CONTENTS

Featured Author
Brenda Miller  A Dream of Ariadne  5
               Opalescent  13
               Huckleberries and High Holidays:
               Writing the Lyric Essay as an Act of Faith  22

Fiction
Andrew Coburn  Gods and Buccaneers  25
David McGrath  Yafa Street  36
Neil Grimmett  Calling for Help  49
Gavin S. Lambert  Human Resources  57
Girija Tropp  Serial Blondes  64

Creative Nonfiction
Lisa Norris  Claim Jumpers  68

Poetry
Allan Peterson  Think Of It This Way  74
               Their Known Haunts  75
               Whistling at Sea  76
Barbara Maloutas  Cavafy  77
               Pieces  78
               Orthodoxy  79
               Bratsera  80
               Oracle  81
George Kalamaras  Angora  82
               How Abundant, How Awful  83
               American Warbler  84
Jenna Cardinale  Break-in  85
               For Distortion’s Sake  86
               Language  87
Leslie Whatley  The Biography of Toto the Wonder Dog  88
               The Maculate Conception  93
Sally Molini  He used to live  98
Martin Willitts  Where Did The Children Go?  99
               Why Do They Always Come During The Rainy Season?  100
Jayne Fenton Keane  Because You Said Forever  101
Charlotte Pence  Ducks and Drakes  102
               Lying in Bed  104
Robyn Art  
Floating Objects  
[her, sleeping]  

Ronda Broatch  
Woman Emerges from Mud  
Moon Shell Meditation  

Jesse Ratner  
Blood  

Suchoon Mo  
He Went to His Own Funeral  

Contributor Notes  

Segue / iv
I.

I have a vivid memory so unlikely I know I’ve either dreamed it or made it up: my mother, alone, packs her three kids into the station wagon and drives us into downtown Los Angeles to see *West Side Story*. We’ve been listening to the soundtrack at home, on the big stereo console, my brothers and I dancing in manic jerks as we became the Sharks and the Jets. We’ve hounded my mother to take us, even though the movie won’t arrive at our suburban theaters for another month.

I don’t know why my father is absent in this scene. He always did most of the driving; my mother, a native New Yorker, had learned just a few years earlier and was a timid driver. She was terrified of sneezing on the freeway, because of the split second her eyes would be closed. Once, a man shouted out his window to my mother after she bungled a parking job in the lot at Hughes shopping center, perhaps taking up two spaces—*where’d you get your license? Sears?* My mother bit her lip and kept her head down as we hustled down the sidewalk to the supermarket, her hand gripping my shoulder. The shame burned on her face, across her whole body; I could feel it, palpable as fire.

And now, it’s just us here in the car—my brothers, my mother, and me—on the way home from *West Side Story*, and I can feel inklings of that shame emanating from the front seat for no immediately apparent reason, but I prick up my ears, stop looking out the window and stare hard at my mother’s head, which is swiveling back and forth, and I note the way her body is hunched forward over the steering wheel, and I see glimpses of a front tooth worrying the skin of her lower lip. It was daylight when we started from home, but now it’s dark, the early dark of winter, even in southern California. My mother drives slowly now, and am I really the only one to notice we’re in trouble? My little brother is asleep in the “way back” of the station wagon, my older brother chewing gum and looking out the window or playing with his baseball cards, or doing something to annoy me, spidering his fingers toward my side of the bench seat, and I note the car’s gradual deceleration, my mother now sitting up straighter to peer over the dashboard.
I straighten up too, swat away my brother’s hand and scramble up to my knees to rest my chin on the front seat, to hover right behind my mother’s taut neck. We’re stopped now, and her head looks left and then right; the streets here are different than the streets in our neighborhood, the tidy cul-de-sac where our own house sits so placidly, awaiting our return (why have we been gone so long, it must wonder, and our Great Dane, Sheba, who will be dead in a few years’ time: she must be pacing the backyard, wondering where everyone has gone, the unnatural quiet as dusk falls; why not the smells of dinner, the thump of the basketball, the creak of the jungle gym?) The streets here are narrower, with dark houses, porches filled with tricycles and paint cans, front yards with small boats leaning into the grass; we can hear the freeway off to our left somewhere and my mother cocks her head in that direction.

Are we lost? I say, and I say it softly, trying not to sound an alarm, though distress signals begin to shoot all up and down my body, that lost feeling rising in my chest. I once got lost just a block from my house, running home from school because I was hungry and had to go to the bathroom, and suddenly I turned a corner and had no idea where I was—Mayall street suddenly unfamiliar as a foreign city, the trees transformed into lush canopies, the houses a different color, and I turned around in a circle, bewildered, and that lost feeling began to spiral up my throat until the light shifted and the street looked normal again, and I flew down it toward home.

My mother taps the long ash off her cigarette, and holds it up to her lips, just holds it there. “No,” she says finally, “We’re not lost.” The station wagon idles, then she presses the gas and turns left. “I’m just not quite sure where we are.” And then the station wagon glides (oh, I remember that glide, as if we weren’t really driving at all but on one of those clever rides at Disneyland, where around every corner something lurks to surprise and terrify you), and we turn a corner and ease right into a vast field, where steel towers rise a hundred feet into the air, a dozen of them at least, and at the top of each one two red lights blink asynchronistically, first one, then the other.

The freeway surges on the other side, cars swooshing back and forth, so sure of their direction—north, south only two distinct ways to go—and between them and us lies this field of steel towers with their blinking lights, and a barbed wire fence with cyclone netting.

My mother stops the car again, loosens her hands from the wheel. I understand now, years later, how young she must have been—with three children in the back of the car whom she had, unwittingly, drawn into a landscape so unfamiliar it could have been the moon. Home most likely felt as far away as the outermost planets, those orbs I would later fashion from Styrofoam and hang on wires to map the desolation of outer space. I had always just seen her as my mother—a fallible woman, yes, but still capable of negotiating the most treacherous places in our small world. But really she must have always been scared, unsure of herself, baffled by how she had found herself just here, just now, not only miles from our suburban neighborhood, but thousands of miles from her true home, in Brooklyn, far away from her own mother, her sister, her friends, her job as a typist at a stylish magazine in Manhattan and the nice clothes she used to wear, the high black heels and the red lipstick, the ingrained map of those subway lines etched into her brain, so she is never lost—a smiling young lady emerging fresh onto those familiar, bustling streets.

For an hour or two, in West Side Story, she remembered it all: her childhood streets, her sense of knowing who she was and where and why. But all that is now eons away. Instead she sits now in the front seat of a station wagon, her daughter breathing down her neck, her sons asleep or carefully watching. The towers blink their red eyes, back and forth, over and over, warning
airplanes away from their misdirected paths, nudging them back to routes that will lead them out of
danger and toward a safe arrival.

II.

Ariadne was lost the moment she laid eyes on Theseus, the warrior. She caught a glimpse of
that blond head and it was all over. I want to know her more than the mythology books allow: that
vague figure standing at the opening of the labyrinth, holding the end of a golden thread, watching
as her beloved ventures off to slay the Minotaur who lives within those coils. Some say this thread
was given to her by Daedelus, himself—the architect of the labyrinth—and that it carried within it
the clue ("clew"), the key, an ingrained map to the center and back out again.

Once Theseus slays the Minotaur, he follows the thread back to Ariadne, they embrace,
they kiss, they flee together on a boat for the island of Naxos. But when Ariadne awakens after her
one night of love, she finds herself completely alone. Perhaps there are ships off in the distance,
perhaps a wind; perhaps her neck aches from her night spent sleeping among the stones. But before
she even raises her head she can tell from the quality of the air—some high keening that whistles in
her ear—that she is completely alone, and lost.

III.

In her series of prints, Cell Study, artist Macy Chadwick uses knotted threads in winding
patterns against paper or fabric, and the threads sometimes wind their way toward a center. But in
her most recent work, the threads seem to have given up on any sense of direction, and they
dangle, cut, from an arched bow. Macy tells me these knotted threads are a form of language, a
primitive Braille that predated the raised dots on a page. These were string alphabets for the blind:
each knot or succession of knots represents a letter, and so the blind could read their way along by
feeling for the texture of the knots, their distance from one another. It must have taken a long time
to translate even the simplest passages to be read: imagine the skeins and skeins of knotted thread,
passing through the fingers like a rosary.

In Macy’s prints, however, her knotted threads don’t necessarily find their way to meaning.
They want to speak; they are, in fact, words (one is titled “My Words Hang in the Air”), but we
can’t understand what they say. She spends a great deal of time knotting the threads according to
the alphabetic code, and then chooses to keep the sentence indecipherable. She seems undone a bit
by it all. “Just when I want to communicate quite clearly,” she says, “I find myself speaking more
and more in code.” Of course, many of the words are spoken to a lost lover—a man who cannot,
or will not, hear what she has to say.

Her words, her knotted words, hang in the air. In one of my favorite pieces, “Cell Study,
2003,” the knotted thread snakes its way over organza cloth, turning back on itself, a labyrinth.

IV.

My friend Bruce is studying the ancient Scriptoriums, where monks copied out scripture, a
whole factory of them listening as the head monk speaks and they all copy it down as fast as they
can. Of course, the work is deadly tedious, and often the monks’ minds wander to other things, coming back at key moments, so each one, though they’re making a copy, creates a different version of the text. The holy language becomes a little garbled. As Bruce says, “Sometimes they lose the thread.”

I keep coming back to that suspended moment in the myth. Not the triumphant emergence of Theseus from the maze, a little bloodied but alive; not the flight to Naxos. No, I keep wanting to approach Ariadne as she sits at the labyrinth’s entrance, holding her end of the golden thread. I want to know what Ariadne thinks at that moment, as she watches the thread unreel, watches it go taut and then slack again. I want to come up to her, put my arms around her shoulder, say: Ari, my dear, let it go. Put the thread down. Walk away from the thread.

I keep coming back to that moment in the car, the blinking towers, my mother’s absolute stillness. I feel us at the moment we drop the thread, lose our way. There’s only one way out, I would tell her. The labyrinth leads you back the way you came. It’s only an illusion that you’re lost.

V.

“One clear autumn afternoon I was sitting on a bench in the middle of the Piazza Santa Croce in Florence… I had barely recovered from a long and painful intestinal illness and was in a state of almost morbid sensitivity. The whole world around me, including the marble of the buildings and fountains, seemed to me to be convalescing….

—Giorgio de Chirico

In most of Chirico’s “Ariadne” paintings, Ariadne is rendered as a statue recumbent on a pedestal in the middle of an empty public square. Deep shadows cross these courtyards, and in the background there may be incongruous palm trees the color of smoke, or the sharp outlines of a black train arrested in forward motion. Often a red tower holds sentinel in the composition. Mysterious figures whisper together in the background. In all of them, Ariadne lies half raised on one arm, the other flung over her head, while her massive chin tilts down toward her chest.

The paintings are titled with cryptic phrases: “The Soothsayer’s Recompense,” “Ariadne’s Afternoon,” “The Lassitude of the Infinite,” “The Joys and Enigmas of a Strange Hour,” and “Melancholy.” In all these portraits, Chirico has not made clear if Ariadne has yet wakened to the fact that Theseus has fled. He prefers to capture her in that state between knowing and unknowing, the realm of enigma. What awaits her is Melancholy, yes, but not quite yet. Everything remains paralyzed in the moment just before sorrow.

VI.

From the Nietzchien Dithyrambs of Dionysus:

“Be sensible, Ariadne:
We should not first hate each other if we are to love each other.
I am your labyrinth.”

Segue
I forgot to mention: there are many different versions of the Ariadne myth. Not of the labyrinth and the Minotaur and the golden thread, no—those elements are all pretty much in good shape. What’s in dispute is what exactly happened on Naxos; that part of the myth seems to have taken place off stage, hidden from the eyes of even the gods. Some versions say that Ariadne, in defiance of direct instruction from Theseus’ crew, wandered off the ship and fell asleep on a headland; no one knew she was missing when they set sail early the next morning. They didn’t mean to leave her behind; they just “forgot” to check to see if she were on board. It was all her fault. In this version, Ariadne wakes alone and throws herself off the cliff in despair. (Theseus, after all, was quite absent-minded; he also “forgot” to change his ship’s sails from black to white, to let his father, the King—who anxiously awaited his return in Athens—know that he had come back alive. When his father saw the black sails, he, too, threw himself off a cliff, and Theseus inherited the kingdom.)

Other versions attribute more intent to Theseus; some say he had already gotten Ariadne pregnant, and he abandoned her deliberately to avoid early fatherhood. Some say he regretted taking her with him, now that the first flush of victory over the Minotaur had faded. In any case, he saw her sleeping on the headland and deliberately decided not to wake her, stealing off with his crew and those black sails in the dead of night. In this version, Ariadne wakes in despair, but the god Dionysus—the god of wine and debauchery—waits for her. He’d been waiting for her all this time, and he sweeps her up and makes her his wife.

In any case, before the decisive moment, Ariadne dreams. She sleeps on the beach at Naxos, where they have landed exhausted in their flight from Crete. The waves lap the shore, as they are known to do. The men stir and begin filling the boats, but no one looks to Ariadne, the boss’ savior. They tiptoe around her and sail off into the north. Her dreams are of bacchanalia, her body overtaken with both desire and repulsion. She throbs. She aches. She feels herself carried high into the air and then dashed on the cliffs.

It’s not long before Dionysus will sniff her out on the beach, stake a claim to her, turn her eyes away from the cave where the Minotaur, though dead, still lurks. I am your labyrinth, he murmurs in her ear, and she hears it: the way love twists and turns the heart inside out.

VII.

The inner ear is shaped exactly like a labyrinth, the cochlea a serpentine passage through which language arrives, all of it a garble of sound until our brains sort it out. When we are lost, when we say in a whisper to a good friend, or to ourselves in the dark, I’m lost, we often find language leading us back out again. We talk and we talk (well, we women do anyway) and gradually we rise from our chairs, or our beds; we put away the telephone, or we kiss the cheek of our friend, or give a hug that lasts a long time.

Nietzsche was obsessed with Ariadne’s ears. They were tiny, like miniscule seashells. Perhaps he imagined her so vividly lying on that beach, her head turned to one side, as the sound of the night waves wove in and out.

I remember my mother’s ears, small, covered with a fringe of her hair. Clip-on earrings clamped to the lobe; I always thought that must hurt. I sat near as I could to her from my place in
the back seat of the car, breathed into her ear while she stared straight ahead. *Are we lost?* I whispered. *No,* she said, *no we’re not lost. We just don’t quite know where we are.*

VIII.

Macy’s new prints have come all undone. In a few weeks in her studio, she’s gone from coded language to almost no language at all. Threads flit all over the place, wild on the page. Her latest piece is called “It all unravels.” A long coil of knotted thread zips across the page and then flares out in a spray of wild threads with no clear direction. I tell her it looks like the splayed end of a nerve, right where it might fire and spark. She says, “I needed to lose some control, not have it be so coherent.”

I had thought Macy’s prints showed me a new version of Ariadne’s thread: language as that one essential lifeline; language made tactile, leading us hand over hand out of darkness and back to one who waits patiently for us to emerge. It’s language that leads us—bloodied, tired, triumphant—out of that labyrinth we call our hearts, all those chambers and arteries twisting toward a strange and fearsome center.

But at some point, yes?*, we all start babbling. *We lose the thread.*

IX.

I’ve walked a lot of labyrinths in my time. Labyrinths laid out on huge canvas cloths in the center of a chapel. Labyrinths laid out in stones in a clear field. Labyrinths marked out with masking tape on a ballroom floor. They were popular for a while as a form of walking meditation, or prayer, reviving an ancient practice: to get found, you must first get lost. But you’re never really lost. There’s only one path in to the center and back again.

But you feel like you’re lost. The paths keep curving close to the center and you think you’re almost there, but then you find yourself traversing the outer corners, far from the destination. You make many turns, back and forth, so it’s easy to get a little dizzy. You pass many other pilgrims along the way, all of them doing their best to look serene, hands behind their backs, their steps measured and cool. Sometimes the labyrinth keepers will give you a piece of paper with instructions on it: *Breathe in with each step, breathe out with each step.* Or say a little prayer: *The Lord is my Shepherd I shall not want.*

For you, there may be a point, about halfway through, when you start to panic. You feel it rising from your hands to your chest, and you have to keep walking through it, resist the urge to simply step over the lines and back into the world.

Once you reach the center, there may be others already arrived before you, sitting cross-legged, hands upturned on their knees, or merely standing quietly, swaying a little on their feet. It’s unclear what you’re supposed to do once you get there, and so you stand quietly, waiting for a sense of divine contentment to settle over you. In these labyrinths, the Minotaur, the monster at the center, has supposedly already been slain, but you—you find him there anyway, gazing at you with yellow eyes, drooling.
And now here I am, on a pilgrimage of sorts, sitting on an islet off the main harbor of Naxos Town, in Greece. I’ve just returned from a daylong bus tour of the island, where we traveled up and down mountainous roads. I saw the abandoned kouros of Dionysus in an archaic marble quarry; it had cracked beneath the nose and so was not suitable for transport to its designated spot; it has lain abandoned for thousands of years, since the 6th century B.C. Of course we all took our pictures standing next to the monolith, touching that ancient marble. There is white marble everywhere on this island (our guide told us there is a saying: “When God made the world, he shipped all the leftover rock to the Cyclades.”)

On our way back to Naxos Town we rode along the wild north shore of the island where there are no villages, just cliffs and the roiling sea, the occasional Venetian castle dotting the landscape. Our guide, Evie, now tells us the myth of Ariadne, and her version is the “it was all a misunderstanding” variation. “When she awoke,” Evie tells us, “Ariadne was naturally very disappointed, and she threw herself off the rocks into the sea.” These rocks, she says, are right on the verge of Naxos Town, where the gate of Apollo’s temple rises on the horizon. Evie, almost as an afterthought, goes on to tell us the happier version of the story: the God Dionysus taking Ariadne for his wife, swooping in to save her just moments before she kills herself. My guidebook tells me that even the “very air of the island is intoxicating enough to cure a broken heart.”

So when I return from the bus trip, I make my way out to the fabled islet, where many tourists now wander with their cameras to film the abandoned, unfinished temple to Apollo (many things on this island seem to remain unfinished). Those marble pillars rise into one lone portico on the headland, a gateway to nothing but the sea. I find a place on the rocks, with my back to the crowd, to sit and look out to those waves and try to imagine Ariadne lying just here, her head rising from the rocks: the epitome of loneliness, aloneness. I lower my head so that I see only the waves repeating themselves over and over.

The island of Paros is nearby; the cluster of Small Cyclades wavers off in the distance. I try to imagine the jolt of recognition, the moment an inkling expands into knowledge. And I have to admit that I think, briefly, about the men I have known in my life who have been a bit like Theseus: you help them out of a jam, you extend the golden thread of yourself to them without question, and when they’re back on their own two feet they drift away absent-mindedly with barely a “see ya” tossed behind their backs.

It’s hard to feel mythic in the midst of tourism; before long a Swedish couple asks me take their photo next to Apollo’s pillars. I turn from Ariadne’s dream and snap the photo of the happy couple embracing, the archaic pillars framing the harbor where you can walk along the quayside and order drinks with names like “Sex on the Beach” and “Orgasm.” You can stroll along and see smooth, tanned women sunbathing topless, their arms absentmindedly stroking the backs of their new husbands and lovers who lie with their faces turned away. I have my own picture taken, a few times, with me smiling up at the unfinished gate.

I decide to go back via the Kastro, the old city; I wander behind the castle and get turned around in the narrow, whitewashed streets. I recognize that rising flutter in the chest when I know I’m lost. I think of my mother, the helplessness that came over us in the station wagon as we watched the cars roaring by on the freeway, with no clear way to get from here to there. But we must have. We must have made it home, to the happy dog and her dinner bowl, to the backyard.
and its friendly eucalyptus trees. Either we asked a kind stranger, or an inner compass kicked in—whatever it was, we made it out alive.

So I keep my game face on, and a sauntering gait, to fool anyone who might be watching (who would be watching?) into thinking I’m just on a touristic stroll, happy to be meandering through these claustrophobic alleyways that pass for avenues.

I keep going: I pass a Spanish restaurant, and a souvenir shop, think I’m in familiar territory, then turn a corner and the world turns sinister, with motorcycles roaring past inches from my feet and exposed wires trailing on the ground. I finally stop into a police station and ask three young officers for directions. I give them the card to my hotel, and they confer among themselves for several minutes, arguing in Greek, and I stand there with a smile fixed on my face, looking from one to the other. It must be very complicated, this business of getting me back on the right track, but finally one of them jerks his head and has me follow him outside, where he sweeps his arm and through a series of gestures to tell me it’s right down this street.

So I believe him; I walk a few feet down the narrow road, and then the world opens up again—there’s the mini-market where I bought water yesterday, there’s the Mexican restaurant, and there’s the hotel—the Hotel Poseidon, with its plaster busts of the gods, so familiar, beckoning me home.
Opalescent

I.

I’m buying stained-glass panels for the windows of my new home. They’re from a store called “Rejuvenation” in Portland, and my friend Kathleen has encouraged me to get them. She now sits in one of the lush, reupholstered chairs in the showroom, her hands clasped in her lap, her head tilted just a little to the side as she watches me, bemused at the gravity I’ve lent to this endeavor.

Rejuvenation has many, many Tiffany-inspired glass panels from which to choose: There are floor-to-ceiling windows all along the back wall—enormous paintings of climbing morning glory or gingko trees—and lamps with clusters of glass that bend into dangling wisteria or the sleek bodies of dragonflies. Now I know why Rejuvenation is Kathleen’s favorite place, and why she insisted that we come. This shop lives up to its name: the light here does rejuvenate, makes our bodies feel young in the careless way the young live, even amid all these breakable things.

I don’t live in Portland, so to make a choice now is full of risk—what if I don’t like the window once I get it home? What if it cracks on the way?—but now that the longing to buy has transmuted into the inevitable purchase, there’s no turning back. I keep returning to a triptych that hangs vertically in a side window: a white lotus flower blossoming up top, with vines that interweave and flow down three sections to reach, finally, an unopened bud. The glass winks in shades of lavender and teal. I pay the $250, and a nice salesman wraps it up securely in layers of cardboard for me take back to Bellingham.

Later, Kathleen kisses me goodbye, sorrow and joy consorting on her face to make it strangely alight. All the way home, I’m aware of the stained glass in its box beside me: a container of pent-up brilliance, already broken.

II.

Marc Chagall: For me a church window represents the transparent partition between my heart and the heart of the world.

I first saw Chagall stained glass at the Art Institute of Chicago. You see the light before you actually see the windows: a lavender glow as you come down the stairs into the foyer of the museum. I stood with my friend Kristin before American Windows, glass collages that incorporate classic Chagall motifs: figures floating midair or perched improbably in the crowns of trees; birds soaring in currents of yellow and red; objects unhinged from any force that once kept them aligned. All of it seems a frenetic act of worship, the faces drawn upward, offering candles and song in postures of supplication.

Kristin and I stood there together, transfixed in the Chagall blue. Glass, perhaps, afforded Chagall his perfect medium, though he came to it late, well past the age of 70. Chagall, whose paintings emerge from his Judaism (“were I not a Jew,” he said, “I would not have become an artist”) first assembled a stained glass mosaic for a Catholic church—the Church of Notre Dame de
Toute Grace—in France. He considered it a privilege to create windows for holy places. He took no payment for his work.

Kristin walked on, anxious, I think, to get to the O’Keefes. A doctoral student at the University of Chicago, studying comparative theologies, Kristin often called me late at night to talk of her troubles: a boyfriend whose jealousy verged on dangerous, her doubts about the myriad academic paths she has taken. Years from this moment, she will travel to southern India, squatting in huts and asking Hindu women, in her rudimentary Tamil, about their reverence for the Virgin Mary.

As far as I know, Chagall did not piece together the Virgin in cobalt blue glass, her head tilted to the side in compassion, but if he had I imagine she would look much like the primary model for his paintings, his first wife Bella: she of the long neck and dark eyes, her skin a pallor that turns incandescent under her husband’s brush. Bella’s head, in both photographs and paintings, tilts to the side the way Mary’s does, a half-smile tugging at her lips.

Bella died in 1944. She and her husband had been married almost thirty years. For nine months Chagall’s brush lay still and quiet in his studio. I wonder how the light felt to him then, if the windows clouded over and became opaque. He had not yet discovered stained glass as a vehicle, but maybe that’s what he needed then—scythes of blue, eruptions of yellow—and the deliberate, tender restoration of all that would be lost.

III.

And this, from a 19th-century edition of Harper’s: “The window, being the opening to admit light, is always the first attraction to catch the eye. The deep warmth of the ruby, the tender contentment of the sapphire, the glow and coruscation of the amethyst…may all be summoned to the satisfaction of the least cultivated eye by the infinite wealth of the glass-stainer’s art.”

