, serving dessert, I lost control of my tray. Fruit salad and ice cream went sliding and smashed on the floor. For a second I stood there, holding the empty tray in front of me like a shield. Then I was down on my knees, using my apron to dam the slop so it wouldn't reach the old people's shoes.

Later, in Mrs. Jimson's apartment, she asked if I was nervous about something. I said no. She said, "I think you are. I'm going to make you some herbal tea right now. I don't want dark clouds around my Sunshine."

She went to the kitchenette, and I sat there, sweaty, my foot bouncing like crazy. I'm not a good person, I know that. The real truth is, I've stolen a lot. Tons of store candy. Books from kids' lockers. I stole my best friend's doll. I've stolen from people I loved: Coins from my mom's change purse. Bills from my dad's wallet, while he was in the shower. I figured Mrs. Jimson wouldn't care about money, she was rich. Besides, we wouldn't hurt Willis. She was going to get him back.

She came in with a tray. There was a teapot shaped like a camel, and the tea poured out its nose. There were cups and saucers, white with golden flowers. A plate of chocolate-dipped biscuits. Mrs. Jimson served me, like I served her every night. That felt wrong, but I saw she was enjoying it.

When we were sitting with our teacups and our biscuits, just like a couple of ladies, she wanted to talk about my education. She had sky-high hopes for me, she said. I would be very well advised to take the high school equivalency exam, and she wanted to help prepare me for it. "Dear, are you listening?"

I was trying to, but Willis had just gone out. I was scared to move or say a word. Then he barked, and as Mrs. Jimson was trying to get up, the barking changed to a horrible squeal. She got to the door as fast as she could but not as fast as me.

It was just getting dark. There was Matthew, running away

with Willis in his arms. Like an idiot, I screamed his name. Then I climbed the fence and chased him down Silver Mountain's long driveway. Willis wiggled loose and fell, bounced back on his feet, and Matthew sprinted after him to the driveway's end. At the street, Willis ran straight into traffic and Matthew didn't stop either. He danced and dodged around cars and dove through their headlight beams and grabbed Willis up in his arms. He stood there, stroking Willis's head, until the traffic stopped in both directions. The screeching of brakes was finished, but they were still blowing their horns.

Then I walked between the panting cars and hugged Matthew because he was still alive, and I was alive, and the time in front of us was endless. He said, "This wasn't a great plan, was it? Sweet Ones, I'm sorry."

I looked behind me. Mrs. Jimson had unlocked the gate in her fence and was walking toward us down the driveway as fast as she could, reaching out with both hands. I told him, "If you have to go to prison, I'll wait for you."

Matthew? He kissed me and laughed. When Mrs. Jimson reached us she was out of breath, and I held her—I was afraid she'd topple over. I watched her eyes, and I could almost hear her old brain clicking as she figured it out. Matthew said, "Ma'am? Is this dog yours?" And he gave her his biggest blue-eyed smile.

Now Matthew works in the kitchen at Silver Mountain. Mrs. Jimson recommended him. He told her he was coming to pick me up from my shift and happened to see a Boston terrier wiggling under a fence! He was just barely able to save it from getting run over. It was his greatest lie ever. Either Mrs. Jimson believed him or she's an even better person than I thought.

I told her that Matthew and I were living together in someone's basement. I don't know why—I just wanted her to know who I really am. She said she'd already guessed that we had an "arrangement" and made me call my parents right away. But when my father answered, I couldn't say a word, so she took the phone. I heard her talking about their spirited, intrepid daughter, and then invite them to be her guests for dinner at Silver Mountain.

I didn't think they'd show up, but they did. When I came out to take their orders, and called them ma'am and sir, my mother

pulled me onto her lap and I cried like a little baby. I saw wrinkles on her neck, and white hair in my father's eyebrows. Finally I stopped crying and brought Matthew out to meet them, in his checkered pants and white jacket and hairnet. That morning I'd made him brush his teeth and shave under his jaw. He told them he was working to save money for college, which was bull, and I could see they were impressed, but Matthew never knows when to stop. He said that after college he planned to become a lawyer, then go into politics. They began looking at him suspiciously, and I led him back to the kitchen.

The tomb had a tunnel, just an inch wide, so the king's soul could travel between the world of the dead and our world.

Mrs. Jimson told us both to come to her apartment, and we talked to her about Belize. Of course, it turned out she'd been there, too. If we ever did go, she said, we needed to visit Altun Ha, where a Mayan king lay inside a pyramid. When we got there, we should look very carefully. The tomb had a tunnel, just an inch wide, so the king's soul could travel between the world of the dead and our world. And after she told us that, her face sank in a way I'd never seen, maybe because Silver Mountain didn't have those little tunnels.

That thought made me so sad I really had to talk to Matthew, when we got home and were lying on our mattress. I told him we had to change. We needed new jobs—I couldn't look at those old, dying faces. We needed to save money and get a better place to live. Matthew nodded and rolled closer. He slid his hand under my shirt, across my stomach, and his mouth was next to my ear. We will, he said. We'll change, we will, we'll get our passports, we'll camp on the beach, we will, Miranda. And because he'd never called me that, I knew the change had already begun. We made love all night, I wouldn't let him stop, I just wanted to feel him, and hear him keep saying my real name, Miranda.

EMILY SINCLAIR

THEN, WE KNEW EVERYTHING

One of us saw her in a magazine.

It was on a weekend in the luxurious mountain town of Crystal that one of us idly opened the copy of *Crystal Life!* the hotel had generously supplied. There, among the society photos of standard-issue-blonde, weather-worn women in expensive dresses, was Lydia Collins. She was holding a glass of champagne and standing between an older, silver-haired man and the artistic director for the Crystal Ballet. Her name was given as Sybille Moreau, and she was listed as a dancer.

Our cell phones began buzzing. *What Lydia C. said is True! She's French, too. Text me back!*

When we knew her some years ago, Lydia Collins was wife to Walt, mother to Elsa, Henry, and Bronson. She was delicate and olive-skinned, with slender arms and legs and round, full breasts. Lydia had pushed the children to preschool in an old-style British pram. The children wore coats with big buttons and shoes that closed with real buckles, instead of Velcro. She spoke in a breathy Continental accent, like Audrey Hepburn. She lived her life alongside ours, but more gracefully than we did, and now, as we slid into the middle of our lives, trenchantly ourselves, Lydia had become, at forty, Sybille, the French dancer. What, we wondered, did it mean for us—the other mothers, who'd thickened in the middle and learned disappointment, the *lumpenmutter,* we called ourselves—that the goddess among us had gone away and begun again?

The story of Lydia's defection is the story of those of us who stayed.

The children are two. Neurally speaking, they stand at a developmental precipice: Little dendritic connections are forming all over their brains, and all the pathways that don't get used will die off very soon. It is our job, as mothers, to ensure the frantic and wide-ranging development of their brains so that connec-

tions are retained. We hug them, we sing to them, and we are in a church, waiting for a music class developed by child experts.

On the worn carpet of the church meeting room, Lydia sits, her wavy hair flung over a shoulder, her legs, encased in tall black boots, stretched out in front of her. We eye her. Lydia absentmindedly rocks a baby in a car seat, and a small, still girl sits next to her. When we go around the circle, introducing ourselves, Lydia says, "This is my daughter, Elsa, and my son, who will either be called Hunter or Bramble." We nod.

"Welcome, Lydia! Welcome, Elsa!" we say. Hunter and Bramble are stupid names and how could you not have named your baby already?—but we try not to judge. We tap our finger cymbals and try to find the beat while keeping the egg shakers out of our toddlers' mouths. The toddlers rock from side to side on sturdy legs as we hold our infants, with their wide, wet eyes, in our arms. Lydia is a beautiful woman with beautiful, chocolate-eyed children. We will absorb her into us. We sing happy songs and watch through the window as autumn leaves release themselves from the trees. Our bodies have run marathons, given birth, fed our young. Our lives are rich and tender and the intensity of feeling nearly unbearable.

At the end of class, we ask Lydia if she liked it.

"I miss New York," she says, shrugging.

"Oh, well," we say, somewhat at a loss for words. "Denver's not New York. But Denver's a really nice place to raise children."

We gather at the white wooden fence of the little Montessori school on Snyder Street, waiting for our children to come out of their morning toddler class. We wear jeans and ponytails, and we carry paper cups of expensive coffees. We have parked our minivans and station wagons and SUVs at the curb, some with sleeping younger siblings in car seats. We have groceries in the backs of our cars. Some of us have on clothes from the gym or yoga studio. We were lawyers, doctors, teachers, and editors before we had children. We have married men who are successful. We buy organic. We breastfed and read about infant intelligence. Some of us had fertility treatments. We are hasty, cobbled together in our appearances. We leave our troubles at home. We are here to pick up our children, and soon the door

swings wide and they emerge, small and wobbly, wearing tiny backpacks stuffed with art projects and half-eaten snacks. They step carefully down the stairs, like little drunks, people in awe of the world and blind to it, too, and then some of them run to us and some amble and some stop to examine a fallen leaf or stray ribbon in the yard. When the children come to us, we are filled with some great liquid feeling that engulfs and threatens to drown us. In its currents are the deepest of attachments and the greatest of sorrows.

Our worlds grow small. The things in the newspaper and on TV—they're like things happening to other people. And in fact they are happening to other people.

Lydia is at the gate, too. She's cut her hair and looks like a young mother from a 1960s magazine with her slim button-down shirt and neat Capri pants. She pushes a big navy pram with great white wheels, and the baby, now named Henry, sits up and looks at us.

"Henry is an adorable, peach-skinned baby," we say. With the heel of her hand, she brushes something invisible off her forehead.

"Oh, thank you," she says. "It's exhausting, isn't it, having two? I can barely keep the weight on."

We glance at her flat belly and then away. We don't like Lydia very much.

Most of us have two children. Our husbands wanted only one, or twins, just to get it all over with at once, as if we were taking on an engineering project and looking for cost containment.

Two kids in, we are exhausted. The thyroid things and the uninvolved husband things and the early childhood neuro-development things are a lot of work. Kids cry a lot, and simple things—things you take for granted, like the ability to use the toilet or a fork—take on great significance because little kids don't use toilets or forks with ease. Kids want you around all the time, and then sometimes they punch you and throw stuff at you. We understand that kind of anger, we really do, but twenty times a day, it gets old. Our worlds grow small. The things in the newspaper and on TV—they're like things happening to

other people. And in fact they are happening to other people. You, you're underneath the backseat of the minivan, trying to find the toy that came with the meal.

Unless you are Lydia. Days after she delivers her third child, a girl, she stands outside the school gate with her pram, a giant Russian fur hat mounted on her head.

"My water broke at the opera," she says, "and from there, everything happened quickly." Sleeping peacefully in the pram is Henry, now a toddler. The newborn is curled like a leaf in the baby sling. Three children, eighteen months apart. Lydia, pearl earrings glinting against her skin, presses a hand to her full breasts and says, "Oh, I need to get home."

The opera, indeed.

When we meet at Starbucks, someone says, "*My* water broke at Target. All I could think of was that I wanted to get out of there before they made the announcement—*Wet cleanup on aisle six!*—and how completely grossed out the janitor would be if he knew."

"It's not piss," someone says.

"But it *feels* like piss," someone replies. "It's as close to piss as you can get without it being piss."

"Is anyone friends with her?" someone else asks.

A friend of a friend knew her at Princeton. We accept this information glumly. Of course she'd gone to Princeton. Her name was Lydia Lewandowsky then. The truth is, Lydia makes us feel inadequate. We are tired, uncertain of how we are doing, and on top of it, our pants are tight, and we make the same crappy meals night after night after night. Tacos, mac and cheese, meatballs. And day after day, there is Lydia at the school gate, in pearls and pressed clothes, with her silent, beautiful children and her pram, with its white wheels and satin blankets, an effortless affront to the truth of our lives.

Day after day, there is Lydia, in pearls and pressed clothes, with her silent, beautiful children and her pram, with its white wheels and satin blankets, an effortless affront to the truth of our lives.

When summer finally comes and we need to get out of the house, we load up our giant strollers, which feature expensive all-terrain wheels, with diapers and snacks and boxes of juice and hand sanitizer, and we take the kids out in the world. We push them to the park, where we spot them as they climb the ropes and chains on the play structure. We push them in swings. We push them to the ice-cream store and then to the coffee shop for our iced lattes. We push them to construction sites so our boys can watch the action. We stand in the shade of a tree, feeling sweat trickle down between our breasts, our coffees in the stroller cupholders. We ask questions designed to help our children become critical thinkers. *Why do you suppose there are different kinds of equipment? Why do you suppose the concrete truck is always turning?* Out of nowhere, Lydia appears, with her pram.

"Henry loves the big trucks and diggers," she says, shrugging, as if to make it clear that she isn't there for her own entertainment. Lydia wears a straw hat and a long silky dress that dances in the breeze. We are eating the kids' graham crackers.

"How's your summer going?" we ask. We want to know: How do you keep the wheels of the pram so white? How are you *you*? Perhaps now, she'll tell us how to be her, how to wear a great hat and not look ridiculous. How not to eat, out of boredom, all the crackers in the baggie. How to make what we do matter day after day.

"I'm really meant for someplace like Paris," Lydia says. We are lined up on the sidewalk, watching through a chain link fence as men in hard hats build a new retail center. The sidewalks have fractured and buckled, so we wedge stroller wheels against the concrete upthrusts to keep the kids from rolling away.

"Is that where you're from?" we ask. "Paris?"

Some big scooping thing thunders and shakes. Dirt flies from the rising bucket.

"No," she says. "I'm from New Jersey."

"You look less like you're from New Jersey than anyone ever has," one of us says. In the heat, we are all vulnerable, even Lydia. She assures us, wiping sweat from her temples, that it is all true, she is from Weehawken, where her father, before

he died of lung cancer, owned a couple of delivery trucks. We imagine her framed in smokestacks. For a moment, in summer, Lydia has let us in.

"I never expected to end up here," she says. "I thought it was just for a couple of years. But Walt's mother is here and she's alone and she wants her grandchildren here."

A mother-in-law problem! We understand that. We push our strollers in closer and chatter at Lydia:

"When my in-laws come, they have to stay in a hotel. It's the only way it works."

"—and she says, oh, I'll take the kids, and I make appointments, and then she cancels. Then she calls Tom and says I never let her see the kids!"

"His father has invested in the business, so we are hardly in a position to say no, but every year, we have to spend our vacation with them—"

Lydia is quiet. "I was a dancer in college," she says finally. "This is not the life I thought I was going to have. I thought I'd dance and that I'd travel all over the world."

"Did you?" one of us asks, in a hushed tone. While we were in graduate school, or competing for internships, Lydia was pirouetting through Prague, Paris—

"No," she says, frowning. "I taught Pilates. Some yoga. And now"—she looks around at the streets, the hot dog vendor, the emerging strip center—"I'm just here."

We are quiet. That is the thing we don't say. *I'm just here.*

"You give up everything for your children," she says. "Don't you feel it?"

"You get so much back," one of us says. The diggers and scoopers rumble and growl. One of the children begins to twist and fuss in her stroller, trying to escape her safety buckle and harness. The conversation dwindles and dies, a polite acknowledgment of the disagreement that lurks below.

When Lydia leaves, we don't see her again until school starts in the fall. Our hearts go out to her—even with Lydia, things are not as they seem!—until we take them back, later.

Our children are beginning their last year of preschool; we are gearing up for testing, applications, and interviews for elementary school. *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* is being replaced by

New Reader books. We begin to eye each other: What will the testing reveal? Whose children will get in—and whose won't? We have been a support for each other through biting and toilet training, but now we whisper about who has odd or difficult or dull children.

We learn from the preschool teachers to emphasize personal responsibility through choice. "I see Matthew is choosing not to sit quietly," we say. "I see Olivia is choosing to keep her hands in her lap." We are having the children's learning styles assessed and gathering data about what types of schools will be a good match for those styles. It is our job to know these things. At Back-to-School night, someone hears Lydia say that they are applying to the international school. Briefly, we fret: We have not considered multilingualism as a style, only auditory, visual, and kinesthetic.

