Painted Bride Quarterly

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Front cover photograph: Brett Bennett
Back cover photograph: Ulvis Alberts
The All-Night Hitchhike

I have to open the Cadillac’s door,
Pleased as a prom date on the Parkway West.
I have to settle my homebound self
Among the quadrophonic speakers
And the temperature set at sixty-six.
Relax again, happy to be hauled
Past Pittsburgh to Millvale along
The coincidence of that driver’s route.
Bear opera’s soprano instead
Of sax riffs, bear strings instead of blues
From the surround-sound of leather walls.
Answer the questions about school,
The English major, the waste of Vietnam.
Say “Route 8, bear left, and up the hill.”
Listen to the next lines about sex—
How was I fixed for that?—like the man
In the razor-blade commercial
Replaying on another station.
Pause and let my street slide by,
Neighbors thinning to the empty fields
Of farms, a choice of sheltered roads.
Wait until “I’ve taken you this far.”
Think of my suitcase behind the seat,
How easy it is to drive one-handed,
How quiet a Cadillac is on gravel,
How it stops like a hotel elevator,
My floor a surprise, the hall unlit,
As if every smoke alarm were whistling,
And all of the guests had taken the stairs.
Writer’s Statement

I work with WritersCorps, Washington, D.C. One of the unusual features of this federally-sponsored program is that writers teach in “areas traditionally underserved by the arts.” For over a year now, I have developed and maintained creative writing and literature workshops in homeless centers for women, a women’s prison, and with senior citizens. Consistently, I witness the healing properties of language: how the process of writing affirms the primacy of the individual experience, and urges by its very nature the awareness that what we say and what we do has value. Women marginalized by the poverty and violence which accompanies their current social status often feel, quite accurately, that they are invisible and silent participants in culture. Recovering their stories often means experiencing through the creation of a text personal events that are painful and unwieldy, memories “too painful for words.” As a writer, I am challenged by that struggle to describe that which seems beyond words.
Talk, Talk, Talk

I.

We are showered and dressed and eating pasta shells with shellfish and white sauce. This is a treat, an occasion, and we are enjoying good conversation to celebrate the number of days we have, we say it this way, been together. The waitress brings more bread and you tear a piece off and chew — my eyes watching your mouth are suddenly seeing something not there for you and not you at all.

His teeth are white and chalk.
His skin is white and chalk.
The sun is white and chalk.

II.

And when I think of this particular morning which has grown large in the middle of my mind, I see a youngish girl riding the bus in the yellow and streaking light of Ohio sunrise. I drink hot, thin coffee: eggs spooning over easy toast all in a marvelous hurry, and class, hustling, community college in the middle of the parking lot in the Middle West. It’s all about nurse’s training and computer literacy and boyfriends and bars and anthropology and not just having a job but a career. The operating principle seems to include also the development of finer ideas and the cultivation of more advanced citizens: why we do what we do, and what we have done that survives.

Riding the #14 downtown mornings there is an older woman talking to the window about Jesus, yes, John 3:16. For God So Loved The World That He Gave His Only Begotten Son That Whosoever Believeth In Him Should Not Perish But Have Eternal Life, praise the Lord. Wet and fragrant heads dip and roll until that mystical, habitual portion of the brain wakes to their stop, praise the Lord. And that youngish girl, to her mind not so young, the same one that I was that morning standing in the back
of the bus until a seat opened next to an equally young, not-so-young man. The seats are green and woven with that peculiarly uncomfortable piping and smell of heat and old cigarettes. So he, and this is the young man with the empty seat and dry hair, pats the space there, and she, I'll never forgive her for this, sits down and actually thanks him.

It's 8:30 maybe and he smiles and starts asking her questions about "you in school, cat eyes? You in college? My girlfriend goes to Plains Community," and she watches a personalized tattoo of a woman on his upper arm. She is dye driven into his skin and has been with him a long time in every kind of weather.

"Something like a dental assistant or something," he continues, "you know, because she wants to make good money." He scratches his face, and the tattoo woman twists a little to one side. "No way, no fucking way you'd find me looking into somebody's mouth for a living. Nine to five or some shit, telling me to floss more and pay at the front desk." He watches her. "You got a boyfriend? Somebody sweet to you?" And he watches her more and she wants to say yes and she wants to say no and can not make out the correct answer. She nods, and steps to get off the bus, wrong stop and several blocks early. She gets off the bus and he gets off the bus walking to school.

