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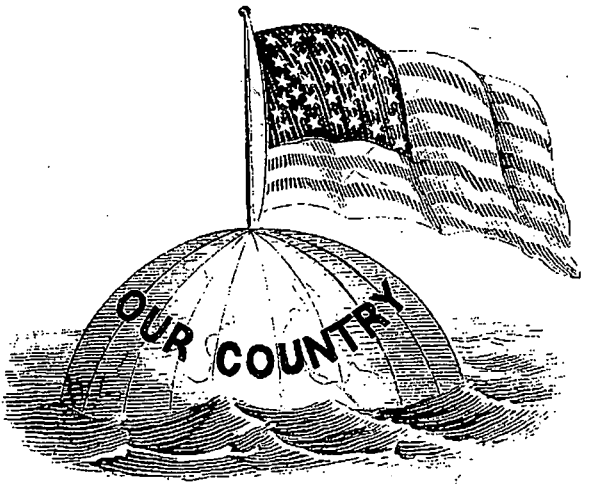

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Contents

Stephen Wolter

Fantasmagoriana

Haunted summer. Lightning strikes the rod on top of the church steeple two times in two different storms. Arthur sees the bolts cutting through black sky and feels the floors of the parsonage tremble as he watches from his bedroom window. Three strikes on the church means bad luck, Rose tells him. Arthur thinks that his sister is just making this up, that she knows nothing more about evil signs and dark omens than she does about growing corn on farmer Brinkman's back forty. "It's true," Rose says. "The old-timers talk about these things." But what does Rose know about the old-timers of Arlington? Rose thinks she is so much smarter, thirteen now, two years older than Arthur. Two years, so what? Rose doesn't know everything. Still, the storms keep coming. Ugly black clouds, low and rumbling, roll in from the west. Late afternoon or early evening, the wind picks up and the sky grows dark.

Arthur remembers the previous summer: the dry heat, the hot southern winds, the gritty red dust that settled over everything. "It's blowing up from Texas and Oklahoma," his father, Pastor Bernthal, said of the red powder. Arthur took a broom and swept the back porch, but by the next morning a blanket of dust covered the wood planks once again. The parsonage was four miles north of Arlington, out in the country. Open farmland all around. Mainly he remembers walking to the mailbox across the road one hot afternoon to retrieve the Omaha paper for his father. Arthur looked at the headline, three inches tall, then took off sprinting toward the parsonage. "They got Dillinger! They got Dillinger!" He screamed it over and over running through the front door and into the kitchen, where he collided with his mother.

"Arthur, calm down," she said, but of course he couldn't.

"Mom," he said. "They got Dillinger. They shot him dead." Arthur was thrilled to be the one delivering the news. He went out back, looking for Rose.

The news this summer is of a different sort. A mystery hangs over the Arlington township. Chicken thieves are sneaking onto

farms in the dead of night. Yes, these are hard times, and a stolen chicken means a meal on the table. But a crime is still a crime. Drifters are suspect, only none has been spotted. The locals are jumpy. Just one mile down the road from the parsonage, Herman Stork blasts both barrels of his shotgun in the direction of his chicken coop one evening. "Good Christ almighty!" his neighbor, Caspar Laaker, yells out. "What in the name of sweet Jesus are you doing, Herman?" Caspar is only delivering a still-warm rhubarb pie that his wife has baked for Mr. Stork, a widower these past two years. The misunderstanding is sorted out. Herman's eyes are not what they used to be, the storm clouds darken the evening more than usual, and the wind plays tricks with his hearing. Caspar nods as Herman ticks off these explanations and apologies—*yes, yes, everything is fine now, don't worry, Herman.* The two men shake hands and Caspar tells his neighbor to go a little easy on the trigger finger. "It's only chickens disappearing, not the *Mona Lisa,*" Caspar says.

Arthur hears Mr. Stork's gunshot, a sharp clap echoing across the empty Nebraska countryside. The sound pushes right through the rising wind. Arthur is in the downstairs parlor, reading a library book: *Kidnapped*, by Robert Louis Stevenson. Only when the words are impossible to see does he sit up to turn on a lamp. The parsonage was wired for electricity five years ago. Arthur is old enough to remember the delicate glow of oil lamps. Down the hall, Arthur's father sits at a desk in his study, working on his next sermon. Here it is, only Sunday night, but the pastor views procrastination as a minor sin. He will stay in his chair scratching a fountain pen across paper until the sermon is complete. Arthur knows better than to interrupt. He slides back down into the heavy cushions of the parlor chair, returns to his book. Outside, the elm trees surrounding Gethsemane Lutheran Church sway wildly back and forth.

In the middle of the night (or is it during the strange dreamtime of early morning?) young Arthur is suddenly awake. Asleep one moment, eyes wide open the next. Has he heard a noise? He pulls back the single cotton sheet and slips out of bed. Moonlight spills over the edge of the windowsill. The storm clouds have moved on. Arthur can see the black outline of the church, fifty yards away, and beyond that, the spiked, wrought-iron fence of the cemetery. From this distance, the gravestones are nothing more than dark blotches brushed across a canvas of

night. A copse of trees, fields with knee-high cornstalks, the countryside sloping subtly toward the bluffs above the Elkhorn River—Arthur sees all of this under the white light of a half-moon.

And then, a shadow moving.

By the old tin-covered barn, behind the parsonage.

Arthur presses his face against the window screen and stretches his neck for a better angle. What is down there? An animal? A person? *I did hear something*, he thinks. The corner of the barn blends into the darkness. He feels a tremor inside his chest. Arthur stands at the window for the better part of three minutes but sees nothing more. When he finally returns to his soft bed, sleep overpowers both his curiosity and his nervousness.

In the morning he walks to the chicken coop and counts. Thirty-six hens and eleven roosters, same as yesterday.

In late June, a student from the Lutheran seminary in St. Louis arrives. His name is Hans Rottman, and he is here to work with Pastor Bernthal in the church. He is given the empty room next to Arthur's. Hans is tall and awkward, with thick black hair on the backs of his hands and fingers. At dinnertime, Arthur stares at Hans' protruding Adam's apple, a bobbing stone stuck in the young man's throat. "He's a German version of Ichabod Crane," Rose whispers to Arthur one evening while the two children clear the table of dishes. Arthur laughs and covers his mouth so that their parents don't hear. Hans is from Munich, but America is where he will become a Lutheran pastor. Arthur wonders why Hans could not have simply stayed in Germany and learned to be a pastor there. Why come all the way to the United States? There are millions of Lutherans in Germany, according to Arthur's father. And Pastor Bernthal should know —he is a native of Berlin himself, having immigrated to America with his family at the age of ten. Germans are scattered all across the farmlands of eastern Nebraska. Once a month, Pastor Bernthal performs Sunday worship entirely in the language of the old country. Arthur understands barely a single word, but the parishioners crowding into Gethsemane's pews seem pleased.

Every so often, wandering hoboes stop by the parsonage. Mother will give them green apples or a wedge of cheese. Sometimes a slice of pie if they are lucky. Arthur can't understand what these drifters are doing way out here in the country. The railroad runs through Fremont, seven miles to the west. Maybe

the hoboes are lost. One evening, as the family and Hans gather around the dinner table, someone knocks at the back door. Pastor Bernthal leaves the dining room, and everyone at the table pauses. Arthur catches only fragments of his father's conversation with the stranger, but this is enough. He knows it's a man asking for food. Hard times. The pastor returns to the dining room, butters two slices of rye bread. He says nothing, looks at neither his wife nor children, then carries the bread to the back door. It is only when Pastor Bernthal has seated himself again at the dinner table that everyone realizes they are being watched. The hobo, scraggly beard, red bandanna at the throat, skin brown and weathered, stands by the large dining room window, looking in from the back yard. He stares at the family, eating their meal of fried rabbit, red potatoes, and applesauce. Then, as if it is the most natural thing in the world, he raises his hands and presses the two slices of bread against the glass. The butter works like glue.

"Good heavens," says Mother.

Rose laughs while Pastor Bernthal mutters, "*Ach!*" The hobo gives them a final once-over glare before he turns and walks away through the back yard, heading west in the direction of Caspar Laaker's farm.

"Farmers vould be vise to vatch their chickens tonight," Hans says.

Rose kicks Arthur under the table. She and her brother often make fun of Hans' thick accent behind his back. Arthur glances at his grinning sister. He knows what she is thinking—*vould be vise to vatch their chickens*—but Arthur is more concerned about the retreating hobo. Maybe Hans is on to something. This man, this ungrateful drifter—he could be one of the chicken thieves. Outlaws are everywhere. Just look at what happened last summer, with Ma Barker and her gang robbing the bank in Fairbury, a town only a hundred miles away from Arlington. After dinner, Arthur is sent outside with a pail of soapy water to clean the window. He thinks about the drifter's face and it gives him the jitters. When he finishes scrubbing the glass, he dumps the water on the ground, then turns and gazes west, checking to make sure the hobo is really gone for good.

Several evenings each week Pastor Bernthal and Hans sit in the parlor listening to radio programs. *The Lutheran Hour*, the president's speeches, Father Coughlin, Will Rogers—nothing

Arthur finds interesting. On one occasion, as Arthur passes by the parlor door, he hears the voice of a man speaking German coming from the radio. He peers into the room. Hans sits on the edge of a chair, his chin resting in a cupped hand. Pastor Bernthal, upright in his favorite rocker, is perfectly still. He wears a face of somber concentration. The voice on the radio rises in intensity. Arthur, without comprehending a single word, senses the anger, the rage. There is applause, cheering. "*Gott in himmel*," Pastor Bernthal says softly, his words like breath. Hans lowers his eyes and stares at the floor. Neither man sees Arthur standing by the parlor door, and a few moments later he walks away, up the stairs to his room, where he will lie on his bed with a book even as a new front of storm clouds pushes its way above the horizon.

Arthur listens to his own radio shows: *Wilderness Road*, *Let's Pretend*, *Jack Armstrong*, and his favorite, *Little Orphan Annie*. Five nights a week on the Blue network. He drinks Ovaltine while the program plays. "Leapin' lizards, kids," says the announcer, "Help Annie come up with a name for the deserted island featured in her latest adventure." Arthur decides on a name—Palmatta, because there are palm trees on the tropical island where Annie is stranded. Mother addresses an envelope, mails off an Ovaltine seal and Arthur's entry. Five weeks later a pair of roller skates arrives in the mail. "It doesn't matter what you named that stupid island," Rose says. "You could have named it Arlington, Nebraska; they still would've sent those roller skates." Rose no longer listens to *Little Orphan Annie*. She tells Arthur she has more important things to do. He can't imagine anything of importance involving his sister.

One Tuesday night he turns the radio dial and just by accident comes upon a program he has never heard before. He hears the sound of howling wind, a bell ringing mournfully in the distance. For a moment this is all Arthur hears—the wind, the bell—as though sound effects have replaced the radio show. But then a voice, old and scratchy and filled with menace, begins to speak. "It's time, once again . . . for *The Witch's Tale*! Blood-chilling stories told by Old Nancy, the witch of Salem." Arthur looks over his shoulder. His mother and father do not want him listening to these scary programs, but they have driven to Fremont this evening to visit Mrs. Krueger, a parishioner from Gethsemane who is in the hospital. Rose is spending the night

with a girlfriend in Arlington, and Hans is upstairs in his room, reading his theology books, no doubt. Arthur sits down on the floor in front of the radio.

"Tonight's tale," Old Nancy begins, "is taken from the *Fantasmagoriana*, the frightening collection of ghost stories that, over a century ago, inspired Mary Shelley to write *Frankenstein.*" Old Nancy chuckles, and Arthur feels a shiver work its way across his shoulders. He knows about *Frankenstein.* Everyone has seen pictures of the movie. "Imagine a castle by a lake," the old witch says. "Imagine a black sky lit up by crackling bolts of lightning. Imagine a haunted summer . . ."

Arthur imagines everything. For thirty minutes he sits by the radio listening to the horrid adventure of the hero, young Blendau, secretary to a German princess, as he becomes trapped in "the gray room" of a deserted castle. Blendau confronts the hideous apparition of Gertrude, nearly succumbing in her icy embrace. He fights off the animated skeleton of Count Hugues, Gertrude's murderer. By some miracle—Arthur can hardly believe it possible—Blendau survives the terror-filled night only to proclaim at the end that every event in this story transpired exactly as described. "On my honor," says Blendau, "all of it is true."

All of it is true.

Arthur licks his lips. The cackling laughter of Old Nancy fades away, and then a man with a deep, almost soothing voice announces that this is the Mutual Radio Network. Arthur realizes that his hands are tucked tightly into his armpits. He pulls them out, rubs his fingertips together. They are moist with perspiration. Through the floorboards of Hans' bedroom, he can hear the young seminary student snoring.

Sleep does not come easily for Arthur this night. Lying in bed, he stares into the far corner of his room expecting the ghost of Gertrude to present itself. *Don't*, he tells himself, *don't think this.* But the specter in his mind won't go away. Gertrude's ghost floats above his bed, her long white gown—her death shroud—flowing, rippling like a flag in a chilly breeze. He pulls the sheet higher, keeps his eyes shut, and pictures Little Orphan Annie on the island of Palmatta.

More chickens disappear. Farmer Brinkman claims that the thieves made off with over a dozen of his prize hens. The Sperling farm, the Eckhardt's, the Toebben's—they all lose good birds. These larcenies aren't just happening close to Arlington.

Folks near Kennard, Nickerson, and Blair also report incidents of thievery. A mystery without resolution. The summer passes, but the chicken thieves are never found out. In time, the leaves turn brown, Caspar Laaker's pumpkins grow fat, and the thieves—however many there are—move on, heading south perhaps, following the lead of migrating geese. "Not every question in the world has an answer," Mother tells Arthur.

If lightning strikes the rod on the church steeple for a third time, Arthur doesn't see it happen. Fewer and fewer storms appear as the season progresses. By the time the first dry flakes of snow appear, on an unusually cold afternoon in mid-October, the summer thunderstorms are a faraway memory.

Ma Barker is killed in the summer of 1935, her luck and good timing, like John Dillinger's, finally coming to an end. G-men ambush her gang; a rain of bullets cuts her to pieces. She dies, all the newspapers say, with a machine gun in her hands.

Hans returns to St. Louis not long after Christmas to finish his final few months of study in the seminary's classrooms. He is ordained the following summer as a pastor of the Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod. In time, he becomes a missionary, spreading the gospel to the people of Brazil. To the best of Arthur's knowledge, Hans never returns to his homeland.

By the end of 1940, Pastor Bernthal discontinues his once-a-month practice of performing German-language services at Gethsemane. The reasons seem obvious enough, given the state of the world, but this does not prevent several longtime church members from voicing their complaints. When Mother learns about this discontent within the congregation, she happens to be in the parsonage kitchen breading the plump pieces of a freshly cut fryer. She slams the palm of her hand down on the countertop. "When will these people learn that this is America?" she says to her husband, not bothering to hide the anger in her voice. "*This* is their country!" Pastor Bernthal says, "Well, Mother . . ." but then his voice trails off and he has nothing more to say about the subject. He will neither try to explain his parishioners, nor castigate them. People will think whatever they want to think, but he is still the pastor of this church and he's made his decision.

Two years after the Second World War reaches its conclusion, Rose and a young man named Walt Hennessy are riding together in Walt's Plymouth on Highway 30 west of Schuyler.

They have spent the afternoon picnicking at State Lakes park. Rose sits in the front seat, her shoes kicked off, warm September air rushing through the open windows. The moment before it happens—when a local drunk named Floyd Abbot loses control of his '39 Nash Ambassador and slams into the Plymouth nearly head-on—Walt is telling Rose about his family. Rose remembers laughing at Walt's story, something to do with his crazy brothers. She doesn't remember much else. Walt, she is told, dies instantly. For the rest of her long life, she moves about in a wheelchair. She never marries. Nebraska is the only place Rose will ever live.

Arthur never stops reading. He loves stories—on the radio, at the Monarch movie theater in Fremont, or by his mother's side when she describes the olden days on cold winter nights. But he treasures books more than anything. Two or three years after the summer of 1935, Arthur borrows a copy of *Frankenstein* from the library. The story, slow and ponderous, leaves Arthur puzzled. What does it mean? The mad doctor, playing God; the creator who rejects his creation. Arthur follows the plot well enough but knows all along something has escaped his understanding. Where is the horror? The book seems far less frightening than the stories Old Nancy is fond of telling on the radio. *Fantasmagoriana*. Many years later—long after he witnesses phantasms of his own in a place known as the Ardennes Forest—Arthur seeks out this strange and marvelous word, a word he has never seen printed on any page, never heard spoken aloud by either friends or strangers, but still as familiar to him as his own name. He searches the dusty stacks of libraries, pages the contents of generous but little-used indexes, loses hours in the dark corners of antiquarian bookshops.