And this, from stainedglass.com: “Glass is most like a supercooled liquid…sand transformed by fire. As stained glass artistry grew, the lead lines that were once accepted as a necessary and decorative element became necessary evils to be camouflaged by the design.”

IV.

Ann Gardner, an artist who lives in Bellingham, is known for mosaic sculptures that mimic waves upon waves of unsettled water. She got her start in mosaic when commissioned to create a tile wall on a stairway in Seattle. “I made all the tiles,” she said, “And I laid them all down and there just wasn’t enough energy for me. So I took a hammer and broke them all.”

V.

Down in California, my friends Rhea and Jim are building a patio. They use what they call “rip-rap”: chunks of concrete ripped out of houses undergoing restoration. They pick it up in town when they hear of it on the local radio station: people have extra rip-rap to give away, and you haul it back home yourself. They finished about half the patio when they ran out of rip-rap, and the truck used to haul it had broken down, exhausted under the weight.
What to do? After a few days of gazing with yearning at their unfinished patio, they simply decided to make their own.

So they created a mold, poured cement and aggregate into it, let it dry, then went at it with sledgehammers. They broke it into pieces—they broke it apart—merely to put it back together again with the barest of spaces between the fragments. We both laugh as Rhea tells me about this process, how silly it seems when you actually do it: to create something whole, only to destroy it, to have those pulverized pieces come together again to mimic the whole.

As we stand on the completed patio, I see they have planted small, tender starts of creeping thyme to fill in these spaces with greenery and fragrance. It’s the kind of herb that can be trampled; in fact it likes foot traffic and will thrive there, filling in the cracks the way lead does on stained glass, or mortar in mosaics. Up the hill they’ve planted a perennial garden, mulched against the summer heat by a layer of cocoa husks so that now, in the late June sun, the garden smells of chocolate, wafting across us where we stand on the broken and lovely ground.

VI.

I was a child in love with jigsaw puzzles, starting slowly with the big-eyed puppies and clowns, moving on to the 100-piece, then 500, then inevitably 1000-piece contraptions. Where did we do them? I think my father must have built us a special puzzle tray, a flat board we lifted from the kitchen table at mealtime, replaced a little later, after dessert. I can see his high cheekbones and the dimples I’ve inherited, the five o’clock shadow lining his face. Of course, like all good puzzlers, we created as much of the border as we could first, then filled the interior at a slow, methodical pace that required patience. You need to be willing to try, and fail, and try again—nudging the contours of the pieces together, sometimes roughly, sometimes softly, always the snap/sigh combination when the piece hits home.

Often we kept the television on, or the radio, and we must have been serenaded by the sound of my mother washing the dishes and scrubbing her stove. We must have looked up from our work occasionally, watched a bit of the show, said something to my mother; my brothers must have joined us now and then, never sitting but hovering, reaching out their basketball-grimed fingers to shove a piece in place. But I prefer to remember father and daughter at this shared task of assemblage alone, the only sound the muted scuff of puzzle pieces across the board, an occasional sigh, and the crisp tap when a piece settled into place.

I imagine us at this for hours, the day outside our suburban window draining away, the new landscape unfolding before us bit by bit (vistas we would never see in real life: baronial white mansions, spreading seas of lavender, wooden bridges across leaf-strewn streams). At first we used the box cover, propped up, as a guide. But after a while we glanced up at it less often, training our eyes to see by intuition, to feel our way toward the center piece by piece, color by color, through instinct alone.

Sometimes I liked the completed puzzle so much my father would spray it with a special adhesive and hang it up on my bedroom wall. I’d gaze at the picture admiringly for a few weeks or so, but after awhile the glow of accomplishment faded, and the picture turned tawdry, dull, a fake. The point was never the picture after all. What I loved (I knew even then) was the process of
rememberment. As if the picture were itself a dim memory, a collective loss, and through our grave attention we brought it to life again.

VII.

I’ve never broken a bone in my life. I say this sentence more often than I would think necessary, and I say it with obvious pride, as if to keep my bones intact this long is some sort of accomplishment. Not for me the heavy cast on the arm, dirtied on the playground, adorned with spirals and flowers of magic marker. But the first boy I kissed had a broken wrist, and his cast lay inert on his lap as we sought out each other’s mouths. His breath smelled of alfalfa sprouts, or maybe that was the rancid odor emanating from thick plaster and gauze. My hand, I vaguely remember, fell to rest on his cast, and I think, knowing me, that I stroked it gently, as if it really were just an extension of his knobby wrist.

Bones, after all, are used to it; even in good health, they’re always in the process of breaking. Every minute the osteoclasts gnaw away at the old collagen, and the osteoblasts muscle in to lay down fresh cells. When a bone breaks, the stem cells begin a mad dash, speeding up their rate of duplication a thousand-fold. The osteoblasts speed up too, laying down the collagen, the minerals, the calcium, until you have a whole bone, good as new.

Because of this cycle, any human bone is never more than 20 years old. Look at your arm, beyond the skin to divine the ulna and radius—no longer “hard as bone” but always in a state of flux, neither ruined nor repaired, but somewhere in between. Now move your gaze to the shoulder, or touch your fingers to your clavicle, that place where our skeleton becomes most distinct. Or place your chin in your hand, feel that jawbone: how solid it seems! How wholly your own bone, that’s been with you a thousand years, jawing through conversations both mundane and profound, meals that left you swooning.

But really that bone’s barely older than an adolescent, just now reaching her prime. That other bone—the one that had your first kiss, the one that felt the stroke of the first man you really loved—it’s gone, dissolved. Where does that leave us, with all these naive bones? Have they learned a thing?

Don’t grieve. Think of it as rejuvenation.

VIII.

And you see where this leads:

“The foot bone connected to the… leg bone,
The leg bone connected to the… knee bone,
The knee bone connected to the… thigh bone…
Oh hear the word of the Lord!”

And so on. Actually what Ezekiel said was: “and behold, there were very many in the open valley, and lo, they were very dry. And he said unto me, Son of Man, can these bones live?… and there was a noise, and behold a shaking, and the bones came together, bone to his bone ….”
IX.

...So I took a hammer and broke them all...

Sometimes the stained glass catches my eye by surprise. I forget, but not for long, that these pieces glisten in my window, submissive to whatever light happens on them.

Louis Comfort Tiffany grew famous for his memorial windows: commissions made by grieving families to remember the dead. A highly private man, yet gregarious, he threw lavish costume balls and built an entire estate, Laurelton Hall, as a testament to his art. He invented opalescent window glass, a process whereby color fuses into the glass itself, creating a rich texture impossible to obtain by mere application. He was, as some critics suggest, “intoxicated with color.”

And so when asked to create memorial windows to be set in the walls of churches, a standard practice in the late 19th century, Tiffany balked at the convention of Biblical scenes and veered instead into landscapes lush with color and light. The church frowned on this, but the families loved it: in one of his most famous memorial windows, Magnolias and Irises (ca. 1908), a field of purple iris leads the eye to a luminescent pool fed by a river snaking through the overlapping hills in the background. The water, a recurrent motif in the memorial windows, represents the River of Life, bearing departed souls from this realm to the next. Above it all, a stand of magnolia trees bursts into full bloom, echoing the golds and pinks of sunrise.

Bishop Durande de Mende: Stained glass windows are divine writings that spread the clarity of the true sun, who is God, through the heart of the faithful, bringing them true enlightenment.

X.

Rhea has joined a quilting circle. The women sit together once a month with their squares spread out on their laps, stitching and talking through the rainy winter months. None of them really knew how to quilt at first; they learned the craft together, bit by bit, and soon the quilting became a back rhythm to their conversations, allowed their thoughts free reign.

Rhea came to visit me when I moved into my new house, before the furniture was in place, the windows still unadorned. She brought with her some squares she was piecing together from scraps of blue silk, a bit of gold. She sat on my front lawn while I tinkered with my new potted plants. Rhea made each stitch carefully, the needle appearing and disappearing among the weave of the cloth.

Two Jehovah’s Witnesses came by—in their stiff suits and sickly smiles—and asked us if we worried about where our souls would go when we die. Rhea just kept stitching her squares, and without looking up murmured that she had no worries at all. She said it with such conviction—no worries at all—the witnesses turned away without argument and headed for the next house. I heard my 90-year-old neighbor open the door, and her quavery voice as she answered them: “Well, I prefer not to think too much about it.”

When I hold Rhea’s quilt, or run my hand along its surface (this instinctive gesture when confronted with such broken and reassembled things), it’s as though I touch an essential body that lies just beneath the coverlet of skin (them bones, them bones, them Dry bones...) And I sense not only my friend’s presence in the quilt, but all the women who spoke as they sat together commiserating:
a rough man, a troublesome child, the drought, the flood—all these voices dissolved in the space between each stitch.

As Roethke put it: “May my silences become more accurate.”

XI.

Divine writings….

I’m attending the wedding of a good friend’s daughter, held in an Episcopal Church in Bellingham. I’ve driven by this church many times, but this is my first foray inside, and I’m surprised to see that we’re surrounded by panels and panels of stained glass. From the outside, these windows look dark, barely noticeable, but inside: what a grand illumination! We’re bathed in blues and yellows and reds as we watch this marriage commence.

Such belief in that room, the bride glowing with her faith, her communion. We hear psalms and prayers and blessings; the priest talks about marriage as the fusion of incomplete fragments, that the two people who kneel at the altar (so young!) could not be whole without the other. Though I—oh, modern woman that I am—squirm and balk at this particular sermon, I settle down in the light of the stained glass windows: the bride and groom, in their formal clothes, do indeed look like puzzle pieces made to be joined. So poised she is, so elegant, her arm hooked through the arm of her new husband.

When the priest follows them down the aisle, holding the gospel close to his chest, he stumbles a bit and falls against one of the pews. Later, I will hear that he is in the midst of stage-four cancer and does not have long to live. Despite this, or maybe because of it, the priest put on a good show, enthusiastically joining these young people in marriage, exhorting us to shout “We Will!” when asked if we would support this union.

I wonder now if he thought of Ezekiel and had confidence in an eventual resurrection. The bones rejoined, the sheath of the body flawless.

XII.

My friend Suzanne once broke her wrist and wore a cast for several weeks up to her elbow. The day they sawed through the plaster, the technicians split away the two sides to reveal a hand transformed: a thick mat of dark hair covered the back of her hand, like an animal’s coat, she says, laughing. I looked like a freak. She finally went back to her doctor, to see what had happened. He told her it was normal, to be expected. When a bone breaks, growth hormones flood the area, eager to repair but unable to distinguish exactly which kinds of growth to facilitate. I imagine these hormones like a mass of children let loose for recess after a long day of rain, their energy so effervescent they swarm over anything in their path. They urge everything to flourish. Grow, grow! they shout. Mend!
XIII.

…the lead lines that were once accepted as a necessary and decorative element became necessary evils to be camouflaged by the design…

When Chagall made his now famous “Jerusalem Windows,” he saw them as “jewels of translucent fire.” His windows have been described by art historians as “jewel-hard and foamy, reverberating and penetrating, radiating light from an unknown interior.” Chagall, himself, in a summation of his life’s work said: “My art is an extravagant art, a flaming vermilion, a blue soul flooding over my paintings.”

XIV.

They call it “Chartres Blue.” In the miles of stained glass that bedeck Chartres Cathedral—an hour’s train ride from Paris—a violet-blue light emanates that no one had ever really encountered before the 12th century. Can you imagine it? A pilgrim, you trudge with head down, up the hill toward the ramparts, the towers etched with hundreds of saints who wink and smile in the muted light. You enter the nave, with its cobbled labyrinth and sink to your knees, crawling toward your salvation along these winding paths. The only light in the immense dark comes from the stained glass windows, and it is enough, more than enough. Everywhere you turn there is more of it, up high and down low, the rose windows presiding over the portals. The royal blue—a color so new to your eyes that your mind ceases its babble, speechless—accumulates pane by pane, until it bathes your retinas in the glow of the saved.

Or imagine this: You are a worker, a tradesman, in the twentieth century, a time of what they call the “great” wars. You live in the village of Chartres, and everyone knows what’s coming. You climb up scaffolds and begin removing the stained glass windows, painstakingly, bit by bit, so they won’t be destroyed by errant bombs—all of Europe now quaking, and it’s up to you to save what can be saved. It doesn’t matter how much time it takes. Each piece comes away easily once you’ve loosed it from its lead casing, and you label it, put it in its proper box. A new kind of light streams into the cathedral, naked and unadorned. Who can be saved in such a glare? Once the war is over, once a peace is certain, you will climb once again and replace the windows, bit by bit. Maybe they won’t be finished before you die—such a restoration might take decades, the slow time necessary for such consecrated light to return. But you persevere, fitting each piece of stained glass into its socket, until finally the litany of saints might be whole again.

I make my own pilgrimage to see it. And even on the train, I felt a slight shift in my mood, an expansion of the self out of its narrow channel of worry and preoccupation. For days I’d been wandering Paris in earnest tourist mode, checking museums off the list, hopping on and off the Metro like an expert, pretending to have a good time. But I’ve been recovering from a broken heart, and so the City of Light has been tainted a bit, and I found myself irritably glancing at lovers along the seine, impatiently shouldering by them to get another helping of Berthillion sorbet. There’s too much light in Paris, the days reaching 90 degrees and the sun setting at 10 p.m., until sometimes I just wanted it all to go dark.
But on the train to Chartres, and in the cathedral itself, I get it: the divine balance of light and dark, the heat tempered by the centuries’ old stone. There’s a noonday mass going on in the central sanctum, the priest’s slow voice amplified so that it seems to start nowhere, to emerge from the air itself. There are only a few people actually participating in the mass, the rest of us circling around them as we keep our heads tilted toward the massive windows that loom at every turn.

I light a votive candle in front of a Mary carved from pear wood; she’s holding high the infant Jesus in her arms. It’s said that children came here during “troubled times” and prayed to Mary for her comfort and guidance. I stand there in front of my sputtering candle, my hands held like a lotus against my chest, and whisper the only prayer I really know these days: the metta prayer of Buddhism, wishing for all beings to be free from fear. Because right at this moment—in a place that has weathered so much history, and that has absorbed so many supplications—I’m thinking fear must be the root of all of it, all our suffering. And all our prayers merely aimed at a dissolution of that fear into something akin to a mother’s hush. Afterward I walk down the center aisle, and though most of the ancient labyrinth is cluttered with chairs, I place my feet carefully on the smooth cobbles of the exposed bits of the path, weaving my way in an odd, sideways little dance toward home.

XV.

My friend Kristin has returned from India. When she answers the phone, we coo to each other a few moments of our pleasure—her voice finally in my ear after so many long months, my voice in hers. I’m slouched on my sofa looking at, but not really seeing, my new stained glass windows from Rejuvenation; she’s in her new apartment in Chicago, two roommates hovering somewhere out of sight.

She tells me about a temple in India with its 22 sacred wells. She tells me about walking through this temple and undergoing a strange baptism: at each well the guide poured buckets of water over their heads, three times each—so, 66 dunkings in the course of an hour. “It was bizarre,” she says, “but also.….” We pause for a moment, the line that connects us suspended.

“Afterward I had to lie outside in the garden, I was so tired. I fell asleep, all these people around me and I’m sleeping like a baby.”

And while she talks I imagine the Chagall blue, the Chartres blue: Kristin with her blue eyes, in her blue sari, her leather sandals, the whisper of her footsteps in the halls, the splash of water over her head. She tells me about the worn stone floors, the puddled water from the pilgrims that came before, light flickering along the dim temple walls. Though the rest of India glares on the plain, inside this temple my friend is baptized again and again, drenched in holy water, calm and cool, wholly herself.

XVI.

From photographer André Kertész: We can never know how beautiful nature is. We can only guess.

And perhaps that’s what Tiffany was up to, with his stained glass: taking wild stabs at it. I imagine him walking the grounds of Laurelton Hall, pausing in the courtyard to admire his
fountain: an octagonal pool trimmed with iridescent glass, an elegant, favrile vase rising from the center. ...and as the light fell on it the colors glimmered like mother-of-pearl... I imagine him passing his fountain and stopping for a moment under the magnolia tree, the heavy wisteria. We can never know how beautiful nature is. We can only guess.

These days, when I walk to work, I’m often confronted by the locust trees in front of Old Main, just now coming into their yellow fever. It’s all uphill, this walk, and so each tree comes into view incrementally: I see the crown, then the low branches, then the weathered trunk. And my eyes perceive the broken pieces rather than the whole: I see each leaf as the individual fragment of the tree itself. And at the same time, no leaf exists in isolation: the single leaf would not carry the aspect of the season as much as this multiplicity of leaves, all of them conjoining in this singular pattern we think of as autumn or locust or tree.

The trees are losing their leaves, of course they are. It is not unexpected; we saw it coming all along. The leaves fall along the brick pathways, obscuring the proper way. Some of the people I pass notice this disassembling, but most do not. Some of the leaves fly up and whirl out of our way. Some of them, but not all, disintegrate under our feet.

...a transparent partition, between my heart and the heart of the world...

In any case, we walk easily, without fear, each of us held together by camouflaged ribbons of bone.
Huckleberries and High Holidays: Writing the Lyric Essay as an Act of Faith

The other day I went huckleberry picking on the flanks of Mt. Baker, an hour or so from my house in Bellingham. Schreiber’s Meadow, on the south side, is my favorite patch: the bushes spread out for a long way along the trail, the ripe berries dangling from the underside of the copperish leaves. You have to restrain yourself from simply hunkering down and picking at the first opportunity (which presents itself just two minutes from the car), because you know that at each bend in the trail a more ample vista will greet you. From the rickety boardwalk, you’ll see green wetlands that need only a Moose high-stepping into the field to complete the picture. You’ll see the glaciers of Mt. Baker through the trees, and you’ll cross the rubble from an avalanche slide that roared through years ago, picking your way across displaced boulders and the remnants of a hopeful little bridge. You know black bears are out there, rolling on their backs in the berry bushes, gorging themselves on fruit to sustain them in the lean months to come.

Huckleberry season is my favorite time of year; not only does it usually arrive at the beginning of the high holidays—the Jewish New Year—it seems to herald both the end of something glorious (summer in the high country) and the beginning of something new and unknown (fall, school year, etc.), all with a few weeks of jeweled treats to be gobbled in many incarnations—huckleberry French Toast, say, or salmon roasted with mustard and huckleberries, or perhaps a little palate cleanser of huckleberry lemon tarts. Sometimes I don’t really know how it will all turn out, but I keep doing it anyway, putting together in my mind vague memories of the various flavors. The huckleberries—precious in their smallness, in their rarity, in the effort it takes to acquire them—demand attention, demand to be used now; they want to be both squandered and preserved (personally, I never have the patience or foresight for huckleberry jam; I leave that to my friend Suzanne, who will give me a tiny jar if I prove myself “jam-worthy.”) I’m driven mad by the memory of huckleberry on my tongue, my desire for meals redolent of the meadows in which the berries ripen.

But even before that orgy of delight: the huckleberry picking, itself, makes you assume a posture of worship, and like all good rituals, it leads you into a trance far removed from your workaday world. After walking at a stroll through the meadow, you finally find the spot that can’t be resisted, each bush loaded with plump berries. And you begin: at first bowing down from above, then squatting, then sitting in the heather, your hands working with ever greater efficiency as you see how to grab two berries at once, then three, then four. Each bush leads to the next and the next, until you look up—dazed and stained—to find yourself far from the trail that led you here in the first place.

And let’s not forget: this all happens at the time of what, for me, is the “real” new year. The high holidays, in the Jewish tradition, invite reflection on the year past and a setting of good intention for the year ahead. You both let go, and look forward, blessed for a few moments to be somewhere in between. Never a people to rush things, we take ten days for this endeavor, during which time we visit a body of running water and toss in bread crumbs as a way of both acknowledging and letting go of our past transgressions. We do this near water, because the fish—
who never close their eyes—bear witness for us. We always need a witness. We don’t know what the new year will bring, but we pray for it anyway. We become contrite, in a state of surrender to our lives exactly as they are—right here, right now, teetering between past and future, completely absolved.

So why do I spend my time (and yours) talking of huckleberries and high holidays? What do these delicious and holy things have to do with the hard work of simply getting words on paper and shaping them into sense? Because, dear Reader, here we are, together, in a magazine called **Segue**, whose mission articulates the full meaning of that wonderful word: “Movement and the shape of movement: As verb, “segue” describes the transition from one thing to another—from here to there, innocence to wisdom, familiarity to strangeness.” And that is where we are—when we’re huckleberry picking, or when we’re doing mad kitchen improvisations with huckleberries, or when we’re enacting the rituals of the Jewish New Year, or when we’re writing a lyric essay: we’re in that transition from one thing to another, and we happily embrace the movement of transition; sometimes we actually prefer the movement to the destination itself (even when that destination leads to Huckleberry French Toast on the tongue…).

I’m happiest in writing when I really have no idea where I am, when I’m feeling my way along, when I’m in that holy state of **segue**. The essays I’ve offered you here—”**Opalescent**” and “**A Dream of Ariadne**”—both started with nothing but a glimpse, an image that lingered in my mind, and I felt compelled to follow that glimpse wherever it would lead. I had nothing to go on but faith and desire. I found myself in thickets surrounded by sweet things, picking them as fast as I could, knowing eventually I would need to fashion them into something beyond themselves, something that takes care and devotion and faith.

I often begin with what is right in front of me, and then I allow that concrete detail or image to give rise to a deeper question, one that usually begins with the simple but potent word, “Why?” That **why** becomes the trail we (reader and writer) follow through the underbrush. The essay “**Opalescent**” started with, naturally, the stained glass windows. I was so inordinately pleased with them, I sat for a long time just watching their light shift and change the atmosphere in my living room. As I set pen to paper to describe them—and as I uttered the magic word “**why**”—I learned that it was not really the quality of light I felt drawn to, but the **brokenness** of that light, the way this kind of sacred beauty could emerge from that which is fractured. Going deeper, I understood that this essential quality of “**brokenness**” had resonance in my life far beyond these stained glass windows. My task, then, was to follow that rather abstract theme, or idea, and excavate how it had manifested—and continues to manifest—in concrete scenes and images.

Once these pieces were assembled, I needed to fashion them together; I needed to work as a stained-glass artist myself and find the right mortar to hold them together. I had to let go of the pieces that dulled the image, and I needed to polish those that would brighten it. I needed to find the essential repetitions across space and time that cemented these pieces together in a way that felt inevitable. As time passed, new images would enter the scene, and I’d clear a space for them (my
friend Suzanne telling me about her broken wrist; or traveling to Chartres cathedral long after I thought the essay was “finished”). The essay was always in flux, until it wasn’t anymore—until I had found the order and language that seemed to fix it into place.

And yet, I hope that sense of flux remains, infusing the essay with a fluidity that enables the reader to feel as though she is putting it together herself, that she enacts the kind of faith the composition itself required. In the end, the essay moves from a simple description of stained glass windows, to a meditation on mortality—to the realization that we’re all shattered to the core, and it is exactly this brokenness that makes our lives beautiful.

“A Dream of Ariadne” began with a memory that surfaced during meditation in the chapel at the Vermont Studio Center. There, all by myself in front of the altar, I “remembered” vividly that moment of being lost with my mother. Having nothing else on the writing docket for the day, I wrote out the scene, allowing the details to evolve even if I didn’t know they were “true.” That scene sat all by itself for a while in my notebook, until I came back to it with that essential question—Why? Why did I remember this scene? And why those particular details? Why should it stick in my memory all these years later?

That “why” led me to the essential theme of “lost-ness,” and how that quality, too, had penetrated my life and my sense of myself. Being lost somehow led me to Ariadne, a mythic figure I’d always loved but never really known. Her story led me to the paintings of de Chirico, and on and on—each image, each new bit of research, opening up new pathways into this lush thicket. When one is writing like this, so much of the world offers itself as a gift to be plucked: a painter using thread as a way to communicate; a trip to Greece that leads you to the exact place of Ariadne’s downfall. Your job as a writer is to continually sift through these images and rinse off the dust, arrange them in a form that makes some kind of intuitive and delicious sense.

Huckleberries and High Holidays. The earthly and the sublime existing side by side, past and future stretching out for miles on either side of the trail. And you, in the middle of it all, segueing from one to the other with only the tools you have readily at hand: a container to hold it all, a raincoat to keep you dry, a pocketful of bread crumbs to scatter on the water and see where they’ll land. You need a witness (the dear reader), and you need your faith, simple and steady, to see you out and back again.
Poised to race into a wave, they were an eye-goggling couple. The young woman was raven-haired and uncompromisingly beautiful, and the young man, heroically built, stood well over six feet. The classical Greeks surely would have elevated each. Two mature women standing at the tide line were unable to take their eyes off them. Mrs. Simmons, glistening with lotion against the burn of the sun, nudged her friend. “They’re gorgeous. I’d give anything to watch them mate.”

Mrs. Bourque seemed to smile. “Ringside?”

“Balcony, if I could have opera glasses. You know who that is, don’t you? Margaret Neal’s daughter. Her age, that was me.”

