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CutBank

Fall/Winter 1980

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Cover painting by Ron Jenkins
A PAINTER, HIS MODEL AND A WOMAN LOOKING AT HATS

We wish these two could pose with the windows open,
modest in the sunlight's plain paint.
But it's 1913, the curtains are pulled.
The model sulks under her flame of red hair.
It's a hard job to fix her on canvas—
the painter must keep his crayon-pink lips to himself.
Does he want to lay down the brush, take his pipe from his mouth,
and turn to her?
There's neither time
nor peace in a shut-up room.
Faces of deep-sea fish keep rising from the paint spilled on the floor.
The air reeks of the sea, shadows breed.
And perhaps it's those oiled bodies,
fish, he must keep himself from.
The picture disturbs us.
We were told that people then
were simple and correct.
We were shown

the painting of a woman looking
at hats.

Her skirt is one brushstroke,
she glides evenly on the hem.
THE PART

Stories of synecdoche . . .
The corporate exec who couldn’t be bothered; so had himself leechled

and let that bottle of blood slugs blush in embarrassment, rile
in anger, for him. Or:

what happened to it, after she unwrapped the twine-tied linen in the brothel light, that

van Gogh had left on the ratted velvet? She dropped it once, surely.
And then? Where is it today, that mold-of-a-ziggurat, almost tiered for the stepping up of a priest—one sized of
course to the smallness but moaning in true full-felt theophany . . . Well I’ve heard the twelve men on the board of execs
go yes or no like a domino fall around their walnut table. I’m sure it’s important. But you say urgency and

I see Vincent, his arms crossed over his chest in confusion, the hands deep in the armpits like geese bent

back under wings for the night. Each wheat has its star. The wind wants stropping. And Vincent looks up,
near blind with it all, with the seraphs’ braille on that black, and hears the tight tooled skreek of every planet turning, yes and every wrist in Arles. 1889, the night with fire spirals. Sometimes, now, walking out in the tiny rust-tinged stinks of 1980, past the derricks and the other industrial metronomes, the site for the new municipal airport, that bar on East 6th where they kick your shit out good . . . oh there’s a mountain with a radar ear swivelling, swivelling, swivelling for the word from a star so far, pain comes as a pure red brushstroke, hope as a gold.
OPENING THE WINTER BLOSSOM

We wish on a full fire moon, 
on the perfect flat skull 
that once predicted nightmares.

Opening the winter blossom 
of an orchid black sky, 
Jupiter’s evening eye lifts 
the horizon, while we conjure 
old loves whose flowers blackened 
with frost, deciphering 
their irretrievable dying 
like informant parchments. 
The only spell we command 
is the harvest of both roots 
and fruits. New seeds germinate 
in our fibrous hands as we 
discover an onyx orchid 
which glows deep inside night’s 
bloom, patiently breathing.
SLOW DANCE

In the light Stieglitz photographed O'Keefe
we slow dance, my peignoir is open
my nipples are hard. I look away
confused by sleep
or sex. I am lost
in the thinness of the air,
in the lamp's craning neck.

I toss my hair from side to side. I could drown
in the landscape we inhabit, in the thicket
of your skin. We might marry,
see our lives through the dense light
of a chandelier, a mirror, a camas.

We confess the heat we live in
the room we wake in out of context.
Nothing is ordinary.
My hands are a calyx as I hold
your face. On the threshold of sleep
we linger on the camber
of the road unraveling
through the gold eye of my bracelet.
AMERICAN SCENE: A GRANT WOOD TRIPTYCH

(1) The Breaking of Iowa's Virgin Soil

Four strong horses drag a steel plow
deep into the tangled roots of untouched grassland.

One white frame house with a steep Gothic roof
upended from black soil and a red barn
set in the soft contours of these rolling hills.

Blocks of smooth round trees rise in
a kind of steamy haze that mixes sun with sweat.

The rooms are spliced open to bowls of snap beans,
mashed potatoes, platters of sweet corn, ham.
Warm bread, heavy butter, cream floating on
a pitcher of milk and the threshers on the back porch
washing up.

All this is heaped on a blue china plate,
elbows set on the table and the back-breaking
feast of work begins. Outside a windmill

spins water into a wood trough and someone
who still dreams of the earth turning
wrestles a girl farther and farther down
a row of corn leaves. Whatever they touch is

soft and pungent as a high load of hay
set out in a field.

Love is a strange word to drop here, between
hard chores and hot sun, but only here
can you be lost and in over your head
with nothing but high grass to see through.

(2) Victorian Survival

See how soft the land is now that you live in town. After a hard rain chunks of earth come loose with an easy twist of a pitchfork. You can hardly work a sweat up.

Even in these lean and hungry times a small detached human spirit hovers over the feed store and the dry goods.

And the ladies with teacups in their hands lay out the lineage that drift back to a gaunt New England figure from which everything earthy has been cleansed.

Here is the bitter busy work, waxing the carved edges of mahogany veneer and prying the starched curtains open on the narrow yard. She has carried

a potted plant cross-country in a wagon and set it down here on the one side of the river with a tidy parlor.

How to get back to it without leaving the front porch. These are the grandfather's dreams as he loads his rods and rifles in the back seat

and brings home trout and pheasant. In this chair
with pipe and newspaper spread out he is
the engineer again on one of the rare occasions
when he speaks of growing up on the farm
and leaving it with some affection.

(3) Death on the Ridge Road

The curves are more dangerous now. Yellow lines
bend in the middle of black asphalt.

A black sedan is stalled midroad and straddles
the center line. A truck flies around the curve
at high speed and the Ford in the foreground
slowly moves toward the scene of a three-car collision.

These are the roads we remember: two lanes and always
slightly dangerous when wet. At this moment

rain pours from the dark clouds and the drops
settle on the high strands of wire on wood poles.

On each side of the road, lines of barbed fence
a trail of fresh skid marks. The junked parts
of a family excursion spin into the ditch
alongside the smashed side-swiped fender of

a wild drunken party. The careening load of grain
and seed corn presses against them where the ditch
indent into matted weeds from which come
roses called dust pink and the blue glazed cornflowers.
You lunge across the canvas,  
    black  
and white haunches rear  
against purple sky, your palette knife slaps sunset  
on rock.  
You quarrel with your mother constantly, rush off  
to France—to Spain.  
    The dust rises from the desert  
floor in ochre. Your eyes burn red.  
The bellow,  
the roar  
    of hooves is a voice speaking . . .  
    The voices  
began  
for you  
in Kashiwa . . . beckoning  
with their sheaves  
of poppies.  
The coral snake curls  
in a cleft of rock,  
    the lonely iguana  
holds his tail  
in his mouth.  
On the highest ledge of rock  
the sun catches,  
glows there  
in fitful light.  
    Far above the haze of purple,  
the dark  
waits  
for the dust to settle,  
    for slathers of foam  
to dry  
on the sand.
CAMERA OBSCURA

Within my impermanent four walls
of spruce wood
in my small room
ten by thirteen
I am alone

Alone with my baking apple
with dusk
the sixty-watt light bulb
the National Guards
in the company of an owl
alone

with old Belsebub
the path to the fishpond
(district of Swabia)
with my spleen alone

with good Rabmuller
gassed twenty years ago
alone with my red phone
and with much
I care to notice

Alone with every Tom, Dick and Harry
Bouvard and Pecuchet
with bag and baggage
Pontius and Pilate

In my endless room
ten by thirteen
in the solitude of a galaxy
of pictures

of pictures of pictures
of pictures of pictures of pictures
encyclopedic and vacant

alone with my ephemeral brain
where I rediscover the baking apple
the dusk, good Rabmuller
and much I mean to forget

Translated by
Nicholas Kolumban
LOOKING BOTH WAYS

No one came to visit unexpectedly. Months or years appeared and disappeared. Summer afternoons evaporated in a slow blur. Even in the autumn when people return from the lake or the shore or Europe, no one got in touch. It was odd. She was well liked and respected, had been. She had been elected head of several faculty committees. A few former students wrote her amusing notes or sent unorthodox poems now and again. One summer, forty years ago, two men fell in love with her, very much in love with her. There was no paucity of memories, no dearth of characters encountered along the way. But over the years no one came to visit and she noticed it particularly in the fall.

She detested breakfast. When she was younger she would dress as quickly as possible as early as possible and leave the house. She wanted nothing to do with food or morning smells in the kitchen. Her walks were just right, quick steps along a familiar path before the sun could burn its way into the damp early mist. There was a spot along the trail that ran off west of the paved road, a cubby hole, just where the woods began to climb into the hills. This was her nest, found when she was thirteen and cultivated sparsely through the years. No friends or visitors or lovers or relatives were taken there, ever; not because it had to be such a very secret place but because she imagined others would not appreciate it. She was generous in so many other ways. This was an escape from the unwanted, putrid aroma of coffee brewing and strips of bacon frying. Occasionally she considered going to her nest at night but never followed through. It remained year after year as a place to watch the first streaks of morning light rain down through old, flexed branches and new, shaking leaves. The roots and lower trunk of a dead elm held her back perfectly. In a favorite position her legs stretched out into a small crevice. She could pretend that she was paralyzed and could only move her eyes. Nettles and twigs and mossy rocks and wild mushrooms and jiggling ferns absorbed all sounds but the screeches and hoots of a few birds and the dull, distant bass rumble of a transport truck’s gears. Her visits to the nest melded together. She could recall all of them, but not one. More
than eighty years of morning visits, eighty years of stolen quiet moods accumulated like pennies in a glass cannister. And best of all she avoided the foul bother of toasting bread and squeezing oranges for juice. Nest or no, she refused to walk into a kitchen before noon.

One of the men who courted her so zealously, the summer of her two men, had a special fancy for blueberry pancakes. He loved to make them. He loved to serve them and eat them with clumps of butter and showers of powdered confectionary sugar. Their romance suffered greatly on the blueberry pancake mornings. Her love, frisky and genuine as it was by day and night, could not embrace his morning banquets. As if he did not exist on those mornings she would stride out the back door, down the road, down the trail and straight to her nest. Minutes and hours were the same measure there. She gathered in as much time as she needed. When she would go back to the house, he would be sitting in an old bamboo cane chair on the side porch. Breakfast had been devoured with glee and the dishes washed and stacked. Each was ready and they loved each other very hard then.

Mornings now were ripe with thoughts of those mornings and all the others. She took her backward glances under darkness of covers. Early afternoon was soon enough to make a first appearance. No guests were kept waiting, no visitors or acquaintances put out by her gay lethargy. She used to think that you could never have too much solitude. Solitude is good for the figure, she used to say. She did not like to eat by herself. One of the charms of her longer and longer mornings in bed was the elimination of lunch from the day’s agenda. Cooking and cleaning up always spoiled the fun of her exotic, improvised meals. So one diminutive feast in the evening was enough now. She dressed for it, nurtured a glass of sweet vermouth for some time before entering the kitchen. She dined in the pleasant calm which was so like the calm she cherished in her little woods.

One morning right after World War II she had taken a camera to the nest but did not take any pictures.
Her gift for recollection was well developed. After so many walks, so many dawns alone in the shadows and rustling underbrush, she could put herself in the nest without leaving her bed. Now as she awoke later into the day and not as spryly, she would hide. Up and over her head the covers would come. Into her bed, her vault, her womb, would file an endless queue of remembered faces, memorized phrases, underlined chapter headings, street names and favorite lyrics.

Her fortieth birthday happened to fall on an Easter Sunday in the middle of the war. She spent the day and night alone. The next day she met two men, one in a coffee shop, one in a hardware store. Each was a voracious bringer of freshly cut flowers. After a time she abandoned the need to explain her multiplying bouquets to either of them. The blueberry pancake maker favored pink or white gladiolas and an infrequent mixed bunch of roses and daisies. The other chap, the president of Historical Restorations Incorporated, brought lilacs exclusively. His business amounted to restoring the interiors of churches in two counties. He would spend the night in her bedroom, in her arms, only if his lilacs were right there on the night table in an old Mason jar. This ritual was as sweet as the slow, article by article undressing they performed for each other. One morning, up first as usual, she noticed that his undershorts were Size 34 and his trousers, Size 32. She wondered about it but it did not matter.

