The Alembic
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On the cover: Putney Mountain, Vermont by Pete Guenther.

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Letters to E.D.

I presume what trembled in her from the narrow time
at home was the fiercest correspondence of And and None
their echoes made by circumstance or Him
to resound with the constellations.....

She knew Mystery/Perjury, Ecstasy/Away.
She knew Tomb/Room/Home and she knew Summer/Clover.
She knew the heart was a hard little creditor
and she paid and paid in the bandaged ways

of sister, confidante, and daughter of a Republican
and an absence. She paid in Saxon, sentiment,
and devotion by becoming a woman
in the person of the poem. She heard that meant

redemption, and for that she must know all the pains
and anodynes, expanses, the theology of the gentian, common names
for the miraculous. I would like to have written her
and to have received a letter in return, however brief—
a note accompanying a pie, acknowledging a gift of butter—
or just a silence trembling with belief.
At twelve hundred hours, Sir, I smelled that storm coming all the way from East Bumfuck, Egypt, then the dust kicked up like from the feet of legions. I knew I was in the shit, Sir, condition red. A muffled drum, it was like, thunder like a muffled drum, and the leaves suffocated and rustled like the skin of lizards, then quiet, then you could feel yourself unarmed in the heat, then I saw what appeared to be heat shimmers, like sheet lightning, in the distance maybe a klick or two away, but it was actually this close, a red cunt hair, from me to you, the eye over the body.

I knew it was gonna rain, Sir,
I knew it was gonna come down.
Then I saw, I thought I saw, two men, soldiers, at the end of two columns of men, grunts and boots, GI’s and gyrenes, lips pressed to lips, a long, suffering kiss, when, closer, I could see it was a violence over a coin clenched in their teeth and speechless like mastiffs with their meat they struggled in the dust.... Sir,
I understand but I was there and saw no one and still I took a hit to the breastplate from the wind and the body was dusted and then this woman.
Dancer in Montana

The real moves for me with irony.
In the broad methods of the west, the choreography

is a longish walk to the mailbox and back in the dust
or a slide off the bar stool and stamp until the cuffs

fall down around the boot. Let’s dance the story
of the basketball star at the university,

the great leaper on crystal meth, who alibied
his missed flights to Reno: a slight death in the family

Other principals in the glossies of Missoula bars
are posed in arabesques— the pitchers, or linebackers

in helmetless efface with necks as thick as steers.
Don’t ask me what I’m doing here.

Everything’s on fire.
Whole initialed mountains burn. Snakes gyre

from the canyons to the cool
of lawns, and trout linger in the only pools.

In the rooms we occupy, our company is shrill
in unappreciated genius. An audience who would kill

to see these god-kissed Achilles tendons
is all we ask. We’re victims of our visions—

fasting, fame— our names projected eccentrically like stars
from their orbits. There’s little room

for our compulsions— all sacrifice, no altar,
in the smoke clouds from the Valley of the Moon.

Yet, at the reception after the performance, *Iphigenia at Taurus*—the Isadora Duncan Dance

of love and homeland, exhausted, still perspiring,
I'm captured by the widow and her daughter who admired me.

I adore them in their haute couture,
a whiff of Paris. I didn't get the whole story

but her husband, the poet, dead six years,
lived here among the buffalo and elk and other creatures

shot and mounted, the wind and all its citizens
in the self-translating winter powdering the town

like arsenic. I can understand the impulse if not the art
of the body's degradation and its longing to outwit

the weather and the Lutherans with just a heart.
And I'm thrilled by the grand gossips about

the corpses dragged in daylight out of the Sweetheart
Motel. And when she showed me the photos,

her angelic flyboy turned puffy Bogart, Oh,
I thought, if there's one man to dance

this country's two-step bile and pleasure and scaled possibility
it's this lovely absent fat man or maybe it's the townies
who risk their spines in the first position
they assume high in the bridge's girders
and drop into the one deep spot of the river.
Even the wind sticks close to her.
Tattered newspaper on the breeze,
curled brown leaves, dandelion tufts,
they all barnacle themselves to her,
a second thicker layer of clothes
like a magpie's nest, some string,
a McDonald's Arch Deluxe wrapper,
a lost wedding band, pocket lint.
She used to smoke, would carry
her chrome lighter on her hip like
a pistol. She'd light, spin, then stick
it back as some spaghetti western
warrior might. That was back before
things got bad, back when everyone
wanted her at their party, would ooh
and aah at the Beer-Can-to-Elbow
trick, the Lit-Cigarette-on-Fingertip.
Now she sits most days in the tub,
scrubbing free the debris, the detritus
that glitters her body like a won't-say-no
lover, a piecemeal history, the garbage
that chronicles the curse that is her life.
On Mount Sano in the Quiet Above Huntsville

From here I can see the evening city's jewels
strung out like a sun's residue
and the speeding cars each with a clear destination.
I watch the world's shadow fill all the spaces
around me like some unweighed liquid
as the choir of night begins its veiled rehearsals.

All things straight must be used:
tall wheat stalks, felled by the hunger of villagers
and tossed in a brisk and useful wind;
uniform planks in a ship's hull
caulked tight to resist the agitated fluids;
level pavement that runners never wear thin;
words on a line like laundry waving secrets;
time gathering memories as a miser hoards coins
for his passage into heaven;
steel spikes impaling the new captains of industry.

All things swift are betrayed:
furry little animals so quick with their eyes
only the still reptilian jaws are unseen;
soaring things, weightless from millennia
as carefree banditos among the slow earth-bound;
comets burning themselves up in a pointless
rush through the slow cold between stars;
children too busy running among fun things
to see the slow threat of maturity coming;
Indians galloping from one lush field to another
as a European sun rose slowly from the east.

For a moment I give up being straight and fast,
wander aimlessly through this unlevel place,
reticent as the jagged rocks
on Mount Sano in the quiet above Huntsville.
Jeffrey Levine

Andes

Quito perches mid-planet, mid-cloud,
peaks rising up and up,
est and west, like green imperial armies,
walling the city on both flanks -
vulcanic bird, her feet dusted with ash.

She breathes the inconsequence sea level,
the distant inconsequence of sea,
and speaks a language swimming
in too thin air, too thick with idioms -
a tongue that loves its vowels, worships consonants -
her counterpoint, dashing and languid,
stocky, mustachioed and suave.

I think you'd love this city.
I think it would appeal to some part of you that wants -
I don't know - wants.

Presumptuous of me, yes, but listen:
twenty multi-colored flags, flutes and condors,
amid the sky parched blue gray and mutable.
Clouds slide overhead like fresh lava -
equatorial brilliance cooling to burnt toast
and back again, the light changing by moments,
and changing the moments themselves
into more than themselves -

That sort of want -
the kind that lasts and outlasts.

You'd melt at the exchange rate of illumination -
merest gossamer to blinding incandescence,
mild yellows, greens, indigo, violet -
then fields of glint, glare, glow siezing
the white colonial facades,
buffing the tile-domed churches
and iron statues, polishing
the Winged Madonna on the mount,
her face awash in luster and lava, wanting
everything at once for us,
wanting for nothing at all.
Henri of Hoboken, an Epic

Following his much-celebrated debut, Dante at Large, the Poet returns with another enduring hero. This time it’s a fifty-year-old Gnostic with a photographic memory. Henri’s intermittently rears by gamblers, thieves, whores and priests in one of America’s most notorious sin cities. But, he’s living as a saint in fifth century Byzantium.

As in Dante at Large, the Poet’s new epic describes the labyrinthine terrain in which we shape our identities and search for meaning. And like Dante, mid-life Henri places his questions into a distant and possibly wiser world. For some reason, the stories of ancient Byzantium help Henri make sense of his absurd - and often dangerous-exsistance. Henri of Hoboken is an ironic, funny, and heart-rending account of the ways we become our own saviors by choosing what to believe.

Praise for Dante at Large

“...a charming, unexpectedly poignant first epic.” - The Willamette Picayune

“Dante at large is a work of art that struts its way on to the bookshelf...”
- Clearwater Beacon

“...a modestly entertaining poem.” - The New Jersey Post Book World.

Excerpt from Henri of Hoboken -

Henri went to bed and lay down. He tried to forget himself and Byzantium and Hoboken. To forget everything, but he couldn’t. He went to the window and looked out into the darkness. He knew this was a cliche. He didn’t care anymore.

His angel said, those who come to know themselves enjoy their possessions. Henri asked the angel what happened if you had nothing to possess, his face pressed to the glass, trying to see the empty fields below.

The angel said then the light will descend upon you and you will be clothed in it. The angel spoke like this.
Henri tried to imagine being clothed in light, but he couldn’t. He was disappointed. It was like that sometimes.

He would go instead to the mountains of New Hampshire, start there. He would take a new lover. They’d walk. It would be many days. They’d hold each other’s faces with both hands.

They’d throw away their clothes, see what happened in the light.
Or swim to Byzantium. Pay off the angel.

Lay down together in the ivory sand.
Women Who Carry Water From the River

they cloister at the sandy banks to gather water
to bring back to their kitchens,
quench the thirst of household *cuyas*, guinea pigs, neither pigs, not from Guinea,
staple, gifts, like this water they bend like willows
for, so close to the surface. They catch
their reflections against the slick surface,
mirror magic, they believe in,
stand straight to sniff the wind, tuck a strand
of hair back inside their shawls or hats,
does come for water, egrets and other wader birds; a carp breaks the water's surface, then there is silence. *I really enjoy this,*
says one of the younger women,
others look beyond her at the huts leaning
into the grassy hillsides, the sway of plantain fronds, shimmered light off everything
*Youth,* they say, *they were young once,*
too, and the men returned from the hunt sooner,
thirsty, hungry, tired from the miles their feet have traveled. Now they know
the men don't appreciate this hard work,
this fetch of water to fill gourds hung from ceiling rafters. Hard work indeed.
Now they carry the clay jugs homeward,
slow ascend, water swishes, not a drop falls, not a drop. They walk steady, strong,
their shadows now in front,
then at their sides, this is the life, they sing,
this close to the river's edge
where so much life thrives.

Necessary this is, so necessary.
those Sunday matinees I stood in line with my friends to buy the tickets, hoping that this new film from Mexico would show more breast, more skin, and the disappointment, of course, always the teasing, the cut-to to the bat dangling from the wire or fishing line, the fakeness of the sets, the gush of ketchup or milk colored with Dye #5, the fact that I was sixteen and ready for more, and at home I stayed up until the early morning hours because once, as if in a dream, they showed a naked woman, and I called all my friends, woke their parents, hung up, I wanted to tell them (as I did later during lunch on the school grounds) that I had in fact been rewarded with a few seconds of nudity, a woman calling my name, as none had started to do, those young women I knew and thought I loved, the way a bat about to turn vampire flies through the window, puff of smoke later, Zap! He's turned into a Mexican Dandy turned blood-thirsty sucker, and I think this could be me, this could be my own hunger, thirst for belonging.
The waters still rush in blue & clear,
bathers bobbing like scabs on the surface,
the cafes & restaurants & bars
all packed, teeming with pink Germans
drinking beer, sun-bleached women
with glasses of port in their jeweled hands;
they don’t know anything, these tourists
from far away as Brazil, how in the early
1980s you could die in Miami Beach
(SoBe now) in an alley & not even the stink
would alarm people. To this beach
only came the retirees, the old folk
from New York, to wait for death,
& they sat out on the rocking chairs
of their apartment buildings, sick, broken,
above them doom pigeons crapping
on the window sills, & nobody ever came.
They sunk deep into the worn lobby sofas
& disappeared. Nobody kept toll,
& on the streets they coagulated
on the sidewalks with metal walkers
& canes, old men with oxygen tanks,
smokers all, women in torn, stained
dresses—look at this place now;
the developers made sure to remove
the old & sick out, those who didn’t
go, paid more rent, died eventually,
gave way to the glitz, the glamour,
only the water remembers the truth.
When all grows quiet, if you stand
really still, you can hear the phlegmy
coughs echo in the hallways, through
the palm fronds, in the inked darkness.
The dead are still here, refusing to let go.
Whatever flies existed, lost themselves
in the fruit, burrowed deep into rind & pulp
of our imaginations, how a single critter
flew across oceans & borders to end
up here in the lost cities of Los Angeles County, where at night the helicopters kept us awake in a clamor of hooves,
thunk-thunk-thunk of their blades above the roofs of our houses, apartments,
sprayed Malathion's sticky goop on our cars, pregnant women,
our children, all of us warned of dangers,
poisons in the water supply, our daily lives disrupted, all for a fruit fly no bigger than a pinhead, shaken from trees,
stirred in the night, risen from the dust of vengeance, each time, ghostly specks, remnants not only of their lost-passage journeys, or of sick fruit trees,
but of our lives in smog, dust, rubble.
Virgil Suarez

Nada

Been to towns filled with dust & cobwebs,
hours spilled over hours, bad loves
like bad weeds, everywhere the black
birds waiting, capuchin-like manes,
these bald birds of carrion, waiting...

Summer days, heat of little resistance,
been in sand storms in El Paso, TX,
mouth full of nails, bitter words rattled
between the thin walls, an old man
coughs up phlegm & doesn’t get up to spit.

Into the pools fall the palm tree fronds,
dead birds struck by pebbles in mid-soar,
at night the bats dive to lap up a drink
from the pond’s surface, catch frogs
in mid-jump, the road loses itself

in the distance, that shimmering dot
where love & hate converge, once we stopped
for a family crossing the border, they spoke
to us in tongues, my wife and I gave them food,
water, bought their children stuffed toy bears,
candy, dropped them off in Yuma,
and my wife turned to me and said she was glad
we’d broken the law, me, too, I said,
nothing seems right but this handout
from this side to those hungry on the other.