We begin to build houses. Our husbands have made partner or grown their practices or opened their own businesses, and they want to come home to the kind of homes they've earned. The little cottages we'd bought in the sweet early years of marriage give way to larger manses with driveways and rock fountains, kitchens with two sinks, and dueling home offices. The urgent pressure of minding very small children is dissipating, and now we meet with architects and builders, urging them to hurry up with construction so we can move in right away. We wonder if our husbands are sleeping with women from work. Just in case, we flirt with the broad-shouldered men who lay tile in our new bathrooms.

Someone hears Lydia say to someone who is building a half hour out of town: "I envy you! I really do! I wish I could get away!"

Lydia's husband has a small, home-based business, and they are not building or remodeling.

"I don't want to be here," Lydia says to our friend who is building in the distant suburbs. "I envy you going even ten miles away. I'd give anything to go to New York. Or Paris!"

Paris! As if we could just pick up and leave! We repeat Lydia's comments, amused. The thing is, jobs and schools and friends are *here* in a kind of enveloping cocoon that gives structure and context to our lives, even as it ensnares us. Paris is nice, but the

mall is more convenient. It's a kind of grace note that we have adjusted while Lydia has grown unhappy.

Lydia begins to appear with sudden regularity at the preschool, a manic maternal figure. She interrupts class with watercolor kits or kitchen science activities. She brings Santa hats for her own children to wear during a holiday celebration, even though the school frowns on such commercial costuming. She puts cornichons and pâté in the children's lunchboxes and offers to teach French lessons twice weekly.

We agree, over coffee, that we ought to reach out to her. We are doing Pilates now and anticipating our marble bathrooms and our oldest children being in all-day kindergarten next year. We have largesse of spirit.

So one of us calls her to see if Elsa would like to come over and make ice-cream sundaes.

Lydia's superiority has a whiff of failure about it, a bit of skin under the fingernails as she clings to something that appears to be slipping away.

"What other children will be there?" Lydia asks. "What sort of activities will you be doing?"

Such questions have never been asked of us before. "Ice cream and sprinkles," says our friend, "and Olivia and Harry and Isabelle and Sam."

There is a quiet moment while Lydia considers the offer.

"I don't think so," she says finally.

Hearing this over coffee, we look at each other with raised eyebrows. Lydia's superiority has a whiff of failure about it, a bit of skin under the fingernails as she clings to something that appears to be slipping away.

"Fuck her," one of us says, "if we're not good enough for her kid to play with." We recross our legs and check our cell phones to see who has called. We are busy and can't be bothered with the politics of the playdate.

Yes. Fuck her. Let the Collins kids sit around conjugating French verbs while our kids play in developmentally appropriate ways.

Still: In preparation for our moves into our new houses, we hold yard sales. Lydia comes to the yard sales and examines things with ferocity. She turns over porcelain dishes to identify the provenance. She opens drawers to ensure they don't stick and rubs her fingers over the surface of tables to check for divots. She picks through the old wooden train sets to see if the paint on the engines is chipped. Then, she negotiates: "If I buy three things, will you knock another twenty percent off?"

We shift from one leg to the other, holding fives and ones to make change. We look over her shoulder at the other people who are considering things. Twenty percent is a lot, actually. But it is so difficult to say no to Lydia. Here it is Saturday morning and she is turned out in pearl earrings and a belted dress. Even though she disdains us, we are flattered that she believes our cast-off toys and chipped dishes have value. We even wonder if perhaps we are making a mistake in getting rid of things.

"Sure," we say. "Special price for you today."

We get together a couple times a month and play cards and drink wine. Sometimes, we drink too much and pile into a minivan to visit the all-night tattoo parlor and someone gets her belly pierced or gets a little tattoo on her shoulder. We do this to reassure ourselves that we are more modern and free than our own mothers, who also stayed home with the kids. Once, one of us stays up all night and later confesses to being slightly drunk the next morning when she drives the kids to preschool drop-off.

The thing about us is, our lives are filled not only with our children but with a kind of maintaining. Everything we do—every meal we cook, every child we bathe—disappears. The food is eaten, the children get dirty again. The new clothing becomes too small. Our figures are at war with the leftovers we pick at when the children are finished eating. The children grow bigger and smarter, our husbands make more money, but we stay in place, cleaning what gets dirty, cooking what gets eaten. The children mark our time. They are our accomplishments. We want to move forward but, in truth, all we can do is stay in the same place while the rest of the world keeps going. Still, these days are easier than the old days and we feel ourselves settling in. Paris or New York or the big job—those things are dim

memories now, and we can't imagine life without our husbands and children. Had we ever considered not marrying, or not having children? Of course. But the fantasy always ends with us elderly and alone, in an apartment with cats and uneven heat. So we are here. We say: It's the zeitgeist. We create a new Euroword for ourselves: We are the *lumpenmutter*. In naming, there is power. At least, that's what they said in our women's studies courses in college.

The oldest children go to kindergarten and first grade. We spend less time at preschool and more in the new frontiers of elementary school. Our children have lined notebook paper and cubbies and micro-homework. Our children attend the old-line private school or the funky gifted-kid school or the very good neighborhood public school. Lydia's children go to the international school where we have a teacher friend. She is discreet, our teacher friend, but at a birthday party, she tells us gratifying stories about Lydia and Walt, who argue points of educational principle at conferences while the children sit stony-faced or crying. Too, the teacher says Henry wets his pants all the time. Hearing about the Collinses' struggles, we are both sympathetic and remote, like when we hear about a plane crash in India. Sad, but.

We have troubles of our own. There are diagnoses (a husband with multiple sclerosis) and exposed secrets (the husband's affair) and misfortunes (the IPO that never happened). And the children—after all the breastfeeding and organic and Montessori, some of them are reversing their letters or having "attentional issues." In late afternoons, we stand in the kitchens of our new houses, cooking on our six-burner stoves, still wearing our yoga clothes. We want to spend a little time with our husbands but there is a great chasm of intimacy. We can easily recognize their shirts on the rack at the cleaners but can't read what is behind their eyes anymore. We no longer see ourselves in the wedding photos on the bookshelves and on the piano. We no longer see the men we loved. Sometimes we think we feel an ache, a fiery, burning feeling that's reminiscent of third-trimester heartburn but worse. But this ache won't end in a joyous event like childbirth; instead, it signals that something we once

had has burned away, leaving us emptied out. We live in our houses, surrounded by our husbands and children, but alone. In time, we leave.

Oh, not right away. When you have children and a family and a new house with marble countertops, you can't just pack up and leave. You go through enough therapy to convince yourself, your husband, and your therapist that you're just throwing good money after bad in therapy and your husband moves into the month-by-month apartment tower with a hot tub in the single part of town and you and the kids, well, you cling to that new house and stay put, just like your lawyer says. You grow thin. You decipher his voicemail code and delete the breathy messages from other women. You wonder if there will be money, now that he's spent what had been your savings. You forget about Lydia Collins, her lovely neck, her elegance, her cornichons and pram. You are too busy turning your own life over and over, wondering what happened. But she is out there, somewhere in the city, with her children, and underneath everything, you share a past with her.

She is out there, somewhere in the city, with her children, and underneath everything, you share a past with her.

By the time Lydia has become Sybille, at least two of our children are in elementary school: They are in second and fourth grade, slogging through cursive handwriting and spelling tests, their afternoons spent at soccer and piano lessons. And we are living in the wake of our divorces, casting about for new lives because the old ones have shattered and the pieces have been swept away. Now, we spend every other weekend on the sidelines of the basketball games or at the craft store, buying Styrofoam to build models of something-or-other for school, just like we'd always imagined. On alternate weekends, we spend time with boyfriends and phone the children at their fathers' houses, trying to bridge the gulf of lying in bed with a lover while hearing about a loose tooth. We have gone back to school. We have

new jobs. A few times a year, we have discreet injections to arrest the appearance of our early forties on our faces.

We repeat the line of a European friend of a friend: Americans are the only people in the world who think they're supposed to be happy.

Someone once said that being a mother is the most masochistic thing a woman can choose for herself. If you are in those flush moments of new motherhood, you will shake your head, thinking we are merely bitter, a group that feeds on its own resentment. If you are cruising along in the minivan years, with your practical hairstyle and your car full of sports equipment, if you switch on the light and go back to reading after sex, if you remember to charge the video camera routinely, then you will think us selfish, with grand expectations. But if you ever think, or often think, about the gap between who you are and who you might have been if you hadn't had children, then you, you come sit with us.

One of the last times anyone sees Lydia Collins, before the magazine article, she is riding to the grocery store on a bicycle with a basket and a bell, a beret angled on her head. Now that she and Walt are divorced, she is spending most of her time in Crystal and not much in Denver. Denver is such a dull city, all grays and browns and earnestness. She does some marketing consulting work that pays the bills. The world—here, she throws her arms wide—is beginning anew for her. Everything she's dreamed of since she was a girl is now coming into fruition. She's met a wealthy man and she is studying ballet again.

"I gave everything up for the children and I never meant to," she says. "There was something missing, something so big that it was as though I'd lost an arm or a leg. And now, I'm back." She pauses, arches an eyebrow, thinking about what she's said.

We have Super-Paks of toilet paper and cups of unsweetened applesauce in our grocery baskets. Lydia is still thin, her posture exceedingly straight.

"We are really happy now, too," we say. "Our children are in the gifted program. Things are so good now. So, how do the children like Crystal?"

Oh, no, Lydia reportedly says, they spend most of their time with their father these days. They left the international school and attend the public school now. The thing is, it's awfully hard to dance and to be in the relationship with the older, wealthy man and take care of the children. His children are all grown up now, and he doesn't really want small kids around. So, one weekend a month, she comes to Denver and they ride bicycles and do art projects together.

How nice, says our friend. Art is such an important way for children to express themselves.

One of us unwittingly schedules a date with Lydia's ex-husband through an online dating service. We meet at Starbucks on a Saturday morning to hear the details. When the two recognized each other at the agreed-upon bar, they laughed at the coincidence and had a drink and caught up. Walt had heard about the picture in the magazine. He said that during the final years of the marriage, Lydia took out credit cards in secret and bought all kinds of things that she hid away in a storage unit. We remember the plates and trains from garage sales and the children's beautiful clothes. He said she'd left the kids to him. She is Sybille and she dances the ballet.

Someone pulls up Walt's dating-service profile on her phone. It says he is looking for a woman who is independent and who likes to travel.

"Again?" someone says.

The teacher friend says she ought not to repeat such information, but the Collins children are thin and strange. They don't talk. They don't smile.

We grow quiet. One of us says, "How could you abandon your children like that?" We think about our children and their lives in our absence. If we left, we'd be taking favorite stories and recipes; we'd be rewriting meaning in memories and history; we'd be stealing a part of their selves they can't reconstruct without us. We'd be saying to them, *Something matters more than you*. To be us is to willingly straddle the divide of what-might-have-been and what-will-be.

Through the glass windows of the coffee shop, the gliding cars and busy throngs of people melt into stripes of color that shoot, horizontal and brilliant, across our vision. Some-

where out there is Lydia Collins, dancing, childless, reborn. We are here.

In the beginning, our children were born, their appearance slick and sudden after interminable hours of labor. The abrupt crossing over from self to selfless was overwhelming: In a moment, our round, hard bellies slackened and we were handed these babies, twitching bundles of bone and muscle, open-mouthed and seeking. We clutched them, naked, to our chests in their first moments of life. We whispered to them and promised. Then, we knew everything.

MICHELLE HOOVER

OUR LITTLE BERTHA

The light in the doorway, the long unfinished homecoming, the old men on their haunches and the smell of manure in the wind, the smell of the inside of my hand . . .

Everything is muted in this place—even the beginning.

Iowa: A slow grinding of continents and now the soil is merely the remains of glacial drift, a lucky convergence of minerals and terrain. Still, I wonder how this place came into existence. It rolls as you watch it, like the sea. It goes on forever but it never begins. There is a low feeling to living here, of being pushed to the earth and rubbing your hands in the dirt. You think of weather. You can see far enough off. You predict snow, rain, and wind, but after the heavy threat of winter, the remaining seasons are a steady run of nothing much. Cobwebs lace the ears of corn, grasshoppers stick to your shoes. Just before harvest, the land is a little bit greater, more golden, and the cicadas so loud the heat seems to be rubbing its legs. The cows take a slow lick from a puddle. A flick of an ear, and they lope their way home. This is the place of simple appetites and small wonders. Of never drawing attention to yourself and keeping your hands in your pockets, your eyes sharp on the horizon. It is the place where I was born. Decades ago, it would have been the rest of my life, but it's been years now since I've returned.

There were many things that came up to discourage us, my great-grandmother wrote a year before her death. *But we refused to be very discouraged.*

It is January in Boston, the winter after I turn thirty, and I suppose that's how long it takes to get a good look at things. In the late afternoon, the sun sets with alarming efficiency and already my windows are dark. A snowstorm is set for the night. Even now I can feel its weight. I am locked inside, sitting at the windows with a notebook and pencil in my lap, and the sky up

here from my top-floor apartment is full of wind. Beneath my window, voices of passersby remind me there are better ways to spend a Sunday afternoon, but I am beginning at least.

In my new situation, newly alone, with a job at last at the university to sustain me, my mother has become a nervous woman again and has decided to visit me in Boston. Though she puzzles over dependent women, the sudden and freeing divorce of her youngest has left her afraid of my rootlessness. It is a cold day, my mother tired of walking. We sit in a café with two cups of hot chocolate, and she takes a stack of papers out of her purse. "Look here," she says. "This is your great-grandmother's. You might want to learn something about your family now, don't you think?"

I squint at the pages but do not touch them. There are fifteen in all, poorly typed, with my great-grandmother's name and date of birth—Melva Current, 1880—at the top. *Perhaps my life,* she wrote, *and that of my dear husband has meant little or nothing to anyone except to us and our immediate family.* Turned at the corners, the pages seem weightless, though her account covers more than seventy-one years.

I stop reading. All I have are questions, but my mother has eased herself out of her chair and pulled her cardigan straight. "I think I'll buy one of those praline things," she says, pointing at the display. "Do you want one?" As if she hasn't just handed me an entire life.

I have my great-grandmother's pages for a month before I begin to make sense of them.

In all the years I've been gone, the empty bowl of Iowa has become entirely something else. My mother says I should see it now. All sorts of newcomers, companies sprouting in the fields, a wave of technology in windowless buildings, so it doesn't matter where the companies are headquartered, only that the rent is cut-rate. Salaries bring the workers in, the low cost of living. Neighborhoods spread across farmsteads like a leak. Iowa, with its open air, its agelessness, its clean-hearted politics. "You should see the new Hi-Vee," my mother says. "Shelves to the ceiling, so many you have to crane your neck, and all the walls are windows. It's a sight."

I look out my apartment window and try to picture it. The

East is so overgrown and rich, even the ghosts here know what they want and how best to get it. My brother and sister and I, we have all left—they to the mountains and I to the sea. Like a body on a surgeon's table, the Midwest belongs to us and we to it—a still warm, beloved thing. But we can't stand to stay in the room for very long.

Mercy Medical Center, Des Moines, 1986. My mother took a guest room in the hospital, and my pregnant sister needed a hand getting in and out of her chair. Her husband and my brother waited with us in the canvas seats, both a decade or more my senior, while I was the unlucky age of fourteen. After a week, my father's eyes opened and his cheeks grew wet, but the nurse said it was an effect of the air, nothing else.

It wasn't until my great-grandmother's final year, when she was already seventy, that she decided to record the events of her life: *And now here I am in February 1950,* she wrote, *broken hearted and sick in mind and body, begging God every day to take me to him or heal my afflicted body and show me what to do. I don't want to stay in this world. It is not my home, but for some reason I am left.*

The pages of her account end there, with more dread and longing in every sentence than I have heard altogether from my reticent family in more than three decades. Born and bred a farmwoman, my great-grandmother bore three children, grand-mothered six others, and was a great-grandmother to seventeen. In the few pages I have, she repeated the word *work* eighteen times; *God* twenty-two; *love* eleven; and references to death, accidents, or sickness, twenty-nine. Skimming the pages, a few lines set the theme: *On August 26, 1908 our fourth baby was born with yellow jaundice and she died in September. . . . In November of 1909 Mother Hess passed away. Father Hess passed away in January of 1913. . . . In February of 1910 my father Martin Current passed away. In May of 1913 my dear Mother passed. . . . We worked awful hard, much too hard. . . . In 1920 we worked harder than ever. . . . In May of 1925 I was almost killed when grinding feed. . . . In 1927 my oldest sister Amanda passed away. In 1928 my sister Merinda passed away. . . . 1934 was one of the worst years we had. . . . 1936*

brought us another year almost as bad as 1934. . . . In June of 1939 Frank became seriously ill again, his illness lasting almost a year. . . .