Sixty years is a long time to live in one house. She resented the house for that sometimes. She started out renting it for her first year of teaching. English Literature was her hero, university freshmen the captive antagonists. The Fothergills, owners of the house, were about to move back to Glasgow and asked if she would take care of the place indefinitely. Years went by, her correspondence with them gradually failed and the house became hers without another word being spoken. It was small, made of stone and mortar and local wood, with large windows and a porch on two sides. Rose bushes on trellises, maniacal ivy, an antique willow, twin mountain ash trees, shrubs and vines and plants without names so dominated the house that everything looked slightly out of proportion. This was a garden with a house, not the other way around. The house was set over to one side
Stephen DeGange

of the lot, almost hidden from certain vantage points, like a child playing hide and seek in a room with too much furniture. It seemed to be edging away from the only other buildings for miles, those belonging to a neighboring farmer. The roof was shingled and pierced through by a crude, crumbling stone chimney. The living room to the left of the entrance foyer was spacious but the rooms petered out after that. The bathroom was a frustrating thing for grown people. The bedroom walls looked like parentheses around the bed. There was a walk-in closet barely wider than a hanger and filled with white clothes and a pungent, musty scent. And there was a good, big window on the east wall which looked out onto her orderly vegetable patch, layers of unbridled growth, a tool shed and the endless woods beyond. The house did not come with dogs or cats. Nor were any added. She thought that animals should not be converted into pets.

Nor did she like the idea of the neighboring farmer. For one thing, he was the local leader of something called the Southern Ontario Adjunct Nazi Party. (He said this was just a hobby.) For another, he was obese. She thought obesity was unnecessary, an unnecessary protest against something or somebody; almost a crime, in fact; the way a wicked drug addiction or extreme parsimony is a crime against one's self. She had less than nothing to do with the farmer and his chubby family. One or two brief conversations in all these years were more than plenty. The side of his property which touched hers did have a pond, however, and she skated there late at night, long after they were all in bed. Cold moonlight is an ice-skater's best friend and she made the most of her clandestine meetings. She imagined she was skating, cutting across the farmer's fat, hideous stomach with her blades.

The pond surfaced in her memory for other reasons. Her forties, visited early by the two explosions of romance, were easier to conjure than, say, her thirties, visited only by routine and nonsense. All women have at least one experience in common: a moment which brings an unwanted suitor to the door. It might happen at a high school locker or in a nursing home cafeteria but every woman knows the burden of being loved by a man in whom she has not the slightest
interest. She knew many of these moments in her twenties and thirties. She liked not to think of it, the wasted time, the excuses. It did not make sense that entire decades could be lived out in dull frustration. Much better to have nothing at all than a taste of something unpleasant. Better still to recall the intrigues that came to her as she headed into her forty-first year. Neither was unwanted in the least. The pancake man, Roger, was more persistent, more demanding, more attentive, less spontaneous, less erotic. The church restorer, William, took many different poses, left many disguises in an apartment he shared with somebody in the city and came out to her house, eagerly, to celebrate. She resisted, not too successfully, the tendency to compare. It would have been easier if she could have convinced herself that someday she would not have to make a choice. The more imminent a declaration or choosing seemed, the less attractive her tryst with each became. In fact, her loyalties were not divided. She disagreed hotly with the notion that passion was a fixed quantity to be metered out like sugar from a sack, or worse, conserved for future use. She knew she could love ruthlessly, fully, constantly and never run out. The object of her affections might be a man, a sonnet, a friend, her nest. She had enough and the variety to go around. This did not lead her to approve of squandering love, however. That was as undesirable as soft-boiling eggs. She was careful with her heart but exuberant with it, too. Her bonds to each man would tangle before they would break.

In one of her classes she spoke derisively of desperate heroines. She was of the opinion that a husband was not a prerequisite for one's life but rather a bonus, if the right one appeared and stayed on.

The second summer of her forties, of her complicated loves, had almost exhausted itself in bouts of humidity and thunder storms when it became evident that Roger sought a commitment, and a clear one. In a strange way, her lavish physical intimacies with William made her less respectful of his feelings. She realized, much later, that she had confused the absence of lust for Roger with friendship.
On the Labor Day weekend of that year she invited Roger to dinner for Saturday evening and asked William to meet her at a campus coffee shop on Friday afternoon. She was going to tell William, calmly, smoothly, that she could not see him anymore. They spent Friday evening undressing one another, swimming naked and splashing loudly with the ducks in the pond and making love for hours all tangled up by a lilac bush out beyond the vegetable garden. At midnight, William threw his clothes into the back seat of his car and drove away.

In the morning she ran to her nest and cried. Cried as hard as she could for as long as she could. Later she rode a bicycle, the blue C.C.M. from her childhood, to the stores, came home to prepare hors d'oeuvres, set out her finest napkins and cutlery and goblets, bathed, put on a long, tight-fitting, white lace dress with short sleeves and went to the garden to pick a vase-full of lilacs for a centerpiece. Roger arrived, on time, politely, unaware that his dreams were about to come true. For a long time they talked about the war, laughed that it would show that the "colonies" were wanting to take control of things; that the allies would emerge victorious but not equal; that this one was about as noble as a war could be. She was glad for the chance to delay the revelation of her good news. After dinner, they took two chairs outside next to the strapping rose arbor. The melancholy of another summer going, another autumn coming pushed the sun behind the tips of the woods. She held his hand in her lap and told him.

They kissed and embraced. He said he must race into town before the L.C.B.O. closed and come back with bottles of champagne. Such impetuosity was not his way. He was ecstatic. He left and she started to cry, quietly. She went to the tool shed and took out a shotgun belonging to Mr. Fothergill. She did not know if it was loaded or not. She sat down in her garden and wanted to cry forever but her morning in the nest had used up most of the tears. With the gun across her lap she watched the trees and the dandelion heads and a struggling ladybug and a squirrel sniffing a cork. She thought she wanted to sleep. Her head fell against her shoulder and startled her.
Slowly she got up and wandered across to the pond. She stood at its edge. Two geese swam over to meet her.

"Stupid soldiers. Stupid men." She aimed at a goose and pulled the trigger. The right side of her body cracked against the rest of her. A splash of red went up from the water.

Roger shouted her name and came running across the lawn with a fancy green bottle in each hand. She turned back to the pond, aimed at the other goose and pulled the trigger a second time. Roger shouted her name again, and again and again, and grabbed her. Her recollections always stopped there. She loved holiday Mondays but that particular one was lost to her memory.

She used to sit in her nest, and now in her bed, and wonder how much was lost. How many people and scenes and remarks had been blocked out, erased, filed in unreachable drawers? She was conscious of trying to preserve the turbulence of her past, possibly to balance the isolated stillness of the present. Turmoil is always easier to recall. It was hard to believe, some afternoons, that no one was left but her. She had not taught a class for nineteen years. She had not made love in seventeen. She had not received a Christmas present in twelve. It was harder to believe that Roger and William had come and gone with half of her life still to be lived.

One morning a few months or a few years back she lost the thread of her sleep, felt pinned to the sheets, eyes stubbornly open.

"My appetite is gone. I will not eat again. That's it." She went to a desk and wrote out a change of address card to be sent to the post office. She filled in that she was moving to Kamloops, B.C. and her mail should be forwarded. She sent a post card to the telephone company asking that her service be discontinued. She washed her face hard. She put a chair in front of the back bedroom window, looked in her closet and drawers and found a navy blue bikini bathing suit, purchased in the fifties. Her figure looked good in the mirror. The suit was bigger on her than it used to be. She attached a portable sun lamp to a book shelf, pointed it at the chair, plugged it in and sat
down. Death need not be a noble thing as long as one keeps a sense of style. She stared right into the center of the heat lamp. Her eyes began to burn. She took in, gave out exaggerated breaths. She could see herself, in her mind, in the mirror. This was her final offer. The past and the future had converged and could be sacrificed.

"I'll heat up 'til my heart glows and stops. Board up my room with red filters."

She found herself much later, in the dark, on the floor. The bulb in the heat lamp had died hours before. What exactly had happened? She put a white robe over her bikini and went to the kitchen. She sliced a peach into a glass bowl and covered it with red wine. The colors were cool, and the taste. She sat. Midnight coaxed her back into bed, back into a nervous sleep.

She had no interest in rereading old letters. All along she stored them, neatly wrapped in bundles, guessing incorrectly that they would help keep certain things in place. Even in high school she had a sense that records should be kept. Now the letters, the crumpled black and white photographs served only to remind her that everybody she had ever known had vanished. She had no interest in being reminded.

She was proud of her life, thought it a worthy creation. Still, it was remarkable that no friends, no former students or lovers, not even relatives of the Fothergills ever happened along. She had not received a piece of mail, not one, in a very long time. She could not remember the last one. It was easier to sleep than to figure it out.

The last day of her teaching career stayed with her, a bedside companion. It was an evening class. She avowed that forty years of strict grading was a legacy that might withstand a final, quirky gesture: each student in the class would receive an A.

"To many of you, this will seem a gift. In return, promise that you won't abandon books the minute you graduate. Also. I want a paragraph from each before you leave today. In it state whether 5:15
Stephen DeGange

a.m. belongs, properly, to the night or the day. I've enjoyed our classes. Keep well.”

She exited with more than a touch of the thespian. Her bicycle took her home to a packed suitcase resting on her bed and an airplane ticket. Her first month of retirement (a word she did not use) was taken in a second floor room at a small inn, south and west of Dublin on the road to Kildare. The innkeeper was generous with portions at evening meals and generous with the inn's bicycle.

She rode each day until fatigue caught up. There were early, early morning rides, afternoon gulps of cool stout, long hillside naps in the open air, slow retreats to the inn, rambling chatter with everyone, and fine, heavy meals. Recollections of all those classroom hours, all the Augusts spent preparing outlines drifted through, were taken in a fonder light for having ended. It had been a solid career, of reasonable purpose, and a summer in Ireland marked its conclusion with aplomb. She mulled her prospects with care and some nonchalance. Her return was unplanned. She might have stayed in Ireland forever had she not missed her house in Ontario and had she not held hands one night with the innkeeper's husband.

She was returning the bicycle to a hut behind the house. He was filing something down in a vice. After hellos and small talk, he had taken her by the wrist and kissed her fully on the lips for a lingering moment. His abrupt touch was not unpleasing. She excused herself as demurely as possible.

They went for walks and bicycle rides. One late afternoon walking across a shrub ridge she took his hard hand and laced her fingers with his. She let go of his hand as the back windows of the inn came into sight. And left Ireland the following afternoon.

The house, her all-time house, always looked good, sanguine if a little
slouched by the years. Not once in a lifetime had she rented an
apartment. Always she unpacked from a trip as soon as she closed the
front door behind her. Most of the summer had been consumed in
Kildare . . . and now the autumn loomed ahead as an open pit to be
filled. For the first time in fifty-six years she would not be a student or
a teacher in September. There would be alumni projects to work on
and several fill-in lectures and she would continue to help edit the
college daily. But from now on, on any random Monday at 9:55 a.m.
she would be unaccountable, unbound by clock or contract. Her
plans to write extended profiles of all the meaningful people she had
known might be realized.

That first free autumn, almost twenty years ago could it be, came in
dancing colors and fresh, smokey fragrances and prism afternoons.
In the march of seasons and centuries, certain autumns reign, stand
out as exalted and perfect, biblical. Her feet mulched the morning
leaves en route to her nest. Clean flannel rubbed against her neck and
jaw. The sun lighted the claret, maple, auburn, caramel, buff, emer­
ald leaves with vigor and imagination. Her thoughts were clear. Her
cheeks were tight, polished hour after hour in the wind and cool sun.
Unburdened by the daily duty of teaching, her life picked up new
rhythms. She had started her profiles. Her walks helped her to
arrange, recall, sketch. Her memories were preserved in the nest.
Then, after several vermouths and supper, she would spend as much
of the night as she could writing in longhand, writing in spiral-bound
college notebooks. She began with family members. She was able to
write lucidly and at great length about her father, which surprised
her. Writing about her lovely mother was arduous and frustrating,
which also surprised her. She avoided her sister, thinking that silence
is the better part of contempt. An aunt who now lived in Calcutta
took up almost two weeks. A grade school teacher was finished off in
one solid seven hour stretch. A chemistry partner who always copied
her notes and who smoked cigarettes in high school required less than
six pages. The first lover called up hours and days of abandoned
sensations and produced what she thought was particularly clever
writing. And lots of it. Yet it was almost impossible to find a name for
him.
She wrote something almost every night. Each selected subject had its own way of pushing or pulling her. She imagined this as a project without end. Lives intersected, sometimes by accident, and brought others out of the shadows to be scrutinized. The light, wet snows of Thanksgiving came before she had come close to resurrecting Roger or William.

