The editors
are pleased to announce
the winner of the 1990-91
Richard Hugo Memorial Poetry Award
Greg Pape
“Wijiji”
published in CutBank 36
Judge: James Galvin

and the winner of the 1990-91
A. B. Guthrie, Jr. Short Fiction Award
Kellie Wells
“Telling the Chicken”
published in CutBank 35
Judge: Lynn Freed

The Richard Hugo Memorial Poetry Award and the A. B. Guthrie, Jr. Short Fiction Award are granted once each year to work published in CutBank. Submissions are accepted from August 15 until February 28. Please send a stamped, self-addressed envelope for writers’ guidelines.
CutBank 36
where the big fish lie

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In not that many years, we have lost Dick Hugo, Dorothy Johnson, Myron Brinig, Norman Maclean and now Bud Guthrie. It seems that an era has passed.

What writer wouldn’t envy even the one book—*The Big Sky*—setting a standard of craftsmanship and serious purpose for a generation, giving a state its name, and—Bud would want us to remember—telling a damn good tale.

That book, from 1947, still looms large. “What do you think of it?” I asked Bill Kittredge, across the hall, as I was about to teach it for the first time. “A classic,” he said. “It had to be written.” And ten years or so later, as we—the seven editors of *The Last Best Place*—began our first of many meetings, that book stood out from the skyline like Ear Mountain, above Bud’s home. “Well, we’re doing an anthology of Montana writings. What’ll we put in for sure?” someone asked. “Ten year too late anyhow,” somebody else replied, and most of us knew the rest of that scene in *The Big Sky*:

“She’s gone, goddam it! Gone!”
“What’s gone?” asked Summers.

Boone could see the whisky in Uncle Zeb’s face. It was a face that had known a sight of whisky, likely, red as it was and swollen looking.

“The whole shitaree. Gone, by God, and naught to care savin’ some of us who seen ’er new. . . . This was man’s country onc’ t. Every water full of beaver and a galore of buffler any ways a man looked, and no crampin’ and crowdin’. Christ sake!”
And who wouldn’t admire being not just a writer, but part of a movement, with Stegner and DeVoto and Joe Howard and others, a group of friends rewriting Western history, taking their homelands back from Hollywood and teaching us all to tell it straight. And who wouldn’t admire the guts, over a long career, long after *The Way West* and *These Thousand Hills* and the autobiography, *The Blue Hen’s Chick*—the guts to change, to come up with new views and new issues, to keep at the keys day after day.

Like Mike Mansfield and most Montana legends, Guthrie had a no-nonsense style. A few years ago, Jim and Lois Welch were at his house beneath the Front Range, near the Ripley Schemm/Dick Hugo cabin on the Teton River, where Boone had settled a hundred and fifty years ago. Bud had been a long time in the hospital in Bismarck, and was eighty-nine years old. He was frail and sick and not too sure what lay ahead. But as usual, he didn’t waste time on sentimentalities or courtesies. “Chrissake,” he said, “when do we get to talk politics?”

—Bill Bevis
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where the big fish lie

CutBank, a Montana magazine with a longstanding tradition of literary excellence, invites you to help continue that tradition. Recent contributors include Stephen Dobyns, Michael Dorris, Louise Erdrich, Patricia Henley, Pattiann Rogers, and William Stafford. Published twice a year; perfect bound.

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CutBank  •  Department of English
University of Montana  •  Missoula, MT 59812
Talons

One late-summer afternoon of that year, Audrey Spalding—my aunt Audrey—latched up her white-shuttered bungalow and rode in a taxi to St. Jude’s where she intended to have her hysterectomy on the sly. She had dropped us a postcard: Such heat! Headed up to the San Juans. Give you a buzz when I get back . . . A little past eight the next morning she took a violent reaction to the anesthesia. Her heart arrested, was started, quit once more, and despite heroics would not take up its work again.

She was fifty-eight.

That was the summer, too, when my parents finally laid their marriage to rest, end of the grueling fresh starts and plummetings. My mother had gone to live with my sister Lil in St. Paul. My father had arranged to be out of the country for six months, overseeing construction of a pumping station for the Saudis. By contrast, it was also the summer—actually, late in May—that Faye and I married, the last forced show of family solidarity. Faye had baby’s breath in her hair, a slippery white dress that showed off her collarbones. When I straightened after our kiss she pulled my head down again and there was laughter. We were toasted, hugged, wished every happiness. We drove off in a gusting rain, with fruit blossoms lacquering the pavement. We were twenty-one, delirious to find ourselves finally cohabiting. We had an airy, one-bedroom flat over Maxine’s Dress Shop in Bremerton. So this is my life, I thought, walking the rooms, smelling their foreign, disinfected smells, taking in the maple dinette, the clawfoot tub brush-painted green, the gauzy curtains sailing and flapping in the cross breeze. Despite her euphoria, I caught Faye doing the same, arms folded,
shivering slightly, including me in that questioning look.

The family strewn, it fell to us to see to Audrey’s instructions, typed on blue file cards (using the old Underwood Noiseless I remembered from childhood, with the o that rose above the line like an escaping air bubble).

She’d left them in her stocking drawer, marked IMPORTANT: Cremation, no service, a small get-together—we were supposed to dust off her bottles of home-made burgundy, drink what we pleased and divvy up the rest. Whoever’s reading this: Absolutely no tearjerking. I mean it, it was short but I had a great time. She’d included a write-up for the Sun, which ended (so as to needle my father): Never once voted for a Republican in her entire life.

She’d left the house clean—fresh linen on her bed, only French’s and kosher dills and seltzer in the icebox—but it wasn’t clean the way you’d leave it if you thought you might not return. I threw out a squash blossom shriveled into a water glass on the sill, erased the single message on her chalkboard: Call M./waterhtr. Unloading a shelf in the pantry, we came upon two tins of letters to her from a man named Frank Leland. The first ones were dated 1955. Gummed to the corner of each envelope was a gold oval that said FRANK’S FRAME SHOP.

“You shouldn’t look at those,” Faye whispered over my shoulder. How can you not look? The one in my hand said, Sweet, it’s unbelievably dreary here. The straits look like tarpaper. Honest, I don’t see how I can bear this much longer . . .

But he’d borne it! Years of letters were wedged into the tins. Some had been ripped open, others scissored off at the end; some appeared to have been read many times. Now the worst of it dawned on me: in with the tumble of junk mail delivered since her death was yet another gold-stickered letter from Frank.
She hadn’t told him either.

Faye and I went on piling Audrey’s things, we boxed and carried and mopped with Pine Sol. That night we lay on the two halves of the folded-down daybed, worn out. It had been hot for weeks and no insects were left to bat against the screens. Out in the dark a dry wind sifted through Audrey’s grape arbors. I couldn’t sleep. I put my hand on Faye. She was tiny and calm, such a mystery to me still. Her skin was damp under the T-shirt, I could feel the fine hairs on her stomach.

“You’ll have to write him, Sammy,” she said.

“Me?” I said, turning, nestling.

“Who else?”

“What a stupid thing,” I said in a minute. I was young enough I’d never lost anyone to death. I was angry, but it was anger I didn’t know, as raw and chastening as the other feelings consuming me that summer. And mixed with it, like grains of fine gravel, was something else—I felt betrayed, straight-armed away from business of wonderful importance.

My beleaguered parents had shipped me off to spend the twelve weeks between eighth and ninth grades at Audrey’s. Audrey taught junior high, biology and health, coached track—I was no mystery to her at all. She read my heart as if it hammering under plexiglass. She was fortyish, thin as a hurdler, tall, with wide bony shoulders and a solitary’s habits. Later on, she wore her hair cropped, almost spiky, still the color of terra cotta—her skull was large and round, warrior-like—but that summer she had two tight-woven braids, bobby pinned in spirals over either ear, bangs wisping above far-apart gray eyes. Where my own mother had grown peevish, flinching at each day’s fresh evidence, Audrey was stubbornly curious. “These two hemlock?” she said,
walking with me along the boundary of the old homestead. “We put them down the same year—they were about as high as your head. Now why do you figure this one’s twenty feet taller?” I had to offer an opinion having to do with soil nutrients, hours of direct sun. “Uh huh,” Audrey said. “Probably right. Then again, maybe one’s just stronger. That happens.” At home we didn’t discuss why Audrey hadn’t married—it was a fact, like the speed of sound, like the distance between parents. “I don’t suppose she cared for . . . that sort of life,” was all my mother had to say.

Mornings, Audrey tutored me in quadratic equations or tried to teach me bridge, afternoons we pruned the grapes or tied up the peas or swam at Dimaggio’s—this was years before the red tides closed our beaches. Audrey’s long white arms ripped out of the waves, jerking her ahead. I can see us lying on two towels, her black tank suit drying, lightening, beside me. At night she put me down on the daybed with the radio playing low. “Come on, cut the crap, Sammy,” she said. “Tell me you love me!”

“Yes, of course,” I said.

She bent and warmed my forehead with her lips. “Roses on your pillow.”

Thus, Frank came as a shock.

All that summer he’d been in her thoughts! She’d read his letters, filed them in the cookie tin, then—while I slept?—settled into the creaky rattan on the porch and typed hers under the gooseneck lamp. Frank lived two hours north, a ferry ride and an easy jaunt along the water, but Audrey was never absent. No strange man ever shuffled up the steps of the bungalow and squinted in through the screen door, no telephone disturbed the peace at crazy hours. And there was no brooding in Audrey—or if so, it burned deeper inside her than I was privileged to see.
Faye was right, I had to tell Frank, but I put it off. I read the want ads. The rains came, I slid into a low humor. My letters of inquiry shot out like radio messages into deep space. All I'd found was day work, and this came with a jarring call, 6:20 a.m., maybe twice a week. Faye was working for three gynecologists. She left in a nimbus of Canoe, awake, white rayon rustling, new white Clinics going *chick, chick* on the tiles. She came home asking how went the job hunt, how went the pavement pounding, saying have faith, Sammy, I love you, don't get down on yourself. A couple of times she asked, Honey did you call Frank yet? I offered a fuzzy reply, slipped my hands under her shirt. Faye giggled, let herself be nuzzled back against the icebox before sliding away, flushed, to see about our dinner.

But one raw morning, waiting for a call, I found myself at our window. Down below, Maxine's customers moved heavily against the wind, their heads in snapping scarves. The bell over the door shook, rang distantly through the floorboards. I stood suddenly and got Frank's letters, dumped them on the oilcloth and tore into the first one my hand fell on. There was his left-handed scrawl spilling down a sheet of legal tablet. *I've been thinking about what you said . . . I've been thinking that it takes an immense strength, a kind of deep in the bone . . .* but I couldn't go through with it. I got my coat, took the bus to where our Falcon sat making rust in the doctors' lot, used the spare key, and drove to the ferry dock.

Frank wasn't at his shop.

"Mr. Leland's sort of retired," a girl in a crimson smock told me. "Hey, what's this about—?" she asked, as if I might be a snoop for the government. I tried to put her mind at ease. "You could call him at home, I guess," she offered finally. "If it's like *personal*.

She bent and scratched the number on a sales slip.
I wadded it in my breast pocket, and went back out into the rain. But calling didn’t seem like the answer. I stopped at a gas station and fished the address out of the book.

The house sat on a rocky hummock along the water, glass and weathered shingles choked with blackberry. A wind chime gave a few meek tings as I stood waiting, pine boughs dripping on me. Frank came to the door himself.

He was an old man. I’d realized he had to be fairly old, still I wasn’t ready. His skin was waxy as a Dixie cup, pale and reddish, hastily shaved. Long filaments of hair were varnished to his scalp. He had the eyes of an old bird. My thoughts ground to a halt. This couldn’t have been Audrey’s lover, not by a breach of nature.

I stuck my hand out. “Sam Church?” I said. “I need to talk to you. About my aunt Audrey.”

Panic toyed with Frank’s face, still he let me in, ushered me down a little corridor of simonized flagstones, and then we were loose in his front room, which faced the straits, and before I got a word out I was confronted by an enormous watercolor of my aunt, commanding the wall over a flowered sofa.

She had the feathery bangs, the two braids wrapped like shells over her ears. She was wearing a yellow-striped sundress I could almost remember. I looked at it for a long time.

“Mr. Church?” he said.

So finally I gave him his sad news. He uncrossed his arms and let them dangle.

He said, “I see, yes—I see,” nodding, blinking. He asked if I wanted coffee.

My stomach was on fire. I didn’t know what I wanted—not coffee served by Frank Leland. But then I was saying, “Well, sure, coffee’d be fine,” and Frank vanished around a room divider. I
heard water running in the sink, and over the rush of the water
Frank crying.

Now the front door opened and two women charged in, the
one in the lead engulfed in purplish flowers. She could hardly see
over the top. "Frank—" she yelled, then noticed me. I got up. She
said hello, cool, unimpressed. She thrust the flowers into my arms
and wiggled out of her coat. Frank appeared with the coffee. He
handed my cup to his wife, I gave him the flowers and he disap­
peared into the kitchen for more cups. When he'd gotten that
taken care of he came back and introduced us all.

The daughter, Sabrina, had the mother's round, disapproving
face, the same arched over-plucked brows. I gathered she was
living at home again, by default.

"Mr. Church here," Frank said to his wife, with a slight jut of
the chin, "is trying his damnedest to talk me into chairing a
committee for the hospital auction again this year."

"Oh, Frank," she said, lips squeezing. "I thought you said you'd
done enough for those people."

Frank said, "It's nice to feel needed."

There was a clattering of bracelets from the daughter. "Let's
please not go through all that again, huh—?" she said.

"Frank's too generous with his time," Mrs. Leland said. "There
comes a point when you feel you've given enough, don't you
think? Some people don't recognize when they're being taken
advantage of."

"Gee," I said, "I don't want you to feel like that."

I took a breath and checked Frank—he'd begun to look for­
lorn, rubbing the knees of his corduroys with both palms.

"If that's how you feel," I said, "don't worry about it. I'll just—
I'll just call somebody else on my list."
That seemed, for a moment, to pacify the women. I couldn’t think of an iota more to say about the auction. I tried a sip of my coffee—it was still scalding.

The daughter shook a Gauloise from its pack and lit up, then slumped back, richly bored, picking flakes of tobacco off her pointed tongue.

Mrs. Leland caught me staring at Audrey’s portrait.

“That picture,” she said. “You like it? I can see you do. Queer deal. Someone had it framed at Frank’s shop, then never showed up to claim it. You couldn’t ever track them down, could you, Frank?”

Frank shook his head, no.

“That was years ago, wasn’t it, Frank?”

Frank hauled himself to his feet. He excused himself, not looking at any of us, and padded down the hallway, his steps strangely weightless. I heard a door close. Old man’s kidneys I thought, not knowing a thing about old men’s kidneys. Minutes scraped by in contorted small talk. No Frank.

A week later Faye and I were in bed. It was a work night for her, late, after one. I was keyed-up, rolling over and over, keeping her awake. I couldn’t get Frank off my mind. I hadn’t said a word yet about going to see him, but now, in the dark, it was all coming out.

“When I finally got outside it was still drizzling,” I went on. “Big dead leaves were plastered all over the windshield. I couldn’t wait to blast out of there. Anyway, I slid down into my seat and there he was.”

“In the car? Frank?”

“Yes. Waiting for me, agitated as hell.”
“Think what you’d told him, though,” Faye said. “Think of all he’d just lost—”

“No,” I said. “I understand that. But you see what he thought? He thought I was going to spill the beans. He thought I’d go back in and spoil his secret. Isn’t that pathetic?”

I slid up on one elbow and tried to see Faye in the weak light. “It’s so shabby—he’s that old and he’s scared to death his wife’s going to catch him. What a life.”

“Oh, Sammy,” Faye said. “Why didn’t you tell me before?” She reached up and rubbed my shoulder. “Honey—”

“I had to just about shove him out of the car,” I said. “I had to almost get ugly with him. I mean he grabbed me, by the arm, he sat there staring at me, like some huge awful bird.”

Far off in the dark I heard a boat horn on the canal, fierce and hollow, but close in there was silence except for our breathing. “You won’t be that kind of man,” Faye said. “You won’t ever be like Frank.”

“God, no,” I vowed, and lay in the dark, feeling my wife’s touch on one arm, and on the other, Frank’s, icy, like talons.
Kathy Kopydlowski

Anasazi on the Kolob
Wijiji

Someone found the ocher clay
or ground soft stone colored by iron oxide
and mixed it in a bowl. Someone
cut the hollow reed from the rushes
along the arroyo or fashioned the long bone
of an eagle’s wing. Someone pressed
a hand on the canyon wall
and blew the liquid ocher onto hand
and stone. Someone a thousand years ago
made this image, a yellow glow
around an absent hand.

