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Ruth Daigon

Bittersweet

these are the falling years for us
we will go deep and remember
how we flew the ecstatic moments
and returned to a nourishing earth
and what we never knew we invented

daressed by a wind
stirring our deepest sleep
we walk the paths of earth
step by step stone by stone
until parachutes of light announced the dawn

youth was once a gift we could afford to lose
but now as the moments spin retreats
every day is strung
and restrung like broken beads

the storehouse of the past guards
the silken clefts of the body
the straight secret of the spine
the winged scapulae
with their recurrent hints of flight
and the blind hours before dawn to midnight's blaze

the heart recalls
the suddenness of trees
and flawless entrance of morning light
spring blooms and impermanent buds
flowers so fragile and generous
willing to fade
giving way to the fruits of summer

ripe and bursting to bloom
the juice flowing from within
abundant
and the rich life reaching down to the roots again
**A Distance Further Than Heaven**

In a world half remembered
a woman scrubbed sheets in the Monday washtub
a man hammered shingles in the leaky roof
a girl washed her hair in the kitchen sink
careful not to clog the drain
while in rooms of broken English
people hummed songs from another country
a music loneliness might sing to itself.

The old drowsed and dreamed
their blood circulating through used hearts
hands marinating the past
cracked voices recalling
how simple and warm it was
timeless and good however bitter the brew
where warnings passed on from father to child
became wisdom.

When time was forever now, we
listened to their stories
waiting for the oven to heat
the bread to bake
with no future to frighten us
or break our hearts
and no one to warn us
that freshly baked bread
would not keep us safe forever.

Even in the warmth of the wood-burning stove
with Father dozing over his Daily Worker
while mother stitched darkness into worn shirt collars
Restless, we longed for their permission to leave.
But in a small glass ball on the kitchen table
where it's always snowing
some part of us remains
in a dream of lost and secret storms
listening to the stillness of snow.
**Frozen Inside the Moment**

On scrubbed autumn days, nothing grows but absence. She's at the pond sighting wild geese overhead and the sun trapped in civilized ripples.

Along pond's perimeter a silence waits for winter. Slow currents prod a scum of leaves from one shore to another.

Frost sets in with its brittle stalks and helpings of salt hay. Winds blow in the same bare place. Winter's breath adds another layer to the year.

Fixed in that perfect tense like a bird hanging midair Frozen inside the moment, she surrenders to the silent population of the snow.

The weather vane grinds on its swivel. Her eye blots out images of green, finding comfort in bare limbs. A snowflake resting in her palm makes of her life a crystal moment.

She's wrapped in frost-thinned moonlight and a twilight of voices humming love songs, birth songs, death songs. All the melodies she left behind return and take her into their arms.
Time Warps

Walking tames the wilderness.
Inching over a segment of soil, we find
dill growing wild through sidewalk cracks.
and we can almost hear the voices of the dead
made perfect by their absence

We walk familiar fields.
Choose a tree.
Count the leaves and branches
down to invisible roots deep in earth

These are the clear days
fragile as air
where the hours grow pale
just below the ribs of night.

We live in collusion with the sun
and conspiracies of light
and climb secretive into the atom's heart
while the sky's perimeter draws near and nearer.

After the summer heat
the sun floats pale moving inward
withdrawing its rays
its ring of steady warmth
while the years burn down to autumnal heart beats
and the black honeycombs of generations
fall between the dried leaves covering the earth

Let them go
Let them all go

Between a hard rim of daylight
and the trough of night
swift seizures of dark appear and disappear
and time means nothing at all.
Dark Duet

lovers creates their own patterns
as they move through light
reaching for the stillness

locked in parallel dimensions
trust their feet
the arms extensions
the wrapped hearts
a fierce joy spilling from them
in spasms of delight

their bodies forget time and place
and without effort
shake off the cadence of the hours

leaning hard into each other
they move in abstract figures
he spins her out
and brings her back
holding her body tight until he knows it by heart

in a dream of possibilities
a touch more than touch
they become artless motion
gestures purer than language
in the dark duet they now perform

where the passion lies in absence of passion
and deep movements from a crimson center
the bodies learn their sweet particulars
reaching for the beat below the beat
the tender compromise

breaking through a flow in time
the pure silk of movement
they surrender and extend
in exuberant gestures
and sensuous rhythms of the dance
Repositioning the Mattress

We pivot around each other
not even our shadows collide.
Dust lifts and settles like the first
snow as we shift through
margins of air and islands of time.

Flipping it over, each wrist
with its bracelet of flesh,
each finger shaped by its bone, we're
upending the days,
exploring the spaces between.

After the long night and porcelain dreams,
after rivers of sleep, morning
hangs by a thread.
Face to face, we imagine our bodies
stored in hollows,
secret deposits deep in the foam.

The day has no beginnings-
sky goes everywhere at once
in turquoise innocence.
Warmth rises. Sweat gleams
and the echo of our interlocking rhythms
pulse through vacant rooms.

This house is what it is,
each wall stands alone
each window with a sky of its own
and we are reaching backwards, love,
in a seethe of memories
that ache like static from another world.

This old mattress grown heavy with meaning,
lopsided with usage,
slopes into a cave
where we tumble like children
in salt waters of the heart.
The Young Dead

in memoriam to all the young victims of war

in the blue fires of midnight
we weep for the children
we will never meet

little naked ghosts
that will not know warmth
or filaments of memory

there is no loneliness like theirs
nothing for them to do but
circle the long days
in the green countries of the mind
still visible but forever out of reach.

we sense the air blowing through cracks in our lives
each night dreams tilt the ancient light of stars
and shift positions toward the young dead
never changing or aging
now perfect in their absence

we watch the young asleep in a universe
just outside our arms
and if they dream a moment
they will see us there
smiling in an older language
waving them on with casual hands and shuttered hearts

and when we step out of our bodies
our spirits will stand guard
until the moon opens her white lips
and welcomes us
Tenant

Like an ideal tenant
the bullet fits precisely in the wound,
closer than a friend,
a relative, a lover.

Removing it, what can we
give the body in exchange
to accommodate it
half so well?

Always the unexpected caller,
it only sleeps with strangers,
ever fails to find the perfect host,
and it in turn

becomes the perfect guest
bringing no gift but itself,
demanding nothing. Lying
cradled in the flesh,

never struggling to emerge,
cushioned in that hollow
as if it knew each curve,
it wraps itself in silence
A Whiff of Chaos

in a caesura between now and then
she clings to the time
when looking back was sweet
a dream of open space
of nights fragrant with feathers
and a carapace of stars
instead
there are snapshots soaked in vinegar and honey
the failed revolution and days gone to scrub
the car's lost in long term parking
her pockets flapping inside out
there's dust to water down
sheets to air
and the mirror no longer casts its spell
but
so far the sky's still there
sunlight climbs from the latest dark
as the new day hovers like surprise
and before she lies in the stone throat of sleep
she breathes scent of buds nippling from branches
of ripe mornings random as vines
or listens to the terse comments of rain,
the hovering business of hummingbirds
and marvels at the luster of lightning bugs
or a thread of spittle sparkling in a cat's yawn.

it's the best that she can do
not much
unless
it's everything
Music to Make Your Rib Harp Sing

Morning rises from the slot of earlier mornings heavy with green counterpoints of sound swelling the air with grace or harmonies freezing the soul

and below the sieve of heaven intoxicating calm and music inviting us to enter the wild light and call it love

After all the unbridled cadenzas let the air circulate let the light enter let the quiet fold in upon itself

Before the unending flow and spiraling echoes let there be intervals older than time alphabets of silence and the quick breath of the moon

Birds on windowsills telegraph their hunger as a worm sings in the throat of a robin.

Priests in Naples are blinding songbirds to make them sing gloriously on Saint's days.

The ocean glistens with a thousand voices, the shore foaming harmonies

and the blood pumping toward the heart.
In My Body of Skin

When I was a nightingale I sang
When I was a serpent I swallowed
My voice spume blown from a wave
a sound too thin for earthworms

With memories older than Prometheus
I remember the time when time was birthed
the sky appeared
sudden light wind and water
where blind valves closed
on a single grain of sand

In my body of skin of moss of clover
I touch fingers to fingers
   lips to lips
   the exposed tip of the heart

Seed work sun work earthwork
If pansies are for thoughts
I pick them early in the morning
so they last

Lake-summer days I climb the hill
drink the sky and pose like Millet's peasant
listening to an invisible lark

With a pocketful of seeds I sit
peeling an orange under a static sun
attentive to the sound of pine cones clicking open

The child sleeps in my shadow
and walks beside me
following from birth
moving as I move
We cling together like small animals

The well is dry the cup empty
and gravity is a long way down
On the Brink

She knows the art of lying still,
sleeping with the invisible in the windless
dark and bedded warmth of night.

She knows the little hauntings, the old scenery
waiting in the wings, the moon on a thread,
the slow swing of the year.

She knows how to wait with the cicadas
for seventeen summers and sing without promise
until the white weather of dreams.

She knows childhood's land of sticks and stones,
fluid days, and how to lie in snowy fields
leaving behind corpses of angels.

She knows how the old spend their days
arranging comb, brush and last night's
news while moonlight seeps through windows.

She knows when the tide comes in, waves
lapping at her feet and she
on the brink of everything she does not know.
Priority Mail for My Sons

I mailed you an extra year
from another country
where wooden sidewalks
end in cinder paths

where privies lean
a little more each year
and morning light falls
weightless on rain barrels

Enclosed you'll find a Chevy
with running boards
a Burma Shave sign
that points the way you'll

travel years from now
I've wrapped with care
the smell of citronella
camphor and cod liver oil

the gramophone scratching out
Hi-Di-Hi's and Bye-Bye-Blues
A blade of grass to whistle through
a fortress at the beach

a woolen bathing suit that
shrinks an inch each season
It's just arrived and waiting
at the back door of your life


Fusing Silence

In the province no one visits, she's still waiting to be born. I can almost feel her breath brushing by me like a dark wish hear the lullabies burrowed deep in time when I lay under stars small fires, waiting under sun's spiral, waiting under vacant wash of sky beyond barriers of sight, waiting.

If I empty my head of names If I empty my pocket of coins If I empty my shoes will I feel the imprint of a palm or hear a voice that fuses silence?

In thought's last extravagance we reach toward each other intent and unaware, and I imagine fears that shape her nights until the world leaps back to brightness.

Yet, she never quite appears even in the down drop of sleep and the moment is never the moment where grace begins.

In the dream she's above me leaning into the pond. From the still, clear water I stare up mouthing her words.

As I drift on the current and beyond, she follows sinking a stone through me then extends her hand. We exchange places.
Water covers her eyes, her mouth.
I inhale her and I am cold.
Peering into the blue façade
I shield my eyes.
One reflection kisses, the other kills.

She sinks through amber depths
into green awareness and then
rises to the surface
singing of a more transparent time.

Night rises like dark wine.
Under the moon's s bald eye,
we float together, the shadow
of one lying darkly on the other.
The Sweet Swindle of Spring

A door slams, a child leaves
looking over her shoulder
and the old left behind
look for gifts hidden in mirrors
in this village
where all the locks open with one key

Leaning back on the knees of soil
under the moon's ivoried light
the earth sighs and settles
dirt ripens

green holds the hill
as our visions grow tender
and the great millstone of heaven
grinds exceedingly slow, exceedingly fine.

A woman opens her throat to the moon.
Her breath descends like a veil on a stone flower.
Her songs echo the sweet swindle of spring
where birds flutter like lost messages

where the river's dark arms are so inviting
and night blooming flowers spread their petals like
the soft mouths of women
saying something wonderful.
**Night's Other Country**

Before the great wind's come and the white noise of night, we'll cut loose from clocks and stand in fields spread out to nowhere singing mantras.

Before the quiet waits in garments of good bye, we'll bridge the silence of guitars and float sound to its center.

Before hours burn to ash, we'll wrap ourselves in wind, in raw strips of light, our bodies wild as vines.

Before land's end, we'll swim in all the rivers of the sky and drown in sunlight, inhaling love as sweet as candlewick.

Before our final season, let it be summer resonant with wings, vermouth of old sunrises, mountains growing slowly in the rain the light around us ripe and round and if it dies out, let it be extravagant, a marvel of darkness in night's other country.
Commentary: From Singer to Poet

"Why" and "how" I moved from music into poetry. The transition from music to poetry came out of necessity. We had been living in New York City and the New York area where contacts and jobs were plentiful: tours, TV, several years on NY's Camera Three, more years as soprano soloist With The New York Pro Musica Antiqua where we specialized in Renaissance Music. Actually the world of music and the world of poetry may have met and it may have been prophetic when I sang at Dylan Thomas's funeral. I was very busy with everything New York had to offer. When we moved to the wilds of eastern Connecticut because my husband was going to teach at the University of Connecticut, the possibility of access to performances slowed down plus I now had two children and I couldn't just abandon them somewhere and take off. Although the University and the Hartford area (recitals, guest artist appearances with the Hartford Symphony and several concert appearances) were still available to me, it was nowhere like living a New York career. I felt the necessity to use my surplus energy and since I had always enjoyed writing whether it was a diary, descriptive account of all my adventures, letters to friends etc. Since I was always comfortable with a pen between my fingers, it made think of other possibilities. Also, since every song is based on a poem and since I had covered three or four centuries of vocal music and sang in six languages, I was very much aware of the importance and appeal of poetry. It was almost natural to supplement my life in music with my growing interest in poetry.

At my husband Art's subtle suggestion, I plunged into poetry. When I started performing, it was rather a heady feeling not to rely on Mozart and Schubert.... but on my own compositions (at whatever stage they were), a rather exciting transition.

The main influence on my writing, was, of course my lasting love of music. The sound and flow of my poetry, the rhythm (See "Night's Other Country"), the cadence, and its lyric quality was given direction by my allegiance to music.

A few years later, it became rather lonely sitting at my desk since musical performances depended on working with an instrumental accompaniment (piano, Chamber music, orchestras...). I realized I needed the stimulation of others. When it was suggested that I make contact by publishing a little mag (Poets On:), I thought "Why not? It may be an adventure." And it was.
The reason I stressed the movement from music into poetry, not so much because of the obvious relationship, but because a person can move from any area of interest or necessary work into poetry. If they're fortunate enough to go to school and learn from knowledgeable, exciting teachers, that's fine. But nothing should stop them from entering the area of poetry because of "lack of education." Dana Gioia, has often advised people to "do something else by removing yourself from the narrow confines of one approach and opening yourself up to other experiences. This will result in growth and a new kind of knowledge you can bring to your poetry."

There were no shortcuts to becoming a poet. I went back to the way I studied and learned to become a singer, and I used everything I knew about music to discover Poetry. In the performance of a Schubert lied the emotion is always carefully controlled and the tone as well. You give less but convey the feeling of great depth and an even greater reserve of energy. Imagine a Wagnerian soprano attacking a sensitive little Schubert lied. A few high C's or a thunderous crescendo and poor Schubert lies slaughtered on the stage.

All of these musical imperatives of tonal control (see "The Young Dead"), technical skill, the feeling of power and energy and power under restraint, were very useful when applied to the making of a poem. Musical control, translated into the realm of poetry, means not squeezing the emotional content out of each word, but letting the phrase carry itself. You have to let go of that all-too-familiar feeling. "Look, Ma, I'm dancing!" and hold back every obvious gesture or phrase. This means trusting your own skill, your own control, and trusting in the poem itself.

Lyric poetry is often synonymous with a passionate outpouring, a singing, a saying... The Poet may feel that to restrain or modify the emotion is to somehow betray the depth of feeling. However, the greater the extent of the passion, the more appropriate it is to harness and control such energy. A little understatement makes the poem more powerful not only cognitively but affectively. A good singer doesn't bear down on each note and squeeze it dry to make certain the audience "gets it". In the same way, a poet should avoid over embellishing a poem. A wild fling into emotionally overwrought language can ruin a poem.

Also, the poet should respect his or her audience and give them a chance to bring their own knowledge to the poem just as a musician must allow the audience to hear the music without too many program notes. Each reader calls upon his/her own experience to understand or interpret a poem. Once the poem is published and opened up to others, the author should expect changes in meaning, in interpretation and affect. There are as many shades of meaning as there are readers and each has the right to interpret the poem according to their experience as long as the disciplines and demands of the text are not violated.
I developed what appeared to be double vision (see "Tenant"), an ability to see and report one set of phenomena in terms of another and to write lines having multiple meanings and elements of ambiguity all of which call for the reader's closer reading of the text.

Using the rhythmic discipline of music, I consider the cadence and tone of each word. The way a phrase curves between two commas is similar to the way music curves between two bar lines. All of these qualities contribute to making the poem mean something not only cognitively but affectively. I am always experimenting with sound, attempting to read music into every day experiences.

One such simple, very early experiment came about this way. I was sitting at the kitchen table wondering what to write about and listening to the kitchen sounds, and this happened:

She listens to domestic static
of fat sizzling on skillets,
dissonance of knives and forks
as light bulbs hum through
sudden arias of soap bubbles,
suck and swell of water gurgling down drains
to the rock and roll of slatted blinds

Nothing to get excited about...but a beginning.

Also, I came from a large family of immigrants who arrived in Canada early in the 20th century. My grandmother had fifteen children, and they all begat and begat. Years later, we children would sit around listening to all these family fables. There was a time when we grew bored with them and couldn't wait to grow up and leave home. And of course, when the time came, I wrote about what I knew, what was important to me. Those old family stories.

Reading the news, an article, a phrase, a headline can engage you. Certainly what's going on in the world is enough to grab you. And if there is too much for me to handle, there's always a notebook to fill so I don't miss out on anything.

