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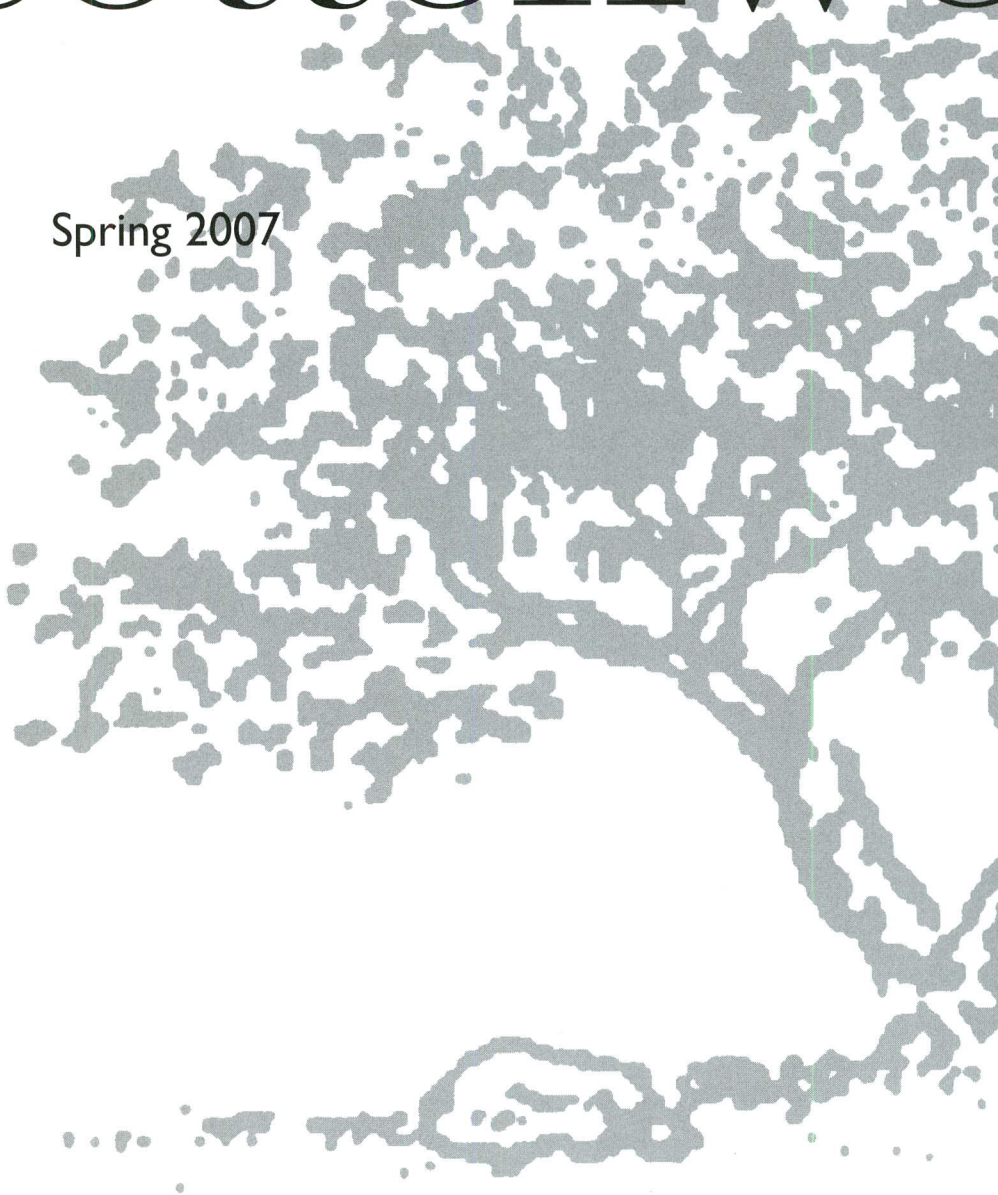

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Stephanie Dickinson

Yellow Onion Jambalaya

The thirst grew not just in Memory's mouth but in her belly and feet. It was habit to open the old-fashioned icebox and reach in. The Polar Bear ice had melted into a pan that pooled with greasy water and flies. A little over a week ago that water had been clean ice. Memory knelt and wiggled the pan free and poured it into a kettle. On the middle shelf a tangerine waited alongside the last 20-ounce bottle of water. She grabbed the fruit, setting it on the counter. The white cat rubbed against her ankle while she poured melt water into his dish, and then he lapped greedily.

The sound of crying came from under the mosquito net. It took three steps to get from the icebox to the table and two more to reach the baby, the blue crib embedded with lucky horseshoes and black-eyed peas. Memory picked up the baby, pressed her lips to the little girl's head already sticky with tangerine kisses. "I know momma's girl wants her bottle. Let's wait a little longer." The baby wailed. Tears clung like warm icicles from her lashes. "Hush, sweet one." She patted the little girl, wondering if that was the good mother thing to do, then she walked the three steps to the table and back. "I know baby is hungry. Soon."

She tapped the mobile that hung from the low ceiling, wiggling a string attached to a Popsicle stick. "Should we count the fishies? See the fishies?" She tickled the bottoms of the baby's feet. Ten toes. Ten little sunfish. The baby grabbed Memory's lip and pulled, tears clotting her enormous brown eyes. How fierce the little fist was.

"Okay, you win." Her head pounded from her own thirst as she scooped formula. She'd been opening cans of corn and beets and drinking the juice. She eased the baby onto her lap, giving her the bottle nipple to suck. Look at how those little lips latched on. "Is that better?" There was a tiny scar in her left eyebrow, a white gouge, something the storm had thrown at the wee one, maybe a fire ant.

Later after she put the baby down, Memory watched, breathing in the tiny brown face and butterfly lips, her eyelashes, all that nice sleep. Then she slumped at the table. Her cell phone sat in the candy dish useless. Her neck ached from holding her head up, but she caught the sob in her throat.

The Voodoo Lily creaked and rocked and so did the broiling pans hanging from their wall nails, the pots that Bluejay made his famous yellow onion jambalaya in. Bluejay said he'd be gone for one day, a debt the boss Valentino Nardelli wanted collected, and now it was the eighth day and even the houseboat seemed frightened to be moored here, all the wash water in the canisters gone, surrounded by the undrinkable black piss of the bayou. Memory had gone to Rice University on a scholarship, didn't want to get pregnant by Bluejay or return to a houseboat in backwards Louisiana. Their infant girl was stillborn and buried in a dress delicate as water lily petals. She thought of the Saint Tammany Parish graveyard like a heaven she wished she could believe in. Everything was okay now because she was in love with this baby who was not of her body.

The white cat jumped on the table, rubbed its head against her chin and began to purr. Like it had heard her headache. How long could you live on stickiness? Memory reached for the last tangerine. Sinking her teeth, all those killers, into the tangerine, she sucked like the segments were crawfish. The muggy juice made her gag, nothing to drink but her own spit and that pan of greasy water. Bluejay, how could you make us wait like this? Listening to every sound, every mockingbird, thinking it might be you. Leaning over the sink, she glanced out the window slit. The sky was darkening and clouds stuck out like tufts of dirty cotton. Then she dipped a measuring cup into the melt water, flicking away a fly and slurping.

Damn you, Bluejay. Where are you?

They'd asked over the radio for anyone with a boat to help so Bluejay and Memory had gone out in the flatboat down to the Lower Ninth. The water stunk so bad you had to wear a handkerchief over your face just like the old time cowboys. They'd moved through the black water oar by oar. A mattress floated by and a piece of a tarpaper roof. Then crickets chirruped from tree tops. Their ears caught the branches calling out for help, their submerged trunks already drinking every evil thing that had

been hidden. A water snake lifted its bulb-shaped head from the black green pit of the water, and then dove again, swimming under the boat, searching for a stringer of fish and whatever else floated in the flood of battery fluid and turpentine and Drano. They oared past the street sign and the place where raspberry bushes used to grow. Ahead, a woman face down in the water, legs splayed. An ice chest tied to her ankle by a piece of kitchen rope. A floater. Then the Styrofoam chest started to cry.

Bluejay and Memory met when she was saving money for Rice University by working at the Casamento's restaurant. Everywhere on the walls there were photographs of celebrity diners. Doctor John munching on the tenderloin trout. Aaron Neville enjoying spaghetti with meatballs and daube. Backup singers in burgundy sequins like tears of slimy amaretto. Always a Casamento opening his arms like a white crane in welcome. The first one forever looking out from the wall with his handlebar mustache and apron. On the jukebox old Italian tunes. The Castrati used to sing Italian opera in the eighteenth century. They'd remove the testicles of choir boys so their voice boxes wouldn't develop. One of them lived into the twentieth century and his voice was recorded. What a ghost song. It was on the jukebox, re-recorded on twenty-first century equipment but still sounded like a starved bird. It was playing when Bluejay walked in like a piece of spit shine, high cheekbones and brown skin. A redbone. Valentino Nardelli at his side. That old Maf who ate boys and girls in his shrimp scampi. Bluejay smiled his dimples at Memory and winked. They'd been together ever since, although that first year of college she'd tried to put distance between them, but then she'd gotten pregnant. And she'd missed his compliments, him always saying how he loved her big brown peepers, those mournfully sexy eyes just for him, and her full lips and mussed hair, her body like a ripe raspberry. Oh, la.

The last morning she'd woken up beside Bluejay, eight days ago.

"She is not going to vanish," he'd said softly, throwing his leg over hers, long brown-red meat threaded with dark hair. His body wasn't furred, but there were patches of vegetation in out-of-the-way places like the hollow at the small of his back. Bluejay's cove, she called it, and the tight nest of hair between his breastbones. She used to talk to those hairs, tickling them with her breath.

"I heard her cry." Memory pushed Bluejay's leg off her, leapt from the bunk, taking two steps to the crib. False alarm. The baby smacked like her dreams tasted good, like she knew her safety was here under the grass-green mosquito net, cooing and humming to herself, her brown skin shining.

"Mourning dove," he whispered in her ear after she'd come back to bed. "Let that child sleep and burble. You don't need to hang over her like a wet blanket. Lie still so I can give you a surprise." She kept her neck craned toward the crib just in case. "Is this how all you mothers are? You forget your men?" Bluejay pulled the sheet back and watched the goose bumps stiffen on Memory's breasts. He drew his finger down her sternum, traced those crinkles in her stomach that looked like tiny white egrets far out in the belly swamp.

"I don't know, Bluejay."

"Shut up." He put his hand over her mouth. "Our baby died, dove, but God gave us another one. Do you think we would have found her if God hadn't made it happen? It's time we made love." He was kissing her nose. First thing in the morning his breath usually smelled fresh like he'd gargled water or ate a tangerine. He loved tangerines and a sack of them hung from the cupboard. His kisses were biting her shoulder like a blue-back crab. "You're hot," he hissed. "You're going to burn me alive. Wait one second, I have something for you."

Was she expecting to hear the snap of a condom, and feel his hand nudge her legs apart? He pushed away the mosquito net and sat up on the edge of the shelf bed, then he got down on his knees, leaned in, and opened the footlocker with a key he wore on a chain around his neck. Out came a jewelry box. "We're going to need these," he said, flipping up the lid. Inside were two gold bands engraved with hollyhocks. Bluejay's clay-colored face almost touched her. "Dove, it'll look better for the baby's sake." His breath smelled fruity, orange moist. "We're going to make our vows to each other right now. I sure don't need a priest or minister or parish hall. I'm going to swear it to you."

He lifted one of the rings from the black velvet. "I got them from a second-hand shop on Canal Street. You remember that hole-in-the wall hock shop run by Ernest Mar?"

Sure. Old twitching Ernest Mar who resembled the chewed end of a cigar. Mar managed to buy and hold onto some of the oldest slave-day jewelry, pierced earrings on long stretched

wires, diamonds in ornate blackened settings, amber and sapphires. Planter spoil, crude jewelry fashioned by slaves, beads strung on cotton twine, all hocked away. Ernest Mar liked Bluejay since he brought in to hock his great-great-grandmother's voodoo doll. An old one that had been handed down from slave times, generation to generation, hair of Spanish moss, body of corncob, with one star sapphire eye, one ruby.

She fingered the chain around his neck. "I wondered why you were wearing this."

Bluejay slipped the gold band engraved with hollyhocks on her left hand ring finger. "With this ring I do you wed. You understand that's for always. For richer for poorer. Okay?" It was almost dawn and the swamp was alive with birdcalls. The diesel generator wheezed away but the mockingbirds tried to out warble it. He closed the ring that would fit his finger into the palm of her hand. "Now you have to wed me to you."

"I, Memory Hebert," she giggled, unable to help it because he looked so solemn, "take thee . . ." and then burst out laughing at the word *thee* invented to fill out a line of poetry. "Okay, okay. Let me start again. I, Memory Hebert, take you, Bluejay Guy, the Third, to have and to hold as long as we both shall live." She pushed it over his knuckle, the few hairs there like seasoning.

Then Bluejay told her he had to go, business for that filthy man.

They'd lifted the baby from the ice chest and were taking her to safety. But where was that? Bluejay oared them past where Huey P. Long urinated on the carpet at the Roosevelt Hotel, all the while hugging starlet Blaze Starr on his arm. They took turns rowing and rocking the baby. Hurry, Bluejay, we have to find milk. Memory wet the baby's cracked lips with her own spit, and it whimpered as they floated over New Orleans of yesterday and a century and a half ago. When Madame Delphine Lalaurie cowhided a slave girl-child and buried her in an old well. Under them were the pens where women from the Rice Coast were kept. They were free now in the thick black water. Hurry, Bluejay. The quiet settled back except for the splash of the oars. He agreed that for the time being there wasn't any safe place to take her except the houseboat way east of the city. Eventually, they'd have to hand her over.

In the distance an outboard motor muttered. Memory wiggled free of her sleeping panties, sniffing before she threw them into the soak bucket. She'd begun seeing sunspots before her eyes. That had to be him. She'd spent this ninth day in underpants and a stringy nightie. On her feet a pair of bunny slippers that made her look about twelve years old. Bluejay, you have a lot to explain and you'd better have brought water or you'll just have to turn right around. The boat was jabbering on the other side of the island.

She closed her eyes and listened hard. Nine days, Bluejay, since you took the good boat to Pier 90, telling me you'd be back in one day. I can't wait till you get here so I can choke you.

Her cutoffs she threw on, grabbing one of Bluejay's wifebeaters for a shirt. The motorboat was running with its throttle open, thumping. She saw it in the mist nosing around the tiny island. Her heart sank. Just a bass boat with planked white cedar sides and red stripes, remote control motor and on the deck loomed the high seat for the fisherman. She was about to wave hard and yell for help when she saw the huge man sitting so raised up and silent: metallic sunglasses and lanky Creole black hair. Another hulk of a man stood behind him in leather hat and yellow beard, holding a pair of binoculars. Bull's eye on Memory. The bass boat's throttle slipped into idle and the black-haired man turned the wheel, steering toward the houseboat.

Get that damn starter pistol and defend yourself. Lolie's voice. Don't wait to see what they want.

Memory reached for the broomstick, raising it, but the bass boat kept coming on. The pistol, fool. She ran inside, slid open the silverware drawer, grabbed Bluejay's starter pistol. It looked like a gun, something he played with as a kid and that's why it still floated in the junk silverware drawer. Bluejay taught Memory to shoot, something a scholarship girl didn't need to learn, but he insisted.

The bass boat idled a few yards from the deck while the man in the high seat took off his sunglasses, his soft face the color of a hammer. To size up Memory he needed naked eyes. She used the triangle position, left arm supporting the shooting hand. "Go on about your business," she yelled, trying to raise a holler out of her voice's silky huskiness.

The baby started to cry from inside. Hush, darling.

"Best tend to your baby crying," the one in the leather hat said. "Anybody else inside?"

She raised the pistol. "There's your target," she remembered Bluejay saying when he taught her using his .48. He'd placed the gun in her hands, threaded his fingers over hers. "I'm gonna catch you when the gun bounces. Okay, use your finger to push and then pull. That a girl." Now she didn't have any bigger finger bearing down forcing her little finger against the metal, and the metal so strong that the big finger really had to work to make it boom.

"Miss, we sure don't mean to scare you. We're looking for Bluejay. We're buddies of his."

"My husband's not here. I'm sorry."

Another cry from the baby.

The big black-haired one slipped his sunglasses back on and suns bounced off them. "Maybe he put aside a package. He knew we were coming by to pick it up."

"He didn't put anything aside." Her tongue felt like cardboard, but she wasn't going to ask them for water.

"Maybe you'd let us look around."

She thrust her shoulders back, her chin up. "Not in a million years."

It bugged her that these buffoons had asked for Bluejay by name. What did they want? She knew the storm had blown plenty of rough trade out of the city and into the back country. The bearded man took off his leather hat and wiped his bald head. No wonder he wore a hat, his head was pointy like a fire hydrant. The big one took the throttle and the boat began to move. Memory plopped on the kitchen chair. Relief. Tears dribbled down her face before she could wipe them away. Shame on her. Stupid, stupid. But they didn't disappear; the bass boat threw down its anchor and waited at the far end of the inlet.

She knelt by the crib and stared. The baby's lashes long as bluejay's wings tried to blink away the bits of sun. A spit bubble formed on her lip, and there was sun inside the bubble, shining. Her eyes flickered over the footlocker, the one Bluejay had reached into for the gold bands. Why was it still padlocked? She studied the wood footlocker, and then got the Phillips and unscrewed the hinges holding the lid on. The corncob doll winked at her first with its sapphire eye, and then with its ruby. Heaped

and glinting, a cluster of diamond rings, some set in ornate settings, other stones dug from their gold sockets. Wedding rings, a century of fingers and vows, hock shop jewels thrashing about. He'd looted Ernest Mar.

They had to get out of here.

Memory would have to bail out the flatboat, plug the leak, see if she could jimmy-rig the broken Merc outboard motor, and get them to Pier 90 without drowning.

What the hell was that? Covered from ears to tail in slime, head above the murk, something neither had seen before swimming. Its eyes were shut against the bug spray and benzene. Paws stroked the water. Something was keeping it going. Not dog paddling but swimming. What kind of animal was it? Groundhog, squirrel, banana rat? Get it, Bluejay, you have to. He didn't argue like some men might have. Didn't say fuck no it'll bite. He reached out with both hands and grabbed. Was it a cat? In the boat it opened its red mouth and a tiny meow rolled out. A cat. Why not? Everything was loose in the water, everything floating up, blocks of shotgun houses and camelbacks. She could see misty yellow clots in the darkness like souls. Maybe they were always there but now without electricity you could see them. What the slaves made their light from was bobbing in the water. Flickering grease lamps, iron bowls filled with lard and rags burning for flame. A hundred years ago on this corner a magnolia tree stood with its blossoms open. The scent was still so strong.

Every Mardi Gras Lolie dolled Memory up in organza and they'd go visit the nursing home. People disappeared in St. Evangeline's. They sat in wheelchairs for years, arms and legs no larger than a ten-year-old child's, peddling up and down. Men and women whose skin didn't see sun. Their mouths stayed open like gutted trout. Memory would stand in the room with the stranded pool table that smelled of blue hydrangea. She'd clutch the baton. "Memory, go on," Lolie coaxed. "Show these good people you can twirl." Memory threw the baton high until it flashed in the sky of the ceiling, and then, like a silver bird, landed in her hand. Again and again she threw. The wheelchair people laughed and drooled and clapped. Mardi Gras nights Memory loved being a girl in the blue boarding house, lotioning

her body and then unfolding Lolie's cotillion gown. "This fat ass can't fit no more in that thing. You go on, baby, and play in it." A green silver evening dress with a bodice of rhinestones. You could feel all the high times in the silk, the Aretha tunes, and the spiced rum. Memory used to stand on the toilet seat and look at herself in the bathroom mirror. Her eyes were brown and her face fresh as cut grass. Her hair streamed like cherry tobacco smoked slowly. She smiled and you saw a girl who gave you her word and kept it. Lolie's girl.

They stood on the second floor of the blue boarding house where Grandma Lolie lived. The stink of the refrigerator, all the green things weren't zucchini, peas, broccoli, or pickles. Not lettuce or onions or cherry tomatoes. The mildew sprouted and spawned black and blue yellow carapaces like deposits from deep space. Jelly maggots in Tupperware containers of yellow onion jambalaya. The mildew spread lace wings over Lolie's sewing machine and buffet. The Coast Guard had already been here. They'd gotten Lolie out.

Memory carried the baby in the sling that tied around her waist, and when she turned to grip the throttle, the baby turned too. The white cat pressed his face to the grill of the pet carrier that she'd set on the opposite seat where Bluejay should be. Underneath layers of newspaper and the cat was a layer of wedding rings. She gave the old Merc 200 Phantom Black more gas, trying not to flood it. Her hand kept slipping. The baby's brown eyes were frightened, and she buried her head against Memory's chest like she wanted to nurse there. Her whole body felt flushed, and her eyes must be thirsty too, so dry in their sockets.

The bass boat still waited at the mouth of the inlet. She'd already decided to go in the opposite direction, out of the way, but they'd make Pier 90 all the same. The Merc putt-putted them around the island with all that calcified bark. Up in the waterlogged trees two vultures sat. Black vultures with their red wattles and at their solemnest. Seven months since the big one and the pelicans still wept, some of their feathered corpses stinking on the bank of the little island, poisoned.

Once they got to Pepaw's Pier 90, she'd call a cab to take them to an ATM machine, and then to a motel. Like the Super

Bowl Sunday in Jefferson Parish. She'd call Valentino and find out where Bluejay was. If worst came to worst she'd hock a ring. If anyone asked if this baby was hers, she'd say yes, the baby takes after my husband, and show them her wedding band. Yup, you can sure tell them that brown baby belongs to you, but without Bluejay will they swallow it?

They were moving at a pretty good clip when the motor started to cough and the boat stopped. It could be anything. A popped gasket ring or a coil slipped off a spark plug. She tried to zero in on all those moveable parts.

Outa gas. Get the can. Lolie's voice rang in her head.

Memory reached behind her for the gas, lifted it. A shine in the water began to dance. A girl in a ratty red slip whirled around and around. It was only the reflection of the can. She filled the tank, and then yanked on the starter. With the baby in the sling she couldn't get her elbow far enough back to pull. Relax. Memory kissed the soft top of the baby's head. It was three seconds before she showed the ripcord enough muscle and the motor rumbled to life. No one would take the baby from her. Then she gripped the throttle.

Mullets jumped, not scared by the old Merc outboard. Plop plop. Damn mullets, Lolie always said. They eat grease, they eat gasoline. Hell, they come for the hook not the minnow. Garbage fish, Lolie spat. And a bad day was catching nothing but mullets and getting their poo slime on your fingers and having to keep throwing them back.

Ahead were trotlines; balls of corroded metal and empty bleach bottles strung on clothesline rope. They marked the fishing lines and underwater hooks lumped with moldy white bait. She had a bad feeling about Bluejay. Then she heard gunshots. From across the bayou on the marshy wooded banks. Was it a fisherman shooting a pelican for stealing his catch? An alligator poacher? The motor died again this time when she took the curve sharp. She yanked the ripcord until her arm hurt and she smelled gasoline. The bass boat sounded from somewhere. Memory stamped her foot, feeling a sharp pain. She winced, but didn't let out a cry. The boat was littered with fishing poles and she'd stepped on a hook.

Easy, boo. Lolie's voice again. You flooded it.

"Please, shut up," she said softly. "Not you, honey. Lolie."

Memory squeezed her foot, imagining it as the mullet's

mouth, and eased the barb out. Biting her lip against the sting, she snatched at the ripcord. It wasn't flooded, no sir, more like busted because she could see that the carburetor float was missing, must have fallen off. When she reached for the oars she found only one. A shot of fear went through her. Trapped. She could hear that blasted bass boat somewhere, but when she craned her neck nothing there. The white cat was wide eyed and staring out of the carrier. Sweat trickled from her temples in little granulated drops, then heavier. The baby quieted, feeling Memory's fear. Wouldn't one of those cream drinks—those brandy Alexanders or tequila mockingbirds, a cool slush drink made with Bombay gin—be good?