A single word, cloaked, so it seems, by an impenetrable mist, a haze that grows stronger and stronger with each passing year. Like a distant summer from his youth, like an unfinished dream vanishing in the waking hour—always a mystery and always out of reach.

Kevin Boyle

Near Lissadell

"no enemy but time" W.B. Yeats

My wife is in a silk kimono,
the light kind of bouncy off
the snow: she does look, oddly,
like a gazelle—all leg and limb,
her hair up in something French.
She bends—in glimmer and sheen—
to strike a match and send the news up
in flames to catch the kindling and wood.
That's cozy, she says. I wouldn't
disagree, the children conked out
in their room, the alcohol giving
even my knees some joie de vivre—
I feel some air under the kneecaps—
and then, what with the wine and heat
and our age, we just nod apace, wake
to needle the other with one
of the day's complaints writ small, check
the time—the kids will be up in ten—
and give in, bit by bit, to what
the body stripped of politics
and vows might want: ourselves alone—
"sinn fein"—beneath her kimono,
inside my trousers, the fingers
that count finding each other out,
the "this again" that marrieds know well—
the neck aflame, the tongue, then the silk
hiked up, the knowledge as we climb up
each other. This is our earth, our plot,
our sphere of influence, mundane,
"mondial," not rising to any other plane.

Mo Perry

From the Front Steps

He unfurls
undulates
like a cat from a nap
or a flower from winter.
I think I could love him.

What is love,
this thing people fall into?
I think it must be the space between two people,
mistaken for common ground,
actually a hole,
filled with light and sound (beautiful).

He's like that tree
outlined
between the shapes of houses:
branching, different from every angle,
no leaves hanging from his fingers.

I could stand there with him.
Watch spring touch him.

My lips on his skin could be like moss.
I could descend upon him like rain.

Victoria Adams

Deer

Together, through the stand of old pines, the branches that curved through the autumn air like pleading arms, Diane and Marcus walked. They did not speak to each other. They looked for deer that came out when it was dark and entered the backyards of vacation homes. The does, their fawns half hidden among the slim maples behind them, stayed tentatively by the paved road to wait for cars bringing children and parents and their plastic bags of white bread and marshmallows. The moon was almost full, but declining. He, the much older one, had led her into the forest with what seemed friendly intent. He wanted to show her a house uninhabited, falling down, thought haunted. And so when he turned and kissed her, his tongue plunging into her mouth, he took her by surprise. She did not exactly kiss him back, but she did not retreat either. There was only the sharpness of surprise—like she had stepped on a piece of glass hidden under the white sand of a long, perfect shoreline. She thought he had seen her as the child she once was, although she was twenty-five.

Later, over the years in which she made love with him, two weeks each in the summer and fall, she found herself in various awkwardnesses: moving away from the furtive kiss when his wife Sue walked by the cabin where they lay in the dumpy hollow of an old mattress (they could hear her tramping feet through the gravel from far enough away); Diane sliding down on the wet spring dirt of the soon-to-be front lawn of Marcus and Sue's new home; her springing up from her back, her knees, her belly, just in time before a hunter or an unarmed traveler might find them.

When she wanted to end it—which was once a year, at least—he would beg, and she would relent. When she came to stay, she stayed in a cabin as if she were a guest. No one suspected, certainly not the other guests in their own remote cabins, the families drinking beer and grilling pork chops and always being very kind and friendly, calling, when she passed, "Hello." She played with the families' children, who knocked on her door

in the morning with their basketballs or crooked and unraveling plastic lanyards in need of reweaving. They helped her gather wood for the stove that heated her cabin. Their parents told them to be kind to her; she was a single woman alone and needed company. But the children helped because they liked her, the way she spoke to them as if they were confidants, the way she knew their fears.

She liked the way the nights would always turn cold in the mountains, summer or not. She made fires in the cast iron stove the way Marcus taught her, in the middle of the night stoking them, then lifting the heavy piece of beech that would last for hours until early morning, dropping it and pulling away from the bright and dark sparks that rushed to her eyes.

Up in the north country of Wisconsin, embracing the loneliness of the cabin, the early night that came especially in autumn, sometimes she could get a Canadian radio station. More often, she would get the preachers, every day, not just Sunday, who said things like *What is it that you don't speak of to others? What is it you would say if no one would look at you with surprise?* Or this one, the last time she listened: *Why, when we see the wonder of things, do we turn away?*

He was going hunting. It was early morning, still almost dark, and damp. The hills beyond the lake turned gray, then blue, in the beginning light. She came out of her cabin to see them, then him. He sat at the table in the hotel, his cup with the name of a hardware store printed on it filled with black coffee and making rings on the plastic, gingham-patterned tablecloth.

"I wish I could have two wives," he said. She looked so radiant to him in her newness of waking up that he blushed when he spoke, and he had to look away.

Diane laughed. She could not believe it. He was serious. She didn't want to marry anyone, especially such an old man. She had a crush on him when she was a little girl and he was grown up and newly married. Now she was fucking him. She knew how common that was, but she still did it; it made her feel somewhat powerful for a brief time. She knew that was sad but had only so much strength to turn away from someone who wanted her. But it was not love.

He pointed to his lap. He wanted her to sit there, and she did. It was awkward; she was too big.

"I'd like you to have my baby."

So far everything was about him.

"I don't want a baby," she said, getting off his lap as he tried to pull her back to him. "I don't want to get married."

He got a hurt look. He stayed silent, though. She thought how she loved the smells of this old kitchen, the slightly chemical smell of the pilot light. It was the same place she used to run through as a girl on the way to other things: playing with a bucket, raking the small beach of the lake to separate the stones from the sand.

"No offense. It's not you," she told him. That was true.

His face now looked like it had been burned by hot water. "I know it's impossible," he said, pretending a laugh. "I wish. That's the thing. I dream. You look so pretty with your hair like that."

This was the type of compliment she liked. They would have sex again for sure. Then, in a few days, when her two weeks off from work were up, she would go home with some doughnuts from the gas station in the back seat and, in the glove compartment, the seventy-five dollars that he gave her for gas money, all he could afford. She didn't want to take his money, but honestly, she could use it.

"I have to go," she said then, leaving his lap though he tried to hold her there. " I have to go now. I'm hungry."

"Oh, but please stay just a little." He still kept his hands on her hips. His palms were so callused he had ceased feeling anything underneath them. He wanted to have sex with her before he went hunting. He wanted to shoot a big buck, he told her—one with seven points, eight. But he wanted her more right now, he said. She started to feel sick to her stomach and dizzy. It was early in the morning, before the other guests were up, and she was always too tired in the mornings for much of anything. She liked the sex but everything up to it, the talking and the feeling, made her sleepy.

When she was very little, five years old or four, her father came with the family to the camp just one time and left after a day and night. Marcus told Diane when she asked that he did not remember her father coming, and Diane's mother once said it was when she was too little to remember. Diane had a picture of her father in front of a cabin, standing in the fore-

ground, looking like Charles Atlas in one of those ads in comic books: swimming trunks up to his waist, black string tied in a dry bow. It did not look as if he had been swimming. He stood with his shoulders pulled back, his stomach sucked in, his dark hair combed back with grease like all men did back then. He was not smiling, the sun shone in his eyes, and he looked very handsome, like a soon-to-be-discovered film star, and afraid.

But Diane did remember how that year there was girl at camp who was a year older than she was. The older girl and Diane sat together in the playground outside the cabins in an old rowboat with holes; it was filled with sand. They sat and played with their shovels, making things and talking. What do five year olds talk about? Diane only remembered this girl telling her something she thought afterwards for many years was true. They had talked about Diane's grandmother dying. Oh, I know about that, said the older girl. "When you die, what happens is you get smaller and smaller bit by bit, no one hardly notices, until one day you are curled up into a ball, and it is too late for anyone to do anything about it. Then you die."

Diane nodded, as if she knew. She wasn't in the least bit skeptical—she was horrified at what no one had told her before. She imagined this dying often and intensely. She dreamed about it that night and many nights after, until it became her own vision of what death was: a ball of flesh that was once a person, and the only thing left moving would be two tiny, seeing eyes, caught in the voiceless stricken body, silently pleading to be set free.

In the future, in a few years, her father would be sent to prison for strangling a man in an alcoholic rage. He woke in prison and the last thing he remembered was someone grabbing him. His left upper arm showed the marks of a hand—four slim bruises the shape of fingers testified to someone trying to hold him back so hard that even his thick, strong skin was marked darkly.

Whatever happened after the grabbing hand he could not remember. This occurred often, the not remembering. Except this time he did not wind up in the back of diner's parking lot retching beside a dumpster. This time he did not wake from the bang of falling off a broken slatted bench outside a railway station in West Chicago. This time he did not jolt awake to find himself driving a car on an empty road that, mercifully, led past nothing and went nowhere. He had hurt no one before, he thought in

panic and the beginnings of despair. This ignorance of the components of hurt was sincere. This time, behind the bars, he pressed his forehead in an effort to remember. The horror of what they told him about what he had done to a man he did not know, and his comprehending its truth, led him to hang himself with the cloth strips from his pants. The jailers on duty were suspended for a week for not watching him closely enough. As if they had wanted to, or cared.

The funny thing was, Marcus *never* got a deer. Not for as long as she knew him. He was proud of his tracking skills and his wilderness knowledge, and he knew the names of all the trees and the calls of the birds. She wondered if he purposely missed. He was not a cruel man, but many hunters were not. Finally she decided he just had bad luck. Getting a buck as the winter approached was not as easy as it seemed, for they went deeper in the forest with the more shots they heard.

She had decided that this year would be her last year with him. He was getting too attached to her and she was afraid he would do something stupid, like leave his wife. His wanting more than her body, but also her love, made her uneasy. Diane happened to know that Marcus' wife was also having an affair with a man because his wife had confided this to Diane this summer, giggling and showing her a letter from the man, one in which he told her how sexy she was. Since Marcus no longer had sex with his wife—he considered her fat and out of shape and dull, although he insisted she was his best friend—Diane was happy for Sue. But she did not want to jeopardize their marriage, nor her pleasure in being in the forest and the places where she had been happy as a child. If someone knew, she could never return.

The night of that day she was in the kitchen, Marcus knocked, very late, on her cabin door. He had been out to dinner with this wife and some friends of theirs, and his breath smelled like whiskey. A feeling like hate welled up in her when he breathed in her face. She did not want to seem unkind, but she could feel her hostility coming through the faked kindnesses of her kisses. She could be cruel if she wanted. She pushed him away.

"Are you sure you don't remember my father?" she asked, sitting down on the chair that was far from the bed he was trying to get her to lie on with him.

"No. Ah . . ." he shook his head as if clearing it from a dive under water. "Maybe. I told you. Didn't I?"

"I like to hear it," she said. This part was true. She did.

"A dark man, quiet, didn't come out much. A business man. He wore a tie. Very serious, I think." He was impatient and making it up from things she had told him.

"Do you feel sad you did not shoot anything today?" she then asked.

He sat up. Even in his dimness and desire he realized that she had gone somewhere inside, and was not coming back. "Hey. Hey," he said, quietly. Then louder: "You always asking about your father. Reminding me how old I am. I can tell when I'm not wanted."

She could not stop laughing, even after he closed the door as loudly as he dared. It has nothing to do with him, but they always think it does, she thought. He did not get it at all. We must always ask other people what they recall about the ones we loved. We ask in order to see if what we missed makes them even more beautiful than we remember.

She would not miss Marcus much. The fact was, those years back, when they did not see any deer but he kissed her, she fought the urge to have sex with him, to do something she did not want, or even need, to do. She assented so she could feel someone's arms around her who would not try to keep her.

And although she stayed there only one more day after this last incident, he ignored her, only waving a quick hello, treating her like a guest, thinking this would hurt her. He never came back with his big buck strapped to the pickup truck, the way the out-of-towners did, riding it around for miles into town and out and back again so everyone on North Bend Road would see what they had killed.

And this last night, the night before she left him and his cabins—the retreat of her past, the place her mother loved best and her father hated because of its silence and beauty that made his emptiness larger—she woke to get another piece of wood for the dying fire. The embers when she opened the stove door made it seem as if the fire could be started again easily. She opened the cabin door to get the wood from the porch, but there was nothing there. Marcus, who usually left many pieces there— the large ones she needed a wheelbarrow to carry—had gone back

to his house and his wife without leaving Diane something to keep the cabin warm. It was a bitter, small gesture. All he could do. She smiled. She would have done the same thing. It was fair.

She walked into the dark, where there were no lights to navigate by. She was blinded by the perfect dark of the unlit country. The stars were numerous, but too far. She put her hands in front of her to prevent her from running into things and swept them from side to side at shoulder height. She would have appeared to someone watching from far away as a child pretending not to be able to see. She only hoped to avoid the soft ground of the cesspool and guided herself by the sound of the ice machine that hummed by the kitchen.

Almost there, almost to the woodpile and the tarp that covered it, she stopped suddenly. With no warning—no movement of feet, no animal shuffling—a dark shape rose in front of her. She did not run. It could be a bear, she thought in that moment. It could be a fearful scavenging one, searching for garbage or coolers. Or it could be an angry, hungry mother readying herself for hibernation. Diane stood very still, the thing to do with hungry, strong animals. Although most people in the North Country, including her, knew that few if any black bears were dangerous, bears evoked a primal fear in everyone—a terror of things stronger. Even if they ran away.

But as her eyes adjusted, as she stood unmoving, not even breathing, she could tell it was a deer, not a bear. It stood looking at her, still. Diane could see the opaque but brilliant reflection of its eyes. Before she came, its head must have been bent down, eating the grasses that grew longer by the sides of the cabins. As Diane had come toward the animal, it had lifted its head upon hearing her.

Diane had seen lots of deer, but no males, and none so close. It was a buck. Potent, solitary, thick with muscle. Most deer gave a snort sounding like a woman's cry when they encountered something so unexpected, a potential danger; but this one stayed still enough—stuck with fear, Diane thought—that she could count its points. It had eight. The deer's only movement was the breathing through its nose that created quick tiny clouds of whiteness that disappeared.

The buck seemed petrified, shocked into stillness by her coming upon it when it felt most safe. That is why it came here in the dark. Beyond, where it came from, was the forest, the old-

growth white pines, those curving arms of power and terrible love. Don't go back there, she said inside herself. "Don't leave," she said out loud. It was a plea. She never wanted anything before this. The buck did not move as she took a step forward. "Stay here," she told him. "I won't hurt you."

The Girl in Question

The summer was one of the driest on record. In the west, thick smog smudged the Manhattan skyline. Out east, trees burned in the Hamptons. In between, lawns across the island turned brown. The roses Ishmael had planted in his father's new yard suffered. Although Ishmael had read the books, he lacked his mother's intuitive sense of how to keep them alive.

Late in August, shortly before Ishmael was to leave for college, he lay on Daisy's sofa with his shirt off, a revolving fan propped on a chair across from him. Her parents had rented the small apartment for her near the train station because it was cheaper than campus housing and because they didn't want her living in Manhattan anyway. The condition was that she share the rent with a roommate, preferably a girl from her high school class. A known entity. She found Ishmael's step-cousin, April, who had never been more eager to move out of her parents' house.

It was hard to say if Ishmael would have asked Daisy out had she not been April's roommate. In any event, he had no regrets. She was a flutist, preppie and trim, with reddish, bluntly cut hair. She drank five glasses of milk a day and had a passion for ice skating. She was, in every way, an unlikely friend for April.

Ishmael had determined he would not go to college a virgin, and once he gave himself over to it, he could not get enough of Daisy. Having recently given up piano, he had plenty of time on his hands. They spent night after night in the apartment while April worked at her father's bar. Most nights she wasn't home by the time Ishmael left at one or two in the morning. He would see traces of her, an ashtray out on the fire escape or coffee grounds in the sink, and he knew she saw evidence of him, a forgotten jacket on the back of chair, a box of condoms brazenly left in the vanity.

On one occasion Daisy had caught Ishmael snooping through April's closet, and he had to confess that he was looking for his mother's jewelry box, the one she had given to April on her deathbed.

He remembered a few weeks after his mother's funeral finding April in his parents' room, helping to sort clothes for the Salvation Army.

April was standing in front of his mother's antique dressing mirror, holding a hanger to her chin. It held a dress his mother had worn to one of his recitals, high collared and elegant, with a dozen lace-covered buttons down the back, unlike anything April would wear. In the failing light it looked to Ishmael like a wedding gown.