We drive through still lost in the clouds.
We learn to drive in darkness and confusion.
We learn to read broken signs, a turn here, a sigh.
We learn to follow cracks up into the mountains,
We learn to love our lives on the run, this gift of speed.
A: Just think about it. It is not good!
D: It's a classic! You don't know what you're talking about. You're an iconoclastic person.
A: You don't even know what iconoclastic means.
D: I do to!
A: You said to instead of too and your instead of you're. I know you said it, but if you were spelling those words in your head I'm sure you were spelling them incorrectly.
D: Now don't you start with your fancy English grammar talk. That might work when your wooing your students, but it doesn't work with me.
A: There! You did it again with your instead of you're. And I said there meaning there, not they are!
D: Why do you continue to harp on these insignificant things? This is a non-issue because we're speaking! We're not writing.
A: If I could help it we would write all the time.
D: Oh God, please don't make me listen to this again.
A: I wish that you didn't have to listen to it! I wish that you hadn't been brainwashed at childhood to believe that speaking was the only way for two people to communicate when they are together in a room. What is wrong with jotting down ideas and showing them to the person next to you? Beethoven did it!
D: Beethoven was deaf! It was the only way he could communicate.
A: Well, it was the right way. Speaking is bad.
D: You're only saying that because you have a lisp!
A: I don't have a lisp!
D: You do too. You can't say conductor without making it sound like you're out looking to buy some oxen.
A: And just how do people sound when they are out looking for oxen?
D: They sound just the way you do when you try to pronounce conductor.
A: Conductor. Conductor conductor conductor conductor!
D: Look what you've done now! You've woken up all the neighbors and Mr. Spelling, the Oxen seller, thinks that he's about to make a sale.
A: Oh I don't care about the neighbors! I don't care about Mr. Spelling. I'll buy his stupid Oxen. All I really care about is you. I care about you and me and how everything is going to work out in the end.
D: This is the end.
A: Don’t say that.
D: I said it and I meant it and there’s nothing you can do to try and make me take it back.
A: Take it back.
D: No.
A: Take it back.
D: No!
A: Take it back or else I’ll do it.
D: Do what?!
A: You know what I’ll do. I’ll do what you hate most of all.
D: You wouldn’t do that.
A: Oh you know I would.
D: You can’t do that.
A: You know I can and you know I will. So it’s up to you. As my eighth grade English teacher used to say, the ball is in your court. What’s it gonna be?
D: I’ll take my chances. Get out of my way and give me the keys to the gate.
A: The gate’s unlocked.
D: I know. I just want to lock you in so that you can’t follow me once I’m gone.
A: I can follow you whether or not the gate is closed!
D: Oh yeah, how’s that?
A: There’s no barrier on either side of the gate. I had the rest of the fence removed just an hour ago.
D: You couldn’t have, I was there just... 
A: Just what? Just two hours ago, three hours ago. It seems you weren’t listening. I told you that I had all of the fencing and walls and barbed wire removed from the premises only one hour ago. That’s right, it was while I was lambasting and you were practicing your juggling. You remember that? That was just an hour ago. We seemed just as happy as ever back then! You thought we were a happy couple of fools back then, didn’t you. Well I knew that something was up, so I called Joey and told him to get rid of all the barriers between this estate and the outside world. I knew something was up. I could smell it. It smelled like roast lamb. It smelled real good. Really good.
D: Fine, you can keep the key to the gate. It doesn’t make any difference to me. You can follow me for as long as you like. I’m not afraid of you and you won’t get in the way of my new life. Sooner or later you’ll get bored with following me and you’ll come back here and try to piece your life together. I do hope that you can get on with
your life sooner than later. I do hope that you’ll find another way to get a suntan. I do hope.

A: I do hope you’ll shut your royal mouth. Why don’t you go back to your palace? That’s where you belong. Your experiment with the peasant is over. You’ve tried the life of a peasant and you couldn’t handle it. Now go back to your silver spoons!

D: You have more money that I do!

A: That may be true, but it doesn’t mean you have more heart.

D: You’re bigger than I am; of course your heart is going to be bigger. It’s all proportional! It’s all proportional!

A: I was speaking figuratively!

D: And I was speaking literally. What does it matter? It’s all just a bunch of patriotic welfare mothers. It’s just a bunch of copies of an outdated book.

A: It’s just a bunch of survivors of a plague trying to piece together their respective memories of life before the plague hit.

D: It always seems so much brighter in retrospect.

A: I hear you.

D: For example, if there were to be some world war beginning next month and lasting for a decade, we would eventually look at these days as the happiest and most wonderful and peaceful days of our lives. It wouldn’t be true, of course, but in comparison to the life that we lived in the war-filled decade, it would all seem like roses. Like wonderful white roses.

A: No matter how bad or good the world is, we always find ways to make our lives miserable. We always find holes in which to —

D: Don’t say it! Don’t say another word. I’m leaving. I’ve always been leaving. It’s all a process. The arrival lasted from my departure from Canterbury to the first time I walked through the gates. From that point on, it was all a process leading to this fateful day. You can talk about existentialism all you want. It all amounts to the same pile of phony baloney no matter which way you slice it. Goodbye and good luck. You are certainly gonna need it without me here to scratch your lottery tickets...

EXEUNT
Mark Terrill

Mississippi Backwards

Used to be this old guy always hanging out down at the corner bar sitting on the same stool up against the wall under the red & white neon Budweiser sign at the end of the bar greasy gray hair combed straight back over his head glass of Coors forever clutched in his meaty fist Pall Mall smoldering in the ashtray in front of him always going on about the thirty years he put in as a union typesetter how he could still spell any word you gave him backwards faster than you could spell it forwards part boast part challenge & after all those years a part of the decor like another neon beer sign or another scratchy jukebox song & invariably some sucker at the bar was willing to bet him a drink that he couldn’t handle Mississippi & true to his word the old guy would fire off the letters backwards in mistake-free rapid succession while the guy at the bar was still consulting his buddy about how many S’s & how many P’s & the bartender was already pouring another cold glass of Coors & the old guy would be glancing around the bar with a tarnished glint of pride in his agate-like eyes & a look of needy expectation eager for that elusive respect and admiration that he felt he’d been cheated out of during all those years at the print shop but whatever feelings there were in that corner bar on a slow weekday afternoon would soon ebb & fade & disappear like so many printed pages yellowing in the trash & the day would resume its place there among all the others forwards or backwards right or wrong it didn’t really matter in the sublime & exacting tempo of irreversible time.
I Quaker Daughter

Philadelphia lawyers on one side — descending pocket watches, piles of white handkerchiefs waiting for grey and black suit pockets, ready for weeping ladies in cricket club restaurants where they've served the same fish dish for eighty years —

married to Daughters of Liberty who scratched their lines back to Penn, back to the wild Schuylkill banks, back even to Old England where they read the advertisements for the Colonies and fled or simply had to see this place where grain shot from the soil and fish jumped over riverbanks into family fires, saying grace, and everything was for the taking.

Cold Quakers who traded china for tin bowls and bunked with North Philly knifers in rotting jails because they preferred that to violence, who lived in Mt. Airy, the country's first integrated neighborhood before it got "overintegrated" and dangerous, who whispered actual thoughts at the ends of cocktail parties but raved against the racist South at sober luncheons and voted for Nixon against their secular religion because they didn't trust that wild Catholic boy

and on another election day they stared politely at their daughter and granddaughter when she announced, already dreading the cold Thanksgiving to come, that she was writing in Eldridge Cleaver on her ballot. Each one smiled then went to bed and wept. Eventually, they all died in those beds when it was time, before their children even knew they were ill; they left perfectly democratic wills — nothing for cats or crazy cousins — even though they never admitted they had a nickel or paid a dime for anything and shook each other's hands goodnight, slept in King beds with fissures down the middle, turned one way, turned the other, goodnight, goodnight...
II Her Husband: Made in Texas

Farmers dying to forget they were Scots-Irish, pushed
to the Appalachian ridge, pushed further into Wisconsin, one day
left the friendly hills, fat milk cows, gorgeous black soil and rolled south
in a pack dredging wagon wheels — drying red and black— through Mississippi mud,
turned right, afraid of being killed by Indians, afraid their guns
were made with hands like theirs and wouldn’t fire.
If they hadn’t been so stupid, stubborn,
when they hit the Texas panhandle they would have turned around
and gone right on back to where they knew things would grow;
but they stayed, prayed, yelled at the fields —

anything for a little rain — stayed and coaxed sprouts from dust,
learned to cuss and spit with dry mouths, went straight from church
into the fields, into the killing sun, turned
finally from the red rut earth and sixteen hour days spent luring
loaves of bread onto beat up kitchen tables, turned,

changed, started driving oil trucks across the hellish frying pan
down sometimes into Mexico which was still a wild place
where they could make a little something on the side,
circled around and had some money now so they could

marry A&M girls twice as smart as them, women who read
at night if they had the time, anything they could get their hands on
and tried to bring their husbands up to date, their nice husbands,
friendliest people in the world, godawful bigots, bad shots
who dropped dead at fifty with Luckies in their blue shirt pockets
after all the talk of owning their own business someday.
The ladies were large, pleasant, big-mouthed whips with names like Little Nell, Big Nell, Angie Sue who rocked, mixed Jack Daniels with 7-UP while the men drank it straight, made great chicken and cornbread but never acted dumb in any mix of company. Bright women, yes, but nevertheless they went on having sons and led somehow to a boy who hid his mother's books in the blankets, hated the Texas sun, hated the smell of oil, hated the thought of becoming his father, went out east to college and met a girl, fixed his accent but still drank Jack in the dark...

III One Thing They Made

Dumped on the flat glacier footprint of Central Illinois, a college town in a cornfield, waiting on the oceans' fulcrum through sticky summers, one eye on weather reports like a real farmer, freezing in December from the fierce plain wind, hardly a day without a cloud, between Washington Crossing and the Palo Duno Canyon, the Delaware and the desert, sour mash and chardonnay, with two ways to die and one to live predetermined by generations of American genes congealed in a cold casserole, stuck with the names of both grandfathers, the last hope for a father's last name, the other side already snuffed out... Stiff, bored, over-educated, terrified, ungrateful son.
Celia Bland

The Word Made Flesh

Want is the engine of baby, the pupil of my dark eye.
And now the kisses -
if she smacks and I smack back it's
the look on young Helen Keller's face:
this is the sign for water
and this is the cool water on your palm, on
your lips, this the curve of cup in your palm and this
the curve of my fingers making the letter, "W."
We are in dialogue.
The other one, my first born, that head like a world in me
thirty hours pressing and I would not give,
fighting the water, until finally the undertow took me up and slammed
me, embarrassed wave, into birth.
Sallow now as the slat of a banister,
I avoid him, leaving the table when he sits, beginning my dishes. Too like
me, too sensitive, complaining.
For him, even the Fat Man in the "The Maltese Falcon" has
to be good.
Bicycle is a verb, a penis and balls, or shaft
and two wheels, a hard ride on the pendulum of time.
I want you again, word, and longing is the flesh wound:
your smell
like water on my skin, your tongue's dialogue
in my mouth. You
fill my vision, meaning world.
For Agamemnon

After your death I searched your things
for the cartons of Winstons, your
fingers, two, three at a time in my mouth.
I closed the window, hammering
smoke into my lungs.

In Hell, dead belly, dead
weight, who will give you tongue?
Describe it:
A wire fence of squares so narrow
no souls can escape, a tomb
erected from whitewash coarse as toothpaste, the stuff
my lungs are caked with.

Dog leashed to a clothesline, you pace,
smoking;

When can I stand at your door
to kiss you goodbye?
Body pulling upwards, flexing calves, reaching
into each other’s mouths
to whisper — what?
I won’t know. Never.

I tell you now
that your so-called friend, Aegisthus,
called me on the phone when I was just thirteen.
I was polite, as you’d drilled me
to treat adults while he discussed
my attributes.
My fingers would feel so good, cool
as water off rock —
flattery sucked dry as he inhaled.
Go to Hell, I should have said.
To keep you company.
He proposed a game
of shape-changing

Ever-quick to such
sallies, she became
Charles Darwin, hypochondriacal
and at home.
Unimpressed and unsympathetic,
he lit a cigarette.
She became a lynx-eyed housewife
totting up the cost
of her buggy’s haul
in the check-out line.
He exhaled wearily and opened the window.
Her breath was a cloud
in the cold room. She sat
behind a door ajar and spoke
of her white dress, her poetry
sewn and seamed in her
drawers.
He was moved, he sat down
on the other side of the door.
“A fly buzzed...” she said
and became that fly,
lighting on his hand.
He raised his hand until he could
look into her jeweled
eyes and she caressed one silken
wing against the other.
He swallowed her.

Even now when he is thinking hard
I can hear her drone.
Take That

In the gym class locker room,
Luckner shoved me when I punched him
for being a freshman. Are you gonna take that?

To declare my intentions to fall
in with the hard fists, I challenged him
to a fight after school.

His face was so smooth I thought
I could take him. I stood in the parking lot
scanning faces, after-school cars
whizzing past. James Johnson,
who'd dropped out to work on cars,
cruised by to pick up his girlfriend —
asked me what I was doing, and I was glad
to tell him Looks like the chicken
ain't showing up. The next day,

I ignored Luckner dressing
across the aisle, and he ignored me.
Hey, I was there.

He didn't show up, I said to anyone
who asked, and that much was true.
They could tease him if they wanted,

but I hoped not too much.
I was thin and hungry
to be included. At home

in my room, I punched the air.
Take that, I said, and that.
Jeff Friedman

Manifest Destiny

Early May, already it is
too warm to wear khakis
and a stiff blue oxford
shirt to school. By 2 p.m.
my shirt gets untucked
and my pants are smudged with crayon,
pencil, eraser shavings.
“Tuck your tails in,” Miss Ledbetter
says and turns to the blackboard.
The red bird rustles the cedar branches.
The bluejays take over
the sycamore, gobbling worms.

I lift open my desk
and read the last pages
of my Superboy comic — Clark
is falling in love with
Lana Lang, a red-haired
beauty. I’m falling in
love with Barbie Sliverman,
who, the sixth graders say,
has the best legs in the school,
long, slim and smooth
in her blue shorts during
gym class. But she won’t
even talk to me.

“Manifest Destiny,”
Miss Ledbetter underlines
the words twice: “the destiny
of Americans to possess
all of America” — like Pressberg
and his friends after school,
taking over the whole playground
for their games, or the crows
usurping the grass, their black
tails wet and shiny,
or my hand moving up and down
Barbie Silverman's bare leg,
which never happens.
Dear Applicant,

We regret to inform you that the position you applied for has been filled. We wish you luck in your continued job search.

Didn’t your mother always say cross your legs, stand straight, head back, smile but don’t speak.

Please always wear pantyhose with a skirt. White shoes in the summer; black in the winter.

Go to college, but do not make a name for yourself. Borrow someone else’s.

Short hair and books by Mary Daly can only mean one thing.

We regret to inform you...You are not a winner, please try again.
A schematic of what is to be done

looking at it flesh covered wand sparkling with platinum and diamond my finger one that will point to the rest as the world sits upon it shining I can hardly believe it has finally come finally I am getting old a maid no longer

Just engaged, dear?