The years, of course, deadened her pace. Her bursts of writing and reading were now less extended. She skipped more and more morning walks. Her midnight skating expeditions on the pond declined in frequency from once a week to once a winter. The fat farmer died of a heart attack back in the late sixties.

Her worldly contacts all but vanished. There was one major excursion out that she could not forget. Had it been her last? Some years after her retirement a former student, a tall woman in her late twenties, asked if she would agree to play a part in a film. The younger woman was becoming a film maker and had a grant to make a twenty minute short. A friend had written a script. The teacher agreed to be directed by the student.

The part was that of a sixty-two year old woman. (She was several years older than sixty-two at the time.) The woman in the film was being courted by a married man almost thirty years her junior. The character was to be elegant and strong and too cynical to take seriously the attentions of the young suitor.

The project was enriching and exhausting. She thought the film makers quite gifted and admired her own performances a little more each day. The final scene had the older woman allowing a rendezvous in her house for the first time after months of surreptitious lunches and concerts and meetings in dark, public places. The suitor enters her house timidly, suspecting a final, drastic stroke, a friendly halt to their pas de deux. Instead she pours tall drinks, tells some of her best, funniest stories and takes him up a long staircase to her bedroom. The
scene is hers to mold and make. Many discussions were held on the set in search of an honest portrayal. It was her idea that her character should undress in front of her suitor, in front of the camera. The scene was performed well after midnight on the final night of shooting. The director asked the lighting man to "keep it soft." Several afternoons later, when she saw the footage, she was alarmed at how beautiful she looked. She had taken her 'looks' for granted years ago. And she had always been unmoved by the compliments or criticisms of others. She looked as she looked. What point could there be in moaning about the color of eyes or the curve of a calf? Such things were irrevocable and rightly so. It happened that she was fond of her hair, had been since grade school. But the rest didn't matter. She had not stepped onto a scale to weigh herself in ages.

What she saw in the film footage came as a grand surprise. Sitting in a darkened screening room, she cheered. But the sensation passed. The last frames of film show her character as she sends the man away from her house, their moment of love fossilized, their time pressed between pages of letters. She smiles knowing they shan't meet again. He leaves, sober, sad, as timidly as he had arrived.

She saw the director, the script writer, the other actors at the first public showing of the film and never again.

She went slowly along with the years and kept utterly to her house, to herself. Months came between visits to the nest. Every five years she would ride her bicycle to the doctor's house. Each time he pronounced her fit. To celebrate her visit, the week of her seventieth birthday, she mailed off her collected profiles to a small publishing company affiliated with the university. She had met an editor there while she was teaching but doubted she still held the position. The manuscript had to be addressed to someone. In a letter of introduction she asked that the profiles be published in one volume and posthumously. She received a letter back from Margaret MacLeay Graham, Editor Emeritus, who said that there was considerable interest in her manuscript and that, if chosen for
publication, it would be published in one volume and posthumously, as requested.

Her recollections of the past decade, her seventies, the century's seventies, were not precise at all, much less precise than her recollections of preceding eras. She read in bed, mostly reread favorite books. She doodled and sketched with ball point pens in old notebooks. More and more she woke up in the midst of complicated, wild dreams, unruly dreams unlike the boring ones she had always had. They were so vivid now and confusing and seemed to dominate and bury her waking hours. Had an entire decade been spent dreaming and drawing figures and rereading The Sorrows of Young Werther? How had she spent the third Tuesday in July six years ago? Or the Friday before Easter last year? Or the winter of her seventy-fourth year? Were many more decades still to come? How could you tell how much life was behind you and how much was ahead? There were no answers. There was only sleeping and dreaming and waking.

One morning her eyes opened, filled with a ragged dream of stolid, wan faces and sharp, unknown objects, corners and right angles, sharp edges, with faces or masks looking out. Everything in the dream was covered with dust or dirt. She got out of bed quickly and sat in an empty bathtub while it filled with hot water and the essence of musk oil and white hand soap. The water washed over her soft, wrinkled, flat stomach as she almost fell back to sleep.

She dressed, put on a short leather jacket and a woolly hat and sheepishly opened the front door as if she expected to find a void on the other side. She tried unsuccessfully to remember her last visit to the nest. She was dizzy, unfocused as if the lights had just come on in a theatre after a long movie. She moved down the steps. The air was cold and dry. Time was a bugger. What day, what damned decade was it? Did she have a class to teach tomorrow? Was she walking with excitement to meet her new friend in Ireland out beyond the shed? Was someone filming her steps along the lawn, or writing about them? Did the light-headed, lost feeling come from recent hours of love-making?
Am I twenty or forty or sixty or eighty on this path, through my woods, coming on to my nest again?

She could feel her heart working. She cupped her breast with her right hand, through layers of clothing. She tried to hide her exhaustion from herself. She sat down hard in the nest, against her elm, and positioned her face so it might feel the full force of the distant sun. Her legs stretched out into their favorite position. Her hands and arms trembled. She held herself tightly. She was confused; too much oxygen filled her lungs, her blood, her brain. She was afraid this might happen.

And yet the nest was always her well, her source. Being there brought a smug flush to her cheeks, a sense of control and vision, a grasp of the difference between life and its antonym. The nest was always there. And here she was in it. She could do without keeping track. Time need not be divvied up into even, square calendars.

How long will it be before I look back at this moment?
THE INSOMNIAC AWAKENS
FRIGHTENED FROM A DREAM OF FLIGHT

Leaning on one
elbow he's awake
again thinking about
sex and airplanes.
He remembers once
while flying over Kansas
his wife told him certainly
houses in Wichita
could never be filled
with mist. But anyway it
curls in there now around
their bed glowing
articulating the curious
knot of her sleep.

He sees out the window.
The moon. Orion's sword.
The land way down.
He loves the curving
the wide weightless drift
the engine's moan
her thighs full of heat
his finger a luminous jet trail
tracing her spine arched high
her mouth open
his mouth climbing
her belly's smooth sky.

His wife sleeps on
like a vast distant plain.
He hangs perilously
on night's great wing
watching far below the
blue line of lights
in a vein behind her knee.
It blinks through now
warning of the ground
coming up fast.
I’ve spent years collecting anecdotes
of natural separation—
tales of salmon on a last run upriver,
the mating dance of stoneflies, the quiet
thrashing of bees.

What a waste of time. These rooms
empty like abandoned mirrors.
I spend whole afternoons watching winter:
the yard outside my window littered
with papery leaves, the spare lines
of church steeples and damp alleys
where dogs turn against the wind.
This year I feel a primitive comfort
in bare trees, like a ragged,
one-eyed crow.

It does not matter that light fails
early this far north.
It does not matter that wind mutters
in the stairwell like a familiar voice.
All I need is in a drop
of pond water under this lens,
all the basic arrangements
of predator and prey.

I sit at my desk keeping careful notes,
accumulating data, writing words that always
mean lamp, letter, autumn and dust.
You can imagine the boy, just a shy wren
on some fleshy knee. One day he looked at that knee
and sent a shiver up it. Good mother, good breasts,
the boy with sea-level eyes. That year he saw
his adolescence in a bit of dirt and spat there.
He knows he will be taken out by fish.
He never learned to swim.

He is, of course, doomed. There are the photographs,
there are those indisputable accounts.
You can see it's not right, the hot day whispering back
"war" in the ear, a three-cornered blade.
It must have been that a page had just turned
and some illegible town spun around with it
like a strange tail. Or that a gate closed
on the mystery they would never solve
in any settlement, ever.

When it's done, there are still two mainlands
and a few bloodied ships. He hopes they will not dig him up
in Paris and they do. Sailors file past the tomb
with their own watery doubts and someone says,
"leave him to the worms." To look back now
is to see the sun enter everything like an ocean,
to find the snail spinning oddly in the delicate boat
of a paperweight. Bad musk comes from the ground.
They say it rises up from lead coffins,
out of alcohol and straw.

So let him wait politely for the flag,
and leave that tiny spot of blood
on the button of his shoe. It's too late;
the widows and their dead, the house full of orphans,
they're already here. They have gathered in crowds
at the dock and looked in. Too late again, the lid's down.
Let him wait for the light tap, for the tune.
SYMPTOMS

There's a strange over-growing of my skin.
It began with the feet and has threatened both ankles.
I believe my leg is in danger.
At any time I expect an ambush.
The eventual seige of my vital veins and womb
could keep me from my body forever.

Let me explain:
I have never known jealousy.
I came of good stock and there was love.
I said "sunny little beaches, porch-lit porches,
dip of roofs, house to house,"
and they patted my hand.

There's a future going out or coming in.
No medicine will do.
Each night in the bedroom my footfalls grow mute,
tied up with some secret.

There must have been reasons.
Was a window left open?
Did a garden grow untended by that long lovely sea?
Perhaps my mother slept too soundly with the memory
of my birth and no one yelled "stop!"
Perhaps as a girl I touched myself too often,
each part of my body infecting some other.
Ten years old, in the dark weedy spot
where garage meets fence,
to think that it all started here,
here, where I held myself and said,
"all the fame and berries of life."
ISLANDS CROP UP

Islands crop up in our heads
now and then. Birds fly over them
and drop the seeds of miraculous plants.
Sweat trickles from the machine’s face;
tears fall from mothers’ eyes.
We drip oil drops while we work.
This is how the world goes around!
Yesterday I thought I was a pear tree.
Children come even today to kiss me
and they shake in me the branches,
heavy with fruit.

I preserved my first love in alcohol;
I often gaze at her—
a strange, little beast.
Hi! How are things?
Thanks, I’m all right. And you?
It could be better.
Is it that we don’t feel desire anymore?
We stagger on top of Mont Blanc, shivering,
and pray: God, oh Lord, why can’t you
make us mountains?
I give myself to you like a mother
gives her warm, full breast
to her hungry baby.

The shrubs are asleep.
I’m going to sleep in you
so at dawn you can be near me,
dear tools,
you with your steel heads.
THE ELEVENTH FRAME

“Didja clean my teeth?” Skeet shouts from the upstairs bathroom. He puts his comb down, strolls across the hall and lets his feet teeter on the top step. “SALLY?”

“Next to mine at the kitchen sink, Dear,” she yells up from the basement. She finishes a label for *pickled tomatoes*, slides three fresh jars into the slot next to *rhubarb* and reaches for the light cord. With dust as an excuse, she crosses the room to examine the trophies crowding the bookcase. The largest is engraved: *1st Place—Flint, Michigan Standard Service—Sally Morgan*. Sally smiles and dusts a bronze woman with a ball over her head: *Sally Morgan, Champion—Ladies Nite at the Eleventh Frame*.

“Ma?” Dixie yells down the basement stairs.

“Be right up, Sweetie.”

In the kitchen Sally slips her own teeth into place and rinses the glass with the DishMaster.

“That’s gross,” Dixie says, sitting at the bar. She takes a glittery hair barette out of her back pocket and examines it.

“You want a mother who ain’t got no teeth, Dear?” Sally chirps.

“Sick,” says Dixie, picking at her eggs and gravy. “Was that true what Aunt Jo said about her husband being swiped from her?”

“No need listening to poor Aunt Jo when she’s been drinking, Sweetie.”

“Why does she rat her hair like that?”

“Now, Dixie . . .”

“The mountain mamas,” Dixie says. She hums the theme song to the *Beverly Hillbillies* and puts the barette in her hair.

“Oh, now, shush,” Sally chuckles. “There’s not a hair the same on Aunt Jo and me.” She uses her apron to wipe fingerprints from the refrigerator and then hangs the apron in the handle. “And take that nail polish off and that glitery doo-da in your hair . . . you’re too young. I’m going to go get ready.”

