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HARVARD REVIEW

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Editorial

A year or so ago I had a student in my summer school class who wrote an essay about the fish collection at the Museum of Comparative Zoology at Harvard. I thought I knew the museum fairly well, but I had never heard about the fish archive, which was described in a way that made it seem like a secret treasure trove of slimy, fascinating things. I happened to mention this essay to another teacher at Harvard, who told me that he, too, had had a student who had written an essay that made use of the same space. It seemed too fantastic a coincidence to ignore, and so I began this issue with the work of two talented young writers, Nandhini Sundaresan and Hannah Hindley, and with the idea of ichthyology.

The careful reader will find that the issue's fish theme runs deep, encompassing not just essays, but poetry and art. But there is also another leitmotif which emerged as spontaneously as the fish, and that is the subject of psychoanalysis—and not just any old analysis, but that of teenagers. Karen E. Bender and Eli Mandel's essays could not be more different in tone and style, or, indeed, perspective: the one, a long look back over an experience that has been thoroughly processed, the other, a short, sharp enquiry into something so recent that its meaning is only just beginning to emerge. And yet they have in common an encounter which, outside of certain regional and cultural subgroups, is not really very common at all.

It's always fun for us to present the work of very young writers (Mandel is a recent college graduate, Sundaresan is scheduled to graduate this year); but it's also fun to experiment with form. Over the years, we have occasionally published very long short stories; Katherine Vaz's wonderful "Lisbon Story" from HR 30 springs to mind,

as does Alan Heathcock's "The Staying Freight" from HR 31. But not since my days at *Meanjin* have I published what could fairly be called a novella. In this issue we have such a work, a story of nearly 23,000 words by Ann Pancake called "In Such Light." A tale of small town melancholy and dubious summer romance set in West Virginia in the 1980s, it follows the fate of a popcorn girl at the local movie theater.

A novella takes up a lot of space, but there are still a surprising number of things in these pages: poems about capitalism and the Celtics, an essay on tenors and soccer, a story about identity theft. We are both sad and happy to include work by the late Jonathan Imber, whose gifts are so startlingly evident even in the very last paintings he made, as well as images of some installations by the wonderfully innovative Otto Piene, who also passed away this year. One other recent death that struck home for me was that of the irrepressible poet and essayist Diann Blakely, who for years has addressed me jocularly as "Miss Wisconsin" (after a Christina Thompson who came by that title honestly in 2007). I will miss her lively correspondence and her wit.

Finally, on the subject of departures, we say farewell this month to our managing editor, Laura Healy. Laura has been a mainstay of *Harvard Review* for the past five years; it would be impossible to list her contributions or the number of changes that she wrought—on everything from the website (which could hardly be said to exist without her) to the database (which she rebuilt from scratch) to the submission system (which she reinvented) to the internship program (which was basically her idea). Indeed, her impact on the organization has been so thorough that one might well wonder what I do, never mind how we will manage without her. Laura is a treasure and everyone who has worked with her will miss her. Here, I simply want to thank her for all her hard work and creativity, and for being such good company all these years.

—Christina Thompson

HANNAH HINDLEY

Remembering That Life

ISHMAEL LIVED WITH ME for a week before he died in my room. It was January, and cold outside, and he seemed uneasy, restless. Frost had begun to form at the edges of the windows, and winter gusts battered the screen frames in forceful staccato; shut off from the wind outside, the room smelled of dust and salt. Blanketed in my top bunk, I read one last poem out loud that final night, and Ishmael looked at me numbly. His mouth opened, closed. “Sweet dreams,” I whispered, and twisted the switch until the light dimmed and clicked out.

In the morning, bangs stuck against my lips from sleeping too close to my pillow, I turned my head to see if he was awake yet. Without my glasses, I couldn’t see clearly, so I inched from under my comforter and used the top of my dresser as a step to lower myself from bed onto the floor in the cramped college double I had come to call home. My roommate was at his boyfriend’s place, so it was just me in the room this morning, and, as I looked more closely at Ishmael’s still form, the dead body of a goldfish.

I guess we’ve all seen dead fish.

*

Years ago, while scavenging for driftwood along California's coast, I stumbled across one that had washed up from the deep, eyes glazed, its thin teeth glistening like needles, and I realized I wasn't the only one swimming in those cold swells. I stared in horror for a few spellbound moments before running from it on fast little legs.

At an outdoor market in Seattle last spring, I watched men dressed in rubbery foul-weather gear toss silver salmon back and forth, catching the slippery bodies with nonchalant bravado. The fish were almost whole, save for long cuts down their stomachs out of which the inner parts of them had been torn. Five ninety-nine a pound.

When I got tired of reading Puritan poetry in college, I enrolled in a class that brought us, without an ounce of literary analysis, to an ichthyology collection at the far end of campus. Through a back door in Harvard's Museum of Comparative Zoology, down a white hallway and just past a room crowded with disarranged papers, we found a fish library.

In the stacks: neither the *Encyclopedia of Fishes* nor Kurlansky's *Cod*, but actual fish, bottled and lined like books down the shelves. *Acestrocephalus boehlkei* from a river in South America, *Abynnodontophis rosaliae* from deep waters off of Cuba, *Bathypterois dubius*, collected among the Azores in 1890.

One and a half million pairs of eyes failed to follow me as I passed down the aisles. Countless gills fluttered limply in unseen currents. Behind their labels, the fish floated in yellowy alcohol, wide-eyed, stiff. The fins on particularly old specimens had begun to shred. Some fish, too large for their jars, pressed against the sides at awkward angles, folded in half or made to curl along the contours of the glass. Others, smaller than my fingernails, drifted in eerie schools together in the same jar, like little pickled hors d'oeuvres. A litter of unborn sharks hovered quietly in a single vessel, their round yolk sacs still connected by a thin cord to their bellies, their snouts softly rounded. They had been an unexpected prize when their mother was caught and opened.

Some fish had fangs, others had spiny scales like the skins of pine-apples. Those taken from deeper places had white pearly eyes, iridescent in the shadows. Some were brown and wrinkled, like apples forgotten in the basement, and in bloated places along some of their bodies, organs had split through the skin and spilled outward, suspended and grotesque. Others had been cleared and stained. We could see every tiny vertebra and fin ray, brittle and bright, each body intact though only the skeletons were visible, vivid with chemical color. Their ribs curved thinly; their jaws were like etched glass. Our whispers sounded loud against the smooth walls.

Intimacy with those little deaths could never have prepared me for the startle of life when I returned from winter break that year to find three real, live fish swimming in a plastic bowl on the table in my living room. One of my roommates was vice president of a theatrical group on campus and had braced us all to expect pranks to be played against him. Unluckily, it wasn't he, but my vegan suite-mate, who had come back to the room a few days earlier to find wild-finned goldfish slapping and twisting on the wet floor in the hallway. The thin bag they'd been in had burst in our mail slot just before she arrived. She screamed and flung open the door, racing to find containers for them, only realizing after she had stepped on several that the fish had scattered on the inside of the room, as well. They crunched and slid beneath her feet: shenanigan-turned-slaughter. With panicked hands, she scooped up the twenty-five survivors and put them in water. She bought them food, but over the next few days, one by one, the battered refugees drifted into death at the tops of mugs and repurposed bowls.

I made it my immediate mission to keep the remaining three alive. Having studied those buoyant archives in the fish collection, I knew how gills worked and understood the careful structure of tails, but now I found myself at a real loss. How to feed those little bodies? Where

to keep them safe? I left my suitcase unpacked and skidded in boots as quickly as the icy streets would allow to the nearest Crate & Barrel in search of a more permanent home for them. Among champagne flutes and overpriced cookie tins, I found a wide-mouthed gallon jar. I picked it up. Thick-skinned, heavy, the glass was vaguely rippled, and I imagined it might take some of the stark sharpness from the fish's view, maybe giving them a better sense of shelter in the wake of their ordeal. I bought it.

On my way home, I stopped by the bead store, hoping to find texture and color for the world I was creating. I chose a long string of uneven green rocks to lay across the bottom of the container and gingerly, I carried my purchases back down the slippery roads.

When I got home, I found the three remaining fish milling agitatedly at the surface of their bowl, gulping with wide, quick mouths. I sprinkled some food over them (made, I noticed on the package, with the dust of other fish), but the restless survivors ignored it. Their mouths opened, closed, opened soundlessly. I tensed and knelt down at their level, trying to make sense of their behavior with what little I knew about their anatomy. In the hushed room, we stared at each other.

When I couldn't watch any longer, I rummaged for a cup and scooped them up one at a time. Careful not to pinch their fins, I transferred them into their new home and set them on a shelf where they couldn't be bumped or capsized. I took the beads and curled them across the bottom of the jar like colored gravel. I scattered more flakes in their water, where they floated in thin flecks before saturating and settling, uneaten, among the rocks. I named the fish Lee, Harvey, and Oswald, and I read to them from Neruda's "Enigmas" before going to bed that night.

*I walked around as you do, investigating
the endless star,*

*and in my net, during the night, I woke up naked,
the only thing caught, a fish trapped inside the wind.*

Mid-verse, a returning roommate opened the door on me. I froze sheepishly. We faced each other with open mouths for a moment before we both broke into laughter—at my absurdity, at his witnessing. “This isn’t what it looks like,” I declared. But he smiled, unconvinced, and left me with the open book of poems in my lap and my three disinterested wards busily searching the underbelly of the surface for something I couldn’t provide. Feeling exposed, I listened to my friend retreat into his room. I think, although neither of us would have admitted it at the time, he knew with greater clarity than I why I sat among the fish, why I read to them, why I fought so urgently for their lives.

Much later, I rose and padded out in the darkness to check on them. Alone in the common room, they drifted slowly in the moonlight, fins spinning restlessly, pale in the thin beams that fell across their jar. By morning, Harvey and Oswald were dead.

Or maybe it was Lee and Harvey.

Not knowing, I renamed the final survivor, and Ishmael moved in with me so I could keep a closer eye on him.

In the fish collection, everything was dead, but maybe not entirely lifeless. Like photos in a darkroom, histories fixed themselves along little lengths of spine and scale. Following the shaft of an anglerfish’s lure—from its base at the top of the head to its knobby, wormlike tip—I could almost see the flashes of bioluminescence scattering as it prowled through the lightless abyss, see that bulbous tip twitch alluringly as careless, hungry little things wandered too close to that tempting filament and lost themselves in the fish’s cage of teeth.

The bottled fetuses looked tender, still round with the possibility of birth.

The stained specimens revealed everything. Each transparent torso exposed the workings of the life it once held. Slow measures of growth showed crisply along each rib. The sludge of the everyday had been flushed from behind their eye sockets and out from between their invisible muscles, and now they looked like memorials of themselves: not quite art, not quite bodies. They were truths, laid bare. They tingled with finely jointed, magenta energy. Skeletal, neon purple, they carried their past gingerly in their jaws.

I watched as a teaching fellow laid a small, fresh shark out in a pan and carefully sawed off a slice of its head. The area around its nostrils was cold and a little rough to the touch. The cartilage cut smoothly. Beneath the skin and skull, we found its brain: wet, pink, ridged. It was just flesh now, soft folds of tissue, but I imagined that somewhere among those ridges, its stories were still hidden: the sharp impulses that drove it to snap and eat, the memory of water as it flushed through gills, the vague, buoyant feeling of tide as the sleepless animal roamed thoughtlessly under the night sky, the final fury of being drawn up with hook and net into the killing air. Written in its skin and in its brain, I could glimpse the movements that carried it through existence. The shark's body revealed its life.

As the knife pressed deeper, the tray filled with dark blood.

Ishmael continued to gasp at the top of his tank, as if he were right on the verge of forsaking his gills and surfacing to taste air, instead. Worried that his frantic behavior might be an unarticulated struggle for oxygen, I rethought the fish's home. I filled a clear plastic storage tub with water and slid Ishmael in, to revel in this broadened surface area, but still he mouthed wordless things at that airy margin.

In the evenings, I read to him. A. R. Ammons. Elizabeth Bishop. Mary Oliver:

*Stroke by
stroke my
body remembers that life and cries for
the lost parts of itself . . .*

I wondered if this was trauma. In his mind's eye, did his two dozen companions thrash lidlessly in the hallway? Could he still feel the sharp passage of air through his gills in those long, urgent moments out of water? Goldfish, I've been told, have three-second memories. I thought about that as I read to him. By the end of each line, had he already forgotten the beginning? By the time he was back in water, could he still remember the close-packed explosion in the mail slot? His anxious mouth seemed too evocative to deny that somewhere in the small chambers of himself, he still held the slap of floor and gasp of companions lodged in some deeper place than mind. I liked to think that even if my words were unintelligible, and even if each came as a surprise to a stupid being who remembered only silence, that somehow the overall body of each poem could still wrap itself around him, pressing against bone if not brain, ricocheting from fin to fin in deep, hidden movements.

Our memories are so much more than intellectual depots. Where the mind fails, the physical enters. A rubber band, when stretched between fingers, will remember its original dimensions and sink back into itself when released. The ocean, with vast, circulating momentum, remembers slight changes in wind and weather and carries those motions through the years in broadening circles and deepening currents years after a storm has dissipated. A cleared fish, bright with stain, will maintain its finely boned shape long after it is moved into its glycerin bath.

What, though, when the body is gone? In the absence of the physical, does memory stand a chance? Ishmael finally stopped gasping a few days after he moved in. He looked realer than the bottled fish, realer,

even, than those sleekly tossed salmon on the other coast. He was neither specimen nor food, but something palpable and named and lost. His was a flimsy body, and not particularly magnificent or repulsive: small, limp, colored a slightly dimmer orange than when he'd been alive. I sang a song in the bathroom, feeling foolish, and flushed him down the toilet.

Two summers ago, my dad and I followed the narrow coastal highway north from our home in California. To our right, rounded yellow hills dipped and rose, punctuated by stray cows and thistle. On our other side, cliffs dropped breath-catching distances down to the sea, as if the land had been sliced abruptly by some cosmic cleaver. Foam and fury edged up against the steep space left behind. New to driving, I sat stiffly behind the wheel, knuckles whitening at each sharp curve. Water churned below us, distant, blue, immediate.

In the late afternoon we parked and explored the coast by foot. Ancient rock from deep regions of the sea had uplifted here and rose in terraces and pillars in either direction. Wind and tide had licked clean and scraped hollows and ledges in the rock, sculpting tall formations, chiseling vast fields of fragile honeycomb patterns into the rough cliffs. In the basins and folds where time had imprinted itself, water had come and gone, and in its place we found crystallized reserves of salt, spread in gemlike crusts underfoot. Pelican shadows brushed against our faces.

We pitched a tent beneath a pine and watched the orange fan of sunset unfold. In the dusk, we sipped the special red wine saved only for father-daughter excursions and, when the color had dimmed around us and the world grown grainy and gray, we unfolded our sleeping pads and read aloud Ray Bradbury shorts, like in the old days. "The Sound of Summer Running," "The Golden Apples of the Sun." We lay under the sky, darker where the gnarled tree leaned across it, and I asked to hear his own stories. I'd come to learn that he would

never share the full arc of his life with me, but instead would only give me isolated memories, the way he'd sometimes bring me a surprise from the cluttered workshop: an old glass bottle, a horseshoe, a bent spring. He'd tell me about the time he learned to build wooden boats in a small town on the West Coast or how, before the days of containerization, he worked as a marine engineer alongside grizzled men who still remembered the days of sail.

Tonight, he told me about his sea voyage to Asia aboard a cargo ship. At a port in Japan, he and a friend found bikes and sped off among the sharp corners and bright noise of the city until twilight found them once more at the water's edge. They got off their bikes and stood in the still evening, watching fishermen cast glowing lures out from the docks. The men called out to one another in a soft language, and my dad listened for the changes in tone and tempo, but couldn't understand their words. He and his friend stood in silence in the gathering night. Set in quiet flight, the little lights skimmed on invisible lines out across the dark water.

At the end of his story, his breath slowed into sleep, and I lay wordlessly, listening to the distant surf crash outside against the arched bodies of rock.

A few weeks later, my dad disappeared on a diving expedition. A friend from work drove me to my hometown that evening and held me with her free hand as I choked back salty fear. I lay curled in my mother's arms that night, and we inhaled in thin breaths as we waited for the ring of the phone, the knock of the door. When I slept, I dreamed of teams of dark divers circling the place where he'd gone missing and could almost hear the sound of helicopters in the midnight sky cutting low among islands. The next morning, a policeman mounted our front steps and touched the doorbell once. My mom answered. His body had been found, seventy-five feet below the surface in a kelp bed off of Southern California's coast.

He was taken somewhere and cut open, but the autopsy revealed only a healthy, if somewhat waterlogged, body. The Coast Guard found no fault with the diving equipment. For months afterward, the men who had been diving with him, guilty, perhaps, that they had surfaced without checking to see if he was following them, avoided speaking to us about the final minutes before my father's disappearance. A mystery, then. Mermaids, maybe, tempting a lost sailor toward death with sweet voices like in the days of old. Or a loss of oxygen.

I decided ahead of time not to look at him when he was brought north for cremation. Waiting for family to come back out of the funeral home, I realized I would never see his face again: the splayed wrinkles that spread from the corners of his eyes, the wide, whiskered smile that never fully left his mouth even when temper furrowed his brow. I was tempted to change my mind, to run inside and see him one more time as a body before even that disappeared, but the strong sense that he was already gone set an open space yawning in my chest and kept me put. I was in no mood to see that face transformed, emptied. I sat in the car, turned off the music. The light moved slowly across the parking lot.

If memory is a physical retention of things—the energy in a rubber band drawing it back into its original shape, the ocean carrying ancient storms in its vast stomach, an interrupted fetus suspended in an eternal glycerin womb, a bruised goldfish gasping for release as its muscles relive, again and again, the terror of the mail slot—what happens when the rubber band snaps, when the fish is flushed? I washed my hands of shark blood in the Museum of Comparative Zoology and didn't look back to see the animal's chunks of brain slip into the garbage among gill filaments and bile. My dad came home in a bag full of fine gray dust and heavier lumps of material: melted buttons, bone. He is scattered now among mountains, soggy in the leaf litter of forests, drifting like

ocean snow in the slow tides off our home coast. Whatever memories his body held have been yielded up to the wind and slow mechanisms of geology.

In the nineteenth century, a young biologist took sponges and tore them apart into individual cells. He set them aside and watched as, with slow, deliberate movements, the cells moved toward one another and came together. They bound themselves into larger formations, first fusing into vague balls, eventually adopting structure. A new body formed from disaggregated scratch. Unified life from torn pieces.

Elsewhere, researchers trained tiny flatworms to respond preemptively to a stimulus by curling up in anticipation of an electric shock rather than stretching out in the presence of light, as is instinctive for them. When the worms were sliced into hundreds of pieces and fed to other untrained worms, the new worms resisted instinct as if they, too, had been trained to fear the shock. They shrank into themselves when the light turned on.

Monarch butterflies cover immense distances as they migrate south to overwinter. Returning north, they only ever reach the lower part of their range before laying eggs and dying. On tremulous new wings, the next generation will complete the northward journey, skimming over wide stretches of continent to precise homes, closing a careful circle they had never begun. The following fall, in a confident orange flurry, they repeat their parents' journey, gathering for the first time, months later, in the exact trees the last generation found in that circuit too vast to be completed in a single lifespan.

Memory, it seems, is not a purely mental exercise, nor is it just a physical record of the bruises and miracles we collect as individuals along the dusty road; it is a forward movement, a thing that carries histories into new lives and seeps, transformed, under rocks and into wings.

*

High in the Trinity Alps, I took my mother to a snowmelt creek and waded with her in the quick eddies above a waterfall that my dad and I had hiked to a year before. I carried a sack filled with what was once my father and, as the channel deepened, we cast handfuls of him across the clear surface. The gray flecks soaked through and sank wetly among the smooth pebbles underfoot. Swift fish, mottled with the blues and sheen of the stones around them, brushed against my ankles and slipped again out of sight. The rocks were loud with the smash and froth of falling water, and twilight settled in softly without my hearing it.

We slept there after sundown, head to head, hauled up on a thin island of granite. Mouths opened and closed in the darkness around us, things drinking from the near shore—maybe, inadvertently, lapping up thin flakes of ash with thirsty tongues. I found her hand in the night, warm to the touch, the color of mountains in the dim light. The moon caught in the branches of trees, and in the quiet hours that carried us places beneath our own thoughts, distant stars spun slowly in the wide current of the night.

PETER MORRISON

*Wherever You Go,
There You Are*

Not always. Go to eastern Arizona, along Highway 77,
Near the southernmost lip of the Colorado Plateau—
North out of the White Mountains, beneath Show Low,
Below Snowflake, not far from where Silver Creek
Feints east for a second time into the Box of Tenmile,
Where you can look across the valley of the Little Colorado
To the mesas rising on the other side and try to imagine
The fern and cycad forests of equatorial Pangaea
In place of the juniper, sage, bunchgrass, and broom
Now scattered over the face of a high and arid land.
Pull off the shoulder on the west side of the road,
And then walk slowly north in a zigzagging way,
Tacking first to the right and then back to the left.
As long as you are not careless or distracted,
Or walk too quickly, or with too large a stride,
You will find it, and you will know when you do,
Not by the sudden scream of a circling hawk,
Or tremors in the sandstone beneath your feet,
Or any perceptible changes to the earth or the sky,
But because your self will unclip itself from itself
To embrace itself with such ardent affection
That you will find no void between what you perceive
And what you feel, between the landscape around you

And you who seem to stand in that landscape, and do,
Such that the air you inhale is the skin you wear,
And what you wear, your body in flight. You will want
To stand beside Highway 77 for the rest of your life,
Because you stumbled through the open gates of Eden,
Not through your merit but by dumb luck alone,
And fear by leaving you will never return. That's one place.
There's another in Rome, by the Piazza Novona
On a fifth floor balcony of the Pensione Hélène,
Although by now it may go under a different name—
Where on summer evenings in the saffron of dusk,
A riot of swallows streaking through the fading skies,
The same thing will happen to you—different,
But the same. It's the way heaven must be,
Which is nothing like the visions of the painters
And nothing like the raptures of the mystics—
No choirs with valveless trumpets, no blinding light,
No ecstatic and eternal communion with a beloved,
No fish schooling in a placid sea, or iridescent colors,
Or dancing calligraphy, or garden of earthly delights,
Or golden temple set with pavestones of beryl,
No crowned or bleeding savior with his hands aloft,
No beseeching mother, or panoply of the saints—
Just you standing on the side of a random highway,
Or on a vacant balcony above the streets of Rome,
Daylight drifting away on the neighboring walls.

LAREN MCCLUNG

Stone Horses

In the underbelly of a limestone cliff
between the Cévennes & the Rhône
four horses gallop where time is *tout d'un coup*.
Their manes move over jagged rocks
that jut or, where water touched, round.
There the shaman's hand caught them
as they moved together across the valley.
Instinct tells a story of the once wild,
but we want to touch & unlock the gates
to a cave or desert then ravish the place.
Yet a hidden horse in the Mojave outlives us.
A berm mane shifts in the light as if blown.
It stands in sleep while the long-ago Quechan
turns stones varnished black by day & then
he shifts rocks to form the shoulders, rump,
& bowed neck of the blue roan or palomino
at least three times lifelike. Horsemaking
is an ode to a body in motion or at rest,
a horse in the mind, like Leonardo's.
But we know the study always leads to death.
The horse is a horse, a man, a man
& he will tame, or wrangle, or bring it down.

LAREN MCCLUNG

Orchids

In the dead of winter they keep coming back in the half-light of the east window, Tyrian purples & deep pink centers open like the mouths of forest animals, their tendrils pushing away from the thick stigmata swollen with its own internal spring. But spring seems far now as branches shake in the wind on Bleecker. You say the genetic blueprint must root back to the Orient, the Manchurian where Sika deer, gorals, & panda feed, where the medicinal petals are harvested for Shi-Hu, blessings for the kidney or liver, but I know the flowers grow below the equator or above in the mystery of the arctic. Perhaps, I sometimes think, it must be the atmospherics, the blustery air that drifts through the apartment. Yet in my dreams the monocots twist themselves into a rapture beckoning & they are thirsty. You know they say the Orchidaceae are punished ghosts undeserving of the beauty wrongdoing becomes. Even in this reincarnate they lure & reach, & if you stand too close, know they will ravish you.



Jonathan Imber, *Muscles and Crabs*, 2002, oil on canvas,
50 in. x 38 in. Courtesy Jill Hoy and Alpha Gallery.



Jonathan Imber, *Bob's Ledge*, 2009, oil on panel,
16 in. x 12 in. Courtesy Jill Hoy and Alpha Gallery.



Jonathan Imber, *Sky Over Mt. Desert*, 2010, oil on panel,
24 in. x 24 in. Courtesy Jill Hoy and Alpha Gallery.

RIGHT: Jonathan Imber, *Twin Delphinium*, 2013, oil on
canvas, 60 in. x 30 in. Courtesy Jill Hoy and Alpha Gallery.







Jonathan Imber, *July Scapes*, 2013, oil on panel,
20 in. x 24 in. Courtesy Jill Hoy and Alpha Gallery.

LEFT: Jonathan Imber, *Three Peonies*, 2013, oil on canvas,
62 in. x 30 in. Courtesy Jill Hoy and Alpha Gallery.

ALIKI BARNSTONE

Who Knew How Far

You will always arrive in this city.
Don't hope for elsewhere.
—C. P. Cavafy

Who knew how far away I'd go
from my bay window in San Francisco?

I say "my" though the apartment was rented
and I flowed from myself
like water drunk
from cupped fingers—or perhaps
like a drunk—though alcohol's not my vice.

I sat in the window and called it home
for a few hours, devoted
to study, industry,
and sporadic monogamy, as if
the two words could exist on the same line.

My then-husband wandered
room-to-room, baseball in his ear.
I absented in ink, listening
to traffic, my soul
roiling as my eye
followed the fog pouring over Twin Peaks,
as if from the Most High's steaming tea kettle.

More than my well-chosen words,
 my lyric, he liked me,
 more than my aesthetics
 eschewing narrative, he liked me—
 (yes—loved me).
 I liked to feel his hands on my back
 when we danced.
 He liked to feel me in silk.
 Aesthetics just means feelings at its root.

Mauve was the designer color
 of the year, gracing Victorian trim:
 same palette as the clouds, same palette
 as my spirit, the outer edge
 designed, maybe
 with passionate hue surrounding gray area
 and my blurring, blurring the
 —unnamable I wanted numb—

and off I'd go across the bay to
 another city, another conversation, another ...

Forgive me. I guess
 my intent was good but shadowed by hope
 for elsewhere as I was,
 who knew how far I'd go,
 helpless to choose a city or a story—.
 His kindness was more than I could bear.

ALIKI BARNSTONE

Built-in

I find myself in a family home, maybe in the old country somewhere,
my people gone, the rooms ordinary and white—could be anywhere.

I open a small built-in cupboard, its glass covered with eyelet and lace.
It's not a shrine, though a goblet is set on iridescent silk with no
tableware.

It's no holier than any other storage or hiding place, and I search for a
word
same as I would a spice or a can of garbanzo beans, though words exist
nowhere.

I find no wine in the goblet, yet I drink and light shakes my upraised
arm. I'm alone,

but a crowd behind me is saying *the word, Alik, the word is in there,*
somewhere.

JUDITH KITCHEN

Tenors

The voice of the tenor is like a wild animal.
—Luciano Pavarotti

THERE ARE MANY TYPES of wild, of course: the timid hare at the edge of the woods, the skittish deer—but that’s not what he’s talking about. No, he means mountain lion, leopard at the height of his leap. Or the wild horse galloping over the prairie, fierce and proud. He means the voice is a thing in its own right, something to rein in and give rein to. Something to step back from, be amazed at, as it takes over, wanting out.

There are four of them, *Il Divo*: tenors from Spain, France, America, and Switzerland. Three have the mellow voices that feel like a forest in England: spaces between trees, soft shifting of sun and shade. But the fourth voice is harder-edged, stone itself, the kind that slices the air and fills the hall. Not granite, not quite. Flint, that’s it. There are four of them, and yes they are spectacular. But oh, the schmaltz. The slow, malingering notes of Leonard Cohen’s *Hallelujah*. Admit it—you hate that song with its “baffled king” and its “what’s it to you?” The same way you hate Paul Simon’s *Bridge Over Troubled Water*, all syrup and sentiment. And still, there they are—hallelujahs haunting you days afterward. You

want to cover their stickiness with something gritty. But that's not the way the body works as the flute-edge of those voices hovers at the back of the brain. Since you hate the song, there must be something finer carrying it, the voices floating the cheap lyrics on something genuine. Something you wish you could define.

There you are, nine years old, restless in your chair as your mother tunes the radio to opera. You do not have time to listen to Caruso, his scratchy recorded voice the stuff of something long ago, something to be let go of. You are full of your body. You want to rush out to climb trees, to gallop over your own imagined moors. You do not want to sit out this Sunday meal in the imposed silence of the radio. You do not want to listen to something so far away. You do not want to make your mother happy. You want her to suffer your disdain. You want her to admit that her experiment is a failure and that, from now on, you can eat and talk as usual, then ask to be excused.

There is one man, but he is not alone. He has his handkerchief, which he folds and holds like a dove at his fingertips. There is one man, but his voice is more than many. For the ages, they say, but Pavarotti thinks mostly of how his father, the baker, was afraid to step onto the stage. How he too is afraid, has to dig for courage to reach for the high notes. But he owes it to his voice—that bucking horse he does not want to tame, but to ride. One and a half hours they stood clapping, that time, back then. When he was younger, trimmer, full of vim and vigor as they say. One and a half hours of hallelujahs, hands rubbed red. What does he owe this voice? Didn't he give it its due? Older now, a bit disheveled, his chest swells; he lifts the high note and holds it there—*tenere*—to hold language and history and something that must be called a range of emotion, before he cuts it off, catches his breath, throws back his head, and grins.

They're wearing orange tonight, not their famous white. They spread across the field in a kaleidoscope of energy. A well-rehearsed orchestra. *Real Madrid*. Royal. The ball has a tenor all its own. Tonight it is dancing to their tune, back and forth, up and down, left and right, in and out. Marcelo. Modric. Benzema. Then, straight to Cristiano Ronaldo, step, step, turn, flick and it's in the net. His head flung back, his grin. This is not arrogance; it is the body's celebration. Pleasure in the very act of performance.

There, you are more alive than you have ever been. Your skates make a muffled hiss along the ice; the wind picks up its tempo; your scarf catches and holds the heat of exertion. Your body is alert to every nuance. You swing out, musical and in tune with the weather. Winter sounds: a cardinal with his faint *not here*; the deep creak of the ice, like an intermittent foghorn; and in the distance, the regular deep breath of the woods themselves, the slim trunks of trees like organ pipes poised in shafts of sun. Your body is eager to be off, eager to let the skates attest to health and hardiness. Your body recalls, even now, that cadence: one and two and one and two and one and on into the clear, cold wind.

There are two men. Pavarotti in his requisite tuxedo, draped in a multi-colored scarf, without his trusty handkerchief. Sting in a sleeveless vest and leather pants, swinging his bare arms nervously. "Why should be elite, music?" says the maestro. "Excuse me. Music must be for everybody," and there he is showing how it's done. Sting's voice is rough, somewhat strained, as though to emphasize the way he wasn't trained. There, on YouTube, you see them then, as they were. You hear their history. On the contemporary blog, someone comments: "I wish I knew what he was singing about nevertheless I feel and understand the meaning!" Together, they sweep the stage with sound. Bread of angels. No harp. Just a simple guitar to join voice to voice to the jealous sun in a Latin sky.

There's something to be said for research. It could have been Mario Lanza your mother called up that Sunday noon, 1950, while the sun outside poured noisily through the window. It might have been the Texaco Metropolitan Opera Radio Network, first on the air in 1931. But those broadcasts were on Saturday afternoons, and you are certain—aren't you?²—that this was Sunday. You will never know, as your own story becomes a past-tense recollection. All you know is that the body held sway, was swollen with promise. You did not stop to wonder at the sound that touched down on the plates of mashed potatoes and, later, the pie. The words were foreign. You did not open your ears to hear the universal; no, you were wild with the urge to run and run.

There are three of them. Each with the voice of an angel. Or human. Miracle. One begins, then stops abruptly, his voice filled in by another's voice, seamless as a bolt of silk. Close your eyes, you cannot tell where one stops and the other begins. Yet you know that at times you can name the particular timbre: Pavarotti, or Domingo, or Carreras. You can tell them apart even as they mix and match. Three of them, distinct, yet here they are, indistinguishable. You love that they are willing to give themselves over to it. To laugh as they play the role they have taken on. To take such pleasure in giving voice. In riding it out onto the fields of gold.

There is such a thing as an "existential there." Editors do not like it, but writers know better. They raise their voices, a chattering that sounds for all the world like an old Selectric twisting its way across the page. Or rather, the page moving under its clatter: there is, there is, there is, until there it is—something you can feel and hear. And touch. It is—oh glorious ambient "it"—a thing in its own right. A horse in the arroyo. Wild pony high on the tors of Dartmoor. Though now the Dartmoor ponies are being culled, the hides of their flanks crafted into drums to

use at Druid retreats, to make a music of “life and the moon.” Or their meat, dyed blue, is being fed to animals in zoos—panthers, lions, tigers—those sleek shadows pacing and pacing.

Their legacy is royalty. They race down the pitch, one cross from the left, one turn, one touch, and the ball does the rest. Top of the net, where no goalie can make his desperate lunge. The sportscaster—master of metaphor—says, “It’s like playing poker with a witch.” Who cares what he means? You understand. The tenor is the game, the vehicle the player. You crown them kings. Plural. Because nothing can happen to one without the others.

There it was, the sentence: *It had begun to snow again*. Snow drifted up from the page, merged with your frozen breath, white against white. Merged with the huffing noise of your lungs as you trudged home from the pond. Past perfect. And the thin silver snake of frozen river of your father’s past. Thirty years between generations shrinking now, your lungs laboring, in and out, catch and release, present and past, as your body rushes to catch up, contain, continue.

There are many versions of one man. Take Alfie Boe, born in Blackpool, as much a product of the Midlands as Sting, Alfred Giovanni Roncalli Boe, youngest of nine children, named after Pope John XXIII. Take Alfie Boe, the mechanic, who sang arias as he polished the cars. Take one customer’s suggestion that he go to London to audition for D’Oyly Carte. Take the courage to take that step, and the rest is history. A rendition of history, since his starring role in the twenty-fifth anniversary production of *Les Misérables* has turned Boe into perhaps the best-known Jean Valjean of all time. He steps out into Victor Hugo’s ravaged nineteenth-century Paris, his clear tenor becoming soprano for the time it takes to plead with God. *Bring him joy...he is only a boy*.

They're not certain what happened. All they know is that in June of 2012 you were on your last legs. An overdose of chemotherapy had left your white blood cells at almost zero. A blood infection was raging and your oncologist used the word "catastrophic." Your husband bought you tickets to see Alfie Boe. In October. Neither of you expected to be there. Yet there you are: seated in the audience, listening to an angry Alfie refusing to sing from *Les Mis*, bitter that the upcoming Hollywood movie would be made without him. There he is, a tiny man with a huge voice, dressed in T-shirt and jeans, surrounding himself with loud rock guitars. Drums. So you settle back to see what he *will* give you, and, in the end, something pulls him back. The background music dims; he steps forth. *If I die, let me die. Let him live. Bring him home.* The long *o* lasts and lasts, rises and rises until it is liquid, is grace itself, is French and English and Moroccan and Chinese.

There were seventeen of them for the second encore of the tenth anniversary production at the Royal Albert Hall—an entire cast of Jean Valjeans marching onto the stage, each with his country's flag. Soft at first, with the steady beat of *Do You Hear the People Sing?*—almost a whisper of the past—then growing, gaining momentum. One by one: in twelve languages, seventeen countries passed the song to each other without missing a note. And each time English came around, the libretto of Herbert Kretzmer reasserted its genius. In twelve languages, you could hear the echoes of the drums, the song of angry men. United Kingdom, France, Germany, Japan, Hungary, Sweden, Poland, Netherlands, Canada, Austria, Australia, Norway, Czech Republic, Denmark, Ireland, Iceland, United States. It was 1995; the Czech Republic was only two years old.

There was no reason not to dream. Everything was possible. If this, then that. If then, then next. If when, then what. What brings the world

together? The World Cup, that's what. And who? Pavarotti had an idea. In 1994, on the eve of the cup final, there were three of them again. Luciano in good form, not yet fully the worse for wear; Plácido, champing at the bit; José recovered from leukemia and eager to loft his quieter, more evocative tone. Well, actually four, because Zubin Mehta added his reputation as conductor. Dodger Stadium, Los Angeles, 1.3 billion viewers worldwide. If the critics complained that this was opera lite, so be it: "It's better we do while we are still here." No one would sleep. Pavarotti had learned, singing with Clapton and Sting for the people of Sarajevo, that "Nessun Dorma" has no need of translation.

They're gleaming in the late light, those banks of French horns and bassoons. Glinting. Mehta raises his baton. Violins dip in unison. The orchestra inhales. Look at them, all suited and tied. Anonymous. Each man or woman giving to the instrument its living voice. Their music rises to fill the stadium with prediction of applause. Team effort, on the night before a bewitched world will watch. And go on watching.

Their voices reach for harmony. Finally, finally, his father is singing. With him. In public. Raising the voice that raised him, now so out of tune that he is forced to step back, turn off his perfect pitch. Almost tenderly, Pavarotti follows the older man's lead. The audience rises to its feet. At last. At last. They grin.