She tugged on the ripcord, and not a grunt. She would have to row them in with one oar. When she picked it up, she saw the second one under it, not even a match to the first, more a canoe paddle, but she managed to fit it into the oarlock. But how was she going to row with the baby against her? Memory's eyelids twitched like insects. Lolie's voice nagged her. Don't get used to that storm baby. You bet families are searching for missing kids. So what if you fished her out of the water like a blue gill, they'll call it babynapping. I'll row with the baby. I'll just do it.

Memory kept rowing. They'd get there already. When she and Bluejay used to mix a little meth in their coffee, they'd take a rowboat and oar just to work off their high. Otherwise, the high would turn nervous like bringing in the crawfish traps from the shrimp grass. Like all that fidgeting inside, they'd be clawing at themselves, crazy. It couldn't be much farther. Hard going because of the hyacinth moving out from the banks. The oarlocks squeaked with each pull. It comforted to look at the white cat with his wide intelligent eyes; he had stayed calm, not uttering a meow since they started.

She heard the bass boat's motor, and the white cat's ears drew back. Memory turned and looked over her shoulder. This time she could see the bass boat bearing down.

Dante Street. Bluejay had taken her once to a club that called itself a dungeon, where the girls were all eyes and bones that kept growing under their skins. Memory got in with a fake ID and all kinds of Cleopatra makeup spread over her face, wowed by the rickety cane chairs and nicotine-stained mirrors you ordered your drink in. Maybe she lit a cigarette. A guy sat

down next to her the minute Bluejay went to the bathroom. Said his name was Trick or Treat. He took the cushion next to Memory, toying with his sports jacket and the red carnation in its lapel. He sure thought he had allure, surly and flirting. His wedding band glinted, and it was his ring finger he stroked her leg with. That was the last thing Trick or Treat touched before Bluejay lifted him off his barstool and sucker punched him, throwing him into the foosball table. On the TV above the bar Cher was singing in a black feather outfit. As if that wasn't enough, she wore breasts plates and a bird-of-paradise headdress. That goofy woman with her warbling voice made Memory laugh out loud.

Another time Bluejay took her to a posh hotel uptown. A hundred and thirty dollars for the night and the electricity shorted out and the a/c in their room died. Bluejay and Memory wandered in the stifling hall like disembodied applause. Luxury was a lie . . . She remembered him stretching out next to the ice machine—the coolest spot, opening his arms to her, taking her face between his hands. "Lie on me," he said. Then he dug into the icemaker and with the chunks and slivers of melting ice rubbed every part of her body, even slipping some inside her, and she had laughed and iced him back. In the pitch dark it felt like bits of frozen stars, like they were traveling through space, flinging themselves into a belt of asteroids.

The Walk Don't Walks stopped blinking their eyes. More holdouts here in The Quarter. There was a wedding going on, and it reeked although it wasn't flooded. Here it was dark like all the darkness of the world. The French Quarter bride wore a silver cowboy hat over her veil, and the groom wore silver jeans and wading boots. A tall man with a shovel-shaped beard and blue eyebrows held a prayer book. The bridesmaid had on thigh-high waders and a vest of fuchsia ostrich feathers. A muddy beige and white pit bull hunkered next to the minister. Bluejay waved at the groom who, after the minister pronounced him a married man, picked up an accordion and started playing. "Join us for the wedding toast," the bride called out in a husky voice. Instead of glasses of tinkling ice and tourist men in white shirts toasting women who smeared lipstick on their cuffs, you could only hear a diesel generator kicking in, and the crickets.

Homestretch, the tin roof of Pier 90 glinted in the last bit of the sun. Then she saw through the dusk a boat with lots of horsepower. A hovercraft like a gigantic dragonfly racing through the marsh waters. It hadn't been there and then it was. A patrol boat was cutting through the bayou, sleek and powerful like a military vessel, flying over the water rather than touching it. It was a high-speed boat with a cockpit hatch. The bass boat didn't melt away but waited, blocking off her way of escape.

She sank the oars in the water, pulled and lifted, feeling the heat of the baby against her, the extra weight and then the thump of the baby's foot right in her chest, almost knocking her air out. Doll baby, not now, not now. Her hands burned; the friction of rowing must have scraped the first growth skin from her fingers. Maybe the game was up and that's why numbness crept through her. Like she was standing on the shoulders of her own body looking down.

The patrol boat bounced through its wake toward them, waves of gray water rippling out. These were swamp polecats, as Bluejay would say, dressed in official windbreakers, and one had a shotgun crossed over his lap. The officer standing, an African-American with neat beard and a walkie-talk at his hip. Like ships with pretty women carved into the prow, only these were stone-faced policemen. Lolie warned her about them. LA cops were supposed to be brutal. New York City cops, corrupt. Louisiana cops took the Mardi Gras cake—they were corrupt, brutal, and stupid.

The white one with the shotgun stood up, a swagger in his shoulders and hips and a thin black mustache like eyeliner had drawn it on. He wore square sunglasses with blue lenses. Something was lumped on the deck, but a tarp had been thrown over it. Bluejay, there's a body under there, she thought. They've pulled a body out of the water and it's my man. Her teeth started to chatter. Memory eased the oars into their locks and wrapped her arms around the baby. She wished she had four arms to protect the child with.

She couldn't stop staring at the tarp; it almost seemed to be growing. Maybe the tarp moved, was rising and falling, wasn't dead. Either way a cold perspiration beaded on her face. The baby must have tasted her fear and opened her mouth, scrunching her eyes, tears starting.

"Honey," Memory groaned. Her spit scratched like pine cones.

The patrol boat sidled up to them, spilling water over the side into the flatboat, wetting the funk on the bottom. Mummified minnow slush. The motor went silent and you could hear ducks quacking and then a muskrat slapped the water. Memory clutched the baby, whispered, "I love you." The baby screamed and more tears ran down her cheeks. Memory tried to hush her, reaching for the canvas bag to find the last of the bottle already mixed with formula. Find the bippy that might keep her happy. The frigging bippy. All the while she dug in the bag Memory tried to comfort the baby, but she couldn't keep her eyes off the tarp. Growing bigger, watching her. Bluejay, are you under there? Finally, she had the bippy in her fingers.

"You need some help?" the white policeman asked.

"If you've got an extra carburetor that would be great," Memory said, trying to bring a smile to her mouth. Then she thought she heard Lolie's squeaky little voice say, show tit.

"Sorry, ma'am, but we don't carry spare parts," he said, lifting his binoculars and aiming them at Memory. She raised her brown eyes and gave him one of those shy half smiles that men liked.

Memory was trying to stay light when every pulse point in her body was jittering. "Nobody at home so I brought my baby . . ."

"Nobody at home," the officer repeated, pushing his glasses up with his pinkie. Even his little finger had swagger. "Where's home?"

"The Voodoo Lily." She explained about the houseboat in the cove, there used to be a swamp village there. Then the baby grabbed at her. "Not my ear, honey bunny." But the little girl twisted Memory's lobe with all her fingers.

He shook his head from side to side like he didn't believe that old houseboat where nobody had lived for years could be inhabited.

"Nobody but kooks and druggies live there. Which one of those categories do you belong to?"

"Kook, I guess," she said.

"Okay, kook, can I see some identification?"

"I left the houseboat without my purse." She reddened, forgetting herself. "Listen, I have a baby. I'm thirsty. You wouldn't have water?"

He introduced them as Officer Sternlight and Officer Kingstone. "I think we've got some bottles of Poland Spring," he said. "Kingstone, get one of those bottles for the little lady." He nodded to the black officer, then lifted the binoculars and glassed the distance where the bass boat sat. "Motherfucker, I know those guys. They better hightail it or I'll have them for dinner."

"Here you go, little lady, catch."

Memory took the sling from around her neck; let the baby down onto her lap. She stretched, first one arm and then the other, lifting them behind her head. Then caught the bottle of water, one twist, and her mouth was all over it, smacking and swallowing, letting the first clean water in days splash down her throat. Quickly, she added water to the formula bottle. Sure they could see everything about her boobs through the thin ribs of the undershirt. She'd pulled Bluejay's wifebeater on in a hurry, Bluejay who might be under that tarp and not going to put on anything ever again. "This is who and what I am. Nothing to hide," she said, then held the palms of her hands out. "Now give us a ride in. We might not make it otherwise."

The white cop couldn't take his eyes off her. "Is that your kid?"

"Yes, she's a real sweet little girl."

"I can see that. Where's her daddy? In Angola?"

A frown crept into the face of the black cop.

The white swamp cop started blabbing about how everyone moving back to the bayous was a dealer or some biker from New Orleans setting up a business. Backwater houseboats were nothing but floating meth labs. He said all that while he took all of her in, his eyes running up and down like they'd go in between her toes if they could. Her legs, her hip-to-waist ratio. Memory agreed that drugs were everywhere. And behind that, things were bad in the city with thugs strolling up to cars at stoplights hawking crack and crystal to grandmas and grandpas.

Then he'd looked his fill. She'd never been undressed, manhandled like that in a few steady glances. The sun hidden behind muggy clouds most of the afternoon began to slip.

"Settle down, sweetie." She banged her head against Memory's chest. Was she frustrated, trying to tell her something? One bang, two. Sternlight bent his body over the rail of the patrol boat, hovering like a hungry bald eagle. "Now let's stop fucking

around. Are you running drugs for those thugs following right behind?" He whipped off his sunglasses and motioned for the boat to edge in closer. "You're pretty cute. Are you sure you can't show me some ID?"

"I can't officer. My little girl is dehydrated. I'm seeing double. We have to get to Pier 90."

"Nobody's supposed to be living back here. This is a wet death valley. Every bullshit chemical toxin got dumped by the storm right here."

"I didn't know that."

"What kind of cat is that?" Sternlight asked, squinting, trying to see into the pet carrier. "Well, I'll be damned. That's a Turkish Van." He crouched trying for a better view. "That long white fur and brown markings, you bet. I used to have one. The breed evolved around Lake Van and the only thing to eat was fish so they learned to swim." He straightened up. "Looks like we've got interests in common."

The cat was stretched out on a layer of diamond rings. Dusk flattened the light, the cypress and moss trees paled, the brush and shrimp grass on the bank looked like bamboo shoots. Darkness was coming to drink the color slowly away. Mist smudged the tree shards that poked from the water. The smell of a malfunctioning septic tank.

Memory felt Sternlight's eyes on her, making the hair on her arms rise. She could smell herself, rough, musky hunks of grilling human being. Did they have a stiff? A floater? Pull the damn tarp back already, and let me see.

"Maybe you know this individual that we found tied to a tree in the water."

It's Bluejay isn't it? she hissed, holding the baby close. The baby took a breath from her greedy sucking of the bottle. Memory lifted her to her shoulder and patted her back. "Good burp."

"Kingstone, want to pull the tarp back and see if the lady has any idea who the hell this is?" The gray mugginess of the air was turning hazy making it harder to see.

Kingstone stooped over the lump before pulling the tarp slowly back, like he himself could hardly believe his eyes. It couldn't be a body because it looked exactly like a rusted hot water heater that had marinated in bayou sludge. That's what it was. A fat swollen-up hot water heater. The baby cried, right in

Memory's lap, but she sounded faraway in another room. Bluejay disappeared. Alaska. Mexico. Anywhere but here. Not here at all. Branches had jammed themselves into his jeans, shirt seeping bayou and weeds. His belt. Face down. How that clothing had even stuck to the body was anyone's guess. Last of the off-kilter sun plucking up the key chain at the neck. Piece of tinfoil. Not Bluejay, maybe an alligator, a small one, this was their turf, their nest territory. They had thumb-sized brains and powerful jaws. They exhaled swamp breath, murky with turtle and mullet, maybe even its own young. A small alligator killed by a bigger one. That's what.

"Well, you're looking awful hard. Should we turn him over? I sure do think it's a him only sometimes they sure surprise me. Turns out the he is a she. This one's been in the water a few days."

Memory turned away, frantic, heart pounding. She leaned over the side of the flatboat and coughed. Okay, I'm okay. Bluejay's not under that tarp, no way. Bluejay said two days, and then three and four days, all that waiting. Waking at every sound, sitting with the baby out on the houseboat deck, and him not coming. All their shared past. Fifth day. Sixth day. No water. Remember how they'd go through Lolie's old *Photoplays,* the grainy pictures of old-time celebrities. Jayne Mansfield. Eddie Fisher. Liberace. Just dressed-up people eating expensive meals. Memory and Bluejay used to pretend they were advertisements; those little square sketches of lingerie way in the magazine back. Scotch taping tinsel to her chest, she'd wrap herself in a sheer black curtain. Bluejay would put on Memory's leopard panties, stick out his fanny and do the swivel walk, and they'd collapse laughing. Seventh day. Eighth day.

Memory covered the baby's eyes. "Please, I don't have any idea who or what that is. But could you please hitch us to your boat and take us to Pier 90? I can't row any farther."

With his licky red mouth Officer Sternlight grinned, "Sure. I get more face time with a beauty like you. Angelina Jolie has nothing on you." He motioned for Kingstone to get the pole with a hook on it and pull the flatboat in. Sternlight crinkled up his smile at Memory, who was remembering Lolie's advice, keep showing tit.

"I think you've got an alligator under that tarp," Memory said.

"You think so?"

The boat was hitched and Sternlight tapped on the railing, his body about to turn. Yes, just go away. Like the gator that would smell her and seize.

Bluejay managed to row them by the rooftop of The Rib Shack, where drowsiness used to clink, a penny being dropped in the saucer by the cash register, and the customers appeared asleep lifting forks of mustard greens and black-eyed peas, "Sha Too Too," playing on a radio. All that flooded away, poisoned by gas leaks. A woman sat in a blue kitchen chair on a rooftop, garbage bags around her torso. "Would you like to be seated?" she asked, her mouth opening wide when she spoke. "I lost everything. I lost my teeth." She didn't want to come with Bluejay and Memory and the baby. Nope, she was waiting on a helicopter. Damn straight she wanted to be lifted into God's sky. A boatload of young guys with bare chests canoed past. One of them nodded to Bluejay. "Stores open on the riverfront, brother. You're heading the wrong direction. Nothin' back there but rooftops." Then a set of blue Formica tabletops floated by like blue spots in front of Memory's eyes.

Memory put the baby in the sling, snuggled against her. Aloneness, no Bluejay, no houseboat. She gripped the pet carrier with the white cat, as if she'd scrounged up a smidgeon of family and had to be careful so it wouldn't disappear. When she was attending Rice University, she'd taken plenty of buses between Houston and New Orleans and knew that feeling of being stranded. She hoisted the canvas bag bulging with water and formula and Pampers and climbed the slope. Memory, the baby, and the cat hunkered down between the moss trees. Dark and warm here with the lights of the bar-restaurant blinking. First she fed her little girl, who happily sucked and farted at once. Memory laughed. "You need a bath. And you sure need a name. I bet you're sick of me calling you baby." She thought of all the babies she used to see in that Houston bus depot, Mexican girls painting the toenails of their toddlers, the black women from one-syllable Texas cities in purple bedroom slippers letting their kids roll on the filthy floor, white girls with blue lipstick mouths eating cotton candy in the middle of the night and feeding it to babies. Hadn't she felt superior, looking down her nose at them

all, thinking if she ever had a child at some far distant time she'd do better? Memory rocked her child and then set her down and undid the Velcro diapers. Unless the little girl had a stable safe place, she wouldn't heal. She loved this child more than Lolie had loved baby Memory, and that had been a powerful love.

Teeming wet weeds surrounded the boat of sleep. Memory's eyes began to tear while she pulled on the oars. He knew where the triggers were, how to get her flesh to take a deep breath. He called her babe and mourning dove in his soufflé voice, doing things to her temples and scalp. He tightened his fingers around her upper arms and squeezed, lifting her upper torso off the bed, then dropping it. Thoughts of Bluejay, each dip of the paddle caught in a syrupy tangle of them. More hyacinths floated toward them.

Neil Nakadate

Chief Joseph Slept Here

(*Hin-mah-too-yah-lat-kekt,* on the hundredth anniversary of his death)

"Although he had surrendered with the understanding that he would be allowed to return home . . . it was not until 1885 that Joseph and the other refugees were returned to the Pacific Northwest. Even then, half, including Joseph, were taken to a non-Nez Percé reservation in northern Washington, separated from the rest of their people in Idaho and their homeland in the Wallowa Valley." PBS Online (2004)

Have you ever fished the Wallowa in the crisp sunrise,
with raspy magpies peppering the trees?

Have you stood there at midday, when tiny insects, motes
of dust, and the sun's glare converge, making eyes water?

Have you been there in pebbled afternoon,
with redwings dipping among the reeds and bushes?

Have you felt cool shadows sliding down canyon walls,
the breeze billowing a line into elegant loops of grace?

Have you had the white-tails query your presence
before flickering into the pines, leaving you,

a buzzing fly, and swirling current?
I fished there once, age 13, and even then knew

it was more beautiful than my father had promised,
more peaceful than sleep. Some time later

I learned that it all belonged to someone else,
whose eloquence came from a sacred place, who had wished

only to return there and rest forever where I stood.

Night of the Pig

for Beth Ann Fennelly

We smash the ceramic pig
on a still April night
long after the neighbors
are gone, and long after

the children have tumbled
off to their bedrooms.
I prepare the hammer
and you prepare the pig,

green, hollow, its snout
as big as a beer stein.
There is no incantation
of any kind, but the ceremony

has a queer flow that we lose
ourselves in each time,
the stillness before the crashing,
the release, the empty last gasp.

Darrin Doyle

In the Moment

People sometimes mistook Jimmy for a man named Clyde Piner, a local actor whose stage credits included *Oklahoma*, *Fiddler on the Roof*, and *Hair*. Piner was also recognized for, among other things, his juggling antics on a weekly public access show called "Local Folks." Piner was once apparently able to keep airborne six blueberries while blindfolded, and another time three cell phones on which he successfully dialed three separate residences without stopping his routine.

Jimmy had no claims to distinction other than his handsome shepherd Fixer—who never failed to attract the attention of ladies on the street—a mild case of hemorrhoids that guys at the garage teased him about, and of course his resemblance to Clyde Piner, which occasionally became the topic of conversation when women were finished petting his dog.

Recently, Jimmy had decided to capitalize on his Piner-esque mug. The only women he could usually sleep with were the tired, aging ones who flaunted their cleavage around the pool tables at Teazer's, where Jimmy and the other mechanics often wasted nights drinking Goebels and chewing Skoal. Jimmy wanted a piece of the other world, the more uppity life: the customers who brought Volvos and Nissans and BMWs into the garage; the brewery-hopping crowd; the jazz quartet fans; the theater chicks; the women with expensive jewelry and tan thighs in January. It certainly wasn't a financial barrier which kept him peeking in from the outside of this social cluster. He wasn't exactly rich, but Jimmy pulled in fifty grand a year as head mechanic and was sitting on another fifty grand he'd inherited from the shoe store when his father passed away.

But Jimmy also had a girlfriend. She was a simple, unquestioning young woman named Jessica whom he impregnated on their fourth date, at the fireworks, in the back of his capless pickup truck. That baby, Jimmy Jr., was stillborn. Jimmy had held Jessica's hand through the entire twenty-hour labor and delivery. To this day, he could recall the image of the shriveled pur-

ple infant, its compressed grimace frozen and coated with blood, as it was expelled from Jessica's body. They buried Jimmy Jr. in a nearby cemetery, marked with a tiny tombstone engraved *Unborn Child.* After that, Jessica's insides were twisted up. She couldn't have any more children, a fact that, after two years, sometimes brought Jimmy close to tears but usually left him feeling apathetic, even relieved.

Jessica worked at the Village Green Daycare part time and waitressed at the Duck Inn on weekends. At home she cooked bland food with the exception of her cornbread, which was unbelievably sweet and soft. She decorated the house with potpourri and wooden ducks, and she cried noiselessly during sex—not from pain, she said, but from love. Jessica kept them up-to-date on bill payments, and she made appointments for Jimmy's monthly haircut. She was a warm, honest young woman with an unselfish heart, yet all of these qualities seemed to make Jimmy's job as permanent boyfriend increasingly more difficult. They discussed marriage frequently. Jimmy said it was too much trouble. He reminded her that the best things in life were treasured because of their existence away from the eyes of the world.

All of Jimmy's buddies—guys from the Amoco like Fred Smith, Tommy Childs, and Jerry Baker—cheated on their wives as a matter of course. They felt no more guilt than they would from flushing a toilet or changing the oil in their trucks. It was as if they'd designed their lives that way—marry young, train the wife in domestic duties, have a few kids to keep her busy, stay out all night on weekends fucking girls and fighting boys. And although Jimmy had to count himself among them in behavior and attitude, he knew he was different. Or thought about trying to be.

Since he couldn't actually discuss these feelings with his work friends, he turned to Jessica's older brother Martin, a thirty-seven-year-old high school English teacher and track coach who was deaf in one ear and blind in one eye from being struck by lightning while running a 10K in college. Jimmy and Martin sat across from one another at the Duck Inn on a Sunday evening.

"I don't know," Jimmy said in response to nothing, tapping his cigarette on the table. "There's two sides to me."

"Lucky you," Martin said. He reached a finger under his glasses to rub the flesh-colored patch that covered his left eye.

"This isn't easy for me to say," Jimmy said. "On one side, I feel capable of doing anything. I mean," he paused to light his cigarette. "Any girl I see, really. Some chick—the neighbor girl on her porch. I just look, and watch, and I'm totally convinced that I *am* going to stroll across the street and have her—you know, right on the lawn." Jimmy paused again, looking across the restaurant at Jessica, who was punching keys on the cash register. "And it's worse at night," he continued, massaging his jaw line, "when I lie there in bed and play out these—" His sentence murmured to a close. He flicked the ash off his cigarette and said, "But then I snap out of it and think, 'What am I doing? I can't, I won't, do this anymore.'"

Martin chewed his pie quietly. Jimmy tried to read his expression but couldn't tell if the half-deaf teacher had even heard a word.

"Listen," Jimmy said. "I'm telling you because I thought you might understand. That I could trust you."

Both of these things were true: Martin might understand because he himself was guilty of sleeping with one of his seventeen-year-old track girls, and Martin might be trusted because Jimmy was the only one he'd told. The almost-brothers-in-law had an unspoken agreement.

Martin swallowed the last of his milk and wiped his upper lip. He was always fairly dramatic.

"Sounds like you're addicted to sex," he said, and belched.

"Don't give me that line," Jimmy said. "I'll give you smoking. And drinking and probably chewing. But try to tell me that something completely natural—" he crushed out the cigarette in the ashtray "—that any animal in the Wild Kingdom is going to turn down a willing female? They're all addicted. All them coyotes need counseling."

"You're not an animal, are you?" Martin said. He seemed tired. "I mean, humans can distinguish right from wrong. I'm not saying me, but some of them can. It's pretty simple, really."

"Fuck it," Jimmy said. "Just because we know we're born to die doesn't mean we should tamper with God-given instincts."

"I agree," Martin said. "I'm sure God would nail a high school girl if He had the chance." They both laughed as Jessica approached the table. She warmed up their coffees.

"Thanks, honey," Jimmy said.

"You boys having fun?" she asked. She didn't wait for an answer. She hustled away to fill more cups.

"What do you want me to say?" Martin continued. "Do you want to have a morality debate right here? Should I get my sister? She likes to argue!" He motioned for a cigarette by snipping his fingers together like scissors. Jimmy gave him a Lucky, lit it for him, and then he continued. "I don't know what you want my role to be. Am I your priest, your shrink, your lawyer? Your dad? I don't know what angle to take on this thing. Damn." He burped again. "That was good pie."

Jimmy sat back, hands over his belly, feeling the chili fries digest. Across the aisle from him and two booths down, Connors the dwarf, sitting alone on a telephone book, bit into a ham sandwich and screamed like a young girl. Everyone at the restaurant looked up from their coffees and conversations to see him flailing his arms, coughing barely chewed bread chunks out of his mouth. A waitress, not Jessica, a new girl, wearing the Duck Inn's purple uniform with matching cap, dropped her order pad and ran to Connors' side. She knelt down and whacked his back with the heel of her hand.

