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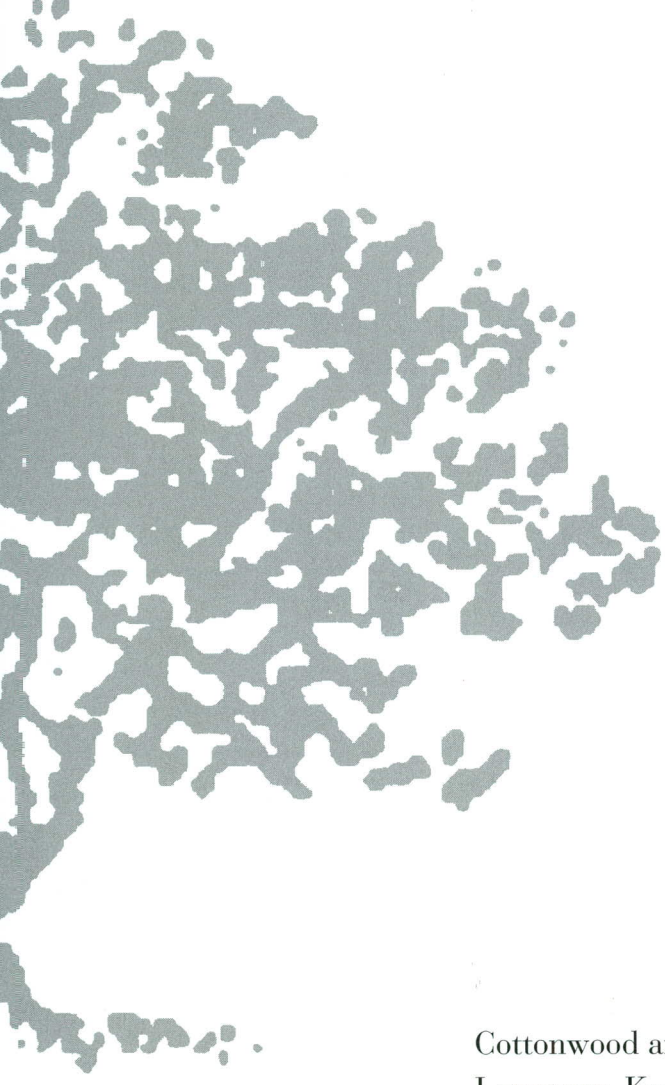

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Contents

Laurence Sarezky

Wild Bill Hickok Tames the West

My BOOK REPORT BY LAURENCE S. CLASS 3P

Wild Bill Hickok Tames The West is all about how Wild Bill Hickok tamed the West and brought civilized order to the Frontier until he got shot in the head. It's a Landmark book so it's all true.

In this book, Wild Bill Hickok goes around Kansas, which was the most lawless region in the West, to towns like Abilene and Hays City and Dodge City, being a peace officer and cleaning them up by killing gunslingers and desperados and outlaws like Big Phil Coe and Tom Custer before they killed him first so the towns could be safe for women and cattle and children and also for men who arent gunslingers, desperados and outlaws, such as blacksmiths, some of the mayors, the stage coach drivers, and the man at the telegraph office.

The three things I learned from reading this book is that if you are playing poker in a saloon and your cards are aces and eights youll probably get killed, especially if you are sitting with your back to the door like Wild Bill Hickok did the last time he ever played cards, because its the Dead Man's Hand. Also, I learned that Wild Bill Hickok's real name was James but he changed it to Bill because who was gonna be scared of Wild James Hickok. And also, a man with long blonde hair doesn't mean your queer or a commie, because Wild Bill Hickok had it.

What this book means to me is that you have to be not afraid to do the right thing even if your only 10 like when Wild Bill Hickok was on the Underground Railroad helping slaves escape from slavery, or if your scared outlaws will kill you, because right is right, no matter what some people say, like slave catchers in Kansas Bloody Kansas or Broken Nose Jack McCall. Just look at Broken Nose Jack McCall who killed Wild Bill Hickok from behind in The Bella Union Saloon but no one ever heard of, and everybody has heard of Wild Bill Hickok.

I would recommend this book highly to boys and girls alike even though its about fighting bears and desperados and Indians and Confederate soldiers, because theres loads of girls in it, such as Calamity Jane, the ladies who danced in the saloons, and also Mrs. Agnes Lake who had a very dangerous life being a tight-rope walker and a lion tamer and Wild Bill Hickok's wife.

B—

Laurence—

This is an improvement over your first book report on The Weekly Reader pen-pal section, which we have now learned is not a book, but please have your mother or father call me.

Also, you still owe me two vocabulary builder checklists from Chapter 4 and your outline for your report on The Planet Pluto. Also, you have not brought in your permission slip for our field trip to the American Asbesticide factory next week, your order form for your class picture, or your canned good for the Junior Chamber of Commerce Annual Food Drive which closes out this Friday!

This is my book report that got me in all the trouble I'm in, and now I have to stay after school every Tuesday with Albert LaChance, who's the weirdest kid in the class. Which isn't even fair, because I get in enough trouble for not doing my homework, like when I forget my homework assignment pad, or when I forget to look in my homework assignment pad, or when I just forget about school altogether.

So I don't think you should get punished if you do your homework but it's wrong, because that's what they have bad marks for. Except if your homework is against the law, like when my brother Stuart told me I was going to jail for committing plaigery in my Social Studies report on *Bolivia: A Country Rich in Natural Resources* because I copied it out of the *The World Book Encyclopedia.*

But I didn't copy my Bolivia report, because I changed a lot of the words.

And I didn't commit plaigery on my "Wild Bill Hickok Tames The West" book report either, because they don't even have book reports in *The World Book Encyclopedia.* Unless they put them under some letter besides B or R. And I even handed it in on time even though my mom had to bring it to school when she found it in the garage where I put it down when I had to pick up

a box of garbage that fell off the garbage cans by accident when I was running through the garage because I was late for the bus.

And my mom typed it for me, so stuff was spelled right, and it had commas, and it was real neat too, except for where the Garbage Man stepped on it.

But I got in trouble anyways, and I knew right away it was a lot of trouble, because my mom didn't even yell at me. She just made me stay in my room, so she could have some peace and quiet to think about my Latest Disaster in. And when I asked her for how long, she told me, "Indefinitely."

When my big brother Stuart came home from his tuba lesson, I was just sitting on the floor in my room not doing anything.

So Stuart said, "What's your problem, Dipshit?" And I told him I was in so much trouble they didn't even yell at me. And he said, "Don't sweat it, Half Pint—you'll get yelled at sooner or later just for being such a little moron."

I guess Stuart was trying to make me feel better. But he didn't, because I don't.

Anyways, the reason I'm in so much trouble is the thing that my mom doesn't want to say "I told you so" about, even though I asked her if I let her say "I told you so," could I come out of my room, and she said, "Absolutely not." Which is that I said "queer" in my book report.

And I don't think that's any fair either, because it's not like I put that Wild Bill Hickok was queer, or anybody else either. Even Broken Nose Jack McCall. I just meant that if you see a man with long hair like a beatnik or something, maybe he isn't, because Wild Bill Hickok had long hair. Which just goes to show you.

My mom told me I shouldn't put that while she was typing my report, but I was afraid if she changed it, I'd get thrown in jail for plaigery. So I told her not to and she didn't, but she might as well have because now I have to sit in my room all day after school anyways. Indefinitely.

A few nights ago when my dad came home from work, my mom showed him my book report and what Mrs. Percival wrote on it, and she made him call Mrs. Percival. They were in the kitchen so I heard it, because I can hear everything that happens in the kitchen pretty good from my room.

My mom told my dad, "I'm at my wits' end with this child, Leon. You have no idea how exhausting it is to be constantly dealing with all of his various catastrophes in school—how

could you have any idea, because of course you're never around—but it's one thing after another, and he'd forget his head if it wasn't screwed on to his shoulders, and I'm not even too sure about that sometimes. And what he did with that perfectly good can of Campbell beans I gave him three weeks ago for the Food Drive, I can't even begin to imagine."

I was going to tell my mom that I had to use that perfectly good can of Campbell beans for the other end of the walkie-talkie that me and Bobby Rebucci made, because one of the cans got ran over when I left it out in the driveway overnight. So we had to open up the Campbell beans can with the can opener Bobby has on his Swiss army knife, and we put the beans in my lunch bag so I could still bring them to school for the Food Drive.

But I didn't tell my mom that, because she gets mad when I listen to what my mom and dad say about me in the kitchen. And I don't like talking about those Campbell beans anyways because of what happened when I took them to school.

You would think it was the beans that is the most important thing to the Hungry People, not the can. But Mrs. Percival doesn't think so, because when she found out there was a bag full of Campbell beans in my desk, she made me throw it out. Which made me feel bad because now some Hungry People wouldn't have anything to eat and neither would I, because the other thing that was in that bag was my lunch. Which never would have happened if I still had my Davy Crockett lunch box that my mom threw out when Stuart told her I kept my Worm Village in there over the summer.

I don't even know how Mrs. Percival found out about the Campbell beans in the first place, unless Roger Conway or somebody like that told her, because I had forgot all about them. And I didn't think it was fair that I had to throw them out, because the Campbell beans were just sitting in there, not bothering anybody.

I could see how Mrs. Percival would be mad if I put them in my ears like Gary Griffin stuck raisins in his ears one time when Mrs. LombardoRN, the school nurse, came to do the Clean Ears and Bright Eyes Check. Or she could be mad if I was throwing the Campbell beans at somebody. But I wasn't, because they don't let you throw food except when the teachers aren't looking in the cafeteria, or if there's a food fight like at a kid's birth-

day party, or when somebody gets married, or if a spaceman invaded your kitchen at breakfast time and the only thing you had to fight with was Sugar Pops. Or you're a clown.

My best friend Carl Sanderson told me I should take one of the Food Drive cans for lunch, because now that my own lunch got thrown out, I was a Hungry Person too. But I didn't want to, because at least I would still get my snack after school, which I don't think some of the Hungry People probably get. And the other reason was I don't have a Swiss army knife can opener.

So I never told my mom what happened to the Campbell beans can, because I just want to forget about the whole Food Drive even though I can't, because I was the one that kept the string bean can on the Food Drive poster from getting colored in all the way to the top. And also, my lunch bag had got pretty gooey and leaked out some beans, so now every time I take out my *Adventures in Arithmetic* book or my pencil box, it reminds me.

I guess what Mrs. Percival told my dad about me wasn't so good, because last night when I was watching *The Lone Ranger*, my mom came in and she told me she hated to tell me "I told you so," but her and my dad were coming to school tomorrow for a meeting with Mrs. Schaeffer and me and some other grown-ups. And she told me the thing the meeting was about was how I was doing in school, and about my daydreaming problem, and that book report I did about Wild Bill Cody.

Which she meant to say Wild Bill Hickok. But I didn't tell her, because it was the original episode of *The Lone Ranger* that they only show one time a year, and she was going to make me miss the best part when Tonto says, "You all alone now. You Lone Ranger." Which is how The Lone Ranger got his name.

Then my mom said some other stuff and I said, "Yeah," and "Yeah, I know," even though I didn't really know, because I wasn't listening. Then when Speedy Alka Seltzer came on, my mom asked me if the meeting made me nervous. And I said, "No," even though it did, and she said, "Well good, because everybody's on your side, so there's nothing to get nervous about." Then she asked me did I have any questions.

I did have some questions, like does a meeting go on your Permanent Record? And if everybody is on my side, how come there are sides in the first place? And also, do they pick captains

like at recess, and if my dad and Mrs. Schaeffer were both on my side, who would get picked for captain?

And another question I had was who was on the other side? First, I thought maybe it was queers, which I never even saw one and I don't even know anything about them except they hold their hand funny and sometimes they dress up like girls. But I don't think they would let queers in school, and even if they did, I don't think my dad would go to a queer meeting.

Then I thought maybe it was Wild Bill Hickok's children on the other side, and they were mad at me because somebody like Roger Conway told them I called their dad a queer. Which is how Howard Millwood got into a fight with Jack Pearlman on the bus last year.

And the other thing I was wondering was, do I have to get all dressed up for a meeting, like for the Christmas Pageant or Closing Exercises, which is the other times there's a lot of grown-ups at school? Because the only meetings I ever went to was Cub Scouts, and they give you a uniform for that. But I never went to a grown-up meeting before, and I didn't really know what you're supposed to do there.

Once, I saw a grown-up meeting on *Million Dollar Movie*, but I don't think it was the same kind of meeting they have in Mrs. Schaeffer's office. It was in the Last Chance Saloon, and the mayor said that if Sheriff McCoy was too yeller to stop those low-down cattle rustlers, the good people of Carson City would have to take matters into their own hands. And then everybody at the meeting started yelling and waving their cowboy hats all around and shooting their guns off. Which they'd never let you do in Mrs. Schaeffer's office.

But then Smitty, the deputy sheriff, said, "Now just hold on one daggone minute. You can put your boots in the oven, but that don't make 'em biscuits. Most of you folks have known Bart McCoy since he was knee-high to a grasshopper. Best dang sheriff we ever had. And the smartest too, which is why he's gonna wait for those Texas Rangers to get here before ridin' out to the Double R Ranch. And if you're smart, I reckon you'll do the same. Now Mister Mayor, I don't think you want to get this bunch of greenhorns bushwhacked by those varmints in Big Bill Shade's gang, do you?"

"Well, do you?" some lady asked. But then I remembered

that wasn't some lady, it was my mom, who I forgot all about that she was standing there.

So I said, "Do I what?" And my mom made her Big Sighing Noise, and she said, "Do you have any questions about the meeting?" So I said, "No."

The only other time I was in Mrs. Schaeffer's office was one time in first grade when I missed the bus home because I had this real bad stomachache. So instead of being in my bus line, I was downstairs in the boys' room, where Mr. Perkle, the janitor, found me when he stuck his mop under the door and washed my shoes by mistake.

When I told Mr. Perkle I had a stomachache, he told me I should put my head between my legs and go upstairs with him to Mrs. Schaeffer's office. But when I asked Mr. Perkle should I wait to put my head between my legs until I got to the office, he just said, "So you're full of questions, aren't you, little fella?" And then he didn't answer my question; he just started walking up the stairs.

So after we got about halfway up, I decided that until I got to the office I was going to keep my head where it usually is. Because if you try to walk up stairs with your head between your legs, you just keep falling over.

When we got to the office, Mrs. Schaeffer came out and asked me how did I feel, and I said not so good. So she told me to sit down over there, and then she called my mom to come pick me up. And my mom told Mrs. Schaeffer she'd come get me even though it was going to make Stuart late for his tuba lesson. Which, my mom told Mrs. Schaeffer when she got there, all could have been avoided if I didn't insist on running around like a wild banshee right after I eat every time.

When we got outside, my mom told me to hurry up and get in the back seat with Stuart and his tuba, because she had these little pink flowers in a bunch of little cups on the front seat. And if I thought she was going to let me throw up all over her pansies, I had another think coming. But I didn't feel like throwing up, my stomach just hurt real bad.

And it hurt even worse when Stuart squished me with his tuba every time we went around a corner. So I told Stuart to quit it, and he said, "quit it," back to me in this dumb little girl voice,

so then I said, "quit *that*," and then he said, "quit *that*," in his girl voice, so we got yelled at for not being able to sit together in a car for two blessed minutes and talk like two normal brothers for once in our lives, and why don't we tell each other what we did in school today.

So I started telling Stuart about how I missed the bus because of my stomachache. But Stuart told me, "Tell it to Mr. Tuba," which is the only way Stuart would listen to a little dork like me. So I put my head in Mr. Tuba's big end to tell what happened, but first I made Stuart promise not to blow on Mr. Tuba's little end at the same time because I already learned my lesson on that one.

When I was telling the part about how I got found by Mr. Perkle in the boys' room, Stuart knocked on Mr. Tuba and told me I could take my head out. And then he told me that Mr. Perkle never answers anybody's questions because he's always got *his* head between *his* legs.

Stuart didn't think my mom would hear that one because she was singing along with that "Unforgettable" song that she had playing real loud on the radio. But she heard it anyways, so she yelled at Stuart and then she yelled at me too, even though I wasn't the one who said it. Because my mom takes Stuart to his tuba lesson each and every week Without Incident, and then I come along one time, and, just like clockwork, there's trouble.

