Our Advantage Over the Vegetable

Lana Costantini

The University of Montana

1983

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd

Recommended Citation

Costantini, Lana, "Our Advantage Over the Vegetable" (1983). Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers. 3153.
https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd/3153

This Professional Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact scholarworks@mso.umt.edu.
COPYRIGHT ACT OF 1976

This is an unpublished manuscript in which copyright subsists. Any further reprinting of its contents must be approved by the author.

Mansfield Library  
University of Montana  
Date: 1983
OUR ADVANTAGE OVER THE VEGETABLE

By

Lana Costantini

B.A., California State University, Sonoma, 1979

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts,
Creative Writing

UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA
1983

Approved by:

[Signatures]
Chairman, Board of Examiners
Dean, Graduate School

[Date]
TABLE OF CONTENTS

POEMS

2. Forgery
3. The Ownership of Couches
5. Note from the Machine Age
6. Meeting the Sky
7. Missing the Northern Lights
8. Driving through Orange Groves in California
9. Passing a Bloom whose Name I do not Know
10. Note from the Park Cafe
11. Breakfast in Hamilton
12. Vacancy in the Face of the North Pole
14. Our Advantage over the Vegetable

FICTION

15. The Feast of Mater Admirabilis
29. The Silent Life of Plants
Forgery

The fat girl in the Christian booth
can't do a thing about my soul, which lies
like a tamale inside me
while I sign my enemies up for junk mail.

She asks me for my signature
on a sheet that says
"Yes, I would like to know more
about Jesus."

I sign because she looks so utterly lonely
in the University mall
next to the rugby booth where boys are hoisting
a twelve foot inflatable doll into the air.

I check items B & C on the questionnaire:
I wish to know more about Creation,
I wish to know more about Resurrection.
I check them because it's true.

I don't tell her about the ten years
I spent defacing statues, or a night
in a cathedral drunk on altar wine
w/ the wrong sort of boys

& I do not mention simply being the wrong sort
of person. I do not want to say
that Isaiah passed over me like a cloud;
I was left alone like a reptile is left alone.

on its warm rock, patiently waiting
for inevitable feasts.
I give the wrong address, knowing the 18-inch
color console will never be delivered,

knowing it is not in me to relieve
her obesity,
that I do not cause the weather,
wanting to do something.
The Ownership Of Couches

Having one is like having a dentist:  
it shows maturity.  
It is a gracious agreement with the home.

You can call it any number of names.  
It won't listen.  
"Divan", you say,  
"you're looking old & grey."

It will sit in the living room  
quiet as a beach.

It's good to own a couch.  
It gives you something to think about  
when you're on vacation  
to the statue of Liberty.

It puts the Museum of Modern Art  
in perspective.

In the ladies room of the Smithsonian  
there is a pink Chesterfield  
that rivals every exhibit.

It makes me want to nominate the towel machine  
as a National emblem.

I think about my life as an anarchist.  
I lounge on the sofa.  
It is good.

There is something civilized  
about the elevator going up,  
opening to a white couch & a potted palm.  
There is something about that  
devotion to form.

There are laws that govern couches.  
They have recently been released  
in a small publication titled:

Facts to Know About Your Divan

1. The futon is similar to the Hide-A-Bed  
but easier to carry.

2. The Hide-A-Bed is obsolete.

3. The same people who call it a Chesterfield  
call the refrigerator a  
Frigidaire.

(cont.)
4. There is no stopping this.

There are those who buy a thirty-year old couch, puffed up like a mint, they get used to it, develop a limp, & there's another tragedy.

There is nothing like a new settee.

There is nothing like making the dog get off the couch.

There is nothing like having a davenport with little crocheted afgans over the arms.

There is nothing like seeing two handsome moving men carry the couch inside in their white t-shirts--whatever you say, whatever defense of the chair--Nothing dispels the obese joy of the sofa; anyone who's had one will tell you.

They will also say you don't put a fishbowl behind it. You don't eat ravioli on it.

You don't offer to let visiting writers sleep on it.

You don't trust anyone who says they would like to paint your portrait while you lay naked on the loveseat, you say Absolutely not

& relax w/ a bottle of Grand Marneir & dream of falling in love with a piano mover.
Who will buy the busted machines of our personal past, 
the rotisserie that no longer follows a cyclical pattern 
but turns now East, now West? 
I ordained the frigidaire & slept to its perfect hum 
until the smell of freon sent me out 
to Desolation Point in a Plymouth that stalled at every turn. 
The trick is to turn those unwanted objects into cash. 

At the garage sale we didn't have an outlet 
so people bought appliances on faith. The following day 
a crowd gathered at the door 
holding their purchases, which had failed them. 
There was the man who'd bought the blender, the woman 
who'd made a deal on the waffle iron, even the boy 
w/ the telescope, which had never worked. Jerry, my neighbor, 
told me by phone but there was nothing I could do; 
I'd moved to Topeka where utilities are cheap. 

I used to like the piles of cars on the outskirts of towns, 
how Chevrolets dismantle themselves, 
red fenders piled up like fish. But now I know the demise inherent in every cylinder, the mental defeat 
when lint wrecks the dryer after twenty years of devotion. Now the dump is a place 
where the maladjusted go for fun. 

My pleasant walks through the wrecking yards 
are ruined w/ the memory of toys I loved: 
the talking doll who wouldn't say Entropy, the blue reptile. 
And it all goes to show how you thought you'd found 
the perfect wheel, but only wandered from street to street in suburban towns remembering your first bike. 
If I had a way to make things stay I'd do it. 
If the car runs, sell it.
Meeting the Sky

Even if you type it
no one will believe you.
Stupidly, you keep repeating
that the sky is an Italian painting
w/ the same conviction
as the drunk at the bus stop
who murmurs Louise, Louise, & you notice
no one believes him, either.

Today you saw the first impatiens
blooming pink & shameless.
You thought
there must be a luminous tower

or another place to direct
your praise. But the sky
is crazy bottle green,
& the only tower in town
lights the department store.
People have told you about the value
of corrective lenses, but you
put carnations in the teapot,
say a word of French
for effect. In the light at 6 p.m.
a Plymouth whispers as you pedal by,
saying all the world alights

on the rear window,
Boticelli naked in the clouds.
It is possible
to make a trumpet from your hands,

place yourself w/ the obesity
of angels. You want to tell the wino
that lovemaking is a public act.
Riding home, you tip your hat.
Missing the Northern Lights

You called from Harry O's in the middle of the night to say the Northern Lights astonished you, that they were visible in the sky above the street where you stood in a phone booth from the 40's by a neon sign that, if it had been lit, would have ruined everything.

I found out later you'd charged a string of long distance calls to the bar: Detroit, California, friends in Green Bay, even an aunt in Alberta.

You told them all the sky was singed w/ green so bright it left the smell of sulphur in your nose,

like those nights on the beach in New Jersey when fireworks lit the air by the boardwalk only better.