“Don’t know why you spend so much time dressing for that stupid game,” Dixie grumbles.

“I’m only in three leagues this year.”
The night before, when the whole clan was over, Granny sat in the kitchen shaking her head. “Could see clear through to her crotch and the label from the Sears Roebuck Company . . . actin’ drunker ‘an a jilted bride,” Granny said when Aunt Jo squatted to coo at someone’s baby. It was when poor Aunt Jo fell over, right on top of the squealing baby, that Granny had moved into the kitchen. “In my day, we had a good time jes’ talking . . . weren’t no call for booze or four-letter words.”

Aunt Jo ran a hand over her ratted hair when she stood up and then flirted with the male relatives, finally settling on Skeet’s lap. “My sneaky little sister Sally hadn’t gone off and married you, I would a done it myself,” she cackled, her voice as scratchy as the jukebox in the Stagecoach Tavern.

Skeet, as used to women sitting on his lap as she was to sitting on them, clicked his teeth, beamed up at her and said, “Would that’ve made me your fourth or your fifth?” His face looked like a topical map with deep leathery cracks. “Be like Casey Johnson who’s his wife’s husband and her uncle.” He slapped his knee and laughed out loud along with the rest of the uncles and sister-in-laws. In fact, he laughed so hard his teeth almost fell out.

Aunt Jo stood. She patted down the most ratted part of her hair. Her skin, already filled with broken blood vessels from alcohol, deepened to the color of her smudged lipstick. “None of ’em mattered. Only one and he was stole from me.” Her knees buckled and Skeet stood to catch her.

“Ain’ t goin’ back out there,” Granny said. “She ain’t no daughter of mine. If I’d known she was drinkin’ again, I’d have gone to my bingo game instead.” She took a drink of her Ginger Ale and sighed.

When Sally wandered back out into the living room and wasn’t looking, Dixie spiked her 7-Up with gin. She’d already had three. “Let me show you something,” Granny said. Her teeth were stained and the fingers she dug through her billfold with had liver-spots. “There’s my babies,” she said. “In Mississippi where a family was a family.”

Dixie glanced at the black and white picture of her mother and Aunt Jo . . . two girls in dirty dresses, barefeet and spindley legs, standing in front of a Ford.

“That’s when work kept us clean,” Granny sighed again, staring at Dixie’s nailpolish for the first time. “Before all this General Motors
“I know, Grandma. I know,” Dixie said. “And Mama shot a mountain lion out the back window when she was thirteen.”

Dixie took her spiked 7-Up into the living room where Aunt Jo was shouting at Sally.

“Ain’t goin’ in there! Ain’t going to apologize and listen to her call me a whore! That blasted bingo is more important than me!”

Later that night, when Sally had given up, Skeet finally lured Granny into the living room with the rest of the family. She even clapped and sang when Skeet flipped on the amplifier to his electric guitar, clicked his teeth into place and began the chorus of: “How could you leave me, Lucille? Four lonely children, crops in the field . . .” Granny looked down at her feet when Aunt Jo carried on and made howling noises.

Sally dabs a generous portion of Tigress After-Bath powder on her damp chest and arms. The room is still humid from her long bath. She smears a peephole into the mirror, plucks a hair from her chin and gives her perm a friendly pat.

“Hurry up in there,” says Dixie, knocking for the second time.

“Out in a minute, Sweetie,” Sally repeats with no intention of hurrying. She bites the insides of her cheeks, studies her profile and then rouges and mascaras. Her black bra and panties have a minimum of overflow considering all the weight she lost last spring. She finally lifts the brick-orange smock from the stool, with Steel’s Plbg. & Htg. printed across the back in bold black letters, and smacks her lips with the same brick-orange color.

“You can come in now,” she calls down the hall.

“It’s about time,” says Dixie, putting her own toiletries on the counter.

Sally continues straightening. Without looking up she says, “Long as you’re in the shower, you can wash that glitter off your eyes, Dear.”

“Ain’t glitter!”

“Whatever it is,” Sally looks at her squarely, “you ain’t leavin’ the house with it. And what’s this?” She picks up a t-shirt with Expensive written across the chest.

“Nothin’.”
“You think you’re meetin’ boys down at that rink, young lady, you’d best think again,” Sally says as Skeet comes up the stairs.

“Things aren’t the same as when you were young. And this isn’t Mississippi,” Dixie pouts.

“Has nothin’ to do with it.”

“Aw, Sally,” Skeet says. “She’s near sixteen.”

“You’re a fine one to talk.”

“That ain’t nice, Sally.” Skeet walks toward the bedroom making noises with his teeth.

“Aw, I didn’t mean it, Sweetie. It’s just she’s too young.”

Dixie sits on the edge of the old pedestal bathtub and screws the shower attachment on. “Can’t wash nothin’ off with this thing,” she shouts after them. “I don’t see why we can’t get a shower like normal people.”

It was last spring that Aunt Jo’s husband left her. She stayed with Sally and Skeet at first, then with Granny, and then she started drinking at the Stagecoach again, like she had when her last husband left her.

“Wouldn’t care so much,” Aunt Jo confided to Sally, teasing her hair unconsciously during one of her crying spells, “if he hadn’t took up with a damn teenager.”

And sure enough, Sally ran into Aunt Jo’s ex and his girl soon after at the five and dime. His girl wasn’t really so bad, certainly no teenager. But it was a shock to them all when he started shacking up with her, especially so soon.

“And don’t you be so smug in your ways, little Sally,” Aunt Jo chided one day. “You know Skeet’s been steppin’ out for years.” Which made Sally’s insides curdle, like a pail of sour milk.

Because she’d always known. At least in the back of her head, where she wanted it to stay, she’d always known. She met Skeet in Mississippi when she wasn’t much more than a girl, when she wore her brother’s blue jeans for the most part, when she looked forward to fishing and Sunday dinners. It was when Skeet was still working for the coal mines, like he had since he was twelve, before he joined up with General Motors.

Maybe Granny was right about money being the ruination. Maybe Sally’s years with Skeet hadn’t all been happy . . . first the two older ones and then years later, by accident, Dixie. But he’d certainly done
his share of going out drinking, especially lately. And then there was
the time she thought she’d seen him with a woman at Smitty’s. And
she’d be goddamned if some thirty year old hussy was going to steal
her husband.

So, she bleached her hair and had it permed with little curls around
the face, just like Vanessa’s in *Love of Life*. She lost eighteen pounds
and bought three new pantsuits at the May Company in Detroit. And
then one night she sent Dixie over to her girlfriend’s. She took both of
Skeet’s 22’s out of the hall closet and locked them in the basement.
She took the handgun out of his sock drawer and hid it at the bottom
of the clothes hamper. She found all the spare sets of keys to the
Bronco and the Galaxy, put them in her sewing basket, sat in the
living room and waited.

“Something smells good,” Skeet said, coming in the front door.
“And look at you . . . you’re all fixed up.” He pecked her on the cheek
and made a bee-line to the kitchen. “What smells so good?”

“It’s pot roast, Dear.”

“Where’s Dixie?”

“At her girlfriend’s,” Sally said, untying her apron.

“Let’s eat! I’m starved.”

After dinner, he poured himself a Scotch, put his teeth in a water
glass and went into the other room to watch t.v. When Sally was
through loading the dishwasher, she went into the other room too,
and flipped off the television. And then she broke a cardinal rule.

“Hey . . . what’s doing? I was watching that.”

Seated on the couch, her fluffy blue slippers planted firmly in the
ground, elbows resting on her knees, hands clasped in front of her,
Sally said, “You been messin’ around, Sweetheart.”

“Whadya mean?” Skeet froze, his mouth hanging, his gums
showing.

“You know what I mean.” Sally looked at him directly, a lot more
directly than usual.

“How’d you know?” His face was red, his fingers were extended
around the arms of his recliner, like he was ready to spring.

“I know’d, Dear. And it ain’t gonna happen any more . . . or I’m
leavin’.”

“No . . .” Skeet said. His fingers kneaded his thinning hair and then
covered his face.

“Yep.”
He stood. His shoulders were as curved and rigid as a coat hanger. "Don't . . . I can't . . ." And then he threw a lamp on the floor and left the room.

Because whatever else Skeet was, he was a God-fearing man. Reared baptist. Never meant any harm to Sally or the kids, always good to them, made sure they didn't want for anything. And like he promised that night, he never cheated on Sally again.

“You ready, Dear?” Sally shouts from the base of the stairs. “Ready as I'll ever be,” says Dixie. She hops down the stairs, three at a time, with her skates under her arm. “Your braces match the glitter on your t-shirt,” Sally teases. Dixie groans. “Dad’s already warmin’ up the car, Dear.”

The Bronco speeds down the only road through Swartz Creek with George Jones blaring on the radio: “Your heart turned left and I was on the right . . .”

After a bit, Sally says, “I suppose Granny’s at Bingo tonight.” “Suppose so,” says Skeet. “She’s been darn lucky lately.” After another silence, he clicks his teeth and says, “How in the world can you dance and roller skate at the same time any how?” “Has a mind to do it every night, if she could,” Sally shakes her head and smiles.

“I’m the best in Flint, if you wanna know,” Dixie says, lacing her skates in the back seat. She has the glittery barette hidden in her back pocket.

Sally and Skeet drop Dixie off at the roller disco and then head on up the road. “You look awful pretty tonight,” Skeet says, glancing sideways at Sally. “Thank you, Dear.” Sally looks out the window. “Who’re you playing tonight?” he asks, pulling into the parking lot. “Ace Realty.” With the engine still running, he turns to her and says, “Well, I’ll be over at the Stagecoach. Pick you up at 11:30.” They stare at each other. “Just goin’ to play pool. Just goin’ to play pool.”
They kiss goodby.
Sally pushes the metal bar on the glass door and then walks into the echoey sound of battered pins smacking hardwood floors. She picks up a copy of *Alley Chatter* and glances over at the blackboard where *Women's Championships* is written across the top. Next to her name is: *Number 1, 275 Actual*.

At the other end of the carpeted foyer there are five women in a pit with brick-orange smocks, just like hers. A row of women with *Steele's Plbg. & Htg.* in bold black letters across their backs. All of their hair is blonde, with little curls around the face, just like Vanessa's in *Love of Life*. Toothy smiles bordered in brick-orange lipstick. All mothers and friends. But when Sally Morgan walks down the foyer of the Eleventh Frame, heads turn.
JACKLIGHTING

Some nights, after too much wine or whiskey, we’d take our .22s and cruise the dark for something moving.

We held to dirt roads, maybe gravel: places where we’d meet few cars and houses crouched behind the tangled trees.

Headlights off, we pored along the dustgrey swath that split the darker clumps of branches.

The first to spot a smude of fur, something more than drunk distortion, moonlight gathered on a blowing scrap, would call it, flick his safety off and lean against the braking, hand on door to tumble free, take rapid aim and fire when the headlights opened wide

the night and caught the rabbit, scrabbling in the sudden light, panicked that two suns ripped the dark, searing closer than the one had ever come before, exploding brilliant orange, then we drove on.
WITCHITA BURNING

I know this woman . . . The difference between *Life* and *a life:* Picture
it all
laid flat, as mercator, on white paper, every city
a black die-dot. A man comes
on a pinto, in the corona of fly-wing sheen,
sombrero tilted for light to catch
down its brim like a diving preybird, his voice
a chainsaw. And on a whim—the fluctuation
of grain on the market, a nectarine tinge in the air,
the way her breath leavens—a woman
undoes the catch on her doorlock, lets him
in, takes him off
the horse and allows a new half and half
mythological beast in the darkness. He takes her
to Wichita, one black possible splat
on a field of white, that's
her story. But it's how . . . Picture
Wichita burning, people amok, flesh
incandescent, babies like burnt shoats, and a woman
whose hair shot like torched gasoline. And
all this set like a bauble of bad glass and phlgem
amid the constellatory black gems of Paris,
Sioux City, Detroit. I mean
random choice, and how we have to be careful,
please, of whose eye we let cast back the small light
our lives give off, whose
acceptance. We have to be careful
whose dice we blow luck. See,
a man is coming; against the sky like a sliver
of pine off-center in a parquet landscape.
We have to be careful.
He's done in fringe, and star-stitched chambray.
We have to be careful.
We have to be careful.
His breath at the gate says dust / ivory / ink.
We have to make a decision now.
Of course there's largesse. I'm not denying the air in this ratty black jazz club blossoms: invisible, sure, but there's actual hothouse jasmine from the sax, and a stoop-gait lube-hipped riff-riding guy in back is holding his clarinet between sets like a prom kid just walking out from the florist's: and then he blows, he blows: great duotone orchids, long low ditchside flowers, a single blue camellia. What I focus on, though, is the trumpet, its golden rose. And this: long after the last tapped key has its one amber after-drop wiped, and the overlapped rings of the stein-bottoms on the countertop are lost to a cloth: a glisten of spit is still on the trumpet. Save it. A kind of juice from the stem.

