CutBank

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CutBank 50

25th Anniversary Issue
Fall 1998

Dedicated to
Jocelyn Davis Franz & Michael Franz
CutBank 50 Fall 1998

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CutBank accepts submissions from August 15 through April 1. Manuscripts/slides must be accompanied by an SASE for return or response. All manuscripts are considered for the Richard Hugo Memorial Poetry Award and the A.B. Guthrie, Jr. Short Fiction Award.


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On the cover:

Edgar Smith
Illinois Family Reunion
Oil on wood, 25" x 37"
1997
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The editors of CutBank are pleased to present

**THE 1997-1998 A. B. GUTHRIE JR. SHORT FICTION AWARD**

to

Dan Chaon

for his story *Passengers, Remain Calm*

published in CutBank 49

Judge: Kevin Canty


**THE 1997-1998 RICHARD HUGO MEMORIAL POETRY PRIZE**

to

Dennis Hockman

for his poem *Ritual Scarification*

published in CutBank 49

Judge: Ànnah Sobleman
Amy Ruedinger
*Entrance Denied*
Ebony pencil
18" x 24"
In AD 946, Italian diplomat Luitprand of Cremona was sent as ambassador to the Emperor Constantine of Constantinople, who formally greeted him while he rested on his palace’s legendary ‘Throne of Solomon.’

The “great gilt lions” roared and simultaneously the “gilt birds” sang “according each to its kind.” The throne itself, “of great size,” floated from the gilded floor and levitated straight to the ceiling—clearly not your everyday chair—but Luitprand reports “I felt no terror, nor was I moved with astonishment, having made inquiry beforehand of these things, from one who knew of them.” Where Someone-A gets pingpong eyes in stupefaction, Someone-Z is slipping into lidded-eyed ennui. The man who nursed his infant son (“thick milk, and very sweet”) for five months when the mother’s breasts went dry, amazed the European scientist—enormous exclamation-pointed rushes of amazement—though the natives of the Venezuelan village all accepted it as curious (but mildly so), and in the spirit of similar village history. And the sinister, wizardly gesture that bespooked a band of well-armed Mongol bandits into fleeing?—was Museum of Natural History archeologist Nels C. Nelson removing his glass eye. Just one more example: last night, at The Kozy Korner Tap & Grill, a nineteen-year-old puppyguy comes in with the antigravity leaps of an astronaut jigging in space, he’s so alive at the thought of being alive, he’s so much freshly risen cream. “Am I in love?” he asks the room, “Am I in love? Oh, am I!”—there’s the sugared glaze of danishes across his eyes. He tells us: “I can’t stand to be away from that woman one minute!” And up at the bar, six grizzled veterans of it all, in their forties and fifties, turn to stare at him —their faces so overswimming with pity and envy at the same time.
"The best laid schemes o' *Mice an' Men*" (and Martians, evidently, if this issue of *Eerie Adventures* from 1953 is any proof) "Gang aft agley": which might indeed have been in highland Martian to Corinna when I quoted it, but when I undeciphered it (go off astray), she nodded with a weary recognition, Nathan having (*drumroll*) wakened only days before to fervently announce that he was leaving her, that what he *really* wanted was to be a woman (*cymbals-crash*): and no, she hadn't planned on this upheaval seven years ago in the midst of their traded I do's.

As for the Martian, he's just landed with a "ray machine" that makes "slave zombies out of every living human being on the face of the Earth!" Now *there's* a scheme. And "face"

is what I want to consider—"face," the me we choose to show the world, whatever shriek or stoic shield we construct for public viewing, while the minions of the *real*-me conduct their saturnalia on some muzzle-hidden hummock in the brain's back ranges several zillion subjective miles away. Jung says he analyzed "2,000 dreams per annum" and here, in his detailed journal notes, they are: the seven-petalled rose, the wolfman pulled like a tide by the full of the moon, the slinkily sheath-hipped snakegirl, the grail, the words that leave the mouth on rainbowed wings, the butchered heart, and the rest. Ascending now from Nathan's deepest, longest-lost identity wells, is the tiny ivory figure of a woman, and it won't be denied, it twists, persists, and *surfaces*

—that is, it comes up into the face. (And with, I should add, a convert's overzealous use of blush-on and strident viridian lipstick.) He appears fulfilled: appears, on most days, wonder-filled. Corinna, however, is flying ever farther, and smaller, into her sky-blue anti-depressant capsules. This, the "plan-a-sensible-life" instructional tapes on the *Self Help* shelf at Mindfood Books & Video never prophesied, and neither did the actuarial stats; or the priest; or Madame Mystica's Psychic Line. And as for the Martian... it turns out Marilyn and Dan are oceanographers in a bathysphere experiment, surrounded by the weaving deep-sea beasts
of the Atlantic, when that would-be conqueror rakes his numbing ray across the landscape: in a sense, they aren’t “on the face of the Earth,” so don’t succumb. We see them rising from the planet’s most primordial hold and, over the panels of eight tumultuous comic book pages, battling to avenge and restore us all. The scene where they first emerge... I can’t help but remember a night, it must have been about 3 a.m. one summer, I saw a couple come out of the subway staircase, so imbued with subwayness, so stained with the sense of a far-away and preexisting darkness, that they seemed to be shambling out of a lair, and making their way by feelers, like a roach. Great rolls of energy steamed visibly from their bodies. He was covered in coal and clay, and maybe dung for all I know, and she was wreathed in pliant seaweed. Or it might be I imagined them, and that they nodded in passing.
The Crow call this time of year the Black Cherry Moon when the rose hips are blood-bright, spattered on their overwrought stems, and the creek calls so clearly in words almost our own as we come sliding down the bank.

Last night, we covered the gardens in plastic. The chickadees were back after their wide diet of summer. We ate the last trout, its spine curved from disease. So much can go wrong, I want to know what you will promise me as our hands reach in and in through the copper, the carmine leaves. I know you are lonely, alone with your grief for your parents who are not my parents, for your life, which, despite all, is not my life. The cherries are thick here, hanging in clusters, purple-black from frost. It has started to rain and I am chilled by it.

Each day, we promise, we will talk of our fears of intimacy, how we still expect to be hurt when we love. You bring me a coat from the back of the truck, but I want to stop our task now, to sit in the cab of the truck while the gray spills, slick with thunder. What if I kissed you there in depth.

After so many years, I can misunderstand the difference between instinct and obligation, how my hand continues to grasp the stems. Keats said poems should come easy as leaves off the trees, but look how they cling and wrestle with their ties. And now, the sun shines. It is not this grace I had imagined. When Keats said poems, I meant love. The chokecherries roll easily into my palm, then fall into the plastic bag that binds my wrist. Over and over, until we have enough, until our fingers are bruised with their dark juices.
I guess I should have known the trip was doomed from the start.

When Josh forgot the Coleman stove and the five-gallon water thermos but only remembered to tell me about the stove on the truck-stop phone, and Henry’s plane, four hours late into Salt Lake City from Chicago, he and Thea fighting over the Wagoneer’s front seat, baiting each other like teenagers before we even got on the I-15 headed south.

I put in a Leonard Cohen tape, which Thea exchanged for something grungy and indecipherable, which Henry exchanged for Jimmy Buffett’s Living and Dying in 3/4 Time.

Thea said, “Henry’s not happy unless the music he listens to exploits at least three cultures simultaneously.”

It had been three years since Josh had come into my life wanting to know how to run rivers, two years since I taught him to row, six months since he decided he knew more about the river than I did, two weeks since he stopped speaking, since he started forgetting indispensable pieces of gear.

By the time we got to Hite’s Crossing, ready to leave the truck at the take-out, we couldn’t find the pilot who was supposed to fly us back upriver.

The little Beachcraft 270 sat on the runway, wings flexing against the wire tiedowns and I knew that meant we were paying for ground time while we all walked around separate coves and inlets trying to find the pilot, hands over our eyes, over our sunglasses, trying to fend off the glare and the hot wind and the waves of dizzying afternoon heat.

By the time we did find him the wind was up further, and he said it was too rough to fly, and would we mind keeping him posted while he ran down to the trailers where he had a little girlfriend, and it wouldn’t—he winked at Henry—take him but a minute to go down there and see about her.

Thea and I sat on the short runway in the shade of the plane’s left wing and looked out across the surface of Lake Powell, al-
most turquoise in the late-in-the-day sun, and the white and rust colored mesa tops that receded into forever beyond it.

"Not a bird, not a tree, not even a blade of grass," Thea said.

"What precise level of hell is this?"

I looked at the scaly bathtub ring that circled the canyon walls thirty feet above the lake's present surface, at the log and silt jam that floated in the dead space where what used to be the Colorado River once came roaring through.

"Somebody's bright idea," I said. "Land of many uses."

The wind howled across the surface of the lake making a hundred thousand rows of diamonds moving toward us fast.

"And there's really a river up there?" Thea said, pointing with her chin to the north, to the other side of the log jam, a hundred miles beyond that to the put-in where Russell and Josh and the boats had been ready for hours, to the place the plane would take us if the wind would ever stop.

"Thirty miles up-canyon," I said, "is the wildest whitest water in America. The wind can howl up that canyon all day sometimes, and once you get through the rapids, once you hit lake level, you can row as hard as you want to—you won't be going anywhere but upstream in a blow even half this strong."

"Lucy," she said, "you're always going upstream."

"I know," I said, "but not as bad as that."

I looked along the shore to where the pilot had disappeared and tried not to think about the river level, 61,000 cubic feet of water per second and rising. Everybody who ran Cataract Canyon knew the sixty thousands were the most difficult level to negotiate, not counting, of course, the hundred-year flood.

I'd been running rivers a lot of years by then but I didn't overwhelm anybody with my level of confidence, hadn't ever acquired what I would call an athlete's natural grace.

It all went back to my father, I guess, as most things did, how he'd wanted me to be Chris Evert—not to be like her, understand, but be her. And being her always meant to the exclusion of me.

I got decent on the tennis court when I was seven and twelve and fourteen but could never move my feet fast enough across the hard clay surface to win a first place prize.

I'm strong for a girl, and stubborn enough not to give up without a dogfight. I took to the river because I believed it talked to me.
I believed that I could read the river, that I could understand its language, that I could let it tell me, sometimes even mid-rapid, exactly where it wanted me to be.

Thea said, “So how are things between Josh and you anyway.”

“You invited Josh to go to sleep,” Henry said, startling us from behind. “He accepted.”

“Easy thing to do, sleep,” I said, “when you keep your eyes closed all the time.”

“You’re getting smarter,” Henry said, “slowly.”

“That’s quite the blessing,” Thea said, “coming from you.” She turned back to me. “I, by the way, have ended things with Charlie.”

“Charlie,” I said. “Did I know about Charlie?”

“He was in love with me,” Thea said. “I was in love with the Universe.”

“You can’t be fussy,” Henry said, “if you’re gonna fuck ’em all.”

“When are you gonna bring one of these guys down the river,” I asked her.

“With us?” she said, “With you? Never in a hundred billion years.”

Henry and Thea had come into my life in the same year and both because of photography. Thea was my student at a semester-long seminar I taught in Denver, and Henry had bought one of my prints out of a gallery in Chicago and liked it so well he’d hunted me down. They had taken an instantaneous dislike to each other at a party I’d had the summer before to celebrate the summer solstice. I was running four or five rivers a year in those days and Thea hardly ever missed a launch date. Cataract was Henry’s first trip.

I had been down Cataract Canyon three times before, but always in the drought years, thumping along through the Big Drops in the slow motion of six or eleven or fifteen thousand cubic feet per second while the Park Service waited for the one big snow that was going to come down from the high country as melt water and fill the reservoir to the top again.

Now the river had come back with a vengeance, filling the lake and threatening daily to burn up the dam’s sluggish turbines.
The spillways were carrying too much water, and the sandstone was being eaten away on either side of the dam. Thirty miles upriver, five people were dead at the bottom of Satan's Gut already, the season barely three weeks old.

"Tell me about the people who died," Thea said, and I blinked at her, my eyes dry as sockets in the wind. She read my mind like that a couple times daily. It still unsettled me.

"Well," I said, "Two of 'em were that father and son that came down the Green in their powerboat, got to the confluence and turned the wrong way."

Thea nodded and I knew she'd have studied the maps before she came.

She didn't have a lot of experience but she wanted it bad, was the best student of the river I'd ever trained. When we were in the boat all I'd have to do was think of something I needed—a throw line or a spare oar blade, even a drink of water—and I'd open my mouth to ask her for it and there she'd be already putting it into my hand.

"And another one," I said, "was that crazy who tried to swim the whole series at high-water each year."

"Twenty-six rapids?" Thea said.

"In the drought years the water is warmer," I said, "and there's ages of time between falls. They say he wore three life jackets, one right on top of the other. I know it sounds impossible, but there were witnesses, five years in a row."

"Not this year," Henry said.

"No," I said, "he was dead before he even got to the Big Drops."

"And the other two?" Henry said.

"The other two were experienced boaters," I said, "out to have a little fun."

"Just like us," Thea said.

"Yep," I said. "Just like us."

The wind died right at seven like an alarm clock, and the pilot flew along the tops of the canyon walls, our flight path winding like a snake no more than two thousand feet above the surface of the water.
To the east we could see the heaved-up blocks of the Devil’s Kitchen, the white humped back of Elephant Hill, the red and yellow spires of the Needles District, lit up like big bouquets of roses by the setting sun.

To the west was Ernie’s Country, the Fins, and the Maze, multi-colored canyon walls repeating and repeating themselves like God gone mad with the Play-doh.

After thirty miles the long finger of lake turned into a moving river again, the canyon walls squeezed even tighter, and in two more bends we could see the falls that were known as the Big Drops.

The rapids in Cataract Canyon are not named but numbered, 1 through 26, a decision that said to me for serious practitioners only. The rapids come after three whole days of hot and silent floating without so much as an eddy, a riffle, a pool.

Numbers 20, 21, and 22 are bigger and badder by far than the others, deserve to be named a second time and are: Big Drop 1, Big Drop 2, Big Drop 3. Big Drop 2 is famous for being the third highest runnable falls in America. Big Drop 3 is famous for the wave in the dead center of it: an unavoidable twenty-foot curler by the name of Satan’s Gut.

Even from that far above them, I could feel the rapids roar, and my stomach did flip-flops while the pilot dipped first one wing, and then the other so that Henry and Thea and I could see.

I could see the rock in Big Drop 2, dangerously close to the only safe run and bigger than a locomotive, saw the havoc it created in the river on every side.

Below it, in 3, the Gut surged and receded, built to its full height and toppled in on itself. Bits of broken metal and brightly painted river gear winked up at us from the rock gardens on either side.

People said I was good at running rivers and I’d come to believe that they liked me because of it. I never gave much thought to what would happen if I stopped. I just kept taking each river on, like I took on every other thing my life served up to me: not an if, but a how.
The nineteen rapids above the Big Drops sailed under us like an old-time movie in reverse, and before we knew it we were over Spanish Bottom.

The pilot circled the confluence, the place where the waters of the Green and the Colorado come together. The waters don’t mix right away, but flow along side by side for almost a mile before mingling, the greenish Colorado, the browner Green finally becoming indistinguishable in the bend that leads to rapid #1.

The pilot dipped his wing one more time before turning for the airstrip, and pointed toward the severed brown and green edges of the formation called Upheaval Dome.

“They used to think the dome was made of salt,” he said, “squeezed out of the ground hundreds of thousands of years ago, built up and up like a pillar before time collapsed it, before weather turned it into the crater you see. But now they think it’s the site, not of a rise but of an impact, the place where a meteorite one third of a mile in diameter crashed into the side of the earth.”

I talked the pilot into driving us to the City Market so we could replace the cook stove, talked him further into taking us the eighteen miles to the put-in, out of town and back down-river, near the mostly defunct Potash Mine.

By the time we got there it was almost nine o’clock, near dark with a full moon on the rise right above the canyon, the mosquitoes so thick I was worried for the grocery bags of food.

Josh and Russell had the boats in the water and were trying to keep the bugs off by drinking beer and smoking fat cigars. Russell was a sports photographer from San Diego who had been a conference buddy of mine until the day he met Josh and our friendship instantly receded.

“Too long enough,” was the first thing Josh said, and then when he saw me put the new stove into my boat he said, “Oh yeah, I forgot the water thermos too.”

We studied each other in the moonlight for a minute.

“It’s not like it’s any big deal,” he said. “We can manage without it.”
And technically speaking he was right. But it was July 15, the quick-baked middle of the hottest month on the river, and we had four full days to get ourselves good and dehydrated under the Utah summer sun in the bottom of a canyon that didn’t know the meaning of the word shade.

The drinking water would heat up to ninety degrees in no time, would taste like the hot insides of a melting plastic jug. A thermos would keep ice through the first day, maybe into the second. We could steal a half a block a day from the food cooler after that.

The mosquitoes weren’t going to let anyone sleep, that was clear, and I was too mad at Josh to lie next to him, so I set out walking for the City Market, which I knew was open twenty-four hours a day.

“Where the hell do you think you’re going?” Josh called after me, and I didn’t turn around, even though I had set out without a water bottle, and I could already feel my throat start to close, even in the first half mile, even in the dark of the night.

The summer triangle hung bright in the sky above me, and the tamarisk, still in their spring blossoms, scraped the canyon walls in a wind that had all of a sudden rekindled itself. A couple of tiny stones skittered down the wall and onto the road in front of me and I strained my eyes upward in the twilight looking for whatever it was, wild sheep or coyote, that might have knocked them off.

My throat got drier still and I was almost ready to give up and turn back when I saw headlights behind me, moving slow and from a long ways off.

I thought briefly about the part of the world I was in, a place so far away from the city that the danger curve had bottomed out and started to rise again, a place where raping a woman and cutting her up into little pieces could be seen either as violence or religion, depending upon your point of view.

Then I thought about how mad I was at Josh, how dry my throat was, how dry it would be in five days without a water cooler, and I smiled into the oncoming lights and stuck out my thumb.

He worked the late shift, just off duty from the Potash plant. He was born again, recently, had sworn off liquor and cocaine.
He was a big fan of Red Skelton, was picking up part-time work as an extra in a movie they were making in Lavender Canyon. He played a cowboy, he said, and the funny thing was he'd never gotten near a horse in his life.

The more he talked the slower he drove. But every time he got to saying how lonely he was, how in need of female company, I just sat up straight like one of the boys and said I knew that if he stayed sober one day soon something good would come his way.

When he stopped the car in front of the market I was out the door and running before his hand was off the gear shift and I didn't stop until I felt the whoosh behind me of the automatic doors.

I bought the thermos, filled it with ice cubes and started the long walk back to Potash. The town was deserted, except for the trucks that lined the roadway, their decorator lights glowing, their radios murmuring softly in the dark.

"Where do you think that little girl's going with a great big water jug at this time of night?" a husky voice crackled loud across the citizens' band.

I hunched my shoulders over and didn't lift my eyes. Eighteen miles was a long way, but I had water now, and by first light I'd have more than half the distance behind me and there would be friendlier cars on the road by that time, mountain bikers and climbers, and everything would look different than it did in this eerie 2 a.m.

I walked through the portal, the big sandstone gate that says soon the Colorado River will start to plunge again. Above me lay The Land Behind the Rocks: a wilderness of knobs and chutes and pinnacles, a playground for mountain lions and coyotes, for lizards, tarantulas and snakes.

I considered climbing the broken rock wall a couple thousand feet up and into it. Taking my thermos and getting lost back there for as long as I could make the water last. Staying up there till the level of the river ran itself back down into the fifty thousands. Till Josh and Russell and Henry had floated on down deep into the heart of the canyon. Then Thea and I would make our run, barely speaking, never shouting, the boat moving through the rapids as easily as if it had wings.
Russell was pretty impressed that I came up with the water cooler before he’d even gotten out of his sleeping bag, and Henry was impressed generally. Being from the city, even the put-in felt like a million miles from anywhere to him. Thea just smiled as if doing a thirty-six mile turnaround in the middle of the night without a vehicle was the most logical thing in the world.

Henry said, “I think that girl’s in awe of you.”

And Josh said, “I’m afraid it’s even worse than that.”

We launched early, before the sun crawled over the canyon wall, Russell and Henry in Josh’s sixteen-foot Riken, Thea and I in my Achilles, a foot shorter than Josh’s boat, and the tubes less than half as big around.

“Damned if it isn’t hot already,” Henry said.

We hooked the boats together with a carabiner and let them float down the river, all the way to Dead Horse Point with only a few words between us, the sun climbing higher in the sky, the canyon walls slick with desert varnish, the heat pressing down on us, not a breath of breeze, too hot it seemed even to lift the water jug to our lips.

Then it got hotter still and we lay stretched out across the tubes like sea lions, hands and feet dangling in the water. We could have all slept like that till nightfall, till three days later when we’d hit the rapids, till the late summer rains came at last to cool us down.

“Well, what I think,” Henry said, breaking at least an hour’s silence, “is that things will never get right in the world until women are willing to give up some of their rights and privileges.”

That’s how it was with Henry, always had been, when the silence got too much.

“Say that again…” Thea said, and then they were off and into it: custody rights and fetal tissue, maternity leaves and female sportscasters in locker rooms, job quotas and income tax breaks.

I picked up the oars for a minute and gave the boats a nudge away from the bank, back toward the center of the river.

“Okay,” Henry said, “if we’re all so equal, then tell me this. Why is everybody so goddamned accepting of hetero girls falling in love with each other.” He looked from Josh to Russell and
then back to Thea. "Why's there no similar deal between heterosexual men?"

I watched both Russell and Josh startle, watched them arc their bodies slightly away from Henry as if in a dance.

"Maybe in your fantasies, Henry," Thea said, not quite under her breath.

"Lugs" I said, louder than I meant to, trying to remember, and all four heads turned my way. "Lesbians until graduation," I said. "In college we called them Lugs."

"It's not that it's unacceptable," Russell said, his voice rising. "Men just aren't attracted in that way to other men."

"I hope that isn't true," Thea said, "for all your sakes."

"But it is," Henry said, "Women are trained to appreciate each other's bodies. Men aren't. Josh, for instance, would never tell Russell that he had a nice ass."

"Even if he did," I said, and winked at Russell.

My mind was running three days ahead to the rapids, and how our lives might depend on resolving our sociological differences if we all found ourselves in the water, needing to work together just to survive.

"It's just not something I'm interested in," Russell said, "and don't tell me I'm in denial."

"When a woman meets someone," Thea said, "she decides whether or not she is attracted to them prior to noticing if it's a man or a woman."

"Prior to?" said Henry.