I put on my big green coat, a grey hat pulled low, logger's boots & garden gloves-

I stood at the corner of Helen & University searching the sky. I looked up hard; there was nothing but a pale Orion, the outline of the fraternity house, an old Plymouth parked against the curb.

All the way down to the interstate the signal lights on Arthur St. changed to yellow.

It was eight degrees. You didn't say where you were headed next. & I had no idea where North was.
Driving Through Orange Groves In California

I want the mountains
to float.
The mountains do float.

Is she drunk
or what? It was to these valleys
Adam escaped
to eat oranges
in the yellow light,
he didn't complain.

I'm headed east
in a red Chevrolet
& my heart is sane.

It's April.
Rain is dripping emerald
off the leaves

& chariotlike the sun
blasts everything
catched naked for the first time.
Passing a Bloom whose Name I do not Know

My eyes have not yet grown accustomed
to the tall fan of these blooms,
are still shocked by the hue,
the deliberateness I never half suspected.

Are they called gladiolas
which by nature rise & repeat?
I pass them in the driveway,
stand solemn the way I stood
twenty years ago

before white nuns w/ cornered hats,
hats that folded outwards in the sun
like kites.

Before those creatures I could
form no words, would stand in the convent garden
lilacs in an arc overhead;

I searched & repeated every prayer
I'd learned & still could find no way
to address them.
If I refrained from the pauses I take,
did not regard

the semen of the stem, the hospital nurse
wheeling in pink infants
flushed w/ having been born,

Mother Superior & the white flock
standing like egrets at the edge of a lake –
if I refused to stand bewildered,
ashamed of my own insistence,

of my education which is made
of single fingers pointing,
of that which reduces a flock
of egrets
to a crowd of gossiping women –

to whom
do I apologize?

Are they called gladiolas
which by nature rise &
repeat

these sudden long gods
six inches from
my face?
First let me say there was a long silence. A tree blew down at the University & winter embalmed us. During those months I walked a few blocks only in each direction, did not ask the time, rarely used the dictionary, & twice patted the head of a stranger's dog.

An accidental turn on a frozen day led me to the Park Cafe, its orange booths bright as lanterns, its German waitress, its case of pies. I was numb from the white air, from Plotinus lying dead in my white books. I ordered a double cheeseburger. The old couple beside me were midway through dessert. Their silence made me mouth the words 'happy marriage' & 'damn shame' because I didn't know which.

I still can't say what it was that caught me there on the swivel stool- I suddenly knew that all I've ever wanted is an art deco kitchen w/ a red booth & a jukebox, a neon sign that says BUICK V8. That night I returned my copy of The Inferno to the library & went back to why Jeff left Maureen in my favorite Harlequin.

I've spent every morning since at the breakfast joint downtown drinking coffee like the world was ending. I keep a menu as a beacon, the flag of the world that loves naugahyde & knows the value of pie, knows that this is life on the inside: a deliberate belch.

I write old friends & casually mention my new collection of rounded appliances. I say there was once a life before this but it fell apart quietly in a single moment, that I can be found at the Park Cafe, that I count on the beauty of Chevrolets. What's more, I don't listen to anyone who sees misery in the busted neon sign fizzing over the door.
Breakfast in Hamilton

Was it my new pink scarf tied toughly to the side or the old pink convertible parked against the curb slowly filling w/ snow? Was it the surfer sitting next to me or the four fried eggs I ordered in a sudden, ravenous mood? Who could tell? Her state demolished me.

She carried the weight of another four decades, not gracefully, making me think I should refuse the banana cream pie in the clean glass case, a fourth cup of coffee, the caress of the large, handsome man to my right whose designs of love & extravagance reminded her of a yellow cotton dress she owned in the nineteen thirties. Romance, I would say, is a whirl through Des Moines in an old Chevrolet, but who asked? I ordered another side of toast when I returned from the restroom mirror thinking my best days are gone.

Was it my bleached hair pulled back w/ a cheap hairpin, rocking the Hamilton cafe like a California quake, turning men's eyes from the dust bowl as if there were another way to breathe? I asked the waitress for three more jelly packs & tried to look like a visiting relative.

Her children live in roadside towns, married to loggers who search for timber, or miners who search for precious elements: silver, uranium, the triumph of the NFL, a decent rodeo. I had nothing to explain & so devoured my bacon & potatoes,

embarrassed by the empty street that revealed all of me, shamed by the sad pinball machine receiving nothing in this town's dirty arcade, consumed by the futile appetite I carry like a perverted love that burns through Main St. ignoring the speed limit. So I go into this cafe to laugh at the morning paper pressed out of this sad town, the high school team, the occasional burglary intelligent people pray for, to weather the stares of this woman who maybe wishes time had stopped forty years ago & stares because she carries the impossible knowledge that it didn't.
Vacancy In The Face Of The North Pole

Santa Rosa is a town where I live & am not a writer. Last night I thought about Sweden, thought I'd go there, buy a Norwegian sweater & be a writer again. Or go to Lapland, which is, in truth, the North Pole. Here there are small streets, bottled water, dogs that do tricks. The Golden Gate Transit runs eight times a day. I go to the supermarket & buy brocolli. I fill out resumes & try to make myself sound interesting. I answer the phone, which is not for me.

The first thing I saw when I woke up this morning was a map of the world. All those islands up above Canada, are they white all the time? Must be glaciers. How many people have frozen to death? In Santa Rosa there are people who have owned ramblers for years, people who are postmen & pharamcists & bartenders. My brother runs a news stand. I take buses around & try to convince myself I'm not mentally disabled. Somewhere there are great miles of snow & frozen mammoths, long grey barges stuck in the ice. I want to wear fur, see it get light for twenty-two hours in a row, spend ten years describing glaciers, carve Woody Allen's face in the ice so that when Hell freezes over there will still be something of interest to go & see. Somewhere there are people who spear whales & sleep in ice & are warm & maybe not even amazed! Somewhere there are people who draw pictures in the frozen ground of the king of the whales & the death of old warriors who could still get it up. Have they heard the word California & thought there are people there who have televisions & rotisseries & buy maps to tack on the walls & kill themselves w/ places they won't go? Have they heard the words entropy & annihilation?