I know, there's bounty enough most days so storage seems superfluous gesture: pigeons with the chests of opera divas, strutting for crusts; the gaudy drag-dancer fans on the peacocks; hemstitch kiwis; the blue in the bird of paradise lit like lapis lazuli, the blue in the parakeet that of the nursery curtains; owl-stare; cockatoo-spectrum. Here, a flock of crows taking off, slow and superciliously, a black shrug. And one feather, a comma, landing. Keep it. Press it, punctuation too large for its book.

Okay, the seed in the seed so any peach on the plate is a cornucopia, sort of. Sure, the cosmos. Right, those limitless cities of prairie dogs. When I was a child I walked the canyons the milliner's aisles were: batiste, and Irish lace, and jonquil-patterned linen, bolts of it big as cathedral organpipes, felt and burlap, velvet, organdy, corduroy, tearose silk and gauze.
And a back room for scraps the size of my hand. Or, here: just a knuckle of cloth, just a thumbnail, that and a frayed half-yard of yarn. You'll want to take it with.

And if you won't I will. Frugality's child, I'll place it all on this page—against the day of its being needed, against the dark and the long dump down. Black feather, motley bits from the seamstress's tatter-basket, stickum gobbet of spit—I'll make a doll of you from it, in perpetuity, make a doll of you from it, doll of you from it, in case.
This is the book of ordeal,
of hinges

upon which turn
the great doors of pain. Open

them as you open your eyes
from that long sleep

strange with dreams
whose traces linger in the darkness

of your nose and throat
which are the last to wake.

Open them
as you open the last letter

from the friend
whose agony is ending

without seizures
of regret. Open them

as if to fields of ancient ice
the daily thaw and freeze

has sealed in a vast mirror,
that shield over darkness

blinding with the wide sheen of the sun.
The grace of long arrival

dissolves the way before.
WHEN YOU ARE EIGHTY
AND I AM THIRTY-FIVE

After awhile the fire burns low.
The only ones to stoke it fell asleep
by the road and you can’t chop wood
or do much but weave
until you feel thin as rain.
Thinking of wheat you fall into a wish
something like summer and sway,
searching for hands to lather your crown.

After awhile the wind blowing through the screen
begins to wrestle your hair
but you continue pruning fingernails
back to the young quick.
New hair, black and soft as a pup’s
washes down a sink clear through the night.
Tonight, black limbs of the moon
rock your chair, stain the corners of your mouth
like cherries, like blood.
Summer leaves your breath.

Tonight, they’ll catch your scent
on the moon and gather you up like a ragbag,
take you to one of their parties with flowers
on napkins, the right number of chairs.
You’ll tell them not to feed the birds,
they won’t search for food in other places.
You’ll pick at your cake.
You think it's a logger, then see the Chevrolet. Another shithead from town. No Tribune, Crown Royal. He walks like water surrounds him, leans on his heels as though he were there, tackle on water, ripples of his own. He says he belongs, has title to trout. He brought his dog, an aunt, kids busy with Fritos.

Tell him fish are not hitting. Say Go back, fish in the river. His mind is working. He thinks of lake on his legs, the insistent grip, gentle pressure. But listen, land is your pulse, knows what you'll do before you do it, like cowmen good with cattle. The lake is not its own. See that fish are worth their trouble.

Make him a deal. Let him in, demand half the trout. There's crew to feed, the pig and piglets wait for the cook and the end of his dream. Fish have ways of looking you over, a ghost that ruins you sure as any—rattles windows, fish-gill breath on you neck. Believe me, it isn't worth it.

Look, this fisherman isn't right. Fish make a difference, like moon, cloud cover, time of day. Watch the mechanic. Welders have maker's way with metal and melt steel to steel, like a lake fuses creeks, even lakes that keep to themselves. I'm here to tell you, fish the fisherman. His boots were made to irrigate.
The wheat farmer
is churning up only stones in the field,
a bandanna of stars circling his neck.
I inhabit the sack of his body
as he undoes the brass catch
on his leather harness
and plods to the weathered shack,
where in the highest window,
his sister's bedroom lights
blink off, on, then off again.
Laurie Cosca

DARKER

The dog has run away again.
Her day off she drives through
Fairbanks snow-covered streets
calling him, to come home quiet,
eyes animal-like with his loss.

After dinner her husband heats water
for the dishes, saves some for her hair.
She leans into the deep bucket as he pours
water over her head, holds her small waist
while she towel dries her hair.

The dog is not waiting for her
but the woman knows where he would have lain,
and how her hand would have passed
over the stiff-furred head. She creates
a curve of warmth in the bed.

Her husband does what has become
habit: smoking after dinner,
pulling her to him the way he drags wood
every morning. She wants to tell him
that strength is not everything.

She stares at his boots and her shoes
near the door, as if parts of them
are always leaving places. He sleeps.
The room is too dark for her. Alaska is darker
than any place on earth.
NETTING BATS NEAR ORIZABA
—to Dilford

The mammalogist showed us
where to stretch the net so the bats
which swoop down from caves
through this forest path to the river
would impale themselves gill-like,
their radar warning them
even of such thin filaments,

but generations-sure of this corridor
spilling out into millions of mosquitoes
hovering over the river like bait,
they would not believe.

Later, pans scrubbed and dried,
pipes smoked and cleaned and cold,
we lounged in canvas chairs, zipped up our coats,
and watched the stars. The frogs, the frogs,
all down the river brecketing began,
flooding the night with frogs.

Unable to hear wings fluttering,
we felt the wind shift,
thousands of bats beating toward us,
the camp dogs whining, yearning to howl.

The neg sagged with hundreds of bats
wringing like larvae in honeycombs,
obsidian eyes glinting at our lanterns,
their hog snouts pink,
wringling for breath,
baring their needle tusks.
Counting, we banded each left leg
and let them go.
Next night, only a dozen collided,
were banded and released.
For two nights more, the net was clean.
And then we dropped the net,
set up the cameras and red lights.
Blindly believing their new map
the bats bunched high
along the corridor of trees,
ignoring the absence of echoes.

Next season we went back, reset the cameras.
An hour after dusk the sniffing dogs
stood up, began to moan,
the air thrumming with bat wings
still flying the highest formation
under an umbrella of branches,
safe from the net in their minds.
THERE'S A SIMPLE-MINDED . . .

For Stephane Mallarme.

There's a simpleminded little cobbler with a hunchback
Who works behind quiet green windows.
On Sundays he gets up and washes and puts on
Clean clothes and leaves his window open.

He's been taught so little that though he's married
He never seems to say anything during the week.
I wonder if on Sundays when they walk
He has anything to say to his bent old wife.

Why would one who walks so little make shoes?
Oh, he plays his part enabling others to walk.
Also, there's something pure about the little fire
That lights up his place and gleams like gold.

And indeed when he dies the people will carry
Him to the cemetery; he enables them to walk,
For God well loves poor folk and stones
And grants them the honor of being carried.

Don't laugh! What good have you done?
You lack the serenity of the green sunbeam
That passes quietly through the half-open pane
Where he trims leather and crosses laces.

Do you really think when you put on jewels
That because you are pleasing to perfumed women
You wear on your face the radiant green
Of quiet sadness serene as a song?

Little cobbler, nail your nails a long time yet!
The birds that pass by in the peaceful spring
Will take no more notice of the crowns kings wear
than of your old knife slicing poor black bread.

Translated by
Antony Oldknow
SNOWSCAPE

Half-past winter and still snow
spilling down from the mountains. You wake
slow as a worm. For two days you think
how these iron bars have crept
to their casements, how easily they have closed
around you, how well you have grown
to your submission. You sit in a canvas chair,
fingering your rosary, trying to remember
all the sorrows you have ever imagined.

There is nothing here
to keep you from dying and yet you look
for anything you can hold to, anything
you can call your own. You know these arms, these hands,
the shallow palm with its short life-line
you've taken to heart, the small sear
on the lip of a finger. These are yours
like those long years you call your own.
And each breath, almost religious
in the way you count them now, fingering beads,
feeling the smooth roundness, wanting
always the same touch, the same cool
hardness. It is how you know you are here,
by counting, by touch.

In the east are the mountains
with snow piling on snow, moving closer
everytime you look. You cannot see
to the west but you know what's there, can almost
feel the cold slipping into your mouth, the rough edges
lodging in your tongue. At night
you hear the odd hooting of an owl.
You think how one more day
it will be gone, lost in its own slow sorrows
of winter. How calm it all is, your willed
dying, a deception you’re painted yourself, 
your final giving in to the last rites of winter.
HYMN TO THE LEFT HAND

I was born on the Barrer River
And raised from Blue Ash, Ohio.
Now I uproot myself, moving
Where “Mystery Train” is my anthem
And the state bird is a pig.

You know me by my birthmark:
Three stripes of blood on either arm,
A blazon of pain. Each nurse
Would shriek and drop me in the crib
Where I rocked all night like a fever.

I whistle the payment up beneath my heels;
I grunt till the clouds pump rain.
When the light vowels spring from my tongue
Like the tip of a switchblade, the crows
Blink and pull in their greasy wings.

This heartbeat is a warning, a footstep
Over frozen ground. The blind veins
Tunnel from neck to fingertip;
The scrotum strokes back and forth,
Keeping time between my slag-pile thighs.

The way I take a woman, I could
Be coiled in chains and still
Strike myself against her like a matchhead,
The vows now spurting into smoke,
The rings now fused around my wrists.

And here I will build my house of brick,
Only a crack open for the traffic
To gaze through at the new beast,
For the cheap tours that would yearn and cancel
The holidays of the left hand.
Frank Cauley loved to fish. Even before he retired at age sixty-three he had tried to fish at least five days a week in the summer months. The Merrimac River, a branch of the Mississippi, was only a mile or so from the outskirts of Bloomfield, and Frank would rise early, putting in a couple of hours on the bank before driving back to change quickly and make it to the courthouse where he worked. Frank was the County Treasurer, or had been the Treasurer for ten years before the cancer. But fishing was still what he thought of first when he woke, not the other. That would come later, when Wilma walked around the kitchen with a long face, or when the pain burned and tore upward from his rectum deep into his body.

Frank pushed back the covers and sat on the edge of the bed. He could smell the heat from the living room furnace. Only September, but the days were already cool. In a few weeks Wilma would turn the heat up high the first thing in the morning and leave it that way, scooting around in her slippers with a sweater clutched to her chest. Summer was over. Across from him the edges of the window around the drapes were dark. It would be cloudy outside, then, going to rain probably and Wilma wouldn't go with him out to the river. She hadn't let him go alone ever since Dr. Massey had said cancer, as if it could suddenly take one big bite out of him and he'd drop into the river. What he could do, now, was tell Wilma he was going over to Dave's, do a little work on those cupboards they were putting in the kitchen. He could take his son's rod and spend the day on the banks. Frank stood and shed the pajamas slowly, drawing on the jeans and shirt he had folded on the chair the night before. He hadn't lost too much weight. He wondered how little he'd get.

"Morning," he said as he rounded from the hall toward the step-down bathroom in the store room, the only place they could fit it in when they had added the plumbing years ago. Wilma's eyes scanned him with her new expression before she smiled.

"You feel like eating?" she asked.