There must have been joy
in the moment of making, and joy
touched with sadness in the moments
afterward, just as there is now
in the way the glow holds
to the shape of the hand that’s gone.

On my way to this place
I thought of you, the one I ask so much of.
Storm clouds rose over Chacra Mesa.
Fajada Butte stood alone with its secret
knowledge of the sun. I walked
up the path in the changing light of the canyon
toward Wijiji, least of the greathouses
of Chaco, place abandoned for a thousand years,
word uttered by the body of a hummingbird.
No one knows what it means.

Wind came up through the sage
and brought the smell of rain.
Somewhere in the rocks Kokopelli,
with his burden of seeds and his flute,
bent over and blew his hopeful music
down on the husks. The seed of that music
opened and rose, waved and clattered
like green corn. Virga blew
in tattered curtains above the mesa.
A hummingbird hovered at a red flower.

At the base of the canyon wall
when the wind stopped I knelt
before water symbols and migration spirals,
the wolf pulling down the deer, the mother
giving birth, and the small absent hand
lit with a yellow glow.
I put my hand to the image
and saw it disappear.
More than one or the other, more than all the regrets, more than the hand that touches, it is the touching that lasts.
Blessing at the Citadel

By the time I had walked out of the canyon toward the end of a day of deep quiet and daydreams among lizards and wrens, a day of clarity in the sun and puzzles in the shadows where I found the petroglyph of a running animal pecked into the rock at the base of the canyon a thousand years ago, the animal I thought at first was a horse, but after looking awhile and thinking about it, realized was a mountain lion, I was ready I thought for anything.

I was feeling strong, light, open. I was ready to sing for a stranger, or walk into the cinder hills with one of the spirits of Lomaki, or put on a black satin cape, step out of my dusty shoes, croak, and flap off to ride thermals with the ravens. I was that happy, as if a new depth had entered my life.

When I came upon the tattooed family posing for pictures among the walls and rubble of Box Canyon Pueblo, and noticed
their station wagon with Indiana plates and the trailer with the words *Skin Tattoos* painted carefully in big black letters, I considered asking the smiling father, his tattooed belly bulging proudly beneath his shirt, to make a portrait of the lion on my chest. I was that happy. But asked instead, how you doing? Pretty good so far, he smiled. And I went on walking across the road, past a battered pickup, to Nalakihu and the Citadel, home to the Hisatsinom, ancestors of the Hopi, guardian spirits of the land nicknamed America.

I suppose I should keep this to myself, but there are things in a life that happen only once, and make us who we are, like being born from one woman or the first true kiss that makes all the others possible. I suppose I should hold my heart hostage to a regular beat, and if it must go faster, they say, it should do so gradually so it isn’t strained or damaged so the whole system starts to break down
and the invisible bird that flies back and forth between the extremities doesn’t burst into a sudden scattering of individual feathers.

But there they were, three of them, standing at the top of the Citadel in late afternoon light, silhouettes among the rocks rising like gods in human figures from the ancient walls. I stood quietly on the trail below until one of them came down to me and put a hand on my shoulder, lowered his head, opened my shirt, and spoke in the old way directly to my heart. Don’t go any further heart, he said, until you are blessed. He rubbed hooma over my chest and touched my forehead with the white dust of cornmeal on his fingers. He poured hooma in my left hand and placed a sprig of cedar in my right. Go pray, he said. What for? I asked. Pray for now, this place, all your relations. Pray for the hostages. Then he walked off down the trail
to join the others, not gods
but poor, living men from Moenkopi
here at the home of their ancestors
to pray for the world and bless a stranger.
The Flower Cutters

1.
A teen in time of war dances closer during slow songs.
He grows his hair . . . roams the lane of brothels,
where whores dye garments black in kettles
for funerals of student brothers buried at morning.
And these people pass the firewater jug, door
to shanty door. Their children gnaw at sugar cane plugs.
This strip, La Avenida, is on a hillcrest.
Stars blister above. For these stargazers
the stars are clear, are payment, given that here
porch lights forgive and burn red.

2.
All weekend: morning funerals and afternoon weddings.
The folks wear black satin then white voile.
Peasants make good business cutting flowers
on volcano Izalco. The bundled gladioli on their backs
like quivers of arrows for some afterbattle,
where the dead are ushered into the windowed parlor of the family album.

During noon naps the boys take flowers off graves, alter the sunburst symmetry of the coronals, sell the same flowers to the groom's mother.

Honeymoon is in the parent's house. After muted consummation, she educates his heart in the math of love.

She sleeps, her locks scribble on the pillow. He reads and learns and folds away.

3.
San Salvador is dead asleep. So take notice of what it is that happens: How in the processions sunflowers stop tracking the sun to follow the silver trains of brides.

How the streetsmart drinks an egg for hangover. How the couple, not in love, unravels in the morning, swab their crotches . . . dress. How they execute the sign of the cross, march out through flitting grasshoppers.
The Catch

Nineteen forty three. Disneyland's an orange grove, fantasy land for twelve-year-old Maurice who pitches for the New York Yankees, throwing oranges at trees, at passing trains.

Oranges were made for throwing and Maurice spends hours hurling dreamy curves at freight trains, howling with delight at every strike wondering where the train will take that splattered burst of orange.

Or, winding up, he smashes angry streaks of fastball orange against the rough hide of trees, juice, pulp, and seeds sliding down the trunks. Needs a catcher if he's gonna pitch in the big leagues.

Truth be known, he needs a ball. But his brother's gone, fighting Germans, and Maurice doesn't understand. The ball's nested in Matt's catcher's mitt on the mantle.
where it will stay till the war is won and beyond.

Late season trains are filled with troops, young men, waving and shouting Chuck it here, kid. Show us your arm. One man holds his hand like a glove. Maurice throws from the stretch, bases full, ninth inning, last game of the World Series. The orange colors the air a curving arc, a streaking train, and then the catch!

Time stops, holds the orange beside the soldier’s face, a young astonished face, remembered longer than a brother’s.
Like pallbearers, they'd hauled him down the skid road, the woods full of diesel, cedar scent, the fine curses of men bent on another load before dusk. A man broken by the fall of timber, two vertebrae snapped in their lean housing, and months to pawn everything he owned. The cast sat him stiff, armpits to hips, hollow as the Tin Man. Thumping his chest to Merle Haggard, Patsy Cline, the white smoke of Pall Malls filling the kitchen to barroom haze, he pieced together the thousand bits of blue and green. My father logging the hours over the Eiffel Tower, the stoney foreign faces of Mount Rushmore, daisies abloom in some unbelievable meadow of alpenglow. The world laid out before him on a three-by-three table and nowhere to go. I'd watch the puzzle come together, straight edges first, perfect interlocking frame, the center with its final vacancy, the last tulip among hundreds blooming across the table. In the kitchen, beans soaking, the smell of pot roast sweet with smoke, I never missed the man coming home in twilight, shedding sawdust like snow, bringing my mother wild iris, strawberries small as thimbles, bringing in the sharp air, bending easily to kiss us, while outside the world threw its beauty against our windows.
Blue Ice

Behind the school, sliding away down the hill to Robinson's Corner Drug, the ice pulled us from our rooms. While snow lay solid around us, deep as the bus windows, ice spread in a blue ribbon clear to the hard bone of earth. We ran for all the minutes a school day stole, flying down the sun-glazed path. What did we care about torn skirts, lost mittens, broken arms, or the dip at the end spilling us into the street like loose change. That last day before Christmas held us enthralled until the bell set us free, fighting our way to be first. I jumped and sailed down the slope one last time, not knowing my house was burning, the snow shrinking away into useless vapors. My arms and legs held out like spokes, I spun as the smoke rose and the bells rang their warnings, but I wasn't listening. The world was a tumble of sky, and I was spiralling
through its center, tumbling through the pure air of winter. The ashes would go on floating, ashes of plaster and paper, doll stuff and the sheets of sleep, floating for hours, while I waited for the hard lip of ice to tip me out, leaving me grounded and dazed, everything blue, flames dancing just where the sun touched, then gone.
Blair Oliver

An Easy Thing to Remember

It happened on a Saturday, late February. A she lion wandered down out of the Flat Irons, made tracks through Lost Gulch into my old back yard, and left with my ex-wife’s poodle hanging from its mouth.

I know this because my phone rang.
She said, “You’re going to pay for this one.”
I didn’t doubt it. Not for a moment.
“Your son loved that dog,” she said.

Our son’s been dead for two years. He was stillborn, and it came between us. Instead of making us stronger and closer and more for each other, it was a bomb. My ex, Carol, continued to make a life for our son, if not for the three of us.

At first when she did this I thought nothing. Or post-something. I thought she was like one of the women you see on television, on Phil Donahue. Then I made small fun. After three months I got figuring we needed easy laughter if we were going to lead a life at all. I might’ve been wrong. But whose call was it? It was mine.

So she kept buying things. Rubber toys and boxes of diapers began forming piles in the bedroom, walling us in. When I tried taking the crib down she cried. I held her and said we’ll be OK and she said she better get started on a pair of booties. I told her I loved her a lot.

And when the knitting went on and on, she agreed to get help. I’m talking a psychiatrist. Our life was made better, but then she started sleeping with him. The three of us had it out. I went to jail.
I live in a studio in west Boulder, in a place built for the college students. It’s one mile from my old house and Carol expected me to head over and see what happened, so I went.

Walking. In Boulder you don’t mind. The red and brown stone pours through your senses, the colors running in you like they do the landscape, the buildings and even parts of the sky, to the south above Denver. This is the eastern edge of the Great Divide. The Flat Irons loom stark and hard to the west and north, half topped in sun-glazed snow. The Rockies here are splintered and sharp, and they were behind me.

Evergreens grow fat on the outskirts of town. And on up. Which made my walk red, brown, white and green. The blue sky was thick as midnight.

She was waiting on the front steps with the outside light burning soft in the daylight. Maybe she didn’t want me passing by, or maybe it shined in warning. She sat there and looked pretty in a red sundress underneath a gray sweatshirt of mine. Her straight dark hair just touched her shoulders—short, not the way it was when we first met. I struggle to think literally.

Carol stood when I walked to her. The yard needed work. She stood and pulled me close and I let her. Her body felt right against me, familiar in a good way. For a few moments I thought I could take this forever, like it was all a bad dream, the stuff before. But women do that to me. We kissed a little.

My old house, I worked and cared for it. It was a step forward in life. I’d be lying if I said it turned heads. But that doesn’t matter. It doesn’t. I left school after high school to work at the Rocky Flats Plant installing fuel assemblies. I secretly protest the place I work. But money is money.

And I pushed aside my own convictions to buy the house and
make myself a decent husband in the most obvious way. I’m still at the plant. I don’t make excuses. The house is a shingled brown colonial, shaded under a bent arm of trees and mountain. Now it’s hers. The payments are mine.

“Step right in,” she said.

She was barefoot. I kicked off my boots and followed her. The way she smiled, turned and walked, you would think she had my number. I do admit I enjoyed watching her, the way she always looked clean. We sat on the couch in the den, the sun slanting in through the front picture window. Everything was the same except for her hair. A smell of burning pine and coffee hung in the air, and a women’s magazine lay closed on the end table. On the cover it promised fifty ways to leave your lover. A skinny model smiled at me. Carol leaned into me on the couch, her head against my chest, hot breath and all. I tried controlling my heart.

“It’s knocking,” she said.

Talk. We needed to talk.

She squeezed my thigh and turned her face up to mine.

Goddammit, I thought.

Carol worked for the house too. She’s not the type of woman who’d own a poodle. She works full time as a legal secretary for the local firm specializing in motorcycle accidents and divorce. She did the decorating and planted the herb garden the dog always ate. The lawyers are her aces in the hole. She carries their names like Colts.

“We owe that dog a proper burial,” Carol said.

“It’s gone,” I said.

“We’ve got to find it.”
Now I’m not one to take dead dogs seriously, particularly that one.

“I’ll call the police,” I said.

“Go right ahead. You take the easy way out.”

“They oughta know there’s a lion loose in the streets.”

“Don’t be so dramatic,” she said.

She called the newspaper and reporters surrounded the house. Carol greeted them at the door and detailed the gruesome event. She called it that. She gripped their attention and was more animated than I’ve ever seen her, even while I was falling in love. And for the first time I thought, there was no lion.

She glowed. Because that’s what did it. Carol had a love for life that grabbed you by the hand and said run with me. I can mark the first real day of my life as the day I met her. Before, I now know, I was simply going through the motions. She taught me to feel.

I met her on a ski lift at Beaver Creek. She talked about possibilities, and I was thinking in terms of love by the time we reached the summit. I looked out over the hard-lined mountains, the sky icy and blue, punched with clean clouds, and I smiled at the world. I’m saying it was the first time I ever felt like doing that. For miles in each direction, white peaks shot above the tree line and slid back down into deep green. I couldn’t imagine anything beyond them. Carol took off and said catch me if you can.

The snow flashed, champagne powder mixed with grayer, man-made crystals. I thought skiers could lie as easy as any other sportsmen, could talk long about the big one that got away. And I decided I wasn’t a sportsman or a dreamer but just a guy whose luck might be about to turn.

The trail ran like a tear track down the face of the mountain.
Ponderosa pine, Douglas fir and juniper crowded the edges, the resort having been cut through the heart of the White River National Forest. There stands aspen. And fluorescent clad skiers whizzed by and I tumbled after her like a Rumanian teenager. I pinwheeled down and saw my end. Carol helped me up, the cold snow burned in my nose. I insisted my rental equipment was faulty and skiing too geometrical. That seems like years ago. We laughed in slow motion.

The reporters left with huge smiles and a story. One said, “This will certainly help with my diet. I’m on the NutriSystem.”

Carol laughed, pleased with herself. She asked me to stay for dinner, and I said I’d like that but I’ve got something to do. The truth was I had no such thing.

“Oh, too bad.”

“I’ll call the police first.”

“It was there. I made nothing up.”

They seemed happy to hear from me, and like old drinking cronies I told the sergeant to be on the look-out. He said thanks for the tip and thank you for being a solid citizen. I said it was my pleasure. He said don’t push it.

There were no sounds in the house so I lit a fire before leaving, using the driest logs I could find from the stack in the yard. The fire fizzled some before the wood began to crackle. A potato bug popped. Carol watched me from the couch, and I knew there had been a man here.

“So,” I said, hating I said that.

“Leaving?”

I slid my hands into my pockets, the fire at my back. I felt a wad of laundered money.
“Who’s been here?” I said.
“Ghosts,” she said.

This talk put me in a bad way. But . . . It’s always but with me and her. We’re divorced a year, thirteen months and I’m only twenty-four. What holds me, draws me to her against all reason, I don’t know. Can anyone know? I’ll call it love. I will.

She cooked lamb and rice, and we drank a bottle of California wine. It was dry and we toasted that food, that company. We heard the wine.

“Do you miss our son?” Carol said.
“I don’t think about him.”
“That may be a problem.”

I stood, went to her and kneeled at her side. I took Carol’s hand and pressed my lips into her arm.

“No. It isn’t,” I said.
“Stop talking about it,” she said.

We went to bed in the room we once shared. I always give in to the moment. It is reckless, for better or for worse. Cry tomorrow.

“A plan of action is what we need,” Carol said.

Morning was close, the gray light staying outside the window, not coming in at all. Airy snow fell around and down, holes in the gray. Daybreak would bring glare and you’d need sunglasses to keep a straight face. It would be as most days are, here in the Colorado west. Like a billboard scene along an eastern highway. Say the Marlboro man is on it.

“We’ll go up Flagstaff,” I said. “We’ll look for that lion. The dog is done.”
“Do you think I’m OK? Honestly.”
“No.”
“You’re a bastard,” she said.
“I’m more than that.”
“You just love the image.”
“Image?”
“You love acting down and out. Being the guy with broken dreams, a victim of happy hours and wanted by the law. You’re struck by what you could be. And it is all very desperate.”
I took time out. Some passed.
“Do you think that, Carol, do you? Is that what you’re thinking?”
“I love you,” she said.
Then nothing else. I didn’t think about it. She could say those things, which at times I feel might be true, and then forget she had even spoken. I let it happen because I wanted her to love me, to keep telling me that.
“Do you hear me?” she said.
The light was coming up. From the east it came.