How far do the boats go? The wooden kayaks, the grey bidarka like the one at Fort Ross which I have gone to see ten times? Do I have a blond blood brother who will welcome me if I go? Will I sit up long northern nights dreaming of orchards & houseplants & running square into obstacles such as employment? Will I begin to crave the warm autumns like Sam Magee grinning from the furnace? I will recite poems for Eskimo kids who can't use them, don't need them, I will erase the words Existential Despair from my vocabulary, marry a fisherman & together watch dark babies pop from between my legs & go to die some tough winter remembering that once I ate quiche for dinner on a regular basis & never learned the language except for a few words like water & warm & how much. Will I repeat the same lyrics I have repeated up till now: better not shout, better not cry, because this is the region, for real-

(continued)
This is the authentic place that gave me mythology
& I took it all too seriously, went to too many forts,
saw too many movies, got too fucking bored
& there I'd be like a baby wrapped in newsprint on some savage's step,
there to be healed & inspired, there to prove I have received
every benefit my culture bestowed, there to admit I wasn't enlightened
but only realized the simple error of this life: The years of owning
a typewriter & acting as if I knew. There where you can't
get cantaloupe where there is no Guadalupe to give us hope,
where fish swim under the ice & there actually are important skills
to be acquired - Santa Rosa has gardens where people grow tomatoes
& every day the University fills up w/ students who want to see
Nanook of the North or documentaries of the Iron Curtain
& repeat jokes from old war movies about being sent to Siberia
& no one can be reminded of anything they haven't seen
so it's just film that passes in & out of us as we talk
& the few who could tell us are dead so I sit w/ my maps & books
& old laments & tales I read twenty years ago & open
all the windows wide, waiting for it to get cold.
Our Advantage Over the Vegetable

1. We're mobile.

2. We carry burdens all our lives & they make us happy.

3. We can see it coming when we are going to be eaten.

I told you that so I could tell you this:

Be Deliberate.
The Feast of Mater Admirabilis

Ocassionally something brings me back to a series of processions - twelve years' worth of slow and earnest walks in white shoes, holding a bouquet of a songbook or a can of prepared pumpkin during Christmas giving. There was a marble hall so big you could launch a plane in it; it held all of me and furthermore imparted a great familiarity with cupids, statues, frescoes on the chapel wall, and a millionaire's view of that city by the bay. It's all gone now. I don't even buy Easter Seals anymore. I have one photograph of Madeline Sophie which I received on my eleventh birthday. Though she was declared my patron saint it didn't help in the long run; I keep her face (which bears a look of disappointment) in a drawer along with other mementos. She had been a saint as a child, and all things considered, it was an imperfect match.

Every year I looked with piety on the small clay Christ doll being laid in the manger by some older girl who'd definitely watched her P's and Q's. We dressed in formal whites for the occasion. Being tall, I always had a good view of some senior whose breasts held up her red sailor tie placing the plaster baby (with extreme delicacy) in the cradle at the front of the main hall. I thought about what would happen if she dropped it at the crucial moment and the entire school saw it shatter on the marble floor like a pie plate. Eee gad. By the time I had imagined Mother Macchi and Mother Desmond and Reverend Mother Mardel all clapping their hands for order and frantically
picking up the shards of the fallen infant the ceremony was usually over. I could follow Jessica Barquero (who was always just that much taller) back out the main doors in single file. The song was usually French:

Dans une boîte ou carton
Someille le petit enfant.

But I would sing, solemnly holding my songbook:

Dans une boîte ou carton
Shatters le petit enfant.

My personal amusement and delight did not occur at the expense of my piety, my place in line, or my ability to carry a tune.

We performed with the highest aesthetic in mind. Three hundred white shoes were perfect on the marble floor; it was not questioned and that precision remained in us for years. Theresa Dan always had to be the first to turn at a right angle where the tape on the floor was stuck in a two-inch square, saying "Turn Theresa." Turn Theresa in her sleep, the whole school marching behind. Turn Theresa by the gilt doors and let the festivities proceed.

If we wore honor ribbons they were crossed on the left side and fastened at the waist with a brass pin, Christ if we were lucky, and Madeline Sophie or St. Anne if the best ones were taken. It wasn't fun but the reverence rubbed off and it became a source of serenity to stand in white while a can of vegetables was carried up the aisle. At the end of Christmas giving, two hundred canned hams were taken to the poor. We bade them Bon Voyage in five-part harmony. It was altruism, and it looked good.
It's not surprising that after a few years there developed a feeling that things were being staged. The strangest fact is that, though the deepest spiritual and religious ideals underlay all our ceremonies, it eventually became clear that the most important factor in pulling them off was appearance. The importance or appearance is not to be denied, for the looks of things are the pillars of earth, as Lot's wife will testify. If it looks right, people will ignore it. This became the first law of physics.

The most holy day in spring (second only to Easter) was the Feast of Mater Admirabilis. This was no ordinary feast. The story behind it held our hearts for years. It seems as though an Italian painter in the sixteenth century was commissioned by a very wealthy family to paint a portrait of Mary Mother of God. They had something specific in mind: a pink dress with a blue cape, maybe a serpent in some submissive pose, something lifelike and natural for the front parlor. This painter (whom I shall call Angelo, though his name is not known) set about the task with great energy. He painted at night, he painted during the day, he painted through dinner. The possibility of a personal masterpiece, as well as the opportunity to express his devotion to Mater were in his mind as he painted. The sad fact is that though his heart was pure and his motives lofty, he had no talent whatsoever.

The finished product was terrible. The painting was so bad Angelo experienced a pervasive and unadulterated shame
at having created it. He anticipated the grand showing with nausea; in two weeks he would be publicly humiliated in front of a good portion of the local aristocracy. Unable to face the botch job he'd done on the portrait, he covered it with a sheet, pushed it into a corner, and spent the next two weeks at a little pasta place downtown ordering bottle after bottle of Soave Bolla.

Finally the dreaded day came. The painting, still covered, had been moved into the grand parlor of the aristocrat's house. Everyone who was anyone was there, waiting for the unveiling. There was Cardinal Antonini with his day nurse, Mr. and Mrs. Roccaforte with their daughter Stella, and even the chief of polizia, Vito Ghillarducci, was there with his wife, who wore orchids. Angelo stood in the doorway wearing a borrowed suit and wondered why he hadn't stayed home. it would not be doom, he decided; it would be total annihilation. The moment of unveiling came. The crowd gathered around craning their necks and the cloth lifted. A low murmur came from the room, a hushed sigh. Angelo took his hand from his eyes and peeked at the painting. His hand lowered slowly, and a look of amazement spread across his face. What had happened?

The muddled grey and blotched red of Mater's gown had been miraculously transformed into a pastel blend of silky folds. Her face, which had looked like a bad billboard, was now gentle, radiant, and loving face one could scarcely imagine as belonging to anyone other than the Mother
of God. What could he think? Who could he thank? It was astounding. There was a suspended pause, after which the entire audience was upon him with congratulations, expressions of praise, and rush orders for the holidays. Thus began the feast of Mater Admirabilis.

Whether the transformation of the painting had to do with Angelo's failure as an artist, his success as a Catholic, or the mother of God's desire to appear in the best possible light was never fully explained. All we knew was that a miracle had taken place, and one does not ignore a miracle. Once during a fire drill while we were all answering role on the sidewalk a big chandelier fell on Elizabeth Donahue's desk and that, too, was a miracle. Though everyone said Elizabeth was blessed it seemed more like luck to me, and I told her so after school though she wouldn't believe it. Elizabeth was the only one of us to have a miracle happen to her, and we restrained ourselves from a blatant show of envy by saying how glad we were it wasn't our desk that got all fucked up. I can't speak for the others, but I admit to spending the rest of the afternoon thinking of ways to unscrew the remaining chandeliers to the rest of us might enjoy the same grace Elizabeth evidently received. Because Elizabeth was not the mother of God, it occurred to no one to build a monument in commemoration of her lucky break.