Everybody says the reason that Mr. Perkle says stuff like, "So you're full of questions, aren't you, little fella," even if the question got asked by a girl—and then he doesn't answer your question anyways—is he's a Retard. But I don't see how Mr. Perkle could be a Retard because he has an important job keeping our school clean for us by washing the blackboards and emptying out the garbage cans and keeping his pail full of that green stuff that he sprinkles on it when you throw up. Which is a lot of work to do in one day, especially a day like when all the kids in the hot lunch line ate the Apple Brown Betty that had went bad. And anyways, I think the reason Mr. Perkle talks funny like that is because of the teeth he doesn't have. And also, how is a person supposed to learn how to talk right with a hearing aid stuck in their ear?

But the thing I remember most about Mr. Perkle taking me to the office was that Mrs. Schaeffer told my mom it wasn't my fault I missed the bus, since I had a stomachache. Which was pretty nice by Mrs. Schaeffer. And it was true too, because my

stomach hurt so much in the cafeteria I couldn't even run around like a wild banshee after lunch.

When I got to school today, I was thinking maybe the meeting would get me out of science, which is the subject I hate most, especially ever since I lost my Planet Pluto science project outline. But it wasn't so bad today because Mr. Perkle and a fifth grader brought in the movie projector, and they showed this movie *Our Changing Earth* even though the unit we're on is The Solar System. But we had to see *Our Changing Earth* today because tomorrow it was going to another school and Byrne School won't get it back until next year.

When it got to be reading, I started hoping that maybe they forgot about the meeting. But when we lined up to go to lunch, Mrs. Percival told me not to dawdle because a fifth grader was coming to the lunch room in fifteen minutes to take me to the office.

But I wasn't hungry anyways, so I just sat with Carl and Gary Griffin at our table in the lunch room, and I tried to count the squares in the ceiling. And even when Gary started doing the boogie-woogie song, I didn't feel like dancing my feet under the table like we usually do while we're waiting to be excused for recess.

So then Carl told me don't worry, compared to science a meeting is a breeze. Which I guess Carl should know because every time we get our report cards, he has to go to another how-come-a-boy-as-smart-as-you-doesn't-get-better-marks meeting. But then I started thinking what if a meeting is worse than science, which would be hard to do. But you never know.

But it wasn't, it was just different from science, and from anything else I ever went to.

When I got to the office, Mrs. Taylor was all nice and smiley like she never is when you see her in the hall, especially if you're running or making noise, or you fell down. Or if you did all those things at the same time, like the time Mr. Perkle waxed the first floor and nobody was supposed to walk on it because it was too slippery, and Carl told Albert LaChance the reason there was nobody on the first floor was that all the teachers went to a teacher's meeting, so we could do whatever we wanted.

Carl got in a lot of trouble with his dad for that one, because Carl's dad had to pay for the tooth Albert broke when he decided to dance down the hall like the man who sings "Singing in the Rain." And Albert was doing pretty good too, until his Big

Finish when he tried to jump real high and kick his feet together in the air, but he tripped over the cord to Mr. Perkle's waxer instead and went flying teeth-first through the doorway to the office and into Mrs. Taylor's desk.

When Mrs. Taylor stopped smiling, she asked me was I nervous, and I said no. So then she told me, "Well good, because there's no reason to be nervous, this is for your own good, and why don't you sit over there until they're ready for you."

And that's when I really got scared, because whenever a grown-up says, "This is for your own good," it usually hurts like anything.

So I started singing "I Been Working on the Railroad" real quiet to myself like I do when I'm waiting for Dr. Sloan to give me a penicillin shot. But the only words I know are "I been working on the railroad, all the livelong day," so I changed my song to "The Ballad of Davy Crockett," which I know all the words to. And I started looking at this picture they have on the wall about all the stuff that makes us children grow into strong healthy grown-ups, like exercise and getting a lot of sleep and eating the five major food groups and going to church. Which is all stuff that I do except the church part, because Jewish people don't go to church.

Then I started wondering if all those old, bent-over men I saw at temple at Stuart's bar mitzvah had went to church instead, they would have grown up more strong and healthy and straight. But then Mrs. Taylor told me okay, I could go in now, and she opened the door to Mrs. Schaeffer's office.

My mom and dad and Mrs. Schaeffer and a man and a lady I didn't know were all sitting around this table in Mrs. Schaeffer's office. The man had a mustache and so did Wild Bill Hickok, so I was trying to see in my imagination what the man would look like with a cowboy hat on. But then Mrs. Schaeffer said, "Oh, here's Laurence now! Laurence, why don't you sit over here next to me."

So I went and sat down in the chair next to Mrs. Schaeffer. And then she said, "Well, I think you know almost everybody here. You know your parents, I think. Do you want to say hello to them?"

That made everybody laugh even though I didn't think it was so funny, so I said, "Hi."

Then my mom said, "Hello Sweetie!" which I hate it when

she calls me that because I'm not, and it sounds like stuff they have on those dumb little candy hearts you get on Valentine's Day, like "Be Mine!" and "For Somebody Special!" and "Hello Sweetie!" But at least no kids heard my mom say it, because then one of them would start calling me Sweetie and pretty soon they all would.

I started thinking about making a good catch in baseball and the kids all going, "Good catch, Sweetie," and then I would have to start a fight with somebody, because you can't let something like that happen and not do anything about it. Except if you're Jackie Robinson and Mr. Branch Rickey tells you you can't fight back for two years.

And then I heard Mrs. Schaeffer say, "Laurence, are you with us?" which I never am when a grown-up asks it, so I said, "Yes."

And then Mrs. Schaeffer said, "I think there's one person you haven't met and that's Dr. DeLafonte."

So I asked Mrs. Schaeffer if I was going to get a shot. That made everybody laugh again even though I wasn't making a joke. Then Mrs. Schaeffer said, "No, Dr. DeLafonte is a different kind of doctor, Laurence. He doesn't give shots. He helps boys and girls pay better attention in school."

So then I laughed too like you do when you're scared about something and then you're not anymore, like I was with Dr. DeLafonte now that I knew I wasn't getting a shot and that he wasn't Wild Bill Hickok's son, who was mad at me because somebody told him I called his dad a queer.

And then my mom said, "We always tell Laurence that he can do whatever he sets his mind to." Which I'm not sure what that had to do with anything. And anyways, I think my mom was a little mixed up about that because the one she tells that to is Stuart, not me. And I don't believe it anyways, because if I could do whatever I set my mind to there wouldn't be any school today because it would be snowing, and I would be outside on my sled, not having a meeting in Mrs. Schaeffer's office.

And then Dr. DeLafonte said in this big voice that sounded like the man my dad listens to on the radio, "Nice to meet you, Laurence. I'm Dr. Barry DeLafonte, and this is my secretary, Mrs. Madge Miller." Then Dr. DeLafonte stuck his hand out at me to do a handshake. So I had to stick my hand out too, and Dr. DeLafonte squeezed it and shook it up and down. Which is so dumb, and I don't know why grown-ups can't just say, "Hi,"

except my dad says you can tell a lot about a man from his handshake. But all I could tell from Dr. DeLafonte's handshake was that his hand felt cold and wet and slippery. Kind of like Ed, Albert LaChance's turtle.

Then my dad said, "I'm sorry, what did you say your name was?" And then my mom kicked my dad's leg under the table like she does when we're at Grandma Zalensky's house and my dad asks Uncle Mel where he's working these days, and then in the car going home, my mom and dad have an argument because Uncle Mel usually isn't working anywheres these days because mom says Uncle Mel was never the same after the War. And then my dad says, oh yeah, he forgot that Uncle Mel was the only man in the history of the United States Coast Guard to get shell-shocked, even though the only shells Uncle Mel ever saw were the ones he collected in a pail on the beach in San Diego.

And then Dr. DeLafonte told my father, "The name is Dr. Barry DeLafonte," and then he asked me would it be all right if he asked me a question, Laurence.

And I said I guess so. So then Dr. DeLafonte asked me what was I thinking about when Mrs. Schaeffer asked me, "Are you with us?"—which was how much I hate it when my mom calls me Sweetie. So I said I don't know and he said, "I see." Then Dr. DeLafonte asked me what I like to think about, and I told him I don't know again, and he said, "I see," again. Then he asked me do I like school and I said it's okay and he said, "I see," another time.

Then my dad said, "Isn't there a singer named that?"

And my mom said, "Leon, let's let the doctor ask his questions."

And Dr. DeLafonte said, "No, you're thinking of Harry Belafonte, which is entirely different."

And my dad said, "Oh, that's right, Harry Belafonte. Very similar though, isn't it."

And my mom said, "Leon. . . ."

But I didn't hear the rest because then Dr. DeLafonte started talking to Mrs. Madge Miller about some apple that didn't fall very far from the tree. Which made me wonder if Dr. DeLafonte was the right person to help children pay attention.

Then my dad said, "Excuse me, Mr. Belafonte?"

And Dr. DeLafonte said, "It's Doctor DeLafonte: D-e-capital L-a-f-o-n-t-e but pronounced like an 'a' because it is French. And I believe you heard what I said."

And my dad said, "Well, I was sort of hoping that you might reconsider what you said."

And then Dr. DeLafonte's face started to get all red, and my mom said, "Leon, that's enough!"

And then Mrs. Schaeffer told Dr. DeLafonte he should apologize to my dad, and Mrs. Madge Miller told Mrs. Schaeffer that she didn't think Dr. DeLafonte owed anybody an apology, and Mrs. Taylor came in and asked was everything okay, and Mrs. Schaeffer told her everything is fine, thank you, Mrs. Taylor. And then Dr. DeLafonte said something else to Mrs. Madge Miller, but I couldn't hear it because by then it was getting to be a pretty noisy meeting.

And also, I was thinking that if this meeting was in the Carson City Saloon and we were cowboys, my dad would be throwing Dr. DeLafonte out through the swinging doors, and Mrs. Schaeffer would be breaking a bottle over Mrs. Madge Miller's head. And I would be bringing the horses around, so we could hightail it out of town.

Then I started thinking about my dad getting mixed up about Harry Belafonte, and about that song "Dayo" that he sings—that Harry Belafonte sings, not my dad. Well, except when it comes on the radio in the car, and then Harry Belafonte and my dad usually sing it together.

And that reminded me about the "Greetings from Bermuda" poster that I look at every day when our lunch line goes past Miss Roselli's room. And that reminded me of the time my mom and dad went to Bermuda but I forgot they went, and I took the bus home instead of waiting for my grandpa to pick me up like I was supposed to, and there was nobody home, so I went across the street to Bobby Rebucci's house for dinner. Which everybody said was so lucky for me because Mrs. Rebucci is a wonderful Italian cook, and she made her specialty, Veal Farmerjohn, which made me gag.

Then it was quiet again, and I saw Dr. DeLafonte staring at me. He looked a little funny with his face all red and his glasses slid way down his nose, and he said, "Laurence, can you tell us what you are thinking about right now?"

So I told Dr. DeLafonte I thought they should just let the man count his own bananas 'cause daylight coming and he want go home.

When we were waiting in the bus line, Carl asked me what happened at my meeting today, and was I going to have to stay after because I put "queer" in my book report? I told him they must have forgot all about my book report because nobody even said anything about it, and also, I think they forgot all about me for a while too. But they're making me stay after school every Tuesday anyways, to talk into Dr. Barry DeLafonte's tape recorder.

When he heard that, Carl got all excited. But then he wanted to know how come they picked me to sing the "Dayo" song when I can't even sing.

Carl found out about me not being able to sing so good the time me and him were grabbing report cards, and mine ripped, and Carl got the part with the D Mrs. Percival gave me in "Sings in Tune," which was the only D I got, except for Multiplication. Which is why Carl says I'm lucky they don't have a song for Multiplication Facts like they have the ABC song for letters. Because if they did, I wouldn't be able to sing it in tune, or remember the words either.

But I told Carl that they don't want me to sing into Dr. DeLafonte's tape recorder, they just want me to talk into it. That way, Dr. DeLafonte won't have to remember anything I said. And besides, the man who sings "Dayo" is Harry Belafonte, not Dr. Barry DeLafonte, because Dr. Barry DeLafonte is a doctor, not a singer.

Then Albert LaChance came over to tell us, "You could be a singer and a doctor too, you know. Like The Reverend Dr. Nat King Cole, Jr. He's a famous singer and a doctor, and a great Colored Leader too. And he has this great big smile, but when he sings that song 'Mona Lisa,' nobody can tell who he's smiling at."

I think Albert was a little mixed up on that one, but I didn't ask him what he was talking about, because most of the time when you don't know what Albert is talking about, he doesn't either.

But then right when I was getting on the bus, Albert yelled, "Hey, guess what? I got picked to talk into Dr. Belafonte's tape recorder too!" Which ruined my whole bus ride home, because you never want to get picked for something that they picked Albert LaChance for too. Because Albert is about the weirdest kid around.

But maybe I'll ask Albert to tell me about The Reverend Dr. Nat King Cole, Jr. next Tuesday when it gets boring staying after school with Dr. DeLafonte.

Which I still don't think is any fair, just for putting "queer" in your book report.

Kurt Brown

Mauser

Just the word—*Mauser*—its reptilian sibilance, menace of
something primitive, uncivilized, cruel.
Then the stock, unlovely wood, splintery rippled grain the
color of dried mud, as if a crude approximation
of an ideal stock, some pedigreed hunting rifle sculptured to a
high gloss. And the barrel,
lithe invincible steel, snub rod sticking out of its thin carapace
of wood, top-piece
clamped halfway down its length to sheathe its mechanisms
from fire and flung dirt.

Mauser. The rifle German foot soldiers used, measured not in
calibers but millimeters,
9 millimeters, redolent of something exotic, something
unfamiliar and strange. My father held it up
and stepped back: "This is not a toy," he said. "Never point a
weapon at anyone. And never assume
it isn't loaded. Always look: open up the breech and look,"
which he did by slamming the bolt back
and peering in. "Now you're ready," he said. "Now you can't
hurt anyone by mistake."

He fed a round into the chamber, brass cartridge gleaming in
the sun, bullet pointed like a flame—
drove it home with a snug, oiled efficiency and handed the
weapon to me. "Now aim it,"
he said, "sight straight down the barrel towards that tree.
Don't pull the trigger until you're ready,
just squeeze it, slowly. Hold your breath." Which is what I did,
because a single heartbeat might disrupt its flight,
describing the contours of a lethal trajectory, arc of my own
deadly and determined will.

Nancy White

Green

You had softened, dissolved, become but liquid
other people swam in, that you
swam in, coloring and confusing yourself.
Various others rushed by, peddling hard,
while you drifted in a thick-tongued tide of
purely green, called it failure, necessity.
Your new chant was *diapers diapers bedtime*
and *sweetheart, no*. Later, *this time she won't*
come back. You went on and on, sealike—

maybe we've been there—first fast
and uncontainable, then full of urchins
poisonous and jellyfish pumping on a current
similar to love. The hated starfish
grows back arms overnight, again
the dying, birthing, the inconceivable
vanishing of whole humans, the spark and raising,
everywhere, of new worlds, and nobody
noticing, not even, particularly, you.

You got used to it, how there was no way
to mark this passage, the self so permeated
there was no one to "be," voice transparent, large,
plain like the call of whales. How
your breath lasts now. How you miss
those gone. How you live in a river
so swift you are frightened. How no song will
replace or approximate those missing
and you must find another use for words.

Diana Caza

The Execution of Jim Hill

Harry Kearny, age 27, a liveryman:

First he struck me, which is probably the reason why I am not dead; because it was while I was falling down that he shot at me and missed me cleanly.

I heard women screaming, and I come to and saw him sort of stagger back—because, of course, he had a bun on—and his pistol was pointed at the ceiling. So I got up and ran out of there. I ran as fast as I could away from that house with the blood streaming into my eyes. I was expecting every minute that he would shoot me from behind and I wouldn't know it. Everything would just go dark, and that would be the end. I ran straight toward the only lights I saw, straight into Perkins' store, where I am told I fainted dead away.

When I come to again I saw a lot of men kneeling over me, and the doctor was working on the gash in my head.

I said, "He tried to kill me!" That was all I could say.

"What for?" they said.

But I didn't know. I guess I got in his way.

The authorities went to that house and found the man under a bed and brought him in. It was only later that I found out he was the one who robbed the Camp Seco store and made off with the safe.

