Five or six occasional pieces

Mary Vanek

The University of Montana

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FIVE OR SIX OCCASIONAL PIECES

by

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B.A., Texas Tech University, 1977, M.A., University of Arkansas, 1981

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of

Master of Fine Arts

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Thanks to those who came and helped me over the border.
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Keeping Company with the Dark

What the light was like—that's an important question to ask of someone scared stupid of the dark. In the dark, we all of heard it—the snipping snick of a plastic cap being screwed off the lip of a glass bottle--later, the dull, wet thumps of reconciliation. I never liked indoor dark. I still don't. Which explains why I stay up all night to keep an eye on it--the dark, I mean. That's what I was doing the night John Wayne died. June the 11th, 1979, and I had my first full-bore case of strep throat, though I didn't know that's what it was. What it was then was me lying on the floor of a ready-built tract house dumped in what passed for the middle of Eagle Nest, New Mexico, watching on late-night TV from Albuquerque, Rancho Deluxe. The print of the film was all chopped up, and I was higher than Baldy Peak out back, sailing through the night on NyQuil, when the screen went white with noise and static. A young reporter in a wrinkled blue shirt, his eyes raw as his red tie, stared into the camera. "John Wayne is dead," he said and dropped his eyes to the typescript to read the wire service obituary. I could not stop shaking. My temples ached. I couldn't get my right eye to focus. The worst part of it, aside from the world being
lighter with the old man’s passing, the worst part of it was I had no one to tell. The man I’d married two years ago lay asleep on our king-sized bed, mad I’d holed up in the front room with my bottle of NyQuil and two Darvons left over from the winter before when I’d damn near broken my ankle skiing in the thick, wet powder we hardly ever got that far south. And he hated Rancho Deluxe. He was a big man and mostly trusted other men who worked with their hands. I’d watch him grin and reach for a man’s hand, keeping an eye on his mouth to see which corner of it dropped at the touch of a smooth or callused palm. We were young, the both of us, and we didn’t know any better than to watch each other close.

So I’d laid out on the floor, wrapped up in an old heart quilt my great-grandmother had made. The movie came back on. I did not believe what I’d heard in my ringing ears, which are still ringing, and John Wayne is still dead.

The husband has gone the way of a good many first husbands--out the trap door of a divorce court. I didn’t know it then, but the day John Wayne died gave me my first true look inside myself. It was not a pretty sight, and besides, it was dark.

I have since taken to wearing black or the darker colors to soak up whatever light might be available. So far, it’s worked. I’m still upright and occasionally functional. I tell stories a lot to tell myself who I am, continually reinventing the world I fall in and out of, trying to
convince myself that I do have a future. Whether I do or do not doesn't much count. All that does matter are the stories. Through them, I keep my family and its history of mirage glimmering on the horizon.

We lived on the rim of the Cap Rock of the High Plains where mirages—those tricks of heat and a certain dance of light that cast what look like shadows of the thing itself—have lured many a rider or lost troop of cavalry out onto the Staked Plains of the Texas Panhandle. Coronado and his soldiers named it Llano Estacado for the stakes the Spanish Jesuits drove into the ground to set buffalo skulls on top of, marking the locations of watering holes sometimes fifty to eighty miles apart in the dry season. If you believe in such things. The older I get, the more geography I believe in. Better that than in what I see in my own memory. Sometimes.

Other times there is the light. Once a year, rich or poor, the family went north and west. Daddy always started the trip home late, so we ended up on the shank of a Sunday evening helling down out of Colorado, hitting Dalhart, Texas, off a long smooth glide from Clayton, New Mexico. Daddy drove with one hand—one finger more like—on the power steering wheel of a Cadillac Sedan DeVille, always deep purple or white trash cream, sliding out of our lane and ahead of respectable men and their families in long cars.
Mama cheered or loved on one of us, holding one of the boys or me or Jae on her lap so we could get our heads out the window and hang in the stinging air of what white men called "the Great American Desert" when they first saw it. Being true to our mongrel pedigree, we were passing through, snatching at what we could get hold of on that wind. Always the wind. It blew and still blows at least ten, twenty miles an hour at dawn, picking up windage and elevation as the sun rises. So we traveled, when we could, at dusk and in the dark, Mama and Daddy smoking cigarettes, drinking beer then whiskey when drinking and driving were matters of private choice and not of public morality. We kids fought or slept in the back seat, grimy with road salt-sweat, or didn't sleep from being high on the sugar and caffeine of sweet, canned Coca-Colas. Which may account, I know now, for us not being able to sleep even when we got home. The road still buzzed and hummed in our ears. Jae jerked and kicked more than usual in our double bed at whichever house we could afford to live in.

When Daddy worked dirt, running the big Cat front-end loaders on landscaping jobs, pouring field dirt in flat platters for tract houses to be sold to the families of the Strategic Air Command at the air base, we lived in houses on the north side of town. And we went to school with spare change in our uniform pockets, knee socks that stayed up because the elastic was new and thick. When the air base shut down, closed as one of the first executive orders Lyndon
Johnson signed as Potter and Randall counties had the gall and pure stupidity to vote for Barry Goldwater, Daddy went broke, and Mama worked the blood bank some nights after she left Dr. John’s lab. She cooked a lot of pan-fried potatoes with purple onions and ladled out brown beans over scratch cornbread with hands that ended in nails stained perpetually purple from the formaldehyde tissue-culturing demanded. We thought all mothers had purple crescent moons in the middle of their long nails that scratched backs more deliciously than other nails could because they were strong and hard from their daily chemical bath.

Daddy took up selling insurance. He knew half of everybody’s family from Amarillo to Plainview. And he could talk, still can, now as then, when he’s not drinking. Let me just go ahead and say it—my daddy does drink to excess. He learned how from his daddy and his granddaddy going along on wheat harvest from Brownsville, Texas, to Wolf Point, Montana, every year from the time he was big enough to get his left foot all the way to the floor on the clutch pedal of a grain truck. I still think the drink got to be a true problem from his selling insurance. Daddy has got the black ass bad as anybody else, but he has a sweet soul. What other sort of damned fool would marry a woman in her late twenties with four kids from two other men? Like my mama says—third time’s a charm, so she tells me I’ve two more tries coming.

Insurance got Daddy and us rich and broke three or four times. The last go-round led to bankruptcy, so we ended up
living with my grandparents while Daddy drank, talked to bankers, and bought guns. I still hate guns. And I’m not too fond of bankers even though my little sister, Jae, is one. Mostly, it was the guns that made us dread dark.

I’ve been afraid of the dark ever since I can remember. The long twilight on the Texas Panhandle gave me time in summer and late spring to get to sleep, but come fall and winter I was up for the duration. The other kids—Jae, Joel, and Guy—would sleep, knowing I was awake and watching. For years, I knew just when to creep out from a bedroom hallway and cry about monsters, vampires most often, an occasional werewolf or two, crouched there in the lean dark of my bedroom, their white teeth wet and shining. Mama always made me go back to bed, but not before she’d stop and smooth my hair or let me lie in her lap with my back turned to the TV, hearing her and Daddy’s steady breathing in the static quiet, or the clink of ice cubes into a glass and the snick-snick-snick of a cap being twisted off a bourbon bottle.

But none of that worked after Doug Wherry died, and plans for the insurance company he and Daddy would have founded got crushed along with him in the car that flipped off a Houston freeway. In Amarillo, where we lived, where the land was and is so flat anyone can see what is coming for them long before it gets to them, Daddy went a little crazy. He saw the same elephant that got to a good many of the men and women who made it past the Hundredth Meridian only to
find space a real and tangible thing with no intimacy to be had. They needed recognizable forms, familiar blank spaces, to fill in.

Not me. Give me a clear shot of horizon and enough air that I can give the rest away to other people. It's been my experience that when a gun gets pulled, or a rifle leveled, the air closes up, concentrates, grows dense with all the implied threats two people conjure between themselves. That's what happened in 1969, ten years before John Wayne died, and Daddy still believed in the Code of the West: Never apologize— it's a sign of weakness. Mama had seen the elephant too, but she'd already seen it twice, so she went home to her mother and took us with her. We remembered that part of the drill, but we'd never been tracked before then.

Daddy did his best James Dean, roaring by the house in the Pontiac station wagon, tearing up the hot asphalt. Mama took the phone off the hook and marked the "Help Wanted" ads, even though she knew she could go back to work for Dr. Richard, Dr. John's brother, who'd already helped to bail Daddy out of county jail for drinking then defending an imagined slight against Mama's character in the parking lot at closing time for the Avalon Ballroom. This time, though, Mama didn't drink. She slept a lot, and I didn't sleep much at all. So it was a relief the night Daddy broke the glass on my grandmother's front porch door to punch the wooden door open with the elephant gun in his hand. He'd bought the .270
Mannlicher-Schoenhauer four weeks before with his share of the seed money for the insurance company assure by Mr. Wherry's banker in Houston. The terms of the loan were declared null and void when Mr. Wherry died. Daddy went back to freelancing for a crop insurance agency out of Oklahoma City to pay our monthly bills.

My brother, Joel, eleven and round as a boulder, went straight for Daddy's knees in a textbook clip we'd all learned from Mama's following the career of Ray Nietzsche in Green Bay. Daddy slapped Joel behind a wing-backed chair and raised the back of his hand to Guy who cried and pulled his own hands back down close to his bony chest. Mama screamed something over and over again. I ran for the kitchen and the phone, remember the clean smell of the patrolman's leather holster creaking as he sat down on the living room sofa and explained to Mama what a peace bond bound Daddy to and what it did not bind him to.

My fingers jerked, got caught in the rotary dialing wheel. I heard Jae begging Daddy to stop, put the gun down, Mam screaming whatever she screamed. A dull thud shook the china cabinet, same as thunder in a storm that brings tornadoes will thud. I lost Jae's voice in the voice that answered the ringing in my ear, telling me it was already morning there in the dark at the Amarillo Police Department. My voice wouldn't come out. I croaked, cleared my throat, felt my vocal cords open and close, but nothing like words came out. The woman operator woke up, said in phrases evenly
spaced that I was to give her my address. Daddy wrenched the phone out of my hand, ripped it, cord and all, out of the wall. I watched Mama hit him high on the back with the flat of her left palm, her eyes black as the dark glowing in the window behind her. He stared down at me, still for that one moment, his eyes shiny and focused, his teeth bared. I went for the gun.

Mama yelled, "Goddamn it, Dale," and he whirled on her, jerking me along, caught as I was by my hand stuck between the gun's sight and top of the blot action of the rifle.

He shook my off, and I fell flat on my back on the tea-brown carpet.

"Stop," my mother said.

The boys and Jae got into the kitchen and put their hands on Daddy, his arms gone slack, the rifle pointing down at the floor and away from me. I'd seen the elephant from the opposite end of the gun's sights. I'd like to say I was the elephant, but I don't believe I've ever put the fear on anybody, not even my daddy. If I had, we wouldn't have had to ride around in that damn Pontiac with him and that rifle for four or five hours until he rode out the end of all the adrenaline he'd pumped into his bloodstream.

I remember falling asleep, all four of us kids in bed, set up in the sewing room at my grandmother's house, so Mama and Daddy could sleep in their own room alone. The dawn light seeped in then and gray through the venetian blinds. I dislike the dawn and will avoid it whenever I can, even now.
Twenty years and two business ventures later, the last one still successful, Daddy and Mama live mostly by themselves in a thirty-one hundred square foot house. Joel is still married, for the first and, he claims, last time to a woman who has given a lively daughter and lovely son. Guy looks to get married the second time to a woman who has seen him through drug rehab. She loves both his daughters, quick and beautiful girls, from his first marriage. My sister is married for the second and, if it holds up, she says, last time to a man who has helped to adopt a son and a daughter. I write poems every month or so to my nephew, Jarred, a good-looking Mestizo boy, and to Kelsey, a slim, bright Anglo baby.

When I got back home from my own try at marriage, Daddy could not hardly stay in the same room with me unless Mama was there. It has taken six grandchildren before he could stand me near him. They're none of them my children, but they belong to him and to me through the tidal pull of our own love for them--I don't know what else to call it. They reach out to him or to me or to Mama with the same delighted cries and give back to us what we give to them. But what they want more than touch is the steady rhythm of a story's words as they lay down to sleep in the safe, quiet dark. And that I am good for.
Survival Can Equal Affection

Outside of the occasional terrifying late night phone call, nothing much has happened to me and mine in the recent and historical past. We have all the usual horror stories of marriage and divorce, addiction incited and overcome, or at least held to a manageable level of excess. We are, all of us—my younger sister and two younger brothers—in the process of becoming middle-class citizens, and it's making us all a little crazy. Strange things happen—like I can't remember the word "quicksand," and the road runners turned up again to eat chicken scratch with Sully, the peacock, down there on the High Plains of Texas.

My youngest brother, Guy, just one test away from being a licensed master electrician, rolled the pickup he'd asked Daddy to cosign a note on. That night Guy tried to make the border run between Wheeler, Texas, and the Oklahoma state line along Sweetwater Creek. It was past closing time, and Wheeler is a dry town, and Guy was feeling fine for the first time since he'd had to leave his wife and two baby girls in Amarillo to take a job at the feedlot in Wheeler to get all their monthly bills paid. He was not hurt. The truck was.
Guy has never been able to drive for spit, drunk or sober. He takes me literally when I tell him to keep it between the fence posts. Barditches lie between any two-lane blacktop in Texas and the four-strand barbed wire of a landowner's property. Guy has so much pure juice in him that if he does not drink or work hard—running Romex through a two-thousand square foot house in half the time it would take most men working for an hourly wage to run it—he comes close to losing a leg from all his jiggling up and down of that leg. So he drinks—too much.