"Separate from, if you like," said Thea, "but I really do mean prior to."

"Let me put it this way," Russell said. "I've never gotten a hard-on for a man. That's the bottom line, isn't it?"

"How lucky for you," Thea said, "to have such an infallible bottom line."

Thea unhooked the carabiner that held the two rafts together and gave their boat a push. We floated to the other side of the river and began my favorite girl's boat conversation, naming in order all the men we'd made love to in our lives.

My total always came out somewhere between twenty-three and twenty-seven, depending on how sharp my memory was that day, and also what we'd all agreed would count. Thea had had
only half as many, but she was five years younger and, because of her stepfather, a whole world angrier at men than me.

We camped that night on a fin of Navajo Sandstone and listened to the thunder rumble, watched far-off lightning flash a warning in the darkening sky. I made Josh and Russell cool their beer in the river which made Josh even madder, though he was the one who told me aluminum eats up cooler ice fastest of all.

After dinner we ran out of talk so Thea started us singing songs we could all agree on: Pancho and Lefty and old Janis Joplin, Moon River, You Don’t Know Me, and Light as a Breeze.

“So Thea,” Henry said before we’d been floating five minutes the next morning, “who’s the better river runner, Lucy or Josh?”

“Please let’s talk about something else,” I said.

“Josh has a lot of strength,” Thea said. “Lucy has a lot of patience.”

“Patience?” Russell said. “Like for what?”

In the days when I called Josh and me the perfect couple, I said it was because his carelessness tempered my exactitude; I had too many fears, he had none.

Josh was strong enough to get himself out of tight corners where the river tossed him, and brave enough to go for the odds-against run. He had no fear of the river, which only I saw as a problem. Everything he knew about reading water would fit on the blade of an oar. I still led us into all the major rapids, but I knew those days were numbered, maybe even gone.

“Lucy waits on the river,” Thea said, “waits for it to help her. Like her goal—once in the rapid—is not to have to use the oars.”

“That’s lovely, Thea,” I said.

“I’ve seen her use her oars a few times,” Josh said.

“Okay,” I said, “can we please talk about something else?”

“I don’t know why she wouldn’t use them,” Russell said, kicking Josh’s oar with his foot. “They don’t weight a third of what these do. Have you felt Lucy’s oars, Henry? They’re like toothpicks, like feathers, compared to these.”

“But generally speaking, Thea,” Henry said, “you have to admit that the average man is better equipped to run rivers than the average woman.”
“Not,” Thea said, “unless it’s one of those special trips where the only thing you’re allowed to use is your dick.”

“Is everybody drinking enough water?” I said. “Has everybody peed at least once today?”

“Yes, your majesty,” Josh said, “Oh great protectress of the block ice.”

I sent Thea and Russell hiking up and over a big sandstone fin that the river took six miles to circle, folding back on itself and winding up, as the crow flies less than a hundred yards from where I dropped them off. Then I made Henry row my boat the six miles.

The only good thing about how hot it was, was that it might stop the river rising, that with heat so severe and no rain, evaporation and usage would start to surpass runoff; not too long after that, the river would fall.

In the afternoon, thunder rumbled again in some far-off corner of the sky, and by the time we entered Meander Canyon a few clouds were sailing in the wind that must have been whipping somewhere high above the canyon, and a rainbow stretched above us, reaching from rim to rim.

On the third day we came to the confluence and Russell dove into the place where the rivers ran alongside each other and tried to mix the two strips of colored water together with his hands. We stopped at the huge salmon-colored danger sign to take pictures, and I wondered how the men in the powerboat could have missed it, wondered how any boatman could be mistaken about whether he was moving upstream or down.

We camped that night in Spanish Bottom, two miles up-river from the start of the rapids, knew we’d hear them roaring all night long. Thea and Russell and I climbed up the canyon rim to the Doll’s House, its candy-striped spires like a toll booth, taking tickets for Cataract’s wild ride. We goofed around at the base of the towers, took pictures of each other and laughed a lot, and I thought how different the trip might have been without Henry, who caused trouble everywhere he went, and Josh, who could get so far inside himself that the sound of his laughter would make everybody feel hollow and afraid.

To the north Junction Butte rose like the Hall of Justice on the horizon, and behind it the big flat mesa top called Island in
the Sky. Russell went off to explore on his own and left Thea and me sitting on a big slab of orange rock.

“If the Doll’s House were my Doll’s House,” I said, “I wouldn’t have wanted to play ball with the boys.”

“Lucy,” Thea said, “have you ever made love to a woman?”

“I’ve been in love with a woman,” I said. “More than one.”

“That’s not what I asked you,” she said. “It’s not the same thing.”

“No it isn’t,” I said. “No I haven’t.”

“And no to the next question,” Thea said. “And no, and no, and no again.”

During dinner we watched a thunderstorm roll down the canyon, turning the clouds behind the mesa tops black and lifting the sand into Tasmanian devils all around us. The sun broke low out of the clouds just before setting and lit the buttes bright orange against the black.

Then we heard a rumble above our heads, a noise I first associated with an earthquake in a city, highway overpasses tumbling into each other, apartment buildings buckling and collapsing in on themselves.

We jumped out of the low folding chairs and ran to the top of a dune and looked back toward the Doll’s House.

“There,” Thea said, pointing. We followed her finger to a large wash that plummeted into Spanish Bottom just north of the Doll’s House. A thick ribbon of what looked like molten chocolate had just crested the rim and was thundering down the vertical face of the wash. It took something like ten seconds for the front of it to reach the bottom, where it exploded into a giant fan, covering half the floor of Spanish Bottom.

As it got closer we could see the cargo it carried: tree trunks, car parts, something that looked like the desiccated carcass of a sheep.

“You think the tents are all right?” I said to Josh.

“Yeah,” he said. “The ground is a little higher here, and anyway, this thing won’t last.”

As if in response to his voice the fan closed itself down by a third in that instant, and the thunder coming down the face of the wash changed into a much duller roar.
A rumble began out of sight down canyon, and then another beyond it, even farther down.

“I guess we don’t have to worry about the river falling to below sixty thousand now,” Josh said.

The next day, we all hit the rapids smiling.

Thea and I strapped everything down twice, threw our shoulders into it and hauled on the straps, fastened each other’s life jackets and pulled the buckles tight. The water was thick after last night’s thunderstorms, roiling, still the color of hot milk chocolate.

I led us out among the tree limbs and tires that the flood had brought down, wondered if the debris would give us any trouble, but forgot my worry instantly as I felt the tug of the V-slick in rapid #1.

We rambled through the first several rapids in short order, me pulling hard on the oars, Thea watching for holes and bailing. We got knocked around pretty good in 9, and we filled the boat in the upper reaches of 15, and in 19 I had to spin around backwards to make the final cut.

I was feeling a little out-muscled by the river, feeling like maybe it was trying to tell me something I ought to hear, but as we pulled over to scout Big Drop 1 we were still smiling and, thanks to the sun, almost dry.

In the sixty thousands Big Drop 1 is huge, but not technical, and Thea and I eased through it with so much finesse it was a little scary, the water pounding all around us, my hands strong on the oars. Thea was ready to bail at any second, but we were so well lined up, so precise in our timing, and the river so good to us we hardly took on enough water to make it worthwhile.

We pulled to the side and watched Josh bring his big boat through the rapid. Then we walked downriver to look at Big Drops 2 and 3. There was no way to stop between them. If you flipped in 2 you swam Satan’s Gut, sacrificed yourself to it like a kamikaze.

I looked hard at the boat carnage that littered the sides of the canyon: broken oars, cracked water bottles, even rafts damaged so badly they were unsalvageable, their tubes split open on the toothy rocks, their frames twisted beyond repair.
I knew the river was telling me not to run it. Not in that little boat, it said, not with only the two of you, not during the highest water in a decade, not when it was roaring past me, pounding in my ears, telling me no.

I watched Josh’s jaw twitch just slightly as he stared at the rapid and I knew we wouldn’t have to portage. He was gonna go for it. And if he didn’t die taking his big boat through, he’d like nothing better than a second chance at it in mine.

“I don’t want to run it,” I said, for the very first time in my boating career. “It’s too big for me.”

Henry and Russell lowered their eyes, as if I’d just taken off my shirt.

“It’s a piece of cake,” Josh said. “No problem. Why don’t you follow me this time, if you’re nervous. Then you don’t have to worry about where to be.”

I looked at the big rock I’d seen from the airplane, the size of a seven-story apartment building, and at the torrent of water going over its top.

“I don’t know,” Henry said, “it doesn’t look all that bad to me.”

“You take my boat through then, Henry,” I said, and he smacked me on the butt with his life jacket and turned to Josh, who shrugged.

“It’s not a piece of cake,” Thea said, “It’s a son of a bitch, but I believe you can do it.”

“Okay,” I said, tugging the straps on her lifejacket down and tight, “then let’s just the hell go.”

We agreed that we were going to try to enter the rapid just right of a medium-sized rock that was showing mid-stream, then we’d turn our noses to the right and keep pulling left and away from the seven-story rock, which we’d leave to our right as we entered the heart of the rapid. Once through the biggest waves we’d have to row like hell to get far enough back to the right again to be in position for Big Drop 3.

I was worried about a funny little wave at the top of 2 on the right-hand side, a little curler that wouldn’t be big enough to flood my boat but might turn it sideways, and I needed to hit every wave that came after it head on.
Josh said that wave was no problem, and it wasn’t for his boat and his big tubes, but I decided I was going to try to miss it by staying slightly to the right of wherever he went in.

We pulled away from the bank, my heart beating so fast I could feel it there between my palms and the oar handles. I watched Josh tie his hat to his boat frame, take a last-minute drink of water.

“Watch the goddamn rapid,” I muttered, and finally he looked up.

“Does he seem too far right to you?” Thea said, fear edging into her voice.

“There’s no way to tell with him right in front of us,” I said. “We’ll just have to take him at his word.”

It was right about then that I saw the funny little wave I had wanted to miss more than thirty yards to the left of us and then I saw Josh’s boat disappear, vertically, as if it had fallen over a cliff, and I realized in that moment we were too far right, way too far right, and we were about to go straight down over the seven-story rock. We would fall through the air off the face of that rock, land at the bottom of a seven-story waterfall, where there would be nothing but rocks and tree limbs and sixty-some thousand feet per second of pounding white water which would shake us and crush us and hold us under until we drowned.

I don’t know what I said to Thea in that moment, as I made one last desperate effort, one hard long pull to the left. I don’t know if it was Oh shit or Did you see that or just my usual Hang on or if there was, in that moment between us, only a silent stony awe.

And as we went over the edge of the seven-story boulder down, down, into the snarling white hole, not only wide and deep and boat-stopping but corkscrew-shaped besides, time slowed down to another version of itself, started moving like rough-cut slow motion, one frame at a time in measured stops and starts. And of all the stops and starts I remember, all the frozen frames I will see in my head for as long as I live, as the boat fell through space, as it hit the corkscrew wave, as its nose began to rise again, the one I remember most clearly is this:

My hands are still on the oars and the water that has been so brown for days is suddenly as white as lightening. It is white, and
it is alive and it is moving toward me from both sides, coming at me like two jagged white walls with only me in between them, and Thea is airborne, is sailing backwards, is flying over my head, like a prayer.

Then everything went dark, and there was nothing around me but water and I was breathing it in, helpless to fight it as it wrapped itself around me and tossed me so hard I thought I would break before I drowned. Every third moment my foot or arm would catch a piece of Thea below me, or was it above me, somewhere beside me doing her own watery dance.

Then we popped up, both of us almost together, out of the back wave and moving by some miracle downstream. The boat popped up next to us, upside down and partly deflated, but I grabbed onto it, and so did Thea and that’s when the truth about where we were got a hold of me and I screamed, though it was more of a yowl than a scream, an animal sound, the sound maybe of the river itself inside me. And though there were words involved, words that later we decided were “Heeeeeeelllllpppppp uuuuuussssss!” it was some part of me I didn’t recognize that made that noise in the rapid, a part just scared enough and mad enough to turn into the face of the river and start fighting like hell for its life.


I smiled, a little embarrassed and human again, as if to say I was only kidding about the scream… and Thea laughed with me for a moment, though we both knew it had been the other voice that was the truest thing.

The waves were getting smaller, only pulling us under every now and again and I knew we were in the calmer water between 2 and 3. I got a glimpse of Josh’s boat, somehow still topside, Russell and Henry bailing like crazy, Josh’s face wild with fear and red.

“Help us,” I screamed again, like a human being this time, and Josh’s eyes widened like his face was slapped and I knew that his boat was full of water, way too heavy to move and that he was as out of control as we were, and that Thea and I were going to have to face Satan’s Gut in our life jackets after all.

“Leave the boat and swim to the right,” Josh screamed, and it took me a minute to realize he was right, to picture the way the
rapids lined up when we scouted, to realize that the raft was headed straight into another rock fall, one that would snap our bodies like matchsticks before we had time to say casualties number six and seven, and that our only chance of surviving was to get hard and fast to the right.

I took off swimming, hoping to God Thea was behind me, but I only got about ten strokes in when I saw Josh's boat disappear sideways into the heart of the Gut, which meant that I was too far to the left of him, and Thea farther left still, maybe already in the rock garden, maybe dead on impact, maybe drowning in her own blood.

*This is the one that gets me*, I thought, as I rode the V-slick right into the heart of Satan's Gut and all twenty feet of back wave crashed over my head. The white water grabbed me for a minute and shook me hard, like an angry airport mother, and then just as roughly it spat me out, it let me go.

Wave after wave crashed over my head, but I knew I was past the Gut so I just kept breathing every time I got near the surface, choking down water as often as air. My knee banged into a rock during one of the poundings and I braced for the next rock, the bigger one that would smash my back or my spine, but it never came.

Finally the waves started getting smaller, so small that I could ride on top of them, and that's when in between them, I got a glimpse of Josh's boat, still topside, and Thea inside it, safe.

"Throw the rope!" Josh said to Russell, and he did throw it, but behind me, and too far to the left. He pulled it in fast to throw it again but by that time I was well past him, not very far from exhaustion, and headed for the entrance to rapid 23.

That's when the water jug popped up beside me, and I grabbed for it, got it, and stuffed it between my legs. Rapid 23 isn't big, unless it's high-water and you are sitting not in a boat but on a five-gallon thermos. I gripped the thermos between my thighs like it was the wildest horse I'd ever been on and rode the series of rollers down the middle, my head above water, my feet ready to fend off the rocks.

Then the rapid was over, and Josh was rowing toward me, and Russell had the throw rope again in his hands. This time he
threw it well and I caught it, wrapped my hands around it tight. Henry hauled me to the boat and then into it, and I found myself for a moment back under the water that filled it, clawing my way up Russell’s leg, trying just to get my head high enough to breathe.

“Grab that oar,” Josh shouted to Henry, and he did, and I saw that it was one of mine, floating near to us, and for the first time I wondered how the wreck of my boat would look.

Josh got us to shore and the three men went back to look for the boat while Thea and I coughed and sputtered and hugged and cried together there on the sand.

The boys came back lining my boat down the side of the river, one tube punctured and deflating badly, the spare oar gone to the bottom of the river, but other than that, not too much the worse for wear. I looked for a minute toward the remaining rapids, zipped up my life jacket and jumped in the boat.

“Come on,” I said to Thea. “Let’s get through the rest of these mothers before we run out of air.”

All we had left before us was a long pull out of the canyon. We’d lose the current gradually over the next twenty miles, and eventually—ten miles from the take-out—we’d hit the backwash of Lake Powell and lose it altogether.

We agreed to float until our progress slowed to less than three miles an hour, then we’d row in half-hour shifts, all night if it was required, to miss the winds that would start early in the morning and could keep us from getting across that last long arm of the lake.

For the first time we all sat together on Josh’s boat and I made sandwiches. Thea and I couldn’t stop burping up river water, and every now and then one or the other of us would erupt into a fit of the chills.

Henry and I sang *A Pirate Looks and Forty*, and Thea and I sang *Angel From Montgomery* and then Thea sang *Duncan* all by herself. My boat, half deflated, limped along in tow.

“Well,” Henry said, raising his sandwich, “now that we’re all safe and sound and feeding our faces, I’d like to tell you that I, for one, have had the perfect day.”
“Here, here,” Russell said. “Here’s to Josh, river guide extraordinaire.” He raised the bilge pump to his forehead in salute. “I would go anywhere with this man.”

I could feel Thea’s eyes on me but I kept my head down.

“It was good fun,” Josh said, waving away the bilge pump, “nothing more or less than that.”

“You girls should have seen it,” Henry said. “You should have heard the way Josh shouted those commands.”

I handed Thea her sandwich and the back of her hand rested, for a moment, on mine.

“I’m telling you guys,” Henry said, “the day couldn’t have been any better.”

“Good fun,” Josh said again, like it was an expression he was learning.

“Henry,” Thea said, “weren’t you ever just a little concerned that one of us might not make it?”

“I know what you’re saying,” Henry said, “I do. But Josh had it under control right from the beginning. And what a rush it was.” He grabbed my elbow. “I wish I had a photo of your face when I pulled you in.”

“I would go anywhere with that man,” Russell said again, dozing now, his words little more than a murmur.

“What I always wish,” Josh said, “is that we could go back up there and do it again.”

I studied his profile in the rose-colored light of a sun long gone behind the canyon wall.

“I saw your face while I was in the water,” I said, “I know you were scared.”

“What do you mean?” he said.

“Your face,” I said. “It was red. You were worried about me, I know.”

A light snore came from Russell’s lips. Henry jiggled his shoulder.

“What color do you think my face should have been?” Josh said. “I was trying to move 200 gallons of water.”

Night fell on the canyon softly just as we decided we’d crossed the three-mile-an-hour line, but the sky in the east was already
bright with the moon, the canyon walls so well defined that rowing all night would be no problem.

Russell took the first shift, then Henry, then Thea, then me. Josh slept in a hammock he’d rigged up between his frame and the oarlocks on my boat.

“You know, Lucy,” Henry said, “I know you were only kidding when you said I should have taken the boat through the Big Drops, but looking back now… I really think I could have done it.”

Thea snorted, didn’t speak.

“Josh’s turn,” I said, when my watch beeped.

“Let him sleep,” Henry said. “I’ll cover him. He’s done enough for one day.”

I turned the oars over to Henry, watched the moon rise into fullness on the rim of the canyon, saw in its reflection everything wrong with how I’d come to the river, everything wrong with why I stayed.

“They’ll never get it,” Thea said. “You can’t expect them to.”

But I was thinking, in fact, about my father, who wasn’t now and never would be on that river, how even if I made a hundred runs through the Big Drops, I’d never be Chris Evert, not in a hundred billion years.

Thea and I moved to the back of the raft and sang every song we could think of with Continental Divide in the lyrics until it was our turn to row again.

“What I wanted just one of them to say,” Thea said, “Is that they were glad we made it.”

“What I wanted one of them to say,” I said, “is tell me what it felt like under there.”

Eventually, Russell and Henry faded, and Thea and I took fifteen-minute shifts till we crossed under the bridge that meant the reservoir, the parking lot, civilization, and a world once again bigger than just us five.

The moon was high in the sky by then, and lighting the canyon walls like daylight. We’d rowed ourselves right into the log jam and I couldn’t see the edges of it, so I said we should try to sleep until first light, which I knew couldn’t be far.
I could see the lights in the trailer court and tried to imagine which one belonged to the pilot’s girlfriend. The marina would be a ghost town, they said, before the end of the century, completely silted in and useless, a graveyard for cows and cottonwoods and car parts, every dead thing the river brought down.

We were cold by then, sick from the river water, and shaken from the ten-minute swim, the long night of rowing, and all that remained unspoken between us, though I didn’t know whether it was terror, or love.

“Lucy,” Thea said, “if you were to kill yourself ever, what would it be over?”

“A man,” I said, though I didn’t have a face for him. “It would only be over a man. And you?”

“I don’t think so,” she said. “Maybe something, not that.”

“What then?” I said. But she didn’t answer.

“If you are ever about to kill yourself over a man,” she said, “get yourself to my house. Knock on my door.”

“You do the same,” I said. “For any reason.”

“We’ll talk about what it was like being under the water,” she said, “what it was like when we popped out free.”

“Maybe we should talk about that now,” I said.

“I don’t think so,” she said. “Not quite yet.”

On the long drive home from Cataract, Thea and I slept in the back of the Wagoneer curled around each other like puppies while the boys told and retold the story, trying to keep Josh and each other awake.

I dreamed of the place where the scream lived inside me. I dreamed I was a meteor returned again to crash into the top of Upheaval Dome. I dreamed of riding the V-slick again and again into the dark heart of a rapid. I dreamed of a life alone inside the Land Behind the Rocks.

“Christ almighty,” I heard Henry say, “did you see the way Josh passed that semi?”

The sun beat down through the windows and the sweat poured out of me and I couldn’t tell Thea’s breathing from my own. In my dream everything around us was soft and bright, like water.
There are mornings you feel might never die, when the wind is down and the sun's come out and the quick incessant tick of rain's cut off and no reminders of what can finish things in a wink. So you stand at the door of Fat Jack's, your red waiter's shirt open at the throat, one hand creeping up your back like a friend's hand whose lover's other lovers have both closed early: you feel it telling your skin something as you look out into the mild November morning that might be Easter, the storm over and the grave gaping at the big surprise that hope is, while Mozart comes flying from a nearby window, fresh as ever on wings, uptilted, of meerschaum and frittered light.

