CutBank

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CutBank 45

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acrylic on foam core, 8”x10”
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Winter, 1995

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AS WESTERN CULTURE DECLINES
WITHOUT ITS KNOWING

His body is an accumulation of hindsights,
Dreams of fallout shelters, names engraved
In bullets, centuries of weathered newspapers,
Weeping flags, widows walking through flowers,
Retired heroes living on mild archipelagos,
Credits rising because the movie is over.

It's a small door open to the counterfeit light
Of dead stars, lost sources of celestial rivers,
Marathons time forgot, while another vernal equinox,
The sequel to last year's version, comes true,
Making day once again equal night. It's a hand
Searching for unfamiliar faces and the syllables
They once spoke, because now he's the only thing
He knows, and there's word this galaxy is drifting
In a different direction than previously believed.

This means an unknown is attracting it, though it
Remains intact, iceberg-like, promoting togetherness,
Each person frozen and individually-wrapped
Inside an enormous shape, moving simultaneously
Toward the same unknown. There's also word that
The Palos Verdes butterfly, believed to be extinct,
Has been “rediscovered” in southern California.
About a hundred of them were found “flitting around
A pocket of deerweed” next to an oil refinery.

This is visibility after a period of hiding,
To a lightswitch under finger
As your eyes adjust to fact.

You're both wave and particle,
Doorway and vanishing point,

Possessor of reasons without shapes,
Governments without nations,

And it'll be water that takes you away,
Having read the memoirs of dead generals,
Having known their sad victories.
TAXI

Rwanda, 1993

Doorman slams the sliding door, yells go hurryhurryhurry, cursing the ancient battered Toyota minibus, cursing God, the gravel in the gearbox, Driver, the soldiers at the next checkpoint, the choking six-cylinder, the president, the bald tires, the dangerous curves, the sun that rose not too long ago: StopStopStopStop he screams and Driver does his best to cram the brake pedal through what's left of the floorboards. Doorman slams open the door and smiles and swings his arm wide in welcome.

So we climb aboard and take the last places in the back on a leopard-print Naugahyde seat we have to ourselves. Good Morning, a man smiles. Mwaramutseho I answer. Imana bless us, Driver says, Truly the world's coming to an end. My brother speaks their language and the umuzungu speaks ours. Doorman yells Tugende Tugende and we go, Bob Marley on the radio jammin I need a hamma, a hamma, a hamma to hamma them down.

And even the soldiers smile and wave
us through the barricade as we head out of town, Driver hunched over the wheel, begging the engine for speed, racing all the other taxis north to the capital, gaining altitude, the carburetor wheezing like an asthmatic cow. We open the window for a little air and the woman in front of us shuts it. We open it. She shuts it. The wind gives you malaria, she says. Mosquitoes give you malaria, we say but this time the window stays shut.

Driver pulls us onto the shoulder and Doorman grates open the door for a family traveling to a wedding, the mothers wearing their hair bound up under strips of bamboo, their three brightest cloths wrapped tight. Then we’re wedged together, brothers and sisters and children all sharing rivers of sweat.

The bridesmaid hands us a basket finely woven of turquoise and purple and magenta, to save it from being crushed. We pass on hills, pass on curves, pass more battered taxis, trucks hauling green bananas and sacks of beans, women with hoes over their shoulders, men walking to visit their neighbors carrying gourds of banana beer, platoons of soldiers marching to the border, a bicycle so strung with live chickens the rider seems to be pedaling a newly discovered species of flightless bird.
Driver skids us around another blind corner
and now the taxi's a sauna,
with every breath we breathe human,
smiling, trading handshakes,
even though we all know
that when they demand our identity cards
at the next checkpoint
the soldiers' Kalichniokavs will be loaded,
that the basket I'm holding may have a grenade inside,
that wired beneath the 100-franc bill six schoolchildren
cluster around in the playground just across the road,
there is almost certainly a land mine.
On her left hand Waitress X wears an African ring made of flattened Napoleonic coins, a ring that speaks of atrophied amber light, of flux and loss. She tells me with some pleasure where those corroded colonial coins have traveled, first from French ports to fevered West African outposts and returning, by steamer, to France in their hammered incarnation, then moving to yet another colony, across Canada’s few acres of snow to live on Waitress X’s hand, in this city, the ring now against my cheek. She connected the dots. Perhaps those coins once belonged to a conscripted peasant torn from his family, tossed into the sea in mid-voyage, dead of the tropics, of yellow fever or malaria, shrunk and bent and stitched into a brown blanket and lowered to the fishes, his coins moving on without him, like the family face; a Senegalese reshaping them into this ring, smashing them into something else and now here beside the bartender — flesh colored Band-Aids like stars all over his big hands. In his beard and hat the bartender resembles Cowboy Flett who played with the Leafs and the WHA Oilers and for Freddie the Fog, RIP.

Upstairs, I knock at the hotel door and Normie Ullman answers, naked. I don’t care to see Normie Ullman naked. Curly is after puck bunnies and Dino is chasing anything. Yvan Cournoyer is tanned and grinning and chasing anything. No wonder they call him the Roadrunner. Maybe he’s spending the check from the
big Zeller's ad we did. They’re fighting with fire extinguishers. Their ex-model wives are thousands of miles to the east, Orient pearls swept up on their necks, the cooler shades of love. There are days it seems that all hockey players are pervs or nuts or stickmen. I’m sure several are normal, but there’s not a lot of evidence. We’re away from home a lot, in decent shape, and for a brief while we possess money and youth. We try to rid ourselves of both.

Waitress X worries her hammered ring while strange flowers behind her hair bow towards Chinatown. We finish the fish, explode the last fortune cookies: “A challenge is near.”

“Yes,” says Waitress X, “paying our bar tab. I should be working. Is that Tom Waits over there? He lives in Petaluma, now.”

He’s chasing a veal cutlet like it’s a live lobster.

“He looks more human than on his albums,” Waitress X says. “He is certainly a curious man. Does he still smoke, do you think? Those homemade tunes. What goes on in his dollhouse head? Of course what goes on in all our heads.” She looks at me pointedly.

Later, I call my machine for messages and hear the place being trashed. I get home and my door is gone. A single cloud rises up in a perfect question mark. Sea planes rush the harbor, barely clearing the granite and brick buildings lining Wharf Street. One plane, the very kind I’m in all too often, clips a tugboat and cartwheels across the freezing inlet. No one is hurt, just hypothermia and shock and legal questions. Of course, it can’t happen to me. Gulls go down, fleshy feet hanging over the sun, gliding downstream to spend the night at sea, dreaming, dreaming of the fragrant dump.

In the corner I get my purple glove hard in the
new guy’s face, mash it around a bit. He hisses, “You’re dead old man!” I’m maybe four years older than this seagull, this floater. When he turns, I stick him behind the knee where there’s no pad. I’ll show him a trick or two before the clock releases us for the evening and we can breathe again. He’ll thank me someday, age making him wistful, false.

The blinking coach fined me for having too impressive a suntan. He felt it displayed a lack of commitment to the team. I never play well in LA. I ride the pines until doomsday. Where is Bart Crashley when I need him? This place enters and alters your cells like salt. I like that.

Milk Truck opens one of his own beers after the game. A guy on the kid line, not even of age in this state, asks if he has any others.

“Here,” says Milk Truck, tossing the bottle cap, “sniff this.”

I have the worst sense of smell in the world, but even I can smell alcohol on the center. He floats at the red line; he won’t check anyone and he can’t take a pass. I saw him before the game using an ax to shorten his stick, leaving splinters all over the black rubber mats. We were killing ourselves laughing, but meanwhile our best forward is benched, waiting for a trade, while this idiot plays. It’d be funny if we won a few, but we don’t. I’m the only D-man who stays at home, and they’re making noises about another trip to the farm. Choking chickens. If I get beat it’s because I’m the only one back on a 3 on 1.
You have to play the pass and hang in the middle, ignoring instinct, refraining from charging the guy with the puck. The rest of the team just watches, already thinking up their excuses for not helping out. You guess where the pass will go and you feel stupid when they tic-tac-toe it into the net. You look naked and stupid because you’re the only one back there. That’s your reward.

Our captain is furious. We’re playing like garbage, he screams, like horseshit! I skate harder. I get to the corner first. I’ll show them. My stick is down and my back is to their forward, bracing myself, waiting for him to smash into me, but he swings wide to try and lift my stick and steal the puck. I pivot with the puck, my hip out. He slams straight into the boards hard and falls to the ice, holding his dripping face. The end of his nose is slit open like that scene in Chinatown. The zebras give me a high-sticking major for drawing blood, and I’ve done nothing. My stick was on the ice. He put himself into the boards. I argue and get extra time. Unsportsmanlike conduct. Piss me off. The other team is yelling at me to watch out, they’ll get me back, and I’ve done nothing. I rush their bench, enraged, exultant and leap at them and bop some cement head on the nose. My team is silent, unsure about what exactly happened in those three seconds. I have a rep for elbows. Thanks guys.

My old car is detailed, waxed, gleaming, looking skanking, mint. When in Rome... Otherwise you’d feel like a loser in a grubby bucket of boils. I listen to FM, 10,000 watts out of Mexico. Beer is so much cheaper here. I can get twenty-four Pacifico for the price of a six-pack of no-name in Canada. I can get out fishing anytime with a friend, roaring under the piers and bridges.

On the nude beach a man passes me a handbill.
Others toss them, but I always take them. I like them.

ALTERNATIVE CANCER TREATMENTS IN MEXICO

BIO-ELECTRICAL MEDICINE
(THE ONLY CLINIC ON NORTH AMERICAN CONTINENT TO FEATURE THIS TREATMENT)

7PM — FOLLOW SIGNS

The clinic is Mexican, but the spiel and sizzle seem as All-American as a naked bootleg. No one hands you anything like this back home. You’re behind the wheel of a Batmobile. Dudes chase me in the American city with new age weapons that look like electric shavers. They wreck my hands for kicks. I still inhabit my face. I wake one morning, the spitting image of my father. My father refuses chemotherapy or any treatment. I’d do the same. We talk a bunch on the phone. The bird is the word, says AM radio. This is supposed to be the new world, sings X down at the Whiskey-a-Go-Go. The punks are visibly aging.

I don’t want to go to Disneyland, but the Intended convinces me and I have a riot, running from ride to ride, joyously nauseated, going on Space Mountain just one more time while a thirteen year old Samoan gang member takes a bullet in the spine, in section H, the “Happy” parking lot. Right where we parked. Why not the “Grumpy” section of the parking lot? The brawl eventually involves ten people. Another bullet hits a kid in the elbow. I am lounging on the boring Pirate Cruise. A hole in my poor old Volvo. The Anaheim police take the .308 cartridge as evidence. Later the Highway Patrol stops one of the cars heading south on the San Diego Freeway. A shotgun in the back seat. The thirteen year old dies at 3:00 a.m. at Scripps. Hockey is pretty pas-
sive compared to these jokers. This is big time violence with Uzis and shit. It makes Dave the Hammer’s brand of destruction seem quaint and shy and antique.