Next morning, as soon as I was able to get up, I went to the jail and saw him. He didn't seem to harbor me any ill will or even to remember me.

I said, "Jim Hill, I am the man you struck with your pistol and shot at last night at Guadalupe's house."

He said, "Well, I'm sorry for that." He was just a big kid, like any kid you knew growing up.

I told him, "Jim, it is a little too late to be sorry now."

The Sonora Herald, *June 28, 1850:*

> On Wednesday night, Jim Hill, a man with a scar on his neck, went into the Camp Seco store in the night and held pistols over the heads of the proprietors while others of his gang stole the iron safe. Last night he went into a Spanish house of ill-fame, where Guadalupe, the keeper, is no doubt an accomplice. He hid under a bed where he was found by the sheriff.
>
> This morning a party of our most respectable citizens went to the jail and took Hill away to stand trial in Camp Seco. His identity was proved, and a fair and impartial trial was given before a jury of twelve men who rendered a verdict of guilty unanimously.

Guadalupe, runs a house on B Street, age unknown:

Sure, I hid him. He is all right. He was never nothing but kind to me or anyone in my house. He came in that night and pulled out a bag of gold as big as a sock. I asked him, "Where did you come by that?"

He told me, "Out of the safe at the Camp Seco store."

So I said, "Jim, you better get the hell out of here."

But he preferred to stay and drink, because he said this gold was on fire in his pocket.

Why he hit Harry the way he did I can't say, except that he was drunk. That was all there was to it.

After Harry ran out, I told Jim, "They are sure to be after you now." So I hid him under my own bed. I had some time of it getting him under there, I can tell you.

Pretty soon Sheriff Work and a lot of other men showed up at my door and demanded I should turn over the man that tried to kill Harry. Well, Jim Hill never tried to kill nobody. So I told them, "He's not here any more. He ran away." And the girls, the ones that could understand what was being said, they cried out, "He's not here any more!"

Even so, these men pushed their way into my house and found poor Jim under my bed and dragged him out. In the morning I heard they were taking Jim down to Camp Seco for his trial that very day. So I told the girls, "Put on a white dress. We're going down there to show him we are on his side."

Now I don't know what kind of trial this was, because by three o'clock they had voted Jim guilty and that he should hang. The judge asked Jim if he had anything to say in order to defend himself, and Jim stood up and said, "I am ready to die."

Upon hearing that, my girls fell on each other's necks and began to weep and cry terribly, for Jim was never nothing but kind to them. I could not help but wonder how things might have turned out different if poor Jim had been brought up decent or if anyone had ever taught him how to be a man.

Miss Lucy Apple, a young lady, age 20:

My cousin, Lawrence, told me he would attend the hanging and asked if I wanted to go with him, and I confessed that I did. When we reached the plaza, there were already a great number of people there, many men who had come down from the diggings but also very many ruffians and ne'er-do-wells. Lawrence asked me if I wanted to return home, but I took tight hold of his arm and told him no, for I did not.

After a short time the prisoner was led out on a tether with his hands bound behind him, up onto the platform of the gallows. I would say that I was shocked by his appearance, not because it was horrible, as I expected, but for the opposite reason. He did not appear to me to be an outlaw at all, though I had heard that he robbed the Camp Seco store at gunpoint, and tried to kill a man, and was a horse thief, and who knows what else.

Still and all, he impressed me as being merely a gentle youth, for his face did not display a single mark of iniquity. Being so moved, I turned to Lawrence and said, "They can not do it!"

On the platform the sheriff from Sonora asked the prisoner if he wished to make a statement before he died. The poor doomed boy turned to those in attendance and spoke in a clear, ringing voice, admitting that he had led a life of ignominy and warning others against following in his path. He admitted without evasion that he had stolen and committed other crimes but never murder, which as far as I know is true.

At that point someone in the crowd cried out, "Shall he be hanged?"

The answer "yes" was heard, but every bit as loud or louder was the answer "NO!" I would go so far as to say that my own voice might have been heard among the latter group. No sooner were those conflicting words uttered than pistol fire filled the air. Lawrence pulled me off the street into the miners' supply store from which we watched a scene out of Pandemonium: every-

where the discharge of pistol fire, people running in all directions and men on horseback plunging among them.

I saw the sheriff from Sonora push the prisoner down off the gallows and into a wagon. They drove away willy-nilly through the frantic crowd. It was then that I seized Lawrence's hand and said, "He is saved!"

Jim Hill, age 23:

I've done some wrong things. The first time I robbed a man was when I was ten. I pushed him down in the street and tore the watch right off his vest. I saw it and I wanted it, so I took it. I was caught and spent three weeks in the Watsonville jail. It was only a small room built out of stone with no windows and an iron door. Nevertheless, it didn't change my mind.

The next time I stole, it was from my own mother. I took the money she kept in a tin nailed to the floor behind the stove, the money she made doing other people's wash. One day I went and pried it up and made off with it. I didn't know how to spend it, so I gave it away. I gave a little bit of it to everyone I met who looked like he could use it. For this I was never punished; except that a couple years later my mother died, and I was left an orphan. So I took up the only trade I knew.

I have stolen just about everything there is to steal. But you can ask anyone who ever knew me or heard of me: I never spilt a drop of blood. They say I robbed the store at gunpoint. But before we went in there, I told Frank and Horny and Horny's two cousins, who I never saw before that night, I told them, "Hold your pistols over their heads, for I don't want nobody to be hurt. I want the safe, that is sure," I said. "But I don't want nobody to be hurt."

As for that fellow at Guadalupe's house who I guess I struck with my pistol, I can only say that I regret it.

Even so, I say to any of you here, any of you kids that contemplates taking up a life like mine, that believes there is glamour in it, I tell you, "Don't do it." Frank and Horny and I were living out in the scrub, in the mud and the rain with nothing to eat but a scrawny rabbit or a dove one of us might have shot, and that not very often. We thought, "There's gold in that safe in the Camp Seco store," and we were living worse than beasts,

so we went in there and held our guns over their heads and took it. We had to roll it off the top of Tuolumne canyon to bust it open, and it nearly did me in hauling it up there. After all that, I am going to hang. So you see, there is nothing whatsoever glamorous about it.

I don't want to die. I know I said I did, but I don't. I am young still. I got my whole life ahead of me, or I would if I wasn't about to hang. I want to live, and have a little home and a wife and some kids, just like anyone else. What turned me onto this road and made me as I am I guess only the good Lord knows. Now that I am going to meet Him, I can ask Him about it.

George Work, sheriff of Sonora:

I'll admit it now that I brought the melee on myself by inviting him to speak. Before I knew what was happening, all hell broke loose. There was a good deal of pistol fire and people running every which way and ladies being trampled under the feet of the crowd. Those who felt the kid should be spared took up pitched battle against those who felt he should be hung. As it became clear that someone was going to get hurt if I didn't get him out of there, and also that there wasn't going to be a hanging that day, owing to the breakdown of civil order, I removed Jim Hill from the gallows and into a wagon, and started for the jail in Sonora.

Driving back, I had a premonition of trouble. You don't do this job as long as I have, in Sonora as well as all over California, and also back east, without developing this other sense, like a sense of smell for trouble. Sure enough, as we came into Sonora—it was fully dark by that time—there was a mob gathered in the street with torches and prominently displaying a rope among them. It was pretty clear to me, as well as to the unfortunate prisoner, what they meant to do.

So I laid my rifle across my lap where they could see it, and I whipped up the horses intending to drive right through them. Indeed the mob parted for us. It is only human nature to get out of the way of a speeding wagon. But they surged after us; and a moment later—it was pitch dark—we hit a post, and the prisoner and I tumbled out. Having lost track of my rifle in the dark, I took out my pistol and said, "Make straight for the jail, Jim." I grabbed him by the back of his shirt and pushed him into the arroyo, which provided the most direct egress.

By then the mob had nearly caught up to us. I heard someone yell, "Stop them, for we do not want to shoot George." In another moment Bert Linoberg jumped on the back of the prisoner and threw his arms around him. Jim, being a bull of a man, simply dragged Bert Linoberg behind him. At the same time I saw Colonel Cheatam dash through the brush and up to the back door of the jail, where he faced us brandishing a pistol. Pretty soon we were overrun by the rest of the mob, some of them taking hold of me and others of Jim, but without violence.

I said, "Colonel, this whole thing is irregular. I cannot support the irregular hanging of a man in my custody."

Colonel Cheatam said, "George, you have a pistol, and so do I. Yours is cocked, and so is mine. Give this man up!"

By then four or five of them had pinioned me. Others placed the rope around Jim Hill's neck and led him away. It did not seem reasonable in that circumstance to open fire upon them, though I had not been relieved of my pistol. That being the case, I regret to say I was helpless to prevent them.

Enos Christman, age 22, compositor for the Sonora Herald:

I won't presume to speculate if it was right or wrong. All I will say is that they took Jim Hill out of Sheriff Work's custody and led him to the noble old oak behind the El Dorado Hotel, right in the heart of town. The prisoner stood among this circle of Sonora's most respectable citizens, whose determined faces were lit only by harsh torchlight, and he appeared humbled. He had not put up an ounce of resistance when they seized him. He was a big man—still a boy—with a large, hairless chin and the hulking shoulders of a prizefighter. Now he ducked his enormous head, and the noose hung straight down in front of him with the end of the rope lying loosely on the ground at his feet. He asked to see a minister, and one was immediately sent for. He was given fifteen minutes.

Straightaway Mr. McFreely, the minister, worked his way into the center of the crowd, and, seeing the situation, implored them to return Jim Hill to the jail. But he was told, "We are going through with this thing. We are going to see that justice is done."

Mr. McFreely did his best to comfort the doomed man, but Jim Hill appeared distracted and even impatient to die. Colonel Cheatam, who had taken it upon himself to direct the proceed-

ings, announced that the fifteen minutes were up. The rope was thrown over the stoutest branch of the old tree and attached to the hitch of the very wagon that had returned Jim Hill to Sonora. The team at first seemed reluctant to accept the task of hauling the condemned man up; but at last the horses reared and broke forward, so suddenly that a half-dozen men had to pull them back again, yelling, "Hold! Hold!" During it all, Jim Hill did not so much as kick his legs.

When it was over, Bert Linoberg stood on a milk box and cut the body down while three or four others waited below to catch it. They immediately hauled it into the rough box that Skeets McAllister had hammered together as soon as he heard that the prisoner had escaped punishment at Camp Seco and was being returned to Sonora. The men began filing solemnly past, anxious to get a look at what they had wrought, anxious to reassure themselves and one another that what they had done was right.

With some ceremony the lid was lifted into place, but it refused to go. Skeets McAllister had built the coffin for a man of average size, but Jim Hill was not in size or in any other way "average." It was found that his knees protruded. When his knees were pushed down, the top of his blond head rose up out of the box. The lid was dropped on again, this time with less delicacy. Nevertheless, one end jutted up. Men began climbing onto the lid of the coffin even as it continued to rock on the peak of Jim Hill's knees.

"C'mon, fellows, lend a hand!" they cried. "C'mon, Enos," they said, for I was slender enough to fit up there among them.

I was pulled onto the lid of the coffin and implored to jump up and down with all my weight until, after several minutes of such precarious effort, Skeets McAllister was finally able to pound the nails down.

There was no particular jubilation then. The men wandered away, by all appearances enervated, as if by a full day's labor. I returned to the offices of the *Herald*, where I found my editor, Mr. Gunn, sitting at his desk gazing at the inside of his watch case, which I knew to contain a small likeness of his wife. I suggested that we had better put out an obituary, though it was not strictly my place to say so.

"You write it, Enos, for I am sick of the whole business," Mr. Gunn said.

As it was the first time he had allowed me such a free rein, I

immediately took up pen and paper. But not feeling, as one might say, "in my element," I went instead to my typecase, where I rapidly composed what I felt to be an honest and straightforward account of the past few days' events: the robbery of the Camp Seco store, Jim Hill's apprehension at Guadalupe's house, his trial, and the dramatic circumstances of his reprieve and eventual delivery to justice. I recounted what was known of his history, his orphaned childhood, and early submission to a life of crime.

But once I had laid out the unvarnished facts of Jim Hill's life, I was at a loss as to how I should conclude. It seemed like a job better suited to someone other than myself to sum up the man's life, to declare whether it was good or bad, or the degree to which it was one or the other. I turned to Mr. Gunn to see if he could offer me any guidance, but he had retrieved the bottle from his lower drawer and he was already well into it.

I had no choice but to return alone to my typecase. My fingers had always found the type and set it in the chase as thoughtlessly as they brought food from the plate to my mouth. Suddenly the neat boxes seemed unyielding and mute. I groped for the type and fumbled with it as if I had never composed a line of copy in my life. It might have taken me half an hour to set those last few inarticulate words: "Jim Hill was 23 years old."

Sara Monahan

Blood Brother

I remember your mother told me the meaning of *nothing*.
"It is what rocks dream," she said. I know they wake under
chilly
stars, touched by the river's lucid fingers. I know what pebbles
imagine by day, basking in the sun. The belly of a stone
holds all sorts of visions: light reflected on water. Dragonflies.
The tin roof of an Adirondack cabin painted three shades
of forest, all of them wrong. This knowledge was my safety
whether I feared snakes, or bears, or wild Indian men.
These things will be here always: stars, wild blackberries,
boulders ringed green with lichen, asleep by the river.
I remember, too, the rock we dove from each summer, your
strong
Seneca body knifing the air. Sparks from the water
glinted off your skin like flecks of mica—no colour of their own,
their only thought to throw back the light you gave them.

Say

where ever you are, here, tonight,
gazing across this Malibu canyon,
or there, thirty-six years ago, sitting

at the kitchen table, your open face
reflected in the silver of cans surplussed
from the war, the wolf in your belly

already growling for golden peach halves
bobbing in sweet syrup even as your uncle
takes each round tin out of the box

and stacks them on your mother's table—
say that even when you were alone, later,
in the dark kitchen, shaking each to solve

their mystery, that even when you opened
the one you were sure held fruit and found
instead what you hated most—lumpy, yellow,

creamed corn—you ate it anyway—say
that in this moment so long gone you see
your life, each day peach gold or corn yellow,

nights devoured like sugar plums
or endured spoon by spoon swallowing
a black mush salted with stars—say that

this is the best there is and so you'll
have it—say it and eat it and say it
'till there is nothing left to say.

Donald Lystra Geese

We were sitting around Carl's big kitchen table—Carl, my wife Eileen, and me—waiting for the sun to come up over the frozen lake and for it to be time to take Carl into Muskegon for his cancer surgery. Eileen and I had driven up from Battle Creek the night before so Carl would have some company on his big day. Carl is a bachelor and lives alone.

Most of the conversation was happening between Carl and Eileen. I was doing my best to stay out of it, just studying our reflections in the picture window that looked out over the lake—three bleary-eyed people in their bathrobes having coffee—and listening to the Canadian geese that had gathered in front of Carl's.

"I don't want to talk about it anymore," Eileen said, after a long silence. She was referring to Carl's sick dog, Buster, and whether to turn him over to the vet's so he could be put out of his misery. The night before, he'd kept us awake with his whimpering and his frightened little barks. Carl figured the time had come to face hard facts. "As far as I'm concerned the subject is closed," Eileen added. Her hand reached out and cut the air as if she was slicing something in half.

Carl blew on his coffee, sending a cloud of steam out to the center of the table. I watched it in the window twisting in the air like a tortured phantom.

"Well, it's a fact to be dealt with," he said. He sipped his coffee. "Besides, Buster is my dog if you recall."

"It'd be a terrible thing to do on this of all days," Eileen said.

"I'd hate to spoil the day for you."

"That's not what I meant, Carl."

"Maybe you'd like to go shopping instead. You could get yourself a dress, probably."

"Don't, Carl."

"You could get a nice dress for the funeral."

Eileen folded her arms and stared hard at the floor. Lately, Carl was acting as if his *own* sickness gave him the right to say anything he pleased. Most of what was driving him was fear,

though. The doctors called it exploratory surgery, but Carl was expecting the worst.

A few seconds passed. I watched in the window as the defiance slowly drained from Carl's expression; this did not surprise me, because Carl is not a person who can hold a strong feeling for very long.

"Maybe I'll call and put off the surgery," he announced in a thoughtful voice, as if the idea had just occurred to him. He scrunched his face and stared off like he was weighing the pros and cons of some weighty matter—whether there's such a thing as original sin, of if the polar ice cap is melting. "I could take Buster to the vet's today, and they could reschedule the operation for later."

