Wisconsin fiction : Wisconsin sesquicentennial issue. volume 85 1997

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Wisconsin Fiction

Wisconsin Sesquicentennial Issue

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of Sciences, Arts, and Letters

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Transactions welcomes articles that explore features of the State of Wisconsin and its people. Articles written by Wisconsin authors on topics other than Wisconsin sciences, arts and letters are occasionally published. Manuscripts and queries should be addressed to the editor.

Submission requirements: Submit three copies of the manuscript, double-spaced, to the editor. Abstracts are suggested for science/technical articles. The style of the text and references may follow that of scholarly writing in the author's field. Please prepare figures with reduction in mind.

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From the Editor

"There are myriads of forms and hundreds of grasses throughout the entire earth, yet each grass and each form is the entire earth."—Dogen

This quotation from the 13th-century Japanese Soto Zen master Dogen's *Shobogenzo* (or *Treasury of the Eye of the True Dharma*), his famous collection of 100 essays, appeared on my "Little Zen Calendar" (Workman Publishing) during the month of May. It struck me as an appropriate response to the admirable selections of short fiction that appear in this special anniversary issue of *Transactions*. Somewhat like Dogen's forms and grasses, each of these fifteen stories, unique and limited in style and content, is, at the same time, a revelatory microcosm of literary artistry and of the human condition it seeks to represent.

Publication of *Wisconsin Fiction* has been timed to appear as the citizens of Wisconsin begin to celebrate the 150th anniversary of Wisconsin statehood in 1998. All who worked on the preparation of this commemorative issue did so in hope of making a worthy contribution to the celebration. In the spotlight, of course, stand the fifteen Wisconsin fiction writers themselves, whom I wish to congratulate most heartily on behalf of the Wisconsin Academy and *Transactions*. As explained in the Foreword, they were selected from a much larger contingent of Wisconsin writers who submitted their work for consideration and who, along with many others, are keeping the craft of creative writing alive and flourishing both inside and outside the geographical boundaries of our state.

Our two guest jurors, Kyoko Mori and Ron Rindo, are accomplished and recognized writers in their own right.

Ron Rindo was born in Muskego, Wisconsin, earned his Ph.D. at the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee, and currently lives in Berlin, Wisconsin. He teaches English at the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh and, beginning in July 1997, serves as Associate Dean of Humanities and Fine Arts. His two collections of short stories, *Suburban Metaphysics and Other Stories* (New Rivers Press, 1990) and *Secrets Men Keep* (New Rivers Press, 1995), individually were awarded Outstanding Achievement Recognition by the Wisconsin Library Association. Such recognition is extended to the ten books judged most outstanding among those published each year by Wisconsin writers. Ron is also a familiar figure throughout Wisconsin, in neighboring states and elsewhere, because of his frequent appearances for public readings of his works.

Kyoko Mori was born in Kobe, Japan, and has lived in the American Midwest since 1977. She, too, earned her Ph.D. at the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee. Currently, she teaches at St. Norbert College in De Pere,

Wisconsin. Her award-winning first novel, *Shizuko's Daughter* (Henry Holt, 1993) was characterized by the *New York Times* as "a jewel of a book, one of those rarities that shine out only a few times in a generation." She has also published another novel, *One Bird* (Henry Holt, 1996), a book of poetry entitled *Fallout* (Tia Chucha Press, 1994), and a memoir, *The Dream of Water* (Henry Holt, 1996), written after an extended visit to her native city of Kobe. The *Los Angeles Times Book Review* found this memoir "astonishingly beautiful." Kyoko also has published individual short stories and poems in several other literary journals and magazines. Her book of personal essays, *Polite Lies,* is forthcoming from Henry Holt.

Marshall Cook, professor in the Division of Continuing Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, graciously consented to act as our guest fiction editor, working with our writers after the jurors had completed their selections. Marsh studied creative writing with Wallace Stegner at Stanford, where he received his M.A. He is the author of *Writing for the Joy of It* (Will Beymer Press, 1990), is a frequent contributor to *Writer's Digest,* and edits *Creativity Connection,* a newsletter for writers and independent publishers. His articles about writing appear regularly in hundreds of magazines and have been widely anthologized. He has written short stories for several literary magazines and, just this year, published his first novel, *The Year of the Buffalo: A Novel of Love and Minor League Baseball* (Savage Press, 1997). His *Hometown Wisconsin* (Savage Press, 1994) presents vignettes of 20 small towns in Wisconsin.

The outstanding efforts of our managing editor, Patricia Duyfhuizen of the University of Wisconsin Eau Claire, also deserve special appreciation. This issue marks the fifth year of our collaboration as editors of *Transactions.* As always, I marvel at Tricia's abilities in editing and laying out such handsome final copy. Readers also may be interested to know that *Wisconsin Fiction* afforded an unusual learning experience for the students in her editing and publishing course. They worked in groups of five, running through an entire mock publishing process for the stories. This involved reading the manuscripts for minor errors, preparing an overall design for the entire anthology and a partial layout of selected stories, and even planning extra publicity and marketing efforts for the issue. Several of their ideas were adapted for the finished volume.

Finally, I extend grateful acknowledgment to Faith Miracle, editor of the *Wisconsin Academy Review,* for her valuable advice and collaboration, and to Dagny Quisling Myrah, whose art graces the covers of this issue.

Preparation of this anniversary volume has been a challenge and a joy for all of us who took part. We hope that all who read—and re-read!—this *Transactions* anthology of *Wisconsin Fiction* during Wisconsin's sesquicentennial year and in years to come will encounter "the entire earth" in these stories and find here a continuing source of delight and insight.

Bill Urbrock

Foreword

Welcome to the *Wisconsin Fiction* issue of *Transactions!* This special anthology of Wisconsin writers complements *Wisconsin Poetry,* a special *Transactions* issue edited by Bruce Taylor in 1991, and appears as the citizens of Wisconsin begin celebrations of the 150th anniversary of Wisconsin statehood (1848–1998). The publication of *Wisconsin Fiction* provides evidence that organizations such as the Wisconsin Academy of Science, Arts, and Letters, and the several organizations that have underwritten this project, are keeping the home fires burning in support of arts and letters in Wisconsin.

When *Transactions* editor William J. Urbrock and *Wisconsin Academy Review* editor Faith Miracle asked us to serve as guest jurors for this volume, we were pleased to be given the opportunity. From beginning to end, planning and carrying out the selection process has been an enjoyable and rewarding experience. In April, 1996, a news release calling for submissions was sent to newspapers and other publications across the state and to English departments at all of Wisconsin's four-year public and private universities and colleges. By September 15, 1996, a box full of submissions had accumulated in Bill Urbrock's University of Wisconsin Oshkosh office. It contained over 100 stories by 95 Wisconsin writers, sent from all corners of the state and from across the country.

When we defined what a "Wisconsin writer" was for this issue, we decided upon a geographical, rather than metaphysical, definition. Writers born here, writers born elsewhere who live here now, and writers who, regardless of birthplace, lived here for awhile, all qualified as Wisconsin writers. Many of the writers who submitted stories, and most of those whose work appears here, fit the metaphysical definition of a Wisconsin writer as well, which, to our mind, means that living here has profoundly affected how they see, know, and experience the world. "Place," as Eudora Welty has argued, "bestows on us our original awareness; and our critical powers spring up from the study of it and the growth of experience inside it. . . . It never really stops informing us, for it is forever astir, alive, changing, reflecting, like the mind of man [or woman] itself. One place comprehended can make us understand other places better." Obviously, some writers have deeper roots in Wisconsin than others, regardless of when and for how long they were planted here, yet all 95 of the fiction writers who submitted stories for this issue are new branches in a family tree whose roots take us back to tribal storytellers of Wisconsin Indian nations such as

the Fox and Sac, Menominee, Ojibwa, Potawatami, and Winnebago, through pioneer writers such as Laura Ingalls Wilder, Hamlin Garland, and Zona Gale. Readers interested in Wisconsin's literary history should consult William A. Titus's *Wisconsin Writers* (1930), or Jim Stephens' impressive three-volume anthology, *The Journey Home: The Literature of Wisconsin Through Four Centuries* (1989).

Upon receipt of this box of manuscripts by Wisconsin writers, then, we went to work. We read all the submissions over the course of the next two and a half months and made independent lists of the stories each of us found strongest and liked the best. We read each manuscript at least once, many two or three times. Most of the stories were set in Wisconsin, in our cities and towns; our woods, lakes, or rivers; on farms or in suburban backyards; and it was a pleasure to see so many areas of this beautiful state set to fictional lyric. There is something special about encountering I-94, Marquette University, a Milwaukee neighborhood, Door County, Lake Superior, or the Wisconsin River in a short story; it makes you feel as if you've discovered a familiar face among strangers at a party. (Of course, some stories, including a number of those you'll find here, were set in other places.) At the end of this process, we compared lists, reread stories, and talked through each of our choices—on the telephone and over e-mail —to arrive at our final selections.

Because the names of the writers did not appear on the manuscripts, we did not know who wrote them. We admit, however, that on a couple of occasions, because of our familiarity with the work of writers we'd read before, we made some guesses. We made no attempt to try to choose a roughly equal number of stories by male and female writers (though by chance that happened)) or to give each part of the state equal representation (though that, to a lesser degree, happened also), or to choose only "Wisconsin" stories (whatever those might be). In all cases, the stories we selected simply had *something* the other stories did not—a captivating voice, perhaps; characters that startled, surprised, or delighted us; a conflict that pulled us in and held us; language so dazzling, elegant, or richly detailed, we would have gone wherever it took us. In other words, we chose the stories we felt were the strongest, and in the end, we agreed on the fifteen you'll find here. While this collection is by no means comprehensive, we believe it represents a remarkable range of quality work by many of the state's finest writers. We hope you agree.

Many readers will be delighted, as we were, by the specific regional detail in much of this work, particularly in those stories in which a Wisconsin setting is more than a simple backdrop for the story. Anthony Bukoski's lovely story, "The Korporał's Polonaise," for instance, documents Bukoski's ongoing passion for Poland and Superior, Wisconsin, the old country and the new, linked by the family history his characters so lovingly preserve. The story celebrates Polish Catholic immigrants and Superior, but it also poignantly reveals the human costs of separation from loved ones who remain an ocean, and a language, away.

The narrator of Gordon Weaver's "Saint Philomena, Pray for Us" begins his story by chronicling a series of visits to Marquette University's dental clinic in the 1950s. On each visit, before reaching the dental chair, he must pass the grisly portrait of Saint Philomena, who had all of her teeth viciously pulled from her mouth during her torturous martyrdom. Rarely has the pain of dental work been so excruciatingly rendered as it is in these opening scenes. But this story is not about dentistry; it is about faith and death and religion, and in writing about these things Weaver is clear-eyed and unflinchingly honest.

"Quick Bright Things," by Ron Wallace, takes us on a four-mile run through the farm country near Richland Center in Southwestern Wisconsin. On a hot summer day while his wife and daughters are away in Milwaukee, the protagonist Peterson—a history professor in his late forties—tries to shake off his feeling of doom by running. The details of the countryside—farm dogs, cabbage butterflies, crickets, locusts, and Queen Anne's Lace—give a rich texture to Peterson's musings about his own achievements and failures, his parents, wife, and daughters, and the "inexplicable emptiness of dread" he struggles to overcome.

The two opening chapters excerpted from Tom Joseph's novel, *Two Points*, provide more proof that detailed description can be as thrilling as action. The first chapter takes us back to June of 1934, when the narrator's grandparents, on their honeymoon, fell in love with the lakes of northern Wisconsin. The second chapter evokes the joy and restlessness the narrator feels on the first day of summer as his family prepares to head up north to their summer home.

Other stories in this volume are set far away from here, in other states and even other countries. Karen's Loeb's "How to Save a Cat and Fall in Love" is set in Florida on a sultry summer night and features June bugs, cicadas, plant life, a cat stranded in a tree, and trouble waiting to happen. The protagonist, a plant specialist scheduled to depart for Alaska in the morning, tries to win back his girlfriend's love by rescuing her cat. The story is full of humor and suspense as we experience the protagonist's dizziness caused by heights, love, confusion, and all the plant life around him.

The narrator of "Energy," by Julie King, is a former police officer shot in the head in the line of duty, now living in Texas. He is a marvelous character, full of pain and longing, displaced by bad luck and circumstances beyond his control. His wife wants a child he cannot give her, and his narration of their imperfect, yet loving, life together sparkles with his awkward tenderness. The lyrical ending is heartbreaking.

In Thomas Bontly's "December's Dreams," we find a Midwestern couple stranded in France between the Italy and London legs of the husband's sabbatical semester. The weather is much colder than expected; the Kelseys have recently been robbed during a bird-watching trip. They are at a low point of their "vacation," possibly of their marriage. The story takes us on a tour of their marriage and the husband's resentment, guilt, and frustration, into a moment of sudden joy.

"Fatimata's Ancestors," by David Tabachnick, is about a land dispute in the Guinea highlands between the Diallo family, who are nobles, and the Bah family, their former slaves. We see the action through the eyes of Sekou Traoré, chief justice of the Supreme Court who grew up in a family of wood carvers, and then through the eyes of Yacine, the patriarch of the Bah family, and his independent-minded daughter Fatimata. The politically charged plot is presented with a sense of the mysterious: witchcraft patterns drawn in the sand, a single arrow with a cock's tail, and the rich details of the food Fatimata cooks—"the richness of her sauce which sank happily into fluffy grains of fonio. . . fresh squeezed orange juice, and after dinner, cups of mint tea."

Regardless of setting, a good number of these stories are about human relationships, marriage, or loss, the subjects of much—perhaps most—contemporary short fiction published today. Martha Bergland's "Surface Tension" maps this familiar terrain beautifully, charting the interior landscape of someone thinking through his broken marriage. Even though this story is excerpted from a longer work, the main character's emotional life is fully drawn and as deep and clear as the water at the bottom of a well. "Summer Snow," by David R. Young, is about a young boy sent to his grandparents' house while his mother and father sort out the problems in their marriage. It features a wonderfully eccentric aunt and a family secret, and the narrative has the stark intensity of childhood memories.

In "Dining on Memories at the Starlite Cafe," by Marnie Krause, Vi Watkins sits down to dinner with her husband, Ed, at a diner in a small, Midwestern town. The food comes in due time, but Vi is starving for companionship and love, which she can never get from her impatient husband. The story is poignant and perceptive in its portrayal of a quietly unhappy marriage in a small town where men and women live side-by-side, never understanding each other. Seeing the sudden jovialness that transforms Ed as he talks about crops and weather with other men, Vi longs for the company of women.

Sometimes, a story's understatement strains against its dramatic subject matter, creating palpable tension that is woven through every page. Carol Sklenicka's "Putting Up Storms" is that kind of story, the title perhaps a metaphor for our often futile desire to protect those we love from harm.

In Peg Sherry's "Sand Dollar," two women friends from high school—now grandmothers—share a strained afternoon visit. The first-person narration sheds light on the history of the friendship: the two were best friends through high school and much of adult life, until the one who used to stay home, Ann, got a job and became too busy for the narrator, a high school history teacher. The narrator's nervousness, longing, and resentment ends in a gesture of grace involving a sand dollar from a vacation the two shared in Florida years earlier.

Of course, stories of relationships and loss need not be told without humor, as Margaret Benbow's and C. J. Hribal's stories prove well. In "Bachelor Party," an excerpt from *Matty's Wedding*, Hribal introduces us to

Matty, a no-nonsense Wisconsin woman who puts her grandchildren to bed, goes in search of her fiance, Luther, and finds him "sitting in a cemetery with a couple of doofuses on the eve of his wedding." One of the doofuses is Luther's son, Norbert, and Luther is blind drunk and weeping at the grave of his first wife. Hribal presents this situation with all the pathos and comedy it deserves, complete with an amateur harmonica player drunkenly accompanying a country and western song playing on the car radio.

Finally, the opening two sentences of Margaret Benbow's "Marrying Jerry" introduce us to a captivating first person voice we simply must listen to, and that voice more than lives up to its promise in this wonderful story, which delights with its language and its often wry, ironic tone.

We thank all of the writers who submitted stories for this special issue of *Transactions,* and we are pleased to have been a part of this new contribution to Wisconsin's literary heritage.

Kyoko Mori
Ron Rindo

Dining on Memories at the Starlite Cafe

Marnie Krause

Vi Watkins, sitting across from her husband Ed in a booth at the Starlite Cafe, looked over her shoulder at Mae Collins, who was entering the restaurant with Dotty Gardner and Eleanor Webb. Vi had a smile ready in case they looked her way, but they did not. She watched Mae toss a purse ahead of her into a booth and then slide the heft she carried since childhood over the red leatherette seat. She must have said something funny because her companions laughed.

Vi envied them, though not in a begrudging way. In fact she was happy for the women, admired their independence, wishing only that she might share their company. For all I know, Vi thought, they envy me not being alone, though after considering it a moment, she doubted any of the three would put up with Ed.

Not wanting to stare, Vi settled for quick glances. She wondered if their presence was a last minute decision, or if eating out on Thursday was a matter of routine. She imagined receiving a call from Dotty. "We're going to the Starlite. Eleanor's driving, pick you up at five-thirty." "Oh, good!" Vi heard excitement in her fancied response. "I'll be ready." Mae fanned herself with her hand and said something that caused more laughter.

"Cacklin old hens." Ed frowned. "Wouldn't surprise me if they all three laid an egg."

His comment would have been comical, allowing Vi and him a share of the evening's amusement, if it weren't so mean-spirited. She pictured Ed saying the same thing to a group of his friends, how they'd laugh and think him clever, but then he'd say it differently.

Vi looked at her husband. He sat hunched over, supported by an elbow as he read the menu. The fingers of his right hand drummed silently. He was seldom still. If he wasn't tapping a nervous rhythm, he'd likely be jiggling his foot. When he drove, his head rocked from side to side as though he were working a stubborn crick from his neck.

Vi glanced at the women, and Dotty said a belated, "Hello." Vi, smiling, raised her hand. Ed paid them no mind. Instead he leaned back, crossing his arms on his chest, and called, "Rosie!"

"Ready?" The waitress pulled her order pad from her pocket as she approached.

"I want the meatloaf and mashed potatoes. Don't be stingy with the gravy."

"Green beans okay?"

"I guess."

"Vi?"

Vi studied the menu.

"C'mon, let's get going," Ed said. "Take the meatloaf."

"I don't think so," Vi said slowly. She didn't dare look at Ed but assumed there would be surprise on his face. Her usual response to his pronouncements, especially in public, was, "All right, I'll have that too," hoping to make it sound like her idea all along. But she wasn't in the mood for meatloaf. "I think I'll have the chicken."

Rosie nodded as she wrote. "Baked potato, coleslaw?"

"Yes, that will be fine," Vi said, handing over the menus.

Ed looked around the restaurant, more empty than not. Vi gave up trying to hear what the three women discussed and followed his gaze.

"Business still isn't what it was," she said.

"What's that?" Ed said. He was a small, wiry man who had a way of talking that had a bite to it, a tone that made him sound more important than he was.

"I was just noticing how few people are here."

Ed turned to look at the empty booths behind them but said nothing.

Vi hesitated, then began again. "But folks do seem to be coming back." She watched Ed arrange the sugar packets in their container and then line up the salt and pepper shakers. She waited a few moments and said, "I still think people like . . ."

"They're at Hardee's," Ed interrupted.

Vi looked down at her hands, rubbing the thumb of one hand over the knuckles of the other. She knew they were at Hardee's. She remembered when it opened out at the crossroads, close enough to town, yet within sight of travelers on Route Eight. The arrival of Wal-Mart a year later sealed the fate of Woolworth's on Main Street, where Vi had worked part-time in yard goods for almost forty years. Some Woolworth's employees were hired by Wal-Mart, but Vi, already sixty and having never learned to

drive, had no way to get to the new shopping center. Ed could have taken her, but he was semi-retired by then and wanted her around the house. The demise of the five-and-dime ended what little fellowship, guarded and tentative, she'd known.

Lots of things had changed in the five years since Hardee's came to town. The bank had moved and a school was added. A bad storm uprooted many trees on Vi's street, giving her neighborhood of older homes the barren appearance of Sunset Meadows, the new area west of town where trees were no taller than shrubbery.

In this changing scene, Vi's external life remained constant while her thinking evolved. She had little opportunity to share her opinions, most of which were generated by guests on the daytime talk shows. "Bunch of freaks," Ed called them, and, yes, Vi had to admit, rather odd people were often on the programs—certainly no one she cared to live next door to. There were times the unpleasant relationships described on the shows were more than Vi cared to know about, and she'd run through the channels, seeking something less unsettling.

Recently she'd had the Starlite Cafe on her mind. Though rather deserted these past few years, it would always serve a need, Vi decided. It wasn't just that folks couldn't abide burgers and fries forever, or even that a bowl of homemade soup and a lean pork chop done up golden brown was better tasting. No, it was because places like the Starlite encouraged people to linger, enjoy another cup of coffee, share a few words with Rosie. That's what would bring them back. It was the very idea of "fast" in regard to food that Vi believed folks would tire of eventually.

She was proud of her silent convictions. To her they were like math problems done without paper. Her greatest disappointment was that she never got to ask of friend or stranger, "What do you think?"

Dotty was telling Mae and Eleanor what had happened on Regis and Kathie Lee. Vi wondered if Dotty's hearing was going, she talked so much louder than the other two.

"Wouldn't be all that carrying on if Walter was around," Ed said, referring to Mae's husband, who, needing more care than Mae could give, was in a nursing home. "Them three come to eat or what?"

Vi knew better than to defend the women. She would have felt confident saying, "I think they come for the company. For the food, too, but mostly for the company." But she didn't. Instead she said, "I heard on the television that laughter is good for digestion."

"Y'watch too much TV," Ed said. He turned to find the waitress. "More coffee over here."

Rosie refilled their cups.

"That meatloaf's taking long enough," Ed said.

"It's the chicken takes a little longer."

Ed gave Vi a look. "I figured," he said.

A grin replaced Ed's frown as he gazed beyond Vi toward the door. Vi looked behind to see the Miller brothers, Bob and Stanley, wiping their feet.

"Starting to rain," Bob said.

Before Vi could look back, Ed was up, coffee in hand, headed to where the Millers were taking seats at the counter. Vi turned to see them better. She wasn't interested in what they talked about—more than likely something to do with cars, since the Millers ran the garage—but she was always taken by the change that came over Ed in the presence of other men. Vi observed him as he spoke, animated, giving Stanley a pat on the back. She watched a bit longer as the men nodded their heads, lending authority to some minor consensus.

Vi imagined herself joining the women. It would be a nice thing to do, but would they welcome her? They never had before. In fact, nothing had changed in Vi's relationship with Mae and Dotty and Eleanor since childhood. There was a woman once, Margaret Barnes—Margaret Carter when she came to town—a pretty divorcee who took a job at Woolworth's. She was assistant manager within a year and a friend to all, including Vi. Margaret never fell in with any of the several small groups of women who cut themselves off from everyone else.

One day Margaret asked if Vi would like to take the bus to Milford to see a movie. It was *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. Even after some urging Vi said no, but Margaret teased, said Ed would never miss her, which was true. "Come on, Vi. It will do you good," Margaret said, and finally Vi agreed to go. They decided to see the early show the following Friday when Ed would be busy.

On hearing her plans, he railed about the house, slamming doors, throwing the newspaper. Vi couldn't remember what he'd said besides, "She'll be leading you by the nose in no time," and the hurtful, "What's she want with you, anyway?" In the end, Ed said no wife of his was going to go running around with a divorced woman. Vi backed out of their date, and Margaret never asked again.

"I'm sorry you're upset, Ed, but the movie sounds good, and Margaret and I are going." That's what I should have said, Vi thought, put my foot down for a change. Might have been no harder than ordering the chicken.

Vi glanced at the women and saw Mae staring at her. Vi quickly looked away. She reached for her purse and removed a date book with an attached pen. Paging through, she found a note for her dental appointment. She wrote over the time, 10:30, several times before returning the book to her handbag.

Turning toward the window, mirror-like in the growing darkness, Vi saw reflected a slight, gray-haired woman with glasses, her back as straight as a well-made seam, looking for all the world like an aged school girl waiting to be told what to do. She relaxed a bit and leaned forward,

circling her cup with her hands, enjoying the coffee's warmth against her palms. She was suddenly struck by the memory of a long forgotten girlhood friend named Helen, who had come to town to stay with relatives when her mother was ill. Cancer, or maybe a nervous breakdown. Vi wasn't sure, but she knew it was serious. The girls, both shy thirteen-year-olds, became close friends. One day in early summer, with windows wide and a lilac-scented breeze stirring the curtain, they kissed—several times—soft, pleasant kisses. Vi quickly took her hands from the cup, clasping them on her lap. She looked at the women, expecting them to be staring back at her.

After a moment, Vi let her mind travel back to that day. What had prompted them to kiss? She couldn't recall, but they rarely played anything other than house. Most likely, it occurred to her now, Helen had been the father, coming or going to work. The kisses were part of the game and their innocence made Vi smile. She sipped her coffee, curious if kisses between lesbians had that tenderness about them, or if they too had a kind of urgency, ignited by desire, like that which drove Ed, making him hard and demanding.

Though it made Vi wonder, she knew she wasn't apt to learn more about it unless it was discussed on TV. And it could be, because you never knew what might turn up on Montel or Sally Jessy Raphael. Lot stranger things were talked about.

"Chicken and a baked," Rosie said, setting the order on the table, startling Vi.

She felt color rise on her cheek. "Thank you."

Ed slid into the booth, taking up his fork as the meatloaf was placed before him.

"Enjoy," Rosie said.

Vi looked at her food. She was hungry when they arrived, but the coffee had taken the edge off her appetite. She picked at the chicken, rearranging more than eating it. She watched Ed as he ate, much too fast and with conspicuous gusto, but neatly, gathering up gravy with bits of bread, spearing green beans with swift sure jabs.

Vi held her fork poised to eat, but she turned toward the darkened window, wondering what became of Helen. She might have been sickly like her mother and died young, Vi thought, or she could be alive and well, living no farther than Milford, with children and grandchildren.

What fun they'd had, sharing secrets, collecting magazine photos of Tyrone Power, sitting on the stairs, eavesdropping on the travails of *Mary Noble, Backstage Wife*, which Vi's mother listened to while doing housework. Vi remembered the ironing board creaking as Mother worked through the mounting tension of Mary Noble's complicated life. Vi and Helen, meanwhile, just out of sight, fought giggles.

Both girls had been sweet on Clifford Peterson, the young man across

the street, two years older and as shy as they. Unlike most of the boys, he was polite and studious, with a talent for drawing. In high school Vi had been hopelessly in love with Clifford. He never came back after going away to school and settling in Kansas City, where, Vi once heard, he designed greeting cards. Clifford's kisses would have had that gentle quality, Vi decided. They would have been tendered with a sensitive kind of love.

Her memories surprised her, coming as they did, unbidden, pleasantly recalled, yet leaving her with a sense of sadness. Vi looked around the Starlite, at its handful of customers. She found it appropriate somehow, though she didn't know why, that her remembrances were being rekindled there.

"Git movin," Ed said, reaching for the last dinner roll in the basket between them, "I'm near half done."

Vi took a bit of coleslaw, but its vinegary taste, which normally didn't displease her, tonight was strong and bitter. She sipped her water, speculating on who she might be if she'd moved on, like Margaret and Helen and Clifford, left her small community where, it occurred to her now, others only saw people as they'd always been.

Laughter from Mae, Dotty and Eleanor, joined by Rosie, broke Vi's reverie. She noticed Ed look over at the women and shake his head. Eating was serious business to him. Vi knew he was getting irritated and would likely suffer from an upset stomach later on.

When he finished, Ed laid his fork on the table next to his plate, just as shiny, Vi noted, as a dish set before a hungry pup.

"Why'd you even order?" he said. "Looks like you didn't eat nothin."

"I'll take it home. Maybe you'll like it later."

"Yeah, well, forget the coleslaw."

Rosie returned with coffee. Seeing Vi's dinner, she said, "Anything wrong?"

"Just ain't hungry," Ed said.

"I'd like to take it with me."

"Sure. I'll get a container."

"Bring a slice of apple pie while you're at it," Ed said.

As he ate his dessert, Vi again tried to see herself in different circumstances. She couldn't, but it didn't matter. It was too late now. And compared to talk show women, who were battered or suffered men who were drug users or carriers of all manner of disease, her complaints were trivial. She knew Ed couldn't get along without her, yet she had no sense of identity apart from her own; no feeling of worth or importance fostered by what she saw reflected in the eyes of others.

It's what love should do, Vi thought. Real love, the sort one heart feels from another. She'd long ago given up on the storybook variety she believed in and hoped for as a young woman. It hadn't survived courtship, a period of few romantic memories. Though there had been an incident that

held great promise; recalling it still warmed her. It was the day, nearly fifty years ago, when Ed lifted her down from the Ferris wheel carriage at the county fair. Two of his friends standing nearby hooted. "Go on," Ed said good-naturedly, with a wave. Then, red-faced, he took Vi's hand as they stepped from the platform. How happy she had been at that moment.

Ed picked up the last of the pie crust and popped it into his mouth. He finished his coffee, pulled a paper napkin from the table dispenser, and vigorously wiped his lips and chin. He took another napkin for his hands, then used it to sweep together the crumbs around his plate. As Vi gathered her things, she noticed him breathe deeply and sigh. She thought of Pepto-Bismol, making a mental note to check the cupboard, to see they weren't running low.

C. J. Hribal

Bachelor Party

Excerpt from *Matty's Wedding*, a novel

Matty has a pretty good idea of where Luther is. While she is helping put the boys down at Rose's—Charlie and Bill cling to her neck, ask for stories, water, a trip to the bathroom, a song, *please, Gramma, oh please oh please oh please oh please oh please!*—she imagines Luther at the Y-Go-By. He's keeping an eye on his son Norbert, who's burst in with Byron Joe and Vernon Haight, Jr. and Leo Baumgarten, Augsbury's Mount Rushmore of Indolence.

Luther would be there because he believes he can keep Norbert out of trouble by keeping him company. He's been doing this for a week now. He sits at the bar for an hour or three while the Mount Rushmore of Indolence shoot pool and talk dirty, and when he's heard enough, he says, "Come on home, son," as though the words "home" and "son" meant anything to Norbert. And Norbert says, "Run along, Dad. I'll be along directly." And the next day, when Luther's already up and running a hose over the concrete barn slab, Vernon Haight, Jr.'s pickup or Byron Joe's party van—a phone company panel truck with an easy chair and a sofa bed thrown in back—comes wobbling past, on their way to Vernon, Jr.'s to sleep away the previous evening. The Purple Palace on Highway 10 has striptease till three, and the private parties go on a lot longer than that. Four young bucks with a wad of money could arrange for themselves quite an evening. Norbert has already said he'd like to take Luther there for his bachelor party. Luther rarely drinks, so even his feeble attempts at keeping up with his son result in his weaving into the house like a drugged spider.

The boys are down and Millie's forehead has been kissed—she needs one Mmmwaaa! right over each eye before she'll go to sleep—and Matty's stirring up pitchers of lemonade and iced tea for the family breakfast the next morning. Tonight, Matty announces to Rose as she stirs, tonight she's going after him.

Rose, from the living room, calls out seriously, "Be careful, Mom."

"Be careful?" Matty laughs. "Dear, I'm going to a bar, not a crack house." She shoves a jar of pickles aside on the top shelf of the refrigerator to make room for the iced tea.

"I know, Mom, but you seem so, I don't know, intense, earnest. You practically drilled Millie with those kisses."

"Ol' howitzer lips."

"You know what I mean. I just think, I mean, I'm not saying to be careful on account of your safety, okay?"

"Okay. You want I should put tea on for you?" Rose is sitting in her easy chair with the lift seat so she can go from that to her wheelchair. Her crutches are behind the chair by the window.

"No, I'll be okay. I'm just going to set here and let the beer percolate through me. If I drink any tea, Joe'll come home and find me floating in my own juices."

"He might like that."

"Mother!"

Matty leans over slightly to give Rose a kiss above each eyebrow. "There you go, dear. If the boys or Millie wake up, you have some extras."

"Mom, be careful."

"I will, dear. Honestly, I will."