Mrs. Bourque knew that was a stretch. At twenty Mrs. Simmons had been a bit of a looker; now, at forty, she was a fatty, her backside explosive in a pink bathing suit. Mrs. Bourque, still trim, had survived two marriages that never should have taken place. Her first husband was untrue from the start, and her second was an alpha male with a cigar in his face. Each divorce was a blessing, no matter what the priests said, her nose thumbed at all of them. And no children from either marriage, another blessing.

Mrs. Simmons said, “That young man is a hunk. Who is he?”

Mrs. Bourque said she believed he was one of the Wheelwrights, who had a summer house around the bend. The tide line swept past Mrs. Bourque’s feet, and the frothy water crushed her toes and scaled her ankles. Her toenails were painted purple, which for some reason made her remember the first time a priest planted a communion wafer on her protruding tongue. Mrs. Simmons’ voice startled her.

“Oh, look!”

As if spawning in the waters of the Aegean, the lovely young couple sprinted toward the arc of a wave and threw themselves into it before it crashed.

“Fucking showoffs,” Mrs. Bourque said.

Diane Neal was the apple of her father’s eye the moment she was born, a doll of a baby and a true beauty by the time she entered first grade, where she was smarter than most, as if beauty determined brains. The principal tried not to stare, the janitor fought urges, and her teacher likened her to Shirley Temple. The year was 1938 when the silver screen, along with radio, was the highlight of people’s lives, certainly her mother’s. Her mother wanted to submit her snapshot in a
poster competition, but her father had visions of pedophiles swarming out of the woodwork and said, “No way in hell!”

Rambunctious at recess, Diane severely skinned a knee and was whisked to the principal’s office. The principal, who housed a first-aid kit in his desk, was roly-poly and well in excess of himself but moved with surprising speed to attend her bleeding knee embedded with tiny pebbles. Without a peep from her, he tweezered them out while mentally having his way with her. Then he bared her foot and kissed as many toes as he dared. A game, he told, but she knew it wasn’t. After school she told her teacher that she didn’t like being pretty, and her teacher said, “In time you will, dear. Just don’t let it go to your head.”

Home, she heard her mother say, “Beauty can be a blessing.”
“Or not,” her father said.

Which is it? she wondered.

Sundays at United Methodist, her parents sat in a front pew while she attended Bible class, so many stories, so much happening in the olden days when God was a voice in the sky and Satan the boogeyman, the two of them manipulating poor Job, whom she visualized with a puckered mouth doubling as a toy whistle. On the way home, her father at the wheel of a weathered Ford that seldom started on the first try, she asked whether all those Bible stories were true.

“They could be,” her mother said. “But not necessarily.”
“Don’t tell her that,” her father said, eyes on the road. “Of course they’re true.”

Her father was in real estate and the owner of several marginal properties awaiting buyers. Times were tough. Service in the Massachusetts National Guard supplemented his income. A lieutenant bucking for captain, he looked especially smart in his two-tone uniform, the jacket chocolate with brass fittings, the trousers beige with a sheen. Her mother took loads of pictures of him, one of which was later used in the local paper following his death on a Normandy beach, captain bars on his steel helmet and a prayer book in his sea-soaked pocket.

The loss left Diane uncertain whether he had ever truly existed and made her wonder whether she had created him with crayons, her mother validating the ruse. Unsettling was her discovery of love letters written to her mother and stashed in a fancy chocolate box. The letters weren’t from her father but from her mother’s high-school sweetheart, who wrote from his heart and his loins, impassioned words that added another dimension to her mother, who became more real, her father less.

“Tell me about Gregory.”
“You’ve been snooping.” Margaret Neal feigned anger while indulging a memory that sparked a smile. “He thought I was hot stuff.”
“Were you?”
“It was all in his little adolescent mind.”

Diane was fourteen when her mother ventured out of her grief and began seeing a man named Bruce. Bruce had a pleasant smile emanating from the loose contours of a face meant to instill trust, but his arctic-blue eyes spooked Diane. A frequent visitor and an occasional overnight guest, he approached her one evening when she was doing her homework and whispered in her ear as his overly eager fingers climbed her bare arm. Repelled, she pulled away. She said nothing about it, but her mother knew something had happened. After Diane had gone to bed, Bruce felt the point of a knife against his throat and Margaret Neal’s breath hot and hard on his face.
“Don’t think I won’t.”

He believed her, and that was the last Margaret Neal saw of him, though Diane ran into him a decade later at Logan International Airport. Despite his hair loss and weight gain, she recognized him but couldn’t remember his name. “Bruce,” he said, his smile intact, and with a gush of whiskey breath told her he considered her an anglicized Sophia Loren, nothing lost in translation. When his loose face tightened, his smile vanished. “I’d have married your mother just to get at you.”

“No way in the world, sir, would she have married you.”

They stood eye to eye, two tall women, five-ten in stocking feet, Diane Neal and Mrs. Wheelwright, a generation separating them. Almond eyes and high cheekbones gave Mrs. Wheelwright a fashionable face. She said, “My son has a striking appearance, a warm heart, and an average mind. He won’t shake the world, but he’ll make a good husband.”

Diane, in her final year of college, had no thought of marriage. Damon Wheelwright was her pal and, at tender times, her lover—but nothing surging beyond that. Having spent a summer in Paris, her blood ran hot for Edith Piaf’s singing, Samuel Beckett’s absurdities, and Simone de Beauvoir’s intellectual twists and turns.

Mrs. Wheelwright went on. “Damon’s trust fund ensures security. I realize money isn’t everything, but life is so much lovelier with it. Do you agree?”

Diane did agree. After the war, properties once deemed marginal sold for hefty prices and gave her mother the means to expand their lives, which began with the purchase of a house in the same sweet part of town as the Wheelwrights. The result was that Diane and Damon became a pair, the presence of one adding value to the other. Strangers thought them siblings and stiffened when the two exhibited seemingly unhealthy affection toward each other.

“You’d be perfect for the family, dear.” Mrs. Wheelwright pressed her smile on her. “And you’d be doing me a huge favor. Think me superficial if you like, but I couldn’t bear to have unattractive grandchildren.” Her smile pressed harder. “Would you answer something truthfully? I know you will. Does Damon have any same-sex interests?”

Diane took a half-second. “Absolutely not.”

“Thank God!”

Ensconced in a chaise on the porch of Mrs. Bourque’s rented cottage, Mrs. Simmons sipped a margarita, her second, and imagined herself strolling the moonlit beach, running into a buccaneer, and becoming his booty. She felt the evening’s salty breath on her face and fancied it his. Mrs. Bourque glanced sideways at her and said, “You feeling all right?”
“Fine,” Mrs. Simmons said briskly. Her eye on a passing gaggle of girls, she envied their youth. They didn’t fret about their faces tarnishing overnight and needing to be refinished in the morning. Stretching her legs, Mrs. Simmons scrutinized her plump ankles. “I want to be young and beautiful again…like Margaret Neal’s daughter.”

“Her name’s Diane,” Mrs. Bourque said. “Are you sure you’re all right?”

“I’m a little tipsy, that’s all.” On her first date with her husband, Mrs. Simmons got tipsy and was impregnated. Back then Fred Simmons had a bit of style but now was addicted to house slippers and television. She was glad to be away from him for a while. Mrs. Bourque divined the tilt of her thoughts.

“So how’s Fred doing?”

She resented the question because Mrs. Bourque had once quipped that if the dictionary people ever defined an old fart they’d print a picture of Fred. “Fine,” she said and, cushioning a hand behind her head, wondered whether somewhere on the beach Margaret Neal’s daughter and the Wheelwright boy were copulating beneath a blanket, perhaps where boulders cast the longest shadows, strollers giving them a wide berth out of respect.

Mrs. Bourque said, “Ever wish it had been different?”

“What?”

“Everything.”

“Enough!” Mrs. Simmons said. “If you don’t mind.”

An hour later, emerging from a quick shower, Mrs. Simmons was a burst of pink that was, she liked to think, too much for her husband and, for that matter, too much for any man. The bed in the guest room had crisp sheets that pleased her skin. Eyes closed, she listened to surf sounds, waves crashing and splintering. Sea air shuffled through the open window. Mrs. Bourque spoke to her through the closed door.

“Good night.”

“Good night,” Mrs. Simmons said and, knees raised, entertained herself with both hands, all ten fingers, as if she were a she-devil in heat, marauders in longboats arriving.

Diane Neal, a foot soldier in JFK’s run for the presidency, rejoiced when he won and grieved when he was killed. Later, though no fan of LBJ, she worked doggedly for him because Barry Goldwater and the specter of the mushroom cloud scared the bejeezus out of her. In between times she freelanced for various magazines and met men ready to make fools of themselves over her, which she discouraged. Except once. Felt sorry for him, a freelancer like herself. Then it took her six months to get rid of him.

She was too busy for long-term entanglements. Too much terrible stuff was going on. The nightly news aired slaughter in Vietnam, upheaval at Kent State, police helicopters circling People’s Park in Berkeley. Martin Luther King was killed. Then another Kennedy. Something was rotting in the country. Could it get worse? It did. Nixon. She wrote controversial pieces about his personal henchmen, Haldeman and Erlichman, and proudly made the Enemies List.
The day Nixon resigned she was in New York and took time to visit an old friend, who now lived in the Village and worked at Harper & Row not as a ranking editor, as she had thought, but as somebody’s assistant, the sort of job usually given to a bright young thing from one of the Seven Sisters. They ate Italian at a restaurant on West Nineteenth and grinned at each other.

“You’re more an eyeful than ever,” he said.

She winked, for he was still her handsome Damon, her Adonis now silvered at the temples. She wanted to hug and kiss him, he looked so good! “You’re not so bad yourself,” she said. “You must work out.”

“Sure. Don’t you?”

“Sort of. I’m always on the go.”

He tilted his head. “How’s life?”

“Life?” She twirled angel hair with fork and spoon. “Odd you should ask. I’m doing a piece for Rolling Stone. According to Schopenhauer, life is shit. Death will flush it away. According to Nietzsche, God is dead...maybe never alive.”

“You a cynic now?”

“Realist. Let’s move to real talk,” she said, and each asked after the other’s mother. Margaret Neal was into real estate, had an eye and nose for it, and was doing marvelously well. Mrs. Wheelwright, busy with benefits when she wasn’t wintering in Florida, was severely disappointed that her only child had never married.

“About time we talked about that,” Damon said and looked Diane full in the face.

“Why didn’t we? We could’ve, should’ve. Was it because I didn’t have enough oomph in you-know-what?”

She wanted to hold his hand. He’d be her Rock Hudson, she his Doris Day. Pillow talk. She missed that. Not that it had happened often, but such fun when it did, the two of them looking at each other with affection and mischief, post coitum triste never more than a gentle problem.

“Don’t sell yourself short, Damon. Please don’t do that.”

His face fought for expression. “You and me. I suppose it’s too late.”

Her sympathetic smile held him together as it often had when they were young and groping. “I would think so,” she said and gave it more thought. “Yes, Damon, definitely too late.”

Later, rising to use the ladies’ room, she looked down and saw he was bald where his head lay at night and felt the same gentle sadness as in the old days.

She won a Pulitzer for a series of columns she wrote during a year of the Reagan presidency. One began: Agent Orange is the reason so many of our Vietnam vets go to an early grave and glow in the ground.

Another: Mr. Reagan views the homeless as simple folk craving the urban outdoors.

And another: Space Shuttle Challenger explodes, killing its crew, mythologizing Christa McAuliffe, and exposing the arrogance and irresponsibility of NASA. The majority of Americans, however, rise to the
agency’s defense, as if national pride needed protecting at all cost. The dead crew members become not victims but godlets gazing down from Above.

The man in her life was a fellow prize winner she met at the awards ceremony, a journalist turned book author and twice a Pulitzer winner. He had a high-bridged nose, a la Robert Mitchum, in a seasoned face that led her to suspect he was better looking now than when younger. He’d had two failed marriages, children from the first, none from the second. “Don’t bullshit me,” he said when she told him she was fifty-five. He thought she was late thirties, forty at most.

“I accept compliments,” she said, hair chemically coaxed to its original hue of honey.

They soon had dinner together, live music in the background. Dancing, he was an intimate voice in her hair, against her neck. She intended to fly back to Boston where she maintained an apartment but instead accompanied him to his place on Riverside Drive. He told her he hadn’t been with anybody in months, maybe a year, and she said, “Join the club.” Each intuitively trusting the other, they undressed and stood uncensored, uninhibited. “All for me?” he said admiringly, and she said, “I could ask the same of you.” Covers drawn down, she lay back on her elbows while he chivvied her open and with one slow lick drove her over the edge. She relished the release. Then, assuming the masculine position, he made himself a force in her life, one that would last nearly two years.

Shuttling between LaGuardia and Logan, they shared residences, beds, closets. Best of both worlds, they said. Concerts at the Hatch Shell, Shakespeare in the Park. Public Garden, Central Park. The Charles, the Hudson. They went to movie houses, the arty ones, to see old favorites. Marcel Pagnol’s trilogy. Jacques Tati in Mr. Hulot’s Holiday. They traveled. They swam stark in the Aegean, Poseidon their protector, lesser gods in their wake. Despite Iraq’s war with Iran, a driver taxied them from Baghdad to Babylon, fifty-five miles marked by photos and plywood cutouts of Saddam Hussein. Touring Babylon’s ancient ruins, with the sun-baked air of history on their faces, they rummaged for traces of the Hanging Gardens and the Tower of Babel. Ben claimed he glimpsed the ghost of Hammurabi. Diane went along with the delusion for the adventure.

They collected quotes:

Even this he cannot do right —Josef Stalin, after his son botched a suicide attempt.

Happy is the country where they know at whom to throw their bombs —Rebecca West.

Christians scream worse than atheists on the death-ward —Robert Lowell.

They planned to marry, honeymoon in Hawaii, the date set, but then he learned he had cancer. Why in hell did he have cancer? Pancreatic, worst kind to have. Where was God in all of this? Didn’t matter. She wasn’t a believer, nor was Ben. Burning bushes. Parting waters. An angel delivering a stay of execution as Abraham is about to butcher his son. All a bunch of crap. She held his hand. “Ben, don’t leave!”

But he did, mercifully fast. A blessing, someone said. She stayed bedside, ten minutes, twenty. Unless it was her imagination, the body twitched twice as if unaware it was dead.
In December, Mrs. Simmons and Mrs. Bourque booked themselves on a Caribbean cruise that catered to people escaping Christmas and seeking solace from the throes of aging. Mrs. Simmons, who had lost her Fred to congestive heart failure, hoped she’d meet an interesting man, but the only one who latched onto her did not meet expectations. Mrs. Bourque said he had the color of a corpse and only an occasional blink kept him from being buried alive. “No need to be nasty,” Mrs. Simmons said.

In July they booked a cruise to the Mediterranean. Their second evening at sea Mrs. Bourque drank too much sherry and was rude to an old duffer who introduced himself as Donald and said he’d been in the banking game, high finance. Mrs. Bourque found his face a nuisance to look at, too common, too nerdy, and told him to “fuck off.”

Watching him leave, Mrs. Simmons said, “That was totally unnecessary.” Mrs. Bourque shrugged while muffling flatulence.

At a stopover in Barcelona a youth speaking poor English put a move on Mrs. Bourque, who said, “Do you know how old I am, young man?” He said it didn’t matter, she should simply remember him in her will. In Messina the air was humid, heavy, each drawn breath a burden. Mrs. Simmons felt faint but stayed on her feet, and the two women took refuge under the awning of a sidewalk café, where they drank more wine than was prudent. Tipsy, Mrs. Simmons grew enraged over the memory of her husband’s penis. “It wasn’t hefty, it was skinny. All he could do was poke.”

“Poor Fred,” Mrs. Bourque said. “Born pathetic.”

Mrs. Simmons suddenly took offense. “We had our moments.”

They spent an exhausting day on the isle of Delos, where the Aegean sun burnt Mrs. Simmons’ nose, and the relentless heat nearly brought her lunch up. Angling through one of the crowded market squares, Mrs. Bourque saw someone she thought she knew. Margaret Neal’s daughter? Couldn’t be. By now Diane Neal was past fifty and that woman appeared nowhere near it. Her male companion had a Robert Mitchum look. Were they forms or figments? No matter. The crowd swallowed them.

On the long voyage home, Mrs. Bourque apologized to the man she told to fuck off. “Donald, right?” He nodded, and they went into the forward lounge for a drink. “Don’t know what I was thinking,” she said and proceeded to tell him about her ex-husbands, the first a philandering rat bastard, the second a cigar-chomping sonofabitch who tried to tell her what to do.

“I’d never do that,” Donald said. “Marry me, I’ll give you everything you want. I was in banking, you know.”

“Are you quite well off, Donald?”

“Yes, I am, if I do say so.”

“How old are you?”

“Eighty-one and fit as a fiddle.”

Mrs. Bourque sipped her margarita. “Sorry, too fit…and too young.”

Segue
At age seventy-nine Margaret Neal suffered a broken hip. Diane gave up her digs in Boston and moved back to her mother’s house, back to her girlhood surroundings. Gazing at her with pride, her mother said, “You’ve really made something of yourself. Your father would’ve been proud.”

Three weeks later on a Sunday evening she saw her father on public television, footage of a Normandy landing, a god-awful battle for a beachhead. Her mother screeched, “That’s him!” Who? Couldn’t be. Her mother was crying, jabbing a finger at the screen. “Yes! Yes!” How could she tell? A helmeted head and a partial face with features visible only for a second before the camera swept on. “That was your father!” Embalmed in history, frozen in time maybe mere moments before he was killed. Who could say? Her mother couldn’t stop trembling. “He comes home, he won’t know me. He’s still young, I’m this white-haired old lady who can’t walk straight.”

Diane left on a writing assignment and was back by the following Sunday. Katharine Hepburn in The Corn is Green was on A&E opposite the public channel’s Brideshead Revisited, which Diane would have preferred. Her mother said, “Your father loved Hepburn.” Seeing the helmeted man on film, captain bars visible, had made her father more of a myth than ever, a player in a fantasy. She was nearly sixty, her father forever under thirty.

She left again to interview the sole surviving son of Rose Kennedy, who was celebrating a birthday. In a widely distributed piece, she wrote: “Out of the fruit of thy womb, Rosie, came the stuff of history.” Her mother said, “Your father would’ve thought that irreligious, but I like it.” For her mother, her father had become a presence again, a whisper in the brain, sometimes a tap on the window. Later, over a light supper, her mother said, “By the way, Louise Wheelwright phoned. She wants to see you.”

Years since she had seen Mrs. Wheelwright’s fashionable face, which to a large degree had held its own. Words sprang from Mrs. Wheelwright’s mouth. “You told me Damon wasn’t a fag. You lied!”

Unfair. Plenty of times she had believed he wasn’t. Other times she had merely wondered. Mrs. Wheelwright spoke from the acerbic curl of her lips. “When’s the last time you saw him?”

She tried to remember and couldn’t. “It’s been a while.”

“A long while?”

“I guess.”

“He has AIDS.”

She composed her face to speak. “I’m sorry.”

“If you had told the truth, I’d have gotten him help. Since you didn’t, you should’ve married him. It would have made a difference.”

How much of a difference? Truth came in all flavors, like people, like puppy dogs. Real truth was your face in the morning. She pressed her fingers against her temples. “For God’s sake, shut up!”

She drew the wrath of the religious right when she wrote that TV evangelists preached so much bullshit that they smelled like fertilizer. She called Jim and Tammy Bakker pint-sized absurdities, money ministers, Jesus merchants, entertainers whose religious routines soared beyond slapstick into hysteria. At a talk she gave in Raleigh, North Carolina, someone threw a book at her,
a Bible no less. The incident was reported locally and picked up by Fox. When she returned home, her mother said, “Aren’t you getting too old for this?”

“This is my life, Mom. What else would I do?”

“Enjoy life.”

“If I enjoyed it any more, I’d be giddy.”

Her excitement built when Bill Clinton, despite baggage, wrested the presidency from George Bush, a war hero Time magazine depicted as a wimp. She admired Clinton’s intellect and asked how anyone could refer to a Rhodes Scholar as “Bubba.” On the other hand, concerned about his excesses, she called him “pecker-happy—and that spells trouble in River City.”

She covered the O. J. Simpson trial and termed the verdict a mirror image of white justice in the Old South. She mourned the death of Dean Martin, whom she had once interviewed, designating him the mellow side of Sinatra. That same month she learned that Damon Wheelwright had died. No formal funeral, no memorial service, only an anonymous cremation. Mrs. Wheelwright’s mandate: “Less said the better.”

Mrs. Simmons lost a leg to diabetes and her life to cancer. Mrs. Bourque couldn’t attend the funeral. She was in a nursing home, trapped in an airtight world of old age and disease, and humiliated because she had to use a bed pan and rely on others. She cringed when other residents greeted their children with contrite smiles, as if apologizing for still being alive, and she loathed old men who were lewd at all levels. She wanted to go home. What home? She wanted her cloudy eyes to brighten and her old body to spring straight. Not going to happen!

Her niece sent long-stemmed roses on her birthday but didn’t visit. A young idealistic priest popped in on her, admired the roses, and mused, “Does a flower choose to be beautiful or is beauty thrust upon it?”

Mrs. Bourque said, “Who gives a shit?”

She dreamed of Mrs. Simmons’ moony face. With arms outstretched, Mrs. Simmons looked like shelter. “She was beckoning to me,” she told the semi-retired doctor in the midst of weekly rounds. “She wants me to join her. What do you think of that, Doc?”

“I think we ought to get you into a chair, Mrs. Bourque. “Make you mobile.”

“I think you should get me a new life.”

Diane Neal no longer bothered coloring her hair, which didn’t prevent male dinner companions from feeling she added to their worth. In Boston her escort was a former ranking FBI official, whose voice had rhythm and a touch of the south. He enjoyed slapping his wallet open and flashing his past authority, a harmless affectation. In Washington, over a bottle of wine, a Post editor
told her he remembered himself as a baby in a stroller, his mother fixing his blanket. He also claimed he occasionally saw himself as a dead man, his sparse hair perfectly combed, all his feelings gone.

“ Weird,” she said.

“Isn’t it.”

They talked politics. She didn’t trust the second George Bush, who had ducked service in Vietnam and, she mused, probably had a yellow streak running down his back and rippling into his arse. The Post editor was looking intently at her.

“Will you marry me?”

“’Fraid not.”

“Why not?”

“There’s an answer. I just don’t have it on the tip of my tongue.”

She was in New York when the unthinkable happened, the 9/11 thing. She wasn’t near the disaster site but was there when George Bush arrived to shake a firefighter hand and assume an appearance of strength, wisdom, and leadership. She understood his going to war in Afghanistan—but Iraq? “The guy killing us is Osama bin Laden, not Saddam. Someone tell George!” she wrote for one magazine, and for another, “War is the beat of a hammer against the bone of a human head.”

“Be careful,” a friend advised. “You’re sounding like a propagandist.”

Another said, “Take a rest. You look like hell.”

She flew to London for a long weekend on her own, stayed at The Dukes, broke bread with a man she met there, saw two plays (one with him), and in Piccadilly Square took pictures of pigeons strutting about like plump and pompous ambassadors from a grander era. When she returned she learned her mother had had a minor spell. Nothing to worry about, the doctor said. Her mother was eighty-nine.

“Good God, how old am I?”

At age ninety-one, after major surgery, Margaret Neal was transferred to the rehab unit of Shady Lane Nursing Home, where she was expected to spend no more than a week, two tops. “I have your word on that?” she said, and her doctor said, “You do.”

She said to Diane, “You’re a witness.”

The doctor, his eyes assessing Diane, said to her, “Bet you were a looker in your time.”

Seventy-two years old, Diane said, “I’m still a looker.”

Later she and her mother lunched in the dining room, each particular about what they put into their stomachs. Her mother picked at a garden salad.

“I wish I’d had a grandchild.”

Diane looked up from her plate. “Hell of a time to tell me.”

Her mother speared a cherry tomato. “There’s a high school classmate of mine here. She didn’t have a happy life. Two marriages, both bad. Her name’s Bourque. That was her second husband’s name. Impossible to have a conversation with her. They put her up on the third floor. That’s for people mentally and physically out of it.”

Segue
“That’s sad.”

“I get that way, shoot me.” Margaret Neal’s head rang with a song she hadn’t heard in a long time. She hummed a bit of it. Who had sung it? Must’ve been Sinatra. He had sung everything. She said, “I dreamed of your father last night. Him so young, me so old. We didn’t speak. What would we say? What would we have in common?”

“Me,” Diane said.
Yafa Street

How would your life change if a random accident suddenly took the life of your spouse?

That was Question No. 9 on the Marriage Aptitude Test mailed to my wife and me separately, before our first counseling session.

My answers to the other eight questions were yes or no or “don’t know,” and none of my responses was any longer than what I wrote for No. 6 (“Venus fly trap”), all of which I thought would convey to the counselor and anyone else grading it, that, sure, Naomi and I were not exactly Brad and Anjolina. On the other hand, we were probably not a lot different from other army couples married four years.