III.

Me, myself and I.

Coming to an age when curiosity moves where the head does not necessarily believe. Hand over skin, differently, my hand over skin, curiosity which finds completion in nothing but itself, that is, skin by its own name loving itself into response. The minute awareness of hair, the slight fever, the startled beating of heart. Pressing fingers against the deepness of skin, skin, and muscles chanting in verticals, beliefless in their own pulsing. These are my hands renewing an ancient contract, but you.
You do not know of this untruth of my own hairless hands. Sweetie, these are not my fingers touching you. An ambush of morning sun grew hair on these wrists, thickening them, twisting the tips into callused squares. I do not recognize the dirt under these nails. There is a rib in my right hand missing like a curse, the knuckles shine like some vengeful zipper, beating out a bitchbitch time. The body cannot stop belonging to a series of moments and this telling you still rattles the metal cuff which is called my mouth. Masturbation is memory: I want to tear the skin off my bones.

IV.

She feels the summer break from underneath her skin. She walks quickly with the taste of metal in her throat and the cars and quick slide of brakes spreading like a rash all around her. Old man bums sit on the edge of stores in the paradise light of morning with their dogs and their cups and cardboard autobiographies. He is walking right beside her, faithful and chattering, a litany of “my girlfriend this and her best friend that and never treat people like that, do you, not you, get together.” And the store windows reflect them paired, which is and is not a lie, and they are invisible, like the men and their dogs.

His hand floats over her waist, and she smells breakfast grease and piss brick and automotive choke, and he is still talking to her. Because his hand is on her waist, the small of her back really, and they are walking together/not-together, she can only half-hear what he is saying. It is like being caught in a yellow electric field where she can read lips in passing cars and see far down the road, past the horizon, and catch the bourbon stirring into the coffee of the paper vendor. But his voice, his comprehensive voice, only makes sense in flickerings, like, goddamn, he says, goddamn, he says, goddamn.
V.

It is white hot morning and he keeps talking, furiously, with his chalk and white teeth and the tattoo woman on his shoulder watching. And the words fall around like broken glass and crazy loops of wire, with his flat hands pressing into her throat saying, “scream, and I’ll kill you,” and there are words that went flapping like her head or gray birds into the late sunrise shining between the buildings. And the tattoo woman, it seems, is pointing and wriggling with her inky limbs, signing or translating or saying something, too. It gets very noisy in that alley with no doors, with them talking, and delivery trucks roaring in the street, and him kicking her once or twice. “Shut up,” he says.

VI.

Pretend that you are blue. Pretend that your hips revolve like the law on the street, and that you shine there like a badge in that morning. Pretend your fingers wind around a leather-strapped stick and that you feel the day beating through your fingers in the whirl of this stick. Pretend you hear nothing.

VII.

In this supper light and silverware murmuring I can tell you how that alley smells, face fucking down. I can tell you how the flat of a hand tastes in the mouth. And your hearing is sympathetic and acute not unlike radio journalists attending foreign conflicts. But my telling you is a lie. Because I wear seven watches on my wrist and still do not believe that six thirty a.m. means the sun has come up again. My telling you about that morning many mornings ago in this public hour implies that it is not for me that morning anymore. That time has passed. My voice to you is the ticking of a clock I do not hear. It is always morning. The sun, the moon, the face of your watch, the roundness your mouth takes on in darkness: I cannot tell you correctly.
Fourteen

On the busses I rode that Fall through the bead curtains
of red leaves above all I liked to give
up my seat to those needier—poor

hairless nuns whose dark follicles I
could descry as I swayed from the strap above,
exploding from their holy skulls in sullen rebellion,

or those livercheeked winos who got on
soaked in their own shame, talking to
no one; any woman with a belly—young, old,

these seemed to me most truly piteous,
swollen with their numinous demons & gasses, on
tenterhooks as they slid down

into their seats, slow as molasses
lest they explode. I leapt up
for them, I would have liked to be two

or three of me, to serve them more satisfactorily,
I would have liked to rise & rerise
from every seat in consecution, as in some

lagging strip of film, the better to witness the re-run
ease with which the spaces I had so recently occupied
were refilled, with her & him & her &

them, contemplating the various kinds
of voids: canceled, ended,
Empty
Interview—(I)

O Hôtel, you should be merely a bed

——Frank O’Hara
“Hotel Transylvania”