At morning practice, a bunch of us are fooling around, like kids bumping, tackling for a joke, submarining each other, getting giddy. One guy leaps in the air to land on his buddy’s back, but his good buddy is turned to skate up ice, one leg behind him. 210 pounds land on this one outstretched leg and 210 pounds pull it backwards. It’s unnatural. I see the leg give and I see the man’s face. It makes me sick. I can’t look at the guy who did it, do not want to know more, do not want to know that the knee was yanked right out of the socket, even though I know. Knee injuries make me cringe. The stupid thing is, they help me stick with the team, make a few more pay days.

Most of the guys are drinking gassy draft, eating pickled eggs, pigs’ feet, turkey gizzards, beer sausage. I learn to take a can of Florient on the bus with me, spray it at their noxious clouds. I enter techno-zombie state after the third city.

Another new assistant coach. Power of positive thinking at the defaced chalkboard.

“OK guys, we got ‘em on the ropes, keep pressing, good pressure, good pinching at the blue line.”

We’re down 2-0 and we got them on the ropes? PHD, he says — Pride, Hustle, Desire.

“One game at a time,” he opines.

Yeah, versus what? Just once I’d like to hear a coach say, OK guys, seven games at a time.
Flying around the ice like a hyped-up racehorse, you barely see the puck drilling right at your head, a rising black line, not a disc. Instinct says: move here. I could never play goal. I could never be a coach.

Spittle and bits of ice fly from the coach’s mouth. “GET ON HIS TAIL! STAY ON HIS FUCKING ASS!! Check him. I SAID CHECK HIM!! Oh shit . . . .”

Their guy scores.

The coach is on the bubble, but we may all get cut before he’s canned. It’s a guessing game, tiptoeing around. Our best winger had his anterior cruciate ligament ripped in half and the medial ligament torn from the bone.

Tuesday I stopped a 90 mph shot on the side of my anklebone and couldn’t walk or skate. But a day later it’s fine, just a deep bruise. I keep walking, twitching, knees swollen like basketballs, geography lessons, coins for long distance. I read the calendar — February 14 — thought it said Valium Day. I misunderstood. Yes, I misunderstood.

The Intended is already asleep when I slip into bed. She jumps, frightened, claws at me in the dark; half asleep, she doesn’t know who I am and rakes at my neck, my shoulders.

“I got eyes,” the Intended says to me another time. “I got eyes.”

Now what could that mean? We’re listening to some ancient, scratchy ballad.

“Who is this?” asks the Intended.

“Some way back blues singer. Floyd Tillman. I taped it off an old 78.”

“Floyd Tillman,” she says. “Floyd’s hurting on this
“tune,” she says. “Floyd’s a hurting dude,” she says.

I have scratches healing all over my face. I play an ancient ballad. No one has turntables anymore.

When I was younger, perhaps eleven, I wore a ring of twisted metal. I found it in the meadow by the lake. There used to be a beached paddlewheeler there; we dreamt of making it float. Someone else’s father owned a small white car that could drive right into the lake and then move in the water. How we envied that — to be on the lake and still be in the car. This seemed the height of science’s fruits. This seemed so cosmopolitan. Soon we would be sipping martinis, for sophisticated outside worlds were moving their centers closer. We were in awe and we were bored. My brother began teasing me in front of two girls we liked. He crossed some line and I hit him in the face, not thinking about the ring. I fled, but I still see him staggering around, bent over and clutching his jaw. I threw away the ring, swearing I’d never wear another. That ring may have settled its metal into the grass of the path leading away from the meadow. Sexton beetles may have buried it. Now gravity pulls it toward the center of our earth, or perhaps someone found it, put it on, hit his brother, hit the family face.

I step into a guy just as the whistle blows the play offside. He catches my knee with his. In considerable pain I roll around, convulsing, yelling at everyone, “Leave me alone!” They look on, faces suitably serious, pretending concern. Later, over beer, the masks drop. Milk Truck laughs, asks, “What the Hell were you doing on the ice — the funky chicken?” Everyone cracks up.
I worry about finding work after this is over, after my “career” is over. My dreams go inexplicably back to my gray warehouse job, the fork lift, the infinite afternoon shift, dust suspended in shafts of light in the loading doors, dust over the itchy cardboard boxes, dust over the taverns across the avenue, waiting, like loan sharks. You never lose those brain cells.

When I’m sleeping and the telephone rings at 2 a.m., I know it is Shirt Is Blue and he’s drinking again. He always calls late, holed up in central Alberta, a few too many from Big Bob’s Bloody Mary Mix.

“Make it to that rodeo you wanted to register in?” I ask.

“Oh yeah, hooked up with that, Whitecourt. Didn’t make any money. Drew some bad steers.”

I laugh. Bum steers.

“They were. Not my fault,” he insists. As usual. The rope hits the ground. Another truck hits an Alberta ditch.

He called me when I was in New York state and I had to ask, “Say, do you understand how these time zone thingies work?”

His phone bill is always in dispute. “One and a half hours? That can’t be right,” he protests. He starts putting an alarm clock beside the phone when he calls anyone. He has a few more drinks, sleeps two or three hours, starts drinking warm Labatt’s Blue on his tailgate at 8:30 a.m. Later, another impaired charge, another claim of innocence, another protest. The judge calls him a liar. Shirt Is Blue’s pissed off. “Not my fault.” The telephone rings at 2 a.m. Hang up, says the Intended, just hang up, but I have to listen. I’ve known him since day one.
The Intended is dangerous with the remote control — an average of 3.5 seconds on each channel. This channel surfing drives me mad. Some days I wonder why the Intended and I are together; some days she seems terminally pissed off at me, my late hours, my drinking. We supply each other with our forty miles of bad road, but this is something we have together, something real we depend on in a hallucinatory world. I don’t know how long it can last. I wasn’t made for making ends meet, scratching backs, getting to church on time, weeping and wooing, cakes and cream.

The other times I know it’ll work out okay; we’re related, linked, blood. We know each other on some monochrome level that doesn’t show up on a graph. We’re in love and we like each other.

“I hate frills on watches.”

“Me too,” agrees the Intended. “I mean, what’s it supposed to do, take out your eye?”

I see watches going for thousands and we need a working washing machine for a few hundred.

She says, “We’re so afraid of being poor.”

We’re listening to really fine Mexican music, downing luscious guacamole with lemon and searing Pace Picante.

“I hate waiting for my period. I want my period! Men don’t have anything like this. I hate men.” She pauses. “Let’s go have sex.”

I think of Waitress X and old Mr. Keats, “drowsy with the fume of poppies . . . .” What a good line. We’re in this together. We’re all in this room, in a body.

“Did you cough?” My Intended wakes me in the middle of the night. “I thought I heard my mother cough,” she says. She is upset and lies on top of me, half
asleep, spooked.

I dreamed my lady came and found me dead . . .
I revived and was an emperor, a king. Everyone wants to
be like someone else, and they’re willing to pay through
the nose. I don’t want to be a god, an emperor; I just
want to be like I was. Now I wear glasses, my hair falling
out and going silver, poisonous weight on my face. I’ll
never again have a Waitress X. She was a peak and a nadir
of sorts. The things which I have seen I now can see no
more. Everything is possession, it seems. Everything is
pornographic, even Romeo and Juliet, even Walt Disney,
even the voice of the surf.

I tag along on another player’s 38-foot fishing
boat looking for swordfish and thrasher, but he catches
some huge fucking shark in a gill net just eleven kilo-
meters off a packed beach, a surfing beach. This shark is
the size of a pickup truck. How many minutes would it
take the shark to swim to that beach, to hit someone? It
has a big mouth like a whale, teeth like an assembly line
rolling you over a few rows of razors. Those tiers of teeth
will make you think twice before you dangle your ankle
in the water or put on a wet suit and look like a seal, the
shark’s favorite menu item. It’s not supposed to be work-
ing around here, but then neither are a lot of people. It
doesn’t need a green card, a damage deposit, or H-1 visa.
We climb a hall of heaving ocean and the props flail out
of water briefly. You can smell diesel. We have iced bot-
tles of Mexican pilsner, cashews like tiny claws. I fell try-
ing to carry up sandwiches from below. The other play-
er shoots the shark in the brain, shoots out that weird evil
eye and fills our sneakers with blood.
I had a beer with the ambitious assistant coach. “I’m tired of just blowing a whistle,” he said. “I’m tired of picking up pucks.”

He’s looking discretely for other positions.

In 3 on 1 drills, I wipe and bang my knee hard. A lump that night. Why always my knee? I can’t sleep, so I limp around with a cold Lowenbrau, Ritz and Oka cheddar on a breadboard, watch Brett Hull shrug and smirk at David Letterman.

“What’s for breakfast?” the Intended asks several hours later. “Dry roasted peanuts, mmm-mmm.”

She’s happy. Her period has started. I can’t sleep. I bring her tea and the paper. Our team is getting better, winning some tight games, the ones we used to give away.

Trailing smoke with flimsy struts and wings tilting each way, Shirt Is Blue touches down his Fokker at John Wayne Airport, leapfrogging down from Canada to visit us and check on his 7-11. I don’t know how he makes it over the mountains. His drunken plane looks ready to break. The prop is visible as it turns, the body like cheesecloth, and the wheels dangle, seeming to belong on a child’s wagon. He seems on some hyper sugar rush. He won’t sleep and he won’t stop drinking. He’s always yelling and knocking glasses over, shouting into the telephone at 3 a.m., slamming cupboards, refusing to sleep. I feel hypocritical saying anything because I’m drinking too, but finally with some regret I tell him to leave. We can’t deal with it.

“Oh yeah, I love hockey,” I told the American friend. This friend used to run numbers in New Jersey.
“I’m surprised,” he says. “How can you justify the violence?”

“You call that violence?” An American taking me to task over violence? I’m still getting over Disneyland’s shoot-out, the holes punched in my car.

Last seconds of the game: we’re down one and have pulled our goalie. They’re bottled up in their own end. I know we’re going to score, put it into OT. Some idiot flips the puck right up into my face, trying to clear the end zone. He cuts my eyebrow. Blood spots the ice as the clock runs out. “Stop the clock,” I’m yelling. “Stop the clock!” The referee, Mr. Potato Head, puts something on my cut.

“Hey what’s that?”

“A tampon.”

“A tampon? You put a tampon on my face?”

“Sure, they’re efficient at soaking up blood. Any first aid course will tell you that.”