There's a place for us, Alfie sings from the balcony of Buckingham Palace. It's June 2012, one month after he did the unthinkable in Kansas City, four months before you will see it for yourself, and he tries it again at the Queen's diamond jubilee—segues from a classic rendition of "O sole mio" to Presley's "It's Now or Never." The King, minus cape and sequins, resurrected down to his intonation, his expression, his *muh-muh* mumble, his wail and his swagger, the low dip of his

hips, the raw sandpaper in his voice turning sweet as sorghum as he croons—there is no other word for it—with a voice for the ages.

There is a reason one man takes up another's song. Pavarotti dead of cancer: *Ciao Luciano, black-and-white heart*, from his favorite team, Juventus. Listen to Alfie, silver belt buckle glistening, singing "Nessun Dorma" with that exact clarity of tone. And Elvis, dead when Alfie was four years old, lives on in the only voice that can do him justice. What made that working-class boy in Tupelo reach down into the white and black heart of his South to make it new—and wild—again? He came bursting onto the scene with a voice that spanned more than two octaves—all at once tenor, baritone, and bass—a voice that caught you off guard, gave color, texture, feeling, body. He came bucking onto the scene, saying *that's all right* and *all shook up* and *how great Thou art*. Tonight Alfie, the Liverpool fan, replicates the maestro's vibrato as he plays his ultimate card: he turns his back, swings around, begins again—Pavarotti to Presley in one deft move. *O sole mio...It's Now or Never...* elision of *o* and *o* and *o* and *o* and it is now or never. It is joy, fed at the back of the throat, a note elusive as its source. Tomorrow will be too late.

There it is—first a lump in the throat, then a brimming at the eyes. You think of them as good tears. Necessary. Cleansing. Not the moony *when-you're-weary-feeling-small* of the songs you hate to succumb to, but the pure and natural outcome of art. So you are not surprised to find yourself inconsolable at John Huston's ending of *The Dead*, though you do not know what moves you most—the image of the sifting snow, the infinite night, or Donal McCann's voiceover of Joyce's final paragraphs, with their repetitions falling softly, softly falling like rain on the skylight. A rhythmic sound that taps its elegy to time. You cry out to yourself, knowing you can never quite give true voice its head, knowing that try as you might you cannot reproduce the staccato clank of the

line on the metal mast, or the *skriiitch* of crickets, or the *ck ck wa-heee* of the redwing blackbird on his lonely perch on the cattail at the edge of the swamp. Not on paper. Not in impersonation. The real thing, which is unlike anything else.

STANISŁAW BARAŃCZAK
TRANSLATED BY ROMAN KOROPECKYJ

The Starting Five

Amid the roaring sea of the sold-out
Boston Garden, ecstatic from courtside to the rafters,
they saunter in, relaxed, blasé, awash in a kind of
indolent glory, five towering panthers:
long-armed Kevin McHale, six feet ten of

offensive genius; the stubborn, sullen Chief, the giant
Robert Parish; and freckled Dennis Johnson, master
of the magnificent assist; his teammate Danny Ainge,
a punk, by the looks of him, and artist nonpareil
of the outside shot; then, finally, he trots out onto the parquet

(“LA-RREE!!!” the crowd erupts), phlegmatic, ungainly
blond Larry Bird—who could believe that this is the living
legend, eclipsing everything that came before, the one and only.
The waves of noise swell until their crests come crashing,
down, the sudden silence consecrates what’s plainly

obvious: never in the history of basketball has there been such a
starting five,
so tight, unrivaled. The whistle, the opening tip, game
on. D. J., Parish, and McHale, in four huge strides,

race to the hoop, two points, a roar: they've scored again.

"Sociotechnics: without the games, the stats, the standings, time

would simply drag," I mutter enviously. (Bird penetrates,
fakes, puts up an arcing jump shot: score!) No: they're only less
imperfect than we are—they're perfectly loved and perfectly

detested,

an island rising above indifference. For just a moment. Yes,

but what redeems them for that moment is that they're simply

head and shoulders above the rest.

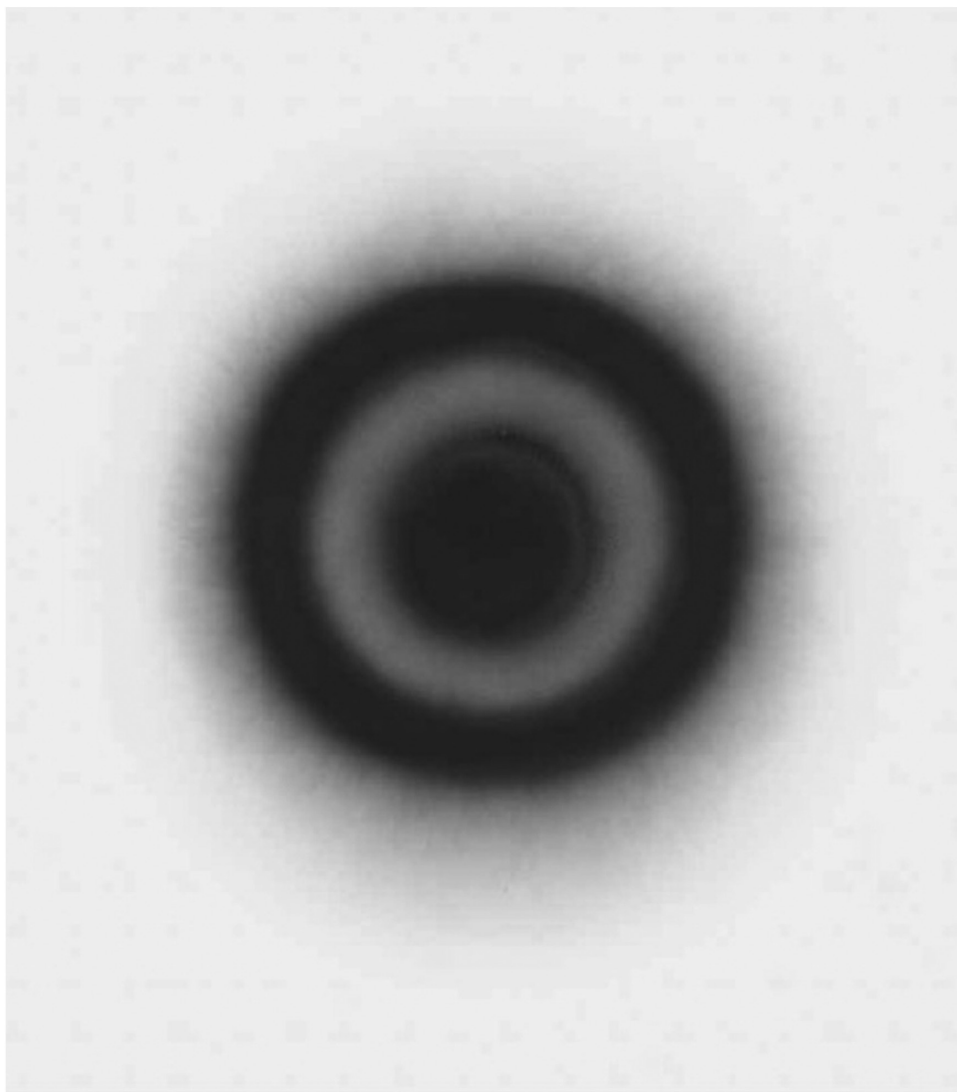
Otto Piene (1928–2014)

IN A CAREER that spanned over half a century, Otto Piene ceaselessly explored connections between art, science, and technology. Trained as a painter, philosopher, and educator, Piene began using light to “exhibit in the sky” as a way of countering his experiences in the German infantry during World War Two. In 1957, he spent four months making raster screens—cardboard panels perforated with holes—to produce series of *Rasterbilder* (raster paintings), *Lichtballet* (light ballets), and *Rauchbilder* (smoke paintings).

Piene performed the first light ballet in 1959 by projecting light through the perforated screens. Piene continued to develop this concept, incorporating bulbs, batteries, and motors to mechanize and orchestrate the works. In the same year, Piene, along with Heinz Mack, founded Group Zero, an international network of artists. The group staged a series of experimental *Abendausstellung* (night exhibitions) and published three issues of their eponymous magazine before disbanding in 1966.

In 1965, György Kepes, founding director of the Center for Advanced Visual Studies at MIT, invited Piene to be among the center’s first group of fellows. Piene went on to succeed Kepes as director in 1974. Piene’s *Sky Events* have been staged most recently in Berlin as part of the exhibition *Otto Piene: More Sky*. These events were celebratory displays of inflatable sculptures and floating lights—collaborations between artists, scientists, and technicians—that realized his dream of exhibiting in the sky “freely, playfully, and actively, not as slaves of war technology.”

—Jeffrey De Blois



Otto Piene, Rauchbild (Smoke Painting) (detail),
1961, oil and charcoal on canvas, 43.7 in. x 43.7 in.
(cropped). Courtesy of Sperone Westwater, NY.



Otto Piene, *Lichtballett* (Light ballet), 2011, MIT Exhibition at the List Visual Arts Center in Cambridge, MA. Photo by Gunther Thorn. Courtesy of Sperone Westwater, NY.



Otto Piene, *Sky Event – FAST Light*, May 2011, MIT
150 Festival of Art, Science & Technology, Cambridge,
MA. Courtesy of Sperone Westwater, NY.



Otto Piene, *Luftprojekt, Sky Event, 1968* at the US Air Force Base, Skeet Shooting Range, Karlsruhe, Germany. Photo by Pe Wolf. Courtesy of Sperone Westwater, NY.



Otto Piene, *More Sky*, Neue Nationalgalerie,
July 2014, Berlin, Germany. Courtesy of
Sperone Westwater, NY.

JOHN FREEMAN

Bombshelter of the Oligarchs

Five hundred feet below the park
tunnels stretch for miles.

Blast-proof titanium corridors
lit by low-voltage Bruck pendants.

Mario, the guardsman, crawled
to freedom to escape Tiso's
Slovakia. For ten years he
has put on a blue Caraceni suit
and plunged into the earth's
inner hush, cutting a motion-
censored wedge of light
into the vault's violent dark.

He's never had a visitor.

Unless you count the butcher
who weekly restocks the Kobe
steaks, the sommelier who tests
the humidity of the cellar, the
mechanic who runs the 1969
Bentley, never driven, for
six minutes each day, the
veterinarian, who feeds the
Bornean elephant 700 pounds of

cabbage, acacia leaves, and
carrots, dropped into its cell
by a dumbwaiter secreted into
park's wading pool.

Twice an hour, Mario
passes the first edition library,
the room of jewels, the art
warehouse as big and cool
as St. Paul's Cathedral,
the harem with women murmuring,
TV turned on high, reality
programs in Russian. At midday,
he kneels down on the settee
by his post, and unwraps a butter
sandwich and chews slowly,
drawing out the time before he
must adjust his blink rate, and
return to his post, and wait
for the call which never comes.

PETER BALAKIAN

Providence/Teheran '79

I.

I was held together by tranquilizers and the weft of a prayer rug,
my back dislodged; all I could do was stare from the floor
at the TV screen glowing with blurred color,

my books out of reach, on the floor like Japanese fans—
the ones I had been cramming—for my prelims—
the ones—by Bill McLoughlin on American evangelicals.

I saw the Seven Seals in the neon light of the Newport Creamery;
heard trumpets of the Baptists blowing down the walls
of American cities and who was I to say—doped up

on pain killers— // when the balustrade of the US embassy disappeared
in Kalashnikov smoke on the TV screen, and students broke
the gate with their signs and fists and chants in Farsi.

The camera cut to the Aya-toll-ah—the sound unrolling
like gauze in my head—was a fade-out to the voice
of the man in the next apartment reading poems to the wall.

2.

I woke in the dark to the glow of a château in France, where the Aya-
tollah—in a robe blurred in light from the camera angle—

was sending videos to Teheran. I once saw the carpets of the Pahlavi
palace

in a photo my cousin took in the '60s when my uncle did business with
the Shah—

the silk wavered like the voice of Begum Akhtar cracking glass,
and then champagne poured and wire slit the voices of the invisible.

By midnight I was in black space, the mullions dissolving
into nothingness, the oak floor levitating my head
into the prayer rug where flowers grew into vines.

Shadows in the mirror disappeared, nightjars fell out of the poplars
in Teheran or Providence, where I thought I saw behind the veil
of what is seen, as the angels came down on the screen.

3.

Hours later I woke to the small white pill of a sun
through a window, to students in the streets of Teheran.
I stared at my pile of books, elegant paperbacks, old library ones

when in my thumbed-out head I heard the Beach Boys' cawing *Barbara-Ann*—then the sync shots of the TV going—*bomb-Iran* in some
echo chamber of some town in the Midwest. Whatever

the screen's daylight waveforms sent me I saw
red blindfolds wrap American faces,
iron bars of a gate twist the windows of American

exceptionalism. Morning. Morning. No dream.
The sun lit up the red brick campus, the TV bathed in light.

DAVID LEHMAN

Capitalism

According to the new book everyone is talking about, Capitalism is a system that values capital above all things—capital that can be monetized. The owners of property, of companies, and of factories are better off than their employees; management has it better than labor; and if this goes on long enough, the discrepancy between rich and poor will widen and keep widening. Although this line of thought goes back to Adam Smith and David Ricardo and even seems to restate principles from *Economics 101*, Nobel Prize economists have lauded the new book as if it were a groundbreaking event, and even tough-minded reviewers are saying that for once you can believe the hype.

It's hard to argue with the fundamental tenets. Capital comes out stronger than ever after a recession during which it can buy up assets at fire-sale prices. To make money you need money. Compound interest is the most powerful force in the universe. If you can file a Schedule C with your return, you're way ahead of the game. I'd rather be rich than poor. Hell, I'd rather be rich than president. The rich get richer and the poor get children and the children get shot at and that's why we should end the war in Vietnam, not to mention that the domino theory is a Swiss-cheese theory full of holes, the largest of which is that Vietnam and China, far from linking against us, hate each other with a venom greater than what Freud called the natural "narcissism of minor differences." Please note the use of the present

tense here. Vietnam and the United States may be in bed together, but the Vietnam War endures—it defines us. Also, I would amend the word “capital” or, rather, construct it broadly to embrace the nuances implicit in such a term as “political capital” in current use or “moral capital,” “artistic capital,” or “intellectual capital” as future possibilities based on the “political capital” model. The wonder, of course, is that any of this strikes anyone as earth-shattering news, but the year’s winning buzz word, “inequality,” has the floor. Read the letters to the paper. See how often the word appears. Political capital will accrue to its reiteration.

This association of thoughts took place in the patient’s mind as the technician pulled a switch and the machine wheeled the gurney into the cave where the body from the neck down would be photographed and X-rayed with contrast, the dye shooting down his veins and arteries, and for a second he saw himself as the glass skeleton on the professor’s desk, with all his organs on display.

PEG BOYERS

Mrs. Casanova

She has no inner life.
Instead, she will have secrets.
And, like him, a mask to cover them.

This is the plan: under the mask she will dwell,
keeping what is on her mind
to herself.

In her transparent world secrets are hard to come by.
She will have to make do with mundane
matters of little consequence.

About the migraine she had last night,
for example, she will not speak.
Nor let on she is embarrassed

when exposed before their guests about
the several political issues she always gets wrong;
the intrigues at court, the betrayals, alliances.

She is embarrassed to have been embarrassed
by something so trivial.
She will hide that too. Under the mask.

Nor will she admit that she was hurt
when mocked before their young friend about the songs
she likes, especially when sung by that new castrato in town.

She will refrain from showing how much she minds
being contradicted about stupid facts like the difference
between poplar and cedar which hardly exist in Venice anyway.

Her pettiness shames her yet she feels deeply wronged.
That these tiny wrongs begin to add up
and weaken her is disturbing.

In her weakness she feels, and *is*, unattractive.
Looking into her husband's eyes
she is confirmed.

Under her mask she notes that yes, compared
to their lovely young friend, she really is a crone.
A stupid, unhappy crone disfigured by unhappiness.

No wonder her husband recoils from her in this state
preferring the attentions
of their lovely young friend.

She too prefers their lovely young friend
to her pathetic unhappy self. Under her mask
she will hide her humiliations

and in that dark airless place let them fester
and grow and from that spreading rot
accumulate something like

an inner life, a place in which to dwell
alone, privately,
in her misery.

In her barren world this sad notion
of fashioning a secret place of her own passes for
a creative solution and, for now, consoles her.

But she is not yet adept at using the mask.
It will take practice and discipline
to achieve the necessary mastery.

When she looks in the mirror to give it a go
her Harlequin reflection greets her
with peals of laughter

undermining at once her determined sorrow.
Perhaps tomorrow she can get serious about her plan,
try on Pierrot or Colombina, the shrewd slave.

Today she is too easily amused—
A ridiculous failure even at despair.

KAREN E. BENDER

Two Entrances

THERE WERE TWO entrances to M—'s home in Westwood Village. There was the front entrance, a pale green door that opened into the living room, and there was the side entrance. The latter was at the top of a set of concrete stairs that rose up beside a buoyant tide of red bougainvillea; its door had a glass window in the top half and opened into the laundry room and kitchen. M— was a child analyst, and her patients were advised to come through the side entrance. When I was fourteen years old, I had my first appointment with her. Walking up the stairs to the side entrance made me feel I was doing something vaguely illegal or tainted, but I was a patient and she preferred having patients come in this way.

When she opened the door, I saw that she was tiny, about four foot ten, with a slight hump in her back; she walked carefully, as she had a scoliosis that made her slightly hunched. She had a froth of reddish styled hair in a sort of asymmetrical flip; she kept the same hairstyle the whole time I knew her. I was bad at estimating the age of adults. She could have been anywhere from forty to seventy years old. We walked into her home. I looked around, trying to get some sense of who she

was. She appeared to be the only person living here and the house was clean and quiet, almost like a museum. She walked me into the office where she saw children. It was a spare, beige room, and I sat on a flat tweed couch and she in a curved chair and we looked at each other. I did not know what was expected of me. She resembled a bemused elf.

I was here because my parents did not know how to help me. I had developed symptoms of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder that were so severe I couldn't sleep. I was focused on making sure everything in my room had been touched three times. I set my families of glass animals on their sides so they could sleep and tapped each one three times; if, when lying in bed, I imagined that I had forgotten to touch one, that meant I had to leap out of bed and touch them all again, sobbing slightly, hating the damn animals, hating myself, hating the world for not letting me rest like a normal person. I couldn't stop myself, couldn't relax until I knew that each animal had been tapped exactly three times. I got back into bed and rested there. My mind seemed a perverse, whirling thing, intent on finding what I could fix. I'd also become aware of shirts or any pieces of clothing that stuck out of drawers. I had to get up and push them back. This meant that I was sleeping just a couple of hours a night.

My father, a psychoanalyst, at first wanted to believe he could help me, in what we called talks, in which I would sit on the floor with him, looking at the titles of his psychoanalytic textbooks on the bookshelf and try to talk about what was bothering me. But, extremely good listener though my father was, I wasn't really able to talk to him about what bothered me, mainly the fact that while I loved my younger sisters I was also afraid of them; or that I wanted to run out to explore the world in the middle of the night but had no one to drive me out to do it; or the fact that I resented this new thing, a pubescent female body, and how when I wore shorts, sometimes boys or even men would yell at me, strangely, out of cars, and that a boy in my junior high school had

pinched my breast in the hallway one day, and then walked on, vanishing into the crowd. Or other, deeper issues—that I didn’t know how to deal with this new body, and therefore resorted to wearing only UCLA T-shirts, trying to look like a boy; that I had seen my dog die in front of me when she was hit by a car a year before; and that my father’s sister’s family—the family closest to us—had been devastated when my teenage cousin drowned and then my aunt died of cancer two years after that. There were five people in the family and then there were three and somehow the number three had to be tapped out again and again in my mind to keep myself from feeling the enormous, disorienting fact of my cousin and aunt’s absence; it was also my magical attempt to keep the rest of us alive. I did not know any of this, consciously, and I could not tell him any of this. So our talks did not make things any better. I kept getting up at two, three a.m., glancing outside at the enormous night, the silent, dark streets, heavy with threat and promise I could not articulate, and I was jealous of the people who were able to sleep and who didn’t need to get up and touch their glass animals or shove shirts back into drawers.

In my diary at the time, I wrote: “Something not so great has happened. Mommy and Daddy, after talks with me, have decided I have gotten about as far as I will with them, and have decided to send me to a psychiatrist...feel rather depressed to go, I’m scared and feel like I’m a hopeless case, or that I’m down to a low emotional level...this idiotic habit interferes daily with my life—every night I’ve had to “rearrange” the bathroom for a long time. Even now as I’m writing, I do it. Well, tomorrow’s my birthday—14! I hope it’s a year when I can get rid of my habit.”

Once in M—’s room, I didn’t really know what to talk about. The room itself seemed oddly empty except for the couch where I sat and her curved black chair. She asked about my friends, who were not particularly nice at the time, or if I had a boyfriend, which was an idea that

then seemed totally absurd. How could she know me if she asked me something like that? I said, at one point, “Sometimes I hate my sisters,” which was not a statement allowed in our house, and she did something wonderful; she laughed.

So three afternoons a week and one Saturday morning I walked up the concrete stairs to the side entrance of M—’s house.

She sat in her chair and sometimes her eyelids, which were large and droopy, would start to close, as the late afternoon sunlight fell onto her face and it looked like she was falling asleep, which was somewhat unnerving. But did not stop me. Nothing stopped me; I talked on. I talked about the minutiae of a middle school life, the intense competitions in Intermediate Orchestra for first or second chair in cello, which girls got what roles in *Nutcracker*, the wild sexuality in the hallways, the grueling social dynamics of the lunchroom. She listened to whatever I brought in to tell her. The teacher of an eighth-grade class called “Youth and Law,” in which the teacher mostly chattered on about his own cocaine experiences (which was both fascinating and unnerving), recommended a trashy book to us about Israeli spies with a sexy cover featuring dark, semi-clad women on it. I bought the book. I brought it to my session and shyly read her sections from the detailed sex scenes. According to my diary, I also read her sections from the Hite Report. She listened. She nodded. I could not shock her, and that created a bond.

The most startling thing was that she listened to a standard situation in my family and saw it in a completely new way. Her face took on a wounded expression, or she laughed at something my parents said, and I understood—she was there to protect me. Or not me, precisely, but something deeper—my feelings. When I was in ninth grade, I wanted to walk separately to school from my middle sister, who was then in seventh grade, an action that was viewed as a severe and cruel betrayal by my sister and my parents. I wasn’t the protective sister I

was supposed to be, but I wanted some time in my head in the morning before I launched into ninth grade. When I told M— about this situation, she looked stricken; it seemed she had taken on my frustration so that it actually inhabited her. This shouldering of my own feeling astonished me; no one had ever done this for me, particularly the emotions that seemed most terrible.

After a few months, the OCD stopped. I don't remember what I talked about, what I revealed or hid, but somehow, I simply didn't need it. If I were brought into a therapist or psychiatrist today with these symptoms, I would probably be put immediately on a drug, but there was something powerfully healing about the process of coming in and rambling on about my life. Or, more specifically, my feelings. I didn't know I had feelings; I would say I was angry, but my anger seemed to float in some netherworld around me. I was the type of slight, cheerful girl who didn't create trouble. I wrote in my diary, "My parents don't know the oldest child's hardships. I was talking it over with my therapist, who was an oldest child and agrees with me. (At least she seems to on the outside—I don't know what she's really thinking.)" Maybe it didn't matter what she was really thinking. Or I let myself believe she supported me. It was this theater of support, which was both a strategy and absolutely real, that comforted me.

As a teen, it was strange having this relationship with an adult I didn't know and with whom I spent so many hours. I didn't want to tell my friends about my analysis, for fear they would think I was weird. And it felt unfair that I couldn't learn anything about her. I knew she had studied math and seemed to enjoy it, which was bewildering. She lived alone in her home in Westwood. I asked her, accusingly, why she wasn't married, for in the 1970s, a single woman her age seemed both glamorous and odd, and she said, "It just never came up." I asked her why she didn't have children. I asked her why she wasn't fat; she said it was because she tended to eat just the right amount. She

loved to travel, mostly to Asia, and had many pieces of Asian art in her house. She had a sister who taught at my junior high school, and I was both interested and afraid of running into her, for fear that something startling—which meant, basically, anything—would be revealed about M—. Mostly, I was afraid that she might have children; I wanted her to be all mine. I would sit in her kitchen, looking at the olive green sugar bowl on her white plastic table, looking over her canisters, her sink, the glitter chip floor; I gazed at the two red rosebuds of soap in her bathroom, trying to find out something about her. Her house seemed an elaborate stage set designed to keep any information about her from me or her other patients. I knew so little about her. She was learning everything about me. It felt incredibly mysterious but also comforting.

There were many ways to fill up an hour. She learned about all the subtle rankings in Intermediate Orchestra and our ballet school, two places I spent a lot of time and hope. She said things that seemed odd and perhaps troubling; responding to my fantasy that I wanted to be a soloist with the New York City Ballet and first cello of the Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra (neither of which were in any way in the cards), she said the reason I wanted these things was because I wanted to steal my father from my mother, subconsciously. This made me a little queasy and felt like a distant theorem that was best left unsaid. Could it be true? I actually went ahead and mentioned what M— had said to my mother, who said, with considered thoughtfulness, “You may love me and your father in different ways.” M— would sometimes make proclamations about me, which, from her official seat across the room, held enormous weight. She said that I had a writing talent, that my humor was not defensive, that I was smart. She didn’t say these things with value attached to them, but as though they were facts. I liked having these points reiterated to me, as it was sometimes hard to hold onto them. One day we were discussing beauty, and she said, matter-of-factly, that I

didn't turn heads when I walked into a room—which hurt my feelings but was true—but that I had a cute figure, which was probably also true. I wondered if either of these statements about my physical presence needed to be said; they may have been important because they may have played into my relationship with my mother, who was beautiful in a way that people remarked upon. I wonder now about M—'s point in making any proclamations—for they had enormous power over a lost fourteen-year-old. The most positive one, though, was that she believed in my writing—and this comment imprinted on my mind in a way that was permanent.

I look at myself, so vulnerable at that age, and I think of what sort of mismatch I could have ended up with—with the wrong person, I could have remained who I was, getting up at all hours, or I could have gotten worse. And, in this culture, the idea of putting so much value, both in time and money, into the concept of talking about one's feelings, seems a relic of another era. To spend time that way was to not spend it hanging out, or doing homework, or practicing a skill, and later I wished I'd had that time. But I also needed those hours with M—they allowed me to see my experience in a new light, with her as a benevolent witness.

Psychoanalysis isn't the treatment of choice now for OCD. If I had these symptoms now, I would probably be treated with drugs, such as Prozac, Luvox, or Zoloft, or with Cognitive Behavior Therapy, for example, Exposure-Response Prevention, in which a patient confronts the thoughts or objects that make her anxious. The term "response prevention" refers to the patient's conscious decision not to do the compulsive behavior after being exposed to the sources of anxiety. According to the International OCD website, seven out of ten patients who decide to do CBT benefit from it. This short-term approach would fit into most health insurance plans, which wouldn't cover psychoanalysis. At the time of my treatment, my parents had an insurance policy that covered

half of the fee for a number of years, which the company eventually stopped offering.

Sometimes I wonder what would have happened to me if I had had these other treatments instead. How did the work I did with M—, and the relationship I developed with her, change me? The time I spent with her helped form me, in that it gave me a new worldview, of both myself and other people. I gained the useful understanding that other people were like onions, with layers of motivation that were surprising and complex. I could see my place in my family in a completely new way, and I had an ally in my perceptions of them. And even if I didn't know much about her, she was a model to me—in her calm approach to situations that made others frantic, in her clear assessment of others' behavior, in her own independence and her ability to explore the world. She was someone who I wanted to be like.

Sometimes when I came to my sessions, I would see someone leave M—'s house out of the front door. I wasn't sure who the person was—it was generally an adult—but I wondered about that person's attachment to M—, and why they were given the privilege of going out the front. I was jealous of these people, their sanity or luck, their knowing M— in this other way. I would mention them, and she would smile and say that she worked as a supervisor of that person at UCLA's Neuropsychiatric Institute, or refer to some other way she might know a person, but nothing really illuminated this for me.

I talked on and on and my outside life became better; it became, to my relief, ordinary. In eleventh grade, I told her I wanted to stop treatment. It felt daring to say this. But I hadn't had any OCD symptoms in a long time, the pressures I faced were the regular high school pressures, and I thought I could handle them. I felt like I didn't have the time to talk anymore, which may have been a measure of health. I don't remember our final session. I associated her with my most terrifying self, so a part of me was eager to say good-bye.

But my work with M— wasn't finished. The second time I saw her was after I dropped out of college during my sophomore year at UC Berkeley. I had applied to Berkeley because I wanted to live away from home, to be in a new city, to feel myself capable in a new place. It came at a difficult time for our family—my father had developed some health issues, and the idea of their daughter living away was unfamiliar to my parents. I was, in my eighteen-year-old mind, ready and eager to start my life; it felt somehow necessary.

This time the symptom wasn't OCD, but panic attacks. They had organized themselves around the activity of final exams, specifically ones that were written in blue books. I was afraid of cramming the information into my mind and then forgetting it or running screaming out of the room. I was certain that I would fail my exams and thus ruin my life. Now, looking back, I see this as a desperate attempt to gain control over my own thoughts, to have time to daydream; I think it was my somewhat inefficient way of declaring that I wanted to be a fiction writer—to write what I wanted, not these other annoying facts.

When I moved home, my parents said that I wasn't going to just sit around the house—I needed to get a job and I should go back into treatment. While my friends got ready for their new semester at school, I filled out applications for fast food jobs in West LA, and got a job working at Square Pan Pizza at the Santa Monica Mall. I wasn't a student anymore, but someone who couldn't function like everyone I knew.

This time, walking up the side entrance, I felt like a failure; I obviously had not been able to use what I had learned before. Now M— brought me into the office she saw her adult patients in, which was painted in darker shades and had a different color couch. Great, I thought—I have now staked my claim in all of her patients' rooms. She leaned forward, looked at me the way she did, which was to see through my frightened self to a better one. It was as though this frightened self was not my real one, that it could be shrugged off with

enough searching. I literally felt she could look through me to see that other person.

“What happened?” she asked.

I sat on the couch and cried.

I moved in with my grandmother, who was recently widowed and wanted someone to share her apartment, worked at Square Pan Pizza, and saw M— five afternoons a week. I literally couldn’t think. My mind felt like Jell-O whirling around in my head. I had my appointment scheduled every day at 2:30, but some hard days the hours felt like they held infinite seconds, endless; it seemed like it took forever until I could sit in that room with her.

When I sat across from her again, I wasn’t better, exactly, because my life outside these walls was in shreds, and lonely, but sitting across from her seemed a moment I could start to think my way out. She seemed to believe that the panic attacks, though unfortunate, were actually a step up. “Before, you didn’t allow yourself to feel the anxiety,” she said. “Now you do.”

“When will it stop?” I wondered.

“When,” she said, “you know that you belong to yourself.”

What did this mean? And why was I not fixed already, for god’s sake? She had no real answer to this, which I resented. But now we were onto the real work of separation from my parents, who did not know how to manage the idea of my independence. What I remember was the way she normalized things that were making everyone around me hysterical. While I was at Berkeley, I had made jokes about jumping out of the Campanile tower at Berkeley during finals week, and my mother called M—, terrified. I had no intention of doing this, but was in an unfortunate state where I wanted to say anything I wanted. She looked amused when she reported this call to me during a session. “She said this wasn’t the Karen she knew,” said M—, and we laughed, somehow co-conspirators in this interpretation of me, not as crazy

person, even though I was acting like one. I stopped making the pronouncements.

What I remember most about that time was her tolerance—I was perhaps not the easiest patient. I began to feel better talking to her again, and decided not to return to Berkeley; instead, I enrolled at UCLA. But each night a test loomed, I felt distraught, and part of my strategy for beating down the panic was calling her. Each time, I tried not to call her, tried to distract myself from the test, and sometimes could make it until late, midnight, and then caved and dialed her number. The interaction went as follows:

Me: I'm afraid I'm going to panic on my test.

M— (sighing): You're mad at your parents.

Me: Okay.

M— : You'll do fine. Good night.

I hung up, worried more, took my test, and did fine. This sort of interaction went on for two years until I graduated.

It's not clear to me how I was using her in this conversation; I knew exactly what she would say, but still needed to hear her say it. She wasn't a therapist then but something more magical, or primitive, or absurd; I wanted to grab her and put her into me, her calm, her belief, and the only way to do that was to hear her voice. She was unremittingly patient in these calls, except for one time, in which I had clearly woken her up, and she said, exasperated, "Oh, Karen," which alarmed me, but I bullishly continued with my comments. Why did she put up with this? Why didn't she just tell me to stop? She just wanted to talk about it the next session, in which my late-night calls seemed the act of an alien person. The progress felt glacial.

Now, many years removed from this time, I wonder what would have happened if I had just been told to get back to school, or just waited. Would I have been able to go back and finish college, in some hampered state? Or would I have been stuck in that panicked state

for years? At the time, I wondered—did it say something ominous about me that I needed this amount of help twice in my life so far? M—explained that strength was about both understanding myself internally and testing myself in the world. We talked, I called her, I took my tests, I had boyfriends, I began to figure out what I wanted to do, wrote magazine articles, got a summer internship in New York, went traveling by myself, and decided that I wanted to move to New York—that was where I wanted to be.

Hesitatingly, I told her that I wanted to think about ending treatment. She laughed, her beautiful, bemused laugh. “I’ve been holding the door open for a while,” she said.

This was a surprise. I hoped she’d be a little let down, at least. She appeared pleased that I felt good enough to leave her; after all, that was her job. I did feel like a different person from when I had first walked into her office. I knew it wasn’t that I would never panic—but now I knew that I could get through it. I hesitated before I asked the next question.

“What will happen to us?”

“I’m not going anywhere,” she said. She mentioned that she sometimes kept in touch with her patients as they grew older; sometimes she even saw them socially.

What? Socially? How? Would I finally find out more about her? Would we have coffee, or what?

We looked at each other—I knew I loved her, but what sort of love was this? I loved her consistency, her laugh, her ability to know what I felt even when I didn’t, her unflappability in the face of my ugliest feelings, her calm and matter-of-fact approach when I came from a family where things tended to be neither, her expansive, almost unreal support. It was a love based on what she did for me, but did she like me at all as a person? And who was she? It was a relationship full of feeling on my part, but it was also contingent on her being paid.

All professional relationships have structures, with certain expectations—teacher and student, supervisor and employee, coach and athlete. You function within it and can become emotionally bonded, and a professional relationship can expand into a friendship as well. But the analyst/patient relationship is built on the most potent of interactions—it is about the analyst listening to the patient's feelings and understanding them without judging them, the patient trusting the analyst with her deepest, most private thoughts. M— let me express anything I wanted; and now we would part ways and become nothing? It seemed, in a way, impossible.

I graduated from UCLA, saved money to move to New York, moved, created a normal life there, having friends, going to work, the beautifully simple act of living on my own. My anxiety was not gone—it floated around me, I wasn't free of it, but I wasn't disabled by it. I was happy because I felt, finally, that I belonged to myself.

M— said that I could keep in touch with her through occasional phone sessions. There were months when I didn't call her at all, and then I would schedule phone sessions with her once a week for a few weeks. Now our discussions had more of an advisory quality—she would interpret the behavior of various men I was dating and tell me, clearly, what she thought it meant. She was usually correct. There was a practical quality to these conversations—it was less about lifting the sheet of symptoms and seeing what they meant.

But what were we? She kept sending me bills in the mail; we were clearly still therapist and patient. Would we ever be anything else? I was too shy to ask her if she wanted to have coffee, or whatever else that could mean. Could I ask her if she wanted to see a movie? Was this even okay in a therapist/patient dynamic? It seemed like this would be more fraught than any actual date ever. What if she liked some movie I thought was horrible? When I came to LA I would schedule a session

just to “check in.” It was a way to see her, and we chatted about what was going on; she would tell me a little bit about her travels, to Japan, to South Africa; I asked her what it was like and she would describe the magnificence of a place, the landscape or the art, but this was never really a revealing description; since I didn’t truly know her, I didn’t know why she responded to a particular place the way she did. She had access to all of me and I had none to her, and that meant I had no context for any opinion she had.

Months would go by when I wouldn’t call her; then, wanting her take on a particular dilemma, I would. Now she told me a little more about her. A tour bus had stopped suddenly on a trip and she had been thrown across it, and her back, already fragile, was badly hurt, and she was not going to be able to travel again. I thought I knew what her traveling had meant to her and wanted, somehow, helplessly, to solve this. “I hope you’re okay,” I said, stupidly, and she sighed, for in some way she was not. It felt ridiculous for me to talk about myself with this fact now on the table, this loss more monumental than what I was dealing with at the time, but she switched modes and wanted to know why I had called her, and then we swung, oddly, into our regular discourse, and she sent me a bill.

A couple of years went by and then I called her again, this time grappling with problems that felt more urgent. She seemed glad to hear from me but her tone was a little off.

“How are you?” I asked.

“Well,” she said. “My sister died.”

I felt something whack against my chest; I remembered her sister teaching at our junior high school, the same hairdo as M—, just gray.

“She wasn’t herself at the end,” she said.