Getting back to No. 9, though, I’d never thought before about what I’d do if Naomi, say, were to crash into the back of a semi-tractor trailer on the Kennedy Expressway, and was decapitated. Not that Naomi’s death is some kind of delirious fantasy for me, but this question was giving me sort of a peek over a bunker to some forbidden and exciting place.

So I was doing some free association, to use the counselor jargon, writing that I would probably want to get out of Chicago. Put the condo up for sale—there’s actually a waiting list for these South Loop prison cells—so that I could get some ready cash.

Nothing would be holding me here, since I haven’t taken a job since being discharged. Could just turn my back on Chicago’s swarm of hustlers and fakes, and its pain in the ass winter, the taxi fumes and the black ice.

I’d head south. Not on a plane—what I hate about cities, I hate about planes, too.

Instead, I’d get a big comfortable car. A Lincoln Town car. A convertible Lincoln Town Car, cream colored, or cocoa, and I would just start driving. Leave early, before rush hour uncoils.

I’d start to feel the freedom past Kankakee, when I hit the rural plains and all the congestion was left behind.

Suddenly (and here I had to pause in my free association because I ran out of space on the form and had to get up and grab a blank sheet off of our fax machine), it would start warming up plenty when I reached Arkansas, and before long, I’d have the rag top down, my left hand on the wheel, my right arm stretched out along the top of the passenger seat, a Carlos Santana album playing on the stereo, the cruise control set at 74 mph, and the Lincoln arrowing into the heart of Texas.

I added a concluding paragraph and stapled the fax paper to the back of the Marriage Aptitude Questionnaire.

Segue
And to make a long story short, I blew it.

Because a couple of weeks later, we’re at the counselor’s office, and he pulls out our questionnaires and reads out loud Naomi’s answers first. In her No. 9 response, she talks seriously about what would be her stunned reaction to my death. There is even the word “paralysis” somewhere in there, and then she goes on to say she doesn’t think she would be able to re-marry. She’d try to move ahead, would join a soldiers’ widows support group. But could not even conceive of dating.

“Uh,” I say, after he’s finished. “I may have misunderstood that question.”

Naomi is giving me that look with her mouth slightly open and her eyes cold, and the shrink is holding our papers, rolling closer to the two of us in his office chair.

And then he flips my stapled pages onto the top of his pile, and he starts to read, going pretty fast, on account of my answers being concise. He pauses after the “flytrap” in No.6.

“What do you think?” he says.

The way Naomi is looking at me, I reach for the top of my head to see if something got stuck in my hair.

“A tad flippant, no?” he continues. “But this is not necessarily a bad thing,” he says, “since your metaphorical characterization of your marriage is, at least, revealing, whereas other vets often obfuscate. Let’s move on to, let’s see, uh huh, No. 9.”

It’s obvious where this is going to go. Trapped in my own bag of dicks, or however you put it, so all’s I can do is listen while the shrink reads it out loud, though the bastard doesn’t have to inject so much enthusiasm in his reading, making it sound like I’m rhapsodizing over all what I get to do if only Naomi were to go toes up.

Which is not accurate, of course. Certainly there would be grief and a waiting period, years possibly, and it’s unlikely that I could afford a Lincoln. Not a new one, anyway.

The question was just worded poorly. It did not set chronological parameters.

I explain all this after he is through reading.

And because there are the three of us seated in stuffed chairs in that blue and pink pastel painted room, and the only sound I hear is my own voice, and because it feels at that moment as though the Supreme Court of Marriage and Divorce had me by the ball (I have only one—long story involving infantile hernia, but not important)—because of all that, I don’t offer even a whimper of protest when the counselor tells us we needed to book flights to Mexico. He doesn’t say at our earliest convenience, but that we just had to do it if we wanted to try to save a marriage, which was when he turns just to me.

“You do want to save this marriage, don’t you Mick?” he says. “I must ask because there is an apparent contradiction. Some of what you wrote seems to say you want out, but your being here, says you want in.”
He’s looking at the bridge of my nose, which, I suspect, is how they’re trained to do it. And Naomi and her chair and body are all facing him, while her one eye is looking at me, or seems to be focusing on my hand below the table, as if she’s watching to see if I’m going to pull out a military issue .45 and go apeship.

I’m seeing all of this while thinking, *Mexico?* I mean, okay, I know it’s Reno or Vegas if you want a fast wedding. And the Dominican Republic for a quickie divorce—I checked on the internet. But who ever heard of going to Mexico for trouble shooting your marriage?

That’s what I asked Austin. Not Austin, Texas, but Austin our marriage counselor, sitting there between us, his eyebrows twitching like crazy. This joker is probably the last person on earth with whom I’d be on a friendly first name basis, but he told us to call him Austin, not Doctor Winchell.

And according to Austin, Naomi and I are apparent victims of plural-techno marital dysfunction, or PTMD, and that we could mightily benefit from a 4 day, 3 night stay in Mexico.

I ask him if he had a travel agent’s gig on the side, and he gives one of those “very funny, but this is serious” smirks, which, of course, makes Naomi even more solid in her alliance with him, which is pretty much the way it has gone so far, more or less confirming what I originally thought about marriage counseling as being a waste of money. But I let it go for now, assuming Austin’s fees qualify as an itemized deduction come tax time.

I figure that PTMD really means “despises each other,” and that it is just a fancy phrase the marriage counseling industry invented to make itself sound all scientific, in order to justify charging $120 per hour, their hour equaling only 45 minutes, which, therefore, makes it really $160 an hour, or $160 for each hour of Naomi describing such things as her revulsion at the way my whiskers stick to the bottom of the sink, or her perplexity at my sudden needs for sex “without affection,” or my insulting sarcasm, or her disgust with other habits and proclivities of mine, which—who knew?—all turn out to be “abusive” behaviors, according to her Austin, who likes to sit there checking things off on his pad with a long black pencil, while asking Naomi encouraging questions, like this one toward the end of Session Two.

“So, Naomi, you feel objectified, dehumanized, in fact, when Mick asks you to get down on all fours?”

Much obliged, Austin.

It kills me that he thinks his degree somehow makes him some kind of marriage repair man, that he could act as a detective to find some find something, a cause, or whatever, of the problems between two strangers, that they themselves can’t see.

Like when he played the Post Traumatic Stress Disorder Syndrome card, or P.T.S.D.S.—I swear, psychology tosses around more abbreviations than the goddam army—soon as he learned I was in Baghdad. Which I figured is a savvy move as far as his cashing in on veterans benefits, or what not. Except that I had to educate him that it did not apply, and that P.T.S.D.S., was no different from what they called shell shock in the John Wayne movies, or cowardice in the time of Caesar and Achilles and Shakespeare or whomever. And I don’t use the term in a derogatory way, since being stricken with it was a total surprise to some originally gung ho grunts I knew. It’s just something in you or it isn’t, and I was among the lucky (or unlucky, depending on grunts-eye view) to be able to deal with fear without pissing my pants.
Or to put it another way, war can lobotomize anybody, but the majority of us are able to handle it.

TOP gave us the whole syndrome spiel when we were decommissioned, including a goddam laminated card with the three major symptoms, two of which, “avoidance and numbing of emotion” and “arousal,” I obviously do not have, and one which is just silly: “re-experiencing.” I mean, unless you had your brains deleted by a I.E.D., you are going to remember what you did in the war, whether it was seeing your partner cut in two, or spending nine months getting a major tan in the motor pool—neither of which was me, but you get the point.

Naomi was giving me her flat stare, and I knew she was thinking of the thing on Yafa Street. But she’s smart enough to know that Austin would love to hear it nearly as much as they love to hear stories about how you hated your mother, though neither applies. I’m not about to be writing $160 checks for his psychiatric masturbation.

To make a long story short, I have become the most patient man in the world, which, by the way, is the last quality you’d find in someone with stress disorder—in fact, call me Mr. Patience, yes, Mr. Patience with a capital P for pussy—just kidding—which eventually brings us here, aboard a Boeing 727, approximately three hours from touchdown at the Cabo San Lucas airport, with Naomi reading *O* magazine next to me; so don’t tell me I’m not giving this “escape therapy” and our marriage a chance, bullshit that it is. The therapy, I mean.

Apparently, the Bahamas wouldn’t qualify, nor would any domestic destinations, since, get this, Austin said the physical distance and foreign territory have a bearing on the psychological benefits with our so-called disorder, which, if you couldn’t gather from its title, means more or less that the pressures and stresses of our present and past environments, interfered with the natural paths of closeness for young married’s. Translation: stuff got in the way of us concentrating on each other. I’m thinking, well, okay, but maybe also thank goodness.

Naturally, I have my own diagnostic theory, which I’ve kept to myself. Not just because I’m not a professional like Austin, but mainly because the diagnosis is, well, not pleasant. Like if someone has a huge, puss filled cyst, or similar kind of fleshy unit protruding from the tip of his nose, and everybody in the room knows it, but they studiously try to avoid making it the topic of conversation.

Naomi has the window seat on the plane, but I can feel the sun pouring in, so I recline my seat for shade. She actually has hell of a profile—quite classic. Straight nose, full lips. You’d think she’d be beautiful.
And I guess I used to think so. Or maybe it was when we were in love. Austin and she tried to blame the war for changing that, for changing me. But I’m looking at her face now and feeling maybe we were not in love for real. She and I back then—it was like a gift that occupies all your time, at first, for its novelty. And now it just sits on the shelf.

We have only carry-ons, so we head to Ground Transportation to get a cab. Blocking the revolving doors is a wide line of people, some in uniforms, some standing behind empty wheel chairs, all staring at us. As we move toward the doors, a pretty, olive skinned woman steps in front.

“Hotel, sir?”

“Uh, El Presidente,” I say. I roll the r with a Spanish accent. I took two courses of Spanish in community college.

“Excuse me?”

“Ell-plrrres-ident-ay,” I say more slowly.

Maybe I have the wrong name.

“The Presidential Hotel,” says Naomi.

“Certainly,” the woman smiles. “Free transportation to The Presidential.”

Can’t argue with that. She escorts us to a van and we slide into the middle seat. The cab driver is all business, handing us a clipboard to sign. It’s in English, and it turns out we not only get the free transportation, but also a free lunch at the Hotel Pacifica Blanca’ provided we sign up for the Hotel Pacifica Blanca “tour.” Some kind of time share pitch.

“Will you take us back to our hotel, to the Presidential after the tour?” Naomi asks the driver.

He says something I can’t make out, but he points to the clipboard.

“Poor bastard doesn’t know English,” I tell Naomi.

“I say English, Senor,” he says, shaking his head.

“Jesus, Mick. He just wanted us to read the agreement, which says, right here in bold, return transportation to your own hotel.”

The driver, turns out, is insane. I don’t mean insane as in mental illness, but insane as in Evel Knevel. He driving probably 150 kilometers per hour, within inches of pedestrians, chickens, oncoming vehicles, and huge box trucks. I swear we must have sliced the side mirror off a bus, but I couldn’t hear anything above the roar of the engine.

Naomi is terrified.
I could wrest the steering wheel from this maniac. It would be tricky timing, to hit the brake and jab the base of his neck, simultaneously.

After two or three miles, or maybe it was five—it’s hard to estimate distance when going at the speed of sound—I try to see his face in the mirror, to search his eyes for bloodlust or satanic glee. Or maybe revenge for my calling him a bastard. But all I see is boredom, it appears, and I decide to wait.

It hits me how this is the key difference back in the world, that you have time to decide things. To act or not. A luxury of time. Whereas, that was the hard thing on Yafa Street: no waiting; no spare seconds.

Yafa Street is where the bus station was in Baghdad, which I was volun-told to guard that afternoon.

It was hot that day, hard to breathe. The metal framed doors of the station were covered with plywood instead of glass, like most of the city’s storefronts, but they were wedged open to let air in, and from my post across the street, I could see any Habibs who were inside or out.

An Iraqi of medium height with thick black framed eyeglasses stood out in front. As sweltering as it was, he had a long sleeved blue and red checked shirt, and he was holding a black briefcase at his side—a wide briefcase, almost like a jeweler’s bag.

And then he smiled from across the street, smiled at me. He looked to be in his sixties, but the way he would run later, made me think he was really only 35. The effect of a missing front tooth and the thick framed eyeglasses made it difficult to judge his age.

When he started across the street in my direction, I was alert. I shifted weight to both legs, resting my arms on the M16 slung across my front. Long afterwards, I realized it was his smile that me relax.

He paused on the street, and then he stepped up onto the curb, facing me. He said something indecipherable with a question in it, and then waited. I just shook my head, and then he held up his hand, waving a small jar.

“Vee-a-gra? Vee-a-gra,” he says, continuing to wave the jar and gesture to his briefcase.

And then it dawned on me, and I pointed the barrel at his feet.

“Put down the briefcase and stand back,” I said. His eyes got very big behind the eyeglasses.

“The street,” I shouted.

I pointed at the briefcase and gestured for him to put it down. “Emphatically” gestured was how I would later write it in the log.

When I flicked the safety off my BPAG, he dropped the case and started running. Not back to the station, but down the street. Really ripping, like a hundred meter dash.

We are trained for this. It all came to me slowly, but in enough time.

I raised the M16. I aimed for his right side, for a spot between his shoulder and his arm, and leading a bit in the direction of his running.

I could have squeezed one shot, but it was better to be sure, and let go three loud bursts.

He jumped, but he kept running. His arm had torn away and plopped in the street. You could see it there wrapped in the red and blue checked sleeve, but he was beyond it, still running. His running was slower, and it was not straight, but he kept going and disappeared to the left, down the side street.
We found him later. He had gotten maybe thirty steps down the side street, where he fell and died.

The briefcase, it turned out, had no incendiary device, no fuel, no bomb that he could trigger after running away. It contained 7 jars of blue pills, and some more unopened bottles of multiple vitamins. He was no Ali Baba, but a Hadji, one of the friendlies we were liberating.

And thank Christ for that. And for me doing everything correctly. Even winging him. Maybe three slugs did too much damage, but maybe also he shouldn’t have run, so, trust me, I’m not having nightmares about any of it.

Naomi has her eyes shut tight and is holding onto my forearm. Squeezing pretty tight, too. Maybe this is one of things Austin was counting on, unity out of desperation, or something like that.

Her eyes open as I feel the driver slowing up, swinging to the right, then accelerating up a newly blacktopped driveway, all narrow and shaded by palm trees, till we get to the top of the hill where sits the pink stucco façade of the Hotel Pacifica Blanca.

The doors must be ten feet tall with glittering stained glass, and there is a mile high pile of sand on the driveway right out in front, marked and roped off. At the base of the sand pile is a cluster of people, other tourists. So far, so good.

The driver opens the door and gives his hand to Naomi to help her exit the van. I hop out, and then he goes to the back and removes our luggage.

“Ole, amigo, we’re not staying here,” I say to him, as I grab my own suitcase to return it to the van.

“Thas okay, my friend,” a voice chirps behind me.

I turn to see a man sailing towards us, wearing a broad smile. He reminds me of somebody. Think of General Colon Powell’s face, but with black, curly hair. He is wearing a maroon suit, white shirt, no tie, and as beefy as this guy is, I don’t see any sweat on his forehead. It started pouring out of me as soon as I got out of the van.

A couple walking up to the door wave to General Powell and call out his real name, Eduardo, and he waves back before turning back to us.

“My friends, welcome to Hotel Pacifica Blanca.”

The “my friends” kills me. I mean, the guy oozes charm. He says he’s been eagerly waiting for us, and don’t worry, we will eat as much as we want, “with my complimentary,” he says, and he leads us through the doors where you can smell the paint and the nylon fibers of the new carpet just off the loom. He hands us meal tickets and leads us through the hallway to the restaurant, all along the way, excusing himself every two minutes to greet others by name. Making little jokes to them. I’m feeling a lot better because of the a.c., and Naomi’s looking all around like a kid at Toys R Us.
He must be the owner of the hacienda, with all these folks gushing at him. Lots of money, we’re talking. He walks ahead of us, kind of slouched, his arms not moving. Colon Powell’s shorter cousin.

“They leeve in Montreal,” he explained about one couple. “They own one of the Sunset Villas. Those, you shall see, sit on the east side across the bay from Steven Segal’s house. You know Steven Segal?”

And, “Maria is the niece of Annette Benny,” he confides, meaning Benning. Maria, a darkly tanned goddess in purple sunglasses and a purple thong peeking through the folds of a white sarong, waves in greeting to him as she strolls the opposite way.

“So we could end up as her neighbor?” I say, and Eduardo does an ever so slight double take, to see if I’m schmoozing him back, which maybe I am, and maybe I’m not, since Eduardo is making us feel very much at home, all soft sell.

We’re feeling pretty jaunty, maybe even with a little bit of pleasure and anticipation about what’s next.

After all the gleaming brass and the polished mahogany back in the lobby, and the humongous live palm trees all lining the hall, which had to have been lowered inside this place before they roofed it, the restaurant seemed itself pretty simple—a large, green carpeted room with white plasterboard walls and a single glass chandelier. Probably hadn’t added the finishing touches yet.

We get into a short line at the breakfast buffet table—waffles, miniature pancakes, scrambled eggs with green peppers, wedges of cold French toast, nothing Mexican, really, and I watch Eduardo circulate through the room.

There are, perhaps, 40 or 50 other people like us, here because of the free ride and breakfast, and maybe some out of curiosity. I don’t imagine anyone seriously wants to buy a time share.

We bring plates to our table, and lo and behold, Eduardo decides to sit with us. Which would be a pain in the ass, out of all the tables, but at least it ensures we get good service. There are two busboys filling water, and a waiter, who you know can’t speak a word of English, but who hops to it when General Powell says something, and he comes back with a frosty pitcher of orange juice.

“Senora?” he says, holding the pitcher next to Naomi.

“Fresh orange juice,” says Eduardo. “From our own groves.”

“Really?” I say. “So do you own the hotel?”

Naomi shoots me a look, but I get the feeling she wants to know, too. I also get the feeling she admires my straightforwardness and experience with foreigners.

“Six years,” says Eduardo. The guy is killing me. He answers six years, but then it turns out he doesn’t mean he’s been the owner for six years, but a good friend to the owner, a Senor McLaughlin—we never learned his first name—whom Eduardo met decades ago when they were both in school in California.

Just for the hell of it, I want to quiz Eduardo about a few things, like whether there’s much crime here, and the cost of living, and can you get a daily newspaper delivered, and fishing, of course, but he stands up and calls the waiter again to bring us “café,” something I understand—community college wasn’t such a waste after all—and to make a little visit to each of the other
dozen or so tables before standing at the doorway, letting his big smile and wide body magnetize everyone’s attention, so that he could announce the start of the tour.

Which isn’t half bad, though it does take a pretty good helping of patience, like any tour. But I do like new construction, the sweet smell of new plywood gives you get up and go, or maybe it was the “café,” and Naomi is all ga-ga about the furniture, paint, appliances, and little doilies and such. For me it is the views of the ocean, which make the windows look like picture frames. The sound effects didn’t hurt, either, since the waves are colossal enough to sound like honest to God thunder when they crash. And, of course, envisioning ourselves sitting on that couch, looking out that window, in our robes, which is pretty much the point of the tour, so you have to admire the whole deal for its drama and persuasion and such.

But by the time we saw the third unit, the Deluxe Suite, I’m getting a little antsy—who wouldn’t? And maybe a little jet laggy, too. And either Eduardo senses this, or they know from experience the optimal time it takes to fatten the buyers for the kill, ad we make the death march back to the cafetería.

“Mick, we listen politely to their spiel, say no thank you, and then take our leave,” says Naomi.

I don’t say yes, don’t say no.

“Right, Mick?” she says.

Man, I wish she didn’t. I mean, yeah, she’s right, like there’s no way we’re going to buy a time share in Cabo San Lucas. Even if the Hotel were magnificent, which, well, it is, but even if the price were dirt cheap, we still wouldn’t. But I suddenly don’t like the fact that I have no choice.

I’m feeling like I’m in Austin’s office again.

“Mr. and Mrs. Hennepin?”

This is said in pure American.

“I’m Rosemary Simpson, of H.R. Properties.”

She sits at our table. You can spot the realtor type a mile away—floral suit, white blouse, bleached blonde hair all trussed up, nicely manicured fingers, one with a substantial diamond. It was just a bit of a surprise down here in Mexico. Kind of reassuring but a letdown at the same time.

She has this clipboard with our names and information on it, and some other papers folded under, and I have this weird feeling that she’s going to pull out my marriage questionnaire.

“What did you think?” she says.

I see Naomi waiting for me to say something, and Miss Rosemary has a smile like Anita the flight attendant, her eyes starting to wander the tiniest bit over our heads to other commotion in the room, when Naomi clears her throat.

“Everything is just…”

Trumpet blast in my ears. I flinch, duck, catch sight of the speaker responsible for the sound, on the wall behind us.

Then the music is muted and a voice that sounds like Eduardo’s announces that Mrs. Gwen Calabrese and her daughter Katrina have just become shareholders in Hotel Pacifica Blanca’s Deluxe Eternity Suite, or something of that nature.

A young woman seated at a table on the far end of the room—must be the daughter—raises both hands like she just finished a race, and then Herb Alpert and the Tijuana Brass resume over the p.a.
I can’t see the face of the other woman at the table, but I see her legs which are showing mucho kilometers. The daughter is smiling like crazy, and then the mother’s face comes into view, also wearing a smile, but one that’s closed mouthed, maybe tightened a bit with buyer’s remorse, or sobered by recent widowhood. A plausible scenario: the old man died and Mother Gwen figures life is too short not to spend the life insurance on a bit of paradise. Si?

I look back at Naomi who is examining her nails, waiting for the Tijuana Brass to quiet, while Rosemary, both her hands holding a pen, casts a glance toward the new buyers, and then raises her eyebrows to me.

Yes, I get it, Sweetie. And suddenly I realize that maybe they’re not even real buyers, just a couple of employee/actors. And maybe the couple across from Steven Segal and the sexy relative of Annette Benny are just plants, too.

The music ends and the room settles back to a quiet buzz, as Rosemary gets out the heavy artillery. She shows three different prices for the three different units: condo, deluxe condo, and villa. Then she breaks these down further into two different kinds of payment plans.

It’s a pretty good routine. They show you movie stars, sun filled rooms, ocean waves right out the window, then sprinkle it all with fairy dust and compress all the fantasy and expectation into a piece of paper that you sign for just $7.87 a day.

“Thank you—it really is beautiful—but we are not interested,” says Naomi.

But for some reason I’m deflated. You’d think I was the salesman. Maybe because her one sentence is too abrupt an ending to their careful, strategic morning. Or maybe because somehow it signals an end, period.

Or maybe it’s just Naomi. She’s got this look of disappointment—a wrinkle in her forehead, her lips bunched up closed—disappointment for having to break this news to Rosemary. And at first I’m thinking it’s an act so we can get out of here, but I realize now that’s how she always looks now, why she is not as pretty anymore.

“May I ask why?” says Rosemary.

She’s still got the pen in both hands, clutching it to her chest, leaning in Naomi’s direction.

“Our situation,” says Naomi, and she turns in my direction but doesn’t look at me, “is fluid. We can’t make any long term decisions right now.”

Rosemary nods, rises.

“I must get my supervisor to initial your decision. Please wait one minute.”

Of course, they’re not giving up. Just going to bring the big guns. For some reason, I didn’t think Rosemary wasn’t referring to Eduardo as her supervisor, but here he is, bobbing between chairs and back to the table, like a cruise ship maneuvering up to the dock.

“My friends, let us speak together.”

Naomi takes her elbows off the table. She goes limp.

“Senora, is there something wrong. Did I do something wrong?”

Segue
“Oh, not at all, Eduardo,” she says. “It’s just that, you know, our finances are uncertain, and we can’t really make any commitments.”

He raises his hand and Rosemary magically appears and hands him the clipboard. He takes a pen from his shirt pocket and circles something on the paper.

“You like your breakfast? Good to eat?”

“Oh, yes,” says Naomi. “Believe me, if we had different circumstances…”

“You like thee rooms? Very beautiful, no?”

“Very,” she says.

“Do you possess a car?” he says.

Naomi looks at me in puzzlement.

“Uh, yes. We have two cars.”

“And how often do you buy thee car?”

“I don’t know. When we got married. Four years.”

“Thees price for unit,” he says, tapping the pen on the clipboard, “no-ocean-view, is same as American car. Total price. Theenk of that. A car wears out. This land, this beautiful, you have forever.”

“But that’s an entirely different matter,” she says. “A car is an essential. We have to buy a car.”

“Do you not must take a vacation every year?”

Naomi shrugs.

“No matter what is in your future, you do two week, at minimal, one week vacation every year?”

“Yes.”

“And is Hotel Pacifica Blanca, Cabo San Lucas, not the place, you tell me, you wish to possess? More than anything, you say?”