Eileen reached across and placed her hand on Carl's arm. "That's probably not a good idea, honey," she said, and I knew exactly what she was thinking. These days Carl couldn't take five steps without running out of breath. Later for Carl was now.

I pushed up out of my chair and went over to the picture window. What to do with sick dogs and sick people were not subjects high on my agenda on this day or any other. If that's a character flaw then I plead guilty. I just wanted Carl's operation to be over so Eileen and I could get back to our normal life in Battle Creek.

"What do you think, Glenn?" Eileen asked, trying to pull me into the discussion.

I made a tunnel with my hands and pressed my face up to the cool pane of glass. Outside, bare branches showed black against a pink horizon. A white sheet of ice covered the lake except in front of Carl's, where an underground spring fed out warm water. Scores of geese had gathered there, more than I had ever seen. A couple of swans, too.

"Glenn and me are here because we love you, Carl," Eileen said after a while. "Isn't that so, Glenn?"

Outside, two geese came in for a landing. They came down slow, spindly legs thrust forward, wings cupped and flexing against the rush of cold December air. They settled onto the glassy surface with barely a splash.

Eileen and Carl were closer than most brothers and sisters are, and that is something I had learned to live with. As kids their mother had run off to Oregon with a man who raised hunting

dogs, and she had not come back, and so Eileen—who was seven years older—had become a sort of substitute mother. She saw that Carl got decent meals and clothes and made sure he stayed in line at school. You could almost say that Eileen had made a career out of Carl, getting him out of scrapes and talking sense into him when his fiery emotions wanted to carry him away. Most people who knew Carl gave him a wide berth, but Eileen saw qualities in him that others didn't. She said Carl was cursed with an intelligence that saw the world in ways that were different than most people, and that made him react to things more powerfully. More than once I'd awakened in the middle of the night and found her downstairs at the kitchen table, the telephone up to her ear, talking to Carl in that soft, measured voice of hers, that sweet, middle-of-the-night voice that held the promise that everything would be all right.

Eileen and I had met at the community college in 1968. She was studying textile design with the intention of going to Montreal and striking it big in the fashion industry. I was taking night classes in car mechanics, which was the professional field I had chosen to pursue. Right from the start, it was clear to me that Eileen was deceiving herself about the fashion industry. It wasn't that she didn't have talent—she had plenty, even I could see it—but with Carl in the picture she wasn't likely to be venturing very far from Battle Creek. Still, I was impressed that she held onto that hope and plowed ahead against obstacles that would have daunted a lesser spirit; lives are built on dreams, after all, and that has to be respected.

As for me and Carl, we got along in a kind of manly, grudging way. Outside of Eileen, we had few things in common. Carl liked to hunt while I tended toward gentler pursuits—golf and model trains are what I prefer—but we always managed to find a few subjects to make the time pass when we were thrown together. In my opinion, Carl could never accept the fact that Eileen had chosen to take a husband, and all that that implied. On my side, I saw Carl as part of the package—good and bad—that comes with someone that you marry.

It was six o'clock now, and I was anxious for the day to start and for it to fill up with some distractions. Almost anything would do besides sick dogs and people. I left Carl and Eileen in the kitchen and headed for the laundry room to check on Buster.

He was lying on an old quilt next to the clothes dryer, a big black Labrador that had seen better days. He lifted his head and watched me with eyes that had no spark of interest.

I knelt down and began rubbing Buster's ears. He settled his head back onto the quilt, closed his eyes, and emitted a dull, lonely sound. For a while, just to kill time, I pretended I was a holy man who could put vital energy back into Buster's wasted body. It was like a TV show I had seen about a man who had special powers. I put my hand on Buster's head and tensed up my muscles; I guess that's what I thought it would feel like if you had special powers.

Suddenly, I was startled by Carl's voice coming from right behind me.

"What do you think, Glenn?" he asked.

It took me a minute before I could answer. "About what?" I said.

"About Buster. That's the topic of the hour, right?"

I kept my hand on Buster, working my fingers through his limp fur. "You probably shouldn't decide anything too fast, Carl." That was the most reasonable thing I could think of to say.

"We're quite a pair, aren't we?" Carl's voice was louder than it needed to be. "Maybe you should take us both to the vet's. Two for the price of one."

"Don't talk like that, Carl," I said. "That's not a healthy way to talk. You know everything's going to turn out fine."

"Is that so?" he said, still loud. "Well, thanks for that information, Glenn. I guess that settles everything, then, doesn't it?"

I didn't know what to say and so I didn't say anything. But I didn't like the way Carl was acting. He seemed to be working himself into one of his agitated states.

I stood up so I could see Carl better. Carl is a big man with hair that has gone mostly gray. He has small, sensitive eyes that remind you of a woman. When he gets excited, he looks at people in quick, sideways glances. That was how he was looking at me now.

"Maybe I could take Buster to the vet's for you," I said. I was thinking that that might calm Carl down, plus give me something to do.

"No," Carl said. "I should handle it myself, Glenn. Buster's my dog and I should handle it."

"Ordinarily, maybe, but not today. Today is different, Carl.

Today you want your mind to be relaxed, just like Eileen says."

Carl stared at me like a man caught in a bad dream; then his gaze traveled across the room and fixed on something.

"The way I'm thinking won't take that much time," he said.

I turned to see what he was looking at: it was his gun cabinet in the corner.

"Carl," I said, "you want to turn Buster over to the vet and have it done professionally. That's the way to handle it."

"Buster deserves better than to be pumped full of chemicals by a bunch of strangers." His voice had a raspy edge that made it sound strange and crazy. He blinked his eyes and looked at me in that sideways way.

"That's not the point," I said, and I noticed that my own voice was loud now, too. "Doing it yourself is a bad idea with you going in for surgery."

Carl stepped in front of me as if the subject was closed. He opened the gun cabinet and took out a pistol in a leather holster. I recognized it as one I'd seen him use to shoot a snapping turtle on a stump. That was probably ten years ago.

"Carl," I said. "We should think about this."

"What's going on?" It was Eileen's voice. She was standing in the doorway.

"Carl wants to take care of Buster himself," I said. "He wants to handle it in a personal way."

Eileen stepped into the room. When she saw the pistol in Carl's hand, she stared at it in disbelief. I could sense a battle beginning to rage inside of her between her normal sweetness and something else. And who could blame her? She had been working all morning to keep Carl in the right frame of mind to have his operation, and now everything was slipping away in a single moment.

"Are you crazy, Carl?" she said. "Do you want to saturate your mind with thoughts of death today, you who's already so afraid." The words rushed out of Eileen's mouth, and I knew they were the wrong words. Her arm went up as if she intended to strike Carl, which was a gesture I had never seen her use before.

Carl paid no attention. He slid the pistol out of the holster, turned it slowly in his hand, as if he was examining it for some defect. Then he put down his hand and lowered himself to the floor, using the slow, deliberate movements of someone much older than he really was.

For one wild moment I thought he meant to shoot Buster

right there on the floor. I looked at Eileen, expecting her to take control of things like she always did. But I could tell from her face that she had no answer for this particular madness.

"Carl!" I said. I knelt down and put my hand over his on the gun.

Carl turned to me, his face swollen with the emotions of a man who doesn't know where life is taking him, or whether it will bring him back. I tightened my grip and pushed against his shoulder, trying to keep the gun barrel pointed at the floor. In spite of his frailness, Carl kept twisting around and throwing me off balance. Then he gave a sudden lurch and I felt his gun hand begin to slip free from my grip.

Behind us, Eileen was making sounds like a frightened animal. Her normal calm demeanor had finally been overthrown. I thought to myself that this was how things happened that you read about in newspapers, terrible things that you believed would never touch you or become part of your life. Then I tried to think of what I could say to make the crazy moment end, and there was only one thing I could think of, and so I said it.

"I'll do it," I said. As soon as the words were out, Carl's hand slackened. I lifted the gun away and stood up and turned toward Eileen.

"Nobody will do anything," she said. "Buster will stay here, and we'll all go to the hospital together. Just like we planned."

I looked back and forth between Eileen and Carl. I didn't know what to do. Carl was still kneeling on the floor, but a little of the wildness seemed to have left his face. It had been replaced with something calmer, something I took to be relief.

"No," I said, turning back to Eileen. "It's important to Carl. You two leave for the hospital. I'll take care of Buster and catch up with you after. That's the way we should do it, sweetheart. Then everybody's happy."

Eileen stared at me as if I was a traitor, or had lost my mind. When it came to Carl, she wasn't used to being overruled.

"You've never even used a gun, Glenn," she said, as if that was a terrible failing.

"I've seen Carl do it, honey. I saw him shoot a turtle once."

Our gazes came together, Eileen's and mine. I could feel the anger stretched tight in her. It's not often we disagree, but this time was different; this time I remembered the look on Carl's face and held my ground.

A moment passed. Then Eileen turned and walked out of the room.

I went back to the kitchen to have another cup of coffee while Carl and Eileen got ready to leave for the hospital. I was upset by my promise to Carl and everything else that had happened in the laundry room. I had never killed a living thing before, or ever wanted to, and now I was committed to shooting poor old Buster. I sat and sipped my coffee and tried not to think about what was going to happen.

After a few minutes, Eileen came out. She was wearing a gray skirt and a sweater with an unusual pattern that bespoke her background in textiles. She went over to the window and began to comb her hair in the reflection.

"Did you ever see so many geese?" I said to her.

She kept combing her hair.

"It's because Carl's got the only open water on the lake. Geese need water to swim in. Otherwise they head south."

Eileen finished with her hair and turned around and fixed me with a level stare. "Let me get this straight," she said. "Carl and I are going to leave for the hospital so he can have his cancer operation, and you're going to stay behind and shoot his dog. Is that the plan?"

I didn't say anything. It wasn't a question that needed an answer.

"Did you think about what this is going to do to Carl?" she asked. "He loves that dog, you know."

"I'm just trying to do the right thing, sweetheart," I said. "It'll ease Carl's mind to know Buster is being taken care of by family."

Eileen stared at me. I stepped forward to touch her but she made a motion with her hands and backed away.

"I'm just trying to do what's best for Carl," I said again, which was the only thing I was really sure about.

Eileen went back to get her coat and then Carl came out. He had on a gray suit that hung loosely on his shrunken frame and one of those wide ties that were popular about twenty-five years ago. The thought of Carl getting dressed up to go to the hospital struck me as funny, but I didn't say anything. I knew he'd been back saying good-bye to Buster.

"Here," he said. He passed the pistol over to me. "I've put a magazine in it."

I hefted the gun. It felt solid and powerful. I sighted down the barrel at a coffee cup sitting on the counter. Then I set it on the table.

After another moment Eileen came back wearing her blue ski parka. I hugged her but she stiffened and pulled away. I shook Carl's hand, and then they both went out through the side door. Carl stood on the porch while Eileen backed his Buick around, and then Carl went down and got in on the passenger's side. In the glare of the headlights tiny snowflakes drifted down, just wispy pieces of ice. I stood and watched the red taillights bump out of sight down Carl's two-track road.

It felt good to be alone and to be able to forget about Carl for a while. I sat in an easy chair and looked through one of Carl's *Field and Streams*. Then I watched the *Today* show on TV. Katie Couric talked to a scientist about global warming, and then there was a man with talking parrots. Then it was eight o'clock and I decided I had better get moving.

While I was getting dressed I thought about what I had to do. There was a stand of pretty pine trees in the woods behind Carl's house, and I had decided that would be a good place to do it. I knew Buster was too lame to walk that far, and I wondered if I could drag him over the ground on the quilt, or if Carl had a wheelbarrow. Then other questions started crowding into my head, practical questions that I hadn't thought about, like where, exactly, I should aim the pistol and what I should do with Buster afterwards.

I began to feel strange. My thoughts were darting around like ants when a rock has been turned over. I wondered if there was another way to do it, maybe take Buster to the vet's without telling anyone, or feed him a handful of Carl's pills so he'd just slip away peacefully. I was beginning to understand there was more to shooting something than I had figured on—way more—and I wasn't sure I could pull it off. I pictured Carl and Eileen out on the road in Carl's Buick and suddenly I wished I was with them and not where I was.

Finally, I managed to pull myself together. I stuffed Carl's pistol into my pocket and lifted Buster up from the laundry room floor, quilt and all, and carried him back to the spot that I had

been thinking about. Then I offered up a little prayer and then I picked up the gun.

It was over so fast I almost didn't realize what had happened. All it took was a little squeeze and the pistol jumped in my hand and Buster slumped into the snow like a puppet with the strings cut. The sound of the gun left a big impression on me, the explosion going out into the forest and then the echo crashing back and back and back, and then hearing the cry and flutter of a startled flock of crows, and then everything quiet again and peaceful and like before, except Buster dead.

I went back to the house and got a shovel. My hands were shaking so badly that I could hardly hold it. The ground was frozen, but I was able to bust through the top layer and get into the soft earth where it was easier digging. I dug like a madman and made a nice deep hole for Buster. I wrapped Buster in the quilt and lifted him down. Then I filled the hole, first with the soft earth and then with the frozen clods. The last thing I did was to roll a big white stone on top, because I wanted to be able to find the grave later and show Carl, if I had the chance.

I stood up and looked around. A north wind had come up; it was driving the snowflakes slantwise with the ground. The wind and the slanted snow made everything white and furious and off balance, and for a minute I wondered if I would be able to find my way back to the house. My heart was pounding and the cold wind was blowing on my face.

I had kept my promise to Carl but I didn't feel good about it. Buster was lying dead in a hole and I was the undisputed cause of it. I tried to tell myself that it was the worn-out Buster I had shot, but my mind kept seeing the young Buster fetching sticks. That was the hardest part: knowing that *that* Buster was gone now, too, and even any connection to him.

"Please accept this fine dog into your kingdom," I blurted out, which was something I remembered from a movie. Then I turned and hurried back to the house.

When I got to the house the phone was ringing. It was Eileen at the hospital.

"They just took Carl back into the operating room," she said in a cool voice. "I thought you might like to know that. I'm here in the lobby."

Before I could say anything there was a muffled sound, as if

Eileen had taken the receiver away from her ear. I could hear her talking to someone in the background, then she came back on the line. "Listen, Glenn, there's a lot of people here so I can't talk for long. It's like Grand Central Station. Everybody's relative is getting operated on today, it seems."

"How was Carl when he went in?" I asked.

"Fine," she said. "Kind of stunned, I guess. Just doing whatever the nurses told him to do. Go here. Go there."

For a while we didn't say anything. I was still feeling strange from being back in the woods, and my heart was pounding like crazy. I moved over to the picture window and looked out onto the lake. The geese were still down there, only now the north wind was ruffling the water and a black skin of ice was starting to form. The geese paddled and flapped their wings, trying to keep some open space around them. At Eileen's end I heard a door slam. Then a voice made an announcement over a loudspeaker.

"He cried a little on the drive in," Eileen said. "Not bad, though. Just started talking about mom and dad and then he teared up."

"I guess that's to be expected."

"I suppose."

"Eileen," I said. "I took care of that business with Buster."

"Oh," she said, cool.

"I was hoping I could let Carl know before he went in for his operation. So his mind would be settled about it." Out on the lake, the geese were bobbing and weaving, working to keep the water free. "Maybe you can tell him when he comes out."

There was another long silence. It got so long that I began to fear that we'd been cut off. But finally Eileen's voice came back. "Listen, Glenn," she said. "I'm tired of talking about that dog. As far as I'm concerned it was a needless aggravation."

"To you," I said, "and to me. But maybe not to Carl."

Eileen went silent again. I knew she was thinking about what I had said, and what she would say back. In the eerie silence coming over the wire I could faintly hear her breathing. The whispery sound of it, that slight rush of air, made it seem like the only connection I had to things right then. To Eileen or to anyone.

I stood completely still, holding the receiver, waiting for Eileen to answer. And I thought about Carl stretched out on a table in a room with blazing lights, and how he had not wanted to be there, but how it was the right place for him to be, and

how Eileen and I had gotten him there in spite of everything that had worked against us. And I thought about the risk I'd run by shooting Buster, how I'd stepped up when Eileen had been pushed too far. And then I thought about going home to Battle Creek, where Eileen and I could resume our normal life together. Nothing about today seemed normal, nothing at all.