"Sure." He was going to eat every morning, want it or not. It made Wilma's face relax a little when he ate. In the bathroom he shaved the
dark stubble and brushed his hair with the brush his grandson had
given him for Christmas. His name was on the back in gold letters.
Frank. There wasn’t much hair to brush, but the bristles were soft and
felt good against his scalp anyway. His skin seemed to have turned
gray in the past few months and he recognized the color. It wasn’t the
cancer. Just what happened to a fair-skinned person who hadn’t been
moving around enough to keep the blood going under his skin. He
rubbed his face, even his forehead, before he went in the kitchen.

Wilma set the plate in front of him. The napkin was there, the juice.
Wilma had always done things right. The window to his left showed
the clouds dark and moving. Damn.

“How you feeling this morning?”

“Fine. I’m going over to Dave’s. Feel like doing a little woodwork.”

“You know you shouldn’t be doing stuff like that. It wears you out
so.”

“Does not.”

Her sweater was dark blue, stretched out at the cuffs so that it
gapped around the wrists. Wilma didn’t eat eggs in the morning. Just
toast. Still watched her weight as she always had and was still a fine-
looking woman. There were creases in her skin, but not bad ones. Just
the ones at the sides of her mouth turned downward and they had
only deepened lately. He wished she wouldn’t change; even if he had
to.

“I wish you wouldn’t go, Frank. Just stay around the house. Rest
up. Dr. Massey said . . .”

“I’m not taking anymore of them anyhow.”

Wilma turned the cup in its saucer. There was a part down the
middle of her hair and the scalp was white, the hair coiled smoothly as
it had always been. “You’re supposed to take the whole series,” she
said. “It don’t do no good if you don’t take them all.”

“Think Dave’d care if I did a little work on my own?”

“No,” she said finally. Her eyes were black, small. She loved him a
lot; always had. He knew that. “You coming home for lunch?” she
asked.

“I’ll get something out of their icebox.”

He had a key to his son’s house. He had helped build that house,
taking as much care with it as he had in raising his son. He liked his
daughter-in-law, too. She was a lot like Wilma. Quiet, soft-spoken,
kept that house shining. Never said one word when he and Dave took
Rose Marie Lowe

off weekends fishing.

The problem was, Frank thought, as he took the dirt road leading back to the Merrimac, what if he caught something? Couldn't throw it away. A man couldn't do that, catch something just to catch it. That was whiling away time. Wasting things. He didn't do that, even if Wilma didn't like fish. She didn't like him scaling them in her back yard either, but even Wilma admitted it was better than wasting them. Of course, the cat got a lot. The old black Tom, battered and mad all the time. It was fall now, and by rights the cat was Glenneth's, but Glenneth wouldn't mind a couple more weeks. Wouldn't be long before she had that cat forever anyway.

Poor Frank, Glenneth thought as she saw the car leave the driveway. She knew about the cancer. Not from Frank, of course. In all the years they had lived side by side, he had been a good neighbor, never nosy, never complaining. He always just talked about the tomatoes in her garden being bigger than his, what kind of flower was that she was planting, things like that. Wilma had told her, sitting in the cluttered living room of Glenneth's house, weeping silently the day after the doctors had told her they couldn't see any reason to even open him up. "He says he won't take the treatments. Says they just drag it out, make you sicker. He's gotta take those treatments, Glenneth, he's just got to." And he had, at first. Glenneth knew that from Wilma and from the fact she hadn't seen Frank taking off with his rod for a long time there. Hadn't seen him puttering around his back yard, straightening the low fence Glenneth had built. Their lots were side by side, stretching back to a drainage ditch and a barren hill beyond. Frank had said they didn't need a fence there, but Glenneth had carefully planted her flower beds on her own side of the property line, bearing in mind Wilma's love of neatness, and had hammered little slats into the soil one day, just to make sure she kept it all straight.

Glenneth opened all the drapes in her house and regretted it wasn't sunnier. Always nicer to start the day off with a little sunshine. She had five more minutes to get the kitchen in order, then she'd have to be off if she wanted to punch in on time. Glenneth had worked thirty-one years in the factory; four more and she could retire. She was round and rosy, loved large prints and wore them. Her house was
filled with knickknacks, everything anyone had ever given her: from Christmases at the factory when they drew names and gave small gifts, from her sister, nieces, even the things her own parents had saved. Glenneth had never married, never loved, unless she counted the boy back in high school. She had believed she would love somebody someday, and marry, but it hadn't happened. Time had kept going and here she was fifty-nine, living in the same house she'd been raised in, with no one she really mattered to. But she was happy enough, she thought. She had her house and her garden and her job. She was a good worker; she had always been a good worker.

Glenneth set out the soup she would have when she came home for lunch, and stepped outside. "Tom?" she called. "Tom?" She could see him in Frank Cauley's back yard, curled up by the chopping block. "Tom, it's September, you old thing." He ignored her, face toward the block. "Suit yourself," she said, and entered the house again. Glenneth had never petted the cat. It owned the two corner lots, hers and Frank's. Glenneth couldn't remember when the cat hadn't been around. It disappeared at times, but it always returned, either at her door or Frank's, depending on the season.

"You seen old Tom?" Frank would call to her from his back yard. "Fed him this morning," she'd answer and Frank would nod. Off and on through the winter months, the same question and answer. Then in summer, when Frank fished, the reverse. Her calling to him and his reassurance that the cat was okay.

Frank took the cushion from the trunk and put it in his favorite spot on the bank. He wished he had his peacoat. Wilma would've known right away, though, and would have been miserable all day. Now she wouldn't know till he got home, if he caught anything, that is. Looked like it might storm. Clouds still blowing fast, wind picking up. The water was darker than usual, churning up mud from the bottom. He probably wouldn't catch a thing. He dropped the line in the water. No more of the treatments. Driving down there, or rather letting Wilma drive him. Fifty miles each way. Walking in for the first few days, then leaning on Wilma the others. Vomiting till he wished he'd die right then, right that minute. Pills for the nausea, pills to counteract the reaction that broke him out in red welts inside and out.
Pills and pills and vomiting. No more. His grandson didn’t like to fish, but that was okay. There was enough insurance for Wilma. If that lizard had come out for sunning, he was going to have a long wait. People would miss him. Dave. Wilma. He hadn’t done anything good for anyone, maybe, but he hadn’t hurt anyone either. Been a good husband and father. Worked in the cleaners till he got the Treasurer’s job at the courthouse. Had his own teeth; he wouldn’t look too bad maybe, at the funeral. The lizard moved sluggishly away. Frank held the rod with one hand already bluish from the chill. He just watched the water, the dirt, the trees, wondered where the lizard had gone.

“Glenneth, could you stop by the office on break?” Mr. Phillips, the manager, was an old friend. Glenneth had known him all the years she worked in the factory. They’d had it out over a few things, piece-price goods, bad machines, bad lighting. That sort of thing. She had been one of his best workers. She smiled at him now and nodded. He was a good man, a decent boss. Only once had he pulled in and balked, and that was over the fan. The factory was in a long, low building, non-union for years, and more capable of closing up completely than of meeting the demands of the small union recently formed. Air-conditioning was impossible, and in the humid summer the few slow fans that hung from the ceiling did little but blow lint. Glenneth had had trouble breathing that year. It started slowly, just being a little stuffy in the morning, but it gradually developed till by the end of the day she felt as if she were gasping. Finally she had gone to Mr. Phillips.

“We need a fan down on my line,” she told him. “A big one. There’s just no air down there and we’re choking to death.”

“No one else’s complained,” he told her, smiling as if it were just one of those woman things he ignored at times.

“Well, I’m complaining. I can’t breathe. I’ve worked here twenty-some-odd years and all I’m asking for is a fan.”

“I’d have to order it, Glenneth. You know that. By the time it got here, the hot weather’d be over.”

“Then give me that one.” She pointed to a small fan set on his filing cabinet.
"I thought you wanted a big one."
"I do. But I'll just put that one on my machine and it'll do me till the other one gets here."
"What about the other women?"
"You just said no one complained but me."
She got the fan, and if the other women made jokes about her and her funny ways, she didn't mind. People always talked about women alone, always read meanings, and oddness into normal things. Glenneth tried to treat people fair in spite of who or what they were, and she figured they should do the same with her. The ones who hogged the work paid for it, she figured. The ones who made little remarks about women who didn't need a man paid for it, too, or would. Maybe she wasn't close to any of the women. Maybe she wasn't close to anybody, but where was the rule that said she had to be? Some people were born just not needing anyone.

The big clock hanging on the wall above the machines read 10:00—break time. The noise died down as the machines stopped, the newly-finished pockets or sleeves sliding into the canvas bags behind each machine. Glenneth hurried to the coffee dispenser and took the lukewarm coffee with her to the office. It was closed in by a partition, half-wood, half-glass. Mr. Phillips was waitin behind his desk. He motioned her in.

"How you been, Glenneth?"
"Been fine, like always."
"You ever been sick?"
"Not so anyone'd know. Why?"
"You're getting on." He said it softly, not bantering like usual. Glenneth kept her knees primly together beneath the lavender print dress. She hadn't given in like some of the older girls, she still wore only dresses to work. Just like she always put on a little sachet at break time. "We're all getting on," she said. "You been here as long as I have."

"Doesn't show behind a desk."
Glenneth knew then why she had been called in. She didn't want to believe it, but she knew. How many years had she managed the piece work? So many she couldn't remember. Always went above the quota. Still had, hadn't she? She tried to recall her last check. What had it been? She deposited it without really looking. It didn't take much to live, the house was paid for, and she had just deposited the
check as usual.
"You call me here to tell me I’m getting on?” She tried to keep her voice light. The manager traced something invisible on the desk blotter with his finger.
"Thinking about moving you to something different.”
"I like piece work.”
"Everybody likes piece work. Everybody wants it.”
"I been on that line for years.”
"I know, Glenneth. Too long.” He looked up at her. “You haven’t met the quota, or just barely met it, for weeks now. Three months, really. Line supervisor is squawking.”
Line supervisor. Melba BeCraft. Tall and skinny and thought the title meant she could snicker about a woman’s hair or clothes or eating habits. Melba BeCraft.
"I can pick it up. She should’ve let me know. Should’ve come to me first.” Glenneth tried to sip the coffee, cold now. She couldn’t taste it.
"You telling me it’s final?”
"Yes. Monday. You go to packaging.”
Glenneth nodded and pushed up from the chair. He was looking at her. He was a kind man. She wouldn’t say anything. Not now. She couldn’t. She closed the door behind her and walked back to the line. Packaging. She knew what she’d be doing. Going after the canvas bags on wheels that caught the finished work, leaving an empty one. Keeping the quick hands stocked. Walking, trying to see who needed what. She swallowed. She put a new spool on her machine. She never had to call him like some of the girls. In her purse was a small kit of tools, a screwdriver, pliers. When Melba BeCraft walked by, Glenneth didn’t look up.

The pain had started about 1:00, but Frank stayed. The cushion hadn’t helped; nothing had. But it wouldn’t have been any different at home. Worse maybe, because he couldn’t keep it from his face and then Wilma got frantic. Not in her movements, because there was nothing she could do, but frantic in her eyes and breathing and the shape of her mouth. She was a good woman, Wilma was. Always had been a good wife. But she looked at him now as if she expected
something all the time. Frank laid the fish on the small chopping block he had built in the lower part of the yard. Old Tom had been waiting as if he knew in advance that Frank would bring home fish. He lay now a few feet away, fat, eyes closed, seeming unconcerned.

"Frank. Please come in." Wilma stood on the back steps, her arms over her belly, the blue sweater hugged tight.

"Just a minute." He could have thrown away the fish and she wouldn't have known.

"Frank."

"O.K., I've just got to clean this up." He heard the door close behind her.

"Saw Tom sitting on your side. Figured you'd been out fishing." Glenneth was standing near her fence, the wind whipping the print dress around her thick legs.

"Don't know how he always knows. You like some fish, Glenneth?" 
"Don't like it."

They'd been through this before, but he always offered. "How's work?"

"O.K. Bout the same." She looked up at the clouds. "We're gonna have a big one."

"Yeah. Been brewing all day."

