

GULF

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Gulf Coast

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Gulf Coast

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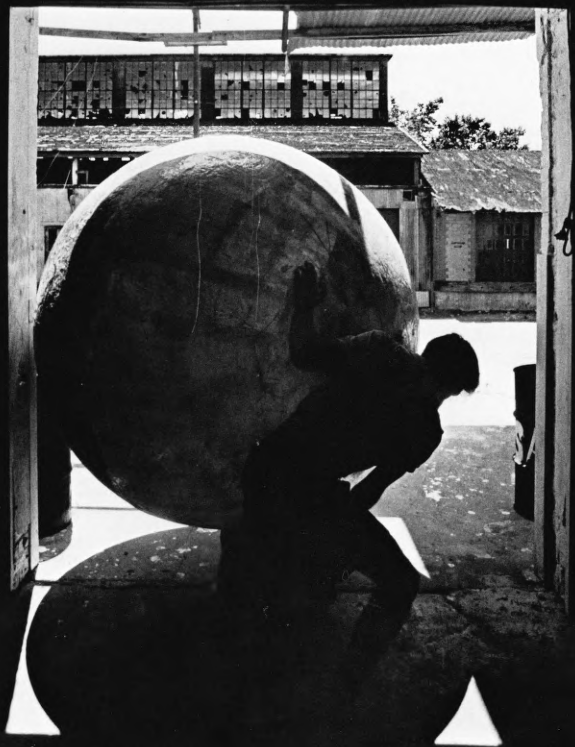
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THE LAME GIRL

PHILLIP LOPATE

Cyrus lived in a small apartment two flights above his rug shop. The building itself was a wide six-story walkup, and he knew many of the other tenants in it, by sight and enough to say hello. The old man directly beneath him had been a shoemaker. Cyrus used to listen to him clearing his throat of phlegm in the middle of the night.

Over a year ago, in late August, Cyrus had closed up his shop and gone away for two weeks. When he returned from vacation, Marge, the woman who ran the pet shop next to his, told him that the shoemaker had died and the apartment had already been rented. The new tenant was a nice young woman who wore a leg brace, according to Marge, and who had some sort of muscular illness whose name she had forgotten.

One night, Cyrus heard slow, deliberate footsteps on the staircase beneath him. He was anxious to meet his new neighbor, whom he already thought of as "the lame girl." This poeticized label conjured up something charmingly nineteenth century: the consumptive courtesan, the lame girl, the sorcerer's daughter unable to leave her garden—fit objects of passion a hundred years ago. Cyrus was old-fashioned; moreover, it took very little to start him fantasizing about meeting the love of his life. But, since the hour was close to midnight, he thought it would frighten the girl too much to come upon her in a stairwell.

In due time he would meet her. A few nights later, unable to wait any longer for Chance to perform his work, he grabbed a bottle of red wine and rapped on her door. It was six-thirty, a more suitable hour.

This way of introducing himself might not have been a very bold thing for another man to do, but to Cyrus it was garishly brazen. The wine in his hand appeared to him almost a professional seducer's implement.

"Who's there?" a frightened-sounding voice cried out.

"It's your upstairs neighbor, Cyrus Irani." He waited.

Eventually a complicated round of police locks snapped and the door sprang open. A gaunt, redheaded woman with a piercing stare behind tortoise-shell glasses managed a gracious smile.

"Welcome to the building, I am Cyrus Irani, the man who runs the rug store. I live right above you."

"I hope I haven't been too noisy for you with my opera records at night."

"Not at all. I love good opera."

"I'm Kathleen, DeVoti. Half-Irish half-Italian."

"Please. I don't want to disturb you, but I thought you might like a glass of red wine."

"Oh, that's lovely. Won't you come in?" she offered, taking the bottle and looking around for a corkscrew. "I'm

afraid I'm still unpacking and this place is a mess."

"On the contrary. It's beautiful, what you've done here." Wooden mini-blinds blocked out all exterior light, making the bare room dark and cool. In its center was a Chinese plum art deco rug, a tasteful one, and above it a ceiling fan rotated slowly. The bookcase contained many oversized volumes on the world's great painters, he saw at a glance. Her interest in culture reassured him. At the same time there was something almost too sealed-off and timeless about the room. He associated its sepulchral air with her illness, though later he learned another reason: she was a night person, and like other night owls he had known through the years, her interior decoration was dominated by the need to create a chamber impervious to the sun.

They chatted for a half-hour about the neighborhood, the building, and the landlord and the wine. Then Cyrus left, feeling rather tired. It was the very particular weariness of one more amorous disappointment, followed by the need to make pleasant conversation.

Just as it took little to inspire Cyrus with romantic hopes, it took equally little to scare them away. In Kathleen's case, the cloud of reality had been a voice too strident and shrill, a face too eaten by physical pain. Nevertheless, he decided, she would make an excellent neighbor and possible friend.

So the next time they were thrown together by the mailboxes, and Kathleen invited him for coffee, Cyrus accepted immediately, although he had been looking forward to an evening by himself reading. This time Kathleen was wearing shorts, and her metal brace over a withered leg was not easy to ignore. As if to acknowledge its presence, she began telling him the story of her illness. She had been twenty-five when she first fell ill, four years and twelve operations ago. "I was working an Office Temps at a big law firm. I bent down to pick up something, and a time-bomb went off."

Cyrus thought at first that she had detonated some sort of letter-bomb, but a moment later he realized she was speaking metaphorically, probably echoing the language of her doctors. "My family has a genetic predisposition to this disease. It kills me to think of my younger sister getting it. She's already starting to have problems with her arm. You can be going along perfectly and then, boom, your leg gives out under you. Or your back snaps out, and your whole life changes. It gets to where you're completely crippled. I'm lucky, I've come back from much worse. I can walk now. But I never know from day to day whether I can depend on my body."

"That must be very hard for you," murmured Cyrus.

"Oh yeah, but there are good things that come from it too. Before it happened, I was drifting around confused about careers and everything else. Thanks to getting sick, I discovered what I really want to do in this life!" she said, her face beaming suddenly. "I started drawing in the hospital, I had lots of spare time. And I felt like I'd finally found myself. I'm not saying Leonardo, but good enough to be a commercial illustrator."

"That's wonderful, Kathleen."

"Unfortunately, since then my arms have snapped out of alignment, so it's been too difficult to draw these last six months . . ."

"How do you support yourself now, if I may ask?"

"I proofread a little. I edit trash. I do odd jobs, piece work. It's better than Welfare. I hated being on Welfare. You can't imagine how degrading they make it. And having to go to the Welfare office—sometimes when I was most debilitated, it would take me two hours just to walk the five blocks from my house to the center. I'd feel all my strength giving out. But I'd scold myself, like: What are you going to do, Kathleen, quit? Fall down in the gutter and stay there? One thing you do discover: you've got to concentrate on what's in front of you. Just make it another fifty feet to that lamppost over there. I also learned I could survive on very little money. Fortunately my little Italian grandmother, she's really tiny, she taught me practical stuff like how to cut up a chicken and make it last for a week. I eat nutritiously and I eat well. Better than most people, and on very little money. I've learned that you don't have to worry so much. Before I got sick I was always in a dither about where I was going to get the money for my bills. You know something? It comes! Somehow the money always arrives just when you need it!"

"You have a wonderful attitude," said Cyrus. He excused himself soon after, feeling dizzy. Inspirational sermons always had that effect on him. Why was she giving him this pep talk? he wondered. Did he strike her as so beaten down that he needed confidence-building? He knew he wore a depressed, defeated air at times—not always, however. Probably she simply had this one story to tell, and felt obliged to squeeze in all the moral lessons, no matter who the listener. It was a form of boasting. Well, she had a right to be proud of herself. What did he know about living with such acute pain? Still, he felt put off by her didactic, nutritionist's manner. She had once again refused to be the lame girl of his imagination.

Early October is apple-gathering season. Citydwellers drive upstate to pick sacks of apples—for a few hours, and for a fee, transforming themselves into migrant workers. Kathleen's sister rounded her up in a borrowed car and drove her to one such orchard on a Saturday morning, with the idea that it would be good exercise. The next day, Kathleen knocked on Cyrus's door.

"You like apples?" she asked.

"Certainly!" he lied. In truth, he was not very fond of them. "Take as many as you want. I've got bags full."

Cyrus invited her into his rooms and picked out a

dozen of the little brown-spotted apples. They were smaller and duller than the Macintoshes in the supermarkets, but for that very reason seemed more authentic. He thanked her again and again, casting about for something to do in return.

Kathleen was talking about a recent terrorist bombing in the Middle East, and how scary the headlines seemed lately. "I don't even like to read the newspaper anymore. I wouldn't buy it at all, if it weren't for the opera reviews."

"It must be difficult for you to walk to the newsstand when the weather is cold or . . ."

"It's not so bad."

"I could drop off the entertainment section of my newspaper on your doorstep after I'm finished with it. That way you won't have to waste your money or go out when it's snowing."

"You don't have to bother, that's too much trouble," she said.

"But I would like to," he said.

So they traded neighborly courtesies, rooted in misunderstandings. Kathleen kept bringing him small dented red apples from the country which sat at the bottom of his refrigerator, and he kept leaving his newspaper on her doorstep in the evening, although he suspected she had already bought her own copy. It would even be more ironic if his intended kindness should rob her of one of her few excuses for getting out of the house every day.

One night Kathleen knocked on his door, asking if he would help her move something. Her favorite picture, by a friend of hers, had developed a crack in the glass frame and she was afraid it would fall down on her head, or be ruined. As he followed her downstairs and into her apartment, he noticed that her voice was close to hysteria; tears filled her eyes when she pointed to the picture hanging on the wall. Cyrus took it down, assuring her that there was very little chance it would burst into a million pieces as she had feared. On examination, he saw the crack was a minor one; something else must be making her so agitated. The portrait was an idealized charcoal sketch of her, looking soft and young with hair down to her shoulders; he guessed it must have been done by an old boyfriend. It was the old Kathleen, before illness had left its shriveling mark. He reglued a wooden splinter in the back, more in the hope of calming her than out of strict necessity, and told her to take it to a picture frame shop if she was still worried; in the meantime she might lean it against the wall on top of her dresser, instead of putting it back on the nail. And all the while he was saying this and feeling a sympathetic ache of understanding, Cyrus had a panicky urge to escape from her apartment at the first opportunity.

One Sunday afternoon, he was entertaining Aberjinnian in his rooms. They were drinking tea when they heard a knock on the door. It was Kathleen. "I have some pumpkins from the country. I thought you might like one."

"Yes, certainly, thank you, that's so nice of you!" he said, the profuseness of his gratitude at the door in direct proportion to his eagerness to get rid of her. He did not want to

expose her to his companion, who made crude come-ons to anyone in skirts. Or perhaps the reason was less chivalrous: he did not want to be seen with a semi-crippled woman in front of Aberjinnian, who always bragged about his conquests.

"You can eat it as a vegetable, or cut out the eyes and mouth and put it in your window as a Jack O' Lantern for Halloween. . . . Oh excuse me, I didn't realize you had company!" said Kathleen, peering over Cyrus's shoulder. "I'm very sorry, I'll come back another time."

"Please, don't be silly, what is there to be sorry about? Please come in and meet my friend." Cyrus pushed her into the flat, where his tea things had been set on the coffee table, and introduced the two of them. "Charmed," said George, kissing her hand. "You didn't tell me you had such a beautiful neighbor, Irani. That's just like you, keeping her to yourself."

"Won't you please join us for tea, Kathleen? There are plenty of cakes left."

"No thanks," she said, looking flustered. "I just came by to bring the pumpkin. I'm in the middle of something."

"It's a pity you won't stay," said Cyrus, suddenly meaning it. "Sometime soon I would like to have you for tea. Next weekend, perhaps?"

"Fine, if I'm around," she said, going out.

Kathleen had no sooner closed the door when Cyrus began explaining in an excited whisper: "She's shy because she is lame—she has something wrong with her leg."

"That I didn't notice. But I did notice that she has the hots for you."

"Don't be ridiculous. I knew you would misunderstand."

"Don't tell me ridiculous. That woman wants to sleep with you. The signs are unmistakable. The pumpkin, for instance, is her symbolic offering. You are to scoop out the vulva—"

"The trouble with you is that you cannot understand any motivation other than sex."

"What other motivation is there?" asked Aberjinnian.

"There are people who just try to make things better, kinder. She brings me fruits from the farm but she gives them also to the woman in the pet store. People live such lonely lives in these apartment houses—I am including myself—that there is no way to demonstrate human connection. We have lost the vocabulary, there is nothing intermediary any more between aloofness and sex. Except for certain good people like her, who go around making things a little less bleak, a little friendlier. . . ."

"Thank you for the sermon. That has nothing to do with the look that girl gave you," Aberjinnian said with a smirk.

"Maybe you're right," admitted Cyrus, sitting down.

"Maybe you're right." And, pleased at the implied compliment, distressed at the prospect that he might someday have to reject her, he thought about the mess he had gotten himself into. It was all because of that damned wine bottle, which had given off the wrong signal.

out a pang of embarrassed guilt. At the same time he stopped leaving the paper for her. That gesture was too much one of pity, he decided. She must have come to a similar conclusion, it seemed, because there were no more knocks on his door.

A few weeks after Aberjinnian's visit, he passed Kathleen in the street. "Hello, how are you?" he called out warmly, but she gave no return acknowledgement. It was hard to tell whether she was in a fog or deliberately snubbing him. Her eyes stared straight ahead; she walked like a madwoman along Amsterdam Avenue.

Cyrus now worried that he had hurt her feelings so deeply it had unhinged her. Supposing she had been standing outside the door when he had told Aberjinnian she was lame? Supposing she had heard their entire conversation! What a nightmare! Even if she had just heard the first part—oh, why hadn't he waited longer, at least until he was sure she was downstairs and in her apartment? Why was it so necessary for him, in any case, to blab to Aberjinnian about her disability?

Cyrus brooded a long while over the incident. If indeed she had heard what he had said, then there was no forgiving himself, he should have his tongue cut out. This blunder ranked with the dozen shameful errors from childhood onward that still had the capacity to keep him awake nights, atoning. If, on the other hand, she had not overheard, then her failure to return his greeting in the street may have merely been a case of self-absorption. In that case, why was he being so hard on himself? Maybe he was exaggerating the whole thing. Did he really have so much to reproach himself for in his conduct with this woman? When he thought over their conversation, the remarks on his end had been polite and well-wishing—empty, perhaps, ultimately, but not malicious. Still, he could not get over the feeling that he had done her some unforgivable wrong.

It was a few days before Christmas when he heard what sounded like Kathleen on the staircase below. He opened his door and called down on impulse, "Hello!"