The pages are muddied, a copy of a copy, the original typed out by her daughter—my eccentric great-aunt. When I look at photographs, there is nothing in my great-grandmother's face that hints at such distress. She is tall and sharp as a razor, her finger crooked at whatever child off-scene isn't doing what she expects. My great-grandfather raised their house out of the dirt, the building a testament to industry and care: latticework beneath the eaves, carved porch rails, and a clean white fence. The sun reaches a narrow corner of the porch, but there isn't a hint of dust. In less than a year, the place will have burned to the ground. Alone out front, my great-grandmother stands in the photograph as if by sheer effort against the wind. *Here I am. Here I am,* she seems to be saying. *Where else would I be?* Hers is not a face of questions. Not, at least, until October 1949 with the death of her husband, Frank. *I had always said my husband's name must be Frank,* my great-grandmother wrote of the day she met him, *and since this man's name was Frank, I thought perhaps this is my Frank.*

My great-grandmother stands in the photograph as if by sheer effort against the wind. Here I am. Here I am, *she seems to be saying.* Where else would I be?

Now in reading the pages she left, I can't tell where my great-grandmother made her mistake, the one that set the tenor for so much loss: Was it in marrying a man she loved? Was it in not marrying a man she didn't? Was it that she chose to live her life in the place she was born? Or that she never left?

My father was the eldest of two on the family farm, the only son. He was the sole member of his graduating high school class. When he was in his twenties, his mother died, and there must have been a quickening to his existence, the sense that things could be lost on the turn of a dime. So he went into the business of saving. A PhD in finance. A university professor until the end of his life. A year ago, we sold that farm to a man who'd

been renting it and giving us a share of the crops. The house, we'd torn down years before, an attraction to vandals. We made a fair profit, I guess. No one in my family had lived or worked on the place in more than fifty years.

When I was ten, my father gave me a tape recorder he'd stored in the basement. The slot for the tape was bare, no cover. Five white buttons fatter than piano keys. At family gatherings, I thought it my duty to record what was said and just how much. In the background my aunts and uncles sat on flowered couches with overfull paper plates in their laps. The talk was about food or weather, a story about a cousin who tried to rope a deer the same as he would a cow. "Dan's been afraid of those deer ever since," my uncle laughed. Often on these visits, the great outing was to pile the grandchildren in a station wagon and drive a half hour to watch eighteen-wheelers unload their grain into grain elevators. "Raised up on their noses," or so we used to describe the trucks. In pencil, my mother labeled each recording I made to give its proper context: *September, Mom's, 1983.*

As everything my father bought, the tape recorder was secondhand, old and close to useless, before he carried it to the basement to be saved for a later time. Now when I listen to my father's voice on one of those tapes, he is swearing at the machine. There is a short in the cord he seems to be fixing, and the tape starts and stops as he twists the cord and straightens it, a riff of cursing so broken that even my mother laughs into her hand when she listens. But what is most surprising is the sound of his voice. Lighter, thinner than I remembered, at odds with a world that should make things that work a lifetime but never did. According to my father, most of our household appliances were "lemons" from the moment he tore the clearance tags off.

Some of what I remember of him seems little more than fiction. I can say that my father was a tall man and his height did him few favors. I can say he was gangly and thin, even his fingers. He was *long* in every sense and frighteningly pale. Once, on our only trip to visit his sister in California, he walked out on the beach with his pant legs rolled and stood barefooted in the surf, watching the ships. Hours later when we returned to my aunt's, his feet were aflame, the water having washed away his careful lotions. He went without shoes for days. ("No, he never did," my mother says. "Your father would never be so coarse.") My father's hair was long at the crest. A heavy lock

above his forehead. When he stood in a wind, it would rise from his head like a sail. There he was, with his tie and his pocket full of pens, his belted trousers, a short-sleeved undershirt peering out from his collar and through his clean button-up shirt. When they buried him, the hair was flat on his head like a cap, a shade or two off, his hands were on his stomach, and clear-colored threads held his lips shut.

God's ways are mysterious ways, my great-grandmother wrote. *I keep asking why, and do yet.*

At the end of his life, we found the strips of paper my father kept in his pockets and the drawers of his desk—verses of poetry, lines from novels, songs, advice he'd heard. I'd always considered my father a numbers man. Only the shadowy side of him had an ear for jazz. Still, here he was in this truncated account of favorites—all scribbles and phrases—while at the end of her life, my great-grandmother's words came out all in a rush. It was as if, after her husband's death, she believed she had died herself and no one could hear her anyway, no one except God—and by then she already had a thing or two to say to him. *I am sick,* my great-grandmother wrote, *and I feel myself getting weaker every day. But I must try to go on with my story before I forget.*

A *story,* my great-grandmother called it, though no one in our family had ever told stories in the normal sense. Whatever might be considered fanciful didn't make the cut. At the heart of it, what our storytellers said was always true, and they didn't bother with anything that wasn't.

I do not remember anything that happened before I was five years old, my great-grandmother began. *I was very ill on my fifth birthday, and I remember when I improved Mother would put blankets and pillows in the large chair and place the chair before the fireplace and the fire burning was very beautiful. I remember my Mother next to me while she was quilting or picking wool, or any work that she could sit down to do. When I began to get tired, she or one of my sisters would carry me back to bed. But I cried every time because I had to go back.*

Iowa. Hardly a good consonant in it, but the people I know there are as straight and sure as the horizon, whittled clean, and

they don't tolerate any fancy business. In my great-grandmother's time, bleached sheets on the line were the only thing worth judgment. My mother speaks of salmon as if of an exotic meat. "Bright-eyed," my ex-husband once said of my midwestern friends, himself a Californian. Now in the East, I have difficulty translating my temperament. I don't care much for baseless fits of anger or misery, consider it bad form to react to any word or misdeed without a great deal of thinking. My tongue is plenty sharp and quick when the subject is distant and there are no casualties I can foresee; otherwise, you might as well grab a magazine and take a seat, because it could take me a while to get the story out—even if in pieces—lest I stir up undue fuss or pity.

Distance in Iowa isn't always a tangible thing. The place is so wide open, you can't tell where you begin or end, and we were always looking for its limits.

When I was in elementary school, I packed a lunch with a friend and we set out along the railway to walk the distance between our town and the next. It seemed important to pick a place and head out as far as possible, pointing at what we thought was the crest of the neighboring town's water tower, a blue bulbous nose peeking out over several miles of fields. But distance in Iowa isn't always a tangible thing. The place is so wide open, you can't tell where you begin or end, and we were always looking for its limits. We carried backpacks of thin supplies, candy bars and apples and an old pocket-sized camera, to mark our adventures, though I don't believe we used it even once. Thing is, in a place like that, a mile will have passed and you can hardly mark the difference. We felt the ache in the soles of our shoes, the dryness in our throats, but that water tower remained straight ahead, never gaining size. The rails we walked hurtled onward, and the land at our sides lay green and flat and fell toward the horizon without event. After several hours, we stopped and turned in a slow circle. The sun had shifted overhead. The shadows of what trees remained had shrunk to stubs, the air gauzy with dust. Pressing fingers to our cheeks, we touched the beginnings of sunburns. Both of us were dreary and heavy-footed, though the rails ahead still promised a wondrous

unknown, a thing for storytelling. When finally we talked about heading back, my friend was the first to turn around.

No matter how the place has changed, Iowa for me remains the same—a constant brooding. A lost landscape where the smell of farms coats you with a heavy sheen, a smell that feels like home to me, even now. While others cover their noses, I breathe it in like paint fumes and go a little bit off. There is a warmth and mustiness to the smell, a between-the-legs kind of stink. Still, going back isn't part of my plan. I need Iowa to stay the way it was so that it can remain mine—a haunted, mud-filled-up-to-my-nostrils sort of place. With the light coming in and the far-off horizon, I knew what to expect. The future, the present, the past—I could hold it in my hand, blow on it to remove the dust. Here in the East the landscape is so busy I have to save myself from thinking, *What next?*

When my mother first arrived, I took her to Boston's Chinatown, a mere fifteen minutes by foot from my apartment, thinking it might impress her.

"How did you find this place?" she said.

"I walked here. It's famous."

"You walked here by yourself?"

We stopped in one of a dozen Chinatown markets, each no larger than three or four aisles, and my mother picked a chicken foot out of a bin and stood staring at it, trying to figure out what it was. I didn't really think such a thing should seem so foreign, seeing as how her own mother had broken a chicken's neck for the dinner table nearly every month of her life. I suppose my mother hadn't been in that place for some time. Of course, she still lived there, but once removed—in a carpeted townhouse all her own. *Good god,* she must have thought, holding that foot. *Where has my daughter gone?* Her cheek twitched. She rested the chicken foot in the bin among a dozen more and headed out. When she stood in the street again, she took a breath and coughed for several minutes.

"You okay, Mom?"

"Yes," she said. "Just a tickle."

What you have to understand is that I come from a place of restraint. Of people who hold their cards close to the chest and project only friendliness. My uncle once described a din-

ner my mother had made him, a pot roast with carrots, corn, and peas, a slice of devil's food cake for dessert. But he didn't have much room for cake, he said. Understand, we talk by way of things that are inanimate and distant, and in doing so we are telling you something important. The pot roast was warm and just a touch raw, my uncle said, but really he was telling me about the recent death of his wife of fifty years and how he had taken to long drives that began on Iowa country roads but soon stretched to the plains of Nebraska and the Colorado mountains. He might be gone a week at a time. And if he said that the roast was dry to the taste or that he had a bit of gristle in his teeth, what he was saying was this: *I am overwhelmed by the emptiness of this country. I can't drive far enough to get all of it in my mind at once.* His wife, a heavy woman, and largely beautiful to all of us, was the person who had weighted him to this earth and given him four large sons and a daughter who could out-sing all of them. Just under seventy, his wife had died far too young, and now he was set loose and traveling. What was it, that gristle in his teeth? *There are good things and bad things,* he was saying. *And both come at the same time. We are always searching. But if I tell you I don't have room for any more, it's because there's so much room—out there, on the road. There are so many places to go.*

When my father grew ill, my family sat together in the hospital room and sometimes we talked, small gestures or jokes, though mostly we didn't. Sometimes one of us got up to use the bathroom or went out with our hands in our pockets, returning with cups of coffee and a yellow bag of potato chips. We were never a family who didn't care to eat. A week before, my father had suffered a brain aneurysm. He was fifty-nine. There had seemed little warning, but afterward we could name the weight he'd taken on and the white in his hair, his sudden exhaustion. Now, only the monitors told us he was alive.

Of the five of us, I was the baby of the family and therefore still waiting for significance. My sister was seven years my senior and pregnant with my parents' first grandchild. My brother would soon become the family patriarch. He had always seemed untouchable to me, a witty trickster. He was the one I trailed after and annoyed for most of my younger years until as

a teenager I turned shy. That day, he hadn't said a word for most of the afternoon. When I woke after a few minutes of dreaming in my chair, he took my hand from my knee and gripped it on the armrest between us.

Later, my mother would favor a chair in the corner of her bedroom, the television on. She would become a diehard for daytime dramas. "My shows," she would call them. She has watched over the deaths, marriages, murders, and hospital scenes on these same shows for over twenty years, the youngest actress soon a grandmother both in real life and on screen. My mother's new house is altogether white, save for the blue stuffed chair in which she sits. She never bothered with gardening. She prefers her vegetables canned and rarely walks in the sun. She was raised on a farm during the Depression, but you would never know it. Alone in her house with only the television, I wonder how she spends her time and how many other lives she has imagined for herself. My mother never remarried, never even considered it. "All those women who think they need a man," she says. Yet in the same breath, she asks if I can't find some nice boy to help me with a ladder or carry a chair up the stairs. Once, when a neighbor asked her out on a date, several years after my father had passed, she laughed. She has found her own way of leaving, I guess.

I have heard that children absorb melancholy in the womb. During the days and weeks of my father's illness, my pregnant sister was eating and drinking a slow kind of grief every night. We always worried about her first child, our little Hannah, whom I remember sleeping on my chest when she was just weeks old. I was astonished by her size. Hannah is twenty now, and after a few missteps and family phone calls, we think she'll be all right. But back there in that waiting room, my sister stood next to my father's bed rubbing her belly, as if given time she could bear them both—father and daughter—whole again and alive.

I remember this: In our basement, my father taking his trombone from its case. He has a small stool there, and he sits to piece the instrument together, clearing the valve with spit. He does this early in the evening, after dinner, and not very often. He closes himself away in the belly of our house, all cement

floors and walls, the place we have stored things better left forgotten. On the floor above, we hear only a low kind of bleating and a muddy trail of chords. But every so often a note lifts, and then another, as if the house has finally found its pulse. When he finishes, he takes the instrument apart, fits the pieces into the velvet slots, and shuts the instrument away in the cubby beneath the stairs.

His health began to fail, my great-grandmother wrote near the end of her story, *until in 1948 he was looking awful bad even though he said he felt all right. Frank still worked hard. That year he got a message that his last sister had passed away and on his 80th birthday. He was the only one left of a family of thirteen children.*

All of the year 1949 he worked hard all summer. Then on the 29th of August he came in and said, "Dear, I'm dizzy this morning." I sent the children to see the Doctor about him, and they had just got home when my darling fell to the ground as if dead. He lived 53 days after falling.

I have to look inward to see anything: the echoes, the coincidences and omissions, this constant eerie voice of an old woman, here in my hands.

I turn the pages my great-grandmother left behind, see the photographs my great-aunt must have pasted in the margins. The faces are mostly severe—mothers, husbands, and sons having to sit so long for the camera that it proved too painful for a person to hold a happy expression. In truth, the worst of them seems close to collapse. With such faces, how can we see anything of ourselves in our ancestors' lives? *What I have written is true,* my great-grandmother declared in her final sentence, *but only a sketch for there are many more things, both pleasant and unpleasant, I could have written only my strength will not hold out.*

Here with my paper and pencil, the snowstorm has grown to a white-out, the streetlamps phantoms and my windows nearly blank, so now I have to look inward to see anything: the echoes, the coincidences and omissions, this constant eerie voice of an old woman, here in my hands. I am only in the middle of it, my

own story that is, and I am just now beginning to understand that there are patterns—from one family member to the next, from one event to another. My great-grandmother never did break her own pattern, despite all her ferocity. What loss in her early years set the tenor for all the rest?

On turning back to the early pages, I reread a passage I had overlooked, only three paragraphs in: *My youngest sister Bertha was born when I was seven years old, and Mother let me rock her, so that was heaven to me. But shortly before I was eleven years old, our little Bertha died, and for a number of years I looked, or seemed to be looking for her, but she never came back.*

Seven years' absence, and I am only now considering a trip home. My mother's townhouse sits across from my high school's parking lot, though I'm not sure I remember the street's name. My close friends have remained there or moved back, happily raising their children to attend the same schools where we met. In the cemetery, my father is buried in a plot under an oak with a good view of a cornfield. My mother's name is inscribed on his stone, though the space after her birthdate and dash remains blank.

Here in Boston, I have a recurring dream. When I was younger it came every other month or so, though now it may come only twice a year, if that. In my dream I sit in my old house with the television going and the terrible gold shag underfoot. My mother stands in the kitchen, making dinner. There's someone at the door. The knob turns: The person is letting himself in, as if he lives here. Gangly and black-haired, a man lumbers into the living room, sets his briefcase beside the couch where I sit, and takes his place in his favorite chair. It's my father, looking as my father always did. His wire-rimmed glasses still pain him, and he drops them now on a nearby table and rubs at the depressions on his nose. Though I am my young self in this dream and home again in the house where I was born, I know he does not belong here. His death was over twenty years ago.

Still, there is no surprise at his presence. My mother stays in the kitchen, hand on her hip, stirring tomato sauce in a pan. The television flashes. None of us speaks. Somehow I understand that my father has finally decided to come home. That

when he left, it didn't have anything to do with a blood clot or a coma. It was a matter of choice. He had grown tired—that was the story. Or he had run off with another woman. Or he had sought a different kind of life, free of student exams and brief-cases, maybe one with a little more jazz. In any case, wherever he went, he grew tired of that as well, and now he has returned, sitting in his chair, where he might close his eyes for a moment and drift before my mother calls us to the table. As if it were the most natural thing in the world.