He slides the clipboard forward.

“What ees to stop you?”

“It’s just, we can’t. No. Thank you.”

He takes up the clipboard, his eyes lowered now, and hands it back over his shoulder to Rosemary. He passes her the pen. He rises from his chair, summons his smile.

“Let me show you my family.”

He turns, walks toward the door on the near side.

“What the Christ?” I say.

“Mick!”

“What the Christ? His family? Let’s just go,” I say, and I push my chair back.

Rosemary steps forward.

“Please, Mr. Hennepin. One more minute.”

As I stand half way, Katrina looks from across the room. Her mother, Gwen, is also watching.

Behind them, Eduardo is already circling the room again, on his way back to us. Carrying a bulging briefcase.

“Plees, sit down, folks.”
He stands behind his chair, the briefcase dangling from his left hand. He wears the insouciant smile, but his eyes look different. Something definitely strange in his eyes.

“Drop it,” I tell him.
“I bring to you a portrait of the Munoz family. My family.”
“Now. Drop it now.”
“Senor?”
“The briefcase. Place it on the floor and step back.”
“My friend?” says Eduardo.
“You are not my friend, General.”
He still holds the briefcase. The others still talking. Except Naomi. She is watching me. She knows.

Seconds are burning up, but I don’t panic. I reach, deliberately, and lift the water pitcher from the table. I raise it, and then I pour the contents onto the carpet. It feels like slow motion. I lower the heavy pitcher, squeeze the handle, then jerk it violently backward, over my shoulder, catapulting it into the speaker on the wall. It’s on target, a satisfying crash and shattering, followed by perfect quiet.

People get low—Gwen and her daughter across the room. Rosemary is backing away but freezes when I look at her. Naomi is shaking.

General Powell finally sets the briefcase on the floor and steps aside. He is watching my eyes with curiosity. He has brought this on, and yet he’s waiting for the next move.

I slide around the table, passing behind my wife. I touch her shoulder and feel her trembling.

Placing my hands gently on both sides of the briefcase, I raise it onto the table. Holding it steady with my left hand, I unzip the main compartment from right to left. I separate the two flaps and remove a heavy, framed, 8 x 10 photograph.

I touch the glass face. I stare at the people in the picture. There is the General, seated next to an older woman. There are more, but none of them is familiar.

The others watch me. I turn back to the photograph and examine one face at a time.

“Mick.”

Naomi wants to go. Her eyes are pleading, but she’s not trembling anymore. She is pretty, prettier than the others. Behind her, Rosemary is sobbing.

Eduardo is looking at my hand. I look down and see there is blood on it.

I hold old out my other hand for Naomi. Let’s go, finally. Everyone else is stone still. They are so hard to deal with. A giant frigging headache. All of it. But I am a patient man.

“Thank you for the breakfast, General.”

He nods. He smiles. You have to hand it to him: he is a man of experience.

But as Naomi told him eight times, we are sorry, but we are not buying. Actually, we could buy, no problem, but we choose not to, even if it were half the price. Because this is such bullshit. Bullshit pretend clients. Bullshit pretend buyers. And most of all, this bullshit of grabbing people right off the goddam plane.

He should be ashamed for trying to bully this innocent woman, who would never conceive of doing an unkind thing to him or his people. And he should be ashamed, most of all, for dragging his poor family into all of this dirty bullshit.
We have nothing to be ashamed of.

Naomi walks beside me. She looks tired. But she’s matching me stride for stride out of the hotel.

It’s a relief to push through the doors, but then the heat hits us like a hammer.

I retrieve our bags from the white van and get a cab, instead, which I later regret, since it was something like 500 pesos. Naomi, silent, looks out the cab window, and I suspect she’s angry.

But the crazy thing, I am wrong.

We end up having a terrific time the rest of the weekend. Sunning, snorkeling, plenty of marguerites and Dos Equiis. Sunday afternoon I hire a guide who takes me fishing in his panga boat, while Naomi does all the souvenir shops. I catch a parrot fish that makes a colorful photo, and get to practice more of my Mexican. And Naomi buys several pairs of topaz earrings to give to friends.

And the sex! A three quarter moon lighted our walk along the beach that night, so we duck behind the stone wall of a villa under construction on the waterfront. Each breaker seems louder, and the intervals between them faster, so that I expect us to be inundated any second. But you know what? It doesn’t matter. It could have been last call for the lifeboats on the Titanic, and it wouldn’t have mattered.

And that is why I am dumfounded, probably for the first time in my life, when I joke on the return flight about maybe joining a Christmas club to save for a vacation at Hotel Pacifica Blanca next year, and she turns and says there won’t be a next year. And I’m thinking, wow, okay, the party’s over, and the other shoe is about to fall, when she dumfounds me a second time.

“I’d like to see Aruba.”

“Hey, I’m game. Mind you, though, I don’t speak Aruban.”

“There is one condition,” she says. “We keep going to counseling.”

Immediately, the smell of Austin’s office furniture fills my head. And I’m thinking, okay, if I play ball, maybe I can limit our visits to 5 bills. And then I’m thinking of the softballs that bastard pitches to Naomi, and the low hard ones to me, and have to admit that, realistically, it will more likely be a thousand before we’re through with that goddam lung puller. So one-thou for counseling, another three-thou for Aruba.

Whatever will keep her pretty. Call me Mr. Patience.
The old man coaxed the machine towards its required speed; a sound of contentment purred through the speaker. This control room was several hundred yards from the mound-enclosed building where the actual work was taking place; the little mesh-hidden voice was a reminder of the reality behind the lights and needles covering the panel in front of him.

Mostly, the only noise was that of the motor driving the stirrers around and around inside huge, metal vessel as the elements for destruction were combined. Sometimes, though, the younger of the two men heard a sudden, strange sound as if someone were walking across the steel floor of the building. As if an intruder had deliberately ignored the flashing beacons and barriers guarding the tunnel entrances and was either unaware of the huge risk or did not care. A saboteur or madman, he’d thought at first. Then, knowing that if he was to survive working in this place, he must keep his imagination in check, he’d tried to convince himself it was probably a faulty microphone, while still living in dread of a voice calling out. The old man seemed oblivious to it.

“Uncle Toby” was what the old man liked to be called. The younger man’s name was Barry, he was married with three children and considered the title, like most of his fellow workers’ games and opinions, beneath him. Toby gave the lever a final couple of tweaks and stepped back from the panel; the purr had eased to a whisper and a look of satisfaction smoothed the creases on his leather face.

“See how it’s done, my son?” Toby asked his trainee.

Barry had attempted to operate the machinery on the final run yesterday and had failed badly. Somehow, as he’d tried to bring the motor up to the correct speed, all the chemicals in the mix had been forced above the paddles, which screamed in delight at their freedom. As the temperature dials swung into the red, Toby, who was the chargehand, moved calmly to the rescue. The old man always made it appear too natural to comprehend.

“You have to coax it to the point, lad,” he said, “just like with a woman: sometimes gentle; sometimes firm.”

Barry had stared at his new chargehand again, and though Toby was nearing retirement age, he noticed that his eyes were clear and sparkling and he was tanned and firm-muscled. Toby never took any days off work, kept the neatest building in the factory, and was admired by everyone. Barry had been advised - jokingly, he’d believed - never to let Toby into his house or near his wife as he was a terrible man for the ladies and had been married three times already. He’d laughed at the time but now felt a sensation of jealousy creep into his mind. Everything here was threatening and the fear had started to sneak out through the security fences and hide inside striking matches or car backfires. Now, even the old men in this place seemed capable of shattering his mindset as easily as the explosives could his body. He knew he had to leave here before it transformed or
destroyed him. But how? It was the only job available and no one ever seemed to escape if they’d lasted the first few weeks of horror and shock.

“I’ll adopt that approach next time,” Barry replied, needing to stay in touch and learn the running of this building so he could move onto something less dangerous at least.

Outside, the vast layout of the explosives factory with its grass-covered pyramids, labyrinth of clean-ways for transporting explosives and network of connecting pipes carrying acids and poisons, appeared, as always, to be still and deserted. Groups of rabbits lived out their lives oblivious to the yellow ghosts of nitrous fume drifting overhead, and the drainage ditches running red that M.O.D. scientists could prove were natural. It made him think of all the bullshit everyone accepted with the need to earn a wage. “Keep your gob shut: keep your job,” was the golden rule in this place. He guessed it was probably the same for the soldiers that would get to launch and drop this stuff one day.

The inside of the cabin was hot, stiflingly so, but Toby liked it that way. Barry was supposed to be watching the indicator needle, checking that the speed stayed constant and making any minor adjustments if it fluctuated, especially upwards. Toby had his back to the panel and was filling in the log book on an old, stand-up desk, though he turned slyly every few minutes to make certain everything was safe. The heat and lack of responsibility offered an illusion of calm that Barry has been warned to guard against every day since his arrival. “Familiarity breeds contempt. And in this place, it will get you killed.” Luckily, before he gave a snore to demonstrate that the message had been wasted, the phone rang. “Hello,” he heard Toby yell. The old man shouted into phones as if he did not trust them to carry his voice. Barry watched as Toby began to look puzzled, then concerned. “Hello,” he repeated, slightly softer. “Is there anyone there?” After a couple of seconds he turned to Barry and, still bawling into the phone said, “I think it’s dead.”

Barry took the phone off him and spoke into it a couple of times without getting any response except for a sea-shell whisper of static. “Must be a fault,” he said and dropped the phone back into its metallic cradle. A noise from the speaker echoed it with perfect timing.

The end of the run was reached and Toby eased the stirrers into stillness. The silence felt coiled to Barry, like a spring that dared any movement. As they moved towards to the building, the phone in the cabin started to ring and Barry was sent back to answer it. Once again, no one responded, but he lingered with the handset held to his ear until he saw the red light on the control panel blink off, telling him that the security barrier had been lifted and Toby was entering the explosives building. Nothing was more frightening to Barry than that moment when the door was opened and what waited inside must be faced for the first time. He was well aware of the fact that high explosives would never be completely stable or predictable; but it was the introduction that terrified him the most. “Do you want anything?” he asked again before hanging up and leaving.

Toby was already busy working inside the building. “I think I’ve just had a dirty phone call,” Barry said, and was relieved to see the old man share the joke and not question his late arrival.
They off-loaded the innocuous-looking mix and were putting together the chemicals for the next, when the phone attached to the outside of the building rang. This time Barry hung up the instant there was no response. Toby took a furtive glance at him and did not even bother to ask. It started again as they were leaving through the mound. “They’ll try the cabin if it’s important,” said Toby, closing the first of the barriers. Barry listened to the sound of the phone, its ring distorted and softened by the cold dampness of the tunnel that zigzagged its passage to safety, dissipating the noise as it was supposed to any shock waves. He imagined the building exploding and firing them to oblivion through this rifle barrel of dirty, lichen-lined stone. He wanted to run; but running was against the rules as it might start another chain reaction.

Inside the cabin the slow drone of the motor began its song again. Barry waited for the old man to offer him the controls but his attention had drifted somewhere else. Then there was a louder, revving noise as a large, red forklift pulled up outside. The driver, Ronald, leapt out of its cab and barged in. He was young, immensely fat and came to the factory straight from the deep, primitive countryside that still existed around the top secret establishment. His job was to do the fetching and carrying for every building on the plant. It was considered to be the lowest position available and reserved for individuals too dumb to be trusted with anything more responsible. And yet, though Ronald had only been their driver for a few months, Barry could sense that he was fitting in well and was already better liked than himself.

Toby seemed particularly fond of him and always cheered up when he was around. Something else happened. Something that both fascinated and disgusted Barry. They wrestled. Or, at least they bent towards each other and grabbed hold of the loose folds in the baggy, zipless, button-free, safety clothing everyone was required to wear. Then they began to struggle until they managed to force a hold around each other’s crutch area. Once they achieved this, the action stopped, and they stood for a time like a statue from some classical age before parting and carrying on with their jobs.

“Hello, my son,” said Toby.
“Hello, Uncle Toby,” said Ronald.
“How's Ronald?” asked Toby.
“Alright, my cock,” he replied.
And the wrestling began.

Once, Barry had attempted a bout with Ronald. Ronald had been far too strong for him and had grabbed hold of his balls and crushed them in seconds. Barry had leapt away with tears welling up behind his eyes; a feeling of shame and disappointment that had refused to fade for weeks. Now, as with so many of the recent events in his life, he sat back and observed, pretending to himself that he understood clearly what was going on, and that these people were just base and crude with nothing more complex worth considering.

All the men were invited for a night out the following week to celebrate the forty years some unseen character from the offices had spent dotting and crossing the messages of love
stenciled on each rocket. Barry wondered how Toby and Ronald would act. Toby’s wife was said to be quite posh; Ronald still lived at home with his parents on a farm. He tried to picture the faces of the lady and old farmers as their men performed this ritual. He knew really that no such thing would happen, that their language and posture changed, unrecognizably, outside the locked and guarded perimeter of this world. And that in some way this was almost another dimension, the danger that surrounded everything demanding its own patterns of esoteric behaviour. “Just for a short spell,” he kept telling himself and everyone else. “That’s what I said,” Toby had replied when Barry informed him. “Thirty-eight years ago and I still don’t know where the days have gone.” Barry could not comprehend how anyone could stay in a place like this for so long, their lives ticking away inside a time bomb.

The phone started to ring. Toby released his hold on Ronald and answered it. Ronald moved off reluctantly and slumped in a chair next to Barry. He stared as the old man repeated the number of the building several times and then shouted into the phone for whoever it was to speak. “Someone’s buggering us about,” he stated.

The phone calls were explained to Ronald who made an instant judgement. “It’s Chopper the Whopper: Ol’ Donkey Dick himself.”

“Stan?” Toby queried, knowing exactly who Ronald was talking about.

“He’s been had up for it,” said Ronald, “that and nicking women’s clothes off washing lines. And worse.”

Barry had only met Stan a few times. He arrived earlier than the rest of the crew and was always changed and on his way to the plant before anyone else, then was the last one back. The only time Barry had spent more than a few seconds in his company was when he came into the cabin to hurry Ronald along. And though it usually meant Stan was angry at having been kept waiting and was running behind time, he too ended up wrestling with the driver before they both left.

“Years ago it was,” Toby confirmed. “The police found wardrobes full of underwear and dresses. He even had some belonging to my second wife. He told them that it got blown into his garden and he’d been tidying up after the storm! But that’s not the half of it. According to what his wife told mine before she left him, anyway. But then you are too young to hear such things…”

Ronald was grinning his head off, “Ding dong King Kong,” he burbled.

Barry listened to this latest slice of gossip without believing a word of it. During his short time here he had gone from taking all the stories and rumors as the truth, to believing they were just another symptom of being forced into having to stay mates and relying on each other in the event of things going wrong. Everyone, it seemed, had some terrible secret that was always connected to sex in this men-without-women environment. When Barry had started working here, he’d had to sign the ‘Official Secrets Act’, and swear not even to tell his wife what went on inside the establishment’s perimeter. He put the gossip and innuendoes down to a need to invent something that they could tell.

“Listen,” Barry said, determined to prove, if only to himself, that this was more of their nonsense, “the next time it rings don’t answer it straight away. I’ll run up over the mound and see if Stan is on his phone at the same time.”

Stan’s building was only a short way from the cabin and the phone would be visible from the top of the mound, so the plan sounded good. They sat waiting and poised. The motor turned, its speed too high, but unnoticed.
The phone sounded and Barry took off. He started to climb the steep side of the mound, trying to shut out the fear that began slowing him as he neared the top. Suddenly Ronald passed him, laughing and panting, “Dirty ring a ding,” he panted. At the top they crouched and stared over the edge. Stan's building was considered reasonably safe and could be operated within the mound from behind thick steel doors. They saw him walk past the outside door carrying a pile of boxes. He was a large man with very pale skin and easy to recognize.

Toby was at the control panel when they returned and Barry noticed his forehead was covered in sweat and that the normally-smooth line on the chart was jagged and close to the red zone.

“We'll have to be more careful,” Toby warned.

Ronald drove off: the last phone call had been genuine and was for him to go and collect chemicals for one of the other buildings. The phone rang twice before their break; both times the caller refused to speak. During lunch Ronald kept on about it. He was sitting close to Stan who appeared as puzzled as the rest. Nearly all the men played cards on this rota, and for money, though it was against the rules. Sometimes, a loud, angry voice shouted out at the stupid way a card had been laid and what it had cost. Mostly though, it was silent, and time dragged more than usual. Ken, the foreman, came to see Toby with some instructions about the rest of the day's work. Afterwards, he stood for a time watching the game of cards with an envious look on his face as if he regretted the promotion that had segregated him from the men. Barry waited to see if Toby would mention the phone calls. He did not, and the foreman moved slowly away trying, and failing, to spark conversations as he left.

After the break, Stan walked the long way back to the plant with Toby and Barry. He said he was having a few problems getting some of the tests in his building to come out correct and Toby agreed to go over and take a look. Toby was the most experienced chargehand on the section and some people said the factory would shut down when he retired, or that there would definitely be another major explosion and more deaths. “The seagulls will be busy when Toby leaves,” Barry was told during his first few weeks, and found out later that when one of the buildings had blown up the only way they could locate the remains of the crew was by watching where the gulls fed. He heard the same things said about another old-timer who retired just after he'd started work.

This man had known everything about one section of the factory. He had cried on his last day—which was apparently the normal thing. Tears streaming down his stained face as he had opened the cigarette lighter they had bought him. “All that knowledge,” the men had said as he dragged himself out of the gate for the last time. The next day it was as if he’d never existed, and had been so ever since.

The next mix was underway when Toby set off to see Stan. It was the first time Barry had been left on his own when the building was running, and almost immediately he could sense the change. He stood in front of the panel trying to keep his legs and hands steady. He felt that the connection between him and the building was like a rope holding some untamable beast that sensed
his weakness and was preparing to turn and spring on its captor. Any second, he feared, a growl would roar through the speaker and announce its intention. The sound though, continued as no more than a gentle purr and the needle stayed ruler straight on the chart until Toby arrived back, well in time to take control at the end of the run. “I had another phone call,” Barry lied, needing to add something to the flat-line reality, “just as I was adjusting the speed.”

Toby gave him and the record instrument a quick, doubtful look. “I will have to speak to Ken about it,” he said.

As they worked in the building the phone rang four more times; each occasion they answered it, there was silence. Once, when Barry was certain he could not be overheard, he felt a desperate need to say something that had been playing on his mind.

“I'm not like these people,” he offered. “I would understand. You could trust me. There is no need to hide inside this hellhole, behind razor wire, or in sealed buildings even.” The silence had seemed to move.

The phone went another three times as they sat in the cabin. The speaker seemed full of metallic-sounding footsteps. Even Toby appeared to find it strange and tapped the top of the panel as if something was loose. The phone rang again as they were leaving the cabin. This time they ignored it; then did the same when it disturbed them working in the building. On and on it trilled until the sound was not a sound anymore.

As they were walking back to the cabin, Ken came cycling over at full speed. “What the hell’s going on?” he demanded. “I've been trying to reach you for ages. I thought something must have happened.”

“We've been getting a lot of aggravation,” said Toby.

“You always answer the phone in this place,” Ken stated, “you know that. It might be somebody calling for help. Someone in serious trouble, panicking, only able to remember your number. You should be more aware of that rule than anyone, Toby.”

A look passed between the two and Barry could see the fear. He'd been told that Ken was once badly burnt in an accident and that his legs were bald and he grew whiskers on the palms of his hands and would do anything rather than enter a building. Toby explained to him what had been happening and how many times they'd tried to answer the phone. Barry backed him up, pleased to be able to speak to his foreman at last. Ken assembled everybody in his office at the end of the day and gave them a rule reading. Toby and Barry had to stand next to him to show they were innocent and Ronald kept making faces at Stan. Back in the shift room, then on the way to the gate, the old hands kept voicing their opinion that it was someone from another part of the factory having a joke.

Barry had a different idea. He'd suspected it after the canteen break, now he was certain. It was Ken. Lonely and brooding through the long working hours in his office with the responsibility of so much resting on his shoulders; the scapegoat waiting to be sacrificed the moment the nightmare scenario became fact; living his life covered in his new skin of fear. Barry was just waiting for the right moment to make the rest of them face the fact, when the M.O.D. police grabbed him. It was not unusual, random searches at the gate happened every day, just his bad luck.

By the time they got through, most of the men had left. Toby stood waiting for the work's bus along with another of their crew. Barry joined them and said what he thought. At first, Toby dismissed it as rubbish, then he remembered something.

“Mind you,” he said, “there were those pervy magazines.”
The other man, Clive, agreed.
 “What magazines?” Barry asked, wanting to refute their nonsense.
 “They caught him in a big newsagents,” Toby explained, “with a couple of dirty books stuffed up his jumper. A store detective threw him onto the floor and sat on him while some young assistant searched him. There was a right stink about it that nearly cost Ken his job.”
 Clive warmed to the memory. “Because of what he gets up to with his wife, I suppose.” Barry wanted to make them understand the real reasons. “I think he’s under a lot of pressure with so much responsibility. Especially considering what once happened to him.”
 “They reckon,” Toby said and winked at Barry, “he goes in for that ‘wife swapping’. Maybe, he was ringing up to invite you and that pretty young bride of yours along!”
 “Or maybe it was you, Toby!” Clive added. The two men were laughing uncontrollably as the bus arrived.

That night Barry told his wife, Pauline, about the phone calls. She responded by telling him that she’d once received an obscene call as a young girl doing some babysitting. Pauline carried on, enumerating in detail, everything the man had said to her, then repeating everyone else’s opinion on the incident and what ought to happen to all the perverts in the world.
 Barry tried to tell her that this was different and had a lot to do with repression and men being forced together in such circumstances.
 Pauline got it totally wrong and recalled reading about some men who were working with chemicals growing breasts. Finally, she started to panic that the foreman of a high explosives factory had gone mad and wanted to know exactly how far a blast could travel and if it was true that you must blow out your breath to stop your lungs rupturing. “Who can we ring?” she asked. “Who? Why is it so secret?”

The steady drone of the motor seemed to invade his head as he tried to sleep. The sound got louder and louder, racing out of control. The needle on the chart climbed ruler straight and began to paint its line in fire. Then another sound woke him properly. Barry shivered, though his hair was soaked in sweat. “Babe, I can't sleep,” he finally said, feeling afraid and alone. “I think I may have heard something.”
 “It’s so hot,” she said, after he spoke again.
 “Want a drink?” he offered.
 Pauline switched on her light and tried to focus on the clock. He got up and went to the bathroom before she could start moaning about the time. The bedroom light was already off as he came back out. He stood on the landing and peered across the fields to the distant glow of the
factory working its continual process, as dangerous to shut down as start. He heard the small
garden gate click open and looked below. The person moved along the path towards his house. A
huge, grotesque shape in an ill-fitting wig and a pale voluminous dress. Barry watched, terrified, as
the figure tottered on high-heels. He could see clearly as the man's large, pale hands opened and
closed as if searching for someone to grab and hold. Barry sensed the longing and hopelessness in
each empty grasp.

“Please,” Barry prayed, “don't look up.” Knowing he had led this out and wishing the steps
were back dancing on the steel floor with the speaker’s static drowning out the voice, now clearly
calling to him, before the explosion could silence it forever.
The phone rang four times before Terri picked it up. I looked at the alarm clock: 1:30 a.m. “Hello…Hello...” Her voice was all rasp and annoyance.

I lay there, listening, with my eyes closed. Little Hannah, lying between us, roused by the disturbance, rolled over and kicked me softly in the ribs.

From inside the telephone receiver came a loud, high-pitched multi-tonal static sound, like a chorus of electric screams, but like other things too. She listened for a moment and then she hung up.

“Who—what was that?” I whispered to my wife, already rolled up again in her third of the covers.

“Aliens,” she rasped back.

“That’s strange,” I said. “They usually don’t call this late.” I rolled over and tried to go back to sleep, but I couldn’t.

I lay there for what seemed like a long while, but I’m not sure, because it’s hard to understand time after being woken up in the middle of the night like that.

As a child I’d always been really scared of aliens. They had seemed to me so real, so possible, and the more real something seemed to me, the scarier it was. Monsters and shit like that didn’t scare me. I was scared of kidnappers, killers, rogue devil worshipers who kidnapped babies and sacrificed them on an alter of blood, real people doing weird things, things you saw on the news. But mostly I was scared of aliens, because they seemed so possible to me, and they looked just human enough to be entirely terrifying. The people who talked about them on TV, the people who had supposedly seen them, were really intriguing to me too. They themselves seemed like aliens, not quite human, but still very real. Their descriptions of aliens were horrifying. As I lay there, I remembered this show that used to come on right before my bedtime, when I was about eight. It was called *How Bizarre*. It was a half hour show, and after every segment all the people in the audience and the panel of guests would say, “How bi-zarre!” A chorus of crazies. They had all kinds of freaks on that show: they had guys with bee beards, woman with six foot long writhing Medusa finger nails, escape artists who could do Harry Houdini-type shit, female contortionists and fire eaters, all sorts of majorly out-there people. One episode had a whole panel of these jittery mental patients who had seen, or had been abducted by, aliens. After all their stories and theories on what they thought these aliens were looking for and why the aliens had picked them, someone from backstage wheeled out this sculpture, this bust of an alien. An artist had sculpted it according to the descriptions of these wick-wicks who had supposedly seen the aliens. It was a composite. It had that classic alien look: huge v-shaped head, skinny neck, big, slanting black eyes, but the guy who had sculpted it was a real Michelangelo because this thing looked so real, it looked alive, and it scared the living shit out of me. I didn’t sleep right for weeks. Now, thinking about
that alien face, after that weird phone call, I was feeling a little creeped out, so I tried to think of something else.