My heart began pounding. I felt we were suddenly, the two of us, in a peculiar bubble of time, of life passing, and I was aware suddenly of our being trapped. We were in the realm of the unanalyzable, the

irrevocable pain of being human. I could not fix this for her; I gripped the phone. There was a silence between us. I could do nothing for her after she had done so much for me. I don't remember what I said. It wasn't enough, whatever it was, for nothing could be. She wanted to go on with our call, and listened to whatever I told her, but when I hung up the phone I felt ridiculous, ashamed.

I couldn't imagine her telling me something this personal when I had been seeing her several days a week. Was it wrong that she was telling me of these events in her own life? But this wasn't regular therapy—it was an occasional call, for which she helped me based on what she knew about my past, and then sent me a bill for it. Should we switch so I could listen to her? But she didn't do that—we were not structured for her to talk about herself.

Over the next few months, I talked to her. But I noticed something else; she seemed to ask the same questions over and over. This wasn't necessarily unusual, as sometimes the same questions arose. But this time it seemed she had not heard my answer the first time. I tried to ignore it, as it seemed disloyal to recognize any diminishment in her. But it continued. She missed a scheduled call, which she had never done.

I was in my early thirties, and I had known her now, on and off, for almost twenty years. I was aware of her growing fragility, the way she moved more slowly when she walked with me to her office. But I did not know what to do with these observations of her. Who could I call to check on her? Who were her friends or protectors? Was there a way I could find out? Or was she all right and I was being overly critical? In my weird mind, to stop calling seemed an insult to her, a betrayal, for it meant I did not want her insights anymore. I wanted her to be capable, even if a part of me feared that she was not. She forgot to send me a bill; I reminded her, suddenly wanting this artifice of normalcy. She did.

The last time I saw her, I was visiting Los Angeles and stopped by her office with my son, who was then about a year old. This was the only way I knew of checking in on her. I sat on the old couch and chatted while my son crawled around the office. I was feeling fine; my first novel was about to come out, I was trying to negotiate the tides of early marriage and an infant—it wasn't easy, but I was in it, enjoying it, in a way I couldn't have possibly imagined when I had sat on that same couch twenty years before. Mostly I watched her; she looked tired, and she did ask the same question more than once, but otherwise the conversation seemed generally normal. She still did not tell me much about herself. She eyed my son while talking to me; once, when he crawled near the couch where I was, she said, quickly, "Pick him up"—she was attuned to what he wanted before I had seen it. Whatever she was going through, she still had that fine sensitivity to what a child needed.

My son began to cry; he needed a nap. We had to go. He would explode in a matter of minutes.

"Can you just lie him on the couch?" M— suggested.

I looked at her; our son, at that time, was a particular creature, only napped when he was driven in a car.

"He won't sleep that way," I said.

"Oh." She seemed puzzled. "You can't just put him beside you?"

For an analyst who specialized in children, this seemed a little dense. I picked up my son. I knew I had to get him into the car, to start driving, for that was all that would put him to sleep before the shrieks became otherworldly. But I didn't want to go.

"It was good to see you," I said.

"You, too," she said.

My son became more insistent, and we had to make a quick exit. M— walked slowly now, shuffling; she walked us toward the front door. Perhaps it was the nearest exit, and she wanted us to get to whatever we needed to do, or perhaps this meant we were something else now. I bent

and hugged her, very carefully—it was not a hug as much as setting my hands on her shoulders, because her back was still fragile. And then my son and I headed out the front door.

I wasn't familiar with these stairs; they wound down the front slope of the house until they reached the sidewalk. Carrying my son in my arms, I walked down each one, carefully. They were just another set of cement stairs, but they felt faraway from the other entrance, the one I had always used. They looked out on the same street, they angled down the same way, but there was nothing really special about them. I felt like anyone walking down them, and perhaps that was the gift.

I got to my car, strapped my son into his car seat and drove, and after a few minutes of screaming, he was asleep. I passed M—'s house, and then I circled back and passed it again; it sat, just a regular house in a neighborhood in Westwood, but seemed to me like a castle. I looked up at it, imagining her inside of it; and then I drove on.

I thought I would call M— when I returned to LA about six months later, but I didn't call her to schedule anything. I don't know why this is. Perhaps I was busy; or perhaps I didn't really want to know what was going on.

"I have to call M—," I kept telling myself, when I made the plane reservations, when we got to LA. I was sitting in my parents' house when I picked up their copy of the *Jewish Journal*. I was leafing through it, casually, and glanced at the obituary section. Then I saw her name.

She was in the obituaries because she was dead. She had died, a month before.

I couldn't breathe. I felt the room shift, the sudden, startling awareness that someone I loved was not in the world. I began to weep. My mother came into the room and I told her what had happened.

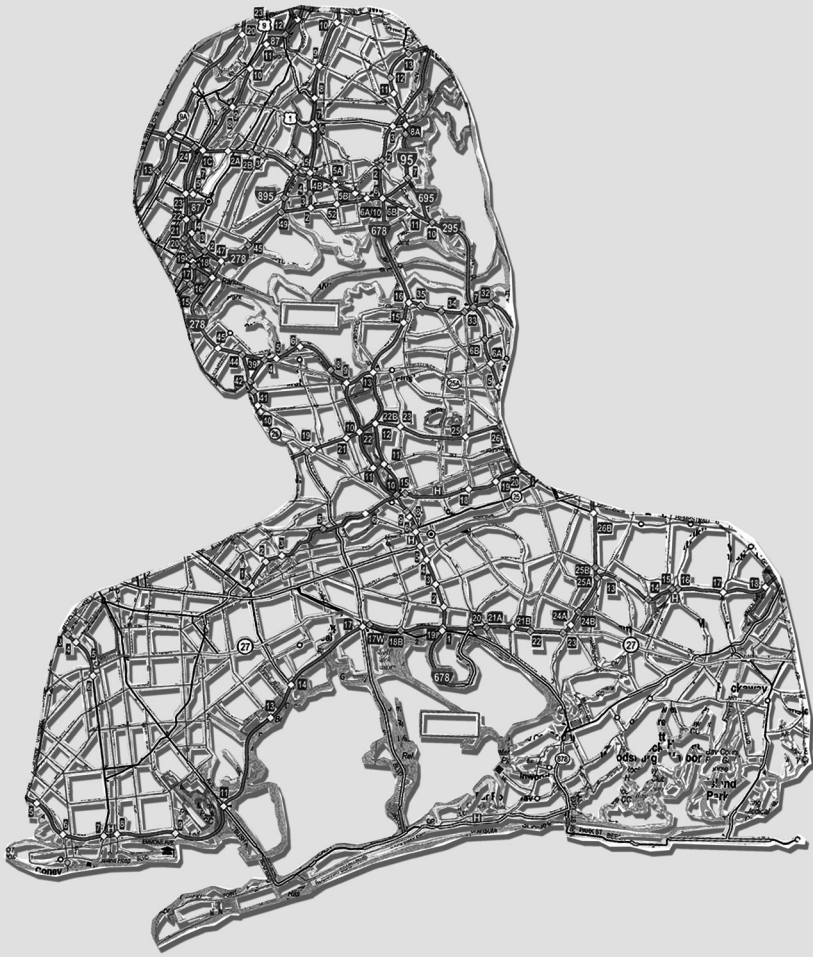
It all seemed so strange. How I had learned about it—why had I picked up that copy of the paper at that moment? I had imagined M—'s death

when I was younger and needed her guidance so desperately; I thought if she died I would not know where to turn. And now she was dead, and I was not. The room I sat in appeared ordinary and sinister. I waited to see what would happen. Selfishly, I waited for the panic. But there was none. She had left me equipped to manage myself. I thought of her sitting in her chair with her bemused expression and I knew that in some way, I held her within me. And what was left was my ache at her sudden and complete absence, and my longing to know who she had been.

It was a strange loss, a real one, but for someone I knew almost nothing about. No one had told me about her death, as our relationship was confidential. I was not invited to her funeral. It was a grief without the regular social structures of mourning. Our relationship was private, as were those with her other patients, so there was no way to talk to them about her. But my attachment to her had been real, at times I had waited all day for our sessions. Sitting across from her was the place where I could start to feel better, where all of my emotions could be alive.

Later, I Googled her name and found almost nothing: a scholarship in her name for a student of child psychology. I found a museum exhibit which displayed soap sculptures made by students at a school in 1930; her name was among the students. Still later, I found a website that listed her family tree with descriptions of the families included. It was a long and complicated list, and I scoured it hungrily, wanting to know more about her. I learned that she had a father who had abandoned the family, and how angry she had been at him. I thought of how I had asked her, a few times, how she was able to function without the anxiety that I had, and she had said, casually, that she had parents who had allowed her her feelings. I had envied this and tried to imagine what this would be like. Now I wondered—was this even true? I thought of the way she had listened to me talk about my own parents, their overwhelming presence, and what she might have felt as I talked about that.

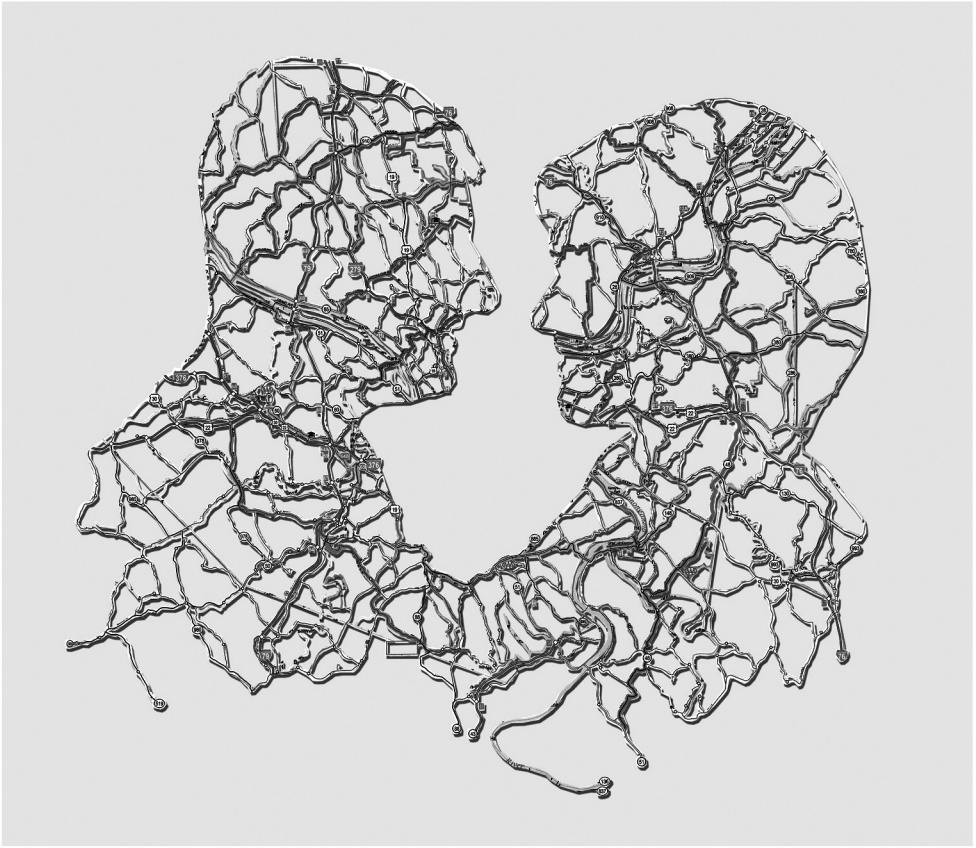
Sometimes, after her death, I imagined walking with her, together, through the front entrance of her home. I imagine pausing at the top of the stairs, looking out over her garden, the magenta rush of bougainvillea, toward the world she had made available to me. I imagine her telling me where she would like to go and my taking her. Anywhere—we could go anywhere. I imagine walking with her down those stairs, into the sunlight. I imagine listening to her talk about what she wanted to talk about. I imagine having a chance to say good-bye.



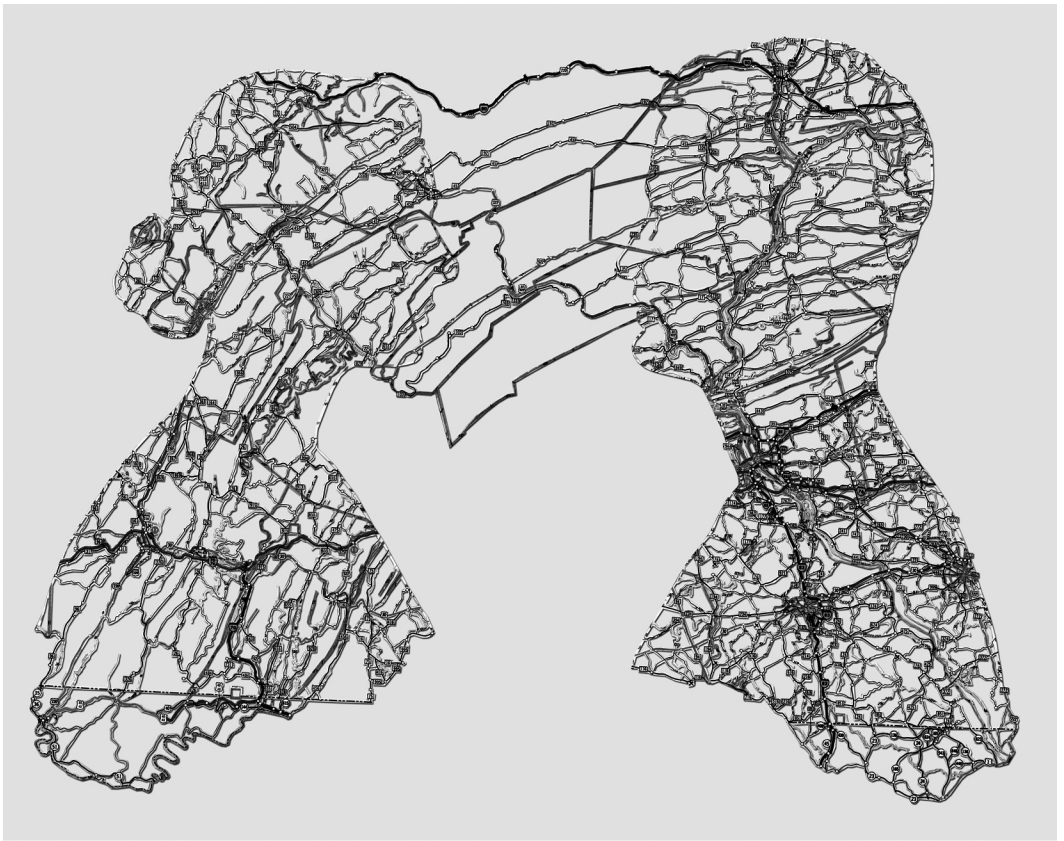
Nikki Rosato, Tom: Jamaica, NY, 2009, hand-cut road map, 10 in. x 8 in. Courtesy of Jonathan Ferrara Gallery.



Nikki Rosato, *Untitled (Self Portrait)* 2010, hand-cut road map, 20 in. x 16 in. Courtesy of Jonathan Ferrara Gallery.



Nikki Rosato, *Couple: Pittsburgh, PA, 2011*, hand-cut road map, 11 in. x 14 in. Courtesy of Jonathan Ferrara Gallery.



Nikki Rosato, *Untitled (Connections)*, 2014, *hand-cut road map*, 11 in. x 14 in. *Courtesy of Jonathan Ferrara Gallery.*

ELI MANDEL

Analysand

I do want to take note that I wasn't quite sure how to be physically intimate with her.

The first time I see a psychoanalyst he is late.

Six days have passed since I graduated—from a Brooklyn private school so disdainful of pomp that our diplomas were rolled-up pieces of construction paper—two more since I took my would-be girlfriend, Sarah, to the prom—which necessitated a harrowing encounter with her federal prosecutor mother. “We did in fact ‘dance’ next to each other for some time,” I wrote in my notebook, which could easily have been the property of a late-nineteenth-century classicist named P. G. M. Dodds-Fitzgibbon. I’d never been to a party before.

My mother says of me as a toddler, “It was like pushing Sylvia Plath around in a stroller.” By age three I was obsessed with death. I went around pointing to everything I saw and asking, “Mommy, is that dying?” It was fall, and so, yes, everything was dying. Despite this, I’ve seen just one therapist before now. Joseph G. Milstein, PhD, spent two and a half years printing out sheets of custom-tailored behavioral exercises for

me. His rigidly cognitive-behavioral methods helped with my panic attacks, didn't hurt with my OCD, and if anything caused further damage in the rest of my life.

I didn't need to practice making conversation, thank you very much. I needed to sort out why I feel so guilty about the crush I'd had on my friend in eighth grade. I needed to make sense of why it was easier to stay in talking to my parents on Friday nights than to ramble around Manhattan with friends. I needed to figure out why I didn't have friends.

But I was too reserved to tell Milstein any of that. Instead I honed the art of receiving off-target advice amicably and futilely. And this is how I have ended up confused about sex, inwardly Victorian, and in possession of one school buddy, who showed up fifteen minutes late to graduation in only a toga and fez.

This is also why I'm waiting here.

The door opens.

*

Remarks:

**difficulty expressing emotions nonetheless deeply felt*

**downplaying of my psychological anguish*

**maybe there are some things I can't feel anymore*

Richard K. Bradley, MD, is not the shrink I anticipated. Big, broad-shouldered, broad-faced, with a softly sonorous voice. Not an Ashkenazi gene in evidence. If he and Milstein got in a fistfight, poor old Joseph might never practice again. I shake Bradley's thick hand, and he lets loose a smile, large and somewhat unnerving.

"So," he says. We recline in twin leather armchairs, eyeing each other. Eventually I will memorize every inch of his office. The plush green

couch. The black-and-white print of three young men. The Christmas tree coaster on a worn side table. The pyramidal clock atop a copy of Jung's *Red Book* (Barnes & Noble list price: \$125.36). For now, though, I focus on him. "Your father told me on the phone that you wanted to talk about some social anxieties. Can you tell me a bit more?"

Whatever I reply is canned. On my dad's advice, I've scrawled some notes on a scrap of paper the night before. *Too reserved. Hard to pursue friendships with people who clearly like me. Worried about making a life for myself at Yale.* "Do you have any idea where all this might have come from?" Bradley asks.

And suddenly I am saying things I did not mean to say.

I am stuttering, yes, I am talking like P.G.M. Dodds-Fitzgibbon, but I am telling him about the fierce crush I had on that friend, about my first (and only) sexual exploit, about how I felt so guilty, so sure I caused trauma, whatever that'd mean, that I smothered myself under the weight of anxiety, and even if my speech is dry and clinical, even if it traces a looping, lemniscate orbit, still something in me is talking. It is not a part of me I want to hear.

"Well, we have to stop there for today," Bradley says. I leave his office, start walking toward Union Square, and am so rattled I lock myself in a Starbucks restroom until I can calm down.

*

Had this dream: Was in my sister's first-grade classroom, apparently having given a performance I deemed mediocre. Both teacher and co-teacher came up to compliment me, but I had two difficulties in responding normally: my mouth was full of gum and I could not get my shoes on.

Bradley's card, which has the date of my next appointment scrawled on it, says he practices CHILD, ADOLESCENT, AND ADULT PSYCHOTHERAPY

AND PSYCHOANALYSIS. In ancient Greek the words would mean, respectively, “attending to the soul like a manservant” and “soul-release/dissolution.” (I’ve hidden in the study of classical languages all of high school and much of middle school. In the foxholes of adolescence, there are classicists as well as atheists.) Will Bradley wait on my soul like a Homeric squire? Will he dissolve it?

“There are three things we’ll pay attention to in here,” says Bradley. “The stories you tell—their actual content. The way you behave towards me, and vice versa. And what you dream.”

Because I am moving to New Haven so soon, Bradley says we will spend our time getting used to this psychoanalytic psychotherapy. He will help me find a doctor to work with at Yale, so I can continue. It is only later, when I read through his list of referrals and notice that all the shrinks are analysts, that it strikes me. Maybe this is different. Maybe most therapy isn’t like this.

I begin to read anything I can find on psychoanalysis, mostly Janet Malcolm’s *Psychoanalysis: The Impossible Profession*, which grew out of her *New Yorker* snoopings around the New York Psychoanalytic Institute. I also find, mixed in with some gardening books on my mom’s shelves, a slim, faded orange paperback, the Swiss psychoanalyst Alice Miller’s *Drama of the Gifted Child*. It prickles with the ponderous terminology of mid-twentieth-century psychoanalysis: postambivalence, signal function, reaction formation, narcissistic cathexis.

I love this needless density. It lets me live abstractly, feel abstractly, feel abstract. For me, theory has always been always easier than practice.

I begin to record my dreams.

✱

RKB: You’ve been talking very objectively, giving examples—“reportage”—not about what you feel. Can you talk about that side of things?

Me: Not really, so far.

At the end of June, I tell Bradley I might want to stop our sessions. The two or three times I've seen him so far have made me intensely anxious. All my obsessional worries—delusional feelings of guilt, imagined wrongdoings—are becoming unbearable. I am possessed, too, by the idea that maybe Bradley doesn't understand my obscure utterances. How can he know that "I'm perfectly comfortable with the idea of sex" means precisely the opposite? Or that "I don't know what to talk about" translates to "I really want to talk to you about Sarah"? He's a shrink, not a cryptographer or clairvoyant. Later I will realize he has understood much more than either of us let on at the time.

Bradley says that maybe I need "more space to contain the force of my anxieties." Do I want to start seeing him twice a week? Inexplicably, I do. After all, the only other occupation I have that summer is taking a German-for-reading-knowledge class with Mr. Cooper, who taught me Homer in tenth grade, as a fellow student. Mr. Cooper tells my friend Sophie's mother that he is the best student in the class—bar me. I do not realize how pathetic these summer plans are, even while roughly three-quarters of my grade is frolicking around Europe for July and August.

It's a struggle now to remember what goes on outside of my forty-five-minute, twice-weekly sessions. I open a bank account. I take long walks through Park Slope in the after-dinner hours. I suppose I talk with my mother. And my father. I don't recall about what. (I don't talk about them with Bradley either, though he does his best to eke something Oedipal out of me.) I don't read much, which is out of character, and I don't write much. Maybe twice that summer I have coffee with friends—once with Sarah, once with my old school newspaper pals. There is, in a sense, nothing to remember.

Sometimes, in fits of worry, I spend hours writing up notes to email to Bradley. I never meet my standards for transparency during our sessions, and so I seek in print a premeditated specificity. I think I am being clearer by this orchestration of my therapy. Clarity, I refuse to realize, isn't the point.

"So, I read what you sent me," Bradley says one day about some of my legalese. I want him to add, "You don't have anything to worry about." Instead he says, "It's very understandable, but there's something—not ornate, exactly—but it's so clinical." He puts on his glasses, quotes from a printout. "The vicinity of the groin? It's reportage."

Afterward I report this conversation in my notebook. For the first time in my life I keep a record of what I've been doing and feeling. Since what I am doing and feeling is being in psychoanalytic psychotherapy, I am reporting reportage. As anxious as I am, there's something exhilarating about it: it's as if I'm a literary text and I'm being taken apart word by word, all while I'm taking apart the taking apart.

Psychoanalysis. Releasing the soul. Dissolving it.

*

Dr. Bradley is not a native New Yorker. He was born on the Florida panhandle and grew up on a Vermont farm, a product of a Southern and Yankee marriage. He attended Harvard College, where he graduated magna cum laude in Slavic Languages and Literatures.

So his website says. Its language is consistently askew. "A product of a Southern and Yankee marriage." Did he write that himself? I try to imagine him at Harvard, in Adams or Cabot or Eliot House. Partying. Reading Tolstoy in Russian. Deciding to become a psychiatrist.

I am mesmerized, too, by his eccentricities and tics. He is always late. He drinks oozing, flesh-colored protein shakes. He dresses in slacks and

dress shirts and garish running shoes—never, it seems, the same pair. He rotates one ankle around and around when he sits. Does he run at lunch? Have a stress fracture?

Certain phrases burn themselves into my memory. *I'll be right with you. What comes to mind about that? Can you tell me more about that? Well, we'll have to stop there for today.* Sometimes now I rotate my ankle around and around when I am sitting in class.

One day I enter the elevator in Bradley's building, hit the button for the tenth floor, and then almost let the elevator doors slam shut on a man rushing in from the lobby. I just barely hit the "Door Open" button in time. "Jesus," the man says.

Neither of us recognizes the other for a moment. Bradley is wearing aviator sunglasses and a tight T-shirt. "Hello," he adds. "How are you?"

We go into his waiting room together. *I'll be right with you.* When I see him next, he is back in a collared shirt. No sunglasses.

What comes to mind about that? What do you mean, *Comes to mind?* I always ask him. I want him to say, *Free associate*, which is what he is asking me to do anyway. I also don't ever want to answer the question.

Another day Bradley ends our session fifteen minutes early. *Well, we'll have to stop there for today.* I get up, but I look at my watch. "Don't we end at quarter of four?" I say. He realizes his mistake.

I sit back down, pick up where I left off. But he stops me. "I'm thinking about what just happened," he says. "There are some other things on my mind today, but nothing that would have distracted me like that. I don't know why I got the time wrong. I'll have to think about it. But I am just thinking, Maybe this is how you feel a lot? Like you're always accidentally, unintentionally, about to do something bad?"

This, I know from reading Janet Malcolm, is called countertransference—interpreting the analyst's reactions to the analysand. I am not sure I follow him, but I am amazed that it's actually happening.

Well, we'll have to stop there for today.

Around this time, I start fantasizing about becoming a psychoanalyst. My office is always Bradley's. My patients are former classmates.

Sarah will call me up, out of the blue, asking for help finding a therapist. We haven't spoken in twenty-odd years, and I ask her to come see me at my practice. *Ever since I met your mom before prom, I knew you'd have your hands full*, I say jovially, and give her the names of some of my esteemed colleagues at New York Psychoanalytic. Then maybe I ask her out for a drink.

I know this fantasy is a way of seizing control, of out-analyzing the analyst, and I know that my analysis of this fantasy is, too. I can't win.

*

Do I need to explain in great detail that incident?

My mother tells me I'm more irritable. "In a good way," she adds. I can't now recall my crankiness, only a wide swath of brooding. All that's on my mind is how I would have lived high school differently. *Why didn't I do this? Or at least that?*

What comes to mind about that?

One day I tell Bradley a story that isn't just reportage, and something happens. I tell him about the day at the end of eighth grade when my friend drew a tattoo in Greek on me. ἦλθον· εἶδον· ἐχρησάμην. *I came, I saw, I fucked*. We were standing on the back stairs of our school, out of easy sight. I pressed my body against my friend's while the two strong-aorist-active and one weak-aorist-middle/passive verbs were scratched onto my shoulder with a ballpoint pen.

"What was the word you used for 'fuck'?" Bradley asks. χράομαι, I tell him. Colloquial. Literally means "to use." Common in Aristophanes.

"I felt a kind of resonance when you told me this just now," Bradley says. "I remembered what being that age was like. You spoke about it so vividly."

I tell him I still feel anxious about it. “Well,” he replies, “You aren’t through yet with telling it.” I think of Alice Miller: *the compulsion to repeat*. Psychoanalysis. Releasing the soul. Dissolving it.

*

Last session, you asked me to pick a “point of confusion” from what I had written, as a starting point of some sort. I didn’t really pick one aloud . . .

Mid-August is the time when New York City analysts go to Cape Cod, like salmon to their breeding grounds. It is also the time, fittingly, for the “termination” of analyses. My days with Bradley are numbered. We talk mostly about how hard it is for me to talk.

One day he says something that shocks me. “I don’t know you that well,” he begins, “but you say ‘for some reason’ a lot. I have the sense that when you say it, you know perfectly well for what reason. You just are unwilling or unable to articulate it.”

When I don’t email notes beforehand, I find myself unable to start our sessions. Bradley expects me to begin talking, to choose a path for us to go down. All I have to do is say something, anything. Instead I prefer to stare him down. We play chicken.

Our last session begins this way, too. I play for time. Same old, same old. Bradley presents me with three possible topics and makes me choose between them. My middle-school friend, Sarah, or my feelings about the end of our treatment. For some reason we are meeting late, at 7:30 p.m.

For some reason. I must be his last patient of the day. It is our last session. He has arranged this deliberately.

In our final minutes, Bradley speaks with out-of-character candor. “When you go off to Yale,” he says, “you don’t ever have to think about your parents. About what they think of what you’re doing. If you were

younger, still in high school, we would have to work around them. But now you won't have to." He looks at me, not quite sternly. "Have fun," he adds.

As he is talking, I think I hear his voice crack. He sounds a little sentimental. I am unmoved.

A little sentimental. He would say, *That's a way of distancing yourself. You mean I sounded like I was going to cry.*

✧

— Original Message —

Sent: Sunday, October 31, 2010 10:21:16 AM

Subject: referral in New Haven

For very smart but very very inhibited young man who responded very well to dynamic exploration and defense interpretation around sexuality and aggression. Probably needs a firm hand, not at all borderline, but defenses are so entrenched has a hard time with free association.

thanks and was wonderful to see you and Will again—hope to do so again soon!

xrkb

Home for Thanksgiving my freshman year, I go to see Bradley one last time. Dr. O'Brien, the analyst I am seeing in New Haven, only nods and squints at me. He doesn't use email, to boot, and I am sick of explaining to him what Facebook is. I want advice.

Bradley and I pick up where we left off. "I get the sense you especially wanted to see me in person," he begins. I want to tell him, "I hate Yale, I don't have friends, all I do is read Aristotle." But instead I just hem and haw.

Bradley accuses me of treating college like an anthropological study. He asks me about my mother. Conveniently, I find I desperately have

to pee. I have never seen someone fight the urge to raise an eyebrow so intensely. Bradley unlocks his private bathroom for me. I didn't even know it existed. I thought I knew every corner of his office.

Toward the end of our session Bradley says, "I don't quite know how to say this—but I take it as a sign of hope that you're trying so hard to find the right doctor in New Haven." A sign of hope? I'm still stinging from the email to his colleague, which he forwarded to me and which makes me sound like a World War I battlefield. *Defenses are so entrenched. Ypres. Verdun. La Somme. Fuck you.*

Well, we'll have to stop there for today.

*

I have mentioned, in reverse order: three French battlefields, Aristotle, Aristophanes, four verbs spelled out in Greek (plus references to their weak- and strong- aorist forms), Tolstoy, German for reading knowledge, a German psychoanalyst, a Czech-born New Yorker journalist, two translations of English words of Greek origin, Sylvia Plath, and a fake Victorian classicist.

I have meant to say: I was unhappy. Now I am less so.

Sibelius and Marley

History is dismantled music; slant,
bleak on gravel. One amasses silence,
another chastises silence with nettles,
stinging ferns. I oscillate in their jaws.

The whole gut listens. The ear winces
white nights in his talons; sinking mire.
He wails and a comet impales the sky
with the duel wink of a wasp's burning.

Music dismantles history; the flambeaux
in flame in his eyes with a locust plague,
a rough gauze bolting up his mouth unfolds,
so he lashes the air with ropes and roots

that converge on a dreadful zero,
a Golden Age. Somewhere, an old film,
Dusk solders on a cold, barren coast. There
I am a cenotaph of horns and stones.

ROWAN RICARDO PHILLIPS

*Never Again Would Birds'
Song Be the Same*

Eight floors below our wide-open window
As early summer sang to early dawn
And no breeze blew, a car crouched idling
Under a red traffic light that had spent
Most of the night with nothing in sight but
The rare bus or cab. I only knew the car
Was there by the boom of its stereo,
That sudden sound stirring me from deep sleep;
Her face facing mine, my face lost in hers,
We'd slept like the lines of a villanelle:
Apart, together, woven into one.
Then I rose and went to the window (how,
For some reason, the mind can't seem to rest
Until it's seen what it's heard and defines
It), and I looked out, and down, but the car
By then had already pulled away, no
Sight of it but for its dragontail of bass.
I still wonder if this really happened:
If it matters in the greater scheme of things;
Is a poem the wonder or the matter?
A little later we started our day:
Coffee, the paper, a shower; she asked,
As we Sunday relaxed, if I'd slept well;

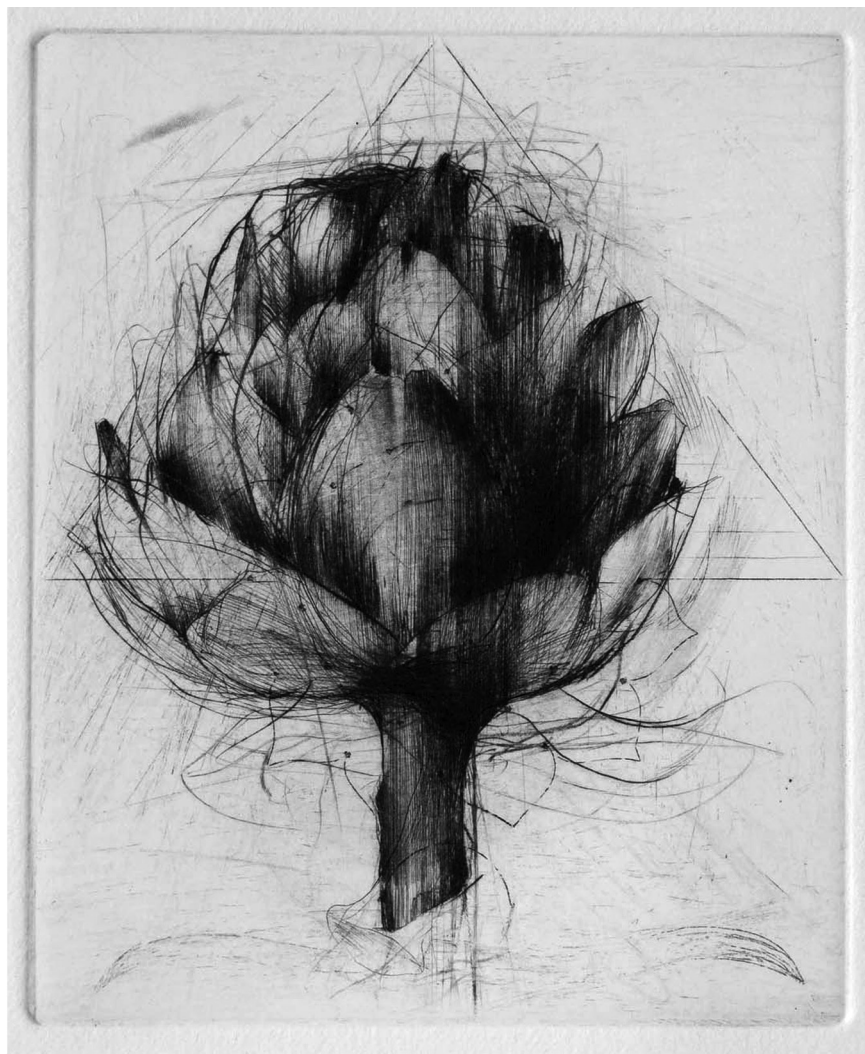
She asked me what I was humming; I stopped.
Months passed, then years, and I still have that song
In my head, like a bees' swarm burrowing
Through the skull and finding there my old self,
Which now feels as though it once knew and loved
The city more in that rare heavenly
Moment that it and I were one, just as
"Wu-Tang is here forever" cracked the dawn,
And swerving swallows raptured in Ol' Dirty's
Voice...yeah, Ol' Dirty Bastard, aka
Dirt McGirt, aka Ason Unique,
ODB, the Specialist, the dead one.