Not so much anymore, though. Not since that truck's back end started sliding on the dry dirt of FM152, and he could not steer far enough into the skid to stop it. He took down Wanda Brown's mailbox, clipped the sturdy metal box set on a railroad tie packed into the red dirt. He clipped that creosote tie damned near in half, and the truck sailed up into the air then whacked over twice before it smacked down into the red dirt washed up out of Sweetwater Creek and into the barditch.

The ditch was dry and Guy, pumped full of adrenaline and dread, was sober. He got out of the truck, set Wanda Brown's mailbox on the ground right next to the five-inch stub of railroad tie, and walked the four miles to a phone booth on State Highway 83 beside Cotton's Texaco to call the sheriff. Guy reported the accident for his insurance, then called Daddy later from the Wheeler County jail where he was held on a DUI charge under a fifteen hundred dollar bond.
It was 1:15 in the morning when the phone rang. Mom, Daddy, and I were up late watching Reds. Jack Nicholson, as Eugene O'Neill, had just said to Diane Keaton, as Louise Bryant, "I'd like to kill you, but I can't. I love you," and the phone rang. We figured someone we knew and loved was dead or had killed someone.

Mom didn't talk to Guy that night. Daddy made sure Guy wasn't hurt, made sure how much the sheriff, at whose desk Guy stood to make the call, was asking for bail, and told Guy to get some sleep if he could. Daddy hung up the phone and told me and Mom what had happened. He didn't call Janet, Guy's wife. Guy asked him not to, so Daddy didn't. We finished watching Reds and went to bed around three in the morning.

Mom and Dad got up early, left me to open the shop and feed the peacock. The Amarillo National Bank teller gave Daddy two lemon suckers when he withdrew fifteen hundred dollars at a little after seven in the morning. That was in mid-August. The suckers melted a little bit, sitting in the bank envelope on the Pontiac's dashboard all day in a parking lot outside the Wheeler County courthouse. They are still on the icebox door in the kitchen at home, held in place by a red apple magnet. Mom and Dad won't tell anybody who asks why they keep those suckers on the icebox and won't give them to the grandkids who get damned near everything else they ask
for. I haven't said anything yet about the suckers, and Guy hasn't asked me.

Here lately, Daddy's been buying Ozarka water for his whiskey. The new well for the house drilled up sandy, sweet for a month before it turned off salty and thick, so Daddy's buying water from Arkansas while he sits with my mother on the northwest corner of Potter country at the edge of the Canadian River breaks above the Ogallala Aquifer. They still raise sweet wild plums with that high-chloride water, and Daddy occasionally drinks chablis from the XIT Winery, but neither him nor Mom will drink what comes gushing out of their sulfate-chewed pipes, much less let the grandkids at it.

Daddy's been strange these past five years. He turned off quiet after my oldest niece, Jacquelyn, was born. I would never accuse this man who sent Ronald Reagan campaign money of being anywhere near liberal, but last year he subscribed to Audobon and sent the Nature Conservancy enough money that they've sent him a steady supply of mail since then. He put their green and white bumper stickers on the car and on the pickup he hauls Hagies with. He makes his living selling high-clearance crop-spraying machines that look like something out of War of the Worlds with their spindly legs and thick bodies.

Last summer, when I worked for Daddy and walked up from the bottom of the pasture at the end of a long, clear sunset,
the machines lined up on the lot looked like insects. Insects are what they kill with chemicals that evaporate into the air or leech up into clouds that spill acid rain onto the High Plains. Daddy's territory runs from Brownsville, Texas, to north and west of another manufacturer's rep's territory in central and southern California.

Daddy's been in hospital twice, sick from 24D after working all day on machines gone down in the field during August, the custom applicator's high season. He quit selling chemicals after that and drank only beer for a while. Then Jimmy Carter decided not to sell wheat to the Russians. After that, Mom and Daddy had to move in with my grandmother for a while. Daddy sent more campaign money to Reagan. Subsidy payments to farmers picked up under the Republican administration. Even the smaller operators needed to keep fallow fields disced and sprayed, no green growth, actual or otherwise, allowed to show if they were to collect their government checks in good order and on time.

Reagan got re-elected. Farmers began to buy heavy equipment again. Daddy bought the house with its fifteen acres right next to the Amarillo Rifle and Pistol Club and built his shop. My niece, Jacquelyn, was born. Then Marlana, her cousin, was born, then Ashley, Jacquelyn's sister, and finally Jarred, their cousin, was adopted into the family. We had four generations on the ground.
As Frederick W. Rathjen says in *The Texas Panhandle Frontier*, “contrary to persistent myth, the only source of recharge to the Ogallala is precipitation upon the surface and the annual amount of recharge is almost insignificant—certainly less than one inch.” Professor Rathjen’s book came out in 1973. In 1986, Ralph Beer, writing for *Antaeus*, reports that the “Ogallala Aquifer in the Midwest has been pumped so hard that grandiose schemes suggesting diversion of water from the upper Missouri River to ‘recharge’ it have recently been seriously proposed.” In the same issue of *Antaeus*, Jim Harrison, whose novels can double as botany texts for the regions he chooses to let his characters inhabit, characterizes Texas as “not a bad place if you ignore the inhabitants and their peculiar urge to mythologize themselves against the evidence.” That evidence, writ large in declining water tables and the falling number of arable acres, is dire and in need of redemption through the body for the body by the body.

We have a lot of little bodies, and not so little bodies, around the house now. We can put the four kids in the square tub off the southeast bedroom if we put half a capful of water conditioner in the water first. The kids all squeal and have a good time batting at the bubbles. The water condition does not cost all that much. Daddy buys it by the case out at Sam’s when he goes into town to buy Ozarka water to mix with his Weller and make ice cubes that will not sour
the whiskey. His paycheck, which is oftentimes quite hefty, is written by the son of a rich man. As a younger, hungrier man, John Hagie, Senior, saw flat land and chemicals as near-perfect purveyors of possibility. He was right, up to a point. He lives in Arizona, now, for its clean air and clear skies.

We still live in Texas with the humidity index rising higher every year of the High Plains. I quit on the idea of having a family this past August. Like everyone born on the Cap Rock of the High Plains, I require distance to see clearly. As a poet, I crave the music of strange, rough voices, voices that do not lapse so easily into the rhythms I know as well as I know the rhythm of rotations the winds from different directions will push the windmill’s blades through. I went north for the sensation of true cold so I’d recognize warmth. So far, I’ve been cold to the bone twice. The counter workers at the Hellgate station of the US Post Office know me on sight and can tell by looking at me whether or not I got mail that day.

I even got a letter Jim Harrison after I wrote him one hot night in Texas, crazed with wind and the sound of my ears ringing. He told me, “Work out your salvation with fear and trembling.” I have the trembling down. I know fear from the same thing that drives my daddy to guns and whiskey and selling machines that spray chemicals on an unstable groundwater table, so I’m set up north and west of Missouri River Headwaters. I’m up here, I’m cold, and I’m not above
mythologizing my past to help save what's going to be left of my family in the salt waters of the Canadian River drainage.
I call him “Daddy” because he’s the only father I’ve ever known. My mother’s third husband, he is the one who made it, who hung on. Mama finally found a man she could shape into what she needed, but he has kept part of himself separate from her and from us kids. Only way he can get to that part of himself is to drink and get mean or work all day in the shop where he rebuilds, tunes, and modifies the Hagie high-clearance sprayers he sells for a living. The shop is neutral ground for us, as close as Daddy will let us come to that soft part of him, the rough work maybe taking the place of words he knows but cannot bring himself to say.

We still have not found our way to that soft part of him. We never have, but the kids have. He’s got six grandkids, four girls, two boys, from my two younger brothers and sister. Me, I have yet to find the man to take to me. I tried once. It didn’t work out. So I keep coming home, circling in and out of the gravitational pull of home ground.

Last time I swung home for a summer tour of duty, I worked all day with him on one of the Hagie high-clearance sprayers he sells to local framers and commercial sprayers, scraping clean the corroded bottom of the tall, spidery frame
that held the oil pan of a Perkins diesel engine in place. He wiped the flaking, red-painted steel down with paint thinner. With a double-edged razor blade, I scraped the last of the corroded gasket stuck to the frame, peeling the black gunk off the sharp beveled edge.

Since my hands are small and I don’t have any fingernails to speak of, I helped Daddy shove the oil pan over and up onto the machine bolts at the front and back of the oil pan he’d cleaned with gasoline. The pan scraped and grated, still out of place. Black, greasy dirt sifted down, fell into the corner of my left eye. I grunted, shoved the motor mount to one side and the oil pan rang home.

"Okay?" he asked.

"I need a nut," I answered.

His hand, black with oil, pushed down between the grimy hydraulic hoses and dropped a brass nut into my hand. I pinned it between two fingers and scrabbled it into place.

There was no room to get a grip on the head of the nut and screw it tight onto the bolt. Daddy got up under the machine beside me and shoved the oil pan flat against the bottom of the machine, then started twisting nuts onto the right side of the mount where there was some free hand room. I worked at the one nut a quarter-turn at a time. My eyes burned and teared.

It was hot inside the shop. Outside the wind blew any here from thirty miles an hour out of the
south-southwest. Daddy's mother lay dying in a hospital fourteen miles north of town.

Hissing sheets of dirt rained against the gray steel building. I had a fever from a strep infection. Sweat dripped down the sides of my face and my sweatpants stuck to my shaking legs. I kept one hand flat against the front bottom half of the oil pan, twisting the nut until the bolt filling the hole appeared.

"Need another nut," I said and held my grimy hand out. Daddy dropped a steel nut onto my palm. This nut went on easily.

It took us all afternoon and into early evening to bolt that oil pan bolted into place. Mama came over from the house around five o'clock with a glass of ice water for me and a frosted mug for Daddy.

I went to the shop sink to scrub at my grease-stained arms and hands with Comet cleanser. Daddy wiped used oil off his hands with a red shop rag and pulled open the under-the-counter icebox to grab a cold can of Coors out of the twelve-pack. He poured the beer from the frosted can into the ice-smoked mug.

"You called the hospital?" he asked my mother.

"No. Jean said she'd like to talk to you tonight."

I slipped past them, pulled myself hand over hand up the operator's ladder to pick my way through the loose tools scattered on the catwalk. I sat on top of the tire well, sipping the ice water Mama reached up to me.
"You're flushed again," she said to me. "Still running a fever?"

"I'm fine," I said, the cold water scraping down my throat.

Daddy stared out into the blank distance of the prairie dirt storm and lit a cigarette. Mama went over to him and finished pouring the beer into the mug steaming with refrigerated cold. I took a deep drink and swallowed, the cold water finally numbing my throat. Daddy squinted down at the phone, rolled his cigarette between his thumb and forefinger, then reached for the receiver. I fumbled a three-quarter ice wrench off the machine. The brass drain in the cement floor rang loud. Mama turned around. Daddy kept punching buttons and drank half his beer down.

"Momma?" he asked. I stood up on the machine to turn and watch the dirt blow up from the cotton fields down around Lubbock, one hundred and twenty-five flat miles south of us. Daddy's voice rose and fell under the steady hissing of the dirt.

We had a full hour of daylight saving time until dark. I raised the plastic glass, let ice clink against my teeth till I found the chunk I wanted to suck on. Mama walked over and held her hand out for the glass.

"I'll call you tomorrow, Momma. Have Vivie call me if you need us," Daddy said and set the receiver back on its cradle. He took a last drag on his cigarette, then flicked it
onto the dirt and grease under the machine. I wiped my sweaty hands with a shop rag I’d stuck in the waistband of my sweatpants at the small of my back. The rag was as wet as my hands were.

“She all right?” Mama finally asked.

“Hell no. She can’t hold water down. Throws everything up. Now they’re going to do a systosomy or some damn thing on her in the morning, going to run a light down her throat to see if they can find where the blockage is. She’s got another doctor, Dr. Boova, Barvoo, something like that. Said he came in, sat on the side of her bed, patted her hand and told her he’d take care of her. Goddamn, Patsy, where does she find them? As long as they tell her what she wants to hear or they talk nice to her, she does whatever they say. Christ.”

He got up, shoving the chair out from under him with his knees and went to the back wall to pick up the wrenches we’d need: a three-quarter inch crescent, and the bigger ratchet wrenches. Those and the thick screwdriver over two feet long, the one with the orange and black handle.

“We need to get that filter back on and bolt that pump back down, or the whole damn thing’ll blow on us when we try to start it,” he told me. Reaching the tools up to me, he stepped on the bottom step of the thin aluminum ladder set up under the machine.

“I’ll call y’all when I put the spaghetti in to boil,” Mama said. She pulled open the door on the east wall of the shop. The building sucked in, its vacuum pressure disturbed.
My ears popped. The door banged back on its hinges, jerked out of Mama's hand by the wind. I tensed, waiting for Daddy to yell at her.

"You seen that oil filter wrench?" he asked me. Mama got the door pulled shut behind her.

"Yeah," I said, quick, my voice hoarse on account of the strep pustules coating my windpipe. "I'll get it. It's on the tool bench."

I backed toward the operator's ladder at the rear of the machine. My foot went wrong on the first step and I banged my shin hard, kicking at the second step to catch it with my right foot and keep from falling the eight feet to the ground.