I counted five of Eileen's breaths.

"Just get yourself in here, sweetheart," she said finally. "I guess I see your point. We'll call a truce."

I held the phone up tight to my ear. Out on the lake, a goose pulled himself onto the skin of ice, but it broke and he fell back into the water, fluttering his wings.

"Eileen," I said.

"What?"

I heard her breathing on the wire. My heart was going like crazy.

"Don't hang up yet."

William Pruitt

West of Cape Girardeau

Ferris wheel tilt a whirl
  Make two shots through the basket,
    guess the speed of your pitch on the radar gun
  Big lights on Main Street,
    it's Homecoming this week at Jackson town square

The band plays country rock,
  mostly older folk sit around the fountain
    or on the lawn in their own folding chairs
  on the courthouse green below the clock where the cool
    breeze cuts the hot sausage cotton candy air

On this last night everyone pauses,
  good-looking women with young children
    husbands with "Busch" t-shirts
  looking up from their homemade Demolay ice cream
    & holy burgers from the Sedgewick Lutheran booth

The little girl sitting on the counter pulls
  out a slip of paper from the bowl,
    bulbs flashing,
  for color tv, rifle, gas, groceries,
    Everyone pauses,

The expressionless ferris wheel operator
  raises and slams the iron bar,
    (someone's got a winning number)
  clearing the wheel of people & filling it up again,
    sending them up, then down, till down is up,

Stopping them near the top, two people swinging gently,
  visitors, her mother's grave at Cape,
    roaring whining diesel generator sending
  oily smoke past them in its
    long twisting journey to the stars

Brandy McKenzie

Driving: Something About Wyoming

The road (any road), long and smooth
as a young man's back arched over
a hidden lover—missionary, or not,
just an asthma of ribs and the river
between, something slight in the shadows,

and new. For the first time since the East,
the edges of this land crust upwards, quick
gasps to block your vision, and you pause,
lick salt from your lips, try to take something
in. It's too much, this shove, this shoulder

nudging you out of your own frame,
the rude bony rise in the corners. Bleached sky
sighs thin and long, a sweet-kissed slip
from a receding horizon—it's all leaving,
just a lingered stroke of your caught-up throat,

a breezy nod, clouds like fingers trailing
along the rolling spine you take on faith:
that crooked, aching line dividing you neatly
in two, half here, half loose
trembling in the clear afternoon light.

Xujun Eberlein

Snow Line

Shiao Su had searched every inch of his room, under the bed, under his roommates' beds, under the piles of dirty laundry, in every drawer of his desk, in between every page of every textbook, but still couldn't find the pages he was looking for. For a moment he even doubted if they'd ever existed.

The class bell was already ringing as he dragged himself toward the Economics Department Building, wincing when the forgotten cigarette burned his fingers. The bright sunshine and gentle breeze of May failed to soothe him. From the other side of the high brick wall that separated the campus and an elementary school, clear voices of children reading their textbooks surmounted the wall with the breeze:

"I—love—Beijing—Tian-an-men
Above it—the sun—is—rising . . ."

The uninformed, innocent voices irritated him; that was the same text he had read in elementary school. There seemed no evidence that this was already the 1980s. In the distance, at the entrance of the main gate of the largest university in southwest China, stood a lime-white, larger-than-life-size statue of Chairman Mao, one arm raised, beckoning you to enter the campus. There the statue had stood for the decade during which the university, like all others in the nation, was closed. Since the university reopened three years ago, Shiao Su had heard of similar statues quietly disappearing from some campuses farther east. An eastern poet had even begun to use, ever so shyly, the word "love" without reference to a political symbol. But for some reason the West seemed always behind the East in China, just as the sun always arrives later.

Shiao Su remained in this distracted state of mind through his economics classes until late morning, toward the end of his math class. The professor was a skinny man of average height in his early forties, only a couple of years older than the oldest students in the class, the very first admitted after the decade-long Cultural Revolution. There had been an exam the day before and, as was conventional, the professor had just read the names

of students who scored above 90 in the test. His level voice stirred up some excitement and some disappointment in the classroom. Shiao Su did not hear his name, and he stared at the professor's thick glasses, his eyes perplexed behind his own glasses.

Suddenly, the professor's voice became animated. "Now I want to read you the best answer sheet I've ever seen!" This unexpected move stilled the class of thirty-two men and women. This was not part of convention. Students in the front rows could see that the pages in the professor's hand were upside down, and he was looking at the wrong side. He walked to the front edge of the dais and read with as much gusto as his thin chest would allow:

"First seeing you as in fog
Across a drifting earth, longing your graceful figure
Is this a wild wish?
I instantly utter—
Be my wife!"

He waved one arm to the audience like a flag as he yelled out "be my wife," receiving only a few suppressed chuckles. A student raised his hand. The professor impatiently permitted his question.

"Be my wife?" the young man asked in a confused tone. "That's a solution to the math test?" The whole class burst into uproarious laughter.

The professor raised his palm for silence.

"This is poetry, understand? Poetry! The twin brother of mathematics!" Then he sighed. "I have not seen a real poem in ages." Before the class calmed completely he again engaged himself in the passionate reading:

"The sun sets, highlighting a mountain peak
On the edge of the green shaded cliff
I throw down a bouquet
The echo says—
Be my wife!"

Another wave of laughter rolled across the classroom but the professor kept reading:

"The fond poet sleeps in a little log house
Wolves cry deep in the woods
Only the moon bends down, recognizing
Each fresh character on the grassy hill—
Be my wife!"

The women students did not join in the laughter. As in any science and engineering classes, they were a small minority. All seven lowered their heads to hide moist eyes.

Shiao Su sat motionlessly, his long back up straight, his glasses glimmering. He was totally awake now. Only now did he understand why he could not find the draft of his first poem, and why his name was not in the top score list as it had often been. As the professor kept on, Shiao Su hoped the author's name might not be revealed.

When the last words of the poem hit the floor with the sounds of brass cymbals, the laughter finally died down. In the fresh silence the bell rang. The professor collected his papers and walked out of the classroom; the women students hurriedly followed.

Behind them, a shrill male voice suddenly broke into a solo of a popular, though long-forbidden, folk song:

"If you wanna be a bride,

Don't be another's—"

All but one man, old and young, picked up the lyrics in one united tone:

"You just gotta be mine! "

Then, pounding their hands on desks, they shouted out as one, "Be my wife," breaking out once again into uncontrolled laughter.

For several nights in a row various handwritten copies of Shiao Su's maiden poem, "Golden Bell," quietly passed from room to room in the women students' dorm. In some rooms candles burned into the small hours after the lights-off bell, as girls concentrated on copying the poem by hand:

". . . The old captain died; the ocean was his life
His ship with proudest mast—now passed on to me
I sail tomorrow, faraway
My heart hides the words—
Be my wife!

Holding sleeves of dawn I float
Put your beloved orchid on the windowsill
Your cat standing on the headboard
I stoop to ask—
Be my wife!
Where will the sampan drift?
Finally stranding at a river oasis

Frightened, my first kiss to you
I murmur—
Be my wife!

Comes autumn, the rice turns gold
Reluctantly, geese part from the lake
Long chasing remnants of sunset clouds
My voice getting hoarse—
Be my wife!"

The poem fell into the hands of a student Party member from the countryside. Though she angrily condemned the "yellow poem," she kept reading. The girl who had shown it to her panicked and tried to grab the paper back; the Party member held it tightly. Rumor was that after that, she hand-copied the entire poem and hid it in her locked drawer, offering a revision for the other girl's copy. "How about changing 'be my wife' to 'be my comrade'?" The other girl did not dare protest.

So that was how the pointy tip of the awl emerged from the pocket. Shiao Su became a well-known lyric poet literally overnight. In the next few months his name constantly hung on the lips of female university students all over Sichuan Province. Despite the Party's rule "no talk of love on campus" that had caused the math professor to be denounced after the fateful class, a few brave girls attempted to contact Shiao Su. They were too late: the poem had already reached its mark. In the circulation of "Golden Bell" there were many variations. Incidentally, or perhaps intentionally, most of them did not have the ending stanza:

"Says she, my response—
Strawberry, mud, olives and baby deer."

2

As flower fragrance graced the summer air of Chengdu, hand copies and mimeographs of Shiao Su's poetry made their way to other universities and the public. His newly discovered talent resurrected his old pa's dead hope for him to become a dragon, while bothering his wife-to-be, Qian-qian, with reason.

One Sunday morning when Shiao Su and Qian-qian were enjoying their weekend together, without warning a small crowd of young women came to Shiao Su's house, or more precisely his parents' house, located in downtown Chengdu, a half-hour bi-

cycle ride from the campus. Shiao Su politely let them in, turning around only to find that Qian-qian had disappeared. The curtain between his bedroom and the small living room swayed in the wind brought in by the uninvited guests. After introducing themselves as "literature youths," the girls started pouring out questions such as, "How did you start writing poems as a science student?" or "What's the purpose of your writing?" He noticed some of them kept eyeing the swaying curtain and he wondered what Qian-qian was doing behind it.

Shiao Su lit a cigarette and sat quietly smoking. In the curling smoke and invisible fog of unfamiliar perfume, he felt a slight headache caused by the questions. Once he had written a foreword to his poetry: "No matter what the topic, when I give up studying its essence, I find myself unspeakably happy and relaxed." Another time, several men from the Chinese Literature Department had a big debate about his motivation for writing. They finally reached an agreement that writing poems "is the best way to radiate outward the strength of his life." The fact that Shiao Su's academic scores were good and that he was also a key member of the university's track and field team were excluded from his "strength." They came to tell him their conclusion and wanted to know what he thought about it. He conveniently wrote two lines on the back of a cigarette pack as the answer: *"The value of all arguments / Merely worth a glowing cigarette butt."*

But the playful disdain for the rational was a trick that Shiao Su could only perform on men. In his twenty-five years of life he had not learnt how to deal with women, especially rational women. He had no alternative but to answer, "Ah, I wrote just for fun."

His words touched off a wave of dissatisfied tongue clicking, but another curious question surfaced at that moment. "Could we see her?" one pretty girl asked with a shy smile. It looked like the question had held her for quite a while. Shiao Su was softened by her hopeful eyes, but he listened to Qian-qian's heart beating behind the curtain. He shook his head and said, "She's not here. Maybe next time?"

Another girl was encouraged by this and started to ask for their love story. When she heard that the couple was introduced by a matchmaker friend and that Qian-qian was a common government employee, not a college student, and only twenty-one

years old, the girl's shining eyes dimmed a little. At this moment Shiao Su knew that the peak of their enthusiasm had passed. A note of disappointment echoed silently between the host and the guests.

Not until almost an hour later did Qian-qian dare to lift the curtain. She eyed the emptied living room, her pink cheeks pouting a little, and she mumbled, "Could you stop mixing with those literary women?"

"Okay, my little deer," Shiao Su replied and placed a light kiss on her youthful lips. She dodged away from his next attempt and warned with a childish anger:

"Be careful, your mother is back!"

As a punishment for his "mixing" with other girls, Qian-qian ordered Shiao Su to accompany her to the farmers' market. Carrying Qian-qian on his bike's handlebars, Shiao Su rode through the twisting alleys, where there were no traffic police, to arrive at the West Suburb Bridge farmers' market. Before Shiao Su locked up the bike, Qian-qian was already off bouncing along the gravel road. Her slickers kicked the small stones up and away; she was humming a children's song. Ahead of her, wicker and bamboo baskets of green, yellow, and white vegetables arrayed with purple, blue, pink, and red flowers lined up on both sides of the road. Farmers, both women and men, cried out under the golden sun, "Come on here, mine's selling cheap!"

It took Shiao Su a while to move his gaze away from Qian-qian as she sank into the crowded market. As he looked around, a sign, "Modern Art Gallery," caught his eyes. He had heard that this was the first private gallery in Chengdu.

He walked into the small empty hall. Oil and water paintings of all sizes were arranged artfully on three white walls. A young man wearing a colorfully stained canvas apron greeted him so warmly that Shiao Su was a little flustered; he was used to the salesclerks' rude yelling in the government-run stores.

Shiao Su perused the walls, occasionally making a stop. Something caught his attention in a quiet corner. He glanced at it, walked past it, and came back to it. He looked closer and lightning struck.

Under a small oil painting were a few lines of his poem written in a delicate script of small characters:

Not a man walking toward me

Not a bundle of familiar sunrays
Only a land of wild flowers
Accompany me
In dusk with no wind
Begin a trek with no reason

He looked at the oil painting with surprise and pleasure. He had been enjoying echoes from his audience; but he had never expected to receive a message from a different form of art. The oil painting was titled "Balang Mountains," with a cool color bias in a purple keynote. Clusters of mysterious flowers and open grounds between wild bushes appeared misty and hazy. From the haziness rose a rich autumn mountain smell, inexplicably touching. Shiao Su let out a sigh; the genuine mood in the painting erased any pretentiousness he perceived in his poem.

The painting was signed "Dandelion." So oil painters also used pen names? He stood in front of "Balang Mountains" for quite a while before he walked away to look at other paintings. Then he came back again.

"Peek-a-boo! I just knew you would be here." Qian-qian's giggles startled him. He shushed her and took a full hand-basket of produce from her hand. For a split second, a question mark flickered in Qian-qian's eyes. She went closer to the painting and looked at the author's name.

"That's a girl's name—I swear to Chairman Mao," she commented as they walked out of the gallery together.

"Chairman Mao is dead," Shiao Su responded with a reassuring smile, his free arm holding her smooth shoulder. He did not think more explanation was needed, as she was unlikely to have recognized his poem. On the trip home Qian-qian sat on the rear carrier kicking the wheel all the way, while Shiao Su could not stop contemplating the wild Balang Mountains and the mysterious purple mist, vaguely feeling its seductive power.

That evening Qian-qian cooked a banquet for the family, including Shiao Su's favorite dishes, sea cucumbers braised in brown sauce and tingling hot tofu. The plate of Kong- pao chicken was a wine dish for Shiao Su's father, and the sand-pot of fish head dish was for his mother. Shiao Su, usually quiet and a light eater, opened up both his stomach and mouth, making everyone chuckle over the dinner table. Whatever the reason, he was in an excellent mood and did not bother to analyze it.

3

As Shiao Su's poems grew increasingly popular, the enticement of seeing them properly printed and bound also increased. However, his submissions to national and local literature magazines were like stones sinking into the sea. The few that ever returned rejection slips had brief comments such as "unhealthy sentimentalism of the petty bourgeoisie"; "obscure words nobody can understand"; or "mist poems do not suit Chinese readers."

His father tried to help by connecting him with an editor friend. Uncle Jin was the chief editor of *Sichuan Youth,* a government-run political magazine. The magazine had newly opened a poetry section. In his desperation Shiao Su set out to see Uncle Jin. "You have talent, truly, you have talent," Uncle Jin said encouragingly. "I plan to use two of your poems. But," he paused and looked apologetically at Shiao Su, "as you know, this is the Party's magazine. You'll have to make several corrections here."

Uncle Jin went on to the particular corrections, including the replacement of the word "love" with "revolutionary affection." Shiao Su was too well mannered to refuse and agreed to do what Uncle Jin asked. He just hoped that Dandelion, whoever she was, did not read this magazine. After he walked out he never returned.

The only choice left was to publish himself. This was an unheard-of concept to Chinese in the early 1980s, but the future dragons and tigers in Shiao Su's economics class were not afraid to set precedents with unknown concepts. They formed a well-conceived plan including applying for the imprimatur, designing the book cover, printing the book, and marketing it. All these steps involved back doors; but who in this class did not have a few connections?

Shiao Su's assignment was to get the book of his poetry, *Black Snow,* printed in a street-run printing shop. He was told he must meet the contact there after hours and avoid the shop manager. The contact's name was Yue Zhu.

When Shiao Su arrived at the shabby printing shop it was dusk. In the air mixed with mold and the smell of oil ink, under bright fluorescent lights, he saw the side of a tall girl standing alone and working on a type board. Her off-white cotton shirt and matching skirt were as simple as elegance. A green silk ribbon loosely flowing with her waterfall, shoulder-length hair

made him wonder how the ribbon could be so loose and still stay, as though it were a strand of her hair.

The green ribbon danced away; their eyes met. He was unprepared to see a pair of calmly intelligent eyes. She nodded to him with a serene smile, as if he was a long-time acquaintance. "Hi. I'll be finishing in a moment," she said softly while her hands kept up their swift movements.

