

# 55

# cottonwood

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N. Scott Momaday

Cris Mazza

Patricia Cleary Miller

Fredrick Zydek

Mary O'Connell



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Spring 2000

Cottonwood and Cottonwood Press

Lawrence, Kansas

Cottonwood 55

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ISSN 0147-149X

*Cottonwood* is a review of the literary and visual arts published twice yearly, in the spring and fall.

Two-issue subscriptions to *Cottonwood* are available for \$15. Four-issue subscriptions are \$28, and six-issue subscriptions are \$40. If you wish to subscribe to *Cottonwood*, or to become a donor, patron, or benefactor, please write to: the Lawrence Arts Center, 200 W. 9th Street, Lawrence, KS, 66044; 785-843-2787 (phone); 785-843-6629 (fax).

*Cottonwood* welcomes submissions of fiction, poetry, nonfiction, reviews, photography, and other visual arts. Please limit poetry submissions to five, prose submissions to one story, review, or essay. Submissions will not be returned unless they are accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope. Simultaneous submissions are accepted, and submissions are read year-round. Please send submissions care of the appropriate editor to: *Cottonwood*; Box J, 400 Kansas Union; University of Kansas; Lawrence, KS, 66045.

*Cottonwood* receives support from the Department of English of the University of Kansas and the Lawrence Arts Center. Production is facilitated by the Word Processing Center of the University of Kansas. *Cottonwood* is printed in Lawrence by the Alliance Communications Group of Allen Press.

*Cottonwood* is indexed by the *American Humanities Index*, *Poem Finder*, and the *Index of American Periodical Verse*.

Featured Artist: Hobart Jackson.

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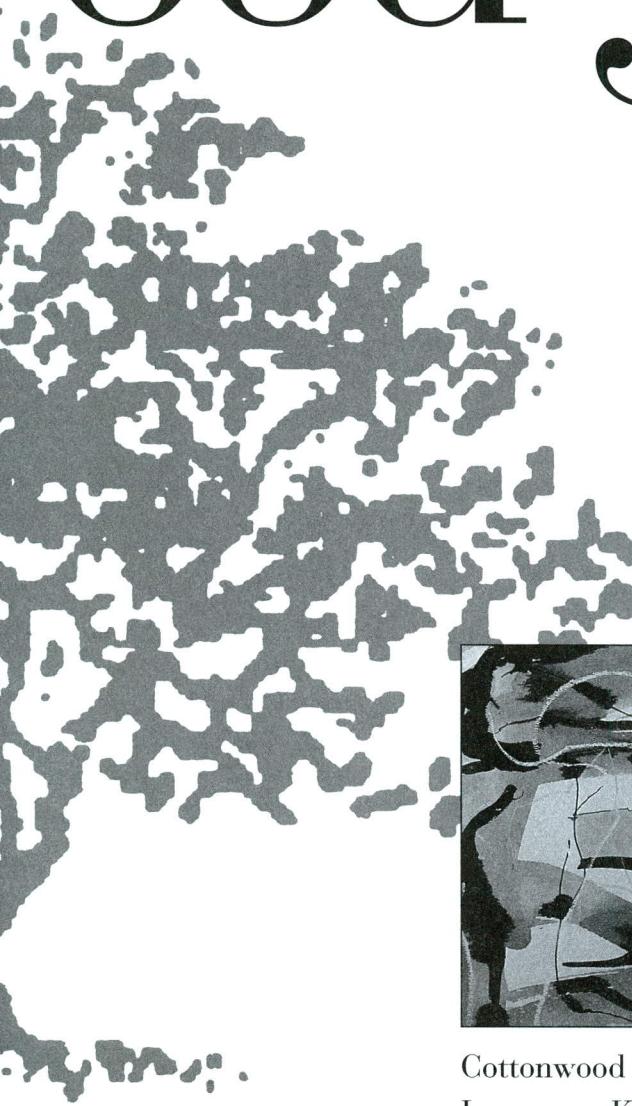


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Cottonwood and Cottonwood Press  
Lawrence, Kansas

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Just before Jan won the title of Miss Sand Valley, California, her agent—who'd driven two hundred miles to Sand Valley the day before the contest and signed her on after the preliminaries—whispered in her ear, Tell them you want to be a doctor, that always knocks their eyes out.

The other finalists hugged her and buzzed her cheek with pursed red smiles. The mayor shook her hand and had his picture taken while being pecked on the forehead. Everyone's faces tipped up toward her, applause sounded like bacon frying, cameras clicky-clacked as she traveled down the raised runway and back again. She was thinking about what her new agent had said.

So, she decided, *this* was not what *she* was all about. She thanked her new agent and he became her former agent. Instead of going on to bigger contests, she left her agent scowling and went to a trade school for health-field employees because what he'd said was, after all, no lie: helping other people was more glamorous, deep inside where glamour counts, than becoming a world-class model.

She breezed through her trade school courses, majoring in hospital administration, because hospitals are not only the most important—she said to whoever it was that took her out to celebrate the night of her graduation—but also the places of biggest need. She pointed out: A dental assistant stands there and hands things to a dentist that he could pick up by himself. A doctor's assistant makes appointments that are never kept on time. A transcriptionist sits typing whatever a doctor says into a tape machine, almost never sees the doctor—or the patient—then whatever is typed might be filed away somewhere and never looked at again. But hospital administration *is* a field where you know you're making a difference every day, working side by side with a family of caring professionals helping those who need you most.

She got a job. Seven new outfits added to her wardrobe made it possible to not repeat for over three weeks, although, as she'd learned in trade school, that capacity was most effective

and important in a geriatric facility with long-term patients—it helped brighten their day—whereas the job she got was a small neighborhood hospital.

At first she was a trifle disappointed because she had the night shift, 11 P.M. to 7 A.M. —never called *graveyard* in a hospital. The whole facility wouldn't be very active: no surgery planned, no meals served, no one needing counseling or company. She didn't even have to dress up, but at least she was the only administrative employee on duty. The things she would be doing no one else did. She had a little office across the hall from the ER and its small waiting room. The main office and plushly furnished lobby were closed and abandoned at night. Jan typed charts for people who came to the emergency room, typed the new hospital census at midnight, copied and delivered the census to message boxes for doctors and heads of departments, typed the next day's menu and posted it, prepared and mailed insurance bills for outpatients M through P, and answered the main hospital phone if it rang. After a week, the thought of joining the Peace Corps or calling her old agent crossed her mind.

It was a full moon on Monday of the second week.

“We can expect some of our friends tonight,” said Ms. Cory, the emergency room nurse.

“A party?” Jan asked.

“No, honey,” Nurse Cory laughed. “Repeaters. The suicide attempts.”

“Oh! But if we know beforehand, shouldn't we stop them?”

“And ruin their fun?”

Jan found an envelope propped on her typewriter. It was an invitation to a costume party, but she didn't know who was giving the party. The hospital was quiet. Only a little past midnight. She sat looking at the card.

Then it started. The bell sounded on the automatic doors at the end of the hall, the door swung open, and someone was calling, “Help us, please!” Jan leaped up, grabbing a blank chart and a clipboard. Nurse Cory was already leading a stumbling man into the emergency room. A woman stood sobbing at the ER doorway.

“Let me help you,” Jan said. She guided the woman into the waiting room. When the woman could speak, she just said, “here,” and handed Jan an insurance card. Jan said, “I'll be right back to talk to you in a while. You'll feel better then.”

Jan took the chart, still blank, into the emergency room. Nurse Cory had pulled a curtain around one of the beds. "So you haven't eaten anything for a week and then ran ten miles?"

The man's teeth were chattering, but he said, "She didn't believe me. I told her I was run down, I told her I'd die of exhaustion soon. Next time she'll believe me."

"There are easier ways, you know," Nurse Cory said. Jan could only see the nurse's ankles and feet beneath the curtain. Then she saw the man's pants drop to the floor at the end of the bed.

"She didn't believe me. Now she will."

Nurse Cory came out to answer the phone. The exhausted man called, "Hey!" Jan found a towel, ran cool water over it, then squeezed it out and brought it behind the curtain to the exhausted man. "What's *this* for," he said, "where'd *she* go?"

"I took care of your wife. She's resting comfortably."

"Not her—the *nurse*."

Jan folded his pants and put them on a chair beside his bed. She took the pillow from the empty bed beside him, tried to tuck it beneath the pillow already under his feet. The exhausted man was holding the curtain aside, watching Nurse Cory talk on the telephone.

"Was the safety pin opened or closed when you swallowed it, sir?" Nurse Cory asked. She doodled on the cover of a magazine. Jan brought her a pad of paper. "Well, did the *pen* have ink in it when you swallowed it?"

When the doors rang and opened again, a cheerful ambulance driver called, "I've got a bleeder here for you." The woman he had on the gurney had deep scratches on her face, neck, and arms—scratches in pairs or triplets, running parallel.

"Hello," the woman said. "Where's Dr. Dempsey?"

Jan dialed the number of the attending doctor's room but no one answered. She let it ring twenty times.

Nurse Cory helped the ambulance driver lift the woman onto a bed. "Dr. D just got a little angry," the woman said.

"Haven't you taken care of that cat's claws yet, Willa?"

"Where's Dr. Dempsey?"

"He's not on tonight," Nurse Cory said. "Dr. Peterson will take care of you."

A doctor came in, yawning.

"He's here!" Jan said, putting the phone down.

*"No, no, no, I want Dr. Dempsey—he said to call him any time I needed him. He's my only doctor!"*

"Here's the perp," the ambulance driver said, coming back in with a small cage containing a fluffy cat. "She had him all ready to go when I got there."

"Dr. Dempsey," the woman said, smiling, holding her arms out for the cat.

Jan lined the wheelchairs up neatly against one wall so no one would trip over them.

"Call Dr. Dempsey at home," Dr. Peterson said. "Those cuts have stopped bleeding."

The scratches were each at least three inches long and most over a half inch deep. The sides of the cuts lay open like the covers of books. There were also some scabbed-over scratches.

"Dr. Dempsey just went a little crazy, I guess," the woman said, giggling. "Probably just boredom. I named him after my favorite doctor, Dr. Dempsey. He sews me up."

Jan found her clipboard on the scratched woman's bed. The exhausted man's blank chart was still on the clipboard.

"I guess he had nothing better to do," the woman said, and continued smiling. "Dear Dr. Dempsey."

"You know how you get a cat to do that?" the ambulance driver asked the nurse. She was dialing the phone.

"Yep—hold it by the tail and dangle it over your face."

Dr. Peterson went in to see the exhausted man. "Where's the chart on this patient?" The wet towel splatted onto the floor.

"Dr. Dempsey's on his way, Willa," Nurse Cory said. "Wasn't there anything good on television tonight?"

"He said to call him whenever I needed him. Poor old Dr. Dempsey. He'll finally meet his namesake."

The ambulance driver took his gurney and left. "I'll probably be back."

"We'll count on it," Nurse Cory said. She was dabbing antiseptic on the scratches.

Jan rinsed out the exhausted man's damp towel then draped it over the back of a chair to dry. "I've got this ready for when he needs it again."

Dr. Peterson left the room.

"Leave them for Dr. Dempsey to sew up," the woman told Nurse Cory.

"When is someone going to take care of me!" the exhausted man called. Jan went through the curtain to his bedside. "Where's the doctor or nurse?" he said, clutching the sheet up to his chin.

"Is there anything I can get you?"

"The doctor or nurse."

The scratched woman was sitting on the edge of the bed swinging her legs. Nurse Cory was still cleaning scratches.

"I've been talking to the man there," Jan said. "I've got him resting."

Nurse Cory took the cat into the waiting room.

The door rang. A gurney rattled down the hall. "A bleeder here," said another paramedic. "Busy tonight?"

The man on the gurney was slashed—arms, legs, torso, everywhere—with a razor blade.

"I've got the same insurance as last time," the slashed man said.

"Have you been here before?" Jan asked.

"Last month—you kicked me out, remember?"

"I wasn't here last month."

"Get me someone who knows something. Couldn't find anything wrong with me. Does everything have to be as plain as the nose on my face?"

Three young people were clustered at the door of the ER holding onto each other's arms. Nurse Cory was on the phone again. "Try a sleeping pill, it won't kill you. "

"May I help you?" Jan asked.

"That's our father."

"Come to the waiting room and you'll be more comfortable. We're taking care of him. He'll be fine, good as new."

The three people sat side by side on the couch. The exhausted man's wife was holding a magazine. The cat purred.

"I finally got him to rest," Jan told the wife.

"Are you the doctor?"

Jan typed a chart for the slashed man, brought it to the emergency room, and laid it on a table which had been wheeled up next to his bed. Nurse Cory removed the chart to put down a tray of equipment for the doctor. "Damn," Dr. Peterson said. "It's going to take me all night to sew this up."

The exhausted man was calling, "Nurse, why isn't anyone helping me?" Nurse Cory was going through the emergency

room with an armload of dirty towels, snatched up the damp one hanging over the back of a chair as she passed.

"Let me take them," Jan offered. The nurse dumped the bundle into Jan's arms and went back to grab the ringing telephone. "How long has his jaw been stuck open?" Nurse Cory said into the phone.

Jan didn't know what to do with the towels. The wet one was making her new blouse damp. She found a housekeeper's bucket in the hall and put the towels in it.

"I'm getting mad as hell," the exhausted man was saying.

"Would it help if you had someone to talk to?" Jan asked him.

"It would help if I had a doctor or nurse."

Jan used a paper towel to wipe up drops of water on the floor. "There, now no one'll slip." She'd learned how to squat while wearing a skirt, with her back erect, knees and ankles together. She stood back up upright without needing help from a chair or doorknob.

Nurse Cory had to wash all the slashed man's cuts before the doctor could sew them. "I could show you the right way to do this," she said, "on your wrists, so it would be more successful."

The slashed man said, "My kids'll be here soon."

"They've already arrived," Jan called from the back counter where she was washing out the sink. "I calmed them down, they're fine." Dr. Peterson came over to wash his hands. Jan had gone out to breakfast with him last week. "This is better than a beauty contest," she said. He dried his hands and went back to the slashed man.

"What do you have for me?" A large man came into the ER wearing a golf sweater over a scrub-suit shirt.

"Dr. Dempsey!" the scratched woman screamed. She clapped her hands. "You came for me. Oh, I knew you would."

"Ah, Willa, again? If you want to visit me, why not just drop by and say hi during office hours instead of showing up disguised as an accident?"

"You're always so busy, Dr. Dempsey."

Dr. Dempsey took the scratched woman's chart, which Jan was handing to him. He laid it aside without looking at it.

"Where's the doctor, dammit," the exhausted man called.

"Calm down, you're all right." Dr. Peterson didn't even look up from his sewing of the slashed man. "Lie still, will you?"

“I’m trying to see what you’re doing.”

“Next time just take some pills, okay?”

The scratched woman chortled, “Dr. Dempsey, just wait’ll you see my kitten.”

Both doctors were sewing. Nurse Cory set up two lamps and directed the bright beams toward the wounds. Then she brought the exhausted man some liquid protein.

“Finally,” he said. Then, “Hey, where’re you going now!” Nurse Cory went out of the emergency room to get some clean towels.

Jan stacked the three charts neatly on the counter.

The phone rang. Nurse Cory was back. “How many marbles did you swallow, Mr. Carter?”

Jan went to the foot of the slashed man’s bed. Dr. Peterson was sewing a long cut that ran from elbow to armpit. “Need a towel for your forehead?” Jan asked. Dr. Peterson didn’t answer. The slashed man glared. Jan found a small washcloth, went to the doctor’s side, and patted his forehead.

“Hey, I can’t see what I’m doing!”

“Now you can. I took care of the perspiration for you,” Jan said.

“I thought I came here for medical attention,” the exhausted man yelled. “I could’ve died in bed at home and saved myself the trouble of driving down here.”

“What’s with him?” the doctor asked.

Jan said, “I’ve been in to talk with him several times,” and Nurse Cory said, “I gave him the liquid protein a half hour ago.”

“Give him more. Maybe you should put it into a baby bottle.”

“I heard that,” the exhausted man cried. “I’ll sue this place, then you’ll see.”

Nurse Cory went behind the exhausted man’s curtain with a small glass and a straw. “My wife should be out there somewhere—worried sick,” the exhausted man said.

Jan went into the waiting room. One of the slashed man’s children was watching the television. The others were looking at magazines. The exhausted man’s wife was smiling gently, flipping through photos in her wallet. The cat was on her lap. Jan went to the exhausted man’s wife and touched her arm. “Your husband is going to be fine. We’re giving him special fluids. He’s resting quietly. I made sure he had two pillows and a cool towel.”

“But what’s the *doctor* doing?” the wife asked, stroking the cat.

“How about our father?” one of the slashed man’s children asked.

“I told him you’re here. That made him feel more at ease.”

“But what’s the *doctor* doing?”

“I just told you,” Jan said, her voice flat; then she quickly remembered to let her smile beam again. “That’s a cute pin, do you like mine?” She bent to show the exhausted man’s wife the brooch on her blouse—a bunny holding a bunch of flowers. She’d bought it in the hospital gift shop.

Back in the ER, the scratched lady sipped soda from a paper cup and Dr. Dempsey put his equipment away. “I haven’t had any mail for a week,” she said. “Not even advertisements. Do you suppose something’s wrong with the post office?”

“I think something’s wrong with your cat,” he laughed.

“He didn’t mean anything by it. In fact, he didn’t seem so angry at all. It’s almost as though *I* was the one who was furious instead of Dr. D.”

“I think I understand exactly how you must feel,” Jan said.

The lady caught Nurse Cory’s arm as she was going by. “You know, all night I hear cats fighting around my house.”

Jan ran into the hall when the door rang, but it was only an orderly going out for some air. She heard giggling coming from the waiting room. The cat was on the floor doing tricks for cheese crackers from the vending machine. One of the slashed man’s children was sorting the exhausted man’s wife’s photos on the magazine table. The exhausted man’s wife was laughing at the cat, wiping tears from her cheeks.

Nurse Cory put down the phone. “Don’t leave yet. Dr. Dempsey, we’ve got another ambulance on its way.”

“Dr. Dempsey,” the scratched lady called. “These places itch—what should I do! Help!”

Jan found a pen under the counter. “Whoever lost a pen—I found it.” She stood holding the pen over her head, careful not to stretch too far and cause her blouse to be tucked into her skirt too loosely and unevenly.

The door rang and blasted open. “Here it is,” Nurse Cory said. The man on the gurney was propping up his torso with his elbows. One of his pant legs was bloodsoaked. “Don’t ask me how it happened,” he said.

“This might be a good time to ask if anyone happened to

notice what color blouse I'm wearing," Jan said. "It's sage, the color that reduces violence in prisons."