JENEVA STONE

WINTER KEPT US WARM

Winter kept us warm, covering
Earth in forgetful snow, feeding
A little life with dried tubers.
—T. S. Eliot

The day I was married, it snowed.

When I woke, I could see only blurred sky. But I knew. When it snows or is about to snow, the air has a quality to it like the inside of a steel canister. The world closes in and the atmosphere becomes metallic.

Snow in November was not, in and of itself, unusual—especially in Vermont, where the wedding took place. I wore Maine hunting boots under my wedding dress to the old meetinghouse where we said our vows, the snow adding to the general excitement. An event, the way snow brightens the dark ground—the ordinary become the unexpected.

My graduate school roommate told me that, in some Asian cultures, snow is considered a sign of luck.

And luck is out of our control.

A friend once mentioned that skiers often say, "Turn in the white, miss the black." He'd heard it while skiing the backcountry out West, an old burn area, charred trunks rising up against a slope of clean snow. As he sped downhill, the black and white flicker became disorienting, and he said he had to look for the white—focus on the spaces, not the obstacles—to maintain control.

For a while, this became my mantra—*turn in the white, miss the black*—looking for the white spaces, ignoring the obstacles. The interstitial flicker of escape in rapid intersection with dark reality.

When I first learned I was pregnant, I was alone. Staring at the lines on the white test strip, a sense of awe settled over me—an awe like the flash before fear rushes dark into that bright opening. I sat down at our dining table pondering the weight of this responsibility. I kept my misgivings to myself.

I gave birth to a child who seemed typical at first, but who, thirteen months into his life, crashed through a weakened floor in the house of his well-being in a catastrophic medical event. He was left profoundly disabled. We still don't know what triggered his collapse, and he remained undiagnosed for nearly thirteen years.

I can remember, as a child in Vermont, snowbanks higher than I was lining the walkway that led from our front porch to the sidewalk, and the snow on my grandparents' farm obliterating every mark of normalcy, changing our landmarks. All this disorientation a form of play, the known world inverted, the ordinary become the unexpected.

Winter in the DC area, where I now live, isn't much most of the time: the occasional huge snowfall, smatterings of ice and slush, and so on. An inconvenience, really. My daughter (my second child) loves these brief glimpses of winter. A look through a glass darkly into another world, I suppose.

But my son, Robert, now wheelchair-bound, can't navigate the outdoors in a foot or two of snow. So when the big storms come, we're confined to the house. *Trapped* might be another word for it.

I have come to prefer spring.

An old memory, a non sequitur, declares itself repeatedly: I'm driving my cousin Amelia into Burlington in my parents' car, and we're headed around a moderate curve. Amelia is very young, perhaps six or seven, a serious child with close-cropped dark hair. She is strapped into the passenger seat. I may be in high school or even college; I've had a driver's license from the time I was fourteen years old.

It is snowing, or it has been snowing, and there is a light accumulation on the road and the shoulders. Maybe I hit the brake lightly, or maybe it's a consequence of the dynamics of steering, but the car goes into a gentle skid. Amelia has been quiet, as she usually is, but her voice pitches high and startled, "We're slidin'!"

And we *are* sliding, several feet to the side of the road. I learned to drive before anti-lock brakes were standard, so I have undoubtedly released my foot from the brake and am

steering into the skid with the wheels locked and that ineffective feeling of the steering wheel rotating far too lightly in my hands.

This friend in the West is an avalanche researcher, winter his favorite season in all its beauty and danger. He reminds me that the qualities of snow are not uniform; crystals vary in size and structure, from the large fluffy snowflakes of children's picture books to the smaller ones that cluster in a blizzard to the hard nubbins of sleet. The different waxes for cross-country skis reflect this: icy, granular, soft powder, heavy and wet snow. Snow has personality—as the early photographer Wilson "Snowflake" Bentley discovered, no two snowflakes are alike. And no two snowfalls, either.

Weather conditions—humidity and sun and wind—affect mountain slopes where snow gathers pristine white against a sharp blue sky. With each storm, snow accumulates in different layers. Sometimes one of the layers is thin and weak, or instable, like cake crumbs shifting in a box between the hard pack of the storms before and after it. An avalanche is triggered when the weight of the upper layers puts stress on the weak layer, and, thus, these snow stacks, invisible to the casual observer, collapse and slide, often with catastrophic results.

Sick children are often said to "declare" themselves when their bodies announce an intention to carry on with this life.

When a person is trapped in an avalanche, death comes most often by suffocation. The weight and torque of the rapidly shearing snow envelop the skier, filling the nose and mouth, pinning or splaying the limbs, and settling in a snowpack that sets like cement, the skier's arms and legs isolated and useless.

Nothing happens. Amelia is probably frightened but shrugs it off when I tell her we're OK. After all, she's old enough now to grasp that floating feeling cars have on snow sometimes, as the wheels slide just within the driver's control, shimmying on

the snow the way you might feel on skis before kicking off and gliding.

The steering wheel now gone heavy with traction, I pull the car back onto the main roadbed, and we continue on our way.

Sick children are often said to "declare" themselves when their bodies announce an intention to carry on with this life.

I don't remember exactly when or how Robert declared himself during the low point of his initial illness. I can remember his body curling inward when it looked like he would round the curve toward coma. But I was determined that he stay; my mind tried to attach itself to his to prevent his leaving. He never slid away completely, and his spirit gained traction bit by bit as he pulled—or I pulled him—back to a semblance of consciousness. His body, though, tumbled frantically into disability over the course of a few days.

This winter, after two storms hit within one week, leaving more than thirty inches of snow, the DC metro region was declared a disaster area. People here throw up their hands at snow and retreat into their homes as though the day of judgment were near. School is canceled, the federal government goes on its liberal leave policy, and the plows don't clear your neighborhood for days. Local and state governments tell us that all hope is lost, we will be alone, the power company cannot be expected to be held responsible for keeping the lights on, the area will be shut down indefinitely, call us in the spring.

When I was young, my parents believed in mastering snow. Snow tires, chains, learning the gradual rocking acceleration, forward and reverse, required to dislodge a stuck tire. All of this perfectly ordinary. Ordinary that my father would drive forty miles to pick me up from college for the weekend during the middle of a storm that dropped at least eighteen inches. That we would take the back roads home because Route 7 was too slippery with traffic and compressed ice. That all would be well until we faced the road on the big hill south of Monkton, its blacktop gone, its edges only faint indentations. That he would turn to me and say, "Well, at least we've got the downhill to

accelerate—rear-wheel drive will push us up!" And it did, our late-model Cadillac shimmying a bit on the front end.

Accelerate slow and steady. Keep your speed even. Use low gear.

In the evening after the first big storm that frosted the DC area like a white cake, I went outside. Crossed the street to deliver a meal to a neighbor who needed it. Returning through the middle of the street, I paused in the knee-deep tire ruts left by the handful of four-wheel-drive urban warriors who'd passed through. Looked up the street, looked down. Absorbed the pleasure of standing in the middle of the road—though ours is not a busy street—without a worry or a thought about a car's approach. Streetlights made the snow glow in a blue-white haze that settled over all.

There is a peace that follows disaster of some sort—perhaps the quieting of all inner voices, all the chatter layered onto the days, whether people or cars or planes or frenetic over-scheduling and task overload. All of that was tamped down under two feet of snow.

And yet. The snow this winter has been a relief, an odd blessing. A transformation from one state to another, or a reminder that transformation is possible. The unexpected become the ordinary.

Locked up in our home, together, there seemed little to fear. Our power was on. We had food. All of Robert's medical supplies were in good order. No reason to leave the house until the plow came—and even then, no reason to leave until the high-pitched hunting-and-gathering post-storm fray had subsided.

Calm. Until this winter, snowstorms had always provoked anxiety and fear in me. I thought of myself as "trapped" in the house, my disabled child sick, his health always uncertain.

My son's collapse was so sudden, so unexpected; it came without a single warning. Throughout these thirteen years without a definitive diagnosis, one neurologist never ruled out the possibility of an underlying metabolic disorder. A metabolic disorder is triggered when a child's increasing weight, his body mass, outstrips the compromised ability of the body's biochemical

processes. A faltering metabolic process, one misstep in a chain of manufacture and reaction, results in a cascade of motor and cognitive malfunctions that build like a pile of talus at the base of a slope.

One of Robert's symptoms is global ataxia, or the body's inability to control and coordinate the movements of muscles and, therefore, limbs—as though his body were divided into four separate containers or cells, one for each limb. My earliest observations were that each of his arms and legs moved separately. One hand might approach the imaginary plane that bisects his face and chest, but stop just short, as though the hand had encountered a pane of glass. The other would be unable to meet it. Each isolated and useless.

The emotional intensity of those days is blinding, returning to them like coming out of a dark tunnel into the supernova of noon sunlight on a snow-covered landscape.

I could bring my hands together, and late at night, I closed myself in the bathroom, knelt at the white edge of the tub, and prayed. The only place I could be alone. This, too, I kept to myself.

Christmas Eve is the night the world often seems to stand still—a long night of waiting and arrival after a day of frenetic activity. Streets empty and lights dimmed. The night the world declares itself. And the night my new year always begins.

My adolescent memories of Christmas Eve involve driving to midnight services, the halting fall of snow flurries whiter and brighter against the black around us, flickering like a photo negative—white then black, superimposed, disorienting. Yet the car always carries us safely around the curve on which Amelia and I will later skid. Sometimes the roads clear, the smooth whoosh of blacktop beneath us; sometimes the tires muffled, the treads lifting and tossing the snow, the barest tension of traction. The minister reading from the scripture Mary's reaction to the shepherds, *but Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart*. Her response to this the same as to her pregnancy: sober

and awed at what has been revealed to her. At what she cannot change, or speak of.

In the months that followed the onset of Robert's illness, I found myself pregnant again, accidentally. The emotional intensity of those days is blinding, returning to them like coming out of a dark tunnel into the supernova of noon sunlight on a snow-covered landscape.

On three successive nights during that pregnancy, I had three dreams. I've never had dreams like these before or since; in fact, I rarely dream at all anymore. Describing them to anyone always feels crazy because they were all of the same texture, all three, and it was a single dream in three parts, a triptych. In the first, a blond child who appeared to be Robert started walking again. In the second, the same child started talking. In the third, I miscarried.

I woke each morning to a sense of disorientation: the dream world had been capaciously real, as though I had walked into another room of my life, a room in which everything was just as it should be, not as it was. And yet I woke into the known world each day, confused by the flicker between the two, between what could be and what is.

The only way to reconcile this was to look for the interstices—to believe the future was being imparted to me, and it would not be unhappy.

I held those dreams close to my heart for years without telling anyone except my husband. They were an arrival, an annunciation, a declaration, the present and the future sliding together the way the brain perceives objects in the midst of a skid: at times, you are sliding toward the tree; other times, the tree is rushing toward you.

I did miscarry a few days after the third dream. And, eventually, as I continued to believe these were a truth shared with me, I understood that the child in the dreams was not Robert with his brown hair, but my daughter, Edith, who was born a year and a half later with a full head of bright white-blond hair.

As the snow was plowed this winter, pushed back into monstrous twelve-foot piles in parking lots, in front of sidewalks,

at the corners of intersections, Edith took to calling them the Alps. Climbing the Alps became one of her favorite activities.

We have pictures of her and her brother posed in front of these craggy mounds of snow—the two of them small and delighted, oblivious to the mock threat of the shoveled and tumbled snow behind them, blackened at its edges with soot. Robert's wheelchair, arrayed like green blades bright green against the near-white of the snow.

The truth is, this winter was the first time we thought of Robert's disabilities as permanent. For years, his abilities—to eat, speak, walk, use his hands and fingers—flickered in ways that now seem as indescribable as dreams. A hazy syllable there, increased stepping reflex here. An ability to grasp, for a few days, an object between thumb and finger. An intermittent opportunity to cleanly select items on a communication device, a constellation of motions that would surface, disappear, then resurface for years. Each of these returning periodically like random green shoots through an early spring snow.

When I look at these pictures, I think about our known world inverted. How ordinary this all seems: my daughter mugging for the camera, my son smiling in his wheelchair.

In another set of photos, Robert, my husband, and my daughter pose, wedged narrowly between snowbanks higher than the kids, on the dark surface of the freshly shoveled walkway in front of our house. Robert is not afraid, even though every mark of normalcy, most landmarks, are gone, the rims of his wheelchair scraping the snow stacks.

When I look at these pictures, I think about our known world inverted. How ordinary this all seems: my daughter mugging for the camera, my son smiling in his wheelchair, the handicapped ramp and its pale yellow railing a fixture I notice only because the static flicker of its many posts and balusters is trellised with snow.

To a friend who had suffered a great loss, the loss of a child, I wrote what I then believed to be true: that control of our lives is an illusion. I was not surprised when she agreed.

It would be easy to say, *an illusion as temporal as snow.* But I don't know if I believe it to be true. In the heart of winter, we may become uncertain that spring will resurface, pulling with cruel force an unreal city of crocus and daffodil from the brown-fogged earth. But the fact of snow remains, dazzling as crystals scattered in our hair, accumulating in the interstices of a world we thought we knew.

At Christmas this year, my daughter, my father, and I went walking in the snow around the perimeter of what I'll probably always call my grandparents' farm, even though the two of them are gone. Four to five inches of completely white, mostly untracked snow covered the meadows and rock outcroppings and decaying farm tools, but it was not enough to bury last summer's three-foot dry stalks of Queen Anne's lace and goldenrod extending upward from the brightening field.

Sometimes the snow declares itself with wind or, mixed with sleet, taps its fingernails lightly on the windowpane. But in the Vermont of my childhood, the snow mostly arrived unannounced, as if by chance—it is, really, the snow that comes in on little cat feet, not the fog. And awakening on those mornings to that sense of bright disorientation is opening the eyes to a world transformed.

My cousin Amelia and I are, once again, passengers in the same car—her daughter, born prematurely, is at a children's hospital in Boston. Natalie is slowly pulling herself through the complications of an early birth, some of which will be lasting, while a rare chromosomal disorder makes itself manifest.

And the future and the past are sliding toward us or we toward them, each of us with our hands on the wheel, pretending to steer toward the white spaces and, some days, feeling the heaviness of traction.

DAVID AXELROD

FROM "SONG OF ACCORD"

Oh, I have made myself a tribe
out of my true affections,
and my tribe is scattered!
How shall the heart be reconciled
to its feast of losses?
—Stanley Kunitz

Man:
It's all trickery distance and the sea pretending it's benign
vague shapes in murky air above the straits
the same mountains as these
before continents drifted apart before floods
stranded us on separate shores and Atlas endured
the burden of his own treachery
a distance we cannot cross
this longing a siren call not far away trickery
men will answer with their lives same burden
same treachery same rowing little boatloads
of despair trying to cross the sea to the city—

Woman:
who remembers what they suffered rowing for their lives
until the seventh day came wind from the south
from the desert came thirst the lunatic urge
to drink the sea throw overboard their oars
and then long swells lulling them to sleep
curled against gunwales to die who will redeem them
they left almost no residue smears of grease on tarred planks
names rags they wore—

Chorus:
in the mountains belled herds descend from one terrace
to the next the same as millennia ago
the same migrations the same grass filling the gap
between paving stones whose mica glows
with residual moonlight sown when we were alive

and fitted these stones here now
a handful of almonds of water drizzling from springs
pomegranate roots twisting through cracks in a cistern—

Man:
and the boats what about the boats
drifting off the coast boats
the cutters will tow into the harbor of a glorious city
migrants heard rumors of a cargo of bodies
who crossed the distances without papers nation home
deprived at last even of their names
what of them what light outlasts their shame—

Woman:
smoke from beach fires drifts up valleys greasy ashes
dropping from a column of fire
today as a thousand years ago the same peril
the same fire that feeds on air
we can only breathe—

Man:
I saw a child charred in flames follow a woman I saw
following the furrow a man cut across a field
in flames I saw the woman dropping potatoes
behind her I saw the child kicking stony soil
and where the row ends in flames I saw
the man halt his mule turn
and begin again in flames—

Woman:
It's just crows just crows
perched as though on a gallows beam
laughing at grain inside an urn
I will pour into your hands in time of great need
but what other time what greater need than now
when fear caches no grain but arms itself
against its neighbor—

Cantor:
inside these granaries
unopened for years
these illuminated pages of the book
of my life before you were born you future
whom I love is it possible
more than my own life—

Man:
You sat across the table late at night at the end
of winter blue snow-light in the windowpane
it was a thousand years ago—

Woman:
your face radiant as that snow
falling in the square in birch hills rising
above the river snow drifting
around the cathedral around the bell tower—

Man:
snow drifting in streets until streets
emptied grew still the shadows of snow
streaked across our faces
it seemed we were the last—

Woman:
two still alive and as you spoke
you poured out of yourself like the blood
of light I want to believe
is still woven inside of words—

Man:
fragile as what lives inside of our words
I press my hands to the shining carmine surface of—

Woman:
words that transfix an infant in the womb
the gravity and calm of living on the brink
of time listening before we were born—

Both:
to press both hands
into the shining surface of it to live again
inside the carmine light of the world unafraid—

Girona—Los Millares—Vilna

ANGELA BALL

POLYANDRY

I confuse geologists
By loading up boulders
And distributing them across campuses
The world over.