How was I able to combine my two passions? I created Song-Poems. My first attempt was "Cultural Exchange." Briefly, my first teacher in Toronto introduced me to the German lieder, Schubert, Schumann, Mozart, Wolf....and then he introduced me to the voice of one of the greatest singers of that period. I was mad about her. Bought her recordings. Went to her recitals and studied much of her repertoire. When I came to New York and was engaged to sing with Pro Musica, the conductor told me his friends Leonard Bernstein recited a terrible tale. My wonderful soprano had been the girlfriend of Heinrich Himmler, one of
the most vicious Nazis. I quit listening to Elizabeth and vowed never to hear her again. But on the eve of her retirement I went to hear her final concert in New York. She was still magnificent and I melted.

The poem that resulted from this experience addresses the puzzle of artistic sensibility cohabiting with the horrors of genocide. But it is also a poem of my artistic conscience, of the intersection of my life as a singer and a poet. The solution came almost easily to me. First, I described this marvelous song recital (and I sang her songs) and then I had horrendous concentration camp scenes running parallel with the music. The songs were used as an ironic commentary upon the content of the poem. The two forms running parallel to one another evoked the best and the worst of German culture. A culture that could create incomparable music and one that could create incomparable cruelty.

**Cultural Event**
*(a soprano sings her lieder celebrating life and love while exterminators work on final solutions)*

Our season tickets stamped on our wrists,
we sit among the perfumed furs and patent leather
in our striped uniforms, waiting.

She appears.
Opening chords lift off
like birds flying backwards.

Long skeins of sound
wrap loosely around listeners.
Himmler nods, applauding
from his private Berlin box.

*Bist du bei mir*
*Gehe ich mit Freude*
*Zum Sterben und zu meiner Ruh (Bach)*
*Zum Sterben und zu meiner Ruh*

She spins music out of its dark cocoon.
Phrases glow brighter than
searchlights on prison towers.

High notes, strict as flames in burning synagogues
singe us in our seats
Her burnished voice,
her tempos locked in marrow,
the even rhythm of her breath
moves us toward the showers.

Wenn die Lieb aus deinem blauen
hellen, offnen Augen zieht
Den fur Lust hinein zu Schauen
Mir in Herzen Klopft und gluht (Mozart)

She sings of spring melting shards of winter,
of summer burning along branches
of seeds spiraling to earth
as light as babies falling in slow motion
into soft beds of soil.

Guten Abend, gute Nacht
mit Roslein gedacht
schlaf immer mein Kind

The texture of he voice
rubbed smooth by each new season-
ours grown thin as parchment

Now she carves sound
out of a country of bare surfaces
where we pound rocks into pebbles
paving roads to Treblinka Auschwitz,
Bergen-Belsen, Buchenwald.

And when she sings of love,
hidden circuits warm our bodies
packed in vats of ice.

Mein Madchen hat ein Rosen Mund
Und Wehr sie sehen wird gesund
O du, O du O du
O du schoenes Magdelein (Brahms)

The audience rises with applause,
the stage buried in bouquets.
She bows.
But from somewhere in the wings,
a voice hums lullabies of barbed wire
and the string quartet rests between numbers
waxing their bows.

The next song poem again juxtaposed several realities. This was triggered by the University's program involving the students and faculty families working with the patients at the nearby Mansfield Training Center, an institution that housed people of all ages that were incapable of taking care of themselves or had no family help. Their problems ranged from the physically disabled to those who suffered severe mental dysfunction. On spring Sundays a busload from the training center joined the picnicking students and young families to listen to some of the local jazz musicians. The bus unloaded and the broken beings formed a crooked line across the picnic grounds to their special seats. The sun on my head. The joyful noise in my ear. And the sight of our guests made me feel that we were all in a Fellini movie where nothing but good times were here.

**Jazz and the Training School Patients**
*(a summer concert on the campus of a Connecticut university attended by patients from a nearby institution)*

*Summertime and the livin' is easy.*
*Fish are jumpin' And the cotton is high.*
*O your daddy's rich*
*An' your ma is good lookin'*

floats over the long procession led by a man thumping air where a drum lies buried,
followed by crutches welded to armpits, twigs propped in wheel chairs and husks on stretchers.
A Frisbee skims past the slow moving line where one man holds a blade of grass to whistle through,
another hugs a ghost, a boy with a chest full of arrows stalks a woman scattering crumbs.
When a lame girl performs her three-legged dance,
heads balloon out of surgical collars.

*Get your hat and get your coat*
*Leave your worries on the doorstep*
*jus direct your feet to the sunny*
*side of the street...*

Washes over skulls nodding to the rhythm
but each one drools a private tune. An old man
curls up on a nipple of notes. Another
swims through the clover with a drowning splash.

I got rhythm, I got music, I got my man.
Who could ask for anything more?
I got daisies in green pastures

sends a child rabbit-hopping into an attendant's arms
and an old woman scrubs the air clean of sound.

O when the saints go marchin' in
O when the saints go marchin' in
I'd like to be in their number
When the saints ...

nudges them to their feet, they hook their crooked shadows on
shuffling into place for the slow march back.

My career took off and one of the delightful ditties kept bouncing through my
head because we were on the verge of marriage, living in Greenwich Village in
New York City and life was perfect.

A Fresh Cadence

It was a lover and his lass
with a hey and a ho and hey nonny no
And a hey nonny nonny no

awake i run my hands
along the flesh I know
better than my own
your body turns
curves against my back
matching perfectly
our mouths shape words
into a new language
stored in linen
for the slow years ahead

shadows stitch the night
we are in a different country
i let my fingernails grow
paint my eyelids blue and invoke
long nights in our fifth floor
village walk-up above Italian
shouts and smells where a thin
thread of sun hovers in a life
of cool mornings
scorched afternoons and naked
nights dreaming of feathers

we know how the seasons insist
how dark eyes of water
glitter through grass in spring
how the heart tugs at the end of September
how December's crust leads us back
to frozen footsteps and idling light

but in the suck of the dark
from sweet ruin to resurrection
through planetary nights
when our bodies drift toward each other
in our private room with windows
there is no elsewhere
only moments of grace.
Road Test

People jump wide of the vomit on the ER floor. “Ugh” someone yelps, others shield their eyes. Morris wants a closer look. He pulls on the black-framed bifocals that hang from his gobble neck, leans on his mop, crouches low until his knees crackle. He’s certain now: snow peas and baby shrimp. He glowers at the Intern, who’s complaining to a nurse. “Clyde did this,” says the Intern, pointing to the homeless drunk snoring on a rusty stretcher nearby, in a cubicle where no one has bothered to draw the curtain. “It’s too good a meal,” Morris announces, shaking his head. “This is yuppie puke.” Morris knows he sounds overly serious, like a salty detective, but Clyde is an ER frequent flyer who prefers alcohol to shellfish.

The Intern’s lips tighten against his white teeth. “And you are?” he asks.

Morris’s pushes himself upright, achingly, making the most of his 5 feet 8 inches. He spreads his arms, draws attention to his gray uniform. “I’m the night shift janitor.”

“Ahh,” says the Intern, as if nothing more needed to be stated.

Head down, Morris diligently mops up the mess, regret in his strokes as the evidence vanishes. Once finished, he stacks bricks of new paper towels in his once muscular arms and makes the rounds restocking dispensers. Morris roams the ER freely, his presence both obvious and invisible, like the walls. Occasionally, someone says “hi” with a bemused grin, or “what’s up” and doesn’t wait for the answer. Not one “welcome back,” though. His wife Tess had recently died. This evening is his first shift as a widower.

Because he considered Tess his counterweight, his life has now taken on a steep tilt. She worked as a school librarian. She believed children were containers of promise and hope, and she took her responsibility to inspire them very seriously. When she read Dr. Seuss the kids sat star struck, cross-legged and barely breathing; she looked deeply into each set of eyes, not having to read the words because they were engrained in her head. When the doctors described the infecting bacteria as resistant to the many antibiotics they’d tried, she was stronger than he. She responded in a weak whisper. “Resistant? Like hippies?” She winked at Morris. “In my lungs/in my pee/in my blood/ they won’t let me be.”
From the sink across from Clyde’s stretcher, Morris watches him sleep. Privacy is an illusion in the ER, Morris thinks guiltily, aware of what he’s doing. He tugs on the curtain to close it. The overhead track rattles when he does, and Clyde snaps awake.

“Who’s there?” Clyde growls, hugging a plastic Gap bag stuffed with his belongings. Morris jumps away. Clyde throws off the thin white sheet. His dark hound-dog eyes bulge. His jeans are soaked with piss. His fingers lap the blotch from his crotch and inner thigh. Their eyes lock. “Who did this?” Clyde screams. People wearing scrubs and white coats pass by. They shoot him a glance but don’t stop.

The Intern rushes over. “What now, Clyde?” he asks.

“Nothing,” says Clyde, scrambling back under the white sheet. Outside, a snowstorm rages. Clyde wants to stay the night, to be forgotten until morning.

The Intern finds Clyde’s wrist and counts his pulse. “You’re looking better.”

“I’m beyond better,” Clyde says, nervously picking at a scab on his sun-burnt nose. “I’m in withdrawal.”

The Intern shines a penlight into Clyde’s darting eyes. “You’re still drunk. How can you be in withdrawal?”

“Not drunk enough,” says Clyde, proudly.

The Intern raises Clyde’s dirt-creased hands, palms down, and contemplates the tremors. Morris shakes his head. Even he knows to check for tongue fasciculations. They can’t be faked as easily as tremulous hands.

The Intern scans the ER. Patients on stretchers hug both sides of the hallway; friends and family, nervous and petulant, stiffly stand guard. “I’ll give you something to calm you down,” he tells Clyde, “and check on you in a few hours.”

Clyde sighs, nestles beneath the sheet. Morris slams the towel dispenser closed, smirking, impressed with Clyde’s performance. Clyde could also roll his eyes high into his head so it appeared his sockets were filled with ping-pong balls. This singular talent always earned him an ambulance ride to the ER during bitter New York winters.

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The sharps box is overstuffed. A nest of bloody needles block the narrow mouth from sliding closed. Morris cringes. The sharps box is a hard plastic container that should never be filled beyond the three-quarter mark. Needles, scalpels, and syringes are disposed there so others don’t get accidentally pricked and possibly infected. Morris dreads this task ever since Tess fell ill. He suspects he may have carried the infection home with him, acquired perhaps from chores such as this one; no one believes a healthy fifty year old woman contracted outlaw microbes from *The Cat in the Hat*.

Clyde calls Morris in a raspy whisper. “Where have you been? I missed you.”

This saddens Morris. Only Clyde had noticed that he’s been gone for four weeks.

“Morris?” Clyde calls louder. “Snake me a meal.”

“Not now,” he says, pinching each needle and dropping it to the bottom of an empty sharps box at his feet. IV needles, butterfly needles, thread-thin insulin needles.

“C’mon. Morris.”

“Damn!” Morris curses under his breath. He rips off the glove, rubs his palm.

“Carefull!” warns Clyde. “There’s nasty shit in those needles.”

Morris examines the skin. No puncture marks, no blood; only shell-hard calluses. His pale blue eyes glass over. He squeezes his hands into new latex gloves. Double gloving doesn’t stop the memories from flooding his head. “How is it that I’m not sick?” Morris had asked the infectious disease doctor. The stern woman removed her round eyeglasses, rubbed tired eyes that had been mournfully focused onto Tess, by now comatose, supported by a ventilator. “Consider yourself lucky.”

Where is this luck? Morris asks himself. He hopes Tess will somehow drop clues for him. In case she does, Morris wants to make certain she’ll find him. He follows the same routine as when she was alive. He walks to work through Washington Square Park. He stops at Kievs on the way home, orders barley soup and picks up the Daily News. He fills the coffee maker with Maxwell House, Tess’s favorite, as if she’s still asleep in their bed, waiting to be waked with a kiss, the beginning of her day marking the end of his. Be grateful that you’re alive, Morris tells himself. But he feels far from lucky. He transfers enough needles so the lid can be
securely closed, the infectious threat locked away, and with a pang of jealously watches how easily Clyde drifts back to sleep.

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Morris trudges about refilling each liquid soap dispenser. Strangely, the gallon jug feels heavier after each stop. His body tells him it must be getting late. He catches the Intern nudging Clyde awake. “It’s 4a.m., time for your road test.”

Morris stops what he’s doing. He wants to watch. The “road test” involves walking the crowded hallway without stumbling. Hardened alcoholics require a measure of alcohol in their bodies to idle smoothly. Sometimes when the level in their blood drops to what the law considers safe, they’ll shake and sweat and go into withdrawal, which can lead to DTs and death. Knowing when to discharge these patients requires keen and delicate judgment. You don’t want them completely sober, only sober enough. If the slurred speech improves, if they can walk steadily and confidently, they’re considered ready to leave the ER and negotiate the two blocks to the liquor store.

“How about breakfast?” Clyde asks.

The Intern scratches his golden hair. It looks stylish even mussed up. “Let’s go.” Morris moves from sink to sink. The Intern stops him, asks if he’ll speak with Clyde.

“I’m only a janitor, remember,” Morris answers acidly. “Get someone else.”

“But it seems you’re friends.”

“What makes you think that?” asks Morris, continuing his work.

“I’ve seen you talking.”

“Do you consider everyone you talk to a friend?” Morris asks, noticing that Clyde was looking towards them, a quizzical expression on his puffed, rounded face.

“He won’t leave unless I give him breakfast.”

“Then feed him.”
The Intern breathes fast. “There’s nothing wrong with him. He’s abusing the ER.”

Morris hands the Intern a paper towel, gestures for him to wipe the sweat dotting his forehead. “I don’t see abuse. The ER doesn’t look black and blue to me.”

“I don’t want to feed him. It will encourage him to come back.”

Morris slips his bifocals to the tip of his nose, takes a hard look at the Intern’s face, shakes his head. He gave the same disapproving look to his daughter. She screamed at him for letting the doctors kill Tess, though there was nothing more the doctors could do. “Stop torturing her,” he finally told them. “She wouldn’t have wanted this.” Now, while the Intern contemplates strategy, appearing as wounded and perplexed as his daughter did, Morris slips Clyde a cheese sandwich, on the sly, like a Washington Square Park drug dealer, then begins emptying trash baskets.

Clyde still refuses to get off the stretcher. The Intern, now indignant, hoists him upright. Clyde lunges for the sheet but the Intern yanks him forward. He notices Morris looking on. “Don’t just stand there,” he says. Clyde’s wide eyes scream the same thing.

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Morris and the Intern escort Clyde down the busy hallway, arm and arm, through a tunnel of whispers and stares. The urine has fermented for a few hours. People aggressively pinch their noses. Clyde shuffles his feet, knees crossed, head slung low. “Let me go,” he says out the corner of his cracked lips.

“Keep moving,” warns the Intern.

“Morris?” Clyde hisses.

Morris’ tight hold on Clyde slows the procession. For years he’s observed this ritual, but he’s unprepared for the wall of eyes, the torch stares, the shame. The walk is a ruse, he realizes. It doesn’t test whether patients are sober enough to leave the ER. It’s a parting dose of humiliation to deter them from coming back. He squeezes Clyde’s arm. It’s unclear who needs holding up. He did the same to the doctor who asked if Tess would have wanted “aggressive measures.” What did he know? She rescued ladybugs that wandered in from their fire escape garden, gave pesky flies an open window and not a swap with a rolled magazine.
Clyde is silent; the only sounds the shush, shush of duct tape reinforcing sock heals. Blown light bulbs darken the furthest end of the hallway. They make a hairpin turn, pass through the harsh, whispering crowd one more time.

“Good job,” the Intern declares buoyantly. “You’re ready to fly solo.”

Clyde breaks away, rushes to his stretcher, shuts the curtain. When he reappears, the white sheet is swathed around his waist. Holding his bag, Clyde walks slightly bent towards the Exit sign. The glass doors part. Morris watches Clyde get swallowed by tongues of swirling snow.

“He’ll freeze,” Morris tells the Intern, who gives him a dismissive look.

“It’s an ER, not a bed and breakfast,” says the Intern.

Morris listens to doctors talk about exciting cases, the “great saves.” But caring for Clyde didn’t make them feel good. The doctors said letting Tess die was the right move. But they were stumped, frustrated, and perhaps relieved to finally see her go.

Morris gets his mop, wheels over the bucket, starts cleaning around Morris’ abandoned stretcher. He finds a puddle of urine.

“Who did this?” asks Morris. He waits for a response. Nothing.

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An hour later, the medics wheel Clyde back into the ER. He sits high in the stretcher, beaming. “You liquored up already?” the Intern asks.

Clyde blows a laugh. “I’m back for breakfast.”

“No food. Forget it.” He waves Morris over. “Make Clyde disappear.”

“Do it yourself. Get your own hands dirty.”

To Morris’ surprise, the Intern abruptly steers Clyde to a spot just to the side of the sliding glass doors, as if being left curbside, free for anyone who wanted him. Morris watches Clyde lay his pink, wind-chilled cheeks against the pockmarked
wall. He walks over, mop in hand. He looks around. When certain no one is watching he cuffs Clyde across the back of the head.

“What the hell?” says Clyde, one eyebrow arching.

“You pissed on the floor. Like a dog.”

“You helped that kid walk me like a dog,” he snaps.

Morris swallows hard. “You pissed on my floor,” he says, “You pissed on me.”

Clyde stutters, then stops and lowers his eyes. He appears repentant, beyond despair. “I pissed my pants, Morris. I’m a fuckin’ grown man and I pissed my pants.” Clyde rifles through his bag. “Oban,” he says to Morris, “Fifty bucks a bottle. Take it.”