Happening

It almost always happens by accident, never when you're tense and expectant, waiting all day in hiding for it, field-glasses ready to take every detail in—not then, but when you're relaxed and turned away from the whole thing, begun to dander inland and thinking of the twists your own life is taking, then is when the marsh harrier bursts out of nowhere flying low and very fast, skimming the astonished heads-up of two herons and lethally flaring over a brace of mallards in the brown pool, who duck under marsh hay their own colour and cower there, hearing their hearts quacking like mad. It's gone then, while you're still fumbling for the binoculars, leaving you with just one trace—a black flash, white spots before your eyes—and a bare tree shaking where the hawk went keen and headlong into it.
Or as a woman fond of wearing hats opined: "Chic chapeau!" catching me pensive in the microwave fluorescence of the pharmacy, buying a pack of red Trojans, unsure where a certain amour was leading, but not above precautions. Handy,

a hat under such conditions, to shield the shoe-ward glance, the muffled smile that hints toward a bald indiscretion. Being bald yourself, you would commiserate with the unfurnished apartment of my eye-to-eye with her, slashed by a brim of voluptuous gloom where a shadow tranced my cheekbones. At such moments a hat can make all the difference, since cat-like, we are creatures invigorated by notions of dignity. So on film Marie Lloyd became "an expressive figure" for the British lower classes,

and Ray’s stories tore down more than motorcycles in rented living rooms across America to announce the sinking middle and working classes. An expressive figure, you seem to say, lends dignity to moments alone in the stairwell, or emboldens our solitude when love, even at one’s elbow, is mostly craving and window-gazing. If dignity were not precarious, we would be worth less. “There goes my dignity,” shrugged the Irish musician Joe Burke, at O’Toole’s one midnight, pulling a drunken mate’s foot out of his accordion. Dazed as I am by hemlock shadow, it is foreign to encounter the bald intensity of your nearly criminal sunlight, so white it drives out yellow, the way concrete in sunlight cousins marble. Daylight, when it is that white, is night’s apostasy—as too much loneliness companions itself. A day with you and I am inwardly shouting: "I suffer like a door!"
for those women in your paintings who could not think to shout, ignored in train cars or offices at night. Their despair wasn’t chic then or now. On their behalf we must swing pressure to the moment because the present is, as you insist, clean and tearing enough to hold back the overhang of future. But how relieved I am!

to be at the fountain’s center with you. The gush and sparkle, so silent here—I am buxomly relieved and clumsily gorgeous, my haunches at a bay mare sway—as if to say “Take that, Degas!” And what would you make of the starved-down magazine waifs of my time, these blitzkrieg-of-the-spirit inhalations? Aren’t we as perishingly alive and nose-to-nose with the unutterable, as fatal to ourselves as they?

Such a long way from the counter to the purse with these red Trojans. My hand so below, so at bottom, so cloud-worn and muted by... solitude trails me off.

You see how easily two puritans slip into the sensual with their blinds half pulled? A bluish gleam is blushing me toward you. Could this moment be the calm, desirous darkening where realism and impressionism overlap? Categories, you see, like us, my not-so-sweet, are simply errands. To be

fulfilled, yet transitory. And now, my banister, my bald-pated blank abode, allow me the full gold of this neither-nor in which we do not meet. This is eternity—with my purse snapped shut, its armory in place. Ah, my glance, my pall-like lids of homage as I pass you, braced there at the counter above an open book.

Soon, too soon, we will gallop our particles of “racing electric impulses” under the viaduct. But first, that tonic blast of your sunlight, a primitive canon to the heart. Sultry and expectant, I doff my hat to you, unfurling Modigliani brows.
Cunning Stunts

Marooned in family life again: these stories always start the same, end in heartbreak. Dad the Bastard. Sleeping with Sis. The night that Mom did something crazy that hurt our feelings. We are the ants of the family, carrying our tiny loads.

What’s the difference between the circus and the Rockettes? Uncle Wolf asks, and Mom hisses him quiet. Uncle Wolf invented the dirty joke, the rubber dog turd. He gambles. He drinks, bourbon and ginger ale, the occasional Manhattan. This is meant to be affectionate. He lives in Baltimore, a tiny apartment he shares with Aunt Angela. Nobody knows if they’re married. She’s six-two, a stewardess, fifty-something, a bottle blonde. Off duty, she dresses like a whore from 1958. We practice the word whore in the basement while they carve the lamb. We steal his cigarette butts and smoke them up.

I love my family, as I am supposed to. That first Thanksgiving—I wasn’t born yet, nor were you—Mom dropped the turkey coming out of the oven and it exploded on the kitchen floor. Mom says, I tell you, that was one time I was grateful for Wolf. He kept the drinks coming while I tried to salvage it. They were all so loaded, nobody noticed a thing. Thank God for gravy. This is the part where I confess: the night I caught Wolf with his pants down in Sis’s room, the creepy gray color of his skin. Sorry, it never happened. He never beat up Angela, or vice-versa, as far as we knew. He did borrow $6500 from my father once and never paid it back but that was my father’s fault. He never should have loaned it, everybody said so. Wolf was innocent. Dad was always wrong.

The night that Mom did something crazy that hurt our feelings: she threw him out in the snow for telling a dirty joke, then broke down sobbing in the kitchen. She was inconsolable. The serial number on his forearm, smeared blue ink, Star of David.

This is a dinner, cocktail couples, my father’s boss. Angela’s away, working the Indianapolis run out of Friendship International. Wolf’s at loose ends. In his brown suit, brown shoes and overcoat, his three-day shadow he arrives. (It isn’t like him to
improvise. Some instinct for the wrong time, the wrong place. Something loves a train wreck.) Dad the Bastard tries to turn him from the door. Flecks of snow in what’s left of Wolf’s hair. The taxi deliberating in the street outside, snow in the headlights. Solemn as a funeral horse it finally drives away.

At least let him call a taxi, Mom says. At least give him a drink. My father’s boss is watching. Sure, sure, my father says, and introduces him around. (The usual parental mix, anger bubbling under congeniality, like ancient tar pits. So nice to see you.) Then:

Wolf starts to warm up, and the smell leaks out of his suit. (He pees in there, the children say.) Watching from the stairway, we catch the drift of his complex smelly stink: cigar smoke, anchovies, sleepless nights, unlovability, feet, baldness. The important guests search the corners of the room, looking for the chemical plant, the door to the flophouse, the grizzly den, hidden garbage truck. Then everybody… looks… at… Wolf.

What would you do? The guests are staring through you but you were born a performer. Gotta sing, gotta dance. A glass of whiskey and ginger ale in your shaking hand, for some reason it seems like a good time for a joke, a time to laugh and a time to mourn, a time to embrace and to refrain from embracing, a time to say the word cunt in mixed company, including my father’s boss’s wife. You grin around the room, awaiting the laugh. My mother—your niece, survivor—emerges from the hallway, weeping, bearing your vile overcoat.

The bum’s rush, is the technical term. Out you go, into the dark suburban street, Indian country to a city rat like you; and you go where? We never see you standing again, though we attend your funeral, lined up in our Sunday best like Caroline and John-John.

This particular night, Dad spots us on the staircase. Get to bed! he shouts at us (thought it’s only eight-thirty, we’re in our rights). He shouts our mother’s name, though we can all hear her weeping. We look past his shoulder, see the thin lips of his boss wrinkling, this unseemly… He wasn’t born a bastard. Dada, baby pictures: we are the ants of the family. Meanwhile it’s off to bed, the lingering smell of Mom’s emotion (scorched, like the air coming off the ironing board), pot roast, every time it rains it smells
like pot roast and Lemon Pledge, potpourri. Marooned in family life again: these stories always end the same, ashtrays, coasters, silent butlers, frozen corn, ancient injuries. Would you like to see my scar? Sis has got a nice one but Mom’s is bigger. And of course Dad. And of course Dad. And of course Dad. And of course Dad.
THE MAN WHO CANNOT CONTROL HIS BODY

is in the window naked across the street.

A pair of falling birds cast out from the quiet of their nest, his hands shuddering, shudder, in the air.

An emptiness between his shoulderblades, An emptiness between a white space a space between his featherless wings, a mold asking to be filled with the red clay between his featherless wings a mold asking to be filled from which horseshoe crabs are pressed with the red clay from which horseshoe crabs are born, are pressed.

He will not look in the mirror, will not look at himself in the shape of his bones cannot stand the shape of bones leaning against skin, flutes tarnishing in secret beneath a thin white sheet.

flutes tarnish He sits here beneath a thin white sheet. on his bed, He sits here every night his legs twisted tightly around each other, his head drifting up
twisted around
drifting slowly away.
He struggles to pull it back struggles not to think of the fullness of an apple down, of the wholeness he feels not to think of the apple, slowly of the wholeness he only feels in his sleep.
Bobby Valentin’s Newsletter

Introduction

I am pleased to announce that I am walking without crutches again. These are dark times. It is thanks only to your support that I have endured this with a minimum of pain. Granted, it’s hard to tell what the minimum is here. I might have a whole different concept of “minimum” right now had support been forthcoming from all parties. Cindy Speyer, for instance. It is not commonly known that, the night after my accident, Cindy Speyer came to me in the corner of Joe Thompson’s living room (where I was icing my heel) and told me she needed to speak to me in private. She helped me across the room and dragged me into Joe’s closet. No one was looking. We lay down beneath the hanging clothes. She undressed. I suggested she hang her clothes up on hangers. I was joking. She did it anyway. Without a word she undid my fly.

Afterwards she promised to come over to my place later on and massage my legs. She never came. I waited for several days. A week later I called Cindy’s house. Her roommate answered. She told me that Cindy had moved to another city. That very night I saw Cindy at Rat Bar, drinking shots of Wild Turkey with Sarah Johnson, my ex. I know they saw me—how can you ignore a man on crutches?—but you wouldn’t have thought so by the way they were trying so hard not to see me. I ask: why is it such a big deal to come to me, to ease my pain?

You will recall that I first sustained the injury to my heel when I fell—or jumped—or was pushed—off Joe Thompson’s porch at a party on June 17. There are many stories. Some have sworn it was the porch itself that caused me to fall—that it was listing with the weight of all the people standing on the south end of it. A rotting support beam, an odd impulse, a malignant elbow? At the time, Cindy Speyer had enough compassion to come over and comfort me, and for a few moments that sufficed. I regret that with the passing of time these affections were somehow lost.
I am living in the Western United States, shacked up with a woman who until recently had never slept with someone from the East. Our horizons have been mutually broadened. We like to get shitty every night of the week: whiskey and coke, bourbon and coke, bourbon...

At bars I attract transients who’ve already tried talking to everyone else. One evening I spoke with a man who’d fallen out of the back of a semi earlier in the day. There was a gob of dried blood stuck to his cheek, and his thumb was severed. “Yeah, I just got out of a coma. I didn’t go to the hospital or nothing, because, well, first I was blacked out, and I wasn’t going anywhere, and then when I woke up I figured, all right, I’ll go over to Claim Jumper’s. I guess I haven’t yet determined what the long-term effects of this decision will be.”

My new girl came up behind me and wrapped her arms around my waist. She licked my ear. I studied the blood on the man’s face, which resembled sealing wax, and gave my undivided attention to his story. My girl stuck her hands in the back of my jeans, and I swatted them away. She slipped off to play pinball.

The man said, “I’m only drinking hot chocolate tonight, on account of my coma. The hot chocolate is free. Hey, did you check out that ass?” He pointed at my new girl’s ass. She was playing pinball. She rotated her shoulders and thrust her pelvis into the machine. I stared at the blood on the man’s face more intently. “I met a girl here one night, she works over at the motel. I went to see her at work the next day, but they said she wasn’t there, even though her car was parked out front. I said, well her car’s parked out front. Will she be coming back? They said she wasn’t there. I can’t understand people sometimes.” The man pulled up the sleeve of his shirt and showed me his watch. “See this watch? It’s a Seiko, a real good watch. I found it out in the back of that semi today. Not bad, huh?”

Later my new girl and I made it in the bathroom of the Claim Jumper’s Casino, on the steps of the courthouse, along the river, sixteen times from one end of the bridge to the other, on the top of some scaffolding that was up against the old hotel downtown. Half the time I didn’t bother to pull down my pants. Neither of us got off. When we tried to climb down from the
scaffolding my new girl's hand slipped on the metal cross piping, and she became scared. I wedged my feet in the cracks between the wooden planks and lowered her to the ground. When we got back to my place we didn't want to do it anymore. Disappointed, we sank into bed. My new girl lay a heavy thigh across my legs and burrowed her head into my armpit. When I woke up at five-thirty she was on the other side of the bed, curled up, facing the wall. I tapped her on the shoulder, and she rolled back to me.

Quarterly Report
An update on Bobby Valentin's efforts to retrieve his possessions:

**A Plymouth State varsity sweatshirt, appropriated by Lisa Boudreau: I was walking along the esplanade, watching the Labor Day fireworks, and I ran into Lisa in the parking lot of Burbeck's, standing near the port-o-sans. She was wearing my Plymouth State varsity sweatshirt. "Hello, Bobby," she said.

Hello Bobby? I told her, hey, nice sweatshirt. She looked down at it. "Thanks," she said. "Uh, is this yours? I can't remember."

I asked her how many other guys she dated went to Plymouth State. She rolled her eyes and said, "I guess you want it back. Look, I'll bring it by next week."

Yeah, I said. I'm sure you'll come by. I'll be seeing that sweatshirt again real soon.

"Well what the hell? It's cold, I don't have a jacket. I'm not even wearing anything underneath, Bobby. I can't give it back right now."

She had a point. But I knew that if I didn't get it then I'd never have it back. That night I was wearing a different sweatshirt. It said Monet in the 90's; it was white, with a smear of green and blue lily-pad in the middle. It was from the exhibition that came to the MFA a couple of years ago. I got it from Cindy Speyer, who I think got it as a present from an old boyfriend. I liked the sweatshirt I was wearing, but my Plymouth State shirt had sentimental value to me, and I wanted it back.

I pulled off the Monet in the 90's sweatshirt and said, here, you can borrow this one and bring it back to me tomorrow. I want that sweatshirt back now, please.

Lisa held the Monet sweatshirt by the sleeve out in front of
her; you’d think I’d just handed her a dead pigeon. “God, you’re a fucking freak.” She looked around. “Where am I supposed to do this?”

Lisa, there are sixteen toilets lined up here. Pick one.

She made a face. “Great,” she said. She walked to an empty stall and got in.

It was a cold night. I stood in the dusty parking lot in my undershirt, shivering. A few seconds later this skinny guy in a grease-stained Aamco repair shirt came out of the john. He had a stringy moustache. He came over to where I was standing and began looking around, his hands in the pockets of his jeans. He caught my eye. “Yo, what’s up?” he said, nodding his head. I nodded back. Cool shirt, I said. He nodded his head again.

Lisa came out wearing the Monet sweatshirt. She threw my sweatshirt at me, and I put it on. I smelled perfume as I pulled it over my face. Lisa was subdued. The skinny guy said, “What the hell is this?” “Nothing,” Lisa said. “I’ll explain later.” To me she said, “I’ll bring this by next week.” She looked down at her chest. “Hmm. It’s a pretty cool sweatshirt.”

That was a few weeks ago. I don’t think I’ll see the Monet sweatshirt again. It’s too bad, because it had a certain amount of value to me, too.

**That Al Green record I can never remember the name of:**

I started dating Sarah Johnson two winters ago. We got to know each other at a party I was having at my place. It was an after-hours party, the sort of party we were always throwing after the bars closed. It was January, a couple of weeks after New Year’s, and we were carrying on as if it was all still a holiday—drinking on Thursday nights, beer and omelets on Sundays while we watched the playoffs. We did that every year, trying to prolong the party, making it maybe as far as the Superbowl, maybe into the early weeks of the first Sunday NBA broadcasts, before we started calling in sick on Mondays, sometimes Mondays and Tuesdays. Sometimes people lost their jobs, and left town. A fun time of year, a time of transition.

I would have never become interested in Sarah had she not taken the stereo hostage that night. It was three in the morning. She started putting on albums I didn’t know I owned: Johnny Mathis, The Troggs, Curtis Mayfield, songs from Fiddler on the Roof. Every time she put on something different someone would
shout, What is this crap? Finally people turned to me, the host, for satisfaction. I went to talk to Sarah, who was swaying in front of the turntable. Her eyes were closed. People are getting restless, I said. I think we should play something different.

“You don’t like the music?” she asked, snapping her fingers.

“Well, I think it’s fine.

“OK. It’s your house, isn’t it?”

I sat down again. We listened to Barry White, Edith Piaf, the Star Wars soundtrack, John Williams conducting the Electric Moog Orchestra. People grumbled. Where did these records come from? I asked myself.

I sat and watched my friends leave—one at a time, in groups of three and four. By four-thirty Sarah and I were the only ones left. She had found the Al Green record, and was playing the third song over and over:

*Lett me be the one you come running tooooo
IIIII’ve never been uh-untrue

She continued to dance, and I sat and watched her. The sun started to come up. She danced while I made coffee and toast. When I handed her a mug and plate she stopped dancing and said, “Oh, thanks. Hey, can we eat out on the porch?”

It’s twenty degrees outside, I told her.

“Oh, yeah. It’s just that I’m so hot right now. It’s OK, I’ll sit here.” She sat on the floor by the stereo and began eating.

She ate the toast, and drank three cups of coffee. I drank coffee, but I didn’t eat anything. I watched her eat just as I had watched her dance, with no thought toward my other guests.

In early spring Sarah and I had a fight. She took Al Green off the turntable, opened the front door, and hurled the record across the street. I watched it sail over the telephone wires and skip off the roof of my neighbor’s house. It knifed into some bushes. Sarah left. I searched for about an hour, but couldn’t find it. A few days later I went to look again. I found it nestled in the shrub branches beneath my neighbor’s bathroom window. I pulled up my sleeve and reached in to get it. As I was extracting it from the bushes the window opened. My neighbor appeared above me. “Yeah,” he said. “I’ve been wondering how the hell that got there. Who is it?”
He nodded. “Great stuff. Think it will still play?”

I didn’t find out until the next weekend, when Sarah and I made up. She started coming over to my place again, playing the records that may or may not have been mine. Al Green with his philosophy of love was, as usual, a popular choice.

**The ceramic picture frame Sarah gave me last Christmas, which I really liked, even if I did say, What the fuck is this? when I unwrapped it—the one she took back last August: I kept a picture of Sarah and me in it. Sarah took it back because she didn’t want me to keep a picture of her. She came to my apartment on a Saturday. A hot day, the type of hot that drove the people on my block into their basements. They’d hide down there with their radios and pitchers of Kool-Aid and watch for the legs that scurried by the windows above their heads. Any legs seen on those days belonged to outsiders—without a doubt, since we were all inside. I suppose those sweltering August afternoons were our one good opportunity to gather some intelligence about the “foreign element” in our neighborhood. I liked to lounge in the laundry piled in front of the water heater. The water heater was cylindrical, and white, with pipes elbowing out of the top in all directions. The previous tenant had painted NASA lengthwise along the cylinder in red enamel. I reclined back in the soiled clothes, breathed their mustiness, and looked through the basement window. The legs always appeared from out of nowhere; I never heard the footsteps because my basement was soundproof. It was impossible to focus on the scene outside for very long because practically nothing happened. My eyes strayed to other things: the insulation peeling off the ducts; forgotten objects that had never belonged to me, the rubber clown with tooth marks in it, a child’s squeeze toy-turned-dog’s chew toy, gathering dust beneath the workbench; parabolas of moisture along the top edge of the concrete. When someone did walk past I caught it out of the corner of my eye, only looked up in time to see the window empty once again, to retain only an imagined memory of the legs, whether male or female unknown to me.

I happened to be looking out the window when Sarah walked by. Her thin calves and the hem of her green sun dress cut across the telephone pole and mail box I’d been admiring. I liked their
shapes. Sarah was coming to my house. I was lucky I saw her. From the basement I would not have heard her knock. I ran up the stairs and opened the front door before she had finished climbing the steps. She hadn’t come with anything to say. We sat in the front room for a few minutes. She slouched on the hassock with her head in her left hand, while she shook her right hand up and down, intending to make some point, but all she could say was, “I don’t understand.” I urged her toward comprehension with my own hands, touching my chest and making sweeping gestures in her direction, had I invented sign language I would have created such a gesture, it would have meant, What is it? And I was repeating, I don’t understand either, I don’t understand. What is it? I asked.

Finally she said, “You have no depth of feeling.” I didn’t understand. Is that the problem? I asked. She didn’t answer. I became quite tired then. I watched as she shook her head and stood up to go. I switched from a sitting position to a reclining position on the couch. Sarah saw the picture of us in the ceramic frame, resting on a wooden apple crate. Sarah’s mother had taken the picture on the day of someone’s christening—Sarah’s niece, I think. We had gone to the christening hung over. Somehow the mere fact we were being such good citizens—feeling so crappy, and yet still getting out of bed and showering and dressing up and going to talk to Sarah’s relatives—thrilled us. Sarah was wearing a black and white checkered retro-style dress; I was wearing a striped sportcoat I’d once found draped over a garbage can in town. In the photo our heads were pressed together, and we were standing in front of a fountain. We were laughing; we’d been pretending to butt heads, like goats. When we first saw the picture after it came back from the developers I said, It’s very retro. It seems as if it could have been taken thirty years ago. This is good, because it means that it will also be difficult to place our love in a particular historical context.

She took the photograph, with the frame. Months later, as I was preparing to leave for good, I found the frame in my mailbox. The picture was in it. At one time it had been torn in half, then taped back together. I suspect at first she’d wanted to hold onto the image of herself, but had then changed her mind. It was fairly well doctored, only a thin line visible between us.
My watch, which I hadn't noticed I'd lost until I got it back: Cindy Speyer returned my watch a few weeks after Joe Thompson's party. She came to my place. We stood in my front door for a few minutes trying not to say anything dumb. In the end we agreed it had been a mistake.

Six months later, when he was moving out, Joe found Cindy's Monet in the 90's sweatshirt gathering dust in the back of his closet. He asked me if I wanted it. I said, Sure, why not?

Today, Tomorrow, and Beyond

I've taken to calling my new girlfriend Cat Brain. Many subjects interest her. Whenever I tell her something new—informative things, mainly: the best whiskey is at least twelve years old, glow-worms glow in order to attract prey—she replies, "That's interesting." Once I was telling her about Sherman's march in Georgia, about how his soldiers dismantled the railroad and bent the rails around tree trunks. It was demoralizing for the confederates to go back to their plantations and see big iron bows tied onto the trees. She told me she thought that was interesting. I asked her, Why do you think that's interesting? She thought a minute, then said, "Because it's historical. It's a historical look at our nation." My new girl placed second in the state beauty pageant last year. This means she does not give talks at the public schools, does not ride in her own car at the homecoming parade, does not appear in television ads for literacy campaigns. Bartenders never suggest maybe she's had more to drink than a state pageant winner with a reputation to uphold should. These days my new girl is maybe drinking more than anyone should. She curls up to me in the late afternoons and becomes sullen, and for a few brief moments in my life I keep my mouth shut. She's taking it step by step, picking up the pieces, trying to look forward.

O Green Garden of Plants

So I found another girl. She was young, and perfect, a rebellious and beautiful young woman who wore suede boots and clung to the wrong crowd until I wrenched her away from it. Failing first with charm, then with reason, I finally seduced her with my tremendous self-pity. She agreed to be mine, with some reservations, which she communicated to me in the form of a typed list:
As we lay in bed one night I tried to teach her something about distance. I once lived an ocean apart from you, I said. “Is this an intimate secret or an impractical arrangement?”