"He was run over," the paramedic said. "By his own car."

"Stop talking and help me," the man said.

"Said he must've fallen asleep while working on his car," the driver said. "But I don't know . . . no light, no tools, just this guy lying under his own car in the driveway. He had a portable phone, though."

"I've been here a full week," Jan said. "How'm I doing so far? Notice, you don't have to tell me what to do anymore."

"Help me, help me—someone get me a doctor! Hey, everyone, come back here!" Jan was the only one left beside the gurney. The nurse had gone to get a thermometer and the paramedic was getting a cup of coffee. Dr. Dempsey was washing his hands, still talking to the scratched lady. "A man's bleeding over here," the man on the gurney called. "Want me to lose this leg?"

"Shut up, shut up," the slashed man yelled.

"Lie still, would you, or I'll sew your mouth closed."

The exhausted man pulled his curtain aside. "I just wanted to see why no one thinks I need any medical care."

"I'm going on my coffee break," Jan said. "Who wants to go with me?"

"You can go on home now," Nurse Cory said to the exhausted man from across the room.

"That's *all* you're going to do, give me a milkshake and send me home?"

Jan dashed to her office, looked around, then grabbed the pen she'd found—it had the hospital's name printed on the side. The exhausted man was still in the ER, dressed and standing near the door.

"Here's a little gift from the hospital staff," Jan said, handing him the pen.

The man put the pen into his shirt pocket. "Any instructions, doctor?"

"Eat," said Dr. Peterson, still sewing the slashed man. He stopped stitching for a moment, rolled his head around, then again bent close to a slash that went from shoulder blade to breast bone.

"It's just a flesh wound," Dr. Dempsey said to the man who was run over. "Just a lot of little cuts and scrapes."

"How was my temperature, nurse? Is my blood pressure normal? I think I went into shock."

"You scraped your leg, you didn't have a heart attack." Nurse Cory was stripping the paper sheets from the exhausted man's bed.

"But it took them so long to get there," said the man who was run over. "I started to get so mad I thought I might blow a fuse or something."

Jan said, "I haven't worn the same outfit twice. And I haven't even started to mix-'n'-match yet. I think we could all learn something from listening to each other tonight."

"Hey doc, will this affect my jogging?"

"It could improve your time if you run in front of cars, especially in the fast lane."

"I was mad too!" the slashed man called.

"You'll know what mad is if you don't stop moving around," Dr. Peterson said.

"Do you need me for anything?" Jan asked. Dr. Peterson didn't answer. "I'm free now—does anyone need anything?" she said, louder, over the din of everyone's mouth moving, hands gesturing, phone blinking, instruments flashing. "Hey!" she said, her face tight with a stretched smile. "What can I do to help? Two comforting hands, two understanding ears for sale here!" Everyone was moving away from her—she realized she was slowly moving backward when her shoulders hit the wall at the far end of the ER. Such a flurry of crucial activity, such important commitment, so many people at once so significantly engrossed, so urgently occupied, so critically busy—tears flooded into her eyes and her throat choked with the immensity of the occasion, the doctors and nurse absorbed with the patients, the patients with the doctors and nurse. Suddenly Jan shouted, "I understand you so well, I'm on your side, I'm right there with you all the way!" She couldn't hear them anymore. But they were all still working. No one turned to stare at her. Her head was ringing. Nurse Cory went to answer the phone. Jan ran from the room with her hands over her ears.

**T**he hospital was quiet in the wee hours. Nobody in a hospital says the quiet is *like death*. The nurse in the ER dozed with her head on the counter. Dr. Peterson went back to his room and went to sleep on the bed. The television was off in the

waiting room and no one was waiting there. The main lobby was dark except a small night-light in the gift shop, making silhouettes out of the straw flower arrangements. The phone hadn't rung for several hours. Jan sat at her desk. She opened the card again—the party invitation. The party was called a *bash*, and there was no RSVP necessary. Her name wasn't on the envelope. No one walked down the hall. Then the air system went off, increasing the silence. The building didn't even creak. No cars drove by outside.

Jan went quietly into the ER without waking Nurse Cory. In a closet she found several scrub suits, the kinds with cords threaded through the waist bands. She took the ropes out of three of the suits and tied the ends together. Back in her office she examined the ceiling. The light fixture was fluorescent, built flush into the ceiling. So she took a nail file from her purse and used it as a screwdriver to remove the handle from a metal supply cabinet. Then she stood on her desk and fastened the handle to the ceiling. It was tedious because the screws didn't want to go into the plaster and Jan's arms got tired. Finally the handle was in place and she tied one end of the cord to it. Then, standing on her chair, she made a large loop in the other end of the rope. The loop was about the size of her face, and it hung level with her eyes, so, standing on the chair, she was looking through the loop toward the open door of her office into the hallway, and, across the hall, the silent emergency room. She stood there a long time. She had to stand very still because the chair was on wheels, but she had learned poise when she prepared for the beauty contest. She leaned forward slightly so her heels wouldn't make holes in the chair's upholstery. Finally she heard footsteps in the hall, getting louder, and a young man walked past the door. Seconds later he came back and poked his head and shoulders into the doorway. Jan looked at him gravely through the loop. In a hospital you should be serious but never *grave*. "Hi," the young man said. "We need some room-change forms at the third station, but I can see you're busy so I'll come back later." He scratched his chin, grinning. "Oh, you know what? There's a typo on your menu for tomorrow, it says 'potato croaks' instead of 'croquettes.' We all *died* laughing. Hey—you're coming to the big costume party next week, aren't you?" He went on down the hall, whistling. Or else it was another siren outside.

When after three days of anguish I fell silent  
the midwives called the surgeon to save me.  
Twice before he had cut into their tiny skulls  
to gain purchase and pull, with crotchets  
tearing at their stubborn limbs  
until all that was left was me  
and something to throw to the dogs.

Again I had failed to give birth,  
the gift of womanhood beyond my parted legs.  
I heard his bag open and hated life.  
No. Not this time. No.

Since I hadn't the strength to speak  
it must have been my eyes that convinced him  
or else he shared my despicable view.  
The women pressed me to the bed  
as he cut a slit in my side.  
I did not struggle or scream;  
like a sigh he slipped from me whole  
like a perfect little man.

In the weeks while my body debated  
how much it could mend  
I saw that he favored his father.  
A milkmaid nursed him  
while my sister tended our fevers.  
Now he walks and speaks daftly,  
a flat head and shoulders too spare  
to ever bear a shield.  
But a sweet crooked smile  
makes him emperor of my heart,  
my womb fallen into scarred ruins.  
His left eye wobbles when he gets tired.  
This is how I have replaced myself in the world.

One early morning, we fished  
on the bayou, cutting  
the engine between two large  
cypresses, hoping not to catch  
the dreaded gar, a creature I thought  
you made up to scare me. Only  
I could get seasick in a boat that didn't  
move, vomiting Diet Pepsi, dizzy  
from one turn of the reel. You observed  
me silently, extricated the rod  
from my hands, and handed me  
your red neckerchief.

By the end of the summer,  
you worked longer hours and early  
mornings together became mornings  
I spent alone, plotting to get back  
to the Midwest where lakes flowed  
freely and all fish looked like fish.  
I became an escape artist,  
secretly packing one bunched  
up pair of underwear at a time  
into my trunk until it looked  
like a gumball machine,  
no quarters required.

One fall day you just didn't  
come home. My planning to flee  
back home turned to tossing  
all your underwear off  
our balcony like tropical birds  
fluttering down to roost.  
You didn't come home,  
and you didn't come  
home. Finally I revved

my engine, peeled out, your neckerchief  
tied around the rearview like a private  
lure hoping to catch the big one.

She is nested deep in slumber now.  
My youngest sister and I have kept  
her oxygen at 2.5 since late this morning.  
It's just enough to keep her euphoric  
even in dreams—and convinced  
she's breathing deep from the well.

Her systems began shutting down  
three days ago, although not even she  
saw them as signs. Yesterday  
she insisted on getting out of bed.  
We wheeled her into the living room  
dragging a plastic trail of hosed oxygen.

It was a day of small meals and great  
thirst—an inability to get comfortable.  
It was a day of back rubs and many  
fluffed pillows. We spoke of old times  
as if repeating the gospel itself.  
It was the last day for kisses and words.

Just before dawn she requested more air.  
I elevated her oxygen, turned on a fan,  
and slipped a crushed pill soaked in sugar  
water under her tongue. She hadn't been  
able to draw water through a straw for hours.  
In seconds she relaxed into the pillows

convinced she was breathing better  
and followed the white powder's irresistible  
call to slumber. It was a long sleep  
and we angels grouped around her chatting  
about good times through our tears.  
I am holding her pulse in one hand

and wiping her brow with the other.  
There have been long pauses between  
her breathing. They are torturous and sacred.  
As I kiss her forehead, Mother's pulse fades  
like the last ripple to leave a pond. She slips  
like light between the leaves—and is gone.

I rise, pull clothes  
from the floor,  
pour coffee, light cigarettes.  
In the shower, I think  
one thought of my father.

Mornings, pinto cat in my lap,  
I write letters in pencil on the backs of  
memos, essays, drafts of poems;  
sit in the maple chair with indigo cushions,  
count the floorboards,  
cannot get out the door,  
unless someone needs help.

When I drive, I thank  
traffic lights, wish ambulances luck,  
tip my hat to hearses.  
When a car with one headlight passes,  
I kiss my girl.

I wear red socks when flying,  
light two to a match, check for exits,  
will not sing on bridges, whistle in boats.  
On ferries I drink.  
When the truck pulls from the snowbank,  
I pat the dashboard.

After the foaling,  
placenta spread across the floor,  
I pass my hands over the map of this birth,  
seeking tears in the fabric,  
throw the lodi stone on the roof of the barn.  
I kiss the first bullet of deer season,  
apologize as I squeeze the trigger,  
speak to each hawk, each crow,

put each rock back where I found it.  
All day long I thank unseen, unnamed gods.

Before sleeping, I check  
the burners, unlock the doors, flip each  
switch three times, am in bed  
before the light is out.  
Later, I'll walk naked  
through the empty house.

A few nights before Navarre Scott Momaday arrived for a reading at the University of Kansas in April 1999, a relative of his, Tom Spotted Horse, talked to me about the renowned writer. We were both guests at a memorial dinner at Haskell Indian Nations University in Lawrence, Kansas, and the reflective occasion lent itself to stories. Spotted Horse himself is a Kiowa gourd dancer and singer-and-drummer, and I listened closely. He said he was related to Momaday through his great-grandfather, Guipagho the elder, and they were both Gourd Clan. His eyes deepened as he talked:

*Guipagho had been one of the most respected leaders and medicine men during the southern plains wars. Because of Guipagho's power the army exiled him to prison in Florida in an attempt to dissipate the Kiowa fighting force. Only by removing a leader like Guipagho was the U.S. government able to break down the Kiowa resistance. Only by separating him from that landscape, which gave him power, could the army diminish his influence within it politically, and perhaps in other ways as well.*

*The Oklahoma town Lone Wolf is named in his memory.*

Although the Florida imprisonment of leaders was one of the darkest times for the Kiowa Nation, they survived. And now they are a thriving population, with a tribal complex near Carnegie, Oklahoma. Guipagho's prayers were not unanswered.

My first sight of Momaday at the Kansas City airport made me think of Tom Spotted Horse's story. The writer has an unusual energy. Momaday is a great bear of a man. Bears have always been significant in his writings, as signifiers of healing, and his presence seemed marked by the animal.

When he won the Pulitzer Prize in 1969 for the novel *House Made of Dawn*, Momaday was just in his 30s. So I realized the man who stood on the airport curb must be in his 60s, though he did not seem frail. He ties his thinning gray hair into a ponytail, and his barrel chest, common among some Kiowa people I have known, makes him appear to be even more substantial. Later, a Haskell student from Oklahoma, Jennie James, told me

she had always wondered if this writer, raised most of his childhood away from the Kiowa community, would still retain recognizable Kiowa traits. As soon as she saw him—in the flash of a first impression—she observed he carried himself like a Kiowa man.

This was the man who studied with Yvor Winters at Stanford in the 1960s, when almost no American Indians received Ph.D.s. In addition to a mastery of British literary traditions, he was grounded in the storytelling tradition of his Kiowa family. He initiated the Albuquerque Renaissance of American Indian writers with his articulation of the oral tradition in literary terms.

Luci Tapahonso and I had driven to meet Momaday during a windy, stormy April afternoon, and the squall hit just after his plane landed. Even in pouring rain with luggage he seemed happy. In his memoir *The Names*, he includes a picture of himself as a smiling child, describing himself as “affable.” Sixty years later, the writer had the same expression on his face as the toddler in the photograph. As a child and as an elder, he presented the same ageless spirit. Much of the old warrior Lone Wolf’s vitality seemed to continue in Momaday’s vitality.

Momaday and Tapahonso have known each other for years, and as we drove they exchanged news. His youngest daughter had a birthday just before he left. She was nineteen and now a student at the University of Arizona. Tapahonso was preparing for her move to Tucson to teach at the university, with Momaday as her colleague. Momaday spoke about his teaching and how he plans to continue several more years before retirement. He had been painting lately, and he was preparing for a one-man show in Santa Fe. A recent book, *In the Bear’s House*, contains his bear paintings as well as his collected writings about bears—poems, fiction, and memoirs.

Momaday’s Kiowa name translates to Rock-Tree Boy, *Tsoai-Talee*, referring to a story about a boy who turned into a bear at Devil’s Tower, or *Tsoai*, Rock Tree. Tapahonso began to explain her clan names in the difficult *Dine*, or Navajo, language. Momaday speaks Navajo, since he lived on the Navajo reservation as a young boy. He is able to form consonants that are difficult for English speakers, and he is familiar with Navajo traditions.

Momaday explained his Kiowa grandfather’s name, the pronunciation of the long “a” instead of “o” in *Mammedaty*, which

translates as “Walking Above.” Later the name became a surname for his father, Alfred Morris Momaday, in mission school when traditional names were written down, often inaccurately. His father’s first and middle names, Alfred Morris, were given to honor a neighbor by that name. Al Momaday was the one who changed the spelling of *Mammedaty* to Momaday, for unknown reasons.

Momaday told the story of a man named Parker McKenzie, the oldest man in the tribe, who had passed away recently. He was named after the army officer who led the fight against the Kiowas at Palo Duro Canyon, which was the last devastating battle. Momaday had no idea how his contemporary kinsman received the infamous name, but the old man lived with the burden throughout his long life. Perhaps government agents gave him that name as a joke

I mentioned the common Kiowa name “Ware,” known well in Kansas and Oklahoma, which comes from three Kiowa brothers who worked at a warehouse during the years when government agents assigned surnames. They were known as the “Warehouse Brothers,” and “house” was dropped. Momaday commented that it must be an old name since there are so many Wares. He had just met a Kiowa student at Princeton named Ware. Indeed, it was a woman named Lela Ware who introduced Momaday’s mother to his father in 1933. His mother, a descendant of the Cherokee Nation, attended Haskell and became good friends with her roommate Lela. During a holiday she traveled to Mountain View, Oklahoma, to visit Lela, and there she met Al Momaday.

Even though Momaday has a Haskell connection, this was his first trip to Lawrence. Momaday said he thought his mother attended Haskell only about a year, at the age of sixteen. I had checked through the Haskell yearbooks and newspapers, but no photograph remains of Natachee Scott, which is not unusual in the transient population of students. At this time Haskell was a nationally known high school with respected athletic teams. I recalled the discussion of his mother in his memoir *The Names*, where he writes that she left Haskell to become a writer. He did not have time that day to tour Haskell; indeed, he would be in Lawrence less than twenty-four hours. He would only have time to drive around the campus. Still, it would be a scene from his childhood stories.

As we crossed the Missouri River and entered Kansas, river bluffs and bottoms gave way to rolling hills dotted with cattle. This was upland pasture, where the water table is too deep for farming. Momaday said this landscape reminded him of Oklahoma near Rainy Mountain. He spent his first years in the town of Mountain View, within sight of the landmark. But, he emphasized, the "mountain" was really more of a knoll. I had seen a picture of Rainy Mountain in a brochure, "The View from Rainy Mountain," which describes murals at the Kiowa Tribal Museum. Three Kiowa painters stand in the foreground of the photograph, within an expanse of grass. Beyond them rises a hump of land similar to the anomalous features that rise inexplicably from western Kansas plains. Coronado Heights, north of Wichita, is a similar hill, defined mostly by its relationship to flat wheat fields around it. The term "mountain" is hyperbole.

Momaday spoke about the significance Rainy Mountain has for him, especially with its connection to his family. The ruins of an old school are there, and his grandmother and other relatives attended that school. Also, the cemetery there is the last resting place of many family members. He said the land was indeed, to him, "sacred."

Tapahonso mentioned that springtime grass burning occurred on the Haskell campus. At Haskell, a prairie landmark is a medicine wheel formed by stone cairns and grass patterns. This month, workers had burned the dried, wintered-over grass to renew the pattern. Momaday was curious about the medicine wheel, and I described its origin in 1992 when artists Stan Herd and Leslie Evans worked with students to design it. It has become part of the south campus area associated with religious practices.

Tapahonso said that sweat lodges are located there and ceremonies occur on the medicine wheel grounds. Further, the land is important because of its history as a campground. When Indian children were taken by the government to Haskell, some parents would camp there just to be near them. The school would not allow the parents to see the children, but they wanted to share the same angle of sun and moon, and the same grasses and trees. Their children would know they were not abandoned. A children's cemetery is located there, a resting place for those who died from disease and homesickness.

When we arrived in Lawrence, the clouds had cleared and

the blue sky set off the redbud trees and tulips. At the KU student union Momaday put his satchel in the trunk with the luggage, and I noticed he had no briefcase. Whatever books and papers he had with him, they were packed away. His first presentation was a discussion of his book *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, and I realized he was prepared to speak extemporaneously. We found the room. Later he would describe an elder relative's storytelling procedure, how he would finish dinner and retire to his room. Only after a decent interval were the children, including Momaday, allowed to go into the grandfather's room for an evening of stories. They sat quietly before him and then he would speak.

Momaday has a remarkable, resonant voice and a theatrical bearing to accompany it. He is one of the few writers I have known who is as articulate in speaking as in writing. Few scholars have his training in the British legacy. He has an almost Victorian style. In addition, he has the training in the tradition of a Native storyteller, a discipline which goes back beyond memory and which bestows the power to recreate a story as a vivid reality.

After the formal presentation Momaday responded to questions, and I reflected on the role Momaday has played in the legitimization of Native cultures. His work has been crucial to helping European American academics understand a non-Western literature, a literature based on quite different categories yet native to this continent. He has written numerous essays about the oral tradition as an embodiment of literary forms as valid as the written form, collected in *The Man Made of Words*. I cannot think of any scholar who had these insights before Momaday. I think of many Native and non-Native writers whose works derive from his innovations.