"Who's there?" she yelled bravely, looking down, at first not realizing that the voice had issued from above.

"It's me, Cyrus, up here!" She stared through the truncated perspective of bannisters. "It's your conscience!" he added facetiously—a strange joke, given the circumstances.

Kathleen broke into a beautiful smile. "Oh, how are you?"

"Wait, I'll come down." Cyrus hurried down the stairs to greet her.

"Did you hear I got a new kitty?" she said.

"Why, no?"

"You must have wondered what all that noise and bumping around was. She's in the active stage. It's incredible what happened. You knew I used to have a cat, didn't you?"

"No, I didn't, but go on," said Cyrus, realizing that she was the kind of person who thought everyone knew everything about her.

"I had a cat for fourteen years, but in the end I had to put her to sleep. She had cancer. Anyway, after that happened, this was about a year ago, I decided I wouldn't get

After that, Cyrus never passed his neighbor's door with-

a cat to replace her right away. And now this is such a coincidence! Marge was walking her dog the other night and she heard some meowing. It was a baby kitten crying. So Marge picked her up and took her to me. The incredible part is that she looks exactly like my old cat! My vet almost had a cardiac when he saw her. I mean, you've never seen two cats that looked more the spitting image of each other. Come in, I'll show you. I'm sure she's around here somewhere."

Kathleen opened the door and the kitten immediately ran to her feet. She picked the animal up in her arms. "Oh, kitty's been lonely? Hadn't anyone to play with?—She jumps on me when I'm asleep. Claws me. I don't mind. Now, you notice how there's a stripe over her face? My other cat had a stripe just like that, although this one's cuts across diagonally, and this cat also has 'boots' which my first cat didn't. But other than that they're identical!"

"That's amazing," Cyrus responded. He was glad that she was talking to him in such a friendly chattering manner. It proved that he had only imagined offending her—unless, unless out of the goodness of her heart, she had willed herself to transcend her anger, the way a saint might. Whichever it was, he never found out. She moved away shortly afterwards to Rochester.

from the novel *The Rug Merchant*

DECEMBER

WILLIAM OLSEN

While sirens shriek through the urban hum of a balmy November, I'd like to take a stab at the life of young Chaucer and place him under a brawny, oaken table, between his merchant-class father's legs. *You have to lie to get at the truth* is a lie. And lying kills, sometimes. Applause for the ashen, rag-sheathed peasant tending the fire, sluggishly turning cold hands over it. Forgive his standing off from royalty. Forget him because the Black Prince, toasting, just dropped his glass of wine, it makes a crimson lake! on the table lined with water cress to resemble the meadows and rills where kings hunt. Troops outside the castle pack in as tight as grains of wood around the patient profiteers dealing looted bread and inside, the pregnant silences of the Prince must be abided by the lesser tipplers. Does their dim, dumb look come from behind the glaze of patience or submission? Snow from under the door makes a little pile. Outside my window, adolescents pile into cars, squeal off. At the end of an otherwise normal day a broken fire hydrant gives up a ribbon of water. At the end of a week water goes on fraying as a cause without beginning. In Jefferson High School the students have made Mobius strips, cutting each one lengthwise, to end up with one strip twice as long as the first one. The moral: geometry tells us we go home richer for having incised our ends down the middle, but history tells us we go away—before anyone knew our seats had emptied.

By night each headlight alters the fraying ribbon. By morning I'm awake, by noon morning was a faint remembering. It's actually *hot* today. Tomorrow I'll find a Mobius strip in a puddle of water, connecting as well as ever, and one more day will tow the line. The young Chaucer will have crawled out from the table to see—by the sooty athletics of the fire jugglers at both ends of the table—two miniature castles of wattled hay translate into fire. Ashes catch on merchant-class lips

like the ragged crows that light on the manned crenellations. Soon it will be the beginning of another December. Tires squealing, an entire city in heat, cars on cinder blocks at the ends of the farthest alleys. By night fog bandages the skyline, and the hot-pink Sears sign floats disconnected from enterprise, and by morning the kids have twisted their mouths into tough smiles and piled back into their high school, slumbering the heroic sleep of boredom and disapproval. Night spliced into day approves us as long as we prove patient, but I'm afraid that patience can outlast the virtue of patience. Outside the castle it's snowing. Inside, Chaucer tries to, but can't imagine the mud-dark road running wildly between the snow-bright fields, toward home. And the child who lives more may not have lived more clearly than his father or his father's uncle, both of whom, long ago, the Were River almost froze.



ANATOLIAN PRINCESS

MELTEM TURKOZ

After the day of the Yellow-hair girl, I didn't go to kindergarten school. I had to become a princess quick. I wanted to wear a long blue gown and a tall pointed hat with a yellow horse-tail streaming out from underneath. My servants would hold up my long-long hair and when we came to the doors of kindergarten school, I'd give them a command in another language and they would lay my hair down on a silk carpet. My teacher with the high hair and paisley eyes would put her hands to her cheeks. Her eyes would widen just like when she followed us to the window to watch Yellow-hairs. My sister Rona said I could start off by learning the commands. For example, *registrail*. She had heard Americans talking in the street and they said things like that. I didn't have to know what it meant. If I said it, people's faces would widen, mothers would drop their kids, soldiers would forget to salute to higher ranks, vendors would get stuck in mid-cry, and all my kindergarten friends would forget to pick their noses. They would scramble to the windows and grease them up with their fingers and mouths. Then some words like *yayo* and *konchika bou* would be good to say. In a movie we had seen there was a woman undressing and she unzipped her skirt and wiggled out of it and let it fall on the ground. Just as she was bent over lifting her feet out of the crumpled up skirt, a door in the ceiling opened and a man's face peeked in. "Ya yo," he said. The woman was so surprised, but she didn't get afraid. "Konchika bou!" she exclaimed, as if he had tickled her armpit, so the man shut the door and the woman hummed a melody.

When we saw Yellow-hair people, even the high-haired teacher forgot who she was. She rushed to the window and patted her nose along with ours. We were all holding hands and turning in a circle singing about the colorful butterflies in spring. My wool tights sagging beneath my skirt, I took the steps, threw back my head, and sang about the butterflies. I kicked up my black shoes with the cherries on them.

Col-lor-ful, col-lor-ful but-ter-flies,
Ap-pear in spring with orange wing,
They are the rose—

Then Sinan's head darted to the window and everyone stopped singing and turning and the circle broke. A Yellow-hair. A girl our age, her hair down to her shoulders, walking with her mother. Behind me Nevin with the horse-tail dug her fingers into my shoulders and pushed me aside. "Let me see," she whined as she reached for the windowsill. The Yellow-hair girl was looking to her mother who held her hand and they talked and smiled. Through the breath-foggy window we watched them walk over to the fountain and when the girl bent over to take a drink from the fish's mouth, "Ahh, look at her," someone said. Then my wool stockings

felt itchy and Sinan cried out, "Begum wet her panties." The girl's mother took her by the hand and they disappeared. My teacher with the high hair forgot to take me to the toilet. She patted her nose along with everyone's and watched the Yellow-hair girl disappear. So I went to the toilet and sat on it and sat on it. When I appeared at kindergarten school with my servants, my teacher would feel horrid. "Is this the girl who excuse me went to the bathroom in her panties all the time?" Sinan's eyes would hurt too much to look at me but he would shield them with a brave fist and walk over.

"May I take you to the ice cream store, Princess Begum?"

"Oh no, not the ice cream store, whoever heard of such a place for a princess." Nevin with the horse-tail would have leaned over the silk carpet where my hair lay about to touch it. I would motion to my servants, "Ya yo, pick up my hair," and then I'd turn to Sinan and say, "I don't go anywhere with snot-eaters."

Sinan flew from one nap mattress to another, drew his sword, swung his cape, flashed his eyes and ignored me. He looked at Nevin with the horse-tail and they exchanged secrets and pieces of snot. When mother and father wanted to tell secrets they spoke in English. They sat at the table, finishing off the beans or eggplant and making different sounds. Rona had listened to them. She told me they said, "Havaryu Nuri," and then father answered, "Mersi, havaryu Perihan."

The day after the Yellow-hair girl Rona and I walked through Maltepe to the fountain to try out the commands and then watch the mothers drop their kids. When we first came out of the apartment building, nobody noticed how foreign we were. Rona told me first to lean on the gate and start speaking as loud as you can.

"Ya yo," I said. I folded my arms, lifted my chin, and frowned. She said to be louder. "Havaryu," I shouted up to Rona. She motioned for us to walk. I bent over first to pull up my socks.

"Konchika bou!" Rona yelled, as if I had just insulted her.

"Hav-ar-yu," I repeated, this time clutching her arm. "Ohh-ahh, havaryu, mersi," she replied, pointing her nose to the sky and laughing. The women with the strollers glanced at us up and down. Then Rona saw a simit vendor. He walked towards us with the sesame-coated rings balance on his head. Rona said he would be a good one because they're from the village and don't know any better. So we stopped him in mid-cry.

"Hav-ar-yu," Rona shouted. He stopped and lowered the rings.

"Bir lira," he said.

"Hav-ar-trail," I said, leaning into his face. Rona took ten lira from her pocket and I picked one out. "Konchika bou," I said as I bit into it.

"Ya yo, ya-trail," Rona agreed.

"Get burdan I'an, delimi ne," he answered. Get out of here, are you crazy? We tried the soldiers next, but all they looked at was either the older girls or other soldiers to salute to. And then we were approaching the windows of kindergarten school.

As we approached school, we made our Konchika bous and Havaryus and Registrails louder: I lifted my shoulders and put my hands on my hips and Rona took long steps over the cracks. By the time we reached the windows, we were walking too fast for them to notice us. I thought maybe we won't have to do this and could just go home the back way talking in any language we pleased. Right as I was drinking out of the fish's mouth at the fountain, I saw Paisley-eyes my teacher staring at me from the window of the classroom I wasn't in. Then I saw Sinan, Nevin and all the other snotty-noses staring at me from behind all the breath-fog. Then my teacher lifted her hand, straightened her finger and shook it back and forth one-two and one-two at me. My teacher shook her finger at me back and forth; no no no. In the window I saw Rona and myself just like in a mirror. I saw our faces framed in black hair.

The next day one-two and one-two my high haired teacher said. We stood in a line facing her. We spread our arms, touched our toes and jumped up twice. Sinan was in front of me, touching his toes. When his head was upside down, "Hey Begum," he said, his face red. I looked up. "Did you know it was my birthday today?"

"No."

"Did you bring me a present?"

"No, I—"

"If you would've come to school yesterday. Our teacher told everyone about my birthday *yesterday*. Everyone knows about it except you." When I would first become a princess I would disappear and then reappear on the steps of kindergarten school with the servants holding my long-long hair. With yayo and registrail I could go and come again. When touching toes time was over, Sinan drew his sword, leapt on his horse, and galloped away. I held my hands together behind my back and stuck out my belly and lifted my chin. Then we went inside and it was cake eating time for Sinan's birthday and then Gul came to take me home. Right as we were leaving the building, Sinan cried out, "Villager girl," to Gul. His mother took him by the hand and they got in a car.

The Snotty-Bug

Once there was a snotty bug called Sinan who wanted to go to the beautiful princess's birthday party in Maltepe.

Sinan was a snotty-bug because everywhere he went he left a trail of shynslimy snot. Because he was so snotty, he couldn't walk fast. So he was going to this birthday party and on the way he became so tired he decided to wait on the side of the road for any other guests going there. Soon he saw some people on donkeys approaching. They were dressed in pink and green and yellow silk. They sang and played their tambourines. Sinan the snotty-bug cried out with all his strength:

O ladies on camels
O sweet-voiced birds,
Can you give me a hand?

"Did you hear that sound?" one of the ladies asked. "Oh yes," the other one replied. "It sounds like voices from the party." The snotty-bug let his slimy head fall to the side and cried shynslimy tears. Then, he heard the sound of pitter-patter footsteps and then swoosh-swoosh. It was Princess Begum with her servants holding up her long yellow hair. The snotty bug cried out as loud as he could as they passed right over him, almost squishing him.

O help me Princess
I am Sinan the snotty bug

The servants, being very alert, heard the snotty-bug and thought it was a ghost. They leaped out of their shoes and let Princess Begum's yellow hair fall onto Sinan the snotty-bug. "What are you doing, konchika bous," Princess Begum exclaimed. "Pick my hair off the ground right away!" When the servants picked her hair up, Sinan the snotty-bug was hopelessly stuck in Begum's hair. "Take me to the fountain," Begum commanded, "And get this snotty creature out of my hair." Sinan pleaded:

O please Princess Begum
Give me a hand
I just want to go to the birthday party
At the end of Maltepe

But Princess Begum could not hear him. She let her yellow hair fall under the stream of water from the fish's mouth and Sinan the snotty bug was washed into the depths of the fountain forever.

I told Gul this story. "What a horrible story," she said. "But this boy called you a villager girl," I said.

"I am a villager girl," she said. Gul had come from her father's village some time back to take care of Rona and me while Mother and Father were at work. She had boobs that stuck out from her striped shirt and made the stripes bend, and she had big white teeth. "I'll tell you a story," she said. She told me about the Boza seller, the one that walks in our neighborhood at night. "He really doesn't scream just 'Boza,'" she said. "If you listen carefully, he's saying, Boo-oo-I'm-gonna-get-you-little-girls-your-walking-doll-and-your-cherry-covered-black-shoes-gonna-cut-you-up-and-bury-you-in-a-box-until-I-

need-you-Zaaaaa!"

"That's not true," I said.

"Yes it is, what do you think he makes Boza out of? Huh, tell me, what do you think?"

"I don't know."

"Out of milk-filled little children, that's what he makes it out of, so you better go to sleep because he can tell if children are awake after it's time for them to go to sleep. And if he doesn't come, the night watchman will, you know . . ." Gul says the night watchman also looks for children. She says he's got wolves tied up in his hat and will untie them if he sees any children with hands sticking out from under the covers. "So don't let any part of you stick out from under the covers," she says.

"Gul, you fool, why should the Boza seller want to snatch us and our doll and our cherry shoes," Rona says. "Begum's shoes are all pee-stinky and you broke my doll anyway! Gul can't say anything to this. The Boza seller would have such a surprise if he snatched us, our stinky shoes and our broken Angelika doll. And Rona and I don't drink milk any more, so if he made Boza out of us he'd have to walk around eight winter nights trying to sell any. I told Gul if the Boza seller was to catch anyone it would be her. Those vendors like the girls from the village. She said there was still the night watchman and his wolves. It made me stick my hands under the covers but still I was thinking of how bad Gul was and how surprising it was that none of the night sellers snatched her. Gul says that her big white teeth are a sign of good luck. They mean that she'll marry a doctor or a tree expert like my father, she says. If I were a night watchman I would snatch Gul, though Gul says that they'd never snatch her because she's too old and her meat bitter. "Now you and your sister Rona, you're just the right size for the Boza seller." Gul says that because she's old, the only person who can possibly snatch her is either a doctor like Mr. Erdogan upstairs or a tree expert like my father. Because of her big white teeth, she says, and because of the bumps on her chest that make the stripes of her shirt bend.