Logical or not, I don’t like a tampon on me. I was reminded of John Lennon in LA with Harry Nilsson. Lennon had split up with Yoko Ono. Lennon was misbehaving. The waitress said to Lennon, “Sure, I know who you are. You’re an asshole with a tampon on your head.”

Don’t celebs know how ignorant they sound? Just like Gretzky at Harpo’s: “Don’t you know who I am?” The millionaire trying to save a $3 cover charge. The bouncer made him pay like everyone else.

They did not stop the clock. We did not put it into OT.

Finally we put together a good streak, the happy underdogs winning, and we finish second — but then a
fourth place team knocks us out. They just ran us and it seemed over in a minute. We couldn’t buy a goal. We collapsed, went into shock. What a crappy, frustrating way to end what seemed a decent season, to end what seemed easy, what should have been.

Also two goals against me on one shift. This eats me. Our goalie let both in from the wide side, but if I’d stopped the guy there’d have been no shot, bad angle or not. I play three good games sick. I get better and have a rotten game. The worst part is, we had a real chance versus the number one team. We know we could have taken them. The fluky fourth place team will get slaughtered. Our club’s GM says to the reporters, “We’re looking for some young, mobile defencemen.” That doesn’t sound like me. I can take a hint. Europe may be next. Better beer at least. The wild colonial boys spinning back to haunt them, to rattle a few bones and mangle their verbs.

Neon phones next.

“You could pick up a small boatload,” he says. “Easy,” he says, “No risk. Absolutely.”

“I want nothing to do with it okay. Nothing to do with me. I’m a dumb jock, an amateur deckhand, understood?”

“Hey no problem. Just don’t come crying to me when I’m flush and you’re out in the rhubarb. Just don’t look a gift bird in the mouth.”

“Rhubarb? Bird in the mouth? What the hell are you talking about? Are the cops after you?”

“The cops? The cops are probably in on it. One of them OD-ed in the parking lot by the Royal. Some of them don’t get out of bed without a little something, a little juice, a little pick-me-up.”

“No way.”
"Yes way. That French guy and his partner. Mr. Shakedown? Thumbs in the pie."
"Gotta go. Up early tomorrow."
"Think about it, OK old sport?"
"OK. I gotta go, though. OK. Sure. OK."

From a distance the line of white surf seems static, a neat trim of lace frozen around the whole continent. Wash, dress, be brief in prayers, for we fish at dawn for insane yellowfin tuna — Wahoos, they call them. One guy tosses a beer can and the crazy fish play volleyball with it — bop, bop, bop — three different yellowfin hitting it, keeping the gold and silver can between the sky and sea. Finally they miss, but none of us can believe what we’ve seen, this wild talent to juggle our flotsam, our shining discards, this ability to connect. Later in the day, the sky and water push more light than the pierced human eye can hope to possess. The light is beautiful and painful. My nose is burning.

I think of my father’s not wanting help, their radiation, their machined light. Gulls touch base with us, patient, wheeling in light, hoping for entrails and a chance to scream. The tide’s ancient noise. The tides are strong and our lines are so thin. And I’m catching nothing. I’m not pulling my weight in the loaves and fishes department. My Intended snags a big, seagoing bass, diving the hook just in front of the streamlined flesh, the compact body and mouth. She connects the dots and she is rewarded with the desired pairing; that much is simple. One swims away while another wants the hook. No random meeting is without its consequences, its altering of innocent cells. Why seek a lesson? The fish’s silver skin shakes and
alters in our hands. Waitress X has an African ring. My Intended’s fingers have no rings, but the scales from the bass place themselves like jewels on her singlet, on her shoulders. We’re out in a radiant sea and it won’t stop moving. A challenge is near. That last fortune cookie . . . . I test my porous memory. In whose hands was it broken?
A man who ran out of gas
walks beside the road at midnight
carrying a styrofoam cup
of unleaded-plus.
It's a long walk and
noticing the big dipper
the man forgets himself
lifts the cup to his mouth
and takes a drink.

Eight white high school boys
crowd into a '69 Catalina.
A boy in the backseat says
"we fuckin look like Mexicans"
and the boy driving says, "no
we're just fucking poor."

This guy down the street
does one kind of body work
fixes bullet holes with putty.
People find his house
by looking for the mailbox
with shot bullets welded on
to make a smiley face.

My friend's favorite joke:
you find a lane lined both sides
with orange construction barrels
and late at night move each pair
successively closer together until the lane disappears.

Two girls steal a construction marker and one takes its blinking light home. When the blinking won't let her sleep she covers it with blankets and clothes even puts it in a drawer but it blinks and blinks like a heart beating so she takes it to the backyard and murders it with a brick.
I'm in the waiting room
and you're in the magnetic resonance imager.
It doesn't take an MRI to discern
the red *pentimento* beneath
the landscape of Rapid City.

I go out to smoke a cigarette.
The lushness of ripe corn, cinnamonned apple
pie and cowcrap blended onto the palette
of black night and then brushed
over the red-necked symmetry
of these squat buildings cannot hide
the fact that this is Indian ground.

A night sky full of Indians died
so that this arrogant little city could live.
This small pimple on the white butt
of America is haunted, truly haunted
by the red ghosts of sunset, darling,
but waxing political is pointless.
You're having your brain scanned
so we can know for sure
if you're spinning a cocoon
for your new empty mind.
MISS BIGGS

Some said she only stumbled
   or, She was having a fit. She did
totter there for a moment, the class
going quiet, wondering
   if this was for effect. Then she started up again
as the tiny lights under glass
of a pinball machine will whirr on slowly,
   my teacher, though I did not know it then,

beautiful in her desolation, in a print dress
matching
   the liver spots flecked over her arms, somehow,
still alive
in the midst of our savagery and boredom. Some said
   her mind seized, the way an engine
clenches at its heart,
but it was arcing, electric, clearly there was
   movement, her limbs fluttering, her eyes
reaching back. As a young woman, she says, stops
   and stares at Jerry Zuniga, his huge half-back frame
folded into a desk, as if she knew his face
would collapse inward that spring
   like a rotting pumpkin—leukemia,
   a word that was opening before us like a flower,
her lips trembling now, the petals of a flower
battered by rain. Deep, she stutters,

in the down-hung apple branches
dusk gathered. Swallows came clustering like bees.

And we think it's all right. Jesus, it's one of her poems or another hard luck story. She whirls around once, as if looking for something she has lost. The sun going where it must, she says this, before sprawling

across the green and white checkered linoleum, the ambulance people and the principal in his worried brown suit and his brogues of authority, shouting us out of the room, some of the girls refusing, some crying all of us gawking and swallowing though, now I think, not really caring very much. We were there, she breathes. Oh, it was sometime

during the depression, the men all gone, useless and ruined. Women with their hair streaming; oh god, can you imagine such women, our skirts full of fruit, standing there, silent by a bend in the river, leaves scattered over the surface, swirled and glinting in sunlight.
THE INSOMNIAC

Your eyes unstick to morning sparking
in the sycamores, scattering the swallows that clot there
    at dusk.
Tell me I can do this, today if I need to. Tell me.
Half dreamed,
    as just before sleep,
that tin-canned echo falls through your head, sudden
as a match tossed in the dark—and sometimes a kind of
vision before you
    like a pattern
of gnats with the brilliance of sun-shafts on water.
A thick pot of coffee
    and you can see
that student in the back, the red-headed one with the
    skin of flecked-
muslin and the soft-mouthed drawl
of slow-motioned answers he hopes to polish and keep.
    You can almost recall
a life as simple. Years ago, you watched from the office
    window
    a fine rain blowing,
the first leaves of the season waking to wind,
    and she called, long-distance,
to say the tests had come back: her, Come soon,
smoked and brittle on the line. Remember after.
    That singular calm. Stars
    creeping out onto puddles to sleep. And you
at an upstairs window, looking down, taking your first
    instructions from the dead.

for DeWayne
I wake in a strange room  
in a strange city  
delivering a funeral oration  
or a lecture about rain.  
All day the dream bobs  
into view, sinks.

What combination of blown leaf  
and jangled light starts  
it talking?  
If I could write down  
its instructions,  
I could fall in love,  
find meaningful work.

Outside, rain drills its pointers  
into the ground, informs  
the roots. Dirt clings.  
Rain streaks like stars  
when a camera lens  
remains open all night.

Why do I insist  
on bronzing what vanishes?  
To mimic rain's  
invisible circumference,  
change as it does  
from silver points,
to damp tunnels,
to white ideographs
of roots, to blank leaves breathing
rain back into the sky.
When you drown, they say, your life passes through you in moments. But what about fire? What about air? My brother and I had the same source; I always thought we were two pieces of one thing. His solidity, my flightiness. His yang, my yin. I, of the two of us, was prodigal, although who would have predicted this, looking at the taciturn young girl and the handsome, wild man?

I begin with Providence because that is the last place we were together, and being there together was a return to an earlier journey we made with our parents. I went to Brown to teach for a semester and my brother came to see me there and later my mother came and my brother’s children, and we all went to the outer reaches of Providence to see the house where we had lived for a short time during the war, when my father was training to be an Air Combat Intelligence Officer at Quonset Point. The house was not at the Navy Base because they had wanted privacy. As we drove by it, my mother gestured at the base with renewed disinterest. “Imagine,” she said, “living there!”

Instead, my father rode for an hour on a train each way, although it isn’t far by our standards now. The train ran along the rocky shore, everyone looking out, perhaps even leaning out to look for ships and planes, the shore and its outlines taking on a new intensity. My father in particular had to know the shapes of airplanes at a great distance. This was his assignment. A brief
glimpse, a flash in the eye. Enemy or ally. Type, size, purpose, capacity. He had described this to my brother in a letter, saying nothing to his son that the army could find irregular. He was going to plan missions over Indochina. He was going to be stationed in the Philippines, although he didn’t know that yet.

My mother drove from Kansas to Providence with my brother and me because my father was already there. All paraphernalia, all the worry about gasoline and ice on the roads. Her hat box taking up too much room in the car, but essential. The ten year old boy and the dog and the baby. An attendant at a service station looking at me and shaking his head. He was sorry about my condition, he said. My mother asked him what he meant by that. Heart condition, he reported sadly, pointing to the dark circles around my eyes. The first evidence that I should not have survived my brother.

But there was a house waiting for us in Providence and my mother was excited about it. She put her worries about me aside and drove on boldly across the weather-beaten continent. She was a beautiful woman. She was on a mission. She loved my father and Roosevelt in that order and had no doubts about taking two children across the country in wartime in order to serve both of them.

My father was thirty-three years old. I don’t know whether his reactions to the war and his own enlistment were complicated or straightforward. My mother says it would not have occurred to him to stay put. The men who did that were not men who you would want to know, she says. And I was a “war baby,” she contends. “We had you for the same reason a lot of people had babies around then — something to look forward to, something to show faith.”