Her good mood lasts until she's in her own driveway—Luther's driveway, really—putting on her turn indicator to signal a left into town (funny how even going out of her own driveway she puts on her turn indicator—this in a town where nobody signals because most everybody knows where you're going anyway). She had driven home from Rose's just to check if he's there. But the house lights are off, as are the barn lights, and it's only the purplish white halo of the mercury lamp high on its pole that lets you know you're in a circle of civilization, a safe spot on the edge of the prairie. She decides, shifting into second and then third, that if she finds Luther tipsy at the Y-Go-By, she will be furious. She'll sit with him for a moment, order a club soda maybe, and then say under her breath, the words cutting over her teeth so they reach him raggedly, grinding his ears raw like sandpaper, "I'm not going to embarrass you by screaming, but you get your fat ass off this barstool immediately and come home or there's going to be hell to pay forever." Then she'll say brightly, "Thank you, dear. I'll see you at the house in a while, okay?" and leave separately, her purse clutched under her armpit.

But she barely goes a hundred yards when she crosses a rise near the

end of Luther's property and sees lights in the cemetery. She stops, her elbow out the window, and, over the engine's idling, hears the plaintive, off-key wail of a harmonica wielded by an amateur.

She drives down another quarter-mile to the stone and wrought iron entrance gate and takes the winding gravel drive back to where she saw the lights. It's near where Marion, Luther's first wife, is buried. There's a small fire there, banked between two headstones. Byron Joe Gunther's white whale is there, the phone company logo spray-painted over with brown paint. It's his lights that are on and his car radio, tuned to the country and western station in Appleton. A honey-husky woman's voice is singing a very slow, tumbling version of "I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry," accompanied on the radio by not much more than a slow-thrumming bass and in the cemetery by Byron Joe's inept harmonica playing. A cat with its tail pulled would produce less reedier wails.

Byron Joe is slouched against the van's grillwork, his belly hugely pregnant with hops, his green sleeveless T-shirt not quite covering the swell of belly flesh as it cascades like a hanging snowdrift over his jean tops. He cuts his eyes at Matty and tries running a trill, but the effect is more like the plaintive, saggy noise you might get from hurling a tabby at an accordion.

A little ways off sit Luther and Norbert, their feet splayed, bottles rising from between their thighs. Norbert's feeding the fire. It crackles like static. Luther's face is streaked with tears; his eyes are glassy, gleaming. His truck's behind him. In the three years since Herbert Tessen courted and lost her, the word he painted on the driver's door panel hasn't faded quite like the rest of the finish. The truck's a creamy, pastel green, the color of a doctor's waiting room, and the dribbly WHORE Herbert painted stands out in ghostly forest green. You can barely see it in daylight, but with Byron Joe's headlights on it, it's like the name on somebody's boat: SEA WITCH or CASSIE'S FOLLY or some other hideous monstrosity done up in reflective black and gold letters. Why would anyone do such a thing? Matty wonders, but the tableau of misery spread out before her would seem to indicate people are capable of just about any stupidity. Remembering her two evenings with Porter Atwood when Ben was dying, she hastens to include herself, but that was at the height of her grief. Luther is sitting in a cemetery with a couple of doofuses on the eve of his wedding.

Byron Joe, true to form, cuts off his wailing and belches lewdly.

"Evenin' again, Matty."

"Good evening, Byron. Practicing, are we?"

He nods towards his van and the husky singing emanating from the radio. "If she can do it, I can do it. It's never too late to be somebody in the music business. Maybe in a few weeks I'll shy away to L.A. and be somebody. You wait and see." In his beefy, lard-like hands the harmonica looks like one of those tin pipes you get in Cracker Jacks. It sounds like it, too.

Unless he's trying to raise the dead, he's chosen a curious career path: town loaf and inveterate trouble-maker makes good in L.A. as harmonica player.

But Byron Joe is too big and frequently too violently drunk to make fun of. "You keep practicing, Byron. You'll catch somebody's eye eventually."

"Caught the eye, the shoulder, the whole damn thing already," Byron Joe says. He cocks his head towards his van a second time and calls, "Louise? You ready?"

A giggle in reply from the van's insides. "Almost, Ronnie." It's not a voice Matty recognizes.

"We were figurin' on doing this at your wedding," Byron says, and tunelessly approximates "Here Comes the Bride" on his harmonica.

A blond woman in a Lincoln green teddy and a feathered Peter Pan hat comes out the back of the van. Her heels wobble in the soft earth; she's young, maybe nineteen. "Oh, hi, there," she says when she catches sight of Matty. "I'm Louise. I'm a dancer."

"You are indeed," Byron Joe says and razzes on the harmonica. Louise recognizes this is not the time or place for harmonica razzing or impromptu dancing. She lets her eyes fall. "Ronnie said I could change here and he'd get me back in time for my next show. I'm seventh at the Purple Palace, shows at three and ten," she announces rapidly, like she's listened to and believed too many carnival barkers. Then she adds, "We didn't mean any harm. Ronnie's always pulling some stunt. He says I'm prettiest when I look to be in trouble." She waits a second, and then her eyes lift. "Are we in trouble?"

Matty shakes her head. "I'd like to put on a sweater at least, Ronnie," Louise says, and disappears inside the van. Through all of this Luther and Norbert have not said one word. Occasionally a stick cracks, and Norbert places the two ends in the fire. Shaking the sticks, he sends up a gussy of miniature fireworks. They look like orange fireflies rising in squadron.

"Evenin', Matty," Norbert finally says. His intonation is even flatter than Byron's.

"Good evening, Norbert. Have you and your father been out here all day? If I didn't know better, I'd say you were." There's a pile of brown and green bottles in the gap between them. Norbert removes a new one from the case he's leaning against, and the empty nestles against its brethren with a friendly clink.

"Pretty much. Me and Byron left for a bit to see about the Round 'Em Up and fetch Louise between shows, but otherwise we've been keeping watch with Luther here."

"Watch?"

"He said he needed to get away from the goings on at his place. Or your place. Or whatever it is. He said he needed to think. Maybe he needs to convene with Ma's spirit. Or Dana's. He's been talking about that, too.

Who the fuck knows?" He takes a glug from his Leinenkugel's and belches, a single pop of air that doubles as punctuation.

Luther sits like a stone. He's staring straight out at the space between the van and the truck, where it's purply black and the trees are greenly dark and the gravesites look like baby teeth. It's a crowded space that's also amazingly empty. Luther seems mesmerized. His cheeks are wet from crying, and a fly crawls around an earhole. Matty squats on her haunches, then places a hand on his shoulders. "Luther?" she says as though he were asleep.

Luther slowly turns his head. His eyes are not blinking. The alcohol must have short-circuited his normal bodily functions. When he turns his head, it's like he's a robot. The voice, though, thick and gummy, is certainly, plaintively Luther's.

"Marion says it's okay for us to marry. It's okay, she says. We can. Marry, that is. It's okay, Matty. Really. We can. We can marry."

Even though he uses her name, it doesn't seem likely he's seeing her. Perhaps when she first came up and Byron Joe and Norbert greeted her, he heard the familiar bent of the syllables and the familiar stayed. But that's not recognition. It's pressing something down in putty, meaningless. Does the putty know it's received the impression? Does it know it's stretched, accommodated, given way? Of course not. Another of Luther's body functions is on vacation. He is—Matty shudders with revulsion—blind drunk.

"Jesus, Luther, Jesus." She sits in the thick green carpet to stroke his forehead. It's clammy. It's been hot all day, and the air is finally cooling off, the water going out of it like a wrung washcloth. Almost immediately she can feel the dew soaking into the seat of her sundress. Then she smells something vinegary and acrid. She feels between his legs. Yes, he's peed himself. Probably a belatedly inaccurate response to what he'd have liked to have done when Byron first fetched Louise. Still another vacationing body part. He pees when he wants to come. She only hopes he doesn't lose control of his bowels. When she was little her own mother was quite old, and as she slipped into senility, cleaning up after her incontinence became a daily, horrifying ritual. She has an early glimmer of what future life with Luther might be like, and it smells like pee.

"Jesus, Luther," she repeats. "Jesus. Norbert, help me here. Help me get him up. Byron?"

Byron's nowhere to be seen. But the white whale begins to rock a little, and over the twangy up-tempo Dolly Parton number, Louise's bell-like voice is ringing like a cheerleader's until the van is shimmying like an unbalanced washing machine.

They watch for a moment, dumbfounded. Fireflies are lighting up outside the ring of the campfire like delinquent flares. Finally Matty says, "I need to get him home, Norbert. Will you lend me a hand?"

Once Luther's on his feet, he moves as though underwater. He has the deliberate movements of one learning to walk again. Of one who remembers he used to remember, but isn't sure you need to remember or simply do. The memory itself is maddening. As they pull even with the van, something else—the guttural gruntings and exertions of Byron—is weaving itself into Louise's cheering. If a grossly overweight salmon urging itself upstream were capable of sound, this would be its noise.

Even leading the somnabulatory Luther, Matty can't stop herself from shouting, "Byron! Give her the top!" And then they hear a sound like the slap of water underneath a pier, then a long grunted sigh, and they know Byron's spent himself and is instantly asleep. Matty only hopes Louise was either on top or is able to wriggle out from beneath his immenseness. She can imagine the poor girl there all night, trying just to draw an even breath. But then there's a metallic rustling from inside the van, the sound of tools being scraped or dropped across metal, the inside light comes on, and they can see Louise struggling into a jean jacket. Then she's holding up a gargantuan pair of jeans and is rifling the pockets.

Matty doesn't need to see anymore. Louise will get what she needs.

And then they are past her, past him, and it is only the varieties of black and green dark and the glow of the tombstones and the incandescence of the fireflies through which they move.

He pees himself again as she's leading him up the porch steps. Norbert helps her with Luther in the cemetery as far as the car door and then says he needs to help Louise get back to work. Uh huh, Matty says. She can imagine what that entails. Byron's is not the only pair of pants Louise will be looking through this evening.

Once Luther's splayed out in the back seat, a blanket under him to protect the fabric, she drives him straight home. No way is she going back to the Round 'Em Up. Mercifully, the children are already gathered and gone. And she's sure the adults have given up waiting as well. But then she looks up, and her oldest son, Matthew, is sitting on the porch swing, his position marked by the glow of his cigarette. When he inhales, it's like a new kind of lightning bug. She opens the rear door and gets Luther out. Bodily functions aside, he is more or less ambulatory, and Matty's doing more leading now, less yanking and tugging. She means to get Luther into the tub, clothes and all, and soak the stench of beer and urine out of him.

"I see you found him."

Between gritted teeth, "Ye-a-a-ssss."

"I see he's quite a prize." A half beat and then he says, "Mom."

They are on the porch proper now. The lightning bugs are still out, flitting freely over the grass. Matty thinks of men with miniature jet packs, trying not to collide. She decides that most men already have them.

"Matthew, come to the point." The exasperation in her voice is weighted

with fatigue. She was prepared to defend herself and Luther against any objections by her children, but the onslaught, the rebuke is so slight, it's like a feather landing at just the right moment on the heights of the walls of Jericho. Matty sees how slight and fragile her defenses are, how frantically hollow. If he were to say one more thing, she might burst into tears the way Leona Griemerts does at any function that requires wailing.

Matthew uncrosses his legs and strides over to her. He props open the screen door with a brick and, with her leading, propels Luther from behind into the living room and up the stairs into the bathroom with the tub. He knows where she wants him. They get his shoes off and one and a half socks. They plop him down and begin running the water on top of him. He's slumped asleep, and Matty turns the shower head so the spray hits nicely into his chest. A long guttural "OH!" escapes him, but all he does is turn on his side so the spray hits him in back, in his ribcage, just below the shoulder. She flips the tub lever to let it fill, then pulls the curtains so she won't have to look at him.

On the front porch Matty waits for Matthew to back out his station wagon. They are not going to talk about this. There's this understanding between them. Matty won't ask him about his evening—she wonders if at any point his old flame Rita Sabo made an appearance—if he won't ask her about hers. His elbow V's out the door. It's the gesture of driving common in her family. Even in winter Keillors drive with their elbows V'd, an unconscious ease of being behind a wheel. At least there's that. In the mechanical world, at least, they are at ease.

"Ma," he says before he drives the three point eight miles to Amanda's, where his wife Angie is waiting. "Go ahead and marry the guy. A man who'd do this to you knowing what you'd be like in the morning is either too brave, too unquestionably stupid to worry about, or too weak to give you any trouble. You can easily handle him, Ma. Marry him. He beats the stuffing out of Daddy in the weakness department."

Karen Loeb

How to Save a Cat and Fall in Love

It's one of those sultry Florida nights, hard to think of sleeping, hard to enjoy the beer that has formed a puddle around the base of the bottle. The suffocating weather is approaching intolerable when your beer bottle sweats this late at night. The June bugs are crashing and buzzing against the porch screen. All is not right with the world. Which means Greta isn't here on the porch. Mike doesn't know exactly why that is. And now he can't do much investigating because tomorrow he leaves for Alaska to study summer plant life. He last saw Greta a week ago at her place: the deluxe Snell Isle apartments where he thought he was staying over. He had every reason to assume this because they had been staying over at each other's places for two months. *"Your bachelor pad,"* she said, her voice curling in derision when they had what Mike thought was a spat and now realizes was probably more like a civil war.

"You're not reliable," she said. "Your work comes first, and now I think it's someone else that comes first."

"I told you," he explained, pinching the bridge of his nose under his wire-rimmed glasses, "that the woman who answered the phone that time was a neighbor."

It was the truth. Valerie is a neighbor. She lives across the alley with a passel of grown sons who ride motorcycles and all-terrain vehicles and cultivate pit-bulls, and a husband—Warren? Wally? Wacky?—who measures people's floors for linoleum and then goes on a bender before he can cut and cement it. No wonder Valerie wanders the neighborhood in desperation and brings pies over to Mike's house. Mike can't help it if she

fixes herself up to look pretty when she comes over. At forty-five, fifteen years more than Mike, she has red hair that he guesses is still her natural color and freckles even. The one time Greta met her, Valerie came over to Mike's bungalow wearing short shorts and a tube top. When they had their fight, Greta brought that up.

"You didn't have to ask her in," she said.

"She's my neighbor—she brought us a dessert."

"I somehow don't think she intended the French silk pie for me," Greta said. *"She was practically naked."*

"What are you saying?" Mike asked.

"I'm saying that you're not making things clear. That here we are involved, and you let this woman in, and an hour later I realize she's not going to leave. When I say, 'Mike, how about driving me home,' you remind me that I have my own car at your house. I drive home with the memory of you both sitting on the couch at one in the morning."

Mike takes a swallow of beer. In front of the porch, the rattling in the bushes commences. It's the nightly run of the possum family. He leans forward, glimpsing these animals that share his yard. He sinks back against the canvas in the director's chair, missing Greta, wanting her to be in the chair opposite his so he can reach over and touch the smooth skin on her face and twist his fingers through her curly spring-loaded hair that nestles on her head like an exotic fern, *Asparagus plumosus,* weaving around his heart and soul.

The phone rings. His muscles tense, but he doesn't move to answer it just inside the door. After the machine beeps, a woman's voice comes on with a message. It's Greta, talking about her cat, Jonquil. It's one reason he likes her. She has a cat named after a plant: *Narcissus jonquilla.*

He leaps for the phone, not knowing he had that much leap left in him at this hour. His hand plucks the receiver. She's still there. He finds that he's extraordinarily happy, giddy, that her voice is wafting into his ear. At first, he doesn't hear what she's saying. He's grooving on the lilts, the intonations.

"Mike, is that you or the machine?"

"Me," he says. "What's this about Jonquil?"

He hears a catch in her voice when she tells him the cat hasn't come home and asks what she should do. Would he come over and help her search?

He thinks of the plane he has to catch from the Tampa airport in the morning and determines that he probably isn't destined to get much sleep.

"Please," she says in a wispy voice.

"I'll get there as soon as I can."

It's a half-hour drive through city streets in St. Pete to her apartment. The back end of his station wagon is open—tied down over the extension ladder he grabbed from the garage. Lost cats and ladders seem like a good

combination. Besides, his father, who was Mr. Fix-it himself, always told him he'd never go wrong if he had a ladder with him at all times.

They're walking around the yard, acreage really, which surrounds Greta's huge Spanish-style apartment building. The moon lights their way in silvery patches. Greta's hair is caught in clumps by each ear, and a crooked part runs up the back of her head. She's wearing perfume with a wild flower smell that is causing Mike to lose his reasoning. They've been hiking in the yard for a half hour, whistling and calling, "Jon-quil, Jon-quil, here kitty kitty."

"Thanks for coming over," she says. They stop under a banyan tree, *Ficus benghalenis.* A streetlight from the alley makes her white T-shirt and shorts glimmer. "I missed you," she says. "I thought it was time to end this stalemate."

"I'm glad you called," Mike tells her. "I'm sorry you were so upset with me." His hand on her shoulder eases her toward him. She presses into him, her breasts flattening against his chest, her bare knees touching below his bare knees. She feels electric to him, and if he were completely honest, he'd admit he doesn't give a damn about her cat. He's glad the cat is missing if that's what it took for her to call. He leans down to kiss her.

"Wait," she says. "What's that?"

"What's what?" He tries for the kiss, but she leans back.

"Listen."

All Mike can hear are the crickets and the million other insects rustling about.

"It's Jonquil. I heard her."

"Are you sure? It could have been the wind," he says with hope crowding his voice. The moment is over, and he feels desolate as she backs away.

She calls in cooing tones, "Jonquil, Jonquil, Jonquil."

Her persistence pays off. A loud meow startles them into holding hands for a second. Mike takes this as a good sign even though Greta lets go quickly. "Where is she?" she asks.

"Over that way." They walk quietly through the grass, listening. Another meow. This time it's overhead.

"There she is, Mike. Oh, Jonquil, you poor kitty." She looks up, and he follows her gaze. There's the cat, its puffy white fur visible for miles, probably. It's a calico because of token orange and black splotches, but it's mostly white. A true glow-in-the-dark cat.

"Jonquil," Greta calls. The cat meows in answer.

She's perched on a thin branch of a toothpick of an avocado tree, *Persea americana,* about twenty to twenty-five feet up, Mike estimates, which is just great because his ladder only extends to fifteen feet. Already he imagines himself shimmying up the rest of the way, grabbing at Jonquil, who scoots just out of his reach, then losing his grip and falling to the soft

Bermuda grass below, *Cynodon dactylon*, which, when he hits it, will feel like ice picks. As he lies there numb, with the pain of many broken bones, he will see, through glazed-over eyes, a large white clump moving downward through the branches. He knows this is his fate, and he also knows that, if he wants the woman, he has to go after the cat.

"Can't we call the fire department?" Greta asks.

"Sorry to disillusion you, but they won't rescue cats. It's an urban myth, like alligators breeding in sewers and coming up through toilets. Wait here and talk to Jonquil a minute. I HAVE A LADDER!" He bounds off, his long legs sprinting over the grass. "Get the ladder, catch the cat," he chants. He's elated that Greta is talking to him but dreading the climb because he has never liked being more than a few feet off the ground.

Now he's on the ladder, which is stretched to the max. If he doesn't look down, maybe the vertigo won't set in. He's peering into the shining, saucer eyes of Jonquil, who is regarding him coolly from her branch five feet above. "Come on, Jonquil, just a little closer," he pleads, reaching his long arm as far as it will go, which is not far enough. Jonquil meows but doesn't move. "Jonquil, you feline fiend," he says in what he hopes are dulcet tones, "get your furry rat-chasing hide down here, dammit." He hopes Greta didn't hear.

He descends half-way. Greta stands by the ladder, her face crimped in distress. "I've got an idea," he announces. Until he says it, he hasn't a clue of what to do next, but it sounds good and it buys time. "Get the basket," he says. "You know, the one you have your *Ficus carica*, your fig plant in. I'll stay here and talk to Jonquil." She gives him a confused look. "The plan is . . . " He pauses. "To get the cat to jump into the basket." She doesn't protest as she turns and runs toward the building.

Ten minutes later she's handing up to him the three-foot-tall basket shaped like a tube. He grasps the straw handle on the side and climbs higher, clucking to the cat.

As he approaches with the basket, Jonquil does something maddening. She edges back on the branch, so she's no longer directly above him. Now she's to the right, regarding Mike with terror, and, he suspects, some amusement. He reaches the basket up and over, leaning as much as he dares, his heart pumping, calling to Greta, "Keep the ladder steady."

The basket reaches within two feet. If this plan works, and suddenly Mike thinks it will because the cat is perking up her ears and extending her neck, then she will jump into the basket. What he has just realized and Greta has no knowledge of yet, is that when the cat jumps, Mike will be so off-balance that he won't be able to keep hold of the basket. It will fall, feline cargo and all, to the ground. He's not sure how to tell her this and maintain his balance and concentration, so he continues talking to Jonquil. "Come on, kitty, pretty kitty. Jump, you rascal."

"Jon-quillll," Greta calls, anguish in her voice.

"Hold the ladder," he hollers as the cat jumps with a heavy, well-fed thud straight to the bottom of the basket. It jolts out of his hands and plunges through the skinny branches, crashing to the ground.

"Ohhhh, my poooor cat," Greta wails. She lets go of the ladder, causing it to sway for a moment, sending dizzy waves through Mike, who's cautiously climbing down.

Once on terra firma he feels much better. Jonquil is crouching in the basket, which is on its side. Greta has to reach in and disengage her claw by claw. They're able to determine that the cat is traumatized but uninjured. Greta holds her large bundle of cat like a trophy. The trophy burrows its head into the crook of Greta's arm and refuses to look at her rescuer.

"I don't know what upset me more, the cat in the tree, or the cat careening to earth," she says.

"I would have lost my balance," Mike explains. "I couldn't hold on to the basket."

"I realize that," she says. "I didn't know if you knew that, and I know Jonquil didn't know." They laugh. "Thanks so much. I know you have the big Alaska trip, and it was asking a lot of you to come over. Jonquil thanks you, too."

"She's a sweetheart," Mike lies, stroking her back, feeling skin twitch beneath fur.

"What time is your flight?"

"The shuttle comes to my house at six a.m."

"I don't have my watch. What time is it?"

Mike glances at his wrist. The phosphorescent dial is lit up like a landing strip. "It's almost three-thirty. Come on, I'll walk you to your door." He grabs the basket and puts his arm around her shoulder and hugs her, and the cat, to him as they walk toward the building. "You'll probably be able to sleep in and do a half-day tomorrow," he says.

"No way. I have four new clients to interview in the morning. My boss doesn't expect alert, but he does expect a body. Besides, you can't blow off people who have appointments."

"They're not like plants," Mike says. They're at her door. "Why don't you put the cat inside," he suggests.

"Good idea." She bends down, lets the cat cascade out of her arms, and stands, facing him. "I'm glad we're talking," she says.

"Me, too. I missed you." They fit easily into each other's arms and kiss for a long moment. "If I don't leave this instant," he tells her, "I'll do something I'll regret, like miss the shuttle." They kiss again.

"Good trip," she says softly, brushing his chin with the back of her hand.

"I'll call you next week. Nope, I'll call you from the tundra mid-week."

"I'll look forward to it."

When she closes the door, he can hear her talking to Jonquil, who's yowling about the momentary desertion.

He enjoys the drive home through the empty streets of St. Pete, still tasting Greta's sweet lips on his. He smiles when he thinks of her prima dona roomie, Jonquil. The *Palmaceae* are alive with wind, the fronds swishing and the trunks bending slightly.

At home, he's barely inside when he hears a knocking at the back door. As he walks through the darkened house, he figures he has enough time for a shower and shave and about an hour to relax. He opens the door to find his neighbor, Valerie, her hand on the frame. He's vaguely annoyed and is about to tell her how rushed he is, but even in the shadows, he can see that her red hair is uncombed and that she has a black eye.

"You didn't get that walking into a cupboard," he says.

"No," she agrees. "I didn't."

He moves aside for her to come in. It's the first time she's visited without bringing a pie or cake. With his hand on her back, he guides her through the house. His feelings for Greta rest neatly in his heart, right below the wooden button on his shirt pocket. In the unlit bedroom he coils his arms around Valerie, momentarily bemused about how this could be happening. But she's here and needs him, and he isn't going to have time to sleep anyway.

Martha Bergland

Surface Tension

A novel excerpt

One

When he hung up the phone the darkness had a new quality. Jack sat up in bed and watched as the darkness was slowly revealed to be jumping colors. Not just behind his eyelids but out there, too. The banging of molecules against each other seemed visible to him. But why hadn't it been clear to him from the beginning, when anyone who looks with two eyes can see that darkness is made of motion? Jack sat in the middle at the head of their bed, like some king he had read about who received his subjects in his bed chamber. But in the dark? There's been a lot of kings. Some king must have sat like this, only it was people around him, invisible in the dark, indistinguishable from the other jumping colors. No subjects here. No subject to contemplate but the dancing silence and darkness which Jack sat watching.

Everything that had seemed still or solid or not there at all now seemed liquid, active, full of motion and color, and, though he sat quiet in his same bed and though he felt calmed somehow by his earlier unexpected tears, he felt himself to be no longer a man whole and solid but made of millions of tiny motions bounded only temporarily by the power of his will, which at this moment felt no stronger than the surface tension that held water over the rim of a glass. He felt that he would soon be overpowered by the tiny, mass decisions of amoebae and cells and viruses and other inhabitants whose names he didn't know—bright pointillist things that added up accidentally to be Jack Hawn in Green Bay, Wisconsin. For a long time he was unable to move. He was afraid that what he was would spill out and that he would become someone else.

But why? Jack knew himself to be a reasonable man. The only thing that had happened to him, he told himself, was that his wife had called and said she wasn't coming back. This happened to men all the time. And Janet hadn't even really left him. She'd said she would stay there in Illinois, in Half Moon, to be where they grew up. She'd just said she thought they both should be there. She loved him, she said. And she was not there to be with his brother again. She was going to live in the old hotel where her dad lived. Jack believed her, believed that she was not going back to Carl. She'd asked *Jack* to go back to the farm and live with Carl, like brothers again, she'd said. You need your brother back. And Carl needs you. His drinking is bad; the farm is in bad shape. All Janet wants is for us to come back where we started from, to come full circle, to come home.

Jack sat very still. The motion was outside of him and inside of him too, the colors and bright unpredictable motion. All his reasoning did not quell the terror that with one tiny slip he would lose himself to the darkness and silence, merge with it. This is crazy, he told himself, but the fear stayed. The motion, the dancing of the molecules of color, could not be willed away with what he thought or didn't think, though he believed that any false, sharp thought might set in motion a chain reaction that would end, not in death, but in the dispersal of Jack Hawn.

After a while a picture came to him—black and white—from a movie in grade school, a picture of ping pong balls in a chain reaction in some glass chamber, and then the picture of himself flying apart like that made him laugh, a short, sharp snort that made him have to wipe his nose and startled the cat asleep on his feet. When Jack noticed the warmth and heft of the big cat, he automatically swept it off the bed with his leg but immediately regretted it. Why did he do that? That's the same, he thought, as automatically smashing the bugs he found around the house. Janet always made a big deal about gathering them up in paper towels and shaking them outside the door, even in winter. It irritated him—her prissy concern for spiders. She would release them outside to a slow death by freezing; in here they could get a nice quick squash and that's that. He'd even heard her talking once to some damn bug: "Get behind the counter before Jack sees you." How different they must be, he thought, if she had to talk to bugs in the house, and he had to kill them. But cats shouldn't be on the bed. They just shouldn't. It's unsanitary.

He was cold and pulled the blanket up around his shoulders. It was the goddamned air conditioner still going full blast. "Relieved. That's what I am." He said that out loud. Then the fear was gone, only dimly remembered. He told himself again that she called from down in Illinois in the middle of the night to ask him to go home, to say she's not coming back. But he couldn't go home, and he didn't know why, and right now he didn't want to know why, but he did know that now he wouldn't have to keep his face together in front of her and see hers always in front of him.

Jack got up and, shivering in his shorts, went into the living room, pried out the stick that jammed the patio door closed, and opened the door to the night air. He stepped out on the little balcony of their condominium and found that it was cool enough now to shut off the air conditioner and open the windows. Jack turned to go in, but, with his hand on the door, turned back to see what there was to see in the middle of the night.

The greenish lights lit the grass already scorched in June. There was no motion anywhere except moths and June bugs around the lights. No cars, no people, no cats or raccoons. Just the sound of other people's air conditioners and, in the distance, the interstate. Jack stood a moment, feeling foolish about his earlier fear, thought of the empty rooms behind him, and decided again that relief was what he felt. Then he heard a train, not just the whistle, but the engines and the freight cars passing over the rails, and again he was amazed that the train could sound so close in the night, when he knew the tracks to be almost a mile away. The sound always pleased him, made him close his eyes in contentment. He hurried back into the bedroom, shut off the air conditioner and opened the window wide. The train was even louder. He got into bed quickly so he could begin to sleep with the sound of the train. He was almost asleep when the sound faded away, and there was a moment when he thought he might slide into some fear again. Then Janet's big cat jumped up on the bed and curled at his back where Janet used to.

As he slipped into sleep, he saw, as if from the ceiling, Jack and Janet Hawn, husband and wife in bed. He saw them sleeping back to back, touching only at the bases of their spines, holding an empty space between them, a vase shape, a wedge of darkness. They were joined at the hips like twins born out of the same belly, not connected at the head or the heart, but joined by the accident of the place of their birth, their growing up together, their being neighbors.

Two

A rattling sound woke Jack up the next morning. It was the goddamned cat prying at the kitchen cupboard where Janet kept the cat food. "Cut it out!" Jack yelled, and the rattling quit.

He woke with an anger he figured he hadn't felt since the winter he and Janet were married. The anger rose like lava into his throat and made him feel heavy and breathless. He and Janet were married in October, so it must have been that next February that he had realized there either was or had been something between Janet and Carl. His own brother, his married brother.

Carl and Shirley and the kids had come over for supper. Ed was there, too, and Jack always wondered if Ed saw the same thing he did. He remembered the bitter cold that evening, the sunset coloring the snow, yet leaving most of the sky heavy and iron hard. He remembered the commotion of Carl and Shirley and the three kids coming into the kitchen with all that cold air, the confusion of the kids and coats and boots. And he remembered noticing a tiny stillness in the middle of all that, a little eddy in a fast current, between Janet and Carl, in the way they wouldn't look at each other or touch each other even casually; it was in Carl's wary face and in Janet's attention to the children, though her body was aware of where Carl was. Jack's pain was instantaneous; he knew he was right. He grabbed up Carl's little boy, began swinging him back and forth in the air in front of him—the boy screaming in delight and fear, "Windshield wiper! See, Dad, I'm a windshield wiper!"—back and forth, back and forth, to block out the sight of the two of them, to keep back the waves of knowing. Back and forth and back and forth, until finally the boy grew pale and clawed at Jack's hands and kicked. Jack let him down amid the silence in the room. Ed took him aside, asked him what they were going to do about the crack in the window over the stove.

He and Janet had made love that night, and afterwards he somehow let her know he knew. But that made it worse. Then he wanted to leave her, at least for a while, to walk out of the place where this pain dwelled, but that night there was a blizzard, and for three days they were snowed in. Jack wondered if he and Janet would still be married if it hadn't snowed that night. She had tried to explain the next morning, but he hadn't let her. He was afraid he would hear things that would make him feel even worse. He was afraid he would hear what the silence between Janet and Carl enclosed. He was afraid it was something still alive. Yet this feeling now was not as bad as it had been all those years ago.

Again the cat rattled the cupboard door. It was late, almost 9:30. Jack got up and went into the kitchen. He shoved the cat aside with his foot, got out the cat food, fed the cat, and started coffee. He knew he would feel better when the day was underway, when he was busy. This business with Janet wouldn't be so bad if he were going to work this morning, if he got that job in Sturgeon selling forklifts to the army.

After he had more copies of his resume made and put in his appearance at the unemployment office, Jack went to the Hardee's Drive-Thru and ordered two cinnamon raisin biscuits, a large coffee, and a large milk.

The voice came over the speaker: "We're not servin' breakfast no more!"

"'We're not serving breakfast *any* more!'" he said back. They all must have heard him because there was a lot of amplified laughter. He ordered a sandwich instead of the biscuits, and when he paid at the window, several people were peering out to get a look at the wise guy. A sign in the window said Hardee's was hiring. Would it come to that, working at Hardee's with retirees and high school kids?