She sighed. “So what are you saying?”


Well, I mostly hung out in a place called Le Jardin des Plantes. “Ah, yes. French. What does that mean?”

It means, Garden of Plants. “Hmm. Seems redundant.”

Redundant? I said. Yes, I suppose it is. Say, did you know that Emerson had a revelation in the Jardin des Plantes? His first wife had just died, and...

“Oh, no you don’t,” she said, cutting me off with a karate chop to the pillow. “Hey. Did you know this is the Garden of Plants State? There isn’t a real Garden of Plants, per se, but we’ve recreated a pretty good one. It’s surrounded by wet glass walls. I won the Miss Garden of Plants State pageant last year. I’m the current title holder. Actually, I’m the unofficial title holder. We hold a separate contest at Claim Jumper’s—an underground state pageant—when the real state pageant is going on. They give an award each year to ‘The Woman Who Is Most Able To Drive Any Given Man Insane With Her Apparent Indifference to Everything He Does.’ Have you heard of it?”

It seems familiar, somehow, I said. I moved my hand down her back. So have I told you I’m trying to achieve a new depth of feeling, just for you?

She looked at the ceiling and shrugged.

I asked her to tell me about the pageant.

“It’s an underground thing. If you know about it, you must be pretty hip. Hey. Do you want to go?”
Where?
“To the Garden of Plants.”

The next day she took me downtown to the Municipal Garden of Plants, a vast atrium crawling with African violets, hyacinths, zucchini squashes. “Be careful not to lose your way,” the attendant said with a sinister chuckle. It was steamy and damp; the tang of Miracle Grow stung my sinuses. I lost my way twice. I lost the new girl. I needed a drink badly. My cheeks were twitching, my limbs trembling. I had to wrap my hands around the stalk of a rubber tree plant to keep from collapsing onto the cement. The rubber tree wiggled like a fire hose as I convulsed uncontrollably. I counted the cracks in the buckling concrete floor, trying to still myself. I let go and staggered under the dripping verdure until I came back to the attendant, who stood at the glass gate, chuckling. I punched him in the face. In the parking lot I found the new girl asleep behind the wheel of her car. I pulled her out and left her dozing on the asphalt and I got into the car and drove, I drove until I reached the dirty streets of a new place, drove until I crashed into a phone booth and knew I had reached the city. The city.

This, I believe, qualifies as something that was lost, a possession I have yet to retrieve, leaving it beyond classification, with neither genus nor species to go on.

Our Goals
From time to time it’s important, I think, to talk a little bit about what the purpose is here. I am Bobby Valentin. I’ve sunk so low I no longer enjoy the simple things—spotting a pretty girl at the record store, or going out to the bars and checking out the girls with the nice hair and the necklaces, smelling their smells, the powdered skin, the blue eyes, the legs, the...

Erratum
I would like to say that, yes, I was humping the New Cat Girl when Cat Brain stormed into my apartment looking for her things. Bobby Valentin, I feel, somehow, should live up to the accusation. But I was alone, and almost asleep. “I’ve heard from many sources that you’ve been fucking every pageant winner in town!”
Cat Brain screamed at me, as she scooped clothes, both hers and mine, from the floor.

I sat up against the wall. Many sources, I said. That's interesting.

"Oh really," she said bitterly. "Why do you think that's interesting?"

Look, I said. This isn't entirely about pageants, is it?

"You fucker, Bobby Valentin!" she said, winding up and thumping me hard in the throat with my belt buckle, before she stole the belt, and my shoes, and a shirt. She stormed back out.

It is with a crippled voice I wish to say a few things about Bobby Valentin. I can't carry on about this man I do not know. I can only expand the search.

We are Bobby Valentin. It should be understood, however, that in assuming one role we do not rule out the possibility that we are somebody else.

Restatement of Our Goals
But now it occurs to me that it should be made clear that this is not, after all, Bobby Valentin's Newsletter. For the sake of I should decide on a new focus. Perhaps something closer to the point. Something like

SARAH JOHNSON'S NEWSLETTER

A Letter From Our New CEO
I'm probably not the best person to ask. I haven't seen Bobby in months. I know he's living out West somewhere, but the few things I've heard about him, I've heard second-hand. He's off drugs, I think, but he's still drinking. He recently got into some trouble, too, from what I understand. I guess he was seeing Miss Something-or-other for a while; they got into a fight, he threw her down on the ground in some parking lot and broke her collarbone. I don't know whatever came of all that, whether it's settled or not. Some locals witnessed the whole thing; I heard they roughed him up pretty bad. Maybe being beaten up is the least of his worries right now. As I say, I'm not the best person to talk to. Joe Thompson hears from Bobby from time to time, he's probably got all the facts.
But if you are just looking for anything, I suppose I could start from the beginning.

Bobby and I met at a party at Joe Thompson's apartment. I knew Joe from work. I'd never really liked him, but I didn't know many people when I first moved to New York, and it felt nice to go out with a crowd sometimes, to be asked. Late that night, after the party had started to dwindle, Bobby introduced himself and asked if I wanted to do some coke. I had done it a few times, and it wasn't often that a handsome man offered to share drugs with me, so I said sure. We went into the bathroom and snorted three lines each. Bobby told me he sometimes pretended that he was inhaling powdered glass, just to freak himself out. It freaked me out.

By the time we went back to the party everyone had gone. Joe was sitting with his head thrown back over the top edge of the couch, passed out cold. He hadn't even loosened his tie. Bobby took me to his place in a taxi. We cut up the rest of his coke on a framed photograph of Grace Kelly and stayed up until ten in the morning. Bobby told me he was a Buddhist saint who had come back to earth to alleviate our suffering. I became irritated with him, but tried not to show it. I nodded at everything he said. He said, "What you need to transcend, Sarah, is this fixation on cause and effect. Things happen independently of other things, and things happen as a result of everything. These concepts are one in the same. The idea that certain causes produce certain predicted effects is the root of all suffering." He banged me hard that morning, driving the headboard into the wall so fast that the bed table vibrated; I watched as two drinking glasses crept across the table top and fell onto the floor. Objects in the room seemed to hop up and down all around us—milk crates filled with books, plants, the dresser, the dresser jumping up from the ground, a stick of deodorant, an alarm clock bouncing on top of the dresser. Everything, it seemed, was cause and effect. I thought I heard the walls singing. It went on for two hours, and I didn't come, and I bled—but still, I never wanted it to end. When finally Bobby rolled off of me, gasping, everything stopped moving, the singing hushed, everything was still and quiet and dead.
Bobby and I went for long walks throughout the city. He pointed out things I’d never have thought twice about on my own. There was the night all the homeless people in Chelsea were walking in the streets wearing homburgs. There was the bathroom in Cafe Jones, where someone had written the thirty-nine steps toward the construction of a noiseless engine across an entire wall. I sometimes imagined that Bobby created these phenomena, that he was rebuilding the city in his own image.

“The trees,” he told me once, during a Sunday stroll in the park, “are like women. No, one tree is not like one woman, but like many women, like all women. The large branches TREMBLE in the wind to caress me, and from each branch extend an infinite number of smaller branches, with different movements, different touches…” I picked up a rock to throw at the back of Bobby’s head, but as he moved onto different subjects—the buxom pond, the garish, succubiestian sky lap dancing above us—my jealousy receded. I let the stone fall from my hand onto the path and put my arm through his.

In the spring I took Bobby to meet my family in Bronxville. He talked to our dogs, he washed the dishes, he told us he loved children and Christmas. Earlier in the week he had told me that holidays reminded him of The Mikado, which he hated, and that children kicked him in the shins whenever he talked to them, but I kept quiet. He told cute, happy jokes to my mother and wry, cynical jokes to my father. He was a hit. By summer I tried to get him to come up every weekend. When we stayed in the city on weekends he almost always ended up with Joe and Joe’s friends. They’d go up to Amsterdam and 110th to buy drugs from some guy who dealt out of a phone booth. Some mornings Bobby got so sick I thought he was going to die. His vomit was gummy and blue, his face was grey. He sat on the couch with a wastebasket between his legs and struggled to breathe. “I can’t swallow,” he said. I rubbed his back and told him it was OK. And I thought about leaving the city. I swore to myself that I would quit my job and go someplace new with him, start over, if it would only get him away from this life. I wasn’t disapproving. I don’t know why I would disapprove, but Bobby sometimes said that anyone else
would have given him a hard time about it. I wasn’t disapproving, or disappointed, or angry, only sad.

Bobby went to Europe to get away from New York. He left in winter. I was standing by the taxi in my undershirt, freezing, and I was crying. Bobby held my shoulders and said, “Everything’s going to be OK, young champion. There will only be an ocean between us.” When he got into the car I turned and walked back to my building, lines of tear water hardening on my face. I couldn’t look back.

Postscript of A Young Champion
I don’t know. I’ve heard that prolonged drug use will sometimes cause people to lose their ability to identify and define certain situations. Reality becomes chaos to them—chronology becomes meaningless, the identities of other people become confused, or misplaced. Environments from certain phases of their lives are transposed onto others. To compensate for this loss of structure the mind creates a different order, one so complex that the minutest details are accounted for. Bobby would probably call this “Inner Evolution,” the perfection of his Buddhist philosophy, but I don’t know, the Buddhists I’ve met all seem to have some kind of a grip.

I have no idea if Bobby slept around when we were seeing each other. I do know he went to Paris in January, and stopped writing to me in February. I felt myself become older each day. When I heard he’d come back to America I didn’t know what to think. I figured I’d just wait for him to call me when he wanted to. The last time I’d seen him was out on the street that winter night, the night he called me a young champion and I walked away thinking it was the saddest thing I had ever heard.

Tough Shit, but for Whom?
We are receptive to all suggestions, ideas, comments, pronouncements, theories, innuendo, delusions or hoopla relevant to these pages. We do regret that we are no longer accepting anything by way of advice or criticism from one Sarah Johnson, for reasons known well enough to her and to ourselves. Sarah made her position quite clear when she tossed a potato masher hand grenade through the front window of our downtown offices one evening.
last April. The office space—along with an IBM Selectrix and a ceramic picture frame—was obliterated. We cannot condone this response; in fact, it is the opinion of this newsletter that reactions such as this one, which stray dangerously close to something like “social upheaval,” are abhorrent and disturbing. It may be the luxury of the intellectual classes to admire the principles or the underlying passion behind such revolutionary tactics, but the editors of this newsletter do not share that luxury.

I’m sure Sarah would be placated if only we printed stories about kittens. I’ve no doubt she’d be pleased if we spun a cheerful yarn about butterflies. But this is not our purpose. It is not even something that adheres to the accepted guidelines of a written newsletter. Our main obligation is to convey periodical reports of the status of many facets of our organization—business matters, as well as social activities designed to mitigate the stress of the work environment on our employees, like softball games, face-painting, intramural sessions of the old slap and tickle—in a dependable and punctual manner (with obvious allowances made for the time it takes to receive all the pieces back from the contributing staff, who are an unruly and incestuous bunch, always needing to collaborate on the simplest articles, always bitching about deadlines). The newsletter is designed to inform a specific sector of the work force about matters that are important to them. These are our goals.

A Letter From the County Lock-up
Dear Baby,

I have lost track of the time. There is no such thing as day, as opposed to night, inside the joint. There is only permanent dimness, the shadows of the bars across my face and across the mattress, shadows that do not shift, and a light down the hall that is never turned off. Is there a guard sitting there, reading? Are there men playing cards? Perhaps I am not in jail, but in the

1Actually, a jar of La Victoria jalapeno peppers, with the Barsamian’s price sticker still on it. And it was Bobby Valentin’s porch window—back when he was living on Jensen, which is not downtown but on the south side, near the depot.
2Rabid kittens
3Poisonous butterflies
basement of a mobster’s house, being held for some fuck-up I can’t remember—a crime against the mob, no doubt: I spat on Jimmy “Spats” O'Reilly’s shiny new spats, while we were standing on the corner of Washington and Mass Ave; maybe I looked too intently into the eyes of Li Ping’s girl at Wally’s Jazz Club last night. Does the mob have its own jails? Its own Mob Justice? I have no idea why I’m in here.

I regret the loss of intimacy more than anything. Try as I might, I cannot escape the loneliness of this place. I have devised methods of alleviating the pain, of finding that release I feel when...

But perhaps this is not the time to be delicate.

I jerk off constantly, as much as I can get away with before the other inmates threaten to kill me. When I masturbate I think of you, so I suppose you could say I am thinking of you constantly, too. You hold the highest place in my thoughts right now. I hope you consider it an honor. My first hour here I masturbated three times; I thought of what you did for my penis that night I fractured my heel, when we sprawled out on the floor of Joe Thompson’s closet (I even put my boots underneath my lower back, trying to recapture the moment); I imagined you dancing the way you always used to dance late at night after we’d fucked—wearing my T-shirt, naked from the waist down, your sticky blonde bush swaying like the pendulum of a clock to that Al Green record I’ll probably never hear again. As I loved myself the bedsprings sang along like crickets; in the corridor the other men shouted and cheered. (The first two times; the third time they ranted and raved, and banged their metal drinking cups against the bars.) In the end it wasn’t enough, I could find no release. I went for heightened simulation. I tried many things. I tore a slit in my mattress and tried to fuck it, but in the end I only hurt myself—the padding is mined with stray, uninsulated metal springs. I tried to get something on with the sink/toilet. True, it is cold, and made of tin. I was drawn to its shape more than anything. The space between the spigot and the rim of the bowl is almost tight enough for my personal needs, and by wrapping a sock around the spigot I made it perfect, really. But ultimately it was difficult to find a comfortable squat from which to start humping away. Half-standing, half-kneeling? No. Late last night,
in desperation, I bartered away my copy of Archie Digest and my last Heath Bar to the man in the adjoining cell, in exchange for a pair of nail clippers. I spent half the night digging, prying apart the craggy mortar and cement in the rear wall, chiseling and smoothing out a hole that I might be able to stick my penis into. Entry was difficult—it is fairly low-grade cement, difficult to shape into a pussy—so I took my other sock and wore it like a condom, which worked, for a while, until I tried for more penetration and ended up pushing myself off of the wall and landing on the ground, nearly breaking my ass. Exhausted, I fell into a fitful sleep, and dreamed about myself, naked, running in circles in an effort to lay hold of my own behind and bugger it soundly. The whole time I was anxious I had run out of socks. I awoke sweating and distressed, unsatisfied even in sleep.

In the morning you post bail. There are no things that need to be returned to me. I am wearing the shirt I wore when I was booked, wrinkled now, unbuttoned at the cuffs. I walk through a door into a long corridor, and I walk down the corridor and go through another door, and I am outside. It is morning, and grey, and yet to the east there are orange and deep blue strips of cloud suspended above the smokestacks. Perhaps it is smoke. In my dress shoes I walk out across the gravel lot in the chill morning alone, and I am released.

A Letter From Europe
And so I tried to live in Europe, and I squandered my savings, lost twenty pounds, developed a scalp condition, got addicted to smack, kicked the smack habit, got addicted to Benzedrine, quit popping Bennies on an hourly basis, quit popping Bennies on a daily basis, wrecked the car of a woman who for a brief time thought I was decent, drank pastis at the Algerian bar, pointed my finger at the Algerians and called them all “Cunts,” ate a box of French crayons, shit in technicolor, got the shit kicked out of me, ever-darkening degrees of red pouring out of my ears, lost my voice, stopped talking, stopped writing letters to my friends, stopped writing letters to my mother, yelled at my mother when I regained my voice, although she was five-thousand miles away, yelled at Sarah Johnson or New Cat Girl or whoever it was who came to stand over me as I squatted in the Jardin des Plantes
trying to look up the ladies’ dresses, I think it was Sarah, I had invited her, believing she might come...

A Letter From Our Old CEO

In the evenings I sat outside a school near the Gare St. Lazare and watched the adolescent girls going home. There was a waist-high stone wall across the street, and I sat up on the edge, my back pressed against the iron bars of a fence. I froze my ass on the cold stone. The girls gathered out front in their dark capes, bags held innocently in front of their groins. It was a dark street, even by day, so that by the time school got out the girls would be nearly lost in the shadows, and I would see only a vague outline of their clothing. But it was in the dark their faces were most vivid: the pallor of their cheeks, the soft blue lines along the jaws merging into black. It was a ghost world, and each night I drifted through it, waiting for the air to get colder.

In Paris I didn’t do much to attract attention. I had a balcony that looked out onto a courtyard. In the mornings I dropped chunks of white cheese down to the alley cats. Afternoons I walked through the Jardin des Plantes, reaching out to touch the bark of the trees, nodding to the panther, the ibis, the Manucode, regarding the timeless pageant and trying to retrieve, from within myself, those strange sympathies that moved Emerson to say, “I will be a naturalist.” I considered that these animals were the descendants of those same animals that brought Emerson clarity in his grief. I felt joy. I perceived an affinity among things. Later, I read that all the animals in the Jardin des Plantes were eaten by the communards during the siege of 1871, while the bourgeoisie bombarded the city, and the public offices burned.

When the alley cats stopped coming around I panicked. I started drinking in the mornings. I hung out at an Algerian bar in the Twelfth, where I met some men who set me up with good dope. They called it La Copaine Blanche. There are several months I cannot remember very well. I walked endlessly. A box of crayons fell out of a young girl’s book bag, and I picked it up and ate each one of them. The crayons in France are thick and chewy like tootsie rolls, and contain lead. I wandered back to the Twelfth and vomited onto the floor of the Algerian bar. They swore at me, hands grabbed hold of my shirt and tossed me stumbling
across the room. I sat up against the wall near the bathroom and pointed at each of them in turn and called them all Cunts. They beat me senseless. They smashed my head against a glass tabletop and left me out on the curb. Later the patron brought gauze bandages and wrapped my head. I think it’s time you consider finding a new place to hang out, he told me, brushing bits of broken glass out of my hair. He led me to the end of the street and helped me sit on the curb. My scalp itched terribly. I scratched at it, the blood caking up under my fingernails. A man stopped and looked at me. He knelt and began picking through my hair like a monkey. He asked if I needed a place to stay, and I got up and began walking, I walked along the river to the Jardin des Plantes and passed out curled around a tree.

Some say the ocean is the cradle of life—our primordial womb. Others stare at the slate-blue arc of the abyss and ponder the long swim. I would admit that yes, I do think about the long swim, and sometimes I will step into the sea. The icy salt burns my feet—I’ve had rashes on my ankles since I was twelve. I have never gone in deep. Some people have. On the other hand I have never understood this cradle of life jazz. I did not walk out of the sea to step into this life.

And so there is a prison behind bars, where I have never been, and there is the prison of this life, where you insist I’ve never been. Of course I returned to Paris. I always will. Perhaps the welcome of Paris will one day wear thin, but Paris is not the point anyway, Paris has never been the point, there are other places—Asia, Africa—where I can get away from this one place, this West or North or Slum, this one place that follows me wherever I go, like the striding shadow that won’t leave the corner of my eye...

In the Spring you come to see me. You find me crouched in the Jardin des Plantes scratching at the bloody bandage wrapped around my head. I do not recognize you at first, I am too busy peeking up the ladies’ dresses. You reproach me. You tell me to come home. I raise my eyes. The panther coughs up ibis feathers as he paces in his cage.
Corner house on Elm, blue with a black roof. Walk past it. Close your eyes. In the after-image you can see the later Rothko paintings. Nothing left but rectangles.

*Color itself, he said, is reason enough.*

Here where there are no city lights to compete with the skies you can watch meteor showers go whizzing across August. Best seen, they say, from a dark country place.

Just like this, says my guest, a dark night, dogs reclining like lions. A train wails. My pup rests his head on my open palm in the grass. There hangs the Rothko, framed by leafy branches.

*However you paint the larger picture, you are in it.*

He later requested his paintings be shown only in dim light. Earth’s light, smudged and failing. Figures lose value. Form disappears. All that’s left is the drama of the mind. Gradually purging the canvas of memory, history, and geometry. *Obstacles, he called them, between the painter and the idea.*

That summer on Clinton Street the sky tore open in thethiocyanide blue and the secrets of form were outlined in a nervous green light. *Expanding and quickening in the eyes. Not the farther but the nearer shore.*

We walked the yard, picking up kimonos that fell from us the night before like sighs. Don’t you have these colors in your life, stained until canvas and pigment are one? Fleeting glimpses of underpainting, repeated washes until the effect is of a hidden source of light. A maximum luminosity where all colors hover at the same plane.
Rothko finally found the human figure impossible for his own use. Instead, his color field, the glowing activity between tones. The sorrow of this later work helps me understand the light here in these very circumstances. The yellow rectangle floating over blue taped to my kitchen wall was for a while the only way to imagine any future at all. 

*Specific references to beach, sea and sky are unnecessary.*

The way water holds the scent of the otter who swam past the day before my dog puts his face in the river, closes his eyes, and inhales.
I can fly here in my car
the morning my brother sells
capped Texas oil wells
to the elderly, and can dine
in one of two Valley motel establishments
and hear him call our waitress’s name
because he has noticed her laminated
tag affixed to her foreshortened blouse
this air-conditioned Thursday,
following the game plan as habitually as the enchanted
elders executed eighteen holes earlier
and every yesterday of their retirement from this
deteriorating situation, lunch,
wherein I have placed my canned soup
and my bottled water order
and am drifting patiently like a plane
going down, nothing wrong, no warning,
just an intuition about my adult years veering
from the light into the glare
and the accompanying mountain wall there,
which contains Green Valley as unremarkably and inevitably
as I have this stranger in my life,
investing in the absolute without knowing
I am going to be let down
and made to live what I was thinking
as the mountain approached, or feeling,
before being saved from the everlasting
heat of one hundred and ten degrees
for the daily heat of one hundred and nine in Tucson
with the lightning and thunder of the oblivion
of our father gone and our mother mistaken,
driving the earth around Miami
in the slow lane of creation
circling her condominium, a cataract
being pulled across her eyes like matting
protecting a manicured course from natural
forces and, all the unsuspecting while,
I am shamelessly pulverizing
crackers and squeezing the life out of a lemon
into the luke-warm bloody soup.
Float now
through the blue skies of my brother's
eyes to the music of geologic
time; listen to the voice
from the sealed well.
This is what has driven me
in the opposite and equally depleted
direction early, carefully listening to fusion
and concentrating on every emotion,
rushing from the riches
of one brother's pledge of celestial weather
to one brotherless blue silk suit of sunny weather.
**YELLOW CAKE**

The faithful park recreational vans and lay their miniature missiles off Highway 70 in the red hue of the sanctuary at White Sands, and all with graceful youthfulness raise their arms heavenward.