I am present in 1934
When DOP, first soap-free mass-market shampoo,
Is promoted through hair-lathering competitions at circuses
And outdoor radio shows around Europe.
I slip repeatedly out of my catcher's grasp
And off the air

To join the mighty handful
Of Russian composers, turning their music,

Artists and scientists always one step from
The discovery
That finesses all questions

And delivers the fiery city
To the hands of the monsoon,
Its wavering globules
On every surface,
Clumsy and uncaring.

ANGELA BALL

LO QUE HAY

I'm just learning about jazz having competing elements
Or instruments that speak up for themselves
Like strings of pearls, like a girl named Anita.

Also shooting apostrophes with my apostrophe gun
Dragging them home to my poetry oasis
Playing them my new favorite song
By Arturo Sandoval, "Eso es lo que hay."

The question we ask about others: how
Is (s)he taking it? For example a widow
Part Cherokee married again but he wanted
Charleston she didn't now she has boyfriend very tall
Cubano-Spanish and daughters in twenties, jobs they don't like

But seem happy. The question about ourselves:
How do we get? Uninteresting spiritless
Envy also sense that thing
Is not thing, but black-and-white jazz funeral,
We its blowsy handkerchiefs.

WAYNE DODD

WHAT IS IT ABOUT THE PAST

that makes it

shine so, almost as if
backlighted? The leaves

of that long-dead mulberry
outside the window

glisten, now, as though themselves
a part of the sunrise, spilling

across the bed . . .
Is it the essential "beforeness" of it

that makes it so compelling—
the sense that time,

in its unforgivingness,
has actually turned back

to those days when everything
(and everyone) still conspired

to make life feel perfect—
and, how shall I put it,

dependable . . .

WAYNE DODD

A CAR GOES

down the street, or maybe it's a bus,
coming up

the street. You're awake.
Or you're asleep. Either way,

there's probably little
you can do about it. Things come

and they go. People come
and they go. Species come

etc. . . . Meanwhile, back at the
(suburban) ranch (four bedrooms,

three baths) the future falls apart
all around us. Really.

Who would've thought?

*

There's plenty of blame to go around,
of course. But the fact is

someone's got to pay. Someone ought
to pay. But how far back

can we go? Ticonderoga? Hastings?
Nineveh?

*

There were palm trees once,
graceful and green

in the sunlight. Surf, sand,
salt breezes . . . Earlier times.

Happier times.
Before you-know-what.

A history problem, then, as in
“solve for when” (not to mention

“whose”). Self-referential,
as always, you may even

name yourself, imagine your own
story as history, your precious, small-bore life

as instance of something larger,
consequential . . .

*

There are always sirens in the night.
Who knows why? Who knows where?

JOHN GALLAHER

WHERE THEY FEED THEIR CHILDREN TO KINGS

The best idea I ever had
can't fit through the door, no matter how
strong we think we might feel
someday. It tells us that minerals evolved
in just this way as well. That young women
are supposed to despair in Texas
on Saturdays, while you're planning a birthday party
for a four-year-old. Maybe it's your son.
Maybe it's your daughter. One of them
is asking you how big a wave can be
and you have to tell the truth
in case things go poorly, and your estimate
has to be revised ever upward.

It has something to do with how much
you love them as they get lost in the woods
or their lives. According to reports,
when Chevrolet marketed the Nova
in Mexico, we all left our mothers and fathers
and leaned ourselves against trees
in the hill country. "It doesn't go," we say, as we start
a campfire. We pack our suitcases with ever smaller
suitcases. The sky darkens, a bit. Our voices
pick us out of any lineup at the academy of faith,
and then we're speaking for two or more
in some language we didn't know we knew.

ADAM GIANNELLI

ORCHIDS, AVENUES

for Philip Larkin

At the skate park, the ramps reiterate
a few pale-shirted figures. Trash cans

teem with wet paper, candy wrappers.
A basketball net hangs,
a punctured sieve.

Early in the morning when the buses run
by the hour, a dampness

covers the grass and pavement. I walk
and walk. It cannot
be stamped out.

I never found that one place that waited,
like a bell untolling. That person whose ardor

had no eyelids. At the bridge, over the railing
I reach out my arm.
It slopes.

When someone enters the dry cleaners,
the bell above the door chimes,

and an old man emerges from the linens.
Brutal how time
serves as our only trellis.

A woman walks to work in a navy skirt
and heels. Her footsteps
chatter like teeth.

In the empty band shell, paint curls
from the seats
of the benches. A motor idles.

NOAH ELI GORDON

THE PROBLEM

One juror finds another's book about the scandalous trial in the remainder bin. This could be the beginning of a movie. Why didn't I think of that? One juror finds another's book about the scandalous trial in the remainder bin. See how time in this sentence is different? The problem is this could also be the beginning of a movie.

THE PROBLEM

I can't figure out how to explain that narrative is the order in which one marshals in the elements of a story without writing a story. For example: High up in the canopy of an elm, a squirrel takes stock of its winter supplies. Or: A squirrel examines food stored in the upper limb of an elm. In both cases, all of the elements are in order. The story begins with the anxiety that assembles them this way. It's the explanation that's the problem.

NOAH ELI GORDON

THE PROBLEM

She's made a point of hanging a small photograph of an eighteenth-century clipper ship in the bathroom of each of the now seven apartments in which she's lived. If you look closely, you can barely make out two men waving from the deck; one a head taller than the other. Is that a piano I hear coming from several houses down? A light snow has settled on the landing. The problem is which landing.

MARK HALLIDAY

APPROPRIATE UTTERANCE

If on a normal sunny day we happened to meet
and I said "How are you?"
and you answered "I am sorry for your loss"

you might be implying, with understated eloquence,
that your own well-being is inseparable from mine
as we share in the human condition of living in time

whereby at every moment we have been abandoned
by the reality of a moment ago and yesterday is
irretrievable and memory gives us only a filmy spray
of images representing a teasy scrap of what we saw
and what we felt and this is true even when
what is gone from today is someone you did truly love.

And if you were to speak to me briefly on the street or in a store
and I said as I moved away "Nice to see you"
the remark might not be banal,

it could mean that I appreciate our painfully limited condition
of being persons largely obscured from view yet still
with some capacity to perceive one another and to affirm
that I have, despite the deluge of atomizing distractions,
observed that you stand there facing me in your essential dignity.

When I walked into the funeral home
to attend the service for an old colleague I'd hardly known

a woman I didn't recognize approached and thanked me
for being there and paused and said "I'm Nancy"

and I murmured "Nice to see you" and turned away confused
and found a seat among the mourners, realizing

how gracefully the widow had acted as if my phrase had been
right enough for the occasion, as if I'd said what a person
should say.

RUSSELL JAFFE

MEDITATION IN BOMBS

• Boys like me are not
• but triggers.
• I'm a memory man whose abridged epitaph will say MEM.
• I'm a man when
• the VCR loops—
• tape over the cassette square
• reinforces my resolve, not just recording but the way I record,
• decision making, loops you make watching TV in the living room:
• To blow or not?
• Timed mines:
• What softens you as a kid.
• I like cartoons and wrestling because the
• problem of palatability is
• answered in explosions.
• My favorite wrestler
• Bam Bam Bigelow had
• tattoos of flames on his head
• and wrestling singlet,
• but in later days he was rounder.
• And Marvin the Martian's head was
• blasted back like young eyes tend to be.
• Looney Tunes bombs: Circular.
• It comes back to that often,
• the only way I know atoms:
• motion, dead TV signals that
• used to be static, now a light blue
• the color of distance.
• Dirty bombs: relevant, and reminders of what you'll be.
• Though I won't let a day ruin this VCR.
• 90s WWF living rooms
• are the tepid baths I'll
• shy away from as a teen
• in throat surgery recovery

- and hangover humiliations
- I'll loop forever piecemeal like the
- controllers I broke I threw at my brother.
- So stick to your minefields,
- I do mine.

PATRICIA LOCKWOOD

FACTORIES ARE EVERYWHERE IN POETRY RIGHT NOW

We are watching a crayon being made, we are children,
we are watching the crayon become crayons
and more crayons and thinking how can there be enough
room in America to make what makes it up, we are thinking
all America is a factory by now, the head of it churning out
fake oranges, the hand of it churning out glass bottles,
the heel of it churning out Lego men.
We are watching lifelike snakes get made, we are watching
lifelike rats get made, we are watching army men get made;
a whole factory for magic wands, a whole factory
for endless scarves, a whole factory, America, for the making
of the doves, a whole factory, America,
for the making of long-eared
rabbits and their love of deep dark holes. We are watching
a marble being made, how does the cat's eye get in the marble
and how does the sight get into that, how does the hand get
on it, how does the hand attach to the child, how does the child
attach to the dirt, and how does the dirt attach to its only name,
America. The name is manufactured here by rows of me in airless
rooms. Sunlight is accidental, sunlight is runoff
from the lightbulb factory, is ooze on the surface of all our rivers.
Our abandoned factories make empty space and our largest
factory produces distance and its endless conveyor produces miles.
And people in the basement produce our underground. Hillbilly
teeth are made here, but hillbilly teeth are made everywhere
maybe. The factory that makes us is overseas, and meanwhile we,
America, churn out China, France, Russia, Spain, and our glimpses
of them from across the ocean. Above the factory billowing clouds
can be seen for miles around. Long line of us never glances up
from the long line of glimpses we're making, we could make
those glimpses in the dark, our fingertips could see to do it,
all the flashing fish in the Finger Lakes
have extra-plus eyes in America. The last factory, which makes last
lines, makes zippers for sudden reveals: a break in the trees opens
ziiiip on a view, the last line opens ziiiip on enormous meaning.

PATRICIA LOCKWOOD

THE BRAVE LITTLE ______ GOES TO SCHOOL

A – Z animals hunger for learning. They hunger
for learning, you sneak them to school. A mouse
in your pocket, a frog in your pocket. They talk
or you think they can talk. A cricket hides in the dark
of your desk and glitters like a great black IQ point.
You carried a housefly to school in your fist, now
repeat after me the teacher says and the fly makes
vowel sounds one by one and sometimes y the
fly says. Now what other animal goes to school—
          a nude in your pocket, a full page of nude!
She shines with concentration all over her skin, trying
so hard to learn to learn. Man is an animal too says
teacher; you brought a man to school today. A man
          from the past is visiting you and the one place
he wanted to go was school and his name is Benjamin
Franklin, Ben. He sits at the desk next to yours, learning
each little quote he's going to say and then lavishing
the learn of his eyes on the nude, whose skin is bursting
with the exports of Ecuador, mostly and mainly rain.
          Ben Franklin should not be in school, the word
in his mouth should not be in school, a word that is where
a girl pees from. A fresh sheet of ditto is laid on your desk.
Don't worry, you tell Ben Franklin—the unlearningest
          animal of all, the Answers, came to school today
in your closed left fist, curly-tailed like they taught you
to write them, impossibly small and already bleeding.
The teacher writes QUIET PLEASE on the board. The pig
who came to school today is unprepared for the squeal
of chalk. It asks is something else in here dying the way
I'm going to? The cricket and Ben Franklin raise their hands,
                                        the Answers somehow raises yours.

PATRICK PRITCHETT

IN THE VALLEY OF ST. VRAIN

So that if the void
        is diamond
then the world
is great
    it fits inside
this body
        & the slightest
gesture
    trembles
    to the
    horizon

"Ah! *non credea mirarti*"
pure lament
inside
the soul
of motion

Mandelshtam
        on fire
moving down
        the river Kama
"burning like a black
        candle"
that cannot pray
    only cover this name
    in soot
    & silence

The white shack
        across the street
sinks in winter light
    resides as a feather resides

astride
the wind
or never
but not to be blown
back

For the body
is
diamond
& void
not the place
for the soul
but the soul
itself
respiring
the porous shape & shadow of it
hallowing
the decree to breathe

It is how
each abides
morning
into evening
the long lake
we push
across
on the blueness of prayer
on fire

PATRICK PRITCHETT

IN A SOMER SESON

Of fire to fire renew
summer the fall
of light and season
of mortal dews.

Overall the evening
set of moon
August high in the trees
equatorial burn.

Grass under green water
& cycle of song
in circle renew
fire of summer to summon

Or signal the fade
of the long moon that burns.
Orbit of fire alive
under green water too.

STEPHEN RATCLIFFE

FROM "TEMPORALITY"

12.26

pink cloud in pale blue sky above black
trees, song sparrow calling from branch
in foreground, sound of wave in channel

volume, not that it becomes
therefore linear form

or point, in space distance
from each, two bodies

grey white clouds reflected in channel,
shadowed green pine on tip of sandspit

STEPHEN RATCLIFFE

FROM "TEMPORALITY"

12.27

red orange of sky on horizon above black
plane of trees, silver of planet by leaf
in foreground, sound of waves in channel

triangle formed by the leaf
at the bottom, center

surface tilts into viewer's
horizon, plane, whose

silver of sunlight reflected in channel,
cormorants flapping across toward ridge

FROM "TEMPORALITY"

12.28

light coming into cloud above blackness
of ridge, pattern of leaves on branches
in foreground, sound of wave in channel

there in marks, composition
different from design

what keeps itself concealed,
to be that which, *its*

silver of sunlight reflected in channel,
whiteness of gull flapping toward ridge

STEPHEN RATCLIFFE

FROM "TEMPORALITY"

12.29

orange edge of sun rising below shadowed
branches, white half moon above branches
in foreground, sound of waves in channel

is present in the world, is
said that with things

because in itself, material,
end without the means

grey white clouds reflected in channel,
pelican flapping across toward horizon

STEPHEN RATCLIFFE

FROM "TEMPORALITY"

12.30

orange edge of sun rising below shadowed
branches, motion of green leaf on branch
in foreground, sound of waves in channel

which in a certain way this,
how to say more about

green against bright greens,
these things, what is

silver of sunlight reflected in channel,
whiteness of gulls gliding across ridge

FROM "MATCH"

Question & solution,
sometimes silence.

What's matter isn't
science:
            blackboards
refuse immutability.

Equation & induction
reign supreme, erasers

after the bell: clouds.

Boy & girl mushroom,
hands impressioned.

A spelling bee blown.

FROM "MATCH"

What's your husband do
presumes.

Let's age
like wine, girl-on-girl
statues or like giraffes.

I can't run for damage
I did running.

I'm tuft
& like torrents & blame.

I am spotting the floor.

MISTAKEN FOR ICE, AIR

1

. . . how quick is quick when one speaks of a geologic event.[1]

Spring: the girl commands all doubt to blur out, traces of sadness erase. Black charges (*a guilty house*) falter; she runs downstream with lemon water, rituals. Ringed with *hail marys,* riddled with salt, she dives in, cranes shoulders into her hangdog back.

Inside blue-lipped basins, clams chatter, open, accept her bold intrusion without fanfare. Slipped a disc, she's sheriffed to weightlessness (*this is how mummification feels*)—suit-straps shift down, worms squat in nostrils' gulfs, a breath-line shears one second from the next.