This Mater, however, was a different story. She was taken on as the patron saint of Le Convent de Sacre Coeur,
and because of this, replicas of her were placed strategically throughout the corridors and stairways in such a way that one could simply not avoid passing her on any given day. Given to formality, the Mothers informed us that due to the important nature of this miracle, we were required to curtsey whenever passing Mater; not a quick, sideways stamp but a full-length, six-count curtsey, the kind that would admit us to the Queen of England's chambers, if we had the chance.

For a reason I have never understood, the portrait of Mater was reproduced as a statue. She sat bigger than life on a throne with a dome of light around her head. The wall behind her was painted pale blue. Her gown was pink and she had an urn of lilies to her right. The folds of her dress left her feet, which were bare, visible from the ankle down. She was stepping on a snake — a huge coiled green snake whose mouth was open. But who can tell with a snake. It may have just been choking, because its body was being crushed by Mater's feet. There was an apple, too, but I can't remember exactly where it was placed. The thing that captivated me about the statue was the piety of her face. Her beauty suspended me, those early years, and I believed the transformation as surely as I believed that the host would burn holes in the floor if I dropped it while pretending it was a Necco wafer, or that priests didn't eat. Though most often I offered the stamping curtsey, I was certain that Mater transformed them into courtly bows,
at least she could if she wanted.

The real thing, though that grabbed me was the snake. I touched it once when the hall was empty, felt its cold green coils and even touched its teeth. I couldn't see the feet of Mater eternally resting there. The snake was soon what I looked at in passing, its twisted head that wouldn't die, Mater's feet smaller than mine and pink as filets resting there. I was always looking at the snake.

The feast of Mater Admirabilis came in April. Everyone wrote a letter to her, thirty words or less on faith, obedience, devotion, and the forces of evil which constantly messed things up. We printed them in pencil on pink squares of linen paper, folded them by four, and tied them up with a blue satin bow. When the big day came an honor guard was picked to carry the letters up the long aisle and place them in Mater's lap while everyone else sang Ave Maria in perfect rows on the sidelines. It was a time of great seriousness and piety. To have shown our letters to anyone else was a form of sin and rightly so; this was our personal relation with the Lady of the second landing who saw when we walked by not looking or too sweaty from Red Rover to curtsey. This was the time to make it up and hope she didn't see too far into us or else she'd know just how some of us felt about the snake and that some of us suspected her head was plaster through and through, like the plaster in walls, or the plaster of cupids in some people's gardens. It was, of course, restraint that caused us to edit certain suspicions from our letters.
Despite our instruction to approach the event with absolute piety, I always experienced a burning desire to know exactly what it was my classmates wrote. They looked so serious, so deliberate, so absorbed in their letters, and while I understood that the intimacy was sacred, I couldn't stop myself from wishing for an omniscient eye. What could they have to say that was so important? If it was secrets, Mater knew them. She knew it all, what could you say? But every spring a particular silence settled as we printed what was most important, calm in the certitude that Mater read each word, relished it, would never forget it.

Unlike my classmates, I always encountered great difficulty on Mater's feast - that of finding something I wanted to say to her. Most often it was a matter of phrasing; there was simply no polite way to tell her I thought the snake was more interesting to look at, and since we were taught that evil is as evil thinks, after a while it became evident that sin was mainly in the mind. Ever since I'd started looking at the snake I knew it was my soul that was taking the brunt of it. A heretic in the head's worth an idol in the hand, I knew that much.

Because I'd already envisioned the contents of my classmate's letters, it seemed a waste not to open them in earnest.

This theory was tested against Jean Champion, sixth grader. To my mind Jean had all the qualifications of a
capable partner: I'd noticed that she frequently arrived at school in regular blues when formal whites were required, that she fastened her ribbon with a Batman pin, and that at least twice she'd made a barfing gesture during feast day practice. It didn't take much convincing, then, to get Jean to say she threw up her eclair and meet me on the second landing where Mater sat with a lapful of last year's letters. We each grabbed a handful and ran full tilt to the theatre, which was empty. One by one we opened them. There was Elizabeth's letter which began

Dear Mater,
   Thank you for the chandelier.

We laughed wickedly. Then there was Leslie McNeil's which read

Dear Mater
   Is there anything you can do about the braces, you-know-who is moving in next door.

We ripped it apart delightedly. There were two requests for grace, three promises of absolute devotion, one request for a bicycle, and half a dozen apologies. We tore through them like Valentines, read them aloud and shrieked til our throats were dry. The prize was Andrea Charlton's letter, written in a perfect hand:

Dear Mater,
   Could you please change the B to an A, it won't look good at the admissions desk.

We couldn't contain ourselves. Andrea was the smartest kid in the class. "So THAT's how she does it!" Jean yelled. "She gets it from GOD!" We squealed like piglets. We threw
the letters up in the air all crumpled into balls until they lay around us like old carnations. The blue satin ribbons were looped around our necks and we whooped like Potawatamies. Rome laughed with us, Carthage too. It was nothing less than the huge vacuum of Bethlehem that finally silenced us. Mater Admirabilis was still solid as stone on the second floor, and when the dust settled we remembered one thing: she wasn't laughing. We stuffed the letters through a hole in the stage floor and when we crept out of the theatre the school was empty.

That year was 1968. I wrote

Dear Mater,
In case you haven't noticed,
the snake has been dead for years.

I wore my regular blues on her feast day and sat on the sidelines, out of sight. I mouthed the words to Ave Maria and Je Suis Tres Fatigue, Mater. I listened to Andrea singing louder than everyone else like she always did, and I watched her walk by at the head of the honor guard, her ribbon fastened with a three-tone Christ pin. I knew why she always got that pin, and it had to do with the way she knew the words and how perfectly she walked, and Mater's head was vacant as wood, I knew it, I'd knocked, and there was nothing any one of us could do about it. I tried to imagine the letters igniting at the crucial moment and the hall filling with smoke. I tried to see the wonderful chaos in my mind but there was just Andrea walking at the head of the line, slowly, more slowly than it seemed possible, her face turned upwards in ecstasy or praise, or both.
The years passed, Every December two hundred hams were hauled off. Every April a new pile of letters was carried up the aisle. I had a closetful of white shoes and I was flunking. It was 1970. I wrote

Dear Mater,
Fuck you.

Things improved a little after that. In 1973 I got the Bank of America award for English. It was stapled onto the back of my diploma along with a calligraphied card that said FORTITUDE. That was the long and the short of it.