I say she will only find a carpenter or a house-repairer. If she goes around breaking dolls and swimming on the living room floor, that's all she'll get. The time she swam on the living room floor we had to have the whole thing redone. She had told us, "Move the carpets, sit on the couch, and watch me swim." Rona, cousin Sibel and I had sat and watched her. She brought bucket after bucket of water and poured it on the floor. She did this many times and then there was water on the floor ankle-deep and when we leaned over we saw our faces in it. Then Gul undressed, threw herself on the floor and squirmed like a frog. "Ah, ah when your mother and father take us to the seaside, I'll know how to swim," she said. When she saw that her panties were wet, "Oh I'm all wet," she cried and went to her room to change. She came back and swam again and wet her panties and swam again. Even though she mopped up the floor with rags until it was dry, the boards rose up and bent. It looked like the sidewalk.

Gul also broke Angelika, Rona's walking doll. Father had bought the doll for Rona on a business trip to Rome. It was blonde, blue-eyed, and wore black shiny shoes a bit like mine except they had no cherries on them. You turned her on and she walked like a turtle and purred like a cat. When she broke it, Gul was showing Angelika to the neighbors. Rona was at school.

"See you turn her on like this and she walks, oh wait—like this, you turn her on, see." The girl from downstairs gazed up at the doll. "Ohhh, just look at her hair, I hope my father brings me one like that from somewhere." Gul was trying to turn Angelika on still, forcing her legs to make larger steps. Suddenly there was a ripping sound. Angelika's eyes opened and shut as Gul tried to replace the leg that came off. The girl from downstairs said her mother was calling her. When Rona came from school and saw the doll, she pulled me into the bedroom. She had bit her upper lip with her teeth so that it was cherry-red. She scraped some candy out of her mouth with her finger.

"Let's kill her," she said. Gul was sitting on the balcony with cousin Sibel. Sibel had a book in her hand and was making songs of the poems she read. Gul was learning how to make bath-cloths for when she got married. Rona went in the kitchen and snatched the big knife. She told me to keep Gul busy so I went and stroked Gul's hair the way she liked me to because it made her sleepy and happy. Cousin Sibel always knew when we were going to do something. She looked at me, and then looked at the house. "Here's your fate," she said to Gul. Rona's ponytails stuck out from head like upside down knives, and her eyes had grown big. Gul saw her, sprang from her chair, pushed me aside and ran in the house past Rona.

"Quick, get her legs Begum, bite them so she doesn't walk." I caught hold of Gul's shirt right as she was trying to open the door to leave. Rona came and was going to cut her up when the door opened and Father came in. He grabbed the knife. He looked at us, flashing his eyes, and slowly picked up a slipper from the cabinet. Gul was huddled in a corner covering her face with her hands, waiting to die. Rona jumped up and down. "Gul broke my doll, she broke it, I'll kill her." Cousin Sibel went out to the balcony and picked up her book.

"Oh my love when you throw back down the rose and your honey lips turn sour . . ."

My father lifted his arm with the slipper and aimed it at Rona. "We were just playing, Father," Rona said, giggling like a sheep. She stood against the wall, biting her upper lip. My father swung his arm and threw the slipper. Rona ducked and whap, it hit the wall.

"Oh my love do not kill me this way," cousin Sibel sang. "Let's embrace and forget it all."

Sometimes when cousin Sibel was over, she taught Gul and me how to sing poems. "All you have to do is look at the words and make up a song with it," she said. Since I didn't

know how to read, Sibel would say the words first and Gul and I would repeat them and then sing. Together we would sing from the balcony to the passers-by. Sibel said this was the way that Zeki Muren became famous. He was singing on his balcony, just like that, watering the violets for his mother, when a rich man passed by and liked his voice. The rich man invited Zeki to his house to sing. Some other rich people were there and they decided to put him in the movies. But out in Maltepe, there were just soldiers and mothers and vendors and arm-swinging men walking. When the arm-swinging men walked by, Gul and Sibel whistled and said "Shoo" and then hid. Once one of the men came in through the gate into the garden all the way up to the balcony. Gul pinched me from excitement and Sibel pretended she was reading a poetry book. Both of them ignored the man.

"Little girl, what were your sisters saying?"

"I don't know," I answered. My nose was itching and I wanted to pick it but mother said don't do it in front of strangers. Then Sibel began to giggle.

"Hah . . . hah-hah-hah, hah-hah-hah."

"Little girl?"

"Hm?"

"Why is the older one laughing?" I put my face in the crack in my elbow. That way I could scratch my nose. The man was looking around the garden, his hands in his pockets just like in the movies. He picked a yellow dandelion.

"If I give this to you, little girl, will you give it to your sister?"

"She's not my sister."

"Who is she, then?" Gul pinched me on the bottom.

"Nobody."

"Come on, did you find her among the dark-faced gypsies?" He looked at Sibel and started to hum a tune. Sibel looked up from her book and told him to leave.

"You know what I'll do to you?" he said to Sibel.

"What?" I asked. Maybe he'd make her famous like Zeki Muren.

"I'll eat her, that's what," he said, looking into my face like it was good soup. "And I'll eat you too, little girl!"

Sibel put her book down. "Stupid starved villager, why don't you go back to your mother and tell her what you said!"

Gul leaned on the balcony railing and smiled at the man. "And me, you haven't said what you'd do to me yet."

"Shut up Gul," Sibel said. Gul began to giggle.

"Wait til you see what I'll do," the man said. He pushed the bushes aside and held the railing. Sibel pushed him.

"You wait til tomorrow," he said, "I'll be back."

Sibel took up her book. She sang a poem about the Bosphorus fog, getting louder and louder as she picked up a tune.

The fog reminds me, oh love,
How we sat the both of us
Hand in hand after so much
Time apart. The gulls were
Flying and the waves slapped
Along the ferry BOAAAAA.

When Sibel yelled Boat, the man looked like he might faint. He threw the flower down and walked off. "She's crazy, come-right-out-of-the-crazy-house, crazy yes." Sibel said we

should go inside and lock the doors. The man might bring his friends back with him and they'd eat us. I wanted my mother to come home. Sibel and Gul told me to be as quiet as possible. Suddenly there was a knock on the door. "Shh, it's them, under the couch, quick," Gul said and pushed me. They both went into the closet in the living room. The door knocked again and I started to cry. It was getting dark and the dust on the floor flew up with my breath.

"Open up," a man's deep voice commanded. I kept on catching the air like it would run away and Sibel and Gul stuck their heads out and waved their hands back and forth. I didn't want to be cut up into little pieces so I got louder. Gul came out of the closet. The dust flew up as she approached the couch and pulled me out.

"I know what'll make you shut up," she said. She sat me on her lap and lifted her shirt. "Here, suck." She pushed my face into her chest with the two brown buttons. The door banged again.

"Is anyone home?" It tasted like bitter wedding candy and I wanted to pull away, but Gul said,

"Come on, this'll make you stop crying," and pushed me onto her chest. Then I didn't like the bitter taste any more so I jumped on her and bit her head. Then the door opened and there was a man standing there with a torch in his hand. It was the caretaker.

"Hoh!" he said. We slid back against the wall. Cousin Sibel came out of the closet to talk to him. "Turn off the lights tonight," he was saying. "The planes are going to pass."

"Don't worry," Gul said, taking me to the kitchen for some sugar and water so that I wouldn't be afraid any more. "It's just that the coal witch will be out hunting for children tonight and you have to keep quiet and not turn on the lights or speak loud." The coal witch was married to our caretaker. She was all black except for her eyes which shone like two moons. We would often go back there to poke at her. "Coal witch, coal witch, comes from the village and is dirty and black," we'd say to her and she'd chase us until she couldn't run any longer. She didn't like children and once in a while she came out to hunt for them. When that happened, everyone who had children had to close their windows and turn off their lights. Our caretakers would warn us every time this was going to happen because he liked my father.

When Rona, Mother, and Father came home, Sibel told them about the coal witch coming out. Father went and got grandfather's army blanket from out of the cupboard. He nailed it to the window. Then he sent Rona outside to see whether the light showed or not. I watched her scamper out from the window. Her pigtails and skinny legs, her black school uniform still on, she stopped on the sidewalk beyond the gate and looked at the house. A soldier walked, gun in hand, behind her and I knew she was safe from the coal witch if the soldier was there. When she came back inside, we sat down for dinner, the six of us: Mother, Father, Gul, Sibel, Rona and I.

Later my mother put me to my bed and I heard the Boza seller walking. "Bozaaa," he said. I tucked my hands and feet deep under the blankets and the planes passed by, and I went to sleep.

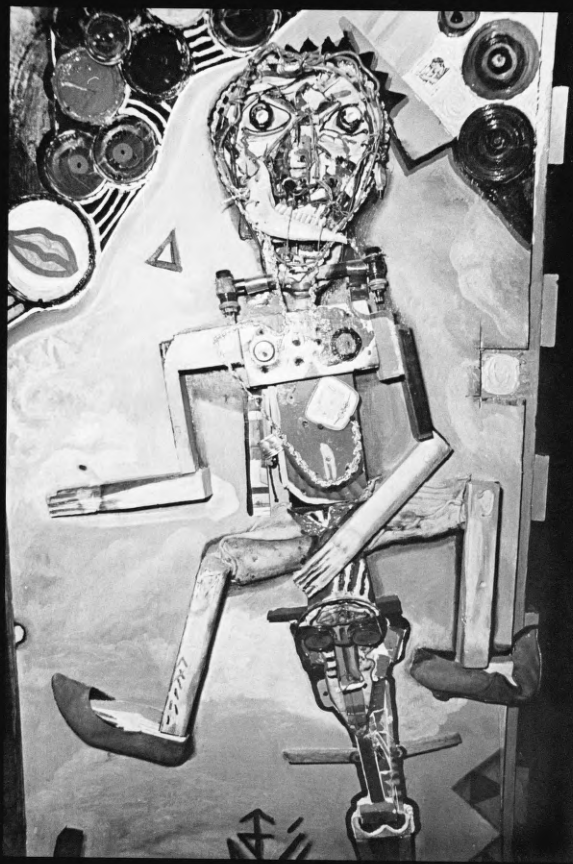
THE ART INSTITUTE

MARTIN SCOTT

Five years ago in Chicago I saw the amphora.
Two damsels in diaphanous frocks
Ran from a man with chin-swept beard, maybe
Heracles, maybe Jason, who, hindered
By his lance, was a hand's breadth behind.
In terror, the girls look over their shoulders,
Stylized calm, as if
Each leaf worked into its place
Drifting down from the willow tree
Releases them into a paradise
Where every passion is checked:
Nothing will come to pass.

You can find this all over the Institute,
In the Oriental Galleries, the stone eye of every Buddha
And tucked into the corner of every scroll painting . . .
And outside, the unlit alleys, pocked
With dumpsters and abandoned cars,
Yellow streetlights burning over empty
Streets, locked department stores protected by
A sleepy guard staring out revolving doors . . .
And the searchlights,
Revolving with the city, white wings,
White moons, defying the highest reach.

Then figures pass me, naked elms walking Rush Street,
And I a bent figure inside a pastoral
That leads, endlessly, into itself and
Variations: willow, girls, willow, girls, willow, girls . . .
And on my right hand, the First National Bank,
Its white marble glowing beside the taxi stand,
Doors and windows sealed.
And on my left hand, the Lakeshore Theater, neon turning
All the way around the corner,
Rosettes of light above the columns
And passageways that lead through the labyrinthine
Aisles, to pastures, willows, susurus in their
Branches, frocks blown like leaves on surf,
Leaning into, as if part of,
Evening dress, the limousine parked sideways
Across two spaces, waiting, windows tinted.



TWO SONGS OF SOLITUDE AND LAMENT

JOE BOLTON

I

There's nothing to celebrate this evening.

I've come home tired
to a mailbox gorged with junk it can't
digest, to a room bereft
of any hope of getting put into order,
to a radio gone numb
with humming the old tunes and passing along
the old gossip: a breakthrough,
a disaster, the economy's rise or fall, a war
going on somewhere.

No one will come by, no one will call,
no ex-friend or -lover
materialize from my wired-out memory.
Boredom is dangerous:
It gets easier with practice. The streetlights,
as if in the celebration
of nothing, erupt the off-shade of cheap champagne,
while in the bedroom
the clock I can never think to wind
ticks down like a bomb.

II

Dozing to the tugging drone of fans
these summer afternoons,
the haunt of memory surrounds and inhabits me
like a siege on some ruined city.
Runners of sunlight manage to twist their way
through a full-leaved maple,
and the shadow-splotched walls of this room are suddenly
the blush of blood
across the skin above your breasts
when you came.

Or it rains, and everything the rain streams down
remembers your hair.
We were in each other's arms then, but now
we are in the arms of the wind.
The proud ancient warriors, in hopeless bondage,
would kill themselves
by biting their tongues in two, so as to bleed to death.
I wake in the dark
and walk out onto the balcony to watch the stars
that won't touch down on the rooftops.



SMALL WOMAN BUYING DRUGS

DENISE REA

You lookin' so fine, sister," he says, easing by in black shorts and an unbuttoned, green-checked shirt. On his head, a snap-brim fedora.

"Thanks . . . you selling anything?" My heart swells with deafening echoes as I try to memorize his peculiar marks, in case of a police report. Sparse goatee, front tooth rimmed with gold, over six feet.

"What you want? Got good reefer."

With both hands filling the pockets of my blazer, I swagger, hoping to demonstrate boredom, like I have done this too many times.

"Do you have any acid?"

"Acid? What, reefer not good enough?"

Laugh, laugh! But I can only spare him a smile.

"I want to get higher."

"Haven't had no acid around here for a long time."

Where you from, sister?"

"The Pacific Northwest."

"Say what?"

"Seattle." Actually, I left that city over two years ago, and now I live in Chicago. Here, on the east coast, promised myself I'd lie.

"Why you here?"

"Just visitin'." Slow down, act casual, meek. I move closer and touch his arm—lightly. "Hey, if I'm causing trouble. I mean, I'd understand if you'd rather not."

"You do drugs?" His eyes touring my shell.

"I get high . . . occasionally."