I was born when my brother’s character was
already formed; his habits of thought were already in place. He and my mother and father were already a family, with a history and customs and private jokes. They were a unit which was unimpeachable, into which I never fit. They had two dogs and four different dwelling places, settling at last in a bungalow in Highland Park, in Shawnee County, in Kansas a couple of years before the war. The dog of that time was named Powder. She’d landed in my father’s lap when he was surveying an artillery range for the Army in an open jeep. He drove back home with the terrified creature in his arms, and my mother, who had longed for a real collie, could never entirely forgive this mongrel for its wild, gun-shy, upstart ways. A year later, or a little less, I arrived as well. Skip told me, the last time I saw him, that he never bore me any grudge. “You took a load off me,” he said, although parental attention wandered back and forth between us over the years. I got the strongest beam of it while I was around, but I was the wanderer, the prodigal, wild and gun-shy. I don’t know if it ever evened out. What I know is that I misunderstood everything up until Providence.

My grandmother said things like that. “Up until.” I like to say I come from peasants, but there are no peasants in America. Where I come from, you get educated or you don’t, and that’s the only difference that counts. My mother worried when she met Father because he wore his hat in the middle of his head. He wasn’t sophisticated. She was a Kansas City girl, and he was a country boy. He’d grown up on a patch of land with three brothers, and each of them had dug a lake instead of planting corn or wheat. It was the water, in that dry corner of the midwest, that supported the family. But my father showed promise in other ways. He was going to be a lawyer like his father before him. While the boys cut ice from the lakes every winter to store in ice houses and sell
in the hot summertime, Granddaddy Dickinson took a bus all the way into Kansas City every day to practice law. He charged money for the privilege of fishing in the lakes, and he grew a good crop of hemp and milked his own cows every dawn before he got on the bus.

My father called my mother Dythe, not Edith. She was a beautiful, willowy girl when he met her at Kansas City Junior College, her hair in waves along the sides of her face and pulled into a chignon. My grandmother made all Mother’s clothes, and they were stylish, vampish, not practical. It was 1930. My mother wanted to be a dancer, but my grandmother wouldn’t hear of such a thing. The theater, she called it. Instead Mother got skinny dresses and plenty of beaus.

My grandmother was called Katie by everyone, as if she had no right to a title. I remember how surprised my friends were when I called her this, or my mother did, but it wasn’t a name. It was a significance, for me, at least. Grandmother seemed too general, as if it applied to every old woman around. Katie was a widow, but I never thought of her that way. She was alone. She was single. Another significance. In all my born days, until I went away to college, I only knew four of those. Single women. There was something wrong with each of them, of course, but with Katie it was only physical, the disability. She was deaf.

My brother was called Skip because, in a moment of prophesy, a nurse placing him in my mother’s arms for the first time said, “Here’s your little Skipper.”

When Skip was small, he was devoted to my mother’s brother Bill, who wore a leather jacket and a cap with flaps and managed, against the usual set of odds, to become an Air Force pilot right at the start of the
Second World War. But who knows which of them inspired the other. Skip had always wanted to fly. When he was three or four years old, my mother looked out the window in time to see him propel himself off the porch rail in a noose. It wasn’t suicide. It was his first attempt at flight.

Bill tested airplanes in California and taught other boys to fly them and one day he turned the controls over to a student who made the kind of mistake that is fatal in airplanes and the two of them were killed. Skip was eight or nine at the time.

My mother was shattered. She hadn’t decided how much her brother mattered to her and he was already dead. She sat by the pool at a modest country club my parents had joined so that Skip could learn to swim. She watched her son dive off the high board and thought about her brother and retreated into a private part of herself that none of us has any access to. Her father had died suddenly, and now her brother’s plane had gone down. I wasn’t born yet, but it was all going to be repeated exactly in my own life.

Now, when I look back on my childhood, there is a lot of Katie in it and not much of Skip. But that can’t be right. Katie lived in another town altogether. She lived in Kansas City, clear across the state line. We didn’t even talk to her on the phone. My mother wrote letters, typed, and Katie wrote back, longhand — a terrible scrawl. She put quotation marks and parentheses around everything. I can still see it. And the scrawl, as if she were writing in haste.

Katie was my mother’s mother. My father’s mother was Grandmother Dickinson, and that was different. There was the education, the upbringing, the settled, respectable past. I never knew her; she died during
the war. But Skip did. He spent a big part of his childhood at the lakes with Grandmother and Granddaddy Dickinson. Summers. The house Spartan, Grandmother Dickinson using a wood stove, my grandfather in his white beard, looking like God.

The Lakes. It should be capitalized: a place experienced by everyone but me. I was too late. It is part of the “unfitness” of my life that I missed all that. Grandmother died when Skip was twelve and Granddaddy lingered on, but it didn’t matter; it was over. I remember a housekeeper named Mrs. Munroe. My grandparents were good Baptists, but Mrs. Munroe was something else. She spoke in tongues and disapproved of everything—even the joys of Granddaddy’s last years. She must have worn a house dress and a tiny bun. That’s how I see her. And black, tie shoes. She was no replacement for the diminutive grandmother whose erudition and quick wit and temper were her legacies.

Each of these people deserves remembering, but who am I to remember the dead? They surround me. They proceed me. “The Dead.” The last time Skip visited us here, in Toronto, we rented the John Huston movie and made him sit through it, which he did politely while I slept on the couch beside him, hating it even in my dreams. He’d wanted to watch the one about wolves, assuring me that it wasn’t sad. But he was too sleepy, after watching our choice, to stay up for his. He had to get up early to get his plane off the ground. So I watched this one about wolves, and it wasn’t sad, but I missed having him next to me and I wished we had let him have it his way. I think of these small, stupid cruelties, these little
competitions in taste, and I want to give him everything. The things I have done and left undone, the gifts ignored, unused, unremarked, the attention that strayed away from course.

When Katie was dying in her own slow fashion, none of us could follow her. It was only a matter of going part of the way. . . along the track of her mind, which wandered in and out of reality. I was living in Hawaii then, although I came home at least once and was taken out to the nursing home to visit her — an experience which resulted in one of my first, short, unfinished stories. I was captivated by the fact that, even senile, she had tried to escape. She had succeeded, in fact. She'd climbed over the locked half door of her room and glided out into the orchard that surrounded the nursing home. So much do we hate, in my family, being bound to anything!

But Skip went with her, even then. He sat by her bed in that place and listened to her describe the river she was not ready to cross. He listened. He was already familiar with death. His best friend had died, and our father. He'd already invented the Good News Bad News Church of Everlasting Life, which was a new-age version of the old food chain. He gave the chicken human incorporation by swallowing it. He swallowed everything. He went into the ocean and into the air. He loved motorcycles, boats, skis, planes. He was out there on the river, riding rapids the way, as a small boy, he had tried to fly.

In high school, Skip bought a Model T. One day he told me to climb in while he went around to the front to crank it up. When it took off, suddenly hurtling down the street, he chased it down, while I sat quietly in the
passenger seat, waiting to be saved. I see him running along beside me, the street visible between the floor boards, the car swaying and tipping, rounding corners precariously. Or maybe I only wanted to be inside. I watched him with such passion. When he was away from home, I used to go down to the laundry room in the basement and try on his clothes. I walked around in his jeans. His shirts and caps. I put them on like a better, male skin.

He had a motor scooter hidden in a neighbor's garage and drove it around secretly, hoping that our parents, who had forbidden its use on the grounds of danger and un-respectability, wouldn't catch him. (When they insisted that he wear a wool suit to church, he kept his pajamas on underneath.)

In college he bought an enormous sailboat, a C-scow that had to be transported up and down the continent.

When he got married the first time, at the age of twenty, he traveled west to the wedding by river, in an inner tube.

Later, with Mary, it was a Harley. Sea kayaks. Canoes. Scuba dives. And the first plane.

He was a pacifist. He joined the Coast Guard so he wouldn't have to take up arms. He became a Quaker, too. But it was his ship in the Pacific that was sent out to arrest the Quaker captain of the Golden Rule who had sailed into the atomic testing range to protest the use of atomic weapons. Torn between two lovers, Skip must have been, for we are a legal family. I suppose towing the Golden Rule back to land was all part of the Good News Bad News Church of Everlasting Life, things operating as they were meant to operate. I suppose that's what he
must have felt. I remember asking him, but I can't remember what he said. The heart is often pitted against itself.

When the salmon travels upstream, its face changes. The jawline juts forward. The nose sharpens. The eyes and cheeks realign themselves so that the fish, on reaching its source, is transformed. Unidentifiable.

I wanted the male life, the male body.

To keep up with my brother, I became a Quaker. In the summer I went to Quaker Camp in Iowa. While my friends went to Wisconsin or the Ozarks and learned to paddle canoes, I watched movies about atomic bombs and held hands with a boy or two while everyone sang The Ash Grove after supper. When the Coast Guard sent Skip and Ruth to Honolulu, I went on an airplane to spend the summer with them. I was fifteen and Hawaii was not yet a state. We lived only two blocks away from my future mother-in-law's apartment, but there were no high-rises in 1958. There was only our squalid apartment block with its giant cockroaches and a Chinese graveyard at the end of the street. Skip and Ruth had a baby by then, but that didn't interest me. I was interested in sailors with their buttoned pants, in the local boys without socks and in my brother, who told me boys never mean what they say.

I was interested in Patrick Ko, Irish-Hawaiian, who gave me a ring decorated with the sacred heart of Jesus. He told me it had been his mother's.

And I kept it. In spite of Skip's warning. In spite of the fact that it turned my finger green and had an expandable band.

Skip and Ruth moved to Oklahoma, where he studied architecture with Bruce Goff. I went back to
Kansas. But I didn't stay. Not after Patrick Ko, who'd led me into the waves at Waikiki. I took train rides down to visit my brother and once kissed a sailor in the dome car. Before long, I married a boy from Hawaii. Then I spent fourteen years on those islands where I had once lived with Skip.

When the plane crashed, all of us changed shape. We didn't know how to speak to the new faces around us. Son, daughters, mother, sister, former wife. Skip had lived in Kansas, going up and down, up and down the river of air over our continent while the rest of us fanned out. When he and Ruth divorced, he found his high school sweetheart. She'd grown up two doors away from the house where Mother lives now, which is not such a big coincidence in a small town. And her parents are buried a few feet from my father, although they weren't friends. And now they all lie there together as if there's anything resolved in soil. They'd lie there even if what we put in the ground were the ashes of Mary and Skip.

Who can believe in death?

Three months after Skip died, I was in Kansas with my mother, and my daughter flew out to visit us. We drove to the airport in Kansas City to meet her. It was September already, the fall of the year. Esta was glad to see us. We took her to lunch somewhere and then talked about what to do with the rest of the afternoon. Mother and I usually go to outlet stores when we're in Kansas City, but Esta hates shopping. She has sprung from a different genetic twig or a different creed. So I suggested something I'd been wanting to do for years. Something I had wanted to do with Skip. I knew it
might be too late, that I'd waited too long to press my claim, but I pressed it anyway. I said, "Let's drive out to the lakes."