You looked very sweet & neat & thin, not at all
What I was expecting: an Ibsen schoolmaster in

A Countess Mara tie, although slightly seedy, as if
You spent a lot of time with shedding mammals,

Long-haired women, men molting along the hard cloth
Of your thighs & also stained with some

Symmetrical sauce—a curry coin—left, I guessed,
By an heraldic luncheon; you mentioned it

In passing, calling for coffee to drown
Your tannic fumes, & went on to me. Why

Oh why was I a woman. I hadn’t
Anticipated caring if you lived or died

After you left Of course
I have long since prudently withdrawn

From all such goings-on, but: Gay Street,
& your Polish mother, your old poet friend

With the blind inamorata—to tell you the truth
I awoke with your crumpled face—

Strange new bedfellow
& it hasn’t yet gone home
Interview—(2) (Threadbare)

You were such a loser, in that suit,
Where in the name of God did you
Get it, did you save it up
From the seventies, all that flare & sag,
Did you find it somewhere, was it
A joke, & the Countess Mara tie: why
Did you put them on, in my honor or because
You pride yourself on not needing

Even your shirt was not so very
White, not everywhere, & ironed by
A blind person with a sense of humor.
Trying to get by on the verge, at our age, is
Kind of silly, Darling, am I wrong here, are
My handed-down chandeliers, grandma-hemmed
Napkins, tiers of teaspoons, asparagus tongs,
Butter knives with monograms
From lord knows how many dead great-aunts
Invalidated by the space they take up, the polish

They consume; you can do without them; you even
Ate up your own teeth, I could see it
At once, in the planetary curve of your mouth,
When you laughed, I made you laugh
In the course of the afternoon
Oh my chicken, my baby, my star
Interview - (4) - Hôtel Tamanaco

Don't ask so soon
if we're going to see us
again. Leave room
for the afternoon
to sink in. Consider the second
you sprang up
& appeared to me
in the lobby
in my easily identifiable
red dress, for Christmas. Consider
your crimson tie: son
of Countess Mara. Why, we
were souls predestined, someone
might have said,
watching us flail about, equally inept, bony & frail,
for the Coffee Shop, to sober you up.
Consider the act of me
sitting down,
kneeling out the chair before
I was aware you were
hovering behind:
So then, Good Lord,
you were a gentleman.
Consider the pipe you lit up
& then forgot, as if it were
a prop, the lunatic range
of our chitchat, a whole diapason
of things on the tip of our tongue
forgotten
in the flare of the moment. Consider you:
tall, spare, greying hair
frilled in total denial. Give me
one more reason why
Rush

I cannot speak for anyone. But Antonio telephoning for the second time says God you’re never in I wanted to tell you a few things if I can I’ve been working so hard I’ve almost got your picture done I’m terrified it’s not coming out the way I want you’re in those baggy pants your legs crossed your feet bare there are these little nuances

I can’t remember what color you wore that afternoon was your blouse red do you like green just tell me what suits you best I would have liked to do it from life I only really saw your face that day

I am alone a lot I wondered if you have read any Djuna Barnes for instance this novel I found I would be so pleased to lend it to you we could meet at twenty I used to think almost exclusively in English I wanted to tell you that you are a woman perhaps you can explain the ending to me she is so enigmatic

I remember saying I did nothing much but I paint & I walk I walk very fast from Sabana Grande to Bello Monte all the way on foot I leave home at two up till then you could call me if you ever wanted to I do it very fast I often almost run I feel I have so much to get done I feel I might die of something soon I don’t know why I don’t drink so much I drink of course

you see
you have the same long pale fingernails
as my Mother though I’ve put your hands
where one cannot really view them but it’s
your toes that are preoccupying me do you
use polish down there how should I portray
them are you eating lunch just now what
are you doing should I ring off I have
still so much I want to say is your real name
Susan or Suzanne will I ever see you again
The *Painted Bride Quarterly* is pleased to announce the winners of its Third Annual Fiction Contest:

**First Place:**
Mark LaMonda
"How Little is Noticed"

**Second Place:**
Karen Rile
"Pillar of Salt"
How Little is Noticed

"How does a good boy behave, if he has received the gift of a peculiar vision that denudes and annihilates human mores, so that he must remain all his life outside? He dodges, he pretends, invents ways to appear the same as others"

—Czeslaw Milosz

In the summer of 1972 I left church too early, and my mother rolled over in her grave for the first time. At ten years old I was able to maintain the current position of my mother in my head, so as to know whether she lay on her stomach or back. I secretly preferred her on her stomach. My imagination was too vivid. I did not like to envision my mother staring up at me, face drawn pale, skin rustling aimlessly on her skeletal remains. I was troubled by the words—"and the holy ghost, amen." I preferred the phrase—"and the holy spirit, amen." Ignorance is bliss, with the meaning of words as with the true nature of events. The word spirit filled me up, where ghosts kept asking questions.