"My thongue, my thongue!" Connors yelled, pointing into his mouth and trying to spit.

Connors the dwarf was known by name because of his size and his cigars. As the proprietor of Connors' News and Cigar Shoppe, he was a familiar face in the small downtown area, not far from where Jimmy and Jessica lived and worked. Now he was on his knees in the aisle, moaning, with his mouth open. Jessica ran up and knelt down by the other waitress, who was holding his chin. They both stared into his mouth.

"Holy Moses, look at that," Jessica said, pointing. "It's still alive."

"Jesus," said the other waitress.

Connors tried to say something, but only gargled.

"Shhh," Jessica intoned softly. "Hold still."

Jessica plucked the bee out of Connors' mouth and crushed it in her fingers. She casually slipped it into the pocket of her apron so it was hidden from the majority of the patrons. Just like a pro, Jimmy thought. Then Jessica and the other waitress lifted Connors easily by the arms and carried him down the aisle, past the counter and through the swinging doors into the kitchen, while Connors pedaled his legs in the air.

Martin turned to Jimmy and said thoughtfully, "Ouch."

"She'll get the stinger out," Jimmy answered. "She's good at that kind of stuff."

Jimmy looked around the restaurant. It was obvious that the customers were now suspicious of their own food; they pried open sandwiches, poked their piles of deep-fried mushrooms, murmured to themselves. Just then, Ricky Phelps, cook and owner of the Duck Inn, burst through the kitchen doors with his fat arms outstretched, like a priest blessing his congregation.

"Your attention, everyone!" he hollered. "There has been a freak mishap. A bumblebee somehow got into Mr. Connors' sandwich, and he was stung on the tongue. But he is not allergic, and our own Jessica is tending to him, and he will be fine!"

Another murmur rose in the room. A couple of people clapped halfheartedly. Jimmy clapped loudly; he also whistled.

Phelps continued. "And just so no one here is worried about their food—" he paused, perhaps for effect—"all of your meals are on the house!"

At this the patrons roared, and a few clinked their glasses with spoons.

"You lucked out," Martin said to Jimmy.

"I usually do," Jimmy replied, sliding out of the booth and dropping two dollars onto the table for Jessica. "Let's go before he changes his mind."

Martin and Jimmy left the restaurant and began walking down Main Street toward the lot where their vehicles were parked. They stopped for traffic at Main and Rose. Jimmy gave Martin another cigarette, which he hadn't asked for. Martin only smoked when he was out of the house, away from his wife and two kids. Jimmy thought this was admirable.

To their right, just down the street, the stone facade of The Sullivan House loomed darkly against the white sky. At its base, seated on a bench, an old woman with waxy, shoulder-length black hair clutched a walking cane. Beside her, staring ahead like an uninterested moviegoer, was a large Indian man whose face looked like a bee's nest. These two were either waiting for a bus or, more likely, were waiting for nothing. Uncle Sam was also there. He was a reliable Kalamazoo presence who dressed in a dingy suit the colors of Old Glory, complete with star-spangled top hat and white fabric cutouts of eyebrows and goatee pasted to his face. He stood motionless beside a mailbox as if guarding the contents within.

Jimmy and Martin crossed the street, passing Connors' News and Cigar Shoppe, which was closed. As they scanned the new magazines in the window display, Martin made a comment

about Connors' bee sting, and Jimmy laughed, although he didn't really hear it; he was preoccupied with the cover of the most recent *Your Town* magazine, which featured a color photo of Clyde Piner wearing a cowboy hat, twirling his lasso atop a white stallion. The caption beneath read, "How Clyde Piner Wrangles Our Hearts." Jimmy had never seen a picture of Piner except for a poor black and white photocopy of the man in clown makeup. He pressed his nose against the window to get a clearer look.

"Martin," Jimmy said. "Does this guy look like me?"

Martin squinted his good eye, then removed his glasses, then put them back on again, then took them off, then put them on again.

"For Christ's sake," Jimmy said.

"I'd have to say . . ." Martin paused, rubbing his chin, thinking. "Most definitely slightly resembles you a little bit. But I think it's the cowboy hat."

"Funny," Jimmy said. "Listen, I have to tell you something. I didn't buy you dinner just to make a stupid confession."

"You didn't buy me dinner," Martin said, walking away. Jimmy followed him on the right side, next to his good ear.

"You ate free, didn't you?" Jimmy said. "I need a favor."

"I figured as much."

"I've never asked you for anything. Listen, I have a date tonight."

"Tonight?" Martin said, looking at his watch. "When?"

"What time is it?"

"Almost six."

"In three hours."

"And you want me to videotape it."

"Shut up." Jimmy's nerves were buzzing, maybe from the coffee, but probably not. He wasn't sure how to start, so he blurted out, "The girl I'm meeting thinks I'm Clyde Piner."

Martin stopped at the edge of the parking lot. He stared across the rows of cars. He inhaled and exhaled noisily, then said, "What are you doing?"

"Just help me out. I just wanna try it this once, but I have no idea about any of that stuff. This girl is a theater chick at the university, and she's gonna want to talk shop, and I wanna see what happens. Just help me out."

"How? You want me to do the old headphones in your ear bit, tell you what to say?"

"You're into plays and stuff. You got soundtracks from some of those things. Give me a few names, character names, plots, crap like that. You used to be in drama, right? You did plays and stuff."

Martin glanced at Jimmy, then swallowed, looking like a man on the side of the expressway with a flat tire.

He didn't refuse.

Jimmy followed Martin's BMW for twenty minutes, into the suburbs. The roads were winding, the houses nested within long hilly lawns, and the streets were silent. Martin's home was the last on his block. His driveway appeared to be a narrow extension of the street, weaving for a hundred yards through dense woods before opening onto an enormous paved lot. Jimmy parked, admiring the faux-rustic, two-story cabin-style home. All of the front windows were filled by reflected leaves. He momentarily imagined that the woods had reclaimed the house's interior. Jimmy and Jessica's home was dwarfed in comparison, but Jimmy felt no envy. He could have such a house, but he refused to sign away years of his life with mortgage payments.

The men entered through the garage and descended into the basement, where Martin had furnished a small wood-panelled den with barbells, a stereo, a Wilson punching bag, and a metal wall shelf loaded with record albums.

They spent the next two hours sitting on the carpeted floor, listening to music and talking. Martin played excerpts from many different soundtracks—*Cats*, *Hair*, *Jesus Christ Superstar*, *Fiddler on the Roof*, *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, and *Oklahoma*, all of which Clyde Piner had had lead roles in. Martin explained the plot lines of the plays and where Clyde's part fit. The only one of these musicals that Jimmy had ever seen was *Hair*, and this was the movie version, more than fifteen years ago.

"What part did I play?" Jimmy asked.

"The Treat Williams part," Martin said.

Jimmy stared and said nothing.

"The main guy," Martin said. "I can't remember the character's name. He gets sent to Vietnam because they think he's Claude Hooper Bukowski, even though he isn't. He dies at the end."

"Right," Jimmy answered.

Jimmy learned that Martin was never actually in a musical,

but did play Tibalt as a senior in high school and was slated to play Romeo his sophomore year of college before the lightning blinded him. As a college junior, he helped build sets; he even got high with Tom Wopat, of *Dukes of Hazzard* fame, after the third and final performance of *Sweeney Todd.* Martin briefed Jimmy on terms like *method acting*, being *in the moment*, and *ad-libbing*, which in particular Jimmy would need to learn, quickly. He described dressing rooms, tryouts, rehearsals, cast parties, stage blocking, lighting, set design, makeup, and bisexuality, which he said was fairly common among theater types.

Jimmy said he didn't mind bisexuality as long as it was girls doing it, and he sat Indian-style, leaning forward while Martin talked and motioned, trying desperately to retain as much information as he could. It reminded Jimmy of grade school, the last period of his life when he'd actually wanted to learn, when he'd memorized multiplication tables, word spellings, historical dates like Abe Lincoln's birth and Napolean's death, and scientific information like hibernation habits of bats and gestational durations of penguins. It all seemed very far away, but it felt good to try again.

As Martin spoke, pictures formed easily in Jimmy's head, images of leaping onto an impossibly long dining table, draped in Old Glory beneath the hot white stage lights, kicking plates and crushing glasses beneath his boots, yelling, "I got life, brother! I got life!" At 8:30, Jimmy slurped down what was left in his can of Coors and the two men went upstairs.

"Do you want to take my car?" Martin asked, as he and Jimmy stepped into the garage and lit cigarettes. "Marge and the kids are at my folks. Clyde Piner wouldn't drive that monster."

"I disagree with you there," Jimmy said, looking out at his new turquoise Ford Bronco, which loomed ominously behind Martin's BMW as if it might swallow it.

"Jimmy," Martin said, taking a breath, "I have to tell you this, and I hope you'll take it the right way."

Jimmy looked at him.

"I think you're stupid, and I think you're an asshole. But more stupid than asshole."

Jimmy looked Martin in the eye and pictured the track coach licking a teenage breast, grinding his crotch between her thighs, his aging tanned ass tensing with each thrust.

"You know nothing's going to come of this," Martin contin-

ued. "Even if you get laid. So what? You got laid. High schoolers get laid."

Jimmy started to speak, but Martin hushed him with an outstretched palm.

"I'm the worst sort of hypocrite when I say this, but Jessica's my sister, and she deserves better. You know it, too." He licked his fingers and pinched out the burning cigarette, which made a soft hiss. "That's all I have to say. Have fun on your date, stud."

"You're supposed to say, 'break a leg,'" Jimmy said.

At 9 p.m. it was still nearly daylight, but the street lamps lining Main Street flickered alive as Jimmy gunned his truck through a yellow traffic signal. He steered with his knees and squirted Polo, which he had borrowed from Martin, onto his wrists. Stevie Ray Vaughn's "Little Sister" came on the radio. He turned up the volume until the dashboard rattled. He smiled at himself in the mirror and tried to mess his hair, which had been cut the day before.

The girl he was meeting at the brew pub was named Caryn Schultz, but she planned to change it to Caryn Carlisle when she got famous. She was short and slender when Jimmy first met her last Friday, packed into a tight black miniskirt, her high-heeled sandals leading to sculpted calves, dangerous thighs, subtle but effective breasts, and a sweet-smelling neck decorated with a black velvet choker.

Caryn had applied for a job at the Duck Inn. She'd filled out an application while sipping iced tea in a booth directly opposite where Jimmy sat waiting for Jessica to get off work. Jimmy had slid into the booth with Caryn and told her that she didn't want to work at the Duck Inn. He said, and he meant it, that she deserved better. He casually scanned the restaurant, and Jessica was not in sight. He told Caryn that she could be a model. He offered her a cigarette. Caryn blushed and said he looked familiar.

And now, as Jimmy eased his truck to the curb in front of the Great Lakes Brewery, he only knew one thing: he wanted to wake up next to Caryn as Clyde Piner, and goddamn the consequences.

Inside, it was smoky. A smooth, thumping bass line from a jazz combo on the corner stage underlined Jimmy's every step as he approached the crowded bar, conscious of the faces that turned to observe him. He sat at a stool, ordered a Guinness, and sipped the bitter foam away while surveying the room. Each

round table bore a clear-covered candle, lit, in its center. The brick walls were lined with mahogany-framed photographs, black and white, showing various Kalamazoo street scenes from what looked to be the early 1900s: an old saloon, a horse and carriage parked in front of a general store, pale women buried under flat-topped black hats, puffy black dresses, black umbrellas.

The customers were well-to-do yuppies, exceptionally clean, the men wearing slacks or unmarred jeans with loafers or pristine leather hiking boots, the women in low-cut tops that showed off their collar bones and shoulders. Nearly all of the men wore round wire glasses like Martin's. Many were balding. Nearly all of the women were beautiful, even and almost especially the older ones, who carried themselves with a sort of flirtatious gracefulness and smoked long white cigarettes. Caryn was not among them.

Jimmy finished his first beer and checked his watch. A large chalkboard hanging behind the bartender's head listed the available beers. Each name was accompanied by a description: medium body, light raspberry taste; deep amber, complex palate, long; malty rich, creamy soft and lightly sweet; deep black color, hints of rich barley and caramel. Jimmy ordered a scotch with water, which cost him five dollars. He tipped the bartender three dollars and settled into his stool sideways, to watch people.

Thirty minutes later, Jimmy was sipping his third glass of scotch, still alone. It was nearly ten. Jessica would be arriving home soon. She would play the answering machine, which had a message from Jimmy, a call he had made from Martin's house saying that he was out with Fred and Tommy and would be home sometime after two. Jimmy had also said that he loved her, to which Martin had frowned. Martin was always trying to convince Jimmy to break it off with Jessica. He called Jimmy a coward. Jimmy was beginning to think that, sooner or later, Martin would talk.

Sucking on an ice cube and feeling pleasantly tipsy, Jimmy tried not to think of the day Jessica would find out. He told himself there was nothing he could do about it; he would live with the consequences. He vaguely entertained the notion that she would forgive him, that she would shed a few tears and nothing would change. He and Jessica would adopt children together—two boys, maybe—and he would stop messing around. But until that day, he had to see what he could achieve.

The jazz band ripped through a snappy number, and a group of ladies who looked to be around thirty, Jimmy's age, gyrated and twirled with honey-colored beers in their hands at the edge of the small stage. He wondered what they talked about when they were alone. He wondered what their boyfriends, or husbands, who tapped their feet and puffed cigars, did for a living, how much they made. Did they quote Shakespeare? Eat goat cheese with French bread? Were they writers or executives, doctors or actors, with original Picassos nailed to the walls of their lofts? Maybe. But deep down they were just chumps playing a different game, that's all. Jimmy stared over the crowded, hazy room, knowing that he could step into anyone's skin, anyone he wanted. He just needed to learn the routine.

By eleven o'clock, he was drunk and anxious. It felt like the men and women sitting at the bar were casting contemptuous glances his way. Or possibly, Jimmy thought, they recognized him as the famous stage actor, Clyde Piner. Was that woman standing at the end of the bar smiling at him? He smiled back, smartly, with a darkness in his eyes, the way Piner might smile; he thought of his stillborn son. The woman paid for her drink and went away. The noise from the pub seemed to amplify: shrieking laughter, clinking glasses, females yacking in voices that were high in pitch and low in quality. Jimmy's hemmorhoids began to itch and sting for the first time in nearly a week. Every few minutes he imagined what Clyde Piner would do in this situation, but nothing came to mind except to be angry about something he didn't have, and so he arranged his expression accordingly. He ordered another scotch and received what he thought to be a suspicious glance from the bartender. Jimmy fumbled with his wallet and tipped the man five dollars.

Jimmy felt a tug on his sleeve. He turned hopefully, only to be met by the shrunken red face of Connors the dwarf. Connors was dressed in a miniature tuxedo; his arm was linked with the arm of a beautiful Asian woman, who towered over him.

"Hey there, fella," Connors practically screamed, before opening his mouth and thrusting out his tongue. He pointed to a small white dot, then shouted, "Thank your wife again for me! She got the stinger out, no problem!"

People within earshot turned their heads, perhaps drawn by Connors' girlish voice, perhaps drawn by the Asian woman, who flaunted her long bronze legs by simply standing motion-

less, or perhaps they all were surprised to hear that Clyde Piner had a wife. Jimmy smiled politely, not at Connors, but at his date.

"I'm sorry," Jimmy said, loudly enough for people to hear. "You got the wrong guy."

"I do?" Connors peeped, slightly embarrassed. "I apologize. I'm a little bit drunk, you know." He leaned in closer, patting Jimmy's arm. "You look just like a fella named Jimmy."

Jimmy was trying to make eye contact with Connors' woman, but she only stared away, toward the band.

"Not me," Jimmy said, to the back of her head. "That ain't me."

John Forbes

The Switchman

One night Luke Melton's foreman, Tom Adams, called him into his office and said that Illinois Central was putting him and nine other men on furlough. Luke had been a switchman at IC for fourteen years, starting there when he was twenty, and the news came as a shock even though he'd hardly ever earned a week's wages when there wasn't the threat of furlough. He'd seen other men let go, and he'd had a couple of close calls. But it had never happened and somehow it had become a distant threat to him, like the howl of a coyote far away in the woods. While he stood in front of Tom's desk, Luke rubbed his thumb over his keys in his front pocket, confused by the formal tone in his foreman's voice as he told him why IC was forced to take the measure. When he was through talking, Tom expression seemed to soften. He rose from his chair and clutched Luke's hand as he walked him to the door. Luke left the building unable to recall anything that Tom had said.

On the way home, he turned the radio off and tried to replay in his mind the meeting with Tom. For a while he could only remember the handshake at the end. The conversation remained a haze, though, except for two parts: Tom said something about the price of corn and that Luke should keep in touch with the union office to find out when things would get right again. That was all. He decided that the rest of it probably didn't really matter anyway. He'd be back to work before long. He believed he was a good worker and did nothing to cause the layoff. This was just one of those unpleasant moments in life that everyone was bound to face, and he was glad that at least this wasn't as bad as having a bad wreck or watching his house burn down. After a while, the glow of Memphis lights was in his rearview mirror. Up ahead were an empty two-lane road and a black, starry sky. Sometimes at night he imagined the country road was someplace far away, and he was seeing the night in a land as an engineer might. A land with surprising turns, reflecting lakes, and lighted homes and buildings, the silhouettes of strangers through cur-

tained windows going through the motions of lives he could invent.

But he was not in a faraway place. He was on Tate Road, about eight miles from home where his wife, Susan, and son, Jimmy, would be. And the road was familiar to him long before he and Susan moved there six years ago. On weekend nights when he was in high school, he and his friends would ride all night on Tate Road and all the other back roads outside of Wenona.

When he got home and pulled into the gravel drive, he felt in his breast pocket the pink slip Tom had given him. He hadn't looked at it. It was just a piece of paper. It could've been a list of things he needed to pick up at the hardware store or a list of chores to do this week. He went inside through the kitchen where a light was on over the sink, the counter wiped clean. In the living room, he found Susan lying on the couch. The TV was on and the volume was muted. Susan's eyes were shut. He put his hand on her shoulder and she twisted her head.

"I fell asleep," she said, rubbing her palms over her eyes. Her long brown hair was on her back and in front of her shoulders.

He sat on the couch arm, hanging his thumb in the upper corner of his back pocket.

"You should've seen this movie," she said.

"What was it?"

"It was a TV movie, but it was wild."

"What was it about?"

"This girl is being followed by this man, and she doesn't know it. And then she finds out she's being followed, so she gets scared and stays away from all her friends. They try to talk to her, but she won't get out." Her eyes had opened wide. "She lives in an apartment with her aunt, who's a drunk. I'm thinking, go to your friends. They'll help you. But she never does, and the man finally catches her. He starts taking off his shirt, and then you find out it's her *father.*"

"That's awful."

"Can you believe it? I was thinking he was some old pervert. But her *father.* How do they come up with these movies?"

"They just try to gross people out."

"They got what they wanted. The *father.*" She shuddered as if she were clearing the movie out of her head, then stretched her arms. "Susy girl's got to go beddy-bye."

Susan was a cosmetologist and worked at a department store in Memphis.

"Stay up," he said, massaging her shoulders.

"I'll never get up tomorrow as it is."

She rose and put her arms around his neck and pressed against him. Her hair in his face smelled like a flower. He told her he was going to stay up a while. She went to the bedroom, and he sat on the recliner and watched the second half of a western.

When Luke woke the next morning, Jimmy had already left for school and Susan was in the shower. He went to the kitchen and pulled out of the refrigerator some sausage patties and biscuits that Susan had made last weekend. He put them in the microwave to warm, then sat at the kitchen table and looked out the glass doors that opened to the back patio. The backyard ran about a hundred yards from the patio to a line of woods. About halfway from the house and the woods, the land sloped downward and four large oak trees grew near each other in a low area Luke called the hollow. The oaks were spaced far enough apart that their branches grew out wide in all directions. A creek flowed out of the woods, through the hollow, under the oaks, then back into the woods. Luke had hung a swing on one of the branches and built a bridge over the creek. Susan liked to throw daisy petals over the bridge and watch the water carry them under the oaks and into the woods. She told Jimmy once that the petals released a potion in the water that protected the deer and the songbirds that drank from it. Sometimes they would spend whole afternoons in the hollow.

The shower was off. Susan would come for a cup of coffee soon. He wondered about their financial shape. The railroad paid him well, and he never tried to discipline their spending habits. Whenever they wanted something, they bought it. If they got into money trouble, they would tighten up for a while, and then things would soon be okay again. There had been many times when he had worked overtime. He wished he'd saved more.

Susan came from the hall to the dining room in a white bathrobe, combing her fingers through her hair. Her skin was evenly and softly tanned. She poured a cup of coffee.

"I bought a couple of rose bushes yesterday," she said.

Luke took a bite of the sausage and biscuit.

"Do you think you can dig a couple holes by the fence today?"

"Yeah."

"They're climbers." She held the coffee cup with both hands and looked out the window over the kitchen sink.

"I'll do it today."

"They'll look pretty over there." She held the cup at her lips.

He put his elbows on the table and laced his fingers together. "I got laid off last night."

"What?" She turned to him with arched brows.

"Out of the blue."

"Why?" she said, walking to the table.

"He couldn't really tell me. He just said business was down. They let nine others go." He shifted in his chair. "It seemed like work was going pretty good to me."

"When are they going to call you back?" She folded her arms.

"He didn't say. Probably not long. You remember Coley got furloughed a few years ago and they had him back after a couple of months."

"Can't Tom give you some idea?"

"These things are out of his hands. You never know what'll happen—but I do know that it'll get moving again, and they'll call up."

She sighed and turned to face the window. He thought she must be soaking in the news, maybe figuring how to deal with it. He went to her and put his arms around her waist.

"Hey, it's not going to be that bad," he said softly in her ear.

She turned to him. "Maybe I can get some work out of you, then," she said, with a light smile.

"Hey, let's don't get carried away, now."

"Well, maybe at least you and Jimmy can do some bonding."

"That'd be great," Luke said. He had worked second shift at the railroad for years. When Jimmy started kindergarten a couple of years ago, Luke found that he had little time to spend with his son during the school year. Jimmy would come home from school when Luke had to clock in, and he'd be in bed when Luke got home for the night. He felt as though he'd lost a connection with Jimmy that most fathers develop with their sons.

Luke held a Matchbox car on top of a ramp that leaned against the kitchen table. The ramp was a strip of trim board he had left over from painting the barn, one of the chores to

complete while he had time off. The furlough from Illinois Central had lasted through the summer, and he still didn't know when he would be called back. He tried not to think about it, but tomorrow was the first day of school for Jimmy, who would be in the second grade. The days when he'd pal around all day with his son had come to an end.

Jimmy sat on the kitchen floor at the end of the ramp with a timer in his hand. He raised his hand then dropped it suddenly, which was the signal for Luke to let go of the car. It raced down the board, and Jimmy rose with his finger on the timer as the car sped to the finish line.

Susan was lying on the couch in the living room, reading a magazine.

"Four point three-eight-eight seconds," Jimmy said after pressing the timer button.

"That's good for second place," Luke said, recording the time on a piece of paper.

"Nothing's faster than the Nova," Jimmy said.

"There's only two challengers left," Luke said. He set the next car on top of the ramp and waited for Jimmy to give him the signal.

Susan came to the kitchen after the last car raced down the ramp. She held a glass of ice tea and her untucked white shirt hung just above her navy blue shorts. She rubbed her head with the palms of her hands and yawned.

"Are you two going to race all night?" she said.

"That was the last car," Luke said.

"So who won?" she said.

"The Nova Super Sport," Jimmy said. He pushed the Nova up the ramp and rolled it around the table.

"That's your favorite one, isn't it," she said.

"I want to get one when I grow up."

"Whoa, now," she said. "We don't need you growing up on us."

"That's an old car now, son," Luke said. "By the time you grow up, it'll be hard to find one in good shape."

"You and me could work on it, Daddy. We could fix it up and make it clean and fast like this one."

Luke imagined the future with Jimmy, both of them in the garage, working under the hood of an old Nova. A faint smile grew on his face. "I imagine we could handle that," he said.

"I don't even want to think about you driving around in a fast car," Susan said.