Yes, just this morning. Would you like to see my ring?

Of course! I remember when I was your age...

listening this beautiful raisin-skinned woman her mouth gaping open teeth like a white picket fence in disrepair grasing sounds together wispy curls tragically pinned to her scalp strapped in next to me to Buffalo no longer home just a pad to visit on treks elsewhere her finger she was married once is was no ring widowed or divorced probably widowed they didn't do divorce in her day I miss Lenny already connecting color coded wires talking robots that dance spirals across the glossed parquet floor

So my husband and I were married fifty years before he passed on.

Is it hard, I mean, now that he is gone?

Oh, yes, dear. But I moved in with my grandson. He's just like William was. He takes care of my banking and drives me to the grocery store on Wednesdays and to my bridge club on Thursdays. He's such a good boy.

Thursday Mom and I shopping for dresses no veil no way maybe even pants in Milan last summer the white pair that swirled in the breeze around each leg as if it were the candy man making albino licorice Mom won't smile about that my wedding my way

What's that you say?

Did you set a date?

Not specifically, no. We're thinking about a year and a half from now.

A summer wedding?

Yes.

Won't that be lovely? Mine was in June you know. The girls looked marvelous. They wore pink; what a beautiful color.

her smile is a Venus Flytrap it swallows me in colorful hot pink glued to her lips and the upper reaches of her jagged chin

My mum was a big help. I was the oldest of four daughters, so mum took control and showed everyone how it was done. My mum, she was a grand woman.

I'm the oldest too.

Oh, he, he! You are in for a treat, dear! You'll have more advice and more people crooning over you than you ever bargained for! Ah, it will be wonderful though.

Hmm, I hope so.
You're not having doubts already?
Oh, no!
Good. It's okay to have them though. I had mine. I had my heart set on being a working woman. Ha! A secretary I was to be. That crazy notion faded fast once William put that ring on my finger for good. He was the worker not me, just the way it was meant to be.
good God staying home all day impossible the kids at school the shop Wine on Pine her hands
Why don't you wear your ring anymore?
It's too painful. It reminds me what I am missing, a part of myself. I'll put it back on one day.
It's too soon just yet.
her hands so beautiful yet so naked
Please fasten your seatbelts and bring your seatback and tray table to their upright and locked positions. We will be landing momentarily.
Best fifty years of my life.
I hope mine will be too.
They will be, dear. Just don't rock the boat. All these young women nowadays are running around with craziness in their heads. You just stand by your man.
Don't worry about me. I'll be fine.
I know, dear. I can tell. I can tell.
what can she tell she doesn't even know me I'll be her in fifty years my own brand of raisins with a story for every wrinkle unable to stop them coming until all shriveled up completely all the juice sucked out
Welcome to Buffalo. The local time is 11:40 pm and the current temperature is 18 degrees

*****

Juliana, I am so happy you found a dress.
Yeah, in the cutest shop right downtown. Did you know I got a veil?
Oh! A veil! I must say I am pleasantly surprised. I never thought it would be you...
me neither a veil and a train and a bustle does it matter of course a ceremony trimmed in perfection out of a story book
Did you set up the appointment with Father Freeman? It is getting kind of late. Maybe he's there right now.
Mom, relax.
It's important! Don't tell me to relax! If you don't see a priest you can't hold the ceremony in the
church.

We did the Pre-Cana and are meeting with Father next weekend when we are visiting you.

Good.

Catholic Church it's been awhile why there it's like I'm a trapped rat in some experimental maze trying to find the exit for faith and a salvation where did the licorice pants go

And, did you...

Mom!! Stop it already! There are a ton of things I need to do. I'm doing the best I can.

I've offered help, but you always say the same thing, that there is nothing for me to do.

There isn't. I live here. You live there. It's as simple as six hours between us.

What is Lenny doing?

He's busy building the robot and with applying and interviewing for his doctorate at UPENN he has no spare time.

Oh, I see.

back to Lenny always a problem a dilemma a catastrophe no more picking daisies and pink dresses while hubby-to-be plays man of the century too bad he doesn't wear the hoops anymore very retro

********

Oh, look, she's getting sick again!

The wedding day jitters. They say everyone gets them.

Poor, dear!

dear is the raisin-lady here the cheese on the pizza breakfast nothing more nothing less cook oooh not again

There can't be much more in her!

Yeah, the next thing that comes up will be her stomach.

Stop talking about me like I'm not here.

Juliana, you are so cute.

cute twenty-eight years old feel like five bubblegum rusty red swingset glass of wine on the rocks please and bubbling with binding patience there really is no Santa Claus I can prove it Rudolph now that's another story I saw him flinging the snow from his eyes with the pulse yielding only hope

Now that you're all set, you can slip into your dress.

Slip into? Ha, ha! It won't be that easy girls, trust me.

Oh, wait! Juliana, we almost forgot your make-up. The woman your mom got is right downstairs. She'll make you into a princess!

princess
Now, Juliana, don't you look pretty? We'll just do a little touch up and voila! Lenny will hardly be able to resist you during the ceremony.

Are you all right? Pre-wedding jitters?

Yes, Mom.

All the boys are going to the church a bit earlier than us to get everything settled. Your father went over there already.

Great. Hopefully Lenny will be on time.

He will, dear. Everything will go just perfectly.

or so we hope. porcelain doll on display. is this real? will I remember all this? it seems like I'm in a dream that saunters in right as the ecstatic beep of the alarm turns high pitched and wakes me up. no beep. where's the pillow. tired already.

There. You are all set.

You look beautiful, Juliana, absolutely gorgeous.

Thanks Mom.

What do you say, we slip that dress of yours on and hurry off to meet Lenny?

slip again. yes, get here. I'll bike it if I have to on one wheel with a broken pedal. thumping my shin into a conglomeration of color. The black and the blue. white for today.

gotta sit. can't flowers. shoulders. head up. a re-visititation of the cheese in my throat.

Ready, Juliana?

Yes, Dad.

It's a short aisle. This will be a piece of cake.

Uh-huh.

You look gorgeous, honey. There is no one in this church today who doubts that you are the most stunning bride ever. This is your day, sweetheart.

Don't trip. spiraling. gym night on the tumbling mat. fifth grade. Lenny. plastic smiles and metal cameras. a blur with but one face. don't let go. the hand of William in mine. whole again.

I, Juliana.

I, Juliana.

Take you, Lenny.

Take you, Lenny.

what's he saying? I can't hear. the beating. looking in his eyes. glints at what it is all about. tiny black specks. engulfed in a sea of splendid color. at me.
Ladies and Gentlemen, I present to you, Mr. and Mrs. Reller!

The Venus Flytrap with an embracing smile thank you thank you Mom thank you
On the back of the beat-up Chevy driving too close in front of me down the Brooklyn Queens Expressway, a bumper sticker reads, “Proud Parent of a National Honor Society student at Midwood H.S.” The driver has a pair of fuzzy stuffed dice hanging from his rear view mirror, I note as I stare into his car.

I imagine my son Jesse handing me a bumper sticker like that. Would I have agreed to put it on the back of my BMW — the car my father finally gave me, the car Jesse’s never seen? Or would I have refused, just as I did when he asked me to hang his first oil painting in the living room? It was a still life with a black banana and too-spherical apple set on a table that lacked all perspective. I suggested he put the painting in his bedroom instead, over his desk, maybe, above the bulletin board he’d fashioned from a piece of Styrofoam I’d discarded. I told him he would do paintings worthy of the living room later.

Everywhere he went that summer, the summer he turned thirteen, he carried that book around with him, the book that listed all the special high schools in New York City. He would have made it into Stuyvesant, I think. He got his own social security card that summer too. He had plans.

We discussed my sending him to classes for the Stuyvesant test in the fall. This I’d neglected to do for the Hunter test, then found out the kids who tested into Hunter had parents who knew to send them to classes, parents richer than I, parents better organized, two parents still living together.

That June when my ex-husband Danny remarried, I bought Jesse a tie. Jesse had asked me to find him one, if I had a chance. I never bought him much. I don’t know where he acquired many of his things, like his Coca Cola baseball cap.

I always feel oppressed by errands, but this time I went. I combed those cheap stores down the length of Canal Street, filled with net stockings and brightly patterned dresses of synthetic material and beaded headbands, until I found two: a bow tie and a clip-on.

He decided to wear the clip-on, though I thought, personally, the bow-tie looked more elegant. Danny had worn a tacky clip-on tie like that to our wedding.

This one I didn’t attend. Jesse was the ring bearer. Danny showed me the pictures, later, after the funeral.

“Who’s that young man?” I asked Danny, pointing to a tall blonde figure in a grey suit jacket, walking up the hill, his head bent forward.

“That’s Jesse,” Danny said, looking at me with astonishment at my lack of recognition.

“But he looks so grown-up,” I said, “in that suit.” He grew two and a half inches between April and June. I have the two marks on the wall next to the closet where he asked me to put
them, one in yellow-orange felt-tip, one penciled in blue.

From the trial of the driver of the van that ran him over, I learned an interesting fact. I found out that Jesse had grown another inch between June and July, when he was killed. He was five feet one.

I also have: some shirts I saved of that Bugle Boys brand he liked, his Earth Day shirt, his baseball card collection in a pink-striped shoe box neatly arranged by team. I have the brass and plastic trophy he won for the all-school Social Studies runoff, even though he was only in the seventh grade. I have the tie. In my Rolodex, I have the numbers he wrote on cards for the international weather and time. I can't find the painting I refused to hang in the living room, though I've scoured the apartment. I thought I would feel better if I hung it, even now.

I have the money he printed up from the computer, in denominations of “leeks.” It was the currency for a world he and his little sister Sophie invented. They would play on nights I was out late. He would pick up a barbecued chicken from the deli. They served it in their imaginary restaurant, in which he was the chef and Sophie was the waitress. Though I often saw the leeks laying around the apartment, I only recently became aware of what they were used for, when Sophie explained this to me.

I don’t have the half-eaten peanut butter sandwich I found in Jesse’s bedroom at Danny’s house. It was sitting on a shelf right on top of his new high-powered binoculars, exactly where he had left it in the morning, the day he was killed. I thought it looked so particularly like Jesse, I wanted to have it molded into plastic and preserved. I kept it in their freezer for a time until I finally threw it away.

I have the crystal vase he gave me — real leaded glass — for Mother’s Day. Later he took me to where he’d bought it, down on the corner from the Italian family that sells imports in their yard. “If you don’t like that vase,” he said, “we can buy a different one, you know.”

The other night I had a dream about Jesse. I was on the deck of a ship, or a terrace with a wrought-iron fence, or the Asbury Park boardwalk of my childhood at night, and Jesse came running up to me with some kids; he looked about ten, with those blond curls before they darkened, and I grabbed him and scooped him up in my arms and held him. “Jesse, it’s you,” I said.

“Mommy,” he said, “Mommy, I just had the strangest dream.”

“What, baby?” I said.

“It was the most awful dream,” he said, “the strangest dream. I dreamed that you died.”

“No, honey,” I said. “That’s not what happened.” I knew somehow, in that way you think
about things in dreams, that he had mixed up the events, as a child does. This was his reasoning of why we were separated now.

“No, honey, that was just a dream,” I said. I held him tighter. But suddenly he broke free from me and began running. I chased him down the bleached grey wood of the boardwalk to the edge, where the steps had splintered.

“Jesse, don’t,” I called out. “Don’t go away. Let me go with you. It will be wonderful, I promise.”

On the dark sand, I caught him by the curve of his shoulder. I was using all the strength I had to keep hold of him, but he was pulling away.

“No,” he said. “No, you can’t come with me.”

I relaxed my grip, and he stopped trying to run. His eyes were turning blue, a cloudy pale blue, like the marbles we used to call cloudies when we were kids. I thought, in the way you think in dreams, that this is how he looked when I found him lying in the street and held him in my arms.

But in truth I never saw him when he was dead, never found him, never held him in my arms. I wasn’t even in the same city as my son crossed the street. I have asked his stepmother, neighbors, for the details: what the driver of the van that hit him looked like, if the school bus lights were flashing. I have accumulated all the details in my mind, but I wasn’t there.

The Hasidim believe that when you dream of someone who has died, you have been visited by the living spirit of that person, who can only speak to you in a dream. When you wake, you are supposed to write the dream down and light a Yahrzeit candle. So I did.
There's nothing in the world that doesn't grow smaller

my grandma often said, recounting
with the wily look of a banker
all the ways winter had
to come at her earlier each year,

the sharp edges daylight seemed
to develop along both its borders
in September, as if light were
curling back on itself, faster

and then faster, until it was
packed so tightly by December
it would take six months
for the dense scroll to unwind.

She said she hoped she would
be here to see another summer
unroll its blanket and lay out
its world of colored glass.

I thought of her closing down,
curling back from her edges
into her bones, compacted pain
whiter than sheet lightning

around slighter and slighter
marrows of heat, until she
squeezed herself at last
into the smallest space

she could manage against all
that cold and dark, believing
as she had for a lifetime
that something greater than herself
would unravel the season
at the last possible moment,
just as it was disappearing
into the indifference of seeds.
The 18th century, thank God there’s still a God—Order, Design, Right Reason not yet gone left. “You’re sooo Johnsonian,” my wife says, handing me a pill. I was obsessing again, tearing clumps of hair from my head, besieging the lovebirds with a dried-out drumstick. Depression—laughter and hypochondria create such strange cozenage...We’re slopping our way to the Café Voltaire, pooped from last night’s cockfights and boxing matches, beer and gin afflicting us in a dreadful manner. “I’ll have no more on’t,” I kept yelling, not quite sure what I meant. At the fair, you befriended an Irishman who shattered a chamber pot by barking out Greek phrases from Sappho. Prostitutes mud-wrestling, fannies spanked with birched rods, then to the inoculation party where we drank cockroach tea while soaking our testicles in warm vinegar. “Not the lessons I wanted you to learn,” I say, feeding a half-eaten tomato to a one-legged dog. Let me repeat: We’re slopping our way to the Café Voltaire, sucking in coal dust, up to our ankles in uric mud, passing a ballad singer, an apple vendor, a dead horse. “By your leave,” a fancy-pants personage apologizes, his black sedan nearly running me down. Later I tell Johnson I’m homesick, but he offers this explanation: “Long intervals of pleasure dissipate attention and weaken constancy.” And how right he is. “Wastrel, Johnny Boy Esquire the Third, do you hear the words of this great depressed man? Do you recognize your likeness in his eyes?” But you’re drunk again, cursing out a kidney pie in Pig Latin. I look to Johnson for solace, but he’s laughing, pinching a wheat-stained vermin from under my wig, then soberly addressing it at close range. “And thee,” he says, “I shall name Boswell.”
From Night

From night, what once was takes shape.
A low fog overflows the river, the small houses

Along a stretch of road stand deserted.
Everyone’s departing, everyone feels a vague stab

Of regret, everyone’s been left to their devices.
Snapdragons-dry, cold-have parted

Their leaves over the round kitchen table.
In the air a hollow opens up, a cave.