For some reason I started thinking about my wife’s ass. It doesn’t now seem to me like a logical sequence of thoughts: aliens—wife’s ass. But I guess it wasn’t that simple. It was probably more like this: creepy phone call, aliens, alien abductees, the dreaded alien abductees’ anal probe, wife’s ass.

She had a good ass, and it wasn’t a scary thing to think about, not compared to aliens. I got an idea. Maybe I could touch it and she wouldn’t even know I was touching it. Hannah moved a little and made a pretty baby sound. I turned over and slid my right hand under the covers and past Hannah’s tiny body and I felt my wife’s bare side, the valley north of the base of her hip. She felt so nice and soft and warm—her body was always so warm—and I could feel an erection coming on, and I hiked my hand up the slope of her hip, to the roundness of her miraculous cheek, slid it over the side strip of her soft cotton panties, then further south, back onto bare flesh, and stopped when I could cup my hand over the smooth, cotton-covered peak of round cheek. What a great ass. What a serious ass. I’d always characterized my wife’s ass as possessing something special, a real prima donna of an ass, an ass of renown. I rubbed the palm of my hand back and forth over her cheek, and I closed my eyes, and pictured it, the perfect little thing that was right there under the sheets, under my hand, and I got harder. With my index finger, I followed the raised edge of her panties, tracing the firm, warm cheek around to the underneath part of her ass, the part that dead ends into the back of the top of the thigh, my all-time favorite part of a woman’s ass, of this woman’s ass, and I cupped it; the soft geometry of that last anguished portion of posterior molded into the palm of my hand. I was in ass heaven. I closed my eyes and absorbed the moment.

“Honey, what are you doing?”
I jumped. My wife’s ass sent a shock to my hand, and then my whole body.
“Sshhh...” she said. “I can’t sleep after that call.”
“It’s just a phone call. Phone calls can’t hurt you.” My erection was completely nonexistent, into negative numbers now. Not that it really mattered. I wasn’t going to do anything with it, at least not to her, anyway.

We were both quiet for a few minutes.

“Why aren’t you asleep? Not scared, too, are you?” She turned around and squinted toward my face.

“No. I’m just having trouble getting tired again. Plus, she keeps kicking me and rolling on me.” We both looked at Hannah, spread out between us, her small body somehow taking up a good third of the bed.

“Hey, lying here, I was thinking of something.”
“Yeah.” I reached over and uncurled one of Hannah’s baby curls. By now, my eyes were so adjusted to the dark that I could see almost everything.

“Hey.”
“What?”
“I was talking to you.”
“I was listening.”

“No you weren’t. I’ve got work tomorrow. I need to sleep. G’night.” She rolled over and curled up a little.
“Wait. Tell me what you were gonna tell me.” I cupped her cheek and rubbed it.
“Quit touching my ass. You’re such a pervert. If I hadn’t been awake earlier, you probably would have worked your way up to my tits.” She squeezed her breasts. I could feel an erection brewing again.
I didn’t say or do anything.
“We’ll talk tomorrow,” she said.
“Great. I’ll never get back to sleep,” but I did around 2:45am.

I wake to a finger in the nose. I look at the alarm clock: 8:13 a.m. “How ‘bout nine, Hannah?” She laughs and puts her finger, the one that had been in my nose, in her mouth. “Gross, Hannah.”

At nine the phone rings.
It’s a telemarketer: “Can I talk to the head of the household, please?” Click.
I derive a lot of pleasure from hanging up on them. Terri is different, very official and professional about it. She asks for their names and she tells them to take us off their calling lists and, please, she says, never call here again, thank you. She says it in this really intimidating voice. She can be scary when she wants to be. Sitting on the bed, dressing Hannah, I start thinking about my wife’s badass little ass again. It shocked me, like an electric eel.

It’s around ten and we’re in the living room and Hannah is watching Sesame Street. There is this Spanish-Latin-Salsa-type music coming from somewhere on Sesame Street and Hannah is dancing to it and she looks so perfect whirling her little torso around with the furry monsters and laughing a little.

I go over to the dining room table to work on some bills and, of course, Hannah comes over and puts her arms out, telling me not to work on them. I pick her up—I know I’m spoiling her—and we sit there making sounds at each other.

At 10:30 the phone rings again. Telemarketer. Click. Hannah, who is now under the table with her left arm through one of the straps of my flip-flops like it’s a purse, laughs. I look at the pile of bills on the table. “They can wait.” Sometimes I wish I were still working so I wouldn’t be the sole person dealing with this kind of shit—bills, telemarketers. Plus, I’m probably spending too much time with our daughter. Sometimes I’m scared I’m going to fuck her up, mold her into a sullen teenager, a repressed and/or suicidal twenty-something, or just a weirdo elementary-school kid who gets picked on and in trouble all the time for doing oddly inappropriate things, like bringing liquor to school from her pop’s liquor cabinet, or wearing horrifyingly mismatched clothes to school, and having tangled hair, and permanently untied shoes, and chasing and trying to kiss all the boys on the playground.
(There was a girl like that at my elementary school. All the girls made fun of her and all the boys were terrified of her kiss. I, of course, had a crush on her, but she never tried to kiss me.)

I am always putting her in mismatched clothes, too. That’s not really my fault, though, because I’m colorblind. I get my reds and greens mixed up. But one time I had Hannah in a plaid top and polka-dotted purple-or-something stretch baby pants, and she was just at home playing so, to me, it didn’t matter, but my wife came home and she wasn’t thoroughly happy about it. “Hun,” she said. “She hasn’t been in these clothes all day, has she?” I said yeah, she had, and she told me that my mismatching patterns like that didn’t have shit to do with being colorblind and that I should have known better. She was right.

I’m fucking up our daughter, piecemeal. My bad fashion sense is just the tip of the fucked-up iceberg. She needs to be around more kids, other adults besides me, more people in general. I’m definitely probably fucking her up. But I hated teaching and I had to quit. I had 120 kids and I was fucking up all of them. I’m sure of it. I could see it. Every day they looked and acted more and more fucked up. It’s different when its just one kid, and it’s yours, but you can’t go around fucking up other people’s kids, too.

Hopefully I’ll find something soon, a job-job, like one of those sitcom jobs where everyone hangs around the break room making fun of each other all day and then they all go out for drinks after work. I’d like something like that, behind a desk, in my own office, or even a cubicle, limited contact with others (except for the time when we get to stand around by the water cooler and joke), shuffling papers or pushing around a mouse, something like that. I don’t know. I don’t really want to do anything, not really.

At 11:15 Hannah and I are watching a cartoon about a super tiny kid who can fly when the phone rings again. This time it isn’t a telemarketer.

It’s the aliens again.

I listen. I don’t hang up. I let it scream until it stops and then I wait for something else, and there is something else:

Whispering. I hear a giggle and I hear a whisper that clearly says hang up, hang up. The phone clicks and there is total silence in the phone. I hang up and pick up again and dial * 69 and a voice that sounds like a relative of the static-scream sound of the aliens says something about not being able to tell me the number of the aliens.

1:00 p.m. Hannah is napping. I call my wife at work. “The aliens called again.”

“Oh.” She sounds distracted.

“I think it’s a prank call because I heard some whispering at the end. Sounded like kids. I did a star 69 but it didn’t work.”

Oh, again.

“Do you need me to go? I can go.”

“No, no it’s okay.”

“Listen, I don’t want to make dinner, so let’s go somewhere tonight.”

“Okay. Cheap, though.”

“Okay. Hannah’s out of it so I’m going to go so I can get some things done while she is.”

“Okay. If the aliens call again, try communicating with them.”

“Right,” I say. We say bye, and I say I love you, and we hang up.
When I check on Hannah, she looks perfectly asleep. Her arms are hugging a pillow. I think about how much I love her and how I never really knew about love until she was born. When I saw her for the first time, I realized that I hadn’t ever really loved anyone before. Before she was born, when I thought about love, when I tried to think about what the word meant, all I could do was picture the word love. I just pictured the word love in all capitals, real tall, standing against a solid background, like on Sesame Street or something. To me, the word love meant the word love. That’s it. Nothing was attached to it. Now, I know how sad and empty that is, because now when I think of love, of what it means, I picture Hannah sleeping like this. No words.

It’s two. I’m lying on the couch, rereading parts of *Fires* for the billionth time, and when the phone rings I jump up and run into the kitchen to pick it up before it rings a second time and wakes up Hannah. It’s the aliens. I listen to the scream and when it’s over I picture Hannah sleeping like this. No words.

Say something. Say something to them. Quickly, quickly.

“You don’t know what love is,” I say. I’m not sure why I say it but I do and after I hear the words, it feels like the right thing to have said.

Several seconds go by and I don’t hear the click. The aliens aren’t hanging up. Several more seconds pass. Then breathing, I hear someone breathing. Then someone, a human, says, “Fuck you, man.” Then click.

2:15 and the phone rings, but I don’t have to run anywhere because after last time I wised up and kept the phone with me. I put down the book and pick up the phone. “Hello,” I say.

“You don’t fucking know me, man,” the voice says.

This is great, I think. This is my opportunity. I can really do something here. I roll my shoulders a few times, like the way boxers do, and I try cracking my neck by tilting my head side to side, but it doesn’t work. I even stand up and do that boxer dance they do. Finally I say, “Hey, man, what fucking planet are you from that you think you can call people at all hours of the night? I was just wondering your thoughts on that, shit head.”

I start thinking of Hannah, and my wife, my beautiful wife with her phenomenal, out-of-this-world ass, her electric ass, and I start thinking about our home, the sanctity of our home. I start thinking about purpose and meaning and scary alien busts and everything, and I start feeling really fucking aggressive.

The alien reiterates: “Man, you don’t know me. You don’t know anything about me.” The alien sounds like he’s losing it some.

“Listen,” I say, “don’t ever call here again. I’m fed up with this shit.”

“Fuck you, old man,” says the alien.

“Brilliant,” I say, “a fucking academic,” and then I say: “Here’s what you’re going to do, asshole. You’re going to hang up and you’re never going to call here again. You’re never going to call anyone again, not like this, not like a little fucking coward-prick like this.” I yell all this and the alien kid is listening. I can feel that he is listening, and when I’m finished I say, “Now. Hang up.”

I hear a sigh. I hear a snort, and he speaks: “Mr. S? Mr. S, you still there?”

I am still there and I say so.

“I’m sorry. This won’t happen again, Mr. S.”

I know this voice. It occurs to me that this is a familiar voice. “Who is this?” I say.
“It’s Hector, sir. Hector Ruiz. I was in your third period Language Arts class last year. I didn’t mean to upset you so much. At least, I didn’t think all this would happen. You kind of freaked me out, man, yelling and everything, and I guess I kind of freaked you out too.”

“Hector—” I hear Hannah cry for a few seconds and then she stops. “Hector, I don’t have much time. I gotta go, but listen—no more prank calls, okay?”

“Okay. Sure. Sorry again, Mr. S.”

“Don’t worry about it,” I say, but I feel like I’m saying it to myself, and I’m about to hang up when he says:

“Mr. S.”

I pause, but say nothing.

“What you said is not true,” he says. “That one thing you said is not true at all, not about me,” and then click.

Hannah is full crying now, so I go into the room and I get her, pick her up off the bed, and I give her a kiss, and I hope he is right, I hope it’s not true at all.

O

That evening when my wife gets home, I tell her what happened. I tell her about Hector Ruiz, the alien. I tell her about the things we said to each other over the phone, which are really pretty funny now, funny and silly. I tell her about all that, and she tells me about Richard in human resources.

Richard Martin: Dick.

She tells me all about Dick and about how it just happened and she hadn’t meant it to and neither had Dick, of course, and she doesn’t know what to do and she is sorry.

And of course I feel like puking.

And the whole time she’s telling me, she’s holding Hannah in her lap and Hannah is just sitting there and you can tell she’s really listening to all this crap. She’s not even two and she’s really listening, and I’m not even looking at my wife, I’m looking at Hannah, and Hannah and I are listening together.

We hear every word.

But then I start thinking, picturing Richard, Dick, touching my wife’s hot ass, holding it, doing things I’d rather not think about to my wife’s crazy little arrogant ass, an ass that, I realize now, is mostly hype, not such a great ass...

Not much of an ass at all, really.

Hannah looks at me and whimpers and then she looks at my wife, my cheating wife, her mother, and whimpers again, and she looks back at me and she tells me telepathically that she doesn’t want a step dad named Dick, and I tell her telepathically don’t worry, it will never happen, but I start feeling awful.

I feel like I might cry, but I don’t want to because I don’t want them to know how upset I am.

And then, for some reason, I think about Hector Ruiz and I know that even though he’s a prank caller, he’s a pretty good kid, and maybe, I think, I had something to do with that. I was his teacher after all. And Hannah—she is a beautiful person, age one-and-a-half, and I know I had
something to do with that, and I know she’s the reason I don’t see the word love anymore. I take a deep breath.

My wife is crying and she’s still telling us why, and she has some good reasons. All reasons are good to someone.

I’m surprised she hasn’t asked me anything yet. She just keeps talking. It’s been several minutes now. She’s probably surprised I haven’t said anything yet: cut her off, cussed her, something.

Hannah climbs off her mom’s lap and walks over to me and I pick her up and put her on my lap.

She is still talking. I wish she would stop.

Hannah squirms so I put her down.

She runs over to one of her toys on the floor, a pink Barbie phone that rings and has a dial tone and talks, and everything. You can even leave messages. Hannah knows what all the buttons mean. She really knows how to use it.

She finally stops.

“Aren’t you going to say something?” My wife looks at me with her sad wet eyes. She’s pleading to me with them, her sad eyes, begging me to say something. I don’t say anything. I can’t.

The little pink phone rings.

Hannah picks it up and presses the speaker button and there’s a pause, some static, and then a voice, a robotic teenaged boy says, “Hi. This is Ken. Do you want to go to the beach later?”

Hannah laughs, and, I swear, she says yes.
Serial Blondes

From the second-storey, I can see her run till she passes the delicatessen; a shadow the color of a day-old bruise follows her like a blessing.

The desks are set in rows sectioned by bamboo screens. Philodendron grow unattended in clay pots and one of them has flowered an impressive beige penis. She flips balled paper towards the wastepaper basket, complains about another dizzy spell. “Makes phone and incoming fax noise even louder,” she says. Her supervisor tells her to see someone at the 24hr clinic. There is a strange mark on one of her cheeks, like an emblem. I am at the end of my roster so I offer my company.

“My finger tips are clammy when I get an attack,” she tells the stooped man at the medical centre, in the same breath as he suggests a second opinion. I’ve been to this doctor to get certificates to cover my sick days. She promises to watch her diet.

When we set down for a drink after, I ask her to a party downtown but she claims fatigue. A few weeks later, the diagnosis is cancer; radiation treatments are suggested. There’s a tremor in her fingers. Her workmates buy incense sticks for her desk and tell her stories of parents, relatives, childhood friends. My brother is a Chinese doctor. Bro is booked out over the coming year but for me, he will squeeze her in, and if she can hotfoot it to his office, he will see her. This is my gift. She rings for a taxi to take her two blocks, does not say yes or no to my accompanying her.

Bro has a bronze plaque on a door and an expression on his face which suggests temporary absence. On his wall are my watercolors of Kali with her serpents and skulls. He boasts about my ability in this medium, the strength of the color. On his finger, a flashy cobra ring, 24 carat gold. I gave it to him after one of my India trips. He’s a quack, a good one—his treatments have a seventy percent success rate. Pretty good for someone without any training whatsoever.

After taking a pulse, and listening to her for close on two hours, he finds her chest hollow. “Please to understand,” he says in a fretful voice, “empty space is dangerous.” He prescribes running. He thinks it will help.

After she leaves, he says to me, “What do you think you are doing?”

“Even vampires have their needs.”

“Someone’s been there before you.”

“Isn’t that always the way!”

“Spendthrift.”
“Murderer.”

We go back and forth a little and then discuss money or rather my need to borrow a large amount to cover debts. Outside his window, a camel makes its way towards the supermarket. The streets have been closed off for a festival and the gongs and flutes give the staid town a lively Eastern feel.

To cover all her bases, she is taking radiation treatments as well and her head is bandaged with a succession of hats. I drop mandarin peel into her philodendron pot and when she protests about untidiness, point out the nutritional factor. “Waste not want not.” The supervisor pushes me with his walking stick, gives me a lecture on sloth.

One day, Bro sits her down and says that her heart has been hijacked, and other body parts are at stake. She is not to use elevators without someone else being there nor is she to look at the ground. As much as possible, she has to gaze at the sky and drink in the color blue. Bro looks at me in a hard fashion. And I return his stare wondering at what he has achieved from nothing. In another country, he had been jailed for murder. Now he is a good father and a decent healer.

He slides his wedding ring off and on. I tell Bro, in private, that she is my soul mate, that we were married in a past life. He thinks I could ruin his good fortune.

A work colleague lends her romance novels so she can have hope. I sit on the edge of her desk flicking rubber bands, warning her when the supervisor is coming.

“Be careful,” Bro addresses both of us.

But she ignores his advice and continues to read. I ask if she likes being a passive object of sex? That brings the Romance Readers Guild down on my head. I invite her to a party that I plan to gatecrash, a woman I used to know, a philosopher, Mavis. They get on rather well, the two bottled blondes perched on the arms of violet-patterned sofas, smoking cinnamon quills.

Her mother, she says, used phrases like he knew me about her father and he went into her about the dangers of being a woman; advised her against the reading of fiction and gave her the Bible where, in the Song of Songs, the woman wakes her lover in the night.

When she was sixteen, her parents joined a Christian sect. A fleur de lis was tattooed on her left cheek because it signified light. She read that Clovis, a Frankish king, adopted the symbol when water lilies showed him how to safely cross a river and succeed in battle. She was popular with boys because she did what it took in the pews after dark.

The women laugh at as if exchanging jokes. “Our generation turned up at the hotels en masse,” Mavis says, “crashed their cars on the same roads, got expelled from schools—then everyone grew up and had kids.” She hands over the conversation.

“Suddenly, there’s the war. I married the brother of a man I loved. The man came back for me, and when he heard the wedding bells, laughed. He accused me of giving in to suburbia.”

The women consider me invisible. Mavis says, “Tell me more.”

When her husband died of a heart attack in front of the shop’s till, she was alone again. After the funeral, she went to the pub, a familiar home. She had always been struck by the similarity between pubs and churches.

I touch the top of her beret. “That’s a lot of information.” The women look at me as if they have to jog their memory. They get up and dance.

She picks on a man, an ex-Vietnam type and follows him. She touches the chevron on his sleeve and asks if he would like to hear her moan. She says she has got the perfect moan. These are
things I know only because I am sensitive after midnight but also because I question the look on her face.

She asks for a cigarette and leans unsteadily for a light. “He said he did not sleep with women he knew.”

“You know a lot of army types?”

“From memory, he used to go out with some skinny Indian who was a user. He had children with three different women, all girls, all moved to the city.

I tell her that I am student of co-incidence, and if she is desperate I am available.

“He asked me about you—whether you were in an advertisement for a vampire movie.”

I laugh. I ask for a mercy fuck. I offer to flip a coin. She loses. She has another drink and follows me. The door opens to shocking sunlight. The world has turned around the moon yet again. I reach for shades.

There are earthmovers in the petrol station on the corner, clearing the ground for residential rezoning. There are postage stamp lawns and picket fences and toddlers who could come out of any of those houses with their warmed milk bottles in hand. I flip the corner of my moustache to clear it of whisky, saying, “Are you ready?”

“I dreamt about you while you were gone,” she tells me.

“Hey, I am not the other guy.”

“Yes.”

I say that it has been a long period of abstinence and now the drought is breaking. The perfect moan—I haven’t heard that one before.

O

Later Bro asks what happened to make her so sick. She asks if he is a therapist and he tells her that life is therapy. He puts her on the couch.

She sees herself entering my second-story flat, the dead laundry scattered over the carpet, syringes, a music poster of a beheaded goat for a long-gone event.

He tells her that some part of her psyche already knows itself as diseased. Bro asks me if I would like to wait outside and I decline the invitation. She has paused a moment for us and then goes on with her story, where I undress and fashion her on the bed in an appealing pose.

She does not recall the exact journey except that the terrain is familiar; a high bridge, porcelain lakes, and reflections of a tie-dye blue-green sky.

The moment she jumps, I found that she told the truth, her moan was perfect.

In the morning, we wrapped frayed towels around ourselves to get the mail or to answer the door. We filled in crossword puzzles in the local paper. We ate bacon and eggs on cheap white plates.

At the end of a fortnight, however much we tried, it was not quite the same, the experience was imperfect. I brought a knife to slice a few rounds from her heart, wrapped the rest and placed it in deep freeze; tilted the cast iron frypan to evenly coat with olive oil; placed the slices side by side in the pan and turned the element up to medium heat, before I went away whistling.

When she was made right, and I was good and ready, I set her free to float away.
Bro is looking at her with a translucent gaze. “Your heart cannot be given or stolen.” And she asks how this applies to her particular case. he tells her to look up at the sky often and struggle against the dark force of herself. After she is gone, he calls me a psychopath.

The streets are flanked by Housing Commission homes and as she runs, she can see the track as it leads through deserted building and lonely corner. Her sneakers leave suckered echoes in the pavement.

The shadow corners her on the ground floor of her childhood home. The wall is behind, cold and straight. Her strength oozes through her feet. She turns, her palms against the wall. The shadow reaches a polyp hand.

She runs straight up the wall. This is a dream, she thinks in relief, in real life, one does not run up walls. She turns around, her limbs plastered to the surface behind and finds herself looking into: the blue of my pupil, the cold eye of her father, the summer of first love, the winter of unreturned phone calls. The sky beneath is a membrane that passes her through a spiral of stars into a relentless void. In the emptiness, she sees her heart pulsing. She is the shadow upon it. I am there like a mirror.
Claim Jumpers

My nine-year-old son Will and I, emerging from our one-story motel into the heat, scuttle from shadow to shadow like sand crabs moving lightly across the surface to their dark, sheltering holes. Idaho City, such as it is near 5:00 PM on a summer weekday in 1998, is otherwise quiet, though in my mind it’s crowded with ghosts: I’ve read about how its boardwalks were once full of miners, its streets with horses and mules, dogs dodging pedestrians or waiting for their masters outside the shops. Hoping to interest Will in its history and entertain us both, I’ve driven him the 30 miles from Boise, where he was spending time with his father, but there is another agenda, too: I want him to have some serious fun.

In 1998, the town is a four-block square, including two motels, a couple of gift shops, an ice cream store, and several historic sites like the museum and the old jail. The population is 350. Most of the shops are closed. The museum is closed. The visitors’ center is closed. We settle for flavored ice from one of the few vendors, cooling our mouths from under a tree on a sidewalk bench, but Will’s at an age where this might not interest him for long.

Indeed there is primarily one thing on his mind: “When are we going to look for gold?” he wants to know.

Will lives with me most of the year, but I’ve negotiated with his father for this overnight during the annual summer weeks when he stays with his father, stepmother and two half-brothers in Boise. Notice my language—stays with rather than lives with. I suspect that every custodial parent is afraid that one day, her child will want to live with the less available parent, thereby making her house the house he visits. If I don’t say to Will he’s living with his father for five weeks, maybe he’ll never say the words I want to live with Dad back to me. If one day Will decides to live with his dad in Idaho, I’ll be the one stuck with 2,500 miles between us. That would be a hard spin out of the familiar orbit I keep, circling around him. I don’t want to be jolted away from him into the deep freeze of space.

But maybe Will doesn’t feel the same. When I went to the house in Boise to pick him up after a three-week separation, he didn’t even get up from “Monster Bash,” the computer game he was playing, to say hello. He didn’t want to quit, because he was having fun. I want him to have fun, but I also want him to miss me. If he has too much fun, I’m afraid he won’t want to come home. Lots of kids wish they could keep having fun wherever they are—amusement park, summer camp, or sleepover—but generally they can’t choose to stay at the place, like children of divorce can choose to stay with the non-custodial parent when they come of age.