We set out to find a mountain lion, riding up Flagstaff in Carol’s black Silverado, a truck that looks even better caked with mud and snow. Throw in some rusting metal.
Carol packed a lunch we’d eat sitting on an Indian blanket on the rocks over Lost Gulch. We’d search a while, find nothing because there’d be nothing to look for, and eat that lunch and maybe make love under the sun and wind. I knew this. I know my weaknesses.
The truck ground up the narrow, dirt road, Carol driving in low gear. We passed a man in a dark suit, standing outside his car,
looking south over the hills toward Denver. There was no smog line. He stood with his hands deep in his pockets and face rigid. He looked at us, waved and pointed a finger to his head as if to blow himself away. It cost him his rhythm and a little balance. He had to stop. Rest. Fear?

No, I didn’t feel that.

Rock and dirt grated beneath the truck tires. Carol drove five miles and we pulled off the road, high in the hard rock at Lost Gulch. Two paths led into the trees, and a sign said there were some rules there. It said beware of mountain lions and told you what to do if you encountered one, however unlikely.

Carol forgot about searching for the dog. Or chose not to, thinking better of it, feeling all right about things. I wasn’t going to remind her. Do you think I’m crazy? She seemed to snap in and out of something like depression, but something more slanted, more sideways than that. You grab the good times, hold hard and hope she does too. There’s always hope. There is always that.

We walked the short trail through pine and knotted juniper, and climbed the cold rocks. This was winter and it was warm, fifty-five and the air dry, snow and ice clinging to edges. We climbed to a flat terrace over the valley of trees where we could see sections of trail below, quick streaks of emptiness.

I put down our pack. Carol took out the blanket, slid to the rock rim and spread it neatly, pressing the folds. The worry line was woven near the corner of the blanket to ward off spirits. It was a black band striking across a field of turquoise, and we liked to think it would always work, always give us a one-up, although we bought the blanket from a Mormon in Salt Lake City. Superstition doesn’t impress me as much as the dollar. I’ll allow it was the right price. We pretended.
I breathed in the air. Miles across the valley, arcing with the horizon, the range pierced the deep sky. Long’s Peak reaches over fourteen thousand feet and towers above Nymph Lake, clear and cold. I thought Pike’s Peak or bust as I often do.

“Why so close to the edge?” I said.

“It’s close to nothing.”

Carol pulled me down onto the blanket. She slid a hand inside my thigh and told me to look at those ripping hills.

“I’m not certain why I’m here,” I said.

“You love me,” she said, pointing to our right. Black Crow’s Nest broke its surrounding blue. It was in the clouds and is where you go to be at the center of the universe, or to watch birds. Eighteen miles of quartz lies encrusted between the peaks, and some believe this is more than geology. It’s the roof of America, and it smelled clean.

“I do,” I said, smiling, thinking only of the snow, sun and evergreens, and Carol right there with me. It was the stuff of postcards and sentimental poetry, always reduced to that in the telling. So I say it. And call me, you, call me a liar.

“Cliches,” she said. “This is wonderful. I can die here. I’d be happy to die in these mountains.”

“It wouldn’t be hard,” I said. “A good stretch and you’ll fall right off.”

“You go ahead.”

“I have to eat first.”

A breeze blew on us. We watched a red-tailed hawk circle wide and soar through open air until it was gone. We shared sandwiches and drank beer, and I let postcard thoughts get the best of me because she remembered I hate mustard and the sandwiches were dry. It’s all right to think in this way for short min-
utes. It was the time I couldn’t get right. For short minutes.

We undressed, held each other and made slow love. At first I remembered the edge. Then I didn’t care. We were alone, in the mountains, in the world. Me and my ex-wife.

“I’ve put the baby behind me,” she said. “It’s strange, but I have. Just like that.”

I listened to the wind running over the rocks. Carol shivered.

“It’s OK,” I said. “You don’t have to talk right now.”

“I’ve been angry, and I know so hard on you. I wake some mornings aching to cut the past. I can’t always do it. The baby, though, isn’t me anymore.”

“Then why did you bring it up?”

“That was before.”

I knew I needed to say something else. I wanted to believe her. I felt close but couldn’t speak. So I held tight.

“I know we can’t be like we used to,” she said.

“We could,” I said.

And then she heard something. I kissed her freckled breasts. We were at peace and she heard a noise, and it would have to be her that heard it. It couldn’t have been me. I wouldn’t hear beyond our last words.

But I followed her eyes and saw the lion on the rocks at the trail end, between us and the truck. It was golden brown, muscular and had watched us make love. It waited until the moment we were most vulnerable as if disbelief and Darwinism weren’t already on its side. I considered that lion. I laughed.

It wasn’t funny. It was there, and real, coat lit against the cool rocks. I could see the lines of its whiskers, straight needles poking air. I said put your clothes on and Carol said why. She said it slow. She was right.

Oliver 35
Don’t run, it likes the chase. Do not move toward the lion and do not crouch, it may think you plan to attack. Jump up and down. Wave your arms and legs. Make yourself look larger than you are. Do that. If the lion attacks, cover your neck and face. Hope it will pass you by.

So I leaped like a madman. Carol started in and we hopped and acted out, buck naked. In barrooms across the state I get in trouble defending the truth of this story. How it wasn’t funny. How my entire life was down to this.

The lion stood ground, watching us. For a long time it waited us out. I can now think of those eyes—light, transparent as if we were not really important. I could almost see both of us reflected in them. The lion was testing us, and while I was jumping up and down I lost myself. A trigger was pulled. I knew if I went back to her nothing would ever change. I thought like the lion, daring it.

It turned, stopped, and its head bent to sniff the rock. My eyes were blurry, blood pounded in my temples. I knew Carol was standing next to me. The lion licked the ground, looked back at us one last time and then left, walking off the way it came.

“You can stop jumping,” Carol said.

I slowed, then stopped. I saw the lion walk but for some reason I kept jumping. A feeling close to disappointment washed over me.

“Get dressed,” I said.

Nobody spoke on the ride back. The light softened late in the afternoon, lifting west. The air went cold, and the moon was faint. I listened to the sound of the tires, and we both looked straight ahead.
"What are you thinking?" she said.

Nobody said anything.

My old house was lit inside. Lights were shining that shouldn’t have been. A muscle in my stomach moved.

Carol stiffened in the driver’s seat. She hit her hand against the dash and turned off the ignition.

“Damn it,” she said, and laid her forehead down on the steering wheel. “You shouldn’t be here.”

I got out, closed the door and walked across the yard, up the steps. I saw new footprints through the snow. The closing of the truck doors played in my head. Thud. Solid like that.

She came behind me and touched my arm, the one holding the knob, my left arm. She said please, wait one minute.

“Please,” she said.

I went in. Logs burned in the fireplace, and a man was lying on the couch, reading the women’s magazine. His shoes were off, his dress shirt untucked and tie loosened, and a beer can rested between his legs. It was a Silver Bullet. He looked at me, and I didn’t surprise him. He wasn’t a big man. I saw that right away.

Carol edged by me into the den. The man stood up across the room from us, and my clock struck high noon. He smiled awkwardly at Carol then looked at me again.

“It appears we have ourselves a Mexican stand-off,” he said.

I looked at him and he shut up. We looked at her.

Carol moved to straighten the pillows on the couch. She busied herself. I couldn’t take this at all. There are things I understand. That I have to work in the morning, and that I will die. I understand occasional violence and the need to take for granted the sun will rise. I know work.
And there are things I don't understand. I shook the man's hand and walked outside. I shut the door and left. I still don't know why I shook that man's hand.

Who can I blame, who owes me? No one. Is that such an easy thing to remember? My real life. The beginning. It's always the beginning. My name is Wade, Wade Rust.

Outside, cars rolled by me in the dark. I walked toward town, to Pearl Street, then changed my mind and started heading for Gold Hill. Lamps burned behind closed curtains, and two shadows pressed in an upstairs window. I was almost out of the neighborhood and into the woods when this car, this station wagon, pulled to a crawl and began creeping next to me. My hands were buried in my pockets, and I walked faster until I realized I couldn't stay ahead. I turned my face to the car, still moving, and through my breath I saw a long-haired woman staring at me. She looked puzzled and began opening the passenger side window.

"Excuse me?"

"Wade," I said.
Only Men Go to Garnet

One is handsome, a young Indian, black braid splitting his back. Three whites in a Biscayne have a case of beer for their passenger. Another man drives a red truck and looks lean, grim and stupid. An empty gun rack means he had to hock his rifle or it's across his lap.

Twelve miles back when the pavement dropped off I knew this was a man's road. I've been fooled by other roads that start off wide and wide open like something in Dorothy's dream, riding the curve of a grassland till without apology the pavement leaves you to gravel and soon not even that. Just hard pack and ruts for twenty miles.

Pick your tragedy. It could happen on this road. Slow violence or sick too far from help. A drive off the edge to be one of Montana's white crosses. But so far from town, it wouldn't make much of a warning. Just a sign that someone didn't reach the ghost town or never got very far away.
Cigarettes

All the science notwithstanding, it's still
a little like a kiss to me,
or what a kiss might lead to.
That first grand expulsion
of breath from the lungs hangs there
like metaphor given skin,
and we almost believe in ourselves
some new way. Now and then
I bum one, and the rush
of dizziness that results
turns me woman in memory.
Though I lived in the world
I hardly stepped outside myself at all,
and women seemed a miracle of confidence.
Once I crossed the street
to retrieve the still-smoldering butt
a high-heeled, tight-skirted woman had tossed away.
I touched the lipstick-tainted end to my lips,
drew, and the fire burned my fingers,
the fire she'd taken into herself and sent out
into the air around us like a spell.
The first woman who ever let me
touch her, a girl really, only seventeen,
kissed me so deeply I fell out of myself
and became her. In the moonlit backseat
I knelt upward and beheld my own eyes
in a body of perfection as vulnerable as a child's.
Quick-witted and foul-mouthed
ordinarily, she was silent now,
even as the moments stretched out toward pain,
even when I reached over the front seat
and took one of her cigarettes and lit it
for myself. When she moved at last
it was both arms rising toward me,
and absurdly, I handed her the smoke.
Perhaps some tatter of cloud passed
before the moon just then
and in that moment her hands ceased
imploring and began simply to accept.
Whoever we would be for the next twenty years
took residence behind our eyes.
With both hands she eased away the cigarette,
and the drag she pulled into herself
cast a light that left me blind.

—for Sara Vogan
The old man's car jerks to a stop in the middle of the crossing. No more trains should come along today, and I want to keep on going. But I can't, and what pains me most is that he doesn't wave or nod, doesn't even look my way, but holds on to the huge wheel as though he believes God Himself will spin the starter. I'd be gone already but now must stop and walk back. It looks like rain, or maybe snow, there are clouds at the top of the northern hills, and above, a plane drones out of sight. I tap at the window, bend to look, and see right away he's dead.

It's obvious, but I say "Hello? Hello? Hello, Sir?" and press my forehead to the glass. That the doors are locked does not surprise me, nor the windows rolled tightly up. And I'm not the least shocked to believe I hear the dull eerie blow
of a whistle. Who'd drive this road out of nowhere but me and an old man surprised by dying, though he might have showed the grace to die one car-length farther on. And it is a train whistle after all, distant but bearing down, that makes me strain against the back bumper, that makes me yell Goddammit! the minute it starts to rain.

In that sudden shower, I don't linger a moment but break the front window out with a rock and unbend each gnarled finger from the wheel and collect his knocked-off hat coming out the door and into the rain. Off the right-of-way, onto the shoulder, we're headed for my truck when the freight train rolls into sight and his old car, older than me, remains, doomed in a place no one but a fool would return to. Try to see, in your mind's eye, how I waited there one or two seconds, then ran, thinking not me, not me, drunk in the starter's queer grind, eyeing my ancient face in the mirror.
Hussman's
Players
Woodcut,
1989.
Wintering

Snow removal equipment, business ready to sell.

Simple enough ad. But placing it hadn’t been so simple. The timing wasn’t right. It was Advent, a time when people were supposed to be thinking about presents and giving and receiving. But for Mary Helen Balsa it was a time to think about selling, about getting her money’s worth, about getting a good buy—a complete contradiction to the spirit at hand. And this didn’t sit square with her. Furthermore, she had come to make a decision she hadn’t expected to make, in a season when all things for Mary Helen moved steadily and according to pattern.

In winter, even with the business, Mary Helen followed the rhythms and vagaries of nature—a time for everything and everything in its time. She and Gordon watched the evening tv weather reports, followed the forecasts in the paper, and prepared accordingly. There was a rhythm of work and ease to winter—the go of the storms and the resting afterward, waffle stompers and her Cabela parka offset by woolies and lambskin skuffs, deliberate, steady action followed by rest and contemplation, totally different from other times of the year.

In the snap of fall and the warm of spring her mind clicked quickly about everything. Like the April morning she decided it was time to repaint.

She had awakened at six, gotten up, and started the coffee. Then she had happened to glance out the living room window to see a brilliant white light hitting the birches. The leaves looked silver green on the underside, celery on top. Inspiration struck.
“The house,” she called back to Gordon in the bedroom, “the house—silver and celery.”
“What?” It was Gordon.
“We’re painting.”

By ten she was standing at the counter of the Diamond Vogel Paint Center on the corner of 66th and Holdrege picking celery green from the chips the clerk had pointed her to.
“How big ma’am?”
“About a hundred linear feet, average number of windows.” Mary Helen had estimated on the drive to Diamond Vogel, fifty-two twice plus eighteen and eighteen.
“I estimate about four gallons,” the clerk said.
“How much per gallon?”
“Latex or oil?”
“Latex.”
“Satin, flat, or semi-gloss?”
“Satin.”
She cracked out the answers, not a moment’s rest between questions. It was spring, morning, and her mind was as clear and good as the white peel of the sun.
“Sixteen ninety-five a gallon.”
“I’ll take the four,” Mary Helen said.

When Gordon had arrived home from work that day he had found her wearing Wayne’s old American Legion baseball hat and standing on the ladder yanking the scraper across the siding on the front of the house over the windows.
“Mary Helen. What in the world?”
“Celery, Gordon, celery,” as she kept yanking.

By late evening Gordon had convinced Mary Helen he should do the scraping and she could do the painting. So that’s how they
teamed up through the next two weekends on a project neither of them had remotely considered before the light struck the birches.

But now here she was, preparing for Christmas, having to think about selling. Wasn’t right.

She’d taken over the business from Wayne—a good business, blowing snow in the neighborhood. It was something Wayne couldn’t imagine, his mother his replacement after he decided to enroll at Milford Tech.


He’d shaken his head, looked at Gordon and said, “Dad, talk to her. Talk to her.”

It hadn’t done any good. By the tenth of October that year, when five inches of big thick wet stuff came out of nowhere, she’d gotten out sooner than anyone else—just like Wayne—and had been down the block before any of Wayne’s old customers noticed. And then she had billed them, just like Wayne.

She had eight regulars, three more than Wayne. First was their neighbor directly west, a soprano whose husband decided he needed to move and grow but couldn’t do it with his wife and their two children; then, the couple retired from Dorsey Labs; the Nelsons (he was with the railroad, always on call); the Goodes (he worked third shift at Goodyear); a biochemist at the university; skip two houses around the corner and then the triplets, as Mary Helen referred to them when she told Gordon about her customers—the three couples with two pre-schoolers each, where the dads were in charge of the children and cleaning and the moms in charge of lawns and gardens, cooking and snow. The moms
contracted with Mary Helen. But the business wasn't really the problem. Parking was the problem. She kept leaving the blowers in the way of Gordon's '71 silver Volvo wagon.

After the first snow of the year Gordon, trying to park in the garage, would encounter the guts of Mary Helen's business. He'd reach the drive, push his automatic garage door opener—automatic garage door up, drive in, get out of car, exit garage, automatic door starts down, automatic door bounces off Volvo trunk, automatic door back up, Gordon wrestles a snow blower forward under the hanging ping pong table, "damn these blowers," Gordon back into car, starts car, drives forward, Gordon out of the car, punches the automatic door, door closes, door down to the concrete pad of the garage floor.

At first Mary Helen couldn't understand.

"Why don't you just hang one of those old tennis balls from a string, like Heldon does," she said. Heldon was their neighbor directly east whose garage was a showcase of tool and car storage. "Heldon never bumps into anything. He stops when the tennis ball hits the windshield."

"Mary Helen," he'd said. "I'm not hanging tennis balls and I'm not Heldon. Mark the garage—put down a tape line, chalk line, I don't care; park the blowers under the ping pong table where they belong."

The ping pong table might work for Gordon, but not Mary Helen. In her business a person didn't look up. A person looked ahead at the equipment and the task at hand, at the corners, to either side to avoid blasting a stream of snow at somebody who might be walking perpendicular to your particular line of attack. Nothing in snow removal equipment storage hung high. It hung low to eye level to Mary Helen, or it sat.
It wasn’t that she didn’t care about Gordon or didn’t understand about his parking the Volvo in the garage. It’s just that she ran her business the way she ran her business. Her business was a winter business, and that meant moving slow, pondering, with full attention and preparation toward the work.