It’s the hour of the first chilly kiss.
This fear, anxiousness, hunger, this wave

of a new love’s drunkenness all pool
In you, even childhood of tinny scratches

Up and down a guitar string. In you a path
Shadows the river, the wind reverses. Oh mouth

Of the women who’s been loved and misplaced
Hourly, give back those lengthening

Sighs, return the burnt-out, last
Supernovas. Of far from anyone, from anything.
It is aqueous light that stays.
Long after the writer-in-exile has strayed,
The rainy streaks descend.
And aren't dispersed on the wall
Or in the ruinous garden.

Perhaps it's waiting for the real reason
He's on a self-imposed vacation.
Or why, at least, a mutt
Pads over to lick the tile
Rather than stay put.

Traveler, heed the window's whimper!
Every dream is a dream of her.
Every dream is of home.
Even we can hear a goat
Tethered by a stream,

Nervously stamping on an anthill.
What joke did he tell earlier to that girl?
Pulled up on a mucky bank,
the half-drowned man spat out:
“What did you expect, thanks?

I live in there.” I live in there.
Does that make him a hypocrite, a liar,
To long for a human angel?
Meanwhile dabbing his nosebleed
Up from the foyer's marble?

No, No: the sound of a buzzsaw
Cuts away what he can't see
To join, one-to-one, these moments.
So that this light in what sticks,
Stripping him down past his nakedness.
A Monologue

An MA from Boston, an MA from New Haven, an MA from New York all in theater. She was a wonderful actress, a Sarah Bernhardt of her day, a Lincoln among stage buffs until one of her admirers stalked her and stabbed her and cut short her career with a steak knife and a sick libido. If only we could spare a few dollars to support her revival she would perform one of her four favorite monologues. I stare intently at her feet, reciting my regrets to her weather worn Nikes and deny the outstretched hand placed in front of my face - it was a strong hand with a thick scar running from the base of its index finger to its wrist.
James sat on the grass watching the ants march down into their anthill. Opening his lunchbox, he flicked the ants a bit of crust from his sandwich and watched them carry it away. Getting down on his hands and knees, James stuck his face right up next to the anthill, but he couldn’t see what was going on down there. Puzzled, James sat back down and thought. After a few minutes, a smile bounced onto his face. Breaking off the little finger of his left hand he flicked it to the ants. They picked it up and carried it away. Delighted, James moved on to the rest of his fingers. Bit by bit, James was taken into the anthill until only his smiling head was left rolling on the ground. It laughed in triumph as the ants picked it up and continued their march.
Chicago Spelling Bee Championship

Only a handful of finalists remained. My turn to stand alone behind the microphone, pronounce, then spell, pronounce again my word. "Persuasion."

After "autocracy," which I'd never heard before, after "mayonnaise," whose double "n" must have registered unwittingly from the Hellman's jar, this was easy. "P-E-R"

I said, confident, smug hare napping "S-V..." and caught myself in the turtle's dust, the irretrievable "v" flying out over the footlights into the darkened assembly hall to sympathetic gasps from the audience. No second chances.

I stumbled out the rest and stepped down. If Ma reproached, mercifully I've forgotten.
To the rock and sway of Cicero Avenue's dirty red streetcar,
I could hear my mistake land again and again in the same circle of hell reserved for the misspelled, the misbegotten.

Scant comfort now to read the OED says "u" is a differentiated form of a "v." That Latin manuscripts written in capitals used only the V,

as in JVLIVS CAESAR. Was I Calpurnia in a previous life? Dyslexic? For years I berated myself for that slip of the tongue. Unable to forgive, too ashamed to admit it ever happened, I kept turning one mistake round and round in my head as if it were my life.
Beneath the rotted plank floor
of the abandoned bridge the river
looks secretive, oily and glib.
In the roar of crickets the current
falters slightly to acknowledge
the end of summer, as if tripping
on a snag. Carefully I lie down
on the broken deck of the bridge

and look straight into the river
and feel its plain imperatives
numb me from the neck up, leaving
the amphibious parts alive.
Usually I wade in shallows
in hip boots, sometimes canvas shoes,
and let the drift of trout determine
my slow march downstream. Tonight,

with twilight fading in violet
overtones, the moon a slice
of lemon in the east, I’m certain
that walking in the dark water
would consume me like martyrdom,
leaving the mildest wink of bone.
Lacking heirs, lacking property,
I’m free to enter this absence

and scatter my atoms and let
the night-wind shuck across the hard
surface of the water and nail me
to the scene as I’d remembered it
a thousand years later: the same
dry moon, the same warm shallows,
and the same old ego adrift
among worn and varied textures.
Marcie should have been groomed, composed, ready to convince the first customer of the day of her command of the field of fashion, but she was panting from her dash up the escalator, still wearing her ancient trenchcoat, when she caught the eye of her boss, Mr. Greener. He was standing in the center of the designer salon, under the chandelier.

"Napkins," he said, "syringes, salesgirls. What do they have in common?"

"Sorry I'm a little late."

"Give up? They are all three *disposable*. Guess which is the easiest on the environment to replace? Guess which does not cost nature a tree?"

"I'm really sorry, Mr. Greener." Marcie's armpits were prickling. "It won't happen again." She would be good on her word. It was not worth the humiliation. Once in nursery school little Marcie peeled the papers off all the new crayons. You'd think she taken her clothes off, the way the teacher carried on. Apparently, there was something naughty about those slick, naked rolls of colors. Having learned that lesson, she henceforth refused to use the broken, exposed ones in the Sunday school basket. From then on, growing up became a series of exercises in keeping herself covered. Now she never made the same mistake twice.

Greener brushed her off. "Go put your coat away," he said. Then he got on the phone. Winnie was marking tags for the winter sale. As Marcie passed, she greeted her through a yawn.

"Everything all right, dear?" "Yeah, I was just late. No good reason." She took off her coat. "But there could have been a reason. It's not like he asked or anything." "Did you stay at the hospital last night?" "No, I went home at ten. As I said, there's no good reason." "Well, all the same, you must be exhausted." Marcie put her coat on a hanger. It was true, she was tired. Tired of the coat, tired of the hospital, tired of her mother dying. She smoothed down her hair and walked back towards suits and dresses that cheered her up. Greener was toting a naked mannequin under his arm. "Look at the wig on this babe," he said. "Remember mercurochrome? No, you're too young." The mannequin was punk, with purple lips in a fishlike gasp. "I don't think our kind of clients would appreciate the look, do you? I'm getting rid of her. "I'll be back in a minute. Try to sell something, in the meantime." Marcie ran her hand along the sale rack. "Are you marking down that Lagerfeld jacket?" she asked Winnie. "A whopping fifty percent. The belt's gone. Don't ask me how that happened, but I can tell you, Greener was not happy when he found out." "He's never happy." Marcie pulled the jacket off the rack. "I'd buy this today if my account wasn't stretched to the limit." She hugged it to her chest. "I love this jacket." Winnie glanced at Marcie's face, then down at the Lagerfeld. "Yeah," she said. "The color's all right on you, with your black hair. I don't care too much for fuschia myself." A tall woman with gold loop earrings was flipping through the cocktail dresses. Marcie put the jacket
back on the rack and kept a careful distance. Just as the woman pulled out a black dress to examine the tag, Marcie pounced. “Isn’t that a great dress?” she said. “It’s one of my favorites.” She got the woman into the dressing room with the first choice and brought her another dress, not on sale, by the same designer, and another, along similar lines, in red, and even more expensive. “This one has a better lining, and wow, you look really good in that red.” Greener got back in time to witness Marcie making the sale. He was not effusive with praise, but she felt better. He did at least nod, and besides, she liked what she did. She ran the card through and waited for approval, all the while keeping an eye on a mother and daughter who had wandered into the salon. The girl was chewing gum, and kept sticking her hair behind her ears. The mother wore no lipstick, and comfortable shoes. They were at the sale rack, tugging at things in the daughter’s size. Marcie’s Lagerfeld was there, bright and obvious among the winter browns. The mother ‘pulled it out and urged the daughter to slip it on. As soon as she finished with her customer, Marcie rushed over. “May I help you?” “Yeah, I like this,” said the daughter to her mother, ignoring Marcie. “It needs a belt,” said the mother. “There are loops for a belt.” The woman’s roots were showing a good inch. You’d think she would’ve noticed in the mirror. “That jacket does not come with a belt,” Marcie said. The pair turned, and noticed her. “But you’re right. It would look really great with maybe something in a patent leather, or with an interesting clasp? If you’ll just wait right here, I’ll bring you some belts to try with it.” “Okay,” said the daughter. She popped a greenish bubble. Marcie rushed down the escalator to Accessories and got someone to open the case. She picked out three knockout belts, one with a Tudor-style jeweled clasp. She was doing it for the jacket, not the girl. “Neat,” the daughter said, fingering the most expensive of the three. The mother balked. “Where’s the belt that was made to go with this? I don’t see the point in buying the jacket on sale if I have to then spend a fortune on a silly belt I don’t want. There must have been a cloth belt that ties.” Like on a bathrobe, thought Marcie. She looked straight at the woman and said, “You cannot put an ordinary belt on this jacket.” As she spoke the words she was convinced of their truth. The customer was incensed. “Well, I’m not buying it as is.” “Ma’am, it has been reduced a full fifty percent.” Greener overheard her. She softened her tone. “It’s a really good deal.” But it was too late. The mother left, and the daughter had to follow. Greener beckoned her with his finger. Marcie approached, clutching the belts. “Don’t worry,” she said, “I’m going to buy it, as soon as I get my paycheck.” “You’re missing the point, Marcella. It’s about good will. We want the mommy to come back and buy a Chanel.” “Fat chance. She’s too cheap.” “She can afford to dress better than she does and she owes it to society to do so. It’s up to you to convince her of that. It’s your duty to beautify the burbs.” “Aye, aye, captain.” The thing about Greener was that he really meant it. There was no end to the things he
really meant. Sometimes it made Marcie feel insubstantial. How many things could she say and really mean, aside from “This jacket needs a special belt” and “I won’t do it again?” “Before you take those back downstairs I have something to tell you both.” Greener clasped his hands together. “Where’s Winnie?” He called her out of the dressing rooms. Waiting, he made a church and steeple with his hands, and put the steeple to his lips. When they were both close enough for him to speak softly, he began. “I want you both to know this, this new thing about me, just in case, well, you know, the chandelier falls on me or something.” Winnie made a little gasp, and held her breath, as if about to be pricked with a needle. “Now, don’t look so horrified,” he said. “It’s really good news I’m telling you. I’m really happy about this, but the important thing is, I want to be sure you know about it.” “All right. Let us hear it,” said Winnie. “Well,” said Greener. “It’s this. I’ve signed up to be a mummy.” “You?” Poor kid who gets him, Marcie was thinking. “Yes, me. Of course I’ll be me now, until the time comes, but then, in my next manifestation, a mummy. Isn’t it wonderful that such a thing is possible? No casket, no urn, but a case, an upright case, with my likeness on it, and me within, perfectly preserved for posterity.” Greener crossed his arms at the wrist and held them close to his chest. “Oh, the King Tut kind of mummy. Okay. For a minute there I...” Disappointed, Greener shook his head. Marcie decided not to explain what she’d thought. “You can do that? Aren’t there laws?” asked Winnie. “Really. You both must start keeping up with trends or you’ll end up working at the dry cleaner’s. This is not just some idea of mine that I made up. It’s completely official. Completely professional. It’s done all the time in California, by this group. First, they perfected the technique on pets, and now, any human can arrange to have it done. Anyone who can afford it. I’ve put down my first installment. I’m planning on having plenty of time to pay it off.” “That’s good news,” said Winnie. “For a minute there I thought you were going morbid.” “Oh, not at all. I’m quite happy about this. It’s a load off my mind. I mean, just imagine what if there really was after all some kind of Judgment Day, wouldn’t you rather be in one piece? Otherwise, just think of what a nightmare it would be trying to get yourself together on time.” “You’re worried about Judgment Day? But you’re—” “Marcie. There are thousands of religions. Educate yourself. Will you ever understand the word prepared?” It was hard for her to see his point. He’d only made her think of her mother, already misshapen, trying to turn sideways in the hospital bed. What was there to preserve that wasn’t lost already? “Thank you for sharing this with us Mr. Greener,” said Winnie. “If anything happens to you, we’ll be sure to take up a collection to pay off the costs of your mummification.” “Don’t worry about that. You know I plan to live a long, long time to make up for all those lost years of my childhood.” His employees did know. They were well familiar with the facts. Mr. Greener’s mother had been an alcoholic. He used to have to step over her body to get to the TV when he
came home from school. Half the time he'd have to cover her up to make her decent, and a few times, it was so bad, the smell and all, he'd had to play outdoors and be prey to bullies. "Mr. Greener, if you don't mind," said Marcie, "I'm meeting someone for lunch." "If that's all you can think of to say, then please do go." "A mummy you say? How amusing." Marcie's friend Jemma was from Wales and had a Celtic tolerance for the macabre. "Wherever is he going to keep - I mean, whoever is going to keep him? It? And where?" She stabbed at her Catch of the Day and gleefully pondered the problem. She was Marcie's married friend. She always saw the humor in Greener, since he had no hold on her livelihood. It helped Marcie to laugh outright. "Do you think he's trying to preserve his looks, that he thinks he has good looks?" She picked up her fork and began to rearrange her fruit salad. She became thoughtful. She slid some melon next to the peaches and considered the colors. "He does take good care of himself." She noticed a spot on Jemma's blouse. "Speaking of mummies," Jemma said, "what's the word on yours? Is she getting on any better since the operation?" "She's okay." People were always asking, but Marcie thought it was in bad taste to tell the truth. Who really wanted to hear, what kindness was it to pretend to share in the smell, the gurgling in the dark room, the green bile, the degradation? The cost? Jemma's blouse was not only stained, but there was a button missing near the breast. Maybe it would be nice to be as visually oblivious as Jemma, to come away not noticing or caring what kind of watch someone was wearing, not seeing how two shades of color didn't match. "I love your bracelet," Marcie said, to encourage as well as to compliment. "This?" Jemma turned it on her wrist. "It's a gift from Dan. Something he rushed into Tiffany's to buy on Christmas Eve." "Must be nice." Marcie cut an apple slice in half. "You know, I saw a teal blouse in the window of Panache on the way down here. It's your color, with your red hair? You should stop off and get it." Jemma said she just might do. Marcie doubted she would, and felt useless. Her break was almost up. Even if she didn't believe Greener would really fire her, she was not up to another clever threat. "Promise me you'll buy the blouse. It's in the window. You can't miss it." "It depends on the time, really. I've got carpool. Now, give me that check. You know it's my treat." Jemma, after all, had Dan and all his money. "Thanks," Marcie said. "While you're paying, I'll just stop by the ladies' room." The light there was rosy, but the neat row of toilets behind painted doors reminded Marcie how bad things were. Her mother had given in to a catheter. To pee on a commode was a privilege of life now denied her. Protect me, prayed Marcie, even while she checked in the mirror for bits of food. She pulled out a tube of lipstick. Her head bent, she thought, for just an instant, how good it would feel if someone, anyone, would cover her shoulders, her neck, her back. She did her lips. She had to hurry. Greener's going to kill me, she thought, and did not bother to line the bow with her little brush. She rushed headlong through
the mall back towards work, passing display upon display with the indifference of a boxcar. Not until she passed through the arched entrance to Thalberg's did she slow enough to notice here a pair of eccentric earrings, there a basket of perfume samples, and near the escalator, a promotional poster for Eye Tissue Therapy Plus, something she probably should have already started using. Go, she urged herself, and stepped onto the escalator. It was getting scary, the indulgence she kept demanding for herself from herself, and didn't have time or cash for. She could use a new fragrance. And cream. Protection. As the mechanical stairs rose, she looked back. An exquisite elderly woman stood fingering the shining contents of a basket on the accessories counter. She wore a mossy turtleneck, cashmere, a kilt with a thread of brilliant blue running through it, sweet Italian shoes. A stout man with an age-spotted head stood patiently behind her. Marcie noticed her minute hand was slightly past the hour. She set it back onto the dot, stepped off the escalator, walked straight into the salon and across the carpet, then stuffed her purse under the counter. There was a little yellow note stuck next to the phone that said, "M-ask me." "You got a call," Winnie said, coming up behind her. Marcie flinched. "You spooked me." She rubbed her fingers. "Did they say who?" "Greener took it." Greener was busy with a customer, that difficult woman who was always bringing things back after she'd worn them. Marcie was afraid of what he knew to tell her. There was a blackening around the edges of her vision as her fear narrowed its focus. Greener came toward her. He was about to speak, but something caught his eye, and his expression changed. "Pillars!" He clapped his hands together. "Our lucky day." Marcie glanced back towards the service elevators. "You mean for display?" "No, no, no, no, no. Pillars, as in 'pillars of society.' Our life blood." He sounded like Dracula. "Just observe, Marcella. You will see the most well-preserved lady in town, Charlotte Sellars, patron of the ballet, the symphony, any cause that's not a disease, and the best thing, she has brought her husband Alfred along, Alfred 'Moneybags' Sellars. That means she is in a spending mood." Marcie knew who he meant without looking. Greener sent her off to make coffee. Sulking at the pot near the dressing rooms, she could hear him ooze. How are you? Looking marvelous, isn't it wonderful? When the machine started to spit steam, she walked back into the salon. She felt grimy. Her fingertip found and worried the ragged edge of a broken thumbnail she had no memory of chipping. Mrs. Sellars was elegant. She stood in a way that reminded Marcie of the charm school teacher who had advised her and her childhood friends to imagine a golden wire attached to the tips of their spines, pulling them ever straighter and straighter. "Now even though this black dress is for all seasons, it is reduced." Greener knew where to begin. "But, really, Mrs. Sellars, who says we have to wear black?" He held the dress out for one beat, then, back to the rack. He was swimming like a seal, singing like a catbird. This was, after all, what he did, and he did it well. To dress women, wrap them, swathe them and drape
them was his calling. He was in control. He ordered the stock, they had to choose from his collections. They were at his mercy, but in the end, he treated them well. If he admired a woman like Mrs. Sellars, it was with the confident eyes of a connoisseur. Marcie, standing with improved posture, tried to conceal her own inner surge of admiration, one troubled with envy. It helped her somewhat to think how little of this someone like Jemma would understand. “This just came in. I can assure you, no one else has it.” Greener pulled an iridescent chartreuse gown off the rack and held it under the light. “Those beads, Kenneth. I don’t know. It’s too reptilian.” “I would have said dazzling, but you do know that reptiles are very in for spring.” He draped another gown over his forearm and before anyone could make associations with the word dinosaur, changed the subject entirely. “This silk just pours. You must see it on.” Marcie’s wave of awe subsided into little popping bubbles of ambition. Fine house, travel, limited damage, the money to limit damage. The silk dress was a muddle on the hanger. Mrs. Sellars tried to convey her perplexity without wrinkling her brow: “What does it do, Kenneth?” How many lifts did it take? Marcie wondered. The woman’s complexion was only faintly scratched. “It’s a wrap. You must try it on. This piece goes over the shoulder.” Marcie shook herself from staring. She asked Mr. Sellars, who sat in an armchair, if he would like some coffee. He gently patted his chest and declined. “Doctor’s orders,” he said. They’re all quacks, she wanted to say. With an acid twinge in her gut, she remembered the phone call. “I’m afraid not,” Mrs. Sellars sighed. “I can’t go with scooped necks or bare shoulders anymore.” She tilted her chin up as if to take note of the chandelier above and to the right of them. “No more bare necks.” Marcie decided to busy herself and went to straighten out the dressing rooms. As she passed Mrs. Sellars, she gave the woman her warmest smile, a sympathetic smile, as if to say, I am sorry about your neck. Mrs. Sellars smiled back carefully. Rising collars, higher and higher, keeping your head above it, until you’re all wrapped in mummy gauze. Marcie slipped a blouse on its hanger and considered her future. She folded four outfits over her arm. The plastic hangers clapped their opaque clap. She checked on her legs in the three-way mirror. A run was beginning down the back of her knee. It was not just a day-to-day thing, she realized that. Years and years of saving your looks might be required. Sums of money, to guard your assets, your best features. The Sellars’ house had to be huge, polished, cool, with French doors and ornate moldings. Jewels in the box on the dresser. Did Charlotte Sellars have daughters to leave her rings to? Marcie drifted out into the corridor and met Winnie. “It’s the phone, again, for you, dear.” “Who?” “Just go pick it up. I’ll take these.” Winnie reached out for the clothes. Maybe it was a customer, someone she could help. She picked up the receiver and said, “This is Marcie.” Then she listened. “When?” she finally said.