They used to go out for breakfast every morning, Jack and Janet, Hardee's or some diner. Janet would meet him when she got off work at 7:00 after taking care of some sick old person all night, before he would begin his day reading the want ads, writing letters, calling around. They'd sit in a booth, and she'd be tired after her night's work. She'd want to talk, but she'd want to talk about them, she said, about the two of them, their problems, their plans—what they were going to do. But Jack couldn't talk like that. He tried to explain to her once or twice that he couldn't talk about a thing until he got a job, that his getting a job had to come first. Then there might be some things to talk about, personal things, but in the meantime, he couldn't talk about that stuff. He tried to tell her it felt like he was about half choked all the time. But she never got it. So they'd sit here, and the waitress would bring them coffee and take their order and go off to the kitchen, leaving Jack alone with this woman who was about to ask him a question that he couldn't answer or ask him a question that was really another question that he couldn't answer. Like she'd ask him, "How are Dave and Linda getting along?" Jack knew that it wasn't Dave and Linda she was asking about. It was Jack and Janet; how were *they* getting along? But she already knew the answer to that question: Lousy. So the real question was, Why Lousy? And the real question under that was, What are you going to do about it, meaning, How was he—Jack—going to change?

Janet never realized that he was a professional talker. He'd been a farmer and a graduate student, a manager of all kinds of stuff, a working stiff, a salesman, and an interviewee, and all those jobs took skill in keeping up a line of patter and steering talk in the direction you wanted it to go. The poor girl never had a chance against him. And he felt bad about it. He saw her face in his mind, and he felt bad about it. She still was pretty to him, but her face seemed tighter and smaller every year. The skin around her eyes looked fragile and papery. It was partly his fault; she would be prettier if she didn't have to worry about him getting a job and about him being a shit while he didn't have one.

Jack could see himself in a diner booth with Janet. He could see himself start up the talk; he would seem to begin to answer her question, then one thing would always lead to something else. He might start in about some bastards who interviewed Dave and didn't hire him, and that would lead to bastards who interviewed him and didn't hire him. And from there it was on to bastards who'd fired him and bastards who'd fired Dave. Then he might have a whack at the pricks who were running the country. The goddamned governor. Congress, of course. The oil companies. The bail outs. Then back to the bank they'd just pulled all their money out of because of their stupid accounting. The condominium management. You name it—there was no shortage of shit.

Jack would watch Janet's face as he talked. At first she followed him, waiting for an opening, hopeful, alert, purposeful, pathetic. Then as his

wall of words got thicker and thicker, she'd begin to be both angry and bored. Her face would begin to harden. She wouldn't even look at him; she'd look at people at another table. She wouldn't be listening or even pretending to listen. Now and then she would look toward him, but not at his eyes. She would look at his mouth; she would watch it talk, as if it were a disgusting rodent or something. Then he would begin to picture it himself—his mouth opening and closing, the dark hole of it, the lips wiggling around the words. He knew then that they both saw Jack Hawn as ridiculous—ridiculous and pathetic. Her face was grim and tight. And without moving her mouth, without a word, she was saying to him, You are a shit, Jack. It was as clear as if she had spoken right out loud. And she was right. But he couldn't help it. He *had* to not talk about what she wanted to talk about, and he had to say what he had to say. It always ended with Janet grabbing the check, leaving too big a tip. She would be out the door while Jack was still finishing his coffee.

Maybe she was right to go back to Half Moon; maybe she was right about them, too. Maybe if they were to be together, it had to be there. She was out of context here, too. And the questions were the same for her—where and how do you live your life.

He wanted to drive, but not south to Illinois. Too many complications, too many connections. He might go to Half Moon if just Janet were there, or just Carl, or just Janet's dad. But the three of them created an invisible force field that kept him away. Besides, the air there was thick with all the past and everyone's disappointment in him. Each time he looked at a face there, he saw that they saw what he could have been, standing right next to what he was. He wanted to go someplace where only strangers breathed the air—though he would have to take the damned cat. Somewhere the air would be thin and clear, not thick and humid like in Illinois and better than the air in Green Bay, which stank of the paper mills and the perfumed dryer sheets they made not far away.

After he left Hardee's he took his lunch down to Bay Beach Park. Jack thought of the time he and Janet had driven years ago to California to see the Pacific Ocean. From where he had stood on the sand at the edge of the continent, Jack had watched the sun go down into the water and waited to feel something. But all he felt was too heavy, too pale, dressed wrong. He was a Middle Westerner out of his element.

He parked the car and walked down to the shore of Green Bay, trying to count the times he'd gone to a beach since they'd lived in Wisconsin, within a mile or two of Lake Michigan or Green Bay. It wasn't very often. After the first few times, Jack avoided the beach, using reasons like, the sun is bad for you, or the sand makes you itchy, or there's nothing to do down there anyway. But none of those was the real reason: The beach made him feel awful. The beach in the summer had everything you could want to make you at least temporarily happy—blue sky and white clouds,

beautiful sparkling water, warm sand, and breezes—but it wasn't for him. It made his ache worse and his bad luck more apparent. What business does an old farmer have at the beach? Though the beach didn't cost anything, everything near the water sounded to him like money: the close little breezes blowing rivulets of sand counted paper money, the waves fumbled among coins, and the delicate change of hardware on sailboats was the coin of a prosperous realm. He never had the right clothes or a tan, and there was nothing he could take home from the beach but the small change of sand in his pockets.

His steps were awkward on the dry sand beside the bay. His jeans were too tight and hot. The walking worked his belly muscles and the muscles in his calves and thighs. Jack sat on the sand beside some driftwood and ate his sandwich.

There were only a few other people at the beach. A couple walked along the sand, and a boy stood at the end of a rubble breakwater fishing in the little waves.

When he finished eating, Jack got up and threw out the trash and then, at the edge of the water, he stepped up on a block of the boulder-sized rubble, balancing awkwardly with his hands in his pockets. The water under the concrete slabs made a hollow ringing he didn't know a word for. He turned to the boy fishing and asked him what he was fishing for.

"Perch," the boy said. He wouldn't look at Jack. He'd been warned about talking to strangers. But what the hell.

"Any luck?"

"Not yet." The boy's eyes darted around like fish, Jack thought, like scared fish in a bowl.

Jack wanted to stick around in case the boy caught a perch so he could see what a perch looked like, but this kid was too spooky. Jack walked back up the beach.

Jack's father wouldn't fish with him and Carl. When asked, D. E. would say, "Where the hell would we fish except at some 'bar' pit where you pay two dollars to fish all day with niggers?" When they wanted to fish, they would go over to Janet's dad's and, though he might be rigging the combine for beans, right then Ed would take Jack and Carl and sometimes Janet over to the state park, where they fished with the dusty bamboo poles Ed hauled down from the top of his garage. The fish they saw were not much bigger than the wriggling grasshoppers they put on the hooks, so they didn't catch anything, but Jack and Carl didn't care. They got to sit on the bank, staring down into water as clear and brown as tea while long-haired weeds moved in slow circles. And they got to hear Ed's fishing stories. They thought they'd heard all of Ed's stories, but if you got Ed in a new situation, it called up a new batch of stories. The only one Jack remembered was about one of Ed's uncles. He was "a drunk," Ed had said, "an alcoholic, as we say now," but he wanted to quit drinking. He lived at

that time with his wife and children outside of Shreveport, Louisiana and had a good job working for the gas company. To stop drinking he went fishing after work every day for a year. He got in a little boat all by himself and rowed out to the middle of Caddo Lake, where he fished until it was dark and too late to buy liquor. He caught a lot of fish, and he did quit drinking. At least that's what Ed said.

Since then, in the back of his mind Jack had held that spending time out on a lake in a boat was a cure for lots of ills. Maybe for Carl's drinking. It seemed a sane cure that would give you plenty of time to straighten yourself out and let others know you were serious. Jack wondered if it could work on his bad luck.

Though Jack did not really believe in luck, he believed that you could get stuck on a track that led only toward bad ends. It wasn't bad luck, he would say, but a kind of stink you took on when things started to go against you. At first you would be the only one to notice it, but after a while, some expression around your nostrils or under your eyes or some posture you thought disguised your fear made others look to see what you were hiding. Then they began to notice it, too, and they ran like crazy in the other direction. He knew that being unemployed for three years had made him stink.

The sun was warm, but the breeze cooled him off. Jack sat down on the sand. It would be nice to go fishing with Ed. Or Carl, the old Carl. One or the other. Not both. Their presence wouldn't ask as many questions as Janet's and everyone else's did. Even Janet's goddamned cat seemed to ask questions he couldn't answer.

In the last few months, Jack had caught people looking at him funny, asking something. Or else he was ignored by the ones who used to notice him—most women and confident men—and now he was noticed by a kind of person that had been invisible to him before.

People like the woman in that Greek diner in a strip mall—an old woman, so old or so sick her skin was like ivory and tight on her bones. She was walking out of the place supported between two big female relatives in sweatsuits. As they slowly left the diner, Jack had a long time to meet her gaze—a bald and startling stare, pure curiosity with no civilization in it, like a baby's stare. There could be no doubt that she found Jack's face interesting, and this was interesting to Jack.

The strangest was the man filling the gumball machine in that same diner later that week. The cafe was packed with the lunch crowd—men and a few women from nearby offices, factories, and construction sites. None of the customers spoke to him, but there was nothing wrong in that. It was a busy place, and he was a stranger. He'd do the same. Look up, classify the guy—salesman from out of town—then go back to eating the meatloaf.

The man came in carrying a steel box. He set the box down beside the

Lions Club gumball machine at the door. On the gumball machine he unscrewed something quickly, then dumped all the coins into a metal jar and put them into his steel box. Then he took out a rag and, squatting next to the gumball machine—the man was big, as heavy as Jack was—he wiped the gumball machine with the rag. Without looking at what he was doing, he wiped the stand, the post, the base, and then the clear globe. Then he started over and wiped it all again with the dirty rag, and he didn't look at what he did; he looked around. He watched from down under, invisible to everyone else; he looked around at the people in the diner. Here was a man looking in from the outside. He squatted beside the gumball machine, polishing and polishing. He met Jack's eye, no one else's. He didn't smile or acknowledge Jack's seeing him. His eyes and his smile could have been warm but didn't go that far; he only looked. Through all the tables and talk and crisscrossing of waitresses and clatter, he looked at Jack, and Jack looked at him. Where are we, Jack wondered. Where am I going?

The sun had come around, and Jack's jeans stuck to his legs. He remembered he was wearing those red briefs Janet gave him; maybe they looked like swimming trunks. Jack slipped off his jeans and walked down to the green water. The mothers looked up but looked back to their children. Slowly Jack waded into the water. Though he shrank from the cold water at first, his arms and legs and then his torso gave in to it. His weight was lightened. He swam to feel his borders blurring among the molecules of water. He swam a long way out, thinking of the life that moved in the dark water below him, and then he swam back looking at the land from behind the ragged tops of waves.

When he trudged back up onto the sand, everywhere he looked he saw water, just water. Clouds were water. The sky behind the clouds was the color of water. Water was between each grain of sand at the hard edge of the beach. The tracks of water were everywhere—in the miniature deltas in the sand, on the satiny wood washed up, on the smooth stones and the cracked ones. The light flashing off the surface of the bay might as well be splashes, it was so watery. The leaves of the locust trees growing over the bank were filled with water, and so were the trunks of the trees and every blade of grass and every stalk of weed. And the gulls and the fish. The live fish. Only the dead fish dried in the sand were not water. Nothing alive wasn't water. Everywhere he looked he saw the watery newness of the world, its sparkling, prickling moments held earth-to-earth with a fragile force.

He was water. Ninety-some percent water. As he made his way over the sand, Jack stopped and looked up. He turned all around. He was alone on the beach. "Water!" he said to the sky. "What would it matter if this 190 pound sack of water didn't have a wife?"

Thomas Bontly | December's Dreams

Joe Kelsey stood in the shelter of the little row of attached houses and watched the rain slanting across a similar row of gray stone houses across the street. Their doors and windows had all been shuttered, giving them the forlorn look of structures abandoned forever by their owners. A cold wind blew along the street, and Kelsey, bereft of his London Fog, had only a sweater and light jacket to ward off the elements. But it wasn't much warmer indoors, and he was enjoying one of the mild Cuban cigars he'd picked up in Carcasonne.

Inside the house his wife was fixing supper, experimenting with French herbs and spices, learning her way around the primitive kitchen with its cheap crockery and mysterious utensils. Neither of them had been able to work the awkward little contraption the French called a can opener. Actually, they didn't know what the French called it, because neither of them could speak more than a few words of French, in accents which brought sneers to the faces of the waiters, shopkeepers and officials with whom they dealt. Kelsey had finally hacked his way through the can of tomato sauce with a jack-knife and pliers but suggested that they'd better avoid canned goods from then on. Of course that meant daily trips to the market, thirty kilometers off in Carcassone, but at least such excursions gave them something to do.

The December dusk was settling in early, obscuring the muddy fields and wooded hillsides that lay beyond the village, but the narrow cobblestone lane was illuminated by tall vapor lights at either end of the block. Almost as if people still lived here, Kelsey thought. Perhaps they did live

here at other times of the year, when the village served as a bucolic retreat for French city-dwellers, but in this bleak season, only three of the thirty or so houses surrounding the hilltop chateau were occupied. The chateau was dark, its windows shuttered, its gate chained, its gardens untended. Beyond it lay the cemetery—its weathered crypts and tipsy monuments overhung by weeping willows, overrun by moss and ivy. Kelsey rather liked the cemetery, since there at least it was possible to imagine a spirited assembly on moon-bright winter nights, a ghastly frolic that might have passed for a social occasion.

Carolyn tapped on the kitchen window to let him know that supper was ready. Kelsey flicked his cigar into the street and went inside. He wiped his feet and hung his jacket by the stairs. Then he went to the kitchen and took a bottle of wine from the refrigerator. "Seems a bit warmer in here now," he said as he set about sinking the corkscrew.

"That's just because you've been outside," Carolyn said. "Or maybe the stove is producing a little heat. The circuits broke again, so I had to turn off the heat in the living room."

"Damn. I don't think this house was meant to be inhabited at this time of year. The agency should have warned us."

"If you remember," Carolyn said, "our first several choices weren't available after late November. That should have told us something about the climate, don't you think?"

"Yes, another screw-up," Kelsey said. "I can't seem to do anything right, can I?"

They had needed a place to spend a few weeks between the Italian segment of their year and the English segment. The south of France had sounded inviting, and Kelsey imagined balmy days on scenic beaches, a nude sunbather or two just to liven things up. That was before he knew about the *mistral,* that cold north wind from the Baltic Sea that swept across France and made it much too cold for sunbathing in December, with or without clothes.

They sat at the kitchen table, and Carolyn lifted the cover of the frying pan to reveal her lamb stew.

"Hmmm, smells good!" Kelsey said. "You're doing wonders in this miserable excuse for a kitchen."

"It's something to do, anyway," Carolyn said as she dished up the stew.

"If only it would stop raining, we could get out and see something of the country," Kelsey said.

"Where would we go? There don't seem to be any footpaths from the village, and every field or woodlot I've seen has been fenced. Besides, there's that pack of half-wild dogs to contend with."

"Well, maybe we could drive someplace—south toward the Pyrenees. We might find some places to hike in the mountains."

Carolyn looked unhappy, and he remembered that she had recently

developed a fear of heights. It was that detour through Switzerland, he thought; he never should have taken some of those back roads.

"We wouldn't have to go all the way up," he said. "Just far enough to find a park or something—a hiking trail that isn't patrolled by German shepherds."

"If you want to," she said and began to carve the long loaf of crusty bread.

He took a sip of wine and felt bits of cork on his tongue. Why was she always so damn submissive? If she didn't want to go to the goddamn mountains, she should tell him so.

"I'm just thinking of you," he said. "You want to see some birds, don't you?"

She put down her fork and brought her napkin to her eyes, which, Kelsey saw, were brimming with tears. "Joe, I don't think I want to see any birds, ever again! Not after what happened to us in the Camargue!"

"Oh, come on," he said, reaching for her hand. "It wasn't your fault."

"I was the one who wanted to go there."

"You suggested it, but I agreed. I was all for it. And anyway, I was the one who ignored the sign."

It had been a very small sign, hardly noticeable from the parking space they'd chosen: *Do not leave valuables in your car.*

Kelsey heeded such warnings when it was convenient, ignored them when it wasn't. Besides, he thought they were just going inside the Nature Center to look at the exhibits. But Carolyn found a naturalist who spoke English and suggested a nature trail that led past several ponds—only seven-tenths of a kilometer. Kelsey never considered staying with the car. He had forgotten about the sign. And after all, they had survived Rome, the city of pickpockets, and Naples, the mecca of muggers. Who would expect trouble way out in the middle of nowhere?

Later, they heard about the bands of gypsies who roamed the highways of southern France and used the Camargue as their sanctuary, but at the time he worried only because the walk was taking longer than they expected. He did try to hurry Carolyn along a bit, but after all, it was her first day of birding since they'd left Switzerland, and she had been very good about the things he wanted to see. Kelsey did his best to take an interest in the three or four mundane tits and larks they flushed from the wintery underbrush.

Even when they came back up the road and saw the small red van with its three swarthy, unshaven occupants barreling out of the lot—even then Kelsey wasn't unduly concerned. But when he saw the Citroen's door ajar and found its lock sprung, and when he looked into the formerly cluttered back seat and saw an emptiness that sprang at him like a spiteful rebuke, he realized that he should have heeded the warning on the sign.

As Kelsey swung the car around, Carolyn quickly checked beneath the

seat and found her purse; their travelers checks and passports were safe, at least. She clambered into the backseat and pulled up the cardboard shield which hid the contents of the trunk. Their two big suitcases were also still there. Nevertheless, Kelsey roared out of the parking lot and set off down the narrow gravel road across the marshland in pursuit of the red van. He had never been robbed before and was full of outrage, convinced that he could run the red van into the ditch and throttle its occupants.

Carolyn tried to reason with him: "Please, Joe—don't drive so fast! What will you do if we catch up with them?"

"I'll think of something," he said, but it was beginning to dawn on him that he couldn't risk their lives in such a foolhardy endeavor. He pictured the two of them in a muddy ditch, their throats cut, their eyes staring sightlessly at the sky, and knew sadly that he couldn't afford to challenge the trio of swarthy vagabonds.

They decided to drive into Arles and seek the assistance of the police. The gendarmes would come to their rescue. They would form a posse, ride out on the Camargue, track the culprits down. Or they would put out an all-points bulletin for the red van, set up roadblocks, round up a set of likely villains for Kelsey to identify.

But when they reached the city, they found that the gendarmery was closed for the lunch hour. A young officer informed them politely but firmly that their crime could not be reported until two p.m. then shut the heavy door in their faces.

Kelsey found it hard to believe that the authorities could treat their loss in such a cavalier manner. Not just his raincoat and his brand new carry-on, but his camera, all his exposed film, his notes toward a new book on the Romantics in Italy, and good God, their tickets! Their train tickets back to Frankfurt, even their plane tickets home to Minneapolis, had been in his bag. Carolyn meanwhile was beginning to make her own inventory of losses: her make-up, her hair brush, her prescriptions and his, their vitamins and aspirins, toothbrush and toothpaste, address books, and oh—their Italian souvenirs! The little gifts she'd picked out for their friends in Germany. "Oh Joe," she wailed, "it's all my fault. We never should have come here. I hate this place!"

Kelsey continued to hold and pat his wife's hand. "Hey, honey, for the hundredth time, it wasn't your fault. I wanted you to see something besides pigeons and starlings, remember? We agreed it was time to do something different. And anyway, we're not going to let this spoil our whole trip, are we?"

Carolyn wiped away her last tear and gave him a smile. "You've been wonderful, Joe. You really have. The way you dealt with the police and the insurance people and made all those phone calls—I couldn't have done all that."

"Oh, sure you could have," Kelsey said, though in fact he had been rather

impressed with his behavior. What Hemingway would have called "grace under pressure." He did what he had to do, fought his way through the French bureaucracy, looked after details, made the decisions Carolyn was in no shape to make. And most of all, he resisted the temptation to blame their misfortune on her or her birdwatching.

Kelsey had never understood his wife's passion for birding but no longer made light of it. Carolyn needed fresh air and open skies the way some people needed a career, a religious experience, or an extramarital affair. It was her hedge against time, against the loss of youth and the departure of her children. Kelsey wondered what he had ever found that could serve him as well as her birds had served her.

After supper they cleared the table and got out the cribbage board. Carolyn was already three games ahead and nearly gained two more on a skunk, but Kelsey came back strong, making it onto fourth street before she pegged out. They polished off the wine as they did dishes. By now it was just after seven, and Carolyn said she wanted to write some letters. Kelsey had written to several people that morning, and he was still too discouraged to try reconstructing his notes. Renaissance painting and romantic poetry, what a shopworn topic; if he never wrote the damn book, who would care?

He turned on the little black and white TV in the living room and checked each of its three channels. Though they were all afflicted by some form of interference, he managed to watch part of an old movie—aristocrats in powdered wigs prancing around some eighteenth century ballroom—then turned to a soccer match. Barcelona versus Lyon. Somehow he didn't greatly care about the outcome.

Shortly after eight, the doorbell rang.

Remembering the empty chateau and its spooky graveyard, Kelsey looked through the peephole before unlocking the front door. A large young man with wet black hair stood waiting on their doorstep. Kelsey recognized Jean Michel, the son of the only family still resident on their street. He quickly unlocked and opened the door.

"Hi, there. Come on in."

"Bonsoir, Monsieur," Jean Michel said with great dignity as he crossed the threshold. "I have come to speak English with you."

On the day of their arrival, Jean Michel had introduced himself and offered his services as a translator while they were staying in the village. He had also shyly indicated that he wouldn't mind a chance to practice his conversational English. He seemed like a nice boy—quiet, soft-spoken, serenely confident in his opinions—a bit like the Kelseys' own son, come to think of it. They had encouraged him to drop by whenever he could.

Kelsey took Jean Michel back to the living room. "Look who's here, honey," he announced. "We're going to have a little chat. Sorry it's so cold in here, Jean Michel. We can't run more than one of these little heaters or

we break the circuits. Could I get you anything—a Coke, maybe, or a glass of wine?"

Jean Michel smiled at the offer of wine. "No, no, a Coca Cola would be fine, please."

Somewhere Kelsey had heard that children were allowed to drink wine in Europe but perhaps only at the family dinner table. He went into the kitchen, got Jean Michel a Coke, and poured himself a stiff slug of cognac.

"So then," he said, sitting down across from the boy, "tell us about yourself. Do you go to high school?"

"Yes, I attend the school in Castelnaudary," he said. "It is my last year. Then I will go to the university."

"Ah, and what will you study?"

Jean Michel looked as if he had been asked this question too many times before. "I am thinking between engineering and mathematics," he said. And then, smiling, as if he had hit upon a more interesting topic: "Have you had yet the opportunity to visit some of our many local attractions?"

"We spent a day in Carcassone," Kelsey said, "but the weather's been so bad, we haven't been going out much. And we lost all our maps and guidebooks in the robbery."

Jean Michel had heard about the robbery. *"Voila!"* he said, producing a selection of maps and brochures from an inside pocket. "My parents anticipated this need. Perhaps you would like me to suggest some interesting itineraries?"

For the next hour Kelsey followed Jean Michel's finger around southern France and listened politely to his account of what each region had to offer the tourist. He particularly recommended the old fortress at Foix— "a most beautiful edifice," as he put it—and the drive from Foix to Quillan, through the foothills of the Pyrnees.

"But won't those mountain roads be icy this time of year?" Carolyn asked.

"I do not suppose it," Jean Michel said. "The weather is expected to improve by tomorrow, and the scenery along that route is quite beautiful."

"Well, honey," Kelsey said after Jean Michel had gone home, "maybe we ought to try it if the weather's halfway decent tomorrow. We really can't sit here and feel sorry for ourselves all week, now can we?"

"No," she said. "I suppose we can go somewhere else and feel sorry for ourselves." Carolyn did occasionally surprise him with her gift for irony.

Before they went up to bed, Kelsey turned off the downstairs heaters, made sure the doors were locked, and closed and bolted all the shutters. Their bedroom was bitterly cold. They turned the heater up as far as it would go and piled blankets and comforters on the old brass bed. The bed sagged in the middle so badly that they found themselves thrown against one another, like two people trying to share a hammock.

"I suppose we might as well make the best of the situation," Kelsey said, slipping his hand beneath his wife's sweatshirt.

"Joe! not yet! Your hand is freezing!"

"Oops, sorry."

They lay in the darkness, waiting for their hands to warm up. "Do you suppose we're feeling too sorry for ourselves these days?" Kelsey asked.

"Well, you are," Carolyn said.

"Thanks."

"I'm sorry, Joe, but you do keep second-guessing yourself. You've rewritten our itinerary a hundred times, and you're always complaining that we're not getting our money's worth, or that somebody's trying to rip us off. Even before the robbery you were getting a bit tiresome; now you're impossible."

"I try to learn from my mistakes."

"That's admirable," Carolyn said, "but at this point there's really no way we can change our plans, and no way we can alter what's already happened, so why keep torturing yourself?"

"There's always next time."

"Next time," Carolyn said with a little laugh, and Kelsey got the impression that the next time he suggested they spend a sabbatical year in Europe, she might have a few revisions of her own to propose—such as that he leave her at home.

They were quiet for awhile, and Kelsey reflected on that aspect of his character that could never rest satisfied with what life had given him. Last winter, when his chronic disatisfaction with his career and accomplishments had led to a prolonged period of insomnia, he asked himself one sleepless December night just what *would* make him happy. He came upon this vision of Carolyn and himself, as free and footloose as a pair of college students, ad-libbing their way around Europe, staying in old country inns and rented cottages, going wherever their fancy took them, seeing whatever there was to see. How soothing, and how motivational, that vision had become. And yet, when he had finally, after much planning and budgeting, made his dream a reality, during their first four months abroad he had found a whole new field of things to complain about. He deduced that dissatisfaction itself fueled the engines of his soul.

He was about to express some of these thoughts to Carolyn when he heard her breathing deeply and knew she was already asleep. He rolled over and, hooking an arm over the edge of the mattress to keep from falling back against Carolyn, set his mind on sleep.

Sometime during the night Kelsey dreamt that he was attending a costume ball in the chateau on the hill. He found himself dancing in a large and elegant ballroom with a strange woman. Some quirk of light in the mirrored room, the shifting shadows of the dancers all around them, prevented him from seeing the woman's face, but he knew she was attrac-

tive and charming and that dancing with her was a privilege. Perhaps she was a former mistress of the chateau, risen from the cemetery to host this gala ball, or perhaps she was an old flame from Kelsey's youth, come all the way to France to haunt him.

In any case, he knew even as he held her in his arms that she was a phantom who drew her power from the wickedness in his own heart. He thought guiltily of his wife, still asleep in their cold bedroom, then spotted Carolyn standing alone at the edge of the marble dance floor. She made no protest, voiced no rebuke. She just watched sadly, forlornly, as he waltzed his spectral partner around the room. Kelsey tried to concentrate on the dance, to enjoy his evil freedom, but increasingly his heart rebelled. Wherever he turned his head, he now saw Carolyn watching him with her sorrowful dark eyes. Filled with pity and remorse, he broke off the dance, took Carolyn by the hand, and led her resolutely from the chateau.

Kelsey woke from his dream and lay in the cold darkness, listening for suspicious noises. The old house creaked beneath the wind; its timbers snapped from the cold; but Kelsey felt confident that no demons had followed him home from the chateau. And he knew now why he had done the right thing in bringing his wife to Europe.

The next morning the heavy layer of cloud that had covered the village for three days began to tear apart. There were intermittent squalls but also glimpses of sunshine and blue sky. Kelsey and his wife ate breakfast, then packed a lunch and loaded the car with maps, guidebooks, birdbooks and binoculars. They drove south toward Foix, and the country roads were dry and lightly traveled. Bits of blue sky continued to appear overhead, and in the fields, large pools of rainwater reflected the restless movement of the clouds.

"So what birds are we looking for today?" Kelsey asked his wife, for despite her disclaimer of yesterday evening, she was alternately scanning the fields with her binoculars and paging through her *Birds of Europe.*

"Hard telling this time of year," she said. "We might see some larks or sparrows, maybe a thrush or two. There's a buzzard right now, soaring just beyond those trees."

"What's the best thing we could see?" Kelsey was inclined to go for big game, birdwise—the rare, exotic birds most birders waited lifetimes to see.

"Well, a golden eagle would be nice, or a black kite. The best thing we could see is a vulture called the *lammergeier.* It's extremely rare, found now only in the Pyrenees." She showed him a picture from her book.

"Hmm, he's a handsome fellow, isn't he? Too bad we won't be going high enough to find him."

Carolyn declined to comment.

They reached Foix late in the morning. Snow flurries alternated with bright sunshine, but the roads were dry. They explored the city, found a

place to park, and climbed the hill to the castle. Though not quite such a "beautiful edifice" as Jean Michel had promised, it was a moderately impressive hunk of military architecture. Perhaps because of the low clouds, the mountains were not visible from the windy parapets. Only a few ravens and magpies inhabited the castle grounds.

"The weather looks pretty good," Kelsey said as they returned to the car. "Should we try that route Jean Michel showed us, through the foothills to Quillan? We may find a few places to get out and walk."

"If you want to," Carolyn said—an answer Kelsey seldom found satisfactory, though in this case he decided not to query further. They ate lunch in a little park beside the river and set out.

For the first five kilometers the road followed the river valley, then veered to the east and climbed through a pine forest. A light mist began to fall, and Kelsey turned on the windshield wipers. "Is it starting to get slippery?" Carolyn asked.

"No, I don't think so. You just keep your eyes peeled for that lammerskite, or whatever it is. I'll handle the driving."

Though Carolyn never criticized his driving, she had begun to send signals that in her opinion he sometimes drove too fast, or inattentively. He knew she was especially nervous with the more aggressive pace of European traffic, but Kelsey considered himself a good driver and resented hints to the contrary—especially since she now relied on him to do all the driving.

They were crossing a high plateau, from which they could probably have seen the snowy peaks of the Pyrenees if not for the heavy clouds to the south. Ever since his first view of the Alps as a young man, Kelsey had loved the mountains and found nothing more inspiring than a range of snow-covered peaks. He hoped they would get at least a glimpse of the Pyrenees before they veered off for home.

The road began to ascend in a series of switchbacks with steep grades. The snow showers intensified, and Kelsey began to notice traces of white along the roadside. He thought of turning back but knew they should be starting down toward Quillan soon. This route, Jean Michel had assured them, did not take them very far into the mountains. Still, he was surprised at the persistence of their ascent and at the mountainous aspect of the scenery.

At a turn in the road Kelsey touched the brakes, and the car began to skid. It was quickly and easily corrected, but Carolyn felt it and released a gasp. "Joe, are you *sure* it's not slippery?"

It was the gasp, more than the question, that annoyed Kelsey. "Would you for Christ's sake please give me a fucking break? I'm doing the best I can."

Too late he realized he had put too much bite in his voice, had used too many gratuitous swear words. He wasn't really *that* annoyed, but now

Carolyn thought he was. She retreated behind a wall of silence—her usual way of dealing with his outbursts.

Now I suppose we won't be talking to each other for the next few days, Kelsey thought grimly. As if they weren't isolated enough in that miserable little village, in this cold and loveless country. He knew a quick apology might spare them both the agonies of a protracted quarrel, but at the moment he really needed to concentrate on his driving. The roadway had turned gray in places with a film of icy slush; the snow was accumulating along the shoulder and clinging to the windshield above the arc of the wipers.

Kelsey cut his speed way down and sat upright, both hands gripping the wheel, his gaze fixed on the road ahead. They were working their way toward the top of a pass, and the terrain was barren and rocky. The wind swept in gusts along the ridge. They passed a sign—"P 100 m."—indicating a turn-out in one hundred meters. Kelsey thought it might be wise to pull off the road and let this storm abate. Unless, of course, conditions got worse. He was still debating when they crested the ridge and came in view of a remarkable phenomenon. Though they were still in the midst of a snow squall, the skies to the south had cleared, and there, in a vision too abrupt and breathtakingly beautiful to seem real, Kelsey saw the snowy peaks he had been longing for.

Brilliant white against a deep blue sky, the Pyrenees stood above the storm like a serene and elegant dream. But far from pleasing Kelsey, these majestic peaks only seemed to mock him with their distance, their unattainability. Of course the mountains were there, and others had seen them, had climbed them, had stood on their summits. But the Kelseys would always confine themselves to the foothills and then risk their necks, quarrel in the process, because that was the way they did things.

"Joe, watch out!"