Morris turns the bottle upside down. Empty. But the idea of scotch warms his chest. He relaxes enough to recognize how complicated his loneliness is. The decision to let her die won’t go away. He doubts himself constantly, not the decision, but the reasoning behind it. Was he really looking out for Tess, or was it a self-conscious attempt to impress the doctors, show them that he was an educated man capable of making life and death decisions? It’s strange, but part of him doesn’t want to find a solution to this question. Not in the immediate future anyway. The doubt torments him, but contemplating that doubt keeps Tess in his life.

Morris can’t confess this to Clyde, a homeless drunk he barely knows. He returns the bottle of Oban. “Put it back in your bag,” he tells Clyde. “You’ll need it.”

Clyde wearily straddles the stretcher rails, jumps down. Silvery ice-crystals crust the crotch of his jeans. The stench is gone. “I’m leaving,” Clyde yells to the Intern, loud so everyone could hear it. “You didn’t make me any better.”

The Intern strides towards them, face engorged. “You don’t want to get better,” he cries. He bites his lip, rubs his temples. “I don’t have the energy to play this game.”

Clyde’s face explodes. “Game?” He points outside. Kamikaze snowflakes slam into the glass doors to the ER. “What game?”

“You pretend you’re sick. I pretend I can help you.” The Intern is breathing quickly now. He curses himself, turns, and with shoulders slumped, walks away.
"Hey Intern," Morris calls after him, aware that he doesn’t know the young man’s name. "Stop," Morris says. The Intern spins around. “My shift is over. He’s not my problem anymore.”

“Go, I don’t need you,” Clyde screams, waving the empty Oban bottle.

This job is crazy, Morris thinks. But he was offered early retirement and refused it. He knew he’d probably be here anyway, one of those lonely, nervous patients who decide 3 a.m. is the perfect time to have the decade-old mole on their back examined.

Morris reaches for his mop. Clyde snatches his wrist, grafts their bones. “You back tonight?”

Morris yanks himself free. “I need to finish up, Clyde. It’s time to go home.”
Midday at Helsell's Pond

Even the geese are still,
pinned to pond’s edge, shading their heads.
It is work enough to shift, wing
to wing, stretch a black neck long.

But the water presses ever east
where two boats rest, stern to keel,
oars side by side like folded pinions.
Dragonfly bi-planes skim electric

blue and red over dory and duckweed.
Only bleached bones of grass
rattle the story of how a year flies out,
how we watch its spectacular spin

unable to reel it in again.
Hawks circle, searching for signs.
The sun, hot. The water still
casting toward the cattail shore.

Ronda Broatch
In This Photo He is Flying

Imagine our wonder when we enlarged the image to define the upper left corner

that streak we mistook as dust in truth the plummeting dove of a man haloed

against the summer sky. White windmill of wings, feet slippered

in cement. Imagine the wind singing in his ears, the sea

that generous body rushing up to greet him.
Going Under

Rain outside.
Breath, a steady tide
   beneath a red woolen sea.

I am towed below
each exhale an ocean
   sigh over sand:

   Ah—hush, you breathe/say, stay
your reading/writing, slide
   into the nether

world of surf. Explore
the depths of sleep, strange
   reef of dreaming.

Three in the morning
is coral: touch it
   and it cuts.
Gerry Canavan

Just Names*

Some things you’re not supposed to ask. Were his pants zipped up? Was he still peeing when he fell? Where was his head when they found him? Was there a final moment of awareness—*how embarrassing, oh shit, is that blood*?—or was the slide between hangover and death marked only by a sudden flash of light behind his eyes at the moment of impact? Who told his parents? Who found the body? Who cleaned up the mess?

Early one morning in the spring of my freshman year at Euclid University Donald Stephens hit his head against a urinal and died. He was my year but I hadn’t known him. The night before it happened he’d been out drinking at a frat party and had more than a little too much, so his friends walked him home and tucked him safely into bed. The rumors said his body trembled all through the night, but even if that’s true there’s no way the friends could have known how bad off he was when they left him there. As they shut off the light and closed the door to his dorm room he must have looked peaceful, serene, like someone who’d already started to sleep one off. When he woke up in the morning he probably groaned from the hang-over. “I drank too much last night,” he might have said. In a just a few minutes he’d pass out from dehydration, hit his head, and die.

The memorial service in the Old Stone Chapel drew nearly four hundred students, half my whole class. I walked by it on my way back from the quad and was surprised to see people who’d said they’d never met Donald standing outside the building in suits and dark ties, smoking. I said to them, “Those things’ll kill you.” No one laughed. That Friday the campus weekly ran a full front-page spread on Donald with a big picture, the same wide-smiling headshot I found on the Zeta Psi webpage when I did a search on the Internet for his name. Even in the picture he looked drunk. Over the next few weeks I was forwarded four copies of a heartfelt email from a girl who was either Donald’s girlfriend or who wished she had been, now that he was dead and famous.

The day Donald died, I instant-messaged Neil a few minutes after I got the campus-wide email from the university president announcing Donald’s death. Neil had been one of my two best friends in high school and I guess you could say that we thought a lot alike. He wore black Chuck Taylors, I wore blue. People were

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*The names and locations in this essay have been changed.
always mistaking us for brothers or lovers. On winter break we both came home sporting brand-new half-grown goatees. “A kid died here today,” I said.

“Oh?” he typed back. “Your roommate?”

“No, just some guy.”

“Too bad for you. You could use the extra space.”

We talked about all the deaths we could remember. Local Thug Drives Drunk, Kills Girlfriend. Ghost-white Girl You Barely Knew in Grade School Gets Leukemia. High School Dropout ODs. “Not to mention Ajit’s mom,” he finally said. Ajit had been a junior when we were seniors and had consistently annoyed the hell out of us for two straight years. He was a know-it-all, an obnoxious tagalong, but worst of all he had no sense of humor. Growing up jokes were the only thing of any value, no matter what the circumstance, and Ajit didn’t fit—he was thin-skinned, self-obsessed, arrogant. He wasn’t funny. He tried too hard. In the big-screen story of our lives he’d be played by Scrappy-Doo.

When we graduated we were glad to be rid of him. But when I think of Ajit now I always think of what happened right before graduation, May, 1998, the night his mother died after a year-long bout with cancer and there was no one else but us to take him someplace away from home. We did it out of obligation, out of a sense of duty, out of the realization that despite how much we disliked him we were the only people Ajit could call friends. The whole way to pick him up we cracked jokes: about taking him to a strip club, about going to see Stepmom, about the annoying things he’d say as soon as he got in the car. We impersonated Ajit doing the eulogy: I’d like to take this opportunity to waste a huge chunk of your time... This reminds me of an article from Scientific American... So, what are you all doing after the funeral? We laughed and laughed. The sorts of things that pop into your head that are too horrible to ever say—we said those things. I can’t remember now what we even did with him. When I think of it now I just think about how hard we laughed before we picked him up.

“I wonder how Ajit’s doing now,” I typed.

“You don’t really care,” he typed back.
A year later, when a letter from Donald’s little brother was printed in *The Weekly* in memoriam, no one said anything about it. “I know you’re all still sad about Donald, but you should know he wouldn’t want you to be sad.” Poor kid. By then nobody cared. Sometimes I thought I was the only one who even remembered. Ever since that first spring morning I’d look up at his dorm room every time I passed it, channeling Neil in a voice just low enough that I was sure no one else could hear: “Remember when Zeta Psi killed that guy? Good times.”

Then sophomore Leslie J. Milner broke a window with a chair and jumped out the ninth floor of Whenn House. That’s how the name appeared in the email we got from the university president, middle initial and all, and that’s how I’ve always thought of him. I never found out what it stood for. He’d lived on the fifth floor of Whenn House so there was no chance it was an accident. It was finals week and *The Weekly* had stopped publishing for the year, so he never got his picture in the paper. A lot of people had already left for summer break before it happened. Probably most of them never even found out. Maybe that’s how Leslie J. Milner would have liked it, maybe not.

Rumors circulated. He’d been sick, maybe cancer, maybe untreatable. He’d just had a nasty conversation with his father. He’d just come out to his father. He’d lost his scholarship. He’d gotten into drugs. He’d gone crazy. He’d been up all night talking to himself. I never met the guy so I don’t know what’s true. The search I did on the Internet didn’t turn up any answers. He was a comp sci major. He was a member of the Film Society. He’d run track for a season his freshman year of high school and gotten second-to-last place at regionals. He was the only person in his engineering class who hadn’t completed his webpage project. He laid on the concrete all night long until the cafeteria workers found him the next morning. People I knew saw his hand peeking out from beneath the paramedics’ blanket. Even with the broken window and the fallen chair and his dead and broken body laying in plain sight it took hours for anyone to take notice of Leslie J. Milner.

I sent what I found out in an email to my friends from home. “It happened again,” I began.

Later that night Neil IMed me: “Remember Beth Flanagan?” When I was in eighth grade Beth Flanagan turned on the family car in the garage and went to sleep. She was one grade above me in school and apparently having academic troubles, though of course there were always other explanations. I hadn’t known her but a lot of people I knew did. The last few weeks of eighth grade her death hung over everything. For years afterwards we talked: about what she did, about how we’d do it, about which ways were better. Would you run a hose from the exhaust pipe to the window or just wait for the monoxide to fill the whole garage? How does overdose compare to cliff-jumping? Are you a temple man or would you rather
suck the muzzle? We speculated. A week after Beth’s funeral a boy from my neighborhood came to the bus stop with bandages on his arms and said he’d tried to do it too. The cuts on his arms all went the wrong way. We laughed and laughed and he just sat there seething.

It was the only student death the kids were old enough to remember in my hometown, where one really horrific calamity seemed to strike every six years or so, as soon as a class came up that was too young to remember the last one. Six years before Beth a car full of teenagers wiped out on a curve on Randolph Ave. You could tell the exact spot where it happened because at the bottom of a big hill the speed limit suddenly drops from 40 down to 25, not that anyone slows down. Then six years after Beth, not too long after Leslie J. Milner jumped out a window, a high school sophomore killed himself in his car with a gun. I never really got the details—just the car, the gun, something about a girl.

Neil typed, “Tufts is twice as big as your school and no one’s ever died.”

Neil typed, “I think someone or something is hunting down the members of your class one by one.”

I said, “Leslie J. Milner was a suicide.”

“Of course that’s what they’d say.”

I said I’d watch my back.

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About a month into my junior year at Euclid Chrissie Camaro died in her sleep. When I first heard the name I thought that maybe it was the cute girl from my creative writing class, but I saw that girl later in the week on the street and I realized I didn’t know Chrissie, either. She was a senior, a sorority girl, and apparently a pretty big name in campus politics, insofar as such a thing is possible. They honored her at the annual Snow Ball that year with a special memorial display. At the end of the night someone stole her photograph from the table and the next week The Weekly published a letter from the president of the student council begging whoever’d taken it to please just bring it back. She’d had meningitis; she’d gotten a new liver over the summer and it didn’t take; they didn’t know what she had and all of Phi Mu was under observation. The email from the university president didn’t give specifics. The entire campus community
is saddened by this highly contagious loss. She’d won a scholarship for academics from the State of Ohio Department of Education. She looked nice in all the pictures. Healthy.

I called Neil. “It’s not just my class, the whole place is cursed.”

Neil said, “Sucks for you.” Then he said, “One out of every thousand isn’t all that bad. How’s your liver?”

I asked around. An RD told me about the freshman in the East Tower who’d died of cancer my second year at Euclid just a few weeks into the school year. She’d been sick when she arrived and when she died they moved her stuff out like nothing had happened. Then the cute girl from my creative writing class told me that a few weeks before the start of my freshman year one of the orientation leaders had died in a car crash in his hometown. I remembered then how subdued all the orientation leaders seemed, how my group was twice as big as all the others.

Then in the spring Neeraj Goyal’s roommate woke up to find him dead. He’d been at a party the night before and even two years after Donald Stephens we all just assumed it was alcohol-related. He was a Zeta Psi pledge, too, and it was weird to see all the same guys having to go through all the same motions all over again. Old Stone Chapel, suits, those things’ll kill you. But this time it wasn’t alcohol—Neeraj had had an undiagnosed heart condition and one night it got him, just like that. There was a picture of him on a plastic stand outside the Old Stone Chapel that I saw on the way to class one day. I found another on the Zeta Psi website, a group photo of everyone in his pledge class. He was kneeling in the front row, his hands in his pockets, the only guy in the photo with a scowl on his face, like he was the only one not in on the joke. He was short but pugnacious. He was scrappy. He looked like a fighter. I’d never met Neeraj but when I saw his picture I felt like maybe I’d seen him someplace before.

I said to Neil, “It happened again. That’s six. In three years. Do you think that will be all?”

Neil said one out of five hundred wasn’t so bad. He said he was betting on a graduation massacre. He said it seemed like we were building up to something really big.

<>
Over the Thanksgiving holiday senior year Tina Welty died when a car driven by her twin sister crossed over the median into oncoming traffic, killing both sisters upon impact. Tina was a freshman and I lived off-campus, and as far as I know our paths never crossed. Nobody seemed to know anything about her. I gathered that she didn’t know a lot of people, that she kind of kept to herself. The article about her death in The Weekly was a quarter-page box on the bottom on page one. Google turned up nothing.

Neil said, “That’s twice as bad as Trudy’s.” Trudy had dated a friend of ours from high school. The first time I went to her house, I saw a picture of a little boy on the mantelpiece. “Who’s that boy?” I asked. She said it was her brother. She smiled a little when she said it and I thought that she was joking. I said, “But you don’t have a brother.” As far as I’d known, she didn’t. I didn’t catch on until she told me. Someone should have warned me about Robbie before I had the chance to ask. Later on she said that Robbie sometimes visits her at night, and for once I didn’t have the heart to argue.

“That’s both your kids,” Neil said. “That’s rough.”

I said, “I think there’s still a little brother who’s not dead.”

“Whatever,” Neil said. “Did I tell you yet we finally had one here?”

Tina’s name was added unceremoniously to the bottom of a plaque I found in a mostly unused wing at the back of the student center memorializing students who’d died while in attendance at Euclid University. There were thirteen names on the plaque and seven had occurred in the four years since I’d arrived. The plaque was black and shiny. When I ran my fingers over the etched names a thin layer of dust coated my hand.

At the end of January Neil came to visit and I took him back there. There were just names and dates and we thought it might be nice to have a little something more. “Hit head on urinal.” “Laid out on the concrete for hours.” “Photo still missing.” I thought about the names I’d given them in my head: Dead Kid, Heart Attack Guy, Car Crash Girl. I figured, that’s how I’ll remember them, once all the rest is gone.

“So what are we looking at for graduation?” I asked as we were leaving. “Bomb? Anthrax? Shooting spree?” There was a shooting spree at Euclid, the year after I graduated. I remember watching it on the news. A crazy man, a bizarre forty-plus perpetual student who’d been a legend in the dining halls for years, opened fire one evening in the halls of the new business building with a WWII-era rifle, killing two. He thought people in that building were out to get him. For some reason he
thought they’d been breaking into his files. See, I thought, there really is something wrong with that place, but mostly I was too shocked to think anything.

The phone rang and I picked it up. “Are you watching this?” Neil asked. It was national news.

“I can’t believe what I’m seeing,” I said. “It seems unreal.”

But before all that, in the student union my senior year at Euclid, Neil placed his bet for the graduation day massacre. “Right now, I like cave-in,” he said, as we left the names behind and headed back to my apartment. “That’ll really tug at the heartstrings.”

At the end of that week Neil went back to Boston and my grandmother went into the hospital. They’d found cancer in her intestine, but it was operable. Three days after being admitted she came down with something and the operation was pushed back until she was well. But they failed—or forgot—or thought they didn’t need—to put her back on her anti-stroke medication, and by the time I’d gotten back to Jersey she’d already had two strokes. By then it was all over and my father drove me down to see her in the hospital. Nana was lying there in the bed with tubes everywhere. Her mouth hung slack and the noises that came out when the machines breathed for her sounded like wind raging through an empty cave. She couldn’t talk or move. She never opened her eyes. The doctors said she had no mental function. A few days later she was dead.

I loved her and all that but it wasn’t like we were especially close. Whenever we drove down to her retirement home I usually brought a book or spent the time talking to my uncles, if they were around. When we were there she’d order a pizza and specifically request that it be cooked well-done. She was a short woman who stood hunched over, with white hair and glasses like a cartoon grandmother’s. She gave me twenty dollars on my birthday and on Christmas. Fifty years after Pearl Harbor she still called Japanese people “Japs.” She talked about my dad like he’d been born yesterday. She had a huge sheepdog I hated that she locked in her bedroom whenever we visited. Behind the door it barked and clawed but never once got out. I guess I knew I’d miss her but I thought I’d handle things all right. But while I stood there in the church beside my father and my brother, my cousins and my uncles all stone-faced down the pew, listening to Aunt Sheryl give the eulogy, I cried and cried and cried.
Argonautica

Could it have been the stern that fell upon Jason: the rear guiding wood, manned by someone lesser known than the hero of Colchis? Or could it have been a simple tiller, a thing made of plank and dowel? the cracking of wood in a new made fire; the creaking of a limb caught between a growing pine; the yawning of firewood under the maul’s split? It doesn’t matter after all, after the words that have sent the timber flying from myth into the lines of death and epitaph.

There is always in the mind, following as the sea, a fear that homecoming may be too late; like an Indian summer that warms the hopeful buds before a killing frost, when the oak tree’s blood, rising in protest in a late fall heat, freezes in November and threatens to crack in the first winter wind: and one wonders if to dream is to die.

A thought, as fleeting and flying as a leaf before the wind: should I touch the memory that stays with me, like the spider’s web in fall—a link to our past like the ruffled silk of courtiers and earls, that sings with sweet syllables and wild flowers whose names defy their scent?