She would come up the hill after her morning around the block pushing the blower, a bent figure, a long and inverted L-shape from her boots to her gloves. Four steps from the garage door she would take out her little bronze key, fit it in the keyhole, twist it to the right once and then again until it finally caught and the door began to lift. She’d shove the key between her teeth, use two hands to push the blower onto the garage floor, and once all the wheels were on the floor she would take a few more steps and then stop. Exact location never seemed important to her just as long as the blower was in the garage, not being snowed on. Then she’d take the key out from between her teeth, hit the button for the automatic door with her left forefinger, keep walking around to her left until she was around the garage, then up the steps, and inside her front door.

Even though Mary Helen’s maroon Honda was the only other car in the garage, there wasn’t much extra floor space what with tennis rackets, Claudette’s old 4-H demonstration display boards, boots, skates, brooms, Gordon’s shop and Gordon’s old trailer. Gordon had built the trailer for their move to North Carolina the year they were married. He still needed it—for the youth group at church who borrowed it once a summer to haul stuff for work camps.

But now it was winter and over the last three weeks Lincoln had had several one-inch snowfalls.
“I moved the blowers, Mary Helen,” Gordon said each time he came into the house after one of these snows. “Thanks,” she would answer. He would pause a moment, look at her, give her half a smile before turning to hang up his coat. Then one night, his coat dangling from his left hand, he had waited a moment longer and added, “again,” to his sentence.

Mary Helen was startled into awareness, as she still was after all these years decoding Gordon’s words and body language. She had missed it at first, but now it dawned on her. Gordon wasn’t just being helpful. These blowers were an irritation, an intrusion, and if there was anything Mary Helen didn’t want to be it was an intrusion, not on Gordon, not on Wayne, not on Claudette. Helpful, yes. A listener, yes. But to let her interests and manner of conducting herself stand in the way of her family? No.

Immediately, everything changed. She saw Gordon new. She saw herself differently. “I have no burden for it,” she said, her eyes focused clearly on him. She realized she would let the business go.

But she was in her winter rhythm of thinking—slow, methodical. What should she sell and how? It took days before she finally picked up the phone to talk to an ad adviser at the Lincoln Star.

Her adviser told her that if all the items for sale cost less than $1,000 she could advertise at a special rate—up to four lines for four days, $4.50, each additional line a dollar extra. But to get the deal she’d have to include the cost of the items.

“I can’t just say ‘best offer’?” Mary Helen asked.

“No,” the voice came back, “you can’t. But you could say best offer under $700, or something like that.”

In the end she had decided not to go for the special. She didn’t want to come right out with an exact cost of things. She wanted
to be able to judge a little, give a little if the occasion called. She decided on two lines for one day, $3.53 per day, no mention of cost of the business or cost of equipment.

Besides three scoops and two wide brooms she had three snow blowers. One was so small—a pup—it almost didn’t count. It had been her father’s. After he died, her mother had given it to Wayne, in seventh grade at the time, who used it when snow was powder. She liked it for powder, too. The second blower was an old Sears Craftsman, hard to start, but it ran especially well in light slush. And that’s why she liked it. But the biggest piece was the John Deere, a twenty-two-inch self-propelled, two-stage, five-horse model 522, three forward gears, one reverse. Gordon owned it and Wayne had rented it on a per snow basis.

Wayne always managed to tuck the blowers away so there was room for the cars. And he made racks for the brooms and shovels so they hung at eye level. Thanks to Wayne, Mary Helen didn’t need to look up. The tools of the trade were down where her eyes were used to being, especially when it was minus forty degrees windchill. A person needed to hunker down, shrink into her collar and scarf, not stretch her neck out to exposure in weather like that.

But that wasn’t Gordon’s way. He’d hung the ping pong table from the joists in the garage. It made a shelf for lawn chair cushions, the canvas for the hammock, Wayne’s soccer balls, Claudette’s garden shoes—all the old Reeboks and Nikes. To Gordon, all a person had to do was look up, eyeball the table, draw an imaginary line down, turn around, back up a few steps and there would be the parking place for the blower, out of the way of the Volvo. Simple enough for Gordon but not for Mary Helen.
The ad produced two calls the first day it appeared, commercial people who thought she was advertising for a commercial operation—parking lots, that sort of thing. A third call was from a man who didn’t want to buy but wanted to sell his own equipment and was curious about the going rate. The fourth call came from a young-sounding woman, to Mary Helen’s ear.

“I want to start cleaning it myself and not keep paying,” the woman said. “Besides, there aren’t many kids in the neighborhood and I never know for sure if it will get done. And all I have is a shovel.”

They’d gotten into a long discussion—the horsepower of the pup, the weight, how much snow it could handle; the reliability of the Craftsman; cost of the John Deere. Carrie Holcomb was her name and if she could have the address of the location of the equipment she would drive over to have a look.

She came after work and stood in Mary Helen’s garage as Mary Helen started the pup, the Craftsman, the John Deere and projected each of them onto the driveway. Then she let Carrie Holcomb start each one and maneuver it around. Mary Helen walked along behind. No snow. She had blown it off into a long low mound along the perimeter of the drive but they could get the feel of things anyway.

“This is your business?” the woman asked, somewhat surprised, pushing the pup towards Mary Helen. “I thought you were just cleaning out the garage.”

Mary Helen had mentioned the Volvo, the pool table and the imaginary line. She nodded.

“How big a business? Does it pay?”

“Pay?” Mary Helen responded, equally surprised. “I should say. Depends on the weather of course, but with eight driveways plus
the sidewalks times thirty-five that's two eighty a snow."

"Two eighty? Sounds like a good business to me. You're giving it up?"

Mary Helen smiled matter-of-factly.

The woman looked at Mary Helen, then back to the blowers. They were in the garage now, the equipment arranged in a triangle around them, brooms hung perfectly behind.

"I don't know; not about the blowers but about your business. Why give up nearly $300 every time it snows?"

"Well, it's an intrusion, in a way. It's time. Look, will one of these work?" She circled her arm over the blowers.

"I'm not sure. I think I'll check new; but I may call back." She was out of the garage. "Your time, I appreciate it."

"No trouble," Mary Helen called as Carrie Holcomb stood on the far side of the drive waiting for a car to turn in, Gordon in the Volvo, coming home from work.

"Make a sale?" Gordon called as he got out.

"Not exactly," Mary Helen replied as she walked up the sidewalk in front of him. "Maybe."

The next day it snowed again. Mary Helen followed her usual routine. She always did the sidewalks first—down the block, around the corner and back up the block. After the sidewalks she came in for a cup of coffee with Gordon before he took off for work, and then she started the driveways. The triplets never seemed to mind when she got to theirs, just as long as things were cleared within twenty-four hours. So she left them till last. Sometimes the driveways would take most of the morning. Usually by the time she got to the Nelsons, Mrs. Nelson would open the door and wave her in for coffee and a roll. Sometimes Mary Helen said yes, other times she just laughed and waved and called out, "Next

Ahlschwede 55
time." She liked the work—outdoors—and so far, manageable. Major drifting had occurred only once that first year. This year the snows had been early, and so far, light, making the work of the business a particularly meditative experience for Mary Helen. In these light snows she could think about the seasons ahead and the seasons just past and about the people in her life—Wayne at school bent over a drafting table, Gordon going and coming, Claudette, who, though interning in Washington, had left a two-month reminder of her summer at home.

Claudette had planted impatiens—flourescent oranges and pinks separated by white—more color than Mary Helen and Gordon ever would have thought of. But the flowers were there when they had gotten home from their two-week vacation in Yellowstone. They had never been to Yellowstone before but decided to go the year after the fire as a sign of support, a kind of environmental statement traveling to Yellowstone, trees or no. They had tent camped for two weeks and had returned to find smatterings of color in the yard where none had existed before, color like the long sprinkles Mary Helen sometimes scattered over frosting on birthday cakes. But Claudette had taken the bull by the horns, as Mary Helen put it to Gordon when they saw their yard. And they liked it—little flowers, globs, like tiny traffic lights blinking in the dark under the pines. Mary Helen still pictured them long after they were covered with snow.

That evening she received a call from Heldon. He was the neighborhood outdoorsman, chain-sawing down dead branches from the pines between his property and theirs, trimming the drive with a weed eater, planting lipstick-red geraniums every spring along the drive, thinning enormous white mums around the base of his mailbox, planting a thick row of sunflowers from
seed along his back fence. He had a garage big enough for two full-size cars plus, in his back yard, a twelve-foot square storage shed shaped like a barn. He had slipped it in without a building permit; no neighbors ever complained, so it stood there chock full of garden equipment, for all Mary Helen knew.

Heldon scooped his own walk and drive by hand, never needed Wayne or Mary Helen. But when he saw her in the mornings blowing snow as he drove down the street in his Toyota long-bed he always lifted his coffee mug toward her, nodded, and tooted the horn twice.

"Mary Helen. That your number? In the classifieds? It's not a mistake?"

"Not a mistake," she said.
"You selling your equipment?"
"Trying to. Some of it at least. Interested?"
"Might be. Mind if I come over and look?"

Why Heldon needed a personal inspection, she couldn't figure. He knew more about her equipment than she and Wayne and Gordon put together. He had more lawn and garden machinery than a used tool shop and if he didn't have what he needed he could make it himself, practically from scratch. That's just the kind of person he was.

He was at the door in a matter of minutes. They walked out to the garage together.

"Why are you doing this?"

"Time to move on, clean out some things, but, mostly, move on."

"Mary Helen, don't kid me. I see you out there in the mornings. You don't mind. In fact, you love this job . . . the neighbors paying you for your morning workout." He was teasing, she could tell
from his face, but serious. “Are you sure about this?”
“I’m sure.”
Heldon took hold of the handle of the Craftsman, turned the key, pulled the rope and started it.
“Always did sound right to me.”
“Thinking you’ll give up the shovel?”
“Not sure actually; but I’m wondering if it’s time to join the twentieth century.” He had switched off the Craftsman and was moving the discharge chute around. “I’ve got some room.”
“Room? What do you mean?”
“Barn’s empty.”
“Empty?”
“All that stuff gone, last summer. Didn’t you see the DAV truck?”
“When was that?”
“Early June.”
Early June, when she and Gordon had been in Yellowstone camping and affirming the environment.
“Well, you’d have room all right.”
Heldon glanced at the pup, shook his head at the Craftsman. “Whatever you’re asking, it’s more than I want to spend.” He smiled and turned to head down the drive.
Later that night she said to Gordon, “Heldon says his barn is empty.”
“Maybe he’ll take the thing down. Doesn’t belong here in the first place. Someday somebody will complain and the city will force him.”
“The Disabled American Veterans came last summer while we were gone. Everything’s out.”
“Sounds like a good time to get in compliance with the code. Better now than to be startled into it.”

“He would have room . . . Room, she thought. Room. She looked at Gordon. “Gordon, Heldon has room, space, lots of it.”

“He’d have even more room in his yard without it.”

Over the next two days she received a couple calls, one from another commercial operator, one from a person looking for a blower bigger than the pup but cheaper than the Craftsman or the John Deere.

Each night Gordon asked, “How many calls? Stuff gone yet?”

Her answer was not many, and no, not yet.

The next day it snowed again, light snow, so her work went quickly. She used the John Deere to finish all the sidewalks and two driveways before she took her break. Gordon had waved from the Volvo when she was partway down the block so she knew she would have coffee by herself.

It tasted particularly good this morning—French vanilla, she realized, a flavor she had forgotten they had. But, obviously, Gordon had remembered. She heated a roll too, pecan, from Gordon’s swing through the grocery store on his way home from work yesterday.

She felt great. Her cheeks were flushed and warm, her hair powdery, damp near the skin. Her legs were tired, but she wasn’t exhausted. The morning was cold and clear, no wind. She headed out again, off toward the Nelsons, with a smile.

That afternoon after she saw Heldon’s Toyota heading up her street, she called him to ask about the barn. Did he need the space? Would he consider renting some out to somebody?

“It’s empty. Don’t see why not. Use what you need. No charge. For the business?”
She thought a moment. “Exactly,” she said, “for the business.”

That night Gordon came home later than usual. It had been dark for over an hour. As he drove up the street something seemed odd at his end of the block. He could make out the shape of Mary Helen’s Honda parked on the street. She never parked on the street. He pressed a little harder on the accelerator. As he kept nosing the car forward he realized his garage door was wide open and all the lights were on. The driveway in front of the garage was bathed in light. It looked almost silver. His eyes followed along the drive toward the street. He could make out some angular shapes that looked familiar—the three snowblowers—lined up two feet apart on the far side of the drive. Sold. He smiled and pressed more firmly on the gas.

He was past the Nelsons’ drive, almost at the soprano’s. He trained his eyes back to the garage. Everything was lit up—the fluorescents over his shop, the two separate hundred-watters for the rest of the place. He pulled to the curb on the wrong side of the street and stopped the car just before the drive.

And then he recognized them—Mary Helen in her stocking cap, Heldon in his Bean vest and hooded sweatshirt. Heldon was bent over, holding on to the hitch, walking backwards out of the garage, pulling, and Mary Helen was behind pushing—his trailer.

“What . . .”

“Gordon.” It was Mary Helen. She straightened to her tallest five feet ten inches and waved the full length of her arm.

“Gordon,” she called out again as he walked up the drive. “The ad’s gone. You’ve got a place for the Volvo, the blowers—everything—we’re moving the trailer.” She gathered her arm back, bent down, and putting her hands flat against the rear gate, nodded to Heldon.
In the middle of the drive they passed Gordon shaking his head, a half-smile forming and unforming. Past the sidewalk they turned up the street to the snow-covered grass between the pines and Heldon’s garage. The trailer rolled slowly, evenly toward the back yard, its tires leaving a raised pattern of v’s, like trapunto on white silk.

“Mary Helen.” It was Gordon.

She hadn’t been looking, but he had come along behind, following them down the drive, up past Heldon’s pines. She stopped pushing, moved herself more upright, slid her hands to the top of the trailer box.

His eyes shone as he took a step closer. “Let me help.”

And Gordon moved into place beside her, the coat of his left shoulder barely nudging the jacket of her right. He put his hands flat against the tailgate, inches from Mary Helen’s. His figure bent parallel to hers. And side by side they pushed, looking over the box of the trailer, past Heldon, to the embrace of the barn, the arms of its doors flung wide.
Rainy Afternoon

shut in your room
with the secrets of your fingers gabbing
we never noticed the hours pass the sky
gray day our futures too so overcast I
was glad just to have you looking at me
straight in the eye our legs interlocked
your open lips inviting mine half asleep
I could half stop thinking of all I didn’t
know couldn’t know cars outside splashing
sidewalks matted with leaves torn branches
iced and glistening as still they reached
for the same elusive evers none of us can
possibly hold like I’d lost my job given
up on my family weeks ago after so long
they’d busied themselves giving up on me
those days I couldn’t care beyond the knot
of us lying there on your narrow mattress
pipes of steam banging us in and out of
sleep your radio murmuring and in my ear
the slow lapping of your tongue your touch
on my chest my thighs I let you take all
I had left so you could smile even with rain
in your eyes one late fall afternoon saying
it’s okay it’s okay you don’t have to promise
a thing just stay by me it’s all I can ask for.
Lowell Jaeger

First Time

The soles of my bare feet scuffed tough enough to pad over gravel of this old logging road, farther than my new permit and the car I stole from my father will drive. I'd be lucky if she were even fourteen. With one pink digit she's hooked me by the belt loop and tags along, complaining without her shoes.

No, she's pushing me. I'm only a whisper in the pine boughs, and the breath of her flesh sways me, wafts me on.