Too late, Kelsey saw the sharp turn to the left. He stabbed the brakes, and the car went into a skid. Thirty midwestern winters had taught him to let up on the brake and work the gas pedal instead. He cramped the wheel hard to the left as the guard rail loomed up before them, then dropped away. He had no idea where the car was going. He couldn't hit the brakes for fear of another skid, yet he couldn't go on sliding sideways down the middle of a mountain road. Then he saw the entrance to the turnout to his left and gunned the car onto its rough-graded surface. They bumped and pitched and rolled to a stop.

"I think I'm going to be sick." Carolyn opened the car door and got out. He watched her cross over to the low wall rimming the parking area. Beyond was a steep drop-off, a swirling white void. The wind tore at Carolyn's hair and billowed her jacket. She leaned over the wall, as if to retch, and Kelsey thought he should go to her assistance. But his own legs were still shaking, and he wasn't sure Carolyn wanted his help.

He rolled down his window to call to her but found himself unable to speak. He seemed at this moment to have been cheated of all sorts of valuable and important things, and he asked himself if it wasn't his wife's will, acting always as a counterforce to his own, which had kept their lives so appallingly mediocre, so mired in the foothills, when something sublime had beckoned on the horizon.

For some minutes he sat hunkered down behind the wheel, relishing his bitterness, and then, at the ghostly kiss of a snowflake on his cheek, he remembered last night's dream—the mysterious chateau, the faceless woman, the dance of death that had held him until he saw Carolyn watching sadly from the sidelines. He covered his eyes with his hand and tried to understand what the dream was telling him. Perhaps it was simply this: that the only thief he had to fear was the greedy little culprit who lurked in his own dreams, who wanted nothing less than to steal all he possessed and leave him with with nothing.

He looked up, ready at last to go to Carolyn's assistance, but where was she? The parking area before the low wall was as empty as the backseat of their burgled vehicle—and as frightening. He leapt from the car and raced across the slippery gravel, nearly tumbling over the wall himself. Bracing himself on his palms, he saw that a trail led down among the rocks. Kelsey started down this trail and soon came to his wife, just beyond a large boulder.

Carolyn had her binoculars trained on a large dark bird circling above them, then gliding out across the valley. Its vast wingspan held it steady against the wind, and the brightening sky showed the golden-brown tone of its breast and sharply tapered trunk.

"Is it—is it that vulture you wanted to see?"

"No, but it's almost as good," Carolyn said. "It's the golden eagle. Isn't he magnificent?"

Kelsey could tell by her tone that their quarrel was forgotten. A valley of considerable beauty lay spread below them, and the several small villages in its folds seemed to come miraculously alive with color as the sunlight moved across them.

"I told you I'd find you some good birds up here," Kelsey said. He put his arms around his wife, holding her close as she continued to admire the majestic bird. He knew that eventually she would let him look through her glasses; in the meantime, he was happy with his chin on her shoulder and her hair in his face, and he looked forward to another night in the village, when they would find some way, he was sure, to outwit the sagging bed and its many quilts.

Margaret Benbow

Marrying Jerry

I met Jerry at a time when I was suspecting I didn't have a life. This happens periodically to people who read a lot. I met him at his health food store, a little marvel of color and order. I would drag myself there on the days when I felt parched and weazened, when life had been a bitch. I would waveringly negotiate the step on the threshold, even the hem of my tragic winter coat drooping with multiple deficiencies. The instant I was inside, I was aware of the compact, humming heart of the store. Every worker knew what to do. Fruits were sold only in their season, and faithful customers like me understood why it would be wrong to carry strawberries home over ice and snow. We felt the sun-strength emanating from the little round yolks of the fertilized eggs.

Jerry was scrubbed and sexy, in a working-stiff, Populist kind of way. We became friends over the unfiltered honey vat, when nobody else was in the store. The vat was glass, and he noticed a little brown thing in the bottom, under the gummy honey-sea. He scrubbed his arm like a surgeon, then said, "Don't take pictures, they'd close me down," and plunged his arm up to the pit into the vat. His fingers closed on the brown object at the bottom, and he brought it up, his other hand stripping honey from his arm as it hit the air. He squinted at the twig-like thing. "It's all right," he said. "It's a flower stem." I stared at the bronze animal hairs on his arm, all glazed and matted with gold. My tongue clove to the roof of my mouth, witless with lust. I actually wondered if he would take it amiss if I offered to lick the honey off his arm.

I did no such thing, of course. We became better friends, gradually. He

rototilled my garden without being asked, brought flowers unexpectedly, and later on, cooked me big range breakfasts. He was also as good as he could be, attending study groups at the local Unitarian church. This was a special church where you didn't have to believe in God or Jesus but instead learned how to tread lightly on the earth. He studied parenting methods in wolf packs, handed out MEAT IS DEAD stickers at his store, and shared advice about how to treat your partner lovingly and caringly, and without wasteful expenditure.

Jerry used to hand me out of his old pickup like a rich jewel.

One time I said something, very hesitantly, about my plain face. "It doesn't matter," he said, so simply that I knew he meant it. "Besides, you have such a beautiful body!"

So we were married. Jerry wrote the ceremony, in which we loudly and repeatedly stated the immaculateness of our intent toward each other.

Our life continued quietly. I quit my job and began working at Jerry's store. Evenings we would walk home hand in hand, and for supper Jerry would make me magnificent sandwiches. I ate his Denver sandwiches with butter running down my arm. I could hardly chew because of the big smile I had on my face those days.

After about six months, Jerry decided that he believed in God and Jesus after all and joined a new church. The members in this church referred to the Bible as the Big Book, a term I'd associated with the AA manual.

My lack of faith bothered Jerry. On his birthday he asked me, sweetly and tenderly, to read Genesis aloud to him as his gift. So I did. Then he asked me to read him Exodus for Christmas, Leviticus for Valentine's Day, and so forth. I realized that he intended to coax me by baby steps through the entire Bible. I decided many of those Old Testament holy men were as big a collection of bullying, lying, fornicating rogues and felons as I'd always suspected, but I bit my lip. If my love for Jerry was true, I should be willing to read him the Bible word by word to give him pleasure.

Around the time I reached Numbers, Jerry came home from Bible study all excited. A new star was now heading the church, a famous evangelist called Sister Lorna. Sister Lorna had recently published a book, *Let the Angels Call the Shots.* Her theory was that each of us has an angel twin, invisible but with dazzling powers. Our task is to learn to plug into this personal angel. Our twin, having access to the wisdom of the ages, can tell us what to do so we'll never be at a loss. We just have to learn how to keep the passage between their mouth and our ear lubricated and clear.

Lorna had also given the study group some bold new information about the old days, when the Big Book was being written. She said that the men who wrote the Ten Commandments, including the seventh, "Thou shalt not commit adultery," were all polygamists. Jerry seemed very struck by this. In retrospect, it seems an ominous piece of information to stick in a husband's mind.

Jerry invited Sister Lorna to dinner. She arrived on a plum-soft June evening, in a big white Cadillac with a zebra-striped interior. She was a large woman and wore a big white suit, with various tactful drapes over her whopping bosoms and big butt. She had a sticker on her car that said, MEAT WEEPS. *Oh, shit,* I thought, remembering the crown roast in the oven. It smelled rendingly delicious.

"How is your name spelled?" she asked me when Jerry introduced us.

"B-e-l-l-e."

"May I call you Bella? B-e-l-l-e always makes me think of Belly." And Lorna laughed ripplingly.

"Well, L-o-r-n-a always makes me think of *freaking moron,*" I said, but only to myself.

Jerry was wearing broad purple suspenders I'd never seen before. He was scrubbed so clean that his ruddy cheeks shone. When we sat down at the table, he carved the roast. He looked doubtful and apologetic as he offered it to her. "Do you eat meat? Will you have—"

"A slice of corpse? I think not," she said, and laughed merrily again. But in the end she ate a lot of the roast. We drank a lot that evening. A pungent aroma of smoke and blood filled the kitchen. The roast had been rare, the kind that makes you remember that *carne,* meat, is the root of *carnal.* Lorna's beestung lips (siliconed, I thought) gleamed with oils and juices. Very late in the evening I noticed how silent Jerry had become. He watched as Lorna wrapped those lips around seared suet, hunks of Roma tomatoes, the blue veins of soft-reeking cheeses. She noisily sucked and nibbled her way through meaty bones, bulbs of green onions, bittersweet chocolate leaves on the Queen of Sheba cake. I have to admit that woman knew how to enjoy a meal. She put her whole back into it.

Jerry watched her. It had become very dark in the room, and I was thinking I should turn on the overhead light when Jerry suddenly got up and went to the counter. He put several small candles on a tray and lit them. In the darkness he brought the candles to the table and set them before Lorna like an offering of flowers. I was confused at being left in the dark and by the dazzle of their two bright heads above the flares of light.

After that, Lorna would often swoop by on especially beautiful summer evenings. She would accept iced tea and converse. Immaculately clad in a white sundress with a sweetheart neckline, she made the wicker lawn chairs creak. Once she laughed so hard at Jerry's jokes that her nose bled. I think it was that evening that she bethought herself of some church business that needed Jerry's immediate attention, and she bore him off in her white Caddy.

As she cropped up night after night, her wild Nordic head flaring in the red dusk, I came to think of her as a Viking raider. It seemed to me that those big, terrifyingly direct turquoise eyes were fixed on my one treasure. But Jerry said Lorna only cared about God and Jesus and was obsessed

with interpreting their will through her angel twin.

Five years before—hell, a year before—I would have laughed at the idea of loving a man who could make a statement like that. But not now.

What is it for: this fierce particularity of yearning, which makes incandescent one human object and no other?

Jerry had always had a wonderfully hot, carnal attentiveness. Now he grew cool. He was increasingly silent and distracted and in the twilight would look down the street in the direction Lorna's Cadillac might come. He watched the street like a dog.

It was during this period that I found a press-on nail stuck to his underwear.

I said nothing to Jerry about this. Instead, I spent a great deal of time driving around in my car with the radio on. Country songs, the kind I'd always made fun of, spoke directly to my condition. *I know he doesn't treat you right. I see the tears you try to hide.* I changed the station and got Buddy Holly singing "Slippin' and Slidin.'" *Don't want to be your fool no more.* Some hope. I rotated the dial. It started to rain hard, and just then Bessie Smith wailed suddenly, *oh it was honey this and honey that and it was baby my baby all the time.* She also sang a song about a woman who murdered her husband. *He wallowed around and then he died.* It seemed to me that this was a good representation of the human condition in general. You wallowed around, and then you died.

I thought a bookstore might cheer me up. The big Waldenbooks was open. As it turned out, there was a huge pyramid of Lorna's best seller, *Let the Angels Call the Shots,* in the front window. I picked up a copy and looked at it. I was interested in the mental makeup of someone who thought the angels told her to ball my husband. *Thou shalt ball Jerry.* Truly God must be everywhere. I looked at the chapter headings. The one called "Love Yourself Tender" caught my eye. I turned to it. Lorna was a big believer in self-love, or more precisely, being crazy about yourself. You deserved, she explained, the absolute best of everything and should always think of yourself as the guest of honor at life's banquet. I thought of Jerry buck naked on a huge silver trencher at her table, an apple in his mouth. Lorna said that, to signify her complete self-love and self-acceptance, she began every day by giving herself a great big hug. Everyone else should do the same.

I put the book down. Tentatively, I encircled myself with my arms. Was I doing it right? I felt thin. My heart beat gravely beneath my wrist. After a moment, in a movement that felt irrepressible, my shoulders hunched and my chin drew down to my chest. I closed my eyes. I stood there for quite some time before realizing that people, a lot of them, were staring at me. A man said in an interested voice, "That's the first time I ever saw anybody sleep in the fetal position standing up."

I drove around for a long time, then bought a bottle and drove to the

store. I let myself in. I got drunk. In fact, I hadn't been this drunk since college, when one night I mistook my roommate's open bureau drawer for the bathroom.

My memories of that night in the store are hazy, but I clearly remember a moment toward dawn when I stood in front of the glass honey vat, with my face over it. I was attempting to weep exactly three tears into the vat—not two, and not four, but three, which for some reason I thought was the appropriate number as laid down by fairy tales.

When I drove home that morning, I discovered Jerry and Sister Lorna in the shower together. I reached in and turned off the cold water. Followed by their tornado-siren shrieks, I walked into our bedroom, hauled the big mattress off the bed and down two flights of stairs, and burned it in the front yard. I was interested to see how quickly the police showed up. We'd been robbed the month before, and that time it took them much longer.

The profoundly shaken, scalded Jerry demanded a divorce. At the hearing, the judge left us alone for fifteen minutes to see if we could reconcile. The reconciliation got off on the wrong foot. Jerry mentioned at once Lorna's belief that, once in every generation, there is a reincarnation of the Great Beast of Revelation. She thought I might be it. I responded that Lorna was a moronic slut, and if she didn't keep her fat ass out of my life, I would drink her blood like wine. Jerry looked horrified and yet oddly satisfied. Apparently I had spoken exactly as a Great Beast should.

The remaining fourteen minutes and forty five seconds we sat in silence. At the last possible instant, as Jerry got up, he looked at me and said, "You may not believe it, but I'm sorry for you. I'm sorry you have nothing and no one." Then he walked out of the room.

It was true that I had no one. Not a person in the world cared if I lived or died.

But Jerry was wrong when he said I had nothing. A conference with lawyers had been scheduled. Six hours into it, when all had been said and done, when Jerry shouted until blood vessels burst in his eyes, and he threw a leather armchair at me and stormed out of the room; when his lawyer retired wordless and gutted, and my lawyer looked at me with exhaustion, but great respect, and said, "Do you mind if I write this case up for the *Law Review*?"—at the end of the day, when I walked out of the courthouse alone, I owned the store.

Julie King

Energy

My wife is terribly unhappy here; she sees herself in the smoky glass of each skyscraper, and what she sees is a woman with spreading thighs, low-slung breasts and a bad perm. That's how she explains herself to me when she wants to move back to Wisconsin; these attributes are not only acceptable but commonplace there. I know she compares herself to the Dallas women, bedecked in turquoise belt buckles and eyelet blouses, who can afford to have their nails tipped. And when she comes home from shopping, I know she blames me for her blue moods. She doesn't actually say it, but her actions do. She places my dinner plate a little too far away from me, so succotash falls from my fork onto the table, and she sighs loudly. I allow her this; I won't move the plate myself. She blames me for the move to this transient city, for not making enough money to allow her to have her toenails done even though she won't wear sandals. Her feet are wide and knobby, she says. I suppose that's my fault, too. I'll take the blame.

What my wife really wants I can't give her. She wants a child. We have been married for eleven years, and every month for nine of those years she has raged against the forces that gather blood inside her, only to release it again in torrents. Sometimes I think she is dying by the number of bundles tossed in the wastecan each month. Sometimes I think I am the one dying. She refuses testing, refuses to discuss adoption, refuses to visit any friends who have children. I suspect she refuses testing because she wants to be able to blame me, my defective sperm. I'll take this blame, too.

I'd like to tell my wife we'll never have children, she'll never conceive,

and each act of lovemaking doesn't have to be a desperate friction of skin, a banging of pelvises, bruises over her thighs in the morning. I will never tell her that I don't ejaculate anymore. A few moments into intercourse—for that is what our making love has become—I soften but then grunt, sweat a little, and kiss her neck with the pretense of pleasure. I know she enjoys none of these animal acts. She doesn't care that she's not satisfied. She only thinks of sperm tumbling and rolling toward her ready egg. I think, when I watch her face, her eyes crunched shut, she is visualizing the moment of conception, as if she can will it to happen, like a cancer patient wills away the killing cells.

So this is how we live. I work as an apartment manager, posting tenants' rents on the first of each month, patrolling the grounds every night. The job is quiet, safe, but pays very little. In the small Wisconsin town from which we moved, I was on the police force, still in uniform, ready to make lieutenant. I quit after I was shot in the head by a man burglarizing a laundromat. He was pounding a washing machine with the butt of his gun when I walked in. I had wanted to buy sodas, Dr. Peppers, in bottles, not cans, for me and my partner. I was thinking about rolling the smooth, cool bottle against my neck when the burglar aimed his gun and fired. The bullet hit my left temple, travelled under my skin, pushed its nose up through my skin and back down again, finally nestling under my right cheekbone, as if it had found its home. Doctors removed the bullet, but I have a thick, red scar that itches when I eat corn on the cob or when I smile. When I'm nervous, which is most of the time, I pick at the raised edges of the scar until they bleed. I tell my wife I cut myself shaving.

My wife did not want to move. She said the chances of getting shot again in our small Wisconsin town were a million to one. But I didn't take her opinion personally, not thinking that she didn't care about me. After my uncle offered me the job in Dallas, to manage one of his many buildings, my wife and I sat at our little linoleum table, the one we bought when we first married, a matchbook under one wobbly leg, and discussed our possibilities. Long after two six-packs were emptied, long after we made charts of the pros and cons of each choice on a pad of paper with an Oxycodone logo in the corner, my wife laid her cheek against the table and cried. The possibilities of us staying in our hometown were depleted. As she cried, a belch began rising from the recesses of my gut. I swallowed hard to squelch it, and she took my hand, mistaking my throat's movement for grief.

Now we live life, waiting for it to be over. I wake at seven and watch my wife sleep. She breathes so lightly, so silently, I wonder if she really sleeps at all. I think she stares at the pimpled ceiling, memorizing its white vastness, and at three seconds to seven, before I glance over at her when I wake, she closes her eyes. I place my feet on the floor and get my bearings, studying the sparse black hairs around my nipples. The hairs wriggle and

crawl as I stretch, and still my wife has not made a sound or moved. If I turn quickly, will I catch her studying my back, the back she used to lay her cheek against every morning? I don't dare turn around, not wanting to disturb the air.

I pour myself some day-old coffee, take in the early morning heat, and wait for my nerves to sing. When I drink pots of coffee, I feel my head is detached from my body, that my vision is sharper—lines of chairs, dishes, the angles of my wife's cheekbones, are more pronounced. I feel my fingers zing; if I spread them before my face, red flashes bounce from one finger to the next. I feel I can see into the skulls of others around me, into the place where thoughts begin, swells of colors, blues and reds, gathering into images and equations and lines of poetry. I tried to explain this to my wife one morning as we sat for breakfast. I told her I could see the formation of her decision to either clean the kitchen or get her hair cut that day. She clutched the handle of the coffee pot.

"Is this new age thought?" she asked.

"No, it's energy. Mine and everyone else's."

She sighed and looked out the window, hoping to see a new life coming up the street in a Corvette. "Use some of that energy and cut the lawn."

Today I only drink four cups. I don't have a lot of work to do or the desire to read others' thoughts. It's mid-month; all bills for the apartments are paid, all rents are posted. I sit in my air-conditioned office, waiting for a toilet to plug up or a wall to fall down. Hours later I note that I missed lunch. I note my hands tremble with anticipation of work, of duty, for my night rounds to begin.

At the moment day meets night, I see an explosion. The heavy weight of darkness slams onto the cool weightlessness of light, and the friction causes blue sparks. I don't tell this to my wife. I thought for a short time that I was crazy when I'd have these thoughts, that the sameness of days had upset the balance between mania and depression, that I was falling more deeply into the latter. But the logic of my random thoughts became clear to me when my wife and I watched television one night.

"Your scar is throbbing," she said.

"What?"

"It is. It's jumping up and down like a jumping bean."

I touched my scar, my blood raging there, and wondered if my scar somehow allowed me to tap into another realm. I accepted the pattern of my random thoughts from that point on.

Before my night rounds, I go home to my wife. She sits at the table, perspiring, drinking coffee and swinging her foot. She had polished her toenails, but the polish on her left big toe is chipped. The remaining polish is an island floating on the expanse of pink skin. Steam lifts the covers of pots on the stove, and she spoons carrots, broccoli, and corn. Her meals are always colorful, always varying in shape and texture. When we first

moved to Dallas, she used to dream of white dinners—turkey, mashed potatoes, rolls with butter—and would wake up vomiting. When she knew beyond the shadow of a doubt the vomiting wasn't morning sickness, she planted a little garden in back of our apartment, in the middle of one sultry night. I was the manager; she was allowed to dig up the grounds and plant lettuce, tomatoes, whatever grew for her. Now she spoons orange, green, and yellow onto pink plates. Our dishes are pink, placemats yellow, tablecloth splattered with tropical colors, peach and turquoise. I can't tell her these colors put me on the verge of a migraine. I accept that this is where she gets her energy, but I want to tell her that white—clean and stark—would aid in digestion, would put her dreams at ease if she believed hard enough.

I eat. My wife swings her foot. We have come to this. Soon it is time to make my rounds of the apartment grounds. I love this time in the evening when lights begin to turn on in the apartments, when my residents are settled in for the evening, secure that the darkness will remain outside. My apartment complex is populated with quiet, retired folk and young married couples, some with small children my wife avoids like the plague. No frills here, just clean, safe places to live, with a clean, safe manager to watch out for all. Many residents sit on their porches until I pass on the first round. We chat about the Rangers. Heat. Lack of heat. Rain. Lack of rain. Flowers. Wilting flowers. I like this, the pure cyclical nature of this.

Tonight is quiet. And hot. I see Mr. Bailey's head behind his shade in silhouette. He and I share books and discuss them on my rounds. I pass Bill and Tina's. They are newlyweds, not ready for the demands of marriage. Sometimes I see her crying, in the darkening, her life encased in brick and cracking mortar. I want to tell her this will pass; she'll settle into the pure lull of it all. But I know the buildings are breaking down, not from weather or age, but from forces inside, emotions and screaming and silence. My own walls suffer hairline fractures from what is not said between my wife and me.

A few curtains are not yet pulled in the half-night. Mr. Linden's are partially open. The times when he sits on the porch, waiting for me, his hand on the head of his cane trembling with the weight of old bones, I shout to him. "I'm here! I'm here!" His head shakes violently, as if a mosquito buzzed there. I know he can't hear me, but I scream anyway, exalted by the vibrations in my throat. Then I put my hand on his, and he lifts his in greeting. I stare into his eyes. He is blinded by blue films of cataracts. I wonder if he sees outlines of the world within the blue, as if we're all underwater, swimming aimlessly. I am afraid of this; I don't want him to see me drowning.

Sometimes Mr. Linden's granddaughter sits outside with him. Eleanor is a big blonde Scandinavian girl, a social worker whose thick teeth show when she talks, which is all the time. She comes by his apartment three,

four times a week to relieve the live-in nurse, to clean, cook vegetarian stews, read her grandfather thick, tattered novels she has kept from her school days. Sometimes I sit on the steps while she reads, her voice smooth as bottled glass, her thick teeth revealed when she lifts her blue eyes to me and smiles. Sometimes she wears cut-off jeans, men's thin-strapped undershirts, heavy breasts untethered, blonde hair soft under her arms. At times like that, I want to crawl into her big, generous lap, to be blind in her arms.

Right now I want to see her, to feel the energy of the extra blood she carries in her strong body. I don't want to look inside Mr. Linden's apartment, but the window emblazoned with light, the half-opened curtains compel me to. I should knock on the door, but the promise of light means the promise of Eleanor. The nurse, when she is there, reads in the extra bedroom, using only a lamp, no other lights in the house. The nurse is frugal; why turn on lights when Mr. Linden can't see? Eleanor revels in the possibility that light may enter Mr. Linden's head and give him internal sight, images floating on the inside of his cataracts, memories and dreams. I need the light she provides; the darkness is smothering me. I am so close to the window by this time that my toes butt against the building. My hands clutch the windowsill. What I see inside dances before me until I am dizzy with sheer speed.

Eleanor, naked and natural in the heat, crouches next to the table, her chest slick with sweat, slowly spooning something into Mr. Linden's mouth, something steaming with gravy. Her large breasts sway with each motion, and the ends of her light hair tickle her pink nipples. She swivels toward me, oblivious of everything but spooning the last morsel of nutrients for her grandfather, and I glimpse the soft curls of her vee, the pink of her lips, a blooming rose. Mr. Linden's throat warbles with nourishment, belly feeling the fullness, eyes blind to this beauty that I witness. I feel my heart break.

I run to my apartment, willing cooler air into the fibers of my clothes. I try to form words I will tell my wife, try to form them before they form themselves in the center of my brain in purples and pinks. Images float in the air: my wife rising from her bath, skin oiled, hair waving from the steam. My wife working in her garden, hair waving from the humidity. I love her at these times, when she doesn't know what a beauty she is. I've never told her this. I want to tell her she is a beauty, leaning against the counter, holding a cup of coffee whose steam blurs any hard edges on the planes of her face. I can't form the words; I only stare, my scar throbbing. She tucks her hair behind her ear self-consciously, her fingers small spades. As her fingers run through her hair, creating even rows, I think flowers will bloom there. I still stare, and she pours me some coffee, in a mug that spells out her name in cartoon letters, and as I drink deeply, covering the letters with my palms, I hold in the warmth, hold in the sparks of her energy.

Carol Sklenicka

Putting Up Storms

Scott Conley stretches out on the rug across from Joe, his friend now since seventh grade, and breathes in the steam from his cocoa. They've finished putting up the Conleys' storm windows this blustery November afternoon, work Scott enjoys because he loves the picture it gives him of sheltering his family from the onslaught, the slashing pain of winter. With good storms in place, a solid house like theirs might remain livable for eight to ten hours after a furnace breakdown.

Scott's wife, Gail, made the cocoa as a way of asking them not to have beer, and Scott wonders if Joe will comment about this. They're watching the dreary end of a Badger game. Joe wonders out loud how some of these ball players get mixed up with drugs. Scott shrugs.

"Listen for Amy," Gail interrupts. "I'm going to the store. She can have her bottle if she wants." Gail has her coat on and her purse on her shoulder, ready to make a run for it, before she adds, "She could be crabby—she's slept a long time."

As the garage door grinds down, Amy erupts with a long, sad wail that sounds like a train whistle coming closer in the night. Joe follows Scott to the crib. In Scott's arms Amy is sweaty and sour and inconsolable, squirming but clinging at the same time. On her back on the changing table she looks at him from black-brown pools in the middle of her incredibly white eyeballs and kicks her warm, fat brown legs. Amy is fourteen months old, but Scott is still scared to death of her. Especially of the tenderness between her thighs that always astonishes him—fat labial cushions ever so slightly puckered by the diaper's dampness, a barely visible purpleness within. He

cleans her lightly, not quite looking at his hand. Joe's watching, and Scott wishes he weren't.

"You don't deserve that little girl, you know," Joe says, apropos of nothing. The remark makes Scott's arms weak and disorients him. It's something he's thought himself, thought and rejected. His head is spinning.

He sees bruises on the pale thighs of that girl in ER last week, the blood and feces on her panties. He raises Amy by the ankles, centers the clean diaper under the wedge of her neat bottom, pulls it between her legs, tapes it down snug, very snug.

Scott wants to put more than padding and plastic between Amy and the world. He wants to put her into steel diapers and carry the key. He doesn't mention this to Joe. Amy wails and thrashes so hard that Scott's enfeebled arms can't get her legs back into the sleeper.

"Let me try," Joe says. "It's been a while, but—" and he's already slipped one leg into the non-zipper side and worked the plastic foot over Amy's. Joe crooks the other knee to insert it into the other pajama leg, and Scott notices how he instinctively shields Amy's delicate skin from the vee of the zipper. Joe holds her foot a minute, touches her toenails, which are thin and translucent as fishscales.

"Un-fucking-believably beautiful, aren't they?" he says. Scott thinks Joe, usually the perfect gentleman, swears to impress him. He first noticed this when he returned from the war and Joe was still in college. A lot of college kids began swearing like infantrymen at that time, as if they wanted to have linguistically the experience of hell they'd otherwise avoided.

Joe puts his face on Amy's naval and makes a noise like a party whistle. He toots her tummy button a couple times, and Amy stops crying long enough to listen. She catches her breath. Lumpy scars on Joe's neck remind Scott that when they were kids Joe had the worst acne.

Joe pushes Amy's second foot into the sleeper, zips her up like a suitcase, snaps the tab at her neck.

"Your baby, mister," he says, swinging her to Scott.

Scott takes her like a crystal vase. His forearms are so tense that he can feel muscles twitching in them.

"Time for the flipperoo, old man," Joe declares.

"What's a flipperoo?"

The girl in Scott's mind is a 12-year-old rape victim, a late night call-out for Scott. Usually he doesn't have to meet the victims with their clothes off, but the ER room at St. Luke's was crowded, and the doctor had never done a rape exam before, so Scott had to be responding officer, detective, and nurse, all at once. The girl's mother's husband's uncle was the perpetrator, and he'd violated this little girl pretty roughly, left Scott all the evidence he'd need to put him away for a while—bruises, blood, semen. It was

midnight before they finished, so Scott brought home the evidence kit containing swabs and hair samples and the girl's soiled panties, white with faded pink flowers. Because the night was warm, he stored the envelope on a lower shelf of the refrigerator.

But in the morning when Gail reached for Amy's milk and asked what was in that bag, he felt his mistake. Gail scalded the milk (a step they could skip now), added water to cool it, and got Amy all set in her high chair before she handed Scott the lidded yellow tippy cup and ran to the bathroom. Scott heard her retch several times and run water to clean up, but she didn't say a word when she came out. She put her face against his chest and hugged him around the waist. "Was it a bad one, honey?"

"Pretty bad," Scott said. Early in their relationship he told Gail he never talks about his work, so she doesn't probe, but sometimes he wishes she would. His co-workers in child abuse are women, and women cops tend to act tougher than the men. They don't talk about what these investigations do to them. All that day Scott was vexed by the thought of his daughter's milk contaminated by that creep's jism.

"The flipperoo. First assignment in Parenting 201, buddy."

"Parenting? That some new Scandihoovian sport?" Scott hates pop-psych words, and as a post-seventies cop, he's heard plenty of them. He hates them because they don't account for the way that girl's crotch looked in the ER. But Joe's credibility as a dad is fine—he has four kids now, one girl already a junior at Divine Savior, the rest coming up through parochial schools—good grades, sports, no problems.

"Those are the best kids you could ever want, all of them," Scott used to tell Joe, but Scott didn't want kids. Before he had his own, he cared nothing about other people's kids except professionally. "How's the rug rat," he'd ask, and barely listen to answers that usually involved ear infections or teething or strep throat. Who needs it? he said to himself. Something relentlessly wholesome about young fathers bugged the hell out of Scott.

His own father was a drifter, first by occupation—he was a highway construction worker who moved from job to job—but perhaps also by nature. His mother owns a fuzzy black and white photograph, an enlargement, that shows her sitting on a train holding Scott up for the camera: a big baby wearing a knitted cap, legs flexed against her thighs, eyes dark and bright even in that poor photograph. "That was when I was going to visit your father in Alaska," she said. She had been married to him then, but not for long, and, as Scott pieces the story together, his parents never shared a residence after that visit to Alaska. There had been no picture of his father in his mother's house, only this other one that represented his father as a destination.

His mother told him his father lived with them on the top floor of a big, blue Victorian house with a cupola when he and his sister were young, but

she said it with the same detailed, irrelevant wistfulness that marked her rendition of walking to work when it was 20 below in Black River Falls or of watching Kennedy get shot while she was tending bar and couldn't even stop serving drinks long enough to have a good cry. For her, loss is the motif of her own and everybody else's history, the only thing that makes it real.

"How young were we, Ma, when Dad lived with us?" Scott used to ask when he was about eleven, clinging to last shreds of boyhood. "Six? Five? Was my sister even born yet?"

"Yes, she was born. We all four lived together, had dinners together, went to the drive-in movies with you kids in the backseat in your pajamas."

Maybe, but Scott has no memory of it. The few memories he's sure of don't support his mother's stories. His sister was born in '49; he remembers that well enough because he was sent to stay at his grandparents' in Door County. Why wouldn't he remember his father's presence?

A father's failings recur in his son, Scott suspects, and the psychology he's studied doesn't contradict this. He knows he's not meant to be a father.

Joe is never plagued by such uncertainties.

The worst thing Joe ever did in his life was get Marty pregnant a couple of months in advance of the wedding. Joe was at Madison then, and he stayed in school, working nights to support his family and refusing to let Marty get a job out of the house. They managed the apartment building they lived in. Scott was a rookie in the police department then and recovering from a disastrous post-Vietnam first marriage by sleeping around as much as possible. A couple of times when he had a new girl to impress, he brought her to Madison for the weekend and borrowed a semi-furnished apartment from Joe and Marty. Marty even provided clean sheets. To repay them, Scott would do a few hours of painting or cleaning on Sunday while his lady friend checked out State Street. Marty kept her distance, but Joe got a kick out of having Scott as his rogue friend. "Lady killer," he used to call him. It didn't bother Scott, who figured it was natural for Joe to be curious since he'd never had a single life himself.