AMY HEMPEL

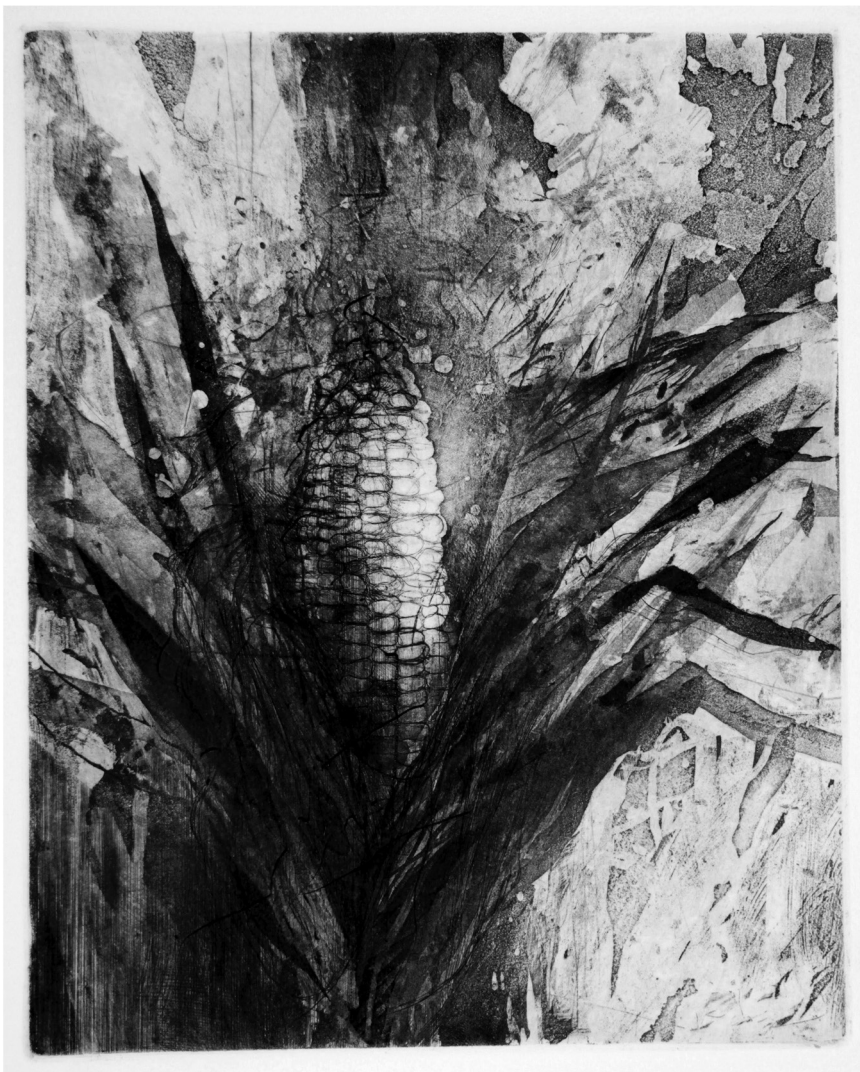
Four Calls in the Last Half-Hour

The relaxed relentlessness, the air of impersonal intimacy, that sense they create of having just been with you despite not having been with you for quite a while; of resuming a rolling conversation that you have not, in fact, been having, that was broken off rather dramatically, actually, by definitive pledges by both parties. They know this, surely, but maybe they're just so lonely that they don't care—and so grandiose that they think if they don't, you won't. Either that or they're living in another dimension, a dimension you thought that you could live in too, once. Just take me there. Just teach me the rules. You adore them for having a hundred percent of something that you have only sixty-five of, but see that most people have even less of, which is why most people don't interest you much. If the one hundred percent you're transfixed by will sacrifice a fraction of his endowment and you can add a little bit to yours, you'll both be at a formidable ninety percent—approximately equally exalted, since you'll be farther than average folks can ever dream of being. You'll be set then. The reigning couple in a private cosmos that's the best little private cosmos out there, because it's yours, all yours, and the humor there is all yours, as well as the sex, the food, the

talk, the everything. But the one with one hundred percent won't compromise and soon the eager apprentice just gives up, haunted by images of what could have been if the master had just been flexible. Which he can't be, because he's the master and doesn't have to be, because he feels he has it all already and doesn't get lonely the way we do, so why trade self-sufficiency for company. But he does get a little bored sometimes, especially on chilly weekend nights. So he picks up the phone to call one he denied. He picks up the phone again.



Jake Muirhead, *Artichoke*, 2012, etching and drypoint, 6 in. x 4 in. Courtesy the artist.



Jake Muirhead, *Husk*, 2011, etching and aquatint, 10 in. x 8 in. Courtesy the artist.



Jake Muirhead, *The Gift*, 2010, etching and drypoint, 16 in. x 15 in. Courtesy the artist.



Jake Muirhead, *Locks*, 2010, etching and aquatint, 10 in. x 8 in. Courtesy the artist.

ALAN FELDMAN

Alan in Poland

I'm probably not very Polish-looking
judging from the people I pass
though my grandmother's family came from Warsaw—
bankers, she claimed; toll takers on a bridge, according to my grandfather...
I hate loud music, but love the musicians playing flute on the street
today.

Sometimes, if I haven't heard really good live music in a while,
I cry. But here in Poland it's sunny
and I'm not crying.

My parents would have died soon after their wedding
if they'd lived here.

My own country's so young, fewer layers.
Here there are many, the top layer being the trees, all this vegetation
like a metaphor for forgiveness.

Yes, I still love the Danzig of Günter Grass,
where the kids would dive into the abandoned minesweeper
and chew seagull droppings on the breakwater...
even though it turns out Grass was conscripted into the Waffen-SS.
The young, all over the streets, don't care much about that.
They have T-shirts in English that refer to the heart:

You Rock My Heart

You Can See into My Heart...

I try to see into their hearts,

but even this bright summer light isn't bright enough.
I wish the world were like Poland on a warm July day,
my T-shirt would say.
Music tells us how we could develop if we stopped hating.
I wish I could finally finish *The Tin Drum*.
I wish I could play Vivaldi on the trumpet,
or even in a jazz band,
or even on the street in Gdańsk,
my coat spread out to receive people's zlotys.
My country is way bigger than Poland, and more varied,
but all I want to look at is July
on the Baltic, and the beaches
filled with bodies that are just visiting,
maybe on vacation, or taking an impromptu day off from work
to bring their kids to the soothing, if forgetful sea.

ALAN FELDMAN

Alan in France

I am not a young American chemical engineer living in Paris
(though Lesson One teaches me to say that).

I'm a retired professor living in Aix-en-Provence
where all the little shops play American songs.
(America, my country, where they misconstrue liberty
to mean extra-low taxes for hedge fund managers.)

My wife makes vividly colored paintings, often of France,
of old stone villages with arches, with flowers.
And Camus' molecules are in the tassels of grass
I carry in my wallet—Camus who described the lives
of the silent poor. How can I not love France?

I like to go to concerts in old churches and cry.
That's me, with the white-gray beard, looking somewhat rabbinic.
My country seems to need to punish the poor.
I like to see hunger managed. Desperation managed.
And the heat of the world managed, the way here
the trees are sublimely managed along the roadside.

Let's say music is as close as we get to heaven.
Though I play French horn and blockflöte (neither well),
I'll never get to heaven, I fear. Only France.

France whose grapes weigh more than all the guns in my country,
if we count all those gnarled ancient vines still uttering leaves.
France that pays young women to have babies.
France that sends its dispirited unemployed to spas.

When I was a child it took seven whole days
to reach here in a ship twenty blocks long.
The war was just over. People were missing legs.
But where else could the joys of peace be better celebrated?

Sixty years later, today, on the Cours Mirabeau,
they think it's time to *couper* the giant plane trees
like so many asparagus in a garden.
And that fellow, in the bleached, abundant, shadeless sunlight,
in front of the monumental fountain
symbolizing rivers tamed, canalized, and pure—
that one is me. Or rather, me in France.

ERICA FUNKHOUSER

*Skating Lessons,
Larz Anderson Park*

Tweed collar turned up against the wind,
he takes the steep steps two by two,
remembering a sentence from last night.

*In the bed of the river there were pebbles and boulders,
dry and white in the sun, and the water was clear
and swiftly moving and blue in the channels.*

If only he'd read Hemingway
fifty years ago, he'd have had a river in mind
every time he came upon a later river.

What had he missed in the swerving
tidal river that made small sucking noises
as it drilled into its muddy banks?

In the river whose freezing springs nipped
his shoulders when he dove? He consoles himself:
the things of the earth, glorious and dreadful

and inadequately remembered,
never stop coming to us in their own way,
coupled by the durable magician *and*.

Just ahead, his grandson caresses
two train cars, one in each hand.
At home, the boy has assembled an oval track

large enough to kneel in, and his companions
are a tankcar carrying milk and a flatcar
stacked with real logs and a corn-filled hopper.

They're always taking us away—
so sings the boy to engine and tender—
but after skating they'll take us home for lunch.

His older sister has already reached the rink.
Her snow pants fit perfectly, her skates are sharp.
Last week she was sure she felt the two edges

of the blade—one toward the body, one away—
but she wishes it weren't so hard to tell
which is which. She's impatient to spin and spiral,

to mirror skate with her instructor.
She can see herself gliding the length of the rink
with one leg out behind her like a knifeblade.

If only the girl who knocked her down last week
would be absent today—not sick, nothing too awful,
maybe a trip to Worcester to visit cousins.

Where the porpoise-colored Zamboni now circles
to shave and polish the white oval of ice,
there once lay a grassy swath

and two rows of perfectly aligned bay trees:
 the turn-of-the-century Italian garden
 of Isabel Weld and Larz Anderson,

whose nuptial ambition was to replace
 inherited acres of sumac and bramble
 with terraces, parterres and topiary.

Sarcophagi were shipped home from their honeymoon,
 along with antique urns and amphorae and columns.
 Every winter the potted bay trees were carried

to a cellar to be kept warm by their own boiler.
 The man catching up with his grandchildren
 has no idea what Mrs. Anderson was thinking

when she willed her impractical property
 to the Town of Brookline for public recreation,
 but he can picture her relief, mid-August,

as she climbs up past the dusty panes
 of the greenhouse, past the dust-covered cutting garden,
 until she reaches the breezy and symmetrical world

where she can look down on Boston proper
 while sitting on some old philosopher's bench.
 The butterflies in her phlox belong to no one.

Near the Warming Hut, where kneeling parents
 tighten laces in a half-dozen soothing
 and impatient languages, there once stood

a marble fountain whose four Cupids knelt
with effortless smiles. Their knees never ached.
In winter they were swaddled in burlap.

In summer, no one expected them
to do more than catch a steady trickle
of water in their ample scallop shells

and let it rain down lightly on the floating lilies
before guiding it away from the iris.
They never saw a day like this, bright snow still falling

and the sun about to break through thin clouds
and, pressed against the rink's scuffed boards, a crowd
of helmeted children waiting to master the ice.

DEBRA SPARK

Swiss Cottage

How QUEER THAT subway passengers never look you in the eye. That's what Sara Wilson is thinking, as she exits the Tube station. *Man's inhumanity to man. Nameless faces in the crowd. Oh, cruel life.* And just like that, her eyes meet the eyes of a man at the station's entrance. Fancy that. The universe reacting to her inner thoughts. What are the chances?

At first, Sara thinks it is an accidental meeting of the eyes. But the man appears to be looking at her quite pointedly. She returns his gaze. He glances away and glances back. Well, two can play that game. *She* glances away and glances back. He is middle-aged with a short haircut that emphasizes the rectangle of his forehead. It's terribly hot, so he's taken off his suit jacket—light gray, lightweight, good choice for the impossible weather—and thrown it over his forearm. His look is one of expectation. “Yes?” he might be asking. He shyly lifts a small sign that reads LIESEL ROSENTHAL. He raises his eyebrows. “Is she . . . ?”

Liesel Rosenthal. What kind of name is that? Swiss-Jewish. Sara has the horrible image of the Swiss Miss girl, the one from the cocoa mix, clawing the concrete inside a gas chamber. It's something Sara learned about in high school—the claw marks inside the gas chambers, that

is—and she's worked for most of the years since then to get the image out of her head.

Unsuccessfully, obviously.

Today is one of the worst days of Sara's life. It seems only right that such a ghastly vision should visit her.

She would like to be Liesel Rosenthal, actually. Well, she'd like the Swiss part, the ringing cowbells and chocolate shops, not the death camp part. *Liesel*. Why not?

Unfortunately, she is Sara Wilson. Not Swiss or Jewish or English even. She hails from Schenectady, New York, drear city. She's the daughter of a salesman. A salesman of what? She doesn't know. How could she not know? Because it changes, because it's vague. Spray-cleaner nozzles? Test tubes? He has sold these things. Pre-fab containers for your spring seedlings? That, too. He sells things that can be sold without a store. He gets in the car and goes out and makes deals. He seems to have a gift for persuasion. Only he's found God recently, and now he doesn't simply want to sell but to convert.

It pisses his employer off. And who is his employer? This, too, seems to change. Sara doesn't know and she doesn't care. She doesn't want to see him. And he, presumably, doesn't want to see her. It's been several years. He's never been very interested in his children. So why did he even have them? That is another thing that Sara doesn't know.

And her father is only part of the reason why she's glad that she's in London, thank you. She's in London and she's miserable, but she is at a Tube stop and not in the parking lot of a mall. There appear to be take-away shops across the road and—a surprise!—an ugly faux Swiss chalet at her back. A Swiss Cottage, she realizes. Thus the name of the Tube stop at which she has chosen to alight. Swiss Cottage. Ah-ha! A place outside of which you might expect to find a Liesel. Well, part of the reason she travels on the Underground and gets off at random places is to

learn new things. The day's errand is not in vain. She has learned a new thing.

Maybe it's not a chalet. It doesn't suggest skiing or snowy heights. It is yellow-brown with an Alpine balcony on which a banner hangs that reads *TRADITIONAL SUNDAY LUNCH, SERVED 12-4*. A few tables with green umbrellas are scattered outside, though why would anyone want to dine al fresco on such a busy street? Side of exhaust with your fish and chips? The words *YE OLDE SWISS COTTAGE* are painted on the façade of the building, just under the roof. A pub, plainly. A pub where (Sara doesn't actually need to enter to ascertain this) the glasses are dirty and the food miserable. A pub where they put a high premium on stupidity, a low one on fresh vegetables.

Grubby, Sara thinks harshly. Still, what does she care? It is London. It is Europe, and Sara wants to drop to the pavement, throw her arm around a trash can (no, rubbish bin, that's what they call them here) and say, "Please. Please let me stay."

It is time for Sara Wilson to go back. Go back to the United States. ("Hellooooo!" she wants to call to the man at the Tube stop, the one who thinks she might be Liesel, as if he might be capable of preventing her departure.) If anything announces the necessity of return, it's the day's events, but Sara can't imagine going home. Or she can imagine it all too well: her mom and that fat man she's married, the two of them parked in front of the TV, the small vase of flowers that her mom will put on the guest room dresser if Sara returns. (Nice touch! Nice touch!) The ancestral home is long gone—a crappy split-level in Cohoes traded for a different but equally crappy split-level in Schenectady. All split-levels are crappy. Why else would they come onto the real estate market so often? And her mother is ever-ready with a checkbook. No disappointment apparent. She'll take it. She doesn't need beauty in her life, because she has drama. She has Justine.

Justine is Sara's older sister.

Gladys is Sara's mother.

Someone has to be named Gladys, someone has to buy crappy split-levels, and that someone is Sara's mother.

And just because it seems there's no point in being fucked-up if you aren't also fucking someone else up, there is another character who must be noted. There is Camille. Justine's daughter. Poor Camille.

It has not been a typical week. If it *were* a typical week, Sara would not be at the Underground station at all. She would be doing what she originally planned to do today, which was go to a funeral. She would not be considering the man who is looking at her, wondering if she should approach him. She would be in another part of the city entirely, and she would be saying, "I am so sorry for your loss."

But say it *was* a typical week. Say everything had gone as it always does. In that case, back in Schenectady, Camille would be running about Gladys's split-level. And if Camille were not running around Gladys's split-level, Gladys would be heading out to get Camille at day care, so that she could come home and run around the split-level. It is to Camille's credit that she wants to run around. What Sara would do, if she were at the split-level, is collapse in a depressive heap until someone rounded her up and took her out to dinner at some place like the Red Lobster, where she would have two glasses of really lousy white wine and come home and collapse in a depressive heap.

If this was a typical week, then eventually Justine would come over to Gladys's place. She'd arrive looking long-suffering and exasperated, though why Justine should be exasperated when *she* is the exasperating one is anyone's guess. She would be wearing the uniform for whatever crappy job she has at the moment, Arby's or Dunkin' Donuts. Camille's father, of course, is missing in action. He actually might be in prison. (Justine has been in prison. In the past, she supplemented her Arby's

pay with some sex for reimbursement. That afforded her a five-day vacation in the pen.) The plain fact is Justine's not a hundred percent sure she knows who Camille's father is. "Why not insist on a paternity test?" Sara has said. That might land Justine some cash. She already has herpes. Why not get everything she can out of the bargain?

But this is just Sara's take on the matter. She doesn't like her sister. She doesn't like the way she treats her daughter. Not long before she moved to London, Sara had taken Camille to a school picnic because Justine couldn't get off her shift in time. When Justine finally arrived, she didn't even walk onto the playground where hot dogs were being dispensed and the kids were chasing each other. "I want to stay," Camille had raced up to the playground gate to say. It wasn't an obnoxious insistence; it was more of a gleeful announcement. She was having fun! That day, her wavy hair was long and pretty, like a hippie girl's, and she'd actually woven a flower garland—well, a weed garland, they were dandelions—for her hair. Justine had whispered to Sara, "I hate all these people. They're fucking her over in school. They're just blowing her off."

The teachers had actually seemed quite nice. Earlier one of them had enthused, "You have sunbursts in your hair," and leaned down and given Camille a little hug.

"Come on," Justine had said, tossing her head in the direction of the parking lot, and Camille had left, not throwing the tantrum that another kid might.

What runs in the family appears to be not giving a shit about your offspring. Or caring but being so busy taking care of the fuck-ups that once you've picked the wildflowers in the backyard, you need a break, you need to watch some TV.

No. Sara cannot go back to that. She'll kill herself, before she goes back to that.

And she means that literally. She'll slit her wrists. In the bathtub. She's already promised herself this.

And what is Sara doing, as she thinks about her horrible family? She is looking at the man with the sign and trying to figure out his lips. It's amazing the number of things you can think about at once. She's trying to figure out why his lips look so weird. They're too red. They're too soft for a man, but he's pretty plainly a man. He has the expensive look of a banker, someone recently moved from air conditioning to the hot press of the day. The requisite circles of sweat under his armpits. The day's tie loosened but not removed.

The radios and TV sets are going on about the heat wave. This morning, when Sara was still in the apartment—she likes calling it “a flat”—she had run a washcloth in cold water and worn it as a hat on her head as she tidied up.

“Are you Liesel Rosenthal?” the man finally asks, hopefully.

In the twenty-four years that Sara has been alive, she has not often been in airports, but when she has been there, and when she has seen people in the baggage claim holding up signs with names, she has had the fantasy of going up and saying, “Hi. I'm here.” It would be a way of getting a free taxi ride is what she has thought.

“Are you Liesel Rosenthal?” the man repeats.

“Yes,” she says, and she feels cold with fear at what she is about to do. “I am.”

The man looks down at his watch. “You're early,” he says.

Sara looks at her own watch. It is 5:45 p.m. She doesn't know how she has managed to make it this far into the day.

“Well,” Sara says and in the Rolodex of possible manners for this interchange, she picks “chirpy.” “I *like* to be early.”

“Me, too,” the man says. “So we're off to a good start.”

“Right,” Sara says. She is supposed to be at the funeral in fifteen minutes. Her boyfriend, Michael, must have figured out that she's not coming back to the apartment. Maybe he'll go without her. More likely he'll stay home without having anyone to goad him into attending. “It's not like I really knew the guy,” he's said more than once, over the course

of the week. "He's your *landlord*," Sara has been replying, as if Michael might forget his relationship to the man if Sara didn't fill him in. Michael is the kind of guy who might skip a funeral, but once there will serve happily as pallbearer. Actually if you say to Michael, "Will you come over and take this pile of rocks, load it onto a truck, and drive it across town, and then unload it? And after that will you reload the truck and bring the rocks back here?" Michael will say, "Sure. OK." But if there were a rock in the path leading up to his apartment building, he'd never think to move it. Someone has to *ask* him to do the favor. It isn't like he needs the gratitude either. The man has no ego. He just needs someone to give him the idea to act.

"I thought you'd be younger," the man with the red lips says.

"Oh," Sara says. "How old did you think I'd be?"

"Twenty-two. That's what the agency said."

She feels a flutter of fear. What is "the agency?" A matchmaking service? Or...not a sex thing surely? You wouldn't just hold up a sign, if you were expecting a hooker? Would you? Tootsie Hendries? Blowsalot Smith?

"Almost right. I'm twenty-four," Sara says. She might as well tell the truth about something.

"Well," the man says. "I guess we should go somewhere to talk."

"That sounds good to me."

"Maybe you should suggest a place." He smiles. Ingratiatingly, Sara thinks. He appears to be trying to win *her* approval. Perhaps the agency is a job agency, and she is, of all things, interviewing *him* for a job. But how likely is that? A twenty-something interviewing a forty-something? "I don't know this neighborhood," he adds.

"Oh, I don't really either," she says.

"The agency said you were from here," the man says.

"Did they? She coughs. "I am. I mean, I was ...a long time ago. Things have changed."

"I thought you grew up in Lucerne."

"Yes," Sara agrees unhelpfully, leaving him to resolve the discrepancy.

Behind the man, she notices a blond girl, probably twenty-two, her hair parted neatly on the side and pulled back into a ponytail. The strap of a schoolgirl-type bag crosses her chest. She appears to be waiting for someone. The real Liesel Rosenthal, no doubt.

"Oh, I remember," she says quickly. "Over there. There's a place we can get some tea." She points down the road, away from the Swiss Cottage. "It's called...it's called," she starts to walk and the man follows. "I'll know it when I see it," she says, picking up her pace, in what she hopes is an imperceptible manner. He seems unfazed by her brisk trot, and he matches her stride, happy apparently to begin whatever it is that they are about to begin. Sara walks a block, then another block, all the while saying things like "I remember it as being here, but it might have been...Oops, no sorry, I guess a bit further." But she doesn't see anything promising. There's a low-rent electronics shop, a bank, a laundry, a filthy-looking nail salon. Stores with their grates pulled down. "I guess it's gone," she says. "Things turn over so quickly in this neighborhood." Of course, she has no idea if this is true.

"Well, we'll take it another block," the man says, and just then, they come to a narrow Indian restaurant.

"Maybe we can go here?" Sara suggests.

"Sure. Why not?"

They step inside.

"Two," the man says to the waiter, though this hardly seems necessary. They are obviously two people, and just as obviously the restaurant is empty. They don't need any help finding a seat. Perhaps the food is terrible. People always say that the only good food in London is Indian. Sara has repeated this wisdom herself, though actually Indian food gives her phenomenal gas. It doesn't quite seem cosmopolitan to own up to this, though, even to herself.

The waiter hands over large menus, but the man says, "We'll just be having something to drink."

So this is not a date for a super-early dinner. "I'm going to have a beer," he tells Sara. When the waiter comes back, Sara asks for some tea, smooths the skirt of her black dress over her thighs. Michael always says she looks sexy in this dress. "But not too sexy?" Sara asks the part of her brain now reserved for Michael's opinions. "Right?" Why inquire, though? Like Michael, her inner voice is rarely sympathetic.

"What shall I call you?" Sara says. She is hoping the question will make sense, that he has one of those names that has two versions. Don't most men? Michael or Mike? Lawrence or Larry? Higgledy Piggledy Pop or just Pop?

"David. David, I should have said. If you called me 'Mr. Burke,' I'd go looking for my father. And Martha, when you meet her. She goes by Mattie. Mattie Burke. She took my name. I know some women don't these days, but she did."

"I'm looking forward to meeting her," Sara says automatically. Is this the right thing to say?

"Yes, we'll get there. Right now, I want to ask you a few questions. I mean, I have your character references." He reaches into his suit pocket and pulls out a fat white envelope. "You have quite the fan club." He unfolds the pages within the envelope, makes some mumbling sounds as he scans what's there. "...and Mattie called the...let's see..." He is holding what looks, from Sara's side of the table, like an application form, "...the Nickelsons for a chat."

He smiles at her. He still seems to be trying to win her over, though why would he be doing that, if *he* is interviewing *her*?

"Well, they adore you, as you must know."

"Yes," Sara agrees, warming to the idea of a fan club. There is something fat and satisfied in his face, she decides, though he is not fat, and his eyes are curious, in a way that makes him seem kind.

Oh, what is the matter with her? There's nothing fat and satisfied in his face! She's looking for flaws. It's purely self-preservation, this fault-finding. She's trying to make herself feel better about herself.

"And then the letters on file are very complimentary as well. The bag game. That's a clever idea."

"Right," Sara says. What could this possibly mean?

"Well, our kids are just about the same age as the Nickelsons. At least when you started with them." He reaches into his back pocket and pulls out his wallet, flips it open for a picture of a beefy little boy with a wide smile and a girl with dark brown hair. The two of them hold opposite ends of a kite, and the boy has his fingers spread into a peace sign above the girl's head. "Alfred's eleven," David points. "And Penelope's seven. Penelope's the one we really have to worry about. She's very attached to her mother."

"I love children," Sara says, because the nature of this interview is finally dawning on her. "I always have. Even as a little girl, you know, I'd play mommy with my dolls. Not that...you know I want to *be* a mother yet. It's good just helping out with other people's kids."

"Now I know you have your studies..."

Sara doesn't say anything. What studies could she possibly have? One of Michael's friends is a reporter, and he once told her that he kept quiet, when people finished answering a question, because eventually they started talking again. Even when they didn't want to. Silence prodded them on. That's how he got his best information.

"So the trick will be to balance your studies with Mattie's schedule. Thank God you don't have the coursework, but I assume you'll go to the library."

"Yes."

"I almost did a dissertation," David says. "In philosophy, not English though."

"Oh?"

"I gave it up, thank goodness. I'm not quite cut out for the penurious life of the mind."

"Oh." She gives a little laugh. "I'm thinking of giving mine up, too." David looks a little startled.

"Perhaps the agency didn't mention?"

"No."

"Well, I guess they can't tell you everything." Sara smiles.

"No."

Sara keeps quiet. He seems disappointed.

"Well, more time for the kiddos then."

"Exactly," Sara says. "That's *exactly* what I was thinking."

He starts in on his questions. What would she do with the kids on a rainy day? On a sunny day? Does she mind doing a little cooking and laundry? What would she do, if the children wouldn't go to sleep?

Sara eagerly lists off activities. (Museums, gardens, playgrounds, games, crafts, puppet shows. What else were you to say?) Then she says she loves to clean. (True. It helps when she's anxious.) And that she doesn't mind sitting in a room till a child falls asleep. (Also true.)

David seems inordinately delighted by her answers. What did others tell him? Sara pictures a stout woman with thick ankles and the beginnings of a gray mustache saying, "A few hours in front of the telly ain't a bad thing. Helps keep 'em inside. Away from the nutters, don't you know? Mind you, a bit of grime never hurt nobody. More important things in life than washing up the dishes, I always say."

Sara smiles at David and says, "I remember my childhood so well. I remember what I wanted to do—the things that were important—and that helps me. You know. When I'm with children, I know what they want. And often I want it too. I guess I'm a kid at heart."

Is this too much? "Kid at heart." Yeesh.

David says, "I can't tell you how good this is to hear." He takes a sip of his beer, then clears his throat. "So before we head over to meet them, I wanted to talk pay and also let you know about the apartment. It's in

the basement, but it still gets good light. It has its own bathroom, but not a kitchen. We'll be expecting you to join us for meals on your days on. But we're thinking Monday and Tuesdays for days off. The girl we had before went to visit her aunt on those days, but you're perfectly welcome to stay, and we aren't the sort of people who mind your having visitors. We'd prefer no overnight guests, if you know what I mean, but we don't want you to feel like a maid. We want you to feel like part of the family. We offer five hundred pounds for the month. Needless to say you're to help yourself to anything in the kitchen and anything you need for the apartment is on us. If there's something you need at the market, we'll pick it up. The last girl wanted everything off the books, so we paid her in cash, but we'll do it any way you want, of course."

Sara tries not to smile. She would most definitely like everything in cash and off the books.

"How does that sound?"

And since there is no point in lying about this, Sara says, "That sounds great."

"Mattie has the final say, of course. We'll need to see you with the kids, but I have a good feeling about this," David says.

Sara's week had started badly. On Sunday, the phone rang at Michael's, and when he said, "It's for you," she was stumped. As far as she knew no one had her number at Michael's. Or no one who wouldn't want to chat with Michael first. She hadn't given the number out.

"Who is it?" she said, extending her arm.

Michael shrugged. "Friend of yours, I guess." He was on his way out to meet his own friend at a pub.

But it wasn't a friend. It was her mother.

"Hi, honey. How are you?"

"I'm OK." Something always tightened in her chest when she heard from her mother. She felt guilty for not wanting to talk to her.

"I hate to bother you, but we've got a situation here."

Instantly, Sara knew something was up with Justine. "What's happened?"

"Well, Justine had a little run-in with the law."

Oh, crap, Sara thought. So far, Justine had been relatively lucky in her run-ins with the law. Three years ago, she'd had the bad taste to put a gun to a man's head. Criminal threatening with a firearm! ("It was a drug thing," Justine had whispered to Sara, in the same way she might have said "It's a women's thing" to a man wondering why she always brought her pocketbook with her when she went to the bathroom.) "And anyway," Justine told Sara, "It wasn't like the gun was loaded." *And she was just trying to be persuasive!* The location of the bullets hardly seemed to matter to Sara, but it did to the courts, thank goodness. They disregarded the firearm attachment to the charge. So Justine got eight months at York Correctional Institution for a misdemeanor.

Gladys cleared her throat and began, "So first there were some break-ins in the neighborhood."

"Jesus."

"And then someone stole our TV."

"Oh!" Sara said relieved. She had thought her mother was implying that Justine was responsible for the break-ins.

"Yeah, she took the TV," Sara's mother said flatly.

"*She* stole the TV?"

Her mother didn't answer. Instead she started into a different story, and it took a moment for Sara to catch on that her mother was telling a story about Justine's car being pulled over by the police.

"Actually, the light was out—you know that whatchacallit—the headlight. Jesus Christ, I can't remember a thing. The headlight was out. A padiddle."

Sara's family used to play a game where you were supposed to call out "Padiddle" if you saw a car with only one headlight. It wasn't all bad,

her childhood. She needed to remember that. Her mom had tried to make things fun.

"So the cops pulled her over just to let her know that she needed to get a new light, and I think she was three sheets to the wind so they had her step out of the car. She was a little...belligerent, I guess you'd say. One thing leads to another. They search the car, thinking drugs, but instead they find half the neighborhood's stereos in the trunk."

Sara's mother took a breath. "But that's not why I'm calling"

"It's not?"

"No, I've actually got some bad news."

Her mother's voice was grave. Hadn't she just delivered bad news?

"Justine's got breast cancer. She's going to have to have a mastectomy."

"She what?"

"She's got breast cancer. She called me last night and told me. I guess she just found out."

Sara couldn't process what her mother was saying, so she said, stupidly, "She's twenty-eight."

"Well, you'd think I'd know that."

"No one gets breast cancer at twenty-eight."

"Well, she did." *How precocious!* Sara thought, panic already starting to take her over. Justine: bad at reading, bad at math, below grade level in every way, but not, it turned out, behind in the way you'd most hope to be behind. Her mother went on, "She was taking a shower. Felt a big lump in her armpit, says she went into the clinic and they let her know what it was."

"What clinic?"

"I don't know. She's got to schedule the surgery." *Oh, God.* Sara felt cold. As her mother continued to talk, Sara snaked the phone over to the bookcase. She had a copy of *Our Bodies, Our Selves*—she'd brought it all the way from New York—and she slipped it out, started flipping

the pages. So far, she'd only really perused the "emotional well-being" section. She knew she had some problems in that arena.

"There's another problem."

"What are you talking about?" There can't be *another* problem. She had done something bad and something bad had been done to her. Didn't that about cover the range of possibilities?

"So you know when the cops pulled Justine over, she didn't have her license?"

"No?"

"Well, it was suspended. After the DWI."

"Jesus," Sara said. She hadn't known about a DWI, but why not? Why not throw that in? A DWI in a community where it was impossible to get around without a car?

"And so when they asked for her name, she didn't want to give it to them, because she knew they'd look up her record and everything. She was telling them the car belonged to Bill, and she didn't know about what was in the trunk." Sara presumed Bill was a boyfriend. Not a name she'd heard in connection with Justine before.

"So what'd she do?"

"She gave the police your name."

Like the news about the cancer, this didn't register with Sara for a moment.

"So they ran you and that was a relief. You know, that you have a valid license and all."

Sara was actually afraid of driving and rarely did it, but, it was true, she had her license, though it was going to lapse in a month. She'd have to retake all the tests, since she wouldn't be back in New York to renew it. "They bought that? Why didn't they fingerprint her or something?"

"Why would they fingerprint her? It checked out. And then I came to bail her out, and we have the same last name, so nothing struck them as fishy."

Sara didn't say anything.

"So we're in a tricky situation," her mother said and then noisily chewed on something. Was she eating *nuts*? *Popcorn*? Something a little salty to accompany the movie of her life? She cleared her throat. "While we wait for the trial, I mean. You know, because she's going to get some serious time, what with the previous arrests and the DWI, she's not really looking like an upstanding citizen."

Sara was only half listening to her mother now. Wouldn't having breast cancer be enough? Couldn't she argue that that should be her punishment? How do you even *do* prison with cancer? she wondered. Years earlier, Sara had been in an emergency room after a snow blower cut off a piece of a friend's finger. (He'd been trying to dislodge a twig from the blade.) Sara had gone with the friend to the hospital, then lingered while a doctor stitched him up. In the waiting room, Sara noticed a thin, delicate Asian man in an orange jumpsuit. He had hair down to his waist and a pencil line of a mustache. Sara had been looking at him for a long time, before she realized he was handcuffed to his chair. What could he have possibly done? Such a slight person? And why was he in the ER? Everyone who wasn't already on a stretcher seemed to be vomiting or bleeding, but he was still, not looking at the TV. Just sitting in the chair and thinking.

Would they take Justine to an operating room, remove her breast, and then slip her into an orange jumpsuit and send her back to a cell? Sara remembers a friend's mother who was always taking out her prosthetic boob and putting it in her pocket and accidentally sending it through the washing machine. Would they even give Justine a prosthetic? Or let her have reconstruction? Of course, Justine didn't have health insurance. Who would pay for the necessary part of the treatment? Sara's heart was racing. Oh, Justine! She did so many things wrong, but she didn't deserve this! Though, of course, no one really "deserved" cancer. Not that the idea of matching that particular misfortune with criminal behavior didn't make a kind of sense. Murder?

That'll get you pancreatic cancer, my friend. Robbery? OK, we'll let you have uterine cancer, no spread. Shoplifting some licorice? You're golden, but we'll give you a little basal cell carcinoma to scare you off any future bad behavior.

And just as Sara was thinking all this, Gladys said, "Justine just feels she can't *do* prison with cancer." It was as if she was talking about college course options. *Justine just doesn't feel she can do physics and organic chemistry. It would be a little too hard.* "Anyway," Gladys breathed, "that's the whole point of my call. Wanted to know if you could help out."

"Help?" Sara said but then realized what her mother was asking. She wanted Sara to confirm her sister's lie, to pretend that *she'd* been the drunk girl with a bootful of loot and the sudden desire to mouth off to a cop.

"I...OK," she said. "But, no, I..." She stopped. Lying would make her a criminal too, and surely no judicial system would fall for such a ruse. "I guess I don't really want to do that, Mom." And then, because this seemed so disloyal, she added, "I mean if it would honestly help Justine, I would help. But I don't really think it would work, and it would just kind of get me in trouble."

"Well, you don't need to decide today," her mother said pleasantly, as if she hadn't heard Sara's words. "The case is pending trial. But we'll need to know before too long. I don't really want to ask you. I know your sister is doing a terrible thing here. I'm just—" And here her mother stopped, and Sara realized she was, of course, crying. "Just really frightened for her. You know?" Her voice had grown small, little girlish.

"Oh, of course, Mom. Of course. I'm sorry. I'm *sorry*." She started to cry, too. "Should I come home?"

"No, no. What would coming home do? Let's talk in a day or two, though. We'll figure it out then. I mean what the best thing to do is. I don't know."

Sara had hung up and dried her own eyes. She finally reached the breast cancer section of *Our Bodies, Our Selves*. There, on the upper

left corner of the page, was a woman, apparently outdoors, her arms jubilantly thrown asunder—*Oh, how I celebrate myself!*—and she had a chest with one full breast and one zipper. Or that’s what the scar looked like to Sara, so Sara did what she thought you should do when you looked at such a thing. She screamed. Then she slumped down onto her couch and sobbed. She couldn’t believe this was going to happen to her sister.

The rest of the week Sara flip-flopped between confusion and tears. It was impossible to know if she should do what her mom was asking her to do. Michael was no help. He offered an initial ten minutes of concern, then made it clear that Sara’s weeping irritated him. “Come on now,” he’d say. “Come on.” Translation: shut up.

Michael and Sara had met through an art professor, back in New York. One day, the professor had told Sara, “You should meet Michael. You’re both talented.”

“Oh?” Sara said.

She had seen Michael in the studio. His British accent interested her, but she wasn’t attracted exactly. His too-round face with its boyish haircut—parted on the side and neatly combed against his scalp—made him look a little dopey. But she’d liked the compliment—her professor thought she was talented!—so when the professor had an end-of-semester gathering for students, Sara sought Michael out. He was from London, it turned out, just in Albany for the spring semester. Sara didn’t last long at the party; the professor had cats, and she was wildly allergic. But when she left, Michael came. She wasn’t even sure she wanted him to.

But then that was that.

Sara followed Michael back to London. He had an apartment rent-free in a building off Clapham High Street. In return, he served as the building’s janitor, replacing light bulbs, trimming hedges, and minding the rubbish bins. Otherwise, Michael didn’t have a job, just some dwindling funds from a school loan. Eventually Sara found herself standing

over the classifieds, saying, “What about this? What about this?” while he rejected every alternative.

She didn’t have a work permit. What were they going to live on? Finally, Sara dragged Michael to a job interview. The restaurant down the road was looking for a baker. It was a place that specialized in cinnamon buns the size of a baby’s head. Also something called a Bunty Cake made of croissant dough, shaped into a biscuit round and drizzled with orange syrup.

So now that was Michael’s job. Making pastries. You couldn’t get him to do anything, but once he had an assignment, he kept at it, until someone told him to stop. He was an object at rest, until someone forced him to be an object in motion. Then once he had the motion thing going, he stuck with that. It made him, in his own way, dependable. Sara appreciated him for that. Or she tried to.