We don't talk. Neither of us can find what we're looking for under her t-shirt, beyond my unzippered surrender and the slow clock of sunlight beating us down.
Nothing lasts
in the flash of that day
more than a painful rise inside her
rib cage, her shoulders,
the deep bloodless welt
where she'd wormed herself against a gooseberry,
the imprint of thorn and needles
tattooed on my thigh.
Memory of the Hand

The hand recalls what it has held, the fist of the truth wedged inside the knuckles, fitting into the drum of things you cared about, lifting its memory to allow you to be alone when you are not alone, forcing you to reach out, take care of that memory you made up with your hands, the one about taking your father’s arm you have never held, helping him cross the street where you let him go without waving goodbye or making a fist at him in anger. The hand aches for what it has held, mist washing its fingers like a smoke where you hide your knowledge of a sign language, a movement of joints,
palms and fingers trying to spell
that silent moment when

you touched what moved out
of your reach—

a soft yearning, a bare back,
the tiny mountain range of spine rising
to remind you the hand holds onto little flesh,
knows nothing about the skin except lines

on its own palm, deep furrows where
the weight of remembrance is held.
They've kept his overalls on a nail
in the back bedroom, his fishing pole on the porch.
They believe he lies in the hammock
between the willows, a blade of grass at his lips.
Not family, I see him near death
in the backwater shack, his pallet sheets soaked
with the heat of his body. His family croons
Emmett or Earl, a name he shares
with his daddy or grandaddy, a name
that rolls off their tongues like a lullaby.
I envy the intimacy of their sorrow, history
of stillborns and drownings.
No one in his family knows
to blame mosquitos, thick all week
in the places he played. Had I been there
when his body first quivered,
I would have grasped his shoulders
and insisted he wake up.
Like a dowser who finds water, I expect someday
to move paperweights without touching them, make radios
snap on.
When my father died, I said I would give up
writing to bring him back, and for awhile,
I believed resurrection could happen.
What sacrifice would this boy’s family give?
What holds us here must hold others.
Laura Stearns

Signals

When we were thirteen we lived by signals.
Yours, a rag doll slung over your father’s porch rail; mine, slow steps across the field between our houses, skeletons of ice crunching under my boots.
When he wasn’t there, I could feel the hands that pulled the blue plate from the oven, the lips that scowled at the chicken in cream sauce, peas boiled to mush.

I thought you were indifferent. You didn’t care about dances
or black fishnet stockings.
You didn't want
dimestore lipsticks
dropped like coins
on your bed.
When he said
he wanted to be
first, when he
called you night
after night
into his dim bedroom,
pulled back the sheets
and commanded you to lie
down—what were you
thinking? The only
world I knew
was my parents’
fenced acre, the house
built from a blueprint:
four children,
Sunday school,
picnics in the meadow.

By summer, you told me
and I told no one,
afraid he might press
a knife to my throat.

What I wrote into my white diary those nights was this:
Today Father mowed the lawn.
Mother finished her canning.
In shade, she cocks a hip and looks
along the line of elms, the pond
a thick flat green in August.
That man from town, what did he say
about waterowl, fish and rain?
Conservation. To conserve. To
keep. She crosses her arms and thinks:
Near Calcutta, a brittle band
serenades the train bearing west
into liquid sun (she is sure
she left that picture there, that stack
of journals in the bamboo rack
near the kitchen pump) a train loud
with beggars doling groveled coins
for a trip to worship cattle
and cobras. Imagine! The dead
float out to sea on dark rivers
while beasts roam the city like lords
and deadly snakes cannot be killed.
She drops an arm and the train stops.
Another and the last coin sticks
to a more practical palm. She draws a deep breath and the dead dissolve into the sea, the band falters through a last horrible measure, leaving the sharp whir of locusts and frogs. Real cattle drop their heads to stagnant water at the base of the hill. Inside, a man calls, a man propped in bed doing paint-by-number parrots. In the house, a crippled piano. Breathless clarinet. Twenty china dogs. Phenobarbital. Artifacts. In there . . . paralysis and clocks. So cattle drink. The train plows on. Sun collides with a pyre of elms. She hears her name and tries to think. She hears her name and bites her lip and says, "E molto distante?"
Deaconess Home for Children

Tommy and I have our own room in Bridger Cottage where we stay and it’s neat because we’re friends. At night when “Just-call-me-Grandma” orders lights out, we choke our laughter in the dark.

At recess today we watched the girls from Glacier Cottage slide the slide. Tommy whispers Mary’s panties. Grandma hears our giggles and Tommy—he’s smart—he rolls underneath the bunk and hides. Me, I get the rubber shoe across my butt and when I wiggle, legs. I bite the pillow so I can’t scream, because Tommy—he thinks I’m tough as hell.

In the mornings we form up on the landing, march to breakfast mush, to class at eight, to noon goulash, to recess, and after supper,
to catechism, prayers, and bed.
Today's rain means crossing Highway 12 to the gym
where fifty years of dust pounds loose.
Tonight I have my asthma in the dark.
Grandma hears me breathe,
comes again with her medicine.
Untitled

Beth Lo

Brush and ink.
Beth Lo

Untitled
Brush and ink.
The rattail file was warm in my hand. I'd been filing out the holes in the stainless steel washers for about an hour, and I still had a good-sized stack to go. Hundreds of stickery legged bugs swarmed around my head in a dizzying hum, excited by the sudden rain and musical both in their different pitches and the ring of stubborn collisions with the bare bulb above my head. The rain came down in large separate drops, first bringing out the scent of dust, and then making the air smell wet, thick with the humid warmth of summer rain so close. These were the nights I had been staying up late for, the desert smells, the slick gleam of sweat on forearms writhing in some simple task, and even the prick of steel slivers between fingers—something about these things gave me peace.

I should have been calm then, with the murmuring cackle of the warm rain that night, but she was watching me with those eyes of hers, empty, like holes in washers set deep in an unmoving and pale face. It was hard to relax when somebody else was in the garage. I was used to working alone, and I couldn't shake a desire to work as loud as I could, banging things whenever possible just to annoy her. Even with that drawn expression she didn't seem sad really, but she didn't strike me as a happy person either. Then again, the happy ones had filtered out of the family somehow. She didn't look content to just sit there and stare at me filing washers, but that's what she did, and hardly said a word. She was very thin then, as she'd always been, with barely noticeable breasts and a slight neck showing her veins. Her skin sank deep into shadowed caves along her collarbones whenever she
moved her arms or took a deep breath. I thought she looked like a praying mantis as she slowly stroked Fred, her wiry cat.

“That looks very interesting,” she said slowly, as if she were conscious of matching sounds to her rhythmic, hypnotic stroking of the cat. I knew she was a crazy bitch, had the genetics for it, but I wondered if that way of talking was some meditation thing she’d learned at a clinic, or if it was just natural crazy talk. She talked that way a lot and it seemed like that self-hypnosis bullshit. But she wasn’t hypnotizing Fred. His eyes flicked back and forth to the rasping jerk of my file, the yellow slits widening with the high-pitched thrusts into the washer’s hole, and he seemed an angrier cat than most. I kept my eye on him, waiting for him to leap on me and try to take a nice chunk out of my neck.

The last time we had spoken was during a Christmas vacation four years ago. That visit had been strange too—those same eyes. She had always seemed odd to me, one of those thin pale kids who got lost in crowds or forgotten at school by parents who were too busy. I guess I’d always thought of her, though I never thought about her much, as a girl who would enjoy wandering through shopping malls, wishing she had enough money to buy things like fancy erasers and scented pencils, shit like that. Her eyes had always seemed to say those things, so flat and ordinary. She was named Athene, but her dad called her “Taco,” and that’s what I called her too—even though her dad was pretty much a prick.

She had called a month earlier to say that she was graduating from college and looking for a job, but had no money to rent a place of her own for the summer months. She wanted to stay with me, and I remember thinking how that was weird, since I knew
Taco couldn’t stand being around me or my family.

“Do you have to work at enjoying that, or does it come naturally to guys like you?” she asked, making sure not to vary the tone she used before. She’d told me when she moved in that she heard I got screwed up in California. She said it like it was a way to start a fight or get me going, but I didn’t give a shit. She probably heard it from her dad. Our fathers were pretty tight, a couple of assholes. She hadn’t changed much over the past four years, just got more irritating.

“I mean, what’s your problem?” she asked, a bit faster now. “Why don’t you just buy some more washers?”

“Pet your cat and shut up, please.” I tried not to be mean to her, but sometimes the words came out, from out of nowhere. At least she could handle it—that was one thing about us, and this time she got quiet, which was real nice. I thought she was one of those people who respond better to abuse, got a taste for it somewhere along the line and started enjoying it, dumb.

But I found myself looking up from my vise and my comfortable task to stare at her face. She was looking out into the rain and playing with her cat’s paws. I wanted to tell her how the flame stays blue and low and wraps a cat’s body when it gets lit on fire. She might have made a snide remark and kept that bland look about her, but I could let her know the truth. I lit one once with some friends, spray painted it first though, trying to make it look like that cartoon skunk. It touched off like a tumbleweed and stayed blue, and that cat moved like a fucking comet across the dead lawn. Left a couple burned spots on it before it holed up to die under the next door neighbor’s wood pile, and half burned that son of a bitch down.
“You know Rob, you’re reminding me more and more of your dad.” She said that like it was a parting shot or something, but that had no effect on me. I didn’t listen to her much. A long time ago she had to check into an outpatient program at the hospital. I never knew why, for sure, but I figured it was for something stupid, like making herself puke all the time or some sort of maladjustment bullshit—leftover shrapnel from her mom and dad’s breakup. My father and her dad were brothers, and I figured she had mine wrapped up with a lot of shit about her dad because it was like our fathers were the same person sometimes.

I filed the way my father taught me a long time before, when I was small. I always had to hold the shank just right and not mess up the angle of the file’s cut or he got pissed. He had thick fingers with those heavy, ridgy fingernails. He clipped them flat, straight across. They were kind of yellow and usually had dirt under them, but he could pull one back behind his thumb and flick it out like a hammer. He flicked me in the mouth with his middle finger for sanding the wrong edge of some nice mahogany once. I had a fat lip for a week, could barely talk. My father wasn’t so gentle, but Taco’s dad was plain mean. Used to throw food at her and shout that she’d be so fat she might as well eat up, but like I said, she was always thin. I suppose he was crazy, and that can’t help but rub off on a person.

She was sitting on the other end of my workbench opposite where I was working, clamping each individual washer into the vise and enlarging the hole with about five strokes of the file. She wore loose shorts and held the cat in her lap, petting him slowly still, despite his nervousness. I wished the rain were louder, loud enough to make it hard to think. The roof over the garage used to be corrugated aluminum, and winter hailstorms could about
make me deaf. I had replaced the aluminum with basic tarred roofing material earlier this summer and so the rain was muffled, even though it was dumping down. But the quiet sound of the downpour made the garage a good place to wander in my thoughts, which I thought was good at times.

I did a lot of thinking out in the garage after I came back to stay at the house. My father told me to. He said I should go home and do some serious thinking about some things and get everything straightened out. I also did quite a bit of repair work. All the faucets got new washers and I reseeded the dead lawn, but the grass didn't take and stayed yellow. I guess I missed working for my father. I did landscaping for him in southern California for a while before I had to come back. He's still there, owns the company. I don't miss him maybe as much as I miss his tools, all top dollar with great handles. I remember my mom hated yardwork, wouldn't do a bit of it. I still saw her once in a while when she heard my father wasn't around. She always told me I should just leave. All I had for tools at the house in Black Canyon were old ones, rusted or beat-up. The only shovel I had for loosening up the dried out soil for the reseeding had been one with a cracked handle. I could still remember how mad he was when I busted that one. He was serious when it came to tools.

Taco pushed Fred off, down to the brick floor, and she sat for a moment, looking at me with her legs kind of spread out on the workbench. I could see the plain white of her panties through the legs of her baggy shorts. I went ahead and looked, even though it felt a little strange, but she sat there like she knew and didn't care. She slid off the workbench then and walked out of the garage and down the brick pathway to the house. I was glad that Fred followed her.
I needed one hundred stainless steel bolts, nuts, and washers to plug holes in the aluminum storage shed. I could have picked up regular steel ones, but they might have rusted in the rain and stained the old white shed, which my father had repainted just a year ago. We kept the old tools and camping gear in it. I figured he would have wanted it done with stainless if he were around. Someone had shot the shit out of the shed with a twenty-two or some small gun, probably kids. The peaked roof caught most of the gunshot, and now with the summer rains the gear was getting wet inside.

I couldn't figure out how I had made the mistake, but I had grabbed a hundred washers the wrong size. I had measured the holes and everything. It was the kind of mistake my father would never make. But then again, my father didn't steal, either. He could just bring them back if they were the wrong size. I couldn't see paying for all those nuts and bolts, so I usually filled my pockets with all but a few and then went to the counter acting like I was just buying those. It always worked, but there wasn't any way to exchange them for the right size. I figured I could still go back and steal a bunch more, but I started to think about that and decided against it. I didn't have Catholic values or anything like that, but I figured a thing worse than stealing was stealing badly, and I wanted to make the washers work. I had some pride, even if it was for something my father wouldn't do.

She returned with a bottle of red wine and a plastic cup for herself, but I ignored her and tried to listen for individual drops of rain coming down onto the edge of the bricks. I did that sometimes, not necessarily with rain, but something like it, just focus on the small stuff. For a while I was leaving my sweaty hand underneath the vise to catch the steel shavings. I just tried to
concentrate on the feel of the filings hitting my skin. After a while it was almost as if I could pick out the feeling of individual grains touching down. Probably not, but thinking hard on small things like that made me believe I could feel it, even though I really couldn’t. That concentration was something I learned a long time ago. It was a way for me to space-out, get a better view on things. There had been times I could look really close at the pores between my father’s eyes, pick out the hair follicles and blackheads and count them even. By the time I was that into it I would have already forgotten that he was yelling at me, and he would have thought I was looking him in the face.

I had a hard time looking at Taco, even if I was only looking for pores. Fred was easier, though, and I thought I could see it in Fred’s eyes, some faint intuition that we all knew each other better than we let on. But I was near certain he wanted to bite me, and I watched him for signs of craziness.

Sometimes Fred became transfixed by the bugs. His intense eyes followed their frenzied orbit around the bulb and blinked at each collision. Often the beetles would knock themselves into a stupor and lazily spiral down. Fred’s head would revolve a little, following the descent closely, and when the insect hit the ground to parade around in confused circles Fred would loft out of her lap and seize the bug, crunching it into mash.

There was something about Fred that interested me, frightened me a bit maybe—something about how much Taco and Fred seemed alike. A friend once told me that her cat was a man, a man bewitched and turned into a cat. This friend did a lot of drugs, and I had a hard time believing much of anything she ever told me, but Fred looked a lot like that cat did. Fred really did have the head of a person, with a squarish face and high forehead, and
he had lips. I knew this was the mark of a strange cat. He liked to move his lips like my old aunt before he jumped onto a bug.

It was late and hot, and I thought delirious things, about sex and filing washers, the different strokes—slow, long, short, quick. I thought Taco was looking for much more than just a job, and that she'd been looking for it a long time—in a mall without money.

I finished my last washer and she asked me if I was done. I was, but I paused, I wasn't certain why, and I said no. I said that I still had to test their hole size with a bolt. So I began to slip each washer over the bolt I had clamped in the vise, and I was pleased that I had created another half an hour to enjoy the rain and think. Sizing the washers took less concentration than filing and I watched her face as she scraped at the old bench with a nail. Her face was less animated than her cat's and I knew the cat had something that she didn't anymore. She stroked Fred like she might a man, her fingers twirling his long hair around them, gently tugging through knots without looking, scratching slow circles around his ears.

I could see her dad in Fred. I could see my father in him too, the two of them silent, judging. It was in Fred's eyes as she twirled the hair like it was on a man's chest, her own father's maybe, or on his hairy backs of legs. I could imagine it, her dad walking into her room and quietly lying down to touch her, and she would have cringed but laid a hand on him. She wouldn't have known how to reject him, her face had always told me that, her eyes saying, yes, look up my shorts, I don't mind. Fred would have lain on the floor and stared up unblinkingly, recording those dark and forgiven moments with him, saving it up, taking her anger for his own. That must have been why I never trusted the cat. Nobody
trusts a thief. Fred had a man in him in more ways than just looks, I thought, and I had a feeling that it was the women who had been stolen from that could sit so open-legged on workbenches.

I refilled the few washers that hadn't fit and I walked out into the rain. I stood on a pile of old rusted scrap metal left over from other jobs of siding and laying reinforced concrete foundations, and I enjoyed the transition from dry and hot to wet. My clothing tempered the shock of the cool water, making it something soothing, and I felt calm.

But the cat needed burning. Maybe he was a witch. A match was all it would take, even though the one I did probably blazed so well on account of all the spray paint. Glowed like hell, just like those Sterno food warmers. I figured Fred should roast for having fathers in him. They needed to stay in their right place, as far as I was concerned. I didn't need cats or fathers. I remember my father had been home that day with the cat, and he heard us all laughing out in the yard. He came out and saw the smoking grass and heard a last bit of screeching. He walked over to me real slow and I braced hard, but he didn't hit me. I remember he just looked at me and called me a coward, and then he walked away.

I could have motioned for her to join me out in the rain, but I stood still, facing the other direction, out into the shadows of the bushes beyond the light of the garage.