April was still, one hand at her throat and the other on her waist. The dress had suited his mother, streamlined and subtle. She had disliked primary colors and dressed only in pastels, whites, and the occasional gray. April, on the other hand, tended toward electric pinks and neon yellows.

She smoothed her hand down along the fabric. Ishmael went in and sat on the bed. She looked at him in the mirror, her eyes shiny in the dusky light. "Try it on," he said.

"It wouldn't fit," she answered.

Everything about the room bore his mother's imprint, the pale pink walls and lace curtains, cherry wood furniture with curvaceous legs, and the lavender fragrance lingering in her clothes. It was the inner sanctum of the house, a room free of televisions and radios, a place meant for reading, undressing, slipping into cool, clean sheets. The place where his mother had died.

During the last weeks, April had visited the house regularly to bathe his mother and change her bedpan while his father was at work. Although she was technically a step-niece, she assumed the role of daughter.

Early one morning, on his way to the shower, Ishmael paused outside the door to listen to the quiet exchange of female voices he had never heard growing up. He could not hear what they were saying, only the tone, so different from the way his parents spoke to each other. His father's voice was gentle but baritone. Even his questions sounded resolute. April and his mother, on the other hand, spoke in a soft, meandering cadence, as if searching for something.

He glanced through a crack in the door and saw that his mother was giving April a lacquered box. Later, April swore it was only a common jewelry box, a sentimental keepsake, but Ishmael felt sure there had been something inside.

He was ashamed when Daisy caught him snooping for it, but Daisy surprised him by offering to help. The two of them picked through April's things like crows through trash. Ishmael went for the carton of papers at the back of the closet while Daisy sorted through lingerie and cosmetics. Soon he forgot about his mother's box. He didn't know what he was looking for, but he was sure it was there.

"Look at this," Daisy said. "Seventeen shades of nail polish. I've never seen her wear any."

Ishmael wasn't looking at the nail polish but at the white cotton underwear that lay in the open drawer. Somehow he had expected something satiny and dark.

He went back to the closet, where he found the oddest things: a book about growing orchids, her brother's preschool drawings, and an envelope of news clippings about Ishmael's recitals.

"What's that?" Daisy asked, taking one from his hand. "'Young Talent Outshines the Rest.' What a headline!"

"It's the *Glenport Gazette*," he said. "Not exactly the *New York Times*."

"'At seventeen years old, Ishmael Coles mesmerized his audience.'" She laughed.

"Please."

"'During a spellbinding rendition of Beethoven's Sonata in F minor, Opus 57, *Appassionato*, Coles' fingers became a fury of simmering emotion, sweetened by its own restraint. His interpretation was edgy, looming on the brink of chaos, yet soulful and soaring. In the extended, sometimes anguished first movement, he plunged the audience into . . .'"

"Enough."

"Modesty's not going to help your career."

"I don't have one, remember?"

She slipped the clipping back into the envelope. "Come over here," she said. "You'll never guess what I found."

In the bottom drawer of April's dresser, beneath a layer of clothes, was a hardbound notebook. Ishmael could not imagine April keeping a journal, but there it was. Daisy picked it up and smoothed her hand over the surface. The binding was covered with olive green fabric, tattered and used. "What do you think she writes about?" she asked, holding the book to her chest.

"How should I know?"

"Well, we can't look, can we. That's going too far." She handed it to him.

He didn't want to take it, but it felt warm in his hands, as though it were alive. He felt the edges of the pages with his fingertips. Daisy was watching him.

"Which way did it go?" he asked, placing it back in the drawer.

"The spine facing right," she said.

"Are you sure? I thought it was this way."

"I'm sure," she said. "With the blue shirt on top."

He closed the drawer and exhaled. "Let's clean up," he said. "My mother's box isn't here."

Daisy nodded, though they both knew it wasn't what they had been looking for.

Later, they lay clean and naked on Daisy's futon. It was the only bedroom, with twin-sized futons head to head in an L shape, flush against the walls. Daisy fell asleep, lips parted and eyelids fluttering. Ishmael dozed on and off, knowing he ought to go home

At one-thirty he was awakened by the sound of an idling car. He heard voices but could not make out the words. He stood up from the futon, careful not to disturb Daisy, and looked out the window.

Two stories below, April was standing on the curb beside the car. The driver was holding her arm through the passenger window, repeating something in a low, plaintive voice. She pulled away but he held on to the sleeve of her cardigan, stretching it. April slipped out of the sweater, leaving it in his hands.

When he heard April's key in the door, he slipped back into bed, not wanting to be seen. He tried to remember where he had left his clothes. He couldn't imagine why he had been so careless. Somehow Daisy and he had left the bedroom door ajar. He heard April dead-bolt the front door and go to the window. She was panting, as though she had run up the stairs.

The car slowly pulled away. There was a dull, beeping tone in the next room, and he realized April had taken the phone off the hook. She went into the bathroom and ran the tap. Ishmael felt the foot of the bed for his clothes, but could not find them.

"Hm?" Daisy said groggily.

"Sh," he said. "It's her."

April's futon was directly beneath the window, awash in a pool of streetlight. Ishmael recognized his jeans and underwear strewn over the bedspread. He reached across Daisy and snatched the clothing just as the bathroom door unlocked. He froze. April came into the room, barefoot but still in her clothes, walking with exaggerated caution, as though she had been drinking. He was sure she must have seen him, but she sat cross-legged on her futon with her head in her hands, facing the opposite wall.

Daisy touched his chest beneath the sheet. He put his finger to her lips. They would just have to wait it out. Once April was asleep, he would slip into his clothes and leave.

April sat for a long while, holding her middle, rocking as if to coax sleep. Ishmael was in an uncomfortable position, supporting himself on his elbows with Daisy beneath him, his jeans still in his fist. Daisy's breathing grew deep and regular, her head lolling on the pillow. Finally April lay back. For a moment Ishmael saw her face, eyes fixed on the ceiling. Her lips moved silently, and she covered her face with her hands.

The journal came to mind, small and worn. Small enough, he wondered, to fit inside the lacquered box? Could it have been his mother's diary he held? He glanced at the drawer, feeling a chill.

Lines of light from the blinds curved along her body. She rolled onto her side, her back to him. His eyes traveled the curl of her waist, the rise of her hip, the downward slope of her thigh. Her pants were taut across her backside; he wondered how she could sleep in them. But gradually her fist on the pillow opened one finger at a time, like one of his mother's roses.

He looked down to find that Daisy was awake, staring at him blankly. He had the cold sense that they had been waiting for this moment. There was no hesitation. Her hands drifted over his backside. He sank down, his groan loud enough to wake the dead.

April did not stir, but he imagined he could feel the seizure in her muscles, the suspension of breath. Daisy and Ishmael looked at each other without surprise. Then, as if to be sure April had heard, Ishmael closed his eyes and whispered to Daisy how desperately he loved her.

Larsen Bowker

A Mother's Words

She was born in January in front of a
Kitchen fire, a middle child with crooked teeth
And an overbite, the child chosen to herd the family
Sheep in summer on silent pastures where words
Built a voice that made her hard to love.

She filled insurance daybooks, both sides
Of brown paper sacks and the backs of her sheriff
Husband's wanted posters, filled them late at night
With poems, moral advice and the sadness
That comes to a woman who feels
The world slap up against her.

She warned each of us as we came
Of age, "I'll leave little money, so you can
Bury and be done with me, but you
Mustn't lose my words."

The Bible and Shakespeare shaped her
Style, but it was fear that filled the piano bench,
The long drawer of her vanity and the cardboard
Boxes under her bed. Even after her

Mind turned metaphysical, she'd stand
In the hallway of her nursing home and beg us
To save her words, the eager slant of a northwest
Wind trying to get in closer to the fire.

Edward Byrne

Transitions in Early Spring

Squinting from this distance, we see the new
flowers now growing in our neighbor's garden

seem like nothing more than colorful splotches,
as if someone had just smudged circles on a canvas,

each simply fitted into its handsome landscape
by a quick stab of twisted brush stroke. A cold breeze

still eases through the willow trees like a sigh
that signals resignation, stirring these leaves already

green in early spring, as splashes of sunlight
filter through their limbs and settle like shreds

of tatted lace, swatches as white as fine linen,
littering the lawn. Farther on, there is a hurried rustle

of feathers, then a flurry when a flock of waxwings
flushed out of bushes by our son flashes and rises

above everything, and the empty sky suddenly
is split with that high string of wings sliding by.

Stragglers swing like kites into a few loose rings
overhead. All day long we have been strangely

occupied by such minor changes in this set
arrangement of the world around us, even as we

had waited patiently for that late word to arrive
from the hospital lab about how our son's life might

never be the same, how the low counts of those red
cells and platelets isolated in the rinsed blood running

through his body have begun to tell a different tale.
In this season when so much is in transition, still

we sit on a stone bench in that broken lacework
of shade beneath these trees, watch those last waxwings

now wheeling over our neighbor's house and above
our son, as we anticipate a slow erosion of daylight.

John Fritzell

Watching The Weather Channel

I would like to spend the night
snuggled up to your cold front,
under a heavy quilt of stratus
high in the hard rockies
somewhere west of Steamboat Springs.

You may bring the cameras,
if you are into that,
but I will just be lying here
dreaming of the big one
striking New Orleans some day.

Category 4 you will call it,
your arm sveltely sweeping the storm
through the gulf and into my bedroom,
where I will be lying stiff,
stunned at how my cigarette bow echoes
into a desirous blanket of snow.

But for now, with the thunder passed,
my dreams are with the stationary front beside me,
makeup removed, eyes closed,
only the faintness of breath
keeping her face clear of the fog.

Forecast

Warmer with increasing clouds
and a chance for a morning shower.

Your arms gesturing over a storm in your belly,
blocking out Cuba, filling the gulf with your billows,
indicating that someone you love lives north of me.

Bob Levy

Cloak and Dagger

The bribe is Nina's idea. Her idea, hers alone. All the Czech crowns in the Meyers' possession—a not inconsiderable sum—if the manager of Prague's Europa Palace will somehow expedite the return of their passports and visas from the police. Once the documents are returned, the Meyers promise to leave the hotel. They promise to leave this miserable Prague, this god-forsaken Czechoslovakia, as soon as humanly possible. As for this business arrangement of theirs—this bribe—it will cross silently with the Meyers and their rented BMW back into Austria.

However, it is Arno Meyer, not Nina, who approaches the manager, small-boned and red-faced, rifling a file of papers behind the hotel porter's desk. "Your country," Meyer begins without the courtesy of a greeting (civility has gotten Meyer nowhere in this place), "has required us to purchase a good deal of your money." It is 1970, and the Communist government requires visitors to purchase two thousand crowns ($70) for each day they intend to spend in the country and to purchase these crowns *prior to* entry. Arno removes a one-inch-thick stack of paper from his billfold and locks eyes with the surprised little man. "But as there is nothing here for us to purchase, and as we are planning, hoping, to leave today, this morning in fact, and as these bills have no value outside your country, there is no reason for us to keep them." Meyer places half the bills on the counter, sliding them in the direction of the manager's open left hand. "Of course when our passports are delivered . . ." adds Meyer, returning the remaining bills to his wallet. Then he leans into the counter. "So, what do you say?"

The hotel manager wears a toupee. It sits atop his head like a black cocktail napkin, the part in the hairpiece in the shape of a smile, one which matches perfectly the corrupt little smile formed by his lips. So perfect a match that Arno Meyer is tempted to laugh. And he would have, had the manager not said, "But there is nothing I can do, sir. As I tell you when you arrive, it is customary that our police . . ."

Meyer nods. He holds up a hand. "Yes," he says. "The po-

lice. But we need them now, you see. Our papers. There is an emergency. And in our country, in an emergency, it would be customary for the police to assist, to help, yes, in any way possible. You know what it means—'emergency'?"

This last bit of condescension is obviously a mistake. The manager's eyes flash.

Arno Meyer is a businessman. A master of the deal, the give and the take. He is not ordinarily a man to provoke, not a man to make an offer without first looking five steps further down the line, studying the ramifications. But that is the Arno Meyer of Meyer and Kauffman Commercial Flooring. This Arno Meyer, however, in the once majestic hotel's dismal lobby, is another story completely; he is an Arno Meyer driven by the desire to grant his wife what she wants, what she needs. To leave and leave now.

"How much then?" he says. To this the manager says nothing. The man, the arrogant peacock, refuses to so much as register that Meyer has spoken. Instead, and with flourish, he turns a page in the hotel's register and pretends to examine an entry. Meyer feels Nina's hand close around his forearm. Her fingers are cold. Nina, whose family had once lived here in Prague, family which was lost—Nina's word for it, "lost"—rounded up by the Germans and carted off to the camps.

"How about all of it?" says Meyer. "All of it right now. We will keep only enough for gasoline and some food for the trip. So, all of it now. Just get us our papers." And here, without looking up, and while drawing a line through the examined entry in the register, the manager opens his left hand.

Home for the Meyers is suburban New York. And in their home, in an old leather trunk, among letters written in Czechoslovakia in the years preceding its German occupation, are albums which contain photographs of Nina's lost family. A family Nina speaks of as though she actually knew them. "My love affair with hats?" Meyer had heard her once tell a friend. "I get it from my aunt Hannah. And, you know how I can never put down a book? Well, my mother had a cousin Bella. . . . Come upstairs. There's a photo . . ."

"To make a connection." Nina's precise words, her reason for visiting Prague. "To see what they saw, my father's sisters, my cousins; see where they lived, to better imagine their days."

And when he would ask why, she would answer, "So that I will better know myself." But over the weeks that preceded the trip Meyer had begun to pick up an unmistakable tremor in her voice. "What if they realize we're Jews?" she said finally, she and Arno seated across from one another in the safety of their kitchen, occupying the sides of the table each had occupied these twenty years. "At customs, at passport control . . ."

She had been spending evenings with historical texts, thick volumes which described the Czech occupation: *Betrayal, The Munich Accords, A Time to Speak,* the plight of the Czech Jew. Before these there had been others. Too many books over too many nights, if you asked Meyer. As for Arno himself—although he denied any relationship with the trip—he had recently attended a double bill at New York's Thalia Cinema: *Foreign Correspondent* and *Cloak and Dagger*. Each film featured an American Everyman as its hero—a reporter, a professor—men like Meyer plunked into the center of Europe at the onset of war, reluctant heroes who, with no training, outfoxed the Gestapo. And over time, Meyer began to imagine himself as just such a hero—Gary Cooper in *Cloak and Dagger*, secreting Lily Palmer across the Swiss border to freedom.

"Come here," he said in their kitchen that evening, drawing Nina close, inhaling the nutlike scent of her hair. And it was in this role of hero-protector that Meyer pulled open the cabinet drawer and removed their green-jacketed passports. "I want you to show me," he said, flipping open the booklets, "where these say 'Jewish'? What in my face, or in that sweet face of yours, says 'Jewish'? Show me. Please."

Four days later they arrived in Prague, one giant step back into the past. The once-grand Hotel Europa—from outside it is opulent, majestic. Inside, the lobby's burgundy carpeting has worn through to the matting, and its immense chandelier—a wedding cake of tiered lights—has fully half the bulbs burnt out. On the elevator's black iron door, a sign reads NO.

The hotel manager, the very man they would several days later offer the bribe, had slipped their papers—their passports, their currency exchange receipts—into the drawer of the porter's desk. "To police." Although "police" was accompanied by a flash of his white teeth, the manager had dismissed its importance with a wave. "They will be returned, do not worry."

"When?" Meyer had asked. 1970. Two years since the Sovi-

ets had retightened the noose around Czechoslovakia. Meyer was taking no chances.

"Four days," said the manager. "Perhaps five."

"And if we wish to leave earlier?" asked Meyer. As though he had heard a whispered prophecy, a warning.

Here the manager had glanced down to the register. "But you are staying for seven . . ."

"But if we should need to leave earlier . . . ?"

From Prague the Meyers drive southeast toward industrial Jihlava. The road there was wide and smooth, the countryside lush with the green of early spring, a green speckled red with poppies and orange with the tile roofs of clustered houses, the passenger compartment of the BMW filled with the relief of a fever finally broken, filled with the good cheer of holidays past.

"Once we're across," says Nina, "I'm getting good and drunk. I mean, my God. The way we just picked up and ran out of there. Like a couple of kids getting away with something."

"You talking about the bribe?" says Meyer. "The bribe's nothing. Believe me. Who's ever going to know?" Even so, without thinking, he reaches out to touch their lifeline, the envelope filled with their documents sitting in the car's center console—the passports and visas, their currency receipts.