But back to Angelo. What happened after Mater was transformed? Though he was undoubtedly lucky, and though a young artist could scarcely wish for more than a miraculous success beheld by God, man and country, the fact remains that one cannot be too casual about this sort of thing. The banquets to which he was invited in the miracle's aftermath must have muddled his head. While it seems obvious that one cannot expect one miracle after another, the light of grace distorted Angelo's vision. Instead of politely excusing himself, he accepted every order for a painting of Mater that was given, about two hundred in all. He agreed to paint Mater by the sea, Mater in the Everglades, Mater by the olive orchard with two snakes underfoot, Mater in yellow, Mater in Spain, and a portrait of Mater with William Tell. It seems he had completely forgotten his lack of talent. "Was I not brought up to believe the tale of leaves and fishes?" he said by way of explanation.
Of course, within six months his career was ruined. His folly was nothing more than expecting his good fortune to last. He prayed for forgiveness and was granted it, but that didn't change the fact that he never worked again. Oh, he tried, he did, but the few kind patrons who, in his later years, did commission him to paint a portrait of a loved one (never again the mother of God) were invariably revolted by the snake he couldn't stop himself from painting underneath their feet. It had become an obsession.

In the end, it appears as though Mater lied about Angelo. Or, did Angelo lie about Mater? If there was a lie involved, what was it? Who told it? I like to think I don't blame one or the other. It's just that Angelo was the one who had to answer for the discrepancy. Even Lourdes could not heal this man.

In fact, the first law of physics is followed by the next. The second law, appropriately, is Entropy. I learned this late in life but its significance was not wasted. I worked and reworked it until it looked right on paper. By the time I got it right a decade had passed.

These years have become distant, dreamlike, and that is how I know I've entered what used to be referred to as the life to come. I never returned to the jewelled city, but in my mind I see it from the top balcony, glinting like a Mediterranean village. I admit I took twelve years of
French and still can't ask for a glass of water, but that
can be overlooked. Moreover I retain an initial sense of
things; the perfect ring of Joyeux Noel, a way of standing
still.

Jean Champion is a physical therapist in Boston.
Andrea Charlton works for the Air Quality Control Board
in Washington, D.C. Theresa writes dialogue in Los Angeles.
I live here now, in a town whose name I periodically forget.
Sometimes at night the hills gleam yellow in the moon.
When this happens I think a transformation has taken place
but this is never so. Rather it is a change of light which
can be measured from the outside.

I walk the dog, rain or shine. I practice phrases
such as Please pass the clam dip, it looks delicious.
Over the holidays I attend social events and have no trouble
deciding which behavior is proper. They eat their hot dogs
and I eat mine, carefully, not stuffing them in my mouth,
which is my first impulse. Women say they like my sweater.
Men ask if I've been to Long Island. I talk about
Voltaire and then pull the cat's tail when everyone leaves
the room it's better this way. The rest of the time I live
on a quiet street in a neighborhood that loses me.

Now, when the slow white walks holding lilies come to
mind I take out my picture of sad Madeline who never
opened her neighbor's mail and thank my stars there are no
thunderstorms in California. At least, it's a rare day
lightning strikes. Once or twice I saw it flash out over the
bay but in that part of the country it never touches the ground.
The Silent Life of Plants

The Chinese have seven words for spring. They have named a wet spring, an early spring, a spring that is especially green. It took centuries of attention to do that. I think of the routes I take daily through this town: to work in the morning rain, then home to sleep with a man who knows the month is June and simply that, who has promised to keep the roof intact.

Sometimes I imagine myself in this way: I glide in and out of the house like a bird, beautiful and offhand, saying I must get to my meeting of the Botanical Society; they won't start without me. Out I'd go with a smart looking case of pressed flowers, proud of the rare Areranium I'd collected in the Andes, certain of its worth.

It would stand in the display case at the Hall of Flowers. Every day I would lecture at the podium and tell how I found it in between large rocks in the mountainous region of Bolivia. I'd show slides on the big screen and talk about the trip back to civilized life: three mules died of thirst and malaria threatened everyone. I was approached at the airport in Antigua by two reporters from Botanical Weekly who asked, "is it true you've found a specimen of Paralias Euphorbia?" to which I replied, "I am not yet ready to disclose my findings."

I think these thoughts on my way to the hothouse where I work five days a week. I plant six thousand seedlings daily: Common loverboy Marigolds, Drummond Phlox, Mixed
Carnations. Sometimes it's vegetables. There is gratification in what I do -- sometimes in the afternoon when the sun shines diagonally over everything I stand between long rows of flowers just staring at a half acre of red begonias until the watchman yells it's time to lock the gates.

It is estimated that every year nine hundred and thirty thousand Americans buy a flat of tomatoes for domestic purposes. In summer the backyards are full of them: Giant Beefsteak, Red Cherry, Jumbo Orange. I do my part.

I have a degree in Liberal Arts, but I keep it quiet. The women I work with don't understand I would want to stay on at the nursery. They assume I graduated at the bottom of my class. I once told them Socrates' definition of the Good Life and Miriam told me three flats of Madame Butterfly Snapdragons I'd planted the week before had died. So much for Socrates.

Miriam is the queen of plants. She can plant with one hand tied behind her back. The girls look to her for advice -- what to do if the baby cries, how to stop the souffle' from falling. Once I asked her how to cook a roast. That was when I first started working at the greenhouse and wanted to fit in. She asked how much it weighed and I was at a loss. The roast was mythical, did not exist. I'd invented it for the purpose of posing the question. "What do you mean, there's no roast?" she demanded. "Well", I said slowly, "I mean if I had a roast how would I cook it?" Then, more sincerely, "I once had a roast and it burned. Then another
time I had a roast and it didn't burn but came out dry as a bone. Never have I had a moist, tender roast." This bit of quick thinking saved me from further embarrassment, but from that moment on, Miriam has despised me.

I told Bud about it and he said her biggest thought is probably that Rock-n-Roll ruined the world. Sometimes at night we go downtown for a movie and a beer. We usually end up at the old art deco theatre on Rose Street where the curtain's painted with a Tahitian beach and two lovers dancing under a crescent moon. The ventilation is bad, but tickets are cheap and we get to see the old stars succeed at glamour. There's nothing like taking up a warm hand in the dark and thinking of another life.

....

It's the second week of June. The weather has been humid and bleak. In the afternoon thick blue clouds pile against the hills. Sometimes you can see them trailing off the farthest peaks and blowing into this valley like one big dust cloud. When it rains. I huddle underneath one of the huge trees that line the streets and feel immuned from the downpour. I don't leave the greenhouse like Miriam, escaping the wild sky in an LTD. I stand beneath a magnolia and wait for the onslaught to pass.

It's hot and the light is strange. I've found that thirty laps in the municipal pool relieves the heavy air. I leave work with my suit and a towel in Bud's old Boy Scout
pack and head straight for the city park where fifty others enjoy the same pastime. I swim mostly with housewives, plus a few bald bachelors who sometimes catch my eye. The shower room is littered with floral sacks and old flat tennis shoes. The women's thighs are like thunderheads and I try to walk with more grace, my towel slung casually over my shoulder like a matador's cape, ready for a smooth mile. But this bearing doesn't last for long; when electrical storms roll over us they clear the pool. We end up standing under the awning listening to lifeguard stories about how a kid from Minneapolis was plucked right out of the water by a bolt of lightning in '63. I stand with my towel pulled tight around my hips, in between thirty women whose husbands are at work. Warm rain obscures the mountains.