And then in winter the fine snow that sifts along the slightest breeze to alight upon the roof-tops—the snow-sculpted patterns—burying, slowly by layer, the long days of summer spent upon the grass:
the nights among stars, wondering what name to give to the arc of light that falls from Jason’s Argo, the timber, the myth.
Penelope’s Needle

As Penelope lifts the needle, suddenly grown heavy, into the curve of the wool, her lips form the question—do you still miss me? Among the magic, rush of water over the prow, the soft flesh of a goddess, the spinning of a leaf in the wind over an unknown land, the howl of a wounded giant, whose words mean nothing to you—do you miss me?

As the light goes from the room where we once held each other as tightly as the roots of this olive tree grip my heart, I am one, alone, among the myriad of mothers, whores, and goddesses who have given you the ease into long, windswept, rainful nights—the dreary grayness of mornings filled with masts without sail, and motionless currents—do you still remember me?

The shy lady whose eyes could not rise from the earthen floor into yours and reflect the fire, the urge, the war that raged within? Or the one whose voice raised you from troubled sleep when you fought other heroes and cried out in emptiness, that you were sorry you had not sacrificed the youngest bull?

No—I fear I am not that one, that day marked in your epic; rather I am she who has floated somewhere above your memory, wafting in a sea wind that blows the scent of alien islands into the hearts of us who must walk the main streets, blasted in the heat of a summer’s sun giving no relief to the armless children, or the waiting widows of war. And should I be happy, as the gods so wished, when your path is crossed by sirens I know to be young, less marked and streaked by tears and the lashes of age; by a woman whose knowledge lets her transform a man into what he should be;
by the luring of a mother, dead before you
returned to her; by a father made old by the
rotting of fruit from the trees that you
planted, hand in hand, smiling as the last
shovel of earth enclosed the roots of a child-
hood; or last, by the howls of your wife—
who has sown and unsown the shroud
of your life, hoping you would return.

And how can this return be blessed? By
the goddess you have placed before me?
The path you have chased is one of blood—
both needless and needful—yet who
will sew the edges one to one, to make
the garment we both should wear?
Were we truly the story of gods? The theme
of poets, blind and babbling along the sea
of Ionia? Or are we real? The subjects of time,
wasted in books, the breviaries of gods
and fate?

I know the wound is real,
the bloodied spot that sits upon my thumb—
pushing the ivory needle through its curve
until it screams: "No more!" and then wearily
prods the dulling point into the next page
of your—of our story.

Oh, for the scent
of jasmine, of sandalwood, of anything but
the sea-brined oak that struggles on the cliff
against the shortening wind: a taste of your
story, a siren feather, a tress of Helen’s hair,
your words flying faster than blind wrath,
or the whistling of an arrow—

“Yes, I remember you.”
Centrifuge

The drum that oscillates water from laundry. Or. The outward pull of a ball on a string. Newton’s first law of motion, certainly. And. The curved contraption in which humans are enclosed. For reasons of experimentation. Because. If you can filter the astronaut from the man, or the dervish from the devil, you whirl this bucket round your head in the clockwise direction. Compass-wise? Never. You risk separating the me from it in the periphery of your central axis while you twirl this bucket east and west and north and south. With skill, you chance not to spill my ship. But this boat is capsized and the oars are lost. And. This time, it is I who want to communicate. But, because you remain nameless, I must instead call this Conundrum a Catastrophe and attempt to measure the speed of things that fly out.

There is a general appreciation that the force can be grown by swelling the speed of the rotation. Or. The mass of the object. Or. The radius of the circle. But perhaps not so generally appreciated is the fact that whereas force is proportional, cold courage cannot be constrained. This time, the child, face flat against the rubberized curve, watches the floor drop from under his feet. This time, it is I who am scared into stiffness. For, if the difference between the things that stay and the things that fly away be restraint, I struggle to dismount the horse from the merry-go-round and go.

The rotor that throws cream from milk. And. The mechanism that measures sedimentation rates. Of. Inflammations in the body rigid. For. If you can filter the astronaut from the man, you can use the same device to clarify vaccines. And. To purify both milk and motor oil. And. Reactor grade uranium. You separate those bodies of different specific gravities and call the gods mercurial. As. Points become lines and drop. But. This time, it is I who want to beg of you. Stop testing my toleration to acceleration. For. This time it is I who fail to measure the time falling bodies take to light.
James Grinwis

Painting Breath

Nothing’s as it’s supposed to be.
Today the sky was an onion.

The character is a painter
who has never landed a single exhibition
though his paintings number the thousands.
They exist, all of them,

like this painting, “Breath.”
A train’s stuck in a tunnel,
and a boy with a flashlight shines the light
on the face of a madwoman
plastered to a star glued to a stone.
The boy’s light makes the woman
as the woman defines the light,
and the star shifts balance so three legs dangle out.

If I went skating through a tunnel on such a night,
I would find inside a spear piercing a shark.
A majestic princess on a horse with a star on her helmet
and a head the size of a mountain laurel
would wield the spear. A speck in the paint
I would be; a millimeter of paint
in the flashlight-gleam of a boy
searching for hope on a train.

The painting, she thought, had little
to redeem itself.
I thought it was breath.

Across the ceiling, like wandering breath,
thousands of tiny feet.
Rabid Cows

Their noses and eyes
seem to need tightening.
They have the looks of those
who put their dreams before everything.
This, and how hard it is
to maintain luminous relationships.
On the other end of the building
are those who don’t laugh anymore.
A deflation of drive, so to speak.
A rodent with an ironing board
scurried upstairs. We get through
somehow. Paper bags pop open.
A baseball that had disappeared
flew through the atmosphere again.
Before I left, I held my wife
one last time. Her body was a strip
of lightning and my arms were the sea,
so skewed things had become. The stranger
walked down the grey road.
His shadow disappeared like a stilt.
When the volcano burst,
fifteen thousand tons of popcorn per second
gushed out. Engulfed in butter
and grief was the land. I become a disciple
of surfaces, which leads to distrust.
Once, I was no longer an individual
but a unit of time. A pedestrian
smiled. The bears crept quietly from
very small dens. So many dens
on the edge of town. Losing oneself:
like stumbling home.
Bird Sculptures 3

Half-Bird Half-Dromedary
Bird Flash Unit
What Else the Bird
Circuit of Clothes Birds
Bird with Sponge for Face
Bird Made of 3 Twisted Leaves
Bird of Her Hair Descends to Snip Me
Loose, Apocalyptic Bird Pecking Bucket of Polymers
Bird with Harvest Moon, 1960
Bird as Serrated Edge
Bird with Igloo for Beak
Bird Jammed in Wall
Bird Caught and Rammed into Stereo Speaker
Night Hawk Tearing Lawn Sprinkler to Shreds
Scissor Bird
Avalanche Bird
Bird Made of Foil, Saran Wrap, and Shells
Bird Made of Paste
Wooden Louse Bird
Bird with Wire Frame
Planted Bird
The Bird Ship
Bird off Highway 9, Spring, 1972
Cave Bird
Ice Bird with Suckling Pig
In the Land of Harvested Birds
The Non-Bird
Bird Made of Alternating Magnetic Bits
Bird Made of Escalator Cable
Bird Made of Escalator Pads
Bird Suspended by 3 Wires
Bird Mounted on Fossilized Vegetable
Bird Floating in Chowder
Bolted Bird with Flexed Talon
Soft Shell Bird
I curled my fingers over the bird, it swelled and strained for air
Heavy was the heart of the bird but light
Nicholas Allen Harp

Galveston: A Walk

A bearded man chats loudly
in Spanish with a woman I'd call,
for lack of proper introduction, Mauve,
the coastal birds get banyan branches
teetering all nerveless and limp,
a passing t-shirt is made from high-tech
sweat-resistant fibers designed by Dartmouth
alums, the fading brick beige of theater
smells sweet like beach sand, and gracias
yields to the ghostly chenille tickle
of breeze.

Stasis comes now in the form
of timeless leather-clad alterna-teens.
There is no loneliness like theirs.
We have in common, I think,
the hypnosis of slang, disillusioned eros,
sometimes defining ourselves by lists.
Not in common: cerulean tattoos,
piercings, hip-hop literacy, the lasting consolations
of anger and irony. The real sulk down here
is temperature. It's easy to feel
myself dying here in this heat,
and all I want to do
is write it down.
Detroit: A Walk

On Woodward Avenue,
mirth arms itself against
anguish. The street shows us
nervy, sap-tucked leaves
riding atop their own shadows,
the precipitous clip

of ugly, unloved cat,
the blithe etiquette of commuters
(excusing me, no excusing me),

the beige brick of strip joint.
XXX neon extols with
ordinal clarity, the hunched

and humped, all those
shaking bodies
onscreen and off.
Richard Jordan

Meadow Lark

A boy runs through a meadow. Say he’s 8. It’s the kind of meadow that’s hard to find these days, with Appaloosas, a crooked cedar fence, goldenrod, clover, a creek, an El Dorado beside a white boulder, stripped of its engine, doors and steering wheel. Wasps swarm, a hive suspended from the one remaining sideview mirror. The boy runs because he heard a scream from the woods beyond the meadow. He leaps, or maybe he soars, when he comes to the creek. It’s the time of day when shadows make the objects that create them seem long and snake-like, and the sky is a shade that defies description. Goldenrod doubles over in a gust of wind that’s strong enough to rattle the El Dorado’s dangling muffler. Fair to say, the boy would like to be a kite about now, string freed from fingers. An Appaloosa rolls in a patch of clover, another snaps at a wasp, the rest stand head to tail a few muzzle lengths from the fence. Some sleep, some snort contentedly. The scream? Why didn’t it startle the horses, too? That’s not a question an 8 year-old would ask. And now the boy’s wet and muddy. He has to swim.
Standing With Maples

I hope you recall the steep hill, but if you don’t, turn right at the rusted mailbox, open and full of cobwebs. Climb until the drive loops back upon itself. To the left you’ll see a wheat field, and in the field there’s an old shed no one knows the purpose of. A maple has found a way to break through decaying floorboards, scrape the ceiling and bend. A tuft of young leaves kisses the opening where a door should be. More maples stand behind the shed and off to the sides, as if to hold it in place, as if being held were enough to make it one of them. When the sun is right and a breeze kicks up, the shed fills with flowing shadows. The leaves wave and the wheat bows, and that’s where I’ll be too, waiting for you to take the picture.
If you pressed me, I’d tell you it was how they handled my father’s death that did it. I don’t feel like I’m one of those people who become oversensitive about this usually prickly issue, but I’m, you know, human. My father had a long and protracted illness, and his passing away was its unavoidable result. It happens; I knew it was coming. Still, he was my father, and he did die.

I suppose I felt the way most people feel about these things—deflated, defeated, depressed. To make matters worse he was up in Pittsburgh, and I told them—them being CMS, the software company I worked for at the time—that I have to take some leave to be with my family, attend the funeral, you know, all the usual maneuverings that surround the death of a close family member, especially a parent. Their response? “You get one day off. See you first thing on Wednesday.” This happened on a Monday.

Some sympathy. I nearly lost it right then and there. ‘Lost it’ not meaning crying. ‘Lost it’ meaning taking out a couple mid-level executives before I went up there to Pittsburgh for whatever fucking time I needed, since priorities are priorities. I’ll never forget. I was in Jack Plummer’s office. Big V.P. The direct management guy over most of us. Lots of expensive tropical plants in his office, the kind that gave the janitorial staff nightmares. The kind of man who wears hair gel so thick he constantly looks as if he just stepped out of a car wash n’ wax. Thin, parched smile was all you’d get from him. If that. So this guy looks me right in the eye and says: “I don’t think we can afford to do without you, Elliot. I mean take a day. Fine. That’s not going to kill us. But we need you back here. Sales are too brisk right now, buddy. You know how things are.”

I was so livid I could barely see straight, much less speak in coherent sentences. I had to lean on his desk for support. To prepare myself.

“Jack,” I said.

“Yeah buddy, you’re talking to him.”

“My father just died here. Got me. This isn’t some ex-roommate in college who’s getting married in the Hamptons. This isn’t a family reunion. This is an emergency situation I’m talking about.”
“Hey Elliot,” he said. “You should know that all of CMS feels your loss. We do. We’re right behind you in spirit and all. But what I mean is, when you’re up there at the funeral, just imagine all of us at CMS standing right there behind you, handing you a tissue, squeezing your shoulder, all those supportive things. However, is this the Social Welfare League? Do we get paid for being humanitarians? We have software to sell here. Since that is what we do. So…We need you back here. I don’t mean to sound crass; I’m sorry to hear about your old man, but…”

“Yeah,” I said. “That’s nice. That’s beautiful.”

It essentially went like that until I was on the verge of quitting. But unfortunately, I didn’t. No, unfortunately I stayed right on with CMS—prostituting myself, returning in a day, as I was told, even if it meant alienating my brother Jeremy who already thought I was disrespecting the family as a result of my sparse presence at my father’s bedside. Part of me thought that Jeremy didn’t understand the demands placed upon me no matter how I turned the story over on him. To Jeremy it was all just a big exercise. The other part of me—the intuitive part—knew he was right. Yet I allowed CMS to govern my life.

In other words, surprisingly the idiotic CMS management style and thoughtless personal repartee didn’t seal it for me. You know what did? Boredom.

Denise

Actually it was the whole scene in Bethesda that was, well, rotten, if you want to know the truth. As far as I’m concerned, I had some difficulties. How do you put this? I suppose I had a tricky time with the attitude. I guess that’s how you’d put it. You know, the whole, faux-New York thing, the whole, “Well, I live in Bethesda” attitude of the locals, the way they intoned “My daughter is matriculating at Holton Arms this year,” or “My husband had lunch with Collin Powell this week. Blah. Blah. Blah-blah-blah.”

Ben even thought the kids at his school were, well, obnoxious: “Mom, they always ask how come I don’t have a Tommy Hilfiger jacket. They always ask what the brand of my shoes are.” Another thing in the mix was it took me an hour plus to get to work every day, even though I was only commuting ten miles away to Arlington. It was, well, miserable.

When I helped Ed write his letter of resignation we worded it as “The disgracefully unhealthy work environment” as one of his reasons for leaving. Yet—get this—Ed couldn’t get over the fact that Jack Plummer took the terminology to heart,
apparently attacking him publicly in several staff sales meetings. Ed even said that Jack started one of the meetings by saying, “Some people around here think this is an ‘unhealthy’ environment, but actually...” It didn’t matter. Ed and I had to make a change. He was sick of boxes of software in his car, sick of twelve-hour work-days in windowless office buildings; and I, for one, wanted out of the suffocating snootiness and pretension.

I wanted to live in a community where my neighbors wouldn’t jump all over me for throwing out an aluminum can, or losing interest in signing their petition against clitorectomies in Sudan, or wherever. That sort of thing. I wanted to live in a place where a thousand consultants didn’t always clatter away at their laptops in the local Starbucks.

Ed

So we moved to the city. After much consternation, we decided on an area that was in the midst of sort of renaissance, an ongoing rejuvenation of which we felt we could be a part. Not that the city was devoid of snootiness. Not by a far shot. But there’s Dupont. There’s Georgetown. This was neither. This community had suffered through riots in the 60’s, dilapidation and flight in the 70’s and 80’s, and despite sparks of regeneration in the 90’s, it was an area on the brink, not past it. I had big plans, big ideas.

Denise was happy to be closer to work since she could take all the back roads, and she volunteered to support me while I got myself set up. My plans? My ideas? I wanted to set up a store in the bottom level of our house. What kind of store I wasn’t sure. I just knew I wanted a greater purpose in life. So, in the early stages of our time in the city—the first year or so—I spent twelve hours a day gutting and refurbishing the bottom levels. The upper half of the building was an already-lived-in Condo, small but livable. Two bedrooms, one bath, small kitchen. It would all be worth it once my dream materialized. Friends helped out on the weekends. Denise was great. Supportive as ever.

Ben

I like the park. I like when he takes me there. Sometimes we go to the park when he’s frowning and sad. Sometimes we go to the park when he’s happy. This time it was a happy time. We played Frisbee. We played wiffle ball. It was a perfect day. There were lots of clouds. Big puffy ones that he called something. I forget.
And high flat ones that he called something else. Cumulumbus, I think. Some of the clouds were moving around and stuff, and it was sunny out.

Then we were both tired. We went back home, and he promised me mint chocolate chip ice cream. That’s my favorite. We walked down this sidewalk thing that was all windy and turned here and there. There were lots of trees and bushes and flowers. It was like the only thing I could smell was honeysuckle. Then all of a sudden I noticed that he was sitting on the curb with his head back. His eyes were closed and I thought maybe he needed a nap. I didn’t think he ran that much, cause sometimes that’s how I get when I run a lot. He smiled like I’ve never seen before. He leaned his head back so far it almost touched the sidewalk. Then he said.

“Do you smell that?”

I said “Yeah.”

“No, there’s more. It’s…something else,” he said. His eyes were still closed and his head was floating around on his shoulders like it wasn’t really attached to his neck. He didn’t say anything, but just smelled the air over and over. Then he stood up and walked closer to a part of the bushes that sort of was caved-in. He leaned into the caved-in part, just smelling everywhere. He smiled so wide it made me scared. It was like those clowns you see in the movies that are smiling cause it doesn’t really mean they’re happy.

Ed

I don’t know exactly how the smells crystallized in my nose in that manner, but they were that clear. I could suddenly clearly distinguish each smell and how each smell bounced off and commingled with the others.

“Hold on,” I told Ben.

Ben has since told me that he tried to snap me out it for five or ten minutes, but I was not to be stopped. When I finally brought myself back to reality, I knew exactly what I wanted to do.