"He'll be all right," Luke said.

Susan frowned at Luke, then stroked her fingers through Jimmy's hair. "But Jimmy, don't you like being a boy?"

Jimmy seemed not to hear her. He rolled the car around the writing pad Luke had used to record the times, making its back end fishtail around the corners.

After they put Jimmy to bed, Luke and Susan sat next to each other on the couch. The house was quiet and the living room lit only by a small lamp beside the fireplace. Luke felt restless. He would be up long after Susan went to bed. He wondered if there was a good movie on TV.

"Kids grow up too fast these days," she said. "I want him to be a boy while he's a boy."

He rubbed her shoulder. "He's a perfect boy. They all like to think about what it'll be like when they're older."

He put his arm around her, but she was rigid, so he pulled back.

"We couldn't afford to get him a car anyways," she said.

He was drawing an unemployment check, but it was only about half what he made at IC. He told her that everything would be okay. "We could get another credit card," he said.

"We're too much in debt as it is," she said. "We need money."

His upper teeth covered his pursed bottom lip.

"When are they going to call you back?" she said.

He shook his head. The regular calls he made to the union office had given him no definite time.

Luke was out in the front yard on a lawn chair when it was time for the school bus to drop off Jimmy. He'd finished painting the barn and had just gotten out of the shower. A cicada chirped near the driveway, and Luke picked at a couple of specks of paint that didn't get washed off his hands. It had been a lonely day, and he was glad that Jimmy would be home soon. Before long he heard the bus, which soon appeared on a rise down the road. It stopped across the road, and seconds later Jimmy rounded the front of the bus and ran across the lawn to him. Luke rose and waved at the driver as the bus revved back in motion.

"How was your first day at school, Jimmy?"

"It was great, Daddy," he said. "Me and Bo Lackey are in the same class."

"Hey, you'll have a buddy." He picked Jimmy up and hugged him.

"Yeah. And we had a long recess too."

"That was my favorite part of school." He set Jimmy down and brushed his hand through his son's hair. "I bet I know what you want now."

"What?"

"An ice cream cone at Charlie's Store."

"Yeah!"

"Come on," Luke said, watching his son run ahead of him to his truck.

On the way to town, Luke saw his old high school. After a new one had been built four years ago, the townspeople couldn't decide on a feasible alternative use for old Wenona High, so they decided to tear it down. Lately, whenever Luke passed by it, he thought of the experiences he'd had there. It saddened him to think that the school would be gone. As they got closer, Luke looked for signs of demolition. An image of him and Susan walking hand-in-hand down the halls flashed through his mind.

"Let's look at the old high school," Luke said, parking his truck on the grassy bank in front of the school.

He walked his son to the red-brick, two-story building. Each level was lined with multipane windows. The white paint on the sashes had peeled and cracked, and the exposed wood had grayed. Around the back, he saw that work had begun. Part of the wall had been torn down, and bricks and debris lay in a pile.

"This is neat," Jimmy said, running to the building.

"This school's over a hundred years old," Luke said, after catching up to him. "It's hard to believe it's gonna be gone."

"I wish I could go to this school." Jimmy raised up on his toes to see through the hole, but he was not tall enough.

"You'll like your high school."

"It's not two-story. And it doesn't have windows like this one does." He found a board on the ground and leaned it against the edge of the hole, then started to walk up it.

"You'll have forgotten all about this school when you get older."

Luke walked alongside Jimmy. He wondered if the desk

where he had etched with a pocketknife, "Luke loves Susan forever," was still in the building.

Jimmy made it halfway up the board, but it gave way. Luke caught him before he hit the ground.

"Can we look around inside?" Jimmy said.

Luke pulled on one of the bricks still lodged to the wall. It shook in its crust of mortar like a loose tooth. "It's probably dangerous, son."

Luke picked him up, put him on his shoulders, and stepped in front of the hole in the wall. "This was study hall," he said, pointing inside. "When we didn't have classes, we went here."

"It sure is big."

"I remember one time, Jimmy, when I was in here." Luke rubbed his chin. "Most of the second floor had been condemned. And I had a friend, Ricky Nelson. He used to sneak out of math class all the time, and when he did, a lot of times he went up to the second floor. He was always doing stuff like that. So I was in study hall, sitting right in the middle of the room, right over there," he pointed, "and I heard something rumble up, and I looked up and I saw little chips of the ceiling dropping right in front of me. And it wasn't long after that before old Ricky came crashing through the ceiling. He fell right in front of Coach Turnage's desk. Coach got red in the face." He laughed. "We had some crazy times back then."

They turned from the building to the pile of bricks that lay in a heap. Luke put Jimmy back on the ground. About a hundred yards away was the cotton gin. He remembered late in the fall the smell of cotton in the classroom and the sound of the gin working. He knelt down and picked up a brick. "I think I'll take one home," he said.

"Can I take one too?" Jimmy said.

"Sure. Grab one."

Jimmy picked up a brick and they walked back to the truck.

They got ice cream at Charlie's, then sat on Luke's tailgate and watched the cars and people go up and down Main Street. When Jimmy had licked his ice cream down to the cone, they headed home. The truck bumped and jerked over the dips and potholes and turns of the narrow back road.

Jimmy stopped working on his cone. "What are you gonna be, Daddy, if you're not gonna be a switchman?" he said.

Luke turned to him. His face was red. "Who says I'm not gonna be a switchman?"

"I heard Momma saying on the phone you were gonna have to look for another job."

"Who was she talking to?"

"I don't know."

Luke turned the radio off. It bothered him to know that she had been talking to other people about him, as if he was failing his family.

"Your momma doesn't understand how that works," he said. "You see, I'm in the union at the railroad. And the union, they're a bunch of guys who look after railroad men like me. Kind of like how you look after Bo and he looks after you. They're gonna see to it that I get back on the railroad. It just might take a little more time."

He looked over at Jimmy. He wasn't sure if he explained the situation to his son in a way that he would understand or believe. "You don't mind your old dad hanging around a while longer, do ya?"

"No, Dad," Jimmy said, swallowing the last of his ice cream cone.

Later that night, Luke got a phone call from one of his old friends, Scott. Susan was taking a bubble bath, and Jimmy was in bed.

"Nobody's heard from you in a while," Scott said.

"I've been laying low."

"You're back working, aren't ya?"

"No."

"I thought you got called back."

"Not yet." Luke went to the living room and sat in his recliner.

"Somebody told me you did."

"They don't know what they're talking about. IC hasn't said anything about us going back anytime soon." He muted the TV. Shifting in his recliner, he pulled the curtain back and looked out the window. "What's everybody been up to?"

"We're gonna play basketball tomorrow night."

"Who?"

"Me, Rick, Glenn, Gary, and Steve."

"Where are ya'll gonna play at?"

"The gym. You ought to come. We can play three-on-three."

The following night, when he arrived at the gym, the guys were standing in the half court area, shooting basketballs. The feel of his sneakers on the wood court and the drumming of the basketballs awakened his senses to an earlier time when he and his friends would get together to play ball.

"The railroad man's here," Gary said.

"I'm not a railroad man now."

"You're still laid off?" Gary passed the ball to Luke.

"I don't know when I'm going back."

"I hate that," Gary said. "You know, Keith Conley got laid off a year ago. He had to go find another job. They're still not hiring at Kronmite's." He shot the ball. "That was a damn good job, too."

They started running up and down the court.

When they finished playing, they went to the parking lot. Their shirts were wet and stuck to their backs. Luke's muscles were sore, but the smell of the basketball on his hands comforted him, as if he had just pulled something out of his past, a past that could soothe his troubles.

"Oh, my legs are gonna feel it tomorrow," Scott said.

"Just drink some beers," Gary said.

"That's your answer to everything," Scott said, smiling.

Gary threw the ball hard at him, and Scott caught it with both hands in front of his stomach. "Hey, if you want to give me a beer, you can," Scott said.

They laughed, then Gary turned to Luke. "What are you gonna do if the railroad don't call you back, Luke?"

"They'll call me back."

"Maybe you can get you a job with Gary," Scott said. "They need hard workers over there."

Gary tilted his head and smiled wryly. "Everybody works hard at DAS," he said.

"You ought to see how hard this guy works," Scott said, as if he had been waiting to tell everyone. As he talked a grin spread across Scott's face. An innocent grin, which made him look young. "I was coming home from work one Friday and I saw Gary uptown." He shook his thumb at Gary. "So I pulled over to talk, and I looked at him, and he was as clean as if he'd just stepped out of the shower. I said, 'Man, you're out early tonight.' And he said, 'No, I just got off work.' And I said,

'Man, you mean you worked all day and you look this clean?' He wasn't dirty at all." Scott burst into laughter.

"I know how to work without getting dirty."

"He knows how to get out of work is what it is," Scott said, still laughing.

"You can work for me if you want," Glenn said to Luke.

Luke leaned against his car; the palms of his hands lay flat on the hood behind his back. He'd never laid carpet before. The work didn't seem appealing to him.

"I can pay you cash," Glenn went on, "but it won't be steady work. Maybe it can help you get by."

Luke nodded and said he'd call him later about it.

On the way home, he crossed Triple Tracks, a place on the Illinois Central line—the main line from Chicago to New Orleans—that was sometimes used to switch cars on tracks. Luke stopped his car on the tracks. He could see a long way in both directions. No trains were coming, only the green light that signaled clear passage on the northbound track. His car idled.

He once saw a man die while he was working on the switchyards. Luke was standing a few tracks away from the doomed switchman, who was standing too close to a track where a boxcar was backing up. Luke waved his arms and yelled, but the man didn't move until it was too late. His body was mangled under the boxcar and part of him was on the track where the boxcar had gone. Blood was all over. All work was stopped for several hours while officials came to make a report, take him away, and clean up the area.

When he got into town, he saw the black shadow that was the old high school. The streets of Wenona were quiet, and he pulled his car over by the wood shop building where he'd built a foot stool his junior year. Now it sat under the telephone in their kitchen. As he turned off his car lights, he looked around and believed no one had seen him pull over. He got out and walked to the back of the building where he and Jimmy had been. He wanted to steal some more bricks.

He went back to the car for an old blanket he kept behind the seat, then drove into the darkness between the streetlights. Returning to the pile of bricks behind the school, he laid the blanket on the ground and started setting bricks on it. He wished he'd asked some of the guys to come with him. It was like the pranks they did when they were in school. He felt a rush of ex-

citement as he tied the blanket together and hauled it to his car. He put them in the back seat, raised his head to see if anyone was looking, then got in his car to go home.

When Luke got home, Susan was on the couch painting her fingernails, and the radio was on. He sat on the edge of the recliner.

"Did you play hard?" she said.

"Yeah. We hung out for a while afterwards."

She finished painting a nail, then lifted her head above the back of the couch. "Was Glenn there?"

Luke hesitated. "Yeah."

"I talked to Tina last night. She said he'd be there."

"He told me I could work for him."

"We need the money," she said. "What did you tell him?"

"I don't know anything about laying carpet."

"He's just looking for some help, Luke. You don't have to be an expert."

"I told him I'd call him. I want to call the union office again, see what's going on."

She straightened her mouth, grabbed her nail polish, and stood up. "You can't keep waiting for IC to call you back, Luke. You're going to have to do something." She paused as if she wanted to say more. Finally, she said, "Jimmy's in school now and I'm working and we can't pay our bills. What are we going to do?"

He reached out to hold her, but she turned away and went to the bedroom. He sat on the couch and listened as she got ready for bed. The water faucet was on in their bathroom. She was brushing her teeth. He longed to be back on the switchyard. He would've clocked out by now and might be drinking coffee in the breakroom with some of the guys. A cabinet door was closed, and a couple of minutes later the line of light around their door went out.

The following nights after the night he played basketball with his friends, Luke went to the high school to steal more and more bricks. One night a police car drove past the school while he was gathering another load. When it turned on Crawford Avenue, Luke feared that the policeman might be circling the block and would soon come by in front of the school where his car was parked. He ran to his car, threw the bricks in the trunk, and

got in, easing out in the street before turning on the headlights. As he neared the stop sign at Wenona Avenue, headlights appeared in his rearview mirror. It was still too far behind him to know for sure, but he believed it was the police car. He turned right, being very careful not to drive away too fast or erratically.

While Susan was at work and Jimmy was at school, Luke would open the trunk and carry the bricks to a corner of the barn, where he covered them with an old tarp. He now had a sizable stack. Sitting on the stool in front of his workbench, he wondered what he would do with all of them. He was surprised to see how high the stack had grown. He had enough to build a barbecue pit. He picked up one, turning it in his hand. It was in the best shape of all the ones he'd gotten. There were no chips, only little specks of mortar. It had survived over a hundred years of sun, rain, freezing weather, and the school's demolition. He rubbed his thumb on the side he believed faced out when it was still attached to the school. It was as smooth as marble. It must've been at a low place on the building, maybe near the east entrance. Where generations of young men stood with one hand on the wall and the other tracing the jaw line of bright-eyed girls, burning for Friday nights, believing in the indestructability of their will.

He set the brick down on the stack and went to the house to get some lunch. When he put the loaf of bread and meat on the kitchen table, he noticed that the red light on the answering machine was flashing. It was Glenn. He was shorthanded, and he'd gotten some jobs in a new subdivision that was being built outside of Wenona. They were all new homes. Easy work.

The message ended, and Luke rested his elbows on the table, pondering the job offer. Gazing out the window to the hollow behind the house, his eyes rested on the bridge he'd built several years ago that crossed over the creek. He thought it would look better if it were bricked.

Finally he rose, went to the answering machine, and erased the message. Illinois Central would be calling before long, and he'd found the perfect place for the bricks. Down in the hollow, they might last forever.

Tom O'Connor Yoola

The story goes that the Aboriginal moon—
Old Man Yoola—attends women who bathe
in rivers. Two maidens invited him on a midnight
canoe ride. Smiling, they overturned the canoe

and watched him sink belly-up in his own
reflection. From above and below,
this moon glares at every woman in view.
You've left for tilting latitudes, lover,

gone for another continent. We spent the day
wading a mountain creek, and skipped
smooth stones into grey clay banks.
Do you remember my incantation to leave:

when you move from sight, I watch
everything without this passion. I live
below stars' celestial fires, satellites
freeze-framing the flat earth. In Tibet,

lamas sit under the winter moon wrapped
in wet blankets. Tonight, it is happening again.
In the cold waterways you travel,
the moon is drowning in your heat.

Eric Rawson

I Must Be Dead

What else am I to think what was none of
My business has been replaced by summer

At water's edge the fireflies fidget in
The gloom where once was thirst is infinite

Wakefulness like that hollow frog that star

Do you think I needed permission to
Take apart the fragrance of my country
Do you think I never felt the needles

Of heat that I never requested the

Prairie that I can't unglue myself from
Saturday afternoon and its copper

Taste of flat beer from the horses

Moving together in the mist or the
Falling into her my last love what else

Can I think when my pillow is a lake

Anis Shivani

Tehran

Deep in the winter smog on the second of Dey, at the Shadman Café in north Tehran, near where the Vali-e-Asr Avenue's shops begin to thin out before the old condominiums built in the Shah's time, there was an explosion killing ten people. Two of the bodies were never identified. The owner of the café, Mr. Tavakkoli, a lover of Hafez and part-time cab driver, was spared because he was skiing that week with his Afghan male lover in the Alborz Mountains. Among the rest were a beautiful thirty-five-year-old pregnant school teacher, whose patterned silk rusari remained intact even though her head was blown off; a white-turbaned young cleric newly resettled from Qom, in whose pocket was found the ungodly sum of twenty thousand U.S. dollars; and the instigator of the attack itself (although he was never identified as such), a Baha'i zoologist whose friends never took claim of the body, afraid of the reprisals for themselves. Next door in a bookstore, the power of the blast made the thin dusty volumes of French novelists in Persian translation totter and fall off the shelves, although the thicker British and Russians stayed put. The Baseej unit first to arrive on the spot, after the late-afternoon tragedy, was quick to note that there wasn't a single picture of Imam Khomeini or any of the current leaders of the Revolution, no sign whatever that the owner and the workers were of pious inclination; perhaps even this distaste couldn't quite explain the slowness of the recovery, nor the wild late-night speculation among them about the future of all north Tehran sidewalk cafés (by nature spots where subversive activity was quick to take root). A sympathizer placed a bouquet of flowers on the curbside the following day, around a placard with Hafez's verses, appropriate to the sad occasion. A month later the site was demolished; Mr. Tavakkoli, disheartened, decided to leave the restaurant business. A year later a women's clothing store, specializing in elegant permutations of various head and body coverings, proudly announced its grand opening. Soon it was difficult for casual pedestrians to

recall if there had ever been a café in that spot—perhaps not; perhaps it was just a fluke of imagination. In the near distance (the shimmering sun sometimes made it appear closer than it was) the smiling Damavand peak, topped with snow, challenged the restless activity with its obsolete calm.

In Mrs. Shahnaz Rasuli's two-bedroom apartment in the clean north Tehran neighborhood of Zafraniyeh, the banter between husband and wife, restrained lately by the awareness of the recent deaths of their respective fathers only months apart, was finally giving way to its usual occasionless levity.

"Mr. Rasuli," said Shahnaz, this being her usual way of addressing her pudgy husband, who thought he was capable of rolling over and dying for her at her merest whimsy, "you haven't finished your ghormeh sabzi. If you weren't hungry, you could have warned me. As it is, I have plenty of papers to grade. Or perhaps you're still thinking about the new Peykan you thought you might get for a bargain from your friend? Has he left for America yet? Perhaps there's still hope. Although I always say one Peykan is as good as another. Mr. Rasuli, are you listening?"

"Khanom, why won't you let a man finish the paper? It could be a newsworthy day."

"The paper? You call *Tehran News* a paper? That man, that editor, what's-his-name, a royalist to the core, a man who wouldn't hesitate to have the Shah's mummified corpse return to Niavaran Palace and rule like a whimsical demon—not to mention the anorexic empress, who looked only half-alive even when she was wife of the King of Kings." At least the Revolution had settled that; there was no going back to monarchy. In that sense, everyone was enqelabi, a partisan of the Revolution.

In fact, Reza never read the establishment papers with anything like attention. He had already been twenty-one at the time of the Revolution, old enough to remember the days when the eternal pull of the Persian toward the reckless hedonism calling forth from the West distorted the smallest news item, making every event worthy of note, because it was laced with a dynamic greed. The censors had relaxed a bit in recent years, but they'd succeeded in permanently cloaking reality with a grim blanket of obligation that no amount of individual heroism could overcome. Reza only read the papers because his best friend from

childhood, Javad-Ali, was editing a newspaper called *Asr-e-Aazadi*. Actually, this was the paper's third incarnation, the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance having shut it down previously for its favorable reportage of student demonstrations against the mullahs' wealth and privilege, and for its criticism of Imam Khomeini's leadership. Reza liked to examine the bland newspapers toeing the conservative line; it gave him hope when he read his friend's paper in comparison, always appealing to the Iranian sense of pragmatism.

"May I return to the paper? The statistics on car production—not to mention steel—are astounding for this year."

"Always the engineer, Mr. Rasuli, always the engineer. Thank God I never understood exactly what it is you did at work, so senior in qualifications that I think they let you warm your seat for your mere honorable presence."

"Shouldn't you be seeing about grading those papers?"

"Oh, I already know exactly what grades each of my students is going to get. Only two of them are getting A's. In Social Studies, Mr. Rasuli, I have to inform you that the opinions of my girls are distinctly on the tame side. You should see how they repeat the Imam's line on the war. The few that have actually been to the Behesht-e-Zahra cemetery, you can always tell who they are. They begin by exclaiming their pride at having a martyr in the family. Do you know, Mr. Rasuli, I think our Social Studies texts are due for a revision? Can your influential newspaper editors possibly affect our reformist leaders in this direction?"

"In the Islamic Republic, the only miracles are effected by the people's own will—"

"Which works as slow as drops of water eroding a rock . . ."

"Now, now, we mustn't be impatient. You, for one, are better off because of the Revolution. You'd have been able to teach under the Shah, no doubt—but would you have had the same prestige?"

"That's because we killed off so many promising young men in the war. Because we didn't have enough air cover, we forced little boys to crawl under Iraqi tanks and blow themselves up. Even now it feels like there are simply too many girls in this country, not enough boys. Where are the boys?"

"The boys are everywhere." Then Reza said something stupid, trying to pacify his wife. "These things balance out over time."

Normally, Shahnaz would have gone into a fit, blaming his excessively rationalistic engineer's mentality for perceiving all the tragedies of the world in mathematical terms. Instead, she became quiescent, insisting only that Reza wash the dishes and clean the kitchen when he finished. She was going out to shop for the party they were having on Friday night, to announce Shahnaz's pregnancy. Would he please also take care to put the garbage out? Oh, and not to open the door when the komiteh knocked in the afternoon, as they had been doing for the last few days. They were going around asking residents in the neighborhood if they owned a satellite dish—illegal still to have in Iran—as if anyone would admit to this.

Reza took a last slow bite of the ghormeh sabzi. These leisurely weekday brunches were the boon of his life, now that the government was paying him a monthly salary of two million rials (half of what he was getting before) after the shutdown of the armaments factory where he had been employed as an engineer since he graduated from Tehran University in 1981. The plant had consistently been running losses; Russian armaments, of better quality, could be had for a fraction of what it took to make them at home, and the enterprise would show a smaller loss if it suspended operations and paid its employees salaries until they transitioned into other jobs. The Bonyad which controlled the armaments industry was facing tough times, as the fervor of the eight-year war with Iraq had slowly dissolved into memory and more pedestrian concerns had taken hold. Reza had been worried about how Shahnaz would take his extended layoff; in fact, she didn't protest a bit, and they'd decided to have a child. It had been their form of protest against the excesses of the Revolution not to have a child during the days when the regime had done everything in its power to encourage an explosive birth rate; but now that the official policy was to discourage births, an opinion of Imam Khomeini having been conveniently discovered from when he was still alive to justify birth control, they had decided to go against the grain once again. They'd decided not to know the sex of the child. If only any of the grandparents were still alive! Without them, the pregnancy felt unearned for some reason, as if they'd stumbled on it, not deliberated for years as they had.

Finishing up the chores he knew Shahnaz would appreciate his doing, Reza thought of the war, which he had been spared

from joining because he had proven to be too brilliant a student in the early going to ever have been put on the military track. Had it not been for the Revolution, no doubt he would have gone to America for his engineering degree; his parents, retired government servants both, could certainly have afforded it. But even though he had never shared the enthusiasm for black-turbaned clerics to decide the nitty-gritty of policy, he felt it would have been a betrayal of some kind to leave the chaos and thrill of the Tehran street for the suburban American life some of his contemporaries wrote about in their occasional letters. No, he had been better off staying; and how would he ever have met a woman as sympathetic and easygoing as Shahnaz had he run away?

The komiteh never knocked on the door that afternoon, and Reza felt confident that there'd be a day not too far off when the komiteh would stop knocking on doors, and arresting people for moral violations, altogether. Javad-Ali had been producing a very tame *Asr-e-Aazadi* in recent weeks when all indications were that, with the reformists in the ascendancy, the criticism of government institutions could be stronger. What was wrong? Reza decided to pay the offices of *Asr-e-Aazadi* a visit and find out. Javad-Ali had often asked him to contribute—"the scientists have a saner view of the world, Reza, and we woolly-headed arts and humanities types could learn a lot from you"—but Reza wasn't interested in giving final shape to nebulous irritations and frustrations. The more concrete a resentment became, the more you had to sustain its daily weight. Better to get along and get by, with as little fuss as possible.

Kazim Shariati had never expected being asked to fill in for his friend and mentor in Tehran, the learned Judge Hashim Tabatabai, in the civil court empowered to resolve marital conflicts. Yet because Kazim had already witnessed at firsthand, on different occasions, the Judge's tendencies and procedures, and because the Judge reserved the right to delegate a short-term substitution in exigencies, and because one simply didn't refuse an older person of authority in such a situation, Kazim had no choice but to preside over the court for a few days that thankfully promised to be less busy than usual. Judge Tabatabai's foremost strategy was to hold his tongue as much as possible and let the antagonists arrive at a reconciliation that they would

feel they had initiated themselves and that would leave both sides feeling victorious, having extracted a small taste of revenge. Kazim promised himself to do the same. Hadn't Kazim been striving for an unexpected demand that would clarify things for himself?