When Joe's first daughter was about six, she noticed that the woman Scott brought for the weekend wasn't the same one as the time before. Joe pulled Scott aside and told him he wouldn't be able to borrow apartments anymore. He tried to blame it on Marty, but his own distaste was evident. "Maybe it's time you found a decent girl and settled down, Scott. Who knows? Maybe it's not too late."

"Too late for what?" Scott said.

"Oh, you, know. To be satisfied with one woman, I guess. I don't know. I never really understood guys like you."

There was a hiatus in their friendship after that, half a dozen years or so, the years in which Gail began deliberately turning his life upside down. Then Scott broke the ice by inviting Joe and Marty to his wedding—without the kids, but not without a certain "so thereness" intended.

By then Joe was a manager at Miller Brewing, and Marty seemed to have discovered birth control. Joe and Scott drifted together again—for a beer after work or to watch a game. When Scott moved to the child abuse section at the MPD, Joe started peppering him with questions—what kind of families they were, how the mothers let it happen, how anyone could prove anything. And, mostly, how Scott got interested in the field. Joe's comments annoyed Scott by making him feel that he was responsible for the crimes he investigated. Still, Scott took them as he used to take Joe's curiosity about women he went out with—as inquiries from a man whose own life had to be boring. Just knowing somebody who dealt in that world of slime must be exciting for Joe.

When Gail and Scott bought their first house, a fixer-upper in Sherman Park, Joe helped more than you'd expect. All three of them had fun together then. Joe would bring over his free cases from Miller, which he said would go to waste at home, and Gail drank right along with them. Joe would back Gail up when she talked about the kids that would live in these rooms someday. Once, after Gail left the room, Joe winked and said, "Don't deny her those babies, Killer."

Now Scott wonders if, by spending all those hours drywalling and plumbing, Joe was escaping the pandemonium of Saturdays with four children. That's hindsight about Joe. At the time Scott saw in Joe the perfect dad he would never be himself.

Scott carries Amy to the family room; on screen they're doing post-game wrap up. Joe hits the mute button and lies down on the floor and raises his sock feet to form a pedestal in the air. "Okay, hand over that baby."

Scott looks at his friend's hands grasping for Amy, his wedding band and clean nails, hands that have never been anywhere they shouldn't have been. He feels Amy's well padded bottom on his own forearm, her sweet sour breath in his face.

"I can do it, Joe. You just talk me through." Scott lies down on the floor next to Joe, bends his knees, sets the baby on his stomach. He's the one in changing table position now.

Amy has on a soft one-piece blanket sleeper, carnation pink with a design of darker pink hearts and flowers embroidered over her own heart. The sleeper is new; Gail commented on that when she buckled Amy in her high chair for her Malt-o-Meal this morning. "We're not going to dribble all over this pretty, new sleeper now, are we?" she'd said in the little voice they both use when speaking to Amy. Because it's new, the sleeper is too large. Amy looks tinier than ever, particularly where her surprisingly strong neck emerges from the suit.

Joe stands over them like a coach. "Now, you just lay her stomach on your feet and hold on to her hands." Scott raises his feet and places his hands under Amy's arms, nearly circling her shoulders. She's balanced on his feet. His heels are under her hipbones, and his toes press her ribs. Scott would give anything to lose this anatomical response to other bodies, but he knows he won't. He's already seen too many dead and damaged human beings.

He's thinking this as Amy begins to laugh. To crow, really. "DaDa! DaDa!" Her eyes are wide, and drool drops a silver line from her beautiful wet smile to his shirt. Joe has quit coaching, but Scott knows what to do next, as if his body remembers this from somewhere.

He sways his legs back and forth and envelops her tiny, warm sweaty fists in his own bigger hands, holding tight enough so her hands can't slip away but not so tight that he hurts her. Then he flips her. She spins in the air and lands lightly on her feet above his head. She's still laughing as she crawls to the other end of him to clamber up the mountain of his knees.

"Dada, do again!"

When Gail comes in with the groceries, they're still doing flipperoos. "What a happy girl!" Gail says in the little voice. "What's Daddy's secret?"

The beeper goes off about eleven that night, after Gail and Scott have snuggled in to watch a movie. St. Luke's again. Dead baby, suspicious circumstances, more than suspicious bruises. Gail watches Scott get dressed, brings him his gun from the locked cupboard. Together they check on Amy. Scott bends far into the crib to kiss her forehead, then pats Gail's rear end, which is maybe a little broader than it was before the baby. Suddenly he's horny as hell and wants more than anything to stay home and make love to this woman he's married against all odds, against all personal wisdom and family history. He pulls Gail close to him and hopes she'll feel his hard-on, takes a chance she won't be more shocked than he is by this inopportune display of desire. He wants her to ask him to wake her up when he gets home.

Instead Gail pulls him close to her and squeezes his butt in the way she knows drives him crazy and she hardly ever does anymore. "Is there time?" she says.

There could be. That baby's dead, after all. But Scott needs to see whoever brought the child to the ER before they've realized what kind of trouble they could be in.

"It'll keep," he tells Gail, knowing he won't have the heart to disturb her the four or five hours from now it's likely to be.

The sun's glinting off the Milwaukee River as Scott drives home. He's spent an extra hour at the station dictating his report so the D.A.'s office can move quickly when the autopsy results come in Monday. He opens the

Sunday paper on the table for Gail and loads the coffee maker for her. He showers. Cleaner, naked, and exhausted, he stretches between their daisy-sprinkled sheets and wonders how life goes on. He feels his penis stir against the crisp cotton and knows. And wonders why.

When Amy's morning cry breaks his sleep, Scott's having this dream: in the house where he and his mother and sister used to live, that horrid house with the asphalt siding on Franklin Street, he is a young boy, reaching up to repair a shower rigged above the claw-footed tub in that always-cold bathroom. Pieces of pipe break off in his hands. Rust and sludge run along his arms and into his armpits. A girl about twelve, looking as if she's hidden small tangerines under her T-shirt, comes into the room. Takes the old pipes from him. At her touch they turn into shiny, white, modern tubing. The girl, who is Amy, repairs the shower and turns to him with a smile. "It's all right now, Dada," Amy-in-the-dream says.

Scott reaches for Gail, who sits up and rubs his neck as she asks, "When did you get home?" before she goes to lift the baby, who's crying into her new day.

David R. Young

Summer Snow

It was June, and cotton from the roadside trees floated in the wind like snow. My grandfather drove down from the ridge to meet me at the station in a black Plymouth that was at least ten years older than any other car in the parking lot. On the platform he struggled with two hard, boxy suitcases my father had packed for me. These had been my father's suitcases in college, and the leather grips were nearly worn through. There was more clothing than I thought I would ever need.

I'd just come west on the B&O to Wheeling, West Virginia, and then, in the afternoon, south through the hills and strip mines of southern Ohio. On the way to Pendarvis I'd been humming train songs, the kind my father liked to play—country and western songs—though he seldom played his records in our apartment. My mother couldn't stand C&W, so he kept his stack of LPs hidden away in the back of the hallway closet. Most of the songs were about treachery. My grandfather had a few words outside the depot with a dark-bearded man in new, stiff overalls and then climbed into the Plymouth. The veins on his hands bulged as he gripped the steering wheel. A thin man with a graying crewcut and narrow red face, my grandfather looked uncomfortable in the white shirt he'd worn to the station. He said he was glad to have me visiting and said little more. I said I didn't want to spend my ninth birthday alone on the farm, and I wanted to know where my mother was.

The sunlight over the fields was soft and drowsy, and shadows of clouds moved slowly. I slid over on the seat and sat as close as possible to the door on my side, holding with both fists the bar between the open window and the ventilator, tilted outward.

Above the noise of the rattling Plymouth, my grandfather spoke for the second time.

"Your Aunt Caprice has made us a strawberry pie," he said, glancing in my direction. His eyes were blue and watery, and I thought he might cry. The man always seemed to have this expression, whether because of shyness or allergies or just the color of the eyes, I didn't know. "You remember your Aunt Caprice, don't you, boy?"

Of course I did. Though on three previous visits, when I'd gone to the farm with my parents, Aunt Caprice had chosen for the most part to stay in her room. She was older than my father, but she lived at home with my grandparents. My father would never tell me why. Aunt Caprice helped with meals and set the dinner table, rarely speaking but occasionally falling apart with an outburst of profanity, usually no more than a few words. Then she would be quiet. It was her glasses I remembered best, thick as the bottoms of soda bottles.

As we climbed away from the valley, I watched the world I had known disappear. In time I would come to know the timothy grass, birdsfoot and wild asparagus covered in dust by the side of the gravel road.

Near the top of the ridge, the steep hillside farm came into view. My grandfather parked in a ditch, and I followed him through a wooden gate to the small, two-story farmhouse, covered with brown asphalt shingles. Grass grew between the red bricks of the sidewalk, and somewhere in the yard hidden flowers smelled like the curry in my mother's kitchen. The breeze, always busy on the ridge, stirred the leaves of two large maples.

My grandmother rose to greet me from an A-frame wooden swing on the lawn by the grape arbor.

"Stevie, we've been waiting for you. We've got supper ready." She wore a loose-fitting house dress with a pale floral pattern, the large collar open at the neck. The dress fell to her ankles, above brown lace-up shoes. "You must tell me all about your trip."

But I wasn't in the mood for talking. Intently, she leaned over to straighten the collar of the white shirt my father had made me wear on the train. My grandmother was a bony woman, with sharp features. She'd been a schoolteacher in her younger days and remained stern in demeanor, though the skin on her face was so tight she always appeared to be smiling.

She took my hand tentatively and led me into the yard through the sweet-smelling shadows. My grandfather, in his white shirt and best pants, was already back in the fields.

"Come inside," she said.

At the kitchen sink she pumped a large wooden handle until water appeared in the spout. She washed her hands with a bar of rough, brown soap. I was expected to do the same. Then my grandmother led me through the tiny dining room where the table had been set with a white lace tablecloth and harsh blue china.

The living room, facing west, was hot from the afternoon sun. A small desk fan near the partially opened window barely moved the air.

"Why not take the rocker?" my grandmother said. "A long journey can be wearying."

There were two caneback rocking chairs in the little room, but one was occupied. Aunt Caprice rocked slowly. The dark, square frames of her glasses hid her face, and her short brown hair looked thin and wiry. I thought I heard her whisper my name and laugh, softly, in an embarrassed sort of way. For as long as I'd known her, she had been far away and unfocused, her eyes—blue, like my grandfather's—swimming behind the thick lenses of her glasses.

My aunt's laugh was shy. It seemed there were many shy people in the family, myself included. I'd come to think my uneasiness was a trait of my father's people, for my father, too, appeared to be uncomfortable in social situations, even when just talking to the other tenants in our apartment building. He often seemed overwhelmed by the fast talk and high spirits of my mother.

I sat down in the empty rocking chair, and my grandmother settled into an overstuffed sofa.

After a long silence, my grandmother said, "Caprice, would you get this young man a cool drink? Something to wet his whistle on?" She patted her silvery hair, which was combed back into a tight bun.

Aunt Caprice did not reply and made no effort to stir.

"He's come many miles today," my grandmother continued. "All the way from New York City."

"I know where he's from, Ruth," Aunt Caprice said. "You were in the kitchen. Get it yourself."

When she realized that Caprice was not budging, my grandmother lifted herself with the help of the sofa's armrest. She walked stiffly.

"Must you behave this way?" she said, walking out of the living room.

"Shit on you," Aunt Caprice said, barely above a whisper. I was hoping the remark was meant for my grandmother and not me.

We sat rocking together, without speaking. The only sound was the desk fan and the slow creaking of the rocking chairs on the braided rug. Sweat was draining into my eyes. In the deepening silence I thought of the brilliant, nervous laughter of my mother and of our trips across the East River to Chinatown, where, in a one-room shop, she purchased the silk dresses she liked to wear in summer. Sometimes a gentleman friend would accompany us.

"What if a woman can't have no babies?" Aunt Caprice said. She laughed quietly to herself. I never understood what she was talking about.

My grandmother returned with ginger ale and a few leaves of fresh mint in a tall, perspiring glass. I looked around the living room. Little had changed since my last visit to the farm, two years earlier. Only the portable

black-and-white TV set, a recent Christmas gift from my parents and now situated on top of the radio cabinet, seemed new.

I turned toward my grandmother. "How long will I have to stay here?" I asked.

"I don't know, Stevie," she replied, more sternly than she'd perhaps intended. The world was still her classroom. "Your mother needs to be away for a time, by herself. She needs rest."

"Where has she gone?"

"I don't think your father knows. That's the truth, son."

I remembered past evenings on the farm when we'd all listened to the radio together. There had been the smell of hot speakers as the radio warmed up. More often than not, the program had been the Grand Ole Opry. Even my mother, with nothing else to do, listened in. My friends back home in the neighborhood had never heard of Hank Snow or Kitty Wells.

"She's gone to Old Lyme," I said at last, "to visit Grandmother Shaw. They have a large house, with a view of the Sound."

"That's possible, son." My grandmother was fussing with her bun of silvery hair, but I couldn't see it was making any difference. "She'll be all right. Your mother always bounces back."

What she did not say was that the Shaws had not offered to take me in. It was assumed I'd go to the farm.

"Your father needs some time alone, too. He's very, very tired." It was disconcerting to see my grandmother smiling, but she couldn't help herself. "Your mother isn't suited for a family. I don't think she means anyone harm."

I'd heard it before. About how my mother had been banned from the farmhouse kitchen ever since her first visit, before I was born. She had reduced a tomato to pulp by slicing it the wrong way, the story went. My grandmother said she'd realized early on that this young woman had never been in a kitchen, and she wondered how my mother would ever raise a family. I'd heard the story every time I'd visited the farm.

Of course, my mother became a wonderful cook. She liked Indian and Chinese dishes. The story was ignorant and wrong, but that didn't stop anyone from telling it over and over again.

"The Shaws never really thought your father was good enough for them," my grandmother said. "That's no big secret, is it, Stevie?"

I wanted to run out of the house, just as, in other years, I'd run outside during the long afternoons when my father worked with my grandfather in the cornfields and my grandmother and Aunt Caprice prepared dinner. On the farm my dad liked to wear a blue chambray work shirt, and his wavy black hair was the color of crows. Sometimes, when I'd tire of running, I'd return to sit by my mother in the A-frame swing. There was the odor of concord grapes warmed by the sun and the bittersweet taste of the

purple skin. We'd listen to the sound of the wind in the maple leaves, and sometimes we'd talk.

"Your father and I come from different worlds," my mother said one warm afternoon. She rubbed the fingers of one hand across the back of the other. "All that Bible teaching. Thou shalt not do this, thou shalt not do that. It drives a person crazy, Stevie."

She grew quiet. My mother must have remembered that I was serious about church, just as my father was. I was a believer. Every Sunday I went to church with my father, who always wore a dark suit and brown felt hat and, in winter, a long overcoat, the same uniform he wore to the office in Manhattan where he worked for my mother's family. Church was as important to us as the country music we both loved to play at home when mother was gone. We loved hymns by Roy Acuff and Webb Pierce. We kept the windows closed when we played our records because we didn't want our neighbors in Queens to think we were country people.

"Your father likes to pretend he's a saint," my mother continued, still swinging in the arbor. She nervously lit a cigarette. "Well, that's the way your grandmother treated him. Ed was always good, Caprice always bad. Little Edward can do no wrong. Just like the Baby Jesus, he was."

We sat without talking, facing the breeze and looking out over the valley. Below, we could see where strip mines had eaten away the distant hillside. My mother's long, auburn hair, unbound like a gypsy's, stirred in the sunlight. Supper on the farm was usually late, and this night, as on many nights, we sat on the porch swing until the grass darkened in the yard.

"They're Puritans," my mother said. "All of them. You'll see, Stevie. You'll understand when you're older."

Now my grandmother raised herself again from the sofa and left the room, and Aunt Caprice followed. She had asked me if I wanted any more ginger ale, but I'd told her I didn't want anything. In the kitchen they would make final preparations for dinner. Alone, I rocked crazily in the tall caneback chair.

The sun was low in the sky when my grandmother called me to dinner. A glistening white lace tablecloth touched nearly to the floor at the corners of the dark wooden table. The window was shut against the breeze on the ridge, and the small dining room was stifling.

My grandfather was last to arrive, washing his hands in the kitchen sink. He'd spent the last hour walking through the rows of corn in his Sunday best. In the months ahead, sitting in the dirt in the hot sun, I'd do my share of weeding in those same hillside fields.

Most evenings he would read verses from the Bible at the dinner table. That first night he merely recited grace, hurriedly. It would take him several weeks to get used to having me on the farm. The aroma of home-made sausage and hot buttery potatoes filled the small room. I thought about the strawberry pie on the kitchen counter.

When Aunt Caprice had cleared away the dishes and served dessert, she joined us again. We had coffee, my cup half-filled with hot milk.

"What would we do without Caprice?" my grandfather said, warmly, to no one in particular. It was as though he felt obliged to say something, anything. He looked embarrassed.

Aunt Caprice stared at the table.

"That's enough," my grandmother said.

"I've always said Caprice would have made some man a perfectly good wife," he added. "Of course, then we'd never have these wonderful desserts here on the farm." He rubbed his gray crewcut with the palm of his hand. "Now, Stevie, you won't be getting married anytime soon."

I didn't know if it was a question or a command.

"The boy has just arrived," my grandmother said. "Leave him in peace."

"When you do find the right girl," my grandfather continued, "you'll know it. She'll wait until marriage. And afterwards, she won't run around. It's unnatural."

"Charles!"

"Women are supposed to wait," he said firmly. "That way, the men respect them. The men don't leave them waiting at the altar, huge as Santa Claus. You know who Santa Claus is, don't you, Stevie?"

Aunt Caprice stood up and began to clear away the dessert dishes. My grandfather stopped talking. He may not have spoken so many words, outside of the Bible, in a month. I left my slice of strawberry pie half-eaten and brought the plate out to the kitchen. I offered to help my aunt dry the dishes, but she whisked me away. At moments I would see a living soul in those blue eyes, behind the thick lenses, but just as quickly Caprice would retreat.

In the living room my grandmother and I sat in the rocking chairs, watching Jack Benny. She watched the program only so she could hear Dennis Day sing. Since they'd acquired the TV, my grandmother had discovered a weakness in herself for the crooning of Irish tenors, not so different from the country music she'd always loved. Sometimes the picture flickered, but the voice came through clearly.

My grandfather had fallen asleep on the sofa. In the evenings to come, he'd soak his right foot—injured in the mines when he was a young man—in a basin of warm milky water while he watched TV.

I didn't notice that Aunt Caprice had joined us in the living room until a commercial break. "Red Skelton's much funnier," she said, just loud enough to be heard. "Shit on Jack Benny!"

She turned and climbed the stairs to the bedroom I would share with her, across the hall from my grandparents' room. I could hear her hesitate a moment near the top of the stairs before she slammed the door.

My grandmother said she was ready for bed, too, and she awakened my grandfather long enough to point him in the direction of the stairs.

"She can be horrid," my grandmother explained to me. "But we must learn to forgive her. She is paying for something she did when she was very, very young."

My grandmother moved about the small house turning off the lights before climbing the stairs. I knew I must follow, but I took a long time in the bathroom downstairs, undressing slowly and brushing my teeth twice before going up.

In the bedroom, Aunt Caprice was kneeling by the side of her bed. When she heard me, she stopped reciting her prayers and whispered, "You're the one like me, Stevie, more than the rest of them. You'll be part of our family now." She climbed into bed in her flannel pajamas. The night was much too warm for flannel.

Tired as I was from the train trip, I wouldn't sleep. I lay in my bed and listened to my aunt's breathing. Then I moved to the ledge and opened the window. The hillside breeze, softer now that the sun was down, whistled lightly through a windowscreen clotted with snow. Through the white patches I watched the farmyard darken. As night settled in, I could hear but not see the wooden gate creaking in the wind and the quiet swashing of maple leaves in the yard.

Sand Dollar

Peg Sherry

I started a new career of writing stories when I retired, so it has become easy to believe in the unexpected. Still, Ann's phone call is such a surprise that I answer in a silly singsong voice, "It's been such a long, long time." Then, mockingly serious, I add, "Even your voice is unfamiliar."

Her words come quickly, with that breathy quality she uses that makes you wonder if she might share an important secret. "Hello, you old retiree. Is all your free time hanging heavy or have you read through the whole library? Wouldn't you love to see Eric? He's ours for the weekend. I'll stop by after I get him from daycare."

I breathe in and picture Ann's narrow face, her close-set brown eyes that could turn cold on contact when someone she didn't like went beyond a brief handshake. But suddenly I see her face, my friend from the past, eyebrows arched, her wide mouth smiling its fullest at one of our ridiculous jokes.

I breathe out as her voice fills with hearty cheerfulness. "Guess who's in charge today? Ed's home tomorrow, and you know how he takes over."

When we hang up, I poke through some dusty photograph boxes. A cleaning-out mood has filled me since I retired. Each day I go through drawers and closets.

"These old pictures of our trip to Florida might help with small talk when Ann brings Eric," I tell Tom. "After today I'll toss them. We never see Ed and Ann anymore."

My husband looks at me over his morning coffee cup. "Maybe you want to keep them for old time's sake."

I jab the breakfast scraps into the garbage disposal. The sudden tears in my eyes amaze me. "I used to think we'd still get together despite her job. When I worked, I took time for our friendship."

I remember my calls to Ann at her new job.

"Sorry. She's in a meeting. Sorry, she's making a speech out of town. May
I do something?" The secretary sounded efficient.

I wondered then if Ann might notice if I shouted, "Help! My job is making me shake. Hooray, I'm retiring."

Ann never made it to my retirement party. She was at a conference.

Now I mutter, "Maybe we've shared all our old stories and haven't made new."

As we look through the faded photographs, Tom teases. "There you are, a lot younger, holding onto that sand dollar. You've never used your wish."

I smile. "Haven't needed to." I glance at the bowl on the coffee table. "But the sand dollar's in the shell bowl, just in case."

As Ann puts the baby on my family room couch and takes off his sweater, I note her hair. She has tipped it. The clipped brown bob gleams in the lamp light. Her blouse is a vibrant yellow silk that detracts from the lines around her eyes. She used to like being our beauty advisor and was determined to help us both stay young. When my hair started to gray, she advised, "Stick
to colors that perk you up. Pink and rose or soft gray might highlight your hair if you refuse to color it."

While she's busy settling Eric, I speak rapidly to fill the silence. "We must be getting old. History is hitting everywhere." Trust me to jump right in, speak in riddles.

In high school, she used to say, "Must you always be so obtuse?" Then she'd arch her eyebrows and smile. "You eggheads are just that way, I guess."

Ann isn't paying attention. She sets Eric on the rug, takes off his knit cap, and smooths his dark hair. He smiles when she kisses the top of his head.

I rattle the morning paper. "History Hits Mall. History Hits Mall!" I repeat the headline as though she's hard of hearing. When she raises her eyebrows, I keep going, "One of my ex-students has a theory that history affects everything, even malls. He wrote this article about the mall on the edge of town. It's closed, deserted." My words won't stop. "I must have taught him something. He spelled deserted correctly."

Ann smiles absently.

On the way to the kitchen to get tea, I slow myself down by giving Eric an old, well-used stacking toy from a chest drawer. I hear Ann settle into

her chair. She raises her voice and sounds cross. "How could you, the smartest person in our class, end up teaching history, such a boring subject?"

I bang the kettle, swoosh in the water, make my voice steady. "History gives a perspective, you know, and a distance. For all we know, history's being made this very moment."

"Remember the little record shop that used to be in that mall?" she says. "We got a signed Barbra Streisand LP at the opening."

"The manager gave you the display sample because they'd run out, and he was afraid you'd throw a tantrum."

We'd told our stories this way many times, playing a familiar game that began in high school when we each desperately needed a close friend. One of us would start, and the other finish. "The Bobbsey Twins," classmates would groan, "doing their duet." It became an automatic chorus that ended in laughter. Now it feels like a tired script. If only Eric could speak, he might give us a new topic.

I give Ann her tea and add, "Even that Streisand record, 'The Way We Were,' would fit right into the theory."

"Theory?" Her voice asks the question.

"The history th . . ." I stop as she thins her mouth. Her frown narrows her eyes and deepens the lines.

We each start again with "My grandchild . . ." then stop.

Ann looks at Eric playing and says firmly, "I must get toys for his visits, but I never shop anymore. My job takes so much of my time."

Her thin shoulders straighten as though to bear the weight of her work. "Long range planning, meetings, speeches, and the Mayor wants me on the new council. I never imagined . . . But I'll stop. Other people's work is tedious to hear about."

She glances at the yellowed photos I left by her cup but turns to examine the wooden stacking stick in Eric's hand. Frowning, she rubs at the gray discoloration of the old toy, then sets it aside. "How's your Tom? It's sad we're all so busy. We never see you anymore, but then, I never see my own husband." Her voice is flat.

She has a way of moving our talk as she did my hands when she tried to teach me to knit booties for my babies. She'd click her tongue. "So smart, but such a klutz." Then we'd unravel the yarn to start again. My children would never have had homemade booties without her.

She clicks her tongue and continues. "Weren't those awful nights years ago, you trying to knit, me learning bridge. You and the men had such card sense, and I always lost. How I hated that game."

Eric pulls himself up by the coffee table and she smiles, her eyes shining. His small, chubby hand pushes and pats the round glass bowl that holds my shells. Leaning forward, he pokes at the glass, then licks it. We both laugh as he turns and looks at Ann, then back at the bowl.

"Eric sees the pretty shells." In her normal voice, she says, "Mine cracked when we moved. God, it seems we were always packing and moving . . . into bigger and better . . . Ed's dream." She looks around the room as though for the first time.

"Is that your same sand dollar, still unbroken? Remember the story you wanted us to believe about the five doves hidden inside? And the wish?"

I point to the pictures beside her. "Tom and I were cleaning out drawers. We found our old Florida pictures."

As Ann looks at the photos, I think about the ancient myth that promises that if you find a perfect sand dollar and break it to free the five doves hidden inside, you get your wish.

The year we visited Ann and Ed at their home in Florida, we searched for sand dollars. Broken shells littered the beach. It made me sad to think of all those wishes strewn through the ocean or pecked apart by shorebirds. Finally Tom found a perfect shell.

"Let's all break it and wish together," Ann announced.

"What if something happens and I need my own wish?" I half believed the words as I spoke."

"What could you possibly wish for?" She nodded at Tom searching for other shells nearby, then frowned at Ed, who stood at a distance squinting into the sun, "Who needs wishes when you have all of it—career, kids, a husband that hangs around."

I hugged her and, blinking, stood looking far out to sea. "If wishes were horses," I chanted. They all groaned, grabbed my arms, and pushed me into the water. We dunked and splashed each other until we were soaked and breathless.

Leaving the beach, Ann whispered, "If the sand dollar cracks on the way home, you'll lose your wish, but I'll still be your friend."

"I'm not superstitious." I had laughed, so sure of everything.

"My God, how young we look." Ann examines one photo intently. "Were our teeth really so white?"

She refuses to move the bowl of shells when Eric fusses about it. "He's got to learn he's not in charge. We never moved things for our kids, did we?" Her tone makes us conspirators who survived raising children. "The old pan and wooden spoon will do the trick. Don't get up. I'll find them. Talk to me about how you're filling time. How long has it been since you retired?"

Her words continue from the kitchen. "I suppose you still collect records. Don't tell me you bother with those good old oldies anymore."

I pour more tea and find a worn stuffed bunny for Eric, who immediately chews at it. "We still listen to the LPs we like best but . . . actually, we're into lots of new things since I retired."

Would she really care about my writing classes or tossing out the

spoons? One morning I picked up a coffee spoon at breakfast. It looked discolored. I picked up another with a dark stain. As I pushed through the spoon drawer, every one looked old and worn. I dumped them all in the trash. The clatter was delightful.

I'm certain if I read her my poem about how retirement and tossing spoons were alike, she'd laugh, "Riddles again," she'd say. "Anyway, cleaning drawers is not my idea of retirement."

I hear drawers in the kitchen opening and closing. Was she reorganizing my kitchen, as she used to when we cooked dinner together on the spur of the moment?

Before she got her job, she'd call me at work. "Ed's middle name is 'tense' these days. Maybe we'll argue less if we have company. His plane comes in at supper time. I'll bring the sauce. We'll do the spaghetti at your place."

Her meals were masterpieces. Spaghetti became elegant with her secret sauce. She made it seem so easy. Even my disorganized cooking space came to order with her there.

Coming from the kitchen, she taps a wooden spoon on a pan. "Your drawers and cupboards!" she accuses. "Everything's changed."

I swallow my cold tea as Eric drops the bunny and begins to tap the glass jar with the wooden spoon. He hasn't gotten into a rhythm yet.

"Haven't you EVER wanted to break it?" Ann stares fixedly into the bowl, then shows Eric how to pound the pan.

"You wouldn't believe what this child has meant to us. Ed spoils him to death—the son he never had." She raises her voice above the clatter. "He called from California to tell me he's had all his work sent home so he can be there with his grandson. I have to give a speech, and with Ed home, I can run to clean up my own desk work at the office. You know when it piles up ... "

Eric pushes away the pan and taps again at the shell jar, but Ann is still looking at the sand dollar. "Even when you choose to do it, work outside the home is . . . consuming. I can almost understand about Ed, what he goes through—so driven."

She sits back as though the lamp is too bright. "I simply can't save him like I did you. Remember how I called you, to get you away from those awful meetings, how many times I saved you?"

"Saved?" The word echoes inside my head.

She would phone me at work, her breathy voice urgent. "Don't tell them it's a friend, so we can talk." She called when she was redoing the living room, when her daughter went to live with a boyfriend, even the time her roses froze.

"Saved me?" I feel so dense.

"Of course. You remember. You and my girls . . . all needed me. And Ed

was away, always away. That's what made it all right, knowing I could rescue you when you needed it. And then the girls grew up. My job came just in the nick of . . . Now I'm not home even when Ed is. Isn't that a switch?"

As a dam inside me breaks, Eric throws the spoon and cries wearily. Ann struggles to put his sweater on him. "We'll have to go home. He's exhausted." She murmurs, as though to herself, "We're both exhausted."

"Wait." I can't seem to get my old teacher voice to work. "Ann, oh, Annie, wait." It seems barely a whisper, but the sudden silence in the room is astonishing. Our eyes meet.

Carefully I lift the sand dollar from the bowl. Stretching it high above Eric, I give it to her. Under the thin shell, the doves wait to fly free.

Tom Joseph

Two Points

A novel excerpt

One – A Whisper and a Wink

This is how it's told in my family. Whether it actually happened this way, I can't say. I wasn't around, wouldn't, in fact, show up for another twenty-five years. I like to think, though, that even back then, I was present in promise, a promise that had carried my newly married grandparents up North to the middle of nowhere, then whispered, "You're home." Who knows, maybe the story's just another of Grampa's bedtime yarns. Would that really matter?

It was May of 1934. Gus and Tess Harriman were on a honeymoon they had no time for and couldn't afford. They'd driven off from Chicago in Grampa's 1929 Packard Roadster with no destination, only a direction. North. Two bone-rattling days later, they found themselves somewhere in far northern Wisconsin at a place appropriately named The Last Resort. After spending the night in a cottage called the Honeymoon Deluxe, which come morning proved identical to all the other empty cabins in every way except for its extra two bucks per night charge, my grandparents stood on the resort's dock, watching the sun rise over a glass-calm lake. A small rowboat was tied up to the pier, and inside the boat were two fishing poles. Grampa hadn't fished since he was a boy in Dubuque, Iowa. Gram never had. But they both looked at the poles with the same attitude that had brought them this far: *Why not?*

Palmer, the resort owner, gave them instructions on row-trolling a sucker and on using a gaff hook. Then he pointed toward an opening across the lake. "That there's the way to Musky Lake. If you don't catch one on the way, find you a cabbage weed bed there. Be careful with your

oars. There's so many fish you're like to knock one in the noggin. Bring one back and the missus'll cook it up for supper."

And so my grandparents trolled their sucker through the winding river channel until they reached the next lake. Palmer hadn't exaggerated. There, in a weedy bay between two pine-topped points of land, Grampa caught his first musky—a whopper, over 45 inches, as the story goes. He and Gram downed a couple beers in celebration, then found themselves in need of a place to relieve themselves. The way Grampa put it, as newly-weds they were acquainted enough to sleep in the same bed, but not quite ready to share the same watering hole. So Grampa Gus dropped Grandma Tess off on one point of land and beached the boat on the other.