While Michael worked, Sara made economical meals and took over the janitorial chores. The hominess of the set-up appealed to her. Still, eventually Michael and she started bickering. Sara guessed they should break up, but she didn’t want to go back to New York. Months passed. Then a year. She was unclear on whether she was in the country illegally or not. The authorities had insisted on seeing her return ticket at the airport when she first arrived, but she hadn’t had one. This caused a fuss, but eventually they let her through. She knew she couldn’t just stay indefinitely, but she hadn’t figured out how visas worked. Was she supposed to have one? After the one-year mark in London, she had the idea she could only stay if she was Michael’s fiancée, so she called herself that, and he went along with it. He was just as daft as she was about the rules. One time, she went to the UK immigration office to try to figure out what the options were. “I’m asking for a friend,” she had said. “I’m just here on holiday.” The people in the immigration office didn’t seem to like her “I’m just asking for a friend” line. Frightened, Sara pretended she needed to go to the bathroom and escaped out a side door.

When she thought about going back to the United States, she thought about lying right down on the pavement and going to sleep for the rest of her life. It wasn't just her family. America with its rest stops and malls, its cars and ubiquitous TV screens. It was a tremendous country, and yet it made her feel claustrophobic.

She'd have to make it work a little longer with Michael.

Michael and Sara's fighting had taken a turn for the worse this week. Of all weeks. You'd think he'd manage not to be such a lunky nobody the week that her sister got cancer and that...that, who knew? That Sara was going to have to fly home? On whose dime she wanted to know? She had some money. She'd been working under the table for a frame shop. Michael's friend Nancy was the owner. If Sara earned enough, she might have gone off on her own, tried London without Michael, but she didn't have enough, and she couldn't get more work without a permit. Sara didn't fancy using what cash she had to confess to a crime she'd never committed. Only if she didn't, what would happen to her sister?

Michael shrugged. She'd figure it out, he said.

But that wasn't what they fought about this week. What they fought about was stupid.

On Tuesday, Michael got a faux leather lounge chair from a tenant who was moving out. It was one of the ugliest things Sara had ever seen. The arms were wooden wagon wheels, and the outline of a cowboy hat was stitched to the seatback. If Sara could have convinced herself the chair was campy and funny—something an artist might have—she might have been able to live with it. But the chair was really just ugly. It was something that that fat guy her mother had married would buy and fart into while he watched TV. It was a chair that had been collecting fat guy's farts for decades, and now it was in her pretty apartment with the wood floors and the white-and-black bathroom tiles, and the

abandoned antique washbasin that she'd found on the street and was using as a side table.

Sara actually hadn't seen the chair until Wednesday morning when she woke up. She'd heard some banging around the night before but hadn't thought much of it, beyond the fact that Michael was going to be exhausted in the morning. He had to get up at four a.m. for the bakery, but he hadn't arranged his sleep schedule around his new work hours.

She called him at the bakery in the morning to talk about the chair. "I hate it," she said. "Let's get rid of it."

"But Joe gave it to me."

"But I hate it."

"But Joe gave it to me."

"He's not going to know if we get rid of it."

"How are we going to get rid of it? It's so heavy. We barely got it into the apartment as is. And you know how big Joe is."

"I can't stand it. I really can't stand it. It gives me the creeps."

"It's just a bloody chair, Sara."

"It's a big and ugly chair. It stands for...don't you understand?" she said and started to cry.

But he didn't. He didn't understand, and he didn't get how terrifying it was that Justine had cancer and how Sara really was going to have to go back to the United States and deal with all this. She'd made a joke of it on Monday night when they were out to dinner with friends—"My crazy family!"—and everyone thought it was appalling and funny, though the cancer part certainly darkened the humor of it all. Still, what a thing for her sister to do! Give Sara's name to a cop!

"I can't listen to this," Michael said of her crying and hung up.

He hung up! She couldn't believe he'd hang up. So she called him back. "How could you hang up on me? My sister's got cancer, and I..."

"I'm at work. I can't do this right now, Sara." He hung up again.

But Sara knew he was alone in the kitchen with the giant dough-mixing machine. No one else came in until seven.

Sara called back. But the phone just rang and rang. So she hung up and called again. She couldn't believe he wouldn't pick up the phone. She hung up and called back again. This time the phone was busy.

Sara got dressed and went down to the bakery. She knocked fiercely at the door to the restaurant—the bakery was located off the foyer inside—and eventually Michael opened the door and let her in.

“How could you just hang up?”

“I'm at work,” he said, tense.

“I know you are at work,” she hissed. “There's not a single person I admire who I can imagine having such a chair. It just speaks to me of stupidity and grossness and...”

His shirt was sprinkled with flour, as if he'd just come in from a light snowfall.

“Sara, it's OK. It's OK,” he said more gently. “Things are just getting to you this week. We can get rid of the chair. It's not worth getting this upset.”

“OK,” she said, her voice small and sullen. It was hard to back off her upset, now that she'd worked her way into it.

“It's all right. Just go home. I'll see you later. Give me a kiss.”

She pecked his cheek, and he wrapped his arms around her.

“OK,” she sniffed and turned for the door. Her body still felt angry, but he had agreed to what she wanted. She needed to stop. Sometimes the idea of killing herself didn't just attach itself to the idea of going home. Why had she just gone so berserk? Sometimes it all just felt like too much and she wanted herself to go away.

That night, she and Michael went out with Nancy and Roman. Roman was Nancy's roommate. Sara couldn't tell if they were a couple as well. The four met at a corner pub. When she arrived, Sara leaned over and kissed Michael and said, “He knows I'm only using him so I can get a visa, but he puts up with me.”

Everyone laughed, so Sara felt that she'd just said it to be outrageous, and people knew that, and things were really OK between her and Michael. She wanted things to be OK.

"You need to become a maid," Nancy said. "Then you can have a visa for five years. That's what I hear anyway."

"I'm not sure that's right," Roman said.

"I can clean," Sara said hopefully.

"Absolutely," Michael put in. "She likes things clean." He turned to Sara and said, "Can I give them an example?"

She shrugged an OK. She knew what he was going to tell them.

"OK," he said and began the story.

One weekend, Michael and Sara had gone to the Cotswolds, and a fellow who worked at the bakery—his name was Snodgrass—had crashed at their place. Snodgrass was a big mystery to people. No one knew where he lived or slept. Sara assumed he was using the bakery job as a cover for what he was really doing, which was dealing drugs. He was fat and had a long beard and long hair like a member of ZZ Top. He always wore a leather jacket and sunglasses, even in the rain. Sara hadn't wanted him to stay, but what could she say? It was Michael's apartment. When they came home, Sara saw her plastic cookie container on a table by the bed. Sara baked cookies once a week, keeping some and wrapping the rest in foil to give to neighbors and people at the frame shop. She liked surprising people with unexpected gifts. She had a fondness for a peanut butter cookie with a chocolate kiss pressed into it, a super-indulgent surprise. Michael opened the container and peeked inside. Then he slammed the lid down.

"What's that?" Sara had said.

"Nothing," Michael said.

"What?" she insisted.

He cleared his throat, then said, "Snodgrass's beard."

Nancy and Roman roared when Michael got to the punch line. Michael said, "Sara went nuts. She fumigated the apartment."

Sara laughed with everyone. It was funny now. Less so when she was scrubbing out the apartment. Every possible pubic hair in the bathtub had struck her as an affront. Ditto the un-wiped spills and

crumbs on her kitchen counter. Snodgrass's leavings. He seemed the sort of man whose body might serve as host for a variety of biting insects.

Michael followed the Snodgrass story with one about the cowboy chair. Everyone laughed and Sara said, "I know, I know! I was being ridiculous." And she felt how crazy it was to get so worked up about a chair. It was just a chair! How could she have her priorities so out of line, especially this week of all weeks?

Still, after their beers, Roman helped Michael carry the cowboy chair down to the street. Nancy and Sara waited outside while they did it. "Blimey!" Nancy said when they finally dropped the chair at the curb. "That's the ugliest chair I've ever seen!" She kissed Sara good night. "Men," she whispered in her ear. "Idiots. Every one of them." Sara started to tear up in gratitude. "Honest to God," Nancy went on. "That chair is grounds for divorce. And you're not even married."

The chair is still sitting on the curb. No one seems inclined to take it. It's not the sight of the thing that has brought Sara to Swiss Cottage though. It's not the week of off-and-on crying, the sobs that Sara can't stop. It's this very day, which started with a six a.m. phone call. Her mother, surprisingly chipper. "So things are all sorted out," Gladys said.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, your dad did something right for a change. He got them to throw out the charges against Justine, and it seems they'll agree to let her go if she'll enter this crazy place that he's got down there." Down there, Sara knew, meant North Carolina, where her father lived with his new wife—younger, natch; dottily Christian, ditto. "They've got some Christian rehab, and if Justine goes and stays clean, she doesn't need to go to prison. He managed to convince the neighbors not to press charges. He can do the sweet talk. I'll give him that. He told them it would be the Christian thing to do, that Justine just needs a little of the Lord's help." She snorted. "He kept the TV, though."

"What are you talking about?"

"Our TV. Your father decided that he'd like to own it. A little payment for his trouble."

"But what's going to happen to Justine?"

"She's going to North Carolina. I'll keep Camille."

"So who's going to be her doctor?"

"Oh, that!" Her mother made a farting sound with her lips. "Justine doesn't have cancer. She was just saying that. So you'd feel sorry for her and help her out of jail."

The way her mother said this it was as if they all knew from the start that the cancer story was a lie.

"Mom. I believed her." It didn't seem like you could feel anger and gratitude at the same time, but Sara was managing it.

"Oh, I did, too. She really fooled me there." Her mother had a "just folks" dumbness she used when she didn't want to deal with the complexity of things. She wasn't dumb, but sometimes it was a way to get by. Or maybe she was too relieved for outrage. "She got us both, I guess," her mother added.

"Right," Sara said, sarcastic. "That she did." Didn't her mother *care*? About what Justine had done? About what she had asked Sara to do?

Sara was relieved that Justine was healthy. She was relieved not to have to take the fall for Justine. But she was also furious. "It all worked out in the end," her mother said cheerfully, and then sensing Sara's emotion without Sara speaking, she added, "Why are you upset? You always get so upset."

"Yeah," Sara snarled into the phone. "*I'm* the problem here." Abruptly, before she had a chance to reconsider, she hung up.

Then she went and put on a black sleeveless dress, because it was time for Colin Gardner's funeral.

What a day! What a lark! (Sara had read Virginia Woolf. Well, part of Virginia Woolf, in her first semester at college.) What a plunge!

(The idea of Virginia Woolf vaguely appealed. Not because she'd liked reading her—she hadn't really—but because Woolf had drowned herself in a river. It made Sara darkly curious. Not that Sara saw herself doing that, though sometimes when she was on the subway platform, she thought, as the train was coming, "What if I just step in? What if I just do it?")

Michael and Sara hadn't known Colin well. He was in his eighties at the time of his death. Still, it seemed only right that they show respect to their former landlord. Sara didn't know why she could mourn life's passing and daydream about offing herself at the same time. She could have that step-in-front-of-the-subway feeling and then flinch in fright when she started to stumble on a staircase. Nothing made any sense.

Today at the funeral, people would cry and talk about Colin's death as if it was a peculiar tragedy, something original Colin had done, instead of something we all do sooner or later.

Sooner, Sara thought. Sooner for her, if she had to go home, if she couldn't get the right papers. She was off the hook with Justine, but not off the hook altogether.

She could not, she recited to herself, for the billionth time, go home. She could not. She could not. She had this recurring dream in which Americans said, "Fries with that?" no matter what the context. The postmistress as she extended a book of stamps. "Fries with that?" A beggar whose sign didn't say, "Homeless. Please help," but "Fries with that?"

Michael dressed for the funeral, too, and then he came into the kitchen where Sara was polishing her shoes with a rag. He'd donned a heavy wool suit jacket, ugly and brown. It was just the sort of thing that a man who owned a chair with wagon wheels might think attractive. "You can't wear that," Sara said.

"It's the only coat I have," he said.

"It's too hot. You'll pass out."

"But it's the only coat I have," he said, stubborn, annoyed.

"You don't need to wear a suit jacket," she said, her voice rising. "No one will care. You can just go in your shirt and slacks."

"I've got to wear a coat."

"No you don't," she snapped. "You'll look like a fool."

He gave her a look and said, "Of course, it's all about appearances," as if he'd finally uncovered her small-minded bourgeois motives, as if heat prostration wasn't the issue here.

"I just can't believe you. I really can't believe you," she shouted, furious. How dare he turn this into a criticism of her? "You'll look like a fool *to me*. I don't care what other people think. *I* care that you're not stupid."

"Don't call me stupid," Michael said calmly.

"I'm..." Sara looked around the room. She was looking for something to do. Action seemed to be required. She said, "I'm taking out the trash!" She bundled it up in a fury, carried it at arm's length, so as not to dirty her dress, and clattered down the stairs. Out the building she went, stopping once at the landing to tug her dress down before she turned for the narrow alley that led to the rubbish bins. From the landing, she could see right into the neighbor's dining room window. She often noticed the family that lived here. The kids always seemed to be drawing pictures at the dining room table, and once Sara saw the whole family lighting Sabbath candles. It had seemed like a beautiful custom to her. Sara liked most religions that weren't her own; sometimes she wished she were a Buddhist; other times an obsessed Catholic. Today, though, as she passed by the open dining room window, she heard the mother say, "It's just been terrible. It's so, so hot, and the crazy woman next door won't stop screaming."

Instantly, Sara had that same feeling that she'd had when her mother said Justine had breast cancer, that same growing terror.

It was her, of course. The mother was talking about her. *She* was the crazy woman next door.

Sara ran the rest of the way to the rubbish bins. She lifted a lid. Inside the bin, there was a broken plastic bag, which looked like it

contained—but this couldn't be—a dead animal, and there were maggots, hundreds of white wormy maggots, swarming all over the thing. Had someone thrown out *a dog*? Sara slammed the lid down but knew she had to pick it up again to add her bag to the heap. She lifted the lid again, tried not to look at the maggots, but looked all the same, and then ran back to the front door and up the stairs. Once inside the apartment, she said, "I've got to pack. I've got to pack."

She couldn't stay here. *She* was the crazy woman next door. Had they all heard her? Had she been *that* loud when she was yelling at Michael? When she was getting upset about her sister? She had to get out. But where would she go?

She started to sob. "Michael...Michael?"

He found her in the bedroom, put his arm around her. "What's the matter? What's the matter? It's just a coat."

"No," she said and explained what she'd heard.

"She wasn't talking about you."

"Of course, she was. I can't..." she said. "I just can't." Then she looked around for her purse. "I've got to go. I can't stay here."

"You've got to calm down."

"No," she said. "I can't. I can't go to the funeral. I can't do this. I'll come back later, but I've got to go now."

"I can't let you go," he said standing in front of her, holding her arms at her sides, as if protecting her from herself.

"Let go of me, let go of me," she said pulling her arms away and then batting at his hands, as he made to restrain her again. "I'm fine. I'm fine. I've just got to go." She could not be the person who lived in this apartment for a minute longer.

She hurried down the stairs and back out of the building. The crazy woman makes her crazy departure. Was anyone even noticing? Oh, God, she hoped not. She wiped her face, smearing, rather than drying her tears, as she crossed the street for the subway. Down she went, wet-faced,

but also reprimanding herself, No crying in public. NO crying in public. Though why not? When she saw people crying in public, she always stopped, asked if they were all right. Which, of course, they weren't. That was why they were crying in public. But it couldn't hurt to know someone was concerned. That's what Sara thought, though it was true people always look horrified when she asked if they needed any help.

As a matter of habit, Sara walked to the northbound line. She was going to ride to a random stop and get out and look around. She did this a lot when she was alone, though always before with an air of adventure rather than despair. Today, she was going to go to, to go to . . . she scanned the Tube map, half laughed at the idea of getting on the Jubilee Line. Today of all days. Then she saw the words "Swiss Cottage" and thought, Yes. OK. There.

At the Indian restaurant, David finishes up his beer. "Just need to run to the loo," he says and stands. "Then I'll take you home to meet Mattie and the kids." He heads for the back of the restaurant. Sara hasn't really had much of her tea. She doesn't like tea, as much as she likes the idea of being a tea drinker. She only ordered it, because it seemed the sort of thing a Liesel would order. Probably the only thing Sara misses about home is the iced coffee at Dunkin' Donuts.

She folds her napkin, thinks briefly of David and Mattie Burke's well-lit basement apartment, which already feels like it belongs to her. It's clean, she imagines, with its own door to a well-tended back garden. The kitchen upstairs is big and open with a central island and copper pots hanging from a ceiling rack.

Sara will be caught in this surely. The real Liesel will show up. The agency will call and ask about the missed appointment. David will try to square her American accent with whatever is on her application form. As Sara thinks this, she looks at David's papers. He has left them on the table. She grabs them, stuffs them into her purse. She will study them

later. She will call the agency and say she is David's wife and apologize for not showing up at the appointed hour for the interview. She will say that she has decided to go another route for her nanny. Even so, she knows this won't work. She'll slip and something the Burkes know will contradict something she says. Police will be called. She'll end the week admitting to crimes, only now they will be crimes she has actually committed, rather than the ones her sister has committed.

David comes back from the bathroom. Fishes two bills out of his wallet, then bends to look under the table.

"Ready?" Sara says, standing and making a move as if to head for the door.

"Oh," he says. "Can't figure out what I did with your papers." He looks at his watch. "Well, never mind. I don't need the papers on Liesel Rosenthal anymore, do I? Now that I've got the real thing!"

"Right," she says. "The big trick is remembering how to spell my name. It's one *s* and one *l* at the end."

This seems like something a Liesel might say.

This might be OK, she reassures herself. (Crazy lady, begone!) This might work. This might, after all, be a whole new life.

She falls into step beside David, but in her head she isn't walking toward the Swiss Cottage stop. In her head, she is back in Michael's apartment, carefully packing her clothes. In her head, she is saying, "It's probably for the best." In her head, she is already gone.

REBECCA MORGAN FRANK

Patriarch

The father is the mother of absence. *Ina*,
Ina. *Ina* means Mama, means mother, means

a fly bite can take a life. Seedy fragile eyes
sit above a foul-mouthed fluttering. Why

shoo fly, shoo. It's the little things that do
by erasure. A missing hem, an updo, you

can't recall what fell from her hair: blossoms
and pins, her skin the color of cocoa cooled

by powdered milk. A delicacy too hot for an
island she never left. He'd get her gifts, he'd

come back soon. Papa means *tatay*, means
the way you speak or be spoken to. He broke

a man, he shot a man, he had a man stomped
on. Don't do wrong. Don't slap back. Snap.

Half of you is half of her, and half of her and
half of you is all him. Don't let him in the blood

and skin. Pinch the baby's bottom and say no,
Daddy, no. I won't come home to death.

Catch and Release

THE MUSEUM OF COMPARATIVE ZOOLOGY is brick-faced and stately, rising three stories above a neatly mowed lawn in Cambridge, Massachusetts. It is not a true museum; rather, it serves as a repository for specimens not currently on display in the nearby Museum of Natural History. It also houses offices, bathrooms, vending machines, and a well-stocked library. The specimens are grouped into collections by taxonomy. Birds, mammals, insects, invertebrates, and even dinosaurs have found a home on floors one through three. To find the fish, however, you have to go to the basement.

I take the side entrance, built almost as an afterthought, which leads me to a nondescript door marked by a small plaque inscribed in white serifs: ichthyology collection. A second plaque underneath reads: K. E. HARTEL. I open the door onto a space that seems part office, part laboratory. Worn books jostle for space with skeletal remains and jars of preserved fish prop up stacks of files. The humidity in the room is making the files curl.

"Can I help you?" says a man sitting behind a desk, swiveling around in his chair. When he sees me, his face relaxes. He has seen me here before.

"Hi, I was wondering if I could look around again?"

He hands me the guestbook. "Sure, just sign in, and remember we close at four."

The collection lies through a door on the far side of the office. I thank him and head toward it, notebook in hand. Almost immediately, the motion sensor lights flicker on. A long hallway extends out before me, only the short stretch near me illuminated. On my left are tall white cabinets; to my right are stainless steel tanks that hold about twenty to thirty gallons each.

On a tour I had taken earlier in the year with an upper level biology class, the group had asked another curatorial assistant to open one of these tanks. He obliged by sliding one out on its rollers and unlocking the latches. We peered inside to see a liquid that was dark and greasy-looking, as though someone had been steeping a tea bag in it for centuries.

"Ethanol and water," he said, gesturing at it. "Seventy proof. It inhibits bacterial growth."

Cheesecloth alternately floated and clung to the tank's contents. When he lifted it up, I saw the severed parts of a juvenile hammerhead shark, mottled with age.

"Sometimes the ethanol is colored by the pigment and oils in the preserved animal," he said. "Sharks are very fatty, it's what helps them float."

He reached into the tank and pulled out a shark head, flanged on either side. Small tears and creases had appeared in the skin.

"How old is this?" I asked, gingerly touching the head.

He paused to think. "Maybe seventy years?" He lowered the head gently back into the tank to avoid splashing us with essence of hammerhead. "We put cheesecloth in these tanks to retain moisture. Even if the ethanol evaporates, the cheesecloth will stay wet and preserve the fish." He covered the fish parts up again. "This is important to remember when we lend out specimens to museums so that researchers can have

access to them. We wrap the samples in cheesecloth, seal them in plastic bags, and then FedEx them.”

We followed him as he led us to a small chamber that branched off the hallway. Inside were massive tanks, each holding about two hundred gallons. He threw them open to reveal a fierce swordfish, a bull shark, a giant marlin the color of brine. The bull shark fixed me with its cold, crystalline gaze.

The tour group murmured at the heft of the specimens. The assistant was starting to enjoy himself. “When collecting, we initially dump what we find in formaldehyde before transferring it to ethanol solution,” he continued. “The formaldehyde stops decay by fixing the muscles. Since it also destroys DNA, we have to take tissue samples first.”

With the air of a ringmaster, he led us back to the hallway, to the tall cabinets we had seen earlier. “Now these,” he said, “are our compactor shelves. Stand back for a second.”

He began to twist a large black wheel on the side of one of the cabinets. It slowly started to peel away from its neighbor, as both of them expanded outward to reveal shelves crammed full of jars, all holding fish submerged in ethanol both cloudy and clear. The jars were labeled with the names of the species and collector, the year and location of the discovery, and various database numbers. The sheer volume of information was overwhelming.

“They are organized by evolutionary order,” he said. “So we begin with Agnatha, the hagfish and the lampreys—” he gestured at a row of blind rubber tubes coiled loosely in their containers. “Then we move on to Chondrichthyes—the cartilaginous fish—that includes rays, skates, sharks, and chimeras. Then come the Actinopterygii, the ray-finned fish; those are the ones that people normally picture when they think of fish.” He pointed at some sticklebacks and harlequin fish. “And then we end with Sarcopterygii. Lungfish, coelacanths.” He paused.

“Where do you guys get all these fish?” someone asked.

The assistant thought for a moment. “Well, a lot of these fish have historically been part of the collection. When the current curator, Karsten Hartel, came over from the Woods Hole marine lab in Cape Cod, he brought a lot of their collection with him and doubled what we have here. The lab went on a lot of deep sea expeditions, hence the large number of deep sea fish you will see on the shelves.”

“So the proportions of species on the shelves don’t necessarily match what exists in the sea.” This was from the girl next to me.

The assistant shook his head. “No, not really. We tend to accumulate dozens of samples of a rare species but then have only twenty of something common like the striped bass, which fishermen catch all the time off the coast of New England. So we have a bit of a collection bias.”

He opened more compactor shelves for us to gaze at. “These days, the National Marine Fishery Service sends us their unusual finds, as do individual collectors. What we keep on these shelves are known as types. They represent their species. We are basically a library.” He looked thoughtful. “That’s what my job is all about. So much information comes through here, and each fish has a history. They need someone to take care of all the data. That’s the real challenge.” He cleared his throat. “It’s what I came here for. I used to work in a lab. Labs tend to have specialized interests, a certain fish or ecosystem...but what I was really looking for was fish diversity.” He shrugged. “I found it here. I’ve been here for eight years.”

We were silent. A wolf-eel grimaced at us from a nearby wall, a creature that resembled little more than a frilled leather belt with a glassy stare.

The assistant broke into our thoughts with his next words.

“We have 170,000 lots of fish—a lot describes a group of fish of the same species caught in the same place. Can anyone guess how many total specimens that might be?”

The group waited for him to share, shuffling their feet from side to side and looking at each other. He continued with the relish of a keeper of the lost ark.

“The collection holds 1.4 million fish.”

A quiet ocean, simmering beneath the grass, and no one ever knew. We were suitably impressed.

This time, I am alone. Without a tour group shuffling around me, I can focus on the sound of my breathing, my feet on the linoleum floor.

The hallways stretch on forever, intersecting each other and opening onto small chambers. All the walls are lined with shelves, the shelves with bottles and jars and vials, corked and bunged and capped closed. Many of them are dusty. Labels have been sunk into the jars themselves, the India ink holding up surprisingly well for its age. Fish scales catch the light and spark from the depths of ethanol tinged amber and claret. We have literally tried to bottle the sea.

I walk among the fish, picking up jars at random and reading their labels. A massive wrinkled form slumps in one of them, its surface like chalk, its barbel-lined mouth agape. *Pangasius buchmanani*, caught in Bangkok, Thailand, in October of 1864 by F. Blake. I picture it swimming, ghostly in the muddy waters of the river it knew as home.

In another jar, the fish is too large for its confines and has telescoped onto itself, nearly unidentifiable but for the label. Dinopterus, captured in Malawi on the banks of Lake Nyasa by A. Loveridge. Fully extended it must have been almost eighteen inches long, sleekly gray, swift in a lake warmed over by the African sun.

Some of the containers hold more than one of their kind. One jar contains a hundred small fish, with a raw lateral stripe on each of their bodies. They are all submerged at the bottom with their heads pointing to the same spot, as though schooling in death.

Many of the deep sea fish, for all their alien eyes and outsized jaws jagged with dentition, are rendered unfrighting by their size. They are tiny demons, curled and impish, and they take up an awful lot of shelving for creatures so obscure and inaccessible. I remember what the assistant said about collection bias.

Not all the specimens exist pickling on the shelves. On hanging pieces of painted plywood, someone has painstakingly woven delicate fish bones and spines into skeletons with twists of steel wire and identified them in curly script. There are also detailed sketches, scales pen-and-inked by hand and flushed with watercolor. Tiny capitals identify the subjects of these portraits by both their Latin and common names.

The oldest and perhaps most unusually preserved are the specimens pressed onto paper, like rose petals. Kept in a drawer with other fishy curios like boxes of pufferfish spines, they were collected by the natural historian William Dandridge Peck in eighteenth-century New England. He cut them in half, skinned them, and then applied lacquer to stop decay. I linger over them, reading his looping script. The samples are beautiful, lifelike despite the shellacking they received at the hands of Peck.

William Peck was only the first of many men to leave his fingerprints on the museum's fish collection. Louis Agassiz was a nineteenth-century ichthyological heavyweight, though his background included paleontology and geology. He was also remembered as a demanding and eccentric professor of natural history, known to "lock a student up in a room full of turtle-shells, or lobster-shells, or oyster-shells, without a book or a word to help him, and not let him out till he had discovered all the truths which the objects contained." A man who valued the pursuit of knowledge above all other endeavors.

This driving force led him on two expeditions to Brazil, where he accumulated much of the aquatic wildlife of the Amazon. Agassiz and

his men hacked through jungle, sweltered in flyblown tents, and risked death and disease in order to fill up jars and safely transport them back to the United States.

Agassiz left a lasting legacy by founding the Museum of Comparative Zoology. His brilliance was matched only by his powers of persuasion, and he convinced the Commonwealth of Massachusetts to fund his brainchild. In return, he promised to make part of the museum public to residents of the Commonwealth on Wednesdays and Sundays.

During his time—later known as the Agassiz period—he filled the collection with many of the fish he obtained from Brazil. He also obtained some specimens from a network of researchers and collectors, a nexus whose main points were Mauritius, St. Petersburg, Cuba, the South Pacific, and the Red Sea.

When Agassiz died, he was followed by Samuel Garman. In his later years, Garman was consumed by an intense paranoia of intellectual theft. When visitors arrived at his office, he would cover his research with sheets so that no one could see what he was working on. During his prime, however, Garman had instituted an exchange system with other museums to try to fill the gaps in the collection with fish not currently represented. He succeeded to some extent, garnering samples from Lake Titicaca, Japan, the Lyons Museum, eastern Africa, and central China.

Later curators procured types from the Great Barrier Reef, Panama, southern Africa, Thailand, and the North Pacific. The collection swelled, a man-made fishscape that embodied the specific interests of the scientists involved, men and women who sometimes loved one fish or fishing ground above all others. This trend continued with Karsten Hartel, who brought his deep sea fish with him.

The collection began to be modernized during the time of Hartel. Bright green cables, motion-sensing lights, and Internet routers were installed, and with the advent of genetic identification technology, a

new collection has been growing: a genetic database with information obtained from the tissue samples taken from the fish. Of course, some animals have never been touched, so it will take some time for the database to be complete. With 170,000 lots of fish, it is a daunting endeavor.

And still the capture and cataloguing of actual fishes has not halted. Researchers all over the world continue to send samples, persisting in their work despite the magnitude of their task, like the ichthyologists of old. What is it about this vastness that compels them? It lies before us, unknowable as the sea, and we responded the only way we knew how: by catching it with nets, by writing countless labels, by shelving it in a library that we lock away underground. To us, the knowledge becomes something to hold, like the curve of a cool jar in a hot palm.

“Hello—there you are.” The curatorial assistant has found me, wandering down a row of jewel-colored reef fish. “Just wanted to remind you that we’ll be closing soon. Do you need anything?”

I shake my head. “No, I think I’m good here.” I pick up a jar containing a seahorse and admire its hooked tail and scrolled, distended belly.

He nods. “Okay. Well, if you take anything from the shelves, remember to put it back exactly where you found it. Otherwise it could take years before we locate it again.” He smiles at me and leaves.

I marvel at the power of a single misplaced jar to stymie even the most careful and painstaking of efforts. The known reduced to the unknown, once again.

The door to the collection slams shut in the distance, startling me out of my reverie. The low rumble is gentle but distinct, making the glass in the room sing faintly. I imagine a lace of cracks appearing in each jar, spidering over the glass. The hairline fractures splitting at the seams and shattering—the liquid forcing its way out in spurts, dripping off the shelves, spilling onto the floor. The fish inside bursting forth,

swirling around me, their gills rippling pinkly as they come back to life in shoals, schooling again.

Next are the tanks, medium-sized, large. Their contents boil up, irrepressible. Dismembered bodies are washed ashore, followed by the giant carcasses of bull sharks, swordfish, marlin. They come alive, snapping and gnashing in the maelstrom, a violent rebirth. Waves surge over the floor, now a linoleum seabed. The water level rises inexorably. Reconstructed skeletons and careful sketches become flotsam, floating by me toward the exit. All this rushing, flowing through the corridors, filling them well-deep, oceans-deep. The sea, returning to itself.

The lights flicker on and off in warning. Dreamily, I replace the sea-horse in its rightful spot. It is closing time, time for me to leave these strange zoological catacombs and to return to another world, the one I left upstairs.

The sunlight and smell of cut grass are bracing after the stale air of the collection. The air here is alive with a thrumming I can feel right under my skin, just like the warmth of the sun. Released from the thrall of the collection, I sense myself responding to its vitality. As I walk away, I can feel the sturdiness of brick as a presence at my back, solid, fixed, the ground dry beneath my feet.



Mark Adams, *Loligo Screen (details 1 and 2)*, 2014,
squid ink on found Japanese screen lined with
anonymous practice paper, 28 in. x 72 in. Courtesy
of Schoolhouse Gallery, Provincetown, MA.





Mark Adams, *Squid Quad (detail)*, 2014, squid ink on watercolor paper,
32 in. x 40 in. Courtesy of Schoolhouse Gallery, Provincetown, MA.



ROBERT THOMAS

Marine Biology

I grew up on the coast in Pescadero and wanted to be a marine biologist.
I had no idea.

I thought it would be just me and a pencil in a red bathysphere.
I'd observe squid and sardines, their black clouds and silver wheels,

and they'd be as amazed by my nimble, note-taking fingers
as I was by them.

In fact the last bathysphere must already have been preserved
in the Smithsonian by the time I left home for college.

Now they used a two-man vehicle (emphasis on *man*)
like Jacques Cousteau's, the SP-350 *Denise*.

I'm trying to explain what happened when everything began
to go wrong, when I could solve differential equations

but could no longer walk from my room to the library
because the trees were *growing*.

The redwoods had always been an asylum.
Now their grace only reminded me of my awkwardness.

When I looked at their perfect branches,
it felt like the time I walked in on Caitlin, my roommate, one Sunday
afternoon

while her boyfriend was kissing her breasts, naked and shameless
and matter-of-fact as knees, and she looked at me with pity and contempt.

Now even the books in the library seemed naked,
which once had looked so beautiful with their buff and russet bindings

stacked like layers of sandstone in a sea cliff.

Now I was the only one who felt shame.

I didn't need to work myself into a rubber suit and ride the *Denise*
into the pink anemones and brittlestars of a coral reef

to feel out of place. The faucet that jutted from the library's concrete wall
was naked, the sequoia's roots simmering in the earth,

naked the egg white, naked the yolk,
naked the olive and clover,

naked the old professor as he lectured on the null hypothesis,
naked the young biologist as she measured the kelp forests,

naked the seven lost psalms of Jonah,
naked the eight beatitudes,

naked: the seventy times seven forgivenesses of water,
none of them for me.

JILL BIALOSKY

Daylight Savings

There was the hour
when raging with fever
they thrashed. The hour
when they called out in fright.
The hour when they fell asleep
against our bodies, the hour
when without us they might die.
The hour before school
and the hour after.
The hour when we buttered their toast
and made them meals
from the four important food groups—
what else could we do to insure they'd get strong and grow?
There was the hour where we were the spectators
at a recital, baseball game,
when they debuted in the school play.
There was the silent hour in the car
when they were angry. The hour
when they broke curfew. The hour
when we waited for the turn of the lock
knowing they were safe and we could finally
close our eyes and sleep. The hour
when they were hurt

or betrayed and there was nothing we could do
to ease the pain.

There was the hour
when we stood by their bedsides with ginger-ale
or juice until the fever broke. The hour
when we lost our temper and the hour
we were filled with regret. The hour
when we slapped their cheeks and held
our hand in wonder.

The hour when we wished for more.

The hour when their tall and strong bodies,
their newly formed curves and angles in their faces
and Adam's apple surprised us—
who had they become?

Hours when we waited and waited.

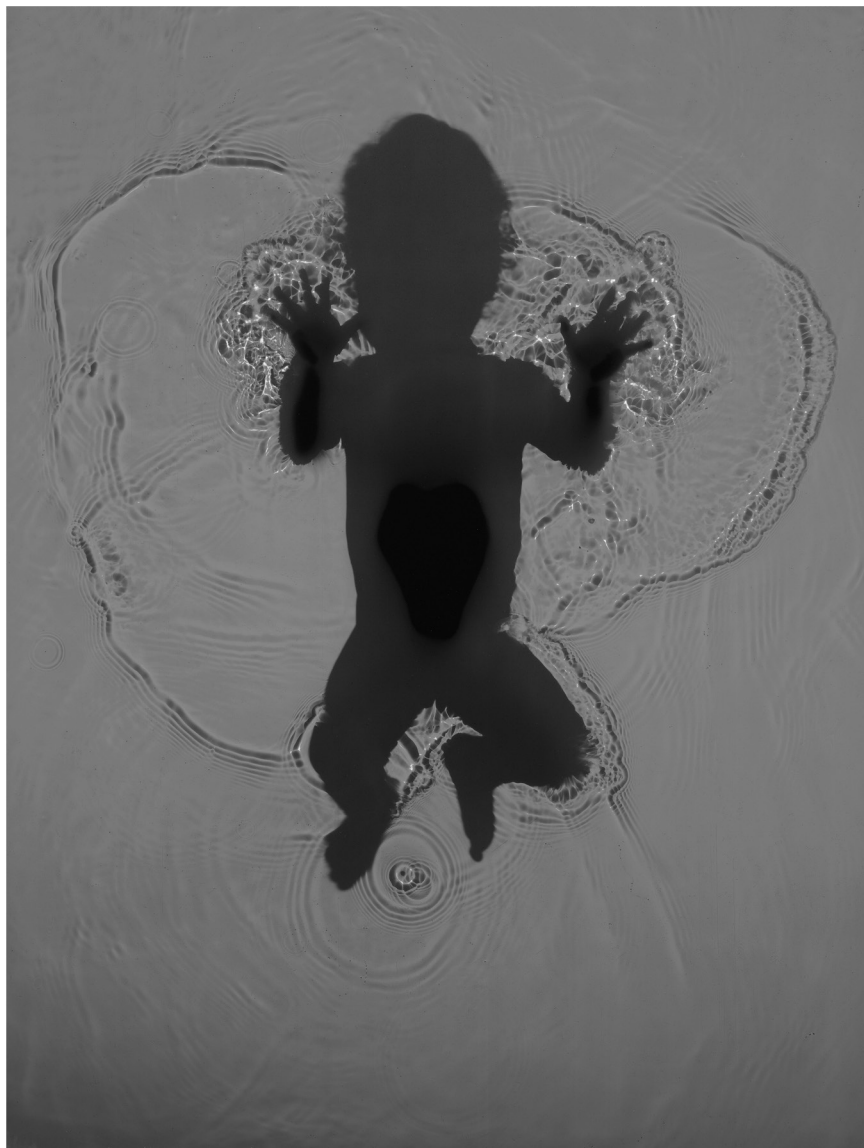
When we rushed home from the office
or sat in their teacher's classroom
awaiting the report of where they stumbled
and where they excelled, the hours
when they were without us, the precious hour
we did not want to lose each year
even if it meant another hour of daylight.