Have to be accurate even in situations like this? High twice over the past month, before . . . must have been at that party freshman year in college, five years ago. Wore band-aids on my nipples so nothing would show through my white dress. Later that night, in the dorm room, remember my boyfriend's jerk as he began to touch me. Laughed so hard we got hungry and ate a box of Wheat Thins. Earlier, in high school, drugs were sold in the second hall girls' bathroom. There, had picked my way through whispered wonderment to the last doorless stall, where a new friend, who felt comfortable here, and I rolled one dollar bills to snort powder. Recently discovered it was probably heroin. My usual crowd of school friends did not know of this drug experimentation since all the trips were taken during school hours, not at parties. But even then my two acid trips were controlled. In psychology class composure was maintained as I sat trying not to notice people were exchanging faces. Answered correctly when the teacher called on me. Now hoping to miscalculate, perhaps overwhelm.

"Hey, I'm sorry for all of this. See, I just want to leave for a while."

"Got coke at my place, sister, and headin' there now."

Might die in his home. My laugh finally emerges.

"No, I'd rather not. Just wanted to buy a trip."

"It's cool, sister. Got to check it out. How do I know, you could be anyone."

I am. When asked my age, I'd say ten, just to shock and a chance to breathe in the pause, that timeless interlude existing before people are sure I'm kidding. At that precise moment, all codes for proper conduct are worthless. No one knowing what to do or say—any costume can be slipped on. (A year ago I did not think like this.)

"I do not mean to be a problem," I say to the man leaning close, as if he believes I have something to tell him. I had gulped Glenlivet before coming here, hiding the bottle of scotch back at Sally's and leaving Mozart's Symphony No. 40 to soothe the space I so rudely disrupted. Sally, my old roommate and closest friend from college, would not understand this part I'm portraying. She had kindly laid out a map of this city, explaining which areas were meant for wandering. Told her I knew where to go. Then I hurried through the pretty red brick sidewalks, birch trees, shiny decorative grates on windows, and brass doorknobs of the newly renovated neighborhood where Sally had bought a condominium last year.

The city's camouflage efforts faded as I neared the street where I'm now standing. Here mangled row houses seem to spit infected bricks, rotten yellowed plastic, iron, spoiled boxes, mutilated kitchen utensils. A garden of sores. I had driven through areas like this, but never absorbed them. Forever, I will remember the man I saw lurching down the sidewalk, his limbs twitching out of control. Near the alley his hands jerked down to unzip his fly. Finally, with arms flailing as if struggling against drowning, he pissed in the air, on a parked car, hit someone's stooping, and a crushed, flowered, overstuffed chair lying in the street.

"It's cool, sister, just got to check out the dudes in the park." He then yells to a kid in the street.

"Yeah, Toki, what's happenin'?" the kid answers.

"Bobby keep you company," Toki says to me.

They want to know my name now. What shall it be? I hadn't given my character a proper name.

"Laura, it's Laura." Another thin lie. Laura is the name my parents christened me. A few years ago I went to the courthouse and legally changed it to Lauren.

As the three of us stroll over to the park, the sun goes out. Six p.m. Friday afternoon and I balance my slim frame against the park bench precariously bolted down outside the entrance. Whites rarely go beyond, I'm told.

"See that fat man in red?" Bobby asks, sort of pointing. His face fresh with a childlike smile. We watch Toki stalk towards a group of men.

"Every time I go into the park I got to fight the dude," Bobby continues.

"Why?" I ask, flinching, remembering I told myself not to ask questions. But Bobby is skinny and can't be over fourteen.

"Cause I have to," he says, unconcerned. "Why you want acid?"

"I need hallucinations."

"Why, pretty sister?" Toki asks, as he returns and perches next to me on the back of the bench.

I revolve. He is raking me. His shell and bone choker pulsing as he hunts my body.

"You a hooker?"

Welcome to reality, Lauren. This man would not ask the question unless he might believe the answer.

"No." (Can I a gush, spewing no, no no? Didn't say that word enough. Myriad tones of yes live in my mouth. Yes, I can do that. Oh yes, I'd love to. Yes, of course, I'm happy: Yes stabs inward.)

"Laura?" Toki asks.

Who is Laura? I wonder, then remember it is my "pretend" name. I decide to tell Toki and Bobby I have to be home by seven. "My friend will be returning then," I say.

"Old man?" Toki asks.

"Yes."

"Toki, the signal," Bobby says.

"Be cool, sister," Toki says, again easing into the park.

"Toki's good, Laura. He makes yeah laugh."

But I am serious. Although I should pay attention to the fact I'm here and out of place, I let thoughts drift back to the morning of my first day at the "top" design firm in Chicago, perhaps nation. Standing in front of the dresser, I deliberately savored every move as I put on deodorant, Oscar de la Renta perfume, bra, slip, and nylons; each carefully laid out the night before. My crisp, pressed french chocolate-colored dress and wide pale pink belt with coordinating pumps completed the image—poised, polished, successful. Congratulations, Lauren, I whispered, expectantly, only two weeks after college graduation. Since I had over-loaded credit hours, I finished school in three years. My career foundation continued with two prestigious summer internships, design awards, and a lovely surprise going away party. Now in my full length mirror I noticed too many tiny gathers created by the belt near my backbone. I rearranged each tuck evenly around my waist. Then as I smoothed out my pale pink nylons, I saw a snag. Later an embarrassing run might develop, so I changed into an identical pair of nylons and, just in case, placed another pair in my briefcase.

"No luck," Toki says.

As we scan each other, he settles and begins spreading grass in a thin line to form a joint. People are strolling by, but it doesn't seem to bother him. How can he be so nonchalant? It took an hour of debating before deciding what to wear for this outing. Camel-colored wool blazer, denim jeans, an olive green shirt, and Perry Ellis flats. Dark hair curves under two inches below my shoulders. No jewelry.

"Here, Laura."

"What?"

"On me, sister."

Smoke enters as I place my fingers near the burning to singe skin. The pain is quick and subtle like paper cuts, and I remember how natural hype has become. Even with friends, casually omitted information. No lying, simply emphasizing certain facts. This is wrong. They think I am confident. I want them to know I'm worthy.

"Well, I'm sorry about all of this," I say, standing.

"Where you going?" Toki asks. "Come and get high. My place is just a few blocks from here."

"No, I really can't. You're being kind." (Make him think he is being nice.) "And I'm a fool."

"Wait, sister."

(Just sell me something. Damn you.)

"Got to buy me some brandy," Toki says. "Go with Bobby to my place. We'll work it out."

I look back, as Bobby and I walk away, forever in the habit of checking spots I've inhabited. No, nothing is left behind. Two kids on bikes playfully zigzag, pretend to run us over. Laughing, Bobby tells them to get lost, and they ride the other way.

We pass the area of pitted street, parking lot and trash heap where Toki and I first met. (Wake up, Lauren! What are you doing? Who cares? You do. No, I want it to cease. But it could finish forever.) My personal history of experiences and teachings tell me I should now leave and return to Sallys. But I am used to finishing what is begun. Besides, this feeling of being out of control is hypnotizing. I like it.

Bobby tells me we are now on Toki's block. It is a cul-de-sac on account of the subway. Some of the row houses are dismantled, doorless, soiled, but not barren. I'm hearing infants. The house we're now passing has a bright red flower box around each bay window. A new Jaguar is parked across the street. Would a few doors open to settings similar to Sallys—original rugs, original works of art, and sleek, imported kitchen electrics?

"Toki's place on top," Bobby says, plopping down on the stoop. A lighted joint hangs from his lips.

"It's been a bad week," I say, sitting down next to him.

"Yeah, I've had one crummy year," sparkling Bobby answers.

Inhale, where are the hallucinations: I crave illusions, not steady scenery. (Sweating—should I take off my blazer? No, it will look like I want to stay.) I am ashamed. What had gone wrong for Bobby? I want to hug him. But I am passive, a dead weight. For once, I will not arrange an outcome. It seems I've always known where I desire to be and made sure I arrived at the proper moment. I am tired of order.

"Your old man beat you?" Toki asks, unscrewing the cap on the bottle of brandy he has returned with.

"Yes," I reply, becoming used to my character. This is a concrete reason, something everyone can grasp and say yes, we can see why she is shaking. I have never endured any major crises, only small glitches, blunders that would seem insignificant to anyone else.

I yearn for deviant behavior. Smacking a tree or guard-rail with my Honda Accord has been an ever present

possibility, but the hassle to get the car repaired allows me to dismiss that urge. Lately, I have quivered through the daily morning creative meetings at work, pondering what would occur if I got up and kissed someone, or did one of two extreme acts: grabbed the person next to me in the crotch or relieved myself in front of the boss' desk.

"Want a place to stay?" Toki asks.

"Thanks, but I don't think so."

"Shoot, sister, you can smile."

The brandy Toki hands me more than biting, gnaws. I do not want to think anymore.

"Sister, come on upstairs."

"Can't you just bring the drugs out here?"

"Come on, it's a public street. You afraid Toki's got tricks up his sleeves?"

Hell yes, my plans disintegrating. How do I move?

Bobby's disappeared. No, there he is across the street, walking away. I want to call out his name, but it takes too long.

The stairs crackle as I saunter up; Toki follows. Chips of maize-colored paint speckle the floor. There are two large holes in the left wall on the third floor landing. When we reach the fourth and top floor, I am hit by color. A glaring blue, red, black and orange graffiti design encases the wall in front of me. I am caught, sucked into the power of movement. Confident shapes, yet I cannot decipher actual figures. A blue swirl I touch seems the antonym of art. A spontaneous release, full of purpose. I have no desire to create it, just want to climb into this swirl and dance. My boss at the design firm complimented me on my ability to anticipate a need and satisfy it. But every action was pre-recorded. I knew how to receive a promotion. My career consisted of wrapping products to please the eye—selecting those enticing shapes, colors, and textures that subtly scream "buy me."

"Wish I could be in this," I say, remembering I am somewhere, with someone.

"Dig Toki's work?"

"You created this?"

"Yeah."

"Have you done others?"

"I got some more."

"Do you sell them?"

"Toki works for pleasure, sister. City beautification, you know."

He brushes against my back, physically directing me to a door. Then, leans over me, unlocks the door and side kicks it open.

"After you, sister."

I hesitate, my play-acting over. (Will I die here?) This scene has not been rehearsed in my head.

"Have a seat."

There are two bean bag chairs near the bay window. (If I needed to, could I possibly jump out?) Descending into the red one, I catch a needed breeze, the room stale. Only a tiny brown oval throw-rug, like the grey one in my bathroom, covers the floor, the rest unpolished hardwood. An expensive component stereo system masks the wall next to me; records are strewn everywhere. (Make it to the door?) Above

me a brass sculpture of a city skyline. The bare bulb, off. (How many locks does he have?) Toki struts over to the rhythm of creaking boards and slides into the purple bean bag chair.

I take out my cash, ten dollars, and present it to him. When I did drugs, a hit of acid went for three dollars.

"Be cool, sister. Put the ten away."

(This is too real. I need delusions.)

"Why am I up here then?"

"We gonna communicate."

"What? This is absurd."

"Man, no way you into drugs."

"So what?"

"Yeah, you gonna be honest with Toki."

"Why in hell do you care?"

"Toki has dreams, sister, you know. He be good as one of those doctor dudes, a psychiatrist, you know. People like me."

No, this is not happening. (He is grinning at me.) I attempt to buy drugs and end up in a bean bag chair next to a dealer who wants to communicate with me.

"Talk to me," Toki says, as he glides to the stereo and begins taking a record out of its jacket.

Over the past few months, tried to talk with Sally, to discover if she thought I was up to par. ("Oh, Lauren, get on that plane and come see me. A vacation will pep you up. There's this painting I'm dying to get your opinion on. I'll buy it if you approve. Works a drain, too. I could use a few laughs. We're going to have a ball.")

After hanging up from that conversation with Sally, I dropped into a steaming bathtub. Slithering down, as if I were sneaking under my favorite comforter, the one my grandmother made for me, I tried to keep still, only my head above water and Chanel No. 5 bubbles. Although I had always been able to relax in that position, I gave up and began creating bikinis, beards, and earrings with the bubbles. I tried to concentrate on which nail color to wear and when I was going to buy the new Joan Armatrading release. But even as I started kicking (later, I found water in my clothes hamper on the opposite wall of my pink and grey bathroom) I could not beat the fact—I had warped. Unable to conform back into myself. And those alarming thoughts surfaced again, murmuring: You're not enjoying work, exhausted, you want to fail, deserve punishment, you're unsatisfied. I screeched no, flinging water against the bathroom tiles. I would clog those cracks. The energy. Would not destroy what I had worked to achieve. Then the phone, on the floor next to the tub, and Jon wanted to know when I would be ready for the party. Told him it would be wonderful to stay quiet tonight, get some use out of my fireplace. (The party? You want to go? No, no it's fine. I mean, well... what am I saying! I always love parties, right? I know, you can count on me.)

"You be crazy, sister?" Toki asks.

"Maybe."

Leaning back in the bean bag, he spreads, displaying comfort. His stretched out legs almost touch me, as he licks a

joint closed.

"Crazy for Toki?"

I should leave—now. Thrashing to stand, I cannot lift myself out of this stupid chair.

"Relax, sister. If I gonna hit on you, it'd be done."

Before rationalizing the act, I reach out and cup his fingers in my hand.

"My brother's old lady had a kid this morning. Ten pounds and he got Toki's name."

I squeeze and his fingers bake my hand. Then remembering this might be misconstrued, let go.

"We be friends," he says.

"Thanks."

"You got babies?"

"No." Cannot remember anyone laboring this patiently to understand. Wish I could share with him what is amiss. But how to explain this incessant desire to be caught, to be found ridiculous?

I'm disgusted with trivial mistakes, like the one I made at work last month. Yes, I remember telling my boss at the design firm, the needed changes in my proposal would be ready for him to approve in the morning. (I often stayed late, volunteering to complete an extra drawing. Where I would be next depended on minute gestures, and I wanted to advance quickly.) After everyone else left that night, I turned off all except one row of overhead lights. My cubicle became a warm womb. Each tool having its own niche. All pencils sharpened, ready for use. Each morning, before I began working, I delighted in the exactness of cleaning all surfaces.

First the drafting table, then tools, shelf, clock, and stool. On the shelf, besides alphabetized books, journals and magazines, there were two brass-framed photos—one of Jon, the other of my parents. Also hung three of my own works on the walls: photographs of Dusk, my seal-tipped Siamese cat, a four-story house on fire, and Suzzalo library on the University of Washington campus during sunrise.