The ring of flowers outside the pool office is a neat pink oval. It's the kind of garden I hate, with a design like the enamel floral clusters on casserole dishes. I sometimes imagine myself a critic of landscape architecture.

....

It's Wednesday. Miriam has been talking about her niece and nephew all morning. Wayne just graduated from college and Mirianne is getting married. Wayne had some trouble back in high school when he fell in with the wrong crowd, but a firm hand straightened him out. He's got a job interview in Hamilton coming up, and would you believe he bought himself a new suit? And you should see it. And that Marianne.
You should see her fiance. He's in business with his father. You know, a nice boy.

I go outside to have a smoke and to get some relief from Miriam. There is a new shipment of peonies under the awning and I look at their multicolored blooms, sunlight just catching them, nodding a little in the breeze. I think, My God, how can a person be so boring? I think of myself in forty years.

No one's around. Boras, the boss, left an hour ago. I heard his truck pull away. Clyde, his son, is off yelling at one of the illegal aliens. I hear his unmistakable slow words, like someone talking to an idiot: "You be here eight o'clock. No nine. Savvy? Eight o'clock for all people. This is rule." I hate Clyde.

The aisle where I stand is white with heat. I close my eyes for a minute and everything recedes. Miriam's voice is very far away. Clyde's yelling is part of an old comedy routine, and the only real sound is the delicate moving of peony leaves on the table next to me. On an impulse, I pick up a six pack of peonies and put them under my arm. I take them to the farthest corner of the nursery, a secluded space about ten feet square which is hidden behind an old bleached shed full of volcanic ash. I come here sometimes to eat lunch. The sun drenches half the area while the other half is shaded, and I've often thought it would be an excellent place for growing. I put the peonies down in the shade, pinch off two dead leaves, and sit down beside them.
I think of an article I read about a man in Germany who found a strange plant growing in his greenhouse -- something he'd never seen -- and how he sent samples to all the leading botanists of his day. They were astonished. People visited his greenhouse from all over the world, and a fountain in the town square was named after him. For what? It was because he'd noticed an accident.

A bee lands on my rolled up sleeve. He looks confused. His soft, thick little body twitches. Maybe there are just too many flowers here.

I think of a trip we took three weeks ago. There was Bud and me. In our old Chevrolet, me with a scarf tied around my neck and Bud with his shirt sleeves rolled, we were like a 1950s' couple in a soup ad, except that we weren't smiling. No - we were like Mindy and Todd on daytime t.v. (the ladies talk about them constantly); nobody, not even Dr. Sterringer who's been married forty years, can help them. I imagine Mindy and Todd in our living room, in the front seat of our car, in the motel room where we stayed with a blue ocean scene over the bed.

Bud and I went to Hamilton. It rained the entire weekend and the storefronts were drizzled and dirty. I saw a yellow ceramic bowl painted with geese in a shop window. We went bowling on the last street in town. When we ate breakfast at the downtown cafe, a man and woman stared at us so hard I dropped my toast on the floor and Bud spilled his coffee. We had nothing to say.
I don't know what it was: the wet streets, the empty pinball arcade, the bar full of drunks where we ordered Polynesian drinks and sat embarrassed by our tall glasses with the wooden parrots sticking out of them. Maybe it was the honeymoon couple at the table next to ours at Jack's Steak House -- dressed in their wedding clothes, quietly getting drunk, or the fat couple on the other side who couldn't stop talking about how next time they'd make it big.

Back at the motel Bud put his arms around me and I stared at the t.v. He held my body from behind when we got under the covers, pressed himself next to me, kissed my hair. I stared out the window at the interstate.

Cars were cruising in a lit up loop from one edge of town to the other; it was an endless route. He wanted to make love. There was something sad and unforgettable about these cars gleaming in the mud, about the woman who took our money at the bar and how her eyes followed us all the way to the door. He stroked me in the dark. "I'm tired, Buddy." He let me be.

The next day we fought about everything. I'd left the gas cap on top of a pump in Victor and he called me irresponsible. We argued over the meaning of over-easy at breakfast and I called him an ignoramus. While we were packing the car he shoved something wrapped in newspaper at me. It was the yellow bowl with the geese.

I'm startled by the 10:15 whistle. I have three
thousand miniature strawberries to plant by four o'clock. I push the peonies into the shade and get back to work.

It's Monday. I eye the woman who takes my money at the municipal pool. Fat. Probably gay. Definitely unhappy. I wonder if she has a boyfriend. I wonder if she's ever had a boyfriend. I imagine her in high school, dumpy in square heels bought by a Protestant mother. I can just see her being dropped off at the Soph Hop in her father's Impala wearing a dress that falls below the knees. She probably stood by the emergency exit all night, staring at the blond girls with straight teeth. I'll bet she's watching me right now, though I'm not as blond as I used to be. Even so, my general appearance must have grabbed her: strong, obviously well bred. I catch a glimpse of myself in the window as I pass. My tired, unfriendly face. I squeeze my change hard enough to hurt and swim forty quick laps.

Sometimes while planting I think of finding, by accident, a mutant vegetable that produces a strain of unknown qualities -- say, a double cucumber. As an invention, it would be right up there with the nectarine and the tangelo. I might write books on how to isolate this strange genetic quirk, on the law of averages, or on new
uses for the double cuke. But it doesn't happen. All the
vegetables I see are of normal proportion. My long days
under the glass roof are uneventful.

I have purple eggplant today -- fourteen flats of
seedlings to be transplanted. Their stems are a mysterious
plum color, beautiful in the white light of the greenhouse.
All the while I'm planting I think of the friendly shape of
this vegetable, the monstrous piles of them in the super­
market. I set two six packs aside under the counter.
During my ten o'clock break, when no one's watching, I
carry them to my corner of the nursery and set them beside
the zucchini I took yesterday.

I now have Sweetwilliams, Double Bloom Carnations, and
three kinds of Marigolds. In a cardboard box by the chain-
link fence there are two books on the odds of mutation in
domestic plants. There is also a book by Luther Burbank,
which I pick up. It's warm by the side of the shed and I
sit down in the morning sun to read:

Hybrids are what makes the world go foreward.
They give us our inventors and poets, our dreamers
and leaders of the earth, and in the plant
world they are the fragrant and gracious
flowers, the luscious and nourishing
fruits, the succulent and meaty vegetables.

I look at my small garden, remembering something I'd read
earlier:

It is well known that every breeder should
look anxiously for possible novelties; but
when he has found one, it depends on him and
him alone whether it attains its full beauty.
The sun is bright and I close my eyes, thinking about the discovery of the navel orange: a beautiful orange, a thick skinned orange, an orange that Persia would have been proud to claim. I fall asleep and in my dreams I see three pound tomatoes growing in the far corner of the nursery, sweet peas that climb forty feet and wave in the air like delicate flags in unimagined colors. I am speaking on national t.v. with a table of enormous radishes behind me. A reporter is saying, "Ladies and Gentlemen, the world has never seen anything like it."