Shiao Su walked closer and saw she was picking the small lead characters from the typecase and placing them into a stereotype board. In front of her, the layout of a newspaper page was close to finished. With effort he recognized the reversed characters that formed the headlines: *Uphold the Party's leadership! Uphold the socialist road! Uphold proletarian dictatorship! Uphold Marxism, Leninism, and Mao Zedong Thought!* The same proclamation for the "four upholds" appeared in all newspapers every day.

"Does this work bore you?" The question slipping out of his lips made him gasp. He did not even know her!

Yue Zhu did not stop her deft hands, nor lift up her eyes. He could only hear her calm voice: "I don't think when I am working."

Shiao Su shut up and walked away a few steps to look around. There were no windows in the rather large, storage-room-type workshop. On the facing white wall that was free from equipment and supply boxes was a large manual timesheet with dates, names, and red checks and crosses. Beside it was a framed space titled "Study Gains," the words that were so familiar and so remote at the same time. In the framed space, notebook-sized pages lined up tidily like soldiers on parade, except one that was not hung well and slightly tilted. Without another look, he knew exactly what was written on the pages: the workers' reiteration of what they had gained after studying Chairman Mao's works. And every page had more or less the same words, the words that everyone wrote but no one read. The only tiny variation within this tidy space was that lone tilted page.

Shiao Su suddenly missed the vast track fields and the modern library building of his campus. He looked at Yue Zhu again and could not put together her elegant figure and calm demeanor with this workshop where no daylight could come in. He felt gratitude when Yue Zhu led him out.

Shiao Su followed Yue Zhu to the end of the hallway along the shop's wall outside. She opened a door and let him in.

He instantly saw this was actually a corner of the workshop they had just walked out of, with cardboard walls separating this small "room" from the rest of the shop. A room big enough to handle a few pieces of simple furniture: a single bed with a bamboo bookshelf as its end, a small square rosewood tea table, and a bench. There was even a small window on one side of the real wall; it looked as though it had been chiseled out by hand as an afterthought. A long, quaint, wooden *Zheng* sat horizontally in front of the window; beside it hung a large basin of wild ferns. A mountain soil smell spread out of the ferns.

"You live *here?"* Shiao Su asked with genuine surprise. He wondered how many more surprises Yue Zhu was going to give him tonight.

"Ah—my father's apartment is as small as this one. Besides, not too bad to have my own place." Yue Zhu smiled.

"Your father . . ." Shiao Su stopped in the middle of the question as his sight was caught by a woodcut print on one wall. A little girl, five or six years old, kneeled in a meadow blowing on a dandelion. He could not believe his eyes.

" . . . is Lord Yue! " he cried out. Fragments of tales about the legendary artist and his family flashed through his memory. Lord Yue won a golden medal for his woodcut "Dandelion" in a world art competition in the 1960s. Red Guards raided his big house and seized the medal during the Cultural Revolution. After many public denunciations, Lord Yue and his wife turned on the gas stove during a dark winter night; the teenage daughter rescued the father but lost her mother forever . . .

Yue Zhu ignored his exclamation. "Don't you want to talk about your poetry book?" she asked.

"Yes, but wait—why don't you apply for the College of Fine Arts?" Shiao Su could not stop his tongue. That's the only way for her to get out this printing shop, he thought.

Yue Zhu smiled placidly. "I did and I was admitted. But my father does not want me to be an artist."

Shiao Su's question hung in the middle of the air. He was quiet for a few seconds.

"I'm really sorry," he murmured at last.

Yue Zhu laughed softly. "Why, this is nothing. Not too bad to be a worker and to live on my own wages." She paused and then added: "It wasn't easy to get this job, you know."

Shiao Su was again silenced. Countless young people their age

had come back from the countryside at the end of the Cultural Revolution and failed to pass the entrance exams for college. They were now a huge unemployment force that had been classified by the Government as waiting-for-employment youths. Yue Zhu and he should feel lucky . . . but was she really lucky?

The remaining glow of the setting sun spilled onto the windowsill and the little square table. Yue Zhu infused a purple sand-pot with jasmine tea and sat down on the edge of the bed. The two sat by the table sipping tea and talked about the details of the printing process of *Black Snow.* In the fragrant air of tea, ferns, and sunrays, Shiao Su's soul slowly returned to tranquility.

"Your room is like a fairy tale," he commented before leaving. "Where did you buy that? Some kind of fern? I've never seen it in the flower markets."

"I dug it from the mountains."

"Which mountains? Balang?"

Yue Zhu apparently did not expect this. She glanced at him and ruminated.

He hesitated, but could not help asking: "Did you go there alone?"

"It's a place of wild soil and wild water. A place for going alone."

"I know it's not a tourist place. But could you please be our guide? My class is organizing an autumn outing and I want to go there." Then he added more firmly, "We are going there."

She did not answer immediately. He followed her pondering eyes to the quaint instrument, long and narrow, tapered from one carved end to the other. Threads of long metal-wound silk strings covered its top. Near the instrument was a music stand with a closed book titled *Classic Zheng Music.* He wondered if his favorite piece, "Gao Shan Liu Shui,"—high mountains and running waters—was in it.

He loved *Zheng* music and often attended public performances, but he had never seen a real *Zheng so* close before. The beauty of the ancient instrument grabbed him. He felt a temptation to pluck a string with his own finger and hear the lingering sound of it clouting the hollow wood, but he controlled himself.

"Is it too late to go there?" he asked.

". . . No. I'll see if I can get permission for a couple of days off."

It took him a while to make sense of the notion that she needed permission.

4

Although it was already mid-autumn, the Balang Mountains were still astonishingly beautiful. The group of twenty-some adventure lovers stayed in the Wolong panda preservation zone overnight and climbed on a truck to go up into the uninhabited mountains the next morning. No tourist buses went this way, but they managed to find a truck driver who did not mind using his state-owned transportation company's vehicle to make some money on the side.

The mountain road was narrow and bumpy. The passengers standing and swaying on the open truck had to hold on to the sides tightly. But soon the girls' nervous facial expressions turned to amazement. Now and then milky fogs drifted off the steep cliff on the roadside, slowly diffusing above them. On the hills light-green woods layered with dark-green woods. Time to time unexpectedly appeared a burning-red wild cherry. Most of the wild flowers had withered between clumps of bushes, adding a bit of solemnity to the autumn atmosphere; but yellow pony feet, red honey flowers, and purple bear beads had just started blooming. At a stop requested by the girls who wanted to take pictures, the driver said they were a few days too late to see the peak, when the blossoms on the hills could stop even a jaded old truck driver who had run this road for a quarter-century.

The group got off the truck halfway to one of the peaks. As soon as their hiking started, Shiao Su played the pleasant cavalier for his female classmates. He carried one's bag and another one's wild bouquet. He cut a tree branch for a girl to use as a cane, and he brought up the rear to make sure no one strayed. Qian-qian did not come. "Too many people," she had mumbled.

Shiao Su subconsciously looked for the scene in Dandelion's painting, but he could not decide if he had found it. They were alike and not alike. Despite his indecisive observations, he experienced an unfamiliar sense of peacefulness. This sense diluted his regrets that Qian-qian had not wanted to come. Still, he had hoped to rediscover that strong feeling that had so startled him when he first saw Dandelion's painting. Why did it not come? Was this the distinction between reality and art? He did not know.

He looked around for Yue Zhu, but she had gone too far ahead.

He had heard that Yue Zhu got along with the women students well last night; she'd even drawn a sketch for each of the girls. "Looked like the real me!" a woman classmate had told

Shiao Su early in the morning when they were looking for the missing Yue Zhu. She appeared just before the truck started, morning dew on her hair and grass tips on her skirt. In her hand was a sketchbook. After they got off the truck, she quickly walked ahead of everyone, her green ribbon hidden, then showing, hidden, then showing between the trees. Several times the desire to catch up with her caught Shiao Su, but he controlled the impulse, aware of the classmates around him.

He lost his chance again when the group stopped at the viewpoint "sea of clouds," as Yue Zhu named it. This was a mountain mouth where the waves of clouds rolled under everyone's feet. Girls screamed and boys whistled with happy astonishment, while Yue Zhu patiently waited for them. "Water is hardly water after seeing the oceans / Clouds are no longer clouds apart from Wu Mountains," the ancient poem flared in Shiao Su's mind. How many mountains had she trudged alone? Had she also been in the mysterious Wu Mountains? He hesitated, wanting to go talk to her. Before he could decide, she had turned to continue leading the way up, leaving him behind again.

They climbed till they reached a small woods near the peak where, the girls exhausted, the group stopped for a long lunch break. Shiao Su noticed that Yue Zhu had disappeared again. He sat under a pine tree and thought for a while. He looked around to see if anyone was watching. Then he stood up and went to search in the woods.

He strolled along a path winding upward in fog. The fog was getting thicker. In a short time the fog wrapped him tightly, pushing an icy coldness into his skin and bones. He started to feel impatient. Where did Yue Zhu go? He trotted for a while, making loud whistles, but could hear nothing other than the wind's garrulousness. Not even the birds were making noise. He walked, then trotted again as the fog began to thin. The fog was gradually disappearing. Suddenly, before he was aware, his whole body was showered in vast dazzling sunshine.

He had reached the top, the highest point in the Balang Mountains, almost to the snow line. What emerged in front of his eyes was an incredible picture. On one side of the mountain dark-gray fogs thickly wrapped secluded forests; on the other side bright sunlight shined on the green pines. The sunny side of the mountain presented layers and layers of colors, their contours distinct and powerful. In the remote yet clear distance, the

Four Girls Mountains, perennially covered with snow, stood tall and erect, the whiteness blinding. He was transfixed. For the first time in the hiking, an unnamed emotion arose.

He was unaware of how long he had been standing when he heard a faint sound from afar. He pricked up his ears trying to capture the sound, only to find a vast quietness. He walked in the direction the sound had come from and searched. Gradually the sound became more audible. It was a person's voice. He ran forward. Then he stopped.

Not too far from him, Yue Zhu stood on a black rock, letting herself go and reading aloud along the wind. There was a wildness in her hoarse voice.

". . . Go collide savage wind
Taste freedom's conception
Go shower brilliant sunlight
Experience the ungrudging forest
Go dive like fearless water
Or circle around in the abyss
Go to the funeral for withered vines
Sing for the moss and pray for lone cliff
Go scream in total strangeness
Complete all your impulses
Go feel yourself eternal
Renew your soul with bare passion . . ."

Mountain winds blew the words far away; indistinct echoes fell among the hills. He had not written these words as beautifully as he heard them now. When silence returned to the mountains, Shiao Su found himself frozen, his chest congested. Except the girl who wore a green ribbon flowing with her waterfall black hair, nothing seemed real. Another blast of wind blew over and awoke him. He quickly turned and ran away as fast as he could.

That evening they came down the mountains too late and had to stay in a small hotel on the road. The exhausted group got into their beds with no time to mind the hotel's unclean and crude condition. Shiao Su lay under the cold, hard quilt and listened to the strange sound of the night outside for a long, long time.

5

During the next few weeks Shiao Su visited the art gallery a few more times. If there was any change in the gallery, it was almost

imperceptible. Yet he went there again and again, unaware what he was looking for.

He told his parents and Qian-qian that he was too busy studying and changed his practice of returning home from every week to every other week. His grades in every subject went down. He appeared in the track fields less and less frequently and smoked more and more cigarettes.

He did not know what he was waiting for. It was not a call because there was only one phone in the entire dormitory building, which was in the janitor's room downstairs. He was not waiting for a letter either; he got more letters than others but he knew without looking that none were that important. Still, he was waiting.

On a Saturday evening when Shiao Su had not gone home for the second week in a row, Qian-qian rode her bike to campus to look for him. She asked for directions several times to find his dorm only to see most windows in the building were dark. It was a clear evening with a sky full of stars, and a Saturday movie was playing in the big field outside the men's dorms. Qian-qian almost wept: how could she find Shiao Su in the dark crowds?

She walked up to room 201 in desperation and was surprised to see the door was ajar. A ray of dim light leaked out the crack. All the happiness of life returned to her heart and she quickly knocked on the door. When she did not hear an answer, she gave a little push to the door. Under a table lamp, she saw Shiao Su was alone, asleep on his arms, a book thicker than a brick opened in front of him. Beside the book, cigarette stubs filled an ashtray. She walked to him tiptoe and gently shook his shoulder.

Shiao Su opened his sleepy eyes and was confused for a few seconds.

"How . . . how come you are here?"

"I want you to come home with me."

He did not know what to say so he said he needed to go to the bathroom. When he went, Qian-qian sat down and waited. To pass the time she read the open page, page 3484, of the big book in front of her:

Entry: "Gao Shan Liu Shui"

Source: *Liezi,* "Tang Wen"

Period: Han Dynasty

> Boya excelled at playing *Zheng,* Ziqi personified listening. Boya's music craving for mountains, Ziqi exclaimed, "towering high cliffs." Boya's music admiring rivers, Ziqi proclaimed, "gracious running waters." Ziqi died, Boya broke the *Zheng* and never played it again.

The text was in archaic Chinese. Qian-qian did not recognize several words, and she could not understand the context. This was not like a textbook of any of Shiao Su's subjects. In fact she had never seen Shiao Su bring this book home before.

Shiao Su came back and saw Qian-qian's questioning expression. He closed the big book and said to her, "Let's go home."

Sunday they went to the West Suburb Bridge farmers' market together. While Qian-qian bargained with the farmers, Shiao Su walked to the art gallery again. He hesitated at the door but eventually walked in.

And he saw at once. The painting "Balang Mountains" was gone. In its place was a new black-and-white woodcut print titled "No Subject" by Dandelion. In the picture were barren hills populated by only two young willow trees, their long thin branches whipping in wind. The appearance of the picture was so simple it was more like a photo. Under the picture frame was a poem by Ai Qing, an old-generation poet from before the Cultural Revolution.

One tree, another
Stand in separation
Wind and air
Telling their distance
Below the soil
Their roots extend
In invisible depth
They entangle together

It finally came. The message he had been waiting for.

After weeks of internal storms, this message was more a verification than a shock. For the first time he clearly saw that an other-worldly life could become reality. A moist green meadow studded with tiny yellow flowers. A flock of sheep grazing lazily in the meadow. A little log house in the woods. A *Zheng* and a steaming teapot in the house. A long trudge no longer lonely. An understanding without words. . .

He did not hear the footsteps, but a familiar, intimate scent pulled him back to the present world. He half-turned and saw Qian-qian's innocent eyes. For a second he thought he detected a thread of fear in her dark brown pupils, pupils that reminded him of a little deer who sensed a hidden prayer.

"What do you see?" Shiao Su asked softly.

"Pictures and a poem." Qian-qian pointed to the wall with her free hand.

"What else do you see?"

"Just artworks. Aren't they? Just artworks. Nothing real," she said a little too quickly.

Shiao Su did not say anything more. He took the full handbasket from her without putting an arm around her shoulder. They followed one another out of the gallery in silence. Outside the gallery, under the autumn sun, farmers hawking their wares not too far away were clearly discernible.

That evening Qian-qian cried very hard over a trivial issue. She shed tears like rain, and there was only one promise that could console her. When she finally fell asleep with tears still glistening in the corners of her closed eyes, Shiao Su wrote a new poem. At the end of it were the following lines:

Only now I know
I can't be enlarged
Nor yet shrunk.
—Is it too late?

6

In late fall, the changing political winds carried an overdue tenseness to the distant Sichuan basin. China's new leadership had demolished the "Democracy Wall" in Beijing and arrested activists who posted opinions and poetry on that wall. The same activists had earlier risked their lives pushing the current leadership into power. Little was novel in this game; in the many thousands of years of China's history, the emperor in every dynasty had killed the donkey the moment it left the millstone.

If Shiao Su was disappointed at the news that his friends failed to obtain an imprimatur for printing his work, he did not show it. He mounted his bike and rode off campus without delay. Yue Zhu needed to be informed as soon as possible; all the

typesetting and printing activities must be stopped. If the authority found out about an unapproved printing, she and everyone involved could be arrested.

It was another dusk, and the setting sun was little by little slanting into rosy clouds. There was a filament of coldness in the autumn air. Shiao Su's bike crunched the fallen leaves across half of the city. At the printing shop he stood his bike against the wall, not taking the time to lock it, and hurriedly walked on to the hallway that led to Yue Zhu's room.