“You’re an angel, Kenneth,” Mrs. Sellars was saying, “but there’s nothing here today that says
me. Grief distorted Marcie's face, tears streaked it, a black one splashed her hand. "I guess I'll have to get Mr. Sellars here to take me up to New York to go shopping." Greener wore a bland grin, and was rocking on his toes, his arms folded over his chest. Mr. Sellars was already standing and ready to go. As the couple stepped off the carpet that defined the boutique's boundaries, Mrs. Sellars waved good-bye with long, mottled fingers. Her eye just caught sight of Marcie, standing at the phone, shuddering from shockwaves of anguish. "My goodness, whatever happened to her?" she said to her husband, who must have been a little deaf in that ear. "Poor thing must have been jilted." This last, she had to repeat in an even louder voice. Marcie bit her lip. A low, ugly noise was welling inside her, ready to rise and make itself heard. It was taking so much effort to hold it back, to keep anyone from having to hear it. She choked back what felt like a black, smoky funnel coming up from her lungs. She was never going to have the restraint it took to walk decades upon decades like the lady Greener so admired, the pillar, held up by the golden thread of charm, walking ever so cautiously toward the escalator so as not to shed the tiniest pink granule of her make-up, or a speck of the dust she was made of. The wail burst through, a wild, wordless animal's cry. The image of Mrs. Sellars crumbled with magical rapidity. Marcie blubbered. Greener put his hand on her back. She was bent, with her face in her hands. "Mother gone?" he mouthed over his shoulder to Winnie, who nodded. "Thank God that's over," he whispered. "Get her coat. I'll take her on down. And put that Lagerfeld jacket she wants in the back. To save it. For, you know, after.

THE END
SHARON DOLIN

Japanese Beetles

It all comes down to killing and feasting
or coupling, doesn’t it.
Strolled down the great sloping
lawn to the fountain—stopped by a clustered iridescence
turning in the grass — kneeled — as it kept turning and growing
catching the sun in golds purples lustrous
metal-greens. Imbricate — like the scales of a pine cone continuously
recomposing itself — all turned
around a core of two it seemed
they must be coupling — and the others
all latched on in aid supportive bustling or could it be vicarious
pleasure — as did I with a grass blade barely able to coax
one away before he wandered back as to a brilliant
spinning magnet. So I rose and walked off
through the woods where white slips of moths darted
in the mud and mosquitoes made lunch of my exposed
back despite White Flower Balm from Hong Kong. This churning
hive has stayed with me even if soon they will fly
to eat the nearby roses and lay their larvae
in the leaves. This morning a wasp
with its iridescent blue belly
has died — one brown wing extended — on my floor and so instead of being
something else’s breakfast she is mine — at least to admire
her shining thorax and ovipositor-sting.
I scoop her up for a paper burial. I don’t know
what to do in this world but play
the notes of these letters off against whatever it is I’ve seen. Call it
a kind of
coupling of thing with thing: buzz of cicada or firefly
flash with scratch of black letters. In the woods a composer
makes his own mockingbird notes — mine are borrowed from wind.
Off The Map

The city that apparently never was, at the end of my tongue, this sentence, its name a figment of both our imaginations. My nostalgia a fiction. My longing, illusion. Do you think they have a name for this condition? They? Yes, the ones who name conditions. Like borders, really, no different than my deciding to believe in the city—and for you to have taken me so seriously.

It wasn't a con job. I'm not deceitful, and rarely wrong. In fact, I still remember the cafes and my walks by the river. The river that never was.

You're taking this news well. Did you ever care? Aren't you at all disappointed? For it was a beautiful city, as I've told you, a place you must visit. I promised you could stay with me—for months, even, if you liked, if you could find time off of work, out of life, money for the flight.

I can't believe the airlines knew before I did. How long do you think it'd have taken them to tell me on their own, if I'd not insisted? And all this time I'd been remembering this wonderful city, my home, been looking forward to returning, when, how can I go on, how can I really admit this—it is a city of different—in fact, more—holidays and

Ah, you're right, I really must stop talking about it as if it exists, though I've no idea now where I'll go this summer and, in fact, wonder where it was I lived all those years I've been recounting to you so well.
At the point of I Can’t Anymore
observe the terrain, all this
point on the map has no to offer:
not vantage but
a certain kind of finch
a certain kind of maple—
only names are certainly known.

A teenage robin beaks up mud
for its maple tree nest.
A pile of peony petals yellow.
A lightning bug alights on its leaf:
everything knows where to go.

Pale limestone, whose chemistry
causes its death in the same rains
that precipitate it,
help me. I don’t know
Where To Go.

But the ant,
colonist, confident,
carries its comrade home.
He has not any butter.
I have no children.
How many hats?
Enough money.
Many books.

a piece of bread
(by the rivers of Babylon)
a glass of water
(sat we down)

(and wept)
The Ballad of Barding Gaol

Up here where birds are, decisions are harder.
An habitation of dragons, a court for owls & an empty larder.

The past is dark as the air and my heart, lo, dark.
A box that smiles to show her teeth fold in like sharks’.

We make a ladder of our vices if we trample them under feet.
Ascend articulate history: now change your sheets with her, not me.

What kind of life does she have with a haircut like that?
I’m impressed by the efforts with knife & hat.

Dejected on the river barge, key lost, shoes far.
Days perfect for Bananafish tell where all Where are.

Here proper names erode; you snood, me scree, holy rood.
The dragon’s wings, his moody food

is me. Here’s where first I saw your face
and your hips did move with their animal grace

(Let long ago Bowie sing here on in) and here I’m alone
in a rain of green in a building of stone

where all I want is to be held,
(her song of darkness and disgrace)

however hard,
in place.
Bumpkin Shopper

I had my first and only child when I was thirty-six years old. At the time, I was the fourth woman partner at the prestigious law firm of Peacock, Bland and Bowers. When I told my secretary, she said, “You know those really tall trees?”

“Redwoods?” I asked.

She nodded. “I think of a Redwood getting chopped down when an older woman tells me that she’s going to be a mother.” She looked slyly at me. “Timber.” Her flat hand slapped her desk.

The clock read 11:00 a.m. On a normal day at the law office I would be on my fifth cup of coffee and my seventeenth phone call.

“The moms all wear these.” The saleswoman held a jogging suit against my body. I examined my image in the mirror. The suit was yellow with blue stripes.

“Comfort plus personality,” the saleswoman said. Her name tag read “Christine.”

I looked like an exotic tropical fish.

“Or more conservative.” Christine replaced the striped pants suit with a baby blue one.

“I’m not a shopper,” I said once again. “I don’t know anything about fashion. But, I don’t think I want a jogging suit. Maybe a cotton knit outfit.”

“Good idea,” she smiled. “Perfect for Gymboree. I’ll see what I can find.” She closed the door behind her.

I sat down on the bench. I could feel my nipples quivering with the expectation of a feeding. My watch read 11:00. I needed to be home in thirty minutes. I hoped the maid had remembered to change out the flash cards in Anna’s crib.

I had transformed Anna’s crib into an infant’s equivalent of a 3-D Imax. A mobile hung over her, with figures dangling from it. A dancer followed a scholar followed an aviator followed a cowboy. The sides were covered with pictures, and I installed a holder for flash cards.

Steve whistled when he saw it. “Where’s the strobe light?”

Lights might have been a good idea. We were parents in an era of brain research. The literature made it clear that my job was to be a cheerleader, rooting my child on to the next stage.