I am wakened by the lunch whistle. I get up with a start, and my first thought is of Clyde. Back in the greenhouse my flats of eggplant are untouched. Clyde is waiting at the door with my timesheet in his hand. "Just where the hell have you been?" he asks. I think of the best thing to say. "Sorry, Clyde. I, uh forgot to turn off the oven when I left the house this morning. So I just ran back and took care of it." He waves the timesheet in front of me and tells me he's sick and tired of having his girls run off. Then he asks me if I want to keep my job. "Sure, Clyde", I say. Then, under my breath, "Worm."

....

I told Bud about my private garden. I even read him a few things out of Luther Burbank, but he wasn't impressed.

"Luther says, 'In the potato I had a striking
lesson..." I began. Before he even found out what the lesson was he said, "Come on, don't you think you're taking a big risk with this? What if someone finds out about these, these experiments?" He spit out the word like it was something bitter. "Wait," I said, "listen to this. 'Hybrids make the world go forward.' What do you think of that?" But he wasn't listening. I asked loudly, "What about the spineless cactus, the white blackberry, the Satsuma plum?" He turned the page of the newspaper. "Fine," I said. "Just fine." I walked out of the house.

I didn't mention a certain Marigold I'd been watching for weeks: it was growing strangely, bigger than the rest, with a full head of triple blooms on a thickened stem. I planted it in a larger pot and it's been growing bigger by the day. It's a real prize, a beauty, a bloom for a queen. Every few days I sprinkle the soil with a mixture of fertilizer and volcanic ash, and in a couple of weeks it will be magnificent.

....

Margret and Cindi and Muffy, 3 girls from the nursery, gave a party for Miriam today. They brought pound cake and egg salad sandwiches and a jar of sweet pickles to commemorate her twentieth season with gadwell nursery. They sat out in front of a greenhouse on benches drying in the sun. Boras and Clyde came by to have a piece of cake and comment
the weather. I listened from the greenhouse where I stood trimming Santa Rosa plums.

It's three o'clock. There are tea cakes on a table by the door, baked by Boras' wife. "It's difficult to bake a tea cake," Muffy says. "Mine are always a little flat." Miriam says her family doesn't bake tea cakes, but shortbread, which is similar. I am thinking about a giant pumpkin I saw once in a magazine. "Lucy, what's your favorite cake?" I don't realize they are talking to me for a moment. I'm at a loss. "Pies," I say. "Fruit pies." This seems to satisfy them.

It's been raining on and off all day. Now the sky over the hothouse is dark and wheeling. Wind rocks the glass house where we work, and the insides of the walls are steamed with the heat of thousands of tiny plants.

Muffy is talking about the stove in her new apartment. There are a thousand Azaleas next to her. Miriam is planting giant Pansies and saying she needs to put the ham in by five, that so much depends on it. Muffy says it, too, how Nancy's really very happy with the kids, even though Dave drinks more than he should. Oh, she's happy, she is, with Jeffie and Sue, and she keeps them so clean and cute. I want to tell her that I hate Nancy and Dave and that I wish the worst for them; my only hope is that Jeffie and Sue miraculously find themselves in the middle of the Australian outback someday so they might grow up with something interesting to say.
I want to say that there's more than this endless pushing in the soil. She'll see. I'll discover some impossible life in the remotest region of the world while everyone else looks at the pictures in old issues of National Geographic while waiting for a free dryer.

I storm through the twelve blocks to the municipal pool. I swim furiously, twenty laps, then thirty. By the fortieth lap my anger starts to diminish. I rest at the edge of the deep end and watch the others swim. An overweight elderly woman steps gingerly out of the shower room. Her face is familiar bulging out of the flowered bathing cap, but for a moment I can't place it. Then it clicks: it's Miriam. I duck down so my chin is under water and watch her. She climbs down the ladder cautiously and slowly lowers her old body into the water. This is too much — Miriam at the city pool.

"The origin of the new form is emphatically due to chance." That's a phrase I think of as I pull each seedling from the soil. I look for some change or difference in the tiny plants, but they are identical.

My Marigold is a jewel, an impossibility. In another week I'll send photographs to the Botanical Society. I wonder if they'll want my picture, too.

Bud came by the nursery during lunch. He was handsome in the pale light, and the girls stared at him. He
wanted to see my collection, but I said no; the Marigold will be a surprise.

It's Tuesday noon. From my seat in Vic's Bar I wonder again and again what mistake I made. Maybe I just disappeared too often. Maybe I should have spread my plants out. Maybe someone saw me with a six pack under my arm.

A new shipment of bonsais came in from Seattle this morning. Bonsais are temperamental, hard to please, and I knew we'd spend a long day pruning casualties from the trip. They were lovely. There were sixty or seventy trees, all delicate and small. Before they were unloaded and counted I put one under my arm and took it to my space by the fence. I could hardly move for all the plants. My Geraniums were monstrous, and they'd blossomed into a deep royal red. My Sweetwilliams overflowed their container. My tomatoes hung like globes. I put the bonsai in the shade and remembered what Luther said about plums:

I wanted to get a plum that would ship, a plum that would dry well, what we call a prune, because the French call it that -- a plum that would be beautiful and delicious, a plum that would be large, a plum for canning, a plum with a small pit, or none at all.

I continued the sentence, adding "a succulent plum, a plum for kings, a plum from heaven, a lavender plum." I said these things absently as I searched through my box of
books for the one titled *Plants of Japan*. I opened it to the chapter on bonsais.

If I'd been listening, if I'd been paying attention, I might have seen it coming, but no. As soon as I heard the footsteps coming around the corner I knew it was all over.

"Well, Lucy. You certainly have a nice collection here." I jumped up. Clyde was leaning against the shed behind me. My throat went dry. He took a spiral notepad out of his shirt pocket and licked his forefinger, using it to turn the pages one by one. "Too bad you didn't think about what stealing from the company means. You didn't think about that, did you?" I said nothing. He opened the notepad to a page filled with figures and took a pencil from behind his ear. "How long did you think you could keep it from me? You know, the reason I was made supervisor around here is because I have a finger on the pulse of this company." He touched a blooming peony with the dirty toe of his boot and smiled. "You have fifty or sixty dollars worth of plants here. We could take it out of your paycheck, but who's to say you wouldn't go right ahead and do it again?" It was warm and a fly buzzed overhead. Thunder echoed in the mountains like a sonic boom.

I looked above the chain link fence at the the railroad yard, abandoned and bleached from years of standing empty at the edge of town. My Marigolds were as full
as any I'd seen, and the triple bloom was a real prize. They were too big to sell. I imagined them in Boras' yard, where I knew they'd end up. I imagined his wife in her bathrobe watering them in the morning before making Boras two fried eggs. I could see it all: him silent over the morning paper, her putting perfect toast on the table. Clyde was still talking. I couldn't make him disappear, and I couldn't silence him. "Lucy, are you listening to me? This is the last straw." I looked up at him and said quietly, "Fuck off, Clyde."