Perhaps it is ironic that Momaday must use an academic medium to justify a Native oral form, but he adds the storytelling dimension to an academic context. And in his works, written and spoken, he respects Kiowa and other Native oral traditions as they evolve in the Southwest, in Oklahoma, and in urban communities of Indian people. He walks in two worlds as well as anyone can.

The most emphatic assertion of Momaday as a Kiowa writer came from Tom Spotted Horse at the introduction for the evening reading. Spotted Horse stood before the room with a hand drum. He spoke about what Momaday means to the Kiowa people from around the Rainy Mountain area.

*A few years ago several singers-and-drummers around Mountain View had been contacted to provide Kiowa music to go with an audiotape of Momaday's work. Each felt it was an honor to be asked. No man turned down the request. All honored his writings.*

Spotted Horse then drummed and sang a Gourd Clan honor song, and the hall echoed with the four repetitions of its verses, honoring this Kiowa elder and warrior of words.

## N. Scott Momaday *Excerpts from Vision Quest*

Cowboys and Indians 7.3 (July 1999).

The vision quest is an old tradition of the Plains and an essential component of the Plains culture. As recently as my great-grandfather's time, the Kiowas were a roving, buffalo-hunting people whose spirit was given its chief expression in the Sun Dance. And the Sun Dance itself was a vision quest. Those who danced were concerned to see beyond the realm of immediacy, into a dimension of mythic experience. Myth and imagination are indivisible and indispensable elements of the human condition; they enable us to tell stories, and our reality consists in the story of ourselves. We imagine, therefore we are. We are characters in the story of creation, evolution, and human destiny. Our visions are the stuff of story; they tell us who we are in the narrative spectrum of time and space. . . .

It may seem that the tradition of the vision quest ended with the decline of the Plains Indian culture, with the disappearance of the buffalo, and the loss of that freedom which inspired the warrior ideal. But the culture of Native Americans remains very much alive, and it is growing visibly stronger. I believe that it is possible to embark upon vision quests in our time. Indeed such quests are being made. The efficacy of the vision quest is even more timely and vital than ever before.

In 1992 I served on the Council of Ideas, an operating program of the Gihon Foundation. My colleagues on the council were people of extraordinary vision—Lee Cullum, Stuart Kauffman, and Walter Shapiro. After long discussion, we formulated a position statement as follows:

“We believe that the foremost issue of our time is this: A world civilization is emerging. It will call forth our best. This culture, sustained by a transnational myth structure, must be generated with faith and imagination, not left to the slogans of advertising. We are being called to an enormous adventure. We are in the archaic stages of an historical integration that can lead to a new heroic age. What could be more deeply human? Thus, the fall of Communism and the opening of borders and minds present this question: What is human purpose? The highest hu-

man purpose is always to reinvent and celebrate the sacred. What once the shaman did for the tribe, we must together do for the world. Let us begin."

I submit that this is a modern formula for the vision quest. It is the spiritual map of a journey that for the salvation of humankind must be undertaken.

(Information is available from The Buffalo Trust, P.O. Box 89, Jemez Springs, NM 87025.)

Please don't glue the world together yet,  
or give it more yellows than reds.

The key should be simple and straightforward.  
A map is not just paper dreaming.

Make the borders bold and the printing  
neat as pins. Question, Thomas?

Proportions! Of course they are important,  
but need not be in stone.

In the Balkans much is hidden still  
—a world you can't imagine seeing.

Enough about me. Let me repeat:  
America is not an island.

Peter E. Murphy      Physics  
for my daughter

The size of the universe expands, she tells me,  
not as I had expected, spilling its matter

into another universe on the other side.  
But the bodies within it drift

imperceptibly apart within the star-dazzled dark.  
I tell her, I get it, I think.

We stand our own organic molecules  
upright on terra firma, but do not notice  
or protest that every beeping thing,  
even love, is moving us apart.

Whisked away from Maine's wet-mitten days (snow to shovel, wood box to fill) for two months in south Florida's barely believable sunshine.

A magic undimmed when Mother's suitcase opened to reveal our forgotten schoolbooks, half-filled workbooks, all neatly bundled up with string.

Costs money to stay home, Father would say, in case anyone should think it was just vacation—and affording it in these hard times?—well,

running a resort hotel then was a bit of luck. Hard times for most, Father said, but some always have money: and take vacations.

The Depression had bottomed out. The landlords were eager to rent anything. There was boom-and-bust land to buy for no more than a woodlot.

Signs might say "Palmville" or "Sun City": we found only wooden stakes hidden behind the dunes and, if we were lucky, lizards or a snake.

So we stretched weeks out with visits to failed developments, some days at the beaches, afternoons of ten-cent movie matinees where,

in those seamless sequences of  
serial escapes, Bill Cody and  
Flash Gordon, like Scheherazade,  
beguiled the Grand Vizier of Time.

I

I was able to climb up the little silver ladder by my bedroom window from the time I was six years old. I liked to sit up on the roof and watch the sun go down, but my mother didn't like me going up there. She said she worried I'd fall off and crack my head open. "And then where will we be?" she asked me once, squinting up at me, her hands on her hips.

"On the ground," I answered.

"Annabelle, don't be a smart-ass," she said. "Just come back down."

But I crawled up there again one night during a lightning storm, zigzags of yellow light slashing across the other side of the sky, and I had to keep my hands over my mouth because I was so scared and so happy at the same time. And then the tornado sirens went off, and she woke up and couldn't find me in my bed. I heard her screaming, "Annie! Oh my God, baby, where are you?", her voice like the sirens, her arms closing around my legs as I came back down the ladder. She was spanking me before we got back inside, bare-handed, quick and hard. But she held me close to her at the same time, and even when she was done spanking she didn't let me go.

But she couldn't stop me from going back to the roof. From there, I could see out and over everything, and the world seemed much larger than it did from inside. The trailer we lived in did not have many windows, and the light that did get in mixed with the overhead fluorescent lights in the kitchen to produce an orange-brown, murky kind of light that made the rooms seem dim by early afternoon. There was dark paneling along the walls, so I often felt we were living underground, burrowed in like snakes. The walls seemed very close together, the ceiling low. Going up to the roof gave me what my room did not—space and brightness—and so the image of my head cracked open and spilling onto the concrete below was not enough to keep me off the ladder.

“I’m serious, young lady,” she said, pointing straight up at me, frowning, her hoop earrings swinging as she shook her head. “Your head will crack open like a pumpkin if you fall. I’ve seen it happen.”

“I won’t fall,” I told her.

I could see rows of trailers just like ours, all the way up to the highway. There were twenty-three trailers in Mobile Acres, seven white, seven green (including ours), four brown, three blue, one hot pink, and another one with different swirls painted all over it. The hippies lived in that one, and I was not allowed to talk to them because my mother worried they would give me drugs. They would put them in brownies, she said. She’d seen it happen. On the other side of the highway, cars whizzing by, I could see the Kwikshop, open twenty-four hours a day. After that, there was only a corn field and then trees. Sometimes I saw deer sneak out of the woods to nibble on the corn, their ears twitching, their eyes watching me. Mrs. Wiggins, my teacher at school, had told me that in these vast prairie counties one would not need to get up very high in order to see out of Kansas and into Missouri, and so I convinced myself that I could make out the glow of Kansas City and even the Arch of St. Louis on the horizon.

And I ignored my mother’s concern over what would happen to my head should I fall from so great a height.

“As if I don’t have enough to worry about,” she would say.

She did, it turned out, have plenty to worry about. But it is only now, years later, that I’m able to understand, to see how these scenes must have looked from her perspective. At the time, I only knew what I wanted, where I wanted to be. I could not imagine how it must have felt to see your small daughter perched on the edge of something high above your own head, calmly looking down at you.

When I was eight years old, my mother’s supervisor at Peterson’s Pet Food, Mr. Mitchell, gave her a white Volkswagen bug. He gave it to her when they canceled the bus service and she told him she didn’t know how she would get to work. He said he didn’t want to lose her because she was a good worker, and the damn thing was just sitting on cinder blocks in his front yard anyway, making his house look trashy and his wife mad. My mother couldn’t believe such generosity had come

her way. She jumped up and down the way people did when they won a car on *The Price is Right* and gave Mr. Mitchell a kiss on his cheek, leaving a red lipstick mark just above the top of his beard.

“You *sweetie!* Jesus! Are you serious? You’re just going to give it to me? Just like that? Oh my God, Merle. That’s the nicest thing anybody has ever done for me. Really.” She looked at me with shiny eyes. “Annabelle, I do believe our luck is changing.”

“Now it’s not so much, Tina,” he told her, trying not to smile. “You’d think I’d given you something valuable. That car has over two hundred thousand miles on it. The clutch is going to go soon, and maybe the transmission. I want you to know that, straight out.”

“No no no,” she said. “It’s wonderful.” She walked in slow circles around the Volkswagen, tapping the windows with red fingernails. My mother had long hair then, and that day she wore it up in a little knot, red-brown curls coiling around her face. Her dress went down past her knees and turned see-through when she walked between us and the sun. Mr. Mitchell and I sat on the front step and watched her, not saying anything, and when she turned to smile at us, I could see both of our faces reflected in her sunglasses.

“I can’t believe I have a car. I thought I’d never have my own car.” She opened the door and slid into the driver’s seat, honking the horn, waving at me to hurry up and get in.

The car was okay from the outside. But on the inside there was a terrible crying sound that came from under the seat. It was supposed to tell us that our seat belts weren’t on, but since there weren’t any seat belts left by the time we got it, it just cried all the time. That sound drove me crazy, like a mosquito had crawled in through my ear and was buzzing around in my brain. I didn’t like to go anywhere in the car. I told my mother I’d rather walk. There was a tape player in the car, but a tape was stuck inside it—*The Best of Diana Ross and the Supremes*—and the off switch was broken, so when the car started, the stereo came on automatically, and it could only play that tape. You couldn’t even turn down the volume. I liked the songs at first, but after a while I got sick of them. I got sick of “Stop in the Name of Love,” sick of “I Hear a Symphony,” sick of “Baby Where Did Our Love Go?” But my mother said that it wasn’t

every day somebody gave you a free car and that I was being an ingrate. She would turn up the tape loud enough to cover up the no-seat-belt sound and sing along like she couldn't hear the buzzing.

She made it to work and back almost every day like that for two years. It broke down a lot, but she was really good at finding men to fix it for her.

Mr. Mitchell came over to look at the Volkswagen sometimes. He was a short, round man with pale blue eyes and a silver mustache that he combed every morning. He had a special little comb for it, which he showed me once. He wore blue jeans and cowboy boots, even in the summer, and he chewed bubble gum because he was trying to quit smoking. Two of his fingernails were black and purple. My mother told me this had happened when one of the women she worked with got her hair caught in the bone-grinding machine, and Mr. Mitchell had yanked her hair out just in time, losing two fingernails in the process.

"He saved her," my mother told me. "Two more seconds and she would have been a goner. He saved her life."

Mr. Mitchell liked to do magic tricks for me, like pretending he could pull his thumb off with one hand, then putting it back on. One time he used ketchup and it really scared me, and he said he was sorry. He liked to pinch my nose between his thumb and finger and say, "got your nose, sweetie." I was too old for all that, but I laughed anyway because he was nice to us. As my mother said, he'd given us a car. The least we could do was laugh at his jokes.

Mr. Mitchell said that cars were like people, and you had to get to know them before you could fix them. He liked golden oldies, and he hummed Elvis songs sometimes while he stood over the engine of the Volkswagen. "Let's see what's troubling her, Annie," he would say, staring down, his big arms crossed in front of him. I knew that he was the one who had put the Supremes tape in, and this is what I wanted him to fix. But I don't think Mr. Mitchell really knew enough about cars to do any good.

The men who worked at garages in town did know about cars, and they actually worked on the Volkswagen now and then, sometimes for free. Some of them had gone to high school with my mother back in Wichita, she said, and they helped her

because they remembered her from the days when she was really something. One mechanic spent a whole afternoon rigging up the rusted-out muffler with rope and wire so it wouldn't drag along the ground when we drove, making sparks, and he didn't even charge her any money.

"You're a sweetheart, Mike," she had told him, smiling her shiny smile. One of her hands touched him on the arm, and the other one reached out to take the keys back. "Thanks for helping us out."

On our way to the Apple Mart one rainy afternoon, we watched the numbers on the dash turn to two hundred and fifty thousand miles. "Baby Love" was playing.

"Would you look at that, Annie?" she said. "That's a quarter of a million miles on this car. A quarter of a million! You'd think we'd driven to the moon!"

I think the VW decided enough was enough right then. Just a few days after we watched the numbers turn, my mother had to start using both hands to move the stick shift. Then, almost every time we stopped at a red light it took a minute of pushing on the stick before she could get it into first again. People behind us would yell and honk their horns, which only got her more flustered and then it would take longer. One time, on a hot and thick day in late August, the gears stuck and people started honking. She got out of the car, her arms straight above her head, and yelled, "Shut up! Just shut the fuck up! I'm doing the best I can!" When she got back in the car she looked like a crazy woman, her curly hair flying all around her.

By then, the men at the garages didn't want to help her for free anymore.

When she found out a new clutch was going to run her some three hundred dollars, she started to be a crazy woman all the time. She made long lists of numbers on yellow notebook paper at the kitchen table, subtracting and adding, rubbing her eyes and shaking her head.

"Why don't you just ask Eileen for the money?" I said. "She'll give it to you."

My mother looked up at me through slit narrow eyes, not saying anything.

If I think back to that day, the day that I came out and said what my mother must have already known for some time, that

she was going to have to ask Eileen for the money, I wonder if that was the moment things started falling in around her. In my memories of my mother before the hard year that came after that day in the kitchen, she is like a different person.

She was still young and feisty then, all swinging hips and movie-star sunglasses, yelling goddamnit when she couldn't find her car keys, laughing and smacking herself on the head when she found them hanging on the doorknob where she had left them. But even then, she spent her days at an assembly line that had the leftover carcasses of cows from the slaughterhouse across the street on one end, shiny new bags of dog food on the other, eight hours a day. She was talking about going back to school though. "My God, you're already ten, Annabelle," she said once. "There's no reason I can't get back up on that horse, no reason at all."

But after that day in the kitchen, when she looked up at me from her yellow notebook paper with tired eyes, things started to shift for her, a little bit at a time. If her life until then hadn't been perfect, it was nothing compared to what lay ahead for her, for us, beyond that moment in the orange-brown light of the kitchen. After she asked Eileen for the money, the next thing happened, and then the next thing, like a chain reaction, until all those things jumped on her at the same time and pushed her down to the place she ended up.

Maybe it was like when you're driving down the highway, and all of a sudden you're in the wrong lane, and then you're on the wrong exit, going seventy miles an hour to someplace you don't want to be. And you can't back on and try again. It's too late. All you did was get in the wrong lane, and you probably didn't even know it was happening when it happened. You were just driving along.

**N**ow that I think about it, I would have to say that my mother came from a long line of women who got in the wrong lane.

The most far back I can go with this is Eileen's grandmother, my great-great-grandmother, who had thirteen babies in Ireland before she fell over dead. Eileen told me she had no idea what this grandmother's name was, the one with the thirteen babies in Ireland, because nobody wrote it down, and anyone who could have told her was dead before she was old enough to ask. But she thought it might have been Mary. Eileen didn't know for cer-

tain that this Mary, or whatever her name was, had a terrible life over there in Ireland. But since Eileen's mother was one of thirteen children from Mallow, Ireland, that means Eileen's grandmother had thirteen babies, one right after the other. Three of them went ahead and died on her when they were just babies. Still, that leaves ten to raise while she was probably pretty sad about losing those three. As my mother liked to point out, one could imagine that our Mary of Ireland was, at the least, a very tired person.

Eileen liked me to call her Eileen and not Grandma or Nana. She said she thanked Jesus every day that I was her granddaughter, but that forty-four was too young to be called Grandma; her hair wasn't even gray yet. Eileen didn't look like grandmothers in my books. She wore sundresses like my mother, but she wore slips underneath them, and she still had long brown hair that went down to her shoulders when she took it out of a bun. She had a pointy nose and soft, watery eyes, and I thought she was pretty, except for her mouth. The left side of it didn't move, and it looked like she was always making a funny face, biting the inside of her cheek.

She drove up to Kerrville from Wichita Sunday evenings to eat dinner with us and catch up. After dishes, she would have my mother read something to her from a *Ladies Home Journal* or a *Wichita Eagle* and say things like, "That's what it says, Tina? Really? I think that's bunk." She would bring over vegetable lasagna that was so good that I couldn't even tell I was eating broccoli, and she would tell my mother she wasn't feeding me enough good food.

"Too much starch, Tina," she would say, looking at my arm. "Her skin looks weird."

My mother didn't like Eileen to smoke in the house, so she would go outside and sit on the front step, holding her cigarette up to her crooked mouth with her left hand. I had been born left-handed too, but Mrs. Strahan, my first-grade teacher, had worked it out of me. Mrs. Strahan was an older woman from Maine, the daughter of a Marine, and she did not put up with monkey business or left-handedness. She would take my pencil out of my left hand and press it tightly into my right whenever she walked by, giving me a stern look.

"Right is right, Annabelle," she would tell me. "Keep your left hand in your lap. You'll thank me later."

And so I learned to use my right hand, almost without thinking about it. But Eileen still used her left, and when I told her that Mrs. Strahan had said right was right, Eileen said she knew plenty of things that this Mrs. Strahan person didn't.

Eileen liked to tell stories during her Sunday visits, and she told them well, her voice going up and down in all the right places like she was reading out of a book. Eileen was born in Alabama, but she got to travel all over the country with her father because he ran a carnival in the summers and he spread the word of God in the winters, when people couldn't go to carnivals.

"Just me and my daddy," she told me, her hand over her mouth, smoke coming out of her nostrils. "My mother died when I was a child, so it was just me and him. She got TB and coughed herself to death when I was still small."

Eileen's coughing mother, that thirteenth of thirteen Irish babies, died of tuberculosis less than six years after arriving in America, when Eileen was only five. Even when Eileen's mother was alive, she was sick in a sanatorium and Eileen wasn't allowed to touch her. Her name was Katherine Daugherty, but that's all Eileen remembered about her, that and her cough. Eileen said that Marilyn Monroe's real name was Norma Jean Dougherty, and that side of the family spelled it different but really it was all the same people. She said Marilyn Monroe was actually my mother's second cousin and that was why my mother looked so much like her. Same smile. But my mother said that was BS if she ever heard it. She said anybody who knew anything about Marilyn Monroe knew that she was born Norma Jean Baker, and that Dougherty was her first husband's name, and that if Marilyn Monroe was her second cousin, then she was Sonny Bono's uncle as well.