At Jihlava they pick up a secondary road taking them south through Stonafov and Zuletava, the earlier greens replaced first by a reddish clay then a crusted brown earth. At busy Zifojmo, some ten kilometers from the border, the road worsens, rutted, the going slower and more difficult. "I'm not going to smile," Nina is saying. "I don't know, it's like if they see how glad I am to be leaving, the guards might get suspicious." Then she shudders. "Too easy. Don't you think so, Arno? Getting out of here, I mean."

Barbed wire, suddenly. Ten feet high, it abuts the blacktop on either side, the fencing appearing to grow closer in the distance, the road appearing to grow even more narrow, a funnel through which Meyer feels them hurtling, the frontier a dismal landscape of solitary trees in the midst of mile-wide expanses. Easy does it, thinks Meyer, lightening up on the accelerator, a racing in his chest as the road sweeps up and across the next rise. And it is there, at the top of that grade, now six long hours from Prague, that Meyer sees it finally: the line of stopped vehi-

cles shimmering like a silver chain in the late afternoon sun. They have returned to Hevlin, the border with Austria.

"Vienna tomorrow?" says Meyer as they come to a stop, the last in a long line of cars and large trucks.

Nina is staring out through the windshield. "What's that? Oh, anywhere, Arno. So long as it's not here."

"Remember that hotel?" he says, placing his hand onto hers. "The Blumen was it? Those trellises covered with ivy?"

"Better move up," Nina says.

The sidewalk cafe—the Sokolov—faced Prague's Vaclavske Plaza. At the plaza's center stood a ten-foot-high statue in black marble, a horseman facing a wild charging dog. The plaza is long, perhaps one-half kilometer. On either side are structures in disrepair but which make up the heart of Prague: their ornamentation, their fairy-tale minarets and steeples, their balconies and oversized windows are at odds with an atmosphere one would charitably call dismal. At one in the afternoon the streets were deserted. That day, the Meyers' first full day in Prague, had been a day out of focus, the sun straining to break through a dusty haze which blanketed the trees, on the windshield of the solitary parked car a rust-tinted dust that burned Meyer's eyes. As they picked at their omelets Nina had rambled on about her cousins, her aunts; how they might well have crossed Prague's River Vltava on the very bridge she and Meyer had photographed that morning (voices she'd heard in the night having directed her to that bridge and no other). Over apple pastry she had wondered: Could her uncles have possibly had beers at this cafe? Sat at this table, these same iron chairs? Their waiter—a white towel over his folded arm, his tuxedo sadly out of place—was a man who appeared old enough to remember.

What was there to say? Twenty-five years married, Meyer had never seen his wife in such a state. Voices in the night directing her to bridges, a cafe's iron chairs. And what next? And what, wondered Meyer, was driving her like this? Was it guilt, that her parents, her grandparents had the good sense to pick up, to get out? What was her coming here, sitting on these iron chairs, crossing stone bridges, going to undo, going to bring back? It was, he realized, as though more and more his wife was becoming one with her lost family, and, as such, was drifting away. And for an instant, as he looked about for their waiter,

Meyer could not help but wonder what it would be like to experience all that she was. Oh, not that he wished to hear voices. Not that he needed to be reminded that he was a Jew. No. His wondering was so that he might keep his wife from floating away. That was all.

A woman had passed the cafe no fewer than three times. She carried a large fabric purse, her skittish eyes framed by a shag of dry yellow hair. Each time she passed she stared hard at the Meyers. She knows we're American, thought Meyer, recalling *Cloak and Dagger*, Gary Cooper being approached in the bar of a Zurich hotel. *You are American, yes?* the pudgy stranger had asked. *Of course. Yes, I see it quite clearly by your clothes. By the martini you drink.*

When, as they were finishing their coffee, the woman passed yet again, Nina nodded and, to Meyer's astonished regret, flashed a smile. The woman stopped in her tracks. And extending a trembling white finger, she called out a question in Czech. A question, so Meyer assumed by the inflection in her voice. Then she asked it again. And, when the Meyers still did not answer, once more.

No. Not just a question, Meyer realized suddenly. Both question and accusation, that's what it was. Well, whatever the woman's problem—the arrogance of the hotel manager, the elevator still out of service, this omelet swimming in grease—Meyer was out of patience. He pushed back from the table. He got to his feet. And affecting his best All-American twang, he announced, "Whatever you think we did, ma'am, we didn't." Then he laughed. He laughed and looked around for a reaction from Nina (not so much as a smile). He looked to their waiter. But the man, after hovering throughout their meal like a dark cloud—as though they might run off without paying—had chosen that moment to turn his back, distancing himself from what he knew was about to take place. Meyer glanced at their bill and removed a handful of crowns from his pocket, scattering the coins across the table like pebbles.

"She believes you are Jews." An elderly man had appeared. Even as Meyer was about to ask him to repeat what he had said, the woman turned her attention to the old gentleman, beating at the air with her fists as she spoke, her fists two small white pistons. The old man did what he could to calm her, appearing or pretending to agree with whatever she was saying. He closed his

hands around hers, brought a white finger to his lips, then to hers. And for a moment, the old man and the shaggy-haired woman had stood quietly, breathing together.

Once the woman had been coaxed into leaving—still muttering, her purse clutched tightly to her chest—the old gentleman sighed. "I am sorry. But she wanted to know why, if you are Jews, why you have come here, of all places? 'Go home,' she said. 'Go now. And do not come back.'"

"Did I tell you?" said Nina. "Did I say they would see that we're Jews?"

But before Meyer could speak, before he could say the woman had made a guess not one in a million would make, the old man's eyes opened wide, the amused look of a man surrounded by grandchildren. "They? Did you say 'they'? I think—no, I am certain—that the poor woman, she is Jewish herself."

Nina did mutter something though Meyer was suddenly distracted. Distracted by his own face reflected, distorted, in a squat glass of water. The gray at the temples, the wide forehead, the creases that fanned out from his eyes. But a face, just a face. Not a face that would reveal more about him than that he is a man. Not a face to reveal the particular God in which he believes. And without attracting attention, he moved the glass to one side.

"We see very few Americans today," the old man was saying, having pulled over a chair, as though someone had asked him to sit. His hair shone like white silk—it just covered the collar of his white shirt, his blue eyes bringing out the darker blue of his suit. And despite himself Meyer found he was drawn to this man, suddenly detecting a resemblance to an uncle of his—the thick lips, the eyes so eager to please. As for Nina, she was already in the midst of a feverish monologue, a whirlwind report to the old man that began with their crossing into the country. And while Nina spoke, in his mind Meyer reconstructed a picture of the border.

"Was it Hevlin?" Meyer heard the old man asking, Nina having stopped for a breath. "Was that where you crossed over from Austria? Was it Hevlin?"

Meyer looked up. At the mention of the village he had been able to add an abandoned railroad depot to the picture, a sign hanging from the slanted roof, a white sign with black letters,

HEVLIN. And before Meyer could stop himself, he had turned and said, "Yes. Yes, we entered at Hevlin."

The afternoon sun bakes the BMW, the upholstery, the dash. The sun glints off the hood. The heat rings loudly inside Meyer's head. In the more than one hour they have been waiting in line, waiting to leave Czechoslovakia, they have moved no more than twenty-five feet. The border at Hevlin sits in a basin between two barren hills. Beyond the facing hill lies Austria—although Meyer, long since having mislaid the good spirits that came with leaving Prague, will believe it when he sees it, when he feels someplace other than Czechoslovakia beneath his feet.

Towering above this basin, less than a kilometer to their right, rise the twin stacks of an industrial plant, the air smoky and full of the rotten-egg aroma of sulfur. Meyer, again rubbing his eyes, is suddenly startled by a boy of a guard, the boy rapping with his hand on the driver-side window of their car, one of two dozen guards Meyer has counted during their long wait. And Meyer recalls these same guards when, four days earlier, they first entered. The same long wait in the heat, helpless as the guards took apart then reassembled their cameras. Recalls doing what he could, attempting to bend the reality until it seemed less a threat, offering to photograph the guards, offering each guard a Mars Bar, a stick of Doublemint, a handful of vanilla wafers for their dogs. The American nonchalance. The charm of Jimmy Stewart or Gary Cooper.

But this particular guard, this young boy rapping today at the window of their car, is a boy you will not win over with Mars Bars or wafers. This is a boy on the brink—of what, Meyer does not know. But the boy's eyes are jittery, his bone-white hands now opening and closing around the butt end of his rifle. A rifle with which he is motioning to the Meyers—Leave your car, now, yes. Leave it here. Go. Go up there. There. Go up to the railroad station. Go, go, go.

The old gentleman at the cafe Sokolov. Eyes squinting, the old man had turned slowly to Meyer. "Hevlin," he said, "is where I myself crossed. In 1938 it was. From your country it was I was coming. You are surprised, yes? From our legation in Washington . . ." And a moment later the old man was describ-

ing his apartment building on Connecticut Avenue, then a visit to St. Louis. "My wife's sister, she lives there still . . ."

Wasn't it enough that Meyer had Nina to care for? But now there was this: this sad old man and his stories. And Meyer had picked up a menu and pretended to read. But as he did he recalled *Cloak and Dagger*. Not only did Cooper escort Lily Palmer to freedom, there had also been a man. An elderly man. A world-renowned physicist . . .

"But already we could see what was coming," the old man was saying. "That a piece of my country would be turned over to the Germans. We believed—ah, we were such fools—if we are home, there is a chance, something we can do. Ha! So we took the steamship to Genova. And from there, Vienna, from which there is the railroad that crosses the border at Hevlin."

"We saw that station when we entered," Meyer heard Nina.

But it was Arno's hand the old man had grasped suddenly. "You, you will forget. But for me, it was at that station that I understood what a mistake, this coming back." The old man removed a white handkerchief and dabbed at his forehead. His own hand set free, Meyer shoved it into the pocket of his trousers.

"My wife," the man began again, "was sitting next to me in the compartment. To her I said nothing—why do I want to worry her? No. What I did, I walked to the back of the railroad car to the steps that went down to the platform. And the steps they were talking: Get off this train. I swear I could hear them. Get off the train now. And I think, if I hurry back to my wife, if I pick up my two sons . . . But the steps, they did not know that we had already crossed over. You see, the border, the gates, at Hevlin for us it was already too late."

Days earlier Meyer had actually stood at that border. Because of this its gray hopelessness was still with him, enabling him to place himself with the old man at that depot. He heard the clanging of bells of the striped gates descending, saw the chalky-white faces pressed to Pullman car windows, the hazy sun flashing off the black polished rifles. And as these pictures rolled past, Meyer had felt suddenly vulnerable, the mask of American hero wiped clean from his face.

The old man was gazing out to the street now, remembering. "At Hevlin," he said, "at that station were a young man and a woman with a black steamer trunk. Side by side they were sit-

ting on a bench on the platform, a small bench black against the outside wall of the waiting room: red bricks. And I think to myself, They are waiting for the train in the opposite direction. And I said to myself, smart. They are smart to be leaving." Here the old man closed his eyes. Then he opened them. "It was green."

"Green?" said Nina.

"The bench." The old man shrugged, then smiled to himself. "Why do I remember? So many years, so much I forget—what my wife asks me to buy this morning—but that bench, still I know it was green."

At that moment a horn blared, three short blasts. A truck with gray canvas siding had arrived at the opposite side of the plaza. When the horn blared again the old man looked up. "Melons," he said, straining to get to his feet. "Now I remember what she says I must buy. Melons. Melons. So, if you would excuse me. Yes. I must get in the queue."

His hand was resting on the table. Nina covered it with her own. "I had family here," she said. "Before the war . . ." The old man nodded, but continued to look off toward the truck, its back filled with cassavas, possibly cantaloupes. "Perhaps you knew them," Nina was saying. "If you came back in 1938 . . ."

"I lived in Karlova," the old man said, lifting both his hands and Nina's from the table. The plaza, once empty, was slowly filling with people moving as though in time to a dirge, all carrying a fabric or straw basket on their arms. "In Karlova from then until this year. My wife, she was not well. Not at all. And you know, in Karlova the waters are special."

"Buy your melons," said Nina. "We will wait. We'll order some tea."

But the old man, if he didn't get home, his wife would soon worry. And a moment later he was gone.

"He reminds me of Morris," said Meyer. "You remember. My father's brother. The whole time, it was like someone from my family telling that story."

Nina turned to him. As though realizing something for the first time, she said, "Do you even know where your family is from? What city? What country?"

Meyer coughed into his hand. "What I'm going to do once we're home is drive out to my father's. You know how he's always dying to talk about the old country." What country that was Arno Meyer did not know. Nor did he know who it was

that forced the family to flee—the Russians? The Germans? But Meyer did know himself that the idea of visiting his father had occurred only because of where he was at this moment—physically and emotionally. Visiting his father was an idea he was certain to abandon once they were safely at home.

The boy with the rifle, the cold jittery eyes—Meyer follows his directions. Up to the station, go, go, go, go. "The old man," Myers mutters. After pulling their valises from the trunk of the BMW, he joins Nina at the side of the blacktop, the two of them stepping across the rail line which had carried the old man home to what then was his country. Rails now red-coated with rust, tall dry brush sprouting between their ties.

The station's platform—where the old man had seen that young couple, seen the black steamer trunk—is long and gray, the concrete in places cracked open wide. It is some hundred feet from their car to the depot's waiting room—he assumes that room now serves as exit customs—and Meyer, toting their valises, perspiring heavily, steps slowly and with care muttering, "Got to get out of this place . . ." until finally he stops, just for a moment, to ease the ache in his tired arms.

And he is about to hoist the valises when all at once, as though his name has been called, Meyer turns right and sees it: a small iron bench. So small it hardly qualifies as a bench; a love seat were it in a parlor, a bench barely wide enough for two. But Meyer has no doubt, no doubt whatsoever, that this is the very same bench on which that young couple sat planning to leave this place while they still had the chance. Yes, there are other benches on the long platform. But only one, this bench, is set back against the bricks. And look, see how this bench has retained the splashes of green on its frame, in the curls of its arms, in the small iron rosettes across its back.

Meyer crouches on the platform and slowly runs a finger along those rosettes. Then he stands and with both hands, careful not to strain himself, lifts one end of the bench an inch or so off the ground, then sets it down. Possibly. Possibly small enough, he finds himself thinking, to tie across the trunk of their car. After all, Nina has her photos, her old trunk—her connections to a past she had never actually lived. Well, he can have this. He can place it somewhere, in a spot he'd be sure to see every day. A reminder—that's what it would be. A reminder. Just that.

"Arno," he hears Nina calling back to him. "Arno, come on."

When the customs people are through with them, he will show it to her, this bench. And will she be amazed? Absolutely. And why not? Thirty-five years and, my God, it's still here.

There is an ancient synagogue in Prague's Jewish Quarter, a small maze of streets north of the Charles Bridge. "Is a synagogue, was a synagogue," Meyer had not been sure which was appropriate. Enough to say a building which at one time served this purpose, the faint remains of Hebrew lettering carved into its outer wall, the color of saffron. On each of their two days in Prague the Meyers had visited this building. Arno's idea: what better place for Nina to learn the history of the Jewish Quarter, those who had lived there, those who still did? Names and addresses. Old photos, perhaps. Two days, two visits a day, on these visits Meyer's door knocking received no response. And so they had wandered the quarter, Staronova Square, the small park no larger than a pocket, the dark streets, cobblestones loose or missing, one or two gas street lamps still standing.

The people they saw were people whose eyes did not quite meet theirs, people who had said with those eyes, No questions. Please. And the Meyers—filled with the story told by the old man in the plaza, filled with his pain—asked nothing of these people. Seven times they silently walked the circumference of what once was the heart of the quarter—the enormous indoor market, now an empty shell. Four times they peered into the shops on Maislova, most of these shops deserted, one sad window still containing several spools of thread, three balls of red yarn. Meyer wiped away the window's grime with his sleeve. But it was on their fifth visit to the synagogue that Meyer believed he had detected the sound of someone moving inside, that he had decided to pound harder and longer on the thick wood. Pounding. *This time they'll answer.* Pounding. *Halfway around the world we've come; don't you treat us this way.* Pounding. *Her family.* Pounding. *Don't you see?* Pounding. *Can't you tell? I'm one of you. One of you, can't you see?* Pounding. Pounding. When all at once the door opened a crack and a man's face appeared, tiny, mouselike, the brim of his hat pulled low, obscuring his eyes. And for one moment a breathless Arno Meyer believed it was face of the old man from the plaza. It wasn't.

"Let's go home, Arno," Nina had said suddenly, once the door had been closed in their faces.

But Meyer, still breathing heavily, had remembered their documents. "Our papers," he'd said. "The visas might not be back from the police."