"That's all right. I don't need it. Fit some flat washers over these bolts here, and we'll get that pump on." He nodded at the four bolts, nuts, and different sets of washers near the tire well where I'd been sitting, holding a drop light for him.

I picked up bolts, pushed the different washers around, and chose a wide washer to thread on before pushing on the thin washer clipped open in the middle. I got the four bolts ready to reach to Daddy. He loosened the long bracket mount for the pump, the belts to the air conditioner and the engine fan slackening, some of them brand-new red. Daddy laughed and plucked at the new fan belt.

"That's to the air conditioner. Son of a bitch wouldn't hardly change the oil, but he made damned sure he didn't have
to sweat no more than he had to. Grab hold of that edge there. Watch your fingers. What am I caught on there?"

"Hose of some kind. Hang on."

I pinched my fingers together and reached into the machine's oily guts to move a thin grease-slick tube away from the back of the pump mount.

Daddy pushed the pump flat up against the machine's frame and reached for the bolt and washers I had put together. I gave it to him and got a nut ready. It was a tight squeeze. We got the four bolts in place, the both of us sweating and sniffling from the dirt, radiating body heat. Daddy had sweat through his shop jumpsuit twice. I left wet ovals from my sweats every time I sat down.

The last nut was the worst.

"Hold your light right here." Daddy reached up without looking, grabbed my slick wrist with his greasy hand and angles the droplight so that he could see into the machine's housing. The last bolt was on the back of the pump bracket. My arm would not reach that far and besides the nuts were hard to turn in the long lateral grooves of the pump mount.

"Come on. That's it, baby. That's it. I got you now, you bitch," he muttered, blinking to keep the sweat out of his eyes.

The phone rang and both of us jumped. My hold on the pump, loosely bolted in place, slipped, and the nut popped off the bolt that clattered to the filthy floor below us.
"I’ll get it," I said and bumped down the ladder to grab the phone. Daddy clumped down the ladder to hunt the bolt and two more washers.

"Good evening. Omni-Ag Distributors," I rattled off. "Mary, the spaghetti’s boiled. Are y’all ready to eat?" A flare of temper made my eyes ache.

"How long, Daddy?" I asked.

"I don’t know. Tell her to wait."

"I don’t know, Mama. Ten or fifteen minutes maybe. We got to get that pump bolted down."

"Tell your daddy I forgot to put potatoes in the sauce. Tell him he can have his fit over there."

"All right," I said and hung up the phone.

I climbed back on the machine, held the droplight where he wanted it. Sweat dripped off the end of his nose.

"Mama said to tell you she forgot to put potatoes in the sauce."

"Damn if I’ll eat sauce with no potatoes in it. Got you, bitch. Now," he said, grunted and leaned back, taking the droplight out of my hand to peer inside the engine housing. He pulled on the fan belts. They each snapped back into their proper places.

"She said," I went on, "for you to have your fit over here."

"Piss on it. Climb on down. Let’s have us a beer break, then we’ll ratchet those bolts tight."

"Can’t drink. I’m taking antibiotics, remember?"
"You want to go on to the house?"

"No, I want to finish up here."

"Well, get you a glass of water then."

We both washed our hands and forearms with Comet, scrubbing the thick gunk off our skin.

"Damn that stings," I said and tried to swallow. The strep infection was swelling my throat shut.

"You look like shit," Daddy said. I leaned back against the edge of the shop desk. He leaned over and reached into the small icebox for another beer.

"Now I know what happened to your hair," I said. "You rubbed it off the top of your head butting up against the bottoms of these machines. They all get this dirty?"

"I steam-cleaned this one three times before you came in. How's school?"

"Dull. Not like this. When you get done, this machine'll look new as those four out front."

He grinned at his beer. "They're all used machines."

I looked out the window at the machines glowing dull in the long blue twilight. Their beige paint shimmered with waxy polish.

"They don't look it. That's what I mean. At least you can see what you've done. Teach a good class, and all I've got left are memories of an hour when everybody stayed awake, and I can't trust my memory."

He sipped on his beer.
"You want a ratchet wrench?" I asked when I saw he wasn't going to say anything else.

"Naw. Give me a smaller one, and I'll get those nuts up flush against the motor mount."

We got back under the machine and went to work. Daddy tightened the twelve bolts on oil pan while I got the four in front and back nice and snug.

The sun went all the way down. We climbed on top of the machine, and I held the droplight while Daddy ratcheted the pump bolts tight.

"That's it for today. We best get our butts to the house or your mother'll boot us both halfway to Dalhart."

We washed at the filthy shop sink. The gritty cleanser burned my red skin, but I still scrubbed, working the sludge out of my pores. We used up half a roll of paper towels to dry our hands and arms, then to wipe the sweat off our faces.

"Your mother says I should wear gloves," he said when I picking at the grime wedged under my short nails. "I hate 'em. Can't feel anything with gloves on."

"Me neither. I did all right for a rookie?"

"Real good. You work hard."

"Hard enough to have around all summer? You pay me what you think I'm worth."

"Sure."

"No, I mean it. Eight to five. Regular work, out here or in the office."

"Okay."
"It's a deal?"

"Deal."

"Good. You want me to close up?"

"No. You go on to the house. Tell your mother I'll be there directly."

I let myself out the back door, though I had to grip the metal doorknob twice to keep my greasy hand from slipping off it. The building sucked in and out. I pulled the door shut behind me and stepped out into the cooling heat at the end of that summer day. The wind had laid, and it was quiet. Baked dirt in the air burned my nose. I walked the side pasture between the house and the shop, my wet feet sliding inside socks squishing against the sides of my running shoes. At the hedge line, I stopped, put my head back, and looked for the North Star, dim but right there above me in the clearing Panhandle sky. The western horizon glowed pink and purple.

Daddy's mother lay dying fourteen miles north of town, she wasn't a woman I knew well. I had a summer job—shop monkey at thirty-four years old. Standing in the air, I shivered, my skin taut with dried salt. In the fall I would be in Missoula, Montana, starting over one more time.

The aroma of oregano, garlic, and basil steamed in imported tomato sauce drifted past me. My mouth watered and I had to swallow. The spit scalded my raw throat.

That was the first day I spent with my daddy without any real pain. Seemed fair. I pulled open the back door of the
house and watched Mama swat at the ripe air dense with burnt garlic toast fumes. She always burned the bread.

I smiled, reached for the crumpled toast, and said, "I've got a job--I'm home."
Czech is a Slavic language, not Teutonic, despite its harsh initially trochaic syllables, though to the English-speaking American ear it might sound like a softer version of German, what with Czech's hissing elision of certain consonants and muted verbs. Which explains why I did not recognize the sound of my own last name being spit out by the harassed cultural attaché of the American Embassy sent out to the airport on a Sunday to collect myself and another American. That and I kept bumping into things, falling past surfaces I thought I'd found the top of only to have them dip further from my hand than they looked to be. I'd lost my depth perception in the strangely flat light.

I'm not quite sure what time of day the plane from Frankfurt landed at Prague's Ruzyne airport. I still cannot dredge up any memories of changing planes in Germany, though I know I did, leaving Pan Am for CSA, the Czechoslovak national airline that still owned most of the international flight connections in and out of Prague. My physical disorientation was driven deeper by the plane stopping on the concrete tarmac in front of the small terminal. An old-fashioned jetway of metal stairs let the passengers stumble
down onto the cracked gray cement, the day itself overcast and dull. I tripped over my own feet in the chilled September air, staring up at “PRAHA” spelled out in dark chrome letters on the squat building. I hadn’t set foot on an airport runway since my friends and I had nearly gotten arrested for riding the rubber baggage treadmills in and out of the loading docks at Amarillo’s airport. That was in the early seventies, our world still innocent of terrorists who favored the use of Czech Semtex for blowing up airplanes and airports. We were committing adolescent mischief, not acts of terrorism, with our bored raid on the local airport. So, that day early in the last decade of the twentieth century, I felt guilty walking almost unattended across the airport’s grounds, especially in a country newly emerged from the Iron Curtain. An almost audible hum settled just below my left ear. I shook my head, tugged at my earlobe.

And bumped into the metal door swung back against me when the passenger in front of me neglected to hold it open for the remaining passengers straggling in behind her. Public manners were largely matters of private convenience in Prague that year. I reached for the door and missed the handle I was sure I’d grasp. My depth perception had gone south on me.

Inside the building itself, dimly lit by the overcast light filtering in through streaked windows, the only sound was feet scraping across dirty linoleum floors. I looked around for signs directing me to Customs or wherever the hell I was supposed to go first to make my formal entry into the
country. The only signs I could find were printed in Czech, German, and the Cyrillic alphabet of Russian, reflecting, I suppose, the demographics of the usual tourists allowed into the country in its socialist incarnation. No signs in English, not in early September of 1990, not that I remember.

I watched my fellow travelers shuffle toward a group of plastic cages behind whose plasticine windows bored men in green uniforms sat, staring mostly above the heads of the small crowd. People seldom looked one another directly in the eyes in public. I frowned and headed for one cage with what looked like "Pasport" printed in the black words running around the marque of the station. I know I smiled at the man behind the plasticine shield, probably said "Good afternoon." He started, grunted, snatched my brand new passport—my first such document, gotten with much grief and trepidation in a record eight days—crumpled the rich blue pages under his fingers, it's still got the initial crease he bent into those pages, and whacked it with a metal stamping machine, leaving the figure of an airplane and that day's date in pale blue ink on the Visa page.

I asked where I should go next. He did frown then. I remember that. I'd begun to sweat, a cold sweat that chilled the under side of my arms. Using his thumb to point, he jabbed that finger in the air of his cage, gesturing over his shoulder. I would learn in my year in Prague that the thumb and not the forefinger is the first finger on one's hand and should be used to point and count. That first day the gesture
merely looked foreign, and I’m afraid I stared. I committed my second transgression by smiling my thanks and went on to follow my fellow passengers who’d gone on past the passport control cages into a drafty, high-ceilinged room where two men in faded blue overalls and thin blue cotton jackets threw our luggage on a carousel that creaked with its accumulated weight.

I started to panic and sweat all over when my large duffel bag did not appear in the second or third batch of luggage the two men heaved onto the metal circle. Most of my clothes were in that bag. In between looking for the bag, I looked around for someone from the Embassy, the someone I’d been told in DC would be there to meet me. I spotted a few people who had to be American, given their clothes and luggage, but it was oddly quiet, not the usual noise one hears in the arrival and departure facilities of most airports. Then again, there were a series of doors guarded by young men in green uniforms with guns on their hips that we still had to get through once we collected our luggage. For some reason, these young men carried more of an air of threat than did the soldiers walking in pairs through Frankfurt’s airport, machine pistols hanging from their shoulders. People glanced nervously over their shoulders at these young men.

A short man, hissing out names, brushed past me, setting me back on my heels. A taller man, his clothes crumpled from the long flight, said in loud, American-accented English, “That’s me.” The shorter man pulled up, stared back,
squinting with bloodshot red eyes at the man who spoke. I saw, with relief, that the shorter man had on a navy blue sweatshirt with the American eagle seal, the words, "American Embassy, Prague, Czechoslovakia," imprinted on it. I hurried over to tug at that man’s elbow, asking him if he knew how to get to the Embassy. He frowned at me, asked my name. I told him. He turned red, sputtered out, "Didn’t you hear me calling your name?" I blushed, said, no, I hadn’t, and he repeated my name. I look blankly at him. He repeated, "Von-yeck," again, the accent heavily Germanic, to my ear, on the first syllable, spitting out the last syllable of my name as though it taste foul in his mouth. I said, "No, that’s ‘Van-ick,’ "the accent easy on the first syllable, sliding into the lighter verb. "Not here," he said and repeated the heavier version of my name.

By then my last bag had appeared. The agitated Cultural Affairs Officer slung it onto the baggage cart, flashed some kind of ID at the young uniformed officials who smirked or smiled timidly and waved us through the stations where other passengers had their luggage open while the guards poked through what they found there. Welcome to Czechoslovakia.

The Cultural Affairs Officer wore contacts. Given the particulate grit in Prague’s air, I’m sure they were not a comfortable convenience. And he had his son with him, a five or six year old, whose attention was barely distracted by a hand-held electronic toy that squeaked and squealed while the
three adults exchanged the usual, empty pleasantries about where in the States we lived and worked. The men sat in the front seat of the Ford station wagon. I sat in the back seat with the child who sniffed and swiped at his nose at regular intervals. There were no hotels, gas stations, or the usual signs of commerce that ring most airports in the area around Ruzyne. Only flat fields, mostly green, rolled unfenced in all four directions. I squinted at the gray light, the hum under my left ear nearly audible to my hearing, trying to get some sort of fix on the dream landscape the car sped through on a two-lane cement highway.

The attaché explained I would spending the night in a student hostel. From there I could catch a taxi to the Embassy the next morning where two of my fellow teachers would fetch me and take me to my "flat." I wondered why he couldn't take me himself. Maybe there were papers I had to fill out at the Embassy. He volunteered to keep my two larger bags with him for me to collect at the Embassy tomorrow. I asked where the Embassy was. He said, just tell the taxi driver you want to go to the Embassy and he'll get you there. Fine.

The one thing I'd done before we left the airport was exchange American cash for the curiously colorful Czech currency. For fifty dollars, they'd given me nearly fifteen hundred "crowns," the American name for "koruna," the Czech currency. I counted the odd-sized bills, tucked them in my billfold.
The other American, a businessman from somewhere deep in the Middle West who'd stared at me when I spoke in my Texas accent, was staying at a hotel in the city's center, so he stayed with the young boy in the car when the cultural attaché wheeled the car to a stop in front of an eight-story rundown building in a neighborhood that had me looking over my shoulder. We pushed through the double doors colored by peeling orange paint. The lobby was dark, one desk light shining from an office shut off by two small sliding glass windows. An older woman, her hair rigorously permed a bluish white slid one of the glass panels back, frowning at us.