I was sitting at the curb ten minutes before the church bells rang signaling the end of morning mass when my father pulled up in our white Ford Courier pickup truck. He hadn’t been to church himself in months. Said, the Lord wasn’t ready to take him back. As I got in the cab of the truck he looked past me and into the church full of people.

"Boy!" My father’s voice thundered. "What are you doing out of church?"

"You’re wearing me out boy. It was you who wore your poor mother down. God rest her sweet soul" I could see egg yolk, mostly dried, on his rumpled, gray shirt
collar—yellow teeth set in a rain cloud. He liked to go to Bob’s Big Boy and chat-up the waitresses over black coffee. I squinted my eyes and the yolk stain became a poodle dog. I snickered quietly to myself.

“I didn’t come out ‘til it was communion time.” I could see my father had stopped at Sesame Donuts after Bob’s. I was clearly having donuts for breakfast. I scooped my hair behind my ears the way he preferred to see it.

“What would your mother say? How do you think this would make her feel, God rest her soul?”

“We always leave at communication time. You say God counts it if you stay ‘til then.”

“I don’t want to listen to your mouth boy. Your mother just turned over in her grave.”

This was a new, powerful image for me—my mother under the ground, rotating based on my actions. I was a lion tamer. I looked into the jaws of the ferocious big cat, and with a flip of my wrist sent the beast off the platform, frolicking on its back like a kitten.

My father dropped me off in front of our tiny yellow house. “Be good,” he said. He reached into the donut bag and pulled out a lemon filled, handed the bag to me, bit into his donut, and sped off with the donut hanging from his mouth.

My mother died in the winter of 1971, and by the summer of 1972 I was obsessed by ghosts. I thought I was being followed everywhere I went. I saw cushions depress beneath the phantom rumps of visitors, and I smelled the sweet scent of roses, indicating the presence of Mary—the mother of God. I took to bringing my dog Chester in the house at night when my father was out prowling the bars. My father warned me against bringing the dog in the house. It was strictly forbidden. Chester was a short-haired, barrel-chested warrior dog. I liked that my father was a little afraid of him. My father told me that he had the neighbors on both sides watching out. He would know if I brought any friends in the house. I’d
draw the curtains and bring the dog in anyway. "Don't bark Chester," I'd say. "Shush boy. Shush." We were masters of the philosophy—not to be seen, not to be heard.

Then, one day, during the long summer of 1972, Chester lifted his leg and peed on my dear dead mother's frilly white curtains—the curtains my mother made before we moved into the house she would die in. The last remnant of femininity remaining in our house. "She's rolled over in her grave," I heard my father hiss.

My mother was on her back now—a bad omen. But, by the time this event occurred my mother had landed on her stomach many times, and I was beginning to hate my ability to retain mundane facts. How many times had my father come home before midnight? How many steps did it take for my father to get from his truck to the front door? How many times could he try the key in the door, before realizing it was open?

My father would certainly notice the stain on the curtains, and then... well... then... Noticed. To be noticed, itself, was a sign of disobedience. My father would know I had been here, that I had disobeyed.

I battled the great pee stain with soapy towels and cleanser; but it seemed the more I sprayed and scrubbed, the more pungent the smell became, the more obvious the monochromatic design. It looked like the underarms of one of my father's T-shirts, yellow oozing down like an ancient Rorschach test. After hours of work, my neglect still hung on the back door like a wart on the nose of a beautiful princess; urine on the lacy curtains made by my dear dead mother.

I smothered the curtains in my father's underarm deodorant, hoping to mask the smell. Everything I added, cologne, wintergreen bathroom spray, made the smell worse.

Finally, I slumped into the stench of wet towels, and was overcome by my mother's death; how my father
blamed me once, when he was drunk, of having killed my mother; as if there was a "Shut your mouth and go to your room young man!" tumor in every mother ready to burst and spread its black cancer. The stain hung before me, testament to the fact that I did not love my mother enough.