So Eileen's Irish mother, who was probably not related to Marilyn Monroe or Sonny Bono in any way, was sick and then dead, and then it was just Eileen and her dad, driving all over the country with Bibles and bearded ladies and Siamese twins and men who could swallow fire like it was nothing. Eileen didn't go to school except here and there, and that's why she never learned to read.

"It was just a different kind of school is all," Eileen said, looking at one of my books on the table with quick, fluttering eyes. "Learned just as much. Maybe more."

The carnival people were nice to her. They felt bad, her losing her mother and all. The bearded ladies were just ladies with beards, and they would still cook eggs for her and wash her clothes, sing lullabies to her at night.

But Eileen's favorite was Vivian LaRue, the Amazo Rubber Girl, who spun around in a circle, her arms and legs spread wide, while her blindfolded brother threw knives that sailed through the air and landed right next to her spinning, smiling face. Vivian LaRue was not her real name. Eileen's father had made it up for her because her real name was Jewish and too hard to say. The Amazo Rubber Girl showed Eileen how to do cartwheels and the Chinese splits and how to say "thank you" and "good morning" in Polish. Almost every night her brother threw knives at her, barely missing her, his blindfold thick and dark.

"Like this," Eileen said, and she closed her eyes and threw imaginary knives across the room, where my mother was standing in front of the refrigerator eating a banana.

The knives would never touch the Amazo Rubber Girl, Eileen said, because she and her brother knew magic, and she couldn't be killed or even hurt. Her handsome brother could put her in a box and cut the box in half, so you would think for sure that she was cut in half too, but then presto, she would jump out again all in one piece.

"You just couldn't kill her," Eileen told us. "No matter what you did. You could stab her, cut her in half, hold her under water for way too long, but nothing would kill her. She always come back out of it again, smiling like nothing had happened."

Eileen knew how all the other tricks were done. But the Amazo Rubber Girl and her brother would never tell how they did what they did, and this made Eileen believe that they weren't tricks at all but really magic. Eileen asked her once where she and her brother had learned their magic. The Amazo Rubber Girl told her their parents had been killed, shot to death in a field in Poland with everyone else they knew, and that you learned magic when you had to.

Eileen believed that I might have known some magic when I was very small, small enough to listen to her stories without talking back, but she thought that as I grew older my magic was leaving me.

"All those books you read," she said. "They suck it right out of you." She made sucking sounds, her crooked lips puckered like a fish's.

Eileen was especially concerned with my science books that had pictures of Charles Darwin, charts and time lines, drawings of apes turning into people.

"If that man wants to think he come from monkeys, that's fine," she said, her small fingers running over the words of my book. "Maybe *he* did. But I know the Lord created me, and since you come from me, that means you too."

"But they know we came from monkeys," I said. I pointed to a chart in my book and tried to explain. "They have fossils, Eileen. They know."

"They know nothing," she said. "Those rocks are dead, and we are alive."

I opened my mouth to try to tell her again, but my mother stood behind her and put her finger to her mouth and shook her head, telling me it was no good to argue with Eileen about monkeys.

Eileen was in a tornado in Alabama once, in the days before her father's carnival. She said she saw a man blowing right past her house like he was flying, his feet not touching the ground. She looked up and saw the funnel, loud and gray and sort of wonderful, sucking up the entire sky. Like in the beginning of *The Wizard of Oz*, she said, only not in black and white. She was standing in front of her house when she saw it, right before her father grabbed her and ran her down to their cellar. The flying man died, and Eileen's neighbors, who were in their cellars, died too, but she and her father stayed alive. She said when they came out from the cellar everything was so quiet, and she saw the flying man's legs sticking straight up out of the ground, like he had dived into the earth.

"You were lucky, Eileen!"

"Not lucky," she said, shaking her head. "Chosen."

She pointed up at the low ceiling with one small finger.

Eileen liked to talk about God and Jesus. My mother did too, but only when she was mad, and then it was goddamn this and Jesus Christ that. And then Eileen would get mad or start crying and tell my mother to watch her ingrate mouth. Eileen drove up from Wichita to take me to church once, Sunday school. They gave me strawberry Kool-Aid and vanilla wafers,

and there was a puppet show of Adam and Eve and the subtle serpent. Eileen told my mother that I liked it when we got home and made her promise to start taking me once a week. But she didn't.

"One crazy person in your life is plenty," my mother told me. "You don't need to meet the people from Eileen's church."

Eileen believed that the world would end very soon and it was important to know which side you were on. She said the stars in the sky were babies waiting to be born and that God took care of them until He knew it was time, and that was why some nights it looked like there were more stars than others. More babies getting born sometimes, she said, and although they looked big when they were in the sky, you could fit all of them on the head of a pin, if that's what you needed to do. And when you saw a falling star, somewhere a baby was being born, and that was why people made wishes on them. Like Cinderella. She said that if an eyelash fell off and you blew on it and then you couldn't find it, it was good luck, but only if you believed in Jesus, and that when a knife fell at the floor, there would be a man at the door, and that you could never pass the salt from hand to hand at the dinner table because that was the same as tempting the devil, which is what Eve had done. She said you had to eat black-eyed peas on New Year's Day or the entire year would be bad. I listened to her say these things with a closed mouth and big eyes, but my mother would stand behind her, twirling her finger at the side of her head to show me that Eileen was crazy.

Once, after Eileen left, my mother said the trouble with not being able to read was that you got all your sources mixed up.

On the Sunday that my mother needed to ask Eileen for three hundred dollars, Eileen brought a strawberry jelly roll so buttery and sugary that I thought I was going to pass out from happiness every time I took a bite. I told Eileen this and pretended to faint, falling on the floor, saying I'd died happy. Eileen thought this was funny, but my mother was too worried about the three hundred dollars, and she hadn't thought anything was funny for some time.

Eileen was almost out the door when my mother finally asked.

"I'm sorry, baby," Eileen said, fingering her cigarette case, where she kept wadded up twenties that she sometimes slipped

into my mother's hand on the way out the door. "I told you he found my stash. He says if you want any more of his money, you're going to have to come see him."

My mother breathed out hard and fast, shaking her head.

Eileen frowned, tapping her fingers on the table.

"Don't you want to see the boys, Tina? Timmy is getting so big you won't hardly recognize him. Daniel asks about you all the time. He's got a girlfriend now, and they're so serious. He wants to meet his little niece. Annabelle should get to meet her uncles."

"No no no," my mother said, picking up dishes and putting them in the sink.

"I don't think he's making an unreasonable request, honey. Most people don't go handing over three hundred dollars to daughters who won't talk to them. He's never even met Annie."

"He said he didn't want to meet her," my mother snapped. She looked over at me, closing her mouth quickly.

"Swallow your pride and come see him," Eileen said. "Look, kitten, sometimes you have to do things you don't want to in order to take care of your children. God knows I did."

My mother frowned. She stared at the smoke curling out of Eileen's mouth for a long time before she spoke again. "I can't, Mom. I'll lose . . . I'll lose something."

She took more dishes to the sink, not looking up, not talking. But Eileen stood in the doorway watching her, waiting for her to look up.

"Hmm. Well, Tina, whatever that something is, she can't eat it, she can't wear it, and you can't drive it to work. So you better just get off your high horse, girl, and come ask him for the money."

I got up and went to the refrigerator to get a glass of milk, looking up at the fluorescent light, humming to myself, pretending not to listen.

"Sow the wind, reap the whirlwind," Eileen said. "I tried to make things better for you, Tina. You ran off with that loser when you was just sixteen. What were you thinking?"

My mother stopped where she was and closed her eyes. I watched Eileen's smoke drift across the table and wrap itself around her.

"It seemed like a good idea at the time," she said.

Later that night, after Eileen had driven away in her black Oldsmobile to go home to Wichita without giving my mother three hundred dollars, I went outside to practice cart-wheels. Deena, Richard, and I had decided we were going to be nationally touring acrobat stars as soon as we reached adulthood. I was captain of our squad, the Mobile Acres All Stars, which only had the three of us as members. Because I was captain, I always got to go first, stand in front, and give the orders.

“Girl, what are you doing flopping around on the grass like that? You look like one of those college students on LSD.”

I stood up to see Mr. Riley squinting at me from his front step. We stared at each other for a moment, not saying anything. His face was tan and leathery from too much sun, and he wore a V-neck T-shirt with the sleeves cut off. Mr. Riley had called me a nosy little bitch two years earlier, the day I saw him peeking into Linda Biggerstaff’s window. I had been up on the roof, and from there I had seen him balancing on his lawn chair, a bottle in his hand.

“I see you, Mr. Riley,” I had called down.

“Nosy little bitch,” he said, and he fell off his chair and slept there for a while.

But he had stopped drinking by the time I was ten, and he wasn’t quite as mean as he had been before. “He’s still a dog,” my mother said, “but not so mean, and getting off the bottle is quite an accomplishment.” By “dog” my mother meant that Mr. Riley often forgot that he was married to Mrs. Riley, who was so fat that it was hard for her to get down the little step in front of their trailer. She only came out to walk their poodle, Jackie O. My mother said Mr. Riley didn’t forget he was married to her because she got fat; it was the other way around. She’d seen it a million times.

My mother said that Mr. Riley’s behavior toward the women of Mobile Acres was unfortunate, especially considering he was the father of two growing boys, and everyone knew where that would lead. When my mother would walk outside, Mr. Riley would whistle at her or sometimes growl like he was a tiger, limping along beside her as she walked. One of Mr. Riley’s knees wouldn’t bend and so he walked like Captain Hook, but my mother said we could never, ever, make fun of that because it happened to him in Vietnam when he was only eighteen years old.

"Hey Annie, who's that pretty lady who comes to see you all the time? The one that just drove off."

I could see his tattoo on his shoulder, a picture of a dancing naked lady with breasts like staring eyeballs. *Carmen* was written underneath, in blurring blue letters. Mrs. Riley's name was LeAnne.

"Eileen?"

"Hmmm. Eileen. Eileen the Queen. But what happened to her face? Her mouth is all crooked, you know?" He pointed to his own mouth. "Was she in an accident or something?"

"I don't know," I said.

"What do you mean, you don't know? A lady comes over once a week and brings you things to eat and you never even bother asking her what's wrong with her face?"

"That's my grandma, for your information."

Mr. Riley look startled. "That was your grandma? She don't look like no grandma. She looks about forty." He tilted his head, smirking. "Oh, that's right, I forget you Bucknow women start breeding young, don't you? How old are you now, Annabelle, eleven?"

"Ten," I said, wiping my hands on my shorts.

"Well shit, I better keep my boys away from you," he said, walking back to his trailer. "You probably won't waste any time, either."

I sat up on the roof for a long time that night, watching the sky turn from blue to pink to violet until I could see the first twinkling stars of the night. I knew which lights were stars and which were planets because stars twinkled and planets didn't. I had recently given a science report on Venus and so I knew where it was in the sky and that it was our closest planet, made up mostly of vaporous gasses. My science teacher at school, Mr. Tanner, had told me that no one could live on Venus. It was covered with clouds, but the clouds were poisonous and the poison would kill you as soon as you breathed it, and anyway it was too hot. The stars were balls of hydrogen and helium and fire, just like our sun, and no one could live there either.

I watched cars race by on the highway, their red taillights getting brighter as the sky grew darker. Someone in a car honked and waved at me out an open window, and I waved back.

My mother rattled her fingernails on the wall. "I know

you're up there. You've got two minutes to get your butt back in here. Two minutes."

I went back down the ladder and found her in her bedroom, lying on her bed with her GED book. She had a cup of coffee on the floor next to the bed, and she was playing her Fleetwood Mac tape on the cassette player that made squeaking sounds along with the music.

She was studying for the GED exam at night because she had never finished high school, and Mr. Mitchell said he might be able to get her promoted if she got the equivalent through the exam. And so she came home one day with a booklet full of little stories and questions about the stories, like the kind I did at school all the time. She practiced writing essays on what she wanted to do with her future, and I would find them on the kitchen table sometimes, written in her loopy cursive on yellow notebook paper.

#### "MY FUTURE" by Christina Bucknow

I want to pass the GED so I can get a better job that pays better so I can take better care of my daughter. I'm doing pretty good now but sometimes not. I would also like to not have to work so much or maybe not so hard so that I wouldn't be too tired all the time when I come home. I don't want to work at Peterson's my whole life. At least not doing what I'm doing now. I would like to sit down more. I would like Annie to have a yard to play in, to.

I knew better than to go over her essays with an ink pen, correcting mistakes the way Mrs. Wiggins did with our essays at school. After dinner she would lie on her bed with her Fleetwood Mac tapes and coffee, squinting her eyes at essays on the U.S. Constitution and formulas for figuring the area of triangles and trapezoids. On this night she was doing long division, checking her answers on the little black calculator she used to balance the checkbook.

"I don't want you on the roof," she said, looking up from her book. "How many times do I have to tell you?"

"Okay," I said.

"You could really hurt yourself." Her right eyebrow was curved high on her head. "I'm not kidding around. I mean it, you go up there one more time and I'll ground you."

“Okay,” I said.

“Okay then,” she said. “Do you want to get your homework and bring it in here? We can do it together if you’re quiet.”

“I did it at school.”

She rolled her eyes at this. “Of course.”

I crawled up next to her on the bed, resting my head on her shoulder. She kissed me on the top of my head and went back to the calculator.

“Most grandmothers are older than Eileen, huh?”

“Not around here,” she said. She looked up from her booklet. “Who’ve you been talking to, Annie?”

“Mr. Riley.”

“You tell Mr. Riley she’s sixty-seven. You tell Mr. Riley it’s none of his goddamn business.”

“He wanted to know what happened to her face.”

“Hmm,” she said, pressing more buttons on her calculator. She chewed on her pencil the way Eileen chewed on her cigarettes.

“Was she in an accident?”

“Yeah,” she said, her mouth in a wrinkle. “She married my father.”

Still, I knew that we would go to Wichita to ask her father for the three hundred dollars. Her columns of numbers weren’t adding up, and there was only peanut butter and Wonder Bread in the refrigerator. My mother would lie on her bed with open eyes for long stretches of time, looking out her window up at the sky as if she were waiting for something to fall down out of it. But we had already gotten one free car, and there was no reason to believe another one would appear any time soon.

## 2

As soon as I got home from school, my mother put me in the tub and scrubbed me like I was a pan. She braided my hair tight, twisting little pink bows at the end of each braid. She did not give me a snack.

“Can you just wait until we get to Wichita? You know Eileen will have lots of good food for us there. We’re running a little low lately, if you haven’t noticed,” she said.

“I’m hungry,” I said.

“When aren’t you hungry?”

For a second I thought she really wanted me to answer this, and I tried to think of a time. Then she looked sad. She put some crackers and peanut butter on a plate.

She wanted to know if she looked okay. She was wearing a yellow dress with a high collar, and I thought this made her look like one of the women on the commercials for dishwashing soap, fresh and clean. She wasn't wearing makeup, and her curly hair was pulled back with two of my barrettes.

I nodded.

She made me wear terrible white shiny tap shoes and tights, presents from Eileen from last Christmas, even though it was almost summer and way too hot for all that. I knew I looked stupid. I ran from the front door to the VW, my shoes clicking on the concrete.

"Hi Annie!"

It was Richard, standing in his front yard with no shirt on eating a hot dog. Mr. Riley was sitting on their front step, smoking, and Travis was sitting next to him, not wearing a shirt either. Travis was only two years older than I was, but already he had little spots of hair on his chest, a scar on one of his brown shoulders from a fight. I knew they were waiting for Travis' social worker to come pick him up in her green station wagon. Travis was spending the month at a group home for boys because he had stolen a knife from Galveston's Hardware and they had caught him. He only got to come home Thursday afternoons for a visit, and then the social worker's green station wagon would come and pick him up and take him back. In fact, Travis Riley spent much of his time at the Juvenile Detention Center carrying out small sentences for petty crimes, and when he was gone Richard and I would go through his comic books, stacked high in his closet from floor to ceiling, but we took care to put them back exactly how we had found them.

"Where you all going?" Mr. Riley asked.

"We're going to *Wichita*." I yelled this because I was excited. We were leaving town. Going somewhere else. But then my mother came out of the house, her car keys jangling in her hand, giving me a look that told me to be quiet.

"What's in Wichita, Tina?"

"Don't look at him. Don't encourage him," she said, and now her sunglasses were on, and I couldn't see her eyes. She waved to Richard.

“You look pretty, Miss Bucknow,” he said, hot dog falling out of his mouth.

My mother flashed him a smile. “Thanks, honey,” she said.

Mr. Riley liked that. He started clapping and hooting saying, “That’s my boy. You tell her.”

Travis caught me looking at him, at his dark, close-together eyes, and I looked away. My mother got into the driver’s seat, checking herself in the rearview mirror. She started the engine up, no problem, the Supremes on the stereo. But the stick shift wouldn’t move. The Rileys watched for a while, not saying anything, while my mother pushed on the stick.

Finally, Mr. Riley came over, dragging his bad foot behind him, and he said he could get it into first if she’d let him trade places with her for a second. Travis and Richard stood behind him.

My mother tapped her fingernails on the steering wheel and tried to move the stick one more time, but she couldn’t.

He stood by the car, waiting.

“I just need to get it into first,” she said, looking down as she slid out of the car. “It just does this when I first start it sometimes.”

He got into the car, holding his bad knee. He smelled like cigarette smoke and old laundry. He only had to use one hand and the stick moved into first. I watched the ball of muscle in his arm move up and down.

My mother said thank you but didn’t look at him, looking up at the sky.

“Yup,” he said and tapped the dashboard twice.

When she passed by him to get back in the car she made her body small. She was wincing, and so was I, because I thought he would say something to her, something gross, and this time it would be worse because she had needed his help, and she wouldn’t be able to tell him to shut up.

But he didn’t say anything. He stretched his good leg out of the car and walked back to his own yard. His good leg had a little swing in it, like he was strutting. Travis and Richard followed behind him, and I could see that they were strutting, too.

I had only been out of Kerrville a few times in my life so I was excited just to be on the highway, going that fast, going somewhere else. I hung my head out the window like a dog would,

the breeze blowing hard on my face as we sailed past farms and rest stops, truck stops and diners. The sky was bright, bright blue, almost turquoise, with no clouds. We passed a lot of cows and my mother rolled down the window and sang Supremes songs to them. The fields without cows were yellow with sunflowers rolling out as far as I could see, or tan and white ribbons of wheat, red tractors moving up and down. The men in the tractors waved back to me when I waved at them.