The Japanese are our favorite comedians, risking a good dusting on the grounds of the Nike-Hercules Missile Monument. Imitating us, they record the magical unthinkable events taking place by bowing to the stone and reciting its contaminated poem, "When Thy Mother Dies in Thine Arms."

The only animal on the place is a prize Guernsey dropping a patty, foreground, like the great draftsman Hiroshige’s large horse standing in dung in “One Hundred Famous Views of Edo,”

very dull and neutral like the real color tea, wood, or straw.

Our favorite comedians stand around glowing like the sun and talk to a grim bronze plaque about the recipe for yellow cake,
uranium for the fuel pads
our Lord faces earthward.
We put to rest the oracle
in the ore of the reactor
by grinding and pressing and entering it
as pellets under honeyed skies’
sulphuric register.

Every quiet afternoon
the grounds are alive.
When thy mother is anointed
and dies in thine arms,
the visitors descend
upon the pyramid,
risking a good dusting.

The New Mexican State Fair
black and white milker
dropping a patty
with youthful gracefulness
pastures among real people
who live in the clouds.
INSTRUCTIONS FOR A BURIAL

Only two classrooms sit outdoors behind the main building. Her room and the ex-nun’s.

The sixth graders hold their heads with their knuckles, their eyes blinking at the white paper. Except the boy. He scribbles a few words, brings his arms across his chest, and grabs his sloping shoulders to rock. Susan knows his handwriting: listless swoops like her own. She considers going over to his desk, gently kneeling and asking him to write the definitions this time. She can hope he won’t grab her by the wrist. “I am writing a poem,” he’ll say sharply. “Don’t you want me to write a poem?” The boy often writes about his grandmother—the quirky, even delirious, behavior of an old Navajo woman. He wrote once:

Mutton stew, chamisa in bloom, the lambs going BLEAT! BLEAT! Nia, the old woman I call Xiola, chucks her shit around the room.

On the nape, his hair is curly before it ends. He reaches to pat the curls, as if he knows those curls, has studied them in the mirror countless times and remarked, “My curls are lovely.” He will be a handsome man: strong cheekbones, long torso, a penchant for making others laugh.

“Hey, Susan!” he yells. “Guess what? I get to make my own dinner.”

“Really?” Susan whispers, because the other students are taking their quiz.

“It’s Nia,” the boy says loudly and raps his chest with his fist. “Almost had a heart attack.”

A basketball rolls from under a desk. “It’s not time for lunch,” scolds Susan, and the ball is bounced off the closet door before being returned under a seat. She asks a girl in the front row, a tiny girl in tiny purple jeans, to collect the papers and runs through her notes. The girl places the stack on the desk. She reaches for Susan’s hair. “So soft. I want to braid it today,” the girl in purple says. “After school, during study hour, okay?” It is not okay. Susan stands up and places her palm on the back of the child’s
head, flat from the cradleboard that carried the girl when she was a baby.

When the child sits, Susan explains, “Today we’re going to draw.” The class perks. They love to draw. She is going to read, and the children are going to interpret the image from the story that strikes them the most. Dark colors of a barrio fill the room as she reads. The white dress of the Virgin de Guadalupe flows.

The boy shouts: “You don’t even know who the Virgin de Guadalupe is, do you?”

She doesn’t. “Does it matter?” Susan says, squinting at the boy, still rocking back and forth in his chair.

“She is the patron saint of children,” the boy proclaims. He’s standing. “She is my saint, our saint. You aren’t even Catholic, are you?” He walks to the front and hoots: “Maybe I’ll teach today.” He clutches the waist of his oversized jeans. It’s the same way Susan clutches the waist of her skirt. He draws his shoulders together the way Susan draws her shoulders together, in the same manner she has held herself since she was the age of these girls, hunched because her breasts came in too soon. The children giggle at his movements, the abrupt changes the boy makes with his body—he’s almost dancing. They hush when Susan walks to the door and steps out, slamming it behind her. She had told the boy just yesterday she would summon the principal if he behaved like that once more.

When Susan asks the principal, “Can you help scare the Chee boy?” Ms. Francisco nods, as if she were expecting this. They walk to the classroom together, and Susan watches the cream pant leg crease and listens to the high heels on the concrete path. Susan’s twenty-three, but, next to Ms. Francisco, she feels eighteen.

When the principal’s heels click into the room, she begins: “This belegana,” and Susan notices the dust. Sand blows in the door and through the window screens. She plans to clean this weekend, mop, polish the tops of desks and the bookshelf with Murphy’s Oil Soap when she hears Ms. Francisco repeating: “This belegana,” the voice climbing, “she is teaching you something,” and the principal pulls in her cheeks and presses a finger to her lips. Ms. Francisco is trying not to laugh. The children squirm and glance at Susan who stands next to the closet door, her hands at
her sides. She wants to raise her hands and cradle her upper arms, but she notices the way the children twitch and prop themselves up to listen. She recognizes the squirreled-away affection filling the air. Even the boy, she knows, is sorry.

The principal's voice has descended into a speech so long and hard it seems rote. Susan only understands scant Navajo. She fades by the closet door, down to bone. In these situations, especially because you are a teacher—she has learned—strip yourself of response.

The boy watches. He lifts one hand from the desk as if to signal: STOP! but the gesture is more complete. His pink palm waves.

*Let's just get in my truck,* she could mouth to him. *Let's drive off the Reservation, we can get grilled cheese sandwiches and lime drinks. Let's stand there by the truck. We can use the hood as a table.*

Ms. Francisco is making longer pauses, and the children, lulled into compliance, pick up their pens, their rudimentary drawings of girls playing double Dutch on city streets. The children leave for lunch, the older woman showing the way with her long, gaunt arms, and Susan hears the shuffle of shoes. Ms. Francisco hovers, and then turns to ask, “Are you sure you want to stay here?”

“I do,” Susan says and files her quizzes in her backpack and laughs, “I love it here. It's just the boy; he's a handful. Haven't you ever run into a child like him?”

“You need to be tougher,” Ms. Francisco says. “That sensitivity is written all over your face.” She leaves, and Susan breathes carefully. Maybe she'll take a drive after school—it's three and a half hours to Tuba City—she can buy lipstick, a plum color.

There is so little in the room, the basketball shoes gone, no longer sticking to the floor. The fragrance of lunch sifts through the screens from one side, and from the other, the Arizona air, like lemons. A row of grammar books, spines never cracked, meet in a shiny sequence of blue. The old desks in rows. Without the students, the desks are so familiar. She pictures a black locomotive crossing the plains of Nebraska, bulldozing winter wheat. The train makes its way from Portland, Maine to Gallup, New Mexico. Her own elementary school teachers stacked the old desks in the box cars.
As Susan heads for lunch, she sees the ex-nun waiting outside. Ellen Barber hitches up her enormous pants. Her lips buckle a cigarette.

"I saw Ms. Francisco reach our little neck of the woods," Ellen says.

"Great to see you, Ellen," Susan replies, but the ex-nun is already interrupting.

"Last night I was at the school board meeting. The old Chee woman, Arlets' grandmother, had walked all the way from her mesa to complain. About you. She says you're not certified. The boy used to bring home all kinds of poems, and now he brings home nothing." She takes a puff.

Susan tilts her head to the side and squints. This vying-teacher plot induces ennui, and she sighs, recalling the grandmother's tidy hogan on the mesa. Aloud, she says: "Nia said I'm 'good luck'."

"Nia?"

"The old Chee woman," Susan explains. "Arlets told me she's ill. I'm not sure how ill, but you know, she called me."

"On the telephone?"

"I like old people," Susan says and steps toward the path to the lunch room.

Ellen calls after her. "Are you sure it wasn't the boy calling? I see you watch him, inhale his spurious, shy lop. Don't let him seduce you."

"You aren't really an ex," Susan calls back, "are you?"

Juniper scatters the valley. The sky is clean and blue. Her father had warned her, "The landscape there is so inhospitable." But red mesas below blush.

_Please use your creativity to complete your assignments_, she'd begged of the boy. _You've got to stop writing only poetry, school doesn't have to be so bad_. She told him _she_ had to go through school once, and she always changed the assignments a little to make them more complex. The boy covered his eyes with his hands. Was _he_ so sensitive?

When his grandmother, Nia, called her—from the pay phone at the one gas station in town, there was the sound of trucks,
and Susan had thought it peculiar, their engines shutting off and turning over. The old woman spoke competent English: *Is the boy okay?* But Nia doesn’t have a phone in her hogan. And it’s right to worry about the boy. He’s precocious. He flirts excessively and can’t follow instructions. One girl, a classmate of his, claimed Arlets pushed her onto the football field, got on top of her, and wouldn’t get off. “The girl is tiny as a twig,” Susan had explained, repeated to a checkerboard of faculty faces: Navajo, Anglo, Navajo, Anglo, “This girl is tiny as a twig, and he wouldn’t get off.”

Susan ascends the path. The boy, Arlets, is standing between the two fence posts in front of the lunch room door. His feet straddle the walkway so she can’t pass. The windows of the lunch room mirror her dragging gait.

“What is it?” she says when she’s only strides away.

“Hey, Susan!” he says. “Xiola wants to trade with you.”

“Who?” she asks, the game wearing on her.

“Xiola, my nail.”

“You grandmother, Nia,” Susan corrects.

“That one. Could you stop by the hospital?” he asks and swings a leg toward the other, so there is just room to pass—she’ll have to rub by.

She approaches and rests her hand on his shoulder. It never settles on the bone. He’s a very young boy. She says, “Maybe, we’ll see.”

When Susan first met Nia, the old woman was standing in the door of her hogan, yelling at the truck: “I’m saving my stuff for the Indian Market. Go to the next house!”

It was the last day for submissions to the school literary magazine, and Arlets said he’d left everything at home. “Fine,” Susan said, “We’ll drive to get everything then.”

The hogan looked so little on top of the mesa, its shape that of a beehive, the eight short sides of logs glued together with mud. When Arlets ran inside, Susan followed, her long print skirt blousing. “It’s Ms. Hunnewell,” the boy said, searching through a box of crumpled papers. The grandmother turned off the television and disappeared into a corner. When she came back, she lay four rugs in the light of the door. Susan brushed her hand
over woven strips of cherry and lime. But the rugs were not interesting, not old chief blankets, and her eyes drifted around the tidy room. Susan recognized a pale orange sweatshirt draped over a chair. Arlets wore the sweatshirt almost every fall day.

“I’ll give that one to you for half-price,” the old woman said, pointing to the rug. “Half, I mean, of the price I could sell it for at the Indian Market.”

“Not today,” Susan said. She placed the brightly-colored rug on the floor and looked around for the boy, but he’d already left.

“That one’s not even natural dye,” the old woman hissed. “Anyways. Are you the new teacher?”

“And you are Nia?” Susan asked, emphasizing Nia. Susan thought: I only teach here, it’s not as if you are famous, as if everyone knows Nia. Nia turned to refold the rugs, and Susan slipped toward the orange sweatshirt and held it to her face. The scent stung her nose a little, then softened.

“You like him,” Nia whispered, startling Susan and then shouted: “You should stay!” Her warm breath reached Susan’s face, and Susan nodded, to avoid a contest. Nia cooed, “So nice,” drawing out the “so” in the way of the girls at school. She was beaming at Susan’s clogs.

“Oh, I bought these in Maine. I’m from Maine.”

“Give them to me.”

“These are the only shoes I have,” Susan said. She scrutinized one clog, the staples in the black worn-in leather, and her face flushed. She was still clutching the sweatshirt.

“Give them to me,” Nia repeated. “I’ll give you my loafers.”

When Susan clambered back into the little truck, she wore brown loafers with worn rubber soles. “You are very still. A still girl,” Nia spoke from the doorway. Arlets explained he’d told Nia about Ms. Hunnewell, and Nia had said: The Anglo woman is good luck, which is what you need.

The rest of the ride, Susan noticed how still she was, the small movements she made to change the gears, her few attempts at bare conversation. She watched the boy’s wing-like hand turn and turn the radio dial.

On Saturday, Susan rises from her bed—a sleeping bag laid out over a mattress she bought used—and does not look back, be-
cause if she does, she might see the single outline on the bed, the impression of her body left there.

Her truck window makes a box of blue sky, and in the box, the arms of two oil pumps bend and extend, bend and extend. Blue skims the thin strip of red ground.

To the west, a huge black mesa shadows the road. It’s still early morning, and even when the sky is so clear, it could snow. A flash flood might roar over this way. Lightning could hit the desert’s surface, blister small straps of land only hundreds of feet from the truck.

Maybe because she is so alone she woke up this morning thinking about the boy, his firm and nagging request to visit his grandmother. She thought she might write a letter today, to the boyfriend she left to come here, but she’d just be picking at words. She will go to the hospital and ask about Nia’s health. She will explain, I am looking out for the boy. I may understand what’s wrong. But it won’t be so easy to just wander in. At first, she might get a look, from Nia, from the nurse. Nia might even yell, “Why the hell are you here?”

The worries fade. She hears, You are very still. A still girl.

In Tuba City, Susan first stops at the department store to pick up overalls. That’s all she wears on weekends anymore. What does it matter? She changes into the overalls—they are pink—in the truck’s cab.

The Indian Health Services building squats on the same wide street. She pauses to consider: is she going in the right place? Hospitals usually tower.

The grandmother lies on top of the sheets. She wears a blue hospital gown, but has put her woolen jacket over it and fastened the buttons to the top. She stares at the wall, making motions with her hands as if she’s kneading dough or whacking the stick of the loom back when she’s finished weaving a line. “Yes,” she faintly utters when she sees Susan in the pink overalls at the door. “I knew you would bring new clothes to trade.”

The lady in the next bed flips on the television. Susan pushes a chair to Nia’s bedside. The old women appears sedated, and
Susan tries not to stare. She doesn’t know what to say and yawns between the white walls, under the flickering lights.

“So raw,” murmurs Nia. She is holding Susan’s hand. “What are you using these on?”

“Oh gosh,” Susan whispers, embarrassed. Her skin is a sight: red and peeling. “I think it’s an allergic reaction… to chalk.”

“Mutton grease, great for dry hands. Wrap them in plastic too,” Nia says. Her palm, warm and wet—the fruity flesh of an old person. Her grandmother’s hands. Yes, but silkier, like the inside of a peach.

Nia shifts her black eyes from the television and lifts her back from the bed. She outstretches her tiny arms and grabs Susan by the shoulders and pulls Susan to her chest. The old woman’s heart drums. “You will have more time,” Nia promises and sucks in a large breath of air.

Susan pulls back and scratches her neck. Perhaps Nia is exhibiting delirium written about in the boy’s poetry. “You must be exhausted,” she decides to say.

“You are very young. Too tired. Feel your hands!” Nia cries. “His own mother bought him a dog, as a pet. Bad luck! You would never do that. She took him to a funeral when he was unborn. Bad luck! You, I trust.”

“I appreciate how you trust me…”

“Yes, trust,” Nia interrupts and puckers her dry lips.

Susan can’t help but laugh. “Nia…” she starts. She just wants to ask the old woman, why am I good luck?

“That’s another thing: Stop staying my name!”

“Look, I’m going home at the end of this year,” Susan says. She is biting on her thumb nail. She doesn’t bite the nail off, just thins it, sliding the curve through her front teeth.

“Don’t get angry and tell me to go to hell. It might happen. I will instruct you on a couple details. Do you know yet how to make blood pudding? I do it special.” Nia points first at her own chest, then at Susan’s, and extends her arms: Come to me. Susan shakes her head. The blue gown, taut around Nia’s barrel chest, ends at the knees. Susan has never seen such slender calves, except on her students.

“You must be exhausted,” Susan says again. “Why don’t you lie down?”
"I don't want to die here," Nia says.

"Are you dying?" Susan asks.

"How much do you understand, anyways? His parents are both gone," Nia explains. "The rest of our clan have gone to Phoenix. Moved all together like a pack." Nia shuts her eyes and adds, "When they fire you, you'll have more time."

Susan yanks her fingers from the old woman's grip. She steps into the corridor. The air is so thick, and the nurse is walking towards her, signaling. Susan can't stand the ardor of the nurse's pace, and she steps back in the room and slumps into a low chair by the wall. The hospital hums—the weight of all those imperfect bodies. Susan is from a family of doctors and never had trust in medicine.

"I don't think," Susan says now very carefully, enunciating, "that you know me." She pauses and starts again. "I don't really know you, and I can't stand... It's just people. Someone tells me I should leave, someone tells me I should stay. They say, 'Wear a dress' and 'Find a boyfriend.'" She mimics the high voices.

Nia launches into a sermon, her eyes still shut. Susan taps her foot, plays with her ponytail, twirls it. The stuttering vowels and monotonous cadences distend the yellowed walls. Nothing Susan does is going to make Nia's life, or the boy's, better. She left Boston, her job filing papers and stamping: approved. The nights with her boyfriend. Two pale ales on the bar. A hockey game on the screen above.

Susan recognizes a few of Nia's words: Diné, which means "The People," ajéédishjool, which means "heart." The gas station attendant in Chilchinbito had kept saying chidí ajéé to her, meaning "car heart"—she needed a new battery for her truck this past winter.

She decides to leave. But when she goes for the door, Nia asks her: when the nurse comes again, can Susan take her home, to the hogan?

"Of course," Susan says.

In the lobby, the nurse hands Susan a bottle of pills and whispers, "These old Indian women, they have no idea. They spit their pills into the toilets. Keep her calm." Susan grabs the bottle. Back East, a hospital discharge could never happen this way. Then
again, she has no idea what Nia is capable of, the clogs clomping across Intensive Care.

Nia carries only a purse with her to Susan’s truck. The purse hangs flat, and Susan decides it holds nothing. What valuables could it hold? Nia wouldn’t have a key to the hogan, or a book to read. Maybe there’s a thin wallet in there, like a man’s.

The drive to Chilchinbito from Tuba City is two and a half hours. Nia switches on the country station. A bobby pin sits on the dash. Nia wraps her braid into a bun, pins it in place, and sleeps, chin pointing at the truck’s roof.

From the pale sky, snow begins to fall, and Susan turns onto Route 160. She worries about getting stuck once she’s on the dirt, though she has four-wheel drive. The smell of mud—so sweet you could eat some—pours into the cab.

Highways run through this reservation. They connect little cities—Flagstaff, Farmington, Tuba City, Gallup—border towns with identical shopping malls that sell things discount and oversized: bottles of apple juice, T-shirts. The roads go for miles and miles and lead to small and smaller towns. The desert reddens the farther you go in. Mesas redden.

Flecks of white cross the red clay, snow or bits of bone, a powder blown through a straw. The boy had told her in the truck that day, the witches dismember bodies and grind the bones up. Xiola, he said, is afraid when she sees Anglo ladies. She thinks they’re skinwalkers shapeshifting into a white woman.

“Are all Nia’s friends as suspicious as Nia?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” he said. “I think, at the market, people are avoiding her.”

The desert lies out before it folds into tables. You can see the tops of homes, the tin flickering. Susan’s truck is the only thing on the road. She can’t remember ever feeling so private, except when she was in college. Among the stacks, she felt a damp solitude and believed, I can read all these books. She listened to only the bells, chiming and tolling.
Susan hears Nia stir, mumbling some question, though the words are so distant, she can’t tell if they’re familiar at all. “I am,” Nia then pronounces in clear English, “I am very sorry... to be such a burden.”

“It’s okay,” Susan says. “If I were to have stayed home today, I would have just read. I’m reading a romance novel.”

Nia repeats, “Romance,” and states, “Romance will not give you time. Maybe love.”

Susan thinks to ask Nia about love: what is it? She has always revered the answers of old people, her own grandmother and aunts. Maybe she doesn’t need to ask anymore. “I love my students,” Susan says.

“When is your wedding?” Nia asks.

“I’m not engaged.”

“When will you be?”

“I’m not ready—I haven’t met anyone. The single people my age all live in Phoenix. You never know. Maybe here I’ll find a man.” Susan laughs. The thought is ridiculous. She looks to see if Nia laughs.

“There is no love left here,” Nia whispers. She has kept her eyes closed. And Susan holds herself there, her elbows out, palms wrapped around the wheel, her long torso leaning toward the dash. Why is this the wrong place?

Sometimes, in class, the boy rocks, the rocking soft but so incessant it’s violent. His gaze leaves the room, and he stares at the sky. Susan recognizes—though the desire for variety never became so bodily for her—a sadness. She recognizes the invitation to go to a place, even when you know it’s not good for you.

Snow still falls, but only on one side of the road. On the other, sunlight filters through a fog. Susan has never had to pull off one of these highways where crosses dot the shoulder, where the lack of shade is strangely terrifying. What about neat New England pines? Huge maples and oaks? The collecting snow, the red cleavage of arroyos make chairs in curves of rock—places where you can rest. Anyplace.

When they arrive at the hogan, Susan is tired. She shifts in the seat—she’s so stiff. The grandmother swings her great legs off
the vinyl and briskly steps towards the hogan. She catches herself, holding her chest, then canters inside.

“Hey,” Susan calls. “Take it easy.” She snatches the pills from the dash. Nitroglycerine. The hogan, once sweet, looks weathered. Some dirty sheep are near. They ruminate and peer at her.

Inside, the old woman is collecting things, making a pile. “Why don’t you rest?” says Susan, sitting at the table. Nia keeps collecting and placing. The items appear hit-or-miss: a pair of jeans, matches, a pouch wrapped tight with a string, a telephone book.

Susan looks around the place, the wood stacked in a pile by the door. Does Nia tend the fire? Susan can just imagine Nia strolling outside to see a line of black ascend the bowl of sky. Mornings, maybe the boy walks to the gas station and pays 50¢ to take a shower.

“Well, what about Arlets?” Susan turns to ask, but Nia has taken off her clothes. Her stomach, her breasts and thighs appear a lighter tan, almost milky. Susan looks away.

“Look here, still girl,” Nia says. “You keep the overalls.” Nia has thrown on a skirt of red crushed velvet, a blue velveteen shirt.

“Maybe you can borrow them another time,” Susan says.

“No, I’d have to give you my skirt. Then you would get all my good luck. You can’t have all mine.” Nia fastens her concha belt. The medallion of her necklace swings forward as she bends to slip on the clogs.

This might be a dream—Nia, dressing for one of those sepia portraits they reproduce on postcards and sell at tourist shops. Susan was once told the prints of Geronimo aren’t even of Geronimo. That the man in the portrait was a stand-in. Nothing is fact, nothing intimate. Susan’s got to fix on something. “Here are your pills.” She sets them among Nia’s possessions, between a jar of cornmeal and a videotape.