The back door slammed and Wilma called again, raising her hand a little to wave. Glenneth waved back and turned toward her own home. She sat at her table as usual, the chicken she had fried turning out golden and crisp. She thought thirty-one years should matter. Always a good worker, on time, didn't spread out the break, didn't make extra runs to the women's room. Didn't cause trouble. Only way she could make it to the pension was by making it the next four years and she didn't know if she could do it. Not in packaging. Pushing, lifting. She laid down the chicken leg. She wasn't even hungry, and she was always hungry. She had never felt old before.

Frank tried to keep it from showing. He ate a little of everything Wilma had fixed, but it didn't work. He saw her watching him, saw the set of her mouth, her eyes changing with the worry.

"It's bad, isn't it?" she asked, and he shook his head. "No. I'm tired. You were right. I should have rested."

"I'm going to call Dr. Massey. Tell him you'll start the treatments
again."
"No."

"I'm going to do it. I'm just going to do it, Frank, I can't just sit here and watch..." She buried her face in her hands, slender hands, with only a few dark spots on the skin. She always made gulping noises when she cried. He wanted to comfort her, but he couldn't. There was nothing he could do. He thought of it again, that nausea deep in the bones, so deep you couldn't throw it up, throw it out. The pain hit him and he gripped the table, glad Wilma's face was still buried. Sweat ran down his chest, cold; he thought he would pass out, wished he would pass out, but he sat with no sound coming from his lips till the pain gradually ebbed away.

"I'm going fishing tomorrow," he said, and left the room.

Glenneth set the timer in the kitchen for thirty minutes and lay on the sofa with her feet propped up. She had never needed to rest after work before, not until bed time, the way it should be. She closed her eyes, seeing the work cart empty, then full, the way the others looked at her as she pushed between the lines, bringing work, taking work. Seeing Melba BeCraft, only forty. When the timer buzzed, Glenneth found her houseslippers, walked into the kitchen. She began peeling potatoes for her dinner. She wouldn't start snacking, like some people did. She'd eat regular meals, at the table. Through the window she could see Frank in his back yard. He hadn't given up the fishing yet. She pushed back he curtains with one hand, watching him. Things changed so. One day he wouldn't be out there. One summer Old Tom would be at her house every day. Wilma would give up the house maybe; new people would move in. She had never been close to Frank and Wilma, but they were good people, good neighbors. Frank had helped Glenneth once when a possum had been caught up in the attic; helped her get the bee hive out of the old chinaberry tree in the front. Some winter mornings he had helped he get her car started.

Outside Frank had leaned suddenly, over the block, his head dipping down till the collar of the heavy coat hid his face. Glenneth dropped the potato and knife into the sink and hurried to the back door. She stopped, looked around her, and grabbed the sack of trash from the basket. In the yard she glanced in his direction as she put the
bag in the barrel by the shed. He still hadn’t straightened. She walked toward the low fence she had built, seeing him from the corner of her eye while she called to the cat.

“Tom, you fat old thing, why don’t you come home. It’s almost winter.”

Frank rose. His eyes were sunken, the pores of his skin seemed to have enlarged so that the stubble showed more.

“Hi, Glenneth.”

She nodded, looked at the sky, back at the cat, but seeing that Frank’s face was still blanched.

“You’re getting him fat.”

“It’s getting cold. He needs some weight.”

“Guess so. Probably snow before Thanksgiving.”

“Yeah. One of those years.” Frank slowly pushed all the scraps together on the block and stepped away from it, toward the fence and Glenneth.

“How’s work going?”

Glenneth wrapped her arms around her waist. “Fine,” she said, “just fine.”

“That’s good.”

They watched Tom jump on the block, his body curving protectively around the scraps.

“He’s been a good old Tom, hasn’t he, Glenneth.”

“He has. Mean. No ears. Half a tail.”

“He’s been something alright.”

They watched the cat quietly. Frank pushed his hands in his pockets, smiled a little. The air had turned cooler, the Missouri night wind beginning. Glenneth pulled her arms closer. Frank’s eyes were blue. She didn’t remember ever knowing what color they were before.

“They put me in packaging,” she said.

“Packaging? Is that good?”

“Where they put old people. Don’t bother me much, though.” She looked away from him, down. “Thought maybe I’d put some bulbs in here this weekend.” She bent, pulled leaves away from the small slats of the fence. “Look nice next spring.”

“Thought they had a union down at the factory.”

“They do. Piece prices, pension, that sort of thing. Think Wilma’d mind having some tulips along here?”
“No. It’d be nice.”

On Saturday, Frank’s son and his family came. Frank sat in his recliner, watching the game with Dave and the boy. He had never seen his grandson so quiet, just sitting, thin legs awkwardly crossed, finger tapping against the arm of the sofa. Dave didn’t tease Wilma about the over-heated house. They all talked and laughed a little, but it seemed as if they were in a church or a sickroom. Even the murmur of the voices from the kitchen, Wilma and Rosie, seemed different. Frank closed his eyes. When he opened them he caught Dave staring at him with Wilma’s expression. Such dark eyes. The boy had them, too. “I can’t do a goddamn thing about it, Dave,” he said. “Not a goddamn thing.” Then he couldn’t talk anymore.

When they left, Frank wouldn’t go back in the house with Wilma. He sat on the porch swing, hands in his lap, staring at the road in front of his house and the homes across it. Prairie Street. When he had moved here, it hadn’t been paved and had no name. When cars went by dust filtered into the house and settled on the furniture until Wilma had spread cheesecloth across the front windows. They had wanted to live in a small town for Dave, in a good neighborhood, with the same friends. A small place where they still carolled at Christmas, had town raffles for turkeys at Thanksgiving. It had been a good little town.

A door slammed shut next door. Glenneth had stepped down from her porch and was crossing her yard with a cardboard box and trowel. He waved to her. She had on her working clothes: an old dress covered with a gray sweater, black and white oxfords with gray socks, men’s leather gloves and a scarf. She had dressed the same, year in and out, when she worked in the yard in the fall. In the spring it would be only slightly different: no sweater and a hat in place of the scarf. She had knelt and was clearing the soil for the bulbs. He watched her for a while, then walked around to his back yard and took his tools from the rack in the shed.

He talked to her about the bulbs; about the broken slats, if it had been his grandson who broke them; about the lopsided tree, if it should come out or maybe would stand up under the next high wind; if the town was really going to build a housing project on the slope.
above and beyond the ditch. Glenneth answered him as she always had, practically, wanting to keep the tree whatever happened, not trusting the town to do what was right, if they built the project the foundations would wash down the slope with the rain. But her voice seemed strained, and she rested often, sitting back on her heels and looking down the fence line at the soil still to be broken.

“How’s work going?”
“Fine,” she said. “Just fine.”
Frank pushed a bulb deep and smoothed the dirt above it. “They still got you in packaging?”
She nodded and moved away, pushing the box of bulbs before her.
“You oughta talk to that union.”
“Can’t.”
“That’s what it’s for.”
She didn’t answer. She shook her head and a few moments later shook it again.

When Frank woke in the night now Wilma fixed him hot milk as his mother had done in his childhood illnesses. Wilma bought the candy he liked and kept it in every room of the house. “Eat, Frank, please,” she said. On the kitchen counter was a schedule. Wilma timed the medication, the dosage. He tried not to ask for it and every time he did, it was too soon. Wilma slept in a cot next to his bed at night so he could sleep easier and he couldn’t make her not do it. She had lost weight, wouldn’t go shopping on Mondays as she always had but instead let Rosie do the grocery buying, the small errands. He called Dr. Massey and asked for something to help Wilma relax but she wouldn’t take the pills.

The weather was cold, the wind strong. Wilma closed the drapes against the chill but he made her open them. It seemed to him there was a quickness outside, the cars speeding, the kids running, laughing, the wind blowing. Even the first snow seemed to fall in a hurry, heavy and wet. Only Glenneth moved slowly. He saw how she sat in her car now when she came home from work and placed her hand on the porch post before stepping up. On the morning after the snow, her car wouldn’t start and he had tried to take his peacoat from the closet, but Wilma had stopped him. “She can call the garage,
Frank. You can't do this.” He watched the mechanic come, put the jumper cables on. Such a simple thing.

The weather warmed again right before Christmas. Frank used the cane to walk in the back yard. The chopping block had darkened, only a few half-rotted leaves lying on its surface. He brushed them off, leaned against the wood. This summer the Merrimac would flow on, the trees bush out, wild honeysuckle line the roadway. But there would be no fish. Not for Frank Cauley. Maybe Tom would sit under the tree and wait. Maybe for the whole summer. Maybe Glenneth would come get him, take him into her yard. He looked toward her house. The dish was by the back steps. “Tom?” he called. “Hey. Tom.” He stepped over the fence and crossed the yard. The dish was empty, a thick ring where the milk had set awhile before Tom had come. But no cat. He stood looking at the back door where white curtains with pink flowers were stretched tight over the glass pane. He knocked.

“Frank. Well I never. You just come in.”
“Looking for Tom.”
“You come on in here. Sit down. I've gotta get some shoes on. Just put these slippers on for a minute and forgot to change.”
Her kitchen smelled like food, a roast, maybe, in the oven. There were plants in the window sills, except above the sink. His daughter-in-law kept plants like that, in every room of the house.
“How's Wilma?” she called from the bedroom.
“Fine.”
“Haven't seen you out lately.” He heard her pause. “but it's been cold.”
“It has. Been a bad one this year.”
Glenneth took cups from the cupboard, poured coffee. She wouldn't sit down till she had put out sugar and cream although he wanted neither, and had placed napkins on the table.
“That Tom was here this morning,” she said. “Just like always.”
“Thought I'd look at him. See how he was doing.”
Frank sipped the coffee. The windows of her kitchen were steamy. The wallpaper she had added was yellow, the seams not matching close to the ceiling. She had done it herself, just like she mowed her own yard, pruned her own trees.
“How's work?”
“Fine. Just fine.”
“Glenneth, that union. You paid for it.”
Her hand smoothed against the table. It was a thick hand; looked stronger than Wilma’s.
“They say I can’t do the work anymore. The union can’t do nothing about that.”
“They owe it to you.”
“Don’t anybody owe anybody anything.” She stood, took his cup to the stove and filled it. When she set it in front of him again, it rattled a little against the saucer. “You won’t have them treatments,” she said.
“No.”
She sat back down, her hand brushing against the table again. “It scares me to go to the union.”
“Those treatments make me sick.” Frank shook his head. “So damned sick.”

The winter was a long one, and hard, rain turning to sleet, then freezing solid. It was early April before a warm day came and the same month that Frank’s treatments stopped the final time. Glenneth didn’t visit. It had never been her way to visit. She worked at her machine and tried to make the quota; it seemed to her that the work had become harder. She came home for lunch often. She had expected to hear from Wilma when it happened, but it was Frank’s son who told her, standing on her porch and speaking to her through the screen. When he left, she walked through her house and stepped outside. She would put in a garden again this year, maybe paint the front porch. She pulled her arms tightly against her. Down the yard the old lopsided tree had made it through another winter; the slope beyond had been cleared by the city. She walked toward her fence. The bulbs had pushed up, still small, fragile. Old Tom lay among them, the sun shining against his gray fur, making him look sleek and young. “Tom,” she said and he raised his head. She picked him up and carried him toward the back door. “Tom, it’s summer.”
OUTLINE FOR A LONGER PRAYRE

I can hear my dear dead grandmother saying to Joseph, many years before she begins forgetting, long before her first or even her fourth heart attack, before the birth of her fourth grandchild, the one Maurice doesn't live to know, before the wedding of her sixth daughter, I can hear her . . . Hear her even before the house is sold because her brother-in-law has secretly shifted some stock, hear her reassuring words in the yard surrounded by ten brothers and sisters before the ceremony of her marriage when hard boiled eggs are served. Yes, I can hear her proudly tell them before her mother's fall leaning over the stove inside the house on Deerfield Avenue while her father closes his goatskin texts of the ancient symbols of a dying language, closing his eyes for a nap, I can hear her before her mother's mirror, I can hear her young voice saying as she guides Max, Joseph, and Rebecca away from the synagogue and into the strange neighborhood, quiet on a Saturday morning with the Sabbath awe, decrepit, washed over by the sepia weather, dreary under the April sky— As the first humid complaint comes to little Joseph's serious lips, I can hear her, and I can hear her mother saying as she squeezes Bessie's frightened hand on the ship's bow before the first awakening, America, she speaks the hymn of her fathers', saying Be happy for what we have.
TEXTILE WORKER

At first glance
it seems to be the moon wandering
late through the April
sky. But she looks
again, decides it's only a cloud
then turns back
to the clattering bobbins.
Nine years old, she
knows enough to braid
her hair tight
and high, to roll her sleeves
beyond the elbow.
She will bring home
two dollars a week.