Deep cleft in her ankles, she's frightened, unbordered, a taster of remembrance's fruit. Coral floats up (*mutter, murder*): she spits freely, suffering at the corners of her mouth.

[1] Zebrowski, Ernest Jr. *The Last Days of St. Pierre: The Volcanic Disaster That Claimed 30,000 Lives*. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2002: 234.

2

In a short time St. Pierre took on the appearance of a gray-brown bog.[11]

Spring: what planes around her's the hardest to follow, dust winding past her cheeks' inner grooves. Soothed by nothing, carved out by nothing, she's remained a weeping statue on her own.

Danger cries out, four-winded, cobblestones blister and release, still she waits, even as rosebushes clot near her, crowding out the sparrow on her tongue.

A crow, a waiting palm, golden-familiar: she's flustered, but someone's got to pull the plow. The heart must find some force to yank it forward, hand to give it anchor and keel.

Look out the window, don't do her favors—fixed-gazing, she'll remain distracted by evening light. Fogged glass crams with pollen, yellows with decades' indecision. *Wherever she travels, try to bless her; let her footsteps be a sign of balance.* Blinded, she tosses salt (hand over shoulder), stumbles through a rock-strewn field.

---

[11] Thomas, Gordon, and Max Morgan-Witts. *The Day the World Ended.* Chelsea, Michigan: Scarborough House Publishers, 1991: 185.

CHRISTA ROMANOSKY

SUDAN TOURIST NOCTURNE

When the cheetah is a little drunk
scent of fresh palms, gunpowder,
the landscape stretched between

the C-shaped rim of mountain,
something withers. In the dawn,
the binoculars hover upon certain

spots. Blotting acres of tin-roofed
hutches, hospices, goats, the discarded
world: glass-blown, fragile, colorless.

The jeep jostles tourists. Look, they
say: oryx, gerenuk, *haboob*
of hooves over savanna. Then gone

the tourists watch the pick-strummed
silhouettes, how light unwinds
not to be. Next stop: Merowe Dam,

electricity, they sigh, point out the Nile
relieved. The guide says, *I have always*
seen, just what I always see,

eats *kisra,* drinks water. Another fishes
from his knee a guinea worm,
he leans into his work, whispers

what to the Sahara. Yawning holes
to be had. He winds the worm
around the gauze, the length, the months,

sun cresting, hitting the yellow tilts
of village, all the graveyard elephants
and their distance. *The stomping*

can be felt for twenty-five miles, he tells
the tourists, drinks and winds
the worm a little more.

BROC ROSSELL

A CLOUD OF FAITHFUL WITNESSES

Hope is a form of penance

Like an oil rig
spouting as it bores,

I climb to discover the rock

Or the Virgin of Guadalupe visits
And labor assumes a purpose.

Romance purports a dialectic between loss and solace

But this clerestorial poem
Has no house

Admits no refuge
Or denies anything I can remember

BROC ROSSELL

CONSCRIPTION

Resonant structures
I a stream
between capital L's and T's
Three-story two-story six-story trees

A genuflective tributary
Where empire
Meets tribe

The shadow of Burj Khalifa
Lashing the gravestones
Of people my first boss killed

So many miles from the suburb
Of my language and my light

ELEGY

I tried to stay in the open moment,
the instant perfectly empty:
there's a casket there,
resting, pure silk and mahogany.
The lining may have been lead
and in the rowboat I remember
my regret, having left the island
with all my imperfections
paying attention to the gesture
but not the person no longer a person.
In good time there were ledges
and seals, the cormorants came back,
and the rusty shipwreck was a site
of devotion for those of us
who'd like to preserve a moment
or drag it with us, the living.

ORPHANS

I cannot fawn
Dear Lord—oh I see
You tinker

With temperatures,
Bringing loves
For some to bury.

My friends
The diasporas
Shake a few fists

At your favored clouds
About to storm.
I won't deny

Parishioners' joys—
With faces both
Coming and going.

I too want a bliss
like theirs:
blankened or beautied.

G. C. WALDREP

QUINCUNX

ANNAGHYDUFF

first ripe: for searching: thumb's
narrow rest: extended: as gloss
to appetite: taste, touch, handle
not: in season: giddy sufferance:

almond wavelength: permitting a
trine burnish: sudary: orthogonal:
en route: some vestal journey:
as barrier: psalm-mark: demand:

DRUMGOLE LOUGH

as through polarized glass: herd's
thick body: burning as swans do:
mid-afternoon: midsummer: bar to
entry: steric protocol: unkniving:

ecliptic: residual epistrophe: fit's
split dayspark: glebe or hermitage:
usufruct: empirical: seek no wider
habitat: synapse: alluvion: guest:

KNOCKCOR

inaccessible: for defense: forest
returned: as gesture: towards
the state: commonweal: candle-
stick: shiny cicatrix: omphalos:

unsuccess: bronze ploughshares:
anatomy: vagile consequence,
sinople: the blind man with his
lucent paraclete: warm-blooded:

KILMARK WEST

grooved, as shaft: issue of blood:
philatelic: what "sends": the body
into its one posture: genuflection:
fetal abseiling, *e.g.*: record this labor:

wedded herbivore, prophetic:
out of orbit: or, parhelic, bright
inhuman ornament: earthdark:
tranche: investment: assize:

CRAPPAGH

to live inside: instruction: livid
inset: residence demands: a fuller
apisphere: in constellation: sweet
possessive: to like & to become:

vernier: your mark or measure:
recompense: for service: hectic
vermillion: cast in sand risks all,
a gradual persistence: ultralight:

MARGINALIA

"le conte dit: . . ."

I.

Remove the cloth.

Benzine removes stains. Take off your overcoat.

Take off—pull off—gloves, hat, boots.

Love deprives men of their reason.

II.

He is at work, at
play. The return
will prove difficult. We
wonder the whole time
whether it's true.

There were two, three,
several of us.

Her friend is waiting for her in
the living room. She is very ill, much
better. She took
three years to write it down.

How do you stand with your . . . (They are always
quarreling.) Today is the tenth. The house is for rent.

To be in bed, that's what comes of not
waking. The village lies below the castle, were it not for my
rheumatism, had it not been for the rain. Books lie on the table.
The truth
lies between these two extremes. You are not
paying attention to
what I say. Your mind is wandering.

III.

In search of truth, in quest of the source of the Nile, always an eye to his own interests.

He orders a search for deserters.

I run to find a doctor.

On further investigation, I discover refinements of cruelty. He dresses with studied elegance, with meticulous care. To seek after friendship. To trace the author of a crime. To find the value of an unknown quality.

The dictionary.

I look up a word.

Chandler
doesn’t get his name mentioned
dresses
stops to snarl
pauses
turns over a few witty sayings
throws the radio in the ditch
does exercises

Penrose
gives an impression of genuine awareness
signifies
turns to the active role
is actually conscious
is not likely to be wrong
considers natural selection
chooses to evolve

Red Lotus of Chastity
goes to hang herself
ties a noose
kicks the drum
dangles from the tree
sounds like *la-la-la*
goes home with the money
barks

Graves
harbours countless examples
fights in the Civil War
has a more urgent sound
troops, stoops, droops

probably occurred to Browning
puts it at a thousand cavaliers
still hungry and thirsty

Buchan
leaves the rails
seizes ironclads
begins to question me
is backed with German money
proclaims a Holy War
has fallen pretty flat
has been disappointed

Hardy
nameless
fights you
rides like hell
writes it down in cipher
guards against accidents
comes to poor Prussia
is but surmise

Predicate Logic
refers back
carries no subject matter
is left standing
can coax vast regions
is faithful enough for most purposes
can be taken in stride
has shown

Mme. d'Aulnoy
s'instruise en quelque manière
craint de l'avenir
est dans une continuelle inquiétude
regrette quelquefois la tranquillité
se donne beaucoup de mouvement
n'épargne ni son argent ni sa force
ne peut se défendre

Kierkegaard
sits
prompts by whispers
is inconspicuous
wishes to be overlooked
strides out prominently
draws every eye
impersonates a distinct individual

Nietzsche
suffers
finds no sustenance
is reverenced
is dull
is so famous!
is offended
can still pose

Boehme
walks about
looks on with compassion
knows *Larva*
has great fear and greatest anguish
does not want to die
fears the world's ridicule
implores grace

v.

You are here.

I see you.

"Physically" here.

I see you, with the reason of my eye.

On an intellectual screen.

Flesh appears.

Obscure. Because I am thinking of something.

After so many parentheses, what can there be that is not hypothetical?

VI.

book
bell
pig

to be

body of a wave disem-
bodied, long road and
lapse of time

become

bondage
bound

to bring forth
boodle

build
booth
dwell among but

how find the message, how
know it's for me

ha ha he says *ha ha ha ha*
she answers *hum hum hum*

VII.

Unity as overlay. Underpinning.

possible   *paint*   *world*   *actual*   *picture*

Within.

A daydream, facing outward.

Besideness.   Betwixtness.   Nextness.

Place.

Places.

Creaturely.

viii.

I am lost.

And, “I am lost,” says
the dreamer.

And, “I have lost
all,” the dreamer
cries, “life
flows away in tears.”

And love, “colorless
in my lungs . . .”

Or in the humor of the
eye, ashes . . .

“I do not
know,” says the dreamer, “where
my beloved is.”

Lungs
gray
mottled.

“And I do not know . . .”

I do not
know.

“. . . where I am.”

IX.

stone walls
fence conceivably

bunched

mittens
stockings
underpants, no
horse of her own

less than
confident, repetition and
refrain

late

to undergo
the most, implied

October

x.

fits of forgotten rage
unfinished
undefined
why

in a certain field

carve gardens

decorate the wind

so as to get talked about

stir the trees, like
a blind man seeing

like a bust of Dante

XI.

He is entirely engrossed in his work.

The old plan is
dead. This one
is by Gauguin.

Such being the case, he is
good-tempered, the finest
going. He is from London.

He is the stationmaster.

He belongs to the municipal
council. Are
you a father?

He is not with the party. *If I
were king . . .*

Will you join our
party, make one of us? Let *a* be
the base of our triangle.

He is a friend of
man, mortal.

XII.

in our daily
rounds we

up, down, right

turning now to
theory

left, forward

consider a painter's
eye

back

lymphlike
in the chambers

apart

what could be less glamorous

XIII.

A notion of me, from what's on my shelves.

Up my sleeve.

(Life and reality not *entirely* separate.)

Photos of great paintings.

Hieroglyphics on a turnip.

Galileo's ship at sea. Einstein's train.

A day, considered as a span of time, period gone through. "God is my witness," cries the knight, "never shall it be said to my reproach that, for fear, I failed to leave by the door I entered."

To think. Doubtful root.

Guarded, the garden door, by the fool.

Slipped, quick, past what I saw, down a memory-slide.

Nothing between duck and doorjamb.

Bow and arrow—bow *or* arrow—uncertain which.

Time's bric-a-brac.

Death can be represented.

Vulture. Possible root.

To be afraid. To be depressed. To breathe.

Death can be represented as a bar of soap.

Monuments labeled. We remain anonymous and unattached.

Others have thought me. Mainland, or the thing on the water. Ah, the Psalmist thinks—grown older—I may dwell in the house of the Lord, but not forever.

A different name for you each time we meet: there's *my* romance—my novel.

Alas for those whose exile is on holy ground.

XIV.

to guess the truth

to despise Rubens, to inter-
rupt succession, let temporalities
overlap

long road, lapse
of time

ELIZABETH WILLIS

ALABAMA

for Maria Ragland Davis

What you are or could be
What you carry or care for

The sample, the given
The collection, the control

Does it ring, is it ringing
true or false

What you felt didn't matter
to the world outside

The cell, the molecule
Its history, locatable systems

Gun stuck to handle
handle stuck to gun

See the smoke pouring out of
the future, the building

Temper this viewpoint
with obsidian or glass

Kill the light that was burning
through the middle of the screen

What is your position
in the room, at the table

The scene crackles open
who you are or could be

A bullet gasps
at the blouse

at the forehead, the thumb
as the air becomes solid

These are the things
it can do to the stem

Paper covers anger
Rock covers flesh

Someone will say something evil
is crazy

Someone will always say
it was nothing

Someone will take
all you are or could be

as a given, as proof of
a mistake in the landscape

Someone tries to drain
all the color from the room

In the end, as the ending
of a given or proof

what you are or carried
can't be covered, will be found

SERVICE INDUSTRY

Can anyone help me
anyone at all

Being forced to the surface
of a stanza

The darkness in a house
like the darkness in a book

These base things mistranscribed
as hunger

Pity the brick
that knows where it's going

Pity the belt
that moves up ahead

ELIZABETH WILLIS

NO MAN IS AN ISLAND

Being cast, a summer
is only part of the green

Being touched, the leaf
withdraws, as a gun

recoils from its bullet
The rest is history

ELIZABETH WILLIS

CURSIVE

There goes the ink that bled this river dry.
A voice as sweet as a tarball
you can't follow across the purple hills,
unmeant to be touched, of turtles.
This postcard smells of plastic
not paper. This beach is touching
everything I used to know
about a country which to speak of
is to lie, to let it lie for you
with its purple dividing line
between the arrows of the map.

So a river can exist inside the sea.
And the sea will have no reverie
inside the letters of a name
we're trying not to look away from.
That voice is not a human voice.
An inhuman wing of government
is not a bird, it's a shovel
made of diamonds
beating down the air.

The voice says yes,
this picture is trying, will be a trial.
It says the shiny purple river
is so gemlike, so delta-force,
couldn't we follow its dark cursive
across the flow chart
of unmeaning and undoing
as if it were just an irreversible dream?
Yes, a fish can drown.

SAM WITT

NEW MOON

It just slipped off my wrist & glinted a last time
on its way down, sterling silver disc, cold new moon,
disappeared into the waters when I was nine,
at the beach. & for weeks after,
I could hear my father's wristwatch ticking,
at night, big as the ocean, as my breathing slowed . . .
That woman for instance has blue eyes
when the sky begins to glow like melted liquid sapphire tonight
& the pond burns off its heavy water at dusk.
That woman opens her blue eyes somewhere out there,
in the desert. Her gravity turns me even now[1]
nights I slip from her wrist out of bed,
then rain down her dry cheeks. Therefore, by the pond,
in the dark, I'm a moonflower. Her face is gone
but it speaks to me in extinct light.
I'm rooted like a waterlily into that disappearance when You,
Black Moon, slide down the tree limbs unseeable,
a majestic liquid being passed from tree to tree
through this portal, tethered to a body, invisible, black,
heavy, fire. Try to think with your skin she said.
Close your eyes, slide down the snapped tree limbs
but it's too late. That's how long it takes
to burn a single human heart at full fathom tonight,
as long as it takes the disappeared moonlight
to search the black corridor of a deer's eye, then move on.
Black bodiless jewel, spill the liquid out of my eye in a single
whisper You leave behind in this flesh, ghostly female,
psychic whisper hollow as a god,
Speak darkly of shedding because, because—

---

[1] Across skyfuls of liquid sapphire now with a woman's form in it, to where the people evade their very own lives. Wed Sep 22 2010 10:53:01 (cdt) via web

when I remove my socks therefore, my jeans,
it's like tearing off a bandage but slowly.
You cannot enter the sky by wading into this pond,
though the clouds hang here suspended
like cottonballs in formaldehyde.
In dark light, in liquid fire, it tells me,
You're trapped in a body by the light of ten thousand sins.
You can't simply disappear but this damaged self does wade away.
The entrance to the kingdom of heaven is everywhere
like the new moon but you can't
just because you contain the sky, enter it, not down here,
not when salvation is saving up light you can't,
not when the disappeared light bathes you in its cold,
redtail's cry, swift, invisible, the kind
you only hear when *you're* the prey & just before,
when the dark forest in this green eye
consists entirely of rain & the horizons
touch nothing but themselves & melt, & even her blue eye
simply vanishes like a coastal shelf, or a city,
into the sea, with its voices—when sound
escapes these words, then it will happen.
I shall call my pupils Stargazer Lilies until then
because they open in the dark, they look back,
above me, into the shattered starlight, far back into the past.
They feed on this new dark light & after.
They navigate by the starchart gone out
in her drowned eye like a xerox of the ocean.
Speak to me in a distant breathing over the telephone.
Speak to me in the droning of disappeared honeybees,
Stargazer, dark light, desert honey, wild bloom,
blue eye, green eye, in a bedroom, until then:
all the vanished honeybees have surrendered
into an oceanic droning within us.
We shall inherit the Kingdom of Oblivion.
The insects shall inherit the earth.