"Pay him off," said Nina instantly, as though she'd been considering it for some time. "The manager. Pay him whatever it takes."

The depot waiting room at Hevlin. Save for the Meyers, the room—three rows of wooden benches facing a single door—is empty. Meyer closes his hand around Nina's and together they stare at that door, which, after some minutes, opens, a couple emerging. The man—burly and tall, seemingly the same age as Meyer—appears highly distressed, the front of his blue shirt stained with perspiration. Without a second's hesitation, and as though he and the Meyers are old friends (or at least in the same fix), the man says, "They're sending us back." The man's accent is British.

Meyer says, "Back?"

"To Prague," says the man's wife. Gray as ash, petite as Nina, she appears on the threshold of tears. "Our visas," she says. "They say they're missing a stamp. One bloody stamp from their bloody police, and they send you all the way back to Prague."

"They held onto *our* papers four days," Meyer says, running a hand over the envelope in his lap.

"No one told us," says the Englishman. "Not when we entered. Not at the hotel. Not the bank."

Meyer shudders. Anything is possible here. "These Czechs," he begins. "They have one hell of a time with languages, you know. Could just be a language problem. Because going back to Prague, my God, it's probably an eight hour drive . . ."

"Meyer." A blond young man in a black suit has stepped out through the doorway. "Won't you come in?" he says, his English showing only the slightest trace of an accent.

The late afternoon sun slants through a pair of tall shadeless windows. Like a sheer curtain, it divides the long room. The room is empty but for a single table and three chairs at its far end. The walls are white, and attached to one wall is a glass cab-

inet containing a rack of black rifles. The young Czech sits across the table from the Meyers. His blond features are fine; so fine, so fair, that if asked Meyer would say he is pretty. A smile that comes easily, a grace to his hands as he opens the Meyers' envelope, their documents—the passports, currency receipts, the suddenly priceless police certifications—slipping out. And Meyer—relieved by the Czech's manner, his effortlessness, the confidence that comes with knowing one's job—lets out a long breath, even as he reminds himself, careful. This is likely the same man who ordered those British back to Prague.

"So, you are leaving us after what? After only . . . four days?"

"We're just leaving." Meyer hears himself as arrogant. And so he nods slowly, and in a tone softer, more generous, he adds, "An emergency. In the family. My wife's family, that is."

The Czech narrows his eyes, then looks down at his desk to the papers, carefully studying one, then slapping it face down and starting in on the next. "You have purchased money when you entered?" he asks, his blue eyes shifting over to a white slip of paper. "Two thousand crowns for each day for each person. This paper, it says twenty-eight thousand," and the Czech writes into a thick spiral notebook. "So, you had intended to spend seven . . ."

"But the emergency . . ." says Nina, grasping the arms of her chair, Meyer closing his own hand over hers.

The Czech smiles. It is the smile of a man who has heard a story too many times. "Yes, of course. An emergency," he says. His prettiness has vanished, replaced by the narrowed eyes and pursed lips of the minor official, the bureaucrat comfortable with his stamps, his forms. "So then," and he rubs his hands together like an insect, "you will have much of it remaining, the money you purchased?"

In fact there is nothing—barely fifty crowns—Meyer having given the hotel manager all but what he had estimated they would need for food and gasoline. The young Czech is saying, "Because it is forbidden for even one crown to leave our country, a most serious offense. An offense against the State. Yes. Not an innocent mistake. Not a missing stamp like those English before you. But, of course, if you have spent the money you purchased, for mementos, for souvenirs, if you would be so kind as to show me your receipts . . ."

The room has grown smaller, the air heavy. Meyer half stands from his chair, and realizing there is nowhere to go, sits back down. He looks for a sign from the young Czech—a smile, a sigh, a casual flip of the hand—something to indicate that after an uncomfortable moment or two they will be permitted to leave. Something to give hope that Vienna—the Hotel Blumen—is still possible. But the young Czech's expression shows nothing. He waits, quietly, for Meyer to speak, his long fingers drumming the desk.

Meyer forces a smile, a smile he knows lacks conviction. He removes his billfold from his trousers and places it onto the table. His American dollars. "A minute?" he says. "There are calculations, some receipts . . ." The Czech frowns. He appears to want to say, Come now, do you have the money or not? Instead, he stands and turns and walks off to the opposite end of the room through the soft curtain of light.

"He's just hinting for a bribe," Nina whispers. "They're all the same."

And of course she is right. But why hadn't Meyer seen this for himself? Or had he seen it and dismissed it, as though, for some reason, he'd wanted there to be a problem, wanted them to be detained? And while he is relieved by Nina's words, the relief is followed immediately by a sense of regret. On some level, a level Meyer cannot explain to himself, he had been enjoying the sense of danger, the powerlessness, the uncertainty of what might come next.

"He seems much too young," he says to Nina, trying to get back to those feelings. "Too dedicated. He might actually be telling the truth about our breaking their damned laws."

Nina sits back. "I'm telling you," she says loudly enough to be heard across the long room. "He wants money. That's all."

"A minute," says Meyer, focusing on the dryness that has closed down his throat, trying to locate and revive the fear which had gripped him, to taste what it might have been like to be Nina's cousins, her aunts, members of his own family, family whose names his father can tell him once they are home.

"Arno," Nina whispers.

Of course, Meyer knows what he is doing is unfair to Nina, to those who had come to places like this and been prevented from going further. Still he sits quietly, elbows on the table, head in hands. Somehow he is going to bring back this moment.

"We'll say we lost the money," Nina is saying. "Let him prove that we didn't."

The young Czech has stepped back through the curtain of light. Smiling, he is leaning against the rifle cabinet, picking at his fingers. To Meyer's right, the closest in a line of windows is open; a truck growls as it passes, particles of dust flittering in the light. And when Meyer looks back, the Czech has returned.

So," he begins, sliding into his chair. "The money."

Meyer sighs. He places what crowns they still have onto the table. "That's it. That's all. Nothing more." The Czech flips open the notepad and is just beginning to write when Meyer says, "But you did say something about our purchasing souvenirs. Mementos? You did say that, yes?"

The Czech lifts his head. "Yes, yes. What about these mementos."

"Because I did see something," and turning to Nina, who seems as confused as she is terrified, "that we can put it in the front yard, somewhere sure to be seen. Between the azaleas and lilacs . . ."

William Snyder, Jr. In English, Lantana

A woman gathers lantana beside a village road, picks
three stems, blossoms on each like clusters
of costume buttons and snaps—pink, white, orange rings
and beads. I like lantana too, and as I draw close
I fumble a book of Greek for in, for English. I want to say,
in English, lantana, so that she might say it too,
but in Greek—round and liquid—like the village name here,
Dhiakofto. I want to make a little synapse of words
between us, drawn close by threads of flowers; this man
who will take the train away in an hour or two,
and this woman—brown skirt, brown sweater, Greek,
stranger, who has gathered this little bunch of lantana sprigs
for mantle vase, window ledge, granddaughter's crib. I point
to her flowers, say: en Anglika, lantana. She pauses, holds
the lantana up. Again I say: en Anglika, lantana. She nods
the flowers closer, smiles *yes*, they *are fresh, bright.*
I like them. Do you? and she offers them to me, her face
a simple gesture of *here, would you like?* I wag my hands
no, no, embarrassed—for this failure at something
so simple, but for words, embarrassed to have been
offered, perhaps to have forced the offering,
then not to have taken. But as she walks into the village, as I
walk to the Gulf below—Korinthiakos Kolpos—I know
I have taken something, plenty: the times I will notice
lantana in other towns, or in photographs, or in those
odd moments of days at home—turning right on 8th,
folding the flap of an envelope, sipping coffee
on a school day morning, and I will see this woman
picking her flowers and I will say, *in English, lantana.*

Marci Pliskin

Face Value

Some folks take things at face value, like my daughter, Lucy-Ann. Right before my sixty-sixth birthday, I overheard my youngest ask, "What does Pop need? Nothing. He's so . . . dull."

"No dear, it's just that he already has a power drill." See how my wife Dottie defended me in her offhand way? Her will, her speech, even the sharp blue of her eyes had become smoothed like a stone in a sandstorm, but when we met, she was forceful, bossy even. Back then she would have listed dozens of gifts: jackknives with plastic magnifying-glass attachments; fancy poker-chip holders that broke the first time you anted up; or jigsaw puzzles designed to make you go half blind. Her emphatic opinions—misguided opinions about who I was, what I needed and wanted—eroded with time. Later I wondered if this erosion had weakened her in other ways, exposing her to the leukemia that killed her.

So. I was a dullard. Dottie and my youngest sat at the kitchen table and I stood, unnoticed, at the threshold. "Pop's so predictable," Lucy-Ann complained. "What you see is what you get." Their hands, framed in the doorway, toyed with the handles of their teacups. It reminded me of when I was twenty years old, a newlywed, eavesdropping at the same threshold. "He only *thinks* he wants to leave Phoenix," Dottie informed her own mother, challenging my romantic dream of our destiny. My hands, still smooth and unveined, felt dumb suddenly, hanging pointlessly at my sides. I'd imagined them hauling up nets filled with cod or scraping the barnacles off the underbelly of my own sturdy fishing boat. "What do we need with hurricanes and landslides and rogue waves?" Her hands had drifted over her swollen belly. "We're better off here with what we know," she continued, her voice faltering, tripping over some fear that had nothing to do with weather at the seashore. Then, after a short silence, she pointed out the kitchen window to the barren desert that abutted our grassy yard and snorted, "Well! We used to be right in the middle of an ocean millions of years ago! That should be enough!"

Soon the babies started arriving. Soon Dottie began her collection of paperweights. Over the wash of years she perfected the recipes that our mothers passed down: lemon-pecan drop biscuits, corn griddle cakes with pear butter, beef macaroni stew, pork roast with apple chutney, upside-down pineapple-cherry cake, chicken dumpling casserole. And I lost my dream, vague as it was, of the sea. As my Uncle Luke used to say: "Marriage is a sweet kind of death."

We carved out a good life. My construction company changed the Sonoran Desert from an arid plain whose horizon shimmered in the scorching heat into dozens of real turf golf courses and housing developments with lawns greener than you'd see in a rain forest. The developments had names like Oasis Hills and Babbling Brook Estates. On weekends my kids tugged on my belt, begging me to toss them in the pool, just one more time. I watered and fertilized and mowed our lawn; I put up a good fight against the encroaching desert. I watched my girls become women. It was easier to transform the desert than to uproot my wife and girls. A family survives because someone surrenders—so for the greater good I was a landlubber. We deepened our roots in Phoenix. I suppose I grew dull, but that blunted my resentment. Then Dottie got sick.

And I would have drained the oceans dry if it could have cured my wife.

After Dottie died, I retired. The grass fried and the coyotes drank the pool water. My power drill collected dust. I stopped carving desert animals—Gila, armadillo, badger—for my grandkids. I stared at Dottie's collections of paperweights, silver teaspoons, salt and pepper shakers—all items that had bound her to this dry earth—and I couldn't shed a tear. I closed the blinds and watched *Judge Judy* and whatever else came after. My eyes ached from the blue glow of the TV screen that ran nearly twenty-four hours a day.

Then Lucy-Ann bought me a ticket on a cruise ship. And what happened to me on that ship amounts to a rebirth. Imagine me, seventy years old, in the eye of an overpowering event.

Love upended me the way a wave knocks you off balance. Dottie and I lived by rules that had more to say about the passion between a man and a woman than Reverend Chase's Sunday sermons. We'd limited ourselves to brief morning interludes when the girls were at sleep-away camp or cautious embraces in

the dark of our air-conditioned bedroom. We'd never let ourselves quench our thirst. But here was a new woman, a woman with a smattering of freckles spilling across her chest like constellations, a woman who tasted like salt.

The night I met her (I was avoiding the karaoke sing-along in the Sea-of-Dreams Lounge), she spotted me on deck, studying the swath of moonlight laying a path on the dark ocean.

"You might think you'd never seen the ocean before!" she said. How could she know that I hadn't? My family had gone to the Mojave, Great Basin and Chihuahuan Deserts, up to Bryce Canyon, down to Yuma, Bisbee, and Tucson—always deeper into the desert, never to the ocean where parched land mercifully ends. I'd never dared to visit the ocean for fear of the spell it might cast.

"There's a first time for everything, I suppose," I said to this woman who leaned over the railing beside me, watching the sea drink up the moon's reflection. I thought about how the desert heat used to sap me, how the years with Dottie slipped by with an enervating predictability, and yet, how I had loved my wife in spite of this. Or because of this. I'd finally grown to love—is that the word?—her constancy, the way she insisted on a row of silver cups on her dresser, one each for pennies, nickels, dimes, quarters. Or how, on my way home from work, I could imagine her in the kitchen, the steam from the boiling potatoes moistening the hair around her forehead and causing her neck to flush. I grew comfortable knowing she'd never let thawed lamb chops go to waste because of my sudden urge for the shrimp cocktail served up icy cold at Coco's Restaurant. I must have loved her for it. Imagine that.

But now here I was, a salty, humid breeze glancing my cheek. The sky and the sea were so black that for the first time in my life I couldn't tell which end was up. The ground beneath me rolled. And just then, my eyes welled up with tears.

I had forgotten the rules of romance or else never learned them: when to do what, how often, in what order? Flowers before champagne? A waltz before a kiss? I had no idea. At first I tried to approach this affair the same way I built housing communities: step-by-step, framing the structure first. But a love affair has no blueprint. It's fluid and changes course and shape and sometimes the passion rushes at you like a flash flood, nearly drowning you. Somehow I held on. I stuck with it.

One morning—it was right before the doctor had finally diagnosed Dottie with acute leukemia—Dottie came into the kitchen, where I was reading the sports page. She held a new pair of beige walking shoes. "I haven't gotten around to wearing these yet," Dottie whispered to herself. My ailing wife struggled to double-knot the shoelaces. "I bought them near two months ago and never took them out of the box. Imagine that!" She stood slowly, clutching at the pain in her side. "I mean to give them a spin around the cul-de-sac," she informed me in a false, cheery way that hung unchallenged between us. "It just won't do to have shoes I've never worn." I got up as if to accompany her, to help her if she'd allow it, but she waved me away. I watched my wife shuffle out to the rock garden where the century plant had finally decided to bloom. Even though she'd been tending that garden for nearly forty years, she looked so lost. I found I couldn't breathe around the ache in my chest. She took slow, determined steps. My wife insisted that certain things had certain uses and to waver from that, to let shoes go unworn, to mix pennies with dimes, was to lose the thread of one's purpose.

But after Dottie died, I found three shoeboxes from Dillard's buried in the back of her closet. In each box was a pair of movie-star, high-heeled slippers, silk ones, with thin, delicate straps. One pair in jade green, one lavender, one pale yellow. Two had flowers embroidered in satin on the instep; the third was covered in silver sequins. The receipt told me they'd been tucked away in that closet for nearly twenty-seven years. Dottie had never worn a single pair of these high-heeled slippers.

I should have taken her to the Biltmore for New Year's Eve celebrations that lasted until dawn. I should have sipped champagne from those slippers and fed her caviar in the back of a sleek limousine. But I never knew. Dottie, too, had secret wishes that never found a home.

The woman who saw me introduce myself to the sea was a talkative person, full of words that shocked me, turning their usual definitions around so that I felt like I was experiencing "butter" or "ice cube" or the idea of "round" for the first time. "This salad tastes green," she blurted one night as the ship headed toward Martinique. "And what does green taste like?" I asked. She lowered her fork. "Like sun and rain and time." She took another bite. "Like life."

Love puts down its tenacious roots in all sorts of unlikely,

inhospitable environments. A cholla tree sends up a shoot in a faint crack in the sidewalk. A saguaro drinks only a tiny bead of moisture yet grows with time. And when that happens, when love survives despite what's forfeited, despite the sandstorms that tear what's cherished from your heart, then is that love better or worse that one that arises effortlessly? Is the new love worth more or less than the one that had cost so much? Sometimes when I kiss this new woman, the one who tastes like salt, her lips give way to Dottie's taste: lavender and the crisp morning desert air. For a moment, they are one. For a moment I accept this gift at face value.

Lisa Verigin

Homeward

We were arrowing through a southern Nebraska winter,
home more than an hour behind us, the place
where Kansas begins, ahead, both of us hoping
out loud for a sign that would let us know where
it *did* begin—everything tending to look so the same
though this heft of America's gut. Then we argued
whether the fog just then starting to argue
with the night was actually fog or mist or vapor.
Whatever, it was shaping itself out of nothing,
like a little fist of thought, small miracle
ghosting from the lazy shadows of brush
lining the road. I said *fog* and quashed the cig
I'd lit up in Wymore where yet another
otherwise reticent quickie-mart clerk had sung us
the "You Ain't From Here Blues," driving us
back to the deep-degreed dark. On the stereo,
Ginsberg kept slurring his funny way through "America."