But, the true epiphany began when I saw the face of my mother in the urine stain, staring at me, crying, ashamed.

How could I? How could I allow this sacrilege? I sensed my mother's shame lay more in the fact that I conjured her image in piddle, than in the actual desecration of the curtain shrine. Her wet eyes gazed at mine, her mouth agape as if in a perpetual moan. I scrubbed ferociously for a few more minutes, in a futile attempt to change my dear dead mother's expression. I used upward sloping strokes, hoping to make a smile. Finally, I gave up on that strategy, stood in front of the curtain, and unzipped my pants. I would change the image one way or another.

Noticing all from under the coffee table, Chester bounded up, viewing this as an obvious peace offering. He howled in anticipation of my consolatory act.

I stopped, and zipped up. Chester had to be out of the house before my father got home. It was darker than the dark the night had started with, dark enough for my father's empty stomach to lead him home for something to eat.

It was great fun for Chester, dodging and barking as I struggled to get him outside. I tried everything in my means to capture him. It was a bowl of Campbell's chicken soup that finally convinced Chester that the back porch was the place to be.

I spent the remainder of the evening talking to My Lady of Perpetual Shame. Initially I shaped the conversation to calm myself; had my mother tell me everything was all right, that I was a good boy, that she was proud of me. While the words calmed me, the image of my mother,
slowly drying in the hot night air, gradually becoming more tortured, belied the sentiment. She reminded me of those bookmarks of Jesus on the cross, sold to pious ladies to mark the points of suffering in the bible.

"I’m in purgatory boy," my dear dead mother said.

"I’m sorry mom."

"You aren’t praying for my soul boy," she said.

"I’ll do better. I can do better."

"Mrs. Montgomery, who died six months after me, has long passed the pearly gates. Don’t you love me boy?"

"I love you. I do."

"You haven’t been a good boy."

"I’ll do better. I can do better."

"Be a good boy for your sad father. Be good!" my dear dead mother said.

I prayed on my hands and knees in front of the stained curtain. I prayed for my mother’s soul. "Dear heavenly Father, carry my mother on your shoulders. Let her rest forever in your good graces." I prayed well into that dark night.

I wondered why my mother wasn’t in heaven. She always wore her scapular, the cloth necklace with pictures of saints on each end to be worn at all times over the neck. I remembered how on Wednesday nights my mother would bring me to rosary meetings. As the only child, I served as the main course for the salvation bound ladies. I must be saved from the evil desires already growing inside of me. I was given a scapular. Anyone who died while wearing one of these scapulars would ultimately be admitted to heaven. I was shown a short film of a reckless teenager who wore the scapular feeling it gave him immunity to the consequences of evil. He died in a car wreck, his Camaro wrapped around a tree. He lay bloodied on the ground. The camera slowly panned up the tree and found the scapular hanging from a branch. "You can’t fool God." I stopped wearing the scapular after my mother died. If I were good, God could throw one on me
when I died, just as he ripped it off the bad boy.

I let my eyes wander over the image of my mother, until Chester, panting and jumping up and down on the other side of the curtain, gave the whole event a three dimensional realism that was too real. I was scared enough to be relieved when my father shuffled up the steps. I would be safe when he finally made it through the door. My father didn't look up from the carpet. He did not notice the house in disarray, did not notice the scent of urine, did not notice me lying on the floor. He went straight to bed. I lay curled in front of the back door pretending to be asleep. I waited until the house was quiet, then rose to close and lock the front door. I crept to my father's room, where I found him snoring on the bed, fully clothed.

I took his shoes off. Turned out all the lights. I sat beside his shoes on the dirty wood floor. I could see huge balls of dust and hair rolling weightless and silvery in the moon's glow. I sat there for awhile, waving my hands in four stroke rhythm, like a conductor, guiding the balls, God creating a universe, millions of dust particles shimmering like a new world's stars, forming constellations bearing the names of great beasts, beautiful maidens and their heroes; before they drifted down on everything, including my father, and including myself. I looked in the mirror and saw my hair aglow in the moonlight, shimmering like an ancient world.

Later, in my room, shaking my head like a dusty dog, the particles flew about, and gradually cascaded down to shimmer on all the things I used in my day-to-day, making all my stuff, all that made me me, slightly magical.