The embassy official spit out a stream of Czech that sounded like the one word he had just enough air to get out. The woman continued to frown, flipped open a much-thumbed ledger book, took her time finding an entry. They exchanged a few sentences. He thumped his thumb on the window's outer shelf. She sighed, turned, and produced a key she kept in her hand. I stood behind him, swaying on my feet by then, a little dizzy. He turned on me. I stumbled back. He explained the woman would show me to my room. There was a pub, small cafe, across the wide boulevard of a street outside where I could get something to eat, and I should be at the Embassy by ten o'clock the next morning. And then he left. I'm afraid I stared stupidly at him, unable to get a question out in the time it took him to get the hell out of the ringing dark of the building's foyer.
I turned back to see the woman looking me up and down, the features of her face somewhere between a smirk and a frown. Neither one of them had looked at me through the entire exchange, though I did my best to smile and nod at the woman. I tried smiling again. She frowned and looked over my shoulder. I turned around to see if the Embassy fellow was coming back in. The entryway stood empty.

The woman waited for me to follow her. We walked down a hall, dark with one red light burning dimly at the other end. An exit, I supposed.

The woman stopped before a single metal door set back in the wall and said something in Czech to me. I smiled and shrugged, indicating I did not speak Czech. I tried “Sorry,” in English and that deepened her frown. Some piece of machinery clunked. She pulled the metal door open, waved at me. I hadn’t been on a lift before. The small metal closet had me staring at the tiny enclosed space, a little worried. The woman nearly stamped her foot at me. I smiled again and let her push me in.

As far as I could tell, there was no one in the building but we went up to the fifth floor before the lift bounced to a halt. She unlocked the door to a suite of two rooms, both of them barely closets in themselves, cold, with a water closet in between. A toilet and wash basin. I’d learn the difference between a bathroom and a water closet that year. An plastic orange phone that looked like a grown child’s toy rested on a shelf of drawers between the pebbled glass doors
of the two rooms. She showed me how to unlock the door of the room I'd been allotted, left the key hanging in the lock, spun on her heel, and left me to myself.

I didn't cry. Not then. Just then I was too dazed to do anything but stare at that ridiculous phone. I went into my room, looking for a lamp, found none, so I switched on the overhead light that turned out to be a fluorescent fixture that took a minute to hum to life. I may have cried then. I can't be sure.

The plane trip had dehydrated me. I looked around for a glass of one kind or another, found nothing, so I cupped my hand under the cold water faucet, and turned the tap. After a horrible gurgling sound, bright orange water ran over my hand. That I snatched out from under that flow. Two full minutes later, the orange faded, thinned out to a yellowish stream. By then I didn't care, I cupped my hand and swallowed two mouthfuls of bitter, brackish water. And started to laugh. It was either that or howl.

I splashed my face with the water before looking for a towel. The one thin metal wrack hung empty. No towels of any kind. Dripping water going cold on my face, I pulled out the drawers in the hall. Nothing but the gray dust of a lack of use. I dug a packet of tissues out of my bookbag, dried my face and hands.

Nothing for it but to head across the boulevard, try and find something to eat. I'd been too nervous to eat since
leaving DC the day before. I thought it was the day before. That’s what my watch said. I’d forgot to ask the local time. Outside the evening dusk had started to seep up.

The trip back down to the foyer was something out of a bad Cold War thriller. No one but me seemed to be in the building. The blue-haired lady was gone. An older man in suspenders over a dull white shirt looked up, startled from the small newspaper he held close to his eyes.

God alone knows what I said in English. I don’t remember. I do remember the irritated frown he gave me, shaking my words off, motioning for my key. Which I reached over to him. He ran his thick finger down the ledger’s pages, said something that sounded almost familiar. It took him two tries before I recognized my own surname. I nodded, pleased at this sudden moment of communication. He almost smiled but caught himself in time to give nothing away.

I stood there awkwardly, miming the motions of eating. This set off a rapid barrage of machine-gun paced Czech and a good deal of arm-waving at the street outside. Finally, exasperated, he emerged out from the office, carefully locking the door behind himself, walking toward the dirty windows, before pointing at the third storefront in the squat block of uniformly gray buildings the other side of the deserted four-lane boulevard. I said, "Cafe?" and he nodded, then turned on his heel and melted back into the dark foyer. To say I was spooked did not even begin to describe the panic dripping in my empty, twisting stomach.
The pub scene was a disaster. I must have been marooned somewhere in Strahov, a working class district of Prague where the School of Economics has their dorms. Young women do not go unescorted into even the local pubs from what I could tell after my entrance literally stopped all the conversation in the garishly lit, smoke-thick room. And you sit wherever there is an empty seat after asking permission. I picked the only two people who looked to be under fifty in the place, gestured at the empty place on the bench, said, "May I?" or some such empty phrase. The young man blinked slowly while his bottled blond girl friend frowned at me. By then I was too tired to care that people mostly frowned heavily at me every time I opened my mouth.

And you do not try to attract a busy waiter's attention. That's the one sure way to get ignored wherever you go in Czechoslovakia to eat or drink. You wait until he slaps a felt pad coaster down in front of you and then stares down at you. I did not get that far in the process that first evening. The two younger people did not offer to help me. They continued their conversation in irritated, tired tones until I asked if they understood English. The young man shrugged--the essential Czech gesture--said he did and went back to his conversation. By then I knew I had to get out there or I would burst out into tears. And, being from Texas and all, I do not cry in public and I damn sure do not burst out into tears in public no matter what the provocation.
I shoved the bench out from under me, again bringing most of the conversation in the place to an audible halt. I stopped at what looked like the dishwashing station on the way out and after much gesturing, left with a bottle of what appeared to be orange juice. A heavy glass bottle that the man behind the counter insisted on opening with a church key on a heavy twine string before he let me leave, having loudly, scrupulously counted out my change into a dirty white china dish on the metal counter. He'd balked at taking the paper bill out of my hand. Another lesson learned. You do not hand clerks or waiters cash money. You lay your bills down in the inevitable china saucer you see beside most cash registers or cash boxes. They, in turn, count out your change into the same china dish.

Outside of trying to talk to the Middle Eastern fellow who handed me my key only after he'd spent five minutes paging through my passport and the low muttered sentences I heard when I answered the phone that continued to ring all night in the small hall outside my room that was it for my first night in Prague. I wasn't in hell so much as caught in a long tour of one of the lower depths of a gray, cold purgatory. And, I knew I deserved such treatment for all my past petty sins of discourtesy and slighting lies. I spent most of the night writing a semi-hysterical letter to friend back home in Idaho.
I now know there's something good, almost essential, to be said for being raised by people who still believe showing only grace under pressure is the true measure of good breeding and the proper courtesy to extend to the mostly indifferent world around you. In short, I made it through the next day on nerves and stubbornness. Yet another sullen individual took my key from me when I left the dorm, preferring to stand in a light haze of damp and wait for the taxi. I'd had enough of that cold building. All I wanted was air, however chill, around me.

The taxi driver spoke no English but understood "American Embassy." I was already wore out from getting the middle-aged guardian of the dorm's office to actually phone for a taxi for me. I think it was the angry tears starting in my reddened eyes that did it. By then, she'd had enough of me and wanted me out of there as badly as I wanted to be gone.

I remember one brief flare of hope and enthusiasm when the taxi crossed the Vltava and I caught my first glance of Hradcany, Prague Castle, on a hill above the gray city. Mostly, though, the relief I felt was in being under open sky for the few moments it took the taxi to speed across the bridge. Amarillo, where I was born and raised, sits square in the middle of the Cap Rock of High Plains. Horizon sprawls three hundred and sixty degrees all around you up there at nearly thirty-five hundred feet before the rolling prairie dips down into the Canadian River Breaks. I'd even got claustrophobic in the riverine valley Missoula sits in, its
actual elevation barely eleven hundred feet despite its being set square in the backbone of the northern Rocky Mountains.

Trziste ulice, Trziste street, where the Embassy sits wedged up in the hills ringing the Vltava, is a two-way street so narrow two trucks can barely pass one another at the same time. Like many of the streets in the older districts of Prague the street is made of cobbled bricks so unevenly worn and spaced that you can turn your ankle badly enough to sprain it. I know. I’ve got bad ankles and spent more than my fair share of time limping after I did not pay attention to where I put my feet while out walking. Something I quickly developed the habit of doing, given the practice of native Praguers’ spitting on sidewalks. The air in Prague is thick with the particulate haze of soft brown coal burnt for heat and energy. Such air is hard on your lungs. Some people, a good number of people, do not hesitate to relieve themselves of this pressure by hawking it out.

The attaché still squinted at me, but smiled when he saw me clearly exhausted by my night in the hostel--the sound of the word aptly descriptive of the night I’d spent there. He reunited me with my bags, had me sign some papers, explained the two-tiered exchange rate for crowns. As a recent arrival, I’d get the more favorable tourist exchange rate, so I ought to take advantage of it and let others in on the deal if somebody from the Embassy asked me to change money for them. But, under no circumstances should I exchange money with the gypsies and other black market operators who would approach
me in public. I wondered how they'd know I was an American, but I didn't ask him. As I said, it was my first trip out of the States. He paused in his set speech to ask me if I had any questions. I blinked twice, slow, trying to get my eyes then my mind to focus on what he had laid out before me. He tapped the messy spread of paperwork covering his desk and told me the two teachers coming to fetch me could answer any other questions I had and gave me an invitation to an orientation session for incoming Fulbright scholars and other assorted USIA appointees—called "USIS" overseas, say the word the letters form quickly, out loud, and you'll understand what help they give their employees.

I took the hint and left to camp in a wingback chair shoved up against the wall in the larger outer office with two secretaries, a Black American woman and a thin, white Czech woman, working their typewriters and phones. I found myself sitting next to a large paper-shredding machine. I did grin right out loud at that sight.

I waited over an hour for the promised teachers. From the tall doors pulled almost shut beside and behind me, I heard the occasionally audible rumbles of a deep voice that sounded familiar enough I began to wonder about the density of my auditory hallucinations. My ears still buzzed with a low-level hum. Finally, someone pulled the doors opened. I looked up and saw Jack Anderson locked in conversation with a red-faced man, his white shirt starched stiff.
Two young people stopped at a desk in the next room, looked up, saw me staring at the two men bent toward one another in conversation. I got up, smiling at the slight blond-haired young man with wire-rim glasses and the trim Oriental woman at his side. Chris is Canadian, Carina Wong had come from Los Angeles. Both taught at the Higher School of Economics where I did. We all spent a month or so in a suite of rooms, a true suite on the bottom floor of a better maintained dorm, until Carina and I landed jobs, moonlighting as English tutors to deputy ministers in the Ministry of Economics and Ministry of Strategic Planning, the old Ministry of Central Planning that essentially ran the socialist state of Czechoslovakia. In exchange for two hours a week with our deputy ministers, we got a flat in the ministry’s boarding house in the working class district of Zizkov on a mostly quiet residential street. The important part of this arrangement was our escape from the Anglophile, sexist boys the school had us sharing the suite with. Had we not escaped, I’m sure Carina would’ve committed physical mayhem against Chris before then.

Czechoslovakia, in 1990, was shaking itself awake from a long, bad dream made of neo-Stalinism at its worst, indifferent but highly institutionalized and effective communist bureaucratic control at its least. Equality between the sexes had no place in that world, a world whose social conventions had frozen somewhere in the early to mid-sixties. Unmarried women were supposed to be comforted by the thought
that, if they were young enough, there would still be time to catch themselves a man and settle into a "normal" life. Men thought nothing of leering at attractive women in public, and Carina is a striking young woman. Everywhere I went with her, she was hissed at or commented on loudly enough we heard each word. Not that I ever understood exactly what was said. I didn't need a literal translation of those comments, though. The tone of the men's voices said everything I needed to know. Carina, who was on her second passport by then and she was only twenty-three, never even slowed down. She looked right through those men and kept walking wherever we were headed.

I didn't have that problem. With my light brown hair, wide cheekbones, mostly thin lips, and slight height, I looked Czech as long as I kept my mouth shut and remembered not to look or smile at people in public. And remembered to wear plain clothing, though even my good cotton clothes attracted the attentions of the gypsy money-changers working Vaclavske namesti, Wenceslas square, where I went every day but Sunday to buy English-language newspapers. Without Carina to attract attention, I went unremarked most everywhere in Prague.

Which made my year in Prague one long private moment. Something I hadn't realized until recently. I did not ever retain enough of the complicated linguistic structure of Czech to do more than make my most basic needs understandable. And my Texas accent, however slight to my own
ears—especially after having to speak English ever so slowly, enunciating each syllable clearly for those Czechs who did speak English or were trying to learn how to do so—mangled horribly my few attempts at an entire Czech sentence, anything beyond the stock phrases needed to buy groceries or ask directions. I spent most of the year perpetually lost if I got off my beaten tracks around Prague.

Being set down in a city built and rebuilt on itself, my sense of direction was permanently skewed. Without the sun in the sky, I couldn't tell east from west. And it was a good month before the sun broke through to shine for more than a few hours. Then it settled down into the quick, deep dusks of winter at so northerly a latitude.