I’ve analyzed that primal moment every which way. Perhaps it was the moisture in the air (though it was dry). Perhaps the trauma of abandoning my former life was getting to me (though I had never been happier). Perhaps at my repressed mourning had finally struck me. Yet, it was, and always will be a singular moment.
I could have sworn I saw the face of God smile upon me. The clouds parted. Light filled me and surrounded my being. I was touched.

At that moment I knew I wanted to make perfume. I wanted to replicate that initial spiritual experience somehow. I found my calling.

Denise

First of all, it was really refreshing to see him so inspired after months of floundering and self-doubt. Ben helped him install countertops and lay the flooring; I had electricians rewire the place and tried to help with the financial end; he advertised. Still, I was worried since he knew little to nothing about making perfume, other than what supplies to order.

Then it came time for him to try his hand at the art. At that time before we went to sleep, every night he would excitedly tell me about perfume making. “The principle behind good perfume making is called effleurage,” he would say, “the idea that animal fats have attractions to certain aromas as uncovered butter absorbs the fragrance of pineapple in a refrigerator. See, the way it used to be done was to hold sheets of glass in wooden frames, coat them with fat, then place flowers in-between the sheets to add fragrance to the fat. After several rounds of flowers you’d take the fats, put them in a churn and beat them with alcohol. The scent passes to the alcohol, and you can do away with the fat. All you need is a fixative—civet, musk, and ambergris. Using the old methods, perfume is aged for nearly a year.”

“Sounds complicated,” I said.

“Yeah,” he said. “It does.”

At work I did some reading up on perfume making myself. It looked like in the past few years all sorts of micro-perfume makers have cropped up. Blame it on the Internet. Nowadays, it seemed like anyone, including my husband could buy all the basic ingredients including the scented alcohol. Then you can invent from here. The grunt work was reduced.
The next few months were a scramble to set up shop, while at the same time, learning a craft. But I thought, what better way to learn than to get customer feedback?

In the meantime I was reading everything I could get my hands on. I learned the standards first. The principles of effleurage, the whole framing process, more than I ever wanted to learn about fixatives, and the importance of the meniscus. I learned to add the solvent to the beaker, to add the other components later. I learned to always mix with a glass rod, to pour from cylinder to bottle instead of the opposite. It really was a vast and complex system, a mystical art. God through the nose.

However, after weeks of this, I discovered that I needed some real face-to-face advice. I still had a problem. I didn’t know how many scents a perfume can carry before it is overloaded, overly complex, or simply sloppy? Beyond five or six scents I had trouble distinguishing the grapefruit from the mulberry, the pikaki from the plumeria. Should I go beyond five or six scents? Everything I read was conflicting and contradictory. What was my limit?

Also, I felt drained, as if that initial inspiration had already slipped into just a process. I was trying to recapture something spiritual, something mysterious, and sublime. Perhaps it was doomed from the start.

I made a few calls and found out that the woman I needed to see was right in the city down in Dupont. Gale Frank.

Gale

Please. This guy looked at me like I was some sort of Katherine Hepburn prototype. So if I’m not the legend they say I am, what am I? I’m just an ordinary Jane, making ends meet on 19th Street.

The day he breezed in here was oh so dreary and blustery. “Welcome to Parfumes,” I said in my best queen sashay. I knew as soon as he saw me his eyes would pop out of his skull. Believe me: I wasn’t disappointed. So he expected an elegant old hag with beautiful silk scarves wrapped around her neck. Who am I to kow-tow to the status quo?

“I was looking for Gale Frank,” he said.
“You found her,” I said. Then he sat down stammering. What a naïf.

“Oh,” he said. “That’s fine.”

“Of course it is, sweetheart.”

These urban raiders are all the same—they’re about as urban as Porky the Pig. I asked him if he wanted a Chai Latte. His eyes half-glazed over, and he shrugged. He said he spoke to me on the phone, and asked me if I remember him. I thought, what does he think I’m retarded in addition? Then, as I was boiling the water I saw him glancing about at Claire Hubbard’s prints. Oh, if she only knew she’d throw a hissy fit. I put on Giselle, and he asked me faux-casually about my store. I glazed over. Couldn’t help thinking about that lead at the Kennedy Center—the pirouettes, the leaps. Oh, it was a thing of beauty.

“The first thing I want to say is I don’t take this as competition.” Of course I said just to be nice. “We’re in this together. If you can turn people on to natural scents, all the better.” I hoped he would read the niceties as a kindly f-you but, of course, he missed it completely.

“I appreciate that,” he said. “I understand, well”

“It’s fine. You need advice.”

“Yes. I’m stuck.” I handed him his tea in a one of those hand blown glass cups from the Laurs Hamburg Boutique. He pawed at it, and then stuck it in his mitt like it was a three-dollar Santa mug from Wal-Mart. The tea was just what it was; that’s what I like about a good Chai Latte—I didn’t want this shchlub to think I was too refined. God help me if I come across as one of those Teaism snobs.

“Making perfume takes a certain witching aspect,” I told him. “At least that’s what I call it. You have to conjure up spirits.”

“You have to—”

“You must learn to allow the scents to come on their own.” I sat on the floor, legs stretched in front of me. I was so completely bored by this whole little visitation, and suddenly wanted to do some calisthenics right then and there—which of course, brought me back to Giselle.

“In other words…” He looked like a child sitting at his lesson, ready for a scolding.

“It’s intuitive. Personally, I like bold statements. I’d rather have a few declarative smells—vanilla, beeswax, jasmine somabane. Something like that. I’d rather have
that than ten smells that blur into one.” Why was I telling him these things? I should have just booted him out back to the land of the quasi-urban middle-of-the-road.

“That was exactly— ”

“It’s a common concern.” I bent forward, and took one last sip.

“But how do you know when it’s enough?”

“I’m always experimenting. Sometimes I’ll use seven scents, sure. Occasionally. But it’s intuitive. You find your own rhythm as you go.”

Then shortly thereafter I gave him the hook. That’s all she wrote. I made up this excuse about having to meet a friend at Galaxy’s, which I thought would disorient him. He thanked me profusely: “Thank you so much. Thank you. Really. Thanks.” Bleck. It was sickening. Who am I Mahatma Gandhi?

Jane

There were placards explaining the original religious purpose of perfumes—to incite communication between heaven and earth. Over thirty handmade perfumes lingered under the glass counters. Glass was everywhere. Tasteful prints. Jazz through the speakers. It was like Border’s only with perfume.

Lisa

Who wasn’t there? I chatted with Leon Bruce. Drank champagne with Phillip Ulger. Danced with Barry Hennigan. Sniffed samples with Pricilla Young. Sashayed with Vickie Sturgen. And the food! All kinds of great stuff. They had the best humus with this real sort of lemony tinge. I loved the pesto. Wonderful brie.

And the perfumes. They were all so beautiful to look at, first of all. It was like you were at a party, only it was just for you and your senses. The music was so heady. So superb, I had at least four or five glasses of the Argentinean wine.
Then I had to wait.

This was the toughest part. My emotional state. The first day shifted from elation (as the early customers at the opening sampled my creations, analyzed the scents, bought bottles of the Chypre) to boredom as they left and the midday lull set in, to utter depression as not a single customer came into the store all afternoon. Then, as I was about to close up shop and walk upstairs a young woman came in, and for a moment the morning’s elation returned. But she was looking for T Street, and I pointed her in the right direction.

Ben just got home from school when I walked upstairs. Denise and I had some talks with him, and Ben was nothing if not resilient. He understood that he needed to let himself in directly after the bus dropped him off at the corner. Ben was watching afternoon cartoons when I picked him up over my shoulders and gave him a whirl.

Denise

For weeks business was slow for him. I felt terrible. He worked so hard for the shop, he deserved a reward. After Ben was asleep we would sometimes place circulars on cars in the surrounding neighborhoods. Even though I was tired from work I’d try to help him talk strategy: how to market the shop so that it might get more interest. He kept saying that maybe it was too much of a niche market, but I tried to tell him to be persistent. Word of mouth takes some time. Then he said maybe we should just rent out the space to another shop. No way, I told him. If we have to do that later on, that’s fine with me, but give it a true effort first. Give it time.

Weeks passed. Then just as he was about to become completely despondent and was ready to throw in the towel, he started getting customers. Then I realized why more customers were coming his way: prom season. Then it slowed down again.

Ed

I started taking my customer’s zip codes, and you know what I realized? Most of my customers were from the suburbs! The foot traffic on weekends as mostly suburban, but so was the little business I got during the week. Hardly any buyers from the community. I felt completely dejected, and I started to go on long walks.
during lunch. I just wanted to see the still-present scars from the riots of the 60’s. I kept asking myself what the hell I was doing.

Ivan

See, the thing is he just didn’t network. Everybody in this city knows that’s what it’s about. If he had made connections, talked to people, done his interpersonal glad-handing he would have at least had a support system. As it was, he and his wife and kid—they pretty much just stuck to themselves. This is fine and dandy in the burbs. But once you get out into the city and you want others to patronize your store, you have to grease some palms and caress some egos. He did neither. And I’m his friend. I love Denise and Ben. But they’re all too quiet. I do feel sorry for him. Definitely. He seems like a nice guy and everything. His biggest mistake was just being himself. They just took whatever mentality they learned up in Bethesda and transposed that here. It doesn’t work that way. I tried to tell him. But he had to learn his own lessons. It doesn’t work that way.

Ed


Denise

One night he cried because he discovered Macy’s bought the old Palmer’s warehouse. He said they had already gotten started on renovating the building. He kept repeating: “Don’t you see? We’re behind the eight ball on this one. Don’t you see?”

Brian

I was eating a corndog. They give me some day olds down at that new grocery. It’s become good. It’s good. I got my ledge, and my regular grub. I was trying to
get them flies away from me cause they keeps following me wherever I go. I don’t want to eat them suckers cause ain’t that how you get Malaria, or what you call it?

Then I saw them walking down 14th again. Every night. They walking along. They staring at them construction cranes and things. It ain’t something where they’re getting in my way. They’re not doing nothing to bother nobody. They just staring at that thing, and then walking back and forth up and down this street. Except it ain’t like they lost. It’s like they lost in the head. They keep saying “riots,” and “taxes,” and then some “gentry” word and then I lost em.

But if I ask em for some change they ain’t got any cause they broke. They told me that story twice. So I sit there on the curb and kick the can. I used to do it when I was six. Now I still do. Then something warm trickles down my leg. That’s life for you.

Ed

I kept thinking back to that moment. What went wrong? There was the spirit, the glimmer of divine intervention, and I was enlightened. The heavens opened up before me. Why would God deceive me? Why would God purposefully lead me down the path to my own self-destruction?

Yet, there I was wallowing in the Hades of personal finance. And I knew I had bigger problems looming. Why? I start doing some serious brainstorming. Extreme thoughts lapped at me.

Charlie

As usual I’m digging out there when this guy in a white polo shirt and khaki’s starts throwing rocks at me. I thought I heard something. I shut off the engine and then I see a rock hurtling straight into the side of this beast. Hits with a clank.

I jump down and start after the guy. Only thing is it takes me a minute to work my way out of the pile of dirt and by the time I make it to 14th street, he’s got to be at least a couple blocks away. I tell Mr. Anderson about it, but he says it’s probably just some anti-gentrification wacko. Some radical. Tells me to come and get him next time I see the clown.
The next time the fool comes to see me, I’m physically engaged, if you gather my meaning. But I hear the doorbell, and since I was expecting Will to come by, I didn’t want him barging in on the scene tinkling his copy of my keys. But it’s not Will. It’s Mr. Britches from U Street.

He tries to sugar-talk me, but as soon as I have him in there for more than a minute I know exactly what he’s after. Then he actually asks for it.

“Oh no,” I say. “I’m so sorry. I’ve been experiencing the same sorts of troubles myself. I don’t know what to tell you.”

This is when the waterworks burst onto the scene. The guy is an absolute Bhopal. I have to call his little woman to come and yank him off the floor. No Chai for Mr. Man this time. In the meantime I’m standing there, wig in hand, with Barry upstairs shitting bricks.

Farula

I tried to tell him there is no guarantee. If I make an image of each of them from pulverized stone mixed with gum, and I put the images facing each other in a vase with seven twigs, and then I bury the vase in the hearth and light a fire in it and put a piece of ice in the fire, then dig up the vase once the ice has melted, this is no promise on my part that anything can happen. I tried to tell him that.

“This works for love, but who knows if it will work for business?”

He paid me my sum any way, and walked out with his back in the shape of a C, and the faintest smell of honeysuckle on him.

Peter

It was really a no-brainer. Dude was caught red-handed. Over the past few weeks I heard all kinds of complaints of damage issuing from the Macy’s site. So I just made it a part of my loop. Every night I’d drive by it twice, hoping, just hoping I’d see that guy the construction crew were trying to sketch for me.

Then, around two in the morning one night, just as I was about to pull off from the curb on 14th, I see a guy climb over the chain link from out of the shadows of the
site itself. He was carrying a bag over one shoulder, and he looked fragile weary to say the least. Dropping things, and barely able to walk straight. At first I thought he was drunk.

He didn’t see me at all. There was no pursuit. I just stepped out of the cruiser, followed him about a block and apprehended him at the corner of 15th and T. Easy pickings: the guy had all sorts of tools in his little knapsack. “Are you helping Macy’s with their construction work these days? Overtime?”

His response was to just stand there.

“So what were you doing over there then?”

“Trying to save my inspiration,” he said.

Then I walked him back to the cruiser, read him his Miranda, and ducked him into the car.

Denise

It’s a tragedy really. And what’s worse, now he feels cursed by God himself. I keep telling him that his moment of “inspiration” may not have been inspiration at all but delusion. It may not have been God come down to reap joyful havoc upon our lives. Perhaps the “inspiration” was actually the work of the devil. “Even if you don’t believe in that, you have to at least ask yourself,” I told him. I’m beginning to believe myself.

But he doesn’t talk to me. Now that the court date’s set he’s even more despondent. I try to get him out of his shell, get him talking, but he just sleeps. And when he’s not sleeping, he’s watching television. Switching the channels back and forth like a child. Sometimes I try to hold his hand, just to comfort him. I caress his arm. But Ed’s cold to the touch, and he hasn’t smiled in weeks. Ben is terrified, of course.

The saddest part is that Ed hasn’t gone inside the store for nearly a month now. He worked so hard to set it up, and then at the sign of financial ruin, he shriveled up like a raisin. He won’t even talk about it. I turn on the lights in there once a week or so just to make sure animals aren’t nesting under the counters or something.

I hate to admit this, but I’ve started praying. Neither Ed or I have ever been religious, but somehow we’ve been drawn into this mindset. Him through scents
(and now he talks about black magic). Me, out of necessity. And the worst of it is, not only don’t I know how we went down this path, but I find myself asking for it to wend back to something close to our old lives. Back to Bethesda.
Barbara Maloutas

Possessive Pronominal Adjective

There are two brown spots on either side of the walkway from the house to my studio. *Correction:* there won’t be two brown spots on either side of the walkway from the house to my studio. *Correction:* there won’t be two brown spots, one on either side of the walkway from the house to my studio. *Correction:* there won’t be two brown spots in the lawn, one on either side of the walkway from the house to my studio. *Correction:* there won’t be two brown spots in the lawn where the dogs lay, one on either side of the walkway from the house to my studio. *Correction:* there won’t be two brown spots in the lawn where the dogs lay, one on either side of the overgrown walkway from the house to my studio. *Correction:* there won’t be two brown spots in the lawn where the dogs lay, one on either side of the overgrown walkway from the house to our studio. While I am in the studio making these corrections, my husband is out on the lawn fixing the sprinkler heads that one of the dogs bit off during its long days in the yard between the house and our studio. If I don’t use its, someone may think that my husband has taken to biting off sprinkler heads. He’s not there yet.
Metaphor

1) Saint Christopher has been abandoned. All his medals have no value. Someone says that he never did do what he was supposed to have done. He didn’t cross the river. He didn’t actually carry a child on his shoulder, one that got heavier by the step. Who can we pray to now, when we come upon treacherous waters?

2) Houses are protected by Saint Joseph. A homeowner can bury his statue in the backyard and sell his house within a week. Based on life experience however, he doesn't do well with floods or snowy conditions. It seems his insurance covers things other than acts of God.

3) Saint Agnes is a name rarely given to girls nowadays, and a good thing because she was either raped by a cousin or had her breasts cut off and put into her own hands. This is called mutilation in either case.

4) Saint Barbara had such a hard time with her father; she is the patron of artillery. It seems she had to go through suffering to get her reputation. Athena on the other hand was born directly from the mind of Zeus. She represents the civilized and intellectual side of war. Does this mean that through suffering we arrive at the wisdom of war?
Bookkeepers

1. The first bookkeeper didn't want to be one. Sometimes we found her walking around the office in her bare feet. The first time, she said the bottoms of her feet were sunburned. After that we didn't bring it up. What she wanted to be was a belly dancer. Once we hired her and her group for a public relations event, and it was true, she wanted to be a belly dancer.

2. The second bookkeeper had a very floral hand that she had developed growing up somewhere in the Middle East. For years after she left, we recognized her files and work sheets by her handwriting, and we would say, "That is her handwriting."

3. The third bookkeeper was young and dishonest. We checked our phone bills and found his family's out-of-state phone number listed often enough. When we called them they gave us their address without any problem. Then they got the letter accusing their son of pocketing sums of cash meant for deposit. They sent a lawyer the next day to settle up. We don't know if the son learned any lesson, but we got our money back.

4. The fourth bookkeeper was an American Indian. We didn't want to believe that she used the petty cash to repair her car, but she put the repair receipts right in the petty cash envelopes, so there was no question. The state employment department said we could even press charges. We felt sad about that whole history stuff, so we didn't.