I caught a glimpse of myself in the floor-to-floor mirror. With my curly hair, straight-on gaze and svelte build, men used to say on meeting me, “You sure are attractive to be a partner at a big law firm.” Now my tummy sagged like a weathered hammock. The skin under my arms felt loose. A trellis of new wrinkles bridged my forehead. Yet this same misshapen body had given birth to a miracle. When she crowned, the doctor said, “You got yourself a redhead.” Blue eyes
and red hair. I counted the fingers on her toes and hands. Each one was a separate and complete blessing.

“You can't do this. We need you.” My boss was a lifer: thirty years at Peacock, Bland and Bowers.

When I told my mother about my decisions, she had said, “You didn't go to law school to learn to be a milk cow.” My mother hadn't read the newspaper story about the effect of nursing on I.Q.'s. Nursed children substantially outperformed their formula counterparts.

Steve, my husband, was the only one who supported my decision. He even wanted me to stay home with Anna permanently.

“We don't need the money. Our lives are insane already without a child. She's most important."

The saleslady knocked.

“Come in.”

“Before we left jogging suits, I wanted you to see just three more.” She held them up sequentially. A lime green one, a blue one with a zigzag of white lightening, a clay colored number, with aquamarine piping.

I dismissed them with my hand. “No thanks.” She backed out the door. Poor Christine. She wasn't too bright.

That afternoon, while I rocked Anna, I planned to read My Baby, My Life. I'd finish it unless Anna fussed. She had colic. At home these days, Anna wailed, dogs barked, yardmen called, appliances broke. My life was a string of interruptions, beginning and ending with nights of broken sleep. I put my head in my hands. The sweet-sour scent that lingered there reminded me of her. That morning, her bottom lip stuck out, she gummed her hand and mine, all the while gazing at me with her blue eyes. I had imagined the complicated circuitry of her brain. Was the Mozart working? I played music constantly in Anna's room.

Christine walked in with an armful of clothes. “One of these has to work.”

“I apologize for not knowing what I want. Until this week, I haven't been in a store for years.” To save time, I ordered all my clothes through the mail.

I slipped on the blue jean skirt and colorful blue jean vest. I looked like a square dancer, not the trailblazer I had become at my law firm. I had insisted on a six-month maternity leave. No woman partner had taken such an extended leave.
I shook my head.
Christine sighed.
I was equally discouraged. I'd have to go shopping again tomorrow. I'd already been shopping three times this week. I hated shopping. Women who shopped didn't work hard at important things.

The day I walked out of Anna's nursery to return to my law firm was one of the worst days of my life. She had a cold and a fever. Her little fingers gripped my heart instead of squeezing my thumb. I had trouble breathing. I walked into my office and closed the door. The quiet was like music. Although it was always hard for me to leave her to go to work, I never felt such excruciating pain again.

Three years later, she threw a block in front of the admissions director at the most exclusive school in town. I didn't think it was serious until she was rejected by the other nursery schools. "She's inventive, playful," my mother-in-law said. Inventive, playful people flipped burgers at McDonald's.

"Schools aren't made for some kids," my neighbor and a mother of five said, unaware of the pain her comment caused me.

Psychiatrists' offices were cold. They all had potted plants. Steve and I sat side by side and waited. We no longer held hands.

Anna danced out of his office into the waiting room. "I'm a ballerina," she cried.

The latest psychiatrist held open the door. "You may step into my office, Mr. and Mrs. Armbrust." He nodded at the Lego table. "Why don't you build something, Anna, while I talk to your parents?" He had lazy lips that barely moved when he talked. His voice was a conceited purr.

"I concur with Dr. James' and Dr. Sparling's and..." he lifted up the last paper, "Dr. Kilgore's report." He smiled, revealing a white wall of straight teeth. "You've been busy."
I sighed.

"But no reason to despair. With a lot of work, she ought to be able to go to college," he said.
"Questions?"

He was talking about my daughter. My perfect daughter. Life had committed a tort against us. I thought of damages, pain and suffering.

"Dr. Kilgore indicated that some of these learning differences might be developmental." I read these words from my notebook.
"In my judgement, no." He twirled his pencil. "Anna is who she is."

Steve touched my shoulder. He had warned me not to argue with this doctor. "Thank you very much, doctor." Steve stood up. "We'll be back in touch."

He took my arm and we walked out the door. I was glad I hadn't quit work. If I had, Anna would've been my main project, and I'd feel responsible.

Diagnosis in hand, we started down the difficult path of trying to teach our bright child to read and write. The complicated circuitry of her brain was intact. After all, when she was an infant and toddler, I had pointed out to her every last cow, railroad car, and tollbridge. But Anna couldn't produce written work. Her mind was like an efficient factory under blockade. Looking back at her early school years now, all I can say is that I survived through practiced detachment. She swayed and lurched along the balance beam of school until miraculously her foot landed on the bar. I paid an army of tutors and baby-sitters to watch. I couldn't. For a reason only God knows, my daughter wasn't made in my professional image.

During those years, I was superwoman. I worked sixty hours a week at the law firm, put Anna to bed and found time for Steve. Every few weeks, Steve and I had a "date" and went to dinner or a movie. (Quality time was for husbands, too). Over our cappuccinos, we discussed whether we wanted to adopt a child. I was aghast at the idea. "With all the problems? More children?"

"Life is problem solving, Olivia."

At Steve's insistence, we went into counseling. My psychologist and I spent years talking about my need to nurture and be nurtured and the suppressed Martha Stewart in me. I came to understand that my fragile self-esteem had demanded that I become a bumpkin shopper and homemaker. But I didn't have another chance at home. Before we exceeded out mental health insurance limit, Steve filed for divorce.

We had become too old for more children. I didn't want them anyway.

After the divorce was final, I let Steve keep the house. Anna and I moved our clothes to the lovely townhouse I had bought because it was close to Anna's new middle school. This school was her last chance. During the move, we discovered a box of baby stuff including the outfits that I had worn during my maternity leave. One of them was a blue potato sack. Its front panel hid slits designed to facilitate nursing.

"You nursed me?" Anna asked, holding up the slit dress as though it were an earthworm.

"Yes," I nodded. "Why?"

"It surprises me. That's all." Anna blew a gum bubble in my face. I had asked her one thousand times not to chew gum around me. I turned away from her dirty T-shirt and insolent face. Thank
goodness she was spending the weekend with her father; I needed time to decompress. For the last several weeks, I had been engaged in a bitter fight for my old boss's position on the management committee. Tonight, I'd uncork the champagne and celebrate my election with a few good friends.

"I can't wait until I have a baby," Anna said and slipped the nursing dress over her head. She smiled expectantly at me.

I managed to smile back at her. Mothering wasn’t like shopping and homemaking. I wasn’t a bad mother. I just needed an accomplished child. Our relationship could have been different. The room was a jumble of paper tumbleweeds. Time to start the next trash box. The future’s mobile lay in a disheveled heap at the bottom of a cardboard box. I stuffed the old newspapers and other debris on top of it.

The End.
Art History

Lorca was passionate over Dali by 1926. Lorca hated women's breasts. But Dali painted them in pairs. Flying. Carnelia’s eyes widen reading the art history article. Dali never succumbed to Lorca. Like the author really knows. If Dali ever caressed the poet’s green scrotum. It’s too hot to keep reading. Carnelia goes downstairs to make lemonade. She bows her head over the lemon’s and powdered sugar. She’s making it for the Tai Kwando Master’s son. Who’ll soon be arriving like a whirlwind. Taking each room apart. Then skipping to the next. He likes to say words over and over. Lemons, lemons, lemons. His hair is raven black like Dali’s. Carnelia can picture him at 22 with Dali’s mustache. And Lorca chasing him behind the grape arbor. She will finish the reading when it’s cooler. Meanwhile she grips each lemon and squeezes until her palm burns. She feels a green tongue licking her calf. Her dog Chow Mein clambers for water.
Charmed Circle

Chancy dragonflies ruled the air
outside her locked window,
eyeing the room with compound facets
far as Anyang from

the four women who looked like friends
gathered around their table.
As though this floor were elsewhere, not
The closest to heaven

da nurse had called it, reserved for dementia
patients. My Mother smiled
and listened. She nodded the way she’d taken
once to my own boy’s
talk about getaway sky. The women’s
words were a kind of code —
breakout plans maybe, soon as
the window was unlocked —

the nurse brought me a chair. Join them
she said. The circle was much too
charmed. All of the women’s lips
were close to a whisper

now as I kept my distance, their eyes
widened over the table
and vision rose like a wingspan borne
on thermals in China.
“Where are you right now?” he asked.
“In bed. I just read this poem by Rilke…”
“What are you wearing?”
“A tank top and boxer shorts. But listen to this,” she read:
‘Wonders happen if we can succeed
in passing through the harshest danger;
It’s wonderful, don’t you think?” she asked.
“Do you know what Rilke considered the greatest wonder?” He paused. “The female body. I wish you were here right now,” he said.
“That’s not true.” She thought he might be drunk. He’d never joked about Rilke.
“Sure it is.”
“OK. I could get there by midnight.”
“Umm. Possibly.”
“See what I mean?” she asked.
“No, but does it matter?” he asked.
They talked about getting together for the weekend. They agreed that she would drive to Maine since his parents were away. He’d been living with them temporarily for a year. But he had a new job as a caseworker, and his thesis was almost finished.

She arrived a little after one, and he wasn’t there. The house was locked. She sat on the brick patio at the back in a wooden chair. The last time she’d come, he’d sat across in the matching chair and explained the dynamic of a therapist-patient dialogue.
When he arrived he said hi, and opened his arms. They were darker. She waited for him to explain where he’d been. He asked her if she wanted a beer.
“So, you weren’t here when I got here,” she finally said, as she followed him into the kitchen.
“That’s right.” He went to the refrigerator and got out two beers. He opened them and asked her if she wanted a glass.
“No. Thanks. So, where were you?”
“I had to help out this guy I know. His car is in the garage, and he had no way to get to his job at Mickey Finn’s. Then he wanted to buy me a beer when we got there.”
“But I told you I’d be here about one.”
“He’s got liver cancer, but he doesn’t want to stop working. He’s in remission right now.” He looked at her face. “You’re angry.”
“Yes. No. How come I’ve never heard of him before?” She sat down in the rocker next to the
wood stove.

"Because I haven't mentioned him before." He leaned against the sink and took a sip of his beer.

"I thought we might drive over to Casco Bay. There's a quiet beach where we could hang out."

"Could I swim? I feel like swimming." She rocked back and forth a couple of times, staring at the bird clock on the wall.

She swam. He lay on his side on a blanket reading The Odyssey and smoking. He saw her become smaller as she swam straight out towards the nearest island. Coming back to shore, she had to swim around a bed of kelp. The tide had lifted it off the beach.

She stood near him, dripping. He looked up. "What?"

"Nothing." She was grinning and breathing hard. Her wet hair was slicked back off her face and beads of water formed jewels on her eyelashes.

"You're a serious swimmer, aren't you," he said, as he watched her dry her hard with a towel. Her raised arms lifted her small breasts.

"I was a porpoise in my former life." Her voice was still a little breathy from her exertion. She inhaled deeply a couple of times.

"Not a mermaid? Or perhaps a Siren or Calypso?" He blew smoke rings in the direction of the bay, and watched the wind catch them.

"Not a Siren, I can't sing." She had bent over to dry the underside of her hair, so her words headed towards the water.

He took another drag on his cigarette, then reached beyond the blanket to stub it out. He got up, and as he passed her, he pulled slightly on a wet strand of hair. "You were the little mermaid who saved the sailor from drowning."

She straightened and watched him walk to the water's edge and stare at the chain of islands in the bay. He raised his head slightly as if he were sniffing something on the breeze. She walked towards him, taking one more deep breath.

"I've found a house to rent on an island."

"When?" she exhaled. "Just recently?" She waited for him to turn, but he didn't.

"A week ago."

"I thought I asked you about your search last week." She walked up beside him.

"It must have been after." He pointed to the island furthest to the left. "It's up the coast near Bath."

"Tell me about it."

"It's small. The last house before the end of the island, near a jetty. The people who own it come
for about three weeks in the summer. They left last week.”

“That’s great. When can you move in?” She wrapped the towel around her suit. The breeze was coming off the water.

“I’ve already moved some of my stuff. It’s just what the doctor ordered: wind and sea.” He lit up another cigarette, then turned and looked at her. “Pretty great, huh?”

“Maybe I could help you move the rest of your stuff in tomorrow. What do you think?”

“I think your lips are turning blue, and it’s about time we headed back. Do you like scrod?” he asked.

“That’s not what I meant.” She bit her bottom lip.

“I know,” he said. “I’ll let you know later.”

She stood by the stereo in the dining room looking through his CD collection as he started the dinner. She lifted a recording of Ella Fitzgerald and Louis Armstrong out of the box and put it in the disc player. The sound of his fork beating an egg was suddenly covered by Louis’s scratchy voice. She walked back into the kitchen.

“I think I share more of myself with you than you do with me,” she said, as she watched the egg mixture follow his fork.

“I let you read my thesis.” He put down the fork and looked at her. After a moment he said, “Maybe you’re projecting a concern about yourself.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” she asked. She sat down at the kitchen table.

He slid the first piece of scrod into the bowl, then put it on the plate of bread crumbs. “You know, projection.” He picked up his beer and turned around. “It works with the head just the way it does with one of those machines.” He pointed the bottle at her. “The picture is projected on the wall, but it comes from inside the machine.”

She sat quietly for a moment, watching him ease the fish over to bread the other side. She’d read his thesis, “The Psychology of Myth,” but hadn’t understood many parts of it. She had told him how beautiful his writing was. He’d seemed genuinely surprised, and had asked her how the Rilke quotes fit in. She’d said they were the best part, and the next week had bought a book of his poems.

“I saw that your books and papers aren’t on the dining room table anymore,” she said. “Is it finished?”

“No. I’m still adding some quotes and making some changes. I haven’t worked out the conclusion.”

She got up and offered to help with the salad. He was getting lettuce and vegetables out of the refrigerator. He handed her a carrot, then asked if she wanted another beer.
“I haven’t finished the first one.” She looked around for her bottle and saw it sitting on the stereo. As she retrieved it, Louis and Ella were singing, “Let’s Call the Whole Thing Off.”

“OK. Will you tell me more about this job?” she asked as she cut very thin slices off the carrot.

“How many clients do you have now?”

“OK. I have fifteen.” He tore lettuce into a bowl.

“More children?”

“I told you it’s a family agency. All my clients are children.”

“But you talked about that father you went to see.” She picked up some of the carrot slices and threw them in a bowl on top of his lettuce.

“Yes, I met with him, because of his son.”