And darkness is only real in the gut of America
where no smear of light's enough to scar the sky.
The light here, tonight, was zero—the moon on the lam,
stars rubbed out by the fog, or mist, or whatever it was,
maybe clouds crawling low. I don't know. All I know is
it all made me wonder again whether Here would ever be Home;
if this slow, dark silence would ever feel more right
than the shimmering tattoo of my gone homes on the coasts;
if being surrounded like this would ever feel saner
than peering over the edge of the world.

That's when it happened: the deer gracing into the double
spotlight of my high beams, then scuttling away
as I slowed, veered, not seeing strange magic,
the second deer busting out of the brush
like a glittery, half-naked lady escaping a paper cake.
It crashed into us, cracking the windshield, wrying the antenna,

shattering the sideview mirror, ricocheting, leaving
rough shapes of itself, this small disaster—

And disasters are sort of like miracles,
like sacrifice, unexpected and only ever half
understood—perhaps the mechanics of how
things get broken or die, never the why do we need it,
except, perhaps, to make us feel at home in the world.

I don't know what happened to the deer.
We just kept driving through the hard arms of night,
    toward Topeka,
while fog curled and settled like it does each winter back where
    I was born.

Robert Cooperman

The Reverend Thomas Burden Thinks of the French Miner, Emil Simon: Gold Creek, Colorado Territory, 1871

If good-hearted whores
were fine company for Jesus,
who am I to sneer
Mary LaFrance is going to Hell:
as innocent a jewel as was ever lured
into that devil's business?
But I draw the line at drunks,
like that Papist atheist, Emil Simon,
and his fancy French lizard-juice.

He's always trying to argue religion—
Jesus a fairy tale, so he says—
damning himself to Hell, and soon.
When the wind blows right,
I'll hear his everlasting agony,
though I'd spare Mary's delicate ears
any misguided pity for that sinner.

I saw the way that Frog swallower
stared at Mary, the one time
his devil-shadow crossed
the threshold of my church;
and then he had the gall to tell me
my wife Lavinia cut a fine figure.

She's all elbows and knees sharp
as whetted axes in our cold bed,
when the spirit moves me to try,
one more time, for the holy child
Mary'd give me with no trouble at all.

Virtuous Men

Frederick is in the swimming pool yelling at Jay to come join him. "It'll make you feel like a new man," he shouts, while flailing his arms and smacking the water with his palms. The last thing Jay wants to do is to go swimming with Frederick. In the first place, he hates to swim. After his father left, his grandmother took him on a trip to Niagara Falls. He spent an entire day cannonballing off the high dive at the hotel swimming pool pretending he was going over the Falls in a barrel. That evening he had a terrible earache. They had to find a doctor, and he had to have a shot. Ever since then he has not liked to swim. When he does, he is careful to keep his head above water. If he stays too long underwater or dives down too deeply, his ear begins to ache.

In addition, Jay despises Frederick but must pretend to like him for his mother's sake. Frederick is twelve, a year older than Jay, and quite a bit bigger. He is the son of his mother's new husband, who is a Presbyterian minister, thin as a rail, and what his mother calls a virtuous man. His mother and stepfather are lying in deck chairs by the side of the pool, reading. Jay sits beside them on the brick patio. With a stick he is leveling anthills constructed from the sand between the bricks. He watches as the ants experience a moment of frenzy before neatly filing off to a nearby, soon-to-be-destroyed-by-Jay anthill.

"Jay, you're making a mess," says his mother. She wears a navy blue, full-piece bathing suit. Jay's mother has a way of making the plainest clothes look glamorous. Jay supposes this is why the minister married her. "Why don't you go swimming with Frederick?" she asks.

"Yeah, c'mon, Jay. Just dive right in. It'll make you feel like a new man, I tell you."

Jay wishes he could laugh at Frederick's nerdy awkwardness, but he hates him too much to find him funny.

"If Jay doesn't want to swim, " says his stepfather, looking up from his book, "I don't think we should pressure him into it."

Jay stands up, his legs covered with sand. He dives into the deep end of the pool and swims downward until he feels a slight

ache in his ear. He looks up at Frederick's dimpled, soap-white legs churning lethargically above him. A full meal for a great white, Jay thinks, and starts humming to himself the theme song from *Jaws*. When he resurfaces, Frederick swims up close to him. "You like it under there? Happy to oblige," and he heaves his heavy body on top of Jay, his chubby fingers gripping Jay's shoulders. He dunks Jay several times.

"I can't breathe, Frederick," Jay manages to say between dunks. "You're going to kill me."

"Well, then you'll be dead, won't you, " says Frederick but he lets go of him. Jay pulls himself out of the pool on the opposite side from his mother and stepfather and lies belly down on the warm bricks. He sees that the ants have invaded the entire patio.

Frederick swims over to him and whispers, "I was right, wasn't I? I bet you feel resuscitated, revived, reinvigorated. I bet you feel like a new man."

Jay presses his thumb down on an ant and smooshes it into a brick. He would like to do the same to Frederick. Instead, he calls him the name everyone calls Frederick behind his back, and sometimes even to his face, at school.

"Motherless nutzoid," Jay mutters, then glances toward his mother and stepfather. Their eyes are closed, their hands clasped and resting on his mother's stomach. His mother's gold wedding band glints in the sun.

Frederick smiles triumphantly and swims off toward his father and new mother.

The last two years had gone by like a speeding bullet. His father left, his grandmother took him to Niagara Falls, his mother married the minister, Frederick became his brother. Jay, who didn't believe in God, prayed time would keep up its accelerated pace. He wanted his childhood over with. Of course, if his mother knew he felt that way, she would dissolve into tears, maybe even get sick and stay in bed for a week. He had learned very clearly that he could not be honest with her. The last time he had told her exactly what he thought had been a disaster, and he had sworn to himself he would never do it again. They had been lying in her bed eating popcorn he had popped, watching the Million Dollar Movie. He didn't remember the title of the movie but it starred Humphrey Bogart. It was Humphrey Bogart Week and they had watched *The Maltese Falcon*, *The Big*

Sleep, and *Casablanca*, but it wasn't any of those. In the movie Bogart played a truck driver, and Jay found himself wishing that the character was his father. Jay realized, during the commercials, that he had been having this childish fantasy and was feeling rather embarrassed when his mother said, "Jay, I have some exciting news. You're going to have a new father." For a minute he thought she had read his mind and was making fun of him. He even blushed.

"I'm going to marry the minister," she said. "You will have a father and a brother and we will be a whole family again. "

"No, " Jay said calmly, "you can't. They're evil. "

His mother got out of bed and turned off the television. "What has gotten into you?" she said standing at the foot of the bed.

"I don't trust them. "

"I'm tired," she said, not looking at him. He knew that was his cue to go to his own room. As he passed her she grabbed his arm. "You are going to love them. And if you don't love them, it will mean you don't love me. And how can I love you if you don't love me?"

He knew she didn't mean it. He knew she was sad and lonely and desperate for a whole family.

"Besides," she said letting go of him, "you're wrong." She flicked the television back on, hopped into bed, and patted the mattress beside her, which meant he could come back. "Frederick is just a boy, barely older than you, so how could he be evil? And your stepfather is a virtuous man—a minister and a lawyer for the poor. You know what I think," she said giggling, as he crawled back into the bed next to her, "I think you're jealous. "

She never mentioned her marriage plans again. He went to stay with his grandmother in Arizona for spring vacation, and when he returned he was shown his new house and his new bedroom, which he would share with Frederick. His mother and the minister had been married in a small ceremony at the First Presbyterian Church, where the minister gave a sermon one Sunday every month. Frederick had been one of the witnesses.

Frederick is draped over an innertube, his white flab bright against the black rubber. He is collecting dead things—spiders, leaves, a cricket—from the surface of the water and arranging them as if for a museum display on the black plastic. A

butterfly lands on the tube and Frederick swats it into the pool, then crushes it in his hands before adding it to his collection. "Oh well," he says, "this one I couldn't save."

Frederick is immensely unpopular at school. He seems to revel in the other children's hatred of him, but especially in his ability to humiliate Jay with his unpopularity. Jay, who had always taken his own popularity with his classmates for granted, no longer could. His new association with Frederick had tainted him, and Frederick knew it. Once upon a time, before Frederick became Jay's brother, Jay had felt sorry for him. After all, his mother had died of cancer. But Jay knew better now. Frederick cultivated his unpopularity. It was all part of a master plan. He had described it to Jay one night in the dark as they lay in their beds on opposite sides of the room. This was before Jay had insisted that his mother buy him a walkman.

"I need to be unpopular now," Frederick explained. "It's part of my training. I need to know how to take it, how to respond to mass rejection and not let it affect me. You see, one day I'll be running the country. Not President," he said, "it's too demeaning. I'll hold the top position at an international brokerage firm or run a media conglomerate. My wife will be beautiful and will have an almost equally powerful job. We will have powerful children that are very unpopular at school because they too will be in training for the future."

Jay would have thought Frederick was pathetic if he hadn't believed that what he was saying was the truth. He *would* be running the country in a few years. He would cheat, lie, steal, even murder, and each time he would say with great conviction, "This one I couldn't save." And everybody, even his enemies and those who were suspicious of him, would think of him as a virtuous man.

Jay is pretending to be asleep but really he is watching the ants through his eyelashes. He has decided that destroying the anthills is a futile endeavor and that it is much more interesting just to observe.

When Jay was nine, his father left him and his mother. One day he just didn't come home. When they finally heard from him they learned that he had moved to the West Coast and was living with a woman who had an autistic child. His mother

responded by staying in bed for the entire month of July, which she could do because she was a high school music teacher and didn't have to work in the summer. Jay did not mind. He and his mother watched TV from the time they woke up in the morning until they went to sleep at night. They ate cinnamon toast and cheerios for lunch and dinner as well as breakfast. Or they ordered Chinese food or a pizza, which would last them a couple of days.

His grandmother arrived at the beginning of August from Arizona, where she lived on a commune. She did the laundry, cleaned the house, and paid the bills, signing his mother's name on the checks. She made elaborate stir-fried vegetable dishes with tofu, bean paste, and wheat gluten and served them to his mother in bed on a tray. She had a strange habit of talking to Jay about his mother right in front of her, as if she were deaf or not there. "I told her once, if I told her a thousand times," she would say while making the bed with his mother in it, "to never marry a virtuous man. But did she ever listen to me? No," and she would hold the *o* until she was out of breath. "Your mother," she went on, inhaling deeply, "is beautiful, talented, charming, intelligent, sexy, capable of inflicting the most exquisite torture. She is the kind of woman that could make a man contemplate blowing out his brains and yet what happens to her? She winds up with a virtuous man, the living dead, the kind who knows nothing of passion and pain. The kind who makes virtue a vice. The kind who runs off with a woman and her handicapped son and tells himself he is doing the right and moral thing."

Every once in a while, when Jay wasn't watching TV with his mother or following his grandmother around while she cleaned, he felt sorry for himself. He thought of the piggyback rides his father had given him, the tickle sessions on his parents' bed, the afternoons spent in the park, the trips made to basketball games. He felt duped, tricked, that his father had just pretended to want to do those normal things a normal father does with his normal son.

Then one day his grandmother announced a plan. "Jay, you and I are going to Niagara Falls. It will be like a honeymoon, a new beginning for all of us. While we're away your mother is going to get out of bed and find herself a new man. Then she can get back in bed for as long as she likes."

Jay's mother gets up from her chair and dips her toes into the water. She never dives in. She takes her time getting into the pool, letting each part—ankle, calf, thigh, belly, chest—get used to the temperature before she finally glides into the water, head always up. Jay knew never to splash his mother. She had no sense of humor when it came to water. More than once she had flat out refused to swim with him because of a handful of droplets thrown her way. It didn't matter now since he rarely went swimming himself.

"C'mon, Mom, " Frederick says, "just dive right in. It'll make you feel like a new woman."

Jay rolls over onto his back and stares up at the cloudless sky. The yellow-white sun is just off to his left. He had been told never to look at the sun directly, but he does now. At first, the light fills his whole body and makes him feel pleasantly dizzy. Then brightly colored spots start to burn themselves into his vision, and he feels sick. He closes his eyes but the spots continue to appear.

He hears a loud splash and wonders if it is Frederick or his stepfather who has jumped into the pool and whether the spray reached his mother. He would like it if she refused to swim, if she became pouty and unreasonable, if she insisted they all leave the pool.

"Jay, Jay, Jay," Frederick calls. His high-pitched and unnatural sounding drone is nearly as nauseating as the green, blue, and red spots whirling around inside Jay's head. "Did you see Mom's belly flop?"

Jay sits up quickly and nearly vomits. He rubs his eyes to try to get rid of the spots but they remain. He peers through them in order to verify that his mother has actually jumped into the pool. She is hanging on to Frederick's innertube. Her hair is wet and pushed haphazardly back from her face. She is smiling.

"I haven't done that in years," she says giggling. "You're so right, Frederick. I do feel like a new woman.

Jay thinks about the seven long years he has in front of him until he's eighteen and officially out of childhood. He tries to comfort himself by conjuring up the Count of Monte Cristo huddled in a cold, damp cell on some forgotten island in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea. But it only makes Jay feel worse. He isn't in prison. He isn't even mistreated. He is just

some normal kid who, from time to time, falls into self-pity and lacks the imagination to climb out.

"My God," Jay's mother says, her voice filled with anguish. Jay jumps to his feet, flushed and embarrassed because he believes, like the time he wished Humphrey Bogart were his father, that his mother is responding to his thoughts.

"Laura!" the minister exclaims in a voice a parent uses with a child when she has done something dangerous.

"My ring," she cries, "I've lost my wedding ring. " And she holds up her hand as proof, her fingers splayed and bare.

Jay scans the bottom of the pool. The spots are still bursting in his eyes so it is a rather useless exercise, but he thinks he sees a flash of gold on top of the silver drain at the bottom of the deep end.

"There it is," he shouts, pointing at a spot, a ring, nothing at all. "I'll get it," he says and dives into the pool. When he opens his eyes the spots have disappeared. He looks toward the drain and sees the gold ring resting on top of it, just as he thought he had seen. He swims deeper, his ears filling with water and aching. He reaches down and grabs for the ring. The gold band falls through a hole in the drain but doesn't disappear. It sits on a wad of soggy leaves. He pushes off the bottom with his feet and goes up for air. He sees his mother's thin white legs dangling with Frederick's plump ones. As Jay rises his ears pop painfully several times.

"Did you get it?" his mother asks hopefully. She glances toward the minister.

"It fell into the drain but I can get it."

"Don't do it, son, " says the minister, standing up and walking to the edge of the pool. "It's too dangerous."

"That's right, Jay," his mother says. She stares down at her hand, which lies next to Frederick's collection of dead things on the innertube. "Forget it. It's too dangerous. I appreciate your trying."

"Of course," Frederick pipes in, "it's not the material worth of the ring but the sentimental value that's at issue here. "

Jay takes a deep breath and dives back down toward the drain. He extends both arms out in front of him like Superman. His head feels as if someone is jabbing thin needles into it. He thinks of Humphrey Bogart, the Count of Monte Cristo, Moses.

He pushes his thumb and forefinger through the hole in the drain and pinches the ring. He tries to pull his hand out. A sharp pain makes him inhale and he takes water in through his nose. His head burns. He doesn't panic. He knows he can pull his hand out of the hole. The worst that can happen to him is that he scrapes some skin off and there is some blood. But he doesn't pull his hand out. He hesitates. He hesitates, just as he will hesitate on several other occasions during his life when death presents itself as a choice. He sees that death is not complicated, cannot be misinterpreted, hurt, betrayed. It does not want only a part of him, but all of him. Death, Jay decides at the bottom of the pool with his hand stuck in the drain, feels very much like love.

He pulls his hand hard. He feels his skin tear and sees a little cloud of pink puff out into the blue water like a parachute opening in the sky. He shoots up to the surface. His head pounding, he crawls out of the pool. He lies down on his back and takes the air deeply into his lungs. The ring is clenched in the palm of his hand.

"For a moment there," yells the future ruler of the world, "I thought you might be dead. Did you at least get Mom's ring?"

His mother kneels next to him. Her sad blue eyes brim with adoration. "You scared me," she says and kisses him on the forehead, on the cheeks, on his nose, on both ears.

His stepfather says, "Your mother and I are grateful to you. What you have done means a lot to us. Although, as your new father, I feel compelled to say that there is a fine line between heroism and stupidity."