BOOK NOTES

If You Knew Then What I Know Now, **by Ryan Van Meter**
Sarabande Books, 2011
reviewed by Nicholas Maistros

In the first essay of Ryan Van Meter's revealing and intensely personal collection, we are offered a memory: the author at age five in the back of a station wagon with his friend Ben, also five, and introduced as "the first brown-eyed boy I will fall for but...not...the last." Van Meter goes on to recount the stumbling beginnings of his life as a different kind of boy—holding hands with his friend, confessing his love for him, and finally asking the boy to marry him. They are effortless, simple, these initial moments of self-discovery, until, after little Ben accepts little Ryan's marriage proposal, Van Meter writes, "suddenly my mother feels very close." She turns around in her seat and confronts her son—"You shouldn't have said that. ... Boys don't marry other boys." And she pressures him to acknowledge—"Okay? Did you hear me?"

While this short essay, aptly titled "First," expressly locates Van Meter's friend Ben as a first love, the actual "first" here, what acts as the initiation for the retrospective journey the writer, and the reader, are about to take, is the reaction of someone close to him, the first time Van Meter's queerness is recognized, scrutinized, and corrected, the first time he is made to feel ashamed of who he is.

But while this collection delves into notions of identity, shame, and repression, it manages to avoid entirely the trap that too many memoirs have so easily fallen into: this is not a writer who feels sorry for himself; his book refuses to wallow in the hardships of growing up different (though these hardships and humiliations are present and described with unflinching clarity and precision). The subject of this book, conversely, is the people who surround this "odd" young man—relatives, girlfriends, boyfriends, the kids on the baseball team his father forces him to join—and their reactions to him.

In the essay "Lake Effect," Van Meter presents a moment at age eleven in which, surrounded by his father's friends on a

fishing trip, he becomes fascinated by the image of one man's shirtless body: "without being entirely conscious of it, I've been staring at Jim's bare chest…the twin circles as wide as dinner plates between his armpits. … His flat belly… his arms, tough muscles like embedded baseballs." When his father notices and tells young Ryan, in front of everyone, to stop—"*Don't do that*"—Van Meter details his mortification with the utmost lyricism: "My shame is solid, and I am immobile under the mass of it; my feet feel prickly like they've fallen asleep. All of us sit and wait for something, but it doesn't seem to arrive." And while a lesser memoirist would stop there, leaving it at that moment of personal significance, Van Meter goes further, wades deeper into the memory, sifts for the inner workings of the other participants: "I understand now that the men weren't just looking at me; they knew what kind of boy acted the way I did. What they wanted to find out was what kind of a man my father was."

Van Meter does not seek, however, to finger those who've hurt him, to blame and to criticize, though his presentation of such incidents is forthright. In "Tightrope," Van Meter's brother, Garrett, finds an old, unflattering yearbook photo of the young man a teenaged Ryan has just gone out with in order to prove to their parents what freakdom may await his big brother. But in the next essay, Garrett is able to find an appreciation for his brother's differences in a simple yet redemptive, intimate moment—trying on a jacket his brother has picked out for him. Even the book's title, *If You Knew Then What I Know Now,* suggests compassion for those who didn't quite understand him as he came of age. For Van Meter's look into his past is not one of self-analysis and therapeutic catharsis—this is a writer who, even as he writes, even as he relives times of anxiety and evasion, is comfortable with himself. What he goes back for, like a queer, modern-day reversal of the prodigal son, are the others. In this, the reader is brought to understand the real courage of Van Meter's literary undertaking, this return to the uglier moments of youth in order to better understand, and many times redeem, those who brought him turbulence. In the title essay, Van Meter recounts an episode of extreme adolescent torment only to show the guilt still felt by his tormenter years later. In the innovative and intellectually stimulating "To Bear, To Carry: Notes on 'Faggot,'" Van Meter recounts instances of the

word's use against him and his gay friends not to garner pity, but to dive into the word's etymology, its origins and developments, its accrued meanings and reflections of societies past and present. This is a writer whose exploration is not powered by emotion alone (though the vulnerabilities risked throughout are commendable), but by the magic of language and, ultimately, an untamed curiosity for the condition that is living a life of, and around, an "other."

By the end of this collection, the reader is not met with a world too awful and cruel to allow for differences of sexual orientation (there are indeed moments of levity, such as his grandmother's discovery of a young Ryan in one of her Sunday dresses, and also moments of tenderness, found most palpably in Van Meter's depictions of his first true relationship with a man, a love whose wake persists well after the affair's conclusion). Rather, the reader shares with the essayist the gift of being different, not only in sexual identity but also in sensibility. For it is this odd young man—who was certain aliens were watching him through the roof at night; who chose books over sports; who wanted to be liked by the weird girl with "apple juice" hair; who didn't only observe the gestures of those around him, but who questioned them, who stored them and returned to them again and again—it is this man's collection of eccentricities that has allowed for such a close, critical, and generous rendering of the people in Van Meter's life, the people in all of our lives, who force us to reconsider who, in fact, we really are.

***The Weather Stations,* by Ryan Call**
Caketrain, 2011
reviewed by Joe Hall

The apocalypse is a reliable vein to mine for artists seeking an audience. Recently, as if following the lead of the global-disaster cinema of the nineties and early aughts, literary fiction has vigorously returned to global extinction in stark, biblical works such as *The Road* or the glop and spume of Blake Butler's *Scorch Atlas*. And why not? The specter of a long nuclear winter has been replaced by a proliferating unease about global warming's megatornadoes and tsunamis, parasites overrunning immune

systems and firewalls, cell phones filling our heads with cancer. The problems, however, with most global-disaster narratives are multiple. Just two: They can indulge in transparent moralizing or fail to provide little more than the pornographic lure of an intimate brush with extinction. Ryan Call's debut short story collection, *The Weather Stations,* defuses these problems with élan.

The ten-story collection begins with the aftermath—a surreal fantasia of rebuilding cities from clouds themselves. Given that this is a genre where we can be duped into rooting for the survival of humanity, no matter that its representatives are sons of bitches, this is a canny move. We become invested in *how* Call's characters live with profound crisis as opposed to *if* they live through it. Through a voice alternately clinical and sympathetic, the subsequent nine stories offer a mosaic that reveals Call's sensitivity to the nature of the individual and the American family.

And the disaster here? The weather. Not the weather as in one killer storm or flood, but various phenomena, such as fleecy clouds that one enters and never exits, or intelligent lightning. The characters see weather the way scientists see it—as a system whose coordination manifests itself in discrete, classifiable, and, in the context of each story, curiously unpredictable and fatal ways. Its capriciousness comes to seem vindictive, the sign of sentience. And much as hurricanes are named Irma, the weather here is anthropomorphized, referred to as if it were making decisions: "The weather lumbered through the fuzzy background of our youth, occasionally leaping forward, taking our city hostage," and "Wherever we went, people recognized us as disciples of the weather and heralded our comings and goings." Does this sound weird? Call's world *is* weird. Cranes push clouds around, architects plaster fractures in the sky, and victims of lightning strikes become addicted to this disfiguring electricity. Yet this weirdness and its easy allegorical implications are complicated by the familiar suburban milieu in which most of the stories begin.

In "I Pilot My Bed Deep into the Night," the protagonist is a young boy whose older brother, a pilot, is lost protecting their domed suburbia from the weather. Oblivious to the weather's

advances and taking advantage of his parents' obsession with it, the boy builds his own weather-combating airplane from backyard scraps and items appropriated from his brother. In the face of nothingness, his yearning for a heroic maturity is made heartbreaking by his simultaneous indulgence in escapist fantasy:

> They yell that I must come downstairs, that we must hurry before it is too late, before the storm breaks through and carries us away.
>
> I sit quietly, alone in my room, swaddled in my brother's long underwear, his flight suit baggy over my body, the gloves loose around my hands, bright parachute cloth billowing behind my back. I wear goggles and the leather flight cap, and I pilot my bed deep into the night.

Call's characters are often isolated and deranged by the weather. Husbands, wives, and children are separated as if the weather is an inherently bifurcating social force.

But not every story is bleak. "Consider the Buzzard" gives us a suburban family that extends its care outward, irrationally taking hundreds of birds wounded by the weather into their home. In the middle of crisis, the birds give the family a purpose that organizes their actions. Here, as elsewhere, Call plays it straight, convincing the reader to accept this absurd situation as plausible via the precision and sonic liveliness of his language:

> Flightless from trauma or some corruption of instinct, they crept around the house, heads bobbing stupidly above useless wings, hopping and stopping, turning a wide eye longingly up at our high ceilings. They called to each other with weakened voices and drank from a bowl of water he had placed in the middle of the family room.

Part of the magic of these stories is that point of view sticks so closely to each first-person narrator and their immediate con-

cerns that the reader does not suspect for a second that this is some sort of ecological parable. Tethered to the first person, there is no framing of why the weather is hostile or who is to blame. The weather simply is. What unites Call's treatment of his characters is a generous evenhandedness. None of them does the right or the wrong thing—they simply react. And the stories' total absorption in the crisis of the present often gives Call an opportunity to show off a remarkable capacity for image-making:

> Our own house then imploded, nearly tipping us over, and for a moment I thought we would be crushed, but instead, the motor home lifted slightly, catching the light air below its tires, the balloon billowed out above us and we shot away, up into the sky. Through the bubble, the crater of our house and the neighboring houses smoked and flamed, the streets became smaller and smaller, and the neighborhood disappeared into the suburban radials of the town. All around, fire spread along the ground, smoke and dust clouds swirled, and the trails of flames and detritus illuminated the pathways of the heavy air columns as they roamed the broken earth.

Many writers can pull off muscular, puritanical fire, but it is a detail as precise and resonant in this confusion as a community's disappearance into radials that suddenly organizes the image. The house is positioned within a larger, rigid, impersonal infrastructure that is itself being destroyed, signaling the sudden and extreme remoteness of the narrator not just from her home and neighborhood but from society in the largest sense. Call's collection is full of these kinds of deft shifts in perspective and scope.

In the quintessential epiphany story, characters learn how to mentally calibrate themselves to avoid viscosity as they turn among the gears of a largely mundane world. Sometimes the lesson is learned in time; more often, it is too late. In Call's stories, both the characters and the world itself, its very physics, are in flux. Instead of achieving a lasting mental concordance with this world, his characters achieve mastery of its conditions

only briefly, before they are again forced to shift. Many of these stories, so frequently told from the perspective of children or young adults, are stories about growing up—or the illusion of doing so. One finally masters the mystical and terrifying world of childhood only to wake up in the banal and crushing atmosphere of adulthood. And then the winds there start to shift. This alertness also sets Call's collection apart from so much magical realism and quirk where the mundane gets weird and that's it; instead, a profoundly strange world gets stranger and what comes into sharp focus are the all-too-human yet still unexpected ways his narrators bumble and swerve through these curiously gentle end of days.

***Works & Days,* by Dean Rader**
Truman State University Press, 2010
reviewed by Eric Weinstein

Modeled on the poetic work of the same name by the Greek writer Hesiod, Dean Rader's *Works & Days* (winner of the 2010 T. S. Eliot Prize) is, like its namesake, an account of labor, the various roles it plays in our lives, and its relationship to other aspects of our worldly experiences, human and non-. In "Ocean Beach at Twilight: 14," Rader asks: "Who's to say the stars understand / their heavy labor, or the moon its / grunt work across the hard curve of absence?" To the poet, labor is not the province of mankind alone, but its joys and sorrows are our own to bear.

The narrator's presence, often underplayed or even absent in the idyllic poems of other writers imitating the classical style, firmly grounds Rader's poetry in the phenomenology of human life. In the opening poem, "Traveling to Oklahoma for My Grandmother's Funeral, I Write a Poem about Wallace Stevens," Rader writes about "the priest attending to Stevens" who swore "he made a deathbed conversion // To Catholicism, a claim his daughter denies. / I deny him nothing." The agency of Rader's narrator, his ability to offer confirmation or denial even in the face of his grandmother's perishing, brings the simple facts of his labors—travel, burial—into line with the emotional landscape of his days.

Whereas Hesiod's text serves as a sort of hybrid mythology, farmer's almanac, and moral treatise, Rader's is somehow subtler. His poems draw out the stories and epiphanies stirring below the surface of description and philosophical query. Instead of Hesiod and Perses, the principal voices of the 700 BC *Works and Days,* Rader takes up the personae of Arnold Lobel's children's book characters, Frog and Toad. (One wonders whether this owes something, at least in part, to Lobel's last Frog and Toad title, 1979's *Days with Frog and Toad.*) In "Frog and Toad Confront the Alterity of Otherness," Rader explores the epistemological questions of knowing whether one exists—and the ontological mystery of existence, period—through the interaction between the two friends. The poem ends:

> Good old Frog, he thinks.
> That bastard knows I hate toast.
>
> Toad spreads the jam like a man
> might smooth mortar on a brick
>
> for which there is no building.
> Thank you, he says.
>
> Thank you Frog.

Rader's poetry is remarkable in that it so often simultaneously attends to the reader's senses of emotional, rhetorical, and aesthetic urgency; his poems ask the difficult questions in accessible ways, ways rendered all the more effective via wry humor and an eye for the darkly poignant.

If there is an underlying fault in *Works & Days,* it is that its author occasionally substitutes bloodless abstraction for the emotionally salient image, as in the poem "Song for the Shell Shaker": "Maybe it was the day when something passed / between the woman / and the words she spoke, / a private understanding / like the silent nods of the blind." "Ocean Beach at Twilight: 14" draws the reader's attention to "the beach's pillar of stillness"; "Ocean Beach at Twilight: 41" invites us to "drink up the darkness." These abstractions detract from the force of the work, its emotional import. We want the blood! We want to

see the labor and sorrow, the victories and joys that life entails, and not merely the Platonic form to which they answer. Give us "April beaten back like a shoreline" ("Self Portrait: Blizzard") over the stillness, "the inside of a black balloon" ("Frog Loses Sleep Puzzling over Parallel Universes") over the darkness.

Rader's *Works & Days* is, like Hesiod's long poem, ultimately concerned with the metaphysical over the physical. It is not simply an attempt to answer "What is there?" but, more importantly, "*What is it like?*" Rader works to answer the age-old questions that have troubled us since the days of Hesiod and before, and like *Works and Days,* Rader's collection uncovers a number of small, startling truths beneath the nebulous heading of THE HUMAN CONDITION, such as "*This is what we have,* says Frog. / Even if the wave function collapses, / we still have this." Later, in "Waking Next to You on My 39th Birthday or The Other Arm," he writes: "The waterbirds circle and keep circling." Like them and like Hesiod, Rader asks and attempts to answer these questions over and over. As readers, we take in the poet's work and try to do the same. And for all our circling, regardless of what happens, we still have *this,* whatever *this* might be.

***Black Seeds on a White Dish,* by Shira Dentz**
Shearsman Books, 2010
reviewed by Holly Welker

Contrast is at the heart of Shira Dentz's first collection of poetry, *Black Seeds on a White Dish,* a volume in which "Something at the edge of danger / Turns into its opposite, and circles" ("The Wind of Madness Has Broken a Skin"). Over and over, these poems explore how longing, love, and lust turn into bereavement, betrayal, and abandonment; how speech turns into silence; how presence turns into absence; and what's left when we confront these painful transformations.

The concept of the present absence, a fond and futile remembrance of someone irrevocably lost, is first explored in English in John Donne's poem "Present in Absence." "To hearts that cannot vary," Donne writes, "Absence is Presence, Time doth tarry." But the hearts in *Black Seeds on a White Dish* are all too

variable; therefore absence is absence, and although the speaker in Dentz's book might have searched for "something that felt eternal, / something to count on" ("The Night Is My Purse, and Here's What I Empty Out:"), time does anything but stand still.

Dedicated to Dentz's younger brother, Asher, the book may well have emerged from the poet's need "to write a requiem to the universe, even if it lasted only 40 seconds" for a loss so profound it's both incomprehensible and unutterable. After the loss of "A son, a brother" in "The Grasses Unload Their Grief," grieving survivors grapple not only with loss but the shame it engenders, ending up so emotionally deadened they seem mute:

> Instead of words, my mother uttered syllables that fit
>   onto silver
> teaspoons whose glossy oval backs flew into the sky.
> Instead of words, my father blew cinders.