Grampa always swore the whole idea, if not yet the name, came as he stood irrigating the great white pine. He realized right off it was a preposterous idea. They'd married late. He was over 30, and Tess was 28. They were too old, too busy, and too strapped to consider such tomfoolery. Yet, with the clear northern air, the monstrous fish, the cold beer, and the release of his bladder, not to mention the afterglow from the wedding two days earlier, Grampa was feeling so good that he plain didn't care. There was something special about this place, something that sent all those logical reasons against his sudden plan skimming like skipping stones to the middle of the lake, where they slowed and sank out of sight.

He finished marking his territory, jumped to the giant pine's first branch, and climbed up for a better look-see.

From his viewpoint high in the tree, Grampa could tell that the lay of the terrain was even better than he'd hoped. The two points of land defining the narrow, deep bay were part of a larger peninsula, roughly U-shaped, which jutted into the thousand-acre lake. Somewhere up the shore was the little town that Palmer told them had been named after the lake.

"Gus? Gus Harriman! Darn you, Gus, where are you?" Gram had finished her own business and come tramping through the woods to find him.

"Up here."

"What in the dickens are you doing?"

"You won't believe what I can see from here."

"I don't believe what I can see from here. A grown man up a tree. Who do you think you are, Tom Sawyer?"

"I tell you, Tess. It's like looking at a set of blueprints. It's all there."

"Well, you're not all there, that's for sure. Now get down from that tree this minute. Talk to me with your feet on the ground."

Grampa climbed down and told Gram what he'd seen. The cabin—their home—would go on the high, east-facing slope that promised a view of the sunrise over the lake. The sheltered bay inside the U would provide a perfect harbor for the fleet of boats they'd surely need. On the opposite side of the property looked to be a good sand beach. There, the children could play within earshot, but not so close that they'd interfere with his

trolling between the two points. There was plenty of room in between for outbuildings.

"Well, I have to admit, I saw something, too," Gram fessed up. She showed Grampa a long, white-tipped feather. "It's an eagle's. Has to be." She led him to the edge of the lake. "See that big pine on the other point? That's the eagle tree. You can make out the nest from here."

"If the place is good enough for them," said my grandfather, "it's more than good enough for us."

"The fishin's not bad," Gram said, glancing back at the weedy bay.

Grampa glanced, too. Suddenly, up to the surface bobbed all those logical reasons. "We can't afford this," he said.

"It's too far north," Gram agreed. "We drove forever to get here."

"That's two points."

"Two very good points."

They stepped back into the boat and shoved off. Grampa made a few pulls on the oars, then set them down. Gram and Grampa floated in the bay for a long time. Finally, signaling toward the opposite shores with each hand, Grampa broke the silence. "But those, those are two *great* points."

Gram reached up and took his hands in hers. A little breeze had come up. In the wind they heard the whisper.

There's a lot more to the story that, for the most part, Grampa didn't care to talk about. Eventually, though, they built Two Points pretty much to a tee the way he mapped it out that first day.

So that's how it started. As it turned out, Grampa was right about the children part, too. Dad was born nine months and a wink later. A quarter century down the line, Dad passed that wink on to Mom, and I got started, too.

Two – Arrival

It was easy, when I was twelve years old, to mark the day summer began. It had nothing to do with the solstice. I knew that because we'd studied it in science class. The solstice was when you stick a pencil through an orange and walk in a circle around some kid's basketball. Then the teacher tells you to stop and asks the class what they see, and some wise guy says, "Juice dripping on the floor." Finally, someone notices that the pencil is pointing directly at the basketball. That's the school version of the coming of summer. Typical. It has nothing to do with the real world.

Neither did a change in weather announce the new season. Up North at Two Points, it can snow in June. I've seen it. Even in Blaine, Illinois, where we lived during the school year, you might go shirtless in March and need

your parka in May. If the thing about the weather were true, we'd have about 158 seasons a year.

The answer was much simpler. Any kid could tell you. Summer began the day school let out.

When, though, was the exact moment? The instant the last bell rang? The second my feet flew off school grounds? Or minutes later, when I got home and jumpshot, hooked and dunked all my spiral notebooks into the bulging trash can as the imaginary crowd chanted, "Two points! Two points!"?

Close. Yet, even those sweet moments were, in truth, no more than the last twitching reflexes of the school year, the kind an animal has after it's already dead, only its nervous system hasn't gotten the message. Summer couldn't really begin while I was still the school-year Danny Harriman, the math brain, the you-play-rightfield ballplayer, the kind of kid who's always in the running for Citizen of the Year. Until something more solid than daydreams came along to crack me open and bust me out of my winter egghead eggshell, summer was still 400 miles away.

As far as I was concerned, the year was divided into two very unequal portions. The first was B.S., the 42-week-long bore Before School let out. The only ten weeks that mattered I called, simply, V. As in Victory. Or as in Vacation. Take your pick. I couldn't wait for the miracle to come along to end the B.S. and transform me into the summer me, free of responsibilities and expectations and homework—heck, just plain free.

How lucky I was to have a miracle I could rely on year after year. It showed up late the afternoon that school got out, as I was dragging the homework-stuffed garbage can down to the curb. There it was, behind my Dad's Olds 88. He towed it slowly past the house, halted, then reversed direction and backed up the driveway. I let out a whoop, dropped the can, and ran alongside. It pulled up in front of our garage. Poof, the school year vanished.

It—*the* it—was the green trailer.

Dad had built the eight-foot utility trailer from two-by-fours and plywood and an axle from Grampa's original 1929 Packard. The trailer was a hefty arrangement, with a drop-in gate too heavy for a skinny twelve-year-old to lift. Its bulk was necessary, though, for it held all our summer needs. Besides the assortment of bulging suitcases, there were our flannel sleeping bags, the Scotch cooler, Mom's box of *Saturday Evening Post* double acrostics (which she brought because newspaper crossword puzzles were too easy), Nick's weight set, Angie's hamster cage, Gram's five-horse outboard, which Dad had rebuilt over the winter, new lawn chairs, a pallet of charcoal briquette bags, a gross of lighter fluid, and a hundred other odds and ends. The trailer held them all, and something more important yet: a promise. It was the very same promise that had brought Gram and

Grampa up North in the first place: Finally we'd be leaving the house in the suburbs and heading for my real home at Two Points.

The trailer was more than the promise. It had survived its winter hibernation outside Dad's office at Harriman Drafting & Blueprinting, and I had survived another winter in Blaine. It was the certain proof that summer had finally come.

From hitch to tailgate, the trailer was painted the same shade as that most beloved of Two Points' buildings which gave the color its name: outhouse green. The truth was, the only finishes that had ever been used on any of the grounds' buildings—and that included the garage, the bunkhouse, the bathhouse where we changed into swimsuits, the boathouse, the screen pagoda and the little playhouse, even my grandparents' house, which had once been a model home at the Chicago World's Fair—were marine spar varnish and that deep, not quite forest shade of green. But outhouse green was what we had always called it, and outhouse green it would always be. Grampa must have had a fifty-gallon drum of that paint. Every summer, one of our chores was to put a fresh coat on whatever needed it.

Merely looking at the trailer took me halfway to Two Points.

Before the tires even rolled to a stop, I was over the side, flashing the V-for-Vacation sign and bouncing on the trailer's floorboards to see how they'd weathered the winter. Naturally, Dad had already seen to that, and greased the bearings and overfilled the tires in anticipation of the heavy load. He was anxious to get going, too. Dad barely pecked Mom's cheek on the way to the basement, where most of our stuff was piled. He didn't bother to take off his tie.

Emerging from the house hoisting two of the heavy suitcases, my brother Nick was ready as well. At sixteen, Nick had muscles and loved to use them, especially when people were watching. He wore his Blaine High gym shorts and his prized University of Moscow sweatshirt with the cut-off sleeves.

Nick looked like the wrestler he was. He had short, thick legs and an oversized torso with arms that hung a foot from his body even when he wasn't carrying anything. He was sure no girl could resist the no-sleeve look, though all it showed off were his tufts of curly brown pit hair. Nick thought like a wrestler, too.

Lifting a suitcase into the trailer, he grunted, "Here you go, Hulk." Nick liked to call me that when I was wearing my own favorite sweatshirt, which showed the Incredible Hulk ripping his clothes to rags simply by flexing. I loved that sweatshirt, half because my muscle-bound hero could snap puny guys such as Nick like string beans, and half because of the Hulk's outhouse green complexion.

With the trailer's arrival and all the excitement, I was feeling the Hulk's power. I hefted the suitcase mightily. It barely budged.

"Shut up," I spat, looking down to see my brother grinning. I avoided his eyes and dragged the suitcase, inch by inch, to the front of the trailer. Sweat beaded on the three hairs under my arms.

I helped tote, wedge, cram and pile until the trailer resembled something out of the Beverly Hillbillies. Dad tied everything down with about a thousand half-hitches, finishing as the sun disappeared behind our neighbor's house. We were ready to head up North.

But we wouldn't. It was part of the routine. We always left in the morning. Tonight Dad would grill a steak, and we'd eat on paper plates. Mom would spend all evening cleaning. "See how I'm leaving the house for you, Isaac," she told my Dad, who commuted back and forth several times a summer. "Try to keep it that way."

Dad knew not to cross her. Though Mom stood barely five feet, she was a coiled spring, wiry and always ready to let loose. Her temper was as dark as her eyes, which when she was mad became little dots of coal compressed so tight they sparkled like diamonds. Dad may have worn the pants in our family, but Mom knew how to snap the belt.

Surprise. We ate steak on paper plates. After dinner I made a last inspection. Rear end nearly scraping the ground, the Olds looked like a sled dog on its haunches, poised for the command to mush. The heck with the load, said the Olds, let's get on with it. I agreed. Why didn't we just leave? I went to bed with the sure knowledge I'd never get to sleep.

The next thing I knew, I was woken from a dream of being attacked by an orangutan, which turned out to be Dad's hairy forearm tickling me awake. He was frisky in the morning and teased everyone, especially Mom, who needed at least three cups of coffee to get going. But even she relented the morning we left for up North, allowing herself to be poured into the passenger side along with her second cup. We bid the house goodbye. I didn't look back. My eyes, the eyes of the summer me, focused North.

Dad drove relaxed, with one hand on the wheel and the other stretched toward Mom. As we approached a red light, he made a show of pressing some button on the dashboard, and the light turned green. We flew through a whole line of stoplights that way, with Dad never slowing down, even though they were red up until the last second. "I know how he does that," singsonged Nick, but when I demanded to know, Nick only sneered and said, "When you're older." Then Dad swung us onto the tollway, throwing the change in the machine as we coasted through. I was sure we'd crash through the striped wooden gate. It lifted in the nick of time.

"Oops," Dad said as we sped up.

"What is it?" asked Mom, totally alert. A second before, she'd been a million miles away in double acrostic land. It's amazing how moms spring to attention when somebody says oops.

"Forgot we were dragging the trailer. We're supposed to go through the

manual lanes." Dad checked his mirror for cops. But we were charmed. We were heading up North. No one would dare to stop us.

Dad made sure of that. He carried an empty Clorox bottle in case one of us had to go, which ensured that we didn't, even my six year old sister Angie. We crossed the border in no time. Nick and I leaned over the front seat, straining to be the first to get to Wisconsin, and blew air from one state to the next.

We settled into traveling mode. Dad and I played license plate poker. Nick slept. Mom chewed her pencil and occasionally entered something on her page. Angie fondled her hamsters, Todd the First and Todd the Second, and looked out the window for signs with the only word she could read: E-A-T. When that got boring, she decided to dress one of the Todds in the pink sweater Gram had knit for Wibbly Wobbly Woo, Angie's favorite doll. Angie gave the uncooperative hamster a Mom-style tongue lashing: "Bad boy. You're going to catch your death of cold if you run around without your sweater on. Besides, don't you know how rude you're being? Wibbly gives you her very best sweater, and you won't even try it on? Bad, bad, boy."

We passed a restaurant, and Angie tuned in instantly. "E-A-T. E-A-T. Stop. Oh, please," she pleaded. She should have known by now that we always had lunch at the Blue Sky Supper Club on the Tomorrow River outside Stevens Point. Dad said the place had special memories. Nick agreed. As far as he was concerned, the triple decker club, a sandwich so tall that even my big-mouthed brother could barely get his chops around it, was the world's greatest memory.

Personally, I loved the Blue Sky for another reason—the bathroom wallpaper. It was one restaurant where I never had to be reminded to wash up, which gave me the excuse to take a leisurely look at the walls covered with bra-and tutu-clad monkeys. *I dreamed I was dancing in my Monkeyform bra,* read the caption next to each. Who knew why the monkeys needed the bras? Their chests were as flat as the luckless half of the girls in my sixth grade class who hadn't started developing. But there was something about the lacy white cups I couldn't pry my eyes from, any more than I could when seeing their outline, whether they were needed or not, through a white blouse. I stood and gawked till my hands got red and wrinkly.

Outside of Tomahawk, we passed the first up North lake. Not the farm ponds or shallow, grassy downstate basins, but the real northern McCoy, bog-surrounded, lined with tamaracks and white birches. A pair of loons drifted across the blue water. We'd entered the domain of up North.

It was still another torturous hour from Tomahawk. Neither license plate poker nor car bingo nor a game of ghost could distract me. I watched the odometer creep each tenth of a mile, heard every tick of the dashboard clock. A pool of water seemed to lie on the road surface ahead of us, as if our lake had come out to greet us; but the pool kept moving back, just out

of reach. It made me so anxious I nearly had to ask for the Clorox bottle. I thought I'd deceived myself. Summer hadn't begun when the green trailer arrived. It wouldn't start until we got to Two Points. We'd be driving forever. We'd never get there.

Then we went over the bridge between Cross and Pickerel Lakes and passed the Virgin Timber Inn and the airport. Then—finally—we turned. Dad slowed to a crawl. We all opened our windows to smell the freshly-scrubbed air. A blue heron fled from the swamp to our left, scolding us in his hoarse squawk for interrupting his hunt in the shallows. To our right, we caught a glimpse now and again of the lake through the trees and underbrush, which in mid-June still had that just-reborn yellow-green shade of spring.

The road curved to avoid a huge old white pine whose roots were exposed along the eroding hillside. We made a right at the sign carved to look like a cribbage board on which were burned the words "Two Points," then passed between the two giant rocks my cousins and I liked to slide down. They looked smaller this year. We coasted down to the turnaround. We were there.

Ron Wallace

Quick Bright Things

An excerpt from a novel in progress

He couldn't shake the feeling that they were all going to die. It had come to him unexpectedly, unbidden, as he was preparing his annual lecture on the causes of the Vietnam War, in which he showed how the United States had, with the best intentions, come to the aid of the French in the 1950s, ignorant of the Vietnamese people's history or culture. What was current events for Peterson was ancient history for his students, who had been infants when the war finally ended. He remembered that day vividly, driving home from work to Christine and Jennifer, hearing the announcement on the car radio that the war was officially over. It was as if a weight had been lifted from him. If this war, this endless war, could be over, so could Jennifer's problems, so could his difficulties with Christine.

But it meant nothing to his current students, who seemed more interested in getting the highest grades with the least work so they could get their MBA's and earn the most money. Maybe he could make some connection between the current crisis in the Middle East; maybe he could get them to see how they could all learn something from the lessons of history.

His thoughts drifted to Christine and Jennifer and Phoebe, how much he missed them after only a few days. They had gone to visit Christine's parents in Milwaukee for the long weekend and were due back this evening. Peterson hadn't wanted to go—he had never liked Christine's father—so he pulled out the old excuse of work and drove himself out to their country place. It had been pleasant—the seclusion, the quiet, the freedom to work on his lectures in peace. But this morning he'd woken up with a pain in his chest, indigestion he figured, and all day he had been uneasy, plagued with some inexplicable emptiness or dread.

Halfway into his lecture it hit him: they were all going to die—Christine, Jennifer, Phoebe. He saw them in the Nova, rounding the circle of Goodfellow Road and County Y in the blind spot where the town board had made a gravel cut years ago, Christine, as always, driving too fast, as a pickup truck of high school boys returning from Richland Center slammed into them. The vision played itself over and over in his mind. It was absurd, he knew. But somehow, it was as real as if it had already happened. "So quick bright things come to confusion," he thought, remembering a line from Shakespeare.

He wished now that he had gone with them to Milwaukee. Christine would have preferred that, he knew, and he could have done the little work he *had* to do there. He wished he'd told Christine and the girls he loved them before they left. He *would* tell them when they got back. Jennifer and Phoebe would be returning to college soon, summer vacation over, and he vowed to spend more time with them when they got back from Milwaukee.

If they got back, he found himself thinking again. He wouldn't get any more work done this day, he decided, not with that violent image pulsing before him. Maybe if he walked up to look at the cut, maybe if he ran the four mile circle he hadn't run for years, he could shake off the anxiety that filled him like a canyon of regret. He put down his lecture, found a T-shirt, some shorts, and his old running shoes, and walked up the gravel road to the cut.

The intersection was well-marked, he noted, peaceful and deserted. It seemed impossible that anything could happen there, surrounded by the neatly grazed hillsides, the draws of cottonwoods and boxelders. The corn, after a summer of plentiful rain and record-breaking temperatures, looked lush. At least they hadn't cut *all* the trees, he mused. And some scraggly vegetation now softened the stark limestone walls. The sun was high overhead, and it was almost unbearably hot. It had been over a hundred for three days straight, and it looked like it would be that again today. Perhaps he shouldn't run after all.

He had kept up his running only sporadically over the years; but he remembered now how settling running had been, how the repetitive rhythm of feet on pavement had always helped him think, had given him good ideas. Christine had worried about his heart, his high cholesterol. It was but another of the petty conflicts he wished he hadn't helped perpetuate.

He did some stretching exercises beside the road. He was in pretty good shape, he thought, for a man nearing fifty. Although he could no longer put his palms flat on the pavement, he could touch his toes with his fingertips without straining his legs. "It's because your torso's so long, and your legs are so short," Christine had teased. "Why people value athletic ability so much, I'll never know," she had said.

The wires on the power pole overhead hummed like bees. He started

slowly up the narrow black-topped road, pleased at how much better he felt. The first fifty yards were uphill, and he negotiated the crest without getting at all winded. From the top of the ridge he could look out over the countryside across the fresh cut hay and alfalfa, the corn tassels patterning the land like wide-wale corduroy or herringbone, as Christine had once said, to the steeple of the Catholic church—the halfway point on the four-mile circle—and then to the ridges and hills even farther off in the distance. The immensity of the view had always surprised him, the blue sky stretching for miles, the sense of serenity and well-being that unbroken landscape provided. This was why he had bought the property in the first place, away from the city with its crowds, cars, noise, and social demands, its houses jostling each other for attention or looming over the superfluous sidewalks.

As he began the slow coast down the first long hill, he felt a slight pain in his lower back and the hint of a stitch in his left side. He remembered his track coach in high school yelling, "Roll down those hills, Peterson. Roll down them."

He rolled down the hillside past Goff's farm, remembering how Goff had insinuated himself into Peterson's barn, shed, and meadow. "That's a nice pasture you got there," Goff would say. "A guy could put some heifers in that pasture. You gonna put any heifers in that pasture?" Peterson had always felt guilty that he wasn't farming. He didn't want heifers or hay or machinery on his place, but he couldn't think of any good reason to tell Goff *no.* Just saying he didn't *want* them there, that he wanted an empty barn, shed, and pasture, seemed somehow unfriendly. If he wasn't going to use them for their intended purpose, why shouldn't Goff? He always agreed—and then spent days resenting the manipulation. He hadn't talked with Goff at all this season, and he wondered where Goff was keeping his heifers, his extra hay and equipment now?

A tan and white foal grazed beside its mother in Goff's field. Phoebe would like to see that, Peterson thought. Maybe she would see it from the car on the way home later. He imagined her excitedly running to the house to tell him all about it. They had called her "the finder"; she always managed to find things when no one else could—lost keys, money, morels. She was lucky, everyone said. She was always winning raffles, cake walks, coloring contests. She loved animals. Once, after a fight over something, she "ran away" for a day and a night to the tent Peterson had pitched in the woods at the end of their property. She was going to forage for a living, she said. They had just seen *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at a local outdoor theater, and she said she was going to live like Puck or like a deer.

He kicked a piece of baling twine and continued downhill. They had called her "lucky," although she was the one who needed the bottle-thick glasses at age seven—Christine's legacy—and the head gear and braces at ten—Peterson's contribution. She got the nickname "Bean" for her skinny

body and stick-like legs. But she was talented, Peterson thought, composing her own pieces on the violin, piano, and trombone. She had even won a city-wide song writing contest.

The hill leveled out, and Peterson noted the yellow, diamond-shaped road sign, with the silhouette of a cow walking into the road, a hole in the cow's ass where some waggish hunter had taken target practice. Cottonwoods and sumac clustered in the draw. The pain in Peterson's lower back sent an occasional pulse down his leg, and his side stitch threatened to move up into his shoulder. "Run through that pain," his coach would have yelled at him. "Goddamn it, just run through it." He jogged on.

If Phoebe had been the Puckish sprite, all angles and energy, Jennifer was the beauty. When she was born the doctors discovered that her head wasn't growing and concluded that she would be a microcephalic. Peterson remembered the strain on him and Christine, how he'd nearly had a breakdown, how they'd gone to Mexico to forget, how they'd mused about a future in which the doctors were wrong and Jennifer turned out not only to be normal, but beautiful and smart. "Not bad for a retarded kid," they'd imagined themselves saying. And then the doctors were wrong, or perhaps Peterson's prayers to the gods were answered. Shortly after the Mexico trip, Jennifer's head started growing, and her development proceeded in textbook fashion from then on. She was living with her friend, Lydia, now and was happier than he had ever seen her.

The road turned uphill again. The sun, aslant over the trees, was already bubbling the asphalt as Peterson watched his feet plod uphill. The front of his T-shirt was drenched with sweat, and his breath was coming hard. He passed the old Thiessen place, where a large dog, chained to a makeshift house, barked at him while dancing to the end of its chain and back. Years ago Peterson had gotten to know all the dogs on the route. He had carried a stick ever since the day Scout, Thiessen's beautiful springer spaniel, had broken free of his chain, scampered down to the road, barking, and made a pass at Peterson, biting him in the calf. It hadn't really hurt—"itched" might have been a better way to describe it. He felt the tickle of hair on his legs as he ran by, saw the flurry of tan and rust at his feet, and felt the itch as the dog retreated to its front stoop.

He had never particularly liked dogs, from the black cocker spaniel his father had brought home for him when he was five—a frantic dog that was always knocking him over in its enthusiasm—to the terrier he had accidentally hit in the jaw with a baseball bat as a teenager when the dog, chasing the pitched tennis ball, leapt up seemingly from nowhere. For years Peterson had carried the memory of that dog—whimpering at his feet, its jaw splintered—trying to persuade himself that it wasn't his fault.

When Thiessen's springer spaniel rushed him, he felt a surge of terror and guilt and kept running until he saw two streams of blood flowing from tooth marks on either side of his calf. He had felt more outrage than any-

thing else. What right had that dog to bite him? He hadn't done anything to it. It was the same kind of outrage he'd felt when that gangly retarded fellow had thrown a cup of cold yogurt in his face as he and Christine were walking home one night when they were first married.

After Scout's bite, the doctor in Richland Center had recommended that Peterson get a tetanus shot and have the dog impounded, but he did neither. Driving to town for the shot seemed too time-consuming, and impounding the dog seemed unneighborly. He suspected that the neighboring farmers already resented his presence in the community—"the rich city guy who bought the old Goodfellow place," he imagined them saying. "No, he don't work none, far as I can see. Teaches at the University or something."

As he passed the Thiessen place, a coon hound came up behind him, crisscrossing the ditch on his right. He wished he'd thought to bring a stick, but the dog didn't seem particularly interested in him and just kept drifting lazily along in parallel, sniffing through the weeds. Peterson reached the crest of the hill and ran more easily along the gentle dips in the road that approached the Catholic church. He looked out over the hillsides, where gray and silver silos glinted in the sun, and black and white Holsteins grazed against the robin's-egg-blue sky. Somewhere over the next hill he could hear the huge ventilation fans roaring in a cow barn and the motor of the vacuum milk tank puttering. Although the pain in his side had abated, the pain down his left leg had become a dull pulse, and both legs were beginning to feel a bit rubbery. Perhaps he would have to walk the last mile or so. He was running straight up and down now, taking inefficient little stutter steps. "Lean into it," his coach would have insisted. "Stretch out."

He took several deep long breaths, the smell of silage and manure assailing him. Several Holsteins looked up, half-interested as he passed, and one calf followed him from inside the electric fence on his left for a few dozen steps.

He could see the steeple clock on the Catholic church clearly now, its hands stuck at twelve. He must be moving slowly today, he thought. In the old days it was fifteen minutes exactly to the church. Today, by the church clock, it had taken two hours. At this point in the circle he had inevitably thought about his father. Just when Peterson felt like walking—wondering what he was doing out in the hot sun, his T-shirt and shorts drenched with sweat, his legs weak, his side aching, his head pounding—he'd thought about his father slumped over in his wheelchair in the nursing home, his gold front tooth gleaming through the crack in his half-smile. His father couldn't lift his head or move more than a finger and would have given anything to be able to run as Peterson was. For a man who could no longer feel anything, the side stitch, the rubbery legs, the sweat, the shortness of breath would have been an indescribable pleasure. Peterson's petty fatigue

was nothing compared to his father's incapacity, and this thought spurred him on. At any moment, you could be paralyzed or dead. He quickened his pace, the adrenaline flowing almost as it had when he was eighteen, running cross-country in high school, his mother urging him on at the finish line with the coaches and other fathers, where his father should have been.

He topped the hill by the church, its stone serenity unchanged. His mother was still active in her church, Peterson mused. Eddie had turned out to be a godsend for her after Peterson's father died. They still traveled to Florida or Hawaii every winter and Canada or Minnesota every summer. Peterson wished he had been more accepting of Eddie. Peterson's hostility had distressed his mother unnecessarily, and it certainly hadn't done his dead father any good for Peterson to remain morally outraged by his mother's affair and hasty remarriage.

It might have made a good story, he supposed. Peterson's father had wanted to be a writer. But the only things he had ever written, as far as Peterson knew, were a short sociological study of Peterson's mother, for a college intro class, and a "How I Live with a Disability" piece for *Reader's Digest.* His sociology thesis—that his wife's rigid moral upbringing at the hands of her father, a Lutheran minister, was counter-productive—seemed to have been borne out in her sister Ida's alcoholism, her sister Martha's escapades with a variety of men, her brother Wilford's sexism, and her own affair during her husband's illness and her hasty remarriage after his death. Or maybe it was just his grandfather's moralistic genes that had determined Peterson's overreaction to his relatives' difficult lives.

The *Reader's Digest* piece was thin and cliche-ridden but sincere. Peterson's father had responded to a call in *Reader's Digest* for first-person stories. They offered $1,000, but it wasn't money or fame that interested him. He believed that his account of his experience with multiple sclerosis could help others. The article was never published but remained a yellowing typescript neatly folded in his father's metal strongbox where Peterson found it after his death.

A rustling in the grass at the side of the road brought him back. He glanced into the weeds, but his eyes were bleared with sweat, and he could see nothing. Years ago, he had fancied that such rustlings were snakes. They were probably no more snakes than was the piece of rope with which his uncle Wilford had scared off the women at the family reunion. Wilford had died not long ago, Peterson had heard, in his fishing boat, adrift on a farmer's pond. His wife, Evelyn, had gone out looking for him late one evening when he didn't come home. She found him in the moonlight, his pole still in his hands, his line run all the way out as if he had finally hooked into something big. She had waded out to the boat, cut the line, and sat with him all night before calling the coroner to come and take him home. Now she lived with Peterson's aunt Martha, who had finally given up on men.

Peterson fought up the steep incline to the old Hubble place, with its shabby asphalt siding, its rusted tin roof, its unmown weedy farmyard—all quack and burdock—its defunct gray windmill, its pile of trash. He had always been appalled at the way some of the farmers just dumped their trash into ditches and draws on their property or piled it in the yard. But what were they supposed to do with it, he asked himself. He had always taken his trash surreptitiously to town and found a dumpster.

He remembered how the Hubble's dog, Spike, had always chased after him for fifty yards or so, barking menacingly. Now, as he turned the sharp corner and began the long downhill before the last uphill section, he caught sight of another dog, much like Spike, bounding from behind an outbuilding. It was a mongrel, its black hair mangy and burr-ridden, the dirty scruff around its mouth shaggy and wet with saliva. It snapped at Peterson's legs and bottom, snarling, but then fell into place off to his side in front of the more docile brown coon hound that had been accompanying Peterson. He supposed if they were planning to bite him, they would have done so by now, and he relaxed into a smoother downhill pace.

If the mongrel looked a lot like Spike, the coon hound was a dead ringer for one the children had brought home years ago. "It just followed us, Dad," they had said. "And I suppose you didn't encourage it?" he had replied. "No," they'd insisted. "Did you discourage it?" "Well, no," they admitted. Peterson had explained, somewhat abruptly, that the dog probably belonged to someone else, that they would be sorry to lose it. "You wouldn't want that?" he asked them. "No." They lowered their heads. Although it was getting dark, he'd insisted that they walk the dog back to the house where it had joined them. When they hadn't returned after an hour, he drove off after them, half angry, half worried that something had happened. When he found them on the road, with the dog at their feet, they'd explained that no one was home, and every time they tried to leave, the dog followed them. Phoebe was in tears. "We knew you'd get mad," she said, "if we brought the dog home *again*."

The pain had become fairly constant in Peterson's left side now, and he was running, even downhill, with a slight limp. He would stop soon and walk, he told himself, taking several deep breaths. A strong smell assailed him, alfalfa and cows, yes, but some other smell he hadn't experienced for some time, a sweet but rank smell, a musky, slightly sour, overpowering odor, the odor, he realized, of something dead. The coon hound wandered off in the weeds to investigate. These were the August days, Peterson recalled, when families of raccoons and possums chose to cross the roads. Phoebe, he remembered, was horrified by the deaths of animals. People never affected her quite as much, but an animal, dead on the road or in a book or a movie, could make her weep inconsolably. When she'd see something in the road from the car, he'd assure her that it was just trash, a paper bag, something that had dropped from a farmer's truck.

Three crows rose flapping from the weeds as the coon hound continued circling. Peterson remembered a conversation he had had with Jennifer. Out of the blue one day she'd said, "You know, it's a good thing people die."

"Why is that?" Peterson had asked.

"It gives you a reason to do things. If you were going to live forever, why would you do anything?"

"If you're just going to die anyway," Peterson had baited her, "why bother?"

"Everybody has something to accomplish. Some contribution, some things you need to do. Death gives them some *urgency.*"

Not a bad little philosopher, Peterson had told Christine later. Not bad for a retarded kid.

He was running on the valley floor now, through bottomland, flat and even. Some of the pain had gone, and he could see the shade ahead where the long final hill began. Maybe he could run the whole way after all, he thought. He coasted along the road. *Everybody has some thing to accomplish. Some contribution.* What had been his contribution? The past few years seemed a blur of sameness—the history courses that he knew by heart, the yellowing lectures he swore as a young professor he'd never resort to, the gradual withdrawal from departmental affairs as younger colleagues implemented changes in committee organization and degree programs, the migration of his friends to better paying positions at more prestigious universities, the failure to finish the books he had once hoped would make his reputation.

Oh, there had been some high points—the first few years of teaching, the publication of a few dozen articles and poems, the citation for excellence in service to the College. But the older he got, the less interested he was in his career.

And then, of course, there was Lissa . . . .

He passed into the shade at the bottom of the long hill. It was the first shade he'd encountered on the run, and it eased him somewhat. The hillside was in shadow, the sun having dropped behind the steep, treed bluff. It was cooler in the shade, and he welcomed it, although the hill would be difficult and long. Staring at the pavement now, pushing himself to get up the long last hill, he heard the chirr of crickets and locusts and saw the cabbage butterflies laying their eggs in the cracked asphalt at his feet.

The white indentation of a tooth mark was still visible on the inside of his calf as he forced his legs up the hill. He remembered his outrage years ago as Scout scampered back to the porch yapping. It had taken old man Thiessen a few minutes to notice Peterson out front shouting and pointing. Peterson wasn't about to leave without letting Thiessen know what had happened, but he couldn't approach the house with Scout stationed in the way. When Thiessen finally saw him, he insisted that Peterson come in,

have the wound treated, and have some breakfast. Thiessen was seventy and hard of hearing. He apologized to Peterson as he shakily applied some merthiolate and tried unsuccessfully to get a bandaid to stick to Peterson's sweaty leg until Peterson finally dissuaded him. Peterson had ended up staying so long to talk that Christine began to worry and came looking. "I thought you'd had a heart attack for sure," she told him later.