With my head hanging out the window like that it felt like we were going fast, but we weren't. The other cars passed us. Richard had told me that when diesel trucks passed us we could wave at them and they would honk. But when I tried this my mother told me not to. It was okay to wave at men in tractors, but not men in trucks. Tractors couldn't catch up, she said.

"Annabelle, get your head back in the car. You're making me nervous. I knew a girl who fell right out of the car hanging her head out the window like that. She went splat." She pulled me back in the car by my arm. "Now you know we're going to see my father," she told me. "Eileen's husband. Your grandfather. I've got two little brothers too, your uncles."

"Okay," I told her, still looking out the window.

"My father and I haven't talked for a while," she said. "Annie? Are you listening?"

I looked at her.

"You're not nervous, are you?" she asked. She was nervous. She told me that my grandfather was a lot older than Eileen. She said he grew up on a farm in Nebraska and that he had seven little brothers and sisters to take care of. His father died when he was only fourteen, and so he had to drop out of school so he could work to help take care of everyone.

She kept talking. She said he worked at Boeing now, making airplanes. She said he went to the Korean War before he met Eileen, when Eileen was still just a teenager, and he had a purple star because another man got shot and my grandfather had carried him seven miles to a hospital, and on the way there he got shot too, but he didn't put the other man down.

"Where did the bullet go?"

"In the stomach," she said.

"Mr. Riley said only poor boys from the country have to go to wars."

"Maybe," she said, looking in the rearview mirror. She was

not looking at cars in the rearview mirror, I knew. She had it tilted at an angle where she could only see her eyes. "And he's missing a finger," she said. "He lost it working in the winter. Frostbite."

"Which finger?" I wanted to know, looking down at my hands.

"That's a weird question. His pinkie. Don't stare at it when you see him."

I tried to imagine him, my mother's father, Eileen's husband, a man with nine fingers and a hole in his stomach.

"Why doesn't he come over to visit like Eileen does?"

She frowned and looked at me, and then back out at the road. "He doesn't like me very much," she said.

I could not believe this was true, because it seemed all men liked my mother. The men who had worked on the Volkswagen for free liked her. The men who leaned on poles outside of the laundromat liked her too. My friend Deena said they liked her because she was pretty and because she always wore dresses and she had big hips, and when she walked her skirt would swing back and forth, and from the back it looked like a bell ringing. When she was in a good mood she laughed and smiled a lot for men, and she made them laugh, and she made their eyes twinkle. Deena said that was how you knew if a man was in love with you, if his eyes twinkled when he looked at you. I told Deena I had never seen this twinkling, and she said that was because no man had been in love with me yet, but that I would know it when I saw it.

I had not seen Mr. Mitchell twinkle, but I knew he liked my mother because he came over all the time. The week before he had brought me a set of jacks, and I played with it the whole time he sat on the front step and talked to her. And everything she said was so funny to him, ha ha ha.

"Why doesn't your dad like you very much?"

"Next question, please."

"Is he nice?"

This made her laugh, but not a happy laugh. "He can be. He has a temper."

"You have a temper."

Her eyes bulged at this. "No. No I don't."

"Is he going to talk about Jesus all the time like Eileen?"

She smiled. "Oh yes. But he likes to talk about God more. Eileen loves Jesus, and he loves God."

“Who do you love, Mom?”

She smiled. “I love you, Annabelle.”

Past Topeka, there were billboards along the highway with pictures of cows dressed up like women, wearing lipstick and hoop earrings, saying, EAT BEEF HONEY. THE WEST WASN’T WON ON SALAD, and PLEASE THEM TONIGHT! SERVE BEEF! SUPPORT KANSAS RANCHERS!—which didn’t make any sense because why would cows want to say that? There were billboards for the Museum of the Oregon Trail and for Ramada Inn. There was a billboard for the Heartland’s Club for Gentlemen. Beneath the name was a picture of a lady with hair like my mother’s wearing a bikini and a top hat with a cartoon bubble saying, “I’d like to welcome you myself, gentlemen.” I asked my mother what this meant, and she said it was better that I didn’t always know everything.

We passed a corn field that had a big sign shaped like an open Bible right in the middle of it. The sign was up on stilts painted light green, so when I first looked at it I thought the Bible was flying over the rows of unopened corn, the pages spread like wings. YOUR INIQUITIES HAVE SEPARATED BETWEEN YOU AND YOUR GOD. 59:1–2 was painted across the pages. There were three signs that said ABORTION KILLS CHILDREN in uneven black letters, and one big one with a picture of a baby on it. I asked her what those signs meant, and she said it meant we were getting close to Wichita.

Eileen and my nine-fingered grandfather had a real house and a real yard. It was a two-story house, green with white trim, on the turnaround of a dead-end street. An American flag hung in the front, as big as the one we had at school. One side of the house had lots of windows and a front door, and on the other side there was a two-car garage. All the houses on the street had this same shape, but they were painted different colors. Rising over the houses were big shade trees, and I could see a tire swing hanging down off one of them. There were kids biking and on skateboards. Two women sat on lawn chairs in front of the house next to Eileen’s, wearing sunglasses, looking up from their magazines to watch our VW sputter and wheeze into Eileen’s driveway, “Come See about Me” floating out the windows.

My mother squeezed my hand tight as we walked up the driveway. I kept my eyes straight ahead, worried the kids on the

bikes and skateboards, Wichita kids, were laughing at me because I was dressed up like a pink-and-white piece of candy, my terrible shoes making so much noise.

We didn't have to knock. The front door shot open and two boys scampered out, a big one and a little one. They were like puppies.

"Hey Tina!" the big one said. The visor of his baseball hat knocked into my mother's forehead when he hugged her. The little one snatched it up and put it on, staring at us.

"Oh my God!" she said, looking at each of them. "You all have gotten so big! Daniel! You're so tall. You're taller than I am."

"Well shit, Tina, I'm about fifteen," he said, smiling widely enough for me to see his silver braces. "Hey, is this my niece? Is this the infamous Annabelle?"

He crouched down and looked at me. He had my mother's eyes and Eileen's bony nose. He was the skinniest boy I'd ever seen in my entire life, wearing a mesh football shirt and a silver necklace with a tiny locket around his neck.

"Hi there, I'm your Uncle Daniel. Pleased to meet you, Annabelle."

I said nothing, staying close to my mother's yellow dress. She was already hugging the little one, going on and on about how big he'd gotten since she last saw him, and how handsome he'd gotten, and how he was still her little angel. But the little one didn't say anything. He looked scared of her the way I was scared of Daniel. My mother wouldn't let him go.

"Annabelle! This," she said, squeezing him so tight his purple bubble gum popped out of his mouth and onto her yellow dress, "is my sweet littlest brother Timmy. I haven't seen him since he was just a baby. I guess he's your uncle too, Annie."

He seemed about my age, too small to be my uncle. We stared at each other, our faces blank. But my mother's eyes were already watery, her lip trembling.

"I can't believe you all are both grown. I feel like I don't even know you now," she said, putting one under each arm. "Why didn't you two ever come visit me?"

"I forgot about you!" Timmy shouted. "We're not allowed to even ask about you, so—"

Daniel slapped him on the back of his head. "Shut up, you'll hurt her feelings. Naw, Tina, we wanted to come see you. We

never even knew that's where she was going. She always told him she was going to visit her friends and make a quilt or something."

"Is he here?" she whispered, looking at the house.

"No, he's still at work," Timmy said. "He's making airplanes."

"This is my girlfriend," Daniel said, opening the silver locket. He showed us a picture of a girl with long blond hair in a permanent wave and blue eye shadow and shiny pink lips.

"Ooo, she's pretty, Danny," my mother said, smiling. "I can't believe you already have a girlfriend! Last time I saw you, you hated girls."

"I love her," Daniel said, and his face was very serious.

"Um, okay. I wasn't laughing at you."

He nodded and tucked the locket back underneath his mesh shirt. "Come on in. Mom's waiting for you. She's about as excited as I've ever seen her."

The little one, Timmy, kept staring up at my mother as if he was trying to put something together, trying to recognize her face. Every time she caught him looking at her she stopped talking and swooped down to kiss him or tickle him. There was a doormat that said WELCOME with a picture of Jesus holding out his arms and smiling. It looked like I was standing on Jesus, my shiny white tap shoes on his neck.

"Is that them? Are they here?" I heard Eileen's voice from a different room. She ran to the entryway carrying a wooden spoon with mashed potatoes on the end of it.

"Ohhh, just look at you, Annabelle! Aren't you a picture? I've never seen you so dressed up!" she cooed. "Boys, did you meet your, I guess your . . . niece, Annabelle. Isn't she just beautiful?"

Daniel and Timmy stared at me, but they didn't talk. Daniel moved his head a little, and Timmy stayed still.

"Well, she is, stupids," Eileen said, patting me on the head. "She is just precious. You all come on in and sit down." She handed the spoon to Daniel. "Go on in the kitchen and make sure the potatoes stay warm but don't burn, okay, hon? Timmy, you go too."

She led us into a large room with baby-blue carpeting and a piano in the corner. My mother and I sat down on a sofa, gold with little pillows on each side, and Eileen sat in a matching

chair, pulling it close so she could pat me on the head and squeeze my mother on the knee.

“I’m so glad you’re here,” Eileen said. “So glad.”

I could smell food cooking, something spicy and warm. My mother held her arms crossed in front of her, her eyes moving around the room, at the painting of the ocean crashing on to rocks above the piano, at the fresh vacuum tracks on the carpet, at the fluffy gold curtains that hung in front of the windows so you couldn’t see out. She picked up one of the pillows, fingering its baby-blue fringe. *Forgive us our trespasses* was needlepointed on one side of the pillow; . . . *as we forgive those who have trespassed against us* was needlepointed on the other. My mother wrinkled her nose and set it down.

“Everything’s exactly the same. Exactly. I’m in a time warp,” she said. She looked at her watch. “He still isn’t home? It’s after seven.”

“He likes to have a drink with his friends after work.”

My mother tilted her head at Eileen.

“He just has one,” Eileen said. “He’s always good about that.”

I heard a garage door open and shut. My mother’s hand went to her throat. “Speak of the devil,” she said.

“You be nice, Tina. You be nice and everything will go okay.”

“I’ll be nice if he’ll be nice.”

“Ray?” Eileen yelled out. “Ray, we’re up in the living room . . . Tina’s here too.”

“Yeah,” said a low voice from below. “I saw that German car out there.”

We stood up and my mother put her hands on my shoulders, leaning so heavily on me that I felt I was holding her up. I heard a door open and shut, heavy footsteps coming up stairs, and then there he was standing in the doorway, wearing a blue button-down shirt and dark blue pants. He was big, wide and tall, so tall his head almost touched the ceiling. He wouldn’t have been able to stand up in our trailer. He had my mother’s large blue eyes, squashed down by red caterpillar eyebrows, and red hair cut close to his head, like a soldier’s. The pinkie on his right hand was missing, just a stub where there should have been a little finger. He saw me looking at it and held it up, wiggling the stub at me.

“Hi Dad?” my mother said, as if she were asking a question.

“Hi there, you,” he said, his voice low and loud. He was smiling. I thought he would be mean, but he was smiling. He put his four-fingered hand in his pocket and leaned against the piano.

“This is Annabelle.”

He nodded at me and smiled again. He unbuttoned the sleeves of his shirt, rolling them up to his elbows.

Then it was quiet. All I could hear was the ticking of my mother’s watch, her wrist just below my ear, her hands still on my shoulders. Eileen bulged her eyes at him.

“I’m glad you’ve come here today, Tina,” he said very slowly. “Your mother has missed you.” He looked at Eileen again. “You’ve been missed.”

“Thanks, Dad,” she said. I thought she should say she missed him too, but she didn’t. Her fingers were too tight around my shoulders, but I didn’t move. Everything in the room told me to stay quiet and still, everything except for Eileen. She was happy, her hands clasped together, her face shining.

“You boys get a chance to talk to your sister?” he asked, his red caterpillared eyes looking down at my new uncles.

“She doesn’t look like a horse, Dad,” Timmy said, looking at my mother.

More quiet.

“What are you talking about horses, boy?”

“You told me she was a horse. She doesn’t look like a horse.”

My mother’s fingers drummed on my shoulders. I looked up and saw her staring straight ahead. Her mouth twitched.

“I don’t think he was saying horse, Timmy,” she said, her words coming through a tight smile. “I think he was saying—”

“Okay, okay,” Eileen yelled. “Let’s go into the dining room! We’ve all got to get along today. No more talking about horses!”

My mother steered me into a new room, and there was a big table with all of Eileen’s food on it. The new room had the same blue carpet with fresh vacuum tracks, and the table was set with glass glasses and folded napkins, like a nice restaurant would have. I saw a ham and mashed potatoes, so much that I knew I would be able to eat and eat and eat and there would still be more left over.

We sat down at the table. It was a table where only four people were supposed to sit, but two extra chairs had been placed at a corner. They didn't match the other four. My mother sat in one of the chairs that didn't match, and I sat in the other. Eileen took one last look at us before dashing through the swing doors to the kitchen, like she was afraid to be gone for too long. She burst back into the dining room a second later, a big bowl of salad in her arms.

"No, no, don't get up, Tina," she said. "I've got it."

It was quiet again. Eileen used big silver prongs to put salad on everyone's plate. I looked at my mother, but she was looking down at her plate.

Her father winked at me and wrinkled his nose and asked, "Well aren't you just a little pumpkin?"

I was not certain how to answer this, so I said nothing. But he asked me again, laughing to himself. When Eileen finished with the salad she stopped and clapped her hands, looking at all of us again like she was trying to take a picture with her eyes.

"It's so nice to have you two here with us. I just can't believe we're all here together again," she said. "You don't know how much this means to me."

My grandfather smiled and looked at my mother, but she was still looking down at her plate.

Eileen put two thick pieces of ham on everyone's plate. I picked up my fork, but my mother poked my knee under the table. She caught my eye and shook her head.

"We have to say grace before we eat, Annabelle," my grandfather said. "We have to thank God for our food, for blessing us. Don't you all say grace at your house?"

My mother looked at me sideways.

"Yes," I said.

By then I knew something was wrong. My mother was like a teakettle, still looking down at her plate. She was tapping her foot under the table, making the ice cubes in my water glass clink. Tap tap tap, the way she did when she was mad.

"Let's bow our heads," he said. "Oh Heavenly Father, we give thanks for the food you have generously blessed us with. We thank you for bringing Tina and Annabelle here with us today. We ask you to bless this meal, this table, and each person sitting at it, amen."

Eileen looked up at us, her crooked mouth in a smile.

My mother still wasn't moving, but I picked up my fork and started to eat.

"Somebody has my appetite," my grandfather said, leaning across the table and smiling at me.

My mother looked up. "She eats like a horse, doesn't she?" she said, her voice shaky and weird. Her right eyebrow was high on her head and she was smiling, but her eyes were wide, crazy looking. She looked across the table at Timmy and held her palms up, shrugging. "Maybe she got it from me."

My grandfather stopped chewing. He looked at my mother and then at Eileen.

"Let's try to get along, Tina," Eileen said. "We all have to try." "Who's the horse, Dad?"

He stopped eating and pointed his fork at my mother. "I heard you all needed money, and I'm willing to help you out. Just drop the horse business, Tina. Just drop it."

My mother went quiet again, and the rest of us started eating. Eileen watched my mother out of the corner of her eye.

"Not a horse," my mother said suddenly, her teeth bared in a weird grin. "You told him I was a whore."

As soon as this word came out of her mouth, her father's hand slammed down on the table so hard and fast that my glass fell over, spilling ice and water into my lap. My mother snatched it up and set it back on the table.

"Is that the word he used, Timmy? Whore? Not horse, whore, right?"

"I'm warning you," he said, his voice quieter than before. "You stop saying that, Tina. You don't talk like that in this house."

My mother leaned back in her chair and laughed, loud and slow, tears already on her cheeks. "Thanks for the introduction."

He gripped the edge of the table with big hands, looking at Eileen. "Get her to stop," he said. "I'm serious. I won't have it in my house."

"Tina," Eileen said, holding her hand out across the table. "Tina, please."

"Is that what you think of me? That's what you see when you look at me? That's all you see? You tell my little brother this, before he even meets me, and I'm supposed to come in here and eat with you all like everything is just fine?"

His face had turned bright red and his nine fingers gripped the table hard, like he was trying not to let go of it. After a while he opened his eyes and stared at her for a long time. "Tina, I am willing to forgive you."

"Forgive me?" she said, and under the table I could see her hands in tight fists. She had torn her paper napkin in two. "Screw this," she said. "We don't need this. I'll starve."

She was behind my chair then, pulling it away from the table, away from the ham. I would starve too.

"Tina, honey," Eileen said, her voice just above a whisper. "Let's just try—"

"Nope. That's it," she said, pulling me to my feet. "I gave it a try, but I see how things are the same. Come on, Annie, we're leaving."

I grabbed the rest of the piece of ham and pushed it into my mouth.

Eileen reached for my mother's hand, but she pulled it away.

"Nope, I guess not," she snapped, fishing her car keys out of the pocket of her yellow dress. She took my hand and pulled me down the hallway, back toward the front door, and I could hear heavy footsteps behind us. Now he was yelling something. My mother squeezed me so close that her chest covered one of my ears and her hand the other. I could imagine his red face behind us, following us out the front door, yelling so hard and fast that spit was flying out of his mouth. He kept saying one thing over and over. Whore. That's what he was saying to her. Whore. But she was moving fast away from him, going down the steps, my arms so tight around her that I knew I must be hurting her, but I couldn't help it.

When I was in the car, she turned around and looked at him. He had followed us down the steps but stayed just there, not coming any closer. He held on to the little black railing, his eyes glittering mad. They were both breathing hard, staring at each other. One of my barrettes had come loose from her hair, and it dangled down by her ear.

"Fuck you!" she shouted, and the women in the lawn chairs in the other yard pulled down their sunglasses and put down their magazines.

Eileen had come out on the front porch, crying so hard that she couldn't even talk. She cupped the bad side of her mouth with one hand and waved to me with the other.

My mother jammed the key into the ignition, and the Supremes and the seat belt alarm started up. She pushed on the gear shift hard, using both hands, and we were in first. The tires squealed, and I looked up to see the two women in sunglasses still sitting in their lawn chairs watching us roll away.

The green house grew smaller and smaller and my mother's face turned red and splotchy. She was crying so much that she couldn't drive straight and we zigzagged all over the road. There was a stoplight up ahead on yellow and she stepped on the gas, trying to make it. But it turned red long before we got there. She slammed on the brakes.

"We are never going back there, Annabelle, I promise you that," she said, her face all shiny with tears. "Never again."