My mother looked stunned.

I said, "We could go home by the old road. I haven't been out there since I was a baby. I'd really like to see what it looks like." I knew it was a dangerous idea. I shouldn't force my mother, at a time like this, to confront a site where so much had been vouchsafed to the three of them, my mother, my father and brother. But I persisted. "You should show the place to us."

Mother told me to take Independence Road. It would lead directly to the property. "The house is long gone," she said. "You knew that didn't you?"

"Sure I knew."

The heat that covered us as we drove was predictable. What else could rise from that river of stories that had connected three generations of Dickinsons? Waves of heat rose off the asphalt around us as we passed the evidence of American industry. Burger Kings and McDonald's and insurance companies and places to rent cars. An endless chain of buildings meant to stand twenty years, no more, some of them having already served that purpose. The air-conditioning in the car matched the unreality around us, the mirage of modern life that covered something older, more basic, something as hard and unhurried as the weather. We drove for half an hour or so, full of our lunch and our various purposes. Mine was simply to win back the dead. I can't speak for my mother and daughter. The two lane highway and the metallic glass surfaces surrounding it reflected all of us in a vaporous haze. My mother shut her eyes tiredly. "This is Independence," she said.

"Truman lived across the road," I reminded Esta. "We'll have a look at his house."
My mother’s eyes snapped open. “Where’d you get that idea?”

“That’s what you always said. You and Daddy. I’ve told people that a million times.” I had a clear picture of my grandfather waving to Harry and Bess as he walked by on his way to catch the bus into town.

“Nonsense. They lived in town.”

“You’re kidding.” I felt I could no longer trust my mother. She was changing the stories. “He was Granddaddy’s friend.”

“They never met.”

“We must be getting close; here’s Dickinson Road.”

“There won’t be much to see.”

“The lakes. We can see the lakes. I remember right where they were, not too far from the porch.” Skip had told me that when he was sick in the hospital several years ago, unable to speak or move as the result of Guianne’s Baret, he’d stayed sane by moving through the rooms of the old house inch by inch in his mind. He’d made himself remember the most minute details. Doorknobs. Window shades. Ornaments. But the house was gone. The property had been converted to a park. Swimming pool, closed for the season, bounded in a chain link fence and connected to a barracks-like changing room whose musty interior I could imagine from as far away as the parking lot. There was nobody else around.

Esta and I climbed out of the car, promising to be back in minutes. “I just want to show her one of the lakes,” I said, although my purposes were stranger than that and harder to explain. All summer, after the crash, I’d heard the thrumming of a small plane overhead. I knew Skip and Mary were present, but they were unavailable even so. We hadn’t even put their ashes in the ground,
because we had not received them. There was no explanation for the crash and no evidence that it had occurred. We'd been told. We had been shown certificates. But there was more to it than that. Who knows what the source of a child's amazement is at the end of a noose?

We cast long shadows on the ground, Esta and I, but they did not absorb our heat. Unbelievably, unbearably, they threw it back at us. We were assaulted from above and below so intensely that our bodies sagged and our lungs hurt, but there were bushes ahead crackling and humming in the hot, dense air. "This way!" I shouted to Esta, realizing she had gone a different way. "Over here!" We were swallowed up. Taken in. Incorporated in a vegetation that belonged to our ancestors. There was a chimney visible ahead. Gray stone covered with weeds. I pushed in farther, deeper, brushing wings and sounds of buzzing off my arms and neck and legs, wet now and dizzy in the heat and blind in all the green. I couldn't see, but I had to keep moving if I wanted to find water. My mother couldn't stand this kind of heat. She'd always hated it. Air conditioning was a necessity to her, but she was back there in the car, surrounded by the past and her new grief and dying to be on the road again. Dying to be . . . "Mother!" I turned around, pushed against leaves, looking for a way out. Air. She shouldn't be up there alone in a hot car. What was I thinking of? I wasn't used to looking after her. Skip had always done that. I'd never been the one to live nearby or deal with her problems and realities. I had my own life. I lived in Canada for Christ's sake. I had no idea how things worked down here. I couldn't even find my way back to the car. I had no idea where the road was. I didn't know the lay of the land. I didn't know what the doorknobs had looked like or what the salt shakers had looked like or where the
root cellar had been.

I climbed back to a place where the light was hotter and brighter. I got out of the bushes and back on the dusty grass. I found the parking lot and saw my mother’s car, its front doors open and a pick-up truck parked next to it. “Mother!” I shouted again, to let her know I was back, looking after her. I’d given up my quest. It was pointless. I couldn’t find the lakes alone and there was no one to guide me. What I had instead was a mother who should be sitting in a mall drinking iced tea and eating something sweet. The truck worried me. I had left my mother sitting alone in a parking lot in what was clearly a backwater. A wasteland. A time warp. The truck had not been there when we arrived. And it was empty.

So was my mother’s car. Someone had dragged her into the woods. It was impossible not to imagine the new grief, the shocked disbelief. “You took her out there and left her alone!” I must have been yelling. “Mother! Mother!” Then I realized it was Esta yelling at me. It seemed odd. That I should be a mother when I was so clearly unready. That I should be anything but a small child looking for her brother in the woods.

“Where’s grandmother?”

“I don’t know!”

“Criminy! You go look over there, past the pool. I’ll go back down to the woods!”

We wandered back and forth. There was a set of swings, motionless, empty. A walnut tree, my father’s favorite kind. Motionless. Alone. The changing room. Locked. The swimming pool. Bare. And the great buzzing swallowing vegetation that had eaten up our past.

We were drenched, too. Although we hadn’t found a drop of water, we had produced plenty of it. I searched the park around the swing set and pool then found Esta at the edge of the bush, stabbing at branches
blindly, calling her grandmother in a sharp, frightened voice. Suddenly she stood in front of us. Mother. Grandmother. "I think it was right here," she said, "the kitchen door. They didn't put the bathroom in until Granddaddy got sick, but it was over there. Your grandmother used an outside pump her whole life. And she never got around to hanging drapes. She just gave up on things. Carpets. Nice furnishings. They didn't have to have bare floors, but she never liked this place. That's my theory. Granddaddy's parents built it to be close to the Latter Day Saints because they'd lost a child and they thought they could get in contact with him that way. Of course it was never any good. Did you find the lake?"

"No. Nothing."
"They dried up then. Or got drained off."
"I found a chimney."
"Those were for campers. So they could cook their fish."
"Not for the house?"
"They never had a fireplace!"
"Shall we go on back? Get some tea someplace?"
"Whenever you're ready."

So we began in Providence and ended up in the same place. As a family. The last time I saw my brother, he taught me how to cut flowers, diagonally, holding the stems under running water. We had driven out to Walden Pond and talked about hiking in. We had argued about the merits of tomato sauce. We had gone to a fruit market and bought bags full of good things to eat, and I had thought: this is something my people do. We buy food and carry it around with us wherever we are. But I was surprised by the flowers. They were for his daughter and they were as beautiful and impractical as the fruit was
edible and ripe. Maybe the flowers were not part of the good news or the bad news, but outside of all that. Only the good die young, my mother used to tell me. But it's easier to be good when you're young, before things happen to you. There is no life without change; the trouble with death is its changeless innocence. The hard part of life is to stay connected in the face of that. And Independence. To find how empty it is.
Mousetrap

As the tongue and pall are readied into place, and the trigger’s grown gaudy with cheese, a beautiful stasis occurs, a sweet equilibrium: the machine, ageless and simple, asleep on your palm, set but unset, no repository of malevolence or pain, just a spring’s steel memory, a swatch of painted lath; and the cheese, the dollop molded by hand from your fingers to the trigger’s toothed grip, is only that, until you ease it gingerly down among the dark confetti of droppings, among the slender curds and commas parenthetical with disease, until you close the closet door and it all resumes—the wind, the sun, the pulse’s long unwinding. . .
Office politics
and the pettiness of each day—

the mind thickens and dries,
a whorl of driftwood.

I keep trying to picture
the American Dipper, to remember

its ordinary body plunging under
the water’s surface;

the Dipper walks upstream, tiny climber
of mountains, traveller between worlds.

I stare across the long
emptiness of the desk.

The river is moving,
memory must

be breathing a specific
afternoon of alpine

light, the rapid
Rio Hondo all motion

and matter—the battered stones’
slow stumble seaward,
and the nondescript, unmistakable bird
who dives into the cold

factual current, eyes open.
An Osteosclereid of Hakea, 1995
electron micrograph

Cristina Pinzon
Electron micrograph
Ashes of a Trochodendron Leaf. 1995
Cristina Pizon
KAREN RICE

Fences and Locks, 1995
charcoal & pigment, 42"x50"
Sweeping, 1994
charcoal & pigment, 52" x 70"

KAREN RICE
LINSEY KNIGHT

Dancing in Place, 1995

photograph
photograph
Bonners Ferry, Idaho, 1995
LINSEY KNIGHT
MICHAEL McKERLEY

Traveling Alone, 1992

photograph
In Prague, Vaclav Havel once kissed my hand. I lived with Max and made art, taking in just enough money for rent and food by posing nude for anyone who thought they were an artist and by selling Jeanine’s handmade hats. I met Jeanine at the Globe, which, back then, was the only bookstore that sold English titles and was where all the Americans hung out. It’s stupid how we all moved so far away from home and yet still clung to each other. We’d sit around and talk about all the things Prague couldn’t give us. Green apples, we’d say. Convenience stores. Maple trees. Parking garages.

But Prague was beautiful. Castles and cathedrals dotted the city like stars.

I would model about three times a week. I’d take off my clothes and stand still for twenty minutes at a time, hear the scratch of charcoal and the breathing noises of people concentrating. Then I’d twist my body into another position and listen to those same sounds again. The rest of the time, I painted my face white with red cheeks like a harlequin, pinned Jeanine’s bright hats to my long skirts and twirled for the tourists.

Max lived off his investments — his CD’s, his stocks and bonds. Max, with his long, red hair, his stringy beard, his dirty fingernails and his talking over the phone to his broker in New York City is a memory I keep. He was going to write. Each morning he’d tell me, today’s the day, and every night I’d come home, my body tired from either standing still or spinning around, and he’d be on the mattress staring up at the ceiling. “Soon,” he’d say.
"It's all up here." He'd knock on the side of his head with the knuckles of his bent fingers.

And yet from all that money he made from that trust fund that made money from itself, he never once paid for anything — not for the movies or for dinner, not for the trains we rode through Slovakia and Poland, not for the abortion. Max never wanted to appear as if he had money. He had me apply to the Czech government for a waiver. Time was going, this baby was growing in me. I could feel it making itself into something like art and I had to wait around for the government to sign a piece of paper allowing me to have it sucked out free of charge. I think it stayed inside me too long. Art can do that.