5. We liked the fifth bookkeeper. On the boss's birthday, she and one of the other women ordered a stripper dressed as a cop, then she covered her eyes because she couldn't watch. Other than that, for five years, she just kept the books.
Sherrie Lynn Maze

Origin

At a time when crazy making caused my mother to start coming out of my mouth just as she had been previously sprouting out of my widening hips, superfluous thighs and rounded tummy, I thought of the words of my mother, “I’m grown get your own damn kids if you want to tell somebody what to do.” Then she’d say “shiiiit” with an elongated I and I still don’t know how it takes a monosyllabic word five or six seconds before it finished getting said. Well, I chose to adhere to the woman who had taught me crazy and finally get my own damn kids.

I was all like, “I am grown woman. I am wise. I am thirty. Gather ’round younclings and listen for what nugget I may have for you to digest today. Many a year I have traveled through my own personal wilderness and now I have arrived at my own personal promise land. Please come and sit by me. I have something to share. I have heard what it is to be grown from Mother God Herself.

The Battle Hymn Republic served as white noise to my marching about the place. My ventures often do begin with blessed assurance, and my fears are usually dealt with in the same manner, I write them out of existence. For years I’ve been writing things down to get them out done and over with in order to put things to rest the way you do with the dead or things that are no longer useful. For the most part, the end result is peace, or sometimes complacency in the guise of peace. Whatever it is, at that point I am done with it. The dirt of my youth has been excavated and re-laid to look like the prairie-lands. My youth did not kill me like I thought it might. I was never pushed off the rooftop of our fourteen-story building. I didn’t get it in a drive-by. The boy that I slept with is just a memory and did not leave me with any ailment or child. I came out of the whole daughter of an impoverished single mother status smelling rather like Ivory Soap. Instead of dying, I turned thirty.

To commemorate this, I decided that the focal point of my existence will no longer be the child that I once was, but the mother I wanted to become. It is like the aphorism from 1970’s black empowerment movement. Perceive it, believe it, achieve it. It is number one on my list of Top Ten Ways to Avoid Becoming a Victim of One’s Life. Alas, I recognized the maternal gene has been revealed because I have some guilt behind not being able say to my child, “The good Christian woman you call mother, waited for your father before doing the deed.”

But as a relatively stable woman, the shame that I once felt has turned into something else, something dead or no longer useful and so I am done with it. I
know that shame is the shortest distance between a point and the psychiatric unit. I am about forward motion carrying what I can and leaving behind whatever is just too damn heavy. So there I left it, back in Brooklyn with the rest of the crooks. I step out now in the land of prairies and lakes, a woman, a wife, a student, a counselor, a friend. I am your every day black middle class, educated woman who is suddenly seeking motherhood and I am basking in the glow of my new demographic.

It is like that scene in Spike Lee’s film Malcolm X. It is at the very end of the movie and Malcolm has been shot. I’m sitting’ in the theater with Gene, who was then my boyfriend. I must have been twenty or twenty-one. I’m just crying and crying unable to move, I got no tissue, and I’m just sniffling and carrying on. Anyway, Nelson Mandela is in a classroom of South African Children and one by one these children would each stand up and say in their South African dialect. “I AM Malcolm X.” It was something of a battle cry. Just like Spartacus. My new battle cry has become “I Am Mother.” It goes back to perceive, believe, achieve. I will achieve motherhood for I have come on the other side of youth for some purpose and this must be the purpose.

Yet, all it takes is a faint whiff or a muted sound of something smelled or heard before and there I am there again walking slowly into my home of origin, amazed at how little has changed, feeling again its narrowness that closed in on me as I grew. I’m sitting on the same couch and watching the same black and white television with the wire hanger sticking out of it. I’m walking along the same linoleum floor, torn and taped in some spots and the edges curling away from the walls. Mice travel in between the chipping plaster and the bend in the linoleum. They scratch about with speed and certainty of their environment. It was my first home of little frill. The reverberations outside of my mother’s first floor apartment are all so identifiable, only a great deal more pronounced than they once appeared. I hear the three o’clock bustlings of active children just let out of school. The lobby carries their noise like an amplifying tunnel. I hear Jay from 111 who sold the Daily News each Sunday morning, floor by floor until he reached fourteen. He’d sing Neeeews Paaaaper! The echo reached my mother’s door and she’d scurry for change and a tip. “What a nice boy,” she’d say pulling out the coupon pages as I dug through for the TV guide. Mrs. Dockery would come knocking eventually to give us a pan of her apple stuffing. Jehovah’s Witnesses would come knocking with the latest issue of Watchtower. Outside, traffic moves west toward the Brooklyn Queens expressway or east toward the Brooklyn Navy Yard. Bridges and highways, vast government subsidized buildings, city parks with graffiti adorned handball courts, it is the landscape of infrastructure and the uninterrupted presence of people, pushing or pedaling, sitting on benches in contemplation or conversation. Sands Street craves its inhabitants just the way mountains and prairies crave theirs’, whatever theirs’ may be bears or butterflies.
Some faces may have changed but mostly they are the same. But, what is this thing that is strangely unfamiliar? I think that I’ve become unfamiliar. I am not who I thought I would be and to some degree I find myself in sad reflection of a misplaced dream. Of course, I have an affinity for black women with dreadlocks, big jewelry and something acutely honest to say. But what I am begrudging to admit is that I never became what I revered. I never locked my hair and for years I have not been unequivocally honest. What I have become is tempered. Tempered by the Midwest, tempered by marriage, by age, by middle-classdom, by religiosity and my new longings for small houses and station wagons.

I am not even sure if can call this newer place that I live home. I have grown with cement not wildness. Now I live with formless raspberry bushes of which I do not pick and of which I cannot destroy no matter how determined I get, and I live with rhubarb transplanted from someone’s country garden. I know nothing of these matters. I planted day lilies in the shade instead of in full sun. I dropped grass seed on a patch of dirt without watering and wondered why the grass did not grow. I cannot distinguish marigolds from carnations. I am afraid of bunnies. In good weather I go out for duty sake, not love. Attempt to make things pretty. Fail. My husband threatens to pave the back yard.

I’ve had the audacity to ask southern ancestors who worked the earth without pay to help me find my agricultural roots. That has helped me as much as asking my dead Cuban grandfather to help me earn an A in intermediate Spanish. I begin to wonder why we didn’t we buy that townhouse instead, and then I remember. We bought this house for outdoor birthday parties, for carrying pitchers of punch to a picnic table after Little League, for playing tag around the big oak tree that hinders the afternoon sun. We bought this house for the same reason that we bought our blue station wagon. Why else would anyone buy a station wagon, blue or otherwise? Pulling out of the driveway I look back for safety sake, sometimes noticing the emptiness of the vehicle, and what feels like a spasm pulls at my chest, and I remember that I have once again become a person in longing. Dreams have gotten me this far, far away from my home of origin. Why not dream some more however it may twinge. Pain has its reasons for being.

I once dreamt of cobblestone blocks lined with old trees and three story brownstones with black iron railings and arched an ornate doors, with one button to push with my name next to it and an intercom for me to holler, “come on up!” I dreamt of living close enough to my home of origin to conduct Saturday morning arts and craft at the Farragut Housing Projects Community Center. My daydreams have escaped Sands Street, though my night dreams still hover there. Dreams of my deceased brother Victor always take place there. I have one reoccurring dream that I knock on my mother’s door. He answers opening the door wide and saying, “Where have you been?” I just stand there and wonder if I’d been mistaken about the everything, the wheel chair, the hospitalizations, the
morphine, the weight lost, the height lost, the life lost, the cremation, the ashes sitting in my father’s apartment? My brother who played high school and college football, MVP… jock who was also smart as hell, and somewhat cocky, who had my father’s gift for debate, the only Williams kid who didn’t take shit from anybody, happened to be the one who would die too young when cancer began to break his bones one by one, determined to show this force of a man who was in charge. And my brother fought against the menacing disease for eight more years after the doctor had given him three months to live. But, when I dream of him… he is whole again, broad shoudered, bowl-legged and still somewhat cocky.

Other dreams occur there, dreams of me holding babies happen there. I had my first baby dream when I was sixteen. I gave birth to a baby that looked more like a velvety red hair-bow. Now, I dream of real screaming babies flaring tonsils at me demanding to be fed. Not long ago, I dreamt of my earliest love. He and I were too young to know when the affair ended. It ended with summer like many good things do. It ended with the fall chill that creeps in quietly in late August. I stood two inches taller than he, though he was two years my senior and already in second grade. I once thought he was as permanent as the Brooklyn Queens Expressway. Later, I would return home for winter break from college and find him still standing or sitting on Sands Street always with a forty ounce bottle of malt liquor wrapped in a brown paper bag. We would always be sincerely kind to one another. How are you Derrick? I’d ask and he’d say, “Well you know, livin’ livin’.” I would notice how I never stopped growing long enough for him to catch up to my height and how I still loved him. I loved him like summer.

He was my brother’s best friend, and together they were Eric and Derrick, small, but dominant point guards on the courts on High Street, with mutual affection like Magic and Isaiah who kissed each other’s cheek before games. But Eric never kissed Derrick, I did. It happened the day that I told him that he was my boyfriend and he said okay. I was five, but the memory survives and is stored where first memories are kept, in the illusory bones and muscle tissue of the soul.

I dreamt that Eric, Derrick and I were together again. We were sitting in my mother’s living room, furnished with the same navy couches, now covered with navy slipcovers. Outside of my mother’s window were beautiful gardens with orange, yellow and purple, brushing against the billows.

“Great job on the Garden.” Derrick said to me. I was unaware at first, but soon realized that the garden was my doing.

“It still needs work,” I responded with false modesty. Inside I was lit like a firefly. We drifted in the color and I imagined myself a lilac bush swaying rhythmically at the will of the forgiving breeze. All that botanical life astounded us and it was right there in the center of our projects just outside my mother’s first floor
apartment, amidst the rumble of the B37 bus thumping over steel planks that covered the potholes on Sands Street. I could have not been more satisfied. Eric gave us peanuts and we ate with joy and laughed just like we did during hot months undisturbed by things to do. The night dream merged my worlds, and in this new creation I new how to garden. I awoke from my dream and cried for the first time after learning that Derrick had died. Eric said it was his liver.

In my wake I have learned that I only wished that my arms had carried more of Brooklyn to the midland. I thought that I would be like the visitors I knew as a child. They would return to their home of origin with mustached husbands and fat babies. They’d be dressed in trench coats and pumps looking like somebody’s black girl-Friday. “Where you been?” One of the elder women would ask. “Oh, I moved to Queens or Virginia, or I’m stationed in Germany.” They’d have grand white smiles, enhanced by true red lips. I would gaze at them as they passed by and greet me by my older sister’s name. I’d correct them and they say, “girl you got big, how old are you now?” I’d say seven or such and they’d say, “Boy, how time flies.”

I never became one of the women who came back. People don’t come back anymore. They don’t pat the children on the head saying “My have you grown.” They’re afraid of the children. They don’t mess the coat of puppies and old tired dogs too stubborn to pass on. The pups and the old dogs now have jaws that lock and are perfectly capable of removing one’s hand from one’s body. What we do, however, is sneak in inconspicuously to visit aging mothers and dart out towards planes, trains or automobiles to flee the disaster our home has become.

I wonder how I have come to a sense of homelessness and of wondering where to land full flesh to the ground. As I watch my husband rake last fall’s remaining leaves, I am struck by the lack of people I see in the street. The few that I see are busy with the upkeep of their own personal patches of green; trimming, mowing, planting in diligent attempt to have the land submit to human wills. They don’t know that I’m watching, or don’t care. I survey our own patch of green and notice last year’s day lilies are trying to grow again in a location not meant for them. When I get the inclination, I will move them out of the shade and replant them in full sun where they belong.
David McGrath

South Side

We were drinkers.

Kids elsewhere were known for other things. The country boys smashed rural mailboxes. Inner city kids looked for fights. The rich kids took drugs and slit their wrists. The weirdoes smoked dope and read *Steal This Book* by Abbie Hoffman.

Not us. As teens growing up in the sixties on the south side of the Chicago, we were defined by beer. Gallons of it. Quart bottles, six packs, twelve packs, half quart cans, kegs, gallon thermos jugs, coolers, laundry tubs packed with cans and ice: three cases of Pabst Blue Ribbon, and one of those 25 pound blocks of ice that tumbles heavily out of the machine dispensers built into the side wall of Town Liquor on 101st & Western Avenue.

Sure, sometimes one of us would get a half pint of Old Kentucky if he wanted to hide it at a dance, or if he had to conceal it in the bleachers at the ball park (we didn’t go to rock concerts). And we’d be stupid to pass up anything with alcohol—vodka, vermouth, bourbon or gin—if we could filch it from the wet bars in our parents’ knotty pine paneled rec rooms. But given our preferences, night in and night out it was beer.

We were not drunks, because most of the year we had to attend high school and get good enough grades so that we could get into college to maintain a 2-S draft status and stay out of the Viet Nam War. And in the summer, we’d go off to a part time job caddying at Ridge Country Club or as a lifeguard at the 79th Street beach, and in the afternoon meet up to go swimming at the pool or get our mitts for a game of baseball at Beverly Park on 103rd and Washtenaw.

We were not drunks, because drinking beer was just what you did on a Friday or Saturday night when you were sixteen and eighteen years old and you grew up with beer, probably since your father worked hard as a washing machine repairman for Sears, or maybe he sold cars for Tony Piet Pontiac on Western Avenue, and he kept a twelve pack of Hamms in the fridge to cool off after a hard day, and maybe to have on hand in case a neighbor stopped by.

Real drunks were old people who developed sclerosis, or rich people who drank Scotch and got divorced, or they were bums and winos (called homeless now), or maybe the Indians up north who went crazy from liquor, or, as Old Len said, the
“spics” who spent their sod-laying money on tequila, or “shines” who spent their welfare checks on Schlitz malt liquor and gin.

Not us. We weren’t drunks like Marvin Harne and Jim Hansen of the Hansen family with 12 kids we all went to school with, who lived just on the other side of Washtenaw, when in 1967, Marvin shot his best friend Jim in the head and then panicked and dragged him to the car and dumped his body off the Cal Sag bridge. They couldn’t charge him with murder since they never found the body, but Marvin owned up to his best friend’s Mom how they were power drinking 16 ounce cans of Budweiser in the Hansens’ basement when they started arguing and fighting, and it was an accident and he got scared.

No, we were not drunks, but clean cut all American kids whose parents voted for Ike or John Kennedy, and who had yard parties with high balls and gin and tonics for the grownups, and we’d better not touch any of it, though a sip of somebody’s icy cold Meister Brau was okay, and when you graduated high school maybe a barrel of Stroh’s was strictly a one time celebration and rite of passage for you and your friends as long as the old man kept an eye on things and nobody left the premises.

Hell, it was just cold beer. You could be under 21 and buy it yourself in some states like Wisconsin or Texas, and buy and drink as much as you wanted if you went into the army as my older brother did after his draft board was notified by a juvenile judge that he’d lent his i.d.’s to somebody who’d been in a wreck, so he was shipped to Germany, luckily, where, he said, he learned to drink “serious” beer, so that he and some army buddies rolled a Volkswagen outside of Frankfurt—no harm done since they were N.A.T.O. and the VW was a rental, insured, and nobody was injured and they were soldiers blowing off steam.

Beer is all American and the official beverage at Chicago White Sox games, VFW halls, bowling alleys, block parties, church carnivals, and community picnics. You can’t very well drink whiskey nonstop in the hot sun while pitching horseshoes or playing softball, but you can do it with beer. From sunup till sundown, you can enjoy your beer and function normally. Anything is possible with beer.

We were not drunks, though most of us had a pretty good taste for it by the time we were 17, and with my first paycheck from Jewel foods where I bagged groceries to earn tuition money for commuter college, I bought a set of fake i.d.’s for thirty dollars from one my friends who’d already had his own and knew the guy who printed voter’s cards and authentic military driver’s licenses, which were official looking and done in half tones and could be Xeroxed. There were even a couple of backers to go along with it, like a United Auto Workers i.d., and everybody who had them knew exactly where they would or would not be accepted.
For us the easiest place was at Hugo’s in the far south side. It was an old time neighborhood bar where Hugo served drafts for 35 cents, and all of us went in there so regularly that after a while he stopped carding us. There’d be Hugo, about 50 years old and short and fat behind the bar, and another old guy, his friend, on our side of the rail where there’d be me and “E. the B.” (nicknames of my friends and brothers) and Old Len and GB and S-Man, Bones, Bohawk, the brothers Cowballs and Zeke, Emil, H.J., Uncy, Robot, Wolf, Titty, and O.E.E. pounding down as many drafts as we could on a Friday afternoon before Hugo wanted for us to scram before the adults started drifting in after work. So he’d tell our spokesperson Len that it was time to go, and we’d order up enough carryouts to see us through the night and maybe through Saturday, too, if we had enough room in the car.

We’d haul it over to Ernie’s house (that was E. the B.) since he lived in the basement and his parents never came down, and we’d drink and smoke cigarettes, and Ernie would pull out the cards with naked women on the front and we’d play poker and have eclectic arguments. We talked pretty philosophically about things, getting all beery and light headed from dehydration, and numb but loose-limbed, and single minded. We argued about the war, since S-Man lost his deferment and was being called up, and I said I’d go to Canada if my lottery number came up, and Len said oh go screw yourself let’s go down to Old Town, and we’d pile into Len’s parent’s white Ford Galaxy with a three speed on the column and the cassette player with Simon and Garfunkel singing “Mrs. Robinson” all the way up the Dan Ryan and along Wells Street.

We didn’t go downtown too often since the strip joints cost an arm and a leg to get in, and then you had to nurse your two-drink minimum since they each cost as much as the cover charge. But the bouncers always honored our fake i.d.’s, the same as at Eddie’s Jolly Inn back in the suburbs on Harlem Avenue, which was a lot cheaper; and unlike the downtown strippers, at Eddie’s they took everything off and would fool around with you at the bar or at your table, but we learned that they were transsexuals, some so sexy we didn’t believe it, so we still went there once a month or so.