Nurtured by precision, I bent over the table that night determining the proper amount of kerning between letters m and i in the word milk. The dairy company had asked for three small alterations in the design proposal which provided their complete line of products with a compelling packaging in mauve and plum-iris. I could create a style and sell it, an ability much appreciated by my superiors. Artist of measured shapes, I coined it, methodical creativity. The after-hours silence of my cave was nourishment. There, I bloomed. Getting up to stretch, I tiptoed down the hall. Noise would be an intruder. As I casually glanced into a side office, the window beckoned—snow falling. Completely oblivious of me, but I could not escape. Frozen crystals plummeting and nothing could deter them. The chair I sank into became cozier, each snowflake soaking me out into that rushing stillness.

The morning janitor woke me at six a.m. I was scheduled to meet with my boss at eight a.m., and the dairy work was as I had left it, undone. ("You show great promise, Lauren," my boss firmly explained. "Do not let me down again.") I finished the proposal later in the day, and the dairy

company's exuberant approval appeased my boss. But my error would not be forgotten.

"I want to get higher."

"Sister, Toki's taken all the drugs there is. No lady can't ever get high enough."

"So, you're not going to get me high?"

"We sharin' reefer," Toki answers. "Be cool, when the brothers come, we party."

It is almost seven p.m. (Sally is home by now. I had assured her I'd be there waiting; our dinner reservations were for eight p.m.) The faint, soft light from the bay window bestows a pearly haze on Toki's room. In the far corner, Toki's mattress could be sand, the crumpled navy blue sheet—waves.

"Had a nightmare the other night." This can be shared. "I was piloting a Lear jet with no idea where I was headed. After landing near a city, I could not think of anything to do. Then an elevator opened and I stepped out on the 48th floor of some high-rise. A woman, who looked like me, began talking, and I asked if she would come out and play. Her mouth expanded to scream, so I took out my Chamois and erased her."

"Toki keep you safe, not let anyone come over on you."

Why had I stopped myself from telling him what actually scared me? (Even now, in order to extend the correct impression, I'm judging words.) During the dream I must have fallen off the sofa because I knew I was on the floor screaming. I could hear piercing cries. My entire body in spasm, resting, then violently contracting. Vomiting sound. I kept wondering why Sally didn't rush in and save me. In the morning she said she hadn't heard anything peculiar during the night.

"I want out of this. You realize I cannot even tell some-one I'm sad."

"Shoot, sister, Toki thinks you crazy."

"I . . . I . . ." laughing uncontrollably.

"See, sister, Toki make you happy?"

He pulls me up, out of the red bean bag chair. We stand for an odd pause, then swirl close and easy. As I bend over to remove a pebble from my shoe, the room is filled. Only about five people have entered, but the dirt and dust from the floor seem to be swirling.

"Hey, pretty sister," Toki says.

I see him huddled with three others around his kitchen table—a cardboard box on its side with a piece of wood. Coke lines are drawn around a bag of pills, some grass, a syringe, foil, matches. Toki winks. I leave.

SUBMARINES

JEFFREY GREENE

Over Little Narragansett Bay
an osprey catches a blue fish,
and together they form one animal
airborne from two worlds.
Since childhood, I heard
that the dead operate a U-boat
somewhere between here
and Orient Point, out where
the osprey could see them
moving in place in the current
not too deep. By now they must hate
their disabled boat,
lost from the terrifying pack,
the bow and stern loaded
with torpedoes, the volatile fish
among rusted tubes and deadly cradles.
Not every devil crosses time,
but I know something black,
swift, and lonely lives in each
childhood place. Not far
at the Electric Boat Company,
they build submarines, and in the '50s
my mother with a small group
of nuclear weapons protestors
would not leave the deck of one.
I don't know how roughly
they dragged her and the others
into custody but sometimes we cling
to what we hate most.
Now she complains about aging,
and from the Gold Star Bridge
you can see in dry dock
a huge hull taking an unearthly form
as if to be commissioned
uncontested into the air.

ISLANDERS AFTER THE SURGE WAVE

JEFFREY GREENE

The Thimble Islands, 1938

If we could raise the flag now
we would, stars down.
We would raise father's white shirt,
arms blowing uncuffed.

And the watchful captain would know
these signals and make way for us
in his launch The Volgasunga
forging rough water.

Now our heads are held under
the tide, under the green
crowned archipelago in late summer
where pulsing men-of-war

in their own albumen
come on the currents.
The sky is a thin blue
like an egg,

the calm of the lagoon
that forms over us
is a design impossible
to break back into.

We never prepared for this—
the sluggish water
of Long Island Sound surging
with a storm wind

to take each thing away
from us and cast it up—
Victrola, drawer, and old dress
turned inside out.

INVENTING DIFFICULTY

JESSICA GREENBAUM

"All music is what awakens from you
when you are reminded of the instruments."
—Walt Whitman, "A Song for Occupations"

"(Contemporary) American poetry lacks ideas."
—John Haines, "The Hole in the Bucket"

You wouldn't say genius invented this world alone,
overthrowing difficulty to make our days waterwheels,
bucket turning bucket of light into evening,
and that underwater half rising to its tiara, Queen
Noon at the coronation. Perhaps a songwriter's

responsible for wind's attachment to leaves,
for the inseparable lyrics to earthly beauty we've memorized
before birth and come here with, already on our lips;
the way hearing "Prufrock" makes a slow groove on the brain,
then plays *you*, hearing it again. Poets

make reunions, but what do we invent? "American poetry
lacks ideas." I turn this thought over while testing
almond croissant around my city Usually deluxe and banal
simultaneously, (a town my contemporaries *could* write into being)
today her housecoat familiarity

is undone by spring light, which loves her. If the world
came from stellar intercourse, two stars bathing together
and spinning us off, that's why we're spun off
in the morning, unmooring and drifting away, casting underwater
for the dream's biggest fish. Out in the glossy day,

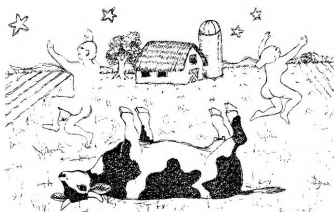
sometimes the three dimensions detach, a circus family
jumping from each other's shoulders, and what's left are life-
echoing surfaces, glorified like the lake by a prostrate sun,
whose back you ride, casting beneath the lid of imagination
for why we're here. It's simple,

inventing difficulty. With any five lines on the white page
of morning, I can fashion a skeleton of the world: a woman
fishing. The sap of tedium and miracles keeps her from becoming
a let-go balloon, keeps her inventing both path
and obstacles toward a reunion with happiness.



SHORTIE STORIES FOR BUSY PEOPLE

GAIL DONAHUE



Cow-Tipping

We first heard of cow-tipping not in Texas where we love and where you would expect dolls to do such things, but in Darien, Connecticut. We were in Darien studying the infidelity customs of Connecticut males and females. Darien has the highest of ex-wives who got the house and who take in single boarders from Manhattan.

Everyone—ex-wives, single boarders, and rows of husbands in briefcases—takes the roommate train back out to Darien in the evening, hiho, hiho. The first time, after work, Stephanie gets all dressed up, drop-earrings, arm in a clean sling, her big boys where you going, Mom, she says, I'm going out to find you boys a new daddy. The boys' eyes say yes, but the Infidelity Dolls—Stephanie, Joanie, and Jackie—don't go to the commuter bar as you might expect. Since cows sleep standing up, they go find a cow in a sleeping pasture and they go up and tip the cow. And that's cow-tipping, how they do, when it's dark in Darien.

THE END

Brouhaha

First a busload of lobbyists forced their busdriver to stop at an all-night doughnut shop, bought up all the doughnuts, and pelted each other until the supply was exhausted. Several lobbyists died.

"Lovely," the waitress said, cleaning up and counting money.

Chickens laid wrinkled eggs. Crushing down on prostitution, a sheriff raided a sneak bar and confiscated two empty beds and one empty whiskey bottle. The pimps got away on Mopeds.

Corn prizes were awarded in Tolono for most perfect ear, largest ear, and most unusual ear. Police concluded the perfect criminal had a *modus operandi* like this: "to act as if he belongs where he doesn't." Someone ate his watch so a mugger wouldn't get it, and he went on ticking as if nothing had happened. Someone else wouldn't let firefighters rescue him until he got a message from angels in his toes. When the radio played his song, a gunman gave up his hostages. After her husband died, a woman bought \$8,000 worth of song-birds and boyfriends, but they all died too. Then an air controller had a neon miss.

THE END

A Boy's Best Friend is his Mother

Why did Thor poke his mother's orchid full of pin-holes before he gave it to her?

"She wore it anyway," he said. "She was always so nice to me."

"Where did you get this orchid?" I asked. We were trying to figure things out because every time something terrible happened all Thor could say was "I don't know why I poked the pin-holes in my mother's orchid."

"I won it for being Best Boy on my newspaper route," he said. "I was ten and I had a bicycle. I also had a bicycle business renting out other kids' bicycles."

"Best Boy, oh brother," I said. There was glass all over the place. The clothes rack was a mess of tangled clothes, twisted coathangers, and bent metal tubing. The bed was on its side.

"We are Domestic Violence itself," I said.

"I don't know why I poked the pin-holes in my mother's orchid," he said.

THE END

Aunt Mabel's Piano

Aunt Mabel sits at her piano.

"I am drinking macaroons," she says, and puts the tea-cup down beside her on the piano bench. But it's almond tea and one of her endearing confusions.

She looks deeply into her piano looking deeply into her. One feels she has been given it. She is so different from using themselves as weapons. From eight-thirty to whole notes, she takes delight in what time is. Dark requests, kissing appreciation, soft exclamations of surprise.

"It bothers me to hear people refer to You as if You were someone other than ourselves," she begins. The piano is her slow slow lover.

To play, she stays indoors from diocesan disease, a broken ankle from tripping out of church.

"That's what comes of too much church," Mega-Mabel says, but Mega-Mabel has a broken ankle in her heart.

Aunt Mabel picks up her cup of abandoned tea, to lift the seat of the piano bench, to take out some music.

"The unconscious is not located in the head," she says, "it is not located anywhere, certainly not in a piano bench."

Aunt Mabel is not confused about that.

THE END

You's TownHome

When her couldn't make ends meet on his Sociological Insecurity Check, You decided to live in a corrugated cardboard TownHome. He was determined not to bother his children or other family members.

"They like You now," You said, "and You want it to stay that way."

After he gave up the apartment, You spent the first night at the Salvation.

"Too much commotion," You said. "You have trouble sleeping in those places, anyway."

So You built a cardboard TownHome, three feet high, three feet wide, five feet deep, on a vacant. And furnished it with a roll of toilet paper and a live blue electric blanket. His kitchen was a paper bag of sardines, a loaf of bread, and a grapefruit. You ate the sardines four times a day. Until a lady walked by and called the flowers to please put You in the jail.

And the wonderful thing about it, happened, now You has an outlet for his electric.

THE END

The Simple Boy

Once upon a night, I was sent back through successive transformations of the thinking self with instructions to get off the train of reverse thinking at whatever time I felt most interested. The closer to the past, the more cloudy the body cohered. However, I did not get off until I was a dull-witted school-boy, sent into the French countryside to work for a clean man and wife.

By the time I got nearby, the French school-boy was so dull-witted (simple) he did not know for himself when to get off the train, and was inclined to think each town was happily his. He ran from his seat and proposed to get off. By this time, intellection was so separate from the body that I was something like a guardian. I put the question mentally to a market-woman: Is this his stop? She nodded yes.

We got off. He plodded, his tousled blond head practically empty, and I hovering outside his view keeping him in mine.

This countryside was so primitive the yards were measured in chickens. We traveled four yards before we met the plump clean woman who was to be our mistress. In her long white apron, she was retracing our steps from the other direction, coming to meet him. She clucked in wonder, how safe would it be to send such a simple boy to market?

THE END

ENTIRE DAYS

PAMELA STEWART

The attic fan pretends to be a train
just gathering itself out of the station.
There's an attending squeak like fast crickets,
or wheels. Again, a cough from downstairs.
A short one. On a day like this

I must catch my breath. The yellow room
where I sit is clouding over, but not
like the platform where that train pulls out
with its great fumes and tidy little men
brushing its sides. No, that train

is heading directly west into a wide
slanted light beside the sea. On the cliff,
a red brick hotel with white-eyed windows.
They stare over hydrangeas into the glazed water
where small boats rock alongside the quay. I watch

everything through wind-stirred net curtains,
even you coming up the road to where I am not.
Another pulls me down against him and the sun
breaks all over the sea into a yellow flare, smoke,
a longer cough. My alibi is the train.

CLEARING OFF

ARTHUR SMITH

She's back, alone, this time
With her top on, packing

Whatever's left. Her husband, who doggedly
Seduced her on the sun deck one Sunday afternoon
last summer

Following, I assume, an argument,
Has left her, or he's dead,

But only because we associate loveliness
With loss. In his own words, he could just as easily

Be faithful and alive
On the nightshift, clocking in

By the hour, the week, and loathing it
All night long, that disquietude

Burning itself up in sleep slowly,
Like ragged coals struggling in their coats.

That afternoon last summer she was tanned
And lovely, and lovelier still, now, clearing off
the sun deck,

Fully clothed and ruddy, and floating face up,
For the moment, in the October wind.



FIRST STAGE

BILLIE FITZPATRICK

You're ironing a burnt-orange dress in front of the window. The light from the streets below is yellow and makes the room sallow like your skin. It's one a.m. A draft catches the back of your throat and encircles you. You shiver. The city moves vaguely, as if in circles, beneath you, keeping you from sleep. You iron instead. He sleeps curled in the center of the mattress. He snores loudly. You turn him on his stomach. He stops. You continue ironing. Tomorrow is Easter Sunday and you're going to Mass with your family. You live downtown, in Chelsea, closer to the street. They live uptown—Lenox Hill. You haven't been to church since Christmas. They have been brooding over you lately—worried that Prunella may resurrect. You expect a quiet attack after communion.

Prunella is Cinderella's wicked step sister. She's make-believe. But they say that she was a real part of you. There is a nursery school report—a psychological profile written by a novice at Sacred Heart—which tells how you once pushed another five year old off the see-saw. You remember that it was your turn and he wouldn't get off—so you pushed him. Fair's fair. Prunella is a seeker of justice.

She destroyed Catherine Pusey from England. Mom invited Catherine to live with your family when you were ten. She was to be your mother's helper—one of the many who came from far away places, like Vilma from Peru and Alba from Cuba and Jessie from the South Bronx. You needed no help. Catherine came to see America and babysit Megan and Maura. She had white skin that turned pink when she was excited. She loved the sea.