I didn't even think, Max could pay for this, easy. I didn't think to ask him to pay. I am used to working for everything. When Max and I were in college, I worked in the cafeteria mixing powdered eggs and slicing cheese while he took LSD and opened yellow books in the coffee shops in Harvard Square.

When we met in Massachusetts, Max and I were eighteen. The world was this huge space I had never seen. Max came into the cafeteria for breakfast one Sunday. "Eggs," he said, sliding his white plate over the counter. When I scooped a serving spoonful onto his dish, he shoved it back with the tips of his fingers and said, "More." I stacked the plate high like an ant hill or a small mountain.

I don't mind working. And I like to look in city places for the things I make art with — the telephone cable, balls of wax, long, metallic cord. I like that I fished my winter coat out of a dumpster. Making what people called trash into something I need is something Max enjoyed, too. He liked living as I was living. There's a dif-
ference between poking through junkyards for the fun of it, though, and doing it because you need to.

In college we would roam the campus together on winter nights, the pond reflecting stars, wind blowing tree branches high above our heads. The dumpsters outside the dorms were filled with things we collected — bits of carpet, popcorn poppers, magazines and stubs of pencils. We’d go back to Max’s and dump what we’d found into a heap between us. Sometimes we cut the magazines into strange shapes and pasted them on his cinder block walls with rubber cement. Often we were up until dawn, rummaging through the found appliances, pasting heads of women in perfume ads onto the bodies of wingless birds.

Most nights the pipes were busted and the clang and hiss of the heat didn’t warm us. Max and I would put on clothes from his closet. I’d take the striped socks with individual toes and a turtleneck and Max would wear the wool mittens his grandmother had knit him and we’d watch the sun come up through the stiff fingers of the trees. We hardly had sex at all, though I lay beside him, the two of us propped up against the cement wall, his arm around my shoulders and my face in his small chest.

But abortions aren’t found or free and the Czech government paid for mine while Max waited with me. The doctors and nurses screamed at each other in Czech, and I longed for sterile, American hospitals, for a language it wasn’t a struggle to understand. Right when Max went to get some food was when they called my name. It was done in an hour, not like in the States where I hear you get counseled beforehand and a chance to recover in a special room afterwards. Max wasn’t in the waiting area when I got out. I took a taxi home. It was
the first time I had done that, but I thought, I’ll treat myself. The flat was locked and Max had the keys, so I walked to Jeanine’s and cried while she stitched gold thread into black velvet. Max showed up around midnight and told me, “Come on, let’s go home.”

“Where were you?” I asked him, and he said, “I was walking.”

I knew what he meant.

When we got to our flat I ran a bath for myself which involved heating pots of water over the stove and putting it into this metal basin we had sitting in the middle of the room. After I had filled the tub and just as I had inched my way into the water that had somehow managed to stay scalding hot, Max walked over to the edge of the basin. He stood over me, the steam rising around him. He almost looked angelic.

“Can I come in?” he asked me.

“All right, Max,” I said.

He stepped into the basin and I watched the water cloud over from his dirty feet. He took up all the room and he cried these big, hot tears. He put his head on my chest, his long hair spreading over my breasts like tentacles. “Ella,” he said, “I don’t think I love you anymore.”

This was not the first or the second or even the third time he’d told me this in Prague. I didn’t care right then. I just wanted him out of my bath.

I cried for days. I was losing everything. It was wintertime which is gray and dark in Prague. I didn’t leave the flat. Max wouldn’t speak to me, to show just how he didn’t love me, and it was at this moment he decided he needed to begin writing. With two fingers he pecked at his old, manual typewriter — click, pause, click
click, pause — until I thought I would go crazy. I knew he was writing about how much he didn’t love me. Click click click pause. I stayed under the covers, weeping, filling my journal. I used a quiet, felt tipped pen. I wrote things like this: It would have been a beautiful baby, a thing from Max and me. And: What use is a body, anyway? Click pause click click.

Everywhere I turned in Prague would have been an incredible photograph. I remember selling Jeanine’s hats on the Charles Bridge and how the tourists reached at the hems of my skirts to finger the hats’ felt rims. They looked up at me and smiled. I wonder, did it change for me after the abortion, when Max officially stopped loving me, or when Newsweek came to take my picture for their piece on “The New Prague”? That was my first time in a magazine. After that article came out, the bridge became thick with tourists clicking cameras at all the vendors, at me with these hideous hats like growths pinned to my skirt. I started wearing a sign around my neck that said: “Photographs, 40 kronen,” which is about 15 cents. I just kept thinking, I’m working hard to keep my head above water. Do you know how cold it gets here in the wintertime? All these visitors to Prague in August, they’ve got no fucking idea. I mean 40 kronen is a metro ticket. It’s nothing.

The tourists should have paid me anyway, for taking my picture, my face painted like a circus clown’s for their enjoyment. They took the city that was my home before anything was translated into English, before the green signs pointed to the Castle, to the Jewish Cemetery, before the brittle bones of scaffolding propped up the insides of churches, and cranes came in to pile dirt over the old stone streets. Those people just took my
picture as if I were part of this changing scenery. They should have paid me for that.

I finally did leave Prague for Paris that spring. Everyone in Prague was posing as something; if Prague was the new Paris, I wanted the old one. When I had all my belongings packed into a green duffel that I’d found in a trash can over by Saint Tyn, Max said, “You know, I made as much money as we spent here.”

“Really,” I said. “That’s great Max.” I was happy for him.

And then I thought, though only fleetingly, just like he could have paid for the abortion, Max could have afforded to make a family.

• • •

Here in Paris there’s no Globe Bookstore. Americans don’t get together the same way. The people in Prague wanted us there in the beginning; they needed Americans to teach them English, to boost their economy. But in Paris we spread out to be more inconspicuous. We know we are hated, and we stay away from each other.

I live in a flat above Maupin’s art studio in the Algerian part of town. Every time I come home, Maupin tells me in which way he’d like to fuck me, which seems to change depending on the moment. I don’t know if it’s because he says it in French, but it really doesn’t bother me. At least he wants me. It’s nice to be sexy to someone again. But when I think of Inez, his wife, and Raquel, his eight year old girl, and how the three of them eat their long dinners below my only window, the sun going down, the wine and cigarettes, Raquel dancing barefoot
in the little garden, then it starts to bother me. I wonder if I should stop posing nude for Maupin. He's not even a very good artist and he still won't put a lock on the door of my flat.

I just want to sit home and make art — long helixes of telephone wire covered with wax. I want to draw quick sketches of naked women, have Jean-Claude fuck me up the ass. Jean-Claude, who comes on girls' faces for a living, is my manic-depressive lover. He stays in bed all day with the curtains drawn tight. We met at a photo shoot for Big Butt, and when we are together in his room I imagine the white lights, the makeup girl with her big, feathery puff, and it is so easy. We appear in lots of porn magazines, sometimes with each other, sometimes his eyes closed on one page, me knelt in front of a woman, opening her up with my tongue on the next. When I pick up a magazine and see myself, I get the same feeling I had with the abortion; I think, whose body is this that my face seems to be attached to?

I get 2,000 francs for a shoot. That's rent and food for the month. I go to the studio for a couple of hours and I don't have to worry about how I'm going to make it through January in Paris. That gives me lots of time to make things. Sometimes I stay in my flat all day and make collages of my sketches. I like to watch the charcoal smear and shine as I cover the paper with a mixture of glue and water. I don't make art like I used to, though. I know something's gone. Often I wonder, will I ever be able to get it back?

I miss Prague. Vaclav Havel kissed my hand at the opening of the Acropolis, the first night club in Eastern Europe. If I had only known more about European men at the time, I could have had an affair with him. But the city was already damaged for me; Max and I were split-
ting up for the last time, and the Germans and the Americans were taking over, gathering at the clock tower each hour to watch it chime, the twelve apostles peering out one by one at the tourists. I wish I had known I could have fucked Havel, his hand on my knee a sign I can’t believe I didn’t recognize, and me only struggling to think of something smart to say to him. Did I want to say I liked his plays or his speeches or simply his writing in general?

I used to talk to men all the time. I moved my hands in the air when I spoke as if I were compelled to, in order to fully express myself. Now I know it would have been easier and much more memorable to have simply slept with Vaclav Havel. Now, when Jean-Claude starts to talk, I listen to his French for a moment, and though it is a beautiful language, I put my hands over his face and wish he’d shut up.

When I can’t sleep at night I walk to Sacre Coeur in Montmartre. There’s no place to move around in Paris, to spread yourself out, but inside churches there is always space, and the musty dark always makes me think of Prague, that shadowed and foreboding place. I sit in the pews, and the other night when I looked up, I saw the baby Jesus. I burst into tears which is strange because I’m Jewish and have never been affected by Jesus. It’s just that he looked so cherubic up there, and I knew that he’d only grow into another man with a beard. He looked so alone. I couldn’t see Mary anywhere.

When I came out of the church that night, there were only a few people on the stairs out front smoking pot and singing old Doors songs. It’s an incredible view from up there at Sacre Coeur, the city spread out below and sparkling with light. While I was looking out, trying
to recognize the places I'd been, this Arab man came up to me. He said, "I can help you," and I ignored him, my eyes on the skyline, until he said, "You have just realized something." It struck me that I had, but that I didn't know what it was and that I did need help. I started crying, and the hairy man hugged me and told me he would tell me my fortune. I really needed to know my fortune. We went back to my flat.

He told me to take off my clothes and I did. He massaged my back with his short, thick fingers and while his hands moved along my spine, kneading my muscles, he said this: "You must stay away from women; women will be bad for you." He said, "You are very beautiful and you must be careful of strangers. You must never marry a Jew." As the heel of his hand dug into the meat of my back he said, "Always be careful whom you kiss. You must only kiss men on the mouth or they will begin to hate you. Your baby would have been a boy and you would have hated him." My muscles must have stiffened then because his voice softened. "You are in love with a bad man," he said. "You are only what you come from. Be sure to wash yourself well."

I didn't understand the fortune. I told him, thank you, but it's time for you to leave, and he said, he wasn't done telling my future. I said, "Please leave," and I saw Maupin looking up from the garden. He must have really thought I was crazy. Who was worse, this hairy stranger I was lying beneath or Maupin, the stranger downstairs I stood naked in front of the day before while he carved me out of wood?

My body is replicated in pictures and sculptures and photographs all over this continent. When someone is making me out of something there is this thought in the back of my mind about the one thing I could have made, the piece of myself that got away.
“Go away,” I told the Arab man. He got up slowly from my mattress on the floor. I watched his fingers spread out on the bed as he leaned on his arms to stand up straight. He turned around. He said, “This fortune,” he smiled, yellow teeth, “this fortune I won’t make you pay for. And one more thing,” he said, “someone will be here soon.” I was trembling when he left.