So the pressure is on: I have to make sure Will has fun—at least as much fun as he was having with his two half-brothers, his father and stepmother. This will be quite a trick, since I’m his only playmate here. But Idaho City has one thing Will hasn’t yet got, one thing that put it on the
map, one thing for which it’s still remembered. He’s already said it: gold. I don’t want to buy my son’s affections, exactly, but I will use what I can to engage him.

At the only restaurant in town, we sit under a porch roof at an outdoor table, Will munching on piles of French fries with his chicken strips. “Do you think we can still find gold around here?” I ask the waitress. She’s a slim brunette, fine lines etched around her eyes and mouth, her long high-cheekboned face dominated by brown eyes that give the impression of worry.

“As a matter of fact, a little girl found a gold nugget in her yard just up the hill.” She brings us the news clipping: the mother recognized the rock as gold from working in the mines when she herself was a kid, and experts estimated its worth at $300-400.

Beneath his baseball cap, Will’s freckled face is partly shaded, but now he looks up at me and into the sun, squinting, to ask, “Do you think we could find something like that?”

“Well, I don’t know. That would be pretty unusual.”

“Yeah.” He lowers his head, looking into his plate. “But wouldn’t it be great?”

I’m thinking it would sure beat Monster Bash.

Just a block from Trudi’s Kitchen, a little shack displays gold mining equipment. The sign in front offers to take tourists like Will and me out for panning. On the roof of the shack, a dummy has been hanged. A big-lettered sign beneath it reads, CLAIM JUMPERS BEWARE. Harry, a big-bellied red-faced man with gray sideburns that travel down his cheeks in the old-fashioned style of mutton chops, owns all the gold-mining equipment.

“Great sign,” I say when we arrive, smiling and pointing at “CLAIM JUMPERS BEWARE” and the hanging dummy.

Harry doesn’t smile. “Anybody jumps my claim, I’ll greet ‘im with a .44.” Then he pulls out a set of big buck knives, displaying them for wide-eyed Will.

We negotiate a price for gold digging (not much), and he tells me where we’re going (not far). His wife, who sticks her head out of the door of the shack to greet us, says she’s coming along. She’s a quiet-voiced, wide-bodied woman in a floral housedress. In part because of her, I decide that, despite Harry’s buck knives, it will be all right. I drive the rental car slowly over ruts and rocks, following Harry’s truck. Pretty soon we stop along something that looks like a ditch, where he wades into the knee-deep water in his rubber boots, digs some mud from the bank with a small, flattened shovel, puts some in his pan, and shows us how to rinse it with water until the gold, heavier than the other material, speckles the bottom of the pan. Maybe two or three speckles in that first pan, each the size of an eyelash. He sucks the gold into a dropper and releases it into a vial.

Will grins and wants a turn right away, and I’m thinking yes, I’ve done it, he’s happy, he doesn’t miss his dad. Harry hands me a pan, insisting that I dig, too.
And it’s not unpleasant work. The creek cools our feet, mud squishing between our toes. We dig and rinse, carefully picking through the dirt, searching for the telltale shine of gold. Harry says he was a Vietnam regular for three years. When he pulls up his shirt to show us the scar on his belly, I’m sure it’s a war wound until he says, “Nope, I was gutshot. Hit by a disc when I was a welder and pipefitter.”

“I have an affinity with the Germans,” he tells us. “I have a German last name, you know.” I think of the neo-Nazis who unfortunately gave northern Idaho a media presence when they headquartered at the Aryan Nations compound there. He further reinforces the stereotype when he says, “Relatives of mine was Indian killers, and they was good at it.”

“How’d you get into gold mining?” I ask, anxious to change the subject. “When I was twelve years old, I went prospecting in California, and I been doing it ever since. You’ve heard it gets in your blood? It’s a disease.”

His wife, sitting on the bank in a lawn chair, nods emphatically, her most passionate communication yet. Meanwhile, Will, diligently panning, rarely finds specks of gold. We’re getting hungry. He’s complaining that he’s tired. My back begins to hurt from bending over the creek, peering into the pan. Miners, according to one 1860s visitor, were “the dirtiest men I ever saw, living in cabins with dirt floors and seldom washing, and all showing high water marks under their chins and jaws, below which water never touched.” Already I feel similarly silted, so for awhile, I sit on the creek bank, watching Will and Harry work the creek.

Tall pines shade Harry’s wife and me. I crane my neck, considering the branches high above. In this hot, dry weather, if I were a smoker and dropped a burning cigarette, the crackly brush and dried-out wood would catch fire fast. In places like this, surrounded by national forest, unattended campfires and lightning storms can result in big losses. I once thought of buying property in the area but decided against it when I overheard some landowners talking about how many times their cabins had been threatened by fire. It was the same when Idaho City was more populated. Since it was settled, the entire city—whose population once surpassed Portland, Oregon’s—has burned twice.

I think of the townspeople who had to pick through the charred remains of their homes, looking for the only existing pictures of relatives, the tiny gown of an infant now buried in the cemetery up the hill, not to mention books, bedding, furniture, dishes, and all the daily comforts. In contrast, my own disappointments seem insignificant, yet at the moment, I have a little boy standing in a muddy creek with only two specks of gold to show for his 90 or so minutes of struggle. A little boy getting hungry for lunch. A little boy sighing deeply and starting to walk up the creek to see what else might entertain him. A little boy who’s ceased having fun and might be thinking about returning to his father’s.

Meanwhile, Harry’s daughter and son-in-law have arrived. Dressed in shorts and T-shirts, they emerge from their Jeep with their happy retriever looking remarkably normal, picnic basket and ice chest in hand. How come Harry, a racist, has an intact tribe while I, so much more enlightened, have to deal with divorce and shared custody? Smiling through my resentment, I bid Harry goodbye, using his family reunion as an excuse to head back toward town. “How about some ice cream?” I ask Will.

“Yeah.”

Segue
We park by the wooden storefront on the dusty street and order our ice cream in big waffle cones.

“Let’s find a place by the river,” I say, “and cool our feet.”

But when he gets into the car, Will’s cone topples. Ice cream slips into the cracks of the back seat, coats the seat belt webbing. I run back into the store for napkins and water to clean up the mess. I don’t scold Will. I’m an accidents happen kind of parent, but his lips tighten. He averts his eyes, and my internal mantra intensifies: He’s not having fun. He wants to live with his dad.

Mopping the ice cream, I think, somewhat desperately, of swimming. What kid doesn’t like swimming? Maybe that’ll improve his mood. So I drive to the hot springs pool south of town, where through the fence, we watch kids splash to the staticky sound of a radio playing country-western music, but Will, still moping, shakes his head. Not interested.

I drive on, guilty and desperate. His bad mood somehow translates into the certainty that someday, because of the divorce, he’ll hate me. In my mind, as I drive, I’m defending myself against his future attacks: how could I take him 2,500 miles away from his father? Why wasn’t I able to make a life with him closer to his dad, or better yet, work out my differences with his dad when he was a baby? I imagine myself cowering before my future son, a grown man with a receding hairline pointing his finger angrily.

“I did the best I could,” I’d say. I never meant to hurt you! I tried—really I tried.”

Meanwhile, the innocent nine-year-old looks out the window, tired and bored. We follow More’s Creek south, looking for a place to pull over. Eventually, Will—unwitting and unconscious nine-year-old CEO of his mother’s emotions—approves a location near a swimming hole, where we take turns changing in the bushes, then shriek as we try to lower our bellies into the icy current. We walk along the bottom of the creek gingerly, the sharp rocks hurting our feet. I bend to gather a handful of pebbles into my palm, still searching for gold. Then, exhausted by my self-inflicted emotional ping-pong, I sit on a rock to bask in the sun, but Will says, “Watch this, Mom.”

He picks up a flat rock and skips it across the surface of the water.

“Nice going!”

Light seeps between big cumulus clouds, making the surface of the water glitter. My round-cheeked, freckle-faced son, wearing his baggy black swim trunks, picks up a stick and asks me to throw him a rock so he can bat it like a baseball. I oblige, ducking as the rock zings back. He’s delighted. “Throw me another one!” The game goes on. All at once I realize we’re back in the groove, we’re having fun, just the two of us, and it doesn’t even require gold nuggets. When the rock games have subsided and the two of us are sitting by the creek, listening to the slosh and chrrr of its flow over the rocks, our wet skin drying in the afternoon sun, I say, “You know I didn’t grow up like you are, with two families, so you might need to tell me how that feels if you think I don’t understand. Your stepsister has two families, so she might understand. Your friend Jesse has two families, so he might understand. But sometimes, I might not.”

“Yeah,” says Will. “But Jesse’s lucky because his dad lives closer.”

“True,” I admit. “although he has to go back and forth between houses more, and that can be kind of confusing.”

“Yeah, and he doesn’t get to go to Idaho.”

“I wonder if sometimes Jesse’s parents get jealous of each other. You know, like Jesse’s mom might get jealous of his dad when Jesse gets to spend time over there.”
“Do you get jealous of my dad?” Will asks, his voice incredulous.

I think of Harry’s sign: CLAIM JUMPERS BEWARE. The only thing I’d protect with a .44 is a person, the boy sitting next to me by this creek. Like the most passionate prospector, I’m possessive of my treasure, but I also recognize that he’s animate; he has feelings. If we fight over him, if we try to buy his affections—whether with “Monster Bash” or a little panning for gold—he might begin to feel more like a possession than like a real live person whom we love.

We watch more water go by. Clouds trap the sun. With my feet in the water, I get chilly. Will and I admire each other’s goose bumps. Then the clouds release the sun, and we enjoy the feel of it, sharing its warmth.

“I’m not really jealous of your dad,” I say. “I’m glad you two get to have time together.”

Rituals give me the feeling of control when I know I’m about to lose it, as I do when I hand over my son. Before I return Will to his other family, one of the rituals I’ve devised is to watch him eat. If he’s well fed, at least for that day, I’m reassured he’ll be OK even if they offer only Cheerios and hot dogs. This morning it’s eggs and bacon and hash browns—his favorite breakfast—at a motel restaurant in Boise, where we listen to canned music and enjoy the air conditioning after vegging out on Disney movies in the room.

We both clean our plates—no appetite problems here—and venture out in the 100 degree furnace. In the car, I immediately turn the air conditioning on “high.”

“Maybe Dad will take you swimming today.”

“Yeah.”

“It’s gonna be another hot one.”

With five minutes to his dad’s house and the heavy talk—such as it was—accomplished, there’s not too much else to say.

I turn onto the street where Will’s other family lives. It’s much like the street where he lives with my second husband and stepdaughter and me—a neighborhood of single family dwellings on a dead end road. Like ours, theirs is the last house on the right. Like ours, theirs has a basketball hoop set up so kids can play in the street. Only here, unlike in Virginia, there are fewer trees, fewer one-story homes, more ranchers. I park in front of the house with the tent-trailer in its driveway.

As Will opens his car door, I say, “Don’t forget the pact.” In our motel room, we’d promised we’d both have fun for two weeks and two days, then slapped hands in a hard high-five.

Will gives me a hug, then runs to the house, heading back—no doubt—to join his half-brothers in their quest to reach the highest level of “Monster Bash,” their own prospecting adventure. I back out of the driveway, turn the car around, and press the accelerator to exit the neighborhood, my throat tight. All around me the City of Boise expands. Its wooden buildings appear hastily erected. Each is inhabited, nevertheless, with its own history—tales of fortunes made and lost: families dwelling together and then, whether by choice or by circumstance, dispersed. I tell myself my stake in the claim at Will’s father’s house can’t be taken. I tell myself to think of the
time when Will and I will be together again. I drive the rental car through these moments I’m wishing were already over, knowing—like those in Idaho City—they’ll be gone soon enough.
ALLAN PETERSON

Think Of It This Way

The scar that lacks sweat finds its philosophers,
    our faces that wad in crying and in time.
Ribbons that remember us: thymine adenine
cytosine guanine
whose celebratory novels are sometimes misspelled
though all that is water
and a few poor adjectives poorly understood.

Or I should remind you, I could enumerate my scars:
    twenty five from the sun and one
on my chin from a bicycle, one on my nose
from a thrown rock. The incidents speak out
sweating without remembrance
with three times the snowfall of Buffalo.

Think of it this way. The weather has twisted west,
the man is teaching the boy
to fish with a spinning reel while the astronauts
stick wrenches to the deck
with Silly Putty while circling the earth.

The physics of written has gravity,
    the cohesive weight of lines
that leave marks on memory.
It is like after a paint job, drying to a sheen,
how the windows glisten but stick shut.
Their Known Haunts

Afraid of forgetting because we do
as soon as they happen they fray
the facts
the unsupportable suppositions we thrive on
the ones we believe to be the world
wholesale
such as how the dead cannot be kept deep enough
they escape to fly about the house
drifting up and out of sight
like an attic of scarves

We will worsen unless we remember
all the small tools of spring that make it move
moths adjusting slightly the lights
extra weight in the oaks from starlings
infinite water wrenches
allowing sparkles to change hands
near the far shore hornets
draining soft apples of their broth

Afraid of the unforgettable
since their known haunts
work against them the useful instances
the book the room
in which the contents recur at night
in particular order
armed by alarmed by longing
unrepressed somewhere
between the heat of the covers
and convergent disappointments
the silhouette’s answer to shadow
recalling the solid illustrations of the body
Whistling at Sea

Whistling at sea is the algebra of grief.
Its proof is a storm wind coming when called,
and then disaster.
Drawing blood requires a red crayon and a boat
coming open at the seams,
brass nails, fox eyes, bodies blown away.
Parenthesis is a tempest
confined between its doors,
period the rock against them, opposing ruin,
coming from nowhere with its small chapped face.

Had he just been singing
nothing vaporous would have overrun the empire.
Breath just didn’t understand the words about regret,
the one that defines sheen on the waxed Pontiac,
only the curse for selling water whose punishment
is drought and dry tears.

Talking back to improbable atmospheres
is like asking Australia to count rabbits, then their fleas,
as if that figure was predictive.
Everyone was nervous. The age of the earth had just doubled
on finding that skull with the impression of pursed lips
and a copy of the Olduvai Times.
Moreover, an orchid had been shown
to be comprised of twilight and wishful thinking,
the green satin stem like a ribbon in a Bible to save its place.
My husband's friend, the one whose house we stay in on the island, says that the old neighbor woman next door is the only woman who takes care of him, who isn't looking for his wallet. No sooner are we through her balcony door than she is offering a small coffee and a homemade sweet on a spoon, a bitter one like an exotic jam. Her cookies are especially healthy. They are made with olive oil only, no butter or eggs although she keeps chickens in the yard that lay plenty of eggs. For our friend she'll bring out a blood pressure cuff to take a reading. He expects to be healthy on the island. He gets disappointed when he walks the mile and a half from the harbor to his house and his blood pressure rises. My husband tries to tell him that he should take his blood pressure when he has been at rest and not after a brisk walk. At night after a meal of local fish and tomato salad our friend reads Cavafy in Greek to us on the balcony of his island house. It sounds like good poetry and although I don’t know what he is saying, it seems like a very good reading.
Pieces

On the island the neighbor woman and her husband are broad bodied with enormous worker hands. They have a pureness, not a clean kind of pure, but one that comes from being clear like glass is clear. The husband's face and especially his long large nose are a ruddy red. He fishes for squid and octopus and other local fish many times a week and never protects himself from the sun. He also has goats that he allows to run free day or night. They come back to him when they are ready to be milked. He makes goat cheese that he gives to the neighbors. One evening he brought over a few birds, something quail-like that his wife had prepared for our friend's dinner table. We had to be careful not to bite down on the shot pieces that were embedded in their bodies. They were tasty and we left the shot pieces and tiny bones on our plates. On the island we always talk about fishing and where to find fish. We feel we are living real life and always sleep restfully in our friend's island house. In the morning we step on the stone floor and walk to the window to open the blue shutters, never knowing what to expect from the weather. If the eucalyptus trees are not blowing and the sea looks calm it does not mean that the hydrofoils to the mainland are operating. The sea could be dangerous out in the open and we wouldn't know it. The last time we were leaving the island, there was an earthquake that was only felt with any force right above where the plates had shifted because its center was thirty to forty miles below the sea.
Orthodoxy

The neighbor's wife suggests we visit a nuns' monastery on the other side of the island. She is a believer in orthodoxy as is our friend who is becoming more and more spiritual as he grows older. We decide to visit the monastery and so take a boat to the other side. There are more than three hundred stairs to the top. At the top before entering the church the women in our party take sack skirts off hooks near the bells to wear over their shorts out of respect. The nuns ask the women if they are orthodox. They lie and say yes. The men had warned the women that the nuns would not accept anyone who was not orthodox. Then they offer lunch for a small donation in a dining room that is reserved for special visitors to the monastery complex. The dining room is full of embroidered cloths, samplers and pillows with crosses and unknown texts. Photographs of severe spiritual directors decorate the walls. We eat a simple meal and do not say too much in order not to give away the lie. The men and the nuns share one language and the women and the nuns share another. The nuns are capable in both languages, but no one knows if they think the women share a language with the men. On the way down we pick greens for salad and rest in the shade of overhanging rocks. Before we leave the two nuns agree to let us take a photograph of them. They are laughing in the photograph and the lilies from their garden with their trumpeting faces toward the sun are in the background.
Bratsera

They converted a sponge factory to a romantic island hotel. The woman who owns it inherited it from her family. Each room has a balcony, some overlook a courtyard and some a winding stone road in the center of the island’s only town. All the rooms are painted with a warm burnt umber watercolor wash. Someone applied it with a sponge and brush and left lots of streaks and texture. Their hand and rhythms are everywhere. The rooms have double beds with mosquito nets draped from the ceiling. Guests leave the balcony doors open without fear of bites. Some think that the owner made some mistakes—she devotes too much space to the bathrooms. They are almost as large as the bedrooms. And then she hires young people, who look like models to staff the front desk. They know nothing about service or find service below them. They do each speak three or four languages and use them in discourses with the tourists. A pool surrounded by an arcade of thin white columns is long and narrow and dramatically lit within the hotel’s outer walls. The hotel is called Bratsera, the name of a vessel where the sponge workers rest after their harvest on the sea floor. A dry well with a wooden bucket stands near the entrance. The water from that well was once used to clean the living matter from sponges. Sponge diving used to be the island’s main occupation. It no longer is. Still sponges are sold everywhere and few know they are using what is a skeleton to absorb fluids or rub off dry skin.
Oracle

A group of tourists visited a sacred place where once there was an oracle. Not having had any experience with oracles, they enjoyed it as much as they could. The night before they were to leave the hotel and the area, they went down to a seaside restaurant for dinner. There they met a very old man who was a fisherman by day. His clothes were a grey green including his hat and jacket. His clothes were old like he was. When the dance for old men started, he danced with his coat over one shoulder, swinging his free arm and snapping his fingers like he was young and sharply dressed. The next day the manager of the hotel chased after the tourist bus on his motorbike as they drove away from the site of the ancient oracle. He would not allow the bus to continue until each person who had left with a white terrycloth robe from their room, opened their suitcase and returned it. After they turned over the robes, they left in shame and no one said a word. What were they thinking?
George Kalamaras

Angora

That seemed deceptively simple.
The lines were fixed as six or more ways of mouth.

My teacher said that conditions are always neutral.
There is a line of mind on which we swell.

I have heard of Bihar village folk granting naked Jain monks a bath of hands.
I have heard the refrigerator recharge its cold belch in the night.

I wish I could describe what it was like to live in China’s mountains those years as a panda.
No one would ever believe a paper clip could arm wrestle a staple gun.

We inherit our wandering black and white selves like we inherit these bodies, one action at a time, each inscribed in the astral spine.
How else could I have ever thought up on my own all these years of hair?

That’s one reason I salivate whenever I touch angora.
I keep recalling what it felt like to be lost.
How Abundant, How Awful

Why didn’t the hummingbird give us one more month of summer?
How could the camellia not have translated the droppings of rare black birds?

When I look out upon the snow, it is a badly-bruised bread.
Pockmarks of salt and yeast somehow indent my childhood name.

Still, I am among you, digesting a gorilla I hadn’t even known I’d seen, from a mosquito infestation my malaria could not inscribe.
That’s the way it is with karma. We come into this life desiring many stings.

How clearly the four a.m. locomotive praises my most hidden scratch.
How abundant, how awful, my ask-for-forgiveness might cattle-car sound.

There are many secret nights, private thighs, intense desire to suck a word from this feminine trembling, from that.
That’s how I grew up. Always afraid, always desiring an urgent, abundant clutch.

Come with me to that tree fort in Indiana and cold November wind-rippings at my vest.
I tried to climb above the anger and hurt of two adults who no longer felt loved, even by themselves.
American Warbler

There are 109 species of American warblers.Introduced into New York in 1890, starlings have been spreading ever since.

The alleged length of a hoaxer’s preface included Leonora Carrington’s middle initial.
In fact, anyone urgently alive was kind of dead.

In any case, a rather peculiar rumor had gone too far.
It went something like this: don’t believe a word—he’s only lived once—there are no multiple incarnations.

I considered a written grudge written by him for him.
It said, he keeps a great horned owl in his refrigerator.

Among human beings, the best possible expression at least sacrificed a seductive anguish.
I devoted myself to Gregorian chanting, to gathering dissonant discussions for the Ubu plays produced in Cochin, China, where I may or may not have once lived.
JENNA CARDINALE

Break-in

Light is a building
material in itself—

Encouraged to decline
the prize—

He took what he could
sell— He left the poems—

Footprint beside the fire
escape— The books

know his scent, his hairs—
All his wants—

I used to write them—

The morning light lends itself
to a drab archeology—

She holds the brush like a dodo
egg— Explores for oil,

the common trilobite—
Digs through glass—
For Distortion’s Sake

Here is my front
matter. The spine cannot be
cracked.

But we are a bit bigger
than books.

The word memoir is important.
It is music.
It is an animal.
Selfish & funny.

The cymbals
and singing.
The grains of rice
against a dried skin.

And here a trail
of teeth.
Language

A discarded art
object— A real
plane—

Outside sound— Not
birds— But
the clatter of Pirahā—

A different kind
of construction— Greased
wheels— Running—
The Biography of Toto the Wonder Dog

I'm in the Warehouse on a Tuesday night
waiting for a fellow graduate student to come onstage
and read from her first book of poems, and Dr. Kirby shows up
and stands next to me in front of the big heater
in the back because it's a cold night, and I start telling him
about a poem I've been working on and that

I'm trying to imitate his prosy, narrative style,
and he says, “Then you can be the next David Kirby!”
And when I e-mail him the poem a few days later,
he e-mails me back and says, “Terrific!
Now can I be the next Leslie Whatley?”
and I think, hmmm... what is this business we're up to?

One hates to feel that one is being mocked
almost as much as one hates to be a brown-noser,
but it's true that David Kirby's first book,
Sarah Bernhardt's Leg, was the first book of poems
I ever read all the way through, back in 1985,
when I was twelve years old and found it in a pile

of books my dad was throwing out, and I think
it had a big influence on my writing, though, of course
my biggest influence was my dad himself,
who never published a book, despite being my favorite poet,
one of those minor figures who haunt us
when we're young, who roam our thoughts

transparent and bitter at how stupid everyone must be
not to see them at all. On the other hand,
I have to wonder if Dr. Kirby might not be thinking about ghosts too,
or perhaps something more literary, like John Ashbery,
who once defended himself against another poet
who was harassing him at a party
by saying, *You can't argue with me. I don't exist!*

At any rate, it should be absolutely clear by now

that I'm totally ripping off David Kirby,

among others, as well as, by extension,

all the poets he ripped off, etc.

The point is that you learn a lot from your teachers,

but at the same time you feel you'd like to take a swing

at them, in the same way you often wanted to give your dad

a good sock in the mouth, though, God knows,

the poor man suffered enough. Years ago

a few of his poems won a major award

and there was an article about it in the *Opelika-Auburn News*

which was picked up in the *Columbus Ledger.*

That weekend my parents had a party to celebrate the award,

and lots of their friends from the university drove out to our house

in the country to eat barbecue. My dad thought then

that this was the first of many prizes to come,

but, alas, my father never became a great poet,

and will never be famous, and so I have developed

an acute awareness of the fate of those ghostly fathers,

whose books never got published or have gone out of print,

yellowed with age on used-bookstore shelves,

if you can find them at all.