It was Memorial Day Weekend—the opening of the beach house. You and Megan were on the beach measuring the loss of sand during the winter. You tried to imagine where you sat under the umbrella last summer and judged the distance to the water's edge. Then you ran against the tide—the water was so cold. It doesn't become swimmable until the end of June. You and Megan noticed Catherine coming down the walkway in her black English bathing suit. She looked black and white and pink all over. You stopped, still standing in your embedded footprints. You were amazed and immediately annoyed that Catherine had the audacity to even think of swimming in your ocean. It was too cold. You collaborated with Megan. When Catherine Pusey stood at the edge of the Atlantic Ocean, you tripped her and pushed her down. Megan grabbed Catherine's hands and held them behind her back, and you shoved her face into the wet, cold sand.

Prunella is still around, troubling you at twenty-seven. She's hiding or buried; you're not sure who has control of whom.

You slide in beside him. You smell his stale breath. Heavy with sleep, it reeks of old food. You push him over, again, and rub his neck until he stirs. He heaves an arm around you and falls into sleep. But you nudge him awake. He says what's wrong, can't you sleep. Come here, baby. You become spoons. You push your fanny into the curve of his groin and he wraps around you. He's awake now. He says he's thirsty, he needs some water.

He returns tasting of peppermint toothpaste. He's aroused. His pajamas bulge.

He touches you until you run. You caress him. He becomes wet, too, and your hand moves easily up and down. You come and he enters. You try to come again, with him, but can't. Your muscles embrace him—until you can't hold on any longer—you like it when he can't hold on. He says keep fucking. You say please, please come. And he says wait—wait. Oh, baby.

Then you're back to baby talk. In and around the loving, you shelter your desire with silly words like whoopie.

Sometimes you cry after making love. He always seems surprised. You asked him once, doesn't he understand the tears. And he said no, but it's okay. He knows it's important; his mother cries all the time. You said he needs to communicate more—verbally; what does he think about when he makes love. He said he just relaxes, he doesn't think. You said like in sports, right; but it's not a sport. And he said it is like sports—you have to become one with what you're doing. And you said but there're two people involved. And he said yeah, but we become one. And you said you guessed so, it's just hard to tell sometimes.

You wake alone. He leaves a note: Went running. Have fun with the family—I'll make dinner. Love, David.

You see them from a block away, waiting in front of St. John the Baptist. Heads are fixed in different directions. You imagine they're wondering from which angle you'll appear. You can't forgive their concern. You dawdle at a corner, then make your way, jay walking across the street. You act oblivious, eyes averted to shop windows. When you reach the church, you say hi. They nod and you follow them up the steps. Charlie, Mom's lover, waits for you. He stops at the doors. He says he'll lag behind if you want. You say thanks but you'd better go in. Mom will throw a fit if you are late. You ask if he and Mom were out late last night. He smells of Listerine and scotch. You laugh. Charlie makes you laugh. He and Mom enjoy each other. Charlie wears a mustache. It covers half his face and Mom says it tickles. He looks like a boy without it. You've seen the pictures. He and Mom window shop together. They play tennis and ski. They have sex all the

time. You can smell it in the carpet. It sticks to the gray ultrasuede walls of their apartment. Megan and Maura have never noticed. But you heard them once—when you were nineteen. Mom talked lowly, words of direction, and it sounded athletic.

Once inside the church, your eyes dilate. And your stomach constricts. Charlie sighs. He's not a Catholic. The altar is smothered in white lilies. They lift the gloom and refract the light from the chandeliers. The Stations of the Cross are shining. You kneel down, last in line, next to the aisle. Charlie sits at your other side. Megan and Mom lean against the pew, resting their heads upon folded arms. They slump against the seat, half-sitting. Maura kneels erectly, her face in her palms. Charlie fidgets.

People rise and fall like music. You long to be in David's arms. You want to fuck David now. You feel trapped by the lilies. And there are no boundaries with David—no light and no dark—only skin. The walls of St. John descend, making your thoughts come faster and faster. It's the smell of the lilies and incense—the mixture—which moves you. You yawn deeply. Charlie laughs. Mom sticks her index finger in your rib. You pray to the white lilies and control Prunella's urges.

Everyone is reciting the Credo. You can't remember the words, but don't take out the missalet. You forget the names, the prayers, the rituals. They used to come swiftly, lightly, to your lips. Other words come now. You mumble.

You can't go to communion. You ate before you came. You watch Mrs. Donnolly lead her old father to the altar. He leans against her and she has her arm around his waist, supporting him. As they approach the priest, she tries to stand behind her father. The old man blindly sticks out his tongue. The priest quietly tells Mrs. Donnolly to leave the church, but loud enough for you to hear. She's wearing a tennis dress. Without trying to explain, she takes her father away. At least he got his host, you think.

After Mass, Mom hums the tune *In Your Easter Bonnet*. She smiles. She says can you believe that Mrs. Donnolly came to Easter Mass in her tennis dress. You say you can't believe the priest told her to leave. You think the priest is an asshole. Mom says that you're vulgar—and that isn't the point. She says can't you laugh—you're such a heavy.

You walk beside her trying to keep up with her. Since you were small, you've had to run. Mom never waits and today is no exception. She tells you that you've lost weight. You look wonderful and that you're her daughter again. You say that's encouraging. She says com'on—you must admit—you were getting a little chunky. And that if she couldn't criticize you, who would. She's your mother and she's allowed to tell her children what's wrong with them. You say okay, Mom, okay—go talk to Charlie. She says not so fast. Why haven't you returned any of her phone calls and what was the meaning of sending her a check for fifty dollars. You tell her that you've been busy and you want to start paying her back for the rent she paid on your apartment. She says that was two years ago. You say that you want a clean conscience. She says why are you worrying about your conscience all of a sudden. You say it's driving you crazy right

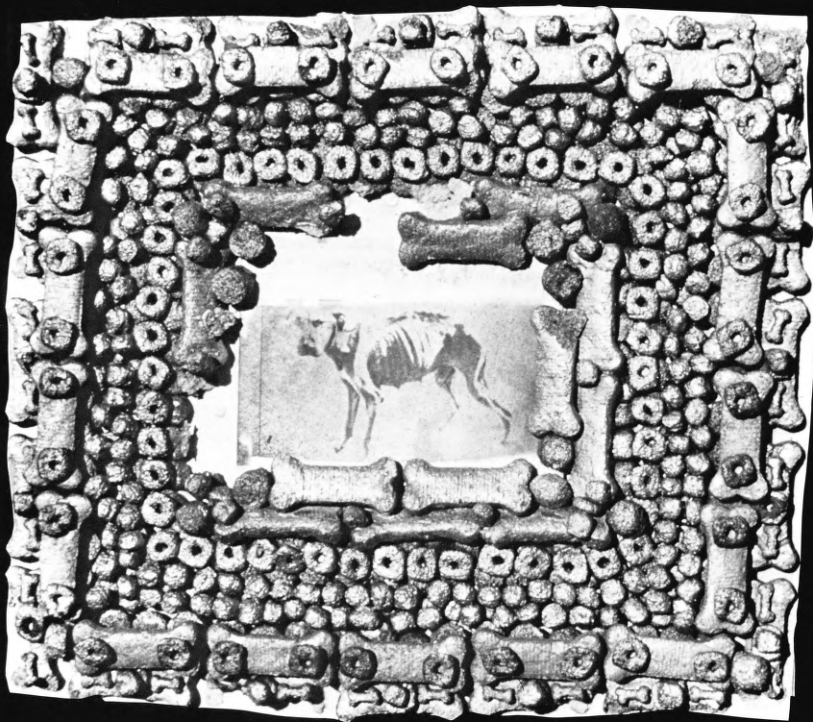
now, that's all. She says now don't try to save the world and atone for your sins. She laughs and says you know bad habits take years to break, besides it must come from the heart. You say it does Mom—please don't start in again. She says did you try that Shisheido make-up yet. It really takes the curse off your face—it's Japanese.

Megan and Maura enclose you on either side. Mom and Charlie take the lead. The buildings frame your view of the sky at noon. In the city, the sun is always at an angle. Maura says Mom is so tacky; she doesn't realize not everyone is made of steel. Although the air is warm, the garbage has not yet begun to stink. You nod to Maura's apology. Megan says are you still working at that soup kitchen. You say yes, that's why Mom's pissed. She says why do you do that kind of thing—you're not a social worker. You say that you really like helping people. Maura says you're going to be killed down there some day. And what about David—are you ever going to get married. They all hope so. You say you're not at that stage of your relationship yet. Megan says at what stage are you. You say the first stage.

FOR ELIZABETH

SUSAN WOOD

Near tears, she swipes at the stove top
in a fury, sweat beading her lip, the limp
summer air barely moved by the fan.
"I just wish something would happen,"
she says, and you know, though she doesn't yet,
what she wants is sexual, another body
to push against, not to take her
out of her own, which seems to outgrow her,
but to make it seem real to her,
hers. She's fifteen and so beautiful
your breath really does, sometimes, catch
when you look at her. When the doctor said
a valve in her heart was leaking, you thought
it's as though there's so much feeling
there, the heart can't contain itself.
She doesn't know what to do
with so much feeling, that's why she tells
the ones she loves again and again
how much she loves them, to ease
this pressure in her chest.
She doesn't want anything to change.
Not this afternoon of late summer heat,
the voices of her brother and sister calling
from the neighbors' pool. The flagstone terrace
splashed clean and the day's light leafing
through the elms, sinking into the dark water.
Everything seems to stop for a moment.
But she can still run. You imagine her alone
on the school track, the best athlete in the class.
Her leaky, fragile heart does
what it has to, and the lungs, heart's bellows,
take in the burning air. The body finds
its straight course, and she's flying now, tongue
licking the sweat from her lip, skin cooled
in her own wind, and the heart's chambers,
fuller than she thought possible,
pushing, pushing her on.



THE AWFUL STATE OF LITERATURE TODAY

LAURIE BERRY

It was the morning after Mexico when she realized that the shades flopped on her bedroom windows in a musical pattern, like the soft thud of a bass guitar. Monterey was a dirty city. When they'd driven into Houston at 5 a.m. the skyscrapers gleamed blue in the dawning light, the street lamps still on as if to welcome them back. She had thought of Geneva, which everyone said was clean; she had heard a great deal about the bathrooms in Geneva. She heard something fall in the next room. Mechanically, she thought the curtains there needed weights to keep them open now that spring was here and the wind played for the first time that year in the corners of her apartment. This was a nagging concern.

As she showered she wondered if the douche really did any good, or just made things worse. The chamomile shampoo, she decided, made her scalp itch for all its organic ingredients. Her new boyfriend, who sold natural products from a booth in the corner of Safeway, had told her the brand she favored was filled with petroleum products. She stood several moments with his can of Edge in one hand, a razor in the other. But with so little sleep she was too unsteady to stand on one leg at a time to shave. She would wear slacks, anyway.

As she dried her hair she thought of the new pink shirt she'd bought on sale several weeks before. When she'd asked her boyfriend how he liked it, he'd said there were a lot of colors he liked better than pink. But that it was a nice shirt anyway. She thought of all the men she knew who wore brown plaid shirts, and she sighed. They were not the sort of men who worried about pink. They worried about the Awful State of Literature Today. She was pleased with her hair that day.

In the kitchen she pondered the coffee. The Mexican kind tasted pleasantly of dirt, but so so potent it gave a queer little jerk to her head for hours afterward. And the mocha java was so smooth it almost put her to sleep. She decided to blend them. She realized then that it was mostly on buses that the men she knew worried about literature, in cars they worried about driving, particularly hers. She had gone to Mexico on a bus with three of them, and they had set upon literature immediately. (The new boyfriend, who was against jealousy, stayed home.) She participated for some time, and then one of them asked her if she liked Raymond Carver. It was a loaded question.

She wasn't sure which slacks to wear. If she wore the black ones she could wear the pink shirt, since it was loose and blousey and good over something tight. But the pants had just been washed; it would be hours before she could risk crossing her legs. She wondered if it was ridiculous to own a pair of pants that tight. Men who wore pants that tight

were absurd. Was there a difference?

She stood, undecided, in her closet. A basketful of clothes she had weeded from her wardrobe two months ago was still in the corner, balanced on one of the blankets her parents sent once a year from Michigan, where it is very cold. There were four such blankets in the closet, evidence that her parents, even in their illogical speculations on Houston weather, worried about her, not about literature, and so it made sense that she should worry more about clothes than about Tolstoy. All the while, however, there was this pants decision to be made. She thought it best to choose her jewelry first.

Maybe I don't care about Tolstoy at all, she thought. What if I am only pretending? What if I am a fraud? She considered a pair of lavender metal earrings she'd bought at Eckerd's for \$3.50. Whenever she looked at them she felt smug. They would go well with a light gray sweater she owned which looked best with the striped skirt whose zipper never stayed closed. The sweater was long enough to hide a belt. But that, after all, was academic: her legs were not shaved. She sighed. She wondered if it was a good sign that she worried about being a fraud: frauds probably don't worry about it. There were other earrings: the hammered silver pair, the pink rhinestones, the ones the new boyfriend had wanted to take with him on a fishing trip to use as a lure. None, however, seemed to point her toward an entire outfit. She looked down and saw one bright green plastic shoe on the floor. She remembered that she had not been let off the hook about Raymond Carver. When he came up again it had been four straight hours (and counting) of talking about literature: "What exactly was it you liked about the story?" she was asked. "It was elegant," she said, and she tried to sound a little imperious and a little impatient. He pushed the sleeves of his brown plaid shirt to his elbows, which meant he was waiting for a better answer. She glanced with longing at the *Rolling Stone* on her lap, which she had bought in Laredo—he carried a volume of Proust that he showed no sign of opening. She looked around the bus. In front of her a woman kept her head bowed to a piece of embroidery, a work in progress. Voices rose up around her, all in Spanish, and she imagined talk of popular music, a neighbor's adultery, a child's swim team. She did not speak Spanish. A minute more of literature and she was going to vomit. "It was elegant," he finally said. "But I can't say it enlightened me, even the dialogue, which admittedly was well executed." He seemed to collect himself. "I mean, after I finished that, I re-read *Dubliners*." He then looked at her significantly.

The green plastic shoe, she realized, had fallen off her

foot the week before when she'd stuck it into the bathroom and rested it on the heater by the door. "Would you be caught dead with a woman wearing these shoes?" she had asked the new boyfriend, who was shaving at the time. "Well, they're not pink," he had said. "And that's good."

Digging through her earrings she found her watch, which she had thought was lost. It was still ticking, and she saw it had been two hours since she'd stepped out of the shower. She walked to the closet and put on a pair of baggy Levis and a green sweater that was torn in a half moon under one arm. The hammered silver earrings. Lots of black eye shadow. She'd learned this trick in Europe. She'd read Conrad that year. "It was amazing," she'd said halfway through the second hour on the bus. "All those months I wanted to read English so bad, something contemporary and hip, and all I could find was Conrad." "Do you like Conrad?" her seatmate had asked. "Well . . . yeah," she said, at once realizing she was in for thirty minutes on *Lord Jim*. A Mexican seated across the aisle was reading a large-format comic book romance. In one frame the heroine's anguished face lifted and exclaimed "Que mas?"