This emotional muteness is one of the most threatening elements of the book. "To speak is to cross onto a highway," we read in "I carry"; certainly this is a world where speech is always dangerous and sometimes impossible. Blurbs for the book repeatedly reference the phrase "nothing to do but let the form of things take over," the final line from "Autobiography," a poem that brilliantly captures the terror of this pervasive muteness, part of a hell as banal and horrible as any Sartre could imagine:

> I was afraid my life would be like visiting my grandparents
> when I was little: green carpet, big ugly sofas, and no one
> having anything to say.

It's not just grief that renders people mute, however, but the disconnect between those who remain. A bubby "always alive and dying" resolutely "sticks to her rule never to talk to old people or goyim" ("10:01"). "Poem for my mother who wishes she were a lilypad in a Monet painting" declares that the sound of the mother's "voice has always been a fragment." But it's the father who most thoroughly silences those around him: "With my father between us nothing could be said" ("-TUDE").

And yet, many things are said in this book, which is lyri-

cal, wise, and generous, partly because it's written by someone who doesn't really need to announce that she is "a sucker for tenderness, delicacy" ("U") as well as an attentive, appreciative observer of the cruel and the mundane.

Of the book's many pleasures, one is its deliberate, explicit aesthetic. "Some people like to find unassociated bits of things and put them together," the poet points out in "I carry," and she is clearly one such person, as evidenced by the title. The book teems with glorious and fertile juxtapositions, most dazzlingly in "A Thin Green Line," an exploration of green designed to help the speaker understand her father, whose birthday is also Saint Patrick's Day, which comes just before the vernal equinox. Too complicated and dense to quote effectively, the body of the poem works through association and accretion, rising to an invocation of "*Ambiguous Loss   when the lost person is still physically present but emotionally absent*"—which the father clearly is.

When the speaker announces, "I will appreciate disconnected bits of form" in the poem "The Existing Lover in Everyday Life," she is telling us about an approach to both poetics and relationships. As is the case with any good book of poems, *form* in this volume helps create and reinforce the music and meaning of the poetry, but it also refers to shapes and patterns in the poet's life. In "Photographs," a prose poem about the illness that killed the speaker's brother, she notes, "Shapes on people's bodies told things." Many of the poems work to figure out what those shapes convey.

The most disconnected "bit of form" is the speaker's father, who is "a star":

> not in the sky or picture of,
> not as in rock or a movie—
> one that has no relationship with space

"Space" here could easily be "outer," but it's worth pointing out other meanings: Something with no relationship to space has no form; form determines relationship to space. Space is what an absence creates, the person-shaped hole left in our lives after death or abandonment. This is explicit in "Rorschach: Last week, the moon dipped close to the gray streets, a surprise

guest, huge and yellow," a long lament for a lost lover. Wanting to "[build] a dictionary of definitions on your body," the speaker begins, "First, your shape—an omission." Conversation with her mother leads the speaker to reflect on "the spaces between my heartbeats / lengthening (like shadows)" ("Poem for my mother"). And when something dies, "What's left is a hum, then / silence: black boxes in a crossword" ("Limn").

Of course, space is an essential requirement if something is going to flourish, thrive, and grow gracefully. Although often presenting stunted people in stunted relationships, the poems themselves are anything but. They freely and ambitiously explore the contrasts of love and loss, speech and silence, absence and presence. And the book as a whole demonstrates an understanding of the need for catharsis, that emptying out of our psychological interior so that space for new states exists. It ends with "A Ritual," both the title of the final poem and something almost all of us do: interact with a lost love in whatever ways remain to us—in this case, via e-mail on a summer morning. Barometric pressure builds; a storm is required to relieve it. That pressure becomes a presence, and at "Lunchtime, the presence felt like a lover relieving your absence." The storm itself remains absent, however, so catharsis consists of recognizing that

> This is the robe of loss,
> the wind creates a gully in the fabric.

Neither comfortable nor flattering, the robe of loss is all too often what we have to put on. Dentz wears it well.

The Cloud Corporation, by Timothy Donnelly
Wave Books, 2010
reviewed by Andrew Wessels

In the short time since its publication, Timothy Donnelly's second collection of poems, *The Cloud Corporation,* has sparked a wide range of critical acclaim. Many reviews have focused on the mix of high and low culture, the melding of mythology and capitalism, and the ability to merge formal restraint with the exploding energy that Donnelly incorporates in these poems.

Donnelly uses roughly one hundred and fifty pages to allow his work to expand throughout the worlds he creates, touching on all manner of themes, subjects, and styles. Despite this length and breadth, my first reading ended after eleven words: the title of the first poem, "The New Intelligence," and the first line: "After knowledge extinguished the last of the beautiful."

What is this new intelligence we find in this collection? The new is not one of formal origination; lines are almost invariably left-justified, and the poems often employ traditional forms such as the villanelle. The key to the title is in the third word, *intelligence*. Innovating the content of the poems is more important than innovating a new form in which to put the content. The space of the poem becomes a receptacle in which rhetoric, emotional amplitude, and intellectual considerations are carefully placed.

The post-apocalyptic vision of this poem continues throughout the collection, referencing the events of 9/11. The new intelligence is, in part, a reference to the new situation and uses of military intelligence in the months and years following this day. This was the moment when, unbeknownst to any of us at the time, our lives and understanding of the world changed drastically. We were about to embark on a roller coaster through terror, pain, togetherness, hope, betrayal, and ultimately disillusionment. We can recall our own memories of the events as Donnelly recounts: "I won't be dying after all, not now, but will go on living dizzily / hereafter in reality, half-deaf to reality, in the room / perfumed by the fire that our inextinguishable will begins." These lines aptly describe the struggle of the survivors—the realization of survival as a blessing and as the knowledge that what was reality has completely changed.

To read this opening poem, however, and to read this entire collection, as just a response to this event is to limit its ultimate power. These lines speak not just to New Yorkers that afternoon but to survivors of all tragedies, large and small, shared and personal. Composing these poems over the nearly ten years since that day, Donnelly has tapped into a universal sensation, one that does not depend solely on this event for its poetic power. As we're now at the ten-year anniversary of 9/11, these verses point us toward something beyond the event itself, implicating us in our current situation and giving us our own ability to ap-

proach a more virtuous world: "Just to see the gold bolt through air / is explanation enough, a knowledge that opens itself up / without ending, an end in itself without having to conclude. Just to breathe on purpose is an act of faith in this world."

September 11 is not an event for which we need poetry in order to relive. The event has taken on an immediate visual life. The video and images can be called up in mere moments on any computer with Internet access. We can watch the planes fly into the towers, we can watch the towers collapse, we can witness the people falling. Donnelly recognizes that the tragic poem in the age of digital reproduction has to take on a different role. We are our own witnesses of the events, and the poem can do nothing to alter that. What can one write about if one has no reason to re-create the images? Rather than causing a roadblock, *The Cloud Corporation* becomes something greater as it challenges itself to break new ground. Donnelly moves beyond the immediate moment, finding a universal truth in how we come to terms with the post-tragic world and our condition as survivors in an altered landscape: "I reach out for small comforts, everyday items: / an unread book, urban water, any refreshment, but my touch / dissolves them." The question at hand is: how do we live now?

"Dream of a Poetry of Defense" blends found language from Percy Bysshe Shelley's *A Defence of Poetry* and a section of *The 9/11 Commission Report*. The poem's location as a common ground between these two texts creates a situation that goes beyond being a poem about 9/11 and into the realm of being a poem about how we live in a world where 9/11 can happen: "a proposal for living, an epitome, a permanent spark // through American darkness, barbarous as nightingale." The poem touches on common fears, making them overtly common, which highlights that these are not fears of terrorism, but fears of living. These are the same fears, the same language, used during the Cold War, used during World War II, used by the Romantic Shelley to defend assaults on the necessity of poetry. The poem shifts from a litany of sentences beginning "As . . ." (a recounting of what has occurred and what is occurring) to a litany of sentences beginning with "Let . . ." (a vision of the future): "Let portions of our being. Let chapter the invention . . ." until we "[l]et the end of the battle be astonished birth of person."

The odd grammatical construction and the unexpected loss of the expected articles "the" and "a" in the poem's final sentence ask for further consideration. "The" occurs twice in the first half of the line, informing us that we are talking about the end of the battle, the singular and particular. What the end of the battle begets is not a singular astonished birth of a person, but rather the profusion of "astonished birth of person" throughout the world—the continuous new intelligence, a statement of hope that we can make ourselves anew, and that that act is in itself a good thing.

The challenge Donnelly begins with is how we are able to "walk back home" after tragedy. In a sense, this is our daily task: to live in a world filled with innumerable horrors. Donnelly strips away the walls and barriers his self constructs, forcing himself to confront a new reality—reality. What we are able to discern as we follow along on this path is the possibility of being virtuous in our own lives, a way to create this new reality as a better reality, one where we might be together. We are assured: "Make it happen, and whatever you need, / I'll be there for you, you know that. Even if it kills me."

***Ignatz,* by Monica Youn**
Four Way, 2010
reviewed by Adam Day

Reading Monica Youn's second volume of poetry, *Ignatz,* it is clear that one is encountering art that is not only accessible and freewheeling, but also astute in emotion and intellect. *Ignatz,* which was a 2010 National Book Award finalist, is based on George Herriman's famed comic strip, *Krazy Kat*, which mixed surrealism, playful gags, and poetic language. The strip ran from 1913 to 1944 and was the darling of William Randolph Hearst, as well as of intellectuals and artists such as de Kooning, Mencken, Kerouac, and E. E. Cummings, who wrote the introduction to the first printed collection of the strip.

The strip was set in Coconino County, Arizona, and featured a love triangle between its three main characters: the ambiguously gendered Krazy Kat, Ignatz Mouse, and Officer Bull Pupp. Krazy is in love with Ignatz, but Ignatz, who is married with three children, does not reciprocate. Instead, provoked or

unprovoked, he makes a habit of braining Krazy with bricks, which the cat takes as a sign of affection. Officer Pupp, in turn, nurses his own crush of sorts for Krazy, and jails Ignatz for his assaults on the cat over and over again. In the context of these relations, the brick itself becomes the fourth main character, really, while a human speaker seems to become the focus of a number of Youn's poems.

Youn's style in this volume puts particular emphasis on jump cuts, a technique heavily employed by Herriman in the iconoclastic strip. In Youn's hands, these jump cuts create a sense of substantive discontinuity—rapid changes of scene, situations that challenge the audience—and a pleasant twisting of the medium's forms and conventions:

> (he is ninety feet
> away) biting the
> backs of her thighs red
>
> blotches suffusing
> her cheeks I'm sorry
> please stop she says (he
>
> is four hundred feet
> away) please stop the
> cab (she opens the
>
> door) the cab stops she
> pushes a twenty
> through the slot (he is
>
> ("X as a Function of Distance from Ignatz")

That Youn makes no attempt to suspend the reader's disbelief as she refigures poetic themes—love and loss, sublimity and violence—that have otherwise become routine in *Ignatz* is genuinely wonderful, and you need not know a thing about *Krazy Kat* to be engaged. The poems here, including the handful of prose poems, are lyrical and subtle, using the fewest words possible to create detailed, imagistic poetry, as in "The Death of Ignatz," in which the lyric's power lies in the intensely "human," if not quite mystical, act of the not only animal, but celluloid hero:

Fallow lies Ignatz,
his salt hands

  helpless
  wicking

moisture from the air.

Youn also shifts from the telescopic to the microscopic with ease. Ignatz's atmospherics are colored by a loose flow of visually oneiric images, and the personality of the work is smart, irreverent, and energetic.

At the most basic level, *Ignatz* is a book about the limitations of language and communication, suggesting, along with the intense economy of Youn's poetry, that language might be unnecessary, if not to some extent impotent. These are, after all, poems in which even the landscape, given its arid desolation, can only give so much. It is also a book very much about the frustrations of interpretation: interpretation of another's words and actions in light of what we *hope* was meant, and in light of what they *may* have meant, or *did* in fact mean.

In turn, there is a good deal of emphasis on requests. Love, or at least desire, seems to insist on its relevance only to be interrupted and disappointed, time and again. There's something about both self-denial and missed chances in this; about the evolution of logic and emotion, or lack thereof; and about whether a given gesture (like hitting someone with a brick) can ever be fully satisfying for either party, particularly if it's misinterpreted:

the gap is where satisfaction helplessly
dissolves the way Ignatz now feels his anger
dissipating in the self-same gap between
the trigger and the smack between his anger
and the smack . . .

It is hard not to approximate the exertions of physical violence with the exertions of sex, particularly when it seems that our efforts, not least in the realm of love, often feel most legitimate when received with a bit of pain—provoked or unprovoked, real or imagined—as in "Ignatz Domesticus":

> She placed a saucer of water under her lamp and counted
> mosquitoes as they drowned
>
> Soot amassed in drifts in the corners of the room.
>
> She pressed her thumb into the hollow of his throat for
> a while and then let him go.

After all, in both *Krazy Kat* and in *Ignatz,* the brick for the morally ambiguous Ignatz and the sexually ambiguous Krazy becomes a kind of fetish—the tool in a game of S/M in which each throw of the brick seems to simultaneously memorialize desire and aloneness. In fact, the brick makes the characters who they are; there is no Krazy Kat, no Ignatz, without the object of the brick. So one can imagine Walter Benjamin's claim of a kind of intimacy—that children could still feel the hand of the worker on the handcrafted toy—projected onto the context of *Ignatz,* where Krazy encounters not only the pain of the blow but the sensation of Ignatz's hand upon it. Embedded in Ignatz's throwing of the brick is its impact on Krazy ("There can be no / launch, only // trajectory // in this elastic / room"). But *Ignatz* doesn't just suggest what objects might stand for, but what they might mean, in and of themselves. In fact, one of the most fascinating and prominent undercurrents of *Ignatz* is its concern with objects: doors, pins, valves, a policeman's glove, etc. In turn, *Ignatz* meditates upon the question of how we use objects to make meaning. For instance, the very opacity of the brick—something that cannot be gotten inside of—invites questions about the interior life of the object.

In *Ignatz* the cartoonish is neither surreal, per se, nor foreign, but speaks to the border between the magical and the mythical while simultaneously speaking to a real variation on situations and feelings we recognize perfectly, as in "Ignatz Oasis," which begins "When you have left me" and ends:

> The sun commences
> its gold prowl
>
> batting at tinsel streamers
> on the electric fan.

Crouching I hide
in the coolness I stole

from the brass rods
of your bed.

The power of *Ignatz* is in the way Youn uses these characters, twice removed from us by virtue of their cartoon-ness and animal-ness, to defamiliarize otherwise familiar experiences into ones that attain, in Bill Brown's words, "a new kind of presence" in our comprehension of the world. In other words, the world of *Krazy Kat* becomes an object through which a new and an old relation to objects, and personal histories, is being voiced.

CONTRIBUTOR NOTES

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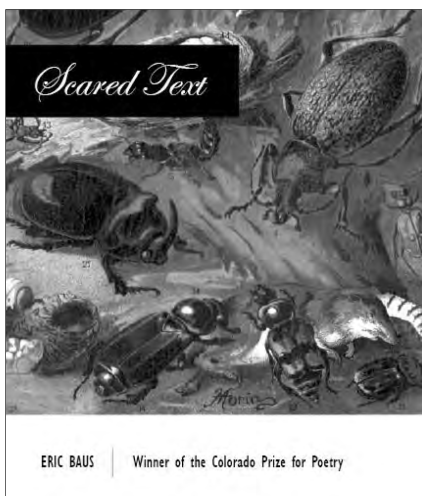

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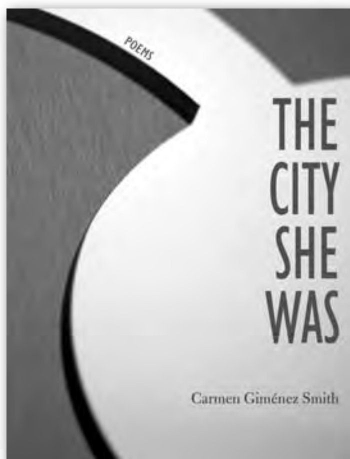

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