What, after all, was a promising young cleric, seemingly destined to achieve the title of hojjatoleslam by the age of forty, to do in the capital city without the constant guidance and supervision he'd been used to since his early days at Qom's Feyzieh Seminary? As much as possible, Kazim had tried to isolate himself from the traditional preoccupations of the clergy once he left Qom at the end of the summer. His goal, apart from the predictability of the daily prayers, was to let at least one unexpected thing happen to him over the course of each day. Once he started substituting his clerical outfit with ordinary shirts and trousers, he found people's attitude to him changing completely: the look of mingled respect, contempt, fear, and expectation he'd come to assume as his due for the rest of his life vanished, in favor of mere friendliness toward his delicate good looks, or at best curiosity when the slowness of his speech (one learned to speak in certain ways before the hojjatoleslams and ayatollahs, who were examining and judging when they least appeared to be doing so) gave him away as a newcomer to urban fastness. In Tehran, it seemed that if you gave the impression of having time on your hands, and looked respectable enough, sooner or later you'd be recruited to help someone. While he wore his clerical garb, he was once asked to help trace a missing mentally ill teenage girl by a pair of frantic parents. In his civilian's clothes, the owner of a new café asked him, and a few other young men, to sit at one of the curbside tables all day long to make it look as if the café were busy.

No beautiful young girl had yet spoken to him beyond the bounds of taarof, politeness of a dilly-dallying kind whose relative rarity he'd come to appreciate in Qom. Now that he didn't tell anyone he was a cleric, and had moved from a neighborhood closer to affluent north Tehran than the run-down south side, he lived in constant trepidation that some girl would make an advance toward him. He'd heard that it wasn't unusual for bored girls and wives to seek nameless trysts, and that certain streets and shopping malls were well known for the prowling activity of frustrated women. His religion taught him not to look

at a woman with lust, let alone touch her in an unmarried state—what would he do if a woman approached him, and his will wasn't strong enough to do the right thing? Sometimes he wondered, sweating in his stuffy little apartment on the second floor of a Mediterranean-style building, if he wasn't turning his fear of such an encounter into a pleasurable fantasy by itself. Sometimes he wondered how different his life might have been if he hadn't been an orphan from an early age, and something other than the existence of a seminary talabeh had been open to him. Would he have been happier? He had always been bothered by the cocksure attitude of some of the top-ranking clerics, who turned every physical sentiment of Ferdowsi and Rumi, Hafez and Saadi, the poets who had given Iran its most lasting heroes and myths, into metaphors for the love of the divine. But now his discomfort had become severe irritation. The next time a cleric talked about how the heady wine, the moonlit night of fevered embraces, the caresses of the beloved's dark tresses, all represented a helpless love of God, he would blow his top. Were the poets so afraid of public sentiment as to have apparently engaged in nothing but convoluted strategies of taarof? Perhaps they were sensualists above all, plain and simple. Perhaps there was more to the sharia than elaboration of rules of cleanliness, the rituals involving menstruation and defecation, eating and sleeping, copulation and masturbation. This dryness was swallowable only up to a point. To become elevated to the rank of ayatollah a prominent cleric had to compile questions and answers to masa'il, problems involving these very rituals of cleanliness for the most part. Yet the curious fact was that once an ayatollah died, it was nearly always revealed that he had been a lover of classical poetry, that he had himself composed in his youth verses that were so risque they couldn't have been publicized while he was still alive. So which was more real? The hidden or the apparent self?

Of course, Judge Tabatabai, who himself came from a family of clerics but had chosen to practice civil law instead, would have said there was no contradiction. The surface and the depth were in harmony, if you only knew where to look. "Why don't you come and visit me at the court some morning?" the Judge had asked. "You'll see that it's not that difficult to square the apparent irreconcilables. You'll learn that the same spark of dignity flares in the most uncouth and the most polite expressions.

We all want to be treated with respect, we're all yearning for freedom from oppression. It's nothing more complicated than that." And so, instead of browsing in the bookstores of north Tehran all morning, as he'd been apt to do, wondering at the ease and certainty with which well-dressed young Iranian women demanded to see this or that Western novel, Kazim had walked to the Judge's house in central Tehran, an annex of which served as his court.

The first case was one where the husband claimed infidelity on the part of the wife, yet he didn't want a divorce, although he was entitled to seek one on that basis alone. What he wanted was public admission of the woman's adultery, the humiliation that he would forever hold against her. They were affluent, both university teachers, and they could easily have settled this matter between themselves, since divorce wasn't the issue. Judge Tabatabai was about to let them go with a gentle admonition for both sides to be civil to each other, when unexpectedly the woman asked for divorce—it seemed genuinely a spur-of-the-moment thing, and Kazim could tell that the husband was completely unprepared for this turn of events. "I never wanted a divorce," he appealed, to which the woman replied, "But I do—now. I've seen a side of you I never wanted to see." "Yet I forgave you for your sin," he argued back. "No you didn't," she shot back. "You're unable to forgive. I can't go on in these circumstances." Judge Tabatabai called a halt to the proceedings, wanting them to think it over before returning in a couple of weeks. Later, Kazim asked him if he wasn't giving the couple all the rope to hang themselves with, since a fortnight of festering resentment might easily spell their end. "I think it's more likely both of them will see they've overplayed their hands. For middle-class couples in their position, secure in their status, it's really difficult to start over. Far better to forget the indiscretion, pretend it never existed." Kazim thought bitterly, Ah, politeness again. Our national bane. When can we ever face facts?

The other cases were deceptively routine. A construction worker had started spending his meager wages on his gambling addiction instead of supporting his obedient wife and four children. At one point the construction worker yelled in anguish, "Where is the Imam Khomeini now? He said for us to have as many children as we could, to fight the war against the devil enemies. Where are the devil enemies now? Why can't we fight an-

other war so I can have four little shaheeds on my hand instead of four hungry mouths to feed? Why can't I live like a man instead of being a slave to—to them!" The children were present in the courtroom, probably because the wife wanted her husband to be shamed into accepting his obligations. Instead of warning the man that he was treading dangerously close to blasphemy, Judge Tabatabai oversympathized with the embittered man to the extent that he started withdrawing his most blatant accusations. Before long, husband and wife were apologizing to each other, and the kids were all crying. "You see, he needed to let off a little steam," said Judge Tabatabai to Kazim, when the courtroom was empty. Another couple were in disagreement over the financial settlement of their already agreed-on divorce—one of the rare actually granted by the Judge, instead of pressing till the last moment for a reconciliation—and a close rehash of the agreement revealed that in fact there was no discrepancy, only a misunderstanding about future income.

Judge Tabatabai was energized at the close of proceedings in the afternoon.

"So! You promised to reveal how things were in harmony once we looked the right way," Kazim protested. "All I see is utter disharmony. No one knows their own motivation, let alone of the person they're supposed to understand most intimately. It is all blindness and chaos. There is no order anywhere, and to pretend there is, is colossal ignorance."

"My young friend, you still understand so little. . ."

"What is there to understand? The sharia codes say one thing. The real world runs on a parallel track. Where do they even meet? We have come too far from the conditions in which the universal laws could apply. Everyone now is interested in only his own happiness."

"I disagree. The Iranian people value sacrifice above all other qualities."

Kazim wondered if this was true. He only found in himself a rage against human unhappiness that led in no way to sacrifice—only self-expression, to use a dreaded Westoxified term. Yet he visited the Judge several more times. Then when he agreed to take over for him for a short while (did the Judge's illness really compel him to make the request, or did he want Kazim to be at the helm for its own sake?), he felt himself an utter hypocrite. How could he, who had never touched the flesh of

a woman, know what it was for a husband and wife to feel simultaneously so full of love and hatred for each other? It was back to his discarded clerical robes for now.

Of the twenty-five hundred fiction, poetry, and drama manuscripts submitted for publication approval to the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance that year, none was odder than the magical realist novel produced by Keyvan Yazdani, whose introductory letter had failed to clarify his age, religion, educational background, and degree of loyalty to the Revolution. Instead of the usual words of slavish praise for Imam Khomeini and the worthy leaders who had followed him, Keyvan had talked knowingly of the condition of postmodernity in the third world novel which, it seemed to him, "had ended up making a fetish of obscurity for its own sake." Keyvan, as the youthful intern who first came across his manuscript was shocked to discover, wanted to "reinstitute in Iranian fiction the degraded naturalist elements lost since the Revolution." So what was the Ministry approving all these years? Mere fantasies?

Even the intern who brought it straight to the veteran director's attention was struck by the irony that Keyvan's novel was more fantastical than any submission he'd come across. The director read it over a weekend, and his first words to the intern were, "The young man has clearly got the hang of his Bulgakov. Yet even I never thought *The Master and Margarita* could be borrowed from. This is either a work of stark madness or genuine inspiration."

The intern, in a high state of alert for any unintentional misunderstanding, noted, "Definitely madness, I would say."

The director replied wearily, "Yes, that would seem to be the safer conclusion, wouldn't it? Still, I wouldn't mind knowing the young man."

"Why do we presume it's a young man? He could be very old."

The director laughed. "Only young men write with such verve, such disrespect for conventions. Writing conventions, I mean, not the conventions of social life the Republic aspires to instill in all our citizens. Old people are too baffled by their own mortality to undertake such revisions. There's a trace of Garcia Marquez here that has somehow been salted and resalted until it's aggravating in the extreme."

"So shall we send this back, stamped disapproved, and relieve the — young man — of his agony?" the intern said, already plotting the contemptuous letter with which he would spurn the ambition of so wild and unruly a writer.

"If we haven't returned any other manuscript, why should this get the special treatment? Here we treat everyone the same. I suggest you place it firmly at the bottom of your stacks of manuscripts in uncertain status. Neither approved nor disapproved."

The intern wondered at the sagacity of this course of action. Perhaps the young man who'd composed the fantastic *Iran Beheaded* would rather, faced with overt rejection, make his escape to more favorable territory, America perhaps, or at least Turkey, rather than try to inflict his agonized reflections on Iranians. The director, on the other hand, wondered long and hard what he was doing at the Ministry if a manuscript of such genuine talent couldn't be approved. It didn't matter that the main tension in the novel was always escaping out of sight, unraveling into too many strands that petered out into nothing — the writing evoked a world of dark horror, where simply to be alive was to have made a fatal bargain with the devil, where simply to exist and talk and love and hate was to have compromised your humanity at every level.

There was in the script a butcher from Kurdistan who dreams of working as an executioner for the Revolutionary Guards, chopping off the rebellious heads of writers and intellectuals with nothing better to do than foment frustration; each piece of meat served by the butcher to his bourgeois customers is an offering to the gods of retribution, a pale substitution for the human heads he'd like to serve to these very same consumers of hatred. There was a charming housewife in Shiraz who has deviated so far from Islamic ritual that she starts her own Satanic religion, involving the torture of unsuspecting neighborhood men — why men, not children or the elderly or naïve wives? The woman ends up becoming a nun, recognized by the Supreme Leader for having devoted her entire life to the service of mankind, the care of orphans, etc. There was a university professor in Kerman who kills each of his competitors in fits of jealousy as they publish accomplished papers in foreign journals, while he, loyal to the Revolution's ideals (if not its outward forms of piety) until the end, languishes in unpublished obscurity; yet this professor regularly goes out of his way to be com-

passionate to the poor and suffering around him, relieving their problems by bringing together patrons with beneficiaries in the unlikeliest of coincidences. Amongst these hyperenergetic agents, a drugged, calculating, rationally mad Iranian citizenry goes about its daily business, turning a blind eye to whatever outrageous violence has occurred the night before, refusing to believe their very senses that anything could be wrong with their revolutionary Republic. It was too much, altogether too much, this young man's ability to see through the most sophisticated delusions! He was spreading the blame equally, without hesitation. It was the sure hand of the kind of writer who came along very rarely, who'd suffered so intensely that his every word, every jotting, was a complete vision, with worlds of hells and heavens scaffolding them.

The manuscript must be destroyed immediately! The director had taken ill, failing to show up for work as he went over the events of the novel in his head again and again. Three days had gone by without his colleagues sending so much as a messenger to inquire if he was alive or dead. The director's wife had left some years ago for a younger man; this was inevitable, since she was a famous beauty and he a mere intellectual, bald and pasty-faced, unable to satisfy her sexual voracity. The director had had a couple of homosexual encounters in his youth; this was during the late years of the old regime, when homosexuality was so close to the surface that it had almost become acceptable, even fashionable, behavior among the bourgeoisie—as long, of course, as one didn't make too much of a fetish out of it, and impose it on others. Now, among eager young interns full of air-tight theories about right and wrong in literature, newly acquired from Tehran University professors who themselves had never published a single story or poem in their lives, the director felt the old homosexual tug of war with an intensity he thought had completely died with his marriage. Yet to act on it was laced with such danger that his throat constricted at the prospect of unforeseen consequences. What was this young man Keyvan like? No doubt he was beautiful and attractive in the extreme—bony in frame, articulate in the way he moved his lips and eyes, almost surrealistic in how he accepted the strength of his physicality.

For the sake of the Republic, the manuscript had to be destroyed immediately! Leaving the last cup of tea he was ever to

savor on earth unfinished—its cinnamon stick would almost dissolve by the time the police captured it for examination of possible traces of drugs—the director jumped into his aging Peykan at five p.m., knowing that all his colleagues would have departed and there would be no one to question him about his sudden arrival at the Ministry so late in the day. He put on an old Dariush tape, a remnant of the old regime that promised the flare of genuine rebellion each time he listened to the singer's sexually charged melancholy, loud and polite at the same time, and promptly ran into a colossal garbage truck which plowed over his little Peykan and made mush of his mangled body, arms widespread, as if welcoming the encounter with the swallowing truck. Dariush blared on, the cassette player undisturbed.

The secret life of Shahnaz Rasuli had grown so extensive over the years of her marriage that she didn't have any more trouble keeping track of her little lies and deceptions in the service of humanity.

Once in a while she helped arrange sigheh matches, temporary marriages she could justify as being rewarding for certain women in dire financial straits and to prevent the overt sin that came from lawless affairs, where the woman had no security whatever and was more likely to be used and then left discarded. She was a member of two book clubs that discussed classic Western novels, and she was friends with a set of young women who attended rare screenings of Iranian films whose release the censors were delaying. In addition to her full-time job teaching eighth graders Social Studies, she also privately tutored girls she thought had an excellent shot at doing well in higher education. She could boast of having encouraged several future Tehran University graduates, now managing successful professional lives, and others who'd gone on to study in Europe and Canada. The money wasn't so much the issue here—although that helped too, with Reza's drastically reduced layoff compensation—as the pride in getting a good job done. In a sense she was circumventing the Revolution's persistent effort to flatten out distinctions amongst students: the very smart were not necessarily encouraged to express themselves, while the dumb were made to feel they were almost as good as the average. But Shahnaz was picking and choosing whom to give the most attention, and that was a no-no. The principal at their school was fond of repeating

Khomeini's supposed edict that the Revolution had to be nurtured one soul at a time, and God never made a distinction between souls, having created them all equal.

In some senses, Reza was a stick-in-the-mud; despite Shahnaz's best attempts to humor him, he could be very stubborn when it came to following the letter of the law. He wouldn't have liked any kind of freelancing, since one never knew where the authorities stood on it. In the years soon after her marriage, when Khomeini was still alive, Shahnaz had offered birth control classes to groups of young housewives, her students' mothers. If a student showed signs of neglect at home, it was a good bet that her mother would be receptive to any idea to improve her harried state of being. Once the war was over the general melancholy dissipated, the glory of martyrs in one's family became less and less an excuse to justify the shabbiness of one's home and children, and her task became much easier. Compared to those years, when a girl Shahnaz was trying to encourage to go to college might burst into a justification for why she didn't have to put herself out, because a brother had already become shaheed in the trenches and their family was already saved, this was nothing. Coming from a well-off, middle-class family, with educated parents, even under the Shah Shahnaz would have had some sort of profession—although only on the Shah's cultural terms, and if she had been one of those women uncomfortable with Westernization, she would have been out of luck. But now far more women worked in the professions than ever before, and in return for Islamic modesty, they got respect from men. It was a fair bargain; women were freer; the tough years of the Revolution were already over, and whatever progress came now would have a sustained momentum. Now was the time to have her own child, so she could teach her—she hoped and prayed it was a girl, which was what Reza wanted too—never to take her freedom for granted.

Yes, this was nothing, Shahnaz thought, as she went over her to-do list for the afternoon, merging into the busy foot traffic heading up Ali Shariati Avenue. She had a more subversive agenda than just shopping for food and drinks for the Friday night party to announce her pregnancy to friends and family. Her younger sister, Sakineh, was a sucker for gourmet French pastries, and the Shadman Café was renowned for its selection;

she would go there at the end and call her husband—he appreciated knowing once in a while where she was perambulating, even though he always acted surprised when she called. But first she had to pay a visit to the mother of a girl, Massoumeh, who had recently moved with her family from Isfahan. The father was a Zoroastrian, Cyrus, a real estate developer, but the mother, Nauroz, had recently converted to Islam, taking every decree of the mullahs as sacred word. In itself this wasn't a remarkable enough fact, but Nauroz had lately been instilling a deep sense of shame in Massoumeh about her thirteen-year-old body. For a girl of average looks this wouldn't have been so much of a problem, but Massoumeh's very identity was rooted in her extreme beauty. Like all converts, Nauroz's zeal was excessive, and she had already sent notes to Shahnaz that Massoumeh didn't seem to be able to explicate the Revolution's goals for women upon Nauroz's own questioning. This had to stop, or Massoumeh would end up a wreck.

Shahnaz chose an orange cab over riding in the back of a bus. She had almost justified the necessity of women sitting in the back, but this seemingly trifle inconvenience grated on her far more than major disabilities. The traffic in north Tehran was a little saner than in the central and south parts of the city, although it was Reza, who was reluctant to let Shahnaz drive their Peykan, who had made her conscious of its awfulness. The reminders of the war—pictures of groups of martyrs, often young boys, graced with Khomeini's certain declarations that they had entered paradise—were less frequent along the wider, grassier boulevards of north Tehran than elsewhere, and the shops were becoming almost blasé in advertising Western goods, many of which couldn't be officially imported at all. Shahnaz agreed with the regime's ban on the use of women to advertise anything—although when it came to refrigerators and washing machines, it was a little laughable to see men caressing the appliances with their thick hands and awkward embraces.

At their single-storey bungalow off Vali-e-Asr Avenue in Mahmoodiyeh, Massoumeh was already expecting Shahnaz. The house was inconspicuous as even the richest Zoroastrians' homes usually were, unlike ethnic Persians whose first indulgence upon pocketing any substantial wealth was a house almost beyond their means. No servants seemed to be in evidence.

"My mother has gone shopping—in preparation for Moharram," Massoumeh explained. "I did my best to keep her, but she hardly listened."

The living room was a curious amalgam of Zoroastrian and Islamic images. A picture of the fire at Yazd that had been burning continuously for fifteen hundred years stood next to one of Imam Khomeini's portraits as a younger cleric in exile in Najaf.

"Khoob, we might as well use our time for some studying," Shahnaz said when an hour had gone by and there was no sign of Nauroz. "We can go over some English grammar."

At four-thirty, Cyrus, a handsome if somewhat portly man dressed in a Western suit (but no tie, since this was banned in the Islamic Republic) arrived, without showing much curiosity about Shahnaz's purpose in being there.

"I'd better leave now. I'll come some other time. Khoda Hafez." Shahnaz excused herself at last when there was no sign of Nauroz, bored for once with Massoumeh's flashy control of the material. She regretted having been deprived of what had promised to be a lively exchange of ideas with Nauroz. Most women were unoffended at Shahnaz's advice. The Revolution had made everyone so used to altering the very fabric of their lives in accordance with the Republic's changing dictates that a little neighborly advice was hardly worth getting one's dander up for.

It was after she left Massoumeh's home that Shahnaz first felt the weight of her pregnancy. Before then she'd hardly noticed it. But it was well into the third month now, and it was undeniable that something was growing inside her. Perhaps she should have taken the Peykan after all, even if Reza would have been offended. She didn't feel like going to the café to pick up the pastries, but if she didn't, it would be awkward to explain to Reza where she had been. Like all men he assumed that it took women hours and hours to shop for things men could buy in minutes. Shahnaz smiled when she thought of the looks on their friends' faces when they found out she was pregnant for the first time at her late age. Always the trend-setter, she thought, even if she had never done the outrageous things her little sister Sakineh was known for.

The dirty Tehran air had already got to Kazim Shariati. He tried to stifle his coughs inside the dark courtroom (there

was a problem with the wiring for the lights that no one seemed to be able to figure out), embarrassed that he had already succumbed to a city affliction. Whenever he felt irritated by some trivial malady, he tried to remember his friends who had died or been injured in the war—so many of them, even from Qom, where they could easily have been excused for the sake of their religious studies, had they chosen to exercise the privilege. He was seventeen when the war ended, several years older than the youngest of the martyrs. Yet his teachers sheltered him from so much as a whiff of participation in the violence on the front. "Iran needs you here, in the seminary," was their refrain, and he had wondered in later years if they had noticed some fatal weakness of his that he wasn't aware of himself. Wherever he went, he found mentors willing to go out of their way to promote him. Perhaps only a woman could explain to him the peculiar hue of light his eyes and face gave off to other men: was it something to be proud or ashamed of? There was no reason why he shouldn't already have been married; had his parents been alive, no doubt he would be the father of several children by now. An unmarried cleric was an aberration; it gave rise to all sorts of suspicions, and besides, it just wasn't considered healthy for a Muslim man to spurn intimate relations if it was within his power to be married. Even the temporary sigheh, often performed for the most exploitative of reasons, was considered better than to engage in more unhealthy, or even sinful, practices. Women were a mystery to Kazim, even an affable young woman like the court assistant Farkhondeh, who'd accepted his appearance instead of Judge Tabatabai as if it were the merest matter of routine.

"Has anyone been delegated before to do this job by the Judge?" he asked.

"No, you're the first one," said Farkhondeh. "Judge Tabatabai takes great pride in his reasoning. But you'll be fine. The cases are very routine. By this time I have them all categorized."

"Oh, and what are the categories?" Kazim said as he sat behind the low desk, on a chair that had the plump Tabatabai's bodily grooves well marked on its ancient stuffing. The first case wasn't due to be heard for a few more minutes.

"Half the time the man is clearly the culprit. He's gotten away with so much unfair advantage all his life that he's completely taken aback when the woman finally can't take it anymore and

challenges him. In these cases, you must not let the man's cries for pity weaken your resolve. Be firm but considerate—"

Kazim didn't know how else Farkhondeh would have characterized the rest of the cases because they were interrupted by the rude entrance of the first couple, peasants who had lived in Tehran for only a few years, battling over the right to spend the money from the sale of the woman's recently deceased parents' land. While listening to their chatter, he wondered idly if at the end of the day he could have a cup of coffee with Farkhondeh, perhaps at the Shadman Café. He'd already been there once: quite a shocking change from the cleric-dominated boring cafés of Qom. Here artist and writer types smoked themselves into strained inspiration, scribbled their notes with vacant eyes, and spoke very fast in squeaky tones that would have earned them only mockery among Qom's articulate young scholars. What had Farkhondeh's training in fiqh at Tehran University been like? Now there were seminaries in Qom training women to be ayatollahs. He tried to picture pleasant Farkhondeh as an ayatollah, and could only smile. Later, his conscience was pricked: she could be an ayatollah, but she couldn't be a judge—the Revolution had stripped women of their judgeships.

The first case turned out to be easy. Their mere presence in the court quickly softened both sides. Kazim had seen the same phenomenon over and over with Judge Tabatabai. Perhaps warring couples in Iran used the marital courts mostly as a covering excuse to reconcile. By the middle of the morning, Farkhondeh was passing him notes on the relevant fiqh as if they'd been doing this together for years. And he was beginning to take it easy, venturing now and then into questions far removed from the antagonists' current dispute. It was only after Farkhondeh left early in the afternoon, just before zohr prayers, to take her mother to a doctor's appointment, that the first really interesting case came before him.