JILL BIALOSKY

Prophecy

We knew how it worked.
Our precursors warned us.
It would happen when they were teenagers.
Still we didn't believe it. Not our boys.
The first time we thought
that they were under the influence
of a drug, or a conniving friend or girl.
They looked right through us, no longer
willing to abide. It was as if another being
had taken over, scorching even their hair
a deeper shade, stealing their voice.
When we went to kiss them
their cheeks turned to stone,
and when they looked at us
it was with disdain instead of adoration.
The kinder and more loving
we'd been meant we'd have it worse.
It was as if they were suddenly warned
of a prophecy
that would bring tragedy and gloom
if they did not turn away; it was as if they'd been
deceived or deluded; it was as if they were
Oedipus discovering he'd married

his mother and took the pin from her
dress, yes her dress,
and stabbed himself in the eye.
We knew there was nothing we could do
but ride it out, that for some
it might take years of wandering and exile,
of restraint and turmoil
until they'd finally come back
as if to seek refuge
in a grove of gentle trees.



Adam Fuss, *Invocation*, 1992, unique cibachrome
photogram, 40 in. x 30 in. Courtesy of Cheim and Read.



Adam Fuss, *Untitled*, 1998, spores on paper, unique cibachrome photograph, 39 in. x 27 in. Courtesy of Cheim and Read.



Adam Fuss, *Home and the World*, 2010, gelatin silver print photogram mounted on canvas, 57 3/4 in. x 53 1/2 in. Courtesy of Cheim and Read.



Adam Fuss, *Untitled*, 1997, unique silver print photogram laid on muslin mounted on linen, 68 3/4 in. x 51 7/16 in. Courtesy of Cheim and Read.



Adam Fuss, *Untitled*, 1998, unique cibachrome photogram,
40 in. x 30 in. Courtesy of Cheim and Read.



Adam Fuss, from the series *My Ghost*, 1999, unique gelatin silver print photogram, 53 in. x 44 1/2 in. Courtesy of Cheim and Read.

ANN PANCAKE

In Such Light

A POPCORN GIRL fringe benefit was a pass for two to any showing at the Alexander Henry Theater. Janie usually took her mentally disabled uncle. During the movie, the two of them would get drunk on Southern Comfort she'd smuggle in in a pimienta jar and mix with a Sprite they'd buy at concessions. Janie's favorite spot was the first few rows where she could be swallowed by the screen, but Uncle Bobby insisted they sit in the back row on the aisle for the quickest exit in case of a fire. In scary movies, he shrieked with laughter, whooping and wheezing at unexpected and inappropriate moments in the movie so he could later say, "I wasn't scared of that movie! I just laughed at it! I just laughed at it, Janie!" Janie would scoot down a little lower, pull her knees up against the back of the seat in front of her, and feel thankful for how few people she knew in Remington and for the way the on-duty popcorn girls wouldn't be in to pick up trash until after the credits were done.

The one day in May when the Alexander Henry had done all their summer hiring, Janie had stood in line with seventy other people, many in their Sunday clothes, and she saw the country in those clothes. She'd glanced down and wondered what the others saw in hers. The job seekers

huddled out of the rain under the short eaves of the storefronts north of the theater marquee, gaunt men with white shirts bunched at their waists, younger men in pool-blue leisure suits and tennis shoes. Women wearing double-knit slacks in tropical colors and faux silk shirts, others humped into dresses, their legs battened down in thick brown hose. Eventually the thumb-shaped theater manager had strolled out, squinted up and down the string of jobless, and shouted, “If you didn’t bring something to write with, you might as well go home!”

The people who needed the money least ended up getting the jobs, and Janie knew even then that she got hers because she had the college-girl wherewithal to bring a pen and because the manager recognized her grandparents’ last name. Plus her looks, such as they were, not that she’d ever thought them much, but throughout the summer, Gus would now and again pronounce, “Nobody wants to come to the movies and see ugly popcorn girls.”

She was staying with her grandparents that summer and only working part-time as a kind of convalescence after “running herself down,” as her grandmother would say, during her first year of college. She wasn’t sure what her grandparents thought had “run her down”—it had all climaxed a few months earlier in a mysterious infection that made her want to sleep sixteen hours a day—but she had to believe they thought it was overworking, which in part it was, instead of overdrinking, which it was mostly. She was sixteen years younger than Uncle Bobby, which made him thirty-four that summer, but his mental age was about thirteen and a half, and hers, when she was drunk, an even fifteen.

This was 1983, and in West Virginia you could still legally drink at eighteen. By the time she’d been in Remington two weeks, she hadn’t made any friends but she and Uncle Bobby had found their places. After supper, while her grandparents watched the *MacNeil/Lehrer Report*, she and Uncle Bobby slipped off in her blue Chevette to Ramella’s on Fourth Avenue and drank White Russians. She and Uncle Bobby went

to Gino's Pub and drank pitchers of urine-colored Miller beer. She and Uncle Bobby hung out in the basement garage across the street drinking Bud, while Nathan, Uncle Bobby's neighbor, smoked pot and worked on this bike.

Often when she'd gotten home from a popcorn girl shift and she and Uncle Bobby were sitting on the front porch, Uncle Bobby would say, "Tell me again about the cat shit," then snigger into his hand.

Janie would pretend she didn't know what he was talking about. "What do you mean?" she'd say. Or, "what was that word you used?" She knew he found the cat shit story thrilling because her grandmother allowed no cussing in the house.

"Ah, Janie. C'mon! C'mon now! Tell me!"

When she knew he couldn't wait a second longer, she'd give in. "Gus tells us, 'Scoop the cigarettes out the ashtrays with that thing you clean cat shit with.'"

At that, her uncle would erupt into howling brays that sounded like an elephant. Janie wasn't sure why he laughed so hard, but no one else laughed at anything she said and she'd take what she could get. When he'd finally calm down enough to put together a few words he'd say, "Remember that time I took you all to *Black Beauty* and Ben lost his mittens?"

Ben was her brother, a year younger than she was. Uncle Bobby had asked her this at least once on each of her twice-yearly visits to her grandparents over the thirteen years since the incident had happened. "Yeah," Janie would say.

Then Uncle Bobby would laugh beyond elephant, beyond cat shit. He'd pound his thighs with his fists and his face would bloom red, his eyes squint shut with his effort to hold back from outright screams. Her grandmother didn't permit that.

She hadn't grown up in this city, but her grandparents and her mother had, and Janie could remember not just the *Black Beauty* incident,

which occurred when she was five, but seeing *Mary Poppins* in the Alexander Henry when she was no more than three. Remington, West Virginia, at 80,000 people, was the biggest city in the state at the time and the only city she'd ever known. She remembered being driven through Remington to visit some aging relative or other and her disbelief at how far they could go and still see houses. Almost every time her family came to Remington, she and Ben were taken to a movie at the Alexander Henry, and the Alexander Henry was the grandest and most elegant place Janie ever entered. In McCloud County, where she grew up, grandeur was found only in nature and the palatial and luxurious not at all.

The theater itself, where you actually watched the movie, was the largest room she'd seen in her life, triple the size of the high school gym back home, and that didn't even count the balconies and mezzanines, the lobbies, and the catacomb of bathrooms. You padded down the lush carpet enveloped in a dazzling world of scarlets and golds, as though pipe organs had been sacrificed, trumpets unwound and resculpted into resplendent spirals and scrolls. These framed the stage, feathered the walls, where Midas-touched vines entwined columns and figures of berobed women and bearded men gazed and glared amongst petrified fruits and urns. Over the box seats mounted on the walls, golden swag upon swag of voluptuous satin soared clear to the towering ceiling, and from the boxes themselves spilled fabric like knights' horses' finery, emblazoned with flags and ensigns and shields, the box seats all the more impressive for never having anyone in them. If Janie stared long enough without blinking before the lights went down, she saw faces in the ceiling.

Many times the Alexander Henry out-glamoured whatever was on the screen, and occasionally Janie watched the walls instead of the movie. There was even a full curtain that drew back to let the show begin, its heavy folds the dried-blood color worn by kings in the Old Testament and its velvet stateliness extended to dense drapes along the

walls through which you swam, your hand in Grandmother's or Uncle Bobby's, to reach a narrow passageway lit by little half-moons if you had to go to the bathroom in the middle of the show. "The show," her grandparents still called the movies, and her uncle did, too, and it had been a real theater at first, for vaudeville and plays and concerts, and her grandparents and Uncle Bobby remembered those days.

The Alexander Henry was not even the same species as the rinky-dink theater in Janie's hometown, population 2,000, with its dull linoleum lobby under bald fluorescent lights. The seats soot-colored, the walls as well, its single adornment an obnoxious illuminated clock advertising a car dealership, and the way you knew everyone there, even if you pretended you didn't, and how you weren't allowed to take your Coke to your seat and had to drink it standing in the back, but your shoes stuck to the floor anyway. When Janie was little and she got mad, which she often did, and threatened to run away, it was to Remington she knew she would go. Remington, West Virginia, Janie saw as real life. The life real people lived and the one she'd reach after she suffered and struggled through the one she'd accidentally been plunked in as a baby. The Alexander Henry was the highest echelon of that real life, the one not many attained but that she just might if she worked hard enough. When she was still a kid, that's how Janie saw it.

Some afternoons, when both she and Uncle Bobby were off work, they hung out in his room and listened to his sixties record collection. Paul Simon, Joni Mitchell, the Beatles, Joan Baez, Bob Dylan—Uncle Bobby had them all, while Janie, of course, had just missed them, born not only in the wrong place but in the wrong time. She lay on the blue pile carpet with a Pink Panther for a pillow so her ears were nearer the speakers, the music rushing into the empty parts of her. Beyond the windows, humidity coated the house like liquid glass, the air-conditioning a seal against it. Uncle Bobby's room, built onto the back of her grandparents'

small bungalow after years of money put away, felt like a hideout then. Afternoon time, hovering time, wait for the true time, which was what would happen at night. And coiled in the hideout, the music transfiguring her, only Uncle Bobby present, and the anticipation of drinking that night, for whole minutes Janie could kick clear of herself and be who she wished she was.

Uncle Bobby lounged in his blue recliner, nodding to the beat, his little Yorkie terrier mix, Tina, of the wise face and the bad breath, curled in his lap. Uncle Bobby had actually seen Joan Baez in concert, had seen Paul Simon at the Remington Civic Center, and such history, along with Uncle Bobby's being more city than her, gave Uncle Bobby areas of superiority over Janie despite his other handicaps. Now Uncle Bobby was telling of his and Janie's recent exploits as though Janie hadn't been present and they'd already rushed into legend.

"And remember, I came out of the state store and I tripped and I fell down! But I held that bottle up! It didn't hit the ground! I didn't break it, did I, Janie? Did I?"

"Nuh-uh," Janie said.

She turned onto her stomach, the carpet showroom clean. Uncle Bobby worked in the bigger of Remington's two hospitals, and before he'd been promoted to laundry he'd spent a decade as janitor. During that period, he'd collected the pennies caught up in his broom, and when Janie was seven she'd spent a whole morning counting them for him. Occasionally now he found abandoned stuffed animals in the laundry and, after a two-week lost-and-found probationary period, he washed them, carried them home, and displayed them in his room. Most were bland Teddy bears, or dogs and monkeys with fur so fake it made your fingers squeak. The Pink Panther was Janie's favorite because of the softness of its fabric skin, like flannel or beaten-down towels. It was the E.T. Uncle Bobby adored. That had been the big movie the summer before and Uncle Bobby was first smitten, then

obsessed. He'd bought her an E.T. cake for her eighteenth birthday last September, and by some divine intervention—divine intervention was not rare in the life of Uncle Bobby—an E.T. doll showed up in the laundry in the winter. It now sat like a big-eyed god on top an oversized jewelry box Uncle Bobby had gotten from a dead “maiden aunt,” the jewelry box in turn on top of his well-dusted chest of drawers. The E.T. was not to be handled.

“...and then there was a knock on the door!” He was onto the night her grandparents had gone out of town and they'd made strawberry daiquiris. Nathan and his girlfriend, Melissa, had stopped by for that one. “And here it was the church people with the church directories!” Uncle Bobby collapsed into elephantine peals, Tina vaulting from his lap, Uncle Bobby convulsing, bent at his waist. “I couldn't believe it! I couldn't believe it! Could you, Janie? Could you?” He exploded again, then abruptly swallowed the last laugh and commanded in a grave baritone: “E.T. Phone home.”

“Where'd you go yesterday afternoon, Uncle Bobby?” She hadn't expected to say it even though she'd been speculating since it happened.

“Huh?” He sobered immediately. Like her, he'd been caught off guard. “What do you mean, Janie?”

“Yesterday afternoon. After you took your shower. After work. Where'd you go?” Janie raised up on her elbows to watch his face.

“Oh.” He paused. Closed his mouth with a loud smack. “To visit a friend of mine.”

“Who?”

“Just a friend of mine. You don't know 'em.” The face armored up. The tone a challenge. “Anything wrong with that?” Then she saw him whisper the same words afterwards, as he sometimes did, as though the spoken words left a shadow in his mouth that made him have to say them again.

Often Janie visualized the uneven operations of the uncle brain which, according to family lore, had been damaged by dehydration

when Uncle Bobby fell deathly ill as an infant. Some parts had melted in the heat, Janie saw them tarnished and clotted together like clock guts after a fire—the part that did numbers, the part that managed cause and effect, the part that gauged how funny things really were—while other parts in that dark crowded space still gleamed and whirled unscathed—the part that could sustain a conversation, the part sensitive to her grandmother’s tireless social skill drills, the part that remembered things. The memory had overgrown in compensation, and Uncle Bobby could recite both his grandmothers’ phone numbers and addresses clear back to the fifties, even though one had moved several times and both had been dead for a decade. He knew the ages and birthdays of most people on Kentworth Drive, and he recalled trivial incidents from ages ago with the most unlikely details in brilliant relief. Which is what he was doing now, retelling, as Janie put away Joni and plunked down Janis, a favorite story from twenty-five years past of how his sister and her friends had put a water sprinkler on the porch of a mean neighbor lady, knocked, and ran. It was a story Janie had heard at least twenty times before. Because this was another characteristic of the uncle brain: certain clock innards had melted into granite-hard configurations—Uncle Bobby was “set in his ways,” her grandmother would say, he “had his routines”—and for this reason and others, most people found dealing with Uncle Bobby maddening.

“I think she deserved it. I do, Janie. I think she got what she deserved. Don’t you, Janie? Don’t you?” This was another reason, the imprisonment in the tag question, his snaring of others in tedious conversations by demanding a response to everything he said by adding “Huh, Janie? Huh? Huh, Janie? Huh?” until you said, “Yeah,” back. The tag questions were an offshoot of Uncle Bobby’s know-it-all-ness, a quality Janie found fascinating given his I.Q., Uncle Bobby’s treasure trove of authority, gleaned mostly from the black-and-white movies he watched on cable TV. “How do you know?” Janie would ask. “Saw it on one of these old movies,” he’d say.

And now he was onto a lady at work who'd been rude to him, another fixation of the Bobby brain, the infinite slights, the corresponding self-righteous indignation. Different family members had different Uncle Bobby survival techniques and most used a combination of several: avoidance, stoicism, humor and teasing, almost always at his expense, and when none of those worked, the occasional no-longer-suppressible outburst. But Uncle Bobby, for some reason, had never bothered Janie much.

Janie knew it didn't bother you at all when you were little. You noticed it then, the difference, but it didn't get on your nerves. It was when your own brain grew to where it passed Uncle Bobby's that the trouble started. First the struggle for control—who was boss of whom? Who child? Who adult?—and then the impatience with him, the frustration, the exhaustion. She'd seen it in each of her older cousins when they became teenagers, she'd seen it in her brother Ben. She'd even felt it a little herself when she was thirteen or fourteen. But this summer, she felt it hardly at all. Part of the spell of the summer, Janie recognized it even then, was the way she and Uncle Bobby almost matched.

“...and he said they broke up.”

“Huh?” Janie said.

“I was talking to Nathan last evening while you were at work, and he said him and Melissa broke up again. But they got back together the next day.”

“Oh,” Janie said.

During her first few weeks in Remington, she'd gone out with two boys, one with an eleven o'clock curfew who kissed with his teeth, the other the kind of well-behaved smart boy who reminded her too much of her secret self. She and Uncle Bobby spent more hours in the garage across the street with Nathan and his bikes.

Nathan had two motorcycles, the one he worked on and the one he rode. The one he worked on, a 1972 Harley Davidson, he loved with

a feral ferocity and hated even harder. Sometimes he'd stroke his hand across its cam cover, its forks and fender, explaining to Uncle Bobby and Janie its extraordinariness, while Janie nodded gravely and said, "Wow. Huh," the way she did with McCloud County boys when they talked about football, cars, and deer-hunting, the way she had more recently with WVU frat boys as they talked about football, keggers, and "brothers." Other times Nathan cussed the bike with a fury, and once Janie had seen spit not fly from his mouth but bubble up at the corners and foam, while she and Uncle Bobby sat at a safe distance near the garage door in silent but sincere sympathy.

A full-sized stereo sat up on a shelf tuned to WAMO, the Tri-State's classic rock station, and Nathan always had a case of Budweiser in the dorm-sized refrigerator, which he'd share with them even when he wouldn't talk. Now and again he'd share his pot, too, skinny roaches in little stamped-tin ashtrays he'd lifted from Johnny's, his favorite biker bar—the dirty ashtray with its slender string of smoke, a tantalizing aberration among the tools Nathan had neatly ranged across the floor. The garage was unlike any working garage Janie had ever seen, its sterility, its orderliness, the smell of clean concrete, not even an oil stain on the floor, and she'd wonder was it Nathan or his mother who kept it that way. "Wacky weed," Uncle Bobby would snigger, then snuffle-squeal with laughter. "Left-handed cigarettes," Janie said, with one ear pricked for Nathan's mother to come down from the living room, but she never did. Often Nathan paid little attention to them, but it was enough to know he wanted them there. Plus, the never knowing what he might do next. It was hard not to watch.

Once, when she and Uncle Bobby were sitting by themselves in the dark on her grandparents' front porch, Janie said, as offhandedly as she could muster, "What do you think about Nathan?"

"Nathan?" Uncle Bobby paused. "Oh, Nathan's a good friend of mine." He paused again. Janie heard his rockers stop. Then start. "I've known Nathan since he was born. I've known Nathan since he was born, Janie."

There were photos at her grandparents' house of her and Nathan and some other children playing together as little kids, but he was way bigger than she was in those photos, and she could barely remember Nathan before this summer. He was four years older than Janie, but now he was exactly her height, Uncle Bobby a full head taller than them both. But how big Nathan could make himself when he wanted to. Janie never hung around guys that much older than she was, and normally she'd have been too shy, but with Uncle Bobby along, and the Budweiser, the pot, after half an hour she felt almost as cool as anybody else. Besides, Nathan had a girlfriend, Melissa, who was a year older than he was. They'd already been together three years and Melissa wanted to get married, but Nathan wasn't ready. "I'm just not ready to settle down," he'd tell her and Uncle Bobby, head hanging, his voice glistening with pain. "Why can't she understand that?" Janie and Uncle Bobby nodding, glowing a little, growing a little, in their role as Nathan's confidants.

He worked from seven to three as a bank teller, and if Janie didn't have an afternoon shift herself, at 3:20 she'd hear his '76 Scout slamming down Kentworth Drive. She'd slip to the window of the front bedroom to watch Nathan park and walk to his house in long heavy strides as though invisible boots weighted his feet. Him leaning forward from his shoulders, his head tucked down, his brow, too, the posture at odds with the three-piece suit. A half hour later he'd emerge from the garage on the riding bike in black leather. Then what that Yamaha would do. To the quiet street, the respectable yards, the middle-class 1920's brick homes with their mostly elderly residents, hardworking, churchgoing, now honorably retired. In one instant of ignition, that motorcycle slashed the whole scene to shreds.

Nathan's moodiness was mesmerizing. One second throwing his tools and beating the concrete floor with his fists until Janie looked for blood (she never saw it). The next, smiling at Janie from under heavy-lidded eyes and asking if she liked the way he'd shaved his beard and let

his mustache stay, as if what she thought mattered. Fifteen minutes later, an anguished confession that he and Melissa were again “having some problems,” she just “didn’t understand him,” his deep voice making what could have been a whine come out a moan. He’d even ask them for advice, which neither she nor Uncle Bobby, sober or high, had any idea how to give.

One night the heat stayed so heavy it drove her and Uncle Bobby off the porch and into the street in hopes of a little air moving. She’d gotten home from the theater an hour before. Now, as she and Uncle Bobby perched in the streetlight, she half listened to her uncle, listening with the other ear for the sound of Nathan’s bike turning off Norway Avenue and onto Kentworth Drive. But what she heard instead was Nathan’s front door open.

She lifted her head. Nathan floated, silent and gray, across his dim lawn and the street. He stopped a little off to the side, just out of the streetlight’s beam. He was dressed in a polo shirt and a pair of shorts. He usually favored black T-shirts and Janie could remember him in shorts just once. The legs looked strange naked. His feet bare, too. Janie felt braver, and sadder.

“Well, Bobby,” he said. “It’s for sure.”

“Uhh-hmmm,” Uncle Bobby nodded, knowingly.

“It’s over.”

“Yep,” agreed Uncle Bobby, the conversational camouflage, decades of practice of acting like he knew exactly what you were talking about whether he had an inkling or not.

“This time...” Nathan halted. He swallowed. “This time. It’s for good.”

“Umm-hmm,” said Uncle Bobby.

Then Nathan looked directly at Janie. He had his head tilted to one side, almost limp. The pale legs. The bare feet, one heel scuffing gently at the grass.

“What do you think, Janie? Three years, and just like that. It’s all gone.” He halted again. Janie peeked at his face to see if she could catch in his eye what she thought she’d heard. Then she looked away. “All because she just can’t wait on me a little while. That’s all I asked.”

“I’m sorry,” Janie finally said. “I’m real sorry.”

Nathan drew a deep breath.

“Well. Good night, you all.”

“G’night,” said Uncle Bobby.

“Good night,” said Janie.

Once he’d gotten far enough away that she figured he wouldn’t turn back, Janie watched him. He flowed up the steps and vanished into the house.

A week later, Janie was riding the motorcycle behind Nathan.

By that summer, they’d docked the Alexander Henry’s glory by cutting the opulent theater of Janie’s childhood into a big central box with two smaller rectangular theaters. They’d bought an adjacent shoe store and converted it to hold a third screen. The popcorn, she discovered, arrived from someplace else in big plastic bags that were stored on a landing over the basement steps. Ronnie, the gentle year-round usher, threw down the bags to waiting popcorn girls, who poured the “butter” out of plastic jugs that listed coconut oil and yellow number something as ingredients one and two. When kids twelve, ten, eight came in for R-rated movies, Gus would march them to the pay phone—“Oh, that’s just awful! That’s awful, Janie!” Uncle Bobby said when she told him this—and sell the ticket after he got whatever passed for parental permission over the phone. Some of the candy was left over from the 1960s—the Chuckles wouldn’t give under your thumb no matter how hard you pressed—and Gus marked them down to a “special price,” then ordered the popcorn girls to “really push ’em.”

“Ooooo. I wouldn’t eat those.” Uncle Bobby screwed up his face. “Would you, Janie? Would you?”

"And this one lady who's worked there twenty years, she says there's ghosts in the bathrooms." Janie stopped and looked at Uncle Bobby. His face got serious, then worried. Just a little. "She says somebody died of a heart attack down there in one of the stalls and people have been seeing the ghost ever since."

"Oh." Uncle Bobby was stroking Tina's back, and now the strokes went a little faster, a little harder. Janie saw Tina brace. "I don't believe that. I don't believe that, do you, Janie? Do you?"

Janie thought.

"If I saw a ghost down there, I'd just laugh at it! I'd laugh at it, Janie!" Tina slipped behind the couch. "Do you believe that, Janie?"

"Nah," Janie said. "It's just what they say."

Most of the new hires at the Alexander Henry were girls from the in-town college, and if they hadn't known each other before becoming popcorn girls, they had friends who had. They were all sorority girls, at least in type. Not the snobby and mean variety, but the variety who knew how to make themselves look cute even in red popcorn girl smocks with health department regulations about loose hair, who knew the right girl giggle or quip for every circumstance, who stayed cheerful and pleasant always, as though they'd never recovered from their high school cheerleader careers. They treated Janie the way they'd treat a person they were visiting in a children's hospital or a nursing home: with kindness, then forgetfulness, and never with inclusion.

The other three were long-timers, year-rounders. Besides Ronnie, there was Tommie Sue, a long pointy woman with high hard hair who held a phantom cigarette between her fingers. She had worked at the Alexander Henry for twenty years, longer than anybody else, longer even than Gus, as she regularly reminded him. Both she and Betty drove into Remington from someplace out in the country, but not the same place. Betty was snowman-shaped, with a constant sad smile and a tiny silver cross riding her large breasts. Intelligent, competent, organized, Betty had put in fourteen years and usually sold tickets, something the

popcorn girls weren't trusted to do. Tommie Sue was vinyl and wire, Betty, cotton ball and artificial flowers. And although neither of them was any more like Janie than the sorority girls were, they were far more familiar. They could have come straight out of McCloud County. They were the ones she'd been around all her life.

It was Tommie Sue who told about the people who had died. When all the movies were at least an hour deep, when the counters had been wiped, the cups restocked, the ashtrays cleaned under Gus's military eye, Tommie Sue would lean against the back of the concession stand between the pop dispenser and Betty, crack her back, cross her arms, and start. The sorority girls tended to cluster at the other end of the counter where they murmured among themselves: what party, what boy, what bar. Janie shuffled around the middle, not sure what to do with her hands.

"You were here, Betty, weren't you, when that big chunk of plaster came down off there and on that guy's head?" Tommie Sue gestured with her first two fingers at the rococo molding that ran between the high ceiling and the wall. Betty nodded. "Knocked him dead on the carpet. Must have hit him just right." Tommie Sue rolled her eyes back in her head a little to remember. The gold-flecked mirror behind her reflected her dark un-dyed hair, defiant, the few white strands as fine as cobweb and invisible in the atmospheric lobby light.

From across the room, poised to prop the theater doors open the moment the *Return of the Jedi* credit music rolled, Gus glared at Tommie Sue. Tommie Sue, at least eight inches taller, gazed evenly back. "Worst one was the manager before Gus. Blew his brains out in the office upstairs while he was counting receipts. If that wasn't a mess."

"You all get ready for this exit!" Gus yelled. The sorority cluster bustled into place. Janie stood at attention over the candy. After a long minute, Tommie Sue reached under the counter, picked up a big stack of the booklets that had come with that year's James Bond, *Octopussy*,

and strode out into the lobby. She flagged them in front of the departing movie watchers.

“Pussy programs! Get your pussy programs!” she sang.

The first week Nathan asked Janie to ride with him almost every day. She’d only been on a motorcycle a few times before and soon she understood. The absence of metal, you closer to dying, and how that shouted all the life in you out to your edge. The way you soared into vaults of odors and the tastes they carried, then left them as rapidly behind—that all the layers of real a car kept you from—and the heat of the muffler against the inside of your calves and what happened to your skin if they touched.

They’d cross the 18th Street Bridge and ribbon down some of the straightest roads Janie’d ever seen, along the Ohio River on the Ohio side, her looking back across at West Virginia. She loved that on the bike she didn’t have to talk, didn’t even have to look at Nathan or be looked at. Them just hurtling forward, her straddling his hips, the bulk of his jacket against her cheek, the smell of his clean neck, his back to her always. Her riding not just the bike, but his back.

He took her places that she’d been only dimly aware of before, places her grandmother never passed on their childhood excursions to Sunday school, to the Remington art museum, to the Alexander Henry. With Nathan, she traveled under horizons of coal power plants, heaving up out of their own steam and effluvium like mirages, menacing unoccupied castles, the cooling towers’ monstrous squat beakers like some mutation out of a chemistry set. The oil refineries with their perverse metal trees, over-tall, spindly, their flares rippling, biblical, each crown a sterile altar. They ripped past hulks of plants even more mysterious, seeping noxious stench that gummed the roof of your mouth, buildings painted a color that matched their stink, putrescent chartreuse, vomitous creams.

When they didn't ride along the river, Nathan favored an east-side outskirts of abandoned warehouses and factories, the streets there always empty of cops. The structures formed a three-story, sheet-metal ravine, their echo spectacular, the motorcycle a contained and rainless thunderstorm ricocheting between walls. The deserted hulks seeped not just eeriness, but somehow anger, even surprise, but Janie and Nathan were shielded by the speed of the bike. They rocketed past enigmatic geometries, cylinders and chutes, cupolas and cones, past towering red letters threatening head injury and limb loss, past windows, if not shattered, so spider-infested that Janie could make out webs at fifty miles per hour. These were places that used to make things, not chemicals, electricity, gasoline, but things you could actually hold, and now the vegetation rising, the weeds shrouding, pressing, fecund, wanton, *plants* and *plants*, Janie'd think in her alcoholic haze, noticing for the first time how the word had been stolen, but ultimately the first plants had won.

The last evening of that week, they pulled over at a spot along the river that Nathan knew. They hid the bike in the brush and pushed down the bank through kudzu and briar. The stillness after the bike shocked Janie's ears, the *chung* of insects slowly returning, and Nathan, halfway down, remembered to hold back the blackberry vines. At the bottom, they reached a decaying dock over river water the color of dirty tires. Nathan sat cross-legged on the punky boards, pulled out his Baggie and papers, and rolled a joint with ostentatious expertise using a fold in his jeans on the inside of his thigh. He sucked in and held, then passed the joint to Janie, who imitated him, like she'd been imitating pot smokers since she was fifteen. And instantly—too soon for the drug to have reached her blood—her tight places loosened. The pot shortened the distance between Nathan and her. This was why she smoked, why she drank. It was not, she told herself, escape, but its opposite. To connect her. It made her more there.

Nathan passed the joint again. The opaque river water under them, its slow invisible poisons, the coal barges silently sliding. And then he was taking off his clothes. The leather jacket, the black T-shirt, his engineer boots, his Levi's. He stopped at his briefs. They had not had sex yet and Janie had never seen him strip down, although the truth was even after they did begin having sex she'd never see him completely naked. He slipped over the dock edge and into the river before either of them said anything.

Janie stared, his body vanishing under the charcoal-colored water, surfacing, him whipping his bangs out of his eyes with a violent shake of his head. Janie watched, the pot continuing to dissolve the hard holding in her, burning away her self-doubt. Nathan broke surface again, gulped, and dove, the white briefs soaked translucent, the skin of his buttocks visible through them. And as she watched him, Janie understood she wanted to undress, too, and a part of her was surprised and a little scandalized. But then she was untying her shoes, rolling off her socks. She hesitated, glanced up and down the river, then unbuttoned her blouse. She was standing on the dock in her jeans and her bra, her shirt wadded against her stomach, when Nathan came up and turned towards her again.

He was treading water, a little too far away for her to clearly see his face. He called, "You better not get in here. It's nasty. I always shower soon as I get home."

Then he was pulling his sleek filth-rimed body back up on the boards. Janie's fingers already stumbling to re-button the blouse. She wondered if the tugboat captains had seen. And at first, along with that embarrassment, a sting that Nathan hadn't wanted her in the water with him. But right after that she told herself he'd warned her not to come in because he cared.

After two weeks of motorcycle rides and one week of sex, she guessed they were a couple, but she didn't know how to find out for sure. Uncle

Bobby seemed to think they were a couple, too. “Nathan came over and asked me, he asked me, ‘Bobby, do you think I should ask her out?’ But I didn’t tell you.” He nodded to himself, solemn. “Because I know how to keep a secret. I know how to keep a secret, Janie. Did you know that?”

She knew that. The story of Nathan’s consulting Uncle Bobby became an immediate favorite in Uncle Bobby’s repertoire, and after he’d told it three or four times, Janie realized he interpreted it as Nathan asking his permission for her, much like a suitor asking a father for his daughter’s hand in “one of these old movies.”

Now she lived listening always for the comings and goings of the Yamaha, of the Scout. Her life a hover of anticipation of the next journey through those mysterious backways, not country, not city. Her grandfather muttered his displeasure, but mostly kept it to himself, while her grandmother, who carried indestructible, if unfounded, faith in Janie, found the romance charming. When she and Nathan thundered through the metal canyon, Janie couldn’t help but think of her grandparents. A few of the factories still operated, at least parts of them did, and in shot-spattered signs, Janie, even stoned, recognized some names from her grandfather’s tales.

Her grandfather’s narratives were more *résumés* than stories. Recitations of his jobs since age thirteen, when he delivered empty bottles on his bicycle from a drugstore to a bootlegging apartment on Third Avenue. The bootlegging was the first step in his bootstrap chronology, through the glass factory, the nickel plant (how Janie’d always pictured this as a child, a flower blooming nickels), the job teaching welding, all the arduous rungs in his hand-over-hand pull to the American Dream. Which he did attain in his late forties: a real estate appraisal business he finally established after Janie’s mother had left home. And she thought of her grandfather, too, as she and Nathan stormed past the rows of grime-inlaid little houses with their chain-link fences and their FOR SALE signs—her grandfather at the supper table lamenting all the lost

homes, large and small, shabby and stately, in this city where he'd lived and worked all his life. The city that had rewarded that hand-over-hand climb, now on the verge of losing its station as largest in the state as people and money drained out. She could hear the hurt in his voice and the humiliation, too, in both of her grandparents. But the contrast, still, with McCloud County, now that was humiliation.

Gradually, she learned that Nathan's parents, a university professor and a high school teacher, were mortified that Nathan had dropped out of community college. He confided in her that they'd bribed him to go back but he couldn't be bought. Janie suspected that they'd pulled strings to land him the bank teller's job, where, she also gradually understood, Nathan didn't want Janie to see him. Nathan behind the bank counter was very hard for her to visualize, and the softness of Nathan's hands always surprised her, especially given all the work he did on the Harley. The hands of boys in McCloud County, even if it was only basketballs they handled instead of tools, had all been harder than Nathan's.

Once she and Nathan were saying good night after parking the Yamaha in the basement. Janie's back against the cinderblock wall, Nathan's face tucked under her jaw and into her shoulder, their hands entwined where they hung at their sides. Lulled by the tenderness of the moment, and pot, and arousal, Janie, who almost never spoke without thinking the words first, heard herself whisper, "A banker's hands."

Nathan jerked the hands away. He stepped back. His shoulders cocked, the compact body engorged, and Janie, startled, marveled at how he could amplify himself at will. And right then, more than any other moment in her life except with her mother, Janie thought she was going to be hit. Then she wasn't.

That was the first time the temper was directed at her. But seconds after he flared, he folded. He slumped against a tool bench, his arms crossed, shaking his head, and Janie saw how badly he hurt. She felt guilty for having been mean, even if she hadn't intended it.

His eruptions cast his sweet parts into brighter relief. The way he always checked to be sure she was dressed safely for the bike. The soft way he held her hand in the movies and didn't go farther. His acceptance of Uncle Bobby. Nathan had been around Uncle Bobby his whole life. He took Uncle Bobby's peculiarities for granted and usually handled him like her family did. Not with kindness, exactly—it was impossible to be always kind to him and stay sane—but with stoicism on good days, suppressed irritation on others, and mild teasing to vent some of the pressure. Uncle Bobby didn't confuse or scare Nathan, didn't make him uncomfortable the way he did most non-family members, who either avoided him or over-tried. Janie knew there was not another person in Remington who could hang out with her and Uncle Bobby without her feeling embarrassed. She and Uncle Bobby and Nathan together felt irresistibly familiar.

One long drawn-out twilight she and Nathan were sitting with their backs against the flood wall, the gravel and ground rubble under them, the grass right beyond their knees almost as high as their faces. Two motor boats creased the river. The bleared sun stifled itself behind the lowish Ohio hills. The joint was moving between her and Nathan when he murmured, "You know, if we're ever going to be close, you have to talk to me more."

Janie's head knocked softly back into the cement. Her body flushed a strange and pleasant warmth that dissipated into confusion. No one, lover or friend, had ever said anything like that to her before. But now she saw that she hadn't even realized she and Nathan rarely talked, and also she saw the stark truth of what he said. She didn't know what to say back.

Evenings when she didn't work or ride with Nathan, or when they rode very late, she and Uncle Bobby would return around nine-thirty from Ramella's or Gino's or a six-pack shared in the Chevette at the riverfront park and head straight to the pantry where they'd gulp a gob of peanut

butter. Uncle Bobby had taught her this technique for eluding alcohol detection, and Janie had to admit it was more effective, not to mention more imaginative, than her own strategy of chewing Freshen-Up gum. Then they'd pause in the doorway of the TV room to greet her grandparents, their empty ice cream bowls beside them. When she and Uncle Bobby escaped to the front porch where their breath was less likely to be noticed, Janie always felt herself darken and narrow with shame, which she never felt in front of her parents, whom she believed deserved whatever they got.