I keep thinking, he’s talking about himself. That man’s going to come back here. What kind of prediction is that? He knows where I live and my door won’t lock.

I’ve put a mustard jar on the top rim of my unlockable door so I will hear a crash if someone enters. Even though I have no idea what I’ll do if it breaks, I feel much better with the mustard jar over my door. No one’s come yet, but I keep it there when I am in my flat, sorting through old drawings, cutting up some of the magazines I find myself in and pasting my head on men’s bodies. I come in at night from my photo shoots under those bright lights, from screwing Jean-Claude in his closed, dark house, and I tiptoe past Maupin’s studio where he works at every kind of hour. Standing on the balls of my feet, I put the jar over the door. I am waiting for someone. The Arab man was right; someone is going to come here.

I hear Maupin hammering wood in his studio downstairs. I can hear people haggling with each other in French on the streets, and I understand them because I live here. It could be Max who will come. Jeanine wrote me that he lives in England now, and sometimes I think he’ll take the channel tunnel and show up here one of these days. He’ll just walk in like he owns the place and he’ll lay down on my chest and cry there. He’ll have been writing and he’ll show me his poems about how he can’t
see me anymore, but he’ll stay anyway.
I hope the man is Max.

Paris is a bright spot on a dark world. Everything glitters. The store fronts and windows are piled high with more pastries and meats and cheeses and breads than seems possible to consume. When I walk along the streets, peering in the glass, I feel like I am starving. I buy things sometimes, like a pain au chocolate, and it is deliciously sweet and also disgustingly sweet.

The girls wear lipstick and high heels, and the men — they are such sad, weepy people. I am sick of them.

I wonder what it would have been like with Havel, the loved president of a changing republic. I wonder who is going to come in here and break that mustard jar. I want to hear it crash. When he comes in, I want to be ready.

“Max,” I’ll breathe when he just walks in after a year and some odd months and breaks my mustard jar. When I am done sweeping up the shards of glass, I’ll turn to him. “Remember Boston?” I’ll say as I take off my clothes slowly. I won’t be wearing any underwear, and I’ll stand in front of him, my head tilted sideways like I do for the photographer.

Max will probably just stand there unmoved, and so I’ll put my jeans and my T-shirt back on and cry because none of this is working. Maybe I’ll say what I mean. I’ll say, “I wonder what it would have been like, you know, if we’d had it, I mean —” and my hands will interrupt me, opening and curling just a bit at the pinkies. My wrists will twist in jerky half-circles, trying to finish the sentence that I can’t.

I’ll stuff my hands in the pockets of my jeans. I’ll
feel the two or three francs, the tiny centimes, the last of the money I've got in this world until my next shoot, my next sitting. There will be lint collecting in the corners of the pockets, and I'll roll it around with my index finger and my thumb, remembering what it's like to keep my clothes on when someone else is in the room.

I'll get the magazines from the top of my dresser.

"Look at my pictures," I'll tell him. "They even sell these magazines in the States."

I'll lay them out on the floor, opened to the photographs of myself. "Max," I'll say, "do you recognize me?"
PASTORAL

You broke it, now cover it up
in the ragged snow that changes
the symmetry of the street’s lining.
In the variety of landscapes it creates,
define yourself —

We walk, and the days are unfortunate
in their longevity. Another early sun
and night to appear.
Create the who
in the speech you do not deliver,
in a day of days on my verandah.

Beauty in artifice. The curve
of the canopy over your head.
Indeed, the light.

These streets are part of you now,
the prints you cannot smooth over,
in a landscape of error —

fill the sound of this day with motors,
keep the appointment, imaginary.
When the traffic is settled in its unity
and you have arrived alone —

Lend yourself to the thought,
here in the morning that leans,
in this city that doesn't want you back:
I own the pieces and I own their order.
You choose the expression that calms you.
LANDSCAPE WITH AT LEAST TWO PEOPLE IN IT

But this is the place of no lover and no angel, Random and inflammable.

How the terrain lurches toward the shore, Willows untwisting their catkins above slabs of old breakwater.

In shadows, last ice, brown and pitted as bone. Seventy degrees’ difference between

Two days. A cottontail doe, stumbling dumb with spring And young, her coat green along


Something sacral, elemental: pathetic Sun, mud, west wind blowing the lake

Nearly waveless. Ladybug and her midwife’s blood, Duck and his hangman’s hood.

Old gods of threshold, gate and field’s End. Shore: liminal, littoral, this world

Speaks, if it does, for itself, the old monologue Of the land. No musing. No talking back. 

for N.E.
mostly it echoes in manhattan, montana

sacajawea holds a t-bone steak bone like a dowsing rod
she points it at every out of state plate on main street
buy her a drink and she'll remember this town for you —
without houses, without streets, without a whisper

she'll pull history around by its leash
and uncork some vintage weather
and if the moon is right she might
howl profanely in a distant language

her face is the map most men begin with
her eyes are flickering back porch lights
her smile is swizzled into a neon cocktail
her nostrils flare at the mention of motion

her laughter skips down alleys past
the lurching limos of buffalo shadows
she winks at the squinting cowboys
washing the color right off their trucks

she's seen the smudges auctions leave on a soul
she hoards memories others would pay to forget
the sound of the only payphone in town
ringing can bring tears to her eyes

sacajawea is devoted to lottery tickets and tulips
and sky speckling redtails circling the minimart
she can spot a hardass in a room full of hallelujahs
and has yet to meet a god she wouldn’t trade for green potatoes

she has picked strawberries with every minister’s son
but the furry undertaste of huckleberries
clings like a jumper to her taste buds
vague satisfactions nibble away at the night

she sings allegiance to the shaggy breeze
as it gargles the coals of her cooking fire
her voice is a sidewalk heaved with roots and frost
her words rollerskate up and down the block

she cuts through groomed dark yards
past tall backboards and short windmills
under clothes lines and out of focus
on her way from one hiatus to another

the urgent scent of her smoky hair
wakes volunteer firemen nestled in craters of sleep
they sniff their clocks before turning back
to dream the old blue worship of lips and hips

under the flagpole sacajawea empties mice from her pockets
for the unblinking owls scarecrowed on the school rooftops
they were once warrior uncles vanishing in and out of the bulging morning light, revenge grim in their eyes

in front of the auto garage in the splotchy dawn she fills her canteen from the fountain and follows the road to the river
she bathes in bridge shadow and studies
the faces on a page she tore from a book

each day a different page where once
any face might have twisted the silence shut—
sacajawea screams at every west bound train that doesn’t
stop here
a boxcar could cure her insomnia on its way to the sea
The shift supervisor let us go out at midnight to yell at the city. I rummaged through the drawers in the break room and found a large metal serving spoon. I took the spoon outside and swatted it against our beige concrete building. It made a sound like a steady drip of aluminum falling to the sidewalk.

Lance shouted a single vowel noise, his voice breaking and falling off at the end of each breath. Firecrackers in the distance — kazooos. The city’s surveillance helicopter sliced the sound of night and noise into circular sections above us.

We attracted the attention of some revelers at the Sheraton, eight stories up, and they waved and we waved back. One of us, probably Lance, breathing hard and scraping the words out of his mouth between vowel noises, said, “Look, they think we’re homeless.” They were drinking up there, champagne, somebody said it must be champagne, sure, they were getting drunk. All I could think was how cold it was. Man was it cold.

Here’s the best part: Juliet, the new girl, jumping and shouting Happy New Year, then kissing me, laughing and jumping in front of me, still shouting Happy New Year. She smelled like spice cologne, and her teeth were sweet sugar, a cold thin kiss, and she kept laughing, so I licked my lips as she turned away, as she turned in a circle, happily toward the sky. She danced in a circle, her arms spread out and she sang the words to Auld Lang Syne, but she didn’t know the words so she made them up.
“Happy New Year,” I said, but nobody heard me.
The shift supervisor leaned against the corner of the building and watched us. His hands stayed in his pockets and he didn’t make a noise. When it was time to go back to work he disappeared inside the building, and we stood out there for just a few more minutes, the starless night hovering above us. The clouds were up there somewhere, and it might snow they said, the sky seemingly wide open with the possibility of snow, and at the same time, as long as there was no snow, just the cold and the night. The sky seemed to be slowly falling down to pin us onto the street.

Murray hadn’t left his workstation and was still taking orders, slamming one into his terminal as we came back inside, and he didn’t seem to notice that the rest of us smiled temporarily. Murray had volunteered to stay inside and cover for everyone, claiming that he hated New Year’s anyway. He wore his head-set like a crown and rattled questions to callers, but there were only a few callers that night, a New Year’s Eve night, everyone else out drinking, getting drunk, driving home or passing out on somebody’s carpet. When we returned to our seats, Murray took a five-minute break to go outside and smoke a cigarette, but then he came back to his computer and waited for the next caller, and he didn’t look even a little bit happy that this was a new day, a new year, that today we could really get started on something if we set our minds to it. He didn’t look at any of us or talk to any of us, even though the phones were deadly quiet by now, and there was nothing else to do but talk to each other.

Finally I had to say something, because I couldn’t stand it anymore, but all I said was, “Hey, you missed it. Juliet kissed me.”

“That’s nothing,” he said. “I just had a woman
call and ask what brand of underwear I was wearing."

"No shit," I said. "What did you say?"

"I don't wear underwear," said Murray.

Every day at lunch time Murray went outside and smoked. I went outside with him to shoot the breeze and enjoy the cold night air and let the ache in my head fly back out through my eyes. Murray said he couldn’t have a proper lunch time at three o’clock in the morning. He said it wasn’t right that the supervisor always took an hour lunch and could do whatever he damn well pleased. The supervisor skipped his breaks so he could take an hour lunch, but we never talked about it this way, because it seemed healthier to ignore the facts and stand around crying about it.

I wondered about the supervisor and if he had to wake his wife when he got home. Did they have sex, or did he actually eat something? The supervisor was younger than the rest of the people on the shift, except for Juliet. She would be going to college full-time except her parents wouldn’t pay for it, so she was working here and taking classes. She was young, but sometimes you could forget she was young because she acted at least as old as the rest of us — sort of wise, intelligent, and sometimes I think she just put up with us because she had to, or because we were interesting somehow, like an ant farm.

The supervisor being so young, he was probably in bed with his wife right then, during lunch, naked to the sweat on his back, shouting something at his wife, something he would have to forget about once it was over so he wouldn’t feel stupid, and I pictured the whole thing in my head and started laughing. That bastard might even take a fifteen minute nap.
Lunch had just started when the woman from the
day-shift, the small one with the cocoa hair and the
porcelain teeth and the wandering eye, the one with
winter-tanned legs and the black miniskirt came right
into where Murray and I had just started talking, still in
the lunch room, because Murray couldn't find his match-
es, and she said, "I want proof," waving a finger at him
back and forth as if to hypnotize Murray into doing what
she wanted.