The sound of a familiar piece of *Zheng* music slowed down his steps. His heart pictured Yue Zhu's lean fingers stroking the long strings. Wood hammering metal, breakers dashing on rocks, waters falling off the cliff, echoes fading in the valley . . . For how many thousands of years had this soul-searching "Gao Shan Liu Shui" been played and listened to? Shiao Su leaned his forehead against the closed door and shut his eyes. The vibration of the *Zheng* strings passed through the door to his body. He lost the courage to knock on the door.

Peng! A sudden sound, the sound of a taut metal string snapping, sprung Shiao Shu's forehead off the door. He heard her wince inside. He stepped back in panic. This could not be happening! This should only be in folklore! That an instrument's string would break if someone who truly understood the music were eavesdropping . . .

The door opened. Yue Zhu smiled at him; he could see the pleasure brought by his unexpected visit. He quickly adjusted himself and said "hi" to her. He went in with her and sat down by her square tea table. When she was pouring tea for him, he saw the fresh red line across the back of her left hand. His throat tightened.

He sipped tea and searched for words. He could not find any.

"I wrote one for you," he finally said. A thin layer of scarlet flushed over her cheeks, then quickly faded. "Could I please read it to you?"

"Yes."

He started to read the poem, his voice flat and dry.

"Snow Line

Far, far away
Dandelion

Absorb the sun's melody

This shore, the other one
Two light spots
One became the moon
One became the sun

Let's play blocks
You and me
Use these odds and ends
Form an entirely new continent
We will smile
Then push them down

A great skeleton
Near the snow line
Silent

My sketch was lost
The lines of flowing water
Graceful green silk
All gone, to the woods of another mountain

The earth forever quiet
Only the uninhabited South Pole
Aurora and meteors
Use the same language to love

I walk to the end of the valley
Winds blow to the universe
Can life return to folktale?

Farewell, birch forest . . ."

Yue Zhu's head lowered in the middle of his reading. Her two hands held the teacup with no movement. When he finished, he did not dare to look at her. He stared at his own teacup, weak steam still wafting up.

"This is the last poem I'll ever write," he said after a while, still not looking at her. The light tone denied the weight of his decision. He did not expect a reply. He thought he could melt in

this endless silence, right here, in this cozy little room, and that could actually make him very happy. Then he heard an almost inaudible laughter from Yue Zhu.

He had never known laughter could rend his heart harder than tears. He reached for her hand on the table, his palm covering its fresh bruise. For the first time since he arrived, he looked into her eyes. They were an autumn lake with thousands of ripples. The bare pain in his gaze burned down the dam of the lake; it could no longer hold the water. . .

Twenty years later, an authoritative expert on literature history, who had entered a different university the same year as Shiao Su, published a three-volume monograph on western China's poetry. He wrote:

"In the early 1980s, the first and by far most outstanding lyric poet in western China was Shiao Su. On many campuses I heard students reciting his poems. To this day, it is still a mystery why he suddenly gave up writing. With his talent, he could have become one of the greatest poets in contemporary China.

"I visited Shiao Su and his wife several years after he put down his pen for good. He had become a top manager of a state enterprise. But he was not happy."

The monograph included the entire poem of "Golden Bell," with no trace of "Snow Line." It did not mention anything about Yue Zhu. The author of the monograph may or may not know Yue Zhu, but his book wasn't about arts, let alone religious arts. Yue Zhu, in fact, later became a Buddhist artist after she met a hundred-year-old priest in a Buddhist temple on E'mei Mountain. The priest said to her, "Nothingness is possession, possession is nothingness." She became the priest's "closing-gate disciple"—his last student. After the priest's *parinirvana*, some had seen Yue Zhu traveling alone between Buddhist mountains. If you visit Buddhist temples in Sichuan's mountains today, chances are you will come across her wall-sized paintings.

Judith Harway

A Box Turtle on Messer Creek Road

"Bones, like words, carry their own history."—Stephen Jay Gould

In the moment when I burst from deep brush,
breathe in light that makes each thing I look at
too distinct—sweet, white-faced calves, a clapboard shack,
barbed wire and goldenrod, the hills beyond—and I can feel
the wick within me lit, you step right out, alight,

the pavement's warmth upwelling. Sparrow-mouth, Flame-eye,
don't hesitate. Your heart is on your sleeve, gold starbursts
on your back. And what a weight, the millstone myths
you're dragging: thirteen moons, the load
of North America or even Earth. How many tons of sky

depend on you, how many stars have been and will be borne
before you rest? For just a sunstruck splash of thought,
you stop, regard me, and I bend to touch
your fine interstices, eroded banks. You shift as though you are
a continent, abandoned on time's doorstep:

slowly fording seas of pavement, nothing changing you,
not even, as you climb the bank, the heart's hard turning
underneath your ribs. But in its chips and scars, irregular
as birdsong, all the crust of you bespeaks your immanence
and history. Old Timer, see the way the Earth you tread

is crammed with bits of Heaven. See the way clouds mold
and make themselves above us, trailing flat blue shadows,
changing everything that passes and is gone. Remind me
how, in the beginning, something had to grab hold as the universe
cast out its long line, hoping for a catch.

Sally Steenland

Best Girl

Emma's father sat at the edge of her bed, tracing his finger along a curved line in the quilt. He was wearing a gray sweatshirt with navy letters that said *Lakeside Girls Soccer.* But her school wasn't near a lake. Her mother had gone back downstairs.

"Did you tell Henry?" she asked.

"Not yet." His finger stopped. She knew it was stupid to read signs into everything, but he'd reached an intersection and could come toward her or go the other way.

She uncrossed her legs and slid a little closer. "Is mom going to tell him or you?" He frowned, and the fine lines around his eyes deepened. His fingers were long and slender, like hers. One was waiting at the apex of a blue-flowered triangle.

Her parents had come into the room earlier, taking turns as if they'd rehearsed it. She'd been writing a story for eighth grade English and thought they were at the door with mocha-chip ice cream. As she listened, she'd gripped her pen. Now her fingers ached.

"I bet she's telling Henry right now," she said. "She's probably in his room, letting him cry all over her." She raised her voice to a mocking pitch. "*Sometimes grown-ups can't live together, but I'll always love you, no matter what. . . .*"

"Don't," he said quietly. "It doesn't change anything."

"You and mom never fight. You hardly even argue."

When he spoke, he was looking out the window. There was an apartment in the city where he was going to live. He said that sometimes not fighting was worse.

"You don't love her anymore?" she said in a small voice.

He said he did, but that they didn't understand each other—even after a great deal of effort and work. He gave her a rueful smile. "Turns out that's more important."

"Try harder," she said. "You can make her understand."

He rubbed his face from top to bottom. When he dropped his hands, he looked the same—her funny, familiar dad. "It's not in her, Em. Her ear just doesn't work that way."

The day after he left, Emma rested her head on the kitchen table and watched her mother unload the dishwasher. Everything was tipped—the ceiling and shelves, her mother's determination to put everything back in place. Yesterday she'd been crying, but today she moved like a robot. Her hands picked up plates, cups, bowls and put them on shelves. Back and forth she went, walking crossways, climbing the walls.

Yesterday her father had packed his books into boxes and stuffed his clothes into a bunch of black plastic trash bags. The boxes came from the supermarket and had shreds of wilted lettuce inside. This was only yesterday, just a day ago.

Emma stood shivering on the sidewalk as he squeezed the last bag into the gray Civic. There was still room to sit if you scrunched up your legs. She could go to school in the city and sleep on a couch in the living room. They'd be like an immigrant family that didn't have much money, but went to concerts and plays. She had too much stuff anyway.

He kissed the top of her head. "It's chilly—go inside," he said. "I'll call tomorrow."

She watched him drive down the street. The back of his head got smaller; then the car turned a corner and disappeared. The sun dipped beneath the roof of the house across the street. Her mother called from the front porch. She went to the backyard, where two thick ropes and a plank of wood hung from a huge oak tree. She sat on the swing, twisted the ropes, and spun.

Em?" Her mother was holding a basket of clean silverware. "Don't you have homework?"

She winced, dreading the clatter that was coming. Her mother's habits were so predictable. The knives and spoons and forks had to fit into their molds in the drawer next to the sink—their hard little beds. No wonder her father left. *Amaze me*, he loved to say.

She let out an exasperated sigh and sat up. "It's Monday—I'm in eighth grade. Of course I have homework."

"Don't start. I mean it." Her mother opened the drawer.

"Why don't you put those someplace else?"

Her mother stared at her, holding a spoon. "Why would I do that?"

"Because you always do everything the same—it's good to be surprised."

Her mother dropped the spoon with a clang. "Every morning you wander around the kitchen half-awake and late for school. Do you really want to hunt all over for silverware?"

"Yes, I do." She had to prove how important this was—how little changes could make a big difference.

Her mother took a Ziploc bag out of the freezer, dumped a frozen lump onto a plate, and stuck it in the microwave. Emma watched her punch buttons and heard the microwave whir. The woman's mind was flat as a countertop, with no secret nooks or layers or anything complicated.

"How's your story for English coming?" she said, taking lettuce from the fridge. "You never said what it's about."

Emma swallowed. The dreaded notebook was on the table, poking her elbow. She'd abandoned her first attempt because the characters were so boring and pathetic. Then she'd made the girl a shoplifter, a rock star, a runaway. Each time, the first few pages had been okay but then turned awful. There were no new ideas left—everything had been done in movies and TV.

Even her father leaving. How many shows had she seen about that. But none had ever described what it truly, honestly felt like. It felt like she sprained her whole body, like it hurt to breathe and hold up her head. It was hard to walk.

"Emma, I asked you a question. What are you writing about?"

She swallowed. "About a girl and her horse. It gets sick, and a doctor comes and saves it."

Her mother put three plates on the table. "That sounds interesting. You always liked horses."

No, I didn't. You never remember anything. "No wonder he left . . ." she muttered.

Her mother stopped short. "*What* did you say?"

A basketball thumped on the tile floor and Henry came running in. He grabbed it and plopped down. "Mom, I've gotta ask you something. Dad said he'd call at four-thirty and it's five."

"That's a statement, not a question," Emma said.

Henry pushed up his nose and made a pig face at her. "Mom, why isn't he calling?"

"You'll have to ask him that." Spicy lasagna smells spilled from the microwave. Her mother threw lettuce into a salad bowl. *Stop*, Emma wanted to say. *You're making too much food.* Another thing. The fourth place mat was still on the table.

"Remember, Lily called." Her mother rinsed off a tomato.

"When? You never told me."

"Yes I did. I told you twice."

"Well, it's too late. I can't call her back now."

"Suit yourself. Pour milk for you and Henry."

"I want Pepsi," Henry said.

On her way to get the glasses, Emma kicked the ball and Henry fell off. "Mom!" he yelled.

"I tripped—he's in the way." She took two glasses off the shelf, still warm and squeaky from the dishwasher. Her father's yellow and blue elephant mug was on the top shelf. She'd given it to him one year for his birthday, and he drank his coffee in it every morning. "Daddy didn't take his elephant mug," she said.

"Remember, I want Pepsi," Henry said.

"Tell him that," her mother said. "Make a list of everything he left."

Emma decided she'd hide the mug under her bed. Her father would search the kitchen, then the entire house. When he begged for help, she'd relent.

As Henry ran to get the phone, Emma poured glasses of Pepsi and milk. Her mother took the mug from the shelf and turned it in her soapy hands. It was amazing how the elephants were linked, trunk to tail, no beginning or end. The mug smashed to the floor. "Oh God, Em, I'm sorry."

"Mommy just broke your elephant mug," Henry said on the phone. "It's a mess over here. Plus Em kicked me off my basketball."

Emma poured her milk down the drain. She put Henry's Pepsi on the table. Her mother was sweeping up the shards with a dustpan and broom. "I'm sorry, I really am," she kept saying.

Emma thought that actually her mother was pleased. She wanted Emma to suffer, too.

"Daddy wants to talk to you." Henry held out the cordless.

She picked up her notebook and walked out of the kitchen. "I've got homework," she said. Halfway up the stairs she heard Henry tell him that. Then Henry kept talking, which meant her father hadn't put up a fight.

My dad is sick.

No. That sounded too informal and everyday, like how she talked to Lily.

My father is ill. His body burns with fever and he coughs up clots of dark blood. He tries to conceal his illness, since he is all I have in this world, but I am not deceived. In the night I wipe his brow and give him sips of cool water. He is delirious. Spare me, he cries out. Spare me.

Her English teacher, Mr. Gerrety, walked up and down the rows. "Revise, people," he said, reaching over her head to give back stories. "We're just getting down to serious work here. Don't even think about a grade yet." Then Mr. Gerrety's hands were empty and she had nothing.

"See me after class," he said as he walked by her desk. Lily, who sat next to her, raised her eyebrows. Her story was about a girl who'd gotten a bad haircut and stabbed the hairdresser to death with his scissors. Emma had argued for a less predictable and violent ending, but Lily, who'd just gotten a bad haircut herself, insisted that Enrico must die.

As the bell rang, Lily stuffed the story into her backpack. *See you in French*, she mouthed. *Be good. He loves you.*

Mr. Gerrety came down the row and sat sideways in a desk near hers. He was short and nearly bald. Her story was in his hand. "This is very good, Emma," he said.

"Thank you," she said meekly.

"Wonderful, vivid details. It's quite moving." He turned pages with his thumb. "Here, where Nel traces her hand over her father's face and feels his skin growing cool—the image of Braille and remembering . . . all the things we talked about in class are here." He flipped to the last page.

I hid in the dirt under the porch. It was dark and damp. I heard a carriage come up the gravel drive and the church ladies get out. The porch creaked under their heavy steps. The screen door banged. I heard them calling my name. I'd buried my father that morning in his garden of sunflowers. The ladies were stomping from room to room, and I lay under the house. I would never leave him.

Mr. Gerrety looked up. "You make me want to know what happens next. After the last page, I want to keep reading because you've made me care about Nel."

Emma blinked, embarrassed, and looked down at her teacher's shoes. The edges of the heels were worn down to nothing. "Did you know your style changes?" he said. "On page five, when Nel is sitting at her father's bedside and gazing out the

window, you change her voice—and though it's a hundred years ago on a farm, she sounds like a girl speaking today." He paused. "Were you aware of that?"

Emma shook her head. She'd wanted Nel to sound less boring than she did, so she made her talk in an old-fashioned style. But she must've forgotten once she delved in. "What should I do?" she asked.

"It's your story. What do you think?"

She glanced away. "Change the beginning to match the end, I guess. I'm not a good enough writer to do it the other way."

He smiled. "There are different kinds of difficulty—some more worth tackling than others. For now, why not follow your instinct? Nel can still live on a farm a long time ago—that doesn't have to change."

The bell rang and Mr. Gerrety stood up. The back of his shirt bunched out of his trousers, and his glasses were halfway down his nose. "Here," he said, scribbling on a scrap of paper. "You'll need a late pass."

It had been two weeks and five days. There were three place mats on the table now and one car in the driveway. Her mother talked a lot on the phone, mostly in the bedroom with the door closed. Her friends brought over chocolate, books, and wine.

All of it made Emma sick. Her family was a wreck sprawled in a ditch, and people were stopping by to gawk. Lily was the only person she told, and she'd made her promise not to say a word to anyone, especially kids with divorced parents who'd come up and say they knew just how she felt. Her mother kept asking what she wanted for dinner or if she wanted to go shopping, as if a pesto pizza or GAP sweater would make everything okay again. *Stop it*, she wanted to scream. *Don't you see how stupid you are?*

One day as they were walking home from school, she said to Lily, "I quit soccer."

"You're kidding." Lily pulled down her sunglasses and stared at her. "I thought you loved soccer."

"I don't love it or hate it. I just got sick of chasing a ball." She kicked an acorn into the gutter and watched it bounce down a storm drain.

Lily stepped carefully over a crack in the sidewalk. "Soccer, band, ballet—it's just stuff they make you do so they'll feel

good. Nick and Elyse want me to take *Tae Kwon Do* because *they* think it's cool." Lily was an only child whose parents were therapists and insisted on being called by their first names. "You know how your mom's always taking pictures of you in your uniform? I bet she didn't play team sports, so you're the compensation."