I’ll leave the grandmother for now, she thinks, drive to check on her tomorrow. There’s nowhere Nia can go. But, the old woman is so busy, kneeling to finish her work. She is smoothing over corners of the room with her eyes, searching into shelves. She bends to gather the folds of the rug, and Susan catches her hand. The heavy bracelets clink. “Hey, Xiola,” Susan tries. “Xiola!”
“Don’t use that name either,” Nia says, her black eyes smaller. “Maybe it was the dog, you never know. When he was little, his mother bought him that dog. Bad luck! So small. You could step on it. Carried it so close like a baby. His uncle—he’s gone now—picked up that dog and kicked it. Arlets loved that dog.”

“Listen,” Susan says. “I am trying to help. I tried to explain to the boy. He can get through school. If he makes some concessions. If he gives in a little…” And Susan remembers the principal’s slap: Are you sure you want to stay here?

Nia is still folding corners of the rug. She is arranging each corner on top of her belongings, so the corners meet and cross over. She is pulling up the load by the ends she’s brought together. She is making her way out the eastern door.

“Where are you going?” Susan demands. The old woman mutters, but keeps hiking down the path to a row of cottonwoods, a cliff. Susan tries to stand in the door, but it’s too short. She leaves the hogan to shout: “You only speak to me in Navajo because you have nothing else to say!”

Nia, halfway down the path, drops her bag. Things have fallen out anyway. She holds herself—two hands on her chest. “You have got to remain calm,” Susan says, running to the woman’s side. “Come back to the hogan. You need to stay there.”

“If I stay there, you cannot live there,” Nia says.

“Where are you going to live?” Susan asks. Her arms hang at her sides. She’s a white flag.

“I am not going to live, I am going to die,” the old woman plainly states, the having to instruct so tiresome. “Right over here on this ridge. It’s a nice place. Great view of the sun setting. Listen, if I die in the hogan, no one can use it again. My ghost would be there.”

Susan holds her cheeks, tugs the skin there. She can only think of blame. Her family will have to send money. “To begin with,” Susan hears her mother scolding, “you should not have gone to the hospital.”

Nia reassembles her sack, gathering the fallen items. Susan is helping. She picks up a belt with a turquoise buckle. “You left this,” she says, folding up the leather and tucking the belt back into the skirt of the rug.

“Yes, I know. It was my husband’s,” Nia murmurs. “I almost
pawned it. I forgot to put it around his pants before the burial. Now—I won't say anymore.”

“Okay. All right. Well.” Susan quivers, and she nods. “Good luck,” she says, and she keeps nodding.

The old woman, in her nicest clothes, is leaving. Before she turns to go, she points at Susan, with her chin, “Don’t cry. You’ll get bags under your eyes.” Nia marches off as if she has just finished a long, put-off chore, pulling the pin out of her bun with one hand.

A slight breeze crosses the mesa, and Susan sways there. She makes out two shapes kicking dust on the road. A thin, taller figure holds a paper bag to his chest. Susan recognizes the wily lope, the sloping shoulders. It’s the boy. And ahead of him races a tiny animal. It’s yipping. A tiny dog.
RISING SMOKE

My brother disappears with his lights on, my mother, at eighty, travels between the heavy rains of the four seasons. What I imagine happens sets not one inn in place,
nor puts our dead father to rest. The air is chilly, despite a feast and a fire. I'm the one to say it about myself, I feel like a servant wading across relieved of possessions.

One obeys nature and thinks of the rest of the journey in straw sandals and paper hat. The leaves larger and the light longer. I could do it in my sleep, my head a roadway peppered with mountain passes.

It doesn't hurt to write, it's as difficult as learning to read a glance. The head of a fawn? Shark teeth? A dream is snatched from me, then emptiness, its carved door broken into.

An afternoon of one glimpse of a narrow bay. A guardhouse stands at the end of a bridge. Sweep of lute strings. This is the spot grown children abandoned their aging mothers,
a young man kissed his love goodbye on the forehead, a young woman returned without composing a single line an old woman not in her own bed.
Marcy James Smith
Faucet, Butte, Montana
Color photograph
1998
Steven Sherrill
The Act, Part One
Mixed media on paper
12" x 18"
Steven Sherrill
The Act, Part Two
Mixed media on paper
12" x 18"
Susan Hammond

Peter

Oil on board

12" x 9"
Susan Hammond

Runaway

Oil on canvas

48" x 38"

Fall 1998
Tatiana Kaupp

Green Botanical

Oil and pencil on canvas

56" x 48"
Tatiana Kaupp
*Botanical Series #1*
Watercolor and pencil on paper
8" x 5"

Fall 1998
Marcy James Smith

Creamery Building, Butte, Montana

Color photograph

1998
This is the body we know:
the one prolific with seeds, seeds
with translucent wings veined like dragonfly
wings, peach pits, and poppy peppers,
seeds cradled in pods, emboweled
in birds, sky-flocking seeds of threaded
down looking like dixa midges circling
midair, swimming seeds with tails
like whips, seeds with teeth, seeds
with caskets, migrating seeds of needled
burrs and thistles, seeds like bits of ash
burning through the evening like flecks
of stars, and the dust-size seed of death
born in every heart coming to light.

This is the body we know:
the one moon-sterile, barren white
and barren black, boulder ed with the frozen
rocks of dry polar plains and dusty drifts
of bristled snow, with gray, ancient
forests of fallen stone trunks and fronds,
littered with smoldering metal, shattered
meteors and melting iron, fossilized
spines and splintered bones, eyes locked
open and sightless in chunks of amber,
impotent, broken penes of marble, cracked
eggs of solid granite, and the rock-
permanent light of the heart born
in every seed rising to death.
Novelist Mildred Walker wrote nine of her thirteen books while living on a ranch outside of Great Falls, Montana. She is perhaps best known for Winter Wheat (1944), acclaimed by author James Welch as “a classic novel of the American West.” An excerpt from If a Lion Could Talk (1970) is anthologized in The Last Best Place (Falcon Press, 1988). Walker died of natural causes on May 27 of this year. The following chapters are part of a biography/memoir written by Walker’s daughter, poet Ripley Hugo, to be published by University of Nebraska Press in late 1999.

Introduction

I FIRST BECAME AWARE that my mother was a writer one summer afternoon when I was about eight years old. My brother and I, with neighborhood friends, careened around our backyard waging a water fight. To escape a stream of water from the garden hose, I scrambled up the side of the house to an unscreened window and leapt down into the cool darkness of the room. I landed with bare, wet, muddy feet on five clean piles of typewritten paper carefully stacked on the floor. I heard my mother’s agonized and furious exclamation. Horrified as I was at what I had ruined, I understood that she had a world completely separate from the world she lived in with us.

When people exclaim to me about the privilege of growing up with my mother, the writer, I think of how my brothers and I grew up more keenly aware of a mother who insisted on her role (in the thirties, forties, and early fifties) of a doctor’s wife in a Montana town of about 25,000 people; a mother whose merriment or pleasure in shared moments seemed reserved for an occasion; a mother who insisted on decorum, performance of correctness in front of those outside the family; a mother who dressed and held herself exactly as other children’s mothers we knew, giving afternoon teas, selling tickets for the Junior League, conducting dinner parties at which we could overhear her enter-
taining guests with vivid, humorous descriptions of our latest escapades. A mother who was not easy to live up to.

It is my mother the novelist whom I have been asked to write about. But to have known her all those early years of my life not as a writer but as a mother with definite ideas for her children has brought back many glimpses of her that I didn't know I had. And those glimpses do not form any steady narrative. Instead, those moments come back to me in a scatter of images, complete with colors, sounds, emotions. I think they are still with me because I clung to them as moments which taught me who she was. Particularly, the ways in which I could interest her in my immediate desperations or delights.

One beautiful afternoon last spring, I listened from my upstairs window to my nephew singing as he worked in the backyard. It was a comforting sound that brought back to me snatches of a lullaby Mother used to sing to us. She crooned it as we were protesting going to sleep, the only song I remember her singing. Humming the melody to myself, I had all the words back in my head by the end of that afternoon:

Baby's boat's a silver moon,
Sailing through the sky,
Sailing o'er a sea of dreams
While the clouds roll by.

Sail, baby, sail
Out across the sea.
Only don't forget to sail
Back again to me.

I remembered the last two lines first, and with them came the long-ago comfort they'd given me: "Only don't forget to sail/Back again to me." I remembered how sharp my relief had been in the darkened room, knowing that although she set me sailing, Mother still wanted me back. It is the strongest memory I have of her nurturing us.

I must have been at least five or six years old at the time. Did I care so sharply about the song's wish to have me "sail back" because I already felt that I was a disappointingly naughty little girl? Very likely! But I wonder now if it had something to do
with rarely seeing her during the day. When we clamored into her room where she worked at her desk, she would settle a crisis sternly, or tell us she was busy, then send us off to play. I could have been not only a naughty child, but also a child jealous of whatever was more absorbing to her than my brother and me.

Whatever feeling of rejection we children may have harbored, it would have been brief. We thought that was the way mothers were, busy doing mysterious things of their own. Our days were mostly monitored by the different women who lived with us and took care of the household. In the evenings when my father was home, we were all together—until our too early bedtime. We often listened to my father tell stories by a fireplace made of odd-sized bricks that jutted in and out from each other. When we would ask for just one more story, and my father would finally agree, it was:

\[
\begin{align*}
I'll \text{ tell you a story} \\
\text{About Minny Morrie} \\
\text{And now my story's begun.} \\
I'll \text{ tell you another} \\
\text{About his brother} \\
\text{And now my story is done.}
\end{align*}
\]

As we were hustled off, whining our disappointment, we didn't know what lucky children we were, but we felt very secure.

As I grew older, I worried about those women of our daytime lives who lived in a room in the basement of the house and were never invited to join our evenings. (It didn't occur to me that they may have craved their privacy by the time evening came.) But somehow I knew Mother was convinced that people lived on different social levels, so whatever I wondered as a child wasn't relevant. I didn't or couldn't articulate to Mother how bothered me. These women were my friends in the kitchen, though, where I was sent to learn domesticity. Later, I understood that that was how Mother worked it out in order to write steadily.

By the time my brother George and I were six and seven years old, Mother planned special outings with us. Summers, the three of us alone at our family cabin for a few days, Mother would take us firmly in hand (at least I felt that resolve in her), sandwiches
prepared, to hike up on a nearby ridge—an expedition. Because she was with us, I know that we were eager to go, hot and tired though we would finally be when we found a rock in the shade to munch our peanut butter and jellies. Mostly, though, I remember her admonitions “not to fuss” and “not to dawdle.” What mother goes on adventures with her small children without admonitions? Presumably, we learned this way. But when I, in my mid-thirties, took my own children on such hikes, I could still remember how I had resented those chidings—as if Mother were not one of us, not also curious about a beetle hiding under a stone.

Those afternoons, I felt Mother’s interest in finishing these moments with children in order to get back to her writing. “Did you resent her for that?” a friend once asked me. No, because we understood that to be the relationship one had with a mother. When we had returned to the cabin, my brother and I would disappear to our own pursuits, but still, we knew our outing had been something she wanted to do.

While we were children, we did not know her to have longings or questions about life. Our own attempts to ask questions about why summer didn’t last or why someone died were dismissed, kindly but firmly, giving me, at least, the impression that it was our obligation to be happily engaged in our own activities. We never asked about her writing because copies of her newly published novels were never out on a table to look at, not until late into our high school years. By that time, I think, we had assumed that we were somehow not eligible to ask. It was a strangeness that has taken my brothers’ and my lifetimes to understand.

But we did know that she wrote books: at dinner parties Mother enjoyed telling stories about herself being a writer. She told the story of being accosted at a cocktail party by a large woman with a large voice, who was also hard-of-hearing.

“And you are a writer!” the woman exclaimed. “I know about your books. How do you do it? With a husband and three children!”

Mother replied, “I just go about it using rump power.”

The woman shrieked delightedly, “My dear, you do? On rum?”

Then Mother would laugh and say, “I left her, and the whole room, probably, thinking I kept myself soused on rum in order
to write.” Her listeners loved the story, and concluded, I think, that it said something about readers in Great Falls, Montana.

What I did resent, growing up, and what took my first thirty-five years to outgrow, was not my writing mother but my social mother. Shopping trips with her were the worst, especially to Great Falls’ only department store, The Paris. Her verbal scorn for the clerk who didn’t carry the right brand of stockings made me burn with eleven-year-old hangdog shame. (And I resented, with silent rebellion as I grew older, her put-down of people who were “not the right sort.” They seemed perfectly good people to me.) Her characterization of me in “ready-to-wear” affected me in a different way: “What do you have that my little girl could wear? She is no Shirley Temple.” I had not yet acquired irony; I only felt sadly lacking when my gawky, tomboy self was seen as difficult to fit. Neither did I have any way of realizing that Mother was making her status felt.

While I understood that I was “a difficult child” in my mother’s eyes, I had no such feeling about that with my father. For him it wasn’t my lack of moral fibre that caused me to set the dinner table incorrectly or to knock over a full glass of milk. When I, about eight years old, complained about the injustice of a curling iron, he took me for a good short haircut, like my brother’s. I only remember my mother’s displeasure when she saw the haircut, but a good number of years later, she told me with wry amusement that my father had left me on the front porch with a box of chocolates to atone for his deed. Unlike our mother, Dad was mirthful about social strictures, at least around my brothers and me.

Dad could turn a well-appointed, sedate family dinner table into an uproarious fest with a well-timed plot. When, one after another, we three children would be in trouble—for elbows on the table, napkins on the floor, or slouching—Dad would surreptitiously half-fill his teaspoon with water, and still looking at Mother, flip it at one of my brothers. He met the giggles and hoots that followed with exaggerated innocence, ignoring Mother’s outraged protests The solemnity of a polite supper suddenly evaporated, to our great relief.

But I remember these contrasts between what my mother insisted upon and what my father deliciously undermined in our
childhood as only the beginning. As we grew older, we clung to his examples of acceptable behavior rather than Mother's. From Mother we received edicts, and rebelled against them, most of the time, silently. She felt it was her place to teach us manners, of course, but they often seemed arbitrary, and sometimes unbearable.

Again the contrast: I never saw my father condescend to another human being, or speak disparagingly of that person afterwards. Instead, there were explanations, sometimes commiserations, offered calmly to us. With him we came to understand the complexities of human life as opposed to what seemed the rigidly black-and-white pronouncements of my mother. But that was my social, not my writing mother.

During Mother's secretly prolific years of writing, (secret as far as we children were concerned), she had steady encouragement from my father. He read her manuscripts first, before they were sent off to her former teacher in Michigan and then to her editor at Harcourt, Brace and Company. The only times I heard my parents' voices raised in sustained argument were in discussions about a character or scene, coming from behind their closed door. In the twenty-eight years of their marriage before my father's death, she published ten of her twelve adult novels.

In writing this memoir of my mother, I am keenly aware of the two lives that she has always lived: the one, essential to her sense of well-being; the other, essential to the strength and excitement of her writing. She kept the dimensions of her life as a wife and mother separate from the more daring dimensions of her life as a writer. I have come to believe that she took few risks, asked few questions of her life as a doctor's wife because she could do that brilliantly and safely in her life as a writer. I think that dichotomy has a part in the strangeness my brothers and I felt—that we were not included in her writing life because we fulfilled a role in her non-writing life. Picture her three adult, married children obtaining copies of her novels from second-hand bookstores, when we could find them.

Chapter One: Grafton, Vermont
An early photograph shows Mother as a wiry, determined child of nine years with a very direct gaze, large brown eyes, and rich
brown hair in ringlets, held back by a ribbon. I see her curled up at one end of a log swing in the barn loft of a modest, old Vermont house, writing with a pencil on a pad of paper. "I knew I was going to be a writer all of my life," she has told us. In Vermont, the barn and the woodshed are joined to the house, but even now the loft is a place to be separate from the bustlings in the house, a separation she coveted as a child.

Perhaps I can imagine her there so vividly because I have known that loft since my own childhood. The long log swing is suspended above the raised platform of the floor, warmly lighted on sunny afternoons by a ten-foot-high small-paned window that brings the green leaves of trees inside, their shadows moving on the rafters and walls. In the darker corners of the loft there are still large chests, some filled with quilts and some with documents, letters, old family photographs.

An open staircase to the side of the loft leads down to the barn floor. Mother used to sit halfway down the stairs, where she could look into the stall of the family's buggy horse, Tony, a sorrel gelding with a white blaze. She talked to him about important things from there, she said, and sometimes she went back up to the raised platform and addressed him in orations.

On the west side of the barn runs a branch of the Saxtons River, the sound of the water over large brown stones reaching up into the loft. The family calls it the brook because it is shallow in summer and easy to wade across. Across the brook lies a hay meadow, and beyond it the road coming from the village crosses the larger branch of the Saxtons River through a covered bridge. From there the road climbs slowly up through tall hardwood and fir trees and patches of cool green maidenhair fern. A low, narrow window in the loft looks out to the covered bridge.

On the east side of the barn lies the main road—in Mother's childhood and ours, a dusty quiet road, lined on each side by tall white shuttered houses and people occasionally walking by, sometimes waving to a greeting from the loft. Later, that road would play a part in three of Mother's novels set in the village of Grafton.

Mother, her older sister Margaret, and their parents first began to summer in Vermont in 1906, when Mother was one year old. Their home was in Philadelphia, where her father was a Baptist minister, but Mother was a fretful baby in the Philadelphia
heat and this determined her parents to travel to Vermont each summer. Reverend Walker and his wife, Harriet, both had family nearby. Harriet had grown to young girlhood in the valley of Brookline, Vermont, just twenty miles from Grafton. And the Reverend’s father had been born on the Walker homestead along the Saxtons River, one mile downstream from Grafton. Two of the Reverend’s uncles had homes along the dusty village Main Street where, by 1916, my mother’s parents bought a permanent summer home: the modest Vermont house with the barn attached and the loft above, the house they had been renting for several years. It is the house Mother retired to, the house that is now a second home to my youngest brother and his family.

I think Mother chose Vermont as her cultural background early in her life. From her stories it was clear that the three summer months in Vermont were far more important to her than the nine months in Pennsylvania. Almost all of the stories she told us were of Grafton and its townspeople. It is true that we walked the roads and paths with her and looked out the windows of the Grafton house at people passing as we never did in Philadelphia. But she chose Vermont as her touchstone rather than Philadelphia because when the family was in Vermont, she knew her parents as part of its history. Many of their stories became hers. And equally important, I have come to think, she saw her parents in Vermont as more interesting than they were in the restricted world of parsonage boundaries and religious obligations.

The old Sidney Holmes house, which the Walkers bought in 1916, was sold fully furnished, complete with a valuable library. The family story goes that the house was bought with Grandmother Walker’s wedding fees, those monies offered the minister by a grateful groom and duly passed on to the minister’s wife, as was the custom. Always with awe, Mother told how her father found a first edition of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in the inherited library. Mother formed a lifelong interest in the Holmes family connections to an earlier Vermont and, during a summer visit to Grafton years later, she found letters of a correspondence in the library that would become an important part of her historical novel *The Quarry*.

Mother’s stories made her childhood in the early 1900’s vivid to us. Each summer the Walker family took passage from Phila-
delphia and sailed up the coast as far as Brattleboro, Vermont, then rode a train inland to Saxtons River, Vermont, where they stopped at a local stable, hitched up Tony to their buggy, and drove the last twelve miles to Grafton.

On one of their return trips by the same route, their ship sprang a leak in the night. Mother told us of being wakened in the dark and advised to be ready to go down in the lifeboats. Her mother sat calmly before a mirror, piling her collection of jewelry on the top of her head in the coils of her hair, pinning it firmly, then covering it with her hat. Her father insisted that the family sit down to a breakfast of oatmeal and bow their heads for grace in the midst of the excitement of the other passengers crowding to the rail out on deck. “We were the only family eating breakfast in the dark dining room,” Mother would remember in a tone of both dismay and respect. She was allowed to carry her pet rooster from the summer in a cardboard box. A sailor who helped her down the rope ladder was careful to keep the cardboard box from swinging out over the water.

Most of the photographs, too, like the stones, show Mother in Grafton. As a toddler she is usually with her protective sister Margaret, seven years older, both little girls dressed in white many-petticoated dresses, perhaps just having come from church services. There are photographs of large family picnics, a tablecloth on a long table spread with oval platters of fried chicken, gleaming ears of corn, heaping bowls of salads, tall white pitchers. Usually, a croquet game is going on in the background. Later on, the little girl, Mildred, stands with a playmate, frowning into the summer sun. Once, she is beside a cart hitched to a large, shaggy dog.

Mother often said that her sister was proud of taking care of her, making up games to play together and purposefully instructing her in how to behave. When they washed dishes out on the back porch overlooking the brook, Mother remembered, her sister named the knives as fathers, the forks as mothers, and the spoons as children. We were told this matter-of-factly as if anyone could see the sense of it. And this same older sister made up games to keep Mother amused in church—folding a handkerchief into a small white mouse to run up her sleeve or under her wide belt, or widening her eyes at something that wasn’t there on
Mother’s Sunday dress. These antics made Mother smile whenever she told them to us.

She liked telling us of her rebellious moments, too. One summer evening her mother got out the pots and pans and her father brought in brimming baskets of peaches. The narrow kitchen was already hot from the stoked-up wood stove. Mother said she did not want to help peel the sticky peaches. Her father looked at her sternly, “Well then, you cannot stay down here and have fun with us. You will have to spend the evening in your room.” Mother wandered off upstairs to her room, feeling shut out, listening to her sister laughing and talking with her mother and father as they worked away.

As they grew older, Mother came to feel that her sister had a separate, much more interesting and dramatic life than her own in the Grafton summers. One afternoon, Aunt Peg came home from the local swimming hole in tears because one of her friends had lifted her skirts so high in front of the young men that her ankles showed. Mother remembered her sister’s shame. This would have been about 1916. Mother showed us photos, pointing out our young aunt with tight curly hair and a warm smile, merriment in her brown eyes. Mother described her with the envy of a younger sister who felt herself to be “plain” and “scrawny” by comparison. But photos don’t bear that out; they show Mother as an equally pretty child, her expression perhaps a little pensive.