I found myself dis-located in every essential way. Which provoked a profound dis-ease, a sensation so physical it could and did double me over in the bends. Which did alarm Carina the first time I came to a dead halt on one of our high-speed hikes through the city for one thing or another. In the entire year I spent with Carina, I don't think we ever walked anywhere. That child sets her mind on things and goes, hellbent for leather. I'm more inclined to gawk, most times in sheer wonder of what I'm looking at, a good deal of time in a futile effort to get my mental or physical balance. In that, I suppose my Czech blood shows. I went out to watch a "Softbal" practice announced in a poster put up at school. High above the city on the Letna Plain, on a soccer field paced off for the Czech idea of a baseball diamond, I watched
the kids fanned out in the correct places. But they none of them moved right. Even the true athletes jerked arrhythmically, trying to bend and scoop a ball up then throw it with the natural motion that starts with your weight shifting from one foot to the other, that contraction turning your shoulder, which in turn provides the snapping force to fire a ball out and cut off the runner running down a baseline. Even the better athletes, male and female, threw the ball from their elbows, snapping a wrist at best. And while some could fake a fluid swing at the dingy pitches hanging fatly in the air, none of them hit through the ball with their bodies fully engaged.

Baseball is foreign to Czechs and Slovaks in a way that tennis and basketball are not. They’re trying to imitate the shadow of motions they’ve mostly dreamed.

I got to where I craved the grace of unconscious gesture as badly as I craved the sight of just one well-dressed person. As I suppose anyone who’s been suddenly uprooted and marooned in a foreign culture will tell you, it’s the details that make you crazy. I spent a good deal of time the first three months of my year in Prague accommodating myself to their culture. I learned you do not simply walk into the local potraviny, foodstuffs store, where you buy mostly canned goods, bread, milk in plastic bags that resemble nothing so much as the thick plastic bags blood is stored in, a lovely metaphor, eggs, and some meat, mostly cold cuts and brick-hard frozen chicken carcasses. No, you go in, look
around for a small, almost child-sized wire shopping cart. If you're lucky enough to find a free cart, you may then wheel it through the turnstile gate and shop, picking cans with no photos on them—I took my lexicon with me to the grocery store for the first month, looking up words to the grim delight of my fellow shoppers—paper packets of spices, fresh bread, unwrapped, uncut, great broad loaves of dark, rye-tasting bread that is one of the main staples of the Czech diet, or small conical rolls of white bread, the occasional, more expensive baguettes. If you wish to invest in the purchase of a chicken carcass for your Sunday afternoon dinner, you wheel your wire basket to the white, waist-high open freezer, bend over, take a deep breath to make sure the refrigeration unit is in good working order, then choose the stone-hard carcass of your preference. Which has no price marked on it. Once you've made your selection, you join the line of fellow shoppers who have their carts lined up before the glass deli case holding strings of various sausages, rolls of processed meat products, head cheese, white and yellow cheeses. Park your cart in the prescribed manner—as close to your predecessor as possible, usually side-by-side in my local potraviny as the aisles are narrow, and wait until it's your turn to be served. The girl, always a woman behind those counters, will look in your general direction—over one of your shoulders, the top of your head, right between your eyes, but not at you—say "Prosim," pronounced
"Pro-seem?", meaning everything from "please?" to "thank you," to "Okay, it's your turn," or "What do you want?"

You hand her your prized chicken carcass. She takes it, puts it on a thin sheet of wax paper, reads the scale carefully set on a the counter so that you can read along with her. Figures the weight, tots up the price, which she marks on the opaque paper that she uses to wrap the already plastic-wrapped carcass, the price plainly displayed in indelible black grease pencil. Asks "Prosim" one more time to see if you want anything else from behind the meat case. You say or try to say "Dekuyi," "Day-cue-yee," in my Texas accent. I got frowned at for a couple of months, then barely smiled at for persisting in my effort to say "thank you" in Czech, something most Czechs rarely bothered with in their commercial transactions. Then you wheeled your cart with your foodstuffs to the line of carts waiting at the check-out counters, each with a woman in a white lab-looking coat working the electric registers. And you had better have brought along a bag of one sort or another to gather up the items the checker slid down the aluminum shoot for you to collect, arrange in your bag, and carry home. Chances are you would push your cart to the first person in the line that had formed behind the register, often longer than the line moving through to check out, waiting for a wire cart so they could gain entrance to the shopping floor and buy what they needed. Get caught without a cart, and you got thrown out of the store. Control, as I said. Power, in a word, disconcerting,
reinforcing the dis-location that sometimes made me physically dizzy or ill with panic.

Standing in those lines, waiting, could unnerve me. Not that I’m given to vapors or anything like that. Standing on line, as Easterners say, is closer to what I’m trying to get at. You stake out your space and defend it with your bodily presence. I spent a good deal of that time, watching, taking mental notes. When I first got to Prague, I thought nothing of pulling a small notebook out to write down what I saw. I have a wretched memory, so I write down what I see, smell, hear, whatever. I quit doing that when I realized it made the Czechs I was quietly watching nervous at best, angry at worst. For forty years, they’d lived under the constant and real threat of secret police informers in their places of work, pubs, cafes, any public and sometimes a good many private places. And there I was in my monochromatic, good cotton clothing, watching them in normally unremarkable, ordinary moments. What the hell did I find so interesting that I had to write it down? What had they just said that caught my attention? Obviously nothing for me since I could hardly make out one word of Czech from another. So I stopped taking notes in public, but I still watched.

And I got better at the quick glance, sometimes a snapshot got from the side glance that took in my neighbors walking past me in a plate glass window. I’d tick off how many bags hung from their hands, anything from the regulation woman’s purse to a man’s briefcase or bookbag of a thing
along with the requisite plastic sack advertising everything from American cigarettes to German cameras to Czech sporting events or football teams or large industrial firms that manufactured beer or cars. In that plastic sack most citizens carried home their potraviny purchases or whatever fresh vegetables were available that day from street vendors set up near the tram stops of in the city's center on Havelska street at the bottom of Vaclavske namesti. Maybe a piece of red meat or a round rump of pork bought after standing on line in the mazo shop, the butcher store. Maybe a runty head of lettuce along with a long green stalk of purple-headed garlic bought after standing on another line in the ovoce/zelenina, the fruit and vegetable storefront. Shopping is a demanding, physical sport in Czechoslovakia. And like American football, there are long moments of standing around, waiting for your chance to make your play in the game. During those moments, I watched.

I lived in Zizkov most of my year in Prague. Zizkov is a solidly working class district. Our boarding house, six floors of flats in a long line of cement and brick buildings marching up Velehradska street just above the aptly named "Prick of Prague," the television broadcasting monstrosity of a tower whose main purpose was to jam programs from the west rather than facilitate any kind of reception, sat on the dividing edge between Zizkov and Vinohrady, the district of Prague where its first democratically elected president,
Tomas Garrigue Masaryk, had made his home. The street was quiet, made up of people who worked for a living, Czechs, Slovaks, Gypsies. But enough of a racial mix that weekend evenings the air held a bit of a menace. Fights could and did erupt down at the disco on Olsanske namesti, Olsanske square, where the main tram stop was. You didn't go out for an evening stroll after a certain hour, and if you were a woman, you did not go out alone much after dark. Which seldom deterred Carina and me.

We owned the sometimes stupid arrogance of Americans living far from home. Not that we were so much arrogant as hopeful. In short, we believed more in the goodness of our fellow human beings than in the more basic instincts that sometimes drive people to acts of random violence. Carina is deeply, profoundly Christian in her apprehension of the world. I am a thoroughly lapsed, cradle Roman Catholic, meaning I have a highly developed, deeply ingrained sense of guilt, and a black and white sense of good and evil. Not that I let any of those qualities stop me from going where I have no business going. I am way too curious for my own good, being the devoutly superstitious coward that I am. With Carina to egg me on, I went places and did things I would have not done or seen on my own. For that, she has my profound thanks and she bore my whining better than I had any right to expect.

Then again, I entered whole-heartedly into her ongoing existential crisis. The meaning-of-life conversation, in a
phrase, that we carried on for that year circumstances threw us together. At thirty-six, I'd decided getting to the bottom of such a thing was beyond my powers of comprehension or understanding. That and I didn't really want that question answered. If I did come up with some kind of codified answer to that question, I'd be obliged to take on a responsibility for my life that I'd just as soon sidestep. Not Carina. Then again, any child named "Carina" by tough, Chinese-American emigrant parents was not going to have an easy time of it. Carina's other sisters, three of them, had among them, a husband, a high-powered career, an education from one of the Claremont colleges. Carina herself had graduated from Georgetown's school of foreign studies. Her year in Prague was her one deep breath before she dove back in to law school, some other professional school, or maybe marriage to a fellow she'd met and committed to, more or less, her last year at Georgetown. She had helped build houses for Habitat for Humanity, worked with inner city kids as she was fluent in Spanish, worked in homeless shelters and old age hostels. All the things I could not do for the same reason I could not and would not go to Auschwitz, though that comparison is hardly fair to all involved, but I knew my limits. Or I thought I did.

When Carina and I moved into our ministry flat, we found to our delight that we each had our own room, airy, high-ceilinged, longer than they were wide, and nondescript linoleum for floors, but each room had six-feet tall windows
that opened out onto the narrow confines of Velehradska street five floors below. Our across-the-street neighbors could see into our rooms as clearly as we could see into their rooms, but we had the requisite white lace Czech curtains for the daylit hours and thicker mustard-colored drapes for evening. But we had that most cherished of essential things—privacy. We'd spent our first month in a dorm room so small we could put our hands out and touch the edge of one another's couch-beds when we lay down to sleep. Again, we had day beds rather than real beds, but we had our own rooms. I hung my Leibowitz photo of Magic up on the wall above my bed first, then taped up my poster of Havel's presidential portrait up on the wall opposite. Carina giggled when she saw my choices. She'd taped up a poster for a black-and-white photo exhibit at one of the Castle galleries, that and her hand-lettered sheets of Czech verb conjugations. I got my Chatham poster, "Summer Thunderstorm," up and I was home. Carina added a color poster of Klimt's "The Kiss." The next morning I got up to find her copy of Havel's presidential portrait poster taped to the inside of the bathroom. We had our own water closet and bathroom in the flat, a true luxury, even if we did have to share a small icebox with the rotating occupants of three other flats, the icebox kept in its own small room near the lift.

Carina's the one started the running joke about "Bathing with the President." My obsession with Havel tickled her to no end. Though, as a scholar, she read everything I had by
Havel, and we'd argue up one side and down the other about his apparent sense of relativity. How could he claim he was "living in truth," Carina demanded to know, when he was a married man who openly had other women? I didn't try to explain this lapse. Carina's a young woman who believes in the sanctity of monogamy. I hope she does not have to modify that belief to live her own life in the future. For the most part, though, she admired Havel as much as I did for his insistence in keeping ideals physically present in a world afflicted with a working agenda of situational ethics. And a certain responsibility, even one publicly acknowledged by a man who has reached an agreement of sorts with the woman he married, the woman who chooses to stay married to him for whatever reason or reasons, is more than most politicians or public figures can claim they are faithful to in the most essential of ways, the private ethics that guide their public decision-making. Havel chose not to participate in the subjugation of his country by communists. For that, as most people know, he got by as best as he could, practicing his profession, writing plays even when they could not be performed in his home theatres, speaking his heart, even when it landed him in prison, testifying in public, even if it did get him elected president of a country whose political and economic fate is still not a sure thing. He has said what he thought was right, what was wrong, and has taken the physical and metaphysical consequences of his thoughts and actions in public and in private.
Besides, he's got that grin, the one seldom far from lighting up just behind his eyes, pulling up the left side of his mustache. I admire a man who can laugh at himself but not give in.
"And it's hard to put your finger on the thing that scares you most,
And you can't tell the difference between an angel and a ghost."

--Guy Clark "Old Friends"

On her Sundays Carina went to church. Didn't matter where or whether or not the services were conducted in Czech or in English. Carina said she went to church to talk more directly with God. She left the more ordinary problems of translation up to the Almighty for solution. That's the only time I can recall she didn't assign herself the detail work of life in our way-foreign land. Me, I headed for the large municipal cemetery that took up a good part of Prague's Olsany district on whose eastern borders we lived.

I relished the idea that Prague's living citizens competed with and ended up having to share the geographic space available to them with the great and not-so-so great dead. My Prague was a true city, home to all the generations of its actual citizens.

So my idea of Sunday bliss grew to become a circling past the main entrance of the large necropolis, hunting for and finding the one tin-roofed obcerstevni (hot food) stand whose balding proprietor opened his shop on Sundays and kept
protected space. Not cold, mind you. Like most Europeans, Czechs do not drink their beer cold, much less cool.

Three months into my year there, the obcerstevni operator began to almost smile at my halting request in mangled Czech for one pint bottle of nearly too full-bodied and damn sure too potent beer and one grilled sausage of indeterminate origin--popping hot meat that steamed on its grease-darkened thick and gray cardboard platter, accompanied by a generous half-slice of the requisite brown rye bread, a tablespoon of bright yellow mustard and a runny forked-over portion of freshly ground horseradish.

I am a creature given to unfortunate habits. Seeing as how the rest of my life has tended to spiral out of control, once I find a habit that works, that turns out as I expect it to, I latch onto that habit with a passion that frightens then simply irritates my close friends. Of whom I have few. But the ones who do take to me and my habits usually suffer my eccentricities with grace and high good humor. In short, I’m always good for a punchline or some sure point of reference. Which is comforting in a world where whirl is often king. Or not. Who can say for sure?