It’s good I wasn’t driving, not so much because of the several quarts of Old Style I’d had by then (we drank so fast that it was too much trouble to bother with smaller bottles), but because I had a “piss poor” sense of direction, the way Old Len used to describe it. And sometimes Len wasn’t so good, either. He’d pull out in front of somebody or pop the clutch of that Ford, and more than once the cops would pull us over, and in a minute there’d be three or four squads, and there’d be eight or ten cops, some grilling Len, others asking GB, who was an athlete, about Leo High School’s basketball team, another transferring the beer from our car to theirs, still others asking Robot whose father was a politician if he knew this guy
or that guy, and pretty soon it’d be like a goddam impromptu Fraternal Order of Police meeting in red blinking lights right on goddam California Avenue.

Len would start joking with them and explaining how O.E.E. got his name (one-eyed eater), or how Cowballs got his (you don’t want to know except that Len christened him with that in the changing room at the Beverly Ridge public swimming pool), and that S-Man meant not superman but Sperm-Man or that Titty was just a more graphic identifier of Teddy who was overweight and bulging, and they’d be laughing and weren’t all shocked when O.E.E. asked for our beer back, though one of the cops said pretty sternly that O.E.E. had the balls of a moose and maybe he should be locked up in the shithouse for the night, and O’ just smiled and took a drag off his Marlboro and said how about giving us at least half of it back.

By then and because the cops had to radio in, one of them said a squad lieutenant was on the way and they shooed us back into the Galaxy and told us we’d better get the hell out of there fast.

It was pretty much that way all the time in those days, when no police would go through the impossible paperwork of trying to write someone up for a D.U.I. So drinking while driving around was about the safest way to spend the evening, though sometimes if someone were really weaving badly or drag racing down 87th Street, we might get a speeding ticket and our beer confiscated and told we’d better get our asses back home.

One afternoon about ten of us met up at Hugo’s and he got a little bit nervous since there was so many, and after the first round when he gave Len his change, he also slipped him a note that said it was a plainclothes cop at the end of the bar and that “young ones better scram.” Len would later smile and shake his head and say Hugo “nearly shit” when all ten of us cleared out at the same time.

From there we went to Kennedy Park where we could always get one of the older fellows who graduated from Mendel or St. Rita to run an order without much trouble, except that they always took extra money on top and came back with the cheapest beer like Blatz or Drewery’s or some pale ale swill we’d never even heard of but drank up anyway since we hadn’t much choice.

When we were low on funds and couldn’t afford the Kennedy Park service fee, we’d fight over who would try to buy at Gee Jay’s on 79th and Western or the Walgreens at 95th, which sometimes didn’t card and sometimes did.

Or we’d drive all the way over to the Baby Doll Polka Club where they were happy to have us sit in and sip drafts, or as a last resort, we’d drive east of
Western and find a “shine” bar where we could always make a buy if someone were brave enough to go in.

The best, of course, was summer time when folks’ parents and the younger children would go on vacation to the Wisconsin Dells or all the way up to Minocqua, and we’d stay back home, all beered up for a week, with parties afternoon and night. Not like the house party in *Risky Business* with all the neighborhood kids that parents would inevitably find out about, but serious bashes with poker and arm wrestling and professional women like Fran and Diane from 74th & Ashland, or maybe a herd of *strange* that Zeke and Cowballs could always manage to round up from outside our area.

Like one night when Zeke and Cowballs pulled up in their identical Chevy Super Sports with 8 girls from the Bush or the East Side by the steel mills, and we pulled an all nighter, and I had my first significant date with a skinny girl named Katie, and I don’t remember that much about it except that we ended up in the walk-in pantry with the door closed and the light turned off but which I had to turn back on when Katie threw up.

When the girls went home the place was a wreck, and most of the boys were staying on through the morning. Len never went to sleep—said the kegger wouldn’t be much good the next day, so he sat with his arm draped around it till morning which was the day we all went outside at sunup and took all our clothes off and showered under the garden hose which we propped up on the basketball standard and then decided to drip dry by running up and down the sidewalk down our block, a spectacle witnessed, we later found out, by Mrs. Giovanni who was cool enough not to tell my parents when they got back home.

We weren’t really drunks, just teenagers, and it was all pretty clean fun. No drugs, no crime, really, and unlike Marvin Harne, none of us shot anybody, though one night I waited in a tree out front for my sister, was going to scare her when she pulled up because she had had her fill of our using the house that week for parties and threatened to tell. I did it up right, with a costume and all, kind of a loincloth and a butcher knife, all a gag, which she didn’t appreciate too much when I jumped down right next to her, all in clean fun.

Or the time Emil got jumped at the Burger King by the 95ers, some goofy-ass white gang who didn’t like something Emil said, which we could almost understand since Emil would get beer balls and call people out just for looking at him. It was August and hot and we all piled into Titty’s car with rocks and clubs and I had this 12 inch metal bar I had sawn off at the factory where I had a job that summer, and Len said later it was lucky no 95ers were around since *She-Dog* (the nickname he gave to me—don’t ask me why) would likely be facing a murder rap, the “mental bastard.”
We weren’t drunks, because it was teenage stuff, ala Little Rascals or the Bowery Boys, and boys will be boys, which is pretty much the way Len’s parents figured it. After they caught wind of the near rumble with the 95ers, they figured that although they couldn’t staunch the flow of Busch and Miller’s, it might be better if we did our drinking in their basement, rather than anywhere else, since it would keep us in the neighborhood and out of serious trouble.

Which it did, mostly, for several years, even as we got older and started to get married to girls from the neighborhood or whom we met at work and school who had fathers and brothers a lot like us. Every Friday, through all four seasons, there’d be 6, 12, sometimes 20 of us together in Len’s basement, playing cards, shooting pool, listening to music, hanging out, and getting right on cold, sudsy beer.

O.E.E. and Bones and Chubsy had turned 21 and regularly ran the orders for us. Old Len would make us put our initials on our quart bottles and our six packs before they went into the fridge in his basement so there wouldn’t be any fights over somebody stealing somebody else’s.

S-Man returned safely from Nam, but he was more into dope than drafts, so we didn’t see him much anymore. And we saw less of Bones and Chubsy, too, since they had gotten girlfriends, fiancés, and jobs and didn’t need the basement sanctuary.

But O.E.E. still came around. We’d see him at the start of the evening, and then at the end, when he’d clomp down the wooden stairs at 2am after a date, dressed nice but with his tie loosened, to see if there was still a poker game going that he could get into.

We waited for him to come, since he was funny and cool and sincere and became a kind of mentor for us, especially on matters of sex. He’d hide his poker hand, looking over his glasses, and while waiting for Bohawk to get back from the john to say whether or not he was still in the game, O.E.E. would tell us how he got in this girl’s or that girl’s pants, or what particular kind of sex act Jessica liked best, or how he forced the issue with Priscilla when after the movie he stopped at Walgreens and told her he was buying rubbers. When he came back out and saw she was still in the car, he knew he was “in like Flynn” and headed west to the Miami Motel on Cicero Avenue.

I was enthralled by his adventures, as were most of the other guys, but some like GB thought he must be making everything up, or else why would he be wasting time with us at 3 in the morning.
The following Friday O.E.E. came downstairs after a date with Jessica and walked directly up to GB, held out his finger, and said, “Smell this.” GB believed him after that, and we all got up to have a smell of it ourselves.

O.E.E. finally found a nice girl that he married, and we all eventually turned 21 but continued to go to Len’s house on Friday nights, when our younger brothers who were 16 and 17 started filling the chairs around the table. We were the ones who ran the orders, and we still went to the card games even as we started to get jobs and get married and graduate from college, until we were all shaken the week before Christmas when O.E.E. was killed instantly in a collision on the Dan Ryan expressway. He had gone to an office party and got pretty “pie-eyed” as Len explained at the wake, and he got on the interstate going the wrong way and plowed into several cars before he could get turned around. An autopsy showed that he was legally drunk at the time that he was going around 105 miles an hour northbound in the southbound lanes, with a backseat filled with Christmas gifts for his wife and his son.

We were not drunks. O.E.E. had just gone too far and we should have warned him. We had a memorial service for him at Panos’s Lounge on 95th and Kedzie, lining up mugs of draft beer—Heineken since it was a solemn occasion—filling up one mug for O.E.E. and placing it in front of an empty chair.

Some people would just sometimes forget their limit, the way O.E.E. did, or like when Robot, crazy bastard, woke up in his car surrounded by police, after he had fallen asleep, he said, and plowed into several parked vehicles. He wasn’t hurt, but the cops roughed him up some.

Wolf wasn’t as lucky, when he and Emil got in a wreck and Wolf went off walking down 127th Street for help and got picked off by some sonofabitch driving and drinking beer, bashed up into the air on a January night, and clipped by a second car going the opposite way as he body fell to the snow crusted street. He was in the hospital for over a year and they had to take one of his legs.

And though I don’t recall if it was after or before Wolf, Emil was jailed after kicking out the plate glass window of a clothing store when he was in one of his rages on a Saturday night. He went on the wagon after that, and he was divorced from the woman who caused his rage, so alls well that ends well.

We weren’t drunks, for it was a sucker punch that knocked me out after an argument in an Oak Lawn tavern about a dart game. Another time, when GB came to on the asphalt of a parking lot of an Alsip joint, beaten and bloodied, he maintained none of it would have happened if it weren’t for a vindictive bartender who slipped him a mickey earlier in the night.
We weren’t drunks. Mostly we had a lot of laughs.

We laughed at an all night party we had at Jewel when we stock boys were locked in to load the shelves and mop the floors, and instead we drank the beer we smuggled in, cooked steaks on the stove in the Jewel Deli, and watched the hockey game on the TV in the butcher shop.

We laughed at E.the B. getting out a bucket and pretending to mop up after one of the female “sweat hogs” at one of the all nighters in Len’s basement.

We laughed when Bohawk and E. were pulled over for racing his Shelby mustang against a red Corvette down 95th street, and how the cops were Mustang aficionados (Bohawk won the race) who actually gave the beer back that time.

We laughed over S-Man’s courage in spraining his ankle while sliding into second base at Comiskey Park after a victory, and of his charming the cops with his knowledge of baseball trivia, so that they let him go.

We laughed about how Ernie won a girl away from Cowballs in one of the poker games in his basement, and how he introduced her to the rest of us as “7 Card Colleen.”

We laughed about Len picking up women at the AA meetings and taking them to Bleekers for a pitcher of beer.

We laughed the night Bones was pulled over in Willow Springs and told six uniformed officers that they were “uneducated sonsabitches” who could kiss his Irish ass.

Today we reminisce about those old days, especially when we go to see Old Len for a few beers at the Legion Hall, which is the only saloon within walking distance of his house, so we go there since he can’t drive after wrecking two different work vehicles and losing his license and then his job and finally his pension, though he still can get by with some unemployment benefits and a little inheritance from his late mother.

It made the papers when he was arrested for having violated the restraining order secured by his ex wife, after he was found parked in front of her house with a .357
magnum on the seat next to him. It sounded way worse than it was, since he was merely in possession of the weapon he had bought some months earlier for a gig he had as a security guard in the neighborhood bank.

We laugh at the Legion to remember how weeks later he had to borrow my car to check up on his ex-old lady, and the cops were at my door at 3am asking if I would go with them to get the Pontiac which was wrapped around a light pole at 95th and Damen, and there was Old Len, red-eyed, beery, and talking a mile a minute, mesmerizing the cops with his tale of marital woe, asking what they would do if they looked through a window and saw their ex-wife blowing some stranger sitting in what used to be Len’s old recliner.

When the watch commander was reported to be on his way, the cops on the scene packed both me and Len into the tow truck and told the driver to get us the hell out of there.

So the cops “sucked it all in,” said Len, and he got off scott free—not even a ticket. And the insurance paid for my totaled vehicle with even a few dollars left over, so that Len said I “made out like a bandit.” Today Len’s liver enzymes are off the charts and we worry about what will happen, but laughing is the best thing.

But we’re not drunks. We’re older now. A couple of us didn’t make it, but that’s life.

We had our kicks when we were young, and those of us who still have our health, still enjoy a few beers. Not as much or as often as the old days, but now we drink better brands, and our wives do most of the driving.

Among us today are lawyers and accountants and tradesmen and professors and entrepreneurs. A couple went on the wagon or in and out of AA, but who out there doesn’t know someone who has? Half of us are divorced, but isn’t that the national average?

No, we weren’t drunks—just making our way, making life fun. Why don’t they use that in the commercials: Drink beer to make life fun.

We weren’t drunks. We didn’t require beer. But it helped us stick together, the way classic car restoration or Civil War history or golf unites other men. Beer made us enjoy each other, as it seemed to help us be funny, brave, loyal, strong, sexy, musical, patriotic, angry, folksy, rebellious, confrontational, honest, proud, emotional, and stoic—attributes which you could see testimony about in the beer
commercials on TV. Not that those things weren’t already inside of us. Beer helped us feel them.
Matt Morris

Life of God

He cried, it rained. He shook
his rattle, thunder echoed
throughout the void. He shat upon
himself, cherubs flitted about
like flies, zealous to change
his sacrosanct diaper, safety
pins pursed on pious
lips. In school, He made friends
readily—out of Popsicle sticks, elbow
macaroni & plenty
of Elmer’s. For His science
project—while Buddha fussed
over a Styrofoam
solar system & Vishnu
ate paste—the Almighty showed off
His awe-inspiring, infinite,
fully functional, complete
with flickering lights & soiled humanity,
universe. Lousy
at sports, He counted on angels, rough
& tumble, blackened feathers
flying, to smite the mocking
jocks yoked in the ritual
of pantsing & dragging
His pimply, omnipotent ass
around heaven’s high school track. He aced
the LSATs, raced through
His J.D., resisted
the devilish temptation of politics, opting
instead for a position with Fidelity
Life, where He rose faster
than Jesus. Married,
He bought a bungalow, mortgaged
beyond redemption, in the burbs, engaged once
or twice in extramarital hoo-hahs, divorced,
remarried, begat 2.5
billion children, who, spawned
in his image, disappointed

him in His dotage. He tossed off sacramental
wine like water, the stubby black
stogy of lost glory clenched
between sin-stained
partials. Is this
how you want to go? Mrs. God
ragged over supper, His wizened
face slumped in a cold bowl
of something, & sure enough.
Idle Days in the Lost City

You can’t ignore the same contented smile that graces each one of the upwards of thirty participants, faces tilted toward the sun. Caught on the breeze, their constructions lift in a dazzling array. Those of you who’ve made one already know it takes more than wind for such a show, requiring hours, even days, of preparation. Watching Jasper cutting balsa, do you know what he wants?

Judging from the length & number of strips at his feet, you may guess he’s making a box, but surprisingly, he’s building a gigantic ring, which, once covered in gold foil, he’ll let fly his lofty design to ask for Lucinda’s lovely hand. Meanwhile, crosstown, Lucinda, wheels turning, drums her nubby pencil eraser lightly on the drawing desk. What’s reflected in her wire frame lenses aren’t postage stamps, but blueprints for a large-scale dragon. But just past the foreboding wings, penciled in meters, do you not see over her shoulder the likeness of another man in the doorway? He walks toward her, she removes her glasses. In the dark, you hear Jasper’s distant tapping,

echoing his heart. You shake your head at the crystal ball,
but maybe as that gold ring soars overhead, Lucinda offers a plausible, perfectly innocent explanation. Or maybe it plummets, the fault lying with Jasper’s schematics, not with Lucinda. Or maybe something unforeseen overshadows the lives of a few who look to the heavens for answers. The truth of the matter—well, you probably already know.
Mr. K.

woke with a hard-on. No
dream, his bedroom’s dour
walls sparsely decked
with photos of his decade
dead wife, half-read mystery face-
down on the nightstand, long
unchanged linens kicked
to the floor. His surprising
boner’s winking eye returned
his gaze. *The hell,*
he thought & rolled
over on the odd
leg & tried to sleep but couldn’t
rid his buggy head
of the diner’s new girl leaning across
the counter with her loosely
buttoned top as she filled
his cup, lingering
like perfume to ask, plump lips
puckered, if he wanted
pie. He nodded. A cock-
roach wriggling on its back
feverishly rubbed its
sticky legs.
Songs for Aging Children

1/Return of Geppetto

Girly thingies, red & lacy, dangle
from the bedpost & puddle the parquet
floor of what used to be the dead man’s
workshop. From his ethereal
cloud, he swoops down, dismayed
to find his wooden-head, fathered
from the purity of the old toy maker’s
heart, squandering his dream made real
life on carnality. Pinocchio, smug,
smudged grin paling, lies entangled
with a pair of marionettes, their silky
strings like strands of angel hair.