My brothers and I know two of the larger white houses with green shutters and generous porches for their importance to Mother’s Grafton summers. One stands against the village green, the other at the fork of Main Street, both with wrought iron balconies above their main doors. On each of these balconies Mother and her sister and village friends had declaimed passages from Romeo and Juliet and The Merchant of Venice. Mother was pleased that several times she had taken Mercutio’s role, and another memorable time been Romeo to her sister’s Juliet. Not so many years ago, when she gestured to the balconies and retold the story for her grandchildren, we felt again her deep sense of belonging to the life of Vermont.

The story that equally thrilled and frightened us occurred on a summer day when Mother and her sister were still little girls.
Their mother was driving them back home from a day's outing in the buggy. As they came along the dusty road nearing their house, the horse shied at some movement. In an instant he was a runaway. He veered off the road onto the wide green lawns of the large houses set back from the road, and Grandma Walker hauled back on the reins, commanding the little girls to get down on the floor of the buggy and hold on tight. She brought the horse down to a walk finally, and guided him back to the barn while the neighbors watched from their porches. "We were terrified," Mother said, "but it was exciting!" As an afterthought, she commented, "Every one said Mother was a good hand with a horse."

As Mother told these stories about her mother, I often sensed an attitude that accorded her mother the accomplishment of keeping house but not much more, not anything particularly admirable or instructive. When I was older, she told me that her mother could always reduce the amount of ingredients called for in a recipe. "Making do," Mother commented. She suggested that this was commendable when the household was pinched for money, but that she thought it, otherwise, without merit. Mother felt that, yes, it kept things going but it was not an effort that she herself cared to make. It annoyed her that "shorting" recipe ingredients (1 1/2 cups sugar when 2 were required; 1/8 teaspoon nutmeg when 1/4 was called for) should be a matter of pride.

What Mother really scorned was her mother's wish to retire to Vermont and raise chickens. "Chickens!" Mother would say when she mentioned this. "How awful that would be." I did wonder about Mother's distaste because, after all, our family out in Montana raised chickens. Still, they were not Mother's enterprise. (We children cared for the chickens and the woman who kept house for Mother prepared them for the freezer.)

I knew my grandmother as someone who sewed "best" dresses for me, and as someone who wrote me right back when I sent her a painstaking thank-you letter. Once, when my maternal grandparents visited us at our family cabin in Montana, Grandma took us into the thicket nearby to gather smooth stones and dug a hole to line a "dry well" for keeping vegetables cool. My brother and I were entranced. And when she whipped up scrambled eggs...
on the kerosene stove, she did it with a flourish I have never forgotten.

Why have I remembered all these years the little stories of Mother’s, characterizing my Grandmother Walker? I wanted to know about her because I was only eight years old when she died, but whenever I recall the stories, I feel the implicit criticism in Mother’s tone of voice. Now, I imagine that Mother preferred not to think of herself as having a mother with such uninteresting ambitions as “making do” or “raising chickens.” Is it simply that she wanted her mother to be a different person—as I, in my callow youth, wanted my mother to be, for different reasons?

Mother’s stories about her father, in contrast, were always told with pride. Each vignette of him from her childhood emphasized how carefully, even exactly, he coached her in important skills. There was the day when Mother had proudly accompanied him in the family buggy to visit an old friend of his who lived at some distance from Grafton. Coming home, they were caught in a hailstorm and took shelter in a covered bridge. For the duration of the storm, Grandfather Walker taught Mother her multiples of eight. She always remembered the day happily, the snugness of sitting under the raised bonnet of the buggy. For Mother it was an example of his excellent influence on her, her approval that he never let an opportunity for instruction be wasted. (I remember thinking that might have been a waste of a good storm.)

She admired his resourcefulness, too, his “Yankee inventiveness.” Rolling up his sleeves, he chopped enough stove wood for a week at a time, repaired leaks and rebuilt stairs. He always approached tasks with exuberant energy, she said approvingly. We experienced once, in our childhood, his thunderous preaching once from the high pulpit of the Baptist Church in Great Falls. The two arcs of his white and bushy mustache moved up and down, quivering with vehemence, as his face turned from red to purple.

After Grandfather Walker’s death, Mother used to tell us the story of his heroism. Walking down a Philadelphia street, he saw a department store on fire. Just as he drew closer, a man ran out with his clothes in flames. Grandfather tripped him and rolled him in his winter overcoat. As he bent over the man, glass from
the large window above him blew outward from the heat of the fire, and fell, slicing off the end of Grandfather’s nose. “Without a thought,” Mother would say grandly, “he found his nose and walked down the street to a nearby doctor’s office to have it sewn back on.” She explained that this was the cause of his nose turning purple whenever he was “exercised.”

Walks through the village with him were a pleasure to her. Whenever they stopped to visit with his friends or acquaintances, she was aware of his eloquence; he had faith in his ability to settle any dispute, she would say in the awed tone of a little girl. She told us when we were grown, almost inadvertently, and with shy pride, that her father called her “Peter.” He had wanted her to be a boy, she said matter-of-factly. He explained to her that Peter was his favorite name because Peter was one of the finest of the apostles, as well as a fisherman. I sensed that being “Peter” assured my mother that she had a special role to fulfill for her father, perhaps of succeeding in a way that a girl would not be expected to, a way that set her apart from her sister. When I asked once how long Grandfather had called her “Peter,” she answered that it was until she went away to college, she thought.

Grandfather was a fine fisherman, bringing home a string of fish whenever he went off to the narrow, shallow streams of dark brown water that ran down the steep hills to join the branches of the Saxtons River. Once, Mother showed us the smooth gray rock behind the Walker homestead where Grandfather had surprised a mink with a large brown trout wriggling in its mouth. Tapped lightly on his head by the end of the fishing rod, the mink dropped the trout, and Grandfather caught it in his free hand.

Mother always enjoyed telling of her father’s fishing prowess, but she herself was not interested in trekking off to fish with him. Aunt Peg was the child who followed him and learned to be as adept at fishing as he. What absorbed Mother most about her father was his intellectual life, she made clear.

In her later years, Mother said that her father was the greatest influence on her writing. It wasn’t that he discussed her early novels with her; his influence went back to her earlier years, when he inspired her to succeed in whatever she attempted. She was very “firm” about this—a word she often used with a slight com-
pression of her mouth, meaning there was no doubt. I imagine that her mother wanted that for her, too, but it may not have been with the same emphasis on ambition.

Perhaps Mother remembered those particular stories from her childhood because they helped her define her understanding of her parents. And perhaps the stories I have told my children about my parents stayed in my mind for the same reason. Stories I've told them about my father are certainly as different from those I've told about my mother as Mother's were. What I know now as an adult is that my stories about my parents are not as much about them as they are about me—my reactions to them. And perhaps her stories about her parents worked in the same way.

I was startled to discover, when I first looked up their family histories, that Mother's parents had very similar backgrounds. It must not have been of interest to Mother to tell us. Both of Mother's parents were descended from families who had emigrated to the Massachusetts Colony in the 1630's, on her father's side from Scotland, and on her Mother's side from England. The only mention Mother made of this was that Grandma Walker, at one time, had been gathering the information necessary to qualify for membership in the Daughters of the American Revolution. It seemed to Mother a rather uninteresting pursuit.

Grandma Walker was born Harriet Merrifield in Newfane, Vermont, in 1865. Moments after Harriet's birth, the new mother asked the reason for the church bells tolling, and was told that they rang for the death of President Lincoln. Harriet's father's people had left the Massachusetts Colony and settled permanently in the Brookline Valley in Vermont by the mid 1700's. Local people in Newfane still point out "Merrifield's Meadow," where they say young men were trained as soldiers for the Revolutionary Army.

Harriet Merrifield, as a child, attended a round brick schoolhouse which still stands at a fork in the main road through the valley. The story told in the local historical museum's leaflet is that the first schoolmaster, a Scot, wanted the schoolhouse to be round rather than square, with carefully spaced windows; in his earlier life he had been a highwayman and wished to see who was
coming from all directions. The advantage for the children in the school was that there were no corners for the winter winds to shriek around.

Harriet Merrifield’s description of her Grandfather Merrifield always made Mother shudder—he was a grim, upright man who ran his finger underneath the rim of each child’s breakfast plate to see that there were no hidden pork rinds. But another story that Harriet told to Mother was of a more playful grandfather at his own family table. A suitor, favored by one of his daughters, had come to dinner. He was not the usual young minister coming to call, and the head of the table asked an unusual blessing:

Dear God of Love
Look down from above
And see how times have mended.
We now have strawberry shortcake
Where mush and milk were intended.

Whenever Mother repeated this story, she seemed to enjoy the slyness of the comment—that the daughter had betrayed her preference for her caller by her choice of menu.

On the invitation of a brother already settled in Illinois, Harriet’s father moved his family west to Mendota, Illinois, in 1880 to join his brothers in the Western Cottage Organ Company, which built melodeons and, later, pianos. (The Merrifield brothers had apparently been apprenticed, earlier, to the large melodeon and piano company located in Brattleboro, Vermont.) In the years following the Civil War, many families left for “the West” as economic conditions worsened in New England. According to Mother, those who moved west at that time showed “gumption,” and those who stayed in New England lacked it, a notion she pursued in her novel The Quarry.

Harriet Merrifield was fifteen when her family moved to Mendota, Illinois. A year later, her mother died in childbirth, and Harriet took on the care of her five younger brothers and sisters. When her father married again four years later, Harriet was free to go on to college. It was a matter of pride to Mother that her Grandfather Merrifield ensured that each of his children was given the opportunity to attend a college or to have means to start in a chosen line of work. At Dennison College in Ohio,
Harriet studied to be a teacher and sang in the college choir. A young seminary student, Walter M. Walker, who attended a performance by the Dennison College choir, met Harriet there and later courted her.

Although Walter Walker was born and raised in Wyoming, Illinois, his father had been born on the Walker Homestead in Vermont. Samuel Walker, who settled the Walker Homestead in the early 1800's, was descended from the Walkers of the Old Plymouth Colony of Massachusetts. A record of the Plymouth Colony written in 1635 includes among its residents a widow Walker who had emigrated with her six sons from Glencoe, Scotland.

Walter's father, Orville Walker, married a Sarah Milliken from a nearby village and, in 1852, moved west to Wyoming, Illinois. As Mother told us, her Grandfather Walker must have been the only one of that generation of Walker sons who had "the gumption" to move West. Two of her great-uncles who stayed built houses in Grafton—along the same main street where Mother's parents would purchase their summer home in 1916.

Elgin, Illinois, became the permanent home for Walter Walker's parents, where they were successful farmers. They were described in a family history as believing in community responsibility and having become staunch supporters of the Baptist religion. Walter and one of his nine brothers went to a seminary school near Chicago, living in a boarding house run by his older sister. The sister devoted herself to making her brothers' education possible in this way. When Walter graduated from the seminary, he obtained a Baptist ministry in Illinois, and kept in touch with Harriet Merrifield by letter.

After her graduation from college, Harriet's father instructed her to return to Vermont to keep house for her bachelor brother, who was running the Merrifield farm. But she also began teaching at nearby Leland and Gray Seminary in Townshend, Vermont. Her father had been a student at Leland and Gray, and while there, had delivered an oration on "The Advantage of Female Companionship." Her grandfather had helped found the Seminary in 1834. But in 1890, Harriet left her obligations in Vermont to marry the Reverend Walter Walker in Elgin, Illinois.

There is a photograph of her newly married parents that de-
lighted Mother. They stand on the deck of a ship about to depart for Europe for their wedding trip. Her mother wears a stylish dress of the 1890's: thin stripes on a dark background, a full skirt and leg-of-mutton sleeves. She is smiling beneath a pertly brimmed hat. Her father holds a straw hat in one hand, erect and smiling at his bride. He wears a suit complete with vest and cravat. “Aren’t they handsome!” Mother would say to us.

Grandmother Walker was twenty-five when she married, but Mother was wistful that she was not born until her mother was forty years old—no longer a young woman. Still, it was important to Mother that her father had honored his young wife’s wish not to bear children immediately after their marriage. Their first child, Margaret, was born in 1898 in Elgin, Illinois. At some time after that, her father took a parish in Philadelphia, where their second daughter, Mildred, was born in 1905.

By the time Mother was one year old, the family had reestablished their family ties with Vermont; from 1906 on, the Walker family would summer in Grafton. Now my youngest brother’s family arrange to be there for most holidays and for family reunions. His eldest daughter chose to be married in the Grafton Church in the spring of 1996. In the village, the Grafton house is still called “the Walker Place.”
After the Absence of Sound Appears
the Presence of Material

If sound can be broken,
and it will be,
and broken into over and over
again in visible syllables
dropped from vaults of glass domes,
sound can stand still
as it has to, so what is still
must be gone away from
to be wanted more.
Who hears a scrap of thought
can’t help listening for the next,
put this with that,
put it over this
loved one’s voice,
moist as it fills in notches
silence hacks away.
Scissors into silk.
Wood speaks to mud,
milk against tooth,
swimming up from depths
too deep to rise above.
Why go there?
Where the sign points to before
it is always too late.
And then a sudden blast
after which everything is quiet.
FROM MY HOUSE TO YOURS

The village store closed for good
and just as suddenly opened its doors.
We go tiptoeingly slow over invisible salamanders

who nevertheless merit our affection
and by virtue of gradual accumulation
work their ways deep into our answers

and our questions. Will anyone buy enough
nightcrawlers to put a dent in that old lady’s rent?
There’s evidence her sons labor all summer
to sell cordwood in the fall. A crooked window
protects her bathtub Virgin Mary shrine.
Nobody would buy the pink house which in late summer

fairly glowed. Will anyone buy it now
it’s painted white? I resist speeding down
the stretch of open road. Everyone knows

a cop’s staked himself in the hidden entrance
to the wildlife sanctuary. His blue light waits
to explode. Honeybees are as deaf as stones.

They cruise through their lives virtually unaffected
by blues. I want to get to your house
without disturbing nature or the dead from their slumber.

Coyotes like this road and have been accused,
like good coyotes everywhere, of killing domesticated
animals. A little farther on comes a place

to have one’s fingers painted. I hear there’s
a long line for an appointment.
I often think of my collection of kitchen knives
and good advice, the kind worth taking, tells us
dull knives are most dangerous.
Somedays buying duck eggs seems like a good idea.

Then I remember their blood orange yolks.
By now I know the road by heart. I can drive it
in my sleep. And we're reminded daily by the modest
dairy farm that they've invested in the Breed
of the Future. And what breed is that?
There's the majestic maple to look forward to
in the fall. I like the house with many capital Bs
painted on its shutters. Near the community
swimming hole one lonely pony stands solemnly still
in its miniature pen. Signs of life at the tiny
trailer park, the whole place is up for sale.
One tenant's stood a life-size deer in the meadow brush
where it's fooled me more than once.
The cemetery hasn't been used for years.
At last I take the turn into your side road,
all jagged shade, hopping lights and cool shadows.
And when we close the door behind us what
goes on goes on, goes on, goes on, goes on between us.
My father took me with him to test-fire his restored seven-mm Mauser. We walked uphill, away from the houses, until we came to a snowy field.

“This rifle was used by cavalry in the First World War,” my father said. “It’s so old the chamber might explode.”

He held the gun at his side, and I covered my ears with my hands. When he fired, I saw an orange flash and light-blue powder smoke, and the air rippled around him. He worked the bolt and fired again. The report echoed along the side of the mountain.

“Mussolini had some good ideas,” my father said. “He knew the difference between humans and people. I also know the difference. But I’m not wearing a black shirt.”

I walked forward a few yards and found the tracks the bullets had made through snow and dirt. When I looked closely, I found the mangled slugs, shaped like small mushrooms.

“If you kill a person in self-defense,” my father said, “it’s not murder.”

At home, I went to my room and pulled the shades to shut out daylight. When my mother found me, she tried to cheer me up.

“Your first word,” she told me, “was ‘gun.’

“Once, when we were watching a movie,” she continued, “I tried to teach you a new word. I pointed at the screen and said, ‘Cowboy! Cowboy!’

“You looked and said, ‘Singing gunslinger Gene Autry!’

“By the time you were two, you were speaking in multisyllables. Then you stopped talking. I didn’t know if you had no thoughts or just didn’t want to tell them. I knew you could hear me, because you answered questions—but only with single syllables. I don’t know why.”

My sister ran out of her room in the middle of the night. “My window shade went up,” she said, “without anybody touching it.”

“Go back to sleep,” my mother said.

“I can’t,” my sister said.
She decided to sleep in the room I shared with my brother, so I moved out, into her room.

During the night, I did not hear the window shade snap up unexpectedly. Instead, I imagined I was pinned to the ground by a sniper. I stayed flat, keeping my head down. But the rifle bullet hit, and I couldn't move, I couldn't even crawl, because I was going to die.

When I returned to my bed in the morning, I saw two people in it: two thatches of dark hair poked above the covers. The longer hair belonged to my sister; the shorter was my father's.

Later, when I was alone with my brother, I asked what my father and sister had been doing.

“What do you think?” my brother asked.

“I think they were doing something,” I said.

“Maybe they were,” he said, “but whenever I woke up and looked, they were just lying there.”

I went to my father's gun rack and picked up a shotgun. I raised it to my shoulder, looked down the barrel and aligned the bead with the curved metal. I sighted at a ceramic lamp, a mirror, a window. I put my finger on the trigger and clicked off the safety.

For some reason, I didn’t pull the trigger. Instead, I pulled back the bolt. When I did, a live cartridge twirled out of the chamber.

I replaced the cartridge, closed the bolt, and put the gun back on the rack, so no one would know I had touched it.

At dinner, my father delivered a short tirade.

“People tell me that if I don't like it here, I can leave,” he said. “But I'm not going to Russia; I'm going to Louisiana. I have an offer to teach art there.

“My parents always told me to get a job. When I said I wanted to teach, they said, 'Who can you teach?' “I can teach young adults in Beauregard County about impasto, chiaroscuro and techniques of gesso.”

“Why go so far?” my mother asked.

“The Dalai Lama had some good ideas,” my father said. “He gathered his disciples and went into exile in India. I’m going into exile, too, as a guru on the bayou.”

Fall 1998
“When you leave,” my mother said, “I’m buying the children a television.”

I found a can of black powder and poured a pile of the pellets onto a metal table, then mixed in azure pigment from my chemistry set. When I lit the powder mound, it burned with an energetic hiss and a blue flame.

Next, I figured a way to contain the mixture so that it would explode. I found a piece of copper tubing, the kind used for plumbing, and packed it with tinted gunpowder. I made a fuse from match heads and sealed the device with solder.

I waited till dark, then fetched my brother and sister and took them, along with the ordnance, to the schoolyard. I placed my bomb on the ground and lit the fuse. The three of us hid behind a small hill and waited.

There was no explosion, only a shower of sparkling blue tear-drops in the shape of a blossom.

A fire caught in the dry grass and spread outward from my homemade grenade. My brother and sister and I stamped out the flames, then headed home.

Inside, we checked the weekly listings, turned on the television, and settled in for serious viewing.

When my father returned from wherever he had been, he collected all of his ammunition and took it outside. He picked up the boxes of cartridges one by one and threw them as far as he could. Then he came inside, picked up the television set, and pitched it through a window.

He didn’t stop throwing things until my mother called the police and said he was trying to kill us.

I took my .22-caliber peashooter to the hill above town. I looked for a target and found a glass gallon jug filled with partly frozen water. I set it on a rock, stepped back and took aim. When I fired, a mist of glass, water and ice sprayed into the air.

I found increasingly smaller objects to shoot at: rusted cans, empty shotgun shells. I practiced until my support hand didn’t waver, my trigger finger didn’t jerk, and my shots didn’t often miss.

I decided that someday I would become a pacifist.
ASHES

Randall and Grace Carlile, In Memoriam

He lay asleep, mouth agape, a strand of drool like an I.V. connecting him to his pillow, his heartbeat ticking the monitor just hours away from death, my stepfather, sprawled like one already gone among the other geezers in the VA ward.

When the mortician phoned, my mother said, *That's dirt, not him, throw it in the bay.* No ceremony with relatives in black. Only a word or two at the local VFW, the Elks, the Eagles, maybe the Moose (my stepfather joined everything), fraternal wildlife facing their own extinction, the fishing boat crossing the bar, the deckhand holding the urn of ashes.

Released from the hospital two days before he died, my stepfather shook my hand: *Still strong as iron!* he said. Sometimes I wake to feel the pressure of that grip, the pain of it, like a trap of hurtful absence that won't let go, like the .22 he left me I could never shoot straight, and his compass pointing helplessly the way he went.

A ruddy little man, a grand liar, embarrassed when the townsfolk coerced him every Christmas into playing their Santa Claus, his *Ho Ho's* frightened the children who had to be coaxed into his lap with bribes of candy. Christmas eves he came home quarrelsome, diagnosed a drunk by his doctor, a drunk, as if the doctor wanted company. His heart enlarged to embrace the world.
he was leaving, his last year hooked
to an oxygen hose, his daily company
a neighbor’s cat, a view from his lawnchair
facing the driveway. My mother found him
at dawn, dead as a fish, released from his line,
away from the current that troubled him:
*Why are we bombing civilians?* he asked,
angering the other vets, patriots to the man.

And if he lied his way through life, always the hero
of his own fictions, who’s to say he was wrong?
In the browntone photos that outlive him
he appears the shortest and fattest, clearly
the loudest, of the lot among the dead animals
and hunting pals he managed to outlast.
That accident on the ranch became
an ammunition dump explosion at Fort Knox.
Antlers sprouted tines, fish stretched.
Lost fights become brave victories,
the managed history of his unmanageable life,
no weirder than my ex-wife’s eccentric aunt’s
whose tabby, trafficked flat beside the road,
became a *sail cat* propped in a crotch
of the cherry tree, a place-mat cat,
scenic from her kitchen window
in the rainfall of fermented fruit.

In my favorite photo my stepfather
and his three brothers
strut in a buggy behind the barn,
four bottles of whisky tilted in a toast
hidden from their mother in the pantry
frowned away from where they clown.
The horse droops in its traces,
as if bored or bemused.

*  

Each morning he brought my mother
a water glass half full of vodka topped
with orange juice, each morning
unscrewed the cap from a bottle
of bourbon and slugged it down. Now my mother wanders the rest home screaming about the Holocaust, waving important papers, delusional from alcohol and drugs. They find her at dawn, in a fetal position, her room torn apart, certain she’s survived a plane crash barely less catastrophic than her life: runaway at twelve, married at thirty, four husbands—one wife-beating brute, one child molester, two alcoholics—all dead. And a slew of shit jobs ending in ess. Sometimes she mistakes me for her husband. Randy? she calls. Randy? No, Mama, I tell her, It’s Henry. Randy’s gone. Of course, he is! she says, as if I’ve told her something wrong.