Jay sits up and hands his mother her wedding band. There's no virtue in death, he thinks. And what he wants more than anything in the world is to be a virtuous man.

Robert J. Oberg — Doing Pépère's Work

Pépère stirs as I nail the first joists.
He's wearing his straw hat and muscle undershirt.
The canvas nail pouch slouches
around his faded blue bathing suit.
He works like a bull inside me,
the hammer singing its persistent arc,
percussion of nails, groans of wood.

Pépère's raft fell apart five years ago.
Its gray deck had grown lopsided,
black metal barrels filled with lake water,
nails rusted, popped from the slippery frame.
Still the ladder lifted its arms in invitation
as we hitched the block and tackle,
hauled it out for the last time.

The view was unsettling without it—a shimmering
vacuum where we seemed to belong only in memory.
The patios fell silent, noise of families
dimmed to visits in one's and two's,
low talk beside a rented hospital bed,
known sometimes, sometimes not, the conversation
repetitious even for a family that always repeated itself.

Still, we'd hoped to hear our favorite stories
one last time. We all came back for coffee
and chicken salad sandwiches after Pépère's funeral.
Mémère pressed so tightly against the veil
it seemed like she died again that day.
Over 50 children, grand and great-grandchildren wandered
the yard. It was as if we were on our own for the first time.
I'm older now than my parents were
the day I first swam to the raft.
Layers of family had cheered from the wall
while my father swam next to me whispering
You can do it, you can do it.

As I climbed the ladder, I felt grown,
the weight of their worry lifting like mist.

My sister lives here now, though the place
almost passed to strangers. Like Pépère I drive
all able bodies as if time were coming to an end.
Twelve hours of skill saws, drills, ratchets,
hemmed in by wires, barely pausing to let food pass,
tools, board scraps, bent nails
strewn like accidents across the yard.

Pépère wheezes on a green metal lawn chair
while we bolt the lower frame, caging blue plastic barrels.
Mémère brings him ice water from the refrigerator jar.
He puffs to get his pipe started,
steadies the bowl with the nub of a finger
lost long ago to a table saw.
He smokes until we're finished.

The veins in his legs look like a chain of mountains
as he rises to help us drag the 1,500 pound raft
headlong down the grassy bank,
fulcrum an edge on the cement wall
and heave it groaning into the lake
with a splash that sounds more like an explosion.
He fades as we help the great-grandchildren scamper on

and we ferry them to the place it always was.
Drawn by the gravity of the cement block
that's secured two generations of rafts,
I dive down, as I did in my teens,
feel for the steel reinforcing rod
that bends through the breadth of the ancient block
before circling out the side like a handle in the earth.

I fasten the chain's alphabet,
fist my hands into the air as I surface.
Sunset glows on our children's faces.
They arch into dives, cannonballs, horsies and belly
flops, scramble up the ladder again and again
until the porch lanterns blur into rainbows,
and mosquitoes light on their uncovered flesh.

Jack Anderson The Consolations of Grime

Oh the sweet
melancholy
of Sunday afternoons
with overcast skies
that make it always autumn:

how sweet to stroll
along the canal path
down by the gas works,
the loading docks,
the mills with stained bricks,

past rows of shabby houses,
each with peeling walls,
a gritty backyard,
and wispy chimney smoke:

how sweet to walk
just as one likes
through a gray day's peace
in an endless November
and not have to be there
to work or to live.

Susan Scheid

Horst Beckmann's Hat

Verstummt squinted through the taxi's mud-spattered window at the Belgian countryside. Between streaks of dried mud, he could make out puffs of cloud riding the sky. The clouds reminded him, as they often did, of his father's *schaumtorte*—mounds of meringue whipped stiff with a wooden spoon. His father had shown him how to flick his wrist at each cycle of the spoon, but no matter how hard Verstummt whipped, the egg whites sat limp in the bowl. He could only watch as his father whipped the whites to a stiff-peaked froth, spooned the cloud-like clumps onto a baking sheet, and, when they were golden-crusted, poured them over with raspberry syrup.

That Verstummt could not make *schaumtorte* himself made him long for it all the more when his father died. Although he'd found the splattered yellow index card on which his father had written the recipe, beating the egg whites by hand lay forever out of his reach. And to use an electric eggbeater, according to his father, was *verboten*. The metal, he'd said, ruined the taste.

The taxi came to a stop in front of the hotel. "Ypres—Hotel Ariane. Four stars in the Eurotour Travel Guide," the travel agent had said. "Bar with an outdoor terrace facing the canal; full buffet breakfast; complimentary Belgian chocolates on your pillow when it's time to turn in." Verstummt liked the idea of the outdoor terrace. He'd imagined striped umbrellas and slender blonde women sipping languidly from wineglasses. He fished a handful of francs from his pocket and counted them into the driver's hand. The driver grunted and careened down the gravel driveway, blasting him with dust.

Verstummt removed his hat, handling it as if it were made of tissue paper—as if, were he to hold it too tightly, it would crumple and lose its shape permanently. The hat was covered in a patina of dust. He balanced it on his fist, where it hovered in the air as if painted there by Magritte, and flicked at it with his handkerchief. It was on account of the hat that Verstummt had come to Ypres.

While no languid blonde women graced the terrace's white-linened tables, Verstummt had guessed right about the striped umbrellas. There was indeed a canal, with a strip of lawn on either side neatly edged with marigolds. From time to time, prosperous-looking Belgians in their middle years marched along the length of it. "And what may I get for you this evening, sir?" Verstummt marveled at the perfection of the staff's English, down to the busboy, and at their wiliness in knowing, before he said a word, that English was what he spoke.

Verstummt stared at the hat, which he'd placed on the table in front of him. The hat was green velour, with a dark green cord wound around its base. The cord secured a clump of dusty feathers that spiked up from the hat like the wing of a ravaged bird.

The original owner of the hat brought it into a shop on the high street, between the bakery and the cookware shop, that specialized in selling second-hand goods. He was tall and somber, with hair gone white at the temples. "I don't like to discard items still of use," he said. "I purchased this hat as à memento of summering in Tegernsee, but under present circumstances I do not wish to be reminded. I could not, however, bring myself to discard it, so my wife suggested I bring it here." With a flourish of his gloved hand, he set the hat on the counter, turned sharply on his well-shod heel, and left the shop. The hat was drab but for the tuft of feathers sprouting from its rim. Nonetheless, the shopkeeper set it in the window.

Verstummt had first seen the hat when he was a teenager. He'd been in the entry hall closet, crouched on his hands and knees trying to find his baseball mitt. A scarf fringed with dust flapped in his face. He'd tried to yank it free and toppled a stack of boxes onto the closet floor. Out of one of them rolled the hat, which teetered to a stop in front of him.

Verstummt had set the hat on his head and preened in the mirror. Rough approximations of acorn, oak leaf, and bark streaked with brown stain repeated on the mirror's frame. Over his shoulder, Verstummt could see reflected an ochre-glazed plate inscribed in raised brown lettering with lines from a German drinking song. The mirror and the plate were *gebrauchte Geschichten*—second-hand histories—the name his father had

coined for objects rescued from Salvation Army bins piled high with the detritus of other people's lives. Verstummt mugged in the mirror and sang, in a loose mimicry of the drinking song's lyric, "Ist das nicht ein Schtupid Hat? Ja, das ist ein Schtupid Hat."

Crisp air slapped at Verstummt's face as his father swung open the front door and stamped on the entry mat. In a mock show of gallantry, Verstummt pinched the hat's brim and tipped it toward his father in greeting. His father responded with frozen silence, and Verstummt's arm dropped to his side, where the hat dangled against his thigh.

"What are you doing with that hat?" His father measured out his words, enunciating each with bone-cold clarity. "Give it to me," he said, "right now." He snapped the hat from Verstummt's hand and disappeared into the closet, holding the hat in front of him as if it were an unexploded shell.

Verstummt stood still, his ears keen to every sound—the soft plack of cardboard as his father returned the hat to its box, the metallic clank of hangers as he chose one on which to hang his overcoat. He waited, immobile, until his father emerged from the closet, retired to the living room, and settled into his reading chair, the one he'd had upholstered in wine-colored leather studded with brass rivets. He waited until his father exchanged his wingtips for a pair of old, battered slippers and set his glasses halfway down his narrow nose. Only when he heard the familiar dry rustle of his father shaking open the evening paper did Verstummt dare steal down the hallway and retreat up the staircase into his room. His father never spoke of the hat again.

Verstummt's father died sitting in his old upholstered chair. A neighbor found him slumped slightly forward, the *Wall Street Journal* splayed open on his lap and his arms slack at his sides, as if he'd simply grown tired of reading. That had been only a month ago, and it had fallen to Verstummt—there was no one else to do it—to gather up his father's clothing and possessions. They were few, for his father had dispossessed himself of most things when Verstummt's mother died, and anonymous. The Hummel figurines, the pressed gentian in the oval cherry wood frame, the Dresden china—all these had gone, although the pottery dish and mirror still hung in the ruined hallway amid its puncture holes, chipped plaster, and shadow-shapes of miss-

ing objects. Verstummt gathered up his father's cardigans and pants, his shoes and slippers and shirts, his coats, scarves, and gloves, and packed them in boxes for the Salvation Army. These would now become someone else's *gebrauchte Geschichten*—though Verstummt doubted if there was much that anyone would want.

The shopkeeper had been on the verge of removing the hat from his window when a group of soldiers clattered down the street and stopped in front of the store. The store was in the backwater of the war, the last stop for soldiers coming in from Germany before they got a taste of the front. Laughter, full of their strong youth, roared through the door as they pushed it open. A young man with dark blue eyes, who knew a bit of Flemish, said, "We will have the hat in the window." The shopkeeper lifted it out for them to view. They handed it around, each setting it on his head in turn, and prodded earnestly at its feathers.

Verstummt set the boxes in two orderly rows on his father's bed, but the mattress was soft, and they leaned in on one another. He sat at the edge of the bed, so as not to topple them, and picked up his father's wallet. There, while searching for his father's Social Security card, he found a note he'd never seen before. He felt in his breast pocket for his reading glasses. The note was still readable, although its ink had faded to a muddy gray and the paper on which it was written was brittle to the point of crumbling.

Poperinghe, 1918

Dear Heart

Hold on to these for me. I won them from one of the Krauts we took prisoner—name of Horst Beckmann. Beckmann says they're heron feathers and prove his claim to a hat. The hat's in a shop not far from here—on the German side of the line, of course—where he left it for safekeeping. Not a bad fellow but a lousy poker player, so the feathers are mine, now—they're all he had left to bet with. When the war is over, I intend to retrieve the hat and wear it home. Hug our boy Bern, and tell him I said to give you a big hug from me.

Jake

Verstummt laid the note on the bed and clutched at his knee. Bern and Jake were his father and grandfather.

He knew little of his grandfather except that he'd not come home from the war. He'd died in Ypres, where he'd been part of the American expeditionary force that collected there in 1918. Five hundred troops, his grandfather among them, stayed in Ypres to support the British defense. They arrived, as everyone else did, in Poperinghe, the British-run staging post behind the Ypres salient. His grandfather had been a medical aide, which accounted, Verstummt thought, for his proximity to German soldiers and games of poker. He wondered what they had made of him, a countryman by origin, an enemy by citizenship, and now in some ambivalent posture of caretaker. He supposed that, for soldiers face-to-face away from the battlefield, the distinctions weren't so clear.

Verstummt thought back to the hat he'd found as a boy. He shut his eyes and pressed at the bridge of his nose, but he couldn't recall what it looked like. He couldn't even remember whether he'd found a hat among his father's things and packed it in one of the boxes sitting behind him. He hadn't, after all, paid much attention to what he packed—why should he have? All his father had left to him were old, used things, nothing Verstummt wanted or needed, redolent only of absence.

He folded the note, put it in his own wallet, and surveyed the boxes. Kneeling on the bed, he folded out their cardboard flaps and slipped his hand inside each one. His fingers nudged into layer after layer of cotton and wool until they were rewarded with the stiff slope of a hat. He pushed aside the clothing in which the hat was buried and drew it out. Now he remembered it. He held it out in front of him, turned it in his hands, and slid the ragged tuft of feathers through his fingers.

Verstummt finished his bourbon and walked down from the terrace. He was headed for the Menin Gate. Signs posted along the way told the time, eight o'clock each night, when the fire brigade sounded the last post. He pictured a pair of unsteady old men dressed in refitted WWI uniforms, their cheeks near to bursting as they unloaded their last breaths into silver bugles. As he neared the gate, he saw instead three boys and an elderly man milling about under the arch. A piece of paper taped to the gate announced in palsied handwriting, "Scout Troop #62—

Vlamertinghe." Their heels clicked against the cobblestones as the boys shifted over to their instrument cases, drew out their bugles, and wandered into place. The old man shuffled and reshuffled them, shooing at them with his wrinkled hand until they formed some semblance of a line beneath the arch.

The boys spit random notes through their bugles until the old man summoned them to a desultory rendition of the last post. As the notes echoed along the arch's perfectly constructed curve, Verstummt tried to picture himself huddled in a trench, to call up the sound of a bugle after dusk, when sorrow no longer had to compete with daylight and could rise freely into the darkened air, but he couldn't. For him, the arch was not a passageway but a barricade that denied him entry to where his grandfather had been and died, and to his father, who must have come here as Verstummt had now in search of his own lost past. The boys snapped shut their instrument cases and climbed into a station wagon as the few assembled tourists wandered off into the night. Verstummt walked back to his hotel, where he would have his dinner, read from his guidebook, and decide what to do tomorrow.

Verstummt stood in the dim light of the museum. He'd been attracted by the promise of dioramas. When he was a boy, he'd been quite expert at constructing dioramas in cigar boxes his father brought home for him. Without a word, his father would set a cigar box on the side table in the entry hall. Only at dinner, once Verstummt and his mother had taken the seats allotted them—Verstummt at the foot of the dining room table and his mother near the kitchen door—would his father snap his napkin open, tuck it into his belt, and say, "There's something for you in the entry hall." Verstummt knew he must wait—although he thought surely he would rocket up from the table, scattering plates and silverware in his wake—through each clink of his father's fork against the Dresden china to the last swallow of roasted potato and slice of gravy-laden veal, until his father set his napkin on the table, rested his knife and fork on either side of his dinner plate, and nodded. Verstummt knew not to run but to tiptoe down the hallway to where the cigar box sat and lift its lid only enough to let the entryway light glitter on the *gebrauchte Geschichten* his father had laid out inside it in two orderly rows—metal soldiers flaked with bits of red and black

paint; miniature horses, sheep, and cows; brass- and silver-plated buttons; birch bark, pine cones, acorns, and twigs; periwinkle shells and desiccated starfish—all of which it was up to Verstummt to transform into anything he could imagine.

Verstummt would closet himself in his bedroom for days on end, lifting each item from the cigar box and turning it over in his hand until his fingers memorized its shape and texture. The pieces told him what to do, and he was strict in honoring their intentions. He'd lie back on his bed and close his eyes until a picture formed in his mind, usually of some ancient landscape that history had left behind—a medieval forest perhaps, or a turreted castle set on a hilltop, its flags waving in the mist.

When he was finished, Verstummt set each diorama on the lamp table by his father's upholstered chair and waited until his father put his paper aside and said, "You've made something for me, then?" Each time, Verstummt stood by the table, his fingers working behind his back, while his father, his glasses perched on the middle of his nose, pushed up the lid with his thumbs and inspected the box's contents. Each time, Verstummt brought his hands to his chest to muffle his heart's frantic beating while his father lowered the lid, set the box back on the lamp table, and looked over his glasses at his son. And each time he waited until his father beckoned him to the side of his chair, where he held the box out in one hand and rested his other, warm and large, on Verstummt's shoulder, and said, "I believe you've earned the right to another."

But the dioramas in the museum were a disappointment—nothing but a few sticks stuck in a landscape of mud. Although he knew they were historically accurate, it hardly seemed worth the effort. He went out into the sunlight, the map of cemeteries he'd bought at the museum shop in his hand. There, on one of the slatted wooden benches, he sat and plotted out his day. The area around Ypres was littered with cemeteries. In one of them, he hoped to find his grandfather's grave.

He returned to the museum in the late afternoon. Although he had not yet found his grandfather's grave, in Verstummt's vision Ypres had been reduced to cemeteries, signposts for cemeteries, war memorials, and demarcation stones marking the edge of the German line. The stones had each borne the statement, "Here the Invader was brought to a standstill," until

the Second World War, when the Germans invaded again. Now, where the words had been the stone's face was blank. He imagined German soldiers consulting enemy guidebooks and stopping at each of over a hundred stones to scrape the markers clean of their offending phrase. Tending to the details of warfare.