“So he’s not your client?”

“I meet with whoever needs my services. That’s my job.”

“But that’s the point, you haven’t ever really told me any details about your job. What exactly do you do for them?” She waved the knife.

“Watch that thing,” he said, and picked up the cucumber. “I took one woman to the police department so she could ask them to put a restraining order on her ex-husband.”

She looked at him. “Did you convince her to do that?”

“I’m not a therapist yet, I’m only a caseworker.” He took the knife. “She came to that decision on her own.” He began to slice the cucumber. Louis started singing, “What a Wonderful Life.”

“But what’s it like for you?” she asked, as she watched him lift and drop the knife, keeping the tip on the cutting board.

“They turn me into whoever they need me to be, whatever role they need fulfilled,” he said.

“Father, husband, brother. Not literally, of course. That’s the way it works for them. That’s the way it works for everyone.”

She walked back over to the kitchen table and sat down. “Who do you think I need you to be?” She took a big swallow of her beer.

“I don’t go into your head, and I don’t let anyone go into mine.” He had said it before. She couldn’t respond, couldn’t step over his line. It was a line drawn in the sand with a bare foot.

After dinner they sat out on the bricks in the two wooden chairs that faced each other. Stars crowded the piece of sky overhead. They couldn’t see the ocean, but they could smell it. There was an occasional clanging of a bell. She sat with her feet tucked up under her and looked straight up for a few minutes, listening to the bell. He smoked a cigarette and watched her.

“So, are you going to take me to see the house tomorrow?” She lowered her gaze.

“Why are you wondering about tomorrow? You could wonder about those stars, or what it
would be like to go upstairs and lie on my bed."

"I just want to see where you're going to be living."

"When I'm ready."

When she entered his room, she started to turn on the lamp by the bed. "Don't," he said. He was lying on his back with his hands clasped on his chest. "It's better in the dark." She lay up against him. She smelled salt and smoke.

In the middle of the night she woke up, and he wasn't there. She found him sitting outside. She sat in the other chair and looked at him, but didn't say anything.

He finally looked across at her. "I need you to go home in the morning."

"Why do you always make me feel as if I want too much?" she asked.

"You've said that before. I don't make you feel anything. There are things you feel and things I feel. I need to deal with my feelings right now," he said.

"But you don't want to discuss them," she said.

"You're angry."

"Yes. No. Frustrated."

In the morning he made omelets with a fresh tomato salsa, while she sipped his coffee. After they ate, she asked him if he was going to finish moving into the house.

"I'll take a few more things over. I told my parents I'd stay here until they returned. There are some matters we need to clear up."

She started to ask what matters, but then asked, "What is the name of the island?"

"Bleeker Island."

"Is there a ferry?"

"There's a bridge." He was staring into his empty coffee cup. "Do you want me to make more coffee?"

"No thanks, I better get started." She got up and put her dishes in the sink, then started running water.

He came up behind her. "Leave those. I'll do them later."

As they stood in the driveway by her car, she leaned against the door for a moment with her arms hanging at her sides. Then he said, "Isn't there a hug here somewhere?" She held him a little longer than he held her.

He shut the door for her and said, "I'm sure we'll talk soon." She tilted her head a little and said, "I'm sure we will." He watched her back out.
She arrived at the sign that pointed right for Portland, straight for Brunswick and Bath. She slowed down to make the turn, but then changed her mind. She stopped at a gas station in Brunswick and asked about Bleeker Island. The teenager pumping the gas gave her directions. The road ended at the jetty. She got out of the car and looked around. She didn’t see a house. She walked out onto the jetty and looked back. On her right was a cluster of pines partially hiding it. She cut through the trees and ended up at the back of the house. Through the window nearest her, she could see a night stand and a bed. A half-open sleeping bag lay on the bare mattress. At the front of the house she peered through a plate glass window. In the middle of the room she saw a futon couch and a chair facing a wood stove, and on the back wall, a bookcase sparsely filled with paperbacks. Then she noticed, just beyond the glass, a table holding his books and papers.

As she stepped away, she saw that the narrow window to her right was slightly open. She clasped the exposed edge of the frame with both hands and pulled. There was a cracking sound as the window opened enough for her to reach in and turn the crank. She had to keep her body very straight to get through.

She found his thesis under a book. On the cover, he’d drawn a small mermaid in one corner. She carried the manuscript with her into the kitchen and opened the refrigerator. There were three beers, a bottle of juice, a carton of eggs and a few jars and bottles of various sizes in the door. She took out the juice and poured some in a glass, then went back into the living room to sit on the futon couch.

She sipped and read slowly. On the tenth page, she came to what she was sure was a new quote. It followed a paragraph that he’d written about Freud accusing Jung of being seduced by the mystical.

“But we, when moved by deep feeling, evaporate; we

breath ourselves out and away; from moment to moment

our emotion grows fainter, like a perfume. Though someone may tell us;

‘Yes, you’ve entered my bloodstream, the room, the whole springtime

is filled with you...’

She read it twice more, then closed the manuscript and put it and the glass back on the table by the window. She heard the clanging of a bell and looked out into the bay. A buoy was rocking in the swells. She walked through the living room into the small bedroom. It smelled of damp, foggy mornings. The pines outside darkened the room. She crawled into the sleeping bag.

“I could have you arrested.”

She opened her eyes and saw him standing there holding his shirts on their hangers. He turned
and hung them in the closet.

She sat up. "I just wanted..." She looked at his back and stopped.
The Darkness of Your Back Pocket

One night Sasha dreamt she unzipped his jeans. The next night she made love to him while she slept next to her husband, and the third she dreamt she stood on the stage of the Academy Awards and read from one of her own stories.

In his bedroom, a wedding photo hung on the wall across from his - their not ours, Sasha reminded herself repeatedly — four-poster bed. More family photos snaked down the stairwell to the first floor. In one, he looked like a movie star, sitting on the beach with black Oakley sunglasses, two daughters leaning against his bare chest, sand molding the curve of one calf. His wife, long-haired when she’d walked down that church aisle twenty-five year ago, would have taken the photographs.

Sasha never made love in Carl’s and his wife’s bed. Would never have wanted to, though perhaps imagining it was a good reality check for her. In fact, she hadn’t made love with Carl very often at all. They did it the most that first year of their affair (twenty-two years ago now!) — before Carl’s and his wife’s children were born, before Sasha married someone else. After that, years would go by, a fast-moving screen punctuated by incidents (beyond understanding? shameful? transcendent or lustful?) whenever they’d meet - for lunch, dinner, a few hours in a hotel.

Now, in what seemed to Sasha a triumphant new chapter of their story, she and Carl were actually going to spend a weekend together. It would be the first time they’d sleep in the same bed, the first time they’d spend an entire night together, dream images wavering and mingling in the sweet, dark air above them. For three days, Carl and Sasha’s spouses and children were occupied elsewhere. And in Sasha’s mind at least, it was time for the shimmering reality of her dream to push itself forward into view.

Of course, no one ever understood why she loved Carl, or wanted Carl, for such a long, unhappy time. But this was why:

The first month Sasha knew Carl, when she was 26 years old, she had a dream. It opened on a scene of gently rolling hills - green and comforting as the farmlands of the West Midlands. There was a very solid-looking gray castle with several turrets. As Sasha - or Sash’a dream-image of Sasha - stood in this castle’s gateway, a costumed courtier handed her an ice cream sandwich. “Eat this,” he said, lifting the vanilla-filled layers of dense, perforated chocolate cake to her lips. “And you’ll meet the true love of your life.”

It was Carl - or Sash’a dream image of Carl - who came up behind her later in the dream as she sat at a long table in that green field.

No one else had ever, during the whole of her life, been pointed out to her as her true love, not even the man Sasha eventually married. So she took the courtier’s words very seriously.

But, Sasha chided herself as she walked off the plane onto the airless jetway at Logan Airport, just
last week Monica had asserted that Bill was her soulmate. Sasha knew how wrong-headed that would appear to the vast majority of Americans. She knew how wrong-headed that sort of thing could sometimes appear to her. But by and large, she was a believer and trusted that matters of the heart and soul were simply too rich and fluctuating to ever peg down once and for all. Perhaps that was why one of her beloved writers had taken such pleasure in catching and pinning those butterflies.

Carl wasn’t at the gate, but she’d known not to expect him. He’d be circling the terminal in his Pathfinder. Her husband, of course, would have been at the gate. Probably bearing flowers. Carl never had been one to put himself forward in any way. Still, after she had retrieved her overnight bag, she stepped into the ladies room to check her hair and lipstick then stepped outside with a huge smile rising from the deepest part of her insides. The Boston evening was damp and cold, and she pulled her raincoat tight around her as she stood on the curb scanning the cars. It took just a few minutes for the Pathfinder to pull up in front of her.

Carl stepped out of the driver’s side, grinning. What a beautiful face, Sasha thought for the umpteenth time. She could still — would always! — see the fine lines of the 27-year-old version she’d first fallen in love with, now shifting beneath the fleshier, middle-aged one.

Carl put her bag in the back trunk and opened the passenger side door for her, something Sasha’s husband wouldn’t do. Then, after he climbed in and Sasha had placed her palm on the comforting texture of his pants leg, he surprised Sasha by saying he wanted to stop by his house in Lexington before they headed out to the inn in the Berkshires. He hadn’t been able to pack for their trip that morning, he explained, and needed to pick up a few things.

He handed her a small piece of white paper as he pulled away from the curb: “Blue shirt, 2 boxers, 2 pr. socks, Odie, dog food, toothpaste, brush, Nev. Gold Co. brief.” “Video camera” had been written down in short, neat printed letters and crossed off.

Carl lived in a hundred-year-old house that had in its dining room a French wallpaper mural of hunters pursuing a hart. Zubere, he called it as he led her through thirteen rooms on a nervous tour.

In the kitchen, the Cairn terrier Odie, was wagging its tail. Carl and Sasha finally stopped for a moment in front of tall 12-paned windows that looked right into the next-door neighbor’s.

“I’d really like to kiss you,” Carl said after taking Sasha’s raincoat and draping it over a deacon’s bench. “But not here.”

Sasha wouldn’t have wanted to kiss him there anyway. She wanted to look at him some more. His hair had quite a bit more gray than the last time she’d seen him. Two years ago now. They’d had some terribel quarrel, as they always did after coming too close to each other. Taking it outside
the box, he called it. It made him uncomfortable, he said, when it started to seem like more than
an affair. Now 48, his shoulders were lower, the lines of not just his face but his entire body less
clearly-defined.

She liked standing near him there in the kitchen but felt somewhat furtive. What was she doing
there, for Heaven's sake? But she stood her ground, knowing on some level that she had to be
there to play this out, even if it hurt.

Carl was reaching for something in a high cabinet. Odie yapped at his feet. Sasha wondered what
it would have been like — standing with Carl in a kitchen just like this one, during the past 22
years. Making pancakes on a griddle. Pulling the Arts section of the paper out from under his
concentrated perusal of the front page. Seeing a too-white strip of skin above sagging pajama
bottoms. Sticking her finger under the stretched elastic whenever she wanted.

She turned away from him to face the refrigerator. It was covered with invitations and announce-
ments and reminders, just like hers was back home in Virginia. Her breaths were quick and
shallow, like a spy's.

"I'll get champagne," Carl said. He touched her waist as he walked past into a butler's pantry.
And he kept talking to her, even from in there.

"A man came by a few weeks ago with a video camera. He said he grew up in this house. His father
had been a hotel supplier and kept bootleg liquor right in this pantry. His mother was a freind of
Flo Ziegfield's mistress. As a kid he used to peer down through the stair railings at the grown-ups
having champagne parties below: Ziegfield, Gershwin, Porter."

Sasha was only half-listening: she'd started reading the refrigerator papers. There was a book list
for Carl's wife's reading group (the March selection was Alice Munro's *The Love of a Good Woman*,
which Sasha had just finished reading herself), notice of an upcoming Suzuki piano recital, a blue
calendar for Middle School lunches.

"The man told me that when he was growing up here, he played football with Jack Kennedy and
the boy who lived next door in the house you and Tom nearly bought."

Once, many years earlier, before Sasha had moved away from Massachusetts, she and her husband
had gone house-hunting in Lexington. She'd known Carl and his family had moved there from
Cambridge but wasn't sure exactly where. So she was surprised when, on the refrigerator in one
house they looked at, she saw Carl's and his wife's names on a pencilled telephone list. She
mentioned briefly, guiltily, to the realtor that she knew them both, a little, from when she'd
worked as a secretary at the *Harvard Law Review*.

Carl handed her a fluted glass and pointed out the now-dark windows.

"You're kidding."
“That’s the one. The realtor was a friend of Jane’s. I think Jane was relieved when you guys didn’t buy it. Though I think it would have been nice having you as a neighbor all these years.” He touched his glass to hers with a clear ting.

Sasha couldn’t have imagined it herself. That might show how much more she loved him than he loved her. Or not.

She remembered the triumphant look on Carl’s wife’s face 22 years ago when she’d heard Sasha was leaving Cambridge. Jane must have suspected something was going on, and now she was one month pregnant with a first child.

“Who lives there now?” Sasha asked and when she realized how much her voice and hands were shaking she brought the champagne quickly to her lips so Carl wouldn’t notice.

“Brin Luther. A widower who’s not well. He had a stroke a few months ago. Wife died last year. Jane helped care for him because there’s no family close by.” He’d noticed Sasha’s hands now and took the glass from her and set it down on the butcher block table.

“Not nearly as nice as if you’d been here,” he said again and pushed her gently backwards into the hallway and kissed her.

Sasha’s stomach rolled. Butterflies, scores of them, with shimmering blue wings.

“I better pack,” Carl said.

Sasha wandered into the living room while he ran upstairs. Who was triumphant now? She wondered. But she wouldn’t set foot in Jane’s bedroom again.

An issue of People magazine lay on the low glass coffee table in the living room: Great Love Stories. There were Liz and Dick, Wallis and the Duke. Sasha didn’t open it but took note. Twenty-two years of an affair, even if it was spasmodic and painful, was nothing to sneeze at.

That first year, in a movie theater in Cambridge, Sasha and Carl had seen Same Time, Next Year with Ellen Burstyn and Alan Alda. That had seemed the best solution, even then, before Sasha married. At first, she couldn’t even consider the possibility of breaking up Carl’s marriage. She was just so vehemently attracted to him. And Ellen and Alan made their affair look so easy: disappearing from each other’s lives for twelve months at a time, then rendezvousing at a small inn once a year. Witnessing only the drastic changes the years wrought: Ellen turning from a belted, bepearled housewife into fringe-vested hippie, from ballooned mother-to-be to white haired grandma. And Alan undergoing his own transformation from newly self-satisfied grown-up to harried workaholic, from proud father to bereaved parent of a lost son.