On Sundays in Prague, I took my beer and sausage dinner with Kafka, much to my own amusement and the obcerstevni owner’s apparent approval. He did not ever try to shortchange me or serve me bad meat. At least I managed to expand my private Articles of Faith to include a sacred, profane act of spiritual reverence and visceral satisfaction.
Pinking the Tank

And I think it's about forgiveness.
—Don Henley

Prague is a palimpsest. Scrape away one layer of acid rain dried to a cracked chemical film and you might find a plaster statue of a heroic worker in the best of all social realist poses, arm upraised in a gesture of honest labor, then discover the Art Deco flourishes of the turn-of-the-century pedestal the worker's sensibly shod feet rest on. Make your way to the Letna Plain above the Vltava and you find the flat stone base for one of the largest statues of Stalin ever raised up in central Europe. Now empty, the dirty gray pedestal is layered with graffiti in six or seven languages—my favorite the traditionally misspelled—"PUNK'S NOT DEAT."

Or, in late April, if you happened to be in the Smichov district of Prague in Soviet Tankists' Square you would have seen a palimpsest in progress, a footnote to history being etched indelibly in lovely pink paint.

On 28 April 91, a twenty-three year old avant-garde artist gave the citizens of Prague an artifact no one could
overlook. David Cerny picked that Sunday in late April to conduct his "happening." The use of that word, dated as it is in the States, illustrates Czechoslovakia's cultural dilemma neatly. The last free exchange of cultural, intellectual, and general hoo-hah knowledge between Czechoslovakia and the rest of the West before 1989's Velvet Revolution took place in the summer of 1968. Even Prague itself caught in that cultural time-warp. Hence, Cerny's "happening." By late April of 1991, after a celebrated and formal showing of Andy Warhol's silk-screen graphic portraits at the National Gallery and the much ballyhooed Rolling Stones' tour stop the previous August—"Tanks are rolling out, the Stones are rolling in"—such a "happening" made perfect, even predictable sense. Around five o'clock on the morning of the 28th, Cerny, a student of Prague's Academy of Fine Arts, showed up in Soviet Tankists' Square. He brought with him a group of fellow artists, carefully forged permission papers from City Hall, material to make papier-mache, and many gallons of light pink paint. In the cold, early spring light, Cerny and his friends, the self-proclaimed "Neostunners," mounted the three-meter high stone plinth in the square and painted the Soviet #23 memorial tank with a thin wash of pink paint. To make sure their gesture would be clearly understood, they added an oversized replica of a middle finger pointing upwards to crown the cupola of the newly pinked tank.

The police did arrive around 6:45, and Cerny thoughtfully presented them with a sheaf of properly stamped
and notarized false documents from City Hall, giving Cerny and the Neostunners permission to make their graphic statement about the machines of war in general and this tank in particular. Number twenty-three is said, by legend, to have been the first Soviet tank to reach Prague in 1945, freeing Prague from the Nazis. Number twenty-three is, in fact, a tank of 1950's vintage installed much later after the fact of the pre-arranged Soviet liberation of Prague. American tanks, under the command of General George Patton, could have gotten to Prague much earlier on an eastward sweep, but Stalin cut a deal with Roosevelt and Churchill that prevented American ground forces reaching further east than Plzen. And, in a good many contemporary Czechoslovak minds, Soviet tanks are identified with the fraternal exercise conducted by the Warsaw Pact powers in the summer invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. So Cerny and his Neostunners painted #23 a light, iridescent pink and then crowned their work with the quintessential American gesture of defiance and disdain.

I knew something serious had happened when I found myself upright in bed, Carina's hand locked on my ankle, demanding I dress and go out with her. Dress? In what? Who died? And where the hell were we going before noon in Prague on a Sunday, the day the city remained quiet, its public thoroughfares deserted. Most people were still outside the city at their country "cottages"--tiny shacks on dwarf plots
of ground where they grew most of the fresh fruit and vegetables that saw them through the long Central European winters.

Carina flashed her well-maintained white teeth at me—her father's a dentist in Los Angeles—and said, "Get up. Get going. If it's not worth your lost beauty sleep, I'll do your laundry."

That did it. In April of 1991 not a single self-service coin-operated laundry could be found in Prague. Living, as we did, on three thousand crowns a month—a median income worth about eighty US dollars—we got by as most middle-class Czechs did, hand-washing our clothes, leaving jeans, shirts, and undergarments to dry on thin clotheslines suspended above the large plastic sink that passes itself off as a bathtub in our government-issued flat. If nothing else, I'd get my socks scrubbed for free. I got up, dressed, and let Carina march me down Ondrickova street to the #9 tram stop. Since it was Sunday, the trams ran on the half-hour, not the weekday schedule of every ten minutes or so. And, being late April at that northern latitude, the sun had barely cleared the long tall row of shops and housing estates that boxed in Olsanske namesti, Olsanske square.

Carina did a jig in her long, black overcoat, reciting for my amusement the Roethke poem she was memorizing. I'd introduced her to contemporary American poets and novelists. In return, as a graduate of Georgetown's foreign studies program, Carina gave me the short course in late twentieth
century European history. So I knew the saga of the USSR's loss of the East Bloc, courtesy of Carina's storytelling abilities and a quick reading of Timothy Garton Ash's The Magic Lantern and Disturbing the Peace by Vaclav Havel.

Reading Havel's book, I discovered it had been translated by Paul Wilson, a Canadian writer, a friend I'd made two years before that at the MacDowell Artists' Colony in New Hampshire.

Carina could recite "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," Bob Wrigley's "Moon in a Mason Jar," and Dick Hugo's "Distances." She spent that Sunday morning regaling me with a lascivious rendition of Theodore Roethke's "The Waking." I tried hard not to crack a smile and so ruin my reputation of being an early-morning bitch of the first water, but I lost it when she hit, "God bless the Ground! I shall walk softly there,/And learn by going where I have to go." The dour Czechs around us frowned at such a display of frivolous and incomprehensible behavior conducted not only in a foreign language, but with much relish in a public place.

The tram, the only one in Prague painted in British Airways' gray, not the regulation red and yellow, screeched to a halt at our stop, blue electrical sparks showering down from the dirty cables sagging overhead. Carina herded me on, making sure I punched my green cloth-textured tick. She had her own monthly tram pass. The only time I was ever checked by transit police, either on trams or the metro, was when I traveled with Carina. Her dark Oriental skin and crow-black
hair attracted the attentions of Czech males. With my light brown hair, wide cheekbones, and dark, drab clothes, I could pass for Czech as long as I kept my mouth shut and remembered not to smile at strangers. My few phrases of Czech came out garbled, mangled by a Texas accent. In short, I could seldom make myself understood. Carina did quite nicely with her toneless pidgin Czech and high-tech southern Californian smile.

From Olsanske namesti, the #9 tram headed through the Zizkov working class district of Prague on to Nove Mesto, New Town, by way of Vodickova Street. As always, I gaped at the progression and regression of architecture ranging from the Art Deco flourishes of late 19th century apartment buildings crammed in next to the disintegrating facades of 20th century socialist housing estates. Prague’s is a ruined beauty, no surface left blank for long.

Once past Hlavni nadrazi—main train station—the #9 tram banged its way to the Jindrisska stop. St. Jindrisska’s Chapel, St. Henry’s Chapel, finished in 1348 A.D., stood on a cramped lot on the left side of the tram. A block of palace buildings and a clock tower of the proximate vintage stood across the street, the clock tower mostly unchanged, the long block of stone palace buildings now housing one auto parts shop, a fishing tackle shop, and several empty, abandoned store fronts. Free enterprise and freefall capitalism had not yet yielded tangible dividends to the emerging Czech entrepreneurial class. The Czech currency, the crown, was
still not freely convertible, and Western business interests were leery of investing in a state still operating under the patchwork Communist constitution.

From Jindrisska, #9 banged up through the middle of Vaclavske namesti, Wenceslas Square, where the current prince of the city, Vaclav Havel, presided over much of the public theatre that made up Czechoslovakia's Velvet Revolution in November and December of 1989. More a long, wide boulevard than a true square, Vaclavske namesti had held over one hundred thousand Czechoslovak citizens in those days of freezing drizzle. They stood, stamping their feet, clapping, cheering exuberantly whenever Havel took a turn at the microphones set up on the balcony of the Svoboda publishing house. In a gesture no political pundit or historian has yet to explain, those one hundred thousand plus freezing, ecstatic citizens pulled their key rings from their pockets and let that tinny music from the background against which the blue, white, and red tricolor flags of their country whipped back and forth in the wet air.

Number nine pushed on, across the Vltava river to Smichov namesti and Soviet Tankists' Square. That morning I was surprised to see people crowded at the edges of the square. Then I got my first glimpse of something pink. Pink? Carina started giggling behind me.

We got off the tram and pushed our way through what turned out to be a loosely packed crowd of smoking, drinking, laughing Czechoslovak citizens. Not that is was unusual to
see folks drinking beer in the morning from green and brown pint glass bottles of Prasdroj and Pilsner beer. To spend an enjoyable late Sunday morning or afternoon was as simple as finding which of the obcerstevni (hot food) stands would be open for business on the borders of the Olsany cemetery. I had my own favorite stand on the south side of the large municipal cemetery. The older Czech gentleman who sold beer out of the tin-roofed building actually kept a case of bottles just inside the back door so that the beer was often cool. Not cold, mind you. Czechs don’t drink cold beer, but this gentleman’s stock tasted of the cool green air to be found under the tall trees of the well-kept cemetery.

The crowd around the tank was festive. Half a dozen kids in faded, black and gamy clothes circled around a fellow with a six-string guitar yodeling out John Lennon’s anti-war anthem, “Give Peace a Chance.” It almost sounded like English. Older people circulated in two’s and three’s, bunching up to laugh or mutter one sentence after another in rapid-fire Czech. Two older gentlemen dressed in faded blue workers’ coveralls and jackets scowled at the well-tended flower beds and smoked rank Sparta cigarettes. Mostly, people looked up at the tank, the thin pink paint drying, the stink of latex in the cool morning air.

Carina and I said nothing. I watched people stare and point at Carina, heard them mutter, “Cinske,”--Chinese--when she walked past. She gave no sign she heard, kept moving, smiling at me now and then. We made our way through the crowd
then circled to the tram stop as more and more camera flashes went off, fixing the tank’s pink light onto the emulsion of high-speed film.

We rode the #9 tram back across the Vltava to the National Theatre where we got off and headed north on Smetanova nabrezi to get to Charles Bridge. The bridge, now closed to all but pedestrian traffic, had been built by King Charles the Fourth, Holy Roman Emperor. Tall, ornate towers marked either end of the bridge. Statues of assorted saints, martyrs, bishops, Christ, and the Virgin Mary lined the bridge at ten meter intervals. Now, in the spirit of free trade, vendors of everything from lace collars to Bohemian crystal to the latest in heavy metal studded jewelry set up card tables and sold their wares to German, French, Italian, Canadian, British, and American tourists whose pockets bulged with nonexchangeable Czech crowns.

Carina and I marched to the middle point of the bridge. She came to an abrupt stop just past St. John of Nepomuk, the spot where the good bishop was thrown from the bridge on the orders of Vaclav IV. The bishop had refused to break the seal of the confessional and reveal to the king what the queen had confessed to him. The good saint cradles a graphic crucifix in his left arm. Carina looked up, past the finely drawn figure of an emaciated crucified Christ and began to giggle. Such a thing made me understandably nervous as I am a thoroughly lapsed, deeply superstitious Roman Catholic. It was Sunday, after all. Carina, for her part, is quietly,
fiercely Protestant: such laughter was out of character for her.

"Was that worth getting out of bed for?" she asked, nodding back up the river in the direction of Soviet Tankists' Square.

"It was a tank, right? And pink? And it had that finger?"

"Yes," she said, and we both of us burst out laughing, then jumped up to exchange one of the clumsiest high-fives ever attempted. The lace vendor two saints down looked up and scowled. We laughed harder.

David Cerny was quickly arrested and charged with "hooliganism" under paragraph 202 of the patchwork, still mostly communist constitution Mr. Havel's government found itself operating under. This same paragraph was the law used to jail Havel himself as late as September of 1989. The minister for national defense offered an apology to the Soviet generals arriving in Prague for traditional May Day celebrations. The tank was divested of its offensive digit and repainted a more somber, appropriate martial green. The Soviet generals, most of them World War II veterans, drank vodka toasts to their former and fallen comrades and left the city.

Carina and I wondered what the equivalent gesture in the United States might be. Paint the National Monument pink? Nope. Crown the local WWI dough boy statue in Elwood Park
back home with early May lilacs? Not hardly. There was no equivalent gesture. Our country had not been invaded in recent historical memory. Not the continent anyway. We had not ever listened with our breath stuck in our throats, drumming in our ringing ears, straining to hear the first clank of tank treads or rumble of low-flying aircraft.

David Cerny suffered from and benefited by the spotlight of sudden notoriety. He gave interviews, saying “art should consist of conflict,” and sold what pieces he had at prices of Warholian splendor. Why not? The joke might have passed, relegated to a long and intricate legal debate even as the country’s constitution was being rewritten had it not been for the second band of merry pranksters.

On May 17th, a group of fifteen members of the Czechoslovak Federal Parliament took the matter into their own hands. Jiri Ruml directed this group of former dissidents dressed in blue coveralls with “FS” stenciled on the back, identifying them as members of the Federal Parliament and hence immune to prosecution under civil law, to the fresh, green #23 tank in Smichov. Armed with new paint brushes and pails of thick, lustrous paint, they repinked the gleaming tank. They did it, they said, to protest Cerny’s arrest, declaring that the notorious paragraph 202 should never be abused again.