These were professionals, the Moavenis, the husband a pediatrician and the wife a researcher at a biology lab, the kind of people who didn't air their dirty laundry in a religiously inspired courtroom and who had plenty of resources of their own, parallel to those provided by the Islamic Republic for people in more straitened circumstances. Still, inflation was terrible, unemployment was rife, and no one knew what to do with the armies of educated people who couldn't find good enough jobs.

So it was possible that even a professional couple might face difficult enough conditions to stoop low enough to come to this court.

"Our problem, you see, is that we need a reliable witness as we pass some money into a third party's hands," the woman, Shirin, said with an immediately confidential tone that Kazim didn't altogether take to. She was leaning too close, and she was one of those women on whom the most elaborate covering only seemed to be wasted as a further token of nakedness. There was no modesty there.

"I don't get it, I'm sorry."

The husband, Abbas, with a habit of loudly clearing his throat every few minutes, put his hand possessively over his wife's shoulder. "My wife wants a divorce, and to leave the country. She's just fed up. I, on the other hand, don't mind — as much. I can survive nowhere but in Iran. But my wife visited Paris a couple of times in her youth, and she still remembers. Be that as it may. They have denied her an exit visa a number of times. She can't even attend scientific conferences in Turkey and Jordan. The only way out is through Kurdistan. We have an agent ready to do the work. We could pay him ourselves, but we thought — we thought it would be safer to pass it on through an authoritative party."

"Someone like you. . ." said Shirin.

"So we're not here for a divorce settlement at all," said Abbas. "We've already agreed."

"How long have you been a Judge?" Shirin asked. "You look awfully young. Not that you don't look authoritative."

"He looks old enough," said Abbas. "I'm sure he knows how to do his job. Now, can we trust you to do this? It'd be helpful if you could get a receipt, but this man, Babak, might not give you one. Next month is when my wife can leave. Meanwhile, here's our settlement agreement, so if you could witness and sign it . . ."

"My job," Kazim said, stunned by the breadth of events, "is to attempt a reconciliation. I'm not some intermediary to pass illegal bribes to human smugglers and act against the laws of the Islamic Republic. I am a—Judge." How ridiculous he sounded, how pompous, presuming to know better than the parties involved what was good for them! His resolve was like the front tire on his old bicycle in Qom, liable to puncture at the least pinprick.

"We understand, but we're past all that, don't you think?" said Abbas.

"We're all adults here," added Shirin. "A man and a woman fall out of love, and that is that. The rest is process, resolution—moving on."

"Absolutely, moving on . . ." confirmed Abbas, although Kazim thought he could detect wetness in his eyes as he looked steadily away from his wife. "It's dark in here. What, the komiteh can't fix a little thing like that? Too busy snatching people's satellite dishes . . ."

In the end, after what felt like hours of deliberation, Kazim agreed. What did he have to lose? If his agreeing to sign the document and to be the go-between for the money made them happy, so be it. He asked them repeatedly if they didn't have a trusted family member or friend to do it, but they insisted it had to be someone religious, someone authoritative, someone not part of their intimate circle. The risk of leakage was too great otherwise.

"And what makes you think I won't snitch on you?" Kazim asked.

"Oh, we hardly think so," said Shirin dismissively. "Look, it's twenty thousand dollars, so be careful. Movazeb bashin!"

"Bist Hezar! Twenty thousand!" Kazim gasped. Even for a doctor and a researcher to have saved that much money with inflation as it was and the government always imposing new taxes was impressive!

"Pick a place," said Shirin. "For today if you can—the sooner the better."

Kazim suggested Shadman Café, and husband and wife were pleased at his choice, grinning at each other as if to say, Sure, we made the right choice coming here.

Locking the courtroom—and wondering how to explain later to Judge Tabatabai why he had agreed to a divorce the very first time it was brought to court—he felt absurd and yet also complete. It was time to sit down somewhere far away and really take a look at what his future was going to be all about. A posting in a village might be just the thing to get his head clear. It would be an excuse to talk to Farkhondeh about. She seemed the kind of urban woman who knew village life inside out.

There was a crack of rare winter thunder and some rain fell, but the smog was barely affected. In Revolution Square, the cab

he was riding in conked out. In Iran you rode a machine, a person, an animal, until the very last moment of its capacity. Then, without warning, it fizzled out, no transition to death being available.

Zoology hadn't been Keyvan Yazdani's first choice of professions. At twenty-one, having graduated from Tehran University with a degree in economics, he had been leaning toward a career in agricultural economics. His urban self could never get enough of the problems of peasants. He didn't believe in any romantic claptrap about them, but the failure of successive land reforms made it a tempting subject to analyze: the Shah tried it, in his White Revolution, to Khomeini's great disapprobation, then Khomeini himself tried it, when he felt secure enough with the bazaaris' support. It was the kind of profession, zoology, where people left you alone. If they thought you weren't doing anything jeopardizing the Revolution's foundations, there was little chance that the Baseejis, the Hezbollahis, the komitehs would bother you. Animals! The Islamic Republic hardly had time for them! Keyvan specialized in wildlife in the northwest of the country, Azerbaijan and Kurdistan, fretting about the environmental degradation of the land that had made their continued existence a problem, especially since the Revolution, when the economy had been so lacking in opportunities that the pressure on the wildlife to succumb to indiscriminate predation was all the greater. Animals had suffered just as much under the Revolution, although nobody was really around to chronicle their miseries. His colleagues, most of them pious if not active Revolutionary party members, were fatalistic about the extinction of species, restricting their worries to the lack of availability of medical care for their elderly parents and relations, or the high price of gas (at a couple of thousand rials a gallon, the cheapest in the world, but they complained!).

His colleagues knew precious little about him. Ah, secrets—their possession and honoring, their preservation and care! So much effort went into it, it almost became rejuvenating, like timed release adrenalin. There was this one time when an older female colleague, another Baha'i as it turned out, had made things a little difficult for him by coming on to him so blatantly that the Hezbollahi-sympathizing colleagues had taken notice, but other than that his true affiliations and tendencies had re-

mained hidden from view. Much like the Hidden Imam, the Shi'ites' expected Messiah who had disappointed over and over—although some of the less literate among Iranians took Khomeini himself to be the manifestation of the Hidden Imam—the thrill was in the secrecy, the waiting, not the discovery. Few knew that Keyvan's great-grandmother was a British Jew, who had traveled to Iran in the late nineteenth century, and stayed after falling in love with the land. Few—or was it anyone?—knew that his grandfather Bayman had been one of the most committed supporters of Shoghi Effendi, the grandson of Abdu'l-Baha', who was in turn the son of the major propagator of the Baha'i faith, Baha'ullah, the long-awaited Manifestation of God. Under the Shah, things were better for the Baha'is in Iran ever before or since; but precisely when this was the case, Keyvan's grandfather decided to renounce any attachment to the Islamic faith, making more of a public production out of it than it had to be. The Shah's support didn't waver either way, and the family's lands around Yazd prospered. In the next generation, when the Shah's power was beginning to wane—of course, he had to choose that moment to celebrate twenty-five hundred years of unbroken monarchy at the infamous farce that was Persepolis in 1971, served by Maxim's and Jansen's of Paris—Keyvan's father promised the budding genius that he could study anything, be anything he chose to be. In the succeeding years of the Islamic Republic, Baha'is, often accused of treason because of their alleged espionage activities—a convenient way to get around even the semblance of following the rule of law and summarily imprison and execute anyone the regime didn't feel comfortable with—studied at their "Open University," organized by dispossessed professors and scientists and writers and journalists out of their homes, enabling many of the graduates to go on to Western universities once they made their escape through Kurdistan or other porous parts of the border. Keyvan never had to go through this kind of humiliation. But he gave the lie to his father's promise by becoming an obscure zoologist. It seemed the least significant profession in an Islamic Republic which never bothered to talk a good game when it came to animals, unlike its constant protestations that whatever medieval barbarism it was imposing on women was for their own good—the marvel being that most educated women agreed that, indeed, being segregated

into "womanly" professions and activities liberated them. Keyvan's mother herself had been a rationalizer in the same vein.

It was difficult to know when his period of degeneration truly began. Perhaps it was when he was in his teens, in the early years of the war, when a younger classmate went off to the front and conveniently died under the tanks, to make heroes of his parents. One afternoon the parents talked to the assembled school about there being no age or other limits to the need for martyrdom. It was sickening, the whole performance. He felt at that moment that he'd seen through the whole spectacle, that nothing from then on was going to fool him. For it just wasn't possible that the mother of a dead thirteen-year-old child could feel only nationalist emotion at such a time. Indeed, the problem of what to do with the wayward heart was eminently solved only by autocrats and theocrats, and they did it by setting up a charmed circle of insiders. Thus the obsession with oaths. Thus the obsession with not giving oaths, as his grandfather Bayman, on the verge of greatness under the Shah, had chosen to do: the other side of the coin, the inescapable currency of remaining alive in a regime that thrived on death.

He was the only one of his immediate family still alive. The rest seemed to have chosen early death as the extreme form of going into occultation. In fact, the whole history of Iran seemed to be one degree or another of presenting two faces to the world: different faiths all pretended to love Iran above all, even as their private passions lay elsewhere—this being the path to martyrdom of the private emotions. Was it any wonder that the leading myth of the nation was Imam Hossein's sacrifice at Karbala, that the most Westernized of intellectuals reverted to Iranian myths of martyrdom to justify whatever social engineering plans they had in mind? Was it any wonder that this nation, practiced in the art of hypocritical double talk, dissimulation, taarof, politeness, courtesy, flowery obeisance and private disobedience, was the home of the modern world's greatest theocracy? If only he could break through his own imposed shell of practicing hypocrisy, tell the world he was a proud Baha'i and be done with it.

But he wasn't a proud Baha'i. He wasn't a proud anything. So when the contact was made with him soon after Khomeini's death—when it seemed that a heavy burden had been lifted off

the Iranian nation and things would perhaps return a bit more to "normal"—from a man who identified himself as a great friend of his grandfather Bayman and one of the leaders of a local spiritual assembly in Keyvan's ancestral Yazd, he was quick to respond: "I'm going to be a zoologist, so I'm hardly to be reckoned a person of any importance. I've never been a practicing Baha'i. Behind Baha'ullah's great talk of the oneness of mankind, the oneness of religions, the oneness of the Manifestations of God, himself being the latest of these, I find the same restrictions on human freedom—nineteenth-century, Victorian, prudish, Arnoldian and St. Simonian and Marxist and Freudian constraints, no doubt, rather than, say, Muhammad's seventh-century anxieties—that infect every other religion. Women are equal to men, but not quite equal, or not quite the same, because . . . Non-Baha'is are equal to Baha'is, but not quite the same, because . . . This whole business of hierarchies, despite it being his intention to abolish, he just gets around. So he ends up being just another Manifestation of the same tyranny that has always existed everywhere, and I see no human solution to it. Forgive my bluntness." He'd gone on in this insulting manner and was surprised to have had a civil response, and continuing correspondence, all these years.

In his manuscript *The Tyranny of Heaven*, later renamed *The Hands that Cause* and finally *Iran Beheaded*, there was a domineering character, steeped in the lore of a Masonic-like brotherhood, who has immense hypnotic powers over younger men at pains to be authentic in a world of only mirrors and illusions. This character was based on his forever-unidentified correspondent, who never stopped pleading with him to publicly identify himself as a Baha'i, to register with the government as such, to work for the mission of the universal faith, to spread the word through his writings and speech, to donate money to the various funds for the educational uplift of oppressed Baha'is. Keyvan had saved every one of these letters. He hoped that the police would follow up on these in the aftermath, trace the identity of the sender (he'd had some suspicions, but each time the person he'd suspected had died, so he had to look for others). It was petty, he knew; but even pettiness can be sweet when one's spirit has been broken down enough.

He studied the disappearance of wild animals, tried to convince his colleagues that some species or other of buffalo or deer

was about to become endangered and that somewhere someone should do something about it, while he labored for years over a manuscript that he knew had no chance of being accepted for publication. The day he finished it, his girlfriend broke up with him because she said he didn't need her anymore; it had only been an act of mercy on her part to see him through its completion. No, she wasn't seeing anyone, but would Keyvan, in his blindness to the needs of anyone but himself, even have noticed if she was? She was a beautiful young Muslim, a pious believer who, even if she didn't cover her hair so tightly that it hid every single strand of hair, did believe that the hejab allowed her to interact with men without being the object of unwanted attraction and scrutiny. "Fine, you're free—and so am I," he'd said, locking himself up in his north Tehran studio for three days, subsisting on cheap caviar and prune juice.

Something seemed to have ended in him after finishing that novel after all. His girlfriend had been right. The extreme politeness of his neighbors and colleagues drove him to fury now. It was then he hatched his plan. He would wait exactly a year, no more than that, for his manuscript to be approved; after all, that was how long the Ministry said was the latest you should expect to wait—assume the worst if you didn't hear by then. His plan underwent many transformations, the precise method unclear to him, but in the end these seemed to him trivial maneuverings of the lost mind. Only the final act mattered. He would go out a free man—never having been married, faithless to the core, irrepressible under the most tyrannous regimes. He would define freedom on his own terms. He pitied the martyrs who were doing it for something so concrete as the keys to paradise (which many kids actually wore around their necks to the front during the long war), which would give them entrée to beautiful virgins. He reconnoitered Shadman Café many times, having picked it out as a terrific location because he felt more revulsion toward the self-satisfied, elegant, healthy faces of the middle-class clientele there than any other place. One woman in particular, a bossy, noisily interfering schoolteacher, had the kind of glow on her face only preaching fanatics used to have in the old days; this halo was now infecting people who merely worked at boring professions. She came frequently, and she smiled at Keyvan brooding over some last French nouveau roman from the 1950s he hadn't got to, as if she knew all his manly secrets. He

dreamed of men who smiled so widely from politeness that all their big white teeth showed and then suddenly slithering venomous snakes came out of their mouths. He had been startled into total wakefulness and he couldn't get enough of it. But he was resolved. It would happen precisely one year from the day of delivery of the unpublishable manuscript. His Kurdish suppliers of the bomb materials insisted on believing that he was a partisan of their side. It was incredible how quickly any weapon could be procured, for amounts and considerations so small as to beggar the imagination. These were the cheapest things on sale in the Islamic Republic.

It was only in the penultimate moment before detonation—he did it precisely at five p.m., when the hateful schoolteacher had done with her selection of pastries for a party she couldn't stop talking about, in that false blustery tone of hers—it was only in that half-moment that he wondered if he wasn't following strictly in the line of Baha'ullah by signifying his own oneness with the inveterate violence of the world, his oneness with the depredation and tragedy that compelled men to put an end to all hopes for a better world at the first sign there would be difficulties along the way. Was he one of them? Was his denial confirmation? But the thought had barely made its way around his mind when it was no more. It was his thirtieth birthday. *Happy birthday to me,* his very last thought fizzled out in his scattered synapses.

Mr. Rasuli enjoyed the gold section of Tehran's Grand Bazaar more than any other. He lingered over gold urns, gold vases, gold trays, gold spoons, and expressed notes of appreciation over the fine craftsmanship of the products. "Kheyli khoob. From Isfahan, no doubt?" he said to the vendors one after the other. They knew he wasn't going to buy, but they were unfailingly polite to him, offering him qahve at every stop. Once in a while, he actually stopped for coffee, the dark Turkish kind, since the majority of the Bazaar merchants were Turkish in origin, and the more rugged Azeri Turkish prevailed here rather than the sweeter Persian. How evocative of the forms and expressions of medieval exchange this vast, labyrinthine, enclosed space was! You felt somehow the dust you were treading on was sacred. True, the actual Bazaar itself was no more than a century and a half old, but it represented the merchant tradition—toler-

ant and pragmatic, never prone to extremes of emotion—better than anything else in this country. Somehow Iran felt timeless, a nation that would outlast many others now considered great, as long as the Bazaar went on as it always had. He was gratified enough that he made an impulsive purchase—a gold earring for Shahnaz. And then he bought a gold penholder for his friend Javad-Ali at *Asr-e-Aazadi.*

He passed a demonstration in Enqelab Square against the high price of bread without much interest and found the offices of *Asr-e-Aazadi,* when he got there around six p.m., to be lacking the turmoil he normally expected there.

"What's wrong, azizam?" he asked Javad-Ali, one of the few intellectuals he knew who didn't really mind being overweight.

Javad-Ali had lately given up his lifelong habit of chain-smoking, and was cajoling Reza to take up running to lose the bulge around his waist. "I see you've lost some weight. Good, good for you."

"I would say I've added a few pounds. Impending fatherhood . . ."

"What! Is that true? My God, congratulations! This is wonderful news. I never thought you would—my God, mubarak!"

They hugged and laughed, making ribald jokes, and then Javad-Ali shared the news with the first person he saw, a pretty young editor who tried her best to look happy for Reza despite the evident strain on her face.

"Her father was a Berkeley graduate," Javad-Ali explained when she had left. "Something obscure, in the sciences, otherwise he'd have been tapped for Rafsanjani's California mafia, no doubt. She's brilliant, very much a chip off the old block."

A childhood friend, whose diplomat father's career had been ruined during the hostage crisis, Javad-Ali always went to great lengths to point out to Reza the slight cracks in the regime's tight control of thought and opinion. "It can only get better, we've already been through the worst," was how he always prefaced some positive development—a movie that had unexpectedly made it through the censors and was getting rave reviews, an admission of unfair intelligence gathering or even torture by the police or Baseej or Revolutionary Guards. Truth be told, Reza himself didn't think things were all that bad—even if at times he did wonder how high his own standard of living might have been if the Shah had managed to survive.

"But the office is so quiet today," Reza complained. "Other than the little commotion I've caused."

"So you've noticed . . . Actually, there have been a lot of staff changes. I've let go of some of the firebrand young editors, replaced them with more seasoned hands. Journalism isn't just a matter of venting your private opinions, you know. There must be some basis in empirical fact if you're going to advocate alternative policies to what the government is pursuing. Besides, I think we've just about played out the cultural angle. Or maybe that's going too far. We can still talk about the illogic of not letting women be judges, when we treat them as adults at nine, but other newspapers are doing that. Heck, the films are doing that now, and getting away with it."

Reza kicked back in his comfortable chair. Ah, to have a nice intellectual discussion, on an otherwise lazy evening! He pictured Shahnaz finishing her shopping and arriving home early to find him not there. She would get to work preparing dinner—morgh polow today, as he'd requested—and she would be more easygoing in bed than usual because school would soon break and there would be no papers to grade, no classes to prepare for. Life was about as good as it could be. If some opportunities had been lost because of the Revolution, perhaps others had been gained.

"So what will your paper write about now?" Reza asked.

"Economic policy, azizam, that's the make-or-break thing for Iran now. How we utilize resources. How we spend the oil wealth. How much we produce in the first place, how much we subsidize food and essential products. And then the problem of dependence on oil—which leads to so much unemployment. Inflation—why can't we control it better? It's simply unacceptable to put so much of a squeeze on the hard-working middle class. You shouldn't have to hold two or three jobs just to make ends meet, if you're a teacher or nurse. These are the ways we can make people's lives easier by having more rational policies."

"You should name your paper *Asr-e-Iqtisadi* then. The age of homo economicus."

"Perhaps we will," Javad-Ali said seriously.

"It would be the first time a newspaper had renamed itself voluntarily, not because the government had banned it."

"There's a first time for everything, Reza."

The pretty young editor, covered elegantly, even if her volup-

tuous figure was undisguisable, came again to get Javad-Ali's approval on a short piece she had finished editing on Iran's participation in some new regional economic cooperation plan.

"Khoob, I don't have to see it, if you think it's ready," Javad-Ali said easily.

"So you're coming to the party Friday night?" Reza said.

"How could I ever miss it! Although I might have to leave early—there's a meeting of editors far out in the suburbs I need to go to. It doesn't hurt to put our minds together once in a while instead of always competing for the scoop."

"The real scoop is that there is no scoop people don't already know about, dorost?"

"Dorost, of course," said Javad-Ali. "There'll be light on hidden things. It's just that it doesn't always come about because we push it to happen."

Perhaps he should take up running, Reza thought on his way out. But if it weren't for paunchy bazaaris who sustained the impression of everlasting Iran, one would almost have to turn to Ferdowsi and Rumi to find the resonating legends. And he just wasn't into poetry.

Laura Hope-Gill

Falling Through a Bridge Into the Aare River, Interlaken, 1988

You will have let go by then. You will have agreed with the waves,
the weight of them upon you, churning the weight of night, the weight

of years you've left to live. You will agree with all of it in the consensual
act of dying that this is how it happens.

Over time, you will swim away from it. The river becomes your reason.
It's not your home, yet like your home it sharpened you, made you take

its name you'll forget you remember. You will drift away again from the small,
and the patient wee fistfuls of things that matter.

The next day, the villagers will say you are the stone girl
that sank against gravity's laws of the water. But now falling, forget the shadow,

just ravens the moon has cast, borrowing shapes that nature has let go into the night,
the air that thrills. Feel the speed of your thoughts falling.

What darkness, the wood hardness of the strike, the shock of skin to surface.
The skin that even the glaciers know as cold and, still, the body says swim.

Here, where you are is where there's nothing, the only breathing is done by waves.

Your lungs drift downstream faster than you can scream after them.

Drowning is loss as any leaving is loss. Cut loose the passport, your last francs.
Lose the Italian leather jacket and the airline ticket home. Make a decision.

Here, I am aware of the river's base above my head, the rock-bed, this mud, was mine.
All errors are mine, including this one final one: how, when the surface closed over me,

I called out from someplace else with orders to swim. You've sat on the embankment
before yet unrescued. You were 10. It was 10 years ago. The small, red-billed coots

fought this current, building nests. You were young. You liked to watch the struggle.
One hard twig at a time, they worked.

Jackie McClenny

Still and Still Moving

That monstrous tuberosity of civilized life, the capital of England.
—Thomas Carlyle

June smog follows me like warm breath as I come in from the throbbing street. Everyone is saying what a hot week it is, and pink-and-white Englishmen scatter themselves on the grass of London's parks and squares, turning their pale bellies toward the sun. It's nothing like the crushing, brassy heat of my own eastern Kansas, but the persistent moisture, the clinging stench of bus exhaust, and the inescapable toil of getting around the city steadily chip away at me during the day, and drain me of energy—energy that is never quite replenished during the short and sticky nights.

As I start down the non-slip stairs to the trains, a stale breeze trickles up from below—not exactly cool, and leaving the handrails damp. I join the stream of other passengers, and without breaking stride, I check the posted route maps to make sure I take all the right turns. I'm getting into a groove, getting a sense of being part or product of some enormous machine—one that runs on instinct, or maybe drives it. White tiles on curved walls pass by as I flow past lighted posters of the latest Andrew Lloyd Webber atrocity and ads for *TimeOut Weekly* with Ricky Gervais on the cover. His small, sharp teeth draw my eye repeatedly, until my fellow-riders and I pour out onto the smooth concrete platform.

Down the tunnel, there is the faintest hiss or grumble. In the space of a long breath, it is certain—a kind of high roar. Another breath and a light is visible, and the red-and-white train, flat-nosed, flies past in a blur of lighted windows and a rush of machine-warmed wind, clattering in on a gust, filling the platform. Doors open, and a chilly BBC voice repeats a recorded, "Mind . . . the *gap*." I cross the black chasm between platform and train, step into the car, and stand with my back against the far wall.

I am hyper-aware of the space around me and the location of my new wallet—the one I bought yesterday to replace the one

that got away, lifted between the time I left the student agency's headquarters in Bloomsbury and the time I stepped off the Number 19 bus outside our group's flat in Clerkenwell ten minutes later. I am worried because I can't afford to lose the money they've taken from my checking account, the scant $600 budget I was planning to stretch out over the next month for cold lunches and maybe a play. I am worried, but not really angry. I can probably borrow from someone until the fall student loans come, and anyway, it would make as much sense to be angry with any legitimate predator in its own environment. Still, it's humiliating to think you are blending in when you're really just another bucket of chum.