He still had two scars from that bite. He remembered a storyteller who had visited his fourth grade class—was it nearly forty years ago?—and told stories about some of his scars. The storyteller then had the children tell stories about their scars. When it got to Peterson, he had no scars to tell about. After school, he'd run home to his mother feeling embarrassed and deprived. "Don't worry," she'd told him. "You'll have your scars to tell about soon enough."

He passed a road sign that had always amused him—steep, winding curve, 15 mph—and joked aloud that he guessed he'd have to speed up. He was running so slowly now that it was more like a walk, a slow motion pantomime of running, as if the pavement were moving steadily away from him with each step, his feet barely able to lift themselves under his body to keep it from falling. He was almost back to the house now, just half of the long hill to go. He thought of Jennifer and Phoebe playing badminton, Christine humming at her loom, the goats clattering on the oak platform he'd built for them in the pen he'd constructed out of old gates he'd found around the farm, the chickens poking through the new mown grass for insects and scraps. He thought he could hear a dove cooing in the boxelders, a phoebe calling its name from a fencepost, a bevy of goldfinches ringing their tiny bells high on the wires.

The cool breeze in the ridge's shadow chilled him, a shiver that started at the nape of his neck, where his wet hair dripped, and trickled down his spine, wrapping itself in tiny rivulets around his ribs and chest. And then the rivulets were thin arms squeezing gently, pushing him toward the unmowed roadside weeds, his legs and thighs trembling with the unending incline, as he thought *yes, a rest wouldn't be such a bad idea, yes, just a few moments in the weeds, yes,* as he stumbled into the Queen Anne's lace and chicory, the ragweed and wild mustard, the goldenrod and coneflower, and collapsed, dizzy, wheezing. It was peaceful in the weeds, a few bees humming, three dogs circling, a cardinal red in the trees.

He remembered stories of Goff's wild dogs roaming the woods, attacking deer and cattle. He had heard their ghostly yelping across the hills on starry evenings, the full moon illuminating the farmyard with milky light. Now the mongrel that had followed him loomed lean and ominous, teeth bared, mangy face thrust in his face. "Spike," he heard himself say. "Spike." Now Spike was licking his cold forehead and cheeks, the dog's rough tongue soothing as a massage. Now the brown coon hound had joined him, and other dogs gathered around, cooing and warbling.

Christine would find him. She'd arrive home to an empty house, begin to worry, and bring the car around. She'd chastise him for pushing himself too hard. "What a foolish thing to do," she'd say. Off through the fillips of Queen Anne's lace and chicory, he thought he could hear Phoebe and Jennifer singing in the breeze. And was that Christine singing, too? They had always made such wonderful spontaneous harmony. *So quick bright things,* he thought. *So quick bright things.* Now all the dogs in the neighborhood were gathered, like Theseus' musical hounds, yipping, yapping, and yodeling in unison some familiar tune. Now a howl, now a croon, now a moan. Now the Queen Anne's lace and chicory. Now the wind without measure or sound.

Gordon Weaver

Saint Philomena, Pray for Us

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death . . .
Psalm 23

More than forty years ago, the sudden death of Kevin O'Leary, my student, made me remember Saint Philomena, patron of dentists. When I was sixteen, my mother remembered I had not seen a dentist since I lost some baby teeth. "Why should I go to a dentist?" I said. "I brush."

"I have an appointment for you at Marquette," she said.

"Marquette? The college?"

"The university dental clinic. You get your work done by dental students."

"Why can't I go to a regular dentist? We're not Catholics."

"And we're also not made of money," my mother said.

So I began a regimen of treatment—prophylaxis, x-rays, a dozen serious cavities drilled and filled, one difficult extraction, two gold crowns—lasting nearly a year, a cycle of boredom and pain, the whole of it marked in my memory by the image of Saint Philomena. I think of it now as a year spent in exile, my innocent, unruly, resistant self banished intermittently to dwell among hostile and exotic aliens: the Jesuits who walked the campus in their black suits and dog collars; the dental students and instructors in white smocks—instructors identified by a red shoulder tab; the motley community of destitute and semi-destitute patients I joined.

But mostly during these periodic exiles I lived in the casual torture of pick, chisel, drill, extractor, with only the brief respite of only occasional novocaine.

I ascended a staircase to the waiting room, past the mural-size portrait of

Saint Philomena on the landing, checked in at a window like a bank teller's, showed my card, took a seat on one of the long wooden benches, as inhospitable as a church pew. I avoided all eye contact. We were a shabby crew of unfortunates: Negroes, harried mothers and their crying or screeching children, thin, unshaven men, clearly skid row winos.

Name called by a bored clerk, I rose and entered the clinic, a hall the size of a basketball court, with row on row of dental chairs, the whirr and whine and buzz of a hundred drills, a pervasive smell, vaguely medicinal, faintly metallic, white smocks everywhere, walking briskly, bent over patients, gathered at the counter where materials were dispensed.

I found my assigned chair—two rows in, seven down—and greeted my assigned student. "Hi," I said, or, "Hey," or, "How you doing?" He never spoke to me; I suspect he did not like juveniles and wonder if he liked anybody. The plastic badge over his smock breast pocket said *Styron.* He nodded, gestured me into his chair, and, after a cursory look at my x-rays and chart, set to his work, the infliction of pain.

The pain—*pain!*—has dissolved over time into an amorphous cloud over my otherwise quotidian teenagehood, one instance almost inseparable from another. The probing of Styron's needle-pointed pick, releasing mouthsful of warm, sweetish blood on my tongue, elides into the burn of the slow-speed drill he seldom lifted to allow it to cool, merges with the explosive jolt of nerve response stiffening my spine, rendering my muscles rigid, freezing the grip of my fingers on the chair's armrests, melds with the crack and crunch of his chisel deep in the shell of a tooth, transmogrifies into my throat's spasms as I gagged on my saliva, is absorbed into the shock of chill water rinse bestowed without warning, the flood of cold air Styron squeezed from a rubber bulb to clear his view.

Perhaps the most intense pain was the sensitivity test. "We need a sensitivity test on that before you bother with an amalgam," the red-tabbed instructor told Styron. Styron wet a paper napkin, wrapped it around a metal baton, and handed it to me to hold. From the baton, a thin cord ran to a black box with a dial set in its face. From the box ran another cord, ending in a wire he placed at the bottom of the cavity he had just drilled. He flipped a switch, the current ran through my nerve, and I jerked in my chair like an executed criminal. The tooth was live, could be saved

Instructors inspected each stage of the work during these two and three-hour sessions. Styron went to get mercury and silver to blend fillings, returning with a receipt for my mother's money. His rare breaks were occasions for speaking to me. "I got to step out a sec," he'd say. When he returned, his breath was rank with his just-finished cigarette.

He talked to his friend and fellow student working the next chair. (I never learned his name.) "So how many inlays you done now?" Styron might ask him. Five, or ten, or a dozen, his friend might reply. "Just shows what a fucking prick you are," Styron would say, or, "You must be as lucky

as you're ugly, huh?" or, "Beats the living shit out of me." They spoke of their various instructors, Styron calling them pricks, turds, bastards, sons of bitches, ass-faces.

This year's regimen of pain, I am convinced, left me the physical coward I have been the rest of my life.

The day's appointment done, I walked out of the clinic, through the waiting room, always near-full with the destitute and near-destitute, all awaiting their pain and boredom, down the flight of stairs, past the portrait of Saint Philomena.

She was depicted in full color, on her knees, hands folded in prayer, a yellow halo like a dinner plate surrounding her head. Her large eyes turned upward in ecstatic search of the deliverance she presumably never doubted. Her bloody mouth, lips collapsed inward, was stark against her dead-white skin. Arrayed about her on the ground were all of her teeth, torn from her jaws with pincers wielded by Moors before they martyred her by fire. This was in north Africa, in the fifth century A.D.

As I came up those stairs to my appointment with Styron, this picture terrified me with its promise of torment, but, descending, I could confront her with something like smugness. I had not died, nor was I likely to—at least not under Styron's indifferently harsh hand.

My family was nominally Protestant, most tenuously Lutheran. Approaching Christmas, my mother topped our tree with an angel and arrayed a hand-painted creche at its base among the wrapped gifts. On Christmas Eve, she took me to midnight services.

"Do I have to?" I complained.

"It won't hurt you," she said, "and it might even do you some good."

I asked my father, also compelled to go, if he believed in religion.

"It's all right to believe so long as you don't get all fanatic about it," he said. He wore a Masonic ring, but I never knew him to attend any lodge. He loved to laugh at Oral Roberts, then a Pentecostal working out of tents in Oklahoma, who called on viewers to place their hands on their television sets to receive his healing. "Get a load of this!" he would shout. I laughed with him. My mother tried to smile. I once watched my father behave with great rudeness to a Jehovah's Witness who came to our door with her small son, offering *Awake!* and *The Watchtower* for only a quarter.

When my mother insisted I enroll in a confirmation class, I appealed to him. He shook his head in sympathetic disgust and said, "Grin and bear it if it makes her happy, okay?" An icy-dour pastor with rimless spectacles conducted the class, requiring us to memorize impossibly numerous scriptures quoted in Luther's small catechism. When I dropped out, my father stood with me against my mother's disappointed anger. "She'll get over it," he advised me.

When I once asked him to explain Freemasonry to me, he told me about

Hiram Abiff and the building of the temple. "It's sort of like a religion," he said. "You follow it, and it kind of takes the place of a religion. You can make a lot of contacts."

Whenever I brought my mother to the edge of her patience and to the verge of tears, she exclaimed, "Jesus H. Wept!"

When my father died, I was surprised to find he had asked in his will for a Masonic funeral. I remember the strangers wearing their stylized carpentry aprons while presiding at the ceremony but cannot recall anything they said.

When my mother died, a Lutheran minister who never met her delivered a eulogy derived from things I told him of her life.

I have not set foot inside any church for nearly half a century. I have only recently begun to think so often about Saint Philomena.

After being educated at tax-supported institutions of higher learning, I was hired to teach at Saint Bernardine College, run by Franciscan friars. I was only mildly apprehensive. The dean who offered me the position, Father Brian, sprawled in his swivel chair. I remember feeling a momentary fear he might expose a thigh or worse as he shifted, crossing and uncrossing his bare legs and adjusting his robe, the beads at his waist clicking. He did ask if I feared being proselytized and assured me nothing of the sort would happen—the truth, for nothing of the sort did. I told him I had no such fear, no feeling one way or the other concerning his religion; I lied.

I enjoyed teaching at Saint Bernardine's. My students, all male, mostly of Irish, Italian, and Polish descent, ninety-seven percent Catholic, were eager, diligent, and docile, dedicated to their education as a certain vehicle upward from their blue-collar origins. I exulted in the breaks their mandatory retreats and feast days gave me.

My first class informed me it was customary to begin and end each session with prayer. I told them, I hope without sneering, that, while I could not, would not participate, I would appoint a class chaplain to conduct the exercise while I stood by, looking out the window at the manifest of each season expressed in the beautiful campus grounds.

I soon grew used to the crucifix in each classroom and learned to ignore the initials they jotted in the corners of writing assignments submitted to me—JMJ, for Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. The opening and closing prayers became a kind of bracket to each meeting. "Saint Francis," my designated chaplain would lead, or "Saint Dismas," or "Saint Bernardine"—the choice was the student chaplain's—"pray for us, now and at the hour of our deaths," they chorused before the amen and genuflection.

I admired some of my Franciscan colleagues. Father Capistran pursued serious secular philosophy and had a bishop's dispensation to read books on the Index.

I disliked others. Having taken his doctorate from Franco's Madrid, Father Amadeus was a rabid anti-Communist and organizer of the Cardinal Mindzenty Club chapter. Father Giles had been Goering's confessor at Nurenberg. Father Cyprian confessed John F. Kennedy aboard PT-109. Father Peter confessed the wife of the state governor's director of taxation and so could retail reliable insider political gossip.

Several of my colleagues, I later learned, reverted to their given names, a few resigned their vocations, and at least one married in the aftermath of John XXIII's Vatican II.

In my third and final year on the faculty of Saint Bernardine College, I appointed Kevin O'Leary chaplain of one of my freshman composition classes.

What can I trace to my childhood? Bits and pieces:

My friend Ronnie Makowski's parents invited me to eat supper with them. In their dining room hung a cheap depiction of the Sacred Heart. His parents talked, Ronnie talked, I ate my meat loaf and mashed potatoes in silence, fascinated by the garish reds and golds, the heavy metal frame above Mr. Makowski's head. Sometime after Palm Sunday, a yellowing frond was tucked behind the frame to stiffen and wither. I of course did not dare ask what all this was, what it might mean. Asked perfunctory questions, I replied politely, as I had been taught by my parents. To question another's religion, I understood, was as rude as staring at a blind man and his dog or at a cripple's limp or crutches.

We—my nominally Protestant friends and I—called Catholics *mackerel snappers* for the fish they ate on Fridays. Ash Wednesdays, they came to school with smeared foreheads they were forbidden to wash. Questioned, they joked, said they were angels with dirty faces.

Swimming at our neighborhood's municipal pool with my friend Ronnie Makowski, I saw the scapular he wore on a thick string around his neck. When we played basketball, Ronnie crossed himself before shooting free throws. This was fashionable for some years but long ago disappeared from the game.

When the husband of our seventh grade teacher, Mrs. Lillian Leet, died suddenly, Ronnie Makowski brought her a prayer card when she returned to our classroom after the funeral and a short period of mourning.

On his birthday, Ronnie Makowski treated me to a movie matinee; I do not remember what movie we saw. He reached in his pocket for his money, withdrew it; his rosary caught on his fingers and clattered to the pavement in front of the ticket window. He picked it up, rolled it into a ball, stuffed it back in his pocket. Instead of asking him what it was, I thanked him again for treating me to the movie.

These bits and pieces come from scattered days, all before I saw the portrait of Saint Philomena.

Ronnie Makowski became a first-rate athlete. Marquette University gave him a football scholarship. Preparing for his first varsity season, he worked out in the university gym. He was doing situps, I read in the *Journal* sports section, when he suffered a heart attack. He was found dead, stretched out on his back on the floormat. The person who found him, the newspaper reported, thought at first he was asleep.

This happened three years after my dental work was complete, when Ronnie and I were no longer friends, when I had forgotten all about Saint Philomena and the pain inflicted by the student named Styron.

What is more contemptible than contemporary religion?

My father hooted at a sweaty Oral Roberts, then a Pentecostal holding revivals in circus tents, claiming to heal through television sets. Roberts turned Methodist for respectability, and I watched him emcee slick variety specials complete with Hollywood guest stars, hair-sprayed, attired in designer suits, claiming to have spoken to a giant apparition of Jesus. I could not transcend my disgust to laughter.

Cable channels bring us smarmy frauds—Bakker, Swaggert, the Crystal Cathedral, a host of blatant swindlers and pitchmen and women—ad nauseam. On prime time, the networks coddle the likes of Billy Graham, Jerry Falwell, and the reactionary pope from Poland.

What could be more contemptible?

I find some solace in their inevitable humiliations. Their sham universities and theme parks declare bankruptcy, they are compromised in sleazy motels, they are strangled in lawsuits. Or they simply fade, are forgotten, like aged rock musicians. Who remembers Bishop Sheen? Who mourns Ezra Taft Benson?

Ichabod! Jeremiah would cry—if there were a Jeremiah among us today. The Glory hath departed us.

And beneath contempt, unworthy of laughter, are the faceless ranks of the mock-pious, the dressed-in-Sunday-best crowding fast food restaurants and sports bars after services scheduled to conclude in time for lunch. Drunkard's Mass, I heard my boyhood friend Ronnie Makowski call the late worship permitting Saturday's revelers to sleep off their hangovers.

Oh yes, there are those who feed the starving, shelter the battered, comfort the despised, march shoulder to shoulder with the outraged dispossessed. But this is politics, of no interest to me.

In the end, there is precious little to laugh at, scarce sufficient cause for righteous anger.

Kevin O Leary.

Kevin O Leary, class chaplain, led the prayer to open the semester's last meeting before final exam week.

I did not think it was a good class. I was ready for the semester to end,

anticipating summer, and so struggled, I think, to be enthusiastic, to inspire my students to enthusiasm. And they, too, were tired of the semester and anticipated the coming summer. I do not remember why we should have been discussing poetry at this last class meeting. The poet was Emily Dickinson, the poem her "Because I could not stop for Death." My students sat, lethargic, indifferent, bored as I all but shouted the lines at them. I do not know why I should have cared so much to generate some response to this poem. There were only a few minutes left when I snapped my text shut and scolded them.

"You think this has nothing to do with you," I said. "You think this is some quirky old maid nattering away at you, and you couldn't care less, right? Well, she's talking to you, and you should listen. You hear what she's saying? She's telling you Death is coming for all of us, and you can't stop it, and you don't know when it's coming, or how it's coming, but it's coming. Not you, though, right? All you can think about is summer vacation, getting out of here, going home, what you're going to be doing tomorrow and the next day, this summer. You're all bound up in your own little lives, aren't you!"

My students did me the courtesy of pretending attention; I understood very clearly I was having no effect at all.

"You just assume," I told them, "you'll wake up every morning, the way you assume the sun's coming up, right? So you care less about Miss Emily's little poem here, right? Well," I said, "you shouldn't." And when there was no flicker of response to this, I looked at my watch, saw we were only a minute from the bell, and said, "Shut us down one last time, Kevin."

Kevin O'Leary stood and led the closing prayer while I stared out the window at the greening, blossoming late spring of Saint Bernardine's campus. I was tired, momentarily disappointed in my students and myself, glad the semester was over.

Which saint did Kevin O'Leary call upon to be with him and his classmates, then and at the hour of their deaths? I cannot recall.

They come to me in a rush, a torrent, an illogical, incoherent flow:

Scapulars and prayer cards, rosaries and ashes smeared on foreheads; bleeding hearts and crucifixes and holy candles and holy water, counterfeit relics; the eyes of statues weep; the hands and feet of celebrated priests and nuns ooze blood at Easter and Christmas; trees and windows and clouds and even vegetable roots exhibit the likeness of Jesus or Mary; plastic Christophers mounted on dashboards; love offerings shamelessly hawked in exchange for tithes; Reverend Ike's prayer cloths guarantee prosperity; crosses worn in the ears, dangled in cleavages; incense and gongs, Buddhas in all sizes; Muslims unroll their rugs in response to prayer calls broadcast from skyscraper minarets; the earlocks of skull-capped Jews flop to and fro as they rock in prayer against the wall; aboriginals gather at

their totemic bamboo control towers and miniature airstrips to coax airplanes out of the sky; Mexican penitents crawl their knees bloody, scourge their backs with thorns; Shinto monks clap hands to summon the spirits of their ancestors; stone ruins of Aztec sacrificial alters; Indians chew peyote; naked Dukhobors assemble to watch their homes burn; snake-handlers and strychnine drinkers; speakers in tongues and recipients of Inner Light epiphanies; bearded Amish in their buggies; Mennonites rebuild houses destroyed by acts of God; hex signs on barns; hot cross buns baked on Good Friday; Nostradamus's riddles; Masonic aprons; horoscopes and polished lucky stones, rabbits feet and horseshoes . . . .

I once drank wonderful coffee, fresh-ground in the refactory, with the faculty of a small Benedictine college in Louisiana; the view from the picture window was the cemetery where they would all eventually join the brothers gone before them.

Saint Philomena.

Late on the night of the first day of final exam week at Saint Bernardine College, Kevin O Leary, having spent all day and evening cramming, left his dormitory alone and walked off campus to the state highway. He walked down the highway toward a convenience store, open twenty four hours, to buy—what? A soft drink? Snack food? Cigarettes? He wore a dark T-shirt, dark slacks, sandals. He walked on the right-hand side of the pavement, just on the gravel road shoulder.

What might he have been thinking about as he walked? I can only imagine. He might have thought how balmy the night air felt. If he looked up, he saw no stars, for they were masked by cloud cover. He may have thought about what he went to buy—soda, snacks, cigarettes? Perhaps he thought about his final examinations, maybe even of questions about poetry he knew he would find on my final examination.

Nothing is certain. He may have been humming, singing, talking to himself, may have walked, hands in pockets, jingling coins, may have strode, arms swinging, or strolled, even shuffled lazily. Pure speculation.

If he hummed or sang or spoke, he possibly did not hear the automobile that struck him, killed him instantly, from behind. Did he not see its headlight beams cast on the pavement and gravel ahead of him? Did he walk with his head down, lost in thought? Could his eyes have been closed just in that instant? Why did he walk so close to the road?

Kevin O'Leary was struck, killed, thrown into the deep ditch running alongside the state highway; he was hit so hard, his feet flew from his loose sandals, found on the shoulder, marking his last steps.

That is all. There was of course a somber memorial gathering on the campus of Saint Bernardine College, but final examinations were held on

schedule. We opened my class's exam with the usual prayer, and an extra prayer for the repose of the soul of Kevin O'Leary; for this I appointed a new class chaplain, because, of course, I could not lead any prayer, could not pray. That is all.

Kevin O'Leary. Ronnie Makowski. My mother and father. The priests and ex-priests of Saint Bernardine College. The Benedictine brothers of that small Louisiana college. Styron. I believe I could compose a very long list. If there were ever to be such a list, I wonder who would add my name to it? That is a vain, foolish thought!

What I truly wonder—and it is not foolish or vain!—is if there will be anything I can hold in my hand, or any words I can speak, any name I can call out to, when my hour is upon me.

David Tabachnick

Fatimata's Ancestors

Sekou Traoré, chief justice of the Supreme Court, came from a family of craftspeople. The Traoré family specialized in wood and ivory sculptures, and throughout Conakry, roadside vendors stacked their sculptures on unsteady tables or set them out in orderly rows on indigo cloths.

Lamine Traoré was the chief designer at the family workshop. He invented a line of figures that were all knees and elbows and featureless faces cocked attentively. He said that these figures represented contemporary Guineans—hollow men bereft of any commitment to the national community. His workshop produced immaculate re-creations of Baga ritual statues, one of them a three-foot long birdlike head with human eyes. The Baga had been famous for their art and ceremonies in the French colonial era, but the post-colonial dictator, now dead, had prohibited the Baga from practicing their art and religion.

Lately Lamine had used some of Picasso's ideas in his work, delighted that a man so influenced by African designs should in turn inspire an artist in Conakry. "I need a room of my own and an open window," Lamine would say.

Sekou Traoré, like his brothers, could carve wood, but he chose law over the family business. As a child he was permitted to go to school but required to practice his woodcarving. He hadn't carved anything for years but still woke sometimes with a block of wood in his hands, convinced that his father was up and waiting to see what he had done. He became a professor of law in Senegal and then moved back to Guinea after the death of the old dictator.

The case before him had been in the courts for twenty years. Sekou Traoré had written out his ruling by hand and read it from the bench to the lawyers and parties seated in the court. Some judges tease you with their ruling, swaying the listener first one way, then the other, blasting at one side and raising the hopes of the other, only to slip quietly into reverse and rule in favor of the side so beaten and discouraged. Sekou's ruling started with the punch line.

"This court finds in favor of the appellees and upholds the rulings of the lower courts that have uniformly rejected the specious arguments of the appellants for the past twenty years."

Sekou Traoré paused and stole a glance at the audience. Murmurs rippled. An elderly man sat erect, tears on his cheeks, young men on either side whispering and exchanging glances.

"Twenty years ago," he continued, "the Diallo family, in a fit of greed, ordered the Bah family off the land the two families had worked side by side for over a hundred and fifty years. In former times, the Bah family served the Diallos as their slaves. We are all aware that even today people of the Guinea highlands, where this dispute occurred, still identify themselves in terms of their social caste: noble or ex-slave. Nonetheless, such social castes have no legal basis in modern Guinea. All Guineans, ex-slaves and nobles, men and women, are equal before the law.

"In modern Guinea we have one law, the modern law of respect for all individuals and for the rights of the individual to private property. The Diallos argue that as nobles, they own the land worked by the Bah family and can dispose of the land as they wish. The Diallos argue, in effect, that they own the land because of their rights as nobles who conquered and enslaved the Bahs, and that as noble owners they have no obligations to the Bahs but may dispossess them at will. The Diallos are wrong on both counts.

"Where do these ownership rights claimed by the Diallos come from? Nobles never, even in ancient times, had the right to expel slaves at will from the land they cultivated. Even in the days of slavery, slaves who fulfilled their obligations to noble families had the right to continued occupation of the land. The Diallos' ancient rights did not include an absolute right to expel the Bahs. The state of Guinea, in adopting the modern law of individual private property, has not added to the rights of the Diallos and subtracted from the rights of the Bahs. Neither have the Diallos added to their rights by paying the Bah family for the right to expel them at will. Clearly the Diallos do not own such a right.

"In any case, the old regime of nobles is gone for good. For decades the Bahs have worked peacefully and productively beside the Diallo family on the land in dispute. It is in both the national interest and the interest of the local community that those who work the land benefit from their labor and be able to live in peace and security with their neighbors. Over these many

years, both families have acquired property rights in the land at issue. The equitable solution, therefore, is to divide the land between the Diallos and the Bahs.

"The court orders the Governor of the Labé region to mark out a division of the land forthwith so that the land may be planted with its first crop in twenty years."

Sekou Traoré vanished in a swirl of judicial robes.

"Eh, I gave it to them straight, Madame Camara," Sekou said as he hung his robes in a closet. He came out of his office into the anteroom where she presided over a manual typewriter.

"People can sort out their problems according to the old rules or come to court and taste modern law," he said. "We have been held back too long. It's time to do business!"

Outside the court the old man, still surrounded by young men, his tears dried, shook hands with well wishers. Supporters of the losing side pushed by, all hard shoulders and dark looks. From out of this clot of men in suits there emerged another erect old man, dressed in sky-blue robes threaded with gold. He paused before his counterpart, more plainly dressed in a brown suit. He hitched his robes over his left shoulder.

"Yacine, you are looking well. We don't see much of each other, since this trouble began. Now we are finished with courts." He suddenly held out a purple nut in a gold brown hand. Yacine spoke, and one of the young men beside him took the nut and threw it away. The elderly man hitched his robes and smiled. "You still fear me. That is good. You know that slaves do not own land." He walked on, and the two groups parted, gloom settling over both.

Conakry is a gloomy city, most of the buildings made of whitewashed mud speckled with patches of brown where the whitewash has worn off. The wet heat softens the mud. Sometimes a little green wriggles up in the courtyards of closepacked houses.

The morning after Sekou Traoré handed down the court's decision, Yacine left Conakry for his home in the Guinea highlands. He rode through steamy lowlands on a red road that winds up forested hills into a temperate cool, where the French were inspired to plant acres of pines to be made into railroad ties and two-by-fours. Yacine lived in a village about fifty miles from Labé, the regional capital. He returned home to the sweet grass glowing between the toes of downy goats and plaintive sheep. Voices of the village bubbled up and floated, accompanied by baas, cock crows and the blows of a hatchet. His home was set in the middle of a garden his wife cared for. On a bend of path by a twisted stand of fruit trees, he found a pattern marked out in the dirt before his house gate.

"Saran, come quickly!" His wife came out of the house and looked down with him at the pattern. A square was outlined and sprigs of greenery placed in each corner. A cigarette carton, a piece of glass, and a stone were

scattered in the square. A single sandal was turned over, its scratched sole facing up. Fonio seeds were sprinkled over the upturned instep.

"Who could have done this?" Saran asked.

"Old man Diallo, no doubt. He threatened me at the court. If I go to the fields to plant fonio, I will die. So much for the modern law of the court."

Yacine went into the house, Saran at his heels. With her help he carried out a heavy water vase. They pushed it over on the square design, washing away the order in the pattern.

"Tell your brother to have his sons patrol the village," Yacine said. "Anyone connected to the Diallos should be escorted out. I am going to see the Governor in Labé. I will stay with Fatimata. Since she kicked out her husband again, she should have plenty of room for me."

The village had one beat-up Mazda at its disposal. Yacine headed back out in this car, driven by his son Daouda, the suitcase he had taken to Conakry unopened and still in the trunk.

When Yacine and Daouda arrived, carsick from the rough journey, Fatimata was home from her job as cook and cleaning woman. She worked for an American musicologist, Brenda Peters, who, like Fatimata, was a woman living alone. Fatimata had lit the kerosene lamps. She had an electric light in each room, but the city power was off till morning. When Yacine and Daouda surprised her, she was already working on a pot of fonio and a peanut sauce for herself. She soon had plates ready for everyone. Fatimata was known for the richness of her sauce, which sank happily into fluffy grains of fonio. She served fresh squeezed orange juice and, after dinner, cups of mint tea.

"I can't let Diallo think he can intimidate us," Yacine said to Daouda. "Any bond between us was broken twenty years ago. A master without servants is a ridiculous sight. Diallo is afraid of looking foolish."

Daouda glanced at Fatimata before speaking to Yacine. "Diallo is said to be a powerful magician, protected by unknown spirits. I have heard that he has a throw rug by his bed made of the skin of the army officer who tortured his son-in-law Mamoudou. Even during the worst terrors of the former regime, the government avoided confronting him."

"I have known Diallo since we were boys. He is the sort of man who thrives on fear. He never did have a sense of humor."

"So what are you going to do, kill him with a joke?" Fatimata asked. "Diallo acts like he is cock of the hill. Maybe the rooster protects him."

"Hush. Your brother and I are discussing a serious matter." Yacine turned back to Daouda. "Tomorrow I will ask the Governor to accompany us to the fields to mark out the division ordered by the court. If we are swift, Diallo may not have time to cause trouble."

"You have waited twenty years for this moment. Why are you in such a hurry?" Fatimata asked. "Perhaps Diallo needs some time to realize that he must comply with the law,"

"Fatimata, even you pay no attention to the modern law. If you did, you would still have a husband in your home."

"Amadou agreed that I would be his only wife. Then he took a mistress and told me it is none of my business."

"Amadou is right. According to the Civil Code, a man may take a mistress without giving grounds for divorce, as long as he does not live with her."

"I don't care what the Civil Code has to say, Amadou betrayed me. I bring home my wages and he wants to spend them on clothes for his little friend. That man told me school made me an immoral woman. When Brenda heard this, she went off like a teapot. Hee yi."

"Father, Fatimata is better off without Amadou. She is saving her money so she can start her own cloth dyeing business," Daouda said.

"Fatimata should raise her children. She has not even had a child. The market women earn money to buy medicine and pay the school fees of their children. For whom will Fatimata run a business? Will the business care for her when she is old? I should have married her off after her first menstruation, as her mother wanted, rather than sending her to school."

"You sent me to school because I pestered you to let me go. I even told you that if I went to school, then I could help the boys with their schoolwork. Now I am helping myself."

Fatimata had the dazzling black complexion that is brighter for being darker, like bare branches against the sky. She moved with unhurried grace. Maybe her stubbornness came from growing up the eldest child, expected by her parents to supervise her siblings and by her siblings to lead and champion them. Yacine was too tired to argue anymore. He went to bed in Fatimata's room.

"So what do you think about Diallo?" Daouda asked Fatimata.

"I think it's a mistake to fight him on his own terms. We're better off using the courts and government officials. We have gotten by without the land so far. But I can't blame Father for being impatient after twenty years."

"Suppose we do get into a fight? How do we counter Diallo's magic?"

"Maybe he does get his power from the rooster. Do you remember the story of Soundjiata and the evil king Soumoro Kanté? Soumoro Kanté also had a liking for throw rugs made of the skins of his enemies. They say he would slip off his sandals and pad about in his bare feet on these rugs."

Fatimata made up sleeping mats for herself and Daouda. Daouda went straight to sleep. Fatimata lay still, listening to crickets and the rumble of a truck, and watched Daouda. His face was utterly untroubled, slender ears and long eyelashes.

She got up and returned with a handful of rice. She sprinkled a few grains around Daouda and did the same for Yacine, who was also fast asleep.

She sat crosslegged on her blankets and again watched Daouda, her face resting in her hand as she thought. She whispered the names of her grandparents, now dead, of her great grandparents, of other deceased relatives whose names she could remember, and she invoked those whose names she had forgotten by referring to some famous deed still talked of in the family: the lion killer. . . the friend of bees. . . the discoverer of water springs. "Shield Daouda, who is too inexperienced to appreciate the meanness of a Diallo. Shield Yacine, the first of your children entirely free of noble rule." Fatimata only slept after she was sure that she had the attention of her ancestors.