Both of them losing the moorings that periodically held them. Shedding skins but not each other.

For that was what happened of course. Every stage, every persona put on as though it would fit
for a lifetime but then somehow becoming tight and uncomfortable, needing to be removed for another change of clothes.

She could hear Carl upstairs packing, opening drawers.

He called down once, “You OK?”

And she called up to answer, though not as though she lived there, “Yep.”

She stood up from the couch, restless. She wandered back to the hallway, stepped up one stair and then another, staring at the photographs on the wall. An unspecified beach. A birthday party, with candle flames caught flickering. A graduation. Carl’s hair longer in some of the older pictures, his body skinnier. She drew close to the photographs, willed herself not to blink. If she could bring them inside her, make them her life - eat them. Then all the years of loving him would not be wasted.

But she could not.

Windows. Those tall panes of glass in the kitchen had reminded her of something, and now she knew what. Another time, during the first year of their affair, Carl had been in her bed, which then was a mattress on the floor in a second-story room that was painted blue. They made love incredibly together; they always did. It was wonderful sex, pulling them out of themselves into a bigger world. It made other things-his wife, Sasha’s initial uncomfortable role as mistress and later as someone else’s wife - shrink away. At least for a while. Like a dream replaces the whir of the humidifier, the dog’s rhythmic pants, an occasional car grumbling by on the street.

But that afternoon 22 years ago, when Sasha and Carl lay sweaty and spent on the low mattress, a housepainter wearing a white cap and shirt had suddenly appeared at Sasha’s curtain-less window. She pulled the sheet over her breasts while he hopped out of bed and ran naked down the short, carpeted hall to the bathroom. He was furious and even broke Sasha’s grandmother’s Depression glass soap dish in his rush to shower and get out of there.

It was Sasha’s who’d kept it going, all this long time. Forgiving and forgetting, mostly hoping, trying to make sense of her dream.

There’d been other dreams, of course, dozens of them. Trying to reach Carl on the phone. Meeting him in his office and dropping her skirt. Carl in the back of Sasha’s car, driven by Sasha’s husband. Carl leaving her in Piccadilly, travelling to Paraguay and India, all over the world.

Once, in one terrible dream, she’d seen him climb out of a sleeping bag and come for her but be sentenced to die at the stake. She watched as he was burnt, naked, then had to sit through the whole thing a second time, with her father at her side, as though in a theatre.

Another time in a dream, there was a party at Sasha’s big house. Sasha’s husband was there, talking to Carl’s son. Everyone was friendly. There was so much food, so much wealth.
Marry me, Sasha said to Carl as they walked across the green yard to the big lighted house. Carl pointed to his wife and children and Sasha’s husband and children and all the abundance around them and said, *Leave this?*  
*Marry me,* Sasha repeated.  
And Carl said, *Because of the power between us?*  
She’d torn up all the photographs she had of him but one. For her to look at when she was an old lady, looking back at her life.  
She put her finger to the sharp corner of one silver frame trembling against the wall.  
“I’m coming,” Carl shouted down. And when she looked up, she saw him at the top of the stairs, turning off the light in his bedroom.  
“Let’s go;” he said and came toward her carrying a small blue suitcase, Odie running in front of him.  
Sasha stepped down off the stairs before Carl did and followed the happy dog into the kitchen. So she saw the flashing lights first, through the windows. There was no siren, only a red and blue-lettered ambulance pulling into the neighbor’s driveway. It drove right in front of Sasha, startling her with the closeness of its spinning red warning lights.  
“Brin Luther,” Carl said, coming up behind her. She could feel his warm breaths on the back of her neck like a child’s, waiting to see what she would do.  
Something had happened in the world outside.  
In the back windows of the ambulance, two six-pronged blue symbols stared back at her like eyes, holding the two intertwined snakes of the caduceus.  
A paramedic jumped out each side door of the ambulance onto aluminum running boards; a third opened the black double doors, giving Sasha, and she assumed Carl behind her, a glimpse into the gray-padded interior with its plexiglass cabinets and equipment. There were red, clear and blue lights twinkling in sequence above the rear door, and the right turn arrow bumper still flashed amber.  
The driver strode to the back door of the house. Sasha watched him push forward with his shoulder, then the lights inside the house went on and Sasha could see into the kitchen: a circular pine table, four tall-backed chairs. A counter covered with pans, newspapers, what looked like mail. But no Brin Luther.  
“What happened?” She hadn’t meant to sound harsh. But Carl looked chastened when she turned to face him.  
“We’ve got to go help,” she said.  
But Carl held her elbows. “Wait a second.”
“Wait a second what?”

“The paramedics are there,” he said. “There’s absolutely nothing you can do.”

He was right, of course. Sasha had no medical training; she wasn’t at all quick-witted in an emergency. Once she’d jumped off the back of a boat just as her husband turned on its motor, trying to stop them from getting sucked into the ocean by the strong current of an opened barrier beach. The sand kept shifting beneath her feet. She’d tried with all her strength to stop the boat with her husband and children on board but it took someone else, someone stronger coming down from the shore to finally grab them. She could just as easily been chopped up as saved anyone.

Odie ran out the door, and Sasha knew she had to follow him.

So she pulled away from Carl, grabbed her coat and threw it over her as she stepped out onto the covered back porch. The rain had stopped, but the grass shone slick in the light of the moon.

Two of the paramedics were lifting a stretcher trolley from the ambulance.

Sasha stepped down into the yard. There was a sunken bluestone patio, wrought iron furniture, huge pots of flowers colorless in the dark night.

There were lilac bushes between the two houses and oak saplings. Sasha walked onto the wood chips and stood behind the biggest bush, on tiptoe in order to get a better view. But the stretcher had already disappeared inside the house.

*They'll think I'm Jane,* she thought at first, but then *No, not hiding back here* and so she pushed right past the lilac bush, catching some of its pearl-blue petals on her sleeve, and stepped onto Brin Luther’s asphalt driveway. As if she had a neighbor’s right.

Carl did not follow.

When the paramedics brought the stretcher out, the old man was sweaty and gray, even on his scalp.

They had already administered oxygen.

Brin Luther’s eyes were open, though they looked like glass marbles. They fixed on Sasha.

*“I’m a…”* Sasha said, wanting to answer the unspoken question.

But one of the paramedics frowned and told her to move out of the way.

She stepped back onto Carl’s property to watch them load the trolley. The lilacs fluttered strong and sweet around her.

In the window of Carl’s house, she could see him sitting at his kitchen table, head in his hands. Above her, none of the stars in the sky stayed still. Red lights circled as the ambulance backed out of the driveway, the staff of Hermes - God of wisdom, God of fraud — leading the way.

*She hadn't done enough,* Sasha though to herself. *Or else she had done far too much.* As though she had
tried to pin a butterfly to a white board, not realizing until the single last moment how its wings were still fluttering, and how its eyes still shone.

Sasha had known for a long time that the story of her dream wasn't about her husband, that he deserved a separate tale. Though he had been buffeted by Carl's windswept entrance to her life as surely as the beating wings of a butterfly can cause a hurricane halfway round the globe.

This had been a story of dreams, pure and simple. Of their abiding hold on us; their constant inconstancy; their fickle, iridescent truth. She'd been given a chance, once, to pin truth down, but that was 22 years ago. No clearer direction could have been given.

*Eat this,* the messenger had said. *And you will meet the true love of your life.*

She stood in Carl's yard, just beyond the reach of light from his kitchen. She knew everything. It was dark outside, and wonderfully light in there, and the line of Carl's shoulder's was sad and sweet. The moon shone, the lilacs smelled, and all above her, Sasha could feel - not hear, not see, but feel — the flutter of something flying.
SUSAN BREARY

Mountain Bluebird
SUSAN BREARY

Velvet
Peter Günter

Untitled
Slide 1
Slide 3
Celia Bland is the author of biographies for young adults, a historical novel for children, and books about the natural world. Her poetry has been published in magazines and anthologies, most recently, Too Darn Hot (Persea Books). She teaches poetry and literature at Parsons School of Design in New York City.


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William Doreski's poetry has appeared most recently in Ekphrasis, Vermont Literary Review, Outerbridge, and Atlanta Review, and his essays have recently been published in The Wallace Stevens Journal, Pembroke Magazine, and The Harvard Review. His most recent books are Suburban Light (poetry, Cedar Hill, 1999) and Robert Lowell's Shifting Colors (criticism, Ohio University Press, 1999). He teaches creative writing and literature at Keene State College.
James Doyle is retired and loves it. He spends his time reading and writing. His book, The Silk At Her Throat was published in 1999 by Cedar Hill Publications. His most recent anthology is Literature: An Introduction to Critical Reading (Prentice Hall: 1996). He has poems coming out in The Ohio Review, The Literary Review, Chelsea, and Natural Bridge.

Gary Duehr’s previous books of poetry are Winter Light from Four Way Books and Where Everyone Is Going To from St. Andrews College Press. A third book, Down Where the Ladders Start, is forthcoming from Salmon Poetry in Ireland in 2001. He lives in Boston where he is a photographer, visual arts reviewer for newspapers and magazines, and co-director of the Invisible Cities Group performance company.

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Ellen Geist has been published previously in The American Voice, River Styx, The Mississippi Valley Review, Brick, and other literary journals. She has been a resident fellow several times at Yaddo and The Virginia Center for the Creative Arts. She attended NYU’s graduate English program in Creative Writing, where she received a merit scholarship.

Don Hoyt was born in Georgia and raised in New Orleans. He received a B.A. in English and Speech Education and M.Ed. in English-Education from Northeastern Louisiana University. He has been a member of Grambling State University since 1995. He has been published in numerous journals and two chapbooks, A New Kerygma (Bootleg Press, NY, 1993) and Rejecting the New Millennium (CC Marimbo, Berkeley, CA, 1999).

Peter Johnson is founder and editor of The Prose Poem: An International Journal. He has published two books of prose poems: Pretty Happy! (White Pine, 1997) and Love Poems for the Millennium (Quale Press, 1998). He received a Creative Writing Fellowship in 1999 from the
Colleen Lee is a senior English major at Providence College. She plans to attend graduate school for English Literature. This is her first publication.

Jeffrey Levine won last year’s Missouri Review Larry Levis Award for a group of poems, as well as the Skyland Writers and Artists Association award. A graduate of the Warren Wilson MFA Program, at this writing his manuscript, Waters, Metal, is a finalist for the Poets Out Loud competition. One of his poems was just nominated by Hayden’s Ferry Review for a Pushcart Prize. Recent work is published or forthcoming in The Beloit Poetry Journal, Many Mountains Moving, Yankee Magazine, The Missouri Review, Quarterly West, Nimrod, 5 AM, Crab Orchard Review, Hayden’s Ferry Review, Barrow Street, Luna, and others. Jeffrey Levine is editor of the Tupelo Press, a new independent press dedicated to poetry, literary fiction and creative non-fiction.

Edward McCrorie has been a member of the English department at Providence College since 1964. His second book of poems, Needle Man, was published last February by Chestnut Hill Press.


Mark Neely was born in Champaign, Illinois. He received the Academy of American Poet’s Prize as an undergraduate at the University of Illinois, and a Graduate Council Fellowship from the University of Alabama where he is currently pursuing an MFA in creative writing. He has work upcoming in Rhino.

Thomas Scalzo is a senior English major at Providence College. This is his first publication.

Bruce Smith is the author of four books of poetry: Mercy Seat (University of Chicago); Silver and Information, National Poetry Series (University of Georgia); and The Common Wages, (Sheep Meadow). A new book from Chicago, The Other Lover, is forthcoming. He has taught at Boston,
Tufts, and Harvard Universities, and at Lewis & Clark and Providence College. He currently teaches in the graduate writing program at the University of Alabama. His recent work has appeared in Poetry, Slate, Grand Street, and Boulevard.


Virgil Suarez was born in Havana, Cuba in 1962. He is the author of four published novels and a collection of short stories. With his wife Delia Poey, he has co-edited two best-selling anthologies. His poetry, translations, and essays continue to be published in numerous journals and reviews. A new collection of poetry entitled You Come Singing is out from Tia Church Press/Northwestern University. He teaches Creative Writing and Latino/a and Caribbean Literature at Florida State University.

Mark Terrill is an ex-merchant seaman stranded in Germany since 1984 with work published in Atlanta Review, Chelsea, Seattle Review, Split Shift, Curious Rooms, Fire (UK), First Word Bulletin (Spain), Stranger Than Madness (Germany), and many others. A chapbook of his poetry recently appeared in the prime poets series from Red Dancefloor Press. Kid With Gray Eyes, a collection of his poetry is forthcoming from Cedar Hill Publications, and a full-length collection of his translations of the poetry of the late German writer, Rolf Dieter Brinkmann, is forthcoming from Sulphur River Literary Review Press.

Ryan Van Cleave is a freelance photographer originally from Chicago and his work has appeared in recent issues of Oxford Magazine, Maryland Review, The Christian Science Monitor, and Poems & Plays; new work is forthcoming in Shenandoah, Quarterly West, Mid-American Review, and Southern Humanities Review. He is the editor of Sundog: The Southeast Review and also serves as coordinator for the annual “World’s Best Short Short Story” competition. His first book, American Diaspora, is forthcoming from the University of Iowa Press.

Liz Waldner’s book, A Point is that Which has No Part is a recipient of the University of Iowa’s 1999 Poetry Prize, and is due out this year.
Andrea White was born in Baton Rouge, Louisiana in 1953. She moved to Houston, Texas in 1961. She graduated from the University of Texas with a B.A. in 1975 and a J.D. in 1978. Before retiring with her second child, she was a partner at a major Houston law firm and practiced real estate law. Currently, Andrea combines family and civic responsibilities. She has three children and is President of the Board of a public school initiative, the Houston Annenberg Challenge.

**Artists**

Susan Breary is a painter who teaches at the Putney School in Putney, Vermont. She has shown her work widely throughout New England.

Devin Carter is in his second year at the University of Massachusetts at Dartmouth and is majoring in both Photography and graphic design.

Gianna Costa is a senior Psychology major, minoring in Studio Art.

Pete Guenther is a photographer who lives and works in Putney, Vermont. He has shown his work widely in New England.