I said, "This is the one?"

Murray had talked about the day-shift woman
sometimes, about her wandering eye, and her lovely face,
a chin like the seat of a bicycle (this was his description,
not mine, but now that I was looking at her, it seemed to
fit) and her tiny body he could practically keep inside his
pocket. I'd never known which one she was until just
then. Murray said she was like no woman at all. She was
like an animal, some mistake in the workings of evolu-
tion. Beautiful, but wild. "Way back," he'd said, smiling,
"some women might have been like her." His smile went
away, and he talked for a few minutes into his headset,
then said to me, "I've got to stop seeing her, though."

"Why?" I said. "Jesus, she sounds like a dream to
me. What's the deal?"

"I don't know," he said. "Something's wrong. I
don't trust her. If you knew her, you wouldn't trust her
either."

"Trust — who cares? You aren't going to marry
her or something."

I took a call then and forgot about it. Murray had
been meaning to break it off with her for weeks, then
months, but never seemed to work up the energy to do
it. Finally one day he broke it off with her and he came
in looking like a dried up mud patty.

"She took a swing at me," he said.
“No way,” I said.
“She hauled off and hit me and if I hadn’t moved a little I’d still be on the ground moaning. As it was she got the side of my head and I’ve got a headache like someone is in there chipping away at my brain with a pickax.”

“You did the right thing,” I said.

Now she was in the lunchroom, and Murray stared at her. She didn’t look like much. She didn’t look like she could hit you hard enough to knock you down. Everyone who had shown up for work — except the supervisor, now probably relaxing, rolling onto his back, patting his wife on the stomach, giggling maybe, or sighing — everyone was watching Murray and the day-shift woman. Seven of us. Murray moved his head from side to side, and touched his chin with his fingertips, stroked his chin. I could hear his whiskers softly scratching against his fingertips.

The day-shift woman said, “I want proof that isn’t you.”

“I gave you proof and then some,” said Murray.

From the back of the lunchroom came stifled laughter and it was Juliet and Lance back there yucking it up, and I was pretty sure they weren’t eating any lunch; they were making jokes about what was going on up here. I glanced back at them and so did Murray. Then Murray looked back at the day-shift woman and smiled.

“How did you get in here?” he said.

She didn’t answer, but her wandering eye moved a bit sideways, and I started thinking about some of the other things that Murray told me about her, that sometimes she screamed at him, “Just shut up and take off your clothes.” She would scream it loud enough so anyone could hear, and then right in the middle of it all, she would scream again — something about sunflowers, that
she could see the sunflowers, or there weren't enough sunflowers. She'd run at him, when he wasn't looking, and he could hear her footsteps running, coming closer, but he never had enough time to do anything about it, to duck or move sideways, and she'd jump on him at full speed, knocking him over, then start tearing at him or kissing him or pounding on his chest.

"I have this bruise in the middle of my chest," he said. "Every time I think it's going away, she jumps on me again and pounds on my chest. She's driving me crazy."

I thought maybe she was going to jump on him now. It had been a while since she'd done it, since Murray broke up with her over a month ago. He was probably healing nicely. She just stood there, though, gripping her purse, her hands at her side. There was a tear in her wandering eye. At least it looked like a tear to me.

"Don't worry how I got in here," said the day-shift woman. "That's not it. That's not what I'm here to tell you. You start talking now or I'll have to do something. I'll do something to you and you'll regret it. I swear."

She probably had her badge with her and the guard wouldn't think that she was up to something. Murray was just searching for something to say. That was obvious. Just about anybody could get in here if they wanted to. Especially somebody who worked here. Even if it wasn't their shift. It was easy.

The day-shift woman said, "Well you're the only one since October."

"I haven't got it," said Murray. "I told you."

"What is it?" I said. I smiled. Murray looked at me as if I wasn't supposed to ask, wasn't supposed to intrude, wasn't supposed to overhear. But the whole room was overhearing, so I looked at the day-shift woman instead, and she was just about coming out of her
pants in anger, and she hissed quietly, “Are you afraid of something? Are you afraid of me?”

She was looking at her purse now. She had something in there that she was fumbling for.

“It’s a lie,” said Murray.

And after Murray said, “It’s a lie,” the day-shift woman pulled out this tiny little gun and put it right up into his face and said, “Tell me the fucking truth!”

Murray didn’t move, except his eyebrows hiked up just a bit, and the day-shift woman started turning purplish red and I thought she might explode. She had a bunch of tears on her face all of a sudden. Her hand was too tight on the pistol. Anybody could see that. It looked for a minute like she might actually do it. She was going to shoot him and he’d drop right to the floor and probably die there, in the damn lunchroom of this lousy company, and that was really no way to die. I could imagine her killing him right there, pop, the little gun flashing into his face, then I could see her jumping on him and pounding on his chest like Murray said she always did, as if all she wanted now was to see him bleed and hurt and die, his life disappearing into an ugly gray carpet, and then we’d maybe have to see the blood stain there every day when we came to work, and we’d all quit our jobs, the seven of us, one by one, because we couldn’t stand to remember the New Year’s Day that Murray died in the lunchroom.

“I’m not afraid to die,” she said. “I’m not afraid.” She lowered the gun a little now, pointed it right at his neck. “Are you afraid, fucker?” she said.

Right then what I kept thinking was how attractive the day-shift woman was, with her wandering eye, wonderful to look at, a true peach, just washed, scrubbed clean, a drop of water still hanging there, but bitten into — yes, exactly that seductive. The gun was the only prob-
lem, of course. Put the gun down and stop making a scene and I'll take you somewhere and make you happier than you were with Murray. Wait and see.

The day-shift woman dropped her hand down and brought it up quick and hit Murray square on the side of the head with the gun. I thought it might go off, but it didn’t, and Murray just stood there, holding the side of his head. The day-shift woman turned around and disappeared. She disappeared so quickly and so finally, that I wondered if she had actually been there at all, except in my mind I could still hear her telling Murray that she wasn’t afraid.

Murray said, “She’s lying about that shit. I know it.”

I went over to the coffee pot and poured a cup of coffee. I put sugar in it.

Murray said, “She’s drunk. I don’t have anything and neither does she.”

I sipped the coffee. It was sweet and bitter all at once. I walked over to where Juliet giggled and Lance gave me a “shove off” look, but I was pretty sure Juliet thought Lance was a moron. I leaned on the table and asked Juliet what she thought was so funny. She didn’t answer, but just looked at me in an awful way.

I said, “There’s this restaurant I found. It’s called Prosto. Will you go with me? Maybe tomorrow?”

I didn’t hear myself ask it, but I knew I had.

She looked surprised, and I could still feel her lips on mine from our New Year’s Eve noisemaking, and I couldn’t think right then, especially with her sitting right in front of me, her face there close to mine, almost closer than it had been when she’d kissed me. The older memory of Juliet’s kiss began to join with the new memory of the day-shift woman, her tears, her body, the gun, with the imagined memory of Prosto Ristorante &
Espresso, dark and haunting coffee, green tablecloths and plastic flowers, lights dim precisely at 7 p.m., antipasto, lasagna, hands touching across the table. It all blustered through and around me like a morning lust; please don’t say a word, just take my desire from me, I’m afraid to die.

The supervisor walked in, quickly striding toward us, and I thought he was going to say something directly to us — to me even — but he looked confused, as if he didn’t know exactly where he was, and maybe a little angry.

He wasn’t supposed to be back yet. He knew that. We all knew that. He stopped, looked around the break room, poured some coffee into a water glass and grabbed two packets of aspirin out of the medicine cabinet. He swallowed the aspirin in a gulp, and then he left again, out to the control room to sit at his desk.

“Shit,” said Murray, “I got those tests.”

Murray laughed softly. He put his hands in his pockets and looked down at his pants and moved his hands around inside, searching. He said, “I got matches here somewhere.” I watched him dig matches out of his pocket — though they hadn’t been there before — and cigarettes out of his coat. He walked past me, stopped, and smiled as if dumb. He put his hand on my shoulder and squeezed, then continued outside to smoke.

I stood there, leaning over the cool white table, waiting for Juliet’s answer.
THE EVANGELIST OF FISH

Furless little animals . . .
your feet, not the hologram limbs
of fantasy and fetish—but bone and flesh
at 35,000 feet, swollen and red like ripeness.

Beneath us, the world was once solid,
rivers and bays so fish-thick
the Indians (legend goes) walked on water.
From here, even the ground is conjecture.

Turning back a page,
everything happened, nothing’s true.
If I told you that down there
a musket shot is being fired at a redskin,

that he takes off with a wave of plovers,
would that keep the plane from going down?
Between Paradise and tabula rasa,
the ax falls—

Cockles and muscles, alive, alive . . .
If I told you Cibola and El Dorado were gilded
inventions next to mounds of fish, stinking,
would John Smith be as real as you?

And yesterday . . .
through the kitchen window,
the garden frozen in glass, tomatoes heaped,
tomatoes rotting on the vines, the red globe

ruptured when you put it in my mouth.
AREN'T YOU GOING TO BE SLIGHTLY ALL RIGHT?

You couldn't have gotten in with a reservation even. Too bad the holiday chamber won't erupt quietly. It's just what I asked for, but it's not what I want.

Then, not far behind winter, the silentarium. I intend to study there eventually.

While you were away, we built another house and put it where your old one was. It's just like the old one. It contains many horticultural exhibits. You used to like them a great deal. You used to fondle the bulbs.

Of course some of us weren't there and we eventually left.

It was curious, indeed, but one of the mysteries was missing. Another mystery was brought in to take its place. No one was fooled, but no one really cared either. A mystery's a mystery. Nobody's that guilty.

Just go easy on the green seawater.

And you chums with the seriously limited social skills can just hold onto your own printed guidelines. Do you expect us to believe your behavior warrants a belief in memorization deficits?

If any arrows were lacking, they were yours. Point to it first and maybe I'll believe you.

I didn't have to win a prize. I only had to prove it wouldn't kill me. And despite the facial hair growing like a white fungus and a certain film noir exhibitionism, these several disinterested considerations, Lillipudlian in conception, were sufficient to engender a visit from the Bootlegger's Jig School of Whimsical...
Night Painting.

I could have shaved my fingerprints and stopped necking with leeks. I could have played the navy game, but tumbling was not fully understood by the masses. And no credentials were cast upon them.

I brought you the Feast of the Flemish Martyrs. It came in three styrofoam containers.

Yes, I know he’s dead. How long has he been feeling this way?

Like a red velvet airport descending.

Something a dog might like.
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