Emma shifted her backpack so the straps didn't dig so deeply into her shoulders. "She's always shooting hoops with Henry. Everyday they're out there, banging against the garage."

"I think it's called displacement or something." Lily stopped in front of the knitting store and peered at herself in the window. "See how crooked my hair is? I swear Enrico was on drugs. He didn't even look at what he was doing, and then he scrunched up the fizz and said it looked great." She tilted her head to make the sides even.

Emma turned away from the glass. She hated looking at herself. She had her father's wide green eyes, her mother's dimples. People said she was lovely. But she could tell they never really looked at her, just at something they wanted to see. She bent over, and her backpack bulged like the hump on a camel. "Look," she said. "The hunchback of Lakeside Middle."

Lily giggled. She bent over too, and dragged one leg a few steps. "Okay, listen," she said, twisting her fingers like claws. "We have to walk like this the whole way to Dresner's. No matter who sees us, from school or anyplace—whoever straightens up first has to . . ." she frowned.

"Pay for both lattes," Emma said.

"No—something really disgusting. Okay. Whoever straightens up first has to drink the other person's spit."

They limped and snarled past the hardware store, past the bakery and antique shop where Emma's mother used to work. Grace Stancil, who owned Cards 'N' Things, came toward them with Daphne, her golden retriever. "You girls are fab," she cried. "Very scary and cool." She flashed Emma a smile that said *you poor thing.*

When they got to Dresner's, Lily stood up and thrashed her fingers through her hair. "Up, girl," she said, yanking the straps of Emma's backpack. "It's time to be normal."

A salesclerk sat behind the cash register, reading a book. "If you want to dump your stuff here, feel free."

"That's okay," Lily said. "We're strengthening our back mus-

cles." She started digging through a bin of crinkly, bright-colored scraps.

"These are tops?" Emma said dubiously.

"Just wait," Lily promised, building a pile over her arm. In the dressing room, she stretched purple fabric over her head. It shrank above her navel and hugged her ribs. "Perfect!" she giggled in the mirror. "I want ten of these." She tossed a shimmery red scrap to Emma. "Here, try it on."

The tiny room was glaringly hot. The fabric felt slippery and thin. "I don't want to," Emma said. "I don't like skinny things."

"But you'll look gorgeous. We'll wear them to school and freak out Mr. Gerrety."

Emma thought of her teacher, who wore faded shirts and droopy socks. Kids made fun of his slouchy walk and the way his glasses slid down his nose. It was upsetting how much she liked him.

Finally, Lily dumped her discards on the counter and handed over the purple top. "First one I tried on," she told the salesclerk.

"Is that so." The clerk put down her book and took Lily's credit card. Emma glanced at the title: *Love's Knowledge.* "Phenomenal," the clerk said to her. "I'm reading it for a philosophy class." She flipped to the first page. "*You may know a truth, but if it's at all complicated you have to be an artist not to utter it as a lie.*" She looked up at Emma. "And that's just one sentence. What are you, a junior?"

Emma blushed. "Not yet."

She handed Lily a shopping bag. "Well, remember this book."

They carried their lattes to a table by the wall. Emma skimmed off a thin layer of foam, then stirred everything together until the coffee was milky brown. In the old days—before her father left—this simple act would've held meaning. Something about froth hiding darkness below. It was like a game, how they'd transform the most ordinary act into something profound.

Lily dragged her backpack from under the table and unzipped a pouch "Okay. Here's the deal." She flashed the red top. "Voile!"

Emma stared at her.

"You can wear it to your dad's," she said, waving its arms like a tiny flag. "If I had your body, I'd wear skinny tops all the time."

"But you stole it."

She gave a little shrug. "When you hit puberty, you shoplift. It's totally normal."

Emma looked down into her cup and started to cry.

"Oh God, Em, I'm sorry—I'll say it was a mistake and take it back." Lily stuffed the top in her shopping bag. "Hey." She let out a giggle. "You're the one who's supposed to be all troubled and delinquent."

She clapped a hand to her mouth "Oh God. Is that why you quit soccer?"

Emma squeezed her eyes, but tears kept spilling out. For a while she didn't say anything. Then, "He takes us to the mall and makes us eat in the food court. He hates the mall but that's where we go."

Lily frowned. "You know, sometimes they don't really want a divorce. They just want to get away for a while—so they buy a new car, drive around, and eventually come home."

"My dad doesn't care about that. Our Civic's falling apart."

"That's not the only reason. There's other stuff. It's totally common." She leaned her elbows on the table. "Why did you quit?"

Emma studied the wall, where stencils of steaming coffee rose like smoke from a genie. She rubbed her finger along the rim of the cup and licked off a residue of foam. "You'll think it's dumb, that I'm being superstitious."

"No, I promise. I'll stop being a shrink-head. Just tell me."

Emma leaned her head against the wall. "Sometimes when I wake up I think he's still there, that he's coming upstairs to talk to me." She swallowed. "It's too hard. And so, I thought if I gave up something, like a sacrifice—maybe there's someone who pays attention to these things—and if I show I can do without something I love. . ." she faltered. "Like in stories, if you make an offering freely from your heart—you get what you desire."

"I bet you're right," Lily said hopefully. "Sacrifices count, even in real life. Listen. Want to come for dinner? Nick and Elyse keep asking how you are. Please? It's creepy eating alone with them."

Emma shook her head. "My dad might call. He's got a break between classes at the university. I should be there."

Her mother stood in the front hall with the phone, waiting for Emma to go upstairs. It was stuck to her like an IV, like a drug keeping her alive. Emma dumped her backpack on the rug. "And hi to you," her mother said. "I thought you had soccer practice."

"Cancelled. I thought you were at work."

"I told you I was showing a house in Piedmont Village and would be home by two."

"I don't care where the house is."

Her mother opened her mouth, then frowned. "I bought you a brownie from King's—it's on the kitchen counter. If you want, we can go out for Chinese tonight."

"I ate with Lily."

Her mother was wearing her navy suit. Pearl earrings matched her necklace. Navy heels matched her suit. In the dining room, teal candles on the sideboard matched a medallion in the Persian rug. Emma put her weight on the bottom step. "You know, if you were more interesting—if your clothes and everything in this house weren't so boring—Daddy wouldn't have gotten lonely and left."

Her mother's arm dropped to her side. "Is that what you think? It was my clothes that made your father leave? It was the chairs and tables and lamps?" She laughed so hard she had to wipe her eyes. "Oh no, believe me—it wasn't that."

"You're lying," Emma cried as she ran up the stairs. "And now you're mad because I know the truth."

How's school?" her father said on the phone. She lay on the quilt, tracing a path with her finger. "Okay."

"How's your French teacher, the malevolent Madame Chipmunk?"

"She's okay."

"What about English?'

"Okay."

"Did you get your story back from Mr. Gerrety? You know, you never told me what you wrote about."

Too many words were crowding her throat, all clamoring to get out. After a while he said, "You know, Em, you're not making this any easier. All I want is a chance to talk to you."

"Then get rid of Henry," she blurted. "Make it just you and me."

There was a long silence. "That's up to Mom. I've asked if you can come for a weekend, but she says no."

"I hate her," she said. "She wants me to be miserable. It's her fault you left."

"Oh no, it's just that she's angry and hurt. Look—give her a while and I'll ask again."

"You took us to the mall. We went *to the mall* and you didn't even make jokes."

He laughed a little. 'I guess I don't feel much like joking. You're my best girl, Em—you're my cup of tea. And look at the mess I've made."

"Mr. Gerrety liked my story," she said quietly. "He thinks it's good. But it needs a lot of work."

"He's right. The only way to make something excellent is to work at it. Listen, I'll talk to Mom again. But you do your part, too. Act like you can be trusted."

He came to get her on a crisp Saturday afternoon. Her mother was raking leaves in the front yard and stuffing them into plastic orange trash bags that swelled like huge pumpkins. Henry had been helping all morning, but she'd sent him down the street to play with Jeremy. Emma had heard her on the phone: *it's not fair to make him watch those two go off together.*

She waited upstairs, kneeling at her bedroom window, resting her arms on the sill and her chin on her hands. Down below, her mother made tidy heaps. She was wearing her new red sweater and black suede boots. *She wants to look good for him,* Emma thought with a flicker of hope. Maybe her mother could change, after all.

The gray Civic pulled up to the curb. Her mother kept raking, then stopped and they talked under a tree. Her father brushed a stray leaf off her shoulder, flicking it with his fingers. When Emma came down, her mother was saying, "Tomorrow night, no later than nine. She's got school Monday." She glanced at Emma. "You have your homework?"

"Math test on Monday and my story, too."

Her father said, "Don't worry, she'll do her work. I'll feed her a good dinner and get her to bed on time . . ."

"You're eating at the apartment?"

"Most likely. Is that a problem?"

"No—not at all." Her mother tilted the rake. "Remember, Jack, she's thirteen. Be a grownup, okay?"

Emma gave her father a bewildered look, but he grabbed her duffel bag and headed toward the car.

He took her on a grand deluxe tour of his two rooms, pointing out the fire escape where they could sit in warm weather, the old-fashioned bathtub with claw feet, and the university baseball cap waiting for her on the futon. Stacks of books made side tables, and more books climbed the walls in shaky piles. Everywhere, there were pictures of her and Henry.

There was no real kitchen, just a tiny stove, refrigerator, and sink stuck in a corner of the living room. Four plates sat on a shelf above the sink, along with three bowls, three glasses, and two plain mugs. His silverware stuck out of a clay flowerpot.

She could live here. The apartment was poetic and filled with possibility. She could do homework on the fire escape and write stories when it rained. She and her father could wander down wet streets and into steamy cafes—even the dusky gloom of winter would be enthralling.

His neighborhood was noisy and dirty and smelled like fried onions. He steered her past sidewalk vendors and shoppers as music blared from storefront speakers. In a Cuban carryout, he talked Spanish to the man behind the counter. He'd never been this friendly to neighbors at home, but here he knew what he wanted—chicken enchiladas, black beans and rice. In the Greek deli he wanted baklava, a sweet gooey pastry she'd never heard of. But when the owner gave her a bite, she grinned and said *yum* with her mouth full.

I'm setting up Scrabble," she announced as he opened a card table for dinner.

"Start to weep, my girl. I've got a feeling I'm going to beat the pants off you."

She flipped the tiles blank-side up and ran her hand lightly over the pale smooth wood. There were times when she could pick up a tile and know the letter before she turned it over. It was a kind of knowing that was more than luck. Her father could sometimes do it, too.

"To my best girl," he said, raising his wine glass.

Her glass was watery pink. "To my best dad."

Later, he put on a jazz CD. They stretched out on the floor and reached into the box. "E," he said. "V!" she cried. "I go first."

She studied her letters. YFTPUSE

STUPEFY went down on the board. "Fifty extra points!" she called, waving the empty holder.

Her father groaned. "You are tough, ma'am, but it's way too soon to get cocky."

He was frowning at his letters when someone knocked on the door. He stepped out into the hall and said, "My daughter's here."

A young woman stepped around him and came in. She was wearing a gauzy red skirt fringed with coins and high-heeled black boots. Sparkling combs held her long dark hair. "Hi, I'm Cleo," she said and held out her hand.

Emma stared at her from the floor.

"Cleo used to be a student," her father said. He'd followed her into the room and stood between them with his hands in the pockets of his jeans.

"The History of Personal Narrative," Cleo said. "And Jack was my advisor when I wrote my honors thesis." One of her combs had come loose and dangled near her face.

"Is there a reason you're here?" he said.

She pushed the comb back into her hair. "I guess I forgot you were busy."

"The registrar's office lost Cleo's grade," he said to Emma. "She's applying for a job and needs her transcript—the whole thing's a mess. . . ."

"The incompetence," Cleo interrupted with a grin. "It's shocking."

He went to the door. "I'll let you know when things get straightened out."

She stayed where she was, not far from Emma's elbow. "Are you being ironic?"

"I'm being literal," he said, opening the door. "You're interrupting a Scrabble game."

"Well, I'd never want to interrupt your word play." Her skirt jingled as she walked to the door. "Nice to meet you, Emma. Have a lovely evening with your father." She fluttered a hand in his face as he edged her out.

He leaned against the door, listening to the other side. "Sorry. She's a flighty young woman—that's pretty obvious, I guess. The job she wants is in publishing—I doubt she'll get it."

"How does she know where you live?"

"Faculty addresses are in the directory. Phone, street, email—you name it, they give it out." He sat down and studied his letters.

"But you just moved and she knew where to find you."

"They're always updating information—it's instantaneous."

But you were talking too loudly. You wouldn't look at her. At the end, her mother had grilled him like this. She'd nitpicked and driven him away. But Emma couldn't help it, she had to know. "Is she your girlfriend?"

He picked up a tile. Then he chose five more and laid them down under the letter F. "No, she's not," he said.

FINALLY hung below STUPEFY. He wrote down his score, but it didn't matter because the letters staring up at her and those scattered in the box made no sense. A trumpet rose to a wail. Higher and higher it climbed, until the trembling note vanished beyond her ear.

Think the opposite," he said at bedtime. "Otherwise you'll get scalded." The hot and cold faucets in the bathroom sink were reversed, so she had to be careful. The shower was unreliable too, linked to flushing toilets throughout the building. The futon was made up with sheets and a blanket. He snapped three bolts across the front door. "I'll be in here," he said, pointing to the bedroom. "Remember to brush your teeth."

"I'm not five," she muttered. "You don't have to tell me."

In the darkened living room, she watched headlights sweep across the ceiling. Sirens wailed. The phone rang in the bedroom and she heard her father whispering. Then her mother was throwing silverware at Cleo, chasing her down the fire escape. Mr. Gerrety stepped through the wall, and the two of them climbed into a locker that opened onto a grassy field. Mr. Gerrety walked beside her and held her arm lightly at the elbow. He said that Nel had to come out. She didn't have to go with the church ladies or live in an orphanage, but she couldn't stay in the dirt.

Emma sat up. She crept into the bathroom and peed quietly. Slowly she turned on the cold faucet and held her finger under the water until it burned. Then she opened the medicine cabinet. Inside was her father's razor, a bottle of Advil, a flattened tube of Crest. A box of Tampax. A tube of mascara. A hair comb. She unscrewed the mascara and swirled the wand in her pee. She slipped the comb into the pocket of her T-shirt.

First we'll get bagels," her father said in the morning. He rubbed a towel through his wet hair and ran water in the bathroom sink. "Then we'll go to the bakery for crumb cake and muffins—have a real feast, and do whatever you want all day." He foamed up his face and leaned into the living room.

Emma lay on her side, sucking her finger. Before he left he'd chattered on like this, talking so steadily you couldn't say anything back. Her stomach felt sick. *Mom knows,* she thought. *He told her lies and her ear could tell.*

The line at the bagel shop went out the door. "I'll wait outside," she said. For a second, his face sagged. "You're not angry, are you? That stupid thing last night—you have to understand, students get crushes all the time."

She remembered the sentence from the book about having to tell a complicated truth as a lie. It was either an excuse, she thought, or too hard to understand. "It's broad daylight," she said. "Nobody's going to kidnap me." He laughed and kissed the top of her head. "Okay then. Wait here. I'll be right back."

At the curb, a dog sat with its leash wrapped around a no-parking sign. A few feet away, another tied-up dog patiently waited. She took a few steps to a tree. A few more to a street light. When she got to the corner, she stepped off the curb and kept walking. She'd left her baseball cap in the apartment and had to squint against the morning sun.

It felt good to be leaving. She imagined him coming out and searching for her. He'd be confused. Annoyed. Frantic. How could she have vanished?

People hurried along the sidewalk. They came out of stores and cafes, bumped into each other and kept going. She wasn't allowed to talk to strangers but wanted to grab each one and say her father was a liar who went off with a girl in a flimsy red skirt. She imagined their horrified looks. *What a stupid man. He'll be sorry.*

She walked past a stationery store whose window was filled with leather books of all colors and sizes. On her desk at home was a white leather notebook her mother had bought for her. Emma had refused to thank her, but at night with the door closed, she ran her hands over its smooth empty pages.

Now she could feel him behind her, hurrying to catch up. She

could see him take her arm as they stepped into a cafe to drink black coffee at a small round table in the back. He spoke to her urgently. She leaned against the store window and closed her eyes, so she could catch his every word—one after another, changing from a puzzle into a story she could understand.

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