In the morning I woke to untamed, distant whispers, and the phone being lifted and set down with strong deliberation. It was Saturday. A day for my father to sleep late. I wobbled hesitantly into the living room wearing my standard gray sweat bottoms and Mickey Mouse T-
shirt.

The first thing I saw was my Aunt Sylvia wearing a new flower print dress, her fat feet bulging out the sides of her yellow vinyl pumps, crouched in front of the back door curtains wringing rosary beads, her eyes gazing with rapture into the pee-stain.

The morning sun shone directly through the curtains, giving the image a golden perfection of transcendence. My father was dressed in his brown suit, and other than his uncombed hair could have played the preacher. He was explaining to my Aunt how he had found the image. “I was up early to check on the boy. When I passed the door a light,” the father crossed himself, “the image of the virgin reflected on my shirt—yellow and blue. It looked like the stained glass at St. Mark’s cathedral. I called you because I believe in your faith.”

He and Sylvia looked down at the flickering yellow that bore itself on her chest. They both crossed themselves, and kissed the tips of their fingers. Then he saw me.

“Son, you change into your Sunday-best now, hear?” He almost wept.

I stared at him.

“We’ve had a miracle boy. The blessed mother Mary, has come down to our humble house to lift us up. Now hurry up boy, and get changed.”

He took the vacuum cleaner out of the closet and powered it up for the first time since relatives cleaned up after my mother’s wake.

When I came back out in my navy blue slacks, white shirt and clip-on tie, my father kissed me on the forehead, then went down on his knees to tie my lace-up shoes. I could smell the toothpaste of his breath, and for at least that moment I was safe.

I could see the house had been dusted and all the newspapers had been tossed.

“Miracles are everywhere. God bless. Hallelujah,” my
Aunt Sylvia exclaimed.

I could smell the curtains a good fifteen feet away—winter-green Lysol, like a sweatshirt wadded up and lost behind the hamper.

I looked past my Aunt in hopes of glimpsing the Virgin Mary for myself.

"Hallelujah," my father wailed.

All I could see was my mother rotating slowly in her grave—back, stomach, back, stomach. The magnitude of my sin was tremendous.

I could hear Chester panting excitedly on the other side of the back door. "Keep still Chester. Be quiet boy," I whispered. But nobody noticed what was being said on either side of the door.
Pillar of Salt

The long, sharp shadow of autumn had spread across the city. The boys were absorbed in the rhythms of their school lives; already, their new pencils were looking gnawed-on, and the bottoms of their backpacks littered with a fine compost of crumpled straw wrappers and eraser crumbs. Standing alone in her kitchen, their mother, Claire, fished out the overripe bananas and squashed sandwiches when Jared and Joseph stormed in fresh from the bus, swaggering, shoving at each other, flinging the debris of their day in her general direction. With barely a word for her they were out again, the soccer ball like a live thing between their four square knees.

Claire moved as in a dream, a state of muffled clarity. Here was a corner she had never meant to turn: the nursing whites, the solitude. Hasty meals eaten alone. Nevertheless, she was not desolate. She was only alone.

In his office downtown, Robert kept a recent snapshot of the boys on his desk. Clients asked after them. Remarkable, how often they remembered the names, though usually in reverse order. Was the younger boy’s an “older” name, or was it something else? Joseph was Robert’s own middle name, it had been in his family for generations, but they’d chosen ‘Jared’ for their firstborn for the sound. He was eleven last month; Joseph would be eight in March.

Except when he was traveling, Robert had them three weekends a month, which was turning out to be a strain. All those soccer games and playdates, his responsibility. Between dry-cleaner errands and trips to the grocery for their Frosted Flakes and milk, he barely had time to check his e-mail, let alone relax. His girlfriend, Lenora, now made a point of disappearing to her office, or shopping or the gym until evening when the boys had already finished their McDonald’s and their baths, and were pajamaed in
front of the TV with a babysitter on the way. When she and Robert got home from the restaurant, they were usually asleep.

He wasn’t used to it, the endless short car trips, the necessity of making small talk with other parents in parking lots. They were mostly women, but sometimes there were other fathers, like him, awkward, hands stuffed deep in the pockets of their khakis, jingling the change. Women tried to catch your eye, but not the men. They looked at their kids or at the ground. Other things on their minds, other places. They were like him, outsiders. This was not their element.