The Governor's offices were in a rather dingy three-story building built thirty years before and poorly maintained since. The mud brick walls were eroded in spots, the paint chipped. Still the ceilings towered luxuriously high. In the absence of electricity, light through eight foot wood window shades filtered into the gloom of bare offices and hallways. This filtering of light was a sensibly cool design thirty years ago but now seemed to age the light instantly.

When Yacine and Daouda arrived, they were made to wait in a room on the first floor along with an assortment of other people in varied states of waiting. Several military men sat with their boots outstretched. A busy man rushed through every so often, sometimes tugging loose from a suppliant, sometimes leading someone out. Finally he stopped by Yacine and Daouda and had them follow him to a second floor office.

"The Governor's assistant will speak with you." He disappeared, leaving them in the hall. They could hear voices behind the assistant's closed door, so they waited. After a few minutes, they were allowed to go in.

"Peace be with you, Yacine. Is this your son?"

"Yes, Daouda is my youngest. Daouda, meet Mohammed Bobo Hitta."

"Pleasure meeting you, Daouda. I know your brother in the Public Works Ministry. We've been to the nightclubs in Conakry a few times."

"Bobo," Yacine said, "I am sure you know of the court's decision ordering the Governor to divide the land between us and the Diallos. I have come to insist that the Governor act right away."

"The Governor is prepared to follow through on the court's order, but he is sick with a bout of malaria. Give him two weeks, and then this matter will be settled."

"I can't wait two weeks. Old man Diallo is determined to intimidate me. He does not respect the court or the Governor. If I do nothing for two weeks, he will find some new way of delaying the division of the land, as he has for twenty years. In any case the planting season is almost over."

"If you go out to the fields without waiting for the Governor, there may be violence. Be patient a little longer."

Yacine shook his head no, shook hands with Bobo, and left with Daouda. In the courtyard of the Governor's offices, they met Diallo on his way in.

"Thanks for the fonio seed, Diallo. It'll come in handy when I start planting this Saturday."

"You are not planting this Saturday, Yacine. If you go off to the fields, they will have to carry you back in a cart, your head held low and your feet dragging."

"You can't stop me any more than you can hold back the floods from bringing silt onto the good bottomland."

"Water which can't be stopped can be diverted into irrigating my fields," Diallo said, giving Yacine a push. Daouda caught Yacine and swung at Diallo, but his fist seemed to pass through a ghost. Daouda stumbled and saw Diallo standing several yards away. Yacine grabbed Daouda, and they marched off. How do you fight someone who can disappear and reappear just out of reach?

They returned to Fatimata's home and ate the evening meal, prepared and served by Fatimata with her deliberate grace. The dishes cleared, Daouda pondered his question by the yellow flicker of the kerosene lamp. Daouda explained to Fatimata what happened earlier in the day. Fatimata gave Daouda a long tail feather of a cock.

"Tie this to one of your practice arrows, one with a blunt tip. If Diallo attacks, skewer his protecting spirit, and he'll realize how naked he is under his robes."

The next day, Yacine and Diallo went to the Mosque within walking distance of their villages but did not speak to each other. Yacine left immediately after services. Diallo stayed and sat with the council of elders, all of noble families.

Saturday morning Yacine set off for the disputed fields, accompanied by Daouda and a group of young men from the village. They carried machetes and hatchets for clearing the fields and an assortment of shotguns, some homemade from lengths of pipe bound with animal skins. The morning was cool, clear of mist, the sky almost cloudless. They walked over bushy, lightly forested hills and crossed streams where cabbage palms sprouted leaves like Mickey Mouse ears beside feathery stands of bamboo. Monkeys hooted warnings from the highest tree tops. They passed families already out in the fields. Mothers placed their babies on blankets while they hoed. People strolled around shaded by brightly colored umbrellas. Kids ran back and forth or crouched under thatched shelters, keeping an eye on foraging goats. Fields had been cleared and burnt over and the earth, turned by hand, looked soft and evenly brown.

They filed down into a valley ringed by green hillsides patchy with brown fields. The rich bottomland was thick with twenty years' growth of timber twisting up from the undergrowth. They began to hack at the trees but didn't get far before Diallo arrived with his group of young men, machetes, hatchets and shotguns. One of Diallo's young men, a shotgun in one hand, a machete in the other, ran angrily up to Yacine, who stood his

ground. The young man fired a shot and somehow missed Yacine completely. He chopped at Yacine with his machete and opened a nasty gash in Yacine's leg. Someone from Yacine's group shot at the attacker, wounding him in the shoulder. People fell in the underbrush and fired blindly, most of the shot rattling into trees.

Daouda had brought only his machete and bow and practice arrows. He notched, drew back and shot the arrow trailing the tail feather of a cock at Diallo, who was partly shielded by trees but still visible in his bright robes. The arrow missed but whistled so close that the feather brushed Diallo's cheek. A bead of sweat sprang out of his forehead and rolled down to the tip of his nose. Quivering he ran back into the woods, followed by his young men.

The wounded of both sides were brought to Labé, to the only hospital in the region. Fatimata and Daouda sat with Yacine in his hospital room. The doctors wanted Yacine to stay overnight, so Fatimata brought a pot of fonio and peanut sauce. They could hear the police interrogating one of Diallo's young men in a hallway outside their room. "The blacks started it," the man kept saying. Yacine said nothing. He sipped water, and ate, a long pause between each bite. Daouda looked puzzled, as if disoriented by the glassy hospital surfaces, the stuttering fluorescent lights.

Fatimata thought about an incident that happened to Brenda Peters' sister. Brenda's sister had come from America for a visit and brought along her new baby, which she carried in a harness on her back. They were all at the market dickering over indigo cloth for Brenda's sister to take back home. When they left, they had to walk a narrow road back to the car, a road thronged with people but with no sidewalk, only an open drainage ditch on either side. A taxi driven by a young man plowed through this narrow road, forcing people to leap the ditch or climb down in it. The taxi driver crowded Brenda's sister to the edge of the ditch and then snagged the strap of her baby's harness on his side mirror. He did not stop, despite Brenda's furious screams, despite her sister's attempt to run with the taxi and free herself. Her sister was slowly pulled over and dragged and the driver was only stopped when someone deliberately pushed a cart in his path. Brenda's sister and baby were both unscathed, although terrified. Fatimata could not stop thinking of the inexorable progress of the taxi down the narrow street.

Anthony Bukoski

The Korporał's Polonaise

Looking one last time at the Polish Eagle painted on the bow of the freighter *Pomorze Zachodnie,* we cursed the captain and scrambled down the gangway. That November day Mr. Lasinski, who worked at the four mill in the East End of Superior, never thought he'd be taking home a family of sailors along with the cartons of *Żywiec* beer he'd gone to the docks to buy from the crew.

After the newspaper articles, television reports, and INS interviews, a few months later as we clean palms in the church basement, we recall it all again for him, our sponsor. For a moment I think of the priest upstairs in the sanctuary. We fear St. Adalbert's Church will close like the other churches. Frightened of this, in confession later I will tell the priest why I left the Old Country. He will tell me his own fears for the new country.

"Bless me, Father," I will say.

"What are your sins, Kazimierz Wroblewski?"

"Despair, Father."

"I despair, too," he will say. "We're both desperate."

Every Sunday since I've been here the priest has carried his grief and mine to the altar. Tomorrow here and in the Old Country priests wear red vestments during the mass and distribution of palms. Tomorrow Marcella Dzikonski will play the organ in Superior, Wisconsin, the way my father did for many years in the Church of St. Bartholomew in Poland.

Mr. Lasinski calls our story "immigrant history," saying we should record it for future generations like Tomasz, my son's. "Will you tell more?" asks Stanislaus Lasinski when my thoughts return to what I was saying about a merchant seaman's life.

I tell him how, in Poland, my father will attend Palm Sunday mass. Later, tucking the palm behind the portrait of my mother on the wall of the room, he'll dream of her, then of me, Kazimierz, of Hedwig, my wife, and of young Tomasz, all come to the Seaway Port of Superior. "When I was very young, my own father carried me through the village like I once did my Tomaszu. 'Precious Kazik,' he called me. He kept me close to his heart," I tell Mr. Lasinski. "My father was organist at the church when I was small. *'Pan'* Organist, 'Sir' Organist, people called him. This was in 'the Land of Graves and Crosses.' This was my Poland. *To był moja Polska.'*

"This is the Poland you left with Hedwig, who was cook on the *Pomorze Zachodnie,* and with your Tomasz?"

"Yes. Life is no good where we came from. The Communists. Speak against them and you're a 'dwarf of reaction, *karzeł reakcji.'* 'Social noxiousness, *społeczna szkodliwość,'* they call it. For years we dreamt of coming here. The northeast wind brought us."

Hedwig looks out the church's basement window at our nine-year-old Tomasz playing in the schoolyard. Her eyes brighten. We need such joy before I tell how we've abandoned my father. *I wish I could send these remarks to you in Poland, dear father, so you could hear me recall your death and resurrection. Now you are so weary you must stop to rest your elbows on the table. When you roll your sleeves, your arms, I imagine, will be thinner than when I last saw you. My only hope is your dear smile so far away in Passion Time. How I miss you and regret leaving. What could I do? I have my wife, my boy. When you yourself once left me, can you now call your son, Kazimierz,* "cygan, *gypsy," for leading his family to America?*

Hedwig, who's been patiently cleaning the palms' silk threads and listening, says, "When a musician passed through during the war, he'd come to Kazimierz's house just as a visiting priest would look up a priest in the village, or a teacher, a teacher, a butcher, a butcher. Wanderers knew who lived where."

"I was very young, our Tomasz's age, when my father left. He joined the Home Army. Overrun, Poland fought back in 1939. *'Ojciec,* father,' I remember crying, asking him not to leave."

Now as I think of him, the silence moves rapidly. What have I done? When my dear father is at some distance from the son Kazimierz's heart, I begin again, more composed. "After he put me to bed, saying he'd see me in the morning, *Pan* Organist ducked into the forests. 'Where is father?' I asked grandfather when the sun rose.

"'Gathering mushrooms,' he said.

"'When will he return?'

"If you only know, Mr. Lasinski!" Hedwig says. "The Russian filth watched us then and now in 1985. Think of the Katyn Forest Massacre, think of 'the Flower of Polish Youth' slaughtered there in World War Two

by the Russians. The heart yearns for them, Mr. Lasinski. And God help us what the Nazis did to Poland and the Jews."

"Now father had gone," I tell our sponsor from the flour mill. "I looked for him by the woodpile, by the pools where leaves swirled above the fish, by the church where no one practiced *'Bogarodzica Dziewica.'* Occasionally you'd hear whispered, 'An organist has come! An organist has come!' The first time I ran so hard to the fields near home, I stumbled over the wagon ruts but got up and kept on. It was the pattern I followed many times during the war. Scanning the roads, going farther each time, I muttered, 'Where is my father? Has he deserted us? Why can't he stay and protect me?'

"When father left, the house was silent. He's not praying for us. He's gone, I'd begun to think."

"How sad it sounds now," Hedwig says. She's washed kneelers, dusted windows, washed the church floor today. For Hedwig, who left only a cousin and a distant uncle in Poland, it may be a little easier forgetting the voyage. Nothing keeps me from remembering father today, however. The thought of the vigil lamp on the altar of St. Bartholomew's in our village in the Old Country—Christ's heart at the center of His church—keeps me remembering.

"What our country has suffered," Hedwig says. "Go on telling it."

"Rumors circulate," I say. "They swirl about the eaves, sweep down through the chimney. I remember how hard grandmother *Babusia* prayed when the rumor that father had died came to our door. Mother fell to her knees. People had heard it on roads, under trees, through open windows. In the late afternoon, I ran off. The priest came looking for me. An old country priest, he feared the devil and the forest. 'Think of your mother and grandmother,' he said, summoning his courage. He was old like the priest upstairs today. He'd borrowed Pomerinski's horse to come to get me. 'You must return home, Kazimierz' he said, 'not stay in these woods. You can't run away from truth.'

"'I'm waiting for father.'

"'What shelter do you have? asked the priest. 'You'll get cold. I don't want to be like the moon bringing trouble to your hearth. Come here tomorrow morning, but for now, please Kazimierz, I am old. I don't want to stay. Come now, please take the reins. I fear for our souls in these woods.'

"Mother rekindled the fire when we came home. 'Are you sure about the rumor?' the priest asked. 'Look in the ashes!' grandfather said.

"For months the priest told me, 'We must serve out God's design. Don't give up.' So I ran to the fields with hope and conviction. 'Have you seen father? Please,' I asked wanderers, 'have you word? He is as tall as you and strong. This *korporał* would be talking about playing the organ at the Church of St. Bartholomew. I am his Kazimierz. Did you see the man

whose eyes are said to resemble mine? Why have we not heard from the *korporał?'*

"Once I thought we had news. A fearsome-looking Russian whose black eyebrows matched his eyes swore he'd tell me if I sang him 'Vlanka, the Heartbreaker.' He said it *'Vlanka Kliuchnik'* in Russian. When I sang, he said he must have another song. I said I didn't know another Russian song. 'I can't tell you my news then,' he said, laughing, walking off through the fields.

"Another time a man selling trapped souls came by. The souls weren't very heavy, but he was loaded down with them. They hung from his shoulders and belt in little boxes. Animals' souls, Russians' souls, everyone's souls. 'Get away. I don't want them loose on earth!' he said when I ran up.

"'Do you have father? Where are you going to put him?'

"'I'll bury him, sell him, place him in a tree. On windy nights, the box will sing to the tree:

Hi! Ho! Hi!
What a man am I!
Hi! Ho! Hi!
A valiant man am I!

"'Please can I see my poor father's soul so I may buy it from you for three or four *złotys*?"

"'You carry the box. Do no more than that. No peeking inside!'

"The man grunted. Sometimes he spit at my feet. His hair and face were greasy, it looked like, with the grease of Russian engines and motors and coal. This box was made of willow switches, clay, paste, string. I thought if I could free father, maybe war would end. When we got to the village, the man cursed me when I gave him the three-*złotys'* reward for rescuing father. 'There's a dog's soul, nothing else in that one, foolish boy. All the miles you've sung to a dog's soul and now paid me for it. I even know its name, 'Kurta the Dog.' I've tricked you. 'Hi! Ho! Hi! What a man am I! Here Kurta! Here, Boy,' he called and whistled for the soul.

"The priest watched me, crying, hang the empty box in a tree to listen for songs from the *korporał* when the wind blew. It was a silent country, though. The soul was gone.

"As ashes are swept from a hearth, so after awhile was my father's memory swept from the village. No one spoke of the *korporał* anymore. I wondered each day, has father sent a rumor through the wind only to make it look as though he's died? Is he buying a widow a loaf of Russian bread or a wick for her lamp? I shall not pray for him, I decided. Let the rumor go back that we're not praying for father whose kiss means nothing. The *korporał's* embrace can mean nothing ever again.

"Bless me, I have sinned," I confess over and over to another 'father,' the priest, in the Port of Superior. I've confessed here and at a church in

Duluth. *How can I have thought so of my father and at that age given my soul to despair? In what past or future am I?*

"'Have you other sins?' the priests ask.

"'Despair, sorrow, anger. We *had* to leave the ship. For Poles, a seaman's life is not so bad under Communist regime, but nothing is as good as being in your country in this northern port.'

"Then the priests ask, 'What other sins must you confess, Kazimierz Wroblewski, merchant seaman? Hurry before churches all close.'

"Despair, loneliness. We can't go back to him.'

"'Hurry! Hurry, our closing is imminent.'

"Over and over I tell the priests that Hedwig and I are the rumors of despair. Is our voyage worthy of retelling? Is it, when tomorrow my father will go to mass alone thinking of mother who died long ago, then thinking of the family that went to America? People will ask him after church, 'When will your Kazimierz return?' Later, he'll place the lunch bowl on the cloth, lie in bed, look out the window at the agent watching the house. I have such images of a beloved father—white hair brushed back, thin, white eyebrows over eyes closed on nearly a century of struggle, nose curved at the bridge, white moustaches. Now he must doubt me, his middle-aged son, and ask the Crucifix and the ashes in the hearth, 'Where has Kazimierz gone with his soul? On what sea is his soul tonight?'

"By midsummer, Mr. Lasinski (who has cared so well for us in America), I'd tell mother, 'I won't be out long tonight.'

"'So the news, is it good news on the roads you walk looking for your father?'

"'No, Mother,' I'd say, disappointing her. "No souls, though I sat with the trap open.' *This is the night she, too, will leave us. What will happen to me?* As the candle flickered, mother would open the latch door and, in the starlight, sweep leaves from the doorstep.

"'Why were you sweeping?' I'd ask.

"'Couldn't sleep. The news, Kazimierz?'

"'No good news, Mother.'

"What I learned I kept to myself. I'd hang the box in a tree at night. Soon I gave up believing I could trap father's soul; the twine that tied the willow switches broke on the box, and the paste and glue gave way on the box that trapped no soul.

"Now autumn and winter passed, and the long, cool spring of 1944 had begun when one day, walking to *Pani* Grotnik's, I saw two young sisters running toward me. 'An organist! An organist!' they cried. When they grabbed my sleeve and insisted, 'Kazimierz, a rider saw him!' I paid no attention.

"They were twelve years old. One of them had scuffed her knee. They went running to neighbors' houses.

"'Who?' people called.

"'Out on the post road. Everyone come!' Zosia and Marta were saying. 'An organist.'

"I'd run to the roads one hundred times. Now in the mist I saw someone. As Zosia and her sister ran, I dawdled, observing the pools of rain in the wagon tracks, the clumps of grass. What excitement could compel me to run? When I looked back, there stood grandfather at the cottage door.

"The priest trotting past on Pomerinski's horse was calling, '*Zprochu powstalés i w proch się obrócisz.* Dust thou art and to dust thou shalt return.' The distant figure—there one minute, in the next he'd be lost in the meadow blackthorns.

"How could a man be so haggard-looking? I wondered when he drew closer.

"'Grimy fellow!' one of the village women said.

"His coat trailed around him in the mud. I wondered whether this stranger would ask for 'Vlanka the Heartbreaker.'"

"War casts up odd, frightening people. Ghosts," Hedwig says.

"I'd come to hate the rags and filth of beggars—the embarrassment I suffered when they passed through. Zosia, her sister, the priest on horseback, the villagers—we kept watching this man stumble closer. Stopping a moment to adjust the rags he'd wound around his neck, he caught his breath, observed the millet fields, the old people who'd come out to see him. 'Christ has come,' they said. But it was no Christ they wanted. They'd been cheated.

"'Tell me of *Korporał* Wroblewski,' I said. 'I'll show you a box. I'll sing you an Easter song.'

"'A ghost!' Zosia said.

"'Do you know my father? Where is *Korporał* Wroblewski?' I asked.

"'Stand away,' said the priest, who started praying.

"'No one knows your father,' the man said. 'No one knows *Korporał* Wroblewski, who's dead.'

"'Does the devil not know *Korporał* Wroblewski?' asked the priest.

"'Yes, the devil,' said the man. 'The devil and I know him!'

"The women wiped their tears. '*Jesu,* no one even recognizes the devil anymore!'

"'Hi! Ho! Hi! A valiant man am I,' I sang, preparing to return home. 'I know him. It's a trick. He'll ask for something, three *złotys,* then tell you nothing. *Nie ma Ojca.* I have no father.'

"Beneath the dirt where the wanderer's skin had peeled, the new skin was white on his face. The dirt caked most of his forehead and cheeks. You could hardly see his eyes. Sometimes his lips moved. No sound came out. Bits of rags stuck to his hands, his fingers like crow's claws. 'I can go no further,' he said.

"'*Nie ma Ojca.* What a valiant man am I without a father,' I said. Imitat-

ing the slump of the man's shoulders, I circled him, repeated a rhyme from the old children's game *Raz, Dwa, Trzy:*

One, two, three,
The devil's watching, see?
Four, five, six,
Watch out for his tricks.

Another demon,' I said and struck him, struck the devil.

"*Babusia* was crying. '*O Boże.* Not dead.' I saw her making the Sign of the Cross. The priest, too, was whispering 'Christ!' Whoever it was, I'd been embarrassed before by a man carrying a dog's soul and could not understand what this wanderer was whispering to us.

"But the villagers now started saying it. 'It is the *Korporał Organista.*' Ha! *I* know the devil, I thought. No father leaves his son. The tricks this demon uses. I had learned so much in the fields, you see, Mr. Lasinski, that now *my* soul was trapped. You could write 'ANGER. SELFISHNESS. PRIDE.' on the box that held my soul. I have brought it to America. It is small enough to hold in the hand. I was a precious, selfish boy. I would not even recognize him that day or all during Holy Week, which now years later we celebrate in a free country where my soul is trapped in new delusions to help me forget.

"The whole week of his passion and resurrection I denied him until, one day late in the month of March, 1944, I saw him sitting alone, resting in the sun. He'd gained strength. He was smoking his pipe, smiling about something. Nodding to me, he said, 'Aren't you happy I'm home, Kazimierz. My little Kazik, I have been defending our country. Come, sing me a Polonaise, hum the melody for your father.'

"He said it so softly, Mr. Lasinski. They were like the words of God. Hearing them, I did as he said. He loved a Polonaise by Count Ogiński. 'La-la-la-la-la,' I sang it. I could see tears form in his eyes. Wiping them back for him, I went in the house then and buried myself in his coat. I kissed the buttons for many years afterward." *How selfish a youth I was in Poland, Dearest Father Korporał. Forgive me. Sometimes I have the hope that I can sing for you an Easter song, and we will be together. Then I know it's too late.*

"But this box! Hedwig, can you bring it to us, the box from the Old Country, the box with the Polonaise? It's delicate mechanism will play it."

"I'll get the music box upstairs, Kazimierz."

"Tomorrow the palms my father tucks behind mother's and grandmother's portraits will wither, Mr. Lasinski. Look at the palms in our church basement. Their scent reminds me of fields I ran through when father returned. Then to come home to see his son bewitched and turned against him. And to hear how his son thought he'd captured a soul! Today in March, 1985, the lamp in the sanctuary burns; the Pascal Candle is in its place in back of the church; *Korporał Organista* has come home to me again in my tale of Passion Week. I could not tell him to his face that we were

planning to leave him last autumn. If I did, the despair would have been so great, I could not have lived. The thought of my father, the *korporał*, alone today—. Hedwig, bring the box! Play Ogiński's 'Farewell to My Country.'"

"I'm coming, Kazimierz. Patience."

"Raz, Dwa, Trzy!" my son's voice interrupts me. He is teaching others the "One, Two, Three" rhyme.

"Look, there's your Tomasz," Mr. Lasinski says.

In he walks just as I am finishing my story.

"Tomasz, son," Hedwig says. "Where have you been? Sing us *Raz, Dwa, Trzy.*"

My boy's hair is tousled from the wind, his face wind-burned. He is excited, happy. He's made friends at St. Adalbert's Polish grade school at Twenty-Third Avenue East and East Third Street in the Seaway Port of Superior. Let me have time with him before he too must grow up and leave.

"Would you like to say something, Tomasz?" Mr. Lasinski asks. "We'd like to hear *your* opinion on matters."

He catches us by surprise. Out of breath, my Tomasz says, "I don't want to return to Poland. I want to stay in America."

"So do I, Tomaszu," I say, a merchant seaman from a village where my father waits alone praying for our return. "I don't want to, either. There's nothing but graves and crosses."

Now Hedwig, coming downstairs with a little box of music to trap souls, says it. "There's nothing to go home for."

Above us, in a church that is to close, the priest prepares for his last Palm Sunday as I open the music box on the table and find a lock of my father's precious white hair. Now the Polonaise he loved begins to play, but we cannot go back to him. We cannot return to the Old Country. All we have are its graves and crosses.

Notes on Contributors

Margaret Benbow is a life-long resident of Wisconsin who grew up in Sauk County, three miles from Devil's Lake. She earned her B.A. at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Currently working on a collection of short stories and a novel, she has published many works previously, including much poetry, some short stories, and a novel. A prize-winner in several national poetry contests, she has published two chapbooks entitled *Poems by Margaret Benbow* (Quixote Press) and *Bride and Bear* (Quixote Press). Her newest book of poems is entitled *Stalking Joy* (Texas Tech University Press, 1997).

Martha Bergland has taught English at Milwaukee Area Technical College for the past thirteen years. She earned her undergraduate degree at Benedictine College in Atchison, Kansas, and two M.A. degrees at the University of Illinois and the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Her first novel, *A Farm Under a Lake* (1989), was published by Graywolf and Vintage in the U.S., Great Britain, Sweden, and Germany. A second novel, *Idle Curiosity,* just appeared (Graywolf Press, 1997). Bergland's short story entitled "An Embarrassment of Ordinary Riches," first published in the *New England Review,* has been reprinted in two Pushcart anthologies.

Born and raised in Wisconsin, **Thomas Bontly** received his B.A. at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and his Ph.D. at Stanford University. For the past thirty years he has taught at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, where he is Professor of English and Coordinator of the program in Creative Writing. Bontly's published fiction consists of four novels (*The Competitor,* 1966; *The Adventures of a Young Outlaw,* 1974; *Celestial Chess,* 1979; *The Giant's Shadow,* 1989) and twenty-two short stories. The latter have appeared in *McCall's, Esquire, Redbook, Denver Quarterly, The Sewanee Review, Cream City Review,* and elsewhere.

Superior, Wisconsin, is home in many ways to **Anthony Bukoski.** Born and reared in Superior, he now teaches there at his alma mater, the University of Wisconsin-Superior. His graduate degrees include the M.A. in English from Brown University, and the M.F.A. in creative writing and Ph.D. in English from the University of Iowa. Bukoski's short stories have appeared in *New Letters, The Literary Review, Quarterly West,* and other journals. He has published two collections of stories under the titles *Twelve Below Zero* (New Rivers Press, 1985) and *Children of Strangers* (Southern Methodist University Press, 1992) and is currently working on a third. In 1997 Bukoski was one of those featured in the Public Broadcasting System video documentary, "A Sense of Place: A Portrait of Three Midwestern Writers."

Born in Chicago, **C. J. Hribal** moved to Wisconsin when he was ten, grew up on a farm, and received his B.A. degree from St. Norbert College in De Pere, Wisconsin, and his M.A. at Syracuse University. A faculty member of Marquette University, he teaches creative writing and English. He also teaches fiction at The Warren Wilson College M.F.A. Program for Writers. Hribal is the author of *Matty's Heart* (New Rivers Press, 1984), a collection of short fiction, and *American Beauty* (Simon and Schuster, 1987), a novel. Recently, he has published the novella *The Clouds in Memphis* in *TriQuarterly* and short fiction in *Witness* and *The Sycamore Review.* A new novel, *War Babies,* is forthcoming. He also edited and wrote the introduction for *The Boundaries of Twilight: Czecho-Slovak Writing from the New World* (New Rivers Press, 1991). He has been awarded a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship and a Bush Foundation Fellowship.

Tom Joseph grew up in Illinois but spent summers in northern Wisconsin. Since 1991 he and his family have lived year round in Manitowish Waters. He serves as the town of Manitowish Waters' municipal judge and is active in developing the North Lakeland Discovery Center, a nonprofit organization dedicated to exploring the natural, cultural, and historic resources of Wisconsin's northwoods. He holds a B.A. in psychology from Yale and a J.D. from Lewis and Clark Law School. Joseph's stories have appeared in *Atom Mind* and *Parenting* magazines, and his humor writing was honored by the Wisconsin Regional Writer's Association. Recently completed, *Two Points* is his first novel.

Born and raised in Milwaukee, **Julie King** earned degrees in creative writing at the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay (B.A.) and the University of Texas-El Paso (M.A.), and lived in Dallas, Shreveport, and San Diego before returning to Wisconsin. She has taught writing and creative writing at El Paso and at University of Wisconsin campuses in Green Bay, Oshkosh, and Parkside. Much of King's writing reflects her own experience and

deals with the transplantation of a Midwesterner to other cultural and geographical areas. Her stories have appeared in *Wisconsin Review, Gulf Coast,* and *The Bridge;* her poetry has been published in many literary reviews and in the *1997 Anthology of Magazine Verse.* She was awarded a Wisconsin Arts Board grant for fiction in 1994–95.

Marnie Krause was born and raised in Milwaukee and attended MacMurray College in Illinois. A current resident of Michigan, she makes Green Lake, Wisconsin, her summer home. Her writing interests range from short stories to art plays. Krause is a member of the Michigan Playwrights Association and the Dramatist Guild. Her play "Axel & Viv" received an award from the Community Theatre of Michigan Association.

After working in Florida for eleven years, **Karen Loeb** moved to Wisconsin in 1988 and has been teaching creative writing and other courses at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. Her story collection *Jump Rope Queen and Other Stories* was published by New Rivers Press after winning a Minnesota Voices Project Award. She has published stories, poems, and articles in magazines and newspapers, including *Habersham Review, North American Review,* and *South Dakota Review.* Loeb is the recipient of two literary fellowships and a grant from the Wisconsin Arts Board. Two of her stories received PEN Syndicated Fiction awards.

Peg Sherry has called Wisconsin home for nearly fifty years since her arrival as a student at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where she earned B.A., M.A., and Ed. Admin. degrees. She taught for twenty-five years in the Madison schools, at Edgewood College, and in summer enrichment courses at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Her short stories and creative nonfiction have appeared in several journals, most recently in *The Writer's Block.* She published her chapbook collection of poems and essays, *Lines from My Life,* in 1992. Twice she was awarded fellowships to Ragdale, the celebrated writers' retreat in Lake Forest, IL. Now in her "retirement" years, Sherry continues to write while volunteering in nursing homes, running an estate sales business, and enjoying the barnwood cabin she and her husband built in the woods near Briggsville.

Carol Sklenicka lives in Milwaukee, where she currently is researching a biography of Raymond Carver. Her work has been published in various magazines, including *Iowa Woman, Confrontation, Sou'wester,* and *The South Atlantic Quarterly.* Her critical study, *D. H. Lawrence and the Child,* was published by the University of Missouri Press in 1991. Sklenicka is the recipient of a Wisconsin Arts Board first place award for fiction.

David Tabachnick has commuted between Africa and Wisconsin since the age of eight, dreaming, he says, of hotdogs and marshmallows in Nigeria and the sound of drums on the night breeze in Madison. He holds a bachelor's degree from Hamilton College and degrees in law and sociology from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. His story "Mistral" won first prize in a University of Wisconsin-Madison creative writing contest. A number of Tabachnick's poems and a brief prose piece have been published in the anthologies *Lonesome Traveller* and *The Glacier's Edge* and in the *Wisconsin Poets' Calendar.*

Ron Wallace divides his time between his forty-acre farm in Bear Valley, Wisconsin, and Madison, where he directs the creative writing program at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and edits the University of Wisconsin Press Poetry Series. His Ph.D. is from the University of Michigan. Among his nine books are *Time's Fancy, The Makings of Happiness,* and *People and Dog in the Sun,* all published by the University of Pittsburgh Press. Wallace is a widely published poet in *The Atlantic, The New Yorker, The Nation,* and elsewhere. The recipient of two ACLS Fellowships and several Wisconsin Arts Board Fellowships, he was also winner of the first Robert E. Gard Wisconsin Idea Foundation Award for Excellence in 1990.

A native of Illinois, **Gordon Weaver** lived in Milwaukee from 1941 to 1961. His earned his B.A. in English at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, the M.A. in English at the University of Illinois, and the Ph.D. in English and Creative Writing from the University of Denver. After teaching at colleges and universities in New York, Ohio, Colorado, Mississippi, and Oklahoma, he returned to Wisconsin in 1995 and took up adjunct teaching duties at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and Marquette University. Some 90 of Weaver's stories have appeared in a wide variety of commercial and literary magazines. In addition, he has published four novels and eight story collections, the most recent of which is *Four Decades: New and Selected Stories* (University of Missouri Press, 1997). Recognition of his work includes the St. Lawrence Award for Fiction, the O. Henry first prize, two National Endowment for the Arts fellowships, and numerous other citations and awards.

David Young has lived in Madison the past eight years and has taught at Edgewood College the past three years. He completed his undergraduate degree at Duke University and his M.F.A. at Indiana University. His short stories have been published in *Ploughshares, Indiana Review, Hawaii Review, CutBank, Descant,* and other journals. In 1990 Young was awarded a Creative Writing Fellowship by the National Endowment for the Arts .

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