"You've always been the weird one." I heard her call out to me. I turned to see Fred leap from her lap after a dazed beetle and she stood to walk away slowly with the bottle in her hand. I watched Fred's jaws working on the bug, but I couldn't hear its shell cracking, as I stood there in the rain with an even stream of warm rainwater pouring off my nose.
Today the sweet peas, dried and twisted
to the trellis, were pulled out in orderly bundles.

I wondered if we could decipher vine-scars
stained across the bared wood, find

what we'd never read from our palms.
Small petals of lobelia gleamed out

of the shade. I noticed pea leaves still
green-tinted along the edges, which were separated

and left uncut. They seemed patient—
as if for them it could only be the sun

as it was right then, as if that green
rim was somehow worth their pucker and hunch.

So I no longer thought of the future, of how
it would be for us who crawl into the small pods

of our beliefs before realizing that even
the whitest moonlight is reflection, and that

song, too, must have something to push against—
some vein for its last spot of green . . .

—for John Carpenter
Vacuuming Kansas

Nothing is sucked into nothing inside the machine
That roars for something not found on Doreen’s clean carpet.
The sound is a doppelganger, a whining ghost of constant Kansas
Wind that spiraled into Doreen’s ears for 17 summers
Until her brain hummed its tuneless song while the wind twisted up
Dust devils for fun around the staked tomatoes.
When the eye of a tornado pressed against a barn,
A farm exploded. Better the unfocused buzz of constant wind.

Only once had Doreen talked about her growing-up years.
Her children were incredulous. “You killed chickens . . . GROSS!”
As if she were not already ashamed: when her children were born,
She farrowed their bloody tissue-slick bodies: she was a sow,
More animal than person. Because of that, part of her could not Love them.
For her last child, Doreen was actually sliced open,
Her belly bacon-striped layers peeled away from the baby.
She does not tell these clean city children anything more About farm life and its dirt. Better forgotten.

But Doreen had absorbed Kansas: green pastures and brown fields
Tilted into her hazel eyes. In 8th-grade civics
She memorized 105 counties: Sumner, Grant, Comanche, Kiowa . . .
Names of 19th-century politicians and uprooted Indians.
Doreen vacuums Kansas, cleaning up Quantrill’s smoky Lawrence;
Pulling up the county lines that quilt the state;
Hoovering up the WPA bridges that tack down the Chickaska, the Neodasha, the Verdigris;
Sweeping the high plains free of grasshopper-legged oil pumps and long-armed irrigators.

Finally Kansas lies still, just an old rug,
Frayed across one corner by the Missouri River.
To the east, wrinkled with flint; to the west,
Stretched high and tight as a new canvas. Still Doreen vacuums.
When she switches off the machine, the empty room buzzes.
Doreen empties the dust bag, with the others,
Somewhere west of Garden City.
In the center of a cemetery made green as spring
by the grey Confederate dead, I sit
near midnight, the black dog
who guards the place sleeping at my side,
cool on the cold cement base of this monument
made by the pride of Southern womanhood.
We all pay our debts in different ways.

The story is, where blood's been spilled
ground will speak if we will listen.
I ease a blade through the pad of my thumb,
the drops pulse out, and it begins:
wind strong enough to strip brown leaves,
a rattle like bones in a clattering bag.
Then nothing. The dog licks his yellow teeth.

I believed they would return, given blood enough
and time, but now, steadied by the throb of the wound,
I doze, legends dying all around me, the last stroke
of the clock tower echoing into silence.
Power comes from what we are,
not what we think we'll be.
Witness Odysseus staining a trench red for Tiresias,
the old man deeply drinking, speaking full of mortal heat.

—for Robert Wrigley
Shirley sent this photograph of John
Before the surgeons took his lower jaw
With strategies to put a new one in.
Their lovely plan was pluck out cancer's claw,
Be sure they got it all. They never did.
Next came his tongue, the cancer going on
Into an artery until he died.

Both hands hold tightly to the other one,
Thick hedge behind.

Wearing a pale blue robe
With darker piping, he's outside in the sun,
And after all these years I can't describe
His eyes on Shirley.

White T-shirt beneath,
Hair combed and shining, he is in some pain.
A Bloody Mary's on the table cloth.
We’re Listening
to the Features Editor

1
The bad baby was my secretary’s
And she believed that it was mine as well,
For all the reasons of our time together,
But did not admit to other company,
Then laughed her laugh and said she knows it’s mine,
And all my misery agreed with her.

And no, she didn’t want to see the thing,
Because the nurse said it was incomplete
And dead, anencephalic.

I figured out the word,
A six-month rough draft nature rejected,
And Margie said she’d known I’d want a look.
She’d told the nurse my curiosity,
And that would have to be this afternoon.

2
The nurse, perfection in her every part,
Tall, blue and beautiful
Was down the hall and to the left and right,
Please follow me,
As if I needed all the help I'd get,
And what I got was more than I deserved.

The nurse and I were come into a lab
That was a great deal like a kitchenette.—
She paused at the refrigerator door
To say she'd never seen one born that way,
Eyes wide and the mouth open,
Agape, staring from the perineum,
Face first and dead.
She said remember that it has no brain.

3
She took it from a pinkish baby blanket
With little figures there,
Though I can't remember what the animal,
And placed it nicely on the shining table.

Well, here we are, I thought, and there it is,
With a frightened gargoyle's face (no skull behind)
As terrible as all we fear of error.

Some delicate intestines were spilled out
And I saw the nurse was lightly touching them,
Then so was I
And then I asked her could I hold the baby.

I was amazed to feel its heft and cold,—
As the nurse relaxed while I was studying
No brains, some bowels out, and his pitiful clubbed feet.
William Kittredge

Leaving the Ranch

Early in the 1960s, in solemn conclave, my family voted to sell our ranch in Warner Valley, in the far outback of southeastern Oregon. Getting the job done took six or seven years.

Ours was what is called a third generation family, shirtsleeves to shirtsleeves. The old man, it was said, talking about my grandfather, he got his name on that property, it’s the best ranching property in the West, and now them grandkids will piss it away. Count on it.

The folk-talk was accurate, not that it took any genius to foresee the future. Most of us wanted out, for simple reasons, having to do with money.

What we owned, in our family, was not really land, but shares in what was called the Warner Valley Livestock Company. I think the story might have come out differently if each of us had owned some land, individually, some acres we could walk on, and dig holes in. We might have felt ourselves connected to living things like the pretty ring-necked Manchurian pheasants nesting down next to the quicksand slough, we might have been attached to one little piece of place in our imaginations. We might have talked about our place, such talk being a powerful aphrodisiac and way of holding people to the soil.

But we did not own any actual land, we owned shares, and our company did not, as a matter of policy, pay dividends. All profits went back into the property. Which was a pretty good deal if you were a majority stockholder with tax problems. But not so hot for minority stockholders who might want to invest their own money. Or piss it away on racehorses or trips to Tibet.
What the Warner Valley Livestock Company paid was salaries. If you worked for the company, you got a salary; if not, you didn’t get, as they say, shit. So it came to be that some family members, who were unlikely to ever be employed in the ranching business, thought they would rather have their money invested in a string of shoe stores or Dairy Queens, or just spend it on frivolities if they damned well pleased.

At family gatherings such desires were called cheap and common and foolish. Since I was one of the few getting a salary, it took me a long time to realize I was one of the heretics; I wanted out.

People ask me if I don’t sometimes really wish I was back on the ranch. Yeah, I say, I got a deep yearning to pitch hay. The answer is always no. I have this life which is mine, I made it up, the whole story. That other life, in such serious ways, belonged to somebody else, somebody’s son or grandson. I was lucky to get out.

My urge toward another life started at the end of childhood, with early marriage. What we thought we were going to do, my wife and I, both of us nineteen in our beginning, was get everything right and never make any mistakes, so long as we lived. I remember the ways we were going to be generous. And the ways we failed, and found reasons to ignore the possibility of absolutely giving ourselves away. I wish I could say it was because we didn’t try. But it wasn’t anything so simple.

We tried hard at being good to each other, and we thought that meant we were being good to the world, and it seemed to be working for a long time. We thought ours was the special case; our connection would never fail. Now we have been divorced for
twenty-five years. What did we ask of each other that was too much; how did our inabilities manifest themselves?

Maybe we were too careful, and tried to be too good.

In December of 1951, when we were nineteen, Janet and I were quite formally married, after religious instruction. She wore a long white dress, and I a white college boy dinner jacket. The ceremony took place in a fine hardwood Presbyterian church; we spent our first night in the Eugene Hotel, and the next day we visited the Sea Lion Caves. We were children, really strangers, but we were decent children, and we tried to accommodate each other.

Here it began; she worked Christmas vacation checking groceries for Safeway; I lay on the couch in our student's apartment and read Henry Steele Commager's two-volume *History of the United States* from cover to cover. This was all strange ground, I was a married man, I was supposed to be looking for work, but I had never read a book like that, never before, so many pages and so serious and filled with things I didn't know. I started making lists of Civil War battles; I couldn't stop.

That was a first experience with my own ignorance, my first recognition that my education had been appalling. I knew nothing of the world; I really didn't know much about ranching, and nothing about the farming in which my father had made his reputation. From my first quarter at Oregon State there were professors of agriculture who would lecture the class about my father's avant-garde irrigation practices, and turn to me for answers to their questions. I didn't know what they were talking about.

And now I could not stop my reading; this was an end to such ignorance. I was a married man, I should have a job, I felt some
guilt but I went on reading anyway, and there began one of the retreats of my life, which I have to respect, I think, as a move, however neurotic, toward salvation.

As illiterate boys will, I came to books, and learned to value ideas beyond anything actual that might be happening right at the time. I reread Moby Dick and Walden and the Cornford translation of The Republic three times each during my senior year at Oregon State. It was as if I thought they had to be memorized, and perhaps I did. The books piled up around my life like barricades; I turned away from my friends and their athletics, and became the worst sort of schoolboy pedant.

Those couple of years were like time out from real life. My wife gave up her college and checked groceries, I took money from my parents and worked at odd jobs for the agricultural research agencies connected to Oregon State, counting beets in a row, things like that.

But books were my obsession and sickness. I had discovered a separate kingdom where nobody lived but me, a place made of ideas.

It is the place where I still do my living much of the time, yet it is not a real place, as we know. For a long while it was only a place to go, a hideout; it was the best trick of my life to turn what I did there into work, and a justifiable profession.

The idea of writing was another thing, something I came to about that same time, beyond reading. Maybe all of it started with my incapacities and my failures at what were thought of as mannish things in my part of creation. Maybe I wanted a world in which I was the one who made it up.

Maybe it was power I was after. That would be easy and clever to say. Or we could blame it on poor lost Hemingway. I first
sensed storytelling as a useful thing to do while reading Hemingway. Which, in light of Hemingway’s misadventures, makes my conjecture about power and masculine failures sound more accurate.

The door to all this had first been eased open for me through the efforts of a teacher my junior year in Klamath Union High School. That sainted man (I cannot recall his name) drove a crowd of us schoolboy semi-jocks to memorize some James Whitcomb Riley and some Emerson and some Whitman, and he tricked us, he got some of us to like it. I came away thinking poetry was one of the things I liked.

So I was happy, the beginning of my freshman year at Oregon State, when I got signed up for Intro to Literature. But the first thing we encountered was Eudora Welty’s “The Death of a Traveling Salesman.” Another defeat. Grown-up reading was incomprehensible.

At first it seems hard to figure out why I was so baffled by a story that these days seems direct and powerful. The story says:

Bowman could not speak. He was shocked with knowing what was really in this house. A marriage, a fruitful marriage. That simple thing. Anyone could have had that.

So maybe my bafflement is not quite unaccountable. It is possible, given my family, there in the seventeen-year-old beginnings of my freshman year, that I did not really understand anything about the idea of a fruitful marriage. It is possible I did not know what the story was about.

So it is easy to imagine my surprise, a couple of years later, when my wife’s father pressed me to read Hemingway, and I
relented and found myself with a writer who spoke to me of what I understood to be actualities and recognizable urgencies, like the chance of dying in a pointless war (for me, the chilling and real possibility of going to Korea).

Hemingway moved me to want to be like him, and say things of fundamental consequence. If you did that you would not ever have to think you had wasted your life.

I tried to write some stories. Everybody in them was doomed. I took a creative writing class from Bernard Malamud, and found that Eastern intellectuals were a breed of human being I had never imagined. Malamud met with us in a little room in a Quonset hut, and he was happy, I think. He had just published *The Natural*, and officials at Oregon State thought the creative writing class was a kind of reward. I suppose it was. Malamud had been teaching nothing but Freshman Composition.

Right off he encouraged me to write something that reeked even slightly of the actual world. What I did was frown my serious frown, and write up some rancher anecdotes I could claim as precious and indeed just like life.

Malamud tried to tell me about recognitions and the fact that my little narratives would not be stories until some one thing changed, until the consequences of some moral stance were played out. He told me there had to be a formal moment of recognition, in which somebody came to see the world in a new way. That was how stories worked, he said, and what stories were about, learning to see freshly.

But I understood that I already saw some true things about the place where I had always lived. Another true thing I thought I saw was Malamud, in his outlander way, trying to pervert my clear, heartbroken, Warner Valley understandings.

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I would have none of his nonsense, and wrote more of my anecdotes. Malamud gave me a series of flunks, red F after red F, until I relented. With some contempt for both of us I wrote an undergraduate college story with a rising action and a recognition—all the phony works. He gave me a red A.

What a pain in the ass I must have been. How that poor man must have shook his head over my arrogance. But he hooked me, he and Mister Hemingway. I was going to be a writer; that was it for me. The man who persuaded me to take books seriously in an academic way was Herbert Childs, an English teacher at Oregon State. I came to respect his intelligence in the same blind way I allowed my father his authority. He nearly wept in the classroom when Stevenson was defeated, and it was unseemly to a boy from eastern Oregon, unmanly; I looked away.

"The last good man who will ever run for President," Childs said, (and maybe he was right). But I agreed with Herbert Childs right down the line, I was prime in my readiness to abandon the politics of my family.

And then, at the age of twenty-one, in January of 1954, I found myself graduated in General Agriculture. It is hard to imagine a more useless degree unless you have it in mind to spend your life as a county agent deep in the Willamette Valley of Oregon.

People were dying in Korea, and Janet had got herself pregnant (that was how I thought about it, as something women did, not something men did to women, or women did to men, but something women did for their own mysterious reasons). So I had no choice, I would enlist in the Air Force where I was unlikely ever to see combat. We had put off our lives, and we could do it again. That was the thinking.
By early summer, 1954, we were living on the second floor of an old house just south across 17th Street from the City Park in Denver. In heat of afternoon we would move out onto a screened-in porch, high up like we were in a secret tree house with the leaves around us, and the nesting birds.

My daughter was an infant, and she was a miracle. So long as you have this, I would think, meaning her, you have enough, everything. My wife and I loved one another, it was clear.

Huge electric storms would form over the Rockies in the late afternoon. The light would turn yellow-green as those storms came sweeping down to us, bearing drumming rain and shattering bursts of hailstones.

It is a time I like to resolve into memories of tranquillity, even though I know the actual days were mostly formed around bewilderment—who were we, who should we want to be? It was the first time either my wife or I had ever lived in a city, or on our own, and we were half a continent from home.

As an Airman 3rd Class, stationed at Lowry Air Force Base, I was going to school from six o'clock in the evening to midnight, training to be what was called a Photo Interpreter, learning to study aerial photographs, and assess signs of damage from conventional (non-nuclear) high-altitude bombardment. A couple of years later, in the Strategic Air Command, at Travis and on Guam, I got closer to what I thought of as the real stuff, high-tech radar bomb-sight scoring, and huge glossies of the aftermath from nuclear explosions over doomed Pacific atolls.

It was as if we were still in school and only had to make it to the next check from home, all of our life an enormous distance from anything that could be considered actual.
I cannot speak for the woman who was my wife; she lives far away in her own privacies. But in this latter day I find sad pleasure in recalling the summery stillness of Denver, and recall watching her push the stroller across through the traffic on 17th Street, so she and my daughter could circle through the ducks around the edge of the pond in City Park before the storms. I don't recall going with them at all.

It's clear we all lose much of what would have been ours because of inattention while we invent the future. But I have to resist telling myself that I can see that young woman and her little girl so much better in my imagination these thirty some years after the fact than I could when they were real and I was deep in the young man's disease of looking beyond the moment.

Such a notion is mostly hindsight nonsense, and it is insulting to the people we were. A friend of mine said that the first summer he was in love exists in his memory like a church he can go visit. Those years are like that for me; we were in love, at least we trusted each other in a blind-eyed way I will never again give to another adult. We were going to be together forever unto death and beyond.