Six years into her future
she remembers
the sun filtered through
windows. Six years
forward she wanders
late through a moonless
night, her one arm
a beacon
and a loom.
TWO AUBADES: NOVEMBER

I.

Six times last night I woke, your arm
Across my back like a bar of sunlight
Warming a stone sill. Now when my body’s stiff
From sleep and the cold drafts of my dreams,
Your hand rubs circles down my skin,
Melting the block of pain between my shoulders.
A warm blade, stroked on ice, sinks,
Opening it to sun and a slow melting.
Under your hands, my stiff skin loosens,
Muscles thaw; I am flesh again

II.

Dawn, gray as the backs of stones,
Flattens what remains—four papery
Gold leaves flapping on the aspen.
Light grates at our eyes; geese cut the sky
Wedged in lines straight as hemlocks,
Then waver in the wind like smoke.
Bark and log split under axe and wedge;
Heartwood opens to the fire.
The geese, escaping winter, cut clouds,
Split earth’s gray wrapping to let the pale sun
Flood our chilling skin.
As though answering
the question she seems
anxious to ask, I say
I don't know where
they come from, as,

from the screendoor,
we watch the migrant underwings
of grosbeaks, a huge
sheet of wings: the choreography
of one instinct
and one sound as they light
simultaneous in our tree.

At her age,
a shoe is an equal
in conversation, still
unsure which things
answer, or stay
unconsciously mute, the rude gloves,
which, though spoken to, do not
move or speak,
not even when she chews them.

I stand in the doorway
holding her, both of us
listening to this score of strangers
chittering and beaking
invisible in the tree,

when she lets out
an unholy, animal yell
and I almost drop her—
the whole world
flying up in our faces.
LETTER TO MAJOR GEORGE THOMSON FROM JENNY

I have given up seeing you this winter.
By the bay window a sunny morning
I saw the names of Oscar Parker and Major Corbett
in the Tribune. Your name was not.
All night lying under our blue quilt
I remembered your hair
blown against your throat,
the steady draw of the buggy.

Snow thickens the roof of the barn
as I walk to the Central House. Our room
was fourteen. In the parlor I listen
to the tread of men's boots. The pine door
opens and I imagine I hear you singing
as you used to lying on the bed.
The amber lamp remains and through the window
the prairies reach out under snow.

I dreamt you came home. Father and I
were scooping oats for the Bay and the brown mare.
You lounged against the barn door in blue
with epaulets and so many gold buttons.
I did not recognize you until you had gone.
Ann Butler said the horses are dying from long marches
and when I watch the snow fall
I feel a bird break from the sky
inside my skull and plunge.

Since the last battle I close my eyes
but can't control myself. I can hear nothing
by telegraph. The government claims the wires.
Years pass between the days, each morning
disjointed, a bird startled from the grass,
no pattern for flight. Lately I don't know
if the brown grass is a new spring
or a spring we knew together.

It is small comfort to know that nothing
is ever finished, that each touch
we carry with us to feel again
some unsuspecting morning,
wheat against our thighs.
Lately I have felt a lameness
between my shoulders.
Where is your heart?
The woman who entered our bedroom last night moved quietly. I could only hear your methodic breath as she touched you.

This morning when you awoke, the skin on your thigh crackling, you thought, perhaps, of lost youth. You showered, as usual. I had been gone already for two hours.

You thought how we share only the darkness, the air we breathe; sometimes we both ride a dark horse, our purpose. This seems enough.

But the sleep we share too is a golden, revolving globe, each night beaten thin, stretched, our world so expanded. At the farthest ends, in niches, we are recluses whether we like it or not; the underbrush is too thick to cut, and the animals! Often we see only their eyes . . . and women, men burst full grown from the trees they have been imprisoned in!

A man visited me last night. I know you could barely hear him, you, miles away with your woman. I imagined our golden sighs burst at the same liquid moment.
as we slept, our curled bodies facing opposite directions.
ARRANGING FLOWERS FOR MY DEATH

Those wax-white hyacinths, they travel well,
set them on my knees,
let fragrance fill my face.
The tiger, my companion, pads
through living room and den.
With twitching tail he looks
to left, to right.
He moves around the furniture,
this room too small for him,
lays his head upon my lap.
His breath is in my lungs,
his purring rattles all my noons.
I stroke that flaming fur,
follow those stripes with my hand,
and he measures my life.
The restless tail strikes cabinets
where all my treasures are,
and the painted egg is broken.
On hind legs he tears the drapes away
from my garden,
and it is now
that we must go—
I climb upon his back,
clutch his deep and glossy rug
as he leaps among the broken trees
where crackling wires hiss,
and the roar of his delight
shakes the pale day moon.
I feel the rhythm of his muscles
beneath me as we dance
to the song of the ordered stars.
Madame Yamasaki sits on my patio
arranging tiger
lilies, tears at her aralia leaf.
“Nothing is perfect,” she says to her hands.
CONTRIBUTORS

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ELTON GLASER's chapbook, Peripheral Vision, was published this year by Bits Press. Elton teaches English at the University of Akron, where he and Janice Fritsch are translating contemporary French poetry.

ALBERT GOLDBARTH's recent booklength poem, Different Fleshes, won this year's Texas Institute of Letters Award.

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DOUG MYERS has worked as a furniture maker, mill worker, surveyor, field geologist, and camp book. He received the Loring Williams Academy of American Poets Prize in 1979. This is his first publication.

SARA MILLER is completing her MFA at the University of Montana. She is pretty, pleasant, and a former editor of *CutBank.*

ANTONY OLDKNOW has taught in Quebec, Wisconsin, and North Dakota. His latest books are: *Anthem for Rusty Saw and Blue Sky,* *Consolation for Beggars,* and *More Sonnets by Oldknow.*

WILLIAM PITT ROOT has three books coming out in early 1981: *Reasons for Going It On Foot,* *In the World’s Common Grasses,* and *Fireclock.*

LEX RUNCIMAN is completing his PhD in Creative writing at the University of Utah. His book, *Luck,* will be published this winter by Owl Creek Press.

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SANDRA WITT recently completed her MFA at the University of Montana. Her poems have appeared in *The Colorado Quarterly, The Anthology of Magazine Verse & Yearbook of American Poetry 79,* and *The Montana Review.*

SCOTT ZALUDA lives in Manhattan, works in a Bronx hospital, and is “remaking” his family history.

BONNIE ZOBELL is attending the Writing workshop at Columbia University. She is working on her first novel.
BOOKS RECEIVED

*Anima*, Sam Hamill, poems, Copper Canyon Press, $5.00.

*Anything Anything*, Walter McDonald, poems, L'Epervier Press, $4.25.

*Asleep in Another Country*, Melinda Mueller, poems, Jawbone Press.


*Coyote Pays a Call*, Bruce Bennett, poems, Bits Press, Case Western Reserve.

*Death Dances*, Marvin Abbot, stories, Applewood Press.

*Father Fisheye*, Peter Balakian, poems, Sheep Meadow Press, $4.95.


*The Lone Woman and Others*, Constance Urdang, poems, University of Pittsburgh Press, $4.50.


*Nursery Rhymes for the Dead*, Sue Owen, poems, Ithaca House, $4.00.

*Soapstone Wall*, Travis Du Priest, poems, Wolfsong Press, $2.50.

*Under the Hala Tree*, Lowell Uda, retold ocean myths and legends, Prickly Pear Press, $4.50.


MAGAZINES RECEIVED


*The Barat Review* (volume 8, no. 1), Laurie S. Lee, ed., Barat College, Lake Forest, IL 60045, $4.50/copy.

*The Beloit Poetry Journal* (Spring/Summer/Fall/80) May Sarton, Guest Editor, Box 2, Beloit, WI 53511, $1.50/copy.

*Beyond Baroque*, (802) George Drury Smith, ed., Beyond Baroque Foundation, Box 806, Venice, CA 90291.

*Chariton Review*, (volume 6, no. 1) Jim Barnes, ed., Northwest Missouri State University, Kirksville, MO 63501. $2/copy.


*fiction international*, (Number 12/80) Joe David Bellamy, ed., St. Lawrence University, Canton, NY 13617, $5/copy.


*Gilt Edge* (Volume 1) Madeline DeFrees, CarolAnn Russell, Elizabeth Weber, eds., P.O. Box 8081, Missoula, MT 59807, $3.50/copy.
The Iowa Review (Fall/Winter/80) David Hamilton, Fredrick Woodard, eds., University of Iowa, 308 EPB, Iowa City, IA 52242.

Kayak (Sept./80) George Hitchcock, ed., 325 Ocean View Avenue, Santa Cruz, CA 95062, $1/copy.

Kudzu (Summer/Fall/79) Jim and Harriet Peterson, Stephen Gardner, eds., 166 Cokesdale Road, Columbia, SC 29210, $1/copy.


The North American Review (June/Sept./80) Robley Wilson, ed., University of Northern Iowa, Cedar Falls, IA 50614, $2/copy.

Northwest Review (XVIII-3) John Witte, ed., University of Oregon, Eugene, OR 97403, $2.50.

Poetry Now (Issues 26/27) E. V. Griffith, ed., 3118 K Street, Eureka, CA 95501, $1.50.

Porch (Spring/80) James V. Cervantes, ed., Department of English, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ 85281, $2/copy.

Quarterly West (Winter/Spring/80) Terry Hummer, ed., 312 Olpin Union, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, UT 84112, $2.50/copy.

Scratchgravel Hills, Rick Newby, et. al., eds., Dog Creek Press, Box 5927, Helena, MT 59601, $3.50/copy.

The Small Press Review (July-October/80) Len Fulton, ed., Dustbooks, Box 100, Paradise, CA 96959, $10/year.

Sou'wester (Volume 8, no. 1,2) Lana Hayes, ed., Department of English, Southern Illinois University, Edwardsville, IL 62026, $1.50/copy.

Stand (Volume 21, no. 3,4) Lorna Tracy, et. al., eds., Jim Kates, c/o 16 Forest Street, Norwell, MA, $2.50/copy.

Tamarack (Issue 2) Allen Hoey, ed., 909 Westcott Street, Syracuse, NY 13210, $2.50/copy.

Western Humanities Review (Spring/Summer/80) Jack Garlington, ed., University of Utah, Salt Lake City, UT 84412, $2.50/copy.

Whetstone (Summer/80) Michael Bowden, ed., Rural Route 1, Box 221, St. David, AZ 85630, $2.00/copy.

Willow Springs Magazine (Spring/80) Bill O'Daly, ed., Box 1063 Eastern Washington University, Cheney, WA 99004, $2.50/copy.

Yakima (Number 4) Jim Bodeen, Barry Grimes, eds., 621 S. 30th Avenue, Yakima, WA 98902, $1.00/copy.
Back Issues


No. 2  John Haines, Quinton Duval, Susan Rea, Rex Burwell, Albert Drake, and others. Larry Hales portfolio. $1.50.

No. 3  Jane Bailey, Lee Blessing, Martha Evans, William Virgil Davis, Andrew Grossbardt, CarolAnn Russell, Paula Petrik, David Steingass, Paul Zimmer, and others. Photographs by Larry Hales. $1.50.

No. 4  Montana Artists Issue: Michelle Birch, Madeline DeFrees, John Haines, Richard Hugo, Pat Todd, and others. Photographs by Nick Baker. $1.50.


No. 6  Albert Goldbarth, James J. McAuley, W. M. Ranson, Gloria Sawai, Mary Swander, Sara Vogan, and others. Special section on John Haines, with an interview and portfolio of new work. $2.00.

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