And with that in mind, it has long been my ambition


to seek satisfaction in the merely good, though it's hard not to want to be famous and admired,

hard to want to be something less than the greatest. (As a friend of mine once said,

*If you're not comparing yourself to Shakespeare,*

*man, then what the fuck are you a writer for?*)

Nietzsche once wrote that *Every talent must unfold itself in fighting... Even the artist hates the artist,*

by which he meant that we should take things personally, nourish a consuming envy of the genius of our teachers and our ambition to overthrow them,
to stand on top of the heap of poets and crow.
On the other hand, one ought to be wary
of all that claptrap romantic philosophy,
since it leads to the sort of ideas you find in *Conan The Barbarian*,
in which Arnold Schwarzenegger, who has been trained since childhood
to fight to the death with other savages in a pit,
is asked by his wizened master, *What is best in life?*

to which he responds, *To see your enemies*
driven before you, and to hear the lamentations of their women.
And I must admit that I've often repeated this line
to myself in the shower, a little pep talk as I lather up
my body, which ain't going to win any Mr. Universe contests,
in the same manner that I'll often look in the mirror

after my wife has cut my hair and say, *I am Spartacus!*
and, *No! I am Spartacus! as if I contained*
multitudes of rebellious gladiators.
What it comes down to is that you either believe
Carlyle's Great Man theory of history or you believe
the post-structural “death of the author” theory

—either the poet is a genius or else he's just some schmuck
with a typewriter in the right place at the right time.
There is a great deal of heartache in being constantly reminded
that you'll probably never be one of those Great Men,
and it has taken me all these years to figure out
what my father was trying to tell me when he said,

*Writing ain't for pussies, son.*
But that night of the party, when my dad could still imagine
a future of literary fame, when everyone was sitting in the backyard
in the twilight a little drunk, staring into the embers
of the barbecue pit, a station wagon came
crashing out of the woods and slashing through the low pines,
tires banging over rocks and downed limbs, headlights casting
apparitions against the tree trunks, and a man
got out and called my father's name and stood in the beams
of the station wagon's headlights holding a page
from the *Columbus Ledger* and compared the photo
of my father there to the man standing in front of him
and, satisfied he'd found who he was looking for, said to my father, *I want you to write* the biography of Toto the Wonder Dog! *You know, Toto the Wonder Dog! The Wizard of Oz!*
The man was a dog trainer from Pheonix City, Alabama, who specialized in terriers and supplied dogs for movies.

Looking for my parents' house, he'd gotten the wrong turnoff, and the folks in the next house over said, *Wallace Whatley lives through them woods,* and pointed the way, so the dog trainer aimed his wagon into the trees and set off. Now he led my father around to the back of his wagon and opened the trunk, full of old movie posters and scripts, dog registration papers and dog show awards. *You got all you need for a book right here,* he said. *All you got to do is write it down!* And this, too, may be how history is made: the Man-Who-Comes-Out-Of-The-Woods theory of history.

In the end, however, my dad persuaded the dog trainer that he would never, never write the biography of Toto the Wonder Dog. So the dog trainer got angry and cussed my dad and all the gathered guests and got back in his car and reversed smack into a tree and bottomed out in the ditch and then hopped out again and started to push and didn't say a word to my dad or the other members of the English Department who helped him push his car back into the road but pealed out, in a cloud of gravel as everyone began to giggle.

At first I only wanted to be able to tell a story as well as my father could, to holler and do all the funny voices the way he used to, to be the center of attention at parties, but now I don’t know. You read the great poets and think, *Who put the hot in Hottentot? What do they got that I ain't got?* But do you ever jump up from your desk
and shout, *Suck on that, Shakespeare!*

*and your little dog too!* One wants to be great
and famous, but one also wants to be happy.

One wants Harold Bloom to come out from behind
his curtain, like the great and powerful Oz, and announce
that it's the Era of Leslie! the Century of Whatley!

but one also wants merely to say something funny,
to get a book published and then another and, one day,
maybe, get tenure. Still, I wonder what kind of life
we all might have had if my dad had agreed
to write the biography of Toto the Wonder Dog.
I like to think it's the kind of job I'd immediately accept

and appear on the *Tonight Show* and sit next to the dog-trainer
while Johnny Carson made ironic remarks, thinking,
They can laugh at me now, but just wait until they read

*The Life and Times of Toto*—
So what if it *is* a dog's life?
It'll still be a goddamn masterpiece!
The Maculate Conception

1

I'm sitting in the sun on a polished granite bench
in front of Sandels Hall before going in to teach
my poetry class, reading “Leda and the Swan”

and “The Second Coming,” which I'll be talking about with my students,
and idly watching girls walk to class in their tight shirts
and low-slung jeans, bellies exposed, tossing their hair,
bare skin as smooth and dark as freckled bread,
experiencing a “shudder in the loins” and
whatever “mastered by the brute blood” must refer to

—or maybe not, since I don't leap up to seize anyone
in my beak but think instead that soon one of these half-dressed girls
will be slumping in her desk, saying something morose
and indifferent. My students just don't get it, don't get that poetry,
if it's at all worthwhile, is about taking an intense interest
in the brief, bright work of being alive, that a really good poem
is a miracle, one of those small miracles that happen all the time,
like healthy babies and reconciliations but also like mere survival.
But I also know miracles like these are mysteries
that can have ugly initiations. In Heart of Darkness, Marlowe says,
*I have wrestled with death. It is the most unexciting contest
you can imagine. It takes place in an impalpable greyness,

*with nothing underfoot, with nothing around, without spectators,
*without clamor, without glory...and without being too maudlin about it,
I think of my own misspent youth and my own encounters

with death. I think of D.B., who spread a plastic tarpaulin in his room
and then shot himself with his dad's shotgun, and Sean,
who drove into a tree on a highway outside Montgomery,

and Joe, who passed out on the railroad tracks, and myself
waking up in a literal straitjacket in the hospital, or
the small apartment where I crawled on my hands and knees,

from window to window, looking fearfully between the blinds,
hearing terrible voices and staring into the flames
of the gas heater all winter, brooding on ways to end it all,

and I wonder if my brain chemistry hasn't been permanently wrecked
since at least once a month, still, I'll lie in my bed awake
all night shivering with the compulsion to somehow do myself in

but knowing that in the morning I'll be okay again.
The point I'm trying to make is that one needs reasons
to live that can stand up to some pretty heavy scrutiny,

and, though it's not the most inspiring thing to hear
from a poet, much less one's English teacher,
I don't know if poetry is enough for me—I think I need god too,

a household god in the style of Abraham and Jesus,
a daddy to belong to, some god who will take the time to count
the hairs on my head in this nasty but beautiful world.

2

But when you decide to believe in something irrational
and beautiful, you have a whole new batch of problems
with just how far you're willing to go, what craziness

you're willing to believe to save your own skin, problems like
the immaculate conception: who could possibly believe a thing like that?
when it seems as ridiculous as the story of the alien

who got ordained by the Vatican I read recently
in the Weekly World News waiting in the checkout line.
But then I think of this story I heard in junior high:

a girl and boy were making out and he ejaculated in his pants,
and then—a real miracle of science—his sperm actually swam
through his jeans and through the girl’s skirt

(there must have been a damp spot)
and impregnated her! I'd just turned thirteen when I heard that
and was taking sex-ed and had already spent
a few minutes in a closet with Melanie W.,
and it seemed so outrageous as to be almost believable.
    Who’d make up a thing like that?

    I was prepared to believe, I suppose, any story that dramatized the danger
of sexual encounters, even *dry-fucking*, as I’d heard it called.
    But as I was sitting there on the bench across from Sandels Hall

    before going in to meet my sullen students bearing Yeats,
which is arguably just as ridiculous as the *Weekly World News*,
    it occurred to me that a little bit of semen

    would be almost invisible right here
against the polished white granite bench, and if it were fresh,
    it might even seep through a pair of shorts,

    the intrepid spermatazoa swimming like mad
through denim mesh in the venturesome dark, into the jungle of pubes,
    tearing along like wild men raised by wolves!

    and steal up into some freshman's uterus like the goddamn forty thieves!
Open Sesame! and find there the treasure of an egg, a pirate's chest of gold
    waiting to be cracked open in those gentle blue Caribbean seas

    just south of the fallopian tubes. I imagine that God
must feel a bit like this as he looks down on us
    as I look over the desks of my students at the start of the semester

    and notice at least one girl in each class with a spectacular pair
of breasts and an even sweeter smile and just can't stop
    myself from thinking about her for the first few weeks

    though I can't do anything about it, not only because I'm married
but also because it's against the rules, against university policy,
    even against the law, occasionally. Well, it's just not done.

    And I realize that I am a thoroughly absurd person who will always
be thinking these somewhat loathsome thoughts and, what's worse,
    rather than acting on them in the privacy of motel rooms,

    saying them out loud, even writing them down for people to read
so that they can develop a really poor opinion of me and despise me
and give me withering glares in the hallways of the English Dept.

and call me a pervert or worse when they sit discussing me
at parties to which I am not invited. I just can't help myself,
and so I write everything down and call it a poem,

“The Immaculate Conception,” and show it to my own poetry teacher,
Dr. K—, and he says, Well, sir, if you want to get a tenure track job
one of these days, you might just want to think twice

about trying to publish a thing like this, because you never know
when some administration cracker is going to get his hands on it
and think, “We can't have a guy like this in the classroom
with all those squeezable co-eds!” And I want to tell Dr. K—
that I'm really a good boy, that I've never once squeezed a co-ed.
No, no! he says, holding up his hands and shaking his head,

You don't have to explain a thing!
It makes no difference to me!
I'm just saying that you should be careful, Leslie.

And he gets up and thrusts the poem back in my hands and advances
toward his office door, nodding and smiling, so that I'm backing out,
trying to explain I've never, ever, squeezed a co-ed in my life....

But it makes me wonder: what might you write in a poem
that would actually prevent you from getting that tenure track job?
I think of Rimbaud's famous letter to Paul Demeny

in which he says, Le Poète se fait voyant par un long, immense
et raisonné dérèglement de tous le sens, or The poet becomes
a seer through a great and systematic derangement

of all the senses, which sounds very nice in French but which
is certainly not what I recommend to my students, having done it myself,
though who can prevent them from the inevitable derangements

of mere living? with all its hallucinations, overdoses, broken hearts
and psychotic episodes? I much prefer Rilke's notion that you must

gather sense and sweetness for a whole lifetime, and a long one
if possible, and then, at the very end, you might perhaps be able to write ten good lines. But of course Rimbaud was right: the soul will, in fact, be made monstrous, no matter what measures one may take to the contrary, whether in the fashion of the comprachicos, that is, those villains in Victor Hugo that Rimbaud is talking about, who kidnap children and mutilate them in order to exhibit them as freaks, or in the style of a more conventional desperation, say, the generic monstrousness of life's feathered glory. At any rate, the ceremony of innocence is drowned;

the best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity. There's not much that's worse than mutilating kids or otherwise having one's way with them, but now I'm imagining how I'll pull this off: to jack off a load here on the bench unnoticed in the middle of the day with all these students walking along on their way to classes in their short shorts and tank tops and then to make my getaway mere moments before some girl sits down in the same place. And then, when one of my students comes up to me after class and says, “I'm sorry, Mr. Whatley, but I don't have my paper on Yeats today. The strangest thing has happened. I am great with child, but I don't know how. I'm a virgin, I've been so upset, etc., etc.,”

I'll have to say, “You kids and your excuses. I've heard it all before,” but in my heart I'll just be dying with joy and fear and maybe even thinking, Our Saviour is born! and wondering if he will have my hair, my nose, my eyes… I'll say, “That's the worst excuse I've ever heard!” and I'll open my grade book and give her a zero, but in my heart I'll be singing, Praise God! I believe you!
SALLY MOLINI

He used to live

on the third floor,
liked to paint six o'clock
reaching into trees,
half-lit strokes that knew
the split rush of leaves
on canvas. Learned
surface is shelter
and hope carves space
so he moved to the
roof and practiced
his ex machina skills,
became a small god
of sculpture, clay
faces for sale in the
cauterized city air.
Where Did The Children Go?

They were driven into the coffin-nail rain
taken by night birds.

Don't you hear their mothers calling?
Their voices are empty pots.

Don't you hear them chanting
the names of the missing, stolen, lost?

They bury the names.
I lock the door & turn away

wondering: am I next?
A child has only so many options.

I hear my name.
Where is my child? Where is my child?
Why Do They Always Come During The Rainy Season?

Nothing grows anymore. Our bellies swell like yams. The flies eat at us. We are too tired to swish them away.

We can tell they are coming by the dust approaching. We cannot hide fast enough. There are never enough trees.

They are buzzards. They devour whatever is left behind. They come after us with machetes and vicious smiles.

They uproot us. We are small animals flushed out by hunters. They kill us at random, at leisure, for sport.

They toss some carcasses on a car hood and pose for a camera. They wear protective gloves to avoid diseases.

They refuse to touch us, unless they are raping our girls. They call this re-education. But we do not learn anything.

We return like drought. We return in spite of the killing. We return too tired to run and we have nowhere to go.

They return with the rainy season. They return drenching the ground with blood.
Because You Said Forever

This roof always sounds as though someone’s walking on it.

They were separated in local woods

found each other on a railroad bridge

before one of the brothers slipped in and drowned.

True story from Cayuga Heights on the 5th June


Walking there is forbidden now.
Ducks and Drakes

_Ducking Stool_: A chair at the end of a plank, in which a culprit was tied and then ducked into water; a form of punishment, formerly used, as in New England, esp. for quarrelsome women.
—Webster’s New World Dictionary, second edition

Mid-July hovers like honey
with nothing moving too fast
toward resolution.
A game of ducks and drakes
is his suggestion,
and he skims the thinnest rock
the mountain can shed
across the creek.
One, two, three…
four, five—Five rings!
Another diminution, she thinks.
She worries she said too much
at last night’s party, and now
her rocks just plunk in the water
like a woman tied to a ducking stool.
She replays: November’s vote
won’t be democratic; I don’t care
for the baby stage; and had she said
tapanâde for tapanâde?
Why this fear of saying too much
or not saying enough,
why this clench in her stomach?
The creek water sprinkles her leg,
their talking starts and stops.
In the overheated afternoon,
her life skips back
to junior high, the drone
of history lectures and a toilet flush
down a distant hall, the rat-atap-rat
of the neighboring teacher
chalking up her thoughts.
As a girl she understood well:
speak only with undebatable facts,
obedience preferred to opinions.
She twists her elbow, flings another rock;
it, too, plops and his skips seven times.
He asks, Why do you always worry?
And she wishes she didn’t
fester, fester. Put me
on the stool, she thinks,
dunk me in with this rock in my throat.
He interrupts to say try again.
And hold the stone as if it wants to fly,
as if you’re holding it back.
But again, plop; a single,
circular bubble rises after it and pops,
the way she imagines her breath underwater
would rise to the surface and break open.
Lying in Bed

When I slide my index finger, its tip, down the center of your chest, your sternum, that short, narrow channel on a man’s body, on you bony and harsh, crooked like a dry creek bed, what exactly do I trace? The way bone bulges then dips in quarter-inch curved steps, striations of calcium deposits, coat after coat until hard, until thickened into a center that could support you, the ribs, the myth of Genesis and Adam forming Eve. A bone to withstand the steady strum of heart, of blood that can’t decide if it’s coming or going, and I think now of your mother’s heart attack last week, and I want to do something to ease your worries: her death, us. We can, of course, only accept which means relearning how to live this life as each person leaves us. From small acts like opening the Times, reading the bold print while you eat your ham-on-rye instead of calling her, to learning how to close your eyes, inhale, recall the smell of my hair when the sun warmed it that afternoon we sat by the pond. We each become what others must get over, if we’re lucky, and that’s why when I press my fingertip up and down your sternum, noting each switchback and elevation as if mapping a trail through woods, and say, “I love this part,” and you give the kid-like nose scrunch and ask, “But why?” I shrug as if I’ve never thought about it, as if I don’t know how this touch will also turn toward memory.
Floating Objects

In dreams the body runs off
in a shamble of old leaves,
a trail of unmade oaths
like books left on a shelf.
All day the man and the woman move
soundlessly past each other
in the nameless oiled clasp
of years lived down to the bone.
all night they lie together in the old
familiar manacle of love: her milky arms,
his body’s attenuated plans,
their girl sleeping between them
like a ledge they step off nightly,
her small fists curled by her face
like the clappers of bells, trembling.
[her, sleeping]

like a catch in the wind
like the beating of faraway wings
a slow tide a stream
over denuded ground
a sapling’s mnemonic quiver
a wilderness in the room
after the final dark, a bird
that goes on singing
Woman Emerges from Mud

A chip of sandstone in your palm,
    you find a willing seam,
slide a blade until the seam widens.
    Separate the layers—inside
    a whorl of red and ochre.

Other stones disclose slender stems,
    or nuts of trees long extinct.
Trace the serrated edges of leaves,
    tiny bones of a life trapped
    when mud rushed over restless earth.

Imagine yourself
    caught in an instant—
picking berries, tracking antelope,
    pursued by bear or boar,
when terra thunders underfoot.
    The warning roar, darkening sky.
    Sun swallowed in dust.

How your body burns
    after the world ceases its chatter.

Imagine opening your dormant life,
    layers flaking away.
You, rescued by a knife
    slicing into stone, your first gasp
    the astonishing brightness of night.
Moon Shell Meditation

Because one in the hand looks like a breast, its round brown nipple centered on a spiral.

Because tracing it with your fingertip makes your heart race.

Because its long grey foot has left it behind.

Because it reminds you of an ear—hold it to yours.

Because even broken, your finger cannot discover a heart,

and somewhere deep inside it has a heart.

Because you can’t see in.

Because, on the shelf, a spider lives in it.

Because it keeps its secrets, never sleeps, points its tiny eye to the moon.
Blood

After Robert Haass’ “Transparent Garments”

Sundown: A young woman in espadrilles and, since it is Halloween, black whiskers. A man in a full-body suit cast in the likeness of an extra-strength pink Tums. The Castro is full of costumes. But I am very tired. I awoke at four a.m. and folded clothes in the darkness, the gold leaf glitter of City Hall, a cupola between my living room window, Ginsberg’s Moloch Saint Francis—

For it is by self-forgetting that one finds bashed out their skulls and digitized their minds--

and two miles distant, beyond downtown, where the Bay Bridge dances away from the city, a landmass tremulous with the presence of Ishmael’s faults. I wonder where Hagar sleeps.

Things change, however. The maternity bras arranged in a pile, socks balled in their own special grouping on the hardwood floor, I trace the string of blue lights along the sweet trellis of the bridge’s steel trussplay. An occasional car rolls by no bigger than a green ant trekking across the bridge of an old oak tree. There is an acorn somewhere. My wife sleeps heavy with her dreams of the coming labor. Despite all the concentration and worry, I am in the shadows of bridgelight and moonbeam, daylight and dreamscape. Intensity, as a proposition. Blush, as a proposition. Must there be a cause? This ladder leading down to rags, up to fallen stars? If I were a grammarian, the present arrangement of parts would be a hard and fast invitation to invent new rules. Clearly,

I just want

to be
the invariant passenger
in our tender car
with you and the baby,
the family.

There is no straying, no way that will not reveal
the proposition, I make. We make. Making makes us.
Later, I wake dreaming of a naked soul in briefs
ranging across the concrete with a sputtering Zippo.
I beat out the truths on the page, like shook foil
they leave this place here and enter the foggy ‘Frisco night where
I sought the twinkle in the outer garments, the dirt still bound
by fear, by idioms of bass and whisper, by cloudbanks
of up and down beats, by the theme of self
and the variation of difference.

Before breakfast, I must shower, the water always
a little hot and cold, my body of passion, been a long day.
Will this drizzle of worry yet wash away? Six bars of soap,
a bucket of ammonia, a Brillo pad and a toothbrush,
bristles as fine as Seurat’s brush, is that enough?
But I do not see a method in this cleaning
business. I am not ending my relationship
with soap entirely, I think. Who can resist jasmine,
texture of talcum, trip of cellos tapping some silent
concerto against the dancing wick of this trick lantern?

Aubade: our red car is where I live, heading up the ladder into
places where no boxcar can possibly go. In the naked
bed the fire goes down and we just talk about nothing. Nothing
relaxes me more. My mind is not right, and I like this, where
the heart is right, as where it forces nothing but blood.
Suchoon Mo

He Went To His Own Funeral

he woke up
got dressed
brushed his teeth
combed his hair
drank a cup of coffee
and went to the church
it was his own funeral
I never saw him since
they must have buried him
Robyn Art’s recent work has appeared or is forthcoming in Conduit, Slope, The Hat, Alice Blue, Glitter Pony, The New Delta Review, Segue, Gulf Coast, La Petite Zine, Unpleasant Event Schedule, Tarpaulin Sky, Coconut, Mipoesias, and canwehaveourballback.com. Her first poetry collection, The Stunt Double In Winter, was selected as a Finalist for the 2005 Sawtooth Poetry Prize and will be published by Dusie Press in Spring 2007. She is the author of the chapbooks Degrees of Being There (Boneworld Press, 2003), Vestigial Portions of the Dead Sea Scrolls (Dancing Girl Press, 2006), the text/visual collaboration Scenes From The Body (Dancing Girl Press, 2007) and the online chapbook, The Last Time I Saw Bonnie Blue (ensemblejourine.com, 2007).


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Jayne Fenton Keane is the author of three poetry books, PhD candidate, the recipient of several major national awards and fellowships, and a poet who experiments across disciplines.

Gavin S. Lambert has had fiction appear most recently in Poor Mojo’s Almanac(k), Thieves Jargon, and Torkstar. He was also a “Top 25 winner” in Glimmer Train’s winter 06/07 Very Short Fiction Award. A story of his is forthcoming in the December issue of The Externalist. His poetry has appeared in “remark,” Orange Room Review, Haggard and Hallow, The Adirondack Review, and Dead Mule. He lives in Northeast Florida with his wife and daughter, where he works in a library.

Barbara Maloutas won the New Issues first book in poetry competition for In a Combination of Practices (2004), and was the winner of New Michigan Press/Diagram Chapbook Contest for Practices (2003). Her work in this issue of Segue comes from Pronominal Pleasure, which was recently selected as one of four finalist manuscripts in Rose Metal Press’ poetry book competition. Other of Maloutas’ work has appeared or is forthcoming in journals including Aufgabe, FreeVerse, Segue, Tarpaulin Sky, Good Foot, The New Review of Literature, bird dog, dusie, Gentle Strength Quarterly, JAB and Greatcoat. Her work is anthologized in Intersections: Innovative Poets of Southern California (2005), Green Integer and the 5th Anniversary Issue of Segue (2006), the online journal from Miami University-Middletown. Beard of Bees will publish an online chapbook, Coffee Hazilly, in 2007. She teaches book structures in Otis College of Art and Design in Los Angeles.

David McGrath’s weekly columns on politics and culture appear in dozens of newspapers across the country, including the Birmingham News, Chicago Tribune, and Duluth News Tribune. He is editor of The Thing About Hope Is…, a literature anthology, author of the novel Siege at Ojibwa, and has recently completed a second novel, The Vocation. He lives with his wife Marianne on Dauphin Island, Alabama, and can be contacted at profmcgrath2004@yahoo.com.

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Suchoon Mo is a former Korean Army Lieutenant and a retired university academic living in the semiarid part of Colorado. His recent poems appear in East and West, Bitter Oleander, Taj Mahal Review, Religious Humanism, Thunder Sandwich, Spillway Review, The Stylus Poetry Journal, Word Riot,
Word Myth, Underground Window, Tryst, Subterranean Quarterly, Orange Room Review, Round Table Review, Strange Road, Feathertale, Dissident Editions, Snake Skin, Flutter, Poetry Cemetery, and others. His music compositions appear in Unlikely 2.0, Mad Hatters Review, Sage of Consciousness, Strange Road, and The Adroitly Placed Word. He has no formal music education.

Sally Molini’s work has appeared in or is forthcoming in such online journals as Stirring, Tattoo Highway, Swink Online, Mad Hatter’s Review, Eclectica, among others. Print journals include (or will include) 32 Poems, LIT, Calyx, Bateau, Margie, the Chattahoochee Review, Fugue, and elsewhere. She is a graduate of Warren Wilson College's MFA Program.

Lisa Norris’ book Toy Guns won the Willa Cather Fiction Prize in 1999 and was published by Helicon Nine Press. Her stories, poems and creative nonfiction have been published in Fourth Genre, Ascent, Notre Dame Review, an anthology called Kiss Tomorrow Hello (Doubleday 2006) and others. “Claim Jumpers” is part of a completed manuscript titled Viewfinder. She is an assistant professor at Central Washington University in Ellensburg, Washington.

Charlotte Pence’s poetry is forthcoming in Prairie Schooner, Spoon River Poetry Review, South Carolina Review, and other journals. She has received the New Millennium Writing Award for Poetry, a poetry fellowship from the Tennessee Arts Commission, and most recently the Libba Moore Gray poetry award. Currently, she is a doctoral candidate concentrating in creative writing at the University of Tennessee and poetry editor for Grist: The Journal for Writers.

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Martin Willitts Jr. is co-editor of hotmetalpress.net where he was judge of their first chapbook contest and co-judge of their current contest. He has two chapbooks by Pudding House Press,
Falling In and Out of Love (2005), and Lowering Nets of Light (2007). Two online chapbooks appear online: Farewell—the journey now begins (LanguageandCulture.net, 2006), and News from the Front (Slow Trains, 2007). Willitts also edited a poetry anthology about cancer, Alternatives to Surrender (Plain View Press, 2007), and a full length book of poems with his artwork called The Secret Language of the Universe (March Street Press, 2006).