It was my plan to spend my years in the Air Force pursuing my secret life, reading the important books of the world and getting ready to become a writer, which was my one vision of purpose. But when I actually seated myself before the typewriter my wife had brought to our marriage, a boy from ranching with a degree in General Agriculture from Oregon State College, the writing was as unreal as the Air Force.

So I gave it up. There was plenty of time. I was a young man, I would do my time in the Air Force, then go home to Warner Valley. I would read all the books, then I would know what to say.
But I didn’t read anything that summer in Denver; I found solace for my anxieties in going back to boyhood, mostly focused on building intricate model airplanes from balsa wood, breathing the fumes of strange glues while I waited for mysteries to dissolve, and new insights to form. But those recognitions never showed themselves, and my model airplanes were ungainly and erratic in flight. Like a sulking child I would light another failure afire and send it sailing out from our second-story porch, down in flames.

The day after Thanksgiving in 1964, at the age of thirty-two, hung over and mournful, I set up my wife’s old black typewriter, and got started trying to write. This is the first page (all that I saved) of the the first story I tried. It was called “Sorrow In L.A. County.”

Jerry Benidict was a thin and handsome young man, married seven years to the same girl and in his secret heart an altogether special person. Nothing seemed to register for the first long seconds except that today was the day after something. His head was going to burst like a pain bomb. (Long seconds at first seemed to register nothing except anxiety about who he was and what). Then he rolled over on the bed and knew something had happened to the Jerry Benidict who lived in a division house in the Thousand Oaks district. A house that shown like pink spangled coral in the great yellow California sun, that same sun that was slanting into his eyes through the dirty Venetian blinds in this furnace of a dingy, crappy, cheap noontime motel room. Great Jesus suffering Christ where in hell
was this? And why in thundering throbbing hell was he here?

Rolling his feet out on the warping linoleum floor Jerry the boy hung his head and knew only one thing, that he was familiarly and wonderfully hung over and that this little room was an air tight oven that he had to get out of because it was the day after the day after Patty the girl bride in the little pink bungalow had lumped his clothes in his suitcases for the third time in the last four years and dismissed him from the presence of herself and her two little girl babies.

He was hung over, really tightened up, and he resented it all because there . . .

There it ends, the beginning I kept as a memento of what it was like to begin as a writer, full of my fixations. I’ve been writing more than twenty-five years, and I’m still digesting those same disconnections, so powerful in that life, which ended with more finality than I could have guessed in January of 1968, when I began trying to live as someone whose major purpose was stories.

The typing was something I would go at every day with all ambition, like work, that was what I said to myself. It was a task I would never abandon, no matter if it came to nothing.

But I didn’t understand what I was attempting in the beginning. I thought it was making sentences and paragraphs, I thought it was fashioning elegance out of what you already knew. I didn’t understand that it is mainly chancing to know, and that it has to be done over and over because of the fragility of what is known; the task is always there, something to do, and always worth doing.
The summer twilight had gone luminous; the children were dark figures on the concrete irrigation dam, silhouetted against that light. The water between me and them was curling with places where fish might live. I looked up and saw my children waiting on the irrigation dam while I went on fishing as darkness came down and I didn’t even know how much it mattered, that moment, in which that was all I was doing.

They were waiting for me to get done with it and go home and sit at our table and look across the table to my wife and have a drink of whiskey; I can taste the whiskey. How much from that moment, then, when we were back there together, alone, in that instant, my children and me with their mother waiting somewhere, do I remember? How long would it take to name all the little I know, this from a time when I thought I was going crazy and unable to know anything, how many pages and pages, and what would that be; why didn’t I pay attention? Who were we?

It is not my business to know what Janet thought; I cannot know. We argued in traditional ways; she was angry, and disgusted, and felt grievously betrayed, I am sure of that. She was also humane; she tried to understand what was wrong with me, she tried to help but she couldn’t, I wouldn’t let her (it was beyond me to admit that I needed help; that would have been an emotional death).

Janet conducted herself with dignity; she was not at fault. What I most deeply remember from that house where I lived with her is decency; that memory is one of the forces that drives me to this work; it has helped sustain me and still does.

By early in 1967 it became obvious that we were at last going to sell the property in Warner; a new life loomed. So what would it be? By 1967 my time was divided several ways: drinking days,
hung-over days, writing days, and an occasional working day. I was about half the nights on a running hide-away drunk, and half the days I was incapacitated by a running hangover.

We had moved to the north side of Lakeview, for the schools we said, although I am sure there were people connected to the ranch who were justifiably pleased to see me gone off the property most of the time. Officially, my daughter was going to junior high, and it was time we moved to town; it was either move to town or board her out with some family.

Alongside the house we bought there was a little one-room study in a remodeled garage, with a real fireplace where I built smoky fires. Thinking this must be the way writers got it done, in studies like this, I set up my typewriter. Each morning I was supposed to be going out to the ranch and at least making some pretense of working; I seldom went. I told myself I would say I needed to work on my writing, if anybody asked; nobody did.

Writing was my only purpose, that was what I told myself, but I didn't really have any story and I went playing instead; my wife clerked in a drugstore; we looked at houses in Klamath Falls; we thought maybe we would buy one after the ranch was sold. Nobody knew what we would do when we lived in Klamath Falls, but maybe we would live there; I foresaw a study with white creamy paint and small-paned French windows looking out on a garden and the town below. I was hanging on; my son played Little League; my daughter had a date; we were a family you might see on television; this is almost all I remember from that last bright sweet springtime.

Without a story, I took to inhabiting fantasies, which in very real ways became my story, as they will.
Over the next weeks and months what had been a slowly accumulating intention began to become resolve. On the day after Thanksgiving in 1965, when I was thirty-three years old, I started trying to write stories. Resolved that I would write every day, give it a lifetime of effort whether it worked or not, because success wasn't the point, I would get out of bed every morning before sunup, and type for an hour or so before going off to the ranch. I have learned to understand writing as useful . . . as gestures, passing from one person to another . . .

"Leaving" (1987)

Sounds sweet and legitimate, and it was, except that I have recounted and decided the year I began was 1964, and it was more complex, there was another side to it, there was the woman who called on the telephone every day or so; she read part-time as a fiction editor at a literary magazine; the talk drifted from literature to sex; I called her back. She was, I think, as lost as I was, as crazy, reaching, as we all sometimes do, into sexual adventure, into some detailed and risque talking, for a purpose. But soon we would both have a story; we would be writers.

In June I went off to help with putting up the hay on the meadows at a place we called the River Ranch, along the Ana River at the north end of Summer Lake, the first serious property my grandfather ever owned (bought in 1911). The hay crew lived in an old motel by the highway, the fault-block uplifting of Winter Rim (named by John C. Fremont in 1847) looming at our backs as we gazed east to the long reaches of an infinite twilight over the alkaline flats.
Every evening I would stand at the telephone in the parking lot and call my literary woman. We talked sex, we got right down; this was the life, I thought, candor, craziness.

The days were hot and long and a delirium of what next. I did not call home. I drank in my room and talked some philosophies, mostly to myself.

Then I went home for the Fourth of July, and found a North American Van Lines truck parked in the street outside the house where I had lived like such a prince of irresponsibility. Men were loading furniture; my wife was leaving me; I was thirty-five years old, my boyhood was finished. I was enormously, foolishly, surprised. And deeply frightened. We can die of our isolations; I thought I was close. My history, I see, could be named Failures of the Imagination.

Which is what I thought I was curing on the day after the 4th of July as I hunted up a couple of women, as I rode away drunk into the dying afternoon, as I wept and tried to see beyond my simple-minded, baby-boy sort of terror.

It was important to head my life out in the direction of significance; I thought the weakness in my limbs would pay off in the long run, and I guess it did, in ways, because I stood it, and because I stood it I have at least some idea of what it is to be your own boy even when your bones are melting.

Those were the sorriest of times, heartbroken, the most frightening. There was not a thing to do but carry on; I had made this mess, so I had to see it through. The next time I went back to Lakeview the house had been empty a couple of weeks. There was nothing in the rooms but all my books, and some ash trays. The spaces echoed, it was all mine.

An old friend came to help me box my thousands of books.
"Jesus Christ," he said. "You'd be a smart son of a bitch if you read all of these."

What did he think I was doing with those books if I didn't read them? Who, in my concealments, had I led him to believe I was? I did not know; even my friends did not know me; I was not surprised, it seemed right.

All my people, my mother and my father and my brother and my sister and my wife and my children, were far away in other lives, and I had better get my ass on the road. I loaded those boxes of books in an old horse trailer and hauled them off to storage; I told myself I would be back for them soon.

Every so often I make a run at naming the moment when I came to understand I was someone else and driven (never ready) to hit the road toward a new life. But there was no moment, there was just a long and intricate series of defeats and evasions and intimacies, one and another until I was the next person.

What I did first was pretty much instinctual. I ran from my wreckage, back to haying at the River Ranch, and on to the Klamath Marsh, insinuated myself into the pity of relatives who were really strangers. They were kind to me in an offhand sort of way.

The late summer and fall of 1967 I drove the pumice-dust drunk-man roads through the distances of timbered country along the Williamson River, I ran my haybaler, and I drank in the evening. I began trying to center myself in work.

My brother and I took an old World War II Jeep and went out to patch fences every day. The enormous yellow pines stank of sweet pitch while we leaned against them and ate our lunch and listened to the World Series on a portable radio. We hammered staples while contrails crossed the skies; we were miles from
anyone; the paved road was thirty miles to the west. As winter came at us I tried to relearn the arts of horseback. I rode the frozen swamplands for cattle, and fell into another love.

By December I was still heartbroken by what I thought of as my estrangements even though I was already obsessed with the vivid woman who shared my second marriage. The snow was two feet deep, and when I was not running the roads I was holed up and disoriented in a three-room ranch-hand house on a high bank overlooking the iced-up Williamson River. A half-dozen huge ponderosas sighed in the winter winds, and I listened to country music on my radio, trying to cherish an imaginary future in which this would all be grist for the mill.

One vividly cold Sunday morning my father came driving in sort of grandly for that neck of the deep woods, in a brand new yellow Mercedes, accompanied by the good woman who would be his second wife. They parked out front with the motor running, fog lifting from the tailpipe into the bright ten-below-zero sunlight, and I watched my father get out and come to the house alone, to ask me if I had anything to drink, by which he meant whiskey.

What I had was Jack Daniel’s. I poured him a glass, and he asked me what I was going to do with myself. I told him I’d be leaving after the first of the year, when I would go away to college again, to do studies in creative writing, which was not a discipline anybody ever heard of in our part of the world. He looked at me like I was crazy, and sipped at his tumbler of whiskey.

“I spent my life at things I hated,” he said. “I sure as hell wouldn’t recommend that.”

What I think he was telling me, since that was the end of the conversation, had to do with the fact that my father had once
wanted to be a lawyer, and that he had allowed himself to be talked out of that ambition by his father. I think he was trying to remind me that his life of working with his father had in any long sense been a failure. The pretty horses of love and familial trust had long since been led to slaughter.

My father was sixty-eight years old, he had suffered five heart attacks and a stroke, he was marrying again, and he was implying that I should get on with my own opportunities.

That moment of talk heartened me through the years from then to now.

In the early summer of 1968 my second wife delivered a fullterm stillborn baby boy. He strangled on his own umbilical cord.

"The worst thing," she said, "is the quiet. It's out and you can't hear anything but the nurses breathing."

In the late summer of 1968 we drove out east from Denver one morning. I was hung over and heading to graduate school in Iowa City, and I lost my nerve as the Rocky Mountains sank behind us into the expanses of the Nebraska plains. This was not my life, there was nothing out there; I was sick with anomie.

But there was nothing to turn back toward, and we went on.

In the late afternoon she took my picture as I stood by the stump of what seemed to have been the only major tree in Lone Tree, Nebraska, and I tried to be happy enough, conjuring at some connection to Wright Morris. It was a purpose.

Many of us live with a sense that something is deeply wrong. Some of us say there has been a fracturing, a fall. We do not understand what we are, or why.
Aristotle talks of “recognitions,” moments of insight or understanding in which we see through to coherencies in the world. We constantly seek after such experiences: We are like detectives, trying to find a true story. And we do, we find the sense in things, over and over, incessantly, theory after theory.

We live in stories; what we are is stories. We are formed in the stories we learn to live in as we go on inventing ourselves. Things happen because of what we are (stories).

We figure, we find patterns and invent, the world drifts, our story falls apart, we reinvent our understandings. It is work that will go on all our lives; we are hapless before it. Alone or not, late in the night we listen to our breathing in the darkness and rework our stories, and we do it again in the morning. All day long, before the looking glass of our unique selves, we reinvent reasons for our lives.

Part of us acts, and another part is outside, witnessing the enactment. Part of us is a mirror in which the other part sees itself reflected. It is easy to see that our place is luminous with significances we don’t understand. We say we are suffering from a wound, a fall from a place where we imagine the animals lying down with one another, where they are content to be part of one another. We want to think our condition is temporary, part of us is and does; another part watches, and guesses at the meaning of things; we want to believe we can be healed.

But it never happens; we wonder what we mean; we lose track of reasons why one thing is more significant than another; we are fearful and driven to forget our most basic generosities; we anesthetize ourselves with selfishness. We are driven to the rituals of connection we find in music and dancing and food and storytelling and narcotics and and fucking while the rain falls outside;
we are disappointed in the long run. I can hide my dis-ease under booze or hard labor or good works or literature, or any other obsession. But it comes back in the morning.

It is a situation which led me to believe, for a long time, that there was no way to discriminate between things that are valuable and things that are not; I was mistaken. I thought I didn't have any politics. But I did; we did. Through it all we were trying to practice the arts of communiality and compassion, which turn out to be the best arts.
Woman with Marvelous Hat
Porcelain, lusters; 1984.
In his fifth book, *What My Father Believed*, Robert Wrigley continues to write poems of reckoning and recognition, but within a more focused range of subject matter. The book contains more straightforward “personal” narrative than his previous full collection, *Moon in a Mason Jar*, which had many persona poems and episodes in the not-quite-real, such as “Moonlight: Chickens on the Road” or “The Glow.” The new book emphasizes personal history, the social/political context often complicating the narrator’s decisions and relationships. The stories he tells are rich with language. Wrigley’s voice is natural as an actor’s—more music, more control than the ordinary, but not enough to distract from the words. Craft and content balance.

Wrigley has a strong and varied sense of structure. The poems are full of surreptitious form. The most formal-sounding or arranged-looking poem might require a scavenger hunt for pattern, while a poem that is downright conversational might be a solid chunk of quatrains. Of the thirty-three poems, about ten are near-rhymed quatrains or couplets, though not in four- or two-line stanzas. The ten poems that are arranged in stanzas of equal length (varying between six and 36 lines) seldom have a recognizable rhyme-pattern, though a pattern may seem about to suggest itself any moment, or the lines may be predominantly iambic—but the same is true of the rest of the poems. In other words, form is part of the poet’s repertoire, not an end in itself.

The book is dedicated “for my father & for my children,” and many of the poems are written from the perspective of the center generation, facing both directions—looking back at himself
through watching his son, beginning to arrive at his father. For example, in “Night Rising,” the speaker, camping with his son, has to get up in the dark to urinate:

   Before I awakened, at the dim edge of urgency,
   I dreamed my own father groaning in the night,
   easing from the door of the station wagon
   we slept in, the cool heft of night air
   hitting me, the dome light momentarily on
   then off, on again, then off for good.

   Now groggy with sleep, I can’t recall
   what is memory and what is dream.
   If such a night ever happened—the minute
   of solitary half-sleep, darkness tattooed
   with the dome light’s blue afterimages—
   I can’t say. Nor can I say for sure when I finish
   which way I’ve come from the tent.

Wrigley captures the precise and dreamy sequence, as he follows the thought so far he literally becomes lost—and we become aware of his disorientation at the same rate he does.

Some of the poems are deeply layered. One that combines individual experience with political awareness is “For the Last Summer.” The poem clearly echoes “Fern Hill,” by Dylan Thomas. Wrigley’s poem is not as long or as lush, but it moves with the same logic, lots of singing and light and wonder in the commonplace—the lost world described with exaggerated believable lyricism. However, instead of a rural retreat, the setting is urban; instead of a boy running innocently wild on a farm, a young man drives around with his girl (probably just before being drafted);
and war, not time, is the force behind change.

The young man in Wrigley’s poem has much less richness around him, but he doesn’t know that. What’s there is intensified by his age and by knowledge of the war, which, like the inevitabilities of time, is somewhere else. The present seems magnified. Even the dust of the foundry town is beautiful, even his mundane job at a gas station seems full of grace.