"Okay," I said, reaching over to pat her on the knee. "It's okay, Mom. Don't cry."

She turned to me and smiled then. She leaned over and grabbed my shoulders. I could feel her wet face on the top of my head, her lips kissing my hair.

Someone honked.

She let go of me. The light had turned green. Her hand flew to the stick shift, but she couldn't move it. More horns. She pushed harder, using both hands.

"Come on, car! Come on, baby!" she whimpered, pushing herself against the back of her seat.

Cars started to go around us, people yelling at us out their windows, until the gear popped, and the tires squealed, pushing us away.

"Okay, we're not going through that again," she said, wiping the tears off her face. "We're going to have to go on some back roads. No more stoplights."

She took a sharp right at the next corner. We drove past strip malls, car dealerships, and rows and rows of houses that looked just like Eileen's. We rolled through three stop signs in second gear, my mother honking and flashing the lights to warn other cars away from us. She was not crying anymore, but her eyes were still pink and her hands trembled on the wheel.

"Oh my God, I can't believe all this is out here," she said. "This used to all be just country when I was a girl."

She started to sing along to "Baby Love" in a quiet voice. The car dealerships gave way to country. Rows of houses became fields and the paved road turned to gravel. Weeds and wild

flowers sprang up in the ditches on either side of the road. She made me sing "Stop in the Name of Love" with her, and she told me that it was important to fill my mind with happy thoughts after something like that. She said singing always made her forget her troubles, and the only thing you could do with a day like today was to just forget all about it.

That's when we first heard them.

Over the sound of the seat belt alarms, over the Supremes, over the wheezing motor of the Volkswagen, something high pitched and loud, coming from above.

"Oh my God, what is that?" she asked, looking up at the sky.

Ahead in the distance I could see a whirling dark blur of something snaking down from the cloudless twilight. At first the blur looked like it was all one thing, like a cloud of smoke moving down instead of up. But as we got closer I could see it was really lots of little things moving toward the ground together. I had seen a television special about the locusts and the Mormons in Utah, and this was what I thought was happening.

"Grasshoppers," I said.

"No," she said, leaning way over the steering wheel. "Birds."

She was right. It was some kind of small, dark bird, all of them swirling together, tens of thousands of them, right over our heads, their cries getting louder as they passed. They were funneling down into a large field ahead, darkening the sky above us like a storm. They covered the entire field, and the rows of neatly planted green turned black.

"I've never, in all my life, seen anything like this," she whispered, and she slowed the car to a stop.

And then it was like nighttime. The birds had blocked out the sun. We could see another group coming on the horizon, thousands more, maybe millions, a black quivering mass. The wings of the birds on their way down seemed to beat in a jumpy rhythm all together, like one big heartbeat, spread out as far as I could see. They pulsed down from the sky in a fast, fluttering line, spreading out on the field below. It was springtime, and the corn in the field was only knee high, not fully grown, but the birds fell down on it like rocks from the sky.

We watched for a long time, not talking, not doing anything. My mother said something to me, but I could hear nothing over the sound of the birds. I had to reach over and hold her hand because it was beautiful and frightening at the same time,

like lightning, like Eileen's tornado. I couldn't look away from them: It was like watching a fire.

After a while, they started to funnel back up into the sky. We watched them go, their cries growing faint, and as they left I saw the field wasn't green anymore. It was mostly dirt now, little strips of stalk.

"I'll remember that my whole life," she said. "I'll remember that forever."

She started the car and pushed on the stick shift. It wouldn't move.

"No," she said.

She pushed again and again. I tried to help. All four of our hands were on the stick trying to push it into first, but it didn't move.

"No!" she said, like she was yelling at someone. "We can't get stuck here. We can't get stuck here."

The birds continued to fly off over the horizon.

My mother didn't give up on the stick shift until the sun was almost down. Then she leaned back in her seat, her hands on the steering wheel.

"What should we do?" I asked.

"I don't know yet," she said, looking at her eyes in the rearview mirror. "Let me think for a minute. Goddamnit, why did we stop?"

The sun hung over the edge of the earth. The whole sky was pink and orange to our left, shades of purple to our right. I saw the birds again, their distant shadow passing over the sun, and then they disappeared for good, leaving us behind.

Michael L. Johnson Aspasia of Miletus

for Cheryl Glenn

She arrived in Athens somehow thoroughly trained  
in eloquence. They said no girl that bright  
could be respectable. Footnote to Pericles,  
her lifelong companion, she taught him all  
she knew as rhetor and hetaira and perhaps  
wrote his orations. But history sealed  
her off, like Philomela. (As Canetti said,  
each language has its own silences.) Look  
at Gérôme's print of her and Alcibiades:  
she lolls, an odalisque, on Socrates'  
arrogant, dissolute friend; one of her hands cups  
his right breast as if to suckle; her mouth  
lingers above his lap; he looks up at the great  
philosopher while she swallows her voice.

When I think of you I see an archway—  
mossy, cool, of scratchy granite, ancient  
Roman gateway to—I cannot tell:  
perhaps a ruined abbey, Norman cloister  
where monks still chant; or Gothic Salisbury  
Cathedral, bombed out and half restored. Some  
might build a party palace, restaurants, condos.  
I do not know: this field that stretches far  
away and even to the wine-dark sea;  
a low green plain, a wasteland where something  
used to be—or never was or will be;  
a wilderness; a field where sheep could safely  
graze, where a child could wander; an edge,  
a precipice down which a child could abruptly  
tumble, grab a protruding root, hang shrieking  
unheard above the black and roiling rocks.

I do not know; I cannot see beyond  
the arch; I do not see the building or even  
the wall from which the arch springs. I do  
not know if it is a monastery. There are  
green vines, but no clematis or wisteria.  
Somehow I know it is spring. The air is moist;  
no rain, neither hot nor cold. The path is sandy,  
damp. The grass on either side is closely cropped.  
It's a low Roman arch, just wide enough for two  
to pass abreast. Perhaps it leads to Italy;  
but this seems more like England. I can't tell  
if you are on the path behind or beside  
or in front of me. I can't tell if you are here  
at all. I feel your presence but I don't  
know where you are. I approach the gate, close  
my eyes, lean against the stone, feel  
its cool smooth surface against my cheek.

When I left home to search  
for you, the sun hurt  
my eyes, so for several  
days I covered them with my hands.  
The chemotherapy has  
taken my hair, and  
the sheets I wrapped  
myself in stick  
in cranes and factory  
clutter along the water's

edge. A row  
of skyscrapers and their lights  
forms the backdrop when I finally  
look into what's left  
of the river, our reflections  
softened by drifting overhead  
clouds. Here, everything is  
stripped practically to lines  
and shadows, and I  
discern your image as if  
it were painted on my forehead,  
the precious ossified  
remains. If I drew in water

with time I might  
connect minute straight  
segments, join and facet  
them until they appear  
curved, until I remember  
our relationship, the pizzicato  
rhythm of your knitting  
needles. Further downriver

where the water is pure  
lavender, I tell myself,  
*Keep pushing your*  
*wheelchair. Across*  
a claustrophobic network  
of abstract planes, the earth  
parched, cracked, at times  
poised on the edge  
of escaping gravity and transcending  
the dullness of the  
material world, I negotiate around

fish heads rotting at the ends  
of their dried spines until, leaving traces  
of my remaining cells in layers of thin  
wash so palm leaves in the background  
may be seen clearly  
through tulip petals up front,  
I enter your loosely defined  
cacophony of voluptuous  
flowers and vegetables where  
the golden light and warm  
earth tones mitigate the unnatural  
beauty of our two seemingly  
opposite deaths.

Reflections of Southern  
Illinois from a Long Way  
Off (Remembering Cousin  
Rose from Cincinnati)

Mozart what, or who? my cousin said,  
in that rat-killing voice she used  
whenever you were about to take up too much  
of her time with what she considered silly  
or whenever it was time for her tv hour  
when the stock cars were running in Vandalia

so when I mentioned Mozart  
as one who better than anyone save God  
did more for mankind and even then maybe  
more than God since no one seen him do anything  
but plenty saw and even more hear Mozart

she was already running her hands  
over her stomach as if checking whether  
she could eat some more of them biscuits  
Gram fixed that morning before the men  
went to the fields to cut dead and rotting timber  
and when they left some biscuits and gravy  
on the table she got into it all day  
as she wrung the necks of several chickens  
for supper because Rev. Nobs was coming to dinner  
because he was coming that's all so she was busy  
with chickens and sweeping through she did  
get to slop the hogs and cut branches  
for a weenie roast since it was summer  
and the flue was broke over the stove anyway  
so let's eat outside why don't we

and she changed into a blue dress none of us  
remembered seeing before and looked at herself  
in the mirror and waited on the porch  
when Rev. Nobs came up the walk with flowers  
in his hand and the Bible in the other  
so we decided to cut out for the timber

and let them alone if that's what they wanted  
or needed so it came as no surprise to some  
when she left Illinois to be with Nobs the Preacher  
as Gram called him to her dying day  
and live in Africa someplace where the heathen  
bore God's anger as he said and show them  
the true path and way all the time swatting flies  
big as buckets she wrote and digging latrines  
so they (the natives bearing the anger)  
wouldn't just hit the nearest bush or tree  
just when the service was going good and hot

but then when we waited for six months  
and no letters came Gram said to close up  
her room beneath the eaves and never go up  
theré again nor ask why but do your chores  
and pray like she taught you

so when at last Rev. Nobs sent her body back  
to bury in the family plot we wondered why  
he never came too but figured the folks there  
were still in need of him as they bore the anger  
God must have saved up for them  
and we left it at that and played  
in the trees and watched the rabbits jump  
in springtime but never went near the mound  
near Turley's Woods where Gram said she found  
her eternal rest and would like it quiet  
from now on

not that we would understand quiet  
Gram said but go ahead and try anyway  
and grow up useful if not smart

and when we went away we watched her  
sitting beside the grave putting fresh flowers  
in the blue bowl she kept there  
and that was the last time I ever saw Gram  
or the grave and never once heard from  
Rev. Nobs or any of the heathen across  
the big water but I kept an eye out

for anyone who liked biscuits and gravy  
whether or not they heard of Mozart  
and I still watch for people like Gram  
or my cousin who laughed a lot and worried some  
about the heathen  
but mainly I'm on the watch for that anger  
God shoves off on some folks when they least  
expect it  
but so far I'm clear and still missing  
those times in the yard when Gram made  
lemonade and we all watched the birdbath  
catch fire in the last light all swinging together  
on the old wide-board porch that's gone now  
and the singing too for that matter  
but there's still the watching and listening  
and remembering  
not talking because people think you just  
make it all up  
as if any of it could be made up  
though I often wish I could make it all up again  
all of it  
over and over again.

Fireflies and snow were wonders to a friend I had in graduate school. He was from Seattle. Corn and soybeans, too, had their own peculiar mystique: when he first saw a television commercial for herbicide (“Did you know they pronounce it with the ‘h’?” he asked me) he thought it was a joke. But it was no joke; we were in Iowa, a land that wore green only in the summer and swathed itself in white come late November.

I grew up in the Midwest and have lived in three states: Illinois, Iowa, and Indiana. I joke that the next logical step is Idaho, but I’m not sure how easy it would be for me to leave this particular valley. I am one of the few people I know who loves flat, treeless land and extremes of weather. Although I enjoy visiting places with hills and mountains, the ocean offers the only other location where I feel comfortable because there is nothing to hide the sky. In college I came across a short, lyrical piece by Melville, a conceit comparing the prairie to the ocean. At the time I missed the yearning in it, the clear desire he had for the prairie to really *be* the ocean; all I saw were the metaphors, the beauty in the description of my homeland. But once, on a boat off the Florida Keys, I looked around me at the familiar swells, the landscape ruled by the wind, the sky with nothing blocking it out, and I felt the most lonely I have ever been. I realized that the more familiar something is the more you miss: what it reminds you of; and I knew that while the wind holds sway on the prairie, moving the grass and the fields of crops and showers of dust and the clouds and even the trees, the ground there is steady beneath you.

**M**y brother raced clouds when he was a child. The object was to keep just ahead of the cloud’s shadow; even without looking he knew by the chill when he wasn’t pedaling fast enough. He tells me now that he considered downhill cheating. Uphill, of course, was too hard. But the long, flat spaces, the stretches of blacktop where few cars drove, were fair game. And the view he had—of the shadows covering patches of the fields

on either side, ahead, and behind him—well, this was the magic of the game. He was a shadow among them, he was part of their movement, he was no longer aware of the way his own body propelled him forward. He was flying.

**M**y parents came to the Midwest before I was born because my father was offered a position at the University of Illinois. They were both born and raised in the East—my father in eastern Pennsylvania, my mother in Washington, D.C. They met at Middlebury College in Vermont, seated near one another at a freshman initiation ceremony because their last names both began with “R.” Neither of them expected to end up in the Midwest; I doubt they’d ever given it much thought. My mother had ties to the West through relatives and one childhood vacation. But gamely they tried it, and my mother managed to carve out most of her dream in the clay of central Illinois.

In Vermont, she had fallen in love with Morgan horses. The farm where Morgans originated was only six miles from Middlebury, and when she saw their fine Arabian heads on thick, curved necks, their strong, compact bodies, and their graceful legs, she was smitten. Therefore our small horse farm in White Heath was home to Morgans, which we trained, showed, and occasionally bred. The pastureland was along the Sangamon River so it flooded nearly every spring. The house, barn, and arena were on a small hill above the river valley itself. We had a large garden, large front and back yards to mow, and a strip of hillside that we left wild. My mother seemed to love it, working as a trainer of horses and kids for ten years.

My father, it turned out, hated it. In Illinois he felt “like an ant on a tabletop.” He was always afraid the hand of God was coming down to squash him. He was always afraid. Tornadoes, hail, ice storms, humidity—the vagaries of Midwest weather terrified him. While we sledded down the ice-covered road, he sat in the house working at his desk, worrying about the finances, worrying about everything and trying not to think of the flatness of the landscape. The sky and the wind rose up around him, and he was exposed.

This more than anything was the reason we moved from White Heath to Champaign when I was ten. In a cluster of people, it turned out, my father did not feel so exposed to the elements. A town was more like his own corner of Pennsylvania. A

nice half-acre lot required less work outside. A short ten-minute drive to work on city streets kept him away from the panorama that oppressed his spirit so terribly. Buildings and trees helped to control the sky there, and that was a relief to him, raised as he was in wooded hills where ancient stagecoach stops nestled, waiting to be discovered during quiet walks.

If I had known of my father's feelings back then, I would have been shocked. At age eleven I did not believe in God except for the possibility that it was the wind I felt when I rode my bike far out on the country roads (we lived on what was the edge of town then), or it was in the smells of green pungency in the summer, of gold harvest in the fall, or perhaps it was the land itself. I yearned for the country so desperately that I rode my bike forty miles and more to get out into it; no experience was more spiritual for me than movement across such space. To fear it never occurred to me. Only later would I understand the kind of fear my father knew. Claustrophobia closed down on me in a cave in Pennsylvania, and when I ran outside, the trees were so dense I felt like a blanket was still over my head. It was worse when I visited a friend in Chicago. She was subletting in a huge apartment building over thirty stories high, and when I arrived I got so turned around after I parked that I had to take a cab the final four blocks to the building. Inside, I felt the pressure of all those people under, over, and around me. It was a hive, I told her, a human hive, and I, it seemed, was no social insect.

Last summer I drove out to Colorado from Illinois with my brother, my mother, and three dogs. My mother slept the whole way until we got in sight of the mountains. As rocks jutted out of the ground beside us, layers of granite and quartz, she kept saying, "Isn't it beautiful?" It was, of course. And so were the streams with glittering rocks shining up through the clear water, the dizzying views from winding roads, the aspen floating in its own green gauze. It was all beautiful, and powerful. The cabin we stayed in at 9,000 feet was cool enough at night to warrant a fire. She told me that even when she wasn't feeling well, it was a joy to sit and look out at the mountains, the trees, and, above the tree line, patches of snow.

I didn't want to tell her that I felt most moved when we stopped at a tiny town in Kansas, a place where there was only one gas station. Right next to it was a pasture where a calm bull

stood, watching me with the dogs. There was a one-story house on the far side of the pasture, a couple of grain elevators near the railroad tracks, and a few houses beyond them. Everything else was fields of sunflowers and wheat and the great big gray-blue sky. I felt I could let the dogs off their leashes to play and race in complete safety and happiness. I felt that, after nine years of not running, a slave to a particularly exhausting disease, I could run again. I could hear the wind, and I thought of the women who went west in pioneer days and lost their minds, isolated in their houses with no one to talk to and the constant rabid conversation of the wind. But I have spent all my life in these open spaces, and to me the wind speaks in an intelligible language.

















## Hobart Jackson

For most artists, life drawing is a discipline in seeing and honing their skills in relationship to painting or sculpture or work in other media. It preserves their connection with a very primal and human way of working. Since having to put away large-scale canvas painting to become a full-time academic, I have pursued life drawing as one of a few means of personal expression, connecting with the human form and interpreting form, gesture, and emotion. It is a continually challenging and vital activity. Over twenty years I have accumulated quite a large body of work, a few examples of which are shown here.

He's younger than most of our sons,  
but his black eyes are bitter as pills,  
and he's brutal as rough men like us.  
When that kid crashed our late meeting,  
he said his life was an empty motel  
smothered in white towels and tiny soap.  
We recited the serenity prayer  
and walked him through all twelve steps  
while he smoked his cigarettes until they hissed.  
This once we let him think he has it bad,  
but the truth is we're equally broken:  
Jodi's choked his kidneys on a habit,  
Guy sleeps alone in the back of his car,  
and I spent years heaving on the patio,  
too thirsty to ask for water.  
Midnight is too early to give him back  
to chance, so we bring him to Shoney's,  
read him the menu four times before he hits  
on biscuits and gravy. He falls asleep  
in the middle of his plate  
because he's dumb enough to think he's safe.  
He doesn't understand it yet—  
we've anchored him to a good corner booth  
and found our regular waitress,  
but in truth we'd crawl over him  
for a better seat and one more chance.  
We all took a risk by coming here,  
wandering from what we know is safe.  
Take me—I'm dumb as the devil, but I know  
that next week it could be me  
with my head on the table,  
sleeping through a beautiful meal.

She raises and pins one side of her blouse  
like the quiet flicker of a main-sail  
caught in dead air space, a place that fails  
to offer relief. But when asked about  
the surgery that removed her arm or  
the injury that shouldn't have caused it,  
she lets loose of each word as if the tip  
of fate were rising up from the seafloor.

And her self-acceptance and battened strength  
make me wonder about this stall in her  
history, this trap of night with floating stars.  
And nothing seems to have hindered the length  
of her reach, not the worn varnish, obscure  
landscapes, or if the hull's battered or scarred.