2/Back to Emporia

No more Scarecrow. He drew
the short straw, crucified
in the cornfield. Tin Man,
broken like a rusty nail, fell
into obsolescence & despair. Poor
Lion, teeth extracted
for souvenirs, roared
his last, too feeble
to care. Toto, Glinda,
the Wizard gone, the family
farm supplanted by a mall,
Dorothy shambled down
the double yellow line
of the blacktop, her rag doll
dress flapping in the wind
of an eighteen wheeler,

muttering, *We’re not
in the Emerald

*City anymore*, to the pretend
hen clutched to her breast.
Christopher Mulrooney

Bo

_The summer dream beneath the tamarind tree._

Poe

Bo

stop the presses
jailhouse rock
way stores
sketch
out of town
railroad town
badlands
the proper scansion of lines in poetry
souvenir of Florence
Lot
a day in the forest
a famous ruin
hill and clouds with moon

Bo

my overarching disappointment wrote my letter
you my says you wonder at my loss
it weren't my since disappointment watch
my tears at my litmus since

I have in my hands the missive

stop the presses

I see his image rude immobile
standing there holding outright a paper
with its headline
a stack of them under his arm
statuesque
jailhouse rock

howsawhatsabout matter
says the jailer
and what are you in for?

life of course
says the prisoner insouciantly

well then says the jailer
we'll have to show you the ropes

way stores

piles of road beside the highway
earth tones mauve umber
carbonized

what hills and plains
and the calm artificer

sketch

lemon-lime on chocolate
purple
the sacrificial sun hoists ahoy
pale seas that break in gullets
rilles shifts outbreaks clifftops
mountebanks of caryatids
surfactants of advertisement
sharp gleaming signalworks the fine fair
dapple-dawn-drawn catacombs of rust and ruin
metamorphosed in the air of clouds
static drawn over the landscape
out of town

there it is from the vast view
a roll of carpets cottonwoods why don't you call it
choke and burn the bloated vaunted old city
full of proscriptions nervous vacillating sunk
with its history written in vanishing plaques all the way up
here it is the pretty scrublands there out of reach
the cones of hills the green and yellow and
sitting at a cafe table the honest to God artist

railroad town

the train comes by all night long
brings mail in the morning
Stetson hats brook sweating bands
you treat and though the mind is poor
is so clear shootouts tote it up so clear
it's not so much a care as there
a something verdurous and scambling

badlands

a great glowing intercession in the plains
you see or don't you see the bluebirds in black
crests the chipmunks walking down the vertical walls

not for worlds the sweetwater memory muddied goes
drifting in a comical posture cambering lazily
like the song the interminable song you arrive at

from the west descending out of woods or from Alpha
Centauri (passing through) a time warp (happy) then you reach
the way it goes through lumberlands and slumberlands
and numberlands and tumblerlands and bumberlands and
cumberlands and dumberlands (you finish the conceit) oh

where you go from now on here on now reflects the oh
so Kilkenny obstreperation of this way you've gone
for so long cutting through the earth to reach the shore
the proper scansion of lines in poetry

where did I see this with an absent passenger withholding all the sees and holds "the granite shores" oh darling

the train waiting in the middle of nowhere

souvenir of Florence

at the tea roast ducklings were served with peas and scrod and puddings galore among the silverware and Paul Reveres and linen Irish linen Chantilly lace and cream liqueurs and candles greens and occasional flowers etc.

we had snapshots made and everybody looked beastly

Lot

struck with a flying salt lick see him abandoned out of town what town what salt whatever was that still is the earth but not by much

da day in the forest

rising out of coolness out of the muck remembered into heat reflected wantonly hit or miss the thickets
groped or moss with a wonder at the old towns' ideal factions here is the woods strange to say the idea counters you all the way down the idea froze you way down you will recall I do remember with your shorts down tumblingly
a famous ruin

well now here go look it'll be here been here
a thousand years just a pile of rocks this ruin
laid out in rectangles and circles you can see it
what do you know the walls spheres layout all of it

just the stones along the dirt with the sun on it

hill and clouds with moon

late the moon
the Milky Way betimes

half-orange wash in the gully of stars
it comes the black cloud silver selvage
in and out

drypoint burr on spangled asphaltum
hill
“Well, I guess I won’t be needing my academic training now,” Meira murmured as she quickly undressed and pounced hungrily onto his body. Again he was amazed; the directness of the women he met in Jerusalem stunned him. He wondered if someone had spread the word that a naïve country boy had come up to the city. She took full license with his body, doing things with it he would never dare ask his wife to do. He shuddered at even hinting his secret desires, they seemed so depraved to him. But with the inflamed Meira, even during intercourse there was no hint of indecency. She did what she did with his body with seriousness, concentration and with not a trace of humor. He was surprised at the depth of the modesty he sensed beneath the passion of her sex. She froze for a moment when, in the heat of the act he let slip aloud some dirty words. “No, she didn’t like that,” he recalled and did not forget it. He tried not to anger her needlessly.

She threw her clothes on the chair, shivering in the fall air that drifted through the window. Again he saw in the dim light of a transparent, desire-arousing October evening, the nunnish simplicity of her dress. Her panties and bra were the cut and color of a uniform, not intimate wear. Her skin was soft and different from his wife’s. His hands smoothed along the tiny bumps down her back and above the rise of her cunt. Her legs surprised him; young legs, skin firm and fair, shaped like a teenager’s. It was as if her body was made up of parts from several different women. Looking at her, he did not hold back praise for her lovely legs. Long after that night she remembered his simple words that touched her heart. Her breasts that had not yet suckled, excited him, her firm stomach and narrow cunt, too, as if he was coming on a girl, like so many years ago. He was happy to make love under an open window and inhale deeply the cool night wind. He had not known air like this, oxygen-filled, clean, stimulating, in his village in the far away lowlands. He put off his pressing questions about her life for another night, a while later, when their first hunger relaxed its hold. Surrounded by her body and her loving, he couldn’t imagine why she was still unmarried. Was she divorced? Why was there no sign of children in her apartment? What did her good friends really know about her life?

*Translated from the Hebrew by Zehava Lerech*
After a light doze, they awoke and he kissed her. She joined her mouth to his and pressed her teeth into it. With his lips and tongue, he felt the metal plate of her dental bridge; its point pierced him and he bit his tongue. Suddenly the pain threw him back to a distant, foreign city, unfamiliar to him except in his dreams. There, in that far off city, he was making love with a woman who appeared lifeless, and for a short moment it seemed to him he was exchanging kisses and pressing into the mouth and jaw of a bare skull.

Without intending to, he moved himself out from under Meira’s hot belly, out of the little room in which they were lying, outside of her Jerusalem apartment, out of the emotional tangle curled inside him before he had time to regret. He told himself he was feeling one of the 60 final retributions—exactly what happens to anyone who sins in an adulterous bed. There were punishments worse than these, stabbing, wounding, hurting, that come swooping down upon you just in the middle of perfect physical pleasure. They were sure signs, impossible to mistake, rushing in just at that soft and pleasant time when the body must not feel any pain, when the soul must rest. These retributions were reserved for him thirty years hence, but he was getting them in advance for the turbulent love affair into which he had fallen.

Yes, one caught in a frenzy like him, gets his due early. He is given to feel what horrible punishment awaits him at the end of the path of pleasures, so he will not err nor forget for even one night from where he comes, where he is rushing to, and what he will suffer when he gets there.

He did not calm down from what was revealed to him during their couplings and between them that night. He was not satisfied with the intensity and the suddenness of his relationship with Meira Hecht. Maybe he would get used to all this at some point. But in the meantime, he already felt pangs of conscience. Pains of regret already assailed him. He recalled what one of his soldier friends said to him once during long months of service in the detested Golan, “You highbrows, we know you. You screw and cry.” Why were those inane words pecking at him tonight?

Under the modest skin of a wandering lecturer, a woman hungry for his body was revealed. While still in her bed he was terrified to think of the pleasure that had fallen into his lap. How would he cope with his overfull portion, how could he get square with these nibbles of life’s delights that he had once forbidden himself, these nibbles that had already given him a first warning. If he did not mend his ways they would hurt him. He would stop immediately, or at the latest, tomorrow, extract himself from the barren connection created between them. Surely she was also warned by her hidden faith; she must also have boundaries she was forbidden to cross. He suspected her, but he had no proof! Despite her freedom as an independent woman who supported herself with honor, was she dedicated
to some secret worship in one of those strange groups that had sprung up in Jerusalem after the terrible breach of the Yom Kippur War? Wasn’t there someone to stop her? He must stop; she must stop; they must desist together from the madness that clutched them. It was impossible they should enjoy so much and not be punished. It was impossible they should cause so much injustice to people dependent on them and not get their just desserts! This was flagrant insolence. Through the window open to the cool fall, he felt himself a debtor warned, whose day of reckoning would come.

He did not deny that he had a family on the kibbutz. “Yes, a wife and two children that I love very much.” He especially often mentioned his little son who clenched his heart. During all the months he spent in the Syrian front and beyond the mountains of darkness, the longing for his little boy strengthened his spirit and filled him with hope. Because of this child he was also filled with strong fears that clutched him amid the shelling. A boy like that was worth coming back to safely from the war. When he helped bring the wounded to the bombed gatations, he heard the older wounded men murmuring blessings and pledges. They wished eternal life and health to their little children who remained after them. Some took out of their scorched clothes remnants of burnt wallets with bits of singed photos. But he told himself that he would come back to his little boy no matter what. No power in the world would stop him. He would cross the smoking basalt fields and return to his little village. He would elude the stray bullets, delayed shells, ambushes and accidents, because his little boy was waiting for him, because he promised him he’d come back, because he had not yet finished his mission.

He really did have readjustment problems when he came back from the war. The ties with his older girl had weakened and it was urgently necessary to strengthen them. With his wife he celebrated a brief Spring of renewed love, immediately after the battles, a kind of rediscovery of each other, a security in affirming the true connection between them. “It’s a fact; despite his rather long stint under fire, he came back.” He had survived stubbornly and come back, as if all he had done in his life until now was desirable and acceptable, undeserving of any punishment. The horrors of war justified their love. But inside himself, back then he already felt that this was only an external facade of the soul. In truth, deep within him, everything had changed since the battles. He knew that if he did little sinning, it was only for lack of opportunities. The pervasive nihilistic spirit that the war had brought did not pass over him because for his part, he very much craved lots of sinning of all kinds. He wanted to kick at every framework he had believed in before the war.

He would be an artist, free and sinful. He would free himself from the cables of provincial morality. But he also feared, lest he lose his immunity if he sinned too much, and would revert to being punishable like he was before being in the
battlefield. But until this pleasant hour, under the refreshing window of Meira Hecht, and between her smoldering sheets, he had not yet been punished.

In his visions, especially frequent on his long journeys, his life flowed along a different course, in his wild dreams surged his other life. In his writing that he had sunk into since the war, emerged a hidden life that frightened him. There among the pages, he castigated himself with various punishments, some deserved and some exaggerated, some altogether undeserved.

Once, a young woman who read a few of his war poems remarked to him: “It is touching how you want to change places with them, but you couldn’t be burnt instead of them and write the poem; you couldn’t be wounded instead of them nor remain there under the darkening waves; and it’s good that you made them a memorial and set up a monument to them. It’s good that you carved something positive from the bad basalt. Through you and your war poems, maybe they will continue living with us many years more.”

Meira did not question him about his family, only here and there made a remark implying that she wondered why a fellow like him, long married like him, was still deliberating over elementary questions. What kind of a country bumpkin was he—clumsy in body, gauche in thought and disturbed by banal pangs of conscience? But in bed she was free and encouraged him to take her body any way he wanted. They had a kind of treaty of silence between them; she did not ask any more about his family and he did not question her about her former life, although always, there were the same unanswered questions—Who was she with before him? Had she ever been married? Why was there no trace of a child in her small apartment?

The Sukkot (Feast of Tabernacles) was already past and the long holiday vacation ended. The hubbub of serious study went on around him, teachers came and went, afternoon lectures were held in the dorm and in the evening too he was urged to attend enrichment courses. Every day he found in his office mailbox numerous invitations to events on campus and in the city. He got a generous stipend to buy basic books in Judaism from the director of the seminary, he spent long days roaming among the little book stores in the northern neighborhoods. He scraped the narrow streets and learned through his feet the dark land of the ultra-religious. His sandal soles wore out and the dry Jerusalem air to which he was not accustomed cracked the skin of his heels. When he started walking in the morning, he limped from pain until his feet got used to the city’s dry, chilly air. The burning cracks of his feet’s skin reminded him constantly that he was not at home, was not eating at his own table and not sleeping in his own bed.

Meira smeared a soothing cream on his damaged skin as dexterously and pleasantly as if she were a merciful army nurse. “Nice,” he said to her, “so you did
learn something in the army.” One hurt was treated, but what about the others? She surprised him by her practical sense when she whispered in his ear, “It’s alright, you can let go within me; I’ve already taken precaution.” He was moved by her frankness and by the dry way she found to relieve him. He always thought that preventing unwanted pregnancies was the concern of the woman lying under him and he fell upon her again and again. The last thing he needed was for her to get herself pregnant suddenly at the end of Fall. From her words, he learned there had been failures too and he supposed that once or twice previously when she was younger, she had been compelled to go through the humiliation of having an abortion. He urged her to tell him, because he too had harsh memories of the days when his wife had to abort their baby, but she was restrained and not eager to disclose such intimate secrets; she also guessed that their relationship would not last long. In whose ears was she entrusting such protected and private secrets? Who was he, after all? A hulky farmer who didn’t even know his way around the campus paths? She clammed up and wouldn’t go on; he tried to learn from what she concealed. So he learned to listen to her silences and found she gave evidence of an unsolved secret, greatly arousing his curiosity.

In those days, he happened into a narrow, stuffy office in the ultra-religious neighborhood of Upper Romema. He knew he had religious relatives in Jerusalem and wanted through them to find out more details about his grandmother and grandfather who had died in Poland. From the office they sent him to the family’s home. He was very disappointed with the meeting. He met reserved people, with a pronounced American accent who regarded him as the real stranger in the country. He, and not them, whose whole being shouted Diaspora, was the foreigner: secular and a farmer, from a distant kibbutz, one who published obscure elegiac poems in newspapers to boot. He looked strange to them. They clearly disapproved of him despite the familial cordiality they displayed toward him. The father of the family pattered in his ears trite commentaries on Scripture from the weekly reading and boasted of new acquisitions of back-to-religion celebrities from the Tel Aviv bohemia. The long, hard war had passed over their shoulders and not touched them a bit. They even had the nerve to wonder how come a big fellow like himself could not get over the prolonged shock.

Walking downhill through the neighborhood from their home, he asked himself if all these were living in the same country? If all these belonged to the same people? If they all shared a common fate?

The stories they told him in brief about his grandfather’s home in a destroyed town in Poland were edited and censored in the spirit of the Jewish traditional, and they had no documents of interest. He had the feeling that they simply exchanged the Polish Exile for the Exile of Brooklyn, then that for the Exile of Upper Romema. They often mentioned “the Book”, a manuscript full of Scripture interpretations, awesome and deep, that his grandfather wrote during the hard
nights of the First World War. But when he asked to glance into “the Book”, of course they did not have it. In the family there was talk of a generous donation gathered with great difficulty, and of an anonymous rich American who was determined to publish it after 70 years despite all intervening events, here, in our Holy Land, in the Holy city being rebuilt, in one of the crowded printing shops of the ultra-religious neighborhood, thousands of years and thousands of kilometers away from the swamplands of the Polish border region.

One fresh Fall morning, leaving Meira’s home surfeited with sex and weary from love, he leapt heavily up the steps leading to the campus, and for a moment deluded himself that he was a young ram full of desire. Had the rutting ewes chanced by on his path and stood meekly before him, he would have jumped on them all with pleasure. He would not have skipped even one. He asked himself what was further from him now? The tranquil citrus groves of his sleepy village? The tumbled-down fences of the crowded religious neighborhood of Upper Romema? The bridge pillars in Brooklyn Bay?

His eyes blurred from the radiance of the clear morning. A dull pain ran through his exhausted loins. A kind of pleasant drunkenness gripped his throat. He was a bit groggy, and surprised to hear the crows croaking wildly in the tangle of hedges along the street. Then, just as in his youth, when he was suddenly filled with unexpected happiness, he longed to cry.
Susan Ruether

The Heart of the Matter

to define the matter: is the stuff around you. the substratum of a question about the size of origin at hand is the maker is what is the matter. a woman in a Kentucky house is the size of origin, she is material substance of a particular kind for a particular purpose, the makers question and the indeterminate subject of reality. a woman who doesn’t do the dishes. to define the matter is a question, where both being and nonbeing she doesn’t, question, love, to matter, to constitute the observable universe anymore she is something written and printed, documented as the parakeets shit the children. so far as that is concerned, for that matter, the maker of the mind over the heart of the matter, we lost hers years ago, condensed light and dimension.
That is Very Rare

Bore art of, are the wounded parts that bore you, song instead of nothing, and the act of a species only appearing dead for years, who waves now perpendicular to the act of Venus – axis of whose star is no longer visible to an untrained eye at each point in the non night and night.

That seasons are particles extracted from the whole
That our best is to fret them back together
and surmise

That anemone souls have prayed their souls to keep, their souls survived the shores highly toxic, the size of stones, seemless, unwilted.
Nottiteln #64

Though small in stature
Vico's *gigante* nevertheless
keeps his one eye trained
on the opiate of
family

***

A page is turned
as our patriarch slips
into his study and into
his easychair

***

Captured in crystal
the wolf-suckled founders
paperweight the cares
of this world

***

Row upon row
of the living dead
wonder if he'll open
their mouths

***

Opting for
the palimpsest of *Memory*
the soft fleshy shutter
is closed

***
Solace comes from
the confluence of texts
illumined from beneath
**Nottiten #88**

A lone white feather as boat
pitching in a sea of air

Unwinding a distaff of days
inside a cerebral mollusk

Gorecki's 3rd—
slowly filling the valley
dissipating above the clouds
**Nottiteln #95**

The light rose in the east
is setting in the west

With mallow roots
a self is born

From start to finish tarnished brass
Ants’ eyes reflecting stars

Merlot unknots the nerves
Delibes kneads

Stroke after stroke
his hands try but fail
to dissolve the years
Nottiteln #97

Odin grotesque
Babel of self
a carp trolling the bottom
for its kernel of corn—
his god fumbled in the dark

His death mask
was a contortion of tears
and regret

In the family plot
beneath an early snow
he slept with her once more