The voice of the driver comes over the speakers inside the train, avuncular but weary, saying, "Please move *right* down inside the car." People do. A shrill little alarm sounds, and the doors shut. The train is stuffy and full of people. This car, like any other, holds a varied sampling of Londoners: city office workers, their smart haircuts and crisp suits wilting as they stand with sharp noses in cheap gossip sheets offering "Free Cake!"; two pudgy teenage girls with lank hair, oily faces, and bitten nails, sharing dirty jokes; a Jamaican grandmother with shopping bags and soft, spreading shoes; a stiff Sikh in a turban scowling at a disorganized young mother with a fussing, sticky toddler. There are a few American tourists, fanning themselves ostentatiously as they lean, jet-lagged, on their enormous suitcases. And there is me, neither native nor precisely tourist, separate and invisible.

The train speeds up into darkness—chunk-chunk, chunk-chunk, chunk-chunk—and then slows, stops. Silence. The car grows hotter and more claustrophobic as the train sits in the middle of a dark tunnel for several uneasy seconds, halting the motion-powered air ducts. There have been several small delays on the system this week, a symptom of heavy summer traffic and the effects of heat on the rails. We passengers, realizing we are trapped in a can five stories below the street, look sidelong at each other and then quickly glance away, as if there were shame in our sudden awareness. The train starts again, and the vents blow, and we breathe.

The Piccadilly Line, opened in December 1906, is one of the Underground's "deep lines," built after the abandonment of

the "cut and cover" method used in the construction of the earliest lines. The old method, which disrupted surface traffic and required cutting through layers of rock, gave way to deep drilling with the invention of the Greathead Shield, a kind of giant ring to keep tunnels from collapsing upon the workers as they were digging. The tunnels containing the Piccadilly Line (which shows as a deep blue line on my Tube map, zigzagging from upper right to lower left) are bored through the layer of clay running seventy feet below London.

On a given weekday, 529,550 passengers travel on the Piccadilly, and at peak times there are 76 trains operating between the suburb of Cockfosters to the north and Heathrow Airport to the west. Each train on the line has one operator, who both drives the train and operates the doors. The portion of the Piccadilly that lies between King's Cross Station and Russell Square Station runs in a single-track tunnel a little over ten feet in diameter. Its walls almost hug the trains that run through it. Here, on the morning of July 7, 2005, when a bomb exploded in the rear half of the first carriage of a packed morning rush-hour train, the force of the explosion had nowhere to go but along the length of the cars. This was the deadliest of the four bombs that went off that morning, killing twenty-seven of the total fifty-two dead.

This melancholy London—I sometimes imagine that the souls of the lost are compelled to walk through its streets perpetually. One feels them passing like a whiff of air.
—W.B. Yeats

There are four ghost stations on the Piccadilly Line, stations that closed as patterns of traffic changed and the suburbs grew. They sit like time capsules buried in the earth, antique advertising posters peeling quietly in the dark. York Road and Down Street stations closed in 1932, and Osterly & Spring Grove and Brompton Road stations in 1934. These ghost stations found a temporary new life during World War II when heavy bombing drove strategic command headquarters underground. Aldwych Station, though not technically a ghost station (since it closed in 1994 it has become a popular filming location), was closed to traffic during the Blitz, serving as both an air-raid shelter and as a storage place for valuable collections

from the nearby British Museum. London, with its dramatic, violent history and fogbound, gaslit Victorian streets, is predictably well-stocked with ghost people as well as ghost stations, and I imagine them gravitating to these corridors—the ghosts of reckless sybarites and scorned suicidal women bobbing nervously on a darkened platform, glancing xenophobically at the sarcophagi of pharaohs.

I find it fascinating—the idea of the conduits and chambers cutting through and lying against the deep soil—the stinky torte of human history: prehistoric villages of thatch and lashed logs and atavistic idols; Roman settlements of ordered commerciality in tile and glass and spilled coins; the stony abbeys and plague-stuffed graveyards of the Middle Ages; the lusty secularity of the Renaissance; the Great Fire of 1666. And then the brief flutter of Frenchified laciness before the coalsmoke curtain of industrialism cast the City into Neo-Gothic shadow. And always a sense of density and intensity, blood and guts, spit and sweat, human and animal, cheerfully wicked, unrepentant, dirty-sweet, innocent-arrogant, bright and nasty, soaked deep into stone and clay and sand, deep underneath the crenellated frostings, the sparkle and crunch of stone and glass. The layers and the tunnels evoke the depths and undergrounds of human consciousness, concealed from everyday sight, revealed in sudden flashes, tableaux lit by unexpected spotlights.

Secret by the unmourning water
Of the riding Thames.
After the first death, there is no other.
— Dylan Thomas

Our student group had moved on from London to York, York to Edinburgh, and Edinburgh to Glasgow by way of the Highlands and Skye. After the heat and grit and noise of London, the long bus rides over stretches of wild, wide, and imposing countryside were necessary nourishment for our spacious American souls. By Glasgow, we had been away from home nearly a month, and we spent most of our time studying for our final exam and making preparations for the trip home rather than getting to know a city we were staying in for only a few days. I have only a few sharp memories of that week: feeding curry chips to seagulls, one particularly good egg salad sandwich

I had at the Willow Tea Rooms, and hanging around the entrance of the Charles Rennie Mackintosh museum waiting for some stragglers to show up, when we heard that there had been a terrorist attack on the London Underground.

Two days later, we are coming back to London on a charter bus to catch our homeward flight. In honor of his home country, or perhaps to torture us for Hollywood's sins, the driver insists on showing us *Braveheart* on the bus' video system. As we roll in from the north, the chimney pots slide by the windows accompanied by the sound of masculine bellowing and crunching bones. Mostly, the students are asleep, waking up only for bathroom stops. Lauren, my fellow Londonphile, has been silently reading the *Guardian* newspaper she bought before we left Glasgow. When she dozes, I pick it up and read the account of Transport Police Sergeant Steve Betts, who describes how he tried to assist the wounded on the 311 between King's Cross and Russell Square: "The roof had collapsed and we had to almost crawl in . . . I was squashed in by chairs and dead bodies as we searched for anyone alive. I could not help standing on things but I had to carry on and do my job . . . After a couple of hours, I came up. The station was pretty quiet by now but someone asked me for directions which made me smile and that made me feel more human. But, as I stood there I felt lonelier than I thought was possible . . ."

I put down the newspaper and look out the window of the bus just as we cross the overpass above Edgeware Road Station. There was also a blast here on July 7, which killed six, just as the train was leaving the station. We are going fast, but I swear it looks as though the sidewalk nearby bears a long, jagged crack like an earthquake fault line. Glancing up over the Euro-Tinkertoy business park buildings, I see a line of solid, fat bombers and fighters flying, anachronisms pasted against the bright sky. It is Commemoration Day, marking sixty years since the end of World War II. Lauren is awake again, and we look out the window of the coach and smile at the airplanes. As we glide into Bloomsbury in our sealed capsule, the other students are silent.

After we drop our bags in our basement room at St. Margaret's Hotel, Lauren and I walk to the end of the block where Russell Square, with its lofty plane trees and flocks of ravenous

pigeons, opens up before us. It is quiet, even for a Sunday evening. This is in itself unnerving, a sign of desperate upheaval, British-style. At the far corner of the square, to our right, where traffic usually blazes past, a two-story white curtain blocks the entrance to the east-west street, and a policeman guards the slit in its center through which equipment and investigators pass toward Russell Square Station. The north-south street at that same corner is entirely blocked by police, their cars, and barricades. Two blocks to the north is Tavistock Square, where Charles Dickens lived at the end of his life, and Leonard and Virginia Woolf resided for a time, and also where fourteen people have died in the explosion of a double-decker bus. The bomber was on his way to his appointed train, but his bus was diverted because of the earlier blasts and he did not make it on time. There was an explosion, a rain of papers, and the bright red roof of the number 30 bus, according to one eyewitness, "lifted lazily forward and a long length of metal spun up twisting in the air."

In the weird trafficless silence, Lauren and I stand in the corner of the square and look down at the pile of cellophane-wrapped bouquets on the concrete at this, the farthest point to which our feet can travel in their attempt to catch up with us. One bouquet bears a card that asks, "Why?" A white pigeon investigates; it has a tumor on its leg the size of a walnut, but seems flourishing nonetheless. And as I lie in bed that night, a mere eight feet or so below the level of the street, I somehow feel as though I am close to the heart of something warm and alive.

David James

Request

When I die
take my heart and feed
it to the crows.
I want to collide
with raw earth

and bleed
my last drops on solid ground
under a sky so blue
even the final piece of me
will shrink and cower.

If I'm going down,
I want to do it right.
The crows will smell the decay,
land nearby, astounded,
and eat my final hour.

Glen Singer

Narrative of Mrs. Geneva Huckaby French (1902)

Editor's Note: The text that appears below is one of a group of forty-seven oral accounts by Missouri residents of their experiences during the bitter ante-bellum Kansas-Missouri conflict and in the Civil War era. Dr. William M. Folk of Independence compiled these recollections between 1899 and 1903. I have chosen twenty-four of the most vivid and detailed narratives for publication in a volume entitled The Missouri Border War, 1855-1865. *I am presenting Mrs. Huckaby French's account for individual publication because of its possible literary implications. I, however, offer no assessment or judgment as to its authenticity or veracity. This text has been drawn from a handwritten document which was transcribed by a stenographer in the employment of Dr. Folk. Dr. Folk himself apparently acted as interlocutor, but his inquiries were not included in the original manuscript. I have taken the liberty to update some of the stilted syntax that I believe to be the product of the stenographer's education and sensibility since at times it does not appear to correspond to the overall tone and context of the document. In addition, I have terminated the account at its point of greatest interest, discarding subsequent material of a more general and less substantial nature. I have employed this same methodology in editing the other narratives that will appear in the forthcoming book.*

* * *

We were living on a bend on the north side of the river, with the back of our cabin to the water in the west while the front looked out over the open plain beyond. That's what my husband, Mr. Huckaby, wished when we built it in '59. He declared that he wanted to see what was coming our way. Well, that plan didn't prove to do a whole lot of good.

That day, I was up at dawn fixing plates for the morning meal when they appeared, riding out of the darkness to the east,

across the flatland. There were three of them, and as they closed I saw they wore Union-blue tunics. My heart fluttered, uneasy. The war that we had hid from was coming to us. I called out for Will, who was out back with his axe. I don't think he heard me at first because he was slow getting to the porch, and the riders gained time on me and him.

They were sitting their horses, maybe thirty feet from the front door, when Will came around the side. They were nothing but shabby boys in dirty blue, but they held themselves with that high bearing and scorn that soldiers and fighters gain when they have the upper hand and prey on common folks. The one on the left sat a big roan with a saddle scabbard. He wasted no time in commencing with the unwanted question.

"Well, Maw and Paw, what be it, Union or Secesh, Secesh or Union?"

Will put down his axe, very slow, and spread his hands nice and peaceful. I knew that he was trying to give himself time and figure the right answer. Ever since I first knew him he'd been good at that. He could tell what people wanted to hear and generally was good at saying it. When we first met in St. Joe, where he was hostling in a stable and sleeping in the straw, he was invisible to most everyone but me as he curried and combed the horses and said this or that pleasantry to the paying customers. They liked him well enough, but never gave any real mind to him as a person. The words he spoke were most of the time lies, but they stood him in good stead. I'd heard him tell half a dozen tales of his boyhood, all of them different. He never told me anything; so I guessed that to be the truest of all his tales.

Will kind of caught my eye, and I could see that he knew that no fancy-foot lie was going to save the day. He started up with some story about Maryland and us being on the run from the war, hiding away, being kind of Union-neutral. Those boys, they showed nothing except thin wolf smiles. They began to inch their mounts up, shrinking the distance between us, looking more and more hungry and eager-eyed. Will's voice trailed off. Whichever side they were, they didn't care where we stood. I figured we were as good as dead.

The one in the center nodded to the boy on the left, and he put his fingers to his mouth and let out a high-pitched bird whistle. Eleven more of them issued out of the stand of black oak and high brush that stood well away to the north of the house.

My first thought was to wonder how they'd been so quiet in there. We'd heard not a nicker or a whinny. But, I knew the answer. So did Will. They were bushwhackers and had lots of practice at being quiet. My second thought was to wonder what were they doing this far east, in Howard County, on our little crook of the muddy Missouri. It was November 1863, and we people north of the river had only heard scary tales of Quantrill and his raiders and their plunder of Lawrence. Now, here they were, riding right toward us.

Like the three before us, all of them were boys. Some of them couldn't have been more than fourteen or fifteen years old. They wore a motley assortment of garments. Many had the butternut gray cavalry pants of the confederate regulars, and many more wore fancy homespun shirts, full of embroidered flowers, stars, and whatnot. Later I learned that their womenfolk spent loving hours making up these shirts. Every one of them was armed to the eyes. They had big Navy Colts in holsters or stuck in their waistbands, they had rifles in scabbards hanging from their saddles, and they had Bowie knives sticking from their boot tops or hung on cords round their necks. They were a dirty, filthy bunch. As they got closer, I saw that a few had scalplocks or chains of shriveled ears hanging from their bridles. I hadn't seen anything like that before, and it took me a while to recognize them for what they were. I'd never knew white men practiced such cruelty on one another. I have to admit it, I was more afraid then I'd ever been and felt sick to my soul.

Now, one of them, and he was not a boy, rode at the head of the bunch. He was a portly sort of man, about Will's age. He had a round, florid face, and a tangle of red curls hung below his hat brim, down across his shoulders. The hat was the turned-up cavalry kind with a long trailing black plume in it. He wore a saber on his left side, and had on about the fanciest of all the fancy guerilla shirts with a sweeping black cape over it. His eyes were squinty, but even so, I could tell on first glance he was insane.

They all rode right into the yard, and the fat one came face to face with us. He swept off his hat and did a bow from the waist. His voice mocked us.

"Captain Thomas Gawain, Emissary Plenipotentiary of General Sterling Price's Army of the Confederate States of America, at your service."

He looked about at our humble cabin and hardpack yard with a show of disdain.

"I must inform you that you are now prisoners of war and that all your goods and chattel are forfeit to the Southern Cause. You will be dealt with as enemies with such justice as my command sees fit to provide."

He inched his big black stallion forward and bent down, looking Will in the eye.

"And you, what be ye called?"

Will was pale, but when I snuck a glance at him, there was a strangeness in his look. He looked straight at Captain Gawain and hardly seemed as frightened as he should be.

"My name, sir, is Willard Huckaby."

The Captain snorted a laugh. A thin young boy by his side, with a brace of pistols at either hand, heehawed, then showed a mouth full of black teeth that were nothing more than stumps. If Gawain was as crazy as I thought he was, this boy had to be pure wildwood imbecile.

The Captain's tone flattened out: "So, Willard Huckaby ye be! Ha!" He wheeled his big horse and began to issue orders to his troops. None obeyed with much in the way of alacrity, though he gave them orders to reconnoiter posthaste. The idiot boy stuck to Gawain's side, and suddenly the Captain seemed to be aware of his presence.

"Ah," he said, "Lieutenant Nelson Clumpers, here, and myself will be expecting the fullest hospitality of your yeoman's homestead, and we will be commandeering your humble pallets for our nightly repose."

He bowed again and assumed a far away look, like we had vanished from sight. Presently, he swung from his mount and grabbed the idiot boy around the shoulders and clucked, "Our home for the night, Lil' Possum." He clanked up to the door with his big Spanish spurs jingling. He nodded, and the boy kicked the door open, tearing the peg from its notch. He bowed to the Captain, like he was the finest nobility, and sniggered, "After you, Ol' Saw, sir." Well, to this day that act sticks in my mind. I can see it plain as day. That idiot boy had just kicked open the door to Hades.

I looked at Will. I know that my face was set in lines of fright, but he whispered, calm as could be, "Take heart, Ginny girl, take heart."

Take heart? What followed was the worst of any of my bloody dreams. Well, the worst short of dying. They were like hyenas turned loose, ravening on our poor, homely existence. Within ten minutes they had clubbed to death all our hens and carried them to me, tipping their hats and, polite as could be, asking for fried chickens and biscuits. While I poked up the fire, they sat and plucked them right onto the braided rug I'd made the last winter, scattering feathers every which way. A couple of others tromped about going through our possessions, opening my trunk and slinging my dresses and underthings about, then grinding them under foot. One of them paraded around in my bonnet, squealing in a high girlish voice, trying to imitate woman talk. They took Will's shotgun and deer rifle and snapped his fishing poles over their knees. It didn't take them long. We had nothing much they really wanted.

Pretty soon the whole place reeked of feathers, burning meat, and the stench of unwashed bushwhackers. I fled outside and joined Will on the bench in front. Neither of us said a thing. I really don't know how long we sat like that. All I know is that on a cool November day, I felt as hot and sweaty as if it was the dog days of August.

When the sun had passed noon, they discovered Will's winter whiskey in the root cellar out back. They broke it open and distributed it among themselves. That Lil' Possum, or Lil' Nellie, as some of them called him, even had the gall to thrust a cup in my face and tell me to drink up.

Soon afterward, Captain Gawain, or whatever his name was, took charge of the cabin, sitting in the middle of the room at our dining table with all our household rubble strewed about him. He called in Will, and the little-boy lieutenant taunted me.

"Ol' Saw, he goin' to inteer-ro-gate the prisoner." I really can't sound as ignorant as that boy talked.

I listened real hard but I couldn't catch a word that Will said, as he spoke in low tones. Every now and again, I'd hear the Captain spout out some loud phrase of pure mean, mockery like, "You look to be one of Jennison's boys," or "I know a Redleg when I see one and you got all the markings." Will seemed to be standing firm in whatever he was saying, but I was getting more and more afraid for him and, at the same time, wondering why I ever left St. Louis and the well-brought-up life I had there. Later, though, they seemed to be talking confidentially, almost

like old friends. I could've sworn that I heard them laugh a time or two, real soft-like, you know.

About then, right in the middle of this, the pigs began to squeal and shriek. I didn't have to look, I knew those verminous boys were carving their dinners. I couldn't sit still any more. I began pacing the dirt and fretting even worse than before. The hyenas were clearly halfway-to-smitten with their whiskey. They were building fires and picketing their horses around a couple of campsites they had thrown up right out in the open. Soon it appeared all our winter firewood was gone, as they built huge bonfires. They carried out bushels of the potatoes and cabbages that we'd stored in the cellar along with the whiskey.

The afternoon stretched out forever. Ol' Saw held Will in the cabin, I paced the yard, and the border trash kept up their lewd and rowdy show. Finally, Will came out from the cabin. He still seemed calm. He patted my shoulder and whispered, "Ginny, Ginny, take heart. This'll pass." Just like he said before. I could hardly believe it.

As the sun was sinking, most all of them headed round the house to the pen back there. They were reeling and singing about hanging Abe Lincoln, and such like. Then the shooting commenced. I heard Enos, our old mule, begin to make bellowing noises such as I never heard from an animal. He was in the worst sort of pain. Even though Will tried to pull me back, I broke free and ran around the house toward the corral. I could feel Will right behind me, trying to snatch me from harm's way. What I saw was the meanest sight in the world. That Lil' Nellie boy was drawing his pistol again and again from the sash about his waist, quick as lightning, and shooting at our poor old mule friend, while the rest of those heathen boys sat up on the fence howling like banshees. Part of Enos' nose looked to be gone, and there was blood dripping down from his withers. He was rearing and thrashing and making those horrible noises. Just as I was almost upon that boy and fixing to tear his eyes out, he shot off the suffering beast's ear. Enos plunged into the dirt and came up kicking. He knocked one of the fence sides clean off its post, dumping all that bushwhacker white trash onto the ground. One of them was up lickety-split and shot that enraged creature right between the eyes. Enos dropped straight to the ground like he'd been poleaxed. Lil' Nellie, he turned on me, poking his long revolver right into my face. I stopped dead in my

tracks. He just tipped his hat and said, "Pardon, ma'am, just a mite o' funnin'."

I can tell you, right then I knew that I'd never hated anybody as much as I hated every last one of those dirty boys. I can still feel the hot burn of it now, almost forty years later. I know it is not a Christian thought, but if I could come face to face with them now, even as toothless, crippled old men, I'd kill every last one. Yes, I would. I mean it!

After then, my memory gets hazy. I remember that night, how their fires burned bright and how they caroused into the late hours. I reckoned that the Devil had let himself loose on earth. Otherwise, I can only recall sitting still as a stone on the bench in front of our cabin, listening to Ol' Saw and his Lil' Possum giggling like schoolboys in our marriage bed. The hours dragged by. I was oblivious to the weather. I believe that some time in the night it began to rain, but I cannot say for sure. I know that when the dawn came, I was cold as death. Will sat beside me the whole time and never said a word. When I reached for his hand in the morning, I found it chill and dead as mine. His eyes were blank, and his strange surety and calmness of the day had vanished. He looked beaten and lost. I don't know what changed him, but I suspect it was the mule and seeing me looking down the barrel of a pistol.

It was a sullen dawn, all gray and wet. Ol' Saw and his Possum strode from the cabin at first light looking none the worse for wear, all smirks and grins and backslapping. The rest of them were still drunk. We watched them staggering around to break camp. Most had trouble saddling their horses. Eventually, they all assembled before their bastard captain. He paced up and down in front of them, jangling his saber and jingling his spurs while they held their mounts, staring at the dirt, cursing and coughing. Finally, like some Fourth-of-July orator, he raised his voice to announce that he had finished his trial and had found Will to be guilty of crimes against the Confederate States of America. My heart sank, while my husband sagged mute and hopeless.

"Boys," he said, "hand me the rope so that I can deal with this nigra-loving disgrace to Missouri soil."

Two of them grabbed me by the arms, while another one threw a heavy noose around Will's neck. I was never a girl to swoon, but right then and there was the closest that I ever came.

My head buzzed and my knees sagged as I watched that Ol' Saw mount and seize the rope that tethered my dear, sweet husband. He rode forward around the cabin toward the willow stand down by the river, jerking Will along behind him.

Lil' Nellie was all smirks and cackles.

"Cap, he wants to do this 'un by hisself. Ain't gonna be purty," he said, or some such words.

Well, it didn't take too long. There was a flurry of shots, then stillness, and then a final loud report. Will's howls carried back and echoed and echoed in my ears.

With that, those boys simply mounted their horses and milled about — all of them except the two ruffians that grasped me. Ol' Saw came trotting around the house like he was simply exercising that big black horse of his. As he drew alongside me, Will's cries died; everything fell silent. That's when the power seized me. I had the strength of a man. I shucked those two keepers of mine like they were cornhusks. I flew at that creature sitting so proud on his mount. I had no fear. My only wish, my blind wish, was to kill him. I was on that man in a flash. I heard myself screaming words that I'll leave unsaid. I grabbed his leg and was jerking him from the saddle, but the stirrup held fast. In another moment, I believe that I could've unhorsed him. However, he wheeled that big animal around, breaking my grip. Its hindquarters struck me and knocked me into the mud. I dragged myself up and went at him again, but one of them that had been holding me, he struck me on the back. I guess he must've hit me with his rifle butt or maybe a shovel, I don't know, but he hit me hard and brutal; knocked the wind from me. I collapsed in the dirt, doubled up with pain and hopelessness. Ol' Saw was on me with his horse, its hooves prancing and stamping all around me.

From up on high, he looked down, and in a whisper says, "Missus Huck, ma'am, today I have shown mercy." Then he turned to his followers and barked, "Torch it, boys."

In minutes our homestead was consumed in flames, and the whole troop of them had set their mounts to a gallop. Just like that, they were gone—taking our whole lives with them.

I started my widow's walk back to the river—with the smoke from our cabin stinging my eyes, blinding me, right past the corpse of our Enos. I held my eyes to the ground and trudged forward. When I finally looked up, I spied Will hanging from a willow. He was slumped forward, but his feet were touching

earth for the rope was knotted around a low-hanging branch. I looked real hard, and suddenly I knew that he was still alive and breathing. I can tell you, I broke into a run, shouting his name over and over.