Carina and I once again went on pilgrimage to inspect the deputies’ work. The tank glowed in early summer’s pollen-laden air. White and purple lilacs perfumed the usual breezed
made up of particulate parts of brown coal burnt for heat, the aroma of sausages grilled over open fires, and centuries of beer spilled on Prague’s cobble-bricked streets. The paint, a better quality than Cerny and his Neostunners could afford, smelled of garlic. Carina sneezed twice in rapid succession. She always did. I waited for the second sneeze before I said, “God bless you.” She laughed.

“They really slathered it on, didn’t they?” she said. The tank would make a fine contribution to the deep pinks and faint purples that graced each day’s lengthening dusk in Prague.

“Government money,” I said and sidled upwind of the garlic-scented paint. My sinuses expanded and contracted, my eyes filled with salt-stinging tears. “Damn. I wonder what Havel thinks of all this?”

Carina shook her head and watched a thin knot of teenagers light each others’ cigarettes. We both started for the tram stop.

On 7 October 1989, a photograph of Havel had appeared in the communist paper of record, Rude Pravo, with the caption, “Ferdinand Vanek of Maly Hradek celebrated his birthday on 5 October, 1989. His fellow workers and friends thank him for the hard work he had done and continues to do in his life and to wish him good health and further success in his work in the years to come.” Since Havel was persona non grata in the eyes of the then-legal communist government his well-wishers
used "Ferdinand Vanek," the name Havel gave to his character in a cycle of three plays he says are the most blatantly autobiographical in his body of work, to congratulate him publicly. "Vanek" is listed as a more formal diminutive of "Vaclav," Havel's given name, my surname. Ferdinand is a passive character, a fellow who provokes those around him to sometimes absurd, self-justifying behavior.

In the nine months since arriving in Prague, I'd read everything I could find by my Czech namesake—most of it turned out to be translated by Paul Wilson, whose acquaintance I'd made at the MacDowell Colony in 1988. Paul had written me letters, fed me bits and pieces about Havel and Prague. A good deal of what I learned in Prague about Prague I learned by way of Havel's translator.

After members of parliament repinked the tank, I sent off a letter to Paul. Publicly, President Havel had chided the pranksters, asking why they didn't act to change paragraph 202 legally rather than break the law themselves. Paul wrote that private citizen Havel may well have relished the prank, but public citizen Havel had little choice but to rebuke the pranksters. That assessment made sense despite its being less than satisfying.

To dampen the controversy, Tank #23, still glowingly pink, was removed from its paint-spattered pedestal and sent to an obscure military museum, presumably to be repainted a proper camouflage green once again and stand as a symbol
somewhere safe behind a glass-enclosed display. The stone plinth in Smichov stands empty as the base for Stalin’s statue on the Letna Plain.

My last day in country, 21 August, was the twenty-third anniversary of Czechoslovakia’s invasion by Warsaw Pact powers in 1968. I woke much too early, even considering all I had to get done that last day. Out of habit and with a sense of dread, I switched on the FM radio tuned to the BBC’s World News and its hourly broadcasts. These, plus the International Guardian and the International Herald Tribune, were my only sources of news inside and outside Czechoslovakia, though I was finally beginning to understand a Czech phrase, maybe even an entire sentence of Czech if the words were spoken clearly and slowly, a rare occurrence. And that day, ironically, was the day tanks were reported in the streets of Moscow. Gorbachev had already been said to be too ill to continue in the execution of his duties.

Late August in Prague had been hot, muggy—typical summer weather. That day turned off cool enough I wore my navy blue pullover sweater on my errands around town. The Czechoslovak Army was said to have mobilized men and tanks to reinforce Slovakia’s common border with the Soviet republic of the Ukraine. This report could neither be confirmed nor denied by the BBC offices in London. President Havel returned early from a summer holiday, where he had, it turned out, written a series of essays on the nationalist tendencies
threatening to break up the federal union of the Czech lands and Slovakia. This collection of essays also examines the nature of power and how it changes those suddenly exposed to it.

On that cool day in August, I walked the city, shooting the only roll of photographs I would take home from my year-long stay in Prague. I got a shot of the empty pedestal in Smichov, a shot of the National Museum of Bohemia at the top of Vaclavske namesti, taking the photo up close enough to the building that I could plainly see the white-pocked craters left in the graying stone by bullets from the Soviet tanks in 1968. Bats still escaped nightly through the empty glass frames. The communists could not correctly replace the glass in the museum’s cupola towers, not even in a country renowned the world over for its glass products.

At three that afternoon, I bought papers from the same two young men who had sold me papers every day I lived in Prague. Their English was better than my Czech. Looking around the bottom of Vaclavske namesti, I picked a spot under a light post in front of the Obcanske Forum building where Czech TV broadcasters had built a stand for their cameras. At four o’clock OF invited any interested Czechoslovak citizens to attend a rally in support of Gorbachev and Yeltsin against the hard-line Soviet communists who had seized power, declared a national state of emergency, and set tanks loose in the streets of Moscow itself.
All day long, everywhere I walked, from Staromestke namesti, Old Town Square, to Malastranskse namesti, across Charles Bridge, I saw people watching television sets in shop windows or listening to radios tuned to news stations. All day long, I heard, sometimes for the first time, bits of Czech that made sudden sense. Yeltsin was seen outside his parliament’s building, the Russian White House. Havel told his people not to panic, the Czechoslovak borders were secure. People watched the contrails of jet air traffic shuffling in and out of Ruzyne airport. Large blue helicopters ferried back and forth from the airport to Hradcany, Prague Castle, all day long. I watched them from Charles Bridge, saw the vendors checking with one another, dialing around the radio bands, listening to Czech broadcasts, BBC broadcasts in English, Voice of American broadcasts, and even news bulletins in French on Europa 2, the pop station.

Rumor had it President Havel might show up at the “Support Gorbachev/Yeltsin” rally conducted from the balcony of the OF building. I got there early, staked out my spot, and read newspapers until the cool summer sun began to lose its heat. The rally finally began as the sun slid toward the tops of the buildings. Being near the front of the loosely packed crowd, I couldn’t tell how many people had gathered around and behind me. In front of me, people stood with enough room to turn easily or walk back and forth in front of one another. All the buildings at the bottom of the square
had open windows full of people. It wasn't until Jan Urban, an OF deputy and master of ceremonies of sorts, mentioned Havel's name that I began to realize how large the accumulated crowd was. Those of us at the front clapped, hooted, and hollered what sounded like "Ahzhee Havelle," long live Havel, until our hands were too sore to clap any more, our throats to dry and raw to continue the chant. The cry washed back over me with the sound of a violent cloudburst of summer rain on a high mountain reservoir. Goose flesh rippled my skin. I shook once from the top of my ringing head to the bottoms of my throbbing feet. "Long live Havel," in Czech rang over and over again off the stone walls of the tall buildings enclosing the bottom of the square.

It took fifteen minutes to die down. News photographers wedged in the tall windows of the OF building looked out in almost gap-mouthed wonder at those of us in the crowd. And older man to my right raised a huge American flag with a press release photo of George Bush pinned to it and pulled the heavy flag back and forth in the cool air. The photographers risked the shallow, flimsy edges of the open windows to focus on the man and his flag. He was gray-headed, dressed in plain clothing. I stared at the flag, thinking it didn't quite look right. The flag had forty-eight stars, some of them less than regularly spaced. It was home-made, perhaps of a 1945 vintage.

For every five or six Czech tricolor flags I saw, I spotted one American stars and stripes flag. I just stood
there and shook, unable to scrub the goose flesh off my arms. Jan Urban interrupted one of the speakers. Urban was smiling, pleased, glancing down at a scrap of paper in his hand. The square went nearly quiet. Urban announced, in rush of clear Czech I understood almost all of, that President Havel had received word that the Soviet tanks were withdrawing from the streets of Moscow and Gorbachev was--. The last of the sentence I lost when the crowd broke out in cheers of "Long Live Havel" with occasional shouts of long life for Gorbachev and Yeltsin too. The tanks, though, were leaving Moscow's streets. I was certain of that much. Soviet soldiers had refused to fire on their own country men and women. The tanks were returning to barracks.

The rally continued on into early evening. I walked down Narodni street, the same route the students had tried to take to reach Vaclavske namesti on 17 November 89 to protest against the then-legal communist government. That crowd of students was bottled up and trapped by security police forces, then herded into half a block of the street well short of Jungmannovo namesti, crowded under the arcade of one of the buildings. Once the students were trapped, the security police waded in with thick, plastic batons and riot gear, and beat the students through a narrow gauntlet that was their only means of escape. That bloody incident started what came to be called the Velvet Revolution, remarkable for its lack of violence as well as its lack of retaliatory vengeance once the communist regime fell.
That day in late August, I lingered long enough in the arcade to take a quick snapshot of the bronze plaque of hands held up, the palms open and empty, with the date 17.11.89 under them. The walls and sidewalk around the plaque were scorched black from the thousands of votive candles burned there in the last year and a half. No one had replastered the arcade walls a pristine white.

Though the thick pinks and deepening purples of true dusk had settled over the Vltava, I walked down Smetanovo nabrezi to Charles Bridge. Three different but equally large circles of young and middle-aged people sprawled out around three guitar players. I picked my way through the first crowd listening to what, to my ear, sounded like classical music. The second circle of people, kids mostly, sang along with "Massachusetts." The third circle, the one nearest the middle of the bridge where I was headed, joined the middle-aged guitarist singing about Neil Young's miner searching for a heart of gold. I found St. John of Nepomuk and watched the last of the light leach up into the bluing night.

When the spotlights began to click on, lighting Hradcany and St. Nicholas's cathedral in Malostranske namesti, I pushed my self up off my elbows, straightened up in the now-cold air and walked stiffly over the cobbled stones back across the bridge, the people singing different tunes, most drinking from pint bottles of Pilsner and Prasdroj, to the #9 tram stop in front of the National Theatre. It was an
unseasonably cold night in Prague. There would be fog before dawn. I knew. I watched the dark change into light, listening to the trams whack and clang up and down the tracks on Vinohradska every half-hour.

At midnight on the BBC World News I watched Soviet tanks clanking full speed out of Moscow. Jack Thompson, the commentator, smiled at the conclusion of the broadcast. So did I.

It's traditional to go to the Jewish cemetery, write a wish on a small scrap of paper, then wedge it into the cracks of Rabbi Low's tombstone. Rabbi Low is the Jewish elder said to have created the Golem, a Frankenstein-like figure to protect the Jewish ghetto. The good rabbi removed the creature's animating wafer each day at dusk. One day the rabbi forgot, and the Golem went on a rampage and had to be destroyed.

I did not make such a wish or go through such a ritual. I spent my last outdoor hours watching the dark waters of the Vltava flow under the arch of Charles Bridge presided over by St. John of Nepomuk, one of the patron saints of Bohemia. If you look in the Prague phone book, when you can find one, you'll find any number of "Vanek"s listed. No "Ferdinand Vanek," though. I assume he celebrated his birthday in early October of 1991. Havel's new book of essays, Summer Meditations, is being translated into English by my good friend and tour guide, Paul Wilson. Carina and I did promise to meet in Prague in 1996. Right now, I'm safe in the deep
heart of a Montana winter. Paul still writes to catch me up on what’s happening in Prague, and I still dream, occasionally, of Tank #23 in its full pink splendor against the hazy May sky, the air around it ripe, redolent with the scent of white and purple lilacs.
Sunday in Prague

"There is no more fear, just letting go."

--Slavenka Drakulic

Let it go—I took a deep breath, stepped out of the fluorescent shadows of the flat's carport, and turned left up Velehradska, determined to make it down to the Vltava river, half the city away from my Zizkov neighborhood. Dumb, dumb, dumb, as it was two in the morning on a Sunday morning. I was crazy with grief-for-no-reason. Something had to happen, and I needed to see the city with clear eyes, with no one watching me watching them.

Zizkov is known as a "working class district" in all the Western guidebooks, which translates as: nothing to see or buy and you might get mugged. No one had bothered me in the seven months I'd lived there. Of course I did keep my head down, wore plain clothes, and remembered most of the time not to smile at strangers, damn sure not to greet them. If I opened my mouth to try out my halting Czech, I gave myself dead away as an American. I still couldn't break the
habit of telling shop clerks or cashiers, "Dekuji," "thank you," whenever I concluded a purchase. Gave myself away as foreign every time.

The early morning air was cool, a relief from the wet mugginess of the long July day. Not a real summer heat, more like something you could wash off your skin with strong Czech soap at the end of the day. I wrapped up in a used black topcoat, flipped the thin velvet collar up, and walked like I knew where I was going.

Walking through the electric light that is dark in that city at night--listening to the occasional thump of tires as a single car or truck raced through the intersection just below the National Museum--had me humming with some kind of expectation. The hisses and shrieks of trains switched through the rail yard at Hlavní nádraží, Main station, the tracks lit with the flat pink of halogen lights. In a moment of sudden quiet, the buzz and high hum of the floodlights illuminated the cupolas of the National Museum at the top of Vaclavske namesti, Wenceslas square. The holes left from machine gun bullets fired from Soviet tanks in 1968 show up white against the pollution-darkened facade. I stood with my back to St. Vaclav's equestrian statue, "under the horse's tail," where guidebooks tell you the natives make assignations. Who's to say?