As she passed through the dining room and living room of the small house, straitjacketed by the concentration of the moderately drunk person trying to appear sober, objects came into focus that were ordinarily blurred. The house brimmed with precious things, worked-hard-for things, each one cherished by her grandmother. Ceramic Swiss children in petrified lederhosen. China plates with pastoral scenes. A chiming wooden mantel clock, blown Blenko glass, an elegant rolltop desk, needlepoints by her grandmother, roosters and flowers gilt-framed and hung. On the footrest before her grandfather's chair lay the day's newspaper divided into sections, the white pages to be thrown away, the sales circulars and coupons—Big Bear, Foodland—carefully sorted out.

Outside, the heat was finally receding, though the humidity was not. Uncle Bobby dropped into his webbed rocker lawn chair and worked it energetically. Janie stretched full-length on the porch swing, reached one hand over her head for the chain, and began her own languid rock. Out of habit, her ear pricked for Nathan even though she knew he'd stayed in tonight because his parents were having his older sister and her husband for dinner.

The front door cracked. "Can you all please turn out the lights and lock the door before you go to bed?" her grandmother called. "And sleep tight."

Shame geysered through Janie again, as deep and shuddery as grief. And then, it was grief. Because her grandparents were among the very few people in the world who loved her, she knew this, and they were the only ones who saw her not as she was, but as she could be. Yet she could not stop being as she was.

To douse her guilt, she started to talk. Tonight, Uncle Bobby would listen to her first. As she usually did, she spoke to the ceiling of her plans for after college. At some point during her freshman year, her ambitions had leapfrogged Remington, and now real life, if she could reach it, lay in an unidentified place out of state. Most of her post-college plans hinged on her becoming famous because leaving West Virginia seemed so outlandish, fame was for Janie the only imaginable route out. The problem was, famous for what? She couldn't do anything well but read.

She told Uncle Bobby she was going to write books, and she told him what would happen after that. "Mmm-hmm. Mmmm-hmm," Uncle Bobby agreed in tune to the thud of his rockers, and she knew he was nodding despite it being too dark to see, "Uh-huh, Janie. Uh-huh," Uncle Bobby taking for granted that of course Janie would do such a thing. She left out the part about how "running herself down" had affected more than her health. How if she didn't pull up her grades next semester she'd be on academic probation. She didn't mention how she'd taken a creative writing course the semester before, how the teacher had written throughout the margins of her story in green ink the single word "unclear." She'd dropped the class because, she'd told herself, it gave her more hours at her grocery store deli job. Janie not only left all that out, but by the time she'd finished talking about her plans to the confident accompaniment of Uncle Bobby's "uh-hmms," she'd forgotten all of it, too. Talking to Uncle Bobby made her brilliant and brave and even obliterated her greatest fear: that if she managed to get through college at all, she'd end up back in McCloud County as a junior high English teacher.

"Why don't you write a story about the time I took you and Ben to *Black Beauty* and Ben lost his mittens?" Uncle Bobby asked when she finally finished. "Why don't you write a story about that, Janie?"

"Well," Janie said. "Maybe one of these days I will."

Then it was Uncle Bobby's turn. Tonight he was in his righteous argumentative mode, operating from the know-it-all part of his brain. The people he quarreled with were always absent, sometimes actual individuals who'd told him something he didn't want to do or believe, sometimes straw antagonists who represented something he considered offensive or ridiculous. Now he was recalling the time he took the Greyhound to McCloud County to visit Janie's family, but the bus driver had forgotten to stop in their town because, Uncle Bobby claimed, he was distracted by a woman with "dimensions"—"dementia" Janie interpreted—who wouldn't stop talking about her false teeth. Uncle Bobby had ridden another hour to Winchester, Virginia, before the driver caught his oversight. Strumming her thumb along the links of the swing chain, the tang of rust sharp against the night scent of juniper, Janie returned the Uncle Bobby favor, confirming, regardless of what he said, "Mmm-hmmm. Mmm-hmm."

He fulminated to the rhythm of his rockers, the indignity of having been forgotten on the bus, the stupidity and insensitivity of the driver, while Janie, the swing jangling end-to-end under her hand, imagined Nathan in his single bed, his room bare, as though he'd stripped out everything from childhood and not known what to put back. "What I should of done, Janie, was tell him off. Next time, I'm just gonna tell him. Would you? Would you tell him, Janie?"

The alcohol lowered her gently tonight. She remembered an incident as a preschooler when she'd brought Uncle Bobby a book and asked him to read to her. Her confusion when he couldn't. That was one of several early times she'd noticed something different about him—his turtle phobia, for instance, or the way he said "animules" for "animals"

and “legotards” for “leotards”—but he was the youngest of her mother’s four siblings, and Janie attributed his inability to read, along with other “young” things he did, with his being the family baby.

Now Janie could tell from his volume and tone that he was winding down. Like he did for her, she joined him for the landing—“Yep, I hear ya. I hear ya”—while Uncle Bobby petered out, “And so forth and so on. And what have you,” Janie agreeing, “Mmm-hmm. Mmm-hmmm,” until he went silent except for his rockers on the floor, and Janie underscored his last proclamation: “It’s awful, Uncle Bobby. It’s just awful.” And then, both of them finished, Janie, nearly sober, asked, “Where’d you go this afternoon after work?”

Almost every other day now, he’d been leaving the house without asking her to come along. This didn’t hurt her feelings but it made her intensely curious because under normal circumstances Uncle Bobby wanted her with him whenever possible. The last two times she’d asked him where he’d gone, instead of saying, “Oh, to see a friend of mine,” he’d said, “Oh, just down to the Coin Castle.”

The Coin Castle was a video arcade across from the Convenient Mart about a half-mile from her grandparents’ house. This answer made her suspicious because Uncle Bobby was terrible at games in general and at video games especially. The answer also worried her. She knew that although most of the neighbors loved and looked after Uncle Bobby, there had been incidents, always involving teenagers and kids. Like those who hung out at the Coin Castle. Uncle Bobby giving boys money, no one ever uncovering for what. Uncle Bobby buying beer at the Convenient Mart for underage kids. An episode several years ago when a couple of teenagers had talked Uncle Bobby into buying them an old Jeep. After that, her grandfather, a staunch believer that a man should have at least a little control over the money he earned, had to take away Uncle Bobby’s checkbook.

And then there had been an event vaguely sexual, so vaguely sexual that Janie wasn’t sure if she’d overheard her parents talking about it

or just made it up. Because eavesdropping was how she'd learned all these stories; they had never been told to her directly. She had overheard them, and when she did, she immediately regretted it. A teenage boy again, again the boy with the upper hand. A fragile place under her heart drew in on itself and pinched. A snarl of emotions, including hurt and helplessness, but also defensiveness and shame, those last two the most confusing and complicated of all. It was like her family's privacy and their territory were being invaded. Only family should know Uncle Bobby's vulnerabilities, and if Uncle Bobby was to be teased or told what to do or manipulated, it was only by them.

"E.T.! Phone home!" Uncle Bobby tried to change the subject.

"What do you want to go to Coin Castle for?" she asked.

Uncle Bobby snigger-chuckled his you've-caught-me-in-something-but-I'm-trying-to-act-like-it's-nothing laugh. "To see a friend of mine." He snigger-chuckled again. "Anything wrong with that, Janie? Anything wrong with that?"

After each showing, the popcorn girls had to drag garbage bags into the theaters and pick up under the seats. Spilled pop running down the theatre, top to bottom, dirty Pampers in *Snow White*. The occasional greasy grocery bag from homemade popcorn snuck in. Halfway through the summer, *Psycho II* came to one of the side theaters and the sorority girls decided to get scared. "I'm not going in there this time, I just won't do it!" A squeal. "I'm petrified!" "My god, I had to go in there Saturday night after the last show, and, I swear, something moved, I'm not making this up, something moved behind the curtain along the wall." Once when Janie herself was picking up, she pushed behind that curtain and ran into Kimberly. Kimberly shrieked so loud even Betty came running, then all the sorority girls collapsed into the nearest seats in hysterical laughter until Gus busted in and yelled at them.

Everybody said they felt the hauntiness in the *Psycho* theater, but everyone acted like it was a joke, so Janie did, too. Inside her, though, it

didn't seem funny at all. Just stepping into the dim empty theater, she'd feel the prickle left over from the screen, the pretend horror having somehow leaked off the film and infected the walls and the seats. But far worse than the *Psycho* theater were the bathrooms.

Out in the lobby, Tommie Sue continued to talk. The attempted murder on the sidewalk under the marquee, a jealous husband waiting for his cheating wife to show up with her date. The more recent seizure in the bathroom, a lady's legs thrust rigid out a stall door, her heels tomtomming the tiles.

"And then that guy who had a stroke during *Porky's*, that was just last year, right, Betty? And it happened during a matinee, that's what the coroner said, and here nobody noticed him until after the last show on a Saturday night, I don't know who was supposed to be picking up that day."

Betty shook her head. She didn't either.

"But there, as we were closing down, that usher—I can't recall his name, I think he was from over in Chesapeake—he tried to shake the guy awake. And a mouse jumped out of his mouth."

Betty shivered and cupped her cross.

"We never saw that usher again."

As always, Janie would be standing between Tommie Sue, at the end of the counter nearest ticket sales, and the sorority girls, huddled at the other end past the pop machine. During the stories, Betty would swivel around on her ticket-seller stool and listen without smiling—these were the only times Betty did not smile. That Betty, practical, even-tempered, cheerful, Christian, never questioned a syllable Tommie Sue spoke and affirmed many with nods made it all triply terrifying. "And that's not all," Tommie Sue said, her big, round, darkish glasses amplifying—bigger, rounder, darker—her cloudy black eyes. Just then Gus barreled around the corner to catch them idle. Tommie Sue didn't blink. "That ain't even counting what all's happened in the old parts," she said.

Gus clapped his hands on his hips, the bloated keychain quivering on his belt like a grenade, and glowered at Tommie Sue. He had to lift his chin to do it. Tommie Sue stared back, a nonchalant blankness. "Somebody get down there check those restrooms!" Gus blared.

Sprawling underneath the ground floor, the Alexander Henry's bathrooms were bigger than many modern theaters altogether. To reach them, you descended a wide staircase covered with a once-red carpet now faded pinkish at its edges and in the middle worn down to mole-colored padding. Despite the clarity of her childhood memories, Janie could not recall, no matter how hard she tried, ever entering these bathrooms before she became a popcorn girl. Some never-seen janitor cleaned the bathrooms in the mornings before the matinees, but then the popcorn girls were expected to do hourly checks. If you were appointed, you had to go down in the middle of the movies, when the fewest people would be using them. None of the other popcorn girls seemed to mind it. Janie pretended she didn't either.

Each pink-gray step deeper her shoulders knitted tighter, her head drained lighter. Once you reached the bottom, before you even entered the rooms with the stalls, you had to pass through odd preliminaries, rooms with no apparent purpose, as if they'd been donated from other buildings. A room with nothing but sinks. A room with a gas fireplace and a mantel piled with broken bricks and musty couches that looked as though they'd been upholstered with short-haired hounds. A tall, narrow, lightless room containing a single empty cot and three locked doors. By the time Janie got to the actual toilets, her panic had spread from her head and shoulders through her whole body, chilling even her fingers and toes. She just had the wherewithal to intone to herself, "You're eighteen years old, Janie. Janie, you're eighteen years old."

Then she was at the threshold of the stalls, stepping into the shock of fluorescent lights. The floor here was a vertiginous checkerboard of disintegrating black-and-white tiles the size of record albums, some chipped, some cracked, some missing completely and in their place

what looked like earth coming up. And there wasn't simply one room of stalls. There were three, end to end. The closed stalls ran on and on to Janie's right, their wooden doors freshly painted the color of flesh. To her left, the infinite mirrors, so many opportunities to find a dead body, everything resplendently lit. Janie quick-clicked down the broken tile floor in her cheap work loafers as fast as she could without breaking into a full run—because always, in a small corner of her huge vague fear, a specific little fear that she might run into a live person down here and all her infantile fears would be found out—her heart now surging like a body-big bellows, all of her, from guts to throat to ears, engorged with that bellowing heart. She kept her head turned slightly to the right, one eye on the tile, the other on the stall doors, all of her resisting the horrific pull of the mirrors. But now and again, in the far corner of her left eye, a flash of her red popcorn girl smock, her black popcorn girl pants, but Janie resisting, refusing, to look full-on, for fear of...what? She thought she knew. For fear of what she might see in the mirror with her.

Until she reached the end, whirled around, and did it all in reverse.

Then she'd burst back up into the relief of the mute lobby lights. She'd pause on the top step until her breathing evened, straighten her smock and run her fingers through her bangs. Then, when her hands stopped shaking, she'd initial the restroom check sheet where it hung on a clipboard near the time clock.

It never occurred to her to cheat and not walk the whole thing.

Relaxed, Nathan always looked sleepy. The contrast made his outbursts even more electrifying when they weren't directed at Janie, and they rarely were. Even so, now that they were a couple, her role in the tantrums changed from those early days in the garage when she and Uncle Bobby could just watch. Now Nathan's upset became in part her responsibility, to placate, to make right, an obligation not exactly imposed by Nathan but something Janie knew intuitively. Knew it

was her job, but had almost no idea how to go about it, so that when he finally did calm down, her relief was so profound it was an intoxication on its own.

She met Nathan's friends, the languid, belt-thin pothead boys familiar to Janie from home. Nathan was the shortest of them all, and it amazed her how he could be so small and at the same time the most cocksure in any group. She'd assumed that growing up in the city would have made his friends more sophisticated, but that wasn't the case at all. As it had with the boys back home, the weed dulled their desires, fertilized their indifference, so that they floated, day in, day out, in a complacent sag. This was another way Nathan stood out. The fuse in his belly, the periodic bombs—they also made him more alive.

Because he still slept in his childhood bed across the hall from his parents, they did it in his Scout. In his father's pickup camper shell. Once standing up along the wall in the clean concrete smell of the basement, his teeth clenching his bottom lip. They did it on the ground wherever the motorcycle stopped, in the blackberry brush between the river road and the Ohio dock, many times on a sheet of plastic in the head-high weeds at the base of one of the old factories, cars echoing in the metal ravine only yards away. Once, after a seven-hour partying marathon that included sneaking into the drive-in, crashing an outdoor party with a band playing some strain of violent country, and buying weed from a pothead friend's father (a man with the oil-slicked hair of the 1950s who dealt while sitting in a barber chair he kept in his basement like a parodic throne), they ended up at four a.m. in a dew-soaked field beyond a couple tract homes. Janie without the remotest idea where they were and her obligated to be clean and sober in time for ten a.m. church. Nathan always came quick, she never did at all, and neither expected anything different.

The truth was, for Janie, the bodies were almost incidental. For her, sex enchanted for the same reasons drugs and alcohol did. The quick easy intimacy, the crumbling of the barrier between herself and other

people, the way during sex it was impossible to hold herself apart not only from him, but from herself as well. The mist of transcendence that sex showered over ordinary things, and later, Janie'd remember not the quick hard thrusts, the skin on skin, but the little fog lifting off that field in the almost-dawn afterwards. She'd remember the scent of sycamores and river from the seat of the bike on the ride home. She'd remember how the act drained both of them like an abscess—from him, his anger, his frustration; from her, her self-consciousness, her anxiety. And also afterwards, a tenderness in him she never saw otherwise for longer than a few seconds, a vulnerability, and she knew it wasn't like that with many boys when they finished, but it was for him.

Once in a while among those pallid, droopy, dope-loving boys, Nathan might make a remark about her. Janie would flinch, and the boys would snigger, but only a little and usually uneasily, and after a few seconds, Janie would think: that wasn't what he meant, was it? Sometimes for a day or two he seemed to ignore her for no reason and then say he hadn't when she got up the nerve to ask him why he had. She'd have to replay the whole period in her head—so she'd just imagined it? She must have.

Sometimes when she and Uncle Bobby hung around watching Nathan work in the basement, he might not even acknowledge them, it all depended on his mood. But she knew he had to concentrate when he was working on the Harley and how exasperated it made him. Besides, his distractedness then and elsewhere meant she, too, could be by herself and with him at the same time. Meant she didn't have to think of things to say. And when he finally did come back, and touched her cheekbone, or sleepy-smiled with his eyes locked onto hers, or patted the back of his bike seat, his attentions radiated all the more brilliantly because of their absence before.

*

One hot Saturday morning after two days of Nathan keeping his distance, he called her and asked her to go with him to the lake. She hadn't known there was a lake. She stepped cautiously into the driveway where he was hitching the aluminum fishing boat to his father's truck. She paused there, uncertain whether he'd noticed her or not, him bent over the ball hitch and his white T-shirt riding up his back. The narrowness of his waist riding out of his Levi's, the gap between denim and skin. Janie raised her eyes and tried to read his mood from the side of his face, but then he finally turned and his smile broke out full, and in the light off him Janie lightened too.

Then they were pulling away down Kentworth Drive, the sky actually blue, exceptional for a late-morning July in Remington, West Virginia, where summer sky was usually the color of pale metal. Janie was drunk before they hit the city limits, as though the half beer she put in herself as they headed out of town ignited the alcohol left in her body from the night before, and she dropped her head back and gazed into that uncommon blue sky. Over her eyes settled a kind of squishy glass, something that often happened when she got drunk in broad day, so that she saw everything but saw it pleasantly distorted and at a padded distance. All along, Nathan was talking to her, gentle-teasing, a mood almost as extraordinary as the sky, and Janie heard herself, more extraordinary, talking, and she understood Nathan was listening, and Janie thought, *this is how couples are. Couples who love each other. This is how couples are together.* Now they were winding through daylight hills that before they'd only ridden at night, and Janie, with the abysmal sense of direction of those who've lived their whole lives in one little place, became, as usual, completely disoriented, and that lostness, as usual, forced her to give over even more to Nathan.

They finally reached the lake, not much more than a pond, Janie saw, its parking lot crawling with people like themselves. Then she and Nathan were putting in the aluminum boat with all the other people putting in their aluminum boats, all the others, too, with heavy, loaded coolers and fishing poles like props, everyone else, too, drunk, but lazy

drunk, not fighting drunk. Nathan was behind her now, his hand on the muted chuffing of the outboard, them moving just faster than a drift. And Janie basked in that similarity between themselves and the other couples, in the miracle of Nathan's contentment, in how he wanted her there in full light, how seldom they did anything together in the day. The two of them in a comfortable silence now, the kind that settles after you have had a conversation and followed it to its natural easy end. The squishy lens still padding her eyes, Janie leaned over the boat edge and towards the water, a second layer to look through. The grasses slimy waving under them and the algaed stones on the bottom, hypnotic.

It might have been fifteen minutes, it might have been forty, when she heard Nathan, his voice like ice water but with just a hint of taunt. "Miss Melissa Kendrick."

Janie's head snapped up. Sliding by, not ten feet distant, was another aluminum boat. A boat so like their own boat that if Janie had come up on them side by side in the parking lot, she wouldn't have been able to tell which from which. The other boat moving exactly parallel to theirs, but in the opposite direction, and in its bow, as Janie was in theirs, sat Melissa.

By the time Janie looked, Melissa was directly across from her. Melissa's blond hair in drifts of perfectly executed curls clear to her shoulders, the hair immobile yet not stiff, her face meticulously but not excessively made up. Her features sharper than Janie's, Melissa had grown into them, they fit her, while Janie's face still floated in baby and beer fat. Melissa wore a bikini, her body big and small exactly where it should be, Janie in a one-piece with a pair of shorts pulled over to hide her thighs. Melissa was beautiful in the way favored by both Remington and McCloud County, the way favored by Janie, too, and under the foundation, behind the mascara, Janie looked for surprise, anger, hurt, jealousy. But by the time Janie saw Melissa, the face had already been blocked off.

Janie registered all this in just a few seconds, both boats moving on their slow opposed courses, and now Melissa was gone altogether and it was the man in the stern Janie faced. Him turned halfway, like Nathan was, with a hand on the tiller, his thick earth-colored hair buckling out from under a black Walker cap. There was a heaviness to his body, to his bare torso, although he was not at all fat, his skin the kind of brown, layers deep, of men who work outside. His face was not as fine as Nathan's, the face had a heaviness to it, too, and a pair of grooves from the sides of his nose to the corners of his mouth. The face of a man. Which—it occurred to Janie for the first time—Nathan's was not.

After Nathan's "Miss Melissa Kendrick," the whole tableau unfolded in silence. When stern had passed stern, the two boats completely clear of each other, Nathan gunned their motor. He straight-lined it back to the ramp, their wake wobbling and shaking the peacefully drunk others bobbing about, it all happening so quickly, Nathan moving so fast, that only a few even had time to muster a "Hey!" or give them the finger.

They drove all the way back to Kentworth Drive without exchanging a word, Nathan silent-screaming from every pore. Janie, tiny on her side of the seat, soberness fast overtaking her, and how she hated to go sober when she was still awake, and this in the worst of circumstances. The squishiness melted from her eyes, the sweet distance it imposed collapsed. And she knew Nathan's rage, his pain, had little to do with her, and she waited to feel pain herself, or jealousy, or anger. But nothing came. Aside from a general miserableness, nothing came but the other man's face. That face she had read. Surprise, yes, but brighter than that, guilt. And she saw too, despite the bulky brown body, despite him being so much bigger than Nathan, you could tell that even when he sat, despite all that, Janie saw he was scared.

"You know those box seats they've got stuck up on the side walls?" It was late Sunday afternoon after the Saturday lake incident, that dead

hour before her grandmother would call them to help her with supper. Janie lay on her stomach on Uncle Bobby's bed, her head at its foot, her bare feet on his pillows where Tina curled. Fresh from his shower after his shift, Uncle Bobby rocked in his recliner, Old Spice flavoring the room, and the air conditioner throbbed in the window, the sky outside cement-colored again. When her grandmother called them, Uncle Bobby would set the table, the napkin rings, the cloth napkins, the water pitcher. Janie would construct the salad, jello squares in little nests of iceberg lettuce, or, her favorite, Seven Layer, with bacon and frozen peas. Napkins in their laps, they'd say the blessing before they ate, they'd please and they'd thank you, and every second, without looking, they'd feel the other's strain: to finish and go out.

"Yeah?" Uncle Bobby said.

"Well, they're fake. There's not even a door to get into them. That's just paint." She hadn't seen Nathan since he'd told her to go home when she tried to help him unhitch the boat. He'd left twice on the motorcycle after that. Once shortly after they'd returned from the lake. Again, Uncle Bobby had reported when she asked, while she was working Saturday night.

"I know that, Janie." It was the soft studiedly understated tone, both pitying and slightly embarrassed for her, that he used when she didn't know something he thought she should. When he knew more than she did, he was always sympathetic. "I thought you knew that. I thought you knew that, Janie."

"Also," Janie pulled Tina down to where she could stroke her back, "Tommie Sue says the basement and the bathrooms aren't as deep as the Alexander Henry goes."

"What do you mean, Janie?"

"She says there are levels under the bathroom that run all under the whole city block." Janie hadn't believed this at first, but reliable Ronnie, with his rubber band legs, his transparent mustache, who'd worked at

the Alexander Henry for five years, said, yes, he went down there all the time to check the heating and air-conditioning.

“Do you think you could go down there, Janie?” Uncle Bobby rocked faster now, she could feel a little breeze off it. “What if you got to go down there?”

“And she says there are still dressing rooms somewhere behind the stage, and under those, a bunch more rooms that are caving in.” Tommie Sue had spoken of snakes, which Janie didn’t mind so much, and of rats, which she did. “Tommie Sue says sometimes the rats get so bad they have to shut the theater down for a few days and spread poisoned popcorn all over the floor.”

“Ooooo, Janie! That’s awful! That’s just awful, now!”

Janie let go of Tina, turned her head to the side, and propped it on an elbow. That’s when she noticed that the laundry E.T. no longer occupied the place of honor on the maiden aunt’s jewelry box. That E.T. now sat on the dresser itself, and on the jewelry box sat a second E.T., a cheaper version made of a smooth synthetic material, well-used, with shiny black streaks. An E.T. that had never seen the inside of a washing machine.

“Tell me about the cat shit,” Uncle Bobby was saying, then peeling into giggles.

“Where’d you get that E.T.?”

“What?” The giggles collapsed.

“Where’d you get that new E.T.?”

“Oh.” He paused. A cloak fell over his voice. “Friend of mind gave it to me.”

“What friend?”

“Oh. Just a friend of mine.” Now he’d recovered himself, retreated into exaggerated nonchalance. Janie watched his face. “You don’t know ’em.” He wasn’t looking at her. “You don’t know ’em, Janie.” His brow furrowed. His lips moved. *Just a friend of mine. You don’t know ’em.* The shadow-say.

A place in Janie's chest twisted. She pulled the liner notes out of the album nearest at hand, *Tommy*, and pretended to read. Only once had she slept in this room, in Uncle Bobby's bed. She was ten years old, and her great-grandmother had died. The house was overfull with relatives home for the funeral, and Uncle Bobby had been moved to a couch because his bed would hold three children. Janie slept there with her two younger cousins, five and six at the time. When she'd been told of this arrangement, she'd feigned annoyance, but she was secretly relieved because she suspected Great-grandmother's ghost might be coasting the house at night.

A generous and bony woman who'd grown skinnier and skinnier until there wasn't enough of her to hold her up, Great-grandmother had lived in a small brick house in the city and wore dresses like the other old ladies in Remington, but Janie's mother had told her many times that Great-grandmother had grown up in "dire poverty." Up a dirt road out in the country, the daughter of a pipe-smoking woman and a half-Cherokee with the un-Cherokee name of "Alan." "Dire poverty," her mother would say. "Your great-grandmother would take me out there to visit them when I was little, but your grandmother was ashamed of them." "Your great-grandmother only went to the third grade," her mother also told her, this the most fascinating piece of all, especially because when Great-grandmother died, Janie was in fourth grade so had just passed her.

After Janie's mother turned out the light that night she slept in Uncle Bobby's room, Janie drew as close to her little cousins as she could without raising suspicions. Then she prayed.

She hadn't known she'd fallen asleep when a rapping woke her. She snapped to, rigid in every limb. At first she thought she'd imagined it, she'd been told since she could talk that her imagination was too big, but then the rapping began again. Against the window pane, an insistent, a confident *tack tack tack*.

She had jerked the covers over her head and was reciting “God is Great” when she heard a hiss as loud as a voice can get and still be under breath: “Bobby!”

“Who’s that?” blurted her cousin Ellie, her voice as clear as though she’d never been asleep, and then she was crawling over Janie towards the window.

Janie followed instinctively to protect her and so as not to appear more cowardly than a kindergartener. Ellie was now pulling back Uncle Bobby’s plaid curtain and rising to her tiptoes, Janie huddled behind, both of them leaning forward. And then looking down into the up-raised and shocked face—she could see one side of his face quite well in the light off the back porch next door—of a blotchy tubby man with greasy graying red hair.

Before he wheeled and sprinted around the corner of the house, Janie saw he carried a yardstick.

The other cousin slept through the whole incident. Ellie did not mention it in the morning or ever again as far as Janie knew, which made her wonder if Ellie had really been awake after all.

Janie never told anyone either. Although she was even more naïve about sex than other ten-year-olds in 1975, an unsettling part of her that occasionally knew things ahead of her mind, a part that felt like memory when Janie knew the things remembered had never happened in her life, that part seeped into her heart an unnameable and untraceable shame for Uncle Bobby and for herself. As she got older, that night at the window would sometimes resurface, and each time it did, she understood more with her brain and she shoved it harder away. But now, here on Uncle Bobby’s bed, behind her a new curtain, still plaid, and Uncle Bobby and the shadow-say—

There came a tap on the door. Janie jumped.

“You all ready to help set the table?”

After the day at the lake, Nathan stopped varying their night rides. Now she only saw him very late, after her evening shift or after she and Uncle Bobby had already been out. On work nights, Uncle Bobby liked to be in bed by ten because he had to get up at five to walk to the hospital. Nathan would go out, too, during those earlier after-dinner hours, to where she did not know and never asked. She'd lie, her body strung tight, on the porch swing, with Uncle Bobby before ten, without Uncle Bobby after, waiting while pretending not to wait, until she'd hear, a quarter-mile away, the Yamaha turn onto Kentworth Drive.

When it slid into the driveway across the street, Janie would lift up just far enough to glimpse through the hedges Nathan rip off his helmet and stalk into his house. Not long after, he'd resurface, float gray across his lawn, then hers—he who had to start work at 7:30 a.m., almost as early as Uncle Bobby, but who never seemed to need sleep, as though the perpetually sleepy look he wore when he wasn't angry was rest enough for him—and fetch her. Sometimes he didn't even speak.

He'd hellbend them out of Remington, using the back streets behind the art museum, past the extravagant turn-of-the-century mansions, a neighborhood Janie's grandmother had showed her when she was little. And when she was little they didn't even make her envious, the mansions were still what she could grow up into. Then, abruptly, they were in woods—how quick the city stopped and the country began—and then in fields, and then in woods again, it could almost have been McCloud County except these hills were smaller, growing gradually out of the Ohio Valley. Within minutes, Janie would be lost. The first time and even the second, although she must have seen the little house in the corn, the impression didn't stick. But she must have registered it because the third time, when they actually stopped near the house, memories of passing it earlier returned. Still, even that third time, Janie believed it was because Nathan liked the ride. By the fourth, she knew different.

That night, she decided not to wrap her arms around him; she clutched the sissy bar instead, to punish him for his aloofness. If Nathan noticed, he didn't show it. By now, more than a week after the incident at the lake, Janie understood that whatever had been between her and Nathan—and she still couldn't name it; neither of them had ever said “girlfriend,” much less “love”—had peaked and there was nowhere to go but down. When she was anticipating being with him instead of actually being with him, she could sometimes bury that understanding. When they were together, like now, the burying did not hold. As they sledged the hills, Janie pushed deeper into the sissy bar, made space between them, closed her eyes, and tried to be with only the smells. The smells so much louder in the night than in day, and Janie pulled them around her, envisioned them as a screen between her and Nathan. Eventually they surged up the highest hill of all, almost a mountain, then down into a straight along a creek, and finally up a smaller hill. At the crest of it, Nathan killed the engine.

They coasted down in the whine of the wheels, the after roar of the engine still vibrating in Janie's ears. They coasted as far as momentum would carry them into a bottom full of hip-high green corn. The bike stopped well short of the house, but with the house in clear sight. Nathan didn't heel the kickstand. They stood there with their feet on the road holding the weight and the heat of the bike between their legs.

The house sat lonely in a tiny lot stamped out of the corn, a single outbuilding behind it. One story, small, porchless, no white clapboard or aluminum siding, there was nothing farmhouse about it. Stucco, of all things, like a bewildered transplant from town. The hills bulked in the near distance. Janie inhaled the McCloud County odor of corn just beginning to tassel. Her thighs were starting to strain. In dogless silence, the house was lit on the outside only by a cloud-scarped moon, on the inside by one illuminated room. Two tall pointed shrubs flanked the front door.

Standing there in the humidity without the wind of the ride, she felt under her sweatshirt the perspiration bead in the small of her back.

Nathan, still straddling the bike, reached into his inside jacket pocket and pulled out a joint. He pushed back his face shield, slipped the joint between his lips, and thumbed the lighter. Janie waited, suspended between outrage at his not admitting her existence and a heart-craning hope that he would. Nathan passed the joint over his shoulder. Janie took it, tasted the moisture of his mouth on it, and she drew deep and returned it. Nathan's face did not waver from the house. Janie stared, too, wondering if she was co-conspirator or afterthought.

She gulped the second drag, all the smoke her mouth and throat could hold. She knew it wasn't Melissa's house, Melissa lived in an apartment near Rees Park. Uncle Bobby had pointed it out one time, and Uncle Bobby was never wrong about that kind of thing. She looked for Melissa's car, she knew that, too, from before Nathan and Melissa broke up, but the only car was a newish Ford truck. She wondered was it something to do with one of the belt-thin boys, maybe a falling out or, more frightening, an argument with a dealer. And then an image bloomed in her mind, and as soon as it did, she felt so foolish her face flushed. The hard brown handsomeness. The grooves from his nose to his lip. His fear anyway.

They smoked the roach until it seared their fingernails. Nathan flipped the last of it onto the berm. He snapped down his facemask and turned the key. He rotated the bike, unrushed, his feet still on the ground. Then he leaned into it and they were smooth-moving, the corn, the flat, the stucco house falling fast behind.

The next time Uncle Bobby left without inviting her along, Janie waited ten minutes, then headed to the Coin Castle.

The Coin Castle had not a single castle attribute, not even a fake turret or a crenellated façade; it was nothing but a cube squatting in a black asphalt lot. From the edge of the sun-fired lot, Janie squinted at the open door, the interior as dark as a midday tavern. She hesitated again on

the threshold. The games sizzled and flashed in the dark, they cheeped and sang, she recognized their voices, Centipede, Donkey Kong, Pac-Man and Ms, she'd played them all, always in bars, never sober. A pack of boys under fourteen jostled each other and the machines, the place ripe with the aroma of grape gum and the high sour odor of pre-pubescent boy sweat. When she finally slipped in, she pulled off to the side and willed herself invisible. As soon as her eyes adjusted, she spotted Uncle Bobby.

He stood beside the counter where they got their tokens, bought their candy, complained when their money was lost. He was fresh from his after-work shower, and now that she saw him, she could detect Old Spice floating through the grape gum and boy smell. His thinning hair neatly combed, his polo shirt tucked into his too-tight shorts—in perpetual denial of his weight, he insisted on buying them one size too small—Uncle Bobby rocked on his heels. And beamed at the woman behind the counter.

A woman shaped like a planet with fine brown hair that fell straight to her shoulders like a thin fountain, making her face look rounder than it was. She wore over brown double-knit pants a smock top of Holly Hobbie fabric. And she was speaking, Uncle Bobby urging her on, “Mmmm-hmmm. Mmm-hmm,” Uncle Bobby attentive, enthusiastic, close to euphoric, now he was convulsing into laughter over something she'd said—“Oh, c'mon, Tessa! C'mon, now! You're kidding me!”—and Janie shifted to where Uncle Bobby could see her.

When he did, not a trace of embarrassment invaded his face. Not a trace of shame. After a short surprise, his face held only pleasure, and not just pleasure, Janie saw, but also pride. He stuck out his arm towards Janie. “Tessa, this is my niece, Janie. She works at the thee-ay-ter.”

Tessa turned to Janie, smiling, and extended her hand. Janie stepped towards her, and as she did, she was startled by how badly she wanted this for Uncle Bobby. Two boys slammed between her and the counter,

slapped money down—"A pack of red hots!"—and Janie was reaching over them, taking the plump warm hand, saying, "Nice to meet you." And while she was usually too nervous to look a stranger in the face for more than a few seconds, this time she looked longer. Because she wanted so urgently for it to be, even though right under that she knew someone like Uncle Bobby could never run a video arcade. Janie took the hand, looked in the face, and saw, first, tiredness. Then patient kindness. And finally, intelligence. Janie saw in Tessa everything was right there.

It was the very next day that her grandmother had arranged for her to pick up Uncle Bobby from work after lunch and take him to his dental appointment. She'd accidentally made it for an afternoon when she was teaching Bible study. "Thank you so much, honey," her grandmother had said. "You'll have to go in and get him. He won't know what time to come out."

Janie decided to drive the back way to the hospital, to follow Uncle Bobby's walking route, two and a half miles each morning, no matter the weather and in the dark in the winter. She imagined Uncle Bobby in his down-to-business get-there gait, his head pitched forward, his arms swinging, his shoulders and butt rocking side-to-side with so wide a sweep you feared he'd lose his balance. But he never did, Uncle Bobby borne upright by momentum. Once in a while her grandmother picked him up in the afternoons, Janie had ridden with her many times, and since she'd gotten her license two years ago, she'd picked him up a few times, too. So for years, Janie had waited in the alley outside the service employees' entrance until Uncle Bobby torpedoed through the door at 3:16. But this was the first time she'd been inside.

She slipped into an empty yellow hall splitting into other empty yellow halls and not a sign anywhere besides EXIT. Wandering right, she ran into a woman resting with a mop bucket in an alcove under the time clock. The woman's chin sloped long off her face like a scoop.

When Janie asked her for directions to the laundry room, the woman laughed, the scoop shimmying. She heaved herself out of the chair, Janie saying, “Oh, no, don’t get up,” the woman laughing at that, too, and then leading her around corner after yellow corner to a set of solid double doors.

Janie thanked the woman, then pushed through them. And her breath stopped.

All these years—he’d been promoted from housekeeping to laundry a decade ago—when Janie thought of Uncle Bobby at work, which she often did, she saw—not imagined, but saw—a cheerful, clean, brightly lit room, a Platonic ideal of a Laundromat. But now she stood on the edge of a sprawling windowless dungeon, somehow both low-ceilinged and cavernous, lit only by intermittent yellow bulbs, and the light stopped before the room did, the room’s edges running off into spaces she couldn’t see. The giant machines thudded in her torso, tingled her hands, now all their beats at cross-purposes, now synching into harmony, now out again, just above her head a convolute of ducts and vents and tube, and she wondered if Uncle Bobby had to stoop. The humidity more tropical than outdoors—that had been another characteristic of the Platonic Laundromat, Janie realized, it was air-conditioned—and the damp heat cottony in her mouth, a taste of lint and used soap and gray water that made her want to spit.

She strained to make out Uncle Bobby among the dim shapes pivoting between a row of mammoth front-loading washers and a row of mammoth front-loading dryers. The dryers emitted eerie light, brighter than the ceiling bulbs when the light wasn’t obscured by the fabric the dim shapes pulled from the machines, scrubs, gowns, sheets, like fishermen hauling in nets, hand over hand, to find nothing at their ends. And for some reason she suddenly remembered another Uncle Bobby story the family told. How as a five-year-old, uncoordinated, he’d stumbled into a heater, and he still carried faded scars on his arms and hands.