She turned in front of the full length mirror. She thought she looked fine and careless. "Sometimes it's better not to fuss," she said to the cat stretching on the floor. She made the bed and thought about buying all-cotton sheets. In the kitchen she rattled a small carton marked BOKNERS!, encouraging a fit of yipping and mewling from the cat, who rubbed vigorously around her ankles. She spread several BOKNERS! on the floor.

The Conrad discussion had occurred much earlier than her friend's *Dubliners* coup. They were seated in pairs, and the two men behind her were discussing Henry James. She could not bear the prospect of James Joyce, for she knew how wrought up men became over James Joyce. The landscape whipped past, now scrubby and dry, Northern Mexico. Occasionally a pink or green house surprised her, dropped like a piece of salt water taffy among the cactus. The man still looked at her significantly. Only nine more hours to go. She remembered when she was nine years old her father had sat her down in his study. He had swept his arm in the air towards the bookcases and said, "The accumulated knowledge of mankind, kid, is all written down. And if you were to do nothing but read books all day long, for your entire life, you'd only make a dent in it." At the time this had exhilarated her. Now the idea was devastating. "I know where all of this is leading," she finally said. "You'll end up asking who is going to last after fifty years, and how there are no more Eliots, or Joyces, or Hemingways, and how the novel is dead and everyone is *stuck*, and how the modern sensibility sucks canal water. But you know even Hemingway wrote some real shit too, some utter shit that's no good at all. . . . all that cat stuff, for instance. Must we continue talking about it?" He sat for a moment, then shrugged and said, "Yeah, I know what you mean."

The light filtered dimly through the blue curtains in her living room. The wind kept flapping them closed, so she took the laces out of two pairs of tennis shoes and lashed the fabric down so her plants would get some light during the

day. There is so much to do, she thought. The couch needed cleaning, the wood floor needed oiling, and records lay strewn across the floor like so many ashtrays. There was marketing to do. She'd only been away three days.

"I didn't cry at my grandfather's funeral," he said when she'd finished telling him a story of how her cat died of antifreeze poisoning on a trip to Louisiana. "You know it's really funny . . ." And here he furrowed his brow. "But the most real grief I've felt was when my dog died. He just got weaker and weaker. Strokes, you know. By the end he was deaf and blind. One morning we found him on the kitchen floor, still alive, but not able to move, all played out. The folks wanted to take him and just leave him at the vet's, but I said no. I'd been with him all that time, and I was going to be there when he died." She nodded and patted his arm. He kept his face turned toward the window as if he were counting boulders on the roadside. For the first time there was quiet between them. The two men behind them were talking about minimalism. One snaked his hand through the divider and tapped her on the shoulder. "Do you *write* like Raymond Carver?"

So much to do. She gathered her briefcase and thought how nicely it matched her purse. She turned on the answering machine and found her keys. She swept the stairs on the way out, then looked back over the foyer. Sunlight streamed around a plant at the windows and hung in sheets from each green tendrill down the steep staircase. It was beautiful, a clean, well-lighted place. She smiled at that. Men cry so damned easily, she thought. The cat followed her out.

SOLITUDE OF THE ONE-MAN BAND

MARTIN MCGOVERN

If his washboard's anything
it's self-containment's rough harp.
If cymbals strapped to knees
have rhythm it's the rhythm of continuous

solitude, each tune he plays,
outside my window, taking him farther away
to some small nook within himself.
Yet look, the fall flowers, how sociable

the morning glories on the fence,
draped all around each other, how amiable
the crepe myrtle's white buds,
their last concerted blossom before winter.

The woman I love is away,
helping her mother pack up her things
for one more town, one more job
somewhere. And I can only accept a silence

that never bothered me before
but bothers me now, as it must the widower
relieving himself in the dim john
he shares with other tenants above the drugstore,

or turning on his television
for company as he takes his dinner alone.

At dusk he'll place his napkin
on the table and walk out through the shower

of neon above the store,
each light separate, distinct, like windshield
wipers we watched closely as children,
hurt, we'd say, because they never touched.

LENOIR, N.C.

LISA LEWIS

I've had enough of willows
And riverbanks, the way
They draw me close to the edge,
My blood chilled and quick
As the current, my arms limp
As the willow boughs, passion
Gone from them, given up.
I've had enough of foothills
And narrow drives submissive
To the prudish kudzu covering
Barns and poplars the same,
To birch-trunks, lovely
Against the rocks, but finally
Overbearing. There was a time,
The starry guessed-at
Years before my birth,
When I could stare into those
Speechless places the trees
Smooth out between them.
I passed to the hands of ancestors
So poor they ached. It was asking
Too much to expect them
To hand down the substance of will,
They who died giving over
Until there was nothing to take.
All that was left was tapping,
The knobby twigs rigid
And tapping on glass, scratching.
Now I've had enough of hands,
My own hands that made this room,
Then turned too weak
To take back what they need,
Tired of waiting for time to be up.
In the left wrist, a break
Never mended, and the sound
Of the bones when they catch
Is of crumbling. These are
My arms, like everything
Built, blown down, and taken back.

THE HAWK, 1920

ELIZABETH DAVIS

Anna's hair is a golden red, wavy. Like my mother's, my father told me. He sat at my table, the one I had salvaged from his barn and painted white the summer Jim and I were married, and watched Anna, in her diaper, careen barefooted across the kitchen floor. I was standing at the sink washing the breakfast dishes, setting scalded coffee cups to drain on a muslin tea towel. My father wore his seersucker pants with blue suspenders, a white open-collared shirt. He sucked on his pipe as if he were embarrassed.

Her hair, he said, is like your mother's.

His voice was husky; his face became the mask he assumes when he speaks about my mother. It's a deliberate blotting of all expression, an automatic erasure, more sorrowful to me than tears.

He had waited until Miss Lucy left the room before he spoke. I have always called my stepmother Miss Lucy, ever since she was my teacher at Sweet Gum School. She was out in the yard watering my tomatoes. Papa never mentions my mother in her presence.

And I have always been afraid to ask him about Mama. That's what I call her in my mind. Mama. I feel shy about calling her that, presumptuous even. I fight myself for my right to say it. But I won't call her Alice. And Mother is too formal. It's not that I haven't asked him. When I was seventeen and going out with Jim I said, Papa, did my mother, did she like *dancing*? But the curtain of pain that falls over his face, his inner bracing, makes me timid, as if I'm at the edge of a taboo. And I have never asked him a fraction of what I want to know.

So, you think Anna takes after my mother? I didn't say Mama out loud. And I waited, motionless, letting the hot water rush from the faucet. From outside my window I could hear the scritch of Jim's spade as he shoveled topsoil into the wheelbarrow.

Anna sat down on the floor and played with Papa's shoelaces. No, he said, stroking the back of her neck. I reckon not. She's too dadburned tiny, too delicate. Your mother was a tall full-figured girl. He doesn't say woman. Mama was just nineteen when she died. But there's something about her hair, he said.

Rachel, Miss Lucy yelled at me. I jumped. There she was, creaking open the screened door. Rachel, did you know, she halted for a moment, staring at Papa. A slow flush, as real and as obvious as an erection, crept up his neck, blotched his face. Rachel, she continued, eyes suddenly bright, did you know, dear, you've got cutworms in your tomatoes?

Mama. Alice. Her essence, tangible as the smell of roses, hovered in the kitchen between Papa and me. I turned off the water, wiped my hands on my apron. No ma'am, I said.

You'd best tend to them, honey. Before they spread. Then she was gone, the back door twanging behind her.

Papa stood. Without looking at me. He picked up Anna, awkwardly kissed her hair, and strode outside with her to Jim. I sat down in his place at the table and stared at the green linoleum, the spot where Anna had been playing. My heart was rushing and my cheeks, too, were hot against my palms. The room was hushed. Empty.

Anna's hair curls like my mother's and will be thick like hers. I have Mama's wedding picture on my dresser, the one they put in the Sweet Gum newspaper at her marriage. And then a year later at her death. My hair is auburn, too, like my mother's but it's straight and fine, no curl to it at all.

Miss Lucy has a green thumb, and when she comes to visit she enjoys tending my plants. She started my snapdragons and helped Jim and me plant day lilies in a row beside our fence. When Jim and I were newlyweds, I was ashamed of her attention to my plants, as if in her putting her was declaring me negligent. But now, I stand back and let her do it. Last time she was here she took my ailing ivy home with her to Sweet Gum and then, a couple of months later, returned with it healed, its variegated leaves standing tall and sprightly in their clay pot. She likes to fiddle with my plants, so I let her.

When Papa married her, Miss Lucy was an old maid, thirty-two years old, older, even, than he. She was my first teacher at Sweet Gum School. Taught me my letters and how to read. From the front of the classroom her voice rang out,

The old oaken bucket, the iron-bound bucket,

The moss-covered bucket, that arose from the well.

She stood, cheeks flushed, before the blackboard, a piece of chalk in her hand, the same hand that adjusted her glasses on the bridge of her nose, and that offered me a clean hanky when I had a cold. After Papa started taking Miss Lucy out, I flinched when that hand smoothed back my hair on the playground.

Where was my mother's voice? I searched for it in the speech of neighbor women, my Sunday School teacher, the lady behind the counter at the dry goods store. In my bedroom, Mama's photograph sat on the top of my bureau; and she watched me with keen and gentle eyes. I told my mother goodnight, deep into my pillow, after Papa had tucked me in; and, under the live oak tree, I set a place for her with my acorn-cup tea set.

I was seven when Papa and Miss Lucy married. The wedding was held at the Methodist Church, decorated with Christmas candles and smelling of pine boughs. I was never sure, that afternoon, holding on to my nosegay, whether I was happy or not. And I suppose I feel that way still. Miss Lucy has always been good to me, and I'm grateful. Polite. But we have never become close.

Today was Anna's birthday. Her first. One pink candle on

my silver loaf cake. Papa and Miss Lucy arrived on the train with gifts wrapped in butcher paper and tied with bright ribbon: a wooden wagon made by Papa and filled with smooth sanded blocks, and a pinafore Miss Lucy had embroidered. Anna squealed when we sang Happy Birthday; then, bewildered, she suddenly started to cry. I picked her up and lulled her as Jim's rich tenor soared above us all, grazing the kitchen's panes and crevices like sunlight. I cupped the back of her curls with my hand as I bent over the highchair to blow out the candle.

Later, while Jim carried Papa and Miss Lucy down to Union Station, I took Anna to the backyard to cool off in the washtub before her nap. I was relieved that everyone had gone. My head felt dry and stuffed, and my throat was tight. I ran a few inches of water in the washtub and sat Anna inside. Then I removed my shoes and stockings, sat in a canvas sling chair, and stretched my legs out in front of me on the grass. My head was in the shade of the pecan tree, my skirt above my knees, legs bared to the sun.

My mother died in childbirth. She died giving birth to me. This is the refrain that circles within me like a hawk above a meadow on a still, burning day. When I was born, my mother died. Even now that I am a mother, the hawk is still there. It lurks deep inside, as constant and imperceptible as my heartbeat. Swooping, hovering, searching, it persists. Or perhaps the hawk is she. Perhaps she is my mother. Now, as I watched Anna splashing in the washtub, in the soft shade of the pecan tree, cicadas making a racket in the heat, even now, that hawk was circling.

Anna stood up in the washtub, slowly, gripping the galvanized tin with her fingers, concentrating. Her hair, wet at the back, was plastered to her neck. At the top of her head, her curls caught the sun, burned with light. She stomped her feet in the water, watched the ripples, then looked at me. A blue dragonfly darted above the washtub. I touched the tip of her nose with my finger. She sat back down.

My mind kept drifting back. Had, all day. Because of Anna's birthday I suppose. To the fragments, the jagged pieces, of all that I have learned about my own birth. I was tiny when I was born, came too soon. No one expected me to survive. Papa and my grandparents had decided they would lay me in the coffin with my mother. Bare back naked, I suppose, since all of my baby clothes would have engulfed me. Bundled in one of the flannel receiving blankets Mama had made for me during her confinement. Tucked into the crook of her rigid arm. Mother and child.

They didn't expect me to last the day. Someone, I don't know who, had the foresight to keep me warm. They swaddled me in blankets and put me in a shoe box. Then they heated bricks in the wood stove and surrounded my box with them, replacing them with other heated bricks as soon as they began to cool.

I survived the washing of Mama's body; the stripping of bloody bedclothes from her bed. While someone's hands sprinkled her with lavender, and dressed her in her pink Easter dress which would no longer fasten at the waist, someone else was heating bricks for me, the mewling, ugly girl-child who had caused such chaos.

A wet nurse was found. My Ellen. Ellen was born in slavery, and she died when I was six. She had recently given birth to her twelfth child, Lydia. It must have been Ellen who told me about the day I was born. I can remember her rocking me on the front porch of her little house, in a rocker with a cowhide seat. Where was Lydia? Perhaps napping on a pallet beside us. Honeysuckle climbed all over a trellis, shading us from a glaring sun. Bees, which normally terrified me, hovered nearby. But Ellen paid them no mind. I was exhausted, had spent myself crying. I don't remember why. My eyes were sticky and swollen, and I shuddered in Ellen's lap. We rocked, soft and easy. My head rested on her bosom as Ellen told me the story of my birth. Her voice, like the bees buzzing around us in the heat, was tinged with a hint of danger, a terror associated with my mother that I could not quite grasp.

I survived the laying out. The funeral. Bricks were heated night and day. The neighbors pitched in to help. I was a miracle baby, Ellen said. Thriving in the midst of grief.

Anna sang baby noises, absorbed herself with a leaf drifting in the water. When she touched it, it wrapped around her finger. Extricating herself required both hands. I looked up. The pecan tree's leaves floated against the sky. Their dance was slow, lethargic. The color green, kindled by the scorching August light, rippled in the air. My neck was wet with perspiration. It had been one year since I survived my pregnancy. Now that I had made it through, I let myself look back. Rested my head on my knees. Closed my eyes. Saw violet, emerald-green, a black square. Funny. I felt like I might could cry.

Papa and Miss Lucy hated it that we left Sweet Gum. But Jim and I were ready, wanted to see for ourselves about Houston life. So we took off. I was eighteen, Jim twenty.