Wrigley writes about his nameless young man from the outside—he could be anyone, himself or a generation. Thomas suggests a fairytale (“And once below a time . . .”); Wrigley invokes the all-American-boy mythology: Fourth of July, baseball, an everyday sort of guy in the car with his girl, music on the radio.

The effect is ironic, doubly so with the weight of Thomas’ poem behind it for contrast. The poem insists that there’s more to grieve than youth’s passing. In “Fern Hill,” the speaker knows already that the magic is gone, but the memory remains a gift. We don’t know what will happen to the young man in the middle of “the only hours of his life he ever knew / as his own.” The war isn’t named, and at one level doesn’t need to be, as it’s a repeating theme. However, from the context of the book, the war is most likely Vietnam, and the young man’s impending disillusionment mirrors the nation’s.

Overall, the book would work better divided into sections, probably three. The first eleven poems, the last of which is the title poem, are all permutations on son/father, coming-of-age in a troubled time; with the title poem there’s a sense of closure—the poet now finds himself arguing with his students the same way his father once argued with him. But there’s no pause before more poems, and, in spite of their fine quality, the book seems to drift a while. There are epiphanic moments in landscape, family
stories, a graceful love poem. “The Big Dipper” and “Body and Soul” work less well, possibly because the father/son block of poems earlier seems so strong in comparison. “The Big Dipper” feels too small, lacking the turn to knowledge we usually see in Wrigley’s best work. “Body and Soul” seems talky, relying on echoes from earlier poems—the boy’s sense of aloneness from “American Manhood” and the father’s record collection in “Sinatra.” Even so, there are moments that make the poems worth reading, for example, from “Body and Soul”: “From dozens of great, cloth-covered hooks / hung an orchestra of silence, / saxophones of every pitch and size . . .”

About two-thirds of the way through, the book picks up momentum again: several consecutive poems of the imagined other or the self made imaginary, the almost magical stance Wrigley does so well. For example, “Night Calls” contains five titled sections about an unnamed “he,” each encapsulating the feel of a different stage of his life, united by his response to night sounds. Earlier subject matter eases back in—boyhood-manhood, politically-tinged stories. “Shrapnel” feels a little self-conscious, and—one of those unaccountable quirks of taste—I don’t like “Camping,” perhaps because it seems too much like well-written exposition; however, it sets up the excellent last poem so well that I can’t quibble too much.

“The Wishing Tree” does all a final poem should do, touching back on earlier themes and finishing with an opening to larger awarenesss. The speaker is camping with his son, enjoying the landscape and a solitary moment looking through the pictures and stories in his son’s notebook, including “an old Indian man who found a tree for wishes.” After the stanza break, the mood changes. “And now I wish I had stopped looking . . . / wish I’d
risen and wrestled on my waders.” While his son is down at the river with the trout he’s caught, the speaker discovers a disturbing picture, rockets and destruction “everywhere / but a white sphere at peace, a circle at the bottom of the page / in which two people played catch,” not smiling, “as though everything / depended on them, everything— / and in the picture, it did, it did.” The wishing tree parallels the Tree of Knowledge. Had he joined his son at the river, he would have seen the boy “hold up a lunker trout, gingerly, by the jaw— / the way I’d taught him”; instead, he has the pain of fuller understanding.

What My Father Believed is a book worth returning to time and again. What I like best is how longing pervades the poems, the longing we all feel throughout our lives but do not often admit or examine. Wrigley brings a sympathetic tone to every subject, himself or the imagined—not dispassionate, not empathic, but sympathetic—just enough distance to understand as well as feel.
Farewell to the Body
Barbara Moore
Paper.
Reviewed by Christine Vance

The poems in Farewell to the Body, the 1990 Word Works Washington prize winner, detail losses personal and planetary: isolation, poverty, aging, death, extinction. And Barbara Moore keeps an eye to minute daily corrosions like salt on spoons. Throughout the book, she employs natural and domestic images that are at once familiar and striking. In the title poem, she records the rotting of a peach:

... the way it teemed, sank, soaked toward center—grew a blue powder all over, then a black, dense, velvety—then collapsed into a kind of bud or navel turned inside out. Then leaked all its juice forever, in a sticky trail on the formica.

In another, a senile woman tries to “make out her face in the smoky spoon of the world.”

Just as Moore sees loss in the small details of life, she also recognizes that it is often small details that change a day or a life, as in the poem “Starling,” in which the speaker is at the point of despair.

Then it happened. A starling flopped down on the porch right in front of me, split its yellow beak, said what a starling always does—Creak, like a rusty hinge, said it again. . . .

After that, I threw this morning after all the others, a pebble mistook for a boulder. Let my words sink back into the ground.
Moore’s poetry is deeply grounded in nature and in the body, “this / tough stuff we tell ourselves / we are not made of.” And just as they are her inroads to pain, they are also sources of her pleasure, as in the poem “Such Afternoons”:

What is there to talk about, except the earth, its ancient freshness, grass sputtering with children and new graves. Also beetles so top-heavy, so drugged with thought, they tip over trying to navigate the simplest distance. Though it’s only one day after another, never the day we’re after, though we walk the pear-shaped earth in gravely wounded lives, such afternoons arrive. A fine languor of cicada, my neighbor peering into his hedges like an earnest bird. What does he see there? Something good, I think. It’s possible to stop worrying the dark for a while, following the chirp of an old lawnmower chewing its ragged way around the lawn. Our feet moving without effort, their depressions filling with quiet water.

Overall, the book is dark, but luminously so. Moore scrutinizes the “inviolable griefs” and the “peculiar happiness” of the human experience with clarity, courage, and generosity. The reader of Farewell to the Body is left confident that indeed the “Sun stokes their hearts to the end / who pick up each moment as it falls.”
In his poem “Old Dominion,” Robert Hass comments on Randall Jarrell: “It puzzled me that in his art, like Chekov’s, / everyone was lost, that the main chance was never siezed / because it is only there as a thing to be dreamt of.” When I knew Joe Bolton in Bowling Green, Kentucky, in 1985, he had this poem taped to his refrigerator; but I little suspected then how apt Hass’ words would be in describing Joe’s work.

Like Jarrell, Joe dreamt of other worlds, unreachable Kafka-esque constructions that his narrators get closer to as they examine the past, but farther away from as they realize the past is no longer touchable, but alive only in a manufactured dream world. Though Jarrell may have used his “other world” as a refuge from the real world, Joe’s only hope is in a precariously balanced present caught between other, better worlds. What we hear in Days of Summer Gone is an elegy to those other worlds, made eloquent by his sensual language, his formal constructions, and his skill at handling the abstract nature of this loss with the particulars of his own life.

It’s not hard to read the tragedy in the poems in this volume. In “The Seasons: A Quartet,” for example, the narrator tells us that “The best days of summer are the days of summer gone: / Something cooking, a wash of light on the water . . . / The music dies, and what I hold is the world. / One leaf falling would break the spell. It falls.” Sadly, however, it is also easy to read Joe’s work as “suicide poems,” poems made more poignant, as Joe Anderson says in a blurb on the back cover, by Joe’s death in 1990. When I first read many of the poems in Days of Summer Gone in manu-
script before Joe’s death, I was taken with their ability to convince me of limited choices in a doomed world, not of inevitable personal doom. Believing the poet is the suicide in “One World” who “had a photograph / He couldn’t reconcile his life with anymore” greatly limits this book and forces an answer to the questions Joe poses as unanswerable. The power of the poems rests in their ability to question and probe an often horrific realization, not provide a rationale for one poet’s death. To read this volume with that end in mind is to misinterpret its fundamental explorations.

Bolton’s best probing is in “American Variations,” a poem whose multi-part structure is reminiscent of poets Joe admired, including Donald Justice and Robert Penn Warren. While the structure of each section remains in strict syllabics, the content of the poem, remembering long distances, flaps back and forth through time. The tension between the constraints of form and the fluidity of time suggests the further tension between lost worlds and the present one. Furthermore, the narrator’s insistence that he is telling “you” these things forces “you” to consider that “Once there was a world you could / Hold in the palm of your hand.”

By Part II, “Song to be Spoken, Not Sung,” the narrator’s imperative commands us to “Say this world and let it be enough for once,” as though the speaker’s vocalization will somehow force it to be enough, that no one could possibly want more than the world at hand. It’s hard to believe the narrator, but even harder to accept that “this world” will never be enough. The schism between worlds opens even wider.

In Part III, the narrator begins to describe his “other world,” in this case, a woman who once loved him. Typical of the lost world, the images suggest the splendor of what is gone: “I remembered/
How gold the fields of the farm got in September, / And how the
woman let her hair loose from the blue bandana.” In “The Return”
of Section IV, the narrator finds that nothing has stayed the same,
that the place “hardly recognized you,” that rivers and people all
move forward with the same unforgiving speed. Here, the narra­
tor seems to dismiss the woman of Section III, suggesting finally
that “lovers were, in the end, reduced / To the sounds of names,
the flesh utterly forgotten.” Despite his attempts to remember and
contain a previous world, no place seems to stay static enough for
this narrator to hold.

If there is hope in this poem, it is in the couple’s ability to
“make what love they can / In this, their one and only world”; but
this decision seems to bear little solace since the flesh, as the
narrator has already suggested, is forgotten so easily.

Throughout the book, Joe poises his narrators on this same
sharp line between going backward and going forward, though
neither movement seems advantageous. The real world, finally,
must be what is in the present. In “Autumn Fugue,” Joe offers a
possible alternative to looking for another world:

If there is nothing between a man and a woman
Except the light by which they see each other,
And a past in which they appear continually smaller,
And a future that seems already to have acquired
The irrevocability of the past,
It seems important, nevertheless, to acknowledge
Their brief victory: the surviving it.

Certainly, even this possibility is bleak. Still, the speakers of the
poems in Days of Summer Gone never pretend that anything is
easy, nor does this poet who forces us to look at our own deci­sions, our own precarious balance.
Contributors’ Notes

Margrethe Ahlschwede teaches at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. She has had poems published in Plainsongs, Whole Notes and the South Dakota Review. “Wintering” is her first published story.

Linda Andrews is a Michigan State University graduate in Literature and is currently an MFA candidate at the University of Washington. Her work has appeared in Nimrod, Poetry Northwest, Seattle Review, Iris, Cream City Review, Midwest Quarterly and others, and is forthcoming in Northern Lights, Willow Springs and Milkweed. Her first book, The Language of Daughters, is forthcoming in 1991 from Linwood Publishers.

Kim Barnes was raised in the logging camps of northern Idaho. She lives and writes with her husband, Robert Wrigley, and their children in Lewiston, Idaho. She has work forthcoming in Shenandoah and The Georgia Review.

Bill Bevis is Professor of English at the University of Montana and the author of Ten Tough Trips: Montana Writers and the West, University of Washington Press, 1990.

David Dale is currently an MFA candidate at the University of Montana. His poems have appeared in CutBank, Jeopardy, Rhino, The Slackwater Review and The Trestle Creek Review. A native of Helena, Montana, he lives with his wife of 31 years and son of 16 in Big Arm, where he bathes occasionally in Flathead Lake.

R. Mark Elling is a junior in creative writing at the University of Montana. He transferred from Yale for the writing program and the skiing, but grew up in Phoenix, Arizona.

Martha Elizabeth is in the MFA creative writing program at the University of Montana. In 1990 she received the Dobie-Paisano Fellowship, and her poetry chapbook, Basics of the Dance, was published by Trilobite Press. Her poems are forthcoming in New Virginia Review and The Bloomsbury Review.
Beckie Flannagan, a poet, is at work on a dissertation about Anne Tyler. She lives with her husband and very young son in Carbondale, Illinois.

Ray Gonzalez is the Literature Director of The Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center in San Antonio, Texas. He is the author of two chapbooks of poetry and three full-length books of poetry, From the Restless Roots (Arte Publico Press), Twilights and Chants (James Andrews and Co.) and The Heat of Arrivals (Southwest Literary Press). He is poetry editor of The Bloomsbury Review, associate poetry editor of High Plains Literary Review, and editor of The Guadalupe Review.

Joel Huerta is a recent graduate of the writing program at the University of Arizona, where he served as an assistant poetry editor for Sonora Review. He has published a long poem in Saguaro, and has work forthcoming from Puerto del Sol, The Americas Review, and eight poems in An Anthology of New Chicano Writing, edited by Charles Tatum.

Lowell Jaeger has two books in print from the Utah State University Press: War on War (1988) and Hope Against Hope (1990). A chapbook, Law of the Fish, is available from Wright Impressions Press of Whitefish, Montana.

William Kittredge teaches at the University of Montana. "Leaving the Ranch" is from his book of memoirs, Hole in the Sky, to be published in 1992 by Knopf.

Kathy Kopydlowski is a Wisconsin artist whose photography has appeared in Fine Tuning and The Windy Hill Review. Much of her recent work reflects her interest in nature as an earth science teacher and her travels west with her husband, Jeff.

B. Victoria Kreider graduated this spring with a BFA from the University of Montana. She is taking a year off to develop a more in-depth study of how light defines form and texture in the human figure before
continuing on to graduate school. She has been featured in several exhibitions in Montana, including a solo show.

Robert Lee lives in Missoula, Montana, where he enjoys fishing for trout and writing about man, the only fisher who names his prey. Robert finds it revealing that we catch and release cutthroats, disdain catfish, and throw squawfish up on the bank to die.

Beth Lo is an Associate Professor of Art and head of the ceramics area at the University of Montana. A member of the Big Sky Mudflaps, she has been awarded an American Craft Museum Design Award in 1986 and a Montana Individual Artist Fellowship in 1989. She is represented by the Mia Gallery in Seattle.

David Long has published two books of short stories: *Home Fires* and *The Flood of '64*. “Talons” is from a collection in progress.

Skyler Lovelace works as a writing coach for various businesses in Wichita, Kansas. She has completed an MFA in poetry at Wichita State University. *Poetry* and *Laurel Review* have recently accepted some of her poems, and she’ll be appearing in the special AWP Intro section of *Puerto del Sol*.

Blair Oliver was born and raised in the wilds of New Jersey, and it’s believed he now lives somewhere in the West. This man has a chicken pox scar on his left temple, and it’s rumored he’s written a dec. n. novel. He is considered unarmed but dangerous.

Chad Oness’ Sutton Hoo Press is finishing a limited edition chapbook of Gerald Stern’s long poem “Bread Without Sugar.” Recent work of his, including an interview with Stern, has appeared or is forthcoming in *Poet Lore, Stand: Newcastle upon Tyne, The Bloomsbury Review, the South Florida Poetry Review*, and elsewhere. He’ll be looking for a job soon.

Greg Pape teaches at the University of Montana, and his books include *Border Crossings* and *Black Branches* (Pitt Poetry Series). His most recent
book, *The Morning Horse*, has just been released by Confluence Press.

Mark Ratledge graduated in 1991 with a BA in English from the University of Montana. He works as a carpenter and mechanic, and hopes to go back to Asia soon.

Robert Sims Reid received his MFA from the University of Montana, and is a detective on the Missoula police force. His most recent novel, *Cupid*, is from Bantam, and his next novel, *Benediction*, is due out from Bantam in 1992.

Tom Rippon teaches at the University of Montana. He has lectured widely, and has been awarded two fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts. His work is featured at the Judith Weintraub Gallery of Sacramento, California.

Laura Stearns also writes fiction and plays. Her one-act play, *Burning Bride*, was performed by the Montana Repertory Theater.

Jim Todd, Professor of Art at the University of Montana, has concerned himself with social subjects throughout his career. He gets his ideas from traveling, and is represented by the Image Gallery in Portland, Oregon, and Plewisast in Hamburg, Germany.

Christine Vance is working on an MFA in creative writing at the University of Montana. Her work will appear soon in *Poetry East*.

Mary Vanek is currently a Teaching Fellow for the U.S. Information Bureau in Prague, Czechoslovakia, on leave of absence from the University of Montana MFA program in creative writing. She has been a resident of the MacDowell Colony and the Ucross Foundation, and her poems and stories have been accepted in such journals as the *American Literary Review, Blue Mesa Review* and *The Bloomsbury Review*.

James Whitehead co-founded the program in creative writing at the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville. He has published three books of
poetry: *Local Men, Domains*, and *Actual Size* (chapbook); and a novel, *Joiner*. He recently completed a new book of poems.

Robert Wrigley teaches at Lewis-Clark State College in Lewiston, Idaho. He has published two chapbooks and three full-length books of poetry: *The Sinking of Clay City, Moon in a Mason Jar*, and *What My Father Believed* (reviewed in this issue). He was recently awarded a Pushcart Prize.

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