Then she did see Uncle Bobby. Because he had seen her first and had pulled away from the others. He was fast-gathering his lunch bag from a shelf. She stepped towards him, and now Uncle Bobby was passing the metal manager's cage, hurrying like he always did, when a voice called from the cage over the din, "Hey, Bobby?"

Janie turned to see inside the steel latticework the supervisor, his legs crossed at his ankles and propped on his desk, his left shoe almost touching the shredded lettuce protruding from a half-eaten sub. He was dangling from his hand what looked like a gold chain. "Ten days are up. I guess it's yours."

Uncle Bobby ducked in. He took the chain from the supervisor at a speed just short of a snatch and mumbled "Thank you"—Janie saw his mouth move, she could not hear it. Then he shoved it into the pocket of his skin-tight work pants.

In the car, after she turned on the ignition but before she put it in gear, Janie said, "Who you gonna give that necklace to?"

She'd asked him directly last night if Tessa had given him the black-streaked E.T. doll. He'd nodded. "It used to belong to one of her kids." Then he'd added, matter-of-factly, "Me and her might move in together."

"Oh," he said now. "A friend of mine."

Then, to Janie's surprise, he stretched out his leg, and, squirming a little, wiggled the necklace out of his pocket. With great delicacy, his breath held, he laid it out across the yellow calluses of one palm.

The chain part was thickish, with large links, a little tarnished. Hanging from it was a large artificial red jewel like a screw-shaped tail.

"She's gonna like it," Janie finally said.

"Mmm-hmm," said Uncle Bobby. "I already know that."

That night when she and Uncle Bobby got home at nine after riding around without even drinking, Nathan was sitting on the wall along his driveway. Janie pretended she didn't see him, and Uncle Bobby really

didn't, but Nathan arced off the wall and strolled across the street. Without speaking, he took Janie's hand and laid it on his cheek. Her limbs loosened. Maybe he was done with the stucco house. Maybe after watching it like he had last time, they would move on to something else.

They did not. They stood again, bike between their legs, in that untraveled road between the corn. The sky starless, the high summer clouds, invisible now, still pressing down heat. The house again with its single light, its single truck. She waited for Nathan to light a joint, but tonight he was so rapt he didn't even think of that. Then, as though Nathan had conjured it by his intensity, the front door opened. Shielded by those high shrubs like it was, Janie saw it open only by the light spilled onto the grass. In front of her, inside Nathan, Janie felt the fuse ignite.

Two figures stepped out of the door, through the light, and towards the truck. All Janie could discern was that one was taller than the other. There was nothing else she could tell. Everything else was blotted, was drowned, by Nathan's body before her, the body dilating, taut as rock, the swelling strained, the high desperation, a shrill to it you could feel but not hear, the fuse flaring, and Janie saw again the unnerved face of the man in the boat, saw again the foam on Nathan's lips, saw again the banker's hand in the garage, cocking back.

Abruptly, Nathan arched his body like a wing and crashed all one hundred fifty pounds down on the kick start. Janie lost her balance, grabbed his belt, and the engine roared, and at the same time, to Janie's disbelief, Nathan screamed, "Look!"

She never knew if they did look because he'd already thrown the bike around, his body married to it low and tight as though he were injecting it with his fury, the better to charge the speed, the volume, and it was true, the bike was flying faster, screaming louder, than Janie could ever remember it before, and she had to wrap her arms around his waist despite herself or she would have toppled off,

and she felt in her skin how she'd skid across the pavement, she felt the burn. The banks, the trees, spinning past, Nathan leaning into turns at an angle too deep, the bike canting to where she feared their hips would scrape ground, and Janie, whom Nathan's driving always scared a little, but in a thrilling way, realized she was scared for real. She was terrified. The bike just holding the curves like a marble in a low-rimmed slot, now cresting the highest hill, and Janie saw the rusty guardrails, the dark-humped crown of trees under them and saw, too, the motorcycle sailing over those guardrails, her body, his, impaled on branches. Janie ricocheted between staring aghast over Nathan's shoulder, her eyes so wide they hurt, and squeezing her eyes shut and begging under her breath. Until, finally, she just balled all of herself into the very top of her chest, right under her throat, right under a scream, and held on and waited for the end. But she did not scream, did not yell, *What the fuck are you doing? Slow down! Are you crazy?* And why? Because her fear of appearing uncool was still more real to her than the fear of dying? Or was it fear of pissing him off that was more real? Or was it simply not wanting to call attention to herself?

Then, suddenly, they rounded a curve, and there was a coal truck. Nathan did brake. But it was too late, Nathan had to pass on the right, the graveled shoulder, Janie felt the guardrail graze her ankle, and that Nathan kept it upright Janie could only attribute later to how hard her grandmother prayed for her each night. The shoulder narrowed, them running out of space, and at the last possible moment, they cleared the truck, Nathan jerked the tires back onto the pavement, didn't even skid, and Nathan and Janie ripped on towards Remington.

Wednesdays at Ramella's was happy hour all night long, and Janie ordered another Tequila Sunrise while Uncle Bobby complained about the lazy ways of the sub-eating laundry manager. "And he just sits in

there talking on the phone to his girlfriend, Janie. Just sits in there talking to his girlfriend, and I'm telling you, I've never seen anyone so fat. She's as fat as those three ladies we saw climbing into that Volkswagen outside of Ponderosa all put together!" and him harr-ing, jungle-roaring, you could hear all kinds of animals in it. By the end of the second drink, Janie could shove away what had sickened her all day—that Nathan was willing to kill himself and her rather than confront Melissa's lover, yes, but also things even oozier than that. Now those things faded and by the third drink Janie was enveloped in glow, for Uncle Bobby, for the bartender, even for the Halloweenishly mascara'd woman in the Styx T-shirt the bartender was hitting on.

Then, at a distance from herself, Janie heard herself talking. The words coming easy as a creek running in her mouth, only when she was high and only with Uncle Bobby could she talk this way, and as she did every bad feeling in her washed clear. She talked loose, with no regard for "grammar," the way almost everyone in McCloud County talked, including most of the teachers at school, the way Janie talked when she wasn't at home or at her grandparents', and she heard her mother saying "You keep talking like that, you'll never find a job away from here," then that, too, washed away. She was telling stories of college, all the wild parties, them wildening further in the telling, things she had actually done, and things she had heard other people had done that she wished she'd thought of, them now done by her in the telling, and Uncle Bobby howling with laughter and admiration at all the right places and then some. "Oh, I can't believe that, Janie! I can't believe it!" "Oh, I think that's so funny, Janie!" "Did you tell him, Janie? Did you tell him off?"

And then she let Uncle Bobby have his turn. He continued in the vein of the risky and the outrageous, repeating the story of the man at church who carried his wife's purse for her, a hilarious and unthinkable violation of Uncle Bobby's "ways." Next recycling the time he came

out of the liquor store, tripped, fell, but saved the Southern Comfort, and when he reached spots in his tellings where he had no words, he'd just improvise—"and so forth and so on and what have you"—Janie mmm-hmmming him right along. She glimpsed for an instant the pair of them in the mirror behind the bar, then jerked her gaze away and tossed back her head and crowed at the latest thing Uncle Bobby had said even though she hadn't really heard it.

Then he got into the keg party Nathan had thrown in high school while his parents were at Hilton Head and how Uncle Bobby had fallen in the bathroom and ripped off the shower curtain. Janie swallowed a gulp of tequila. The day's ruminations crept back like bad light seeping under a door. But it was not just the mention of Nathan, Janie understood that. Something new was going on. It had happened the day at the lake, had happened since, earlier and earlier than it should, than it ever had, the liquor was dragging her down instead of rising her up. Leaving her even more unprotected than she was sober. Uncle Bobby ordered another White Russian while Janie shook her head and picked at her coaster, dread witch-fingering into her. She felt herself pushing the time card into the clock tomorrow at 12:15, the tedium that would follow, broken only by the cold sweat of the bathroom check and by Tommie Sue's monologue. The return to college, in just three weeks, and the loneliness there. Janie had graduated high school with two hundred other students, but fewer than twenty had gone to college, and Janie knew fewer than that would finish. Again, Janie caught sight of them in the speckled mirror, their faces broken by liquor bottles and logos. Uncle Bobby's enormous glasses, his mouth contorted in desperate glee. Janie dropped her eyes to the cocktail napkin on her lap.

And she realized—a paradoxical clarity the post-drunkenness carried—that it wasn't that she was simply tired of Tommie Sue's talking, or even scared of her death stories. Janie understood, had all along, that under Tommie Sue's drone lived a secret knowledge that Janie was horrified she would eventually share. At the same time, she was

equally frightened about what might befall her if she didn't ever know. It was a secret knowing, familiar to Janie because it was held by so many women of her childhood in McCloud County and by most older women she'd worked with in food service and on line jobs since she was fourteen. The Tommie Sue kind of secret knowing was more familiar to Janie than the sorority girls' secret knowing, but at this point, no more penetrable. One component of that secret knowing was an offhand disdain for the college-going and the college-educated, for manager types, for anybody who didn't work with their hands, but a disdain Tommie Sue and the others didn't bother to actively exercise because the objects of the disdain weren't worth it. And the disdain, Janie grasped, was born of Tommie Sue and her people's matter-of-fact insight that they lived in reality while the others only thought they did. And while Janie feared ending up in Tommie Sue's reality, she also suspected that ignorance of that reality could expose her to consequences more dangerous than Janie could yet comprehend.

Now Uncle Bobby was saying, "Remember the time I took you and Ben to *Black Beauty* and Ben lost his mittens?" He fountained into peals so shrill that even the bartender, who was accustomed to her and Uncle Bobby, looked away from the Styx fan to make sure all was well. "Why don't you write a story about that, Janie? Why don't you write a story about that?"

And now, her glass squeezed between her hands, mired in the blank sadness that always came after a drunk if she wasn't quick enough to fall asleep first, Janie understood one part of the Nathan ooze. That the drugs, the alcohol, had never really dissolved barriers, never brought her closer to others. They just generated an insulation whose padded distance made her feel safe enough to make believe intimacy.

Ten days passed after that last drive to the stucco house without a word from Nathan, twice as long as he'd ever vanished before. Janie stayed off the porch this time. She watched from the window only. A Ferris wheel

revolved through her head, each car pausing for her to sit in its feeling a while: rage at his ignoring her; relief that she possibly wouldn't ever talk to him again; pride that she did not reach out to him (she suppressed the fact that her not reaching out was more fear of rejection than anything noble); but, suffusing all of that, this not suppressible: desire for him anyway.

Only once did Uncle Bobby notice anything was amiss. "Wonder where Nathan's been keeping himself at these days?"

Then, a week before she was to return to college, when she and Uncle Bobby had already started saying good-bye to their places, she was upstairs pulling on her black popcorn girl pants for the evening shift when her grandmother called from downstairs, "Nathan's on the phone."

Janie held the receiver a little ways from her ear, like that would help. She stared through her grandparents' living room window, at the brick walls across the street. But Janie could not picture him, invisible inside that near room.

He told her his parents had gone out of town.

"You and Bobby want to come over for dinner tomorrow night?"

No, a rigidity inside her hissed, say *no*. But that part was too brittle, too grown-up, to overcome the other. The seductive teasing in his voice, she heard it even in two sentences as bland as those. The nonchalant confidence, his wanting her and Uncle Bobby there. What's there to lose? Janie thought, and said, "What time?"

Nathan opened the front door, extended one arm and pulled her to him. He turned his crotch into hers for a moment like a promise. In those ten days, he'd grown back the beard he'd shaved during the Melissa breakup, and she flinched at the prickliness. "Whatcha gonna put on the grill, Nathan?" Uncle Bobby was saying. "I could smell the coals clear in my bedroom. I could smell the coals clear in my bedroom, Nathan," and as they passed through to the kitchen, Janie was aware of the garage a story under their feet. How seldom she'd been in this part

of the house except in secret, while his parents slept, she and Nathan tiptoeing up to his single bed.

"Sirloin, Bobby. Only the best," Nathan said. Uncle Bobby had dressed up, his nicest blue and green polo shirt, his new one-size-small khaki shorts riding high on his tree-trunk thighs. "You all want a beer or a rum and Coke?"

"Beer, please," said Uncle Bobby.

"Rum and Coke," said Janie.

"Yeah, that's what I want, too," Uncle Bobby said.

She saw right away that Nathan expected her to pull together most of the meal from groceries he'd bought—iceberg lettuce, baking potatoes, bacon bits—while he fretted over the three steaks on the grill. She set her drink on the windowsill and scrubbed potatoes while Uncle Bobby hovered between her in the kitchen and Nathan outside, Uncle Bobby knowing better than to help with hot things. All afternoon had been pumping up to storm, Janie could smell the lightning making, she didn't have to look at the sky, and the air conditioning at Nathan's was a good five degrees cooler than her grandparents would run it, the chill lifting bumps on her upper arms. Each time Uncle Bobby opened the door, the humidity bulged in like a man-sized blister.

"It's gonna pour, huh, Janie? I hope he gets those steaks done before it pours, don't you, Janie?" She and Uncle Bobby had spent most of the day together, and the tag questions were finally starting to get on her nerves. Janie poured herself another rum and Coke. Uncle Bobby wandered outside to "huh" Nathan awhile. Janie ripped the lettuce into a bowl.

Through the window, she watched Nathan's self-important fussing over the steaks. She felt the pressure of his groin against hers, and she was suddenly so angry her hands shook. She snapped the last leaf into the bowl and swallowed the second half of the rum and Coke. But it wasn't working. Like those Tequila Sunrises at Ramella's, the alcohol was plateauing. She looked at Nathan again, and

again her hands shook, her teeth clenched. But shot through that, complicating, confusing: the normalcy, the domesticity, of standing at this sink preparing food. That Nathan had invited them upstairs, invited them for a dinner he at least thought he was preparing, and he'd asked Uncle Bobby, too. For Nathan, there was nothing strange about having Uncle Bobby. And it dawned on her that this was the only event she or Uncle Bobby had been invited to all summer with the exception of church functions, and this flooded her with such embarrassment and desolation her fist went to her chest.

Shrieked giggles bugled from the patio, Uncle Bobby's high apparently escalating in inverse proportion to hers falling. Through the glass door she saw him doubled over, clenched hands pounding his shorts, his face forced purple, and she knew it was because he'd remembered her grandmother was right across the street and might hear. Janie knew he was trying to gulp down the laughter, flatten it into pressurized shrieks. And finally they were sitting down at the dining room table, famished and agitated, Nathan not having understood how long potatoes took to bake. Janie put her napkin in her lap and surveyed the room.

Its casual fineness made her small. The polished wood of the furniture, the paintings on the wall, the Oriental rugs under her feet, the dark gleaming bookcases with their even rows of hardback books. Other things she didn't even have a name for, only knew that they were expensive. All of it, Janie understood, exactly what her grandparents' house wanted to grow up into. But almost certainly would not have time. And then Nathan at the head of the table in greasy cut-offs, bare feet, and a JOHNNY'S T-shirt with its collar frayed. Two months ago Janie would have marveled at how hard it was to reconcile him with his house and that would have made her want him even more. Now she understood his subversion was deliberate. The air conditioning churned, the storm still had not broken, and Uncle Bobby commented three or four times how lucky they were that the steaks had gotten done before the rain.

They'd only eaten a few bites when the phone rang. Nathan sauntered into the kitchen and lifted it from the wall.

Janie strained to hear past Uncle Bobby—"And I told him, you should keep your dog tied up, German shepherds are mean dogs. And I was right, wasn't I, Janie? Wasn't I?"—but she could tell only that the exchange was muffled, sharp, and short. The clobber of receiver back on the wall. And the second she glimpsed Nathan's face again at the table, Janie winced in the base of her throat. It had something to do with Melissa.

Nathan pulled his plate right under his chin, wrapped one arm around it, and began spearing into his mouth bits of steak he'd already cut up. Every sane impulse in Janie screamed "stay quiet," but the part of her that had asked "What time?" on the phone instead of no, she heard that part softly inquire: "What's wrong?"

"Nothing!" Nathan jammed another chunk of meat into his mouth. Uncle Bobby took him at his word.

"Man. It'd sure be nice to have a nice homegrown tomato with this dinner."

Nathan's jaws worked like an animal's, Janie could hear the cartilage, the hinge. She lifted a forkful of lettuce, Thousand Island dressing, and bacon bits to her lip, then set the fork back down.

"Man, it'd be nice to have a nice fresh tomato. I just love homegrown tomatoes. Those store-bought tomatoes, they taste like plastic water. Huh, Janie? Huh?"

"Yeah," she said. Nathan smashed his baked potato with the back of his fork.

"This dinner would be perfect with a tomato. A nice fresh red tomato." Uncle Bobby demolished his food as he talked without choking on a word, his astounding skill at talking with his mouth full without anyone hearing the food, years of practice under her grandmother's vigilant ear and eye. "I know where there's a homegrown tomato, you know that, Nathan? You know that?"

Nathan tore off half a piece of garlic bread and thrust it into his mouth, Janie could see clear back to his molars before he started chewing. *Don't talk to him, Uncle Bobby*, she whispered in her head, *leave him be*.

"There's a nice ripe tomato on one of your dad's plants out back by the alley. I saw it when I was putting out the trash."

Uncle Bobby, and this time she just about said it out loud.

"I'd sure like to have a tomato now, that would be nice." Uncle Bobby looked at each of them in turn. "You know, if neither one of you all are gonna get it for me, I believe I'll just go out there and pick that tomato myself."

In a single motion, Nathan rammed his chair away from the table and hurled his knife, the blade glancing off an antique bureau and dropping, mute, on the Oriental rug. "You can't have that fucking tomato!"

Uncle Bobby looked down and away. Nathan bolted onto his feet, wheeled, and slammed an open hand against the arch between the kitchen and dining room.

"Goddammit!" he shouted. "Just get the fuck out of here!"

Janie stood up. Uncle Bobby stayed down.

"Not you! Him!"

Uncle Bobby gazed shut-mouthed and blank-faced off to the side. A dog who didn't do it. Upon Nathan's command, Janie had started to sit back down, but she stopped halfway, her hands on the chair arms, her knees slightly bent, paralyzed by emotion. Frustration with Uncle Bobby for never knowing when to stop, and embarrassment for him, too, and shame. But more impassioned than those, the instinct to defend Uncle Bobby against Nathan and the line he had crossed. Nathan was not family, only family was allowed to raise their voices at Uncle Bobby, and when they did, they never screamed, they did not cuss, there were rules for reacting to Uncle Bobby annoyance. But in that moment, overriding even her outrage at the injustice committed against Uncle Bobby, Janie felt most primally the urgency to calm Nathan down.

By now, of course, he'd blown himself up big, and this time he bel-lowed instead of screamed: "I said, get the fuck out of here!"

Uncle Bobby scooted away from the table. As he walked out, his napkin dropped from his lap to the floor.

Nathan flung himself into a living room chair, his heels on the seat, his knees pulled up to his face. Janie eased herself back down into her own chair. She looked at the torn food on her plate and Nathan's. At Uncle Bobby's almost empty one. After a few minutes, she started to clear the table.

Nathan entered the kitchen behind her, placed his soft hand on her arm right above her elbow, and pulled her, not roughly, outside. The clouds strained towards storm, dusk greenish with it, and he led her, still barefoot, to his Scout on the street.

They'd just turned off Kentworth Drive and were passing the Coin Castle when the storm finally broke, instant and violent. Just like a movie, Janie thought. *Just like one of these old movies.* That too explained why everything felt at such a distance from her. Around them, cars pulled off to the sides of the streets to wait out the first blinding force of the rain, but Nathan forged head-on into it, and Janie had no room in her to be afraid.

They were driving up the Ohio River on the West Virginia side this time, the rain exploding on the windshield like comic book firecrackers, and Nathan had not spoken a word. Soon the thunder and lightning started to divide so she couldn't tell which clap went with which flash, and the rain fell with less ferocity, and Nathan was pulling them into a field across the river from an Ohio country club. They'd been in the field before. They had rapid sex in the back seat while the rain continued to slack on the roof. Then Nathan passed out.

Janie disentangled herself. She pulled up her shorts, snapped them. She pushed her hair away from her face. She crawled into the front seat. She could see even in the dark how clumps of weeds in the field had been beaten into swaths laid low across the ground, and from a side

window, she watched the lightning recede across the rest of West Virginia. The lightning cutting the sky to the east. Uncle Bobby would not turn on the TV until the thunder died completely away. He was terrified of the set blowing up, not to mention “ghosts” appearing on the screen, which he claimed he’d seen before during a storm, but Janie’d never understood if he meant actual spirits or some technical term he’d turned into a malaprop. In the morning, he would not mention the dinner. She also knew that no matter what else he felt about the evening, he’d still have some regret about missing dessert.

Suddenly, all the lights went out on their side of the river. The Ohio golf course continued to burn.

Those very last days before she left, she and Uncle Bobby made a final ritual sweep of their places, Uncle Bobby toasting the two of them in each one. To skip the Alexander Henry was unthinkable, but the only movie they hadn’t seen was *Reds*, two years old and just reaching Remington. Predicting small crowds, Gus assigned it to the shoebox-shaped confines of the converted shoe store.

Despite there being only twelve rows, Uncle Bobby made them sit in the back, the EXIT sign’s red glow almost near enough to touch. Janie used to think it was the color that made him think fire, but now she understood the fire fear was yet another suspicion he’d contracted from “one of these old movies.” As soon as the lights lowered and the previews began, Janie eased the Southern Comfort into the Sprite, nudged Uncle Bobby with her elbow, passed him the drink, and toasted the waxed cup with her knuckles. Uncle Bobby hailed their naughtiness with a constricted cackle.

Almost immediately Janie regretted that they’d come. She was unable to focus on the movie, and into the vacuum that inattention created surged the Nathan situation like a vomit. She glanced at her uncle to see how closely he was watching. She doubted *Reds* would have any

scenes he found scary, so at least she wouldn't have to suffer the laugh-shrieking when everyone else was silent. Again, the Nathan situation lifted into her throat. Janie swallowed on it hard. Then she remembered the time back in July when Uncle Bobby had stopped laughing halfway through a movie; she recalled it now even though she hadn't given it a thought since they walked out of the Alexander Henry that afternoon. The movie was *Mask*, the Eric Stoltz and Cher picture about the kid with the horrible degenerative disease they said made him look like a lion but that actually made him look like a lion with a horrible degenerative disease, and Janie hadn't even noticed when Uncle Bobby's laughing stopped. She realized it only when she heard instead a peculiar snuffling sound in the dark beside her, and when she did, she pretended not to hear it, picking up the Sprite to pull a few last sips of ice melt and alcohol. The cup was already drained. The second the lights came up, Uncle Bobby began convulsing with laughter again.

"I have to use the restroom," Uncle Bobby whispered now. He heaved himself up, and the whole row of seats shuddered at the loss of his weight.

The morning after the dinner at Nathan's, she and Uncle Bobby sat across from each other at the dining room table. She rotated in her fingers a piece of toast, Uncle Bobby behind his line-up of mixing bowl, Cheerios box, and gallon jug of milk. He would eat two mixing bowls of cereal because, he had explained to her several years ago, the holes in the Cheerios cut the serving in half. Uncle Bobby acted like the night before hadn't happened, which gave away how profoundly it had, because if it had been a night during which nothing out of the ordinary had occurred, Uncle Bobby would be asking, "What happened after I left, Janie? What'd you all do?"

And as she sat there watching Uncle Bobby shuttle the Cheerios into his mouth with a gusto verging on ecstasy, she understood that

forgiving her had not occurred to him because he had not registered any offense. And self-hatred and shame rushed through her in black-red waves so intense she felt vertigo.

She dropped her toast. Right then she decided, pulling her mind, heart, and groin into a single-steeled purpose. She was finished with Nathan. She was going to, as Uncle Bobby would put it, tell him off.

But how to do it? The phone was out of the question. Because the phone was nothing but voice, even in ideal circumstances with easy people the phone made her anxious. After loading the dishwasher with the breakfast dishes, she threw herself on her bed where she scrawled a three-page-long letter to Nathan, but after she reread it, she shredded it and flushed it down the toilet, praying it did not clog her grandparents' pipes. No. She would have to tell him face-to-face. And because she knew he would vanish again, she'd have to march herself to his front door, firm up her voice, and ask his mother if he was in. Janie stood at her window and stared at that door across the street. The only arched door in the neighborhood, with dark woodwork and three small stained-glass panes. In her head, Janie began what became a three-day-long rehearsal of her telling-off-Nathan speech.

But Nathan didn't vanish. In the seventy-two hours following that dinner, Nathan was more visible than he'd been since before they started going out. Janie saw him from her upstairs post several times a day. Washing his motorcycle in his driveway. Spending a half an hour on the curb with his head stuck inside the car window of a belt-thin boy. Striding back and forth between the Scout and the house, even cutting the grass when Nathan's father had taken care of that all summer long. And each time she spied him alone, Janie inhaled, braced, silently repeated her first rehearsed sentence, and made to approach. And each time, she exhaled, went limp, and told herself there'd be a better time. Then, just yesterday, she had run head-on into him. She was walking to her Chevette in her popcorn girl clothes for her last

shift of the summer and, suddenly, there was Nathan, ambling up the street on foot of all things, an absolute anomaly. There was no way to avoid him unless she turned and fled inside, which she considered, but she kept moving, her insides as roily dark as the Ohio, dragging her practiced speech into her mouth. Then they were across from each other, and Nathan raised his eyes and looked at her as you would an acquaintance you met on the street, and with a chilly smile, part smirk, part faux politeness, he remarked, with sarcasm just subtle enough he could deny it later if anyone asked: “Miss Janie Lambert.” And sauntered right on by.

She had slammed herself into the Chevette and gunned it down the street. By the time she reached the end of Kentworth Drive, rage tears were runnelling down her cheeks. Rage at Nathan, yes, but rage at herself a hundred times that, and as she drove, she actually lifted and bunched her fist, and if she hadn’t had to downshift to avoid crashing into a truck, she would have punched herself in her chest. Her cowardice, her stupidity, her muteness, that she’d allowed him to dump her before she could say a word, even though she was certain she was the one who had decided to dump him first.

Now Uncle Bobby plopped back down beside her, and she shot a look along the row to see if the seat reverberations reached the couple on the other end. Uncle Bobby leaned into her ear again, with his hygienic odor of Crest and Old Spice, and he whispered loudly, “Remember when Ben forgot his mittens in *Black Beauty*? If that’d been in this puny place, I’d have found ’em in three seconds.”

The truth was, Janie did remember it. In scraps and from the narrow tilted perspective of someone looking up out of a box, which was how she remembered many of her pre-school experiences in Remington. She remembered at eye-level a glamorous brass door handle twice the length of her head that Uncle Bobby pushed with one hand while the

other arm bundled Ben and her against him like packages. She remembered how he blocked them with his body the moment they reached the sidewalk in case they should take a notion to bolt into the street. She remembered the windless cold leaching into them as they stood just beyond the gold and scarlet splendor of the Alexander Henry marquee, its contrast with the monochrome vacancy of Remington's late afternoon winter light. Uncle Bobby was very tall and very wide, like grown-ups were, but Janie felt also, as charged as a mild shock, Uncle Bobby's anxiety. All the potential mistakes and mishaps lying in wait for Uncle Bobby, entrusted with taking his little niece and nephew to the show. In the burr of that anxiety, Janie felt only half-safe herself. She understood that Uncle Bobby was only a makeshift adult, but she knew also that he was the closest thing they had at the moment, and she had no option but to surrender to trusting him. And in that moment she trusted him utterly.

He had each of them by the hand then, Uncle Bobby craning his neck up and down Fourth Avenue. "Look for your gran-daddy's car," he told them. It was then Ben mumbled, "I think I left my mittens in there."

Janie could remember Uncle Bobby's face: three seconds of naked shock, disintegrating into blinking confusion, eventually gelling to horror. Now, eighteen years old herself, Janie could translate: the horror of being the most responsible person present. Of having no choice but to take charge in a crisis.

And he had taken charge. All by himself he'd approached an usher—a trauma in itself since Uncle Bobby secretly feared all authority figures, which in Uncle Bobby's mind an usher was—and the four of them re-entered the theater. While she and Ben stood in the aisle, Uncle Bobby and the usher searched under the back-row seats with flashlights. And the mittens were found.

They walked out of *Reds* two hours into it when Uncle Bobby's snoring got louder than the soundtrack. They found themselves swept into

the exiting *Jedi* crowd and Janie glad of it, knowing Tommie Sue would ignore her when she passed and that would be less humiliating if she were veiled by a group. She and Uncle Bobby carried along with the others out the brass-handled doors, Janie groping in her purse for her keys, rooting amongst contraband and tampons, and she halting in the stream under the marquee lights, Uncle Bobby dutifully stopping with her. Finally she shot a hand to her jeans pocket and, of course, there the keys rode, and at that moment she heard Uncle Bobby shadow-say something which struck her as strange because he'd said nothing first to make the echo. She looked at him. His expression was a déjà vu of the lost-mitten afternoon.

Janie followed his stare. Moving away from them, not twenty feet distant, clearly part of the *Jedi* crowd, waddled a globe-shaped woman. It was the large-print smock that gave Tessa away. She walked hand in hand with a squatty man in a purple tank top, his shoulders and neck a snarl of dark red hair the length and texture of daddy longlegs. Janie gawked, mesmerized by the repulsiveness of that thicket, vivid under the streetlights, and suddenly in the folds of the neck she thought she glimpsed, although later she could not be sure, the glint of a gold chain.

The couple vanished into the alley shortcut to a parking lot.

For several seconds, she and Uncle Bobby stood silent. They were alone now, the crowd dispersed to cars and bars. And then her uncle threw back his head and exploded into laughter. His most crazed and out-of-control variety, the kind forbidden by her grandmother, the kind that made everyone within earshot turn with a "What on earth?" stare, the kind that had made Janie run away and duck behind the nearest object in mortification when she was a kid.

"WUHHHHHH wuh wuh wuh, WUHHHHHH wuh wuh wuh," Uncle Bobby bent in half at his waist, his fist beating his thigh, his face the color of wine, "WUHHHHHH wuh wuh wuh, WUHHHH wuh

wuh wuh.” Until finally, after depleting himself, he gasped for breath, caught it after a few strangled tries, and said, “I think that’s so funny, Janie. I think that’s just so funny.”

One especially slow weekday afternoon in early August when Gus was gone for a funeral, Ronnie had volunteered to take them behind the screen and below the floors. Tommie Sue, in her single act of magnanimity that summer, said of course she could cover concessions and egged them on. Janie and two of the sorority girls trailed Ronnie and his flashlight down the side aisle of the big central *Jedi* theater, Hillary and Nicole deliberately bumping into each other with muffled chortling. Janie brought up the rear, breathless with disbelief that this was happening and already buzzing with the anticipation of telling Uncle Bobby when she got home.

Ronnie led them up a short set of steps at the corner of the stage and then behind the screen. Janie nearly tripped in astonishment.

And we were standing there with the Star Wars people right alongside us—

What, Janie? What? I don’t get what you mean.

You could see them on the screen, just we were behind it, Luke and Leia and the Ewoks, they were the same size as us, the characters’ feet and Janie’s feet on the same level so it was like walking amongst them, and Janie stopped, faced them, and gaped, but Ronnie was hissing, “Hurry! C’mon!” motioning them to the rear of the stage to what turned out to be a longer flight of stairs.

These dropped into a dark warren that under Ronnie’s flashlight revealed itself as an elaborate skeleton-work of broken rooms. *It was pitch-black down there, a bunch of rooms with no walls, naked beams, snapped lathes, heaped bricks—Oh, Janie, I didn’t know that—*and they were weaving around piles of dismembered tables and chairs and clambering over flattened doors and plaster piles, everything saturated in an

odor both moldy and dry—*Were you scared, Janie? Were you scared?*—and Hillary and Nicole clung to each other for drama and screamed when one stepped on a board that kicked up a couple bricks at its other end, but to her bewilderment, Janie was not scared at all. Because it was too ruined to host ghosts? Because it was too real to? Then Nicole was asking, “Is this the basement that runs under the whole city block?” and Ronnie was saying, “No, there’s a whole nother level yet below this one. I’m gonna take you all upstairs first.”

And then we climbed two more flights of stairs—Were you scared, Janie?—No, not yet. But by then, I tell you, I was completely turned around, I had no idea if we were on a side of the building, or in back, or even in front—I wouldn’t have been scared, Janie. I would have laughed at it! Halfway up the second flight they were coming back into natural light, and finally they reached a shortish corridor. “The dressing rooms,” Ronnie explained. “There’s three levels of them. The best ones are on the top.” So even higher they climbed, these stairs narrower and steep as loft ladders, the sorority girls quieter now, the light having sobered them. *And then we started peeking in the rooms.*

What were they like?

Dressing tables under a strange white dust as plush as felt and chairs painted in festive colors, aquas and limes and yellows. Decaying clothes looking like dead animal pelts tossed over their backs, and *the makeup in some rooms was still sitting open*, as though all the actors had leapt up to flee a disaster. *They weren’t like dressing rooms on TV and in movies* because, while every dressing room Janie had seen there had been windowless, insular, lit only by artificial light, these dressing rooms were open, spacious, every fourth wall a window that started below her waist and rose nearly to a ceiling twice as tall as she. *It was weird. It was really weird—Yeah, it sounds really weird, it sounds spooky, how come you weren’t scared, Janie?*—and Janie knew these rooms were smack dab in the middle of downtown Remington, Janie knew she should be seeing out

each window just another brick wall. But every last one, the spattered ones, the fractured ones, the ones missing panes, were flooded with the opaque white the sky took on all over West Virginia in the summer, but especially in Remington.

The other popcorn girls were giggling again, teasing each other, while Ronnie smiled shyly, uncomfortable in his authority. "Okay," he said. "The best for last. I'm gonna take you on down into the bottom basement now."

Janie turned to follow, then stopped. For some reason, she wanted that last dressing room for herself for a minute. Without even Uncle Bobby accompanying her in her head. She heard the other three voices receding and again she marveled at her lack of fear. If she'd been asked what she felt, she would have said just a little sad. On the dressing table's surface, a single open jar of face cream, yellowed and parched. In the ornate gold scroll framing the mirror, a wasp's nest. And then Janie noticed the mirror itself.

In the other rooms, the mirrors had been fissured on walls or lay shattered on the floors. Two mirrors had been still in one piece, but reflectionless, just stippled black glass. This mirror looked back. It framed Janie's red-smocked torso. Cut her off at her neck.

Abruptly, Janie stooped. She seized either end of the dressing table with a hand. She scanned the mirror's whole surface. And finally the fear flared, but Janie didn't turn away. The mirror held just her. And to see one's face in such glass, in such light.

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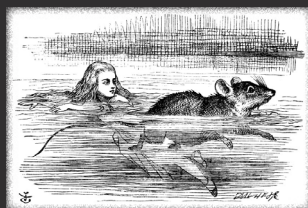


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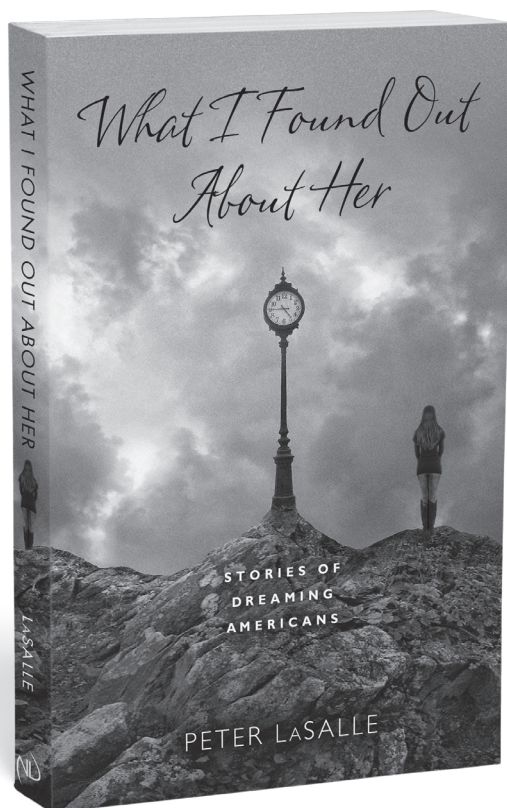
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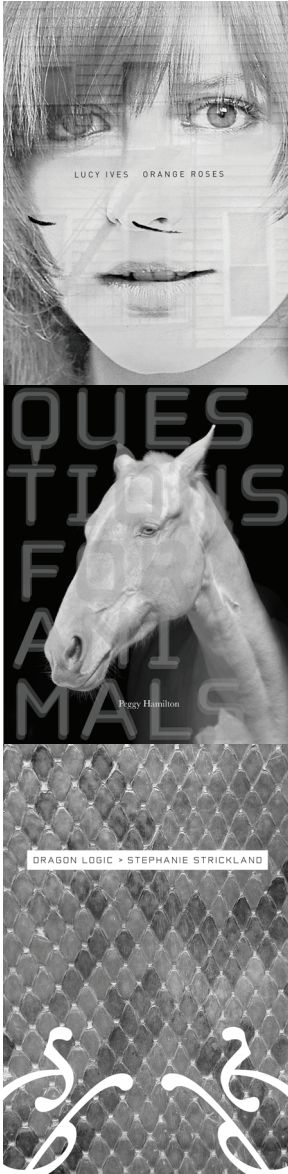
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