I drew the short straw,  
so I strapped on snowshoes  
and shook hands, snow  
more treacherous than Rebs.  
In the drifts, I got turned around  
as a young buck blindfolded  
and spun in a party game,  
snow falling hard and white  
as my flag-of-surrender breath,  
my steps slowing, till snow  
looked warm as a feather bed  
with fresh ticking.

I started awake, surrounded  
by Utes prodding me like a demon:  
my time to meet Jesus,  
I feared, or their ancestors,  
or whoever waits beyond the door,  
me hoping they wouldn't take  
their sweet, nasty time  
shoving me through it.

But they pointed my path;  
when I hauled back the mail,  
hill rats and whores crowded  
like beggars with bowls.  
Wasn't no letter for me,  
but Mary LaFrance's breath  
on my back was hot as a stove  
on a jolly night of winter lies.

I'd've preferred news of home,  
though they must think me dead,  
not much for scratching down my doings,  
which don't amount to much.

Dearest Elizabeth, how difficult sometimes to return your calls, especially on Sundays in the winter. Your voice on the machine light lighter than the gray outside. So I write. Six years can bring space, denials of that space. We question who we were and are, and keep hidden such questions in the words that build images of ourselves, us. I remember your only trip to Kansas, five years ago, and that bag filled too big with sweaters for a Kansas September and I think too of the little sense we had for how some new type of space between us, miles and states, would become more than physical and geographical. Go somewhere, and not just towns get inside you, not just new views of land or sky, but distances from where you started too. They become something defining, conversation starters, yes, but references, allusions to lives once, twice removed. Jersey to Kansas, across Kansas then north, maybe west. Each lengthening space makes you conscious of compression, of what you're willing to be made responsible for. You visit Kansas again in four days, this letter will miss you. I'll tell you not to open it. And knowing you you won't. Love. Bill.

Sister Beth calls out my name, "Kendra Murphy," then pauses for dramatic effect before saying, "Therese of Lisieux," the last syllable a long, sensual *ooooh*. The winter sun cutting through the blinds carves three diamonds on my desk as she pinches a bloom from the pot of her prized miniature rosebuds on the windowsill and lobs it to me in the back row, saying, "A little flower for the little flower." I catch the rose and smile back at Sister Beth. But when she turns her back, I crunch it up in my hand and stick my finger down my throat. My beauty is a gift from God, and standardized tests revealed me a near genius, but popularity requires a certain amount of panache. And you might think Sister Beth would show a drop of imagination and not give me the star assignment, the hagiography of our school's namesake, Therese of Lisieux, the little flower. I'd prefer an obscure, forgotten saint, say Christina the Astonishing, an insane girl who couldn't tolerate the smell of human skin and prayed for her death. Sister Beth assigns Christina the Astonishing to Jenna Kellerman the Wacko, who spent a week recuperating at Four Oaks hospital after her latest suicide attempt. Anna Platt, flute virtuoso, is given Cecilia, patron saint of musicians; Stacey Ramos, my best friend, is given a Hispanic saint, Saint Rose of Lima, and so on, until everyone is assigned their hagiography and we're excused to research our saints in the library.

On the way out of class I toss the rose in the metal trash can. And then, for no reason, I have a moment of giddy happiness. My heart flips in my chest as we walk down Saint Therese's main hallway, which will be demolished over the summer so we won't croak from the asbestos dust and flaking lead paint. The window moldings are scrolled with roses, crosses, ornate Latin calligraphy, and trumpeting, soft-eyed angels. I bring my hand to my face to cover a cough and smell the faint sweetness of the rose.

**A**fter school the suburban mothers roar into the big circle drive in front of Saint Therese of Lisieux in sport-utility vehicles. The girls climbing into their bulky, sparkling cars look

completely humiliated, like they wished they lived downtown and could walk home like Stacey and me. We offer them mournful, condescending smiles as they pull away.

“I got totally jacked,” I tell Stacey.

“How so?” she asks.

My backpack is falling, too heavy with books about Saint Therese, and I tug on the shoulder straps as we cut through the icy drive. We wear parkas, chunky-soled snow boots, and thick leggings layered beneath our uniforms. Our knit hats are jammed in with our books; it’s not that cold.

“Therese of Lisieux is an idiot. A total rich bitch who lived in a mansion and received a special audience with the pope to get permission to join the convent at fifteen. Oh, and she wanted a shower of roses to fall from heaven when she died, which is so Hallmark queer. And she always, always wanted to be a saint. It was a goal. Which should, like, totally disqualify you.”

“God, how embarrassing to have our school named after some ass-kissing freak,” Stacey says, her breath a cold cloud. “But how about Sister Beth assigning me a Hispanic saint? Was she like, hmmmm, perhaps the Mexican girl would enjoy partaking in the rich cultural heritage of Saint Rose of Lima?”

“Oh my God, that so totally cracked me up.”

Snowflakes land on Stacey’s glossy black hair and long eyelashes, clinging there for a fast second before they melt to water drops.

“I guess there aren’t any black saints—because that crazy Klansman Jesus only loves white people—or surely Sister Beth would have assigned one to Darcy Thurston. But Saint Rose of Lima is a real winner, too. She rubbed lye and hot pepper into her face to burn away her beauty. Shouldn’t a saint be working for the poor or whatever instead of doing reverse beauty masks?”

“Stacey, but do you remember when you bleached your side-burns and left the cream on too long and burned *your* face?”

“Bitch from hell! I can’t believe you would bring that up.”

“It wouldn’t be funny if the bleach had permanently scarred you. But it seems to me that you’re Saint Rose of Lima incarnate.” I mock shiver, chattering my teeth. “It’s so uncanny.”

She gives me the finger, but she’s laughing and saying, my, my, what a coincidence, that I’m an ass-kissing freak like Therese of Lisieux, and I’m calling her Our Lady of Jolene

Cream Bleach as we walk down 18th Street where the city buses blast us with fumes, and cars crammed with boys honk and cat-call, and I wish we lived miles and miles away and could walk through the snow all night, but already we are turning onto Meridian, already there is Stacey's house on the corner, and further down the street, mine.

"Come on in," Stacey says, heading up the walk to her door.

I stand at the end of the walk, dragging one boot through the snow in a half circle.

"Ten minutes won't matter that much," Stacey says, and I follow her inside.

We shed our coats and boots as Mrs. Ramos waves hello, hello, her nails gleaming geranium red, her diamond wedding band flashing, and she cradles one arm around each of us and leads us to the kitchen, the brief heaven of her Chanel No. 5 and warm body making me lightheaded. The eight-year-old twins, Paige and Esmerelda, are at the kitchen table eating cake and staring up at the TV on the counter. "Hi Kendra," they say in unison, then grimace, burdened by identical cuteness. Stacey's older sister Jennifer, a senior at Saint Therese, is stretched out on the floor talking on the portable phone and sporadically pounding her feet on the linoleum as she laughs.

Stacey and I sit down with the twins, and without asking, Mrs. Ramos brings us each a piece of warm vanilla cake, then a tall glass of milk. Being here in the Ramos' kitchen—the fresh daisies in a silver pitcher on the table, the thrumming heat from the floor vents warming my cold feet—is like smoking pot: the gorgeous, woozy feeling destroyed by flashes of jumpy anxiety: Why am I here? A car chugs down the alley and Mrs. Ramos looks out the window over the kitchen sink and smiles. Mr. Ramos is home now, whistling as he walks in the back door. Whistling! He kisses the twins on the forehead, and he kisses Stacey on the forehead before he shakes my hand gently, the perfect greeting. Here is a man who would never pull you into a hearty, tit-crushing hug. He acts like he's going to lean down and kiss Jennifer before he rubs his lower back comically and blows her a kiss. Mrs. Ramos takes his coat and they kiss quickly on the lips.

I try to eat a few more bites of cake, but I still feel the perfect gentleness of Mr. Ramos' hand in mine.

I excuse myself to go to the spotless, apple-green bathroom

where I sit on the toilet, pull back the shower curtain, and examine the immaculate tub. I swear, even the rust spots circling the drain are buffed to a shine. On the windowsill an apple-green ceramic pot holds white flowers blooming out of onionlike bulbs. I quit peeing midstream, place the flowers down between my legs, and pee again, soaking the soil and splattering the ceramic pot. I put it back on the sill and flush the toilet. There is a palette of fruit-scented lip gloss on the bathroom counter and I drag my finger through the banana and the soft pink watermelon, then smear the mixture, along with a rind of dirt from under my thumbnail, into a contact lens dispenser. Then I open the drawer beneath the sink and rummage through the cosmetics, spitting into a bottle of foundation, running a velour powder puff over the toilet seat, and flushing an eye shadow applicator down the toilet.

Finally I make sure everything is in order, wash my hands, drag a brush through my hair, and sample a ruby red lipstick, *Roses in the Snow*. There is a stack of pastel washcloths and towels in a white wicker basket next to the tub and I blast them with air freshener—apple potpourri—before I leave.

I walk down the block reading Saint Therese's autobiography, *The Story of a Soul*. Occasionally it reads like a Harlequin novel for nuns, pure crap about how God loves the flowers in the field, but I'm warming to it when a tiny old man in a station wagon rolls down his window to call out, “*que hermosa, que hermosa*,” in a frail, beyond-the-grave voice. I never have privacy. Though I scrubbed my hands at the Ramos' house, the smell of Sister Beth's rose, cold and sweet, rises up through my gloves as I read. Saint Therese's father called her his “little queen.” Of his five daughters, she was his favorite. Also, he clearly preferred Therese to his wife.

The shades are drawn and the TV is muted, silencing the Teletubbies. Mom is on the couch, curled up with baby Caroline in a flowered sling on her chest. Xavier stands up in the playpen, his fat little hands holding the mesh sides, crying out, “Tendra, Tendra.”

“Oh Kendra, you’re home,” Mom says.

“Yep.” I raise Xavier over my head. His diaper is soaked, heavy as papier-mâché.

“I guess he needs to be changed,” she says.

She is depressed, but to look at her you would certainly guess: crack addict. Her black hair is matted in greasy curls and her face looks too thin, with purple-gray shadows ringing her eyes and a red rash buckling her cheeks. If she’s even wearing a bra, she forgot to put in the cotton nursing pads; the front of Dad’s old striped shirt is drenched with jagged rectangles of breast milk.

I fish out Xavier’s bottle from the jumble of toys in the playpen. It is sucked dry with the nipple still indented.

“He just finished that,” Mom says quickly. “He just took the very last drink.”

Caroline wakes and cries out, as if heartbroken, and Mom unbuttons her soggy shirt and starts to nurse her.

I carry Xavier into the kitchen, where the sink overflows with sticky breakfast dishes and pots and pans from last night’s chicken dinner. Tonight will be a pizza night. In the refrigerator is the gigantic jug of ten percent real fruit juice that Dad purchased at the Price Chopper, and I fill Xavier’s bottle while he screams in anticipation.

Upstairs in the babies’ room I change my brother’s diaper, then rock him while he guzzles his bottle and dozes off, his sweet juicy breath warming my neck. There are only three diapers left in his box and not many more of the tiny diapers my sister wears.

When I compare our dirty bathroom to the Ramos’ scrubbed shrine it makes my front teeth ache, but I steal a half-hour before dinner to take a bath and read. In *The Story of a Soul*, Therese alludes to her great beauty, but in photographs from other library books she is really quite the dog. Therese’s mother dies when Therese is five. Two of her older sisters leave the family to join the Carmelite nuns, and despite her love and faith in Jesus, young Therese is bereaved. She is smart, but not well liked at school. She cries during her lessons and, on the playground, gazes piously up at the heavens. She prays to join the Carmelites, to live forever cloistered from the world with her sisters, to make herself over, small and humble, a little flower plucked by Jesus.

**D**ad massages my shoulders while I stand at the sink washing dishes. Mom is feeding Xavier a jar of sweet potatoes, and he slaps the tray on his high chair and twists his head from side to side, performing some kind of infant crazy-from-the-waist-up boogie while he eats. Caroline is already asleep. No bath for her. Tomorrow night is a must.

As Dad lifts up my hair and rubs my neck, I turn the water faucet hotter and watch my hands redden beneath the suds. Mom looks up at us as if from another galaxy, then stirs the sweet potatoes, the baby spoon ringing around the jar.

“Everyone in the office saw your name in the paper from winning the Francis of Assisi humanities scholarship. And they know you’re only a sophomore,” Dad says.

“Great.”

“Of course they have only the vaguest notion of what the humanities are. Anyway, my sorry-ass cubicle has so many pictures of you from the newspaper, I’m starting to look like a stalker.”

“Dad, will you put the pizza box in the recycling bin?”

He takes his hands off my back and clicks his heels together, saluting me.

I escape to the basement to do a couple loads of laundry, and when I come back upstairs Dad is watching TV and Mom is already in bed though it’s only eight-fifteen. I know she’s depressed, and also tired from caring for a three-month-old and a fourteen-month-old all day. I understand everything.

In my room I solve calculus problems, feeling calmer as I space the numbers and letters between blue lines of notebook paper. When David LaFrael calls and asks me to go to the movies, I’m tempted, but I skate on it.

“You haven’t told anyone about my mother, have you,” I whisper into the phone, smelling Dad’s sour breath on the receiver

“No,” he says, disgusted. “You asked me not to. But it’s nothing to be ashamed of.”

David escorted me to the homecoming game where I was crowned sophomore princess, tah-dah, and later that night, with the 1970s retro band blaring from the gym, we made out in a bathroom stall at Saint Therese. When he put his hand on my breast, I had a made-for-TV-movie breakdown and started to cry. To explain myself, I said, “My mother has breast cancer,”

and he was sweetly concerned and full of helpful advice. His father, as it turns out, is an oncologist. Why does Jesus hate me? As I stood there pressed up against the sanitary napkin disposal he asked questions about her course of treatment—chemotherapy? tamoxifen?—until I wanted to pierce his eyeballs with my corsage pin.

I crawl into bed, snuggle down, and read *The Story of a Soul*. Dad comes into my bedroom and looks out the window, where snowflakes feathering the glass are the silver white of Marilyn Monroe's hair.

“Snow was general all over Ireland,” Dad says softly. “Do you know what that's from, Kendra?”

“Sure do,” I say.

I keep reading; I am a speed reader. When Therese goes to Italy to plead with the pope to let her enter Carmel, she alludes to something strange happening on the journey, saying, “Let us pray for the bad priests!” A curious comment.

Dad pulls the shade on the new snow and lies down next to me, yawning.

Could Therese have known an episode like Suzette King, who was planting crocus bulbs outside the rectory of Saint Therese of Lisieux when Father Sam invited her in for “a nice glass of cola?” They ended up having sex on the living room couch beneath an oil painting of a moon-faced, mournful Jesus. Palm fronds from years of Palm Sunday Masses were stuck behind the painting, and they scattered down on the naked bodies of Suzette and Father Sam. To Suzette, it looked like God was lashing Father Sam with dried-up yellow whips. Of course this added greatly to the general freakiness of the experience, the basic reason Suzette was doing it in the first place. (You'd think a Jesuit would be better in bed, she said, and Stacey and I said yeah, no shit, like we're experts on the sex lives of priests.) Afterwards Father Sam fixed her a box of macaroni and cheese, the cheap brand that doesn't get very yellow, and cried into an ironed handkerchief.

Father Thomas, the older parish priest at Saint Therese of Lisieux, has never, to my knowledge, invited anyone in for a nice glass of cola. Even with his lisp and cracked brown teeth, I sometimes fantasize that Father Thomas is my real father. During confession he told Mom to get some Prozac so she could

take better care of the babies. Dad said, Well, golly, I wasn't aware he was a doctor.

Now Dad strokes my arm. I put down my book and pull my nightgown over my head so I don't have to suffer through Dad unbuttoning it with his teeth and whispering sweet nothings like some eighteenth-century lover, and we have sex, him on top of me, me staring up at the ceiling, then looking at the digital clock, steeling myself against the moment when I feel myself shivering and breaking with Dad gasping, "that's right" in my ear, steeling myself against the moment when he is walking back down the hall and I'm in the bathroom peeing and cleaning up and thinking of things other people in the world might be doing right now—sometimes the Ramoses pop popcorn and make a kettle of hot cocoa and sit around the kitchen talking late, even on school nights.

First hour on Friday is devoted to The Social Experience. Some loser visits our class to explain The Bad Thing That Has Happened To Me And How It Has Made Me A Stronger Person. Today the loser is a woman who was molested in her youth. Oh, joy. Everyone in class looks bored—they've heard this discussed about a zillion times on Oprah. But what I wish is that someone else knew about me, Stacey, for instance, so I could turn to her and say, "Oh, the irony," in an ironic, dramatic voice, and we could laugh about it together. At least I've taken a seat in the back row and can jack my book under the desk, ignore the molested loser, and secretly read. Therese's appeals are successful, and she enters Carmel at age fifteen. The reverend mother thinks she is spoiled, and the other nuns seem annoyed by her early entrance into Carmel and by how she is babied by her real sisters, Marie and Pauline. Therese is torn between thinking the whole things sucks—though she claims to love humiliation because it pleases Jesus—and feeling joyous to be suffering for the Lord. When Therese becomes very ill at the convent, she continues with the hard physical labor and long hours of prayer at Carmel. Therese writes, "How surprised you would all be if only you knew the martyrdom I have suffered this past year!"

Stacey chips off her nail polish with her pen lid while the woman talks about the time her Uncle Don molested her in the

alley behind the IGA. One time! Her uncle! Boo-hoo. She is the color of skim milk, with a frizzy blonde perm, no wedding band, and a lumpy ass. Somewhere in the visitor's parking lot is a car with faded "I Believe Anita" and "Keep Your Laws Off My Body" bumper stickers.

I slip Stacey a note that says, "It was probably the only time this superhag ever got any."

Stacey looks down, silently gagging in disgust, and I smile at her so sweetly that she has to cover her mouth like she's coughing. She passes the note to Ashley Vallano, then points back at me. Ashley presses her lips together, swallows her laugh, and gets to work scribbling a cartoon. Then she gives it back to Stacey, who almost cracks up before she hands it to me. Ashley has drawn two stick figures lying next to a trash Dumpster heaped with dented cans and cardboard boxes. One stick figure is crying out, "Give it to me Uncle Don!"

The woman paces back and forth by the chalkboard, telling about her feelings of low self-esteem after "the incident," how her grades dropped, how she couldn't relate to her friends. After it happened once! Now she stands at the window, streaking one finger against the frosted glass.

"This could be happening to someone you know. If one of your friends seems withdrawn or sad, please, please, try to get her help. Or, heaven forbid, if it is happening to you, please talk to one of the counselors here at Therese of Lisieux."