Nothing I say can make her life seem meaningful or right or bring to justice all the slights that stalk her, real or imagined, I nod my head and agree to her complaints, right or wrong. No relative or neighbor’s left unvilified, no trespass uncommitted in her diary of harm. The trouble is, she’s right half the time: her world is ugly, the people bad enough to make you hang your head for what the human race can be. I’m afraid of it, she says. Afraid of what? I ask. A stupid question she will not answer.

Now I’ve consigned her to my stepfather, gulls, flailing their wings, trouble the calm her ashes have fallen through. What coordinates of empty space her smoke inhabits are anybody’s guess. Those of us who still breathe inhale a part of her with every breath we take, the lonely molecules that were her oxygen before they became our fire.
The Usual Landmarks

i.
The word motel is spelled out all across the country. Neon martinis tip in the darkness, the olive lights up bigger than your head. Electric red horses gallop in the infinite sweep of twelve hooves, six horses, red body treading red body. And there are a lot of vacancies, unused rooms with rough curtains hanging loose on the tread. The pools are open. Float across the rippled rectangle and push yourself, hand and foot, from edge to edge. Concrete poured into rectangles, leaves and dead frogs caught in the breathing filter of chlorine systems.

ii.
We stopped for go-carts last night. The wooden blonde standing three stories high on the side of the road forced us to consider trading the wide berth of the American car for a low, exposed engine, the pavement close to your cheek. Lady of the Fairway stood in the dusk, not minding the crab grass uncut around her heels. She held a gold car in her palm, a finger to her lips. She told us secrets and we took the next exit. At the window, the young one in his first job ever stamped a greasy car on our hands, sent us towards the throng of unsteady teenage boys. Men with working tans manned the loop. Back on the highway, the giant female with full wooden bosom went largely unnoticed. She stood in the weeds, a tawdry piece of Coney Island, lost in the middle country.

iii.
The track smelled of gasoline. The pedal moved like a wood block, a crude part in a crude machine. You took the corners with skill, finding your shortest route, while I swooped through the figure eights at my own slow time. The boys roared by, I kept up, I fell behind. The gravel was a close mix of pretty silver grains.
You pay for our room in the motel cottage marked *Office*. The woman in a plaid smock, a nurse’s smock, leads us there. She carries a starched pile of sheets and rough towels. She says needless things so she can get a good look at us. It’s you again. You have a face that makes people want to look, consider how you got that face anyhow. The martini tips blue machine light into the room. You have grown up in a field of stares.
Hammond loved her new office, even though it shared the plumbing wall with a men's lavatory. The office was in the oldest building on campus, spacious and high-ceiled with a lovely view of the campus and further off, the city in daylight and when she worked late, the city in moonlight. But through the wall she shared, she could hear everything. Everything. The sound of every flush. The splash of water in the sinks, the gurgling sound of the drains entering through her wall into the soil pipe and draining below. Especially that—the hollow tail-end sound of water disappearing below. But more than just water and she was not a delicate woman, she was a creative writer, but really, it was all too much.

To make matters worse, her desk, her computer and her work station were up against that same wall and nothing could be done about it because to her right was the view she loved and on the wall behind her were built-in cabinets and wooden bookcases and to her left was her office door and more bookcases. The wood was walnut, black and lustrous and now scarce and impossibly expensive to replace in a public institution.

She thought about complaining, but to whom? She'd just received tenure and the nice raise that accompanies such a promotion. With a favorable tenure decision came a new burden of responsibilities. She was expected to make critical decisions on the inner workings of the University—Planning and Budget, Personnel, Curriculum. She didn't want to be perceived as a complainer. Many of the buildings on campus were old and in need of renovation, not just hers. The allocation of resources was a constant battle, and even if the resources were available there was a coalition of alumni and faculty who were scrupulous preservationists and advocated against any change whatsoever. Tearing out a wall and sound-proofing for the sake of noisy pipes would be an abomination. Besides, the lavatories had only recently been updated with new siphon-jet toilet bowls and to open the walls again would be an unthinkable expense. But mostly, she just couldn't bring herself to say publicly that she could hear the men going to the bathroom and would rather not. She didn't think of herself as being precious and certainly didn't want oth-
ers to think it either. She'd worked hard to gain the respect she had and in no way was she going to put that in jeopardy.

But it was becoming unbearable. As each day went by her aural acuity was intensifying. As her mind learned over and over again what it was hearing, it seemed to gain in its ability to take on more detail, seemed to reach further back along the track of time, taking on sound earlier and earlier. So it came to be that in late September she actually heard a sigh and before that, the sound of male effort.

James, her lover, was in town that weekend and she told him what was happening and he thought it was no big deal. She wouldn't have thought to say anything at all, but he seemed to be preoccupied. He was a program director where he taught and something was always near to boil. Friday night had been lovely, sad and tender and the next morning the same, but by noon their being together had not delivered him of himself and a certain melancholy had come over him.

James had been one of her outside evaluators in her search for tenure. She put him down as someone in her field she didn't know who could comment objectively on her work. In his letter he told how she was a prolific writer, as curious about the making of narrative as she was about displaying its very limitations. He told how her first novel Misfire, though slender, struck him as the sowing of the seeds that were coming to fruition in the as yet untitled manuscript she was working on. He wrote how for a fiction writer, she had taken on the ultimate challenge. In the most recent manuscript, she bared the structures of the form she sought to accomplish, creating fiction and dismantling fiction at the same time. She left the workings of the machinery to the outside, akin to the way architects are adorning their structures with the very pipework, ductwork and wiring that sustains them. He compared what she was doing to writers like Robert Coover on the one hand and Simon Schama on the other and William Gass wherever he was. He declared the prose to be self-conscious, but not. It was narrative, but not. It was of the mind, but not. It was about art, but not. He deemed her work to be courageous and the danger was, it might collapse, but he didn't think so because there seemed to be a strong heart at work informed by a smart brain, rigorous and with insight. The new manuscript seemed to be talking out of his own head as it trav-
eled between the sane and the afflicted, from art to science, experience to imagination, framing each in the language of letter, interview, diary and journal—private voice and public voice, voice with audience and voice without audience and audience itself often in flux. Audience was sometimes the self and audience was sometimes the self through someone else. Whatever faults he saw were faults of ambition. She demanded as much of the reader as she demanded of herself. The new work was not so cozy a read as *Misfire*. One could have said the same of the early work of William Vollman and his literary response was to begin writing a history of the western world in however many volumes James could not remember. He concluded that whatever faults he saw were borne of one reading in some few days. Maybe after another reading or two, they will still be there, but his guts told him not.

...So it becomes simple for me. Advancement in the arts and sciences comes by way of new science or intuitive leap, inspired moments often borne of pure necessity. The flying buttress, the theory of relativity, free verse. Hammond is finding ways to cast what she sees. Her vita documents the range of sources she is compelled to tap, the variety of genres she wants to experience to inform her prose. This is risky business. As an artist, you have to have faith and it is clear to me that she does. In my mind, this is the kind of writer the academy needs and should support.

James also wasn’t supposed to know her the way he did because he was married. Hammond knew this and accepted it as best she could.

“Are you going to tell me what’s up or not? It’s apparent something is bothering you.”

Hammond reclined on the bed in her new apartment. She’d made the move during her sabbatical year that followed tenure. James had been away much of that year, a Fulbright to Spain. They regretted the bad timing, her with a year off and him with a year abroad.

“I am fine,” he said. “Really. Just a mood.”

Hammond surely knew his moods. They could be very dark, borderline suicidal. He worshipped Hemingway and much like how clergymen reference their lives with the ages of Christ, he had a habit of saying things like, do you know what Hemingway was doing at my age? Do you know where Hemingway was right now? Recently, he’d spoken to her about a new guilt he was feel-
ing. He’d avoided the draft by going to college. He played basketball while others were being killed. It wasn’t something Hemingway would have approved of. Hammond knew her way into him, though. She’d call him Baby Tuckoo. She’d say, Baby Tuckoo is discouraged by department politics. Baby Tuckoo has been battling the theorists. She’d say, Baby Tuckoo is the nicest boy and she’d take his hands in hers and travel her body.

“I know,” he said. “It’s stupid to even think about.”

“Baby Tuckoo isn’t stupid. He’s a genius.”

“That’s nice,” he said, closing his eyes and letting her take his hands between her legs. She sighed for him as she closed herself around his hand.

“Baby Tuckoo,” she said. “Why haven’t you kissed me, you know, down there in a long time?”

James took in his breath, held it and gave off with a long sigh of his own.

“On the Hammond organ?”

“Funny,” she said throwing him back his hands. “Fine. Be that way.”

James got out of bed and fished around in his trousers until he came up with cigarettes and a book of matches. That was new. The kind of thing you’d think he’d have mentioned, smoking cigarettes.

“You didn’t answer my question,” she said.

“I don’t know. I just haven’t. It’s not something I ever did very much. It wasn’t intentional, me not doing it, and now I guess it’s just not something I do.”

“I think you’ve talked enough and besides, you’re talking in circles.”

“I know.”

“Do you want to tell me or not?”

“I guess not.”

“But you do want to tell me. Please.”

James lit a cigarette and smoked off it, something he wasn’t very good at. If it was a habit, it was a new one. He kept waving at the smoke with the back of his hand, told her a silly story about a graduate student mistaking the Book of Lamentations for the Book of Laminations.

“James. What the hell is it? Tell me or go.”

He stood and she thought for a moment he was going to go.
He crossed the room and opened a window, apologized for the smoke and told her, okay, he’d try to say what it was he did not understand about himself.

“It started when I killed the snake,” he said, sitting on the bed and crossing his long thin legs. “I was on a picnic one afternoon with my mother. We were going to have a cookout. We were at a state park. I was hiking about, pretending I was a cowboy. I had six-guns and a cowboy hat and a rubber knife.”

“Oh, I like that. Do you still have them?”

“No, but I say, there on the edge of the woods that day was a copperhead. It was curled up on a rock in the sun. I backed away and returned to the pavilion where my mother was cooking, but I couldn’t get it out of my head, sharing the park with a copperhead, so I went back looking for it and couldn’t find it. I had a heavy stick and suddenly I looked down and found it crawling between my legs. That really freaked me out so I killed it, but I didn’t just kill it, I went wild and hacked it up. Afterwards I had such regret. I felt like I’d lost a member of my own family. It was a strange feeling and I can’t explain it, but my mother was a very beautiful woman. I know it’s common for boys to have feelings, but my feelings, these went beyond Oedipal.”

“How far beyond?”

“I don’t know. Memory being however kind or unkind it is.”

Hammond confessed she hated her mother, hated the way she ate, the way she opened her lips like an angel fish to avoid messing her lipstick, her face like a week old cadaver, but it didn’t work. He told her to forget about it. This was all his fault and he stayed in his funk the whole weekend long and slept on the floor and when she drove him to the airport, as politely as he could he told her they were through and that’s what he’d been trying to tell her all weekend long.

“Through?” Hammond said. “What the hell is that? Here I was feeling sorry for you.”

“It’s just not there anymore. I’m sorry.”

“Great. Fine. Cool.”

“Hammond, it’s different now. It’s not the same.”

“I know what it is.”

“What.”

“It’s because now we are equals. I don’t need you like I used to. I’m not dependent. You fucker. You just can’t take it.”

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“Don’t push it.”
“You’re a shit.”

“Okay. Fine. Here it is. You didn’t tell me your own university published *Misfire*. Jesus, Hammond, your own university publishes you and you have the balls to ask me to rubber stamp it. Were you that desperate to get tenure? How do you think I feel? My name might not be much and I know I ain’t no saint, but how do you think that looks?”

“You knew that. I told you. I sent you a copy of the damn book. Why didn’t you say something then?”

“Say something? Say what?”

“That manuscript had to be accepted just like any other publisher. What’s wrong with that?”

“Yeah right, and I got a bridge I’d like to sell them. The answer to your question is, because it’s ugly Hammond. It stinks.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“Draw your own conclusions.”

In October came the sound of trousers dropping, buckles unbuckling, buttons unbuttoning, and zippers unzipping. By then Hammond had stopped crying hot angry tears and now cried because she was sad. At Thanksgiving her mother warned her about gaining the world and losing her soul. Warned her also about gaining weight. She jotted what he said into her journal and when she returned for the last weeks of the semester she could hear the pivot and latch of the stall doors and by semester’s end she could hear footsteps, the swish of door closing, the sproing of the closer being loaded with compression, and even back to the footsteps in the hall.

Outside was cold with the confection of an early snow. It was late in the day, almost dark. Hammond tapped at her front tooth with a #2 pencil, the phone receiver pressed between her shoulder and the side of her face. She was on hold. She had cropped her hair and started painting her fingernails. She was planning on making herself available again. James had taken away a part of her, but she was strong. On her desk was her journal and a yellow legal pad. She was writing again too, starting with the words of her mother.

“Yes. This is Professor Hammond. I am still here.”

“You said you want maintenance to come listen to your wall.”
The young woman on the other end, her voice was so very loud it almost hurt. Hammond could hear papers being shuffled, could hear another faint whispery conversation on the line overlapping her own. The young woman then yelled to someone named Jimmy, telling him, yes, that was the message, and told Hammond someone would be over to listen to her wall.

"About time," Hammond said, setting the receiver in its cradle, doodling Jimmy on her legal pad, rewriting it to be James, sketching a heart and an arrow. She smiled. It didn’t hurt. She encouraged her students to doodle. They even did a doodle exercise together in class. James, she thought, tsk, tsk, tsk.

Within an hour there was a knock at her door. She’d heard him coming and was already up and turning the knob. He was young and tall, the cuffs of his shirt falling above his bony wrists, a tool belt slung over his shoulder. His name was stitched over his breast pocket. He was uncomfortable. Jimmy, she thought, like a little James. He told her he was sort of new and not sure of what she wanted.

"The message was kind of strange," he said.

Hammond told him she simply wanted him to sit at her desk and listen quietly and it would be crystal clear. He shrugged and sat down. As classes were over and it was late in the day, it would be a little while, so they waited, Jimmy at the desk and Hammond staring out the window, her arms crossed as the office went quiet.

"We’re not supposed to talk to professors," Jimmy whispered, "but can I ask you a question?"

"Not supposed to talk to professors?" she said, still looking out the window.

"No."
"What’s your question?"
"What do you teach?"
"Fiction," Hammond whispered. "I’m a fiction writer."

A darkness was coming early to the campus, bad weather that’d been predicted and was now coming to be.

"You write stories that aren’t true?"
"Yes," she hissed, as her window clattered in its frame and went silent.

"What’s the other one? I forget."
"Non-fiction," she said, her head cocked to the side. "Listen, now."
“I hear the wind,” he said.

Hammond kept looking out the window. Sure enough, a strong wind was passing by, making swoops of ghostly noise. It was the kind of wind that hollowed out the air behind it, leaving places where there was nothing to breathe. Trees began to bend and hold to their bend and then snap upright as if come to attention. The window clattered again in its frame. It was a quick and furious storm, a finality with every gust. Loving storms was something Hammond felt she was supposed to do, but this one was scaring her. In a distant part of town, she could see blocks of light flicker and extinguish.

“I knew you were a writer. I write too,” Jimmy said. “I read your book. I really liked it and I have wanted to meet you. I’m a poet, myself.”

A janitor who has read my book. A janitor who writes poetry. Hammond’s nerves were going into a tangle. She couldn’t tell if she belonged in this life. She could say back every smart thing she’d ever heard or read about being a writer. She could tell her classes what Flannery O’Connor said and Willa Cather and Emily Dickinson, but she couldn’t think of a single thing she’d ever said that was hers and hers alone. At that moment she wondered if she were the real thing, if she, Hammond, had anything to say to this poet. He meant me, Hammond thought. It’s ugly and it stinks. He meant me.

Jimmy’s beeper sounded and without asking, he picked up the phone and called Physical Plant. He said he’d be right over and explained to Hammond they were experiencing power surges, but Hammond was hearing footsteps and that stirred her. She crossed the room to where he sat and put her hand on his shoulder, so he would not rise up from her chair.

“Listen,” she said and he did.

“Oh, I see what you mean. Guy’s taking a whiz and you can hear it.”

“It’s as if he is urinating on my wall,” she said, her voice thin and plaintive. Her hand moved higher on his shoulder and she leaned into her extended arm.

“Well, I don’t know if I’d go that far. It is his wall too.”

Then the lights went out all over and in the darkness the sound became intense, like a faucet or a hose. It was all so stupid.
She hadn’t written a decent story since she was tenured and here she was in darkness at the breaking point with a janitor who wrote poetry listening to a man pee. She gripped at Jimmy’s shoulder, thought of him reading her book and she began to cry.

“Hey, it’s okay. I’ll fix it,” he said, standing to her, comforting her, closing her up in his arms as she leaned to his chest.

“I will help you,” she whispered into his shirt.

As he held her, as she let him, she wondered what he must be thinking. She thought to stand erect, to apologize, to make a strange off-hand comment, to be thought of as a little crazy rather than in need, but she didn’t want to move, wanted to stay just so forever. She wondered if his poetry might be any good. It was he who broke the hold, he who put his hands on her shoulders and sat her down in her chair.

“There now,” he said, wheeling her forward and taking a flashlight from his tool belt. “You sit right here and I’ll go have a look at what the big problem is.”

She wanted to say, no, don’t leave me alone in the dark. I am afraid. I want your arms around me again, like we are strangers and you have asked me to dance, like in a smoky bar or a harvest festival on main street, like a wedding. Like we have a mutual acquaintance and that is all. Like we had just read the same book. But she didn’t. She wiped at her tears and smiled up at him in the darkness and listened to him walk out her door and down the hall. Like a bedroom, she thought, and he has gone for a glass of milk or the sound of an intruder, something in the night and he is between me and whatever it is. She picked up her pencil.

She heard the door closer absorb energy, heard his footsteps on the tiles as the energy released and the door swept shut, heard the button on the flashlight being pushed and heard the sound that light makes when it crosses darkness and suddenly she felt her body under her desk to be bathed in light.

She gasped at how warm and white and spectral. It was steady. It filtered through the material of her skirt and flared around her hips. She didn’t move as the light poured into her body from under her desk, until it seemed to be like hands gently parting her knees and slowly spreading her legs. The light flared higher, but suddenly she was patient. In her fingers, she found her pencil.
She looked down again to see the light coming off her right hip and her left hip, looked down and saw it glowing inside her red skirt. It is elementary, she thought, without light there is no color. Without instrument there is no symbol. Without the artist there is no accord.

She reached down and touched at the material, felt its heat and slowly spread her legs until she couldn’t spread them any further. Her heart seemed to pause between beats. She wrote, like a diver, like a suicide. She rolled back in her chair, her legs sliding along the inside walls of her desk and inside those walls were drawers and drawers of manuscript. When far enough to do such a thing, she reached down and began to ease the material up her thighs until it was tucked to her waist and there was the glow of her thin underpants and she did not recognize them as her own.

“Jimmy,” she whispered.

“Yes,” he called back, the breath of his words carried on the light to between her legs and she thought, so what is written might return to what was carried on the breath. She leaned forward, marked an ellipsis and wrote ...Back into the dark. Back to coolness. Back to heat. Back to a time when darkness was first painted with light. She set down her pencil.

“Jimmy,” she said, hooking her thumbs in the waist of her underpants, raising in a moment and sliding them to her knees where they slid down her shins. She spread her legs again, spread them wide and whispered his name.

“Yes,” he said. “Yes.”

She held onto the edge of her desk and began pulling herself deep into the light. She let her knees out to slide along inside as she pulled herself forward.

“Yes,” he said. “Yes.”

She could feel the heat inside, could feel the light to be holy and descended, but knew it wasn’t, knew it was just a light, a beautiful light between her legs. She pulled to where the sharp edge of her desk touched below her ribs. She wanted to get to him, wanted to be where he was.

“Jimmy,” she said.

“Yes,” he said. “Yes. I am here.”

“I’m coming,” she said. “I’m coming.”
From a small prop plane
he dove into the smoke.
He had a shovel. Green boots.
Went down. The white sail
of him. Toward what?
Who could know, who
could see? He said the river
was a sound beyond the trees.

I was a woman on the road
by a water truck. Watching him
step from the smoke. Dragging
the shovel. A tree crashed
across the river. Halfway up
Halfmoon Ridge, the smoke of him
turned to me. I loved even
the green of those boots.

How to unmake a fire before
it unmakes a mountain.
How to unblacken the grasses
after his burn. Trenches of detour.
Wild-eyed, the moose comes tearing
out. Confusing the river sounds
with the crackling trees. Who
can see? From the road, more

smoke over the moose face.
I watch for a green. A man’s kiss
in a freefall. The char on my lips.
An unmade time around
the space. A country in flames.
And then its smolder. A wind of him
blowing. Sounds. He said sounds
were rivers in the trees.
I can't sleep a baby

cries somewhere the kitten curious squeezes
into a narrow
invisible
slot

of the apartment I hear the

fish go ping in its bowl and a wasp bangs
gingerly against
the window

a stealthy feeling stalks

me through daydreams until I am
scared and
then I am
okay

The clock
does my thinking
for me

when it asks, how is it that I got this
moment
at your ear

Consciousness is a layer

of dust on the wing of an
airplane
and so
when the present moment opens

into a new moment, that’s
when I remember

Amelia Earhart

and the dream of becoming birdlike and then
I imagine her

flight over
the flat desert floor

across a blasted ceiling of blue

and fire

and blue
Amy Ruedinger

*The Politeness of Barbed Wire*

Ebony pencil

18" x 24"
CONTRIBUTORS

ELIZABETH BRINSFIELD has worked as a spotlight operator in the circus, as a home health care assistant in Appalachia, and as a teacher at Navajo Prepatory School in Farmington, New Mexico.

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PAM HOUSTON's stories and essays have been published in numerous magazines and anthologies, including Best American Short Stories. “Cataract” is a selection from her second book of fiction, Waltzing the Cat, which is forthcoming from W. W. Norton. A licensed river guide, she lives in Colorado at 9,000 feet above sea level near the headwaters of the Rio Grande, where she is currently at work on a book of essays.

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Guidelines for Artists and Writers

*CutBank* is interested in art, poetry, and fiction of high quality and serious intent. We regularly print work by both well-known and previously unpublished artists. All manuscripts are considered for the Richard Hugo Memorial Poetry Award and the A. B. Guthrie, Jr. Short Fiction Award.

- We accept submissions from August 15 until April 1. Deadline for the spring issue is November 15; deadline for the fall issue is April 1.
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