Jim and I settled in this little house in Woodland Heights and he found a job selling oil field supplies. He had a company car, a Model T, and every day he either went downtown or out to the oil fields—Goose Creek, Blue Ridge, Pierce Junction, or some others. He took me with him once to a spudding in on the Navasota River. A pretty lady in yellow taffeta christened the test well, then the oil company served watermelon and cigars to the crowd. One Sunday we drove out to Baytown so Jim could show me the Goose Creek field, a forest of wooden derricks that went on and on like the Big Thicket. I had noticed the stinky oil smell from miles away. Jim and I got out of the car and he pointed out to me the various parts of the rigs, like pipe racks, hoists, and boilers. Occasionally we had to step over puddles of greenish oil. Goose Creek was ugly to me and bewildering, but Jim's face was flushed with excitement.

By Jingo, he said, this place is a boom town.

He said hello to the roughnecks, smiling, his cigar wet between his thumb and index finger, his other hand gentle on my elbow, as we picked our way through the muddy ruts of the road.

I was learning to cook. Could fix bacon and eggs in the morning, with baking powder biscuits and Miss Lucy's peach preserves. For our first dinner I made chicken with sweet

milk gravy, mustard greens, cornbread, and cucumbers and cream. Baking put me into a dither. My cakes would fall, run over, or be soggy. I would ice them before they had quite cooled and rip up the cake with my frosting knife. The layers would split apart, require toothpicks. If Jim came home in the midst of this, he would find me red-faced, flustered. I jumped at his touch.

Jim and I slept in the three-quarter spool bed that had been my mother's, handmade for her by my grandfather. Everything on it was a wedding present: the sheets from Sears and Roebuck, the embroidered pillow slips from my mother's hope chest, a patchwork quilt, the cream colored crocheted bedspread with the letter "H" in the middle, for Hobson, Jim and Rachel Hobson.

One night, a couple of weeks after our marriage, I woke up to my own screams, found myself in the corner of the room, shuddering and crying. Jim jumped out of bed in his drawers and stood in the corner with me barefooted, his arms around me.

There now, he said. There now, Rachel.

Jim had turned over in his sleep and had flung his hand across my face. Next thing I knew I was across the room hollering. He held me tight for a long while, kissing my hair until I was calm. Then we walked back to our bed.

• • •

Anna began to whimper in the washtub, rubbing her eyes with her fists. I picked her up and wrapped her in a towel. Inside, the house was dark and claustrophobic. I diapered Anna, then nursed her in the noisy rocking chair until she was heavy with sleep. I laid her beside the back window where a faint breeze fluttered the curtains above her crib, and went outside again, beneath the pecan tree, within hearing distance.

When we were first married Jim was after me all the time, like a puppy. I tried to be playful, nipping Jim's ear with my tongue, giggling as we undressed. But soon, for some reason, a cold hush came over my body. And I moved far away from Jim in my mind. Noticed a cobweb in the ceiling corner. I would need to wrap a dust rag around the broom and knock that thing down. I began planning what I'd do afterward. I'd take a hot bath then fix dinner. Then it was over. I held Jim with clay arms, stroked his hair with my fingertips. Put a smile on my face when he at last lifted his head.

It's not that I wasn't passionate. Just that once we married, my passion vanished.

There was a time, when Jim and I were engaged, sitting on the front porch swing. We had been kissing, could hear Papa's snores from the front bedroom. Jim pulled me onto his lap. I could feel his maleness hard beneath me. And something inside, my womb I suppose, started turning over and over. I didn't let on to Jim, I just pressed closer, pushing my breasts against his shirt. Turning and turning, Jim was gasping. I kept myself quiet. Swirling, melting.

Rachel!

We heard Miss Lucy's voice from the darkness inside the house. I could picture her. In her nightgown, hair undone, falling long to her shoulders.

Rachel, are you still out there? It's, late dear. You'd best come in.

One morning after Jim had left early for Blue Ridge, when we had been married a couple of months, I went outside and sat under the pecan tree, my sanctuary. It was October and the pecans were still on the tree, their green jackets turning brown. I leaned against the rough bark, closed my eyes, sank deep into myself, and had a conversation with my mother. Mama came to me in her pink Easter dress and we sat together on a rock in the middle of a rolling stream. We let our feet dangle in the water, chunked pebbles into the froth. The sun sparkled down on us. This is how it is, I told her. She held my hand and listened.

Well, she said. Suppose, God forbid, you do die. Just like me. You get yourself pregnant and die in childbirth. Don't you want to have all the pleasure you can have now, child, while you are still alive on this earth?

I pondered this, holding Mama's hand, playing with her fingers. Then, down the street, someone started up their car. It sputtered. They cranked it up again, and Mama was gone.

I considered what my mother had said. But couldn't get her out of my mind. She was so young when she died. My age. If she were able to come back to life right this minute, she and I could sit in the kitchen, drink hot coffee, and talk. We could catch the Studebaker street car and go shopping together at Foley's. The two of us would be friends.

Like Mama, I conceived right away, after Jim and I had been married about four months. I began to feel drowsy in the afternoons, took naps. Then began waking up in the mornings nauseous. Is this how it was with you, Mama, I thought. I knelt on the bathroom's cold linoleum floor, heaved into the commode as I had every day for a week, then I stood up, cupped water from the spigot with my hand and rinsed my mouth. Could not yet bear to brush my teeth.

I imagined my mother at the same stage of pregnancy, gagging quietly into a chamber pot each morning before breakfast, wiping her lips with a hand towel. Then she would dress herself and go outside. She'd feed the chickens, gather yard eggs in her apron, and stand for a moment in the brisk winter air, her shawl around her shoulders, and listen—to the various roosters echoing each other throughout Sweet Gum, to my father humming inside as he shaved, to a train whistle over at the depot. Then she would climb the back porch steps, scrape open the door, and ease the eggs from her apron into a bowl. To settle her stomach she'd nibble on last night's cornbread, as she stoked the oven for breakfast.

Anna was born on a Friday. Miss Lucy was here, had been with us all week. Waiting, Jim called Dr. Nelson that morning when my pains became regular. But he didn't arrive until mid-afternoon. By then I was biting my wrist with each contraction, as if I could cut the whorls of agony with my teeth. The pain on my wrist I could control; the other was a tide carrying me far, far away, beyond my bedroom and the people in it. *Go away*, I thought I told Jim, as he was rubbing

my back; but he did continue rubbing, so perhaps I hadn't said it at all. Then I bit my wrist again, and left it there wet and substantial against my teeth until the next crescendo. I lay sweating in my nightgown, on a clean sheet, towels layered beneath me. On the kitchen table, brought close to the bed, were two basins of water, cutting instruments, and strips of white sheeting boiled sterile that morning by Miss Lucy. My pains were coming fast now. *Mama, I panted. Mama, I want my mother to come take care of me,* I said to myself, but not out loud. I bit on my wrist, my talisman, until I tasted blood. The room was sweltering. My nightgown stuck to me. I feel sick, I said. Then I retched. It's coming now, Dr. Nelson said. *Mama, I screamed. I want Mama.*

Someone put chloroform to my nose, and held the cloth there. Suffocating, I wanted to jerk my head away. But they held firm. I gasped through my mouth. A stinging burn coursed through my nostrils, transforming my sinuses into a black flaming cave. Then I was still.

Later, much later, I heard the baby. Miss Lucy was holding it, wiping its face with a cloth. There was Jim. His face swaying, enlarged like a balloon. I wafted away again. When I awoke, someone was slipping the sheet from beneath me. On the table was a tangle of bloody towels. Hemorrhage, Dr. Nelson said. He packed my womb with strips of sterile sheeting.

There was Mama standing beside the bed. She wore a thin white nightgown spattered with blood. Her hair was long, in disarray. She whispered something I couldn't hear. Her eyes were black as olives, expressionless. *Mama, I said. Here I am.* I attempted to hold out my arms. She began tilting. My mother. She was floating now, at an odd angle. Her auburn hair swirled before her eyes as if whipped by a gale. I reached for her. Someone was slapping my hand. Miss Lucy. *Rachel, Rachel. For God's sake,* she said. I opened my eyes. Her face was fierce. Her hair had come loose from her bun. She rubbed my hand back and forth between her palms. Jim was stroking my face, weeping. Far away the baby was crying. Dr. Nelson loomed in his shirtsleeves at the foot of the bed. The room rocked in the heat like a buoy. But I was cold, shivering. Miss Lucy pulled the sheet around my shoulders. The cries became louder. I turned my head toward the sound. *The baby, Miss Lucy said. Bring her the baby.* Jim obeyed. And there was Anna. I reached for her as best I could. She was placed in the hollow of my arm. Squawling, savage in her rage, her little hands beat at the stifling air. There, I whispered. There now. *I'm here my darling. I'm right here.*

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I heard Jim's automobile chug into the driveway, and I jumped up from the grass quickly so that I could warn him before he went inside and woke Anna. I smelled his cigar even before I opened the gate and saw him. He had climbed out of the Model T and was wiping the windshield with an old rag he keeps under the seat. He clamped his cigar between his teeth and had pushed his straw hat back on his head. He had not yet seen me and I took my time observing him, pretending for a moment that he was a stranger. He is a

short man, barely as tall as I, and has thick dark hair, a tanned face from being on the road so much, and brown, almost black eyes. He was humming "I'm Always Chasing Rainbows." His sleeves were rolled up, his shirt wet at the back. I could see through to the ribbed cotton of his undershirt.

Jim, I said softly.

He turned around and smiled, his eyes crinkling. He walked over to me and held me close. Thank God they're gone, he said. I've been wanting to do this all day. He kissed me, maneuvering me backward, as if we were dancing, to the kitchen door.

How was your trip, I asked.

My trip, he laughed out loud. I put my fingers to his lips. The baby, I said.

You mean the baby's asleep? Good Lord in Heaven, he said, steering me to our bedroom.

The trip was downright funny, he said, if it hadn't been so sad. You know Papa and Miss Lucy. They're at each other all the time. Your papa was telling me this story about their preacher, Brother Willard. And Miss Lucy was correcting him at every single turn. Now, Edward, she would say, that is just *not so*. Your daddy finally tightened his lips, ignored her as if she were a dagdum ninny, and kept on talking. Then Miss Lucy got quiet and huffy. She stared straight ahead at the windshield, a sour-pickle look on her face all the way to the depot. I tell you, Kache, I couldn't get them on the train fast enough. Now then, he said, where were we? He caressed my neck then began to remove his shirt. It's too hot for this goddamn *apparel* anyway, he said, pulling me to him.

I played with his earlobe and brushed his hair back from his forehead. Jim, darlin', I said.

Why did I become frantic at the height of Jim's passion, slap at him as if he were a swarm of bees?

Leave me be, I shoved him away. My voice was harsh. Guttural. Tears ran hot down my cheeks. I was shaking all over, edging away from him on the bed until my feet hit the floor. I yanked at the rumpled top sheet. Wrapped it around me like a cloak and left Jim lying on his back, rigid, on the far side of the bed.

I hurried to the bathroom. Ran hot water in the tub. Washed myself with a new bar of Ivory. Cried all the while. Put my head on my knees.

I knew I had wounded Jim.

I leaned my head back against the back of the tub and closed my eyes.

Jim knocked at the door.

I said, come in.

He sat on the edge of the tub. I put my arm around his waist and leaned my head against him. Crying.

How do you *abide* me, I said.

We were still for a long time. I couldn't see his face. Then Jim reached into the bath water for the wash rag and started soaping my back. The wash cloth was hot against my shoulders and water trickled down my spine like tears.

I made us hot cheese sandwiches for dinner. Sliced the bread thin, put a thick layer of grated cheese, salt, and cayenne pepper between the slices. Then fried them in hot lard and butter.

THE FLAMINGOS

Jardin des Plantes, Paris

translated from the German by Edward P. Snow

In mirrored images like Fragonard's
no more of their white and their red
comes through to you, than someone would convey
by saying of his mistress: she was still

serene with sleep. For when they rise into the greenness
and stand there, lightly twisted on pink stems,
together, blooming, as in some garden-plot,
they seduce themselves, more alluringly

than Phryne; until their necks curl down and they
bury their pale eyes in their own softness,
where black and fruit-red lie concealed.

Suddenly an envy shrieks through the great cage;
but they have stretched out in astonishment
and stride, each alone, into the world of dreams.

DIE FLAMINGOS

Jardin des Plantes, Paris

RANIER MARIE RILKE

In Spiegelbildern wie von Fragonard
ist doch von ihrem Weiß und ihrer Röte
nicht mehr gegeben, als dir einer böte,
wenn er von seiner Freundin sagt: sie war

noch sanft von Schlaf. Denn steigen sie in Grüne
und stehn, auf rosa Stielen leicht gedreht,
beisammen, blühend, wie in einem Beet,
verführen sie verführender als Phryne

sich selber; bis sie ihres Auges Bleiche
hinhalsend bergen in der eignen Weiche,
in welcher Schwarz und Fruchttrot sich versteckt.

Auf einmal kreischt ein Neid durch die Volière;
sie aber haben sich erstaunt gestreckt
und schreiten einzeln ins Imaginäre.

*Phryne: Greek courtesan, famed for her beauty; she is
supposed to have modelled for the sculptor Praxiteles.*

PARROT-PARK

Jardin des Plantes, Paris

translated from the German by Edward P. Snow

Under blossoming Turkish lindens, at grassy verges,
on branching stands rocked gently by their homesickness,
the aras breathe and think about their countries,
which, even though their eyes aren't on them, never alter.

As out of place within this busy green as a parade,
they put on airs and feel themselves to be above it all,
and with those precious beaks made out of jade and jasper
chew a gray something, find it tasteless, toss it away.

Down below the dreary doves pick up what they've disdained,
while from above the scornful birds make a mock-obesant bow
between their two squandered, nearly empty feeding trays.

But then they start rocking again and sleeping and watching,
and with dark tongues, which would gladly tell lies, play
distractedly with their foot-chains. Waiting for witnesses.

PAPAGEIEN-PARK

Jardin des Plantes, Paris

RANIER MARIA RILKE

Unter türkischen Linden, die blühen, an Rasenrändern,
in leise von ihrem Heimweh geschaukelten Ständern
atmen die Ara und wissen von ihren Ländern,
die sich, auch wenn sie nicht hinsehn, nicht verändern.

Fremd im beschäftigten Grünen wie eine Parade,
zieren sie sich und fühlen sich selber zu schade,
und mit den kostbaren Schnäbeln aus Jaspis und Jade
kauen sie Graues, verschleudern es, finden es fade.

Unten klaben die duffen Tauben, was sie nicht mögen,
während sich oben die höhnischen Vögel verbeugen
zwischen den beiden fast leeren vergeudeten Trögen.

Aber dann wiegen sie wieder und schläfern un äugen,
spielen mit dunklen Zungen, die gerne lügen,
zerstreut an den Fußfesselringen. Warten auf Zeugen.