That he could imagine, but he could not conjure battlefields from this flat, green landscape with its tidy memorials, its rows of headstones, its endless procession of names. He wondered that the Belgians must not feel imposed upon, required to uphold the memory of so many dead not their own—these colonies of the dead that squatted on the land, hard upon tidy brick houses with their neatly planted window boxes and well-kept yards. He leafed through a book of poems he'd picked up in the hotel lobby. "O German mother dreaming by the fire," he read, "While you are knitting socks to send your son/His face is trodden deeper in the mud." He thought back to the diorama of twigs stranded in a rough clay field. His vocabulary of war didn't include mud—napalm, Scud missiles, and atomic bombs, but not mud. Yet soldiers had drowned in the mud. His grandfather may have been among them.

"There are no Americans buried in Ypres," the pimply boy at the museum office told him. Verstummt trudged back outside and slumped onto a vacant bench. It was true. He'd been to all the cemeteries on the map—except, of course, the German one—and none was American. He'd thought since there were so few American troops in Ypres they'd be buried with the British. But the boy was right—he'd seen British, Canadians, Australians, Belgians, and French, but no Americans. He folded the map and slid it back into his jacket pocket.

He wasn't sure now what to do. He could go to France and see if his grandfather was buried there. Or he could go to Germany to where his father had been stationed in World War II. His father had never spoken of it—Verstummt knew where he had been only through an article he'd written, at the behest of a neighbor, for the local newspaper. Verstummt had clipped it out and put it in his wallet, where he still kept it, and, now, his grandfather's note.

> I lived in the country along the highway from Augsburg into Munich for eleven months of the occupation. The displaced went by on the shoulder day and night for all of that time.

There was never the silence of evening. The Angelus backgrounded the never-ending rustle of backpacks, clanking utensils, the shuffle of silent, defeated people coming in four abreast from one ruin to the next. I can still hear that sound if I work at it.

Somewhere in that time, Verstummt's father must have crossed over from the war he was in to an earlier one, from Munich to someplace in Belgium, from where he was to where Verstummt's grandfather had been. Not to find his father's grave—for it wasn't to be found—but to find Horst Beckmann's hat. Verstummt saw that, as certainly as his father had searched *for* the hat, he must now search *from* it, just as he'd searched for imaginary worlds from the *gebrauchte Geschichten* his father had given him as a child.

It was Horst Beckmann who recognized the heron feathers—after all, hadn't his family come from the Tegernsee?—so there could be no question among them but that the hat should be his. To see a hat from his homeland here in Belgium, that was the best of omens. Using the logic they all resorted to, he thought if he could keep the hat safe then he too would make it safely home. Beckmann and his comrades sat in the local pub, lagers in hand, as they determined how best he could do this. They decided, finally, to take it back to the shop for safekeeping. Beckmann removed the heron feathers from the hat, wrapped them in waxed canvas to keep them dry, and slipped the parcel into his knapsack. The soldier with the dark blue eyes explained to the shopkeeper that when Beckmann came to retrieve the hat, he would present the feathers as proof of his ownership. The shopkeeper nodded and took back the hat.

Verstummt hailed a taxi and instructed the driver to take him to Langemark. As he'd been to all the other cemeteries, he might as well visit the German one, too. He walked slowly from the town's center so as not to miss the landmarks—the hexagonal signpost that marked its location, the red granite building that formed its entrance, and the beet field across the street. As he came to its gateway, two men strode past him and entered the cemetery. They spoke in low tones, but not so low that Verstummt couldn't pick out the distinct gutturals that marked their

speech as German. He watched as they walked out onto a huge mass grave—the *Kameradengrab*—lined on each side with bronze slabs carrying the names of the buried dead. Verstummt shivered at the thought of so many bodies tangled together in death-giving intimacy.

He walked out into the cemetery. The British cemeteries had seemed bleached by sunlight, with brilliant clusters of primula set at the foot of gleaming white headstones. Here, in contrast, huge oaks shrouded gray slate stones containing names of the dead. Off to one side, three concrete bunkers loomed over a patchwork of memorial stones laid in the grass. Four stone figures, their heads bowed in mourning, stood at the far end of the mass grave. Germans, he thought, know better than anyone how to brood. He looked up to see the two men, hands locked behind their backs, nodding and muttering, disappear through the gateway. He wandered slowly so as not to catch them back to the gateway himself.

Verstummt stared out at the beet field across the street. The dark brooding of the German cemetery seeped into him, and the murmuring of the two men echoed in his head. He opened the cemetery register. He started at the end, just to see, but there were no Verstummts. Toward the front, though, he found a name he knew. The register gave a location in cryptic numbers and letters; the sign above it referred him to the map of the graveyard. Horst Beckmann was buried in the mass grave.

Beckmann's plan was a clever one, but in the end it didn't work out exactly as he'd thought. In the end, the person who claimed the hat was an American, although his name was as German as Beckmann's, and he didn't come to the shop until after the end of the next war. The shopkeeper hadn't seen any of the young soldiers again—the likelihood was that none of them had had the chance to get much older. But he'd kept the hat, even so. It didn't take much space, after all.

Verstummt made his way down the row of slabs. When he found Horst Beckmann's name, he leaned in close and traced its beveled letters with his finger. Had someone been watching, little would have distinguished him from the two men he'd seen earlier, their heads bent over another of the slabs, searching for another name among the dead.

After a time, Verstummt stepped back and turned to face the brooding figures. He understood the German graveyard in a way he had not grasped the Menin Gate or the British cemeteries with their well-tended primula and box. He saw that the reference points, for him, were all in German—in this bleak, unforgiving place, possessing the land on which it sat so thoroughly that it did not seem to be interred inside another country. From here, he could hear what his father had heard—*the rustle of backpacks, clanking utensils, the shuffle of silent, defeated people, coming in four abreast from one ruin to the next.* He turned back to the row of bronze slabs and retraced with his eyes the letters of Horst Beckmann's name.

"Horst Beckmann," he said, "I'm returning your hat." He smoothed the hat's ruined feathers as best he could and set it on the ground.

Michael Davis

My Friend David

Years from now, I'll see you in a dream.

Your fingertips, nailless and torn where they couldn't claw through the floe, your gaze fixed, mouth frozen shut. You'll be caught near the surface with miles of darkness at your back. And not for one instant will I fail to dream your eyes as small, hard stones under that sheet of ice.

I'll wake beside Jenny, her naked back on my chest, smooth shoulder catching predawn light through the blinds. I'll feel her warmth and remember the coldness of that dream. Then I'll go have a cigarette in the dark living room and see your face in my exhalations, memories of you unraveling like smoke on blackened air.

And I'll see the moment I will lose you completely, the moment I will no longer feel your presence breaking against my thoughts. There, in the living room, as I smoke, you will become an idea of a friend I once had. Then I will get back in bed, put an arm around Jenny, and go back to sleep.

But these, David, are fragments yet to come—your remainder, the last ripples of you through me.

Now, I stand on your mother's stone balcony, watching the canyon. I wonder how it felt when you fell off the fishing boat and the current pulled you under the ice. Jenny is downstairs, still broken from the shock, still weeping in her black dress.

The sky is livid with sunset, clouds black tufts against red. And your presence isn't any more or less real to me than this light or the murmurs from one of the windows nearby. An inch of whiskey sits at the bottom of my plastic cup. Behind me there is a house full of people already trying to forget you, to dissolve you in bourbon or scotch. Some of them will succeed before others. The whiskey burns a path down my throat. And I cough without tears.

After you shaved off all your hair, we sat in the sculpture garden by the zoo, talking about the animals. You said you

couldn't stand to see anything dying, and caged animals were certainly dying. Above us, a moving sculpture twisted avian scissor blades. Our shirts fluttered. We, cross-legged and aimless in the menagerie of sculptures on that grassy hill, looked down at walkers on concrete paths or up at the sky. I can see it well—the stubble on your head and the giant iron circles painted red, half sunk into the ground. You watched them or stared up at the moving blades or murmured about the nobility of animals or the beauty of nature or something else.

Earlier in the zoo, we'd seen a sick polar bear pushing its paw along the plaster of its cell. A baby screamed, pointed, and the bear's watery eyes stared at the sound, then down at its paw, one claw moving back and forth in a groove that went nowhere, the child's scream lost in the dull gravity of the animal's stare.

So, when you said, "I'm going back to get that bear," I nodded, not sure exactly what you meant but knowing that we looked different and wrong up there, backs against the sculpture's stilts. David, we must have looked like odd goslings at the feet of a steel bird-mother moving her beak over us in the wind.

I don't know how long we sat there, staring at the people, at the soft blue sky over San Diego harbor. You said, as if believing it for the first time, "I've decided. I'm going to be a fisherman. You can have my car." And that was when I knew you were still watching the bear. You still saw the dirty, yellowed pelt, the notched ear, thick lips twisted into an almost human grimace as it worked its claw back and forth. When we left the zoo, the bear was still with us, walking between us perhaps.

Maybe it had always been there.

Years from now, I'll see you in a dream. And your eyes will be fixed through the ice on a blue sky—just as they were on that day in the sculpture garden—two stones set in the frozen white of your face.

Jenny is beside me on the balcony now, both of us leaning on the stone railing. Her eyes are red and full of tears for you she has not yet released. Does she say something about you, about how you died in that black Alaskan water?

I'm not sure.

The wind has come up and it's in my ears. Some of her blonde hair is caught in the side of her mouth. Her black dress clings: I see the slope of breasts, waist, the line of a thigh. So I

pull up one of your expressions as if I could contort the bones, make my blue eyes darken to your brown. And, when I put my arm around her and feel her ear an inch from my mouth, and I whisper, "I know. I miss him, too," she'll decide that the tear I push from my eye is hers and yours and mine together. And she'll kiss that drop on my cheek and say, "You remind me of him so much," and I will be there to comfort her.

Review

Song of the World Becoming: New and Collected Poems, 1981–2001

Pattiann Rogers

Milkweed Editions, 2001

"Whoever said the ordinary, the mundane,
the commonplace? Show them to me."

This dare, set forth in Pattiann Rogers' poem "Till My Teeth Rattle," could very well serve as the impetus for her entire oeuvre up to this point, recently published by Milkweed Editions under the title *Song of the World Becoming: New and Collected Poems, 1981-2001.* Now sixty-one, Rogers has been publishing her poetry for twenty years, earning a multitude of prestigious honors and awards. In this thick volume, which includes all of her previously published verse and forty new poems, she demonstrates why she has been called the poet laureate of the natural world. Densely packed and long lined, her poems are full to overflowing with the blood and guts of nature. Consider, for example, these images found in "That Song":

I will take the egg bubble on the flute
Of the elm and the ministries of the predacious
Caul beetle, the spit of the iris, the red juice shot
From the eye of the horny toad, and I will use
The irreducible knot wound by the hazel scrub
And the bog myrtle still tangling, and the sea horse
With his delicate horn, the flywheel of his maneuvering.

In poems with titles such as "Justification of the Horned Lizard," "Eulogy for a Hermit Crab," and "Suppose Your Father Was a Redbird," Rogers' astonishing attentiveness to detail and insatiable appetite for wonder has created legions of devoted fans, especially among the ecoconscious literary set.

Not a quick read, *Song of the World Becoming* is best digested a few poems at a time. Such cyclonic energy, such heated passion is exhausting! Take, for instance, these lines from "Love Song":

This is precisely what I seek, mad myself
To envelope every last drupe and pearl-dropped ovule,
Every nip and cry and needle-fine boring, every drooping,
Spore-rich tassel of oak flower, all the whistling,
Wing-beating, heavy-tipped matings of an entire prairie
Of grasses, every wafted, moaning seed hook
You can possibly manage to bring to me,
That this is exactly what I contrive to take into my arms
With you, again and again.

Rogers' incessant cataloguing of nature's minutia teeters perilously on the edge of tedium, but this distinctive style of descriptive overkill is a minor irritation, certainly forgivable in writing so downright jubilant in both tone and message, so affirming of life in all its forms. It is a habit in the service of a noble task: the invocation of awe at the myriad wonders awaiting each of us outside our respective doorsteps. It would be easy to dismiss this swooning over Mother Nature if, at some level, it didn't feel like something we should all feel, every day, were we truly alive to the world around us.

Still, these poems do not romanticize flora and fauna; they get down and dirty with them. Like Terry Tempest Williams, Rogers hails from the current school of women writers who get sexually charged over nature. In her poetry there is a constant blur between human-to-human sexuality and earthly delight. By eroticizing the natural world, Rogers has done in poetry what Georgia O'Keeffe and Robert Mapplethorpe accomplished in the visual arts. Even the cover photograph for this book, a curvaceous, turning leaf, recalls an Edward Weston nude.

A good example of this tendency to sexualize nature is found in "Rolling Naked in the Morning Dew," a poem celebrating earthy sensuality. Not surprisingly, it is a real crowd-pleaser when performed by Rogers at her numerous public readings. Here are the last three stanzas:

Lillie Langtry practiced it, when weather permitted,
Lying down naked every morning in the dew,
With all her beauty believing the single petal
Of her white skin could absorb and assume
That radiating purity of liquid and light.

And I admit to believing myself, without question,
In the magical powers of dew on the cheeks
And breasts of Lillie Langtry believing devotedly
In the magical powers of early morning dew on the skin
Of her body lolling in purple beds of bird's foot violets,
Pink prairie mimosa. And I believe, without doubt,
In the mystery of the healing energy coming
From that wholehearted belief in the beneficent results
Of the good delights of the naked body rolling
And rolling through all the silked and sun-filled,
Dusky-winged, sheathed and sparkled, looped
And dizzied effluences of each dawn
Of the rolling earth.

Just consider how the mere idea of it alone
Has already caused me to sing and sing
This whole morning long.

Sing she does, like a siren. She sings of nature in all its sinewy abundance, of life itself as cause for celebration. And, with her uniquely rapturous voice, Pattiann Rogers will make you want to stop and look and listen.

Kathleen Johnson

Contributors

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Jack Anderson is the author of several books of dance criticism and history, as well as nine volumes of poetry. *Traffic: New and Selected Prose Poems* won the 1998 Marie Alexander Award for prose poetry.

Larsen Bowker has published poems in *Plainsongs*, *Poetry Depth Quarterly*, *Sou'wester*, and many other journals. He lives in Blacksburg, Virginia.

Kevin Boyle's work has appeared in the *Michigan Quarterly Review*, the *Greensboro Review*, the *North American Review*, *Poetry East*, and other quarterlies. His poem "Conversion" appeared in *Cottonwood 57*.

Edward Byrne has published four collections of poetry, and his work has appeared in *American Poetry Review*, *Ascent*, *Black Warrior Review*, the *Missouri Review*, and other journals and anthologies. His most recent book is *Night Sailing*. He teaches at Valparaiso University.

Robert Cooperman's latest collection of poetry, *The Widow's Burden*, was recently published by Western Reflections. *In the Colorado Gold Fever Mountains* won the Colorado Book Award for Poetry in 2000.

Michael Davis was a recipient of the 1998 William Saroyan Fellowship. His work has appeared in the *San Joaquin Review* and *Descant*.

John Fritzell's work has appeared in *Plainsongs*. A graduate of Grinnell College, he currently resides in Appleton, Wisconsin.

Tom Hansen teaches writing and literature at Northern State University in Aberdeen, South Dakota. His poems, essays, and reviews have appeared in the *Paris Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *Sewanee Review*, and many other reviews and journals.

Tess Callahan James has published her work in *Agni*, the *Stylus Anthology: 1950–2000*, as well as magazines and newspapers. She and her family reside in Buenos Aires.

Kathleen Johnson is a recipient of the Langston Hughes Poetry Award and the Kansas Voices Poetry Award. Her work has appeared in the *Midwest Quarterly*, *Cottonwood*, *Westview*, the *Louisville Review*, and many others.

Bob Levy's story "Cloak and Dagger" was selected as the winner of the Cottonwood/Langston Hughes Award for fiction. A contributor to a variety of literary publications, Levy lives in Mill Valley, California.

Jenny McPhee has published her stories in the *Brooklyn Review*, *Descant*, *Glimmer Train*, *Southwest Review*, *Zoetrope*, and others. Her first novel, *The Center of Things*, was published by Doubleday last summer.

Robert Oberg is the director of the Olney Street Group, an independent poetry workshop founded in 1982. His poems have appeared in numerous journals, and he was awarded the Galway Kinnell Poetry Prize in 1991.

Mo Perry is a student at the University of Kansas and has been active in theater productions since her freshman year.

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