As I drew nigh of him, my heart sank a bit. Will was roped about the chest, and great shuddering gasps were coming from him. His right knee was a bloody pulp. Every lineament of his face showed excruciating pain. He was suffering something awful.

Right then I knew that this man who was my husband, the kindest, most gentle man that God ever put on earth, would live, but that he'd never again walk right and never be the same. What I knew then proved true. Will lost his leg, and he was as broke as broke can be. After that day, he became silent and gloomy-spirited. I don't believe I ever saw him smile again – right up till his death in 1871.

But at the time, I only saw this future out of the corner of my eye as I slogged along the muddy track. When I reached Will, I was already tearing strips from my skirt to bind up his shattered leg. I left him dangling there until I bound the leg tight. He stifled the screams rising up in his chest as I inflicted that pain on him. Great drops of sweat poured from him. His face glistened; his teeth gritted.

As I began to fumble with the noose, he spoke in a pained and angry whisper.

"Damn him," he hissed. "I thought I was shut of him. Damn him to Hell! I just knew . . . just knew he'd turn out mean as a snake."

Then he passed, body and soul, into the oblivion of the wounded.

Gladys Justin Carr Incest

The night before it happened, I observed the unclassified eyes of our Father. Luminous and small. At dinner by the light of candles, following the extraordinary silence of too much said along several strata of meaning—some obscure, others unabashed, in an array of tones now intimate now placid now classical always with the suppressed excitement of sea grindings in a series of caesuras and plosives and full stops and a slurred, unaccepting smile, his face high-ceilinged and fastidious, a fine Edwardian face, its color washing out at the neck, pants just a little bagging at the crotch as if the private shrine there between his legs were hanging limp as the milked-out teats of an ancient cow. He displayed the following: 1) each word as if hauled from out of a fisherman's net with exaggerated gestures 2) professional zeal in insinuating himself into the urethra of one's private self 3) on principle, a rejection of sanity. The magic of black he said, how unique that we escape at all the impulse to suicide, and who is to say which is the true madness-insolence or submission. He spoke of ritual pollutions and questions of identity and the spoiled and stigmatized and the supernatural and the not quite human and witches' sabbaths and black masses (or do I imagine his words), the Aesthetics of differentness, the romance of nihilism (its murder of piety), primitive incantations A black E white I red O... Then he walked to the mirror, as if returning to a place of origin, faced me with an untarnished smile to incite the awe of youth to that heroic agedness he wears like an escutcheon, approached at the underside of awareness the subject of deformity and deviation, tribal wounds, asked with his smile, "We are all, are we not, a little in love with death?" The wine pasteboard, baldachins, crude calligraphy of old toys balanced and arranged in memory beyond one's weight to alter. There were the aboriginal clarities and uncertainties, the wine sweet like long, loose honey running thin. I feel his hand touching my sex, strangely precise. Stiffly, weakly, our voices precipitating, hesitant yet a whisper disturbing memory, displacing it, occluding the moment of then time with now words, simple, sin-

gle file, step by step. I know what we are, slowly, carefully marching, the words in halt and thrust, the squadrons of imprecision, you do not see...you do not wish to see...now beginning in haste, rushing forward, the words turning to solid bodies smashing against the rocks, the current driving them onward in even greater rushes until they climb higher and higher and the walls weaken and topple. And then the extraordinary silence of too much said, a hurtling of unheard words and a hand hard against my face. His, a tired face swimming at my eyes, resembling someone I had loved.

Stephen Massimilla A Light that Turns

1.
In sleep-warped windows, night
gowns fade
in like the *lapsus*
lingua of moths
on water.

2.
Confetti of moths
in yellow odysseys
around the spring theater,
where flags sough like skirts
that brush cold thighs.

3.
In the cold of the open eye,
spark of plane skips
like a lighthouse
in fog which lifts;
flash of snakes
through flesh-colored grass.

4.
The forsythia sheds
under clouds, its yellow
confetti in a light that turns everything—
house, road, fence—to tissue
paper,
adrift.

5.
In sparse wood, blue
darts: does God, like the crescent
of frost, know how
to undress
for the naked day?

Philip S. Holland Jump

The hangar sat like a section of silver corrugated pipe in a large green field. A straight, single-lane road bordered the field, together with waves of sagging telephone wires on tall brown poles. Enclosing the field on the far side were thick woods, the same height as the poles.

Michael paid the $150 at ten a.m., which meant that at three p.m. he'd be jumping out of an airplane. The older man who took his check had walked him into the hangar to do it. He'd placed the check in a green metal box. Michael watched his hands do it, then looked him over. The man was short and gray-bearded, with jeans rolled up at the ankles, perhaps sixty—the age of wisdom, one could hope, in a man who was running an airfield. He introduced himself as just Sullivan.

Driving to the airfield, Michael had reminded himself that he didn't have to do this, that he could turn around and go home. He thought the same thing when pulling the emergency brake, before getting out of the car. Maybe this idea of challenging himself to face a fear had not been the best idea after all. There had to be other ways to grow.

They went back outside and the training began. They sat in two folding chairs next to a long folding table, on top of which lay the knapsack that held Michael's parachute. The air was still and the sky was white, the first being good for minimizing drift, the second not so good: Michael had hoped for a literal birds-eye view of the beautiful October foliage, lit by sunshine. When Sullivan talked, his eyes would twinkle and he would stroke his long beard. He explained the plan. He listed what they would cover. He asserted how safe jumping was and how in all their years, his academy had never lost a person—beginner or expert. A few sprains, breaks even, but nothing worse. If you knew what to do and kept your wits about you, it was practically fail-safe.

Michael had expected to be asked why he had come and had wondered how his explanation would sound. Why do people usually do this? But Mr. Sullivan hadn't asked. Probably most of

the reasons offered him over the years had made him cringe, and now he'd rather not know.

They started with landings. Michael watched and listened intently. "Like this with your legs," Sullivan demonstrated, standing and pressing his knees and ankles together. "Never like this," and he spread his legs. "Like this and you break them. Now for the roll."

He stood atop one of the chairs, legs together, crossed his arms against his chest, and jumped. When he hit, his knees bent easily and he went down to one side. His feet seesawed, up then down. He stood and again crossed his arms. "You fall at about twelve miles an hour," he said, "about the same as if you jumped off this table, which you'll do in a moment. Your knees and ankles are together and your legs are relaxed, soft. When you hit, you let the momentum of the fall roll you without resistance. Just let it go." He eyed Michael briefly. "Now you try."

Michael stepped onto the chair.

"No, first from the ground."

Michael jumped and rolled, got up, tried it from the chair, then the table. So long as he didn't stiffen, there was zero pain. The force seemed to flow right through him.

"Good," Sullivan said. "Just remember: relax, have fun. This is about having fun."

Actually it wasn't. This was the opposite of fun. For Michael, the thought of an escalator was uncomfortable, a skyscraper walkabout nauseating, and hiking on steep mountains out of the question. Being afraid of heights made all such activities terrors. The only reason he was doing this (and he reminded himself many times during the day that, money paid or not, he could quit at any moment) was to face and overcome his fears. Also he liked the idea of challenging himself, making himself uncomfortable, shaking things up. He was only thirty, but was even more afraid of a life spent without brave ambition than of falling from 2,800 feet with nothing but a large piece of nylon to save him.

It had started when he was nine. His family was vacationing in Europe, at an old hotel. His father and mother had stepped out of the room momentarily. When they did, he went to the large casement window. He unlatched and pushed it open and sat on the wide ledge, left leg extended and right foot still on the floor. Below, five stories down, a large yellow striped awning jut-

ted toward the road, and beyond the road was a wide promenade and beach. Cars honked in succession and, though difficult to see in the white light reflected off the pavement, people walked in colorful bunches. Palm trees lined the promenade. After sitting in that position for a minute, he put his other leg up on the ledge too and leaned back against the frame. His weight sank to his behind and he momentarily wobbled, before settling. I could fall, he thought. He had been looking out across the road but now had the impulse to look directly down. A sensation made him tingle and his head almost spun. How easy it would be to fall. If his parents knew he was doing this, they would kill him. What would happen if he fell? He almost wanted to know. The ground beckoned, and he actually had to resist. Then he thought what if, just sitting here, I simply slipped or a gust of wind came and sucked me out? At that thought he became terrified and froze. For some reason, he was too afraid to move his legs off the ledge, and he realized that his back propped against the frame was the only thing keeping him in place.

The door to their room opened and his mother came back in. As soon as her eyes found him she gasped, then charged. She grabbed him and threw him onto one of the beds. "*What's the matter with you, you could be killed, don't ever ever do that again,*" she screamed and began to cry.

Ever since, he had been terrified of heights. Should he tell this to Mr. Sullivan? Sullivan was the expert and perhaps would tailor his advice if he knew. Perhaps he would arm Michael with tricks for how to process the upcoming and overwhelming fact of standing outside of an airplane, left foot on a small footrest and right foot hanging in space while you clasped the diagonal wing strut going sixty miles an hour, wind in your face, filling your mouth, wailing in the cut propeller, causing you to squint even though goggled, all before you voluntarily let go and then slid from a standing spread-eagle to horizontal. As Sullivan explained all this and they practiced the stance and release, Michael wondered what Sullivan would say if he revealed his problem. Could there be special advice? Maybe Sullivan would cancel the whole thing, not wanting to but reassessing the liability. Michael said nothing.

They moved on to the ripcords. The green pack had three ripcords: the real silver metal one, connected by cable to a large flap; a smaller green one below for the reserve chute; and an-

other black fake one in a pouch but attached to nothing. Because, falling, his task would be to pull only one of these (the black fake one—the main chute would open automatically by tether; the reserve should in no instance be pulled while the main chute is deploying, otherwise both chutes could tangle and he'd be left with nothing but a deadly streamer) by looking down and yanking the right one while his brain was objecting to even being in that situation, let alone having to make such a choice, it occurred to Michael once more that he didn't actually have to do this.

At one-thirty Sullivan let him go to lunch, which meant a drive down the road to the Snack Shack, a half-mile that Michael nearly extended into a trip home with the hunch that that was precisely Sullivan's intention: send them to lunch and hope they don't return. Instead he found himself pulling in and scrunching up the gravel driveway. Judging by how little else was around, airfield personnel had to be the Shack's only patrons. Despite its name, the structure itself had clean white clapboard sidings and a red tin roof and was surprisingly well landscaped. Stones shifted under Michael's feet as he approached. Somewhere high overhead the same airplane that Michael would abandon later whined softly before sputtering quiet, ready to unload, sounds that Michael had been hearing all day as background.

A man appeared in the open half-door, upper body only, like a horse in its stall. Michael wondered who would do this, sit out here all day to sell a few sandwiches. The man smiled down from the opening. He had a thin face and round glasses and looked intelligent. His hands rolled over each other, drying a glass.

"Hello there," Michael said.

"Hello," the man said. "Last meal?"

"I'm sorry?"

"Little joke. Just passing by or next door making a jump?"

Michael chuckled weakly. "Making my first jump. I'm on lunch break."

"Brave man." His arms kept in motion, drying one item after another. "How about a free soda to go along with your sandwich?"

"They say it's safe," Michael said.

With a slow broad smile the man said, "So what'll you have?" He pointed next to him.

Aside the opening was a large colorful piece of plywood with

the names of sandwiches, their ingredients and prices painted neatly. The prices were very low. The sandwiches had names like "Free Fall" and "Bounce." Where normally would be listed Side Orders, the list was entitled "Reserves."

"I'll take a 'Drop Zone,'" Michael said, selecting one that purported to balance nutrients akin to a popular diet.

He ate his half-sandwich (which explained the prices) at one of the picnic benches in front, half because the Snack Shack recommended light lunches. The man had gone back inside but later did look out, Michael noticed, as he drove away, probably to check the direction Michael would choose to travel down the road. It was silly, but it felt good to be seen turning back toward the field.

Again he found himself approaching Mr. Sullivan, who gave a friendly smile, perhaps in contradiction to Michael's theory about Sullivan's wanting him to go home. They began final preparations. His chute would be similar to a military chute—large, drab, and round—not the colorful square sport chutes Michael had seen popping open all day. Those chutes had the ability to accelerate forward, Sullivan explained, whereas all Michael would need was to maneuver left and right. This was important because you don't want to fly off into the woods or, worse, a power line. But don't worry, Sullivan reassured, in your helmet will be a one-way comm; you won't be able to talk to me but I'll be talking you down. Your arms will be extended up, holding the toggles. When I say left you'll pull down and hold with your left; same for right. Understood?

They revisited the ripcords. "Remember," Mr. Sullivan said, "you'll be on tether. As soon you step away, the main chute will begin to deploy. While that's happening, you look at your chest—definitely look at it, make sure you *see* it—and pull this one, the dummy. Henry, who'll be with you in the plane, will look to see if you can do it. Three jumps with a successful pull of the dummy and we'll let you free fall. But if you don't see it or can't look, *do not pull anything.* Nothing. Don't even put your hands there. If you reach down and pull the reserve, it's fifty-fifty we'll be notifying those folks on your waiver." Mr. Sullivan, so affable all day, was suddenly in earnest business mode. Michael appreciated the tone and rehearsed the move in his mind. Then he raised his arms and mimicked reaching down with his right hand to pull the dummy.

"The main chute will open no problem ninety-nine percent of the time," Sullivan said. "But if by chance it doesn't, I'll instruct you when to pull the reserve. But not till I say."

At last Michael met Henry, one of the regulars. Sullivan had to go into the hangar to get him, and when Henry came out he was smiling and eating an apple. He wore his red and yellow jump suit, and his red hair was tousled from wearing the cap. The expert jumpers at the club spent nearly all weekend there, making many jumps a day, usually from 15,000 feet.

"Henry is our most experienced jumper, the one who always accompanies the beginners. He packed your chute." Henry was maybe thirty also.

"Michael, is it?"

"Nice to meet you."

"George will be your pilot," Sullivan said. "He's on his way back down now. Once he taxis, you two will be next."

Henry smiled. Michael smiled even more brightly, both a reflection of nervous excitement and a mask to hide his own ambivalence. Truthfully, he was proud to be taking on something so frightening to him, just how frightening even he didn't yet know because, while having been at heights on many occasions, he had never sat at the open door of an airplane and then hung on its wing. Part of his fear was of his own unknowable reaction when faced with that situation, a fear too in part of what he would look like, not so much to George, whose back would be to him, but to Henry, who would see his face. Michael knew that once the plane left earth there was no turning back and that he would jump no matter what, that he wouldn't get up there and then ask to abort, couldn't whine or beg, that his last chance to quit was therefore fast approaching. Henry seemed to detect these thoughts, or perhaps, having encountered them so often, had assumed them, because he said, "Don't worry, if you get nervous I'll put you out there myself. You'll go." Apparently Henry was taking the view that it was better to be dead than a known chicken.

"How are you feeling?" Mr. Sullivan said.

"Great."

"Any last questions?" He still had his business tone. "No? Then let's get you suited up."

As they tugged at him and secured clasps, Michael looked up, away from their too close faces. The sky had brightened. Blue

holes appeared in places. In the nearby woods the sun inflamed patches of the treetops. A breeze rose as a shimmy in the trees, then as air on his face. As the three of them walked toward the white plane, its nose propeller buzzing loudly, Michael saw above it a long strip of blue on the horizon. His pack sat low, and his ears echoed inside the helmet. Henry stepped ahead, reached into the open jump door, and pulled out a short ladder, which hooked to the bottom of the opening. He jumped in without using the ladder and held out his hand for Michael.

Under the wing, the sound was fierce, both loud and muffled in the helmet. "*I'll be talking to you using my mike,*" Mr. Sullivan shouted with exaggerated lip movements. "*It'll sound like this,*" and he spoke into his hand. Quietly but clearly, "Have a great ride," filled Michael's ears. Then Sullivan shouted, "*Hear it okay?*" Michael nodded; Sullivan gave thumbs up.

The plane taxied. George was hunched half visible in the cockpit, and Michael sat with Henry in the belly against the wall opposite the door, which was now lowered and latched. The plane turned on the ground admirably almost in place. In the close space with Henry, conversation would be minimal for the noise. Henry crouched, holding fast to a swaying loop off the ceiling with one hand, like an orangutan, and alternated between looking out the windows, twisting to look at George, and smiling down at Michael. The propeller gave a deep steady purr, as Michael imagined a sated lion might. They swayed with the motion of the plane. Henry crabbed a step over, lifted the coiled tether, and clasped one end to the ceiling by the door. Michael's main chute had a clasp where the other end would go. He hugged his knees to his chest. He could no longer see the hangar out the little windows: it was now at his back. He saw the colored woods, mainly trunks, but could tell that the sun was out now even more. The light had gone from gray to orange.

Still they were on the ground, but not for much longer. When they hit the runway, George would gun it as Michael had heard him do all day, and a second later the plane would lift. Ever since boarding, Michael's heart had been skittering; now it pounded. He fixed a slight smile on his face. Realistically, he couldn't stop it now. They were about to take off and it would look ridiculous to beckon Henry to stop. Anyway, the odds were with him. No matter how afraid he was, he really was in little danger. Things did happen and a jumper never knew when they

might—especially a beginner whose prefrontal lobes, under stress, could malfunction, causing a terrible mistake—but not often. Then the propeller revved and jumped in pitch. Outside the woods flashed quickly, Henry was looking too, and then the runway let go and they floated momentarily before upward acceleration pressed Michael to the floor. The wheels ground and bumped into place.

Flying! Fear of heights or no, Michael had always liked the view from an airplane, that perspective that turned woods into fields of lichen and cities into circuit boards. As a boy, he had loved setting up model railroads, mainly for the chance to arrange the tiny trees, stone walls, and buildings. He looked behind him, out of one of the windows. He saw the road and telephone poles shrink; he found the little red roof of the Snack Shack.

For a brief moment, Henry's eyes searched anxiously inside the plane. Then his face relaxed and he crabbed by Michael and picked up a small metal ring with pieces of long orange material attached. *"This is to test the wind over the drop zone,"* he yelled. *"When we get to altitude, we'll circle once, George will cut engine, I'll open the door and drop this. We'll see how the wind takes it and judge where best to have you jump."*

It seemed to Michael that he had only just nodded when George turned and yelled, *"Altitude!"*

Henry crabbed to the door. He waited there a long while, then yelled to George, *"Little further."* He peered again out the window and yelled, *"Cut!"*

The roar ended, leaving only the rush of wind, which grew furious when Henry unlatched the door. Crouched in the opening, he dropped the flag. He leaned out with both hands pressing against the doorframe and watched the flag shoot behind them and down. He turned to Michael and smiled. Not having to shout so loudly now he said, "I can usually guess right every time." The engines revved again. Henry pulled the door down. Michael too crawled over to look out, and with the help of George's banking, they both watched the flapping orange material get smaller and smaller. Eventually it landed almost in the middle of the large green circle below.

"Every time!" Henry shouted. Then, *"We'll circle back to that point, then you're up. Let's get you tethered."*

Michael knew that although in real time it might take ten

minutes to circle, in felt time it would be seconds. And before he knew it, Henry was again unlatching the door. From here, it was a matter of the engines being cut and of stepping out into position below the wing and going. Once out there, you couldn't dally because a tardy drop might deposit you in the woods or electrocute you on the lines. The reality of the impending moment hit him. Michael wondered how much time Henry figured he'd take out there.

"*Cut!*" Henry shouted.

Michael felt a chill at his neck.

"*Sit here,*" Henry shouted.

Michael slid on his behind to the edge of the opening, until his feet were hanging heavily in the open air. The plane rocked gently. Henry crouched over Michael's shoulder and looked down. Michael let his eyes focus downward too. Far below slid the tiny silver hangar, the large open circle of green, and the greens, reds, and oranges of the woods all around. He felt again the weight of his feet dangling and instantly too felt that queasy sense of imbalance from over twenty years ago—and he was suddenly back on that hotel window ledge.

I could fall, he thought again, and experienced that same odd push-pull of attraction and horror at the thought, and the instantaneous sense of rejecting the attraction as a horror of its own, a character stain present so early in his psyche and still there, apparently, despite now inhabiting a body so much older. He rejected it as a flaw of mysterious and uncomfortable implications, but the rejection did not erase awareness of the feeling. What did it mean? How did he come by it so young? Why did he feel that way, then and even now? Then, as his weight settled further onto his hamstrings at the floor's edge, he suddenly knew what would come of today. He just knew that he would look back on today as the day of having gone toward that feeling, of no longer stiffening in rejection of it, but of accepting, exploring, embracing it as a part of himself that must be acknowledged first and then understood. Today would be a step away from whatever drove him to that ledge because it would be a step toward that feeling, and thus an act of generous discovery, of kind relief. He could relax with himself; he wouldn't have to run. He could take that step . . .

"Okay, my friend—it's okay to go," Henry said quietly, above him, so quietly and clearly that Michael assumed he must have

imagined it, and he turned sharply to look up into the wise, smiling face that looked back down serenely. Michael blinked and then saw none of those qualities, only grinning Henry.

"*Any time*," Henry shouted.

Michael faced back out and saw the wing and strut just before him. A calm had filled him and the sense that stepping out of that plane was nothing more than climbing out of bed in the morning. He found himself placing his left foot on the footrest and reaching out to grab the strut and then was facing forward, the wind in his face, though a remarkably pleasant, a much calmer wind than he had expected, more like sticking your head out of a car window. When he released, his thoughts did race, but he was aware enough to vaguely see the plane lift away as he folded his arms and looked at his chest. His belly began to sink from vertical to horizontal and he saw his chest, saw all three ripcords but didn't pull them because at that instant he heard a deep ruffling above him like a sail filling with wind, and he looked up, as instructed, to assess the quality of the opening and saw the massive billowing, the churning of air through resistant material, the too-slow filling of the canopy in a way that seemed wrong, the delay of the full circle. He wondered if there was a tangle and whether he'd have to cut away to the reserve and in that moment heard a surprising voice in his ear, surprising that a voice could find him here, thousands of feet above the earth, and the voice said, "Pu— . . ." but trailed off, and Michael waited, kept craning upward as the chute at last did blossom perfectly and he felt his descent slow. He reached up to hold the risers.

For the first time since stepping out, he looked down. The countryside—the greens, reds, and oranges, the road and wires, the few structures of silver and red—were all at his feet, feet that miraculously hung in space below him. He floated. He took it in. He looked all around, then far off and slowly across the horizon. An immense flush of pleasure and well-being filled him along with the sense of living a moment, complete unto itself, with neither past nor future. He relaxed into the floating. It hardly startled him to hear a loud snap, which he immediately remembered was just the automatic deployment device, designed to release the main chute in a failed free fall.

"Right toggle," the voice said into his ear, and Michael looked down and could see the tiny man standing at the edge of the drop zone near the hangar, near the table where they had

trained. He looked up into the cavern of the chute, released both toggles from the risers, and pulled down the right one. His body lifted gently and began rotating right. "That's good," the voice said. Then again, "Right toggle. Good." A breeze had been pushing him left, and Sullivan was facing Michael into it. He floated forward just enough to advance over the zone. Steadily everything grew larger, and Michael knew that in seconds he would be down. He wished he could float for a while longer. Next week or month, he would come and try again. He might even go so far as to free fall. But that would be it. After that, he wouldn't need more.

Below, Sullivan's upturned face grew larger and Michael pressed his legs together, bent them slightly, and relaxed. "That's it," he heard in his ear. For all that floating, the last stretch came very fast and the ground rushed up at him. When his feet hit, he rolled, and without pain stood again and let the chute settle. Sullivan jogged over to help remove the backpack before the chute could fill again. As he unstrapped and unbuckled, he did not return in kind Michael's broad grin, but he looked pleased. He seemed to understand something. By now the plane was down, with Henry running over yelling, "*All right*!" though still fifty yards away.

The feeling of floating remained as he turned in his car out of the airfield onto the road. It remained as he went past the Snack Shack, with the man visible in the open half-door, watching him.

Gladys Justin Carr has published her work in the *North Atlantic Review*, the *South Carolina Review*, the *Potomac Review*, and the *Meridian Anthology of Contemporary Poetry*, among many others. Her chapbook, *Augustine's Brain—The Remix*, will be published this coming fall.

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