Ten minutes later I was carrying a paper bag filled with my boots, gloves, an extra sweater, and my botany books out the front gate of gadwell nursery.

....

I moved into an apartment on Howard Street. It has a gas stove and window boxes. There's room for a couch in the living room, but Bud kept that.

I'd come home drunk and late that day, and Bud was waiting with a couple of burned pork chops. I told him what happened and he just blew up. I tried to explain it; I told him about the size of my marigold, but the whole thing was a big screw up to him and I knew there was no way I could really get it across, ever, and that no matter how long we thought about it, the mistake I made and the mistake he thought I'd made would never be the same. The next day I left.
It's rained for nearly a week, and the sky is oppressive overhead. Each day I swim with warm rain hitting my face — quiet, slow laps from one end of the pool to the other. Miriam swims about three times a week, and if she's recognized me she hasn't said a word. I heard her say to a lifeguard once, "It's my heart, you know."

My mind wanders as I swim. I am mostly disappointed about the bonsai, which I never had a chance to tend. Wonders can be done with bonsai. Then, of course, there was the Marigold. I wonder if Boras' wife will notice. It snowed last night in the mountains and unemployment is eleven percent. What to do next. I think of Bonni and Muffy. Or was it Bunni and Moffy. How many ways to make meatloaf. Should I let the grey appear when it comes or should I wash it away.

I hear commotion at the far end of the pool. I stop swimming midstream and look. Everyone has stopped. The lifeguard flashes into the deep end and dives straight down. One woman is hysterical, screaming, "I saw her at the bottom, I saw her, Oh my GOD —" I make my way to the side of the pool and pull myself out quickly, my heart slamming me from the inside. The lifeguard pulls a large blueish body out of the water. It is Miriam.

I went to the funeral. I don't know why. The road to the cemetery passed along the base of the foothills; to
one side the mountains rose green and wet, and to the other side the valley opened to the vast suburban sprawl that hid the grasses, neatly, as if that had been its main intent. I drove slowly, rain drizzling the windshield.

Forty people were gathered at the base of the hill; the grass was soggy underfoot and a smell like fertilizer steamed up from the ground. I saw Cindi and Margret and nodded to them. Boras and his wife were there, and next to them stood Clyde and his fiance'. Most of the others were Miriam's family.

I could see Miriam's puffed cheeks and square jaw in a woman standing close to the open grave. She wore the years in the same way, had the same crooked stance, the gnarled hands. I looked in amazement: four sisters, all fifty or sixty, stood together on the wet knoll with the great black clouds behind them. Their arms dripped with bouquets, which they held like infants. Wreaths of gladiolas decorated the lawn. I recognized this as a family whose men die first. I knew it by their tight-fitting black dresses, by the way they stood together. I thought of the impossibility of forgetting the black hose and veil quietly resting in their drawers at home. Two sisters started to wail, and it was a sound like water birds. It seemed for a moment as if the lilies themselves were mourning, their snowy heads bent forward, the heavy, limp smell escaping them even as they followed Miriam soundlessly into the ground. Clouds piled thicker against
the hills and thunder rolled nearby like kettle drums.
I knew it would rain soon.

I thought of the women in laundromats, the women in supermarkets, the ugly woman in the beauty chair I once laughed at in passing. And here was this woman who died loved, no matter what she thought of anything else, no matter who laughed when she crossed the street with a shopping bag and a sour look. I was grateful for the rain that started to fall.

Suddenly it became clear that this was exactly their lives -- there at the edge of the wet valley bordered by the interstate. I thought of their slow procession home through wet streets, the pots of stew set to boiling, clothes laid out for the next day's work. A tight ring of women walked away when the ceremony was over, holding each other up. I walked away alone, thinking of Bud in his Sunday best at the airport waiting to meet me last fall, and I knew then it was my mistake, my reduction, that it was my life and not Miriam's that was small and cold. Finally, it was these people who had someone to lead them gently away from the warm mound.

I went to a bar downtown. I drank six beers. When it was dark I parked my car around the corner from the nursery and walked to the back gates. No one was around. I walked around the perimeter until I found a hole in the fence, but it was too narrow for me to fit through. I broke two of the thin green slats that held it together and squeezed in.
It was dark, almost too dark to see, but I found my way to the rear of the nursery and my old hiding place. There were flowers in bloom all over, and they were wet with humidity. Their scents wafted up to me: roses, daphne, the wild jasmine that grows unchecked along the trellises. I thought there might be one or two of my plants left, maybe a Pansy or a Santa Rosa plum. But when I arrived the space itself had been filled with stacks of nursery flats. There wasn't even room enough to squeeze into it.

I was suddenly angry: angry at Clyde who destroyed this space, angry at Luther Burbank for the discovery of the nectarine, at the lifeguard who was too slow, at Bud for proclaiming undying love. There was nothing but ordinary plants in the nursery: flowers to ornament the patter of the world that never learns its own motion or how to see it, petunias to please the swimmers at the municipal pool. I kicked an eight foot stack of flats to the ground with a terrific clatter. From the mess I picked up an old piece of lead pipe, the weight of it cool and heavy in my palm. I wielded it against the shed, breaking all six windows in four blows, then beating the side of the building until wood splintered and my hand throbbed. I threw the pipe against the fence. Then I left, walking hard to the front gate, not caring who should see me in a place I had no right to enter.

I drove around for what seemed like hours. Finally
I ended up here, at the Dairy Queen on South Avenue watching the teenagers drink milkshakes. There are a dozen cars parked against the curb and the radios are on. And then I start thinking it is a hard world and nothing can be done about it -- it's just hard living in your letter sweater having nothing to say. Eating my miserable cone I feel suddenly old, too tired to drive home. I'm sick of knowing these kids are probably very nice people, sick of thinking my life is different. I'm suddenly aware of how I look: a half drunk woman sitting outside the fluorescent light on a dirty bench devouring her third double dip.

I leave the car parked two feet from the curb and walk towards home. The neighborhood is dark and windy. There are magnolias overhead -- and maples and elms and willows. The wind through them is clean and hard. I walk past the clipped lawns, windows of the houses lit up yellow. I think of kids warm in upstairs bedrooms, women in kitchens, men who might love them, college funds, rhodedendrons. And I can't stop thinking of Miriam buried like an onion on a wet hill, the warm grave closed up without a seam.

I walk on, remembering something about Odysseus being abandoned by twelve women, a stupid story -- and I know the Greeks' tales did not begin as knowledge but only as hope that the earth wouldn't open and swallow their laurels and statues and emphitheatres without a burp. And what does it mean to lose a triple bloom and is it anything
to know it could be done? The same cars are devouring the
same lit up loop in a town I'd like to forget, and at this
moment there is nothing more soothing than the high winds
overhead -- everything is moving: the leaves, the silent
grass pushing up, the stars like Norwegian children holding
single flames through the darkest months of winter.