In the blue shadow there, I remembered the night I walked around the mission grounds of the Alamo with my
parents. The place glowed, seemed to float in and out of the bright white shadows the lights created. I walked up to the scored wooden doors, put my finger in the round holes punched into the mission's walls by the bullets of Santa Anna's soldiers. History made by invaders of a sovereign republic. Texas is the only state to enter the Union by renouncing its status as an independent country. One of the few places in the continental United States that has suffered invasion and driven the invaders back across a border won through treaty and stupid bloodmindedness. Part of the reason Texas is neither Southern nor Western, is simply Texan, a sovereign republic that, in a moment of political machination, gave up what it had earned through blood and imagination. Forgetting even then what Kristofferson would say in a song a century and a half later, "When you're headed for the border, Lord, you're bound to cross the line." And once that line was crossed, it disappeared, could not be found again. It stranded you in a new country where you had to learn to draw the borderlines to keep you and yours safe.

In my year there, I did not touch another person. That's not to say my words didn't draw up a shiver or two from the people I talked to. That's for them to claim or deny. I can't say. I touched buildings, handrails on bridges, stairs winding up the interior of church bell towers, flattened my palm on the rough pitted surfaces of statues, cathedral's stones, dipped cold fingers in holy water founts in Prague
and Krakow. I shook hands with the people I met, writers whose words still ring in my dreams, but I did not touch another person. Which is strange for me, as I am affectionate by nature, have been known to wrap up people in hugs that leave them short of breath, their ribs aching. Why that distance for an entire year? I had nothing to give them. No real reassurance, for that's what touch is, isn't it? A moment of trust, if not hope, in the certainty that things will turn out to have meaning.

Why? For fear of leaving part of myself there? That was taken from me the moment I looked up from the backs of all the heads in front of me, shirt fronts in back of me that day in Vaclavske namesti, waiting for Bush and Havel to speak to the crowd on the second anniversary of the beginning of the Velvet Revolution, hearing Dire Straits on the sound system, booming out "Once Upon a Time in the West." I looked up into the gray sky, clouds low and wet, hovering above the crowd that didn't care about the rain that might fall, watched my breath frost on the air, watched a large stars-and-stripes flag being whipped slowly back and forth, the heavy cloth of the homemade flag stirring the thick air. The flag didn't look right. I started counting the stars. Forty-eight. How long had the flag-bearer had that flag, where had he kept it for the better part of the last forty years?

The two presidents appeared two hours late. The crowd thickened to chest-to-back density. Marked the first time I found difficulty in drawing a clean breath in a public place.
Helicopters surged over the heads of the people pushing forward. Sirens sounded. Men with guns leaned over the edge of the buildings lining Vaclavske namesti. I nearly tripped, but was kept moving anyway. That old terror—lack of distance, of not being able to see—shook me. A low growl swelled into a cheer of "Long life to Havel," "Long life to Bush."

President Bush gave the Czechs a small replica of our Liberty Bell. The Czechs sang "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" in English, then a long pause and the first lines of their national anthem, "Where is my home? Where is my home?" That much Czech I knew.

I made it to the Vltava river that early Sunday morning. In the low, gray light, the river ran almost quiet under Charles Bridge. The white, crusted rim of a stagnant pool under the near archway scuttled shallow against the blackened stone. Pea gravel crunched under my tennis shoes. The most foreign of moments for me—standing above black water running deep through a city breathing in its sleep, the long exhale of trams on all-night schedules, nothing but the occasional thump of a delivery truck or VB patrol car rolling through the cobbled streets. The summer had been cold, the air a gumbo of car exhausts, stone sweating through another century of beer spilled, sausages fried, bodies washed on a European schedule. That morning on the bridge there was only clean air, a green air the river gave off. The same aroma I could
find under wild plum trees back home on the Texas Panhandle. Dislocated in time on the fourteenth century bridge, shivering in late summer, wondering how the hell I would make it back across the city, I let my own small past go. Made a deal with the saint depicted in the statue above me. St. John of Nepomuk, the patron saint of Bohemia, lost his life on Charles Bridge. Good King Wenceslas' retainers pitched him into the river when he refused to tell the king what his queen had revealed to her confessor under the seal of the confessional. Seven stars reportedly appeared above his head as he sank under the water. Seven gold stars in a worn iron mesh mark the halo crowning the good saint's head above his statue. He is the patron saint of secrets kept, of absolution. Put your finger in any of the small indentations on the bridge's edge, make a wish, and the good saint will grant it—if you keep your wish a secret. I had no secrets worth anything to anyone but me, only a growing sense of guilt at no history but one found on a Sunday morning in Amarillo, Texas, standing half-asleep, leaning from one foot to the next, warming my backside with the heat from an open grate on a gas stove. I was six that morning. My great-grandmother gave me my first cup of coffee, more warm milk and sugar than any real dose of caffeine. And, though I was well and healthy, she set a brown prescription bottle beside my china saucer. I'd been reading for a year by then. On the bottle was my first name and a strange last name, foreign, too many consonants, the last one a "k," making that name a
word to be spit out. My name, she told me, my real father's name, from a country whose name she didn't try to say. She handed me a plate with the picture of a factory and a famous American general on it, "Plzen, Czechoslovakia, May 1945." Who was this father? What did he look like? He left no photos behind. Those came years later from his sister in Michigan to me in Prague, sitting on a rented bed in something called a "flat," not an apartment, in a foreign country. So, that early Sunday morning, I wedged my fingertips onto the cold stone, and asked to come back, to find what I was leaving there, what I was supposed to take home, as soon as I found out where home was to be.
Living at Ground Zero

In April when the prairie greens up, my mother and I tease each other about looking good for death. Living in Amarillo, Texas, on the Cap Rock of the High Plains means living twelve or so miles from Pantex, the Department of Defense plant that is the final assembly and disassembly point for my country’s nuclear bombs. In the fields surrounding the plant, farmers grow winter wheat and milo but not much corn. At nearly four thousand feet above sea level, Amarillo is too high for corn. A short growing season of one hundred and ninety-five days complicates things. And, like most other natives up here, the farmers prefer a clean shot of horizon so they can see what might be coming for them over home ground. Then again, the prime value of living at ground zero is that we will not ever know what hit us, will not be able to dread what we have no say in. All we will see, if we see anything, is the first burst of light heated beyond incandescence that will, in turn, ignite the world’s largest known supply of helium trapped in the Mesozoic rock beneath us. As fire rushes through the porous fissures of calcareous rock, the Panhandle of Texas will become one big Roman candle. Knowing all that
lends a certain doomsday frenzy or stolid indifference to the average Panhandle native’s spirit.

The bombs couldn’t care less. Unlike the Comanches after Colonel MacKenzie slaughtered their pony herd in Palo Duro Canyon, the A-bomb and all its attendant bombs is passive in its resistance to the campaign waged by Peace Farm Tenants camped outside its gates each summer. Bishop Leroy Matthieson developed an ecumenical vigor in his dissent against the Pantex plant in 1981. In 1968, I was an eighth-grade student to the then-Monsignor Matthieson at Alamo Catholic High School. The name fit the school’s perpetual financial dilemma. Monsignor Matthieson taught my reading class such novels as Animal Farm, 1984, The Grapes of Wrath, and Brave New World. He spoke well while warning us about how we should interpret and/or trust any figure of authority’s public statements.

In 1981, as bishop, he issued a parish encyclical directing those Catholics employed at Pantex to question the morality of their work and to resign if their consciences so directed them. In Amarillo, Pantex was one of the few major employers where persons of color and women could get a high-paying, relatively secure job. Few Pantex workers resigned. Attendance at Sunday mass all over the Panhandle fell off. Bishop Matthieson made 60 Minutes.
I have not ever slept well. My insomnia has been diagnosed as everything from a chemical imbalance to a bad case of nerves. This final time Dr. John told me I had Graves' Disease. The tumor growing on my thyroid wrapped itself around my voice box so closely that the surgeons refused to cut on me. A radiologist and an endocrinologist decided between the two of them that I should swallow two ounces of radioactive saltwater to dissolve the tumor. Stupid with Inderal, designed to calm my arrhythmic heartbeat, I agreed.

Dr. John directed my parents and me through gray doors in the hospital basement with yellow and red "Danger--Radioactive" warning stickers on them. A technician dressed in a long lead apron that bumped against his shins pointed at me with white glove and said I should follow him. He pushed at a door that opened with a hiss for me. Pulling the other glove on, he tapped his surgical cap to make sure his hair was covered. From a metal sink, he reached both his gloved hands around a dark gray gritty metal square with a regular hospital drinking straw kinked at the right angle for drinking. I reached for the straw. He said, no, put your hands behind your back, lean over, and drink the water. I leaned forward and sucked up what tasted like sun-warmed seawater.

The nuclear cocktail dissolved the tumor and part of my thyroid gland. The blocked space in my throat cleared. I could swallow easily and fill my lungs with one deep breath.
I take small blue pills every morning now, and I haven't heard any glow-in-the-dark jokes for a while.

Three weeks after I joined the ranks of the nuclear-medicated, my daddy left town for Corpus Christi to see about a used ground-spraying rig. My mother and I stayed up late to watch a new talk show David Letterman had started for NBC. Local television signed off with sudden static as Letterman said good night. Maybe the abrupt conclusion was part of the new show's acerbic style. We waited for the usual flag-waving, jets-flying patriotic message that the local channel signed off the air with. Nothing--only the dirty snow of televised static. We flipped through the other three channels, looking for something to ease our insomnia. We found nothing but the same static on each of the four channels. Even Channel 7's Art Deco station signal was absent. January was the wrong month for electrical storms. Besides, it was a warm night for mid-winter on the Panhandle. We switched the radio on and found the same auditory static. The lights all through the house worked. No power outage. We couldn't figure out what had happened.

Mom opened the back gate enclosing the small patio. That's when we saw it. A low pink glow blanketed the horizon northeast of us. Mom thought the Phillips 66 plant gasoline storage tanks in Dumas forty-eight miles away had exploded. I reminded her that Dumas is northwest of Amarillo. This deep pink glow pulsed and seemed to push itself higher into the
dark sky of that moonless night with each beat. It had turned off almost for a January night.

Mom called the Potter County Sheriff’s department. Or she tried to call. When she finally got a busy signal, I stopped praying. She repeated out loud what the deputy told her about the glow not being anywhere near Pantex. The Phillips 66 plant in Borger, not Dumas, had lost two natural gas wells and eight storage tanks. Mom put the phone down and asked me where Orson Welles was when we needed him. I got twenty-five dollars for the poem I wrote about that night—“A Hometown Prayer.”

I left home for graduate school in Denton, Texas, only twenty-eight miles from Fort Worth, Texas, with its Carswell Air Force Base and the home offices of General Dynamics. Not exactly Ground Zero, but still listed on the then-Top Ten Soviet Hit Parade. I had the twitch.

Summer of 1989, I came home to work for my daddy. I watched the sky east of the house and shop until I finally had to go for myself. I drove over to Pantex by way of State Highway 136. To get there, I left the house on Farm to Market Road 17179, clearly marked as a “Hazardous Cargo Route.” I started out just as the bottom edge of the fat summer sun touched the western horizon. The prairie had turned off green in late August with two days of rain. Cool seeped up with the twilight. Blackened yucca swayed above bunches of cheat grass grown up through the saw grasses and cattle-cropped blue and
hairy grama grasses. The evening light worked its way from yellow to soft orange to reds that bled into grape and violet blue. Mesquite trees, stunted as they were, threw long shadows that ran through the double rows of high chain link fence topped by razor-edged barbed wire circling the Pantex plant.

From the road, I couldn't see all that much. Long, low buildings looked as though they could house any commercial activity. On the prairie where the Defense Department has once grown wheat lay the tombs. Everyone, from nuclear activists to Pantex officials to the anonymous, colorless voice of government documents, calls these storage facilities "the tombs." Pantex, in addition to being the final assembly plant for the bombs, is also the disassembly point. Old bombs are shipped here to be deactivated, taken apart, and their redundant parts stored in the earthen structures. The Llano Estacado, the Staked or Stockaded Plains, so named by Coronado in 1541, has lived up to its name.

I pulled over to see just what would happen. The truck's engine was still pinging down in the cool evening air when an unmarked car pulled up behind me and flashed a spotlight on me. I got out of the truck--an old habit from driving with people who drink alcohol in a dry county--and the security officer asked me to stop. I did. He kept his hand on the butt of his pistol, its draw-flap unsnapped, until he got close enough to see I was a young woman in shorts and a Lakers t-shirt, unarmed. He was polite but firm about my moving on,
speaking in the same twang I did. I left, glancing back at
the long, orderly rows of barrows in my rearview mirror.

I live in Montana now, over fourteen hundred miles from any
ground zero that is native to me. I pay taxes here and I have
Montana license plates on my car. It's April. Back home in
Texas, the prairie is greening up early this year. Mom calls
me once or twice or a week to tell how many semi-trucks with
no "Explosives" stickers or "Hazardous Cargo" warnings on
their side panels have driven down the road in front of the
house. In front and in back of these trucks my mother keeps
count of are plain white station wagons with six or seven
long aerials bent back over the cars' bodies. We laugh about
the "peace dividend" now that the Soviet Union is no more.
And Mom makes wise about how honest our new president is with
the general tax-paying public about what strategic services
we are offering the new Russian Republic. Mom has voted
Republican ever since I can remember. She asks me what I'm
thinking about these days, what I'm writing about. I tell
her, "Living at ground zero." She tells me to keep my nose in
the wind, my butt down--same as she always has, living there
on the Panhandle all these years. We're in it, she thinks,
for the duration now.