But the one counselor here, Sister Clare, devotes her time to watching *The Price is Right* on the black-and-white TV in her office and eating Rice Krispie treats. No one would be stupid enough to tell her their personal problems; she gets rattled when she can't find a pen. But let's say I snapped and told her, "Sister Clare, my father and I have been sexual partners for two years now. My parents experienced a thirteen-year period of infertility after my birth. The month my father started having intercourse with me was also the month my mother finally conceived. So, in a way, my father and I having sex is what allowed two other precious humans to be born. Sister Clare, may I have a Rice Krispie treat? Sister Clare, my father says most people don't have the intelligence to understand our union, and indeed it is a delicate situation. He believes that society is filled with mundane, conventional thinkers who use only ten percent of their brain power. My father is using his whole brain; he has entered

the Mind at Large, where one is free from societal restraints. Due to the stupidity of those who don't understand the Mind at Large, we must keep our relationship a secret. For a while I believed in his theory, but I have now transcended the Mind at Large, Sister Clare."

And then my problems would be solved. Sister Clare would call Social Services and my little brother and sister and I would be placed in foster care, where, according to newspaper stories, we would be cared for by "parents" on crystal meth, fed dry dog food, and burned with cigarettes.

Now the bell rings and we each thank the valiant, molested hag before leaving the classroom. She grins modestly, believing she has made a difference.

In the hallway, I whisper, "Oh, Uncle Don!"

Ashley says, "Nobody gives me sweet lovin' like my man, Uncle Don."

"Do me, Bonnie," Stacey says. "For real, though, I mean that is like so, so tragic to be molested by your very own uncle."

Ashley nods, and I agree: oh yes, yes, what could be more terrible? But I'm disgusted she would fall for this loser lady's sob story. Stupid-ass Stacey and her perfect life.

Stacey grabs my wrist and brings it to her face, inhaling. "You smell awesome. What's that you're wearing?"

I buy Junior Mints from the vending machine and skip lunch hour to go to the library and read *The Story of a Soul*. The library is officially closed over the noon hour, but the librarian, Sister Mary Elise, goes to the teachers' lounge with her sad little thermos of soup and leaves me the keys. I lock the doors behind her then curl up in the book nook, a quadrangle of cushy plaid couches in the back of the library by the windows. The couches were donated by the O'Fallons, a family with five luminous, slutty daughters, and it has been said that if you so much as sit on them you'll contract genital warts, that if the bare skin of your arm grazes the plaid material you'll get scabies, and that the many stains are not from spilled Cokes in the O'Fallon basement but dried menstrual blood and sperm.

I stretch out on a couch, sink my head into the pillowed armrest, and read. I've had a change of heart about Saint Therese, so when I finish *The Story of a Soul*, I reread the sections I originally found ludicrous and skimmed. Now I see how

people are wrong about Therese, how they try to present her as some pure, flowery, fairy girl who wanted to win hearts for Jesus, ignoring her worries, her “scruples” as she called them, ignoring her pain, ignoring her vain and poignant desire for glory, certainly denying the fact that at the end of her life she seems not to want to be a little flower at all but a warrior, a priest, an apostle, a doctor of the Church, a battlefield crusader, a martyr. And I have my suspicions about why she originally wanted to escape from her father’s house, but I will not share them with the class next week when I present my hagiography. The secret of the little flower is mine.

Therese found her freedom in death but I will not be forced to wait so long. One day I will have a big loft apartment in New York City with many books and couches and a shiny ring of keys. Caroline and Xavier will live with me, and I will walk them to school each morning before I go to my college classes, and on my lunch break I will have mango juice and a chocolate croissant and I will wear tall leather boots and many, many men will love me from afar but I will shun them coldly.

All right then. Okay. Here is the other thing: Behold, I show you a mystery. My hands smell of flowers when I think of Saint Therese; like right now, a detectable sweetness is rising from my hands, filling the book nook with the smell of fresh, cold roses. This is not the sort of fact I can use in my hagiography; this cannot be from Sister Beth’s tiny rose brushing my hands. Possibly Therese, in her new world, has considered my suffering and sought to console me. Possibly, following in the tradition of so many great saints, I am headed for the mental ward. To calm myself I close my eyes and hold each Junior Mint on my tongue like a Eucharist wafer until it melts.

**A**fter school, I stop in at Stacey’s again, just to taunt myself. Today her mother serves fudge brownies topped with cream cheese icing.

“Another, Kendra?” Mrs. Ramos asks. Her nails are painted a creamy ivory that fades into the swirls of pale icing as she carves another brownie out of the pan and puts it on my plate. Stacey touches her skirt where it grazes her stomach then jumps up and shrieks, “Jesus Christ, there’s never anything to eat in this house that’s not fattening.”

Mrs. Ramos slams the brownie pan down on the table. She flips open the refrigerator door and starts yelling in Spanish, pointing at a row of bright tangerines, cups of yogurt, a bag of baby carrots, and a bowl of chopped broccoli covered with plastic wrap. Stacey puts her hands on her hips and stares into the refrigerator. She grabs a tangerine and starts to peel it, then sighs and takes another bite of the brownie. Stacey and her mother sputter out a few giggles before they both crack up. The daisies on the table are wilting and I concentrate on their limp petals while I laugh along with my best friend and her beautiful, attentive mother, ha, ha, ha, ha.

I walk home. The crystalline snow of yesterday has melted to dirty slush, and I must have been smoking crack to think Saint Therese was blooming from my palms, because I smell like nothing at all.

I suppose I am simply not meant to have a life like Stacey's. Jesus has a plan for each of us—this is what I hear every day at school and it certainly makes Jesus seem like some retard sorting through his accordion file: Jenna Kellerman should go crazy; Kelli Rohan will hook up with a loser junkie who will devour her life; Stacey Ramos will know nothing but happiness.

Perhaps Jesus' plan for me is to suffer, and I should try to find some glory in it, as Therese did. "Saint Kendra," I whisper. Then to prove I am not going loony, and also to prove He holds no power over me, I say right out loud, "Fuck Jesus mother-fucking Christ," and frighten the paperboy who goes barreling past me on his bike, appalled.

Mom is asleep on the couch—she may be contending for a medal in the sleeping Olympics—and Xavier is crashed out in his playpen, sleeping like a little prisoner with his hand cupping a half-empty bottle of milk. Caroline is slumped in the baby swing, all her little chins folding, and she waves her hands and offers up a birdlike shriek. Mom sleeps on. I pick Caroline up and she smells a bit ripe, so I carry her to the bathroom, lay a fat towel down in the tub, and wash her carefully with Cetaphil and lukewarm water. Some baby books say a three-month-old is supposed to hate baths, but she smiles up at me and splashes around with her balled fists. I lift her head gently to wash the

frizz of curls at the back of her neck, then dry her off, put her in a clean diaper and sleeper, and take her back to Mom.

"Oh Kendra, you scrubbed up the little bug-a-boo," Mom says. She yawns and holds out her hands for Caroline, while Xavier stands and holds out his hands to me. I hand Caroline to Mom and lift Xavier out of his playpen. He runs a few frantic laps around the living room before I wave my hands over my head and swing my hips, coaxing him to dance. Then he shimmies with a look of earnestness that kills me.

"Kendra," Mom says, laughing, "you're such a genius with babies. You're such a big help to me. I don't know what I'd do without you."

My heart starts to pound as I listen to Xavier's happy, heavy breath. Across the street at Mrs. Blumenthal's house, purple and yellow crocuses are pushing up through the snow.

I pick up Xavier so he can look out the window.

"Flowers," I say, tapping the glass.

I bundle up the dirty baby laundry and towels and dash downstairs to start the wash before dinner. I pour a whole cup of detergent into the machine, against the wishes of Dad, who always says this is the manufacturer's way of ripping off the consumer, and that only a half-cup is needed.

Therese's sister, Marie, once told her that fidelity over small things is what matters most, and Therese never forgot this. The detergent swirls through the water, streaks of blue turning to white bubbles.

I've planned how to start saying no, decided how things are going to change, really change, and here we are at it again for the second night in a row. Probably I will get another urinary tract infection and need to sneak off to Planned Parenthood for antibiotics. I let myself sink into it, again and again, my hatred for my father softened by memories of his past kindness, his past innocence, a wreath of violets and white carnations he gave me on my First Communion, a photograph of him at twelve with bony shoulders and patched denim shorts that bleeds into the current vision of our naked bodies twisting on the bed, the condom's foil wrapper on my night stand: Hi, Dad; wishing he would choke me or run me over with his car and in the hospital all would praise me for my bravery and how clear it would be that I was abused and innocent, not like the murkiness of this

moment when my back rounds up off the bed, when I realize my sole escape from this night, from the memory of all our nights, is the grave. I'm imagining my swan dive off the high arcing roof of Saint Therese of Lisieux, the glorious feeling of falling and falling and falling though the school is only three stories high, so at first I don't notice the smell of roses, but soon it's powerful and pouring out of me, like I'm sweating out a garden, like plumes of red-pink smoke will rise off my hands, and I am a rose, my pulsing veins a tangled vine, my brain blossoming with calm joy, the stony bloom of my heart unfurling now—loved, not forgotten—and the angels and saints swirl around my bed, their eyelashes brushing my forehead as my father lifts his head, alarmed, as if he smells smoke.

"What's that smell?" he asks, darting his head around in the scented darkness.

Therese of Lisieux is known as the people's saint, for the people loved her so. In this second I am just another amazed pilgrim, and I raise my hands up in the air as if I am lifting a body, my new body, and I offer Therese my first novena of gratitude.

"Oh, thanks," I whisper.

Now Dad jumps out of bed, tripping on the sheet. "Why are you thanking me? What's that smell?"

I shrug my shoulders in the darkness. "It's me."

Philip Kimball. New York: Henry Holt, 1999.

Stories about the American West derive from romantic myths of cowboy shootists, plains Indian wars, locust infestations, and cattle drives. More recent Western novels, such as those of Larry McMurtry and Cormac McCarthy, show a more realistic 1800s frontier, with an immigrant underclass of unwashed laborers who struggle to achieve necessities. In particular, Clint Eastwood's film *Unforgiven* (1992) shows the brutal realities of the old West, in sharp contrast to pulp-fiction adventure stories. Philip Kimball's new novel fuses the two views of the West into one whole—both mythic and historic—and he views his epic tale from many directions.

*Liar's Moon* is set during those brief years in the late 1860s to 1890s when the Great Plains were overrun by settlers from east of the Mississippi. Kimball uses several techniques to achieve balance in his story. One is to use representative characters from different parts of the country. Several chapters are told from the viewpoint of an African American family from Mississippi. Another family is European American from Indiana. And an unidentified nation of indigenous southern plains people becomes involved in the storyline, as do Lakota Sioux, including Sitting Bull. Buffalo Bill Cody is another actual celebrity who is mixed among fictional characters in the story. All the voices together create the novel.

Kimball unifies the diverse fragments by using a single, colorful storyteller's style throughout the book. This narration borrows from many oral traditions, and the book replicates the spoken word in scenes filled with orations, sermons, and evening bull sessions. Everyone wants to talk except the two main characters, who are children raised by coyotes.

Every myth about the West appears in *Liar's Moon*, starting with the ancient tale of children raised by wolves or coyotes. This pair are male and female (unlike Romulus and Remus) as well as African American and European American. They are mythic heroes who signify the balance of gender and ethnicity.

Everyone is equal in the context of a large landscape. In chapter 1, the two toddlers are lost on the westward trail, only to be found years later when they have imprinted with a coyote family. Kimball makes this incredible tale believable when he describes the captured coyote-boy, Will:

“[C]ould this animal that clawed at the warped boards of the walls when we were gone, scratched and chewed the sides of the wooden crate we had to put it in to prevent escape until paws and muzzle were bloody, that snapped at us and ground its teeth when we approached, that sat in the corner, still covered with the dirt and fleas of the coyote den, silently rocking back and forth, abject, alone, gazing at the moon blurred in the oilpaper window . . . could he ever have been, ever be my brother again? (24)

The character struggles to fit into human society, and he eventually learns to herd cattle and ride horses. But of course he never quite becomes human, even after he marries the somewhat rehabilitated coyote girl.

But this is not the only myth. Buffalo Bill Cody and his Old West Show, the massacre at Wounded Knee, a tornado, cattle drives, a blizzard, Exodusters, buffalo soldiers, and every other icon of the West appear in the novel. All roads lead not to Rome but to Wichita, or thereabouts. The experiences of this multitude create the new story of the West. Kimball decolonizes the West by reorienting the geography, with the High Plains as dead center.

And Kimball is the new storyteller. He uses the colloquialism of the region, such as the reference to a “snipe hunt” when a woman offers to lead Will’s brother to the coyote den. A former slave says, “I swear to God, you country [are] from the get-go,” and the term “get-go” resounds of the spoken language. Indeed, most of the dialogue and narration sound like one language synthesized from many. This technique of the storyteller, sewing his cloth with one fancy stitch, repeated throughout, holds the story together.

Like *Anishinaabe* (Chippewa) novelist Louise Erdrich, Kimball writes in poetic lines that fuse poetry and prose. Toward the end of the book, he describes the prairie at sunset:

"[I] Could imagine the prairie looked then just like it had before the first Asians ventured out onto it: all of us, the Asians, the Africans, the Ole Woman, Will, Sojourner, all of us reaped and winnowed on this enormous thrashing floor, broken loose from history it seemed, annihilated, made over, the troubles, suffering, the absolute beauty of it stronger than any bonds to anything that came before.

Kimball's first novel, *Harvesting Ballads*, had this same voice and the same use of historical context. *Liar's Moon* adds to the scope of his vision. With luck there will be more epic poem-novels to come from this writer, with more of his shadings between grim histories and exalted pioneer myths.

—Denise Low

As its title suggests, Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* accentuates the small details so that we might notice the large and looming issues shadowing its flowing, distinctive, and poetic prose. In the end, it is the small things of this novel that are most potent and rousing—the specific imagery that forces us to look at culture, politics, and family dynamics in a universal way.

The two-egg male and female twins, Estha and Rahel, are the unsuspecting antiheroes of this tale, and the smallest though not the only victims of their environment. India, seen through their eyes, is a child's world turned ugly, cold, and unforgiving in one day—the day of their cousin Sophie Moll's death. "Things can change in one day," the twins recognize. Estaphen and his Elvis puff and pointy shoes, the movie *The Sound of Music*, and a sky-blue Plymouth rolling over the dusty terrain all pervade the hot, rotting, lustful, and damaged, struggling-to-change world of the east Indian culture and landscape.

English and American influences are juxtaposed against Ayemenem, the small, seemingly safe but unsafe world of Paradise Pickles and Preserves, the family's semisuccessful business. Mammachi, grandmother and entrepreneur of the pickle business, accentuates her talents, which are not permitted to emerge until after her husband's unremarkable career as an entomologist ends, and when the family retires to the closed world of Ayemenem. Marxism looms on the horizon and is both courted and despised by Chacko, their Oxford-educated son, who returns home to relegate Mammachi, his mother, to silent partner. With her husband, Pappachi, dead, Mammachi acquiesces. While Pappachi lived, she had suffered beatings for no particular reason except his frustration and humiliation. She continues to subordinate her talents to men, this time with her son.

Ammu, their daughter, returns with the fraternal twins to Ayemenem, having recognized her mistake in marriage too late to reinvent the life she had imagined for herself. "Looking at herself like this, Ammu's soft mouth would twist into a small bitter smile at the memory—not of the wedding itself as much as

the fact that she had permitted herself to be so painstakingly decorated before being led to the gallows. It seemed so absurd. So futile. ‘Like polishing firewood.’”

Chacko sends double messages to the twins, teaching them truth and irony with his words but unconsciously reacting to his early indoctrination. Ignoring the innocent exploratory nature of children, he explains to them that “history [is] like an old house at night. With all the lamps lit. And ancestors whispering inside.”

Ammu courts danger as her twins do, but unlike her children, she is aware of the consequences, acting out of need and urgency. The three of them love a man who is off limits, Ammu by night and the children by day. But the history house, their secret place, is forced to keep its secrets, to once again submerge truth, and everything changes in one day.

If anyone wins anything in this novel, it is Baby Kochamma, spinster and grand aunt, who appears to represent her class, her culture: the keeper of the caste system, the preserver of the *status quo*. She wields power to her advantage, a power of destruction and loss. This is a tumultuous story of jealousy, love, hate, sex, and passion beyond reason. Like her country, Baby Kochamma continues to survive, old, decayed, clinging to the past and dying slowly.

Roy’s style is too rich and complex to be an easy read, but its subliminal effect lingers long after the book is over.

—Carol Mauriello

## Contributors

**Barry Ballard** has had his poems published in the *American Literary Review*, *Midwest Quarterly*, *Flint Hills Review*, and *Whiskey Island Magazine*, among others. His first collection, *Green Tombs to Jupiter*, won the Snail's Pace Press poetry award for 1999.

**William Carpenter**, a former Carruth poetry winner, has accepted a teaching position at Lafayette College beginning next fall.

**Robert Chute** has published poems and short stories in many reviews and journals. Educated at Johns Hopkins University, he is a scientist and teaches biology at Bates College in Maine.

**Robert Cooperman**'s second collection of poetry, *In the Colorado Gold Fever Mountains*, was published by Western Reflections. His chapbook *A Tale of the Grateful Dead* will be appearing this year.

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Carol Mauriello writes fiction, poetry, and reviews. Her short story "The Applegates" appeared in the anthology *Women Who Write* and she has another story in a forthcoming anthology by Toad Hall Press. She teaches at Morehead State University.

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N. Scott Momaday won the Pulitzer Prize in 1969 for his novel *House Made of Dawn*. Since then he has continued to publish, teach, and lecture about Kiowa and Native American topics. He has a Ph.D. in English from Stanford University and currently teaches at the University of Arizona. His most recent book, *In the Bear's House*, is a collection of paintings and writings.

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Mary O'Connell has published short stories in *Columbia*, the *Sun*, *Mid-American Review*, *Room of One's Own*, the *Crescent Review*, the *Chicago Tribune*, and *West Branch*. A graduate of the Iowa Writer's Workshop, she is currently working on a novel about the life of Saint Therese of Lisieux.

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Tom Russell has recent work in *Quarterly West*, the *North American Review*, *Northwest Review*, and the *Southern Poetry Review*. He edits *River City* and teaches at the University of Memphis.

Fredrick Zydek has published four collections of poetry including *Ending the Fast* and *The Abbey Poems*. His work has appeared in the *Antioch Review*, *New England Review*, *Nimrod*, *Poetry*, *Poetry Northwest*, and *Prairie Schooner*, among many others.





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