Before he moved out of the house, Robert had spent several hours every weekend playing squash at the club. It was his game, had been since college. But, as much as it pained him, last month he’d let his membership lapse: what was the point of paying when he never got a chance to use it? The busyness and noise of the new weekend arrangements consumed him. Five years from now the boys would be old enough for lessons. He imagined Jared, straightbacked, a natural athlete, racquet tucked under his arm. He would have a deadly backhand. And Joseph, he was small but quick. For five years they would play together; he would coach them: his little weekend project. They would develop into excellent players, better than he, himself, had ever been. His heart quickened at the thought. His sons. Five years. Then, in ten years, they’d be gone.

In his room, Jared kept the box. It was soapstone, the lid inlaid with other kinds of stone to resemble a chunky spray of flowers. It was a girl’s box, really, useless and pink, not big enough to hold more than fabric scraps and pocket change. It belonged to Lenora; Jared had taken it from her bedroom while she was at the gym. The next weekend, nobody mentioned it. Perhaps it had not been noticed.

Lenora might never say anything; that would be best, since he couldn’t return it now. He had written his name
inside the lid with a Sharpie marker, the kind that won’t wash off. Why had he done it? It was like biting his nails, like pulling on the thread that unraveled the hem of his pants. He couldn’t not. After, he’d tried soap, water, rubbing alcohol, Windex, but the name was stuck. He hated the look of it: J-A-R-E-D.

Mom named him after a boy she’d liked in high school, that’s what she said. The boy had never even known she liked him, yet she’d kept him beside her all these years by hanging onto his name. It gave him the creeps to imagine Mom with a different husband, different kids. It still could happen. She might marry Bob. Then, instead of Claire and Robert they’d be Claire and Bob. People who didn’t know them too well, like next year’s teachers, might never notice. It was practically the same. They would probably have a baby. Bob would want to name it. Bob knew everything about names: Jared was the second-oldest person in the Bible, who lived 962 years, only seven less than Methuselah. But nobody remembers Jared. There was another one, in the Book of Mormon, “Brother of Jared”—he doesn’t even have a name. But the brother has a vision, and he gets written up. Nobody remembers Jared.

In the end, nobody remembers you if you don’t come in first. Being born first counts for nothing. It’s how you finish up. That was the whole point: if you weren’t going to finish on top, then you might as well not even try.

The box was under the pile of laundry in the corner of his closet. It was where he hid things: stolen fabric scraps and post-its, loose change. He kept it in the closet because that was where his mother would not look. She used to always be after him about his room, but not anymore. He was the man of the house now, Mom was terribly busy and (his dad had given him a lecture): it was damn well time he started picking up after himself.

Joseph knew about the box. Sometimes when Jared was still outside, or over at a friend’s, he would uncover it and count the money or read the notes. But he left everything exactly as he found it. He was an angular little boy with
croakies on his glasses, for sports. He was good at sports, though not good as his brother. His room was pin-drop neat. Even the prizes from his cracker jacks, even his baseball cards were filed away in the pigeon holes and drawers of his roll-top desk.

It had been Jared's desk first; that was good. What was better was, one time it was Dad's. Once upon a time. He had a picture of his dad at nine, framed on the desk: a square-chinned little boy in glasses. The frame was very old and valuable: silver. Sometimes they shined away the tarnish with pink liquid and a rag, but not so much anymore. The tarnish seemed to matter less and less. Perhaps they would polish it again at Christmas. Maybe not. Bob was not too interested in cleaning things, though he sometimes washed the dishes so the kitchen would be nice when Mom got home. She was gone a lot now. Because of her new job.

Claire had taken what was available: four twelve-hour shifts, week nights. It was not so expensive to have a live-in from the seminary up the road if all he had to do was get the boys into bed. She was home in time for breakfast and the school bus, which came at eight. Bob, the seminarian, was in his mid-twenties or maybe thirty, it was hard to tell. They were ships passing in the night, he said with a laugh on his way out the door. He was off to class before the boys woke up and, despite her offers, took his meals in the seminary cafeteria, never returning until she was uniformed and slouching towards the door.

Which suited Claire just fine. It was an ugly thing, she thought, like a splinter, like a pimple on your face, to have a stranger living in the house. Bob helped the boys with homework, even coached Jared with his trumpet practice. He answered their phone, "This is Bob Blaysack." It was bad enough when you had a man suddenly answering your phone at night, but worse when he happened to have the same name as your husband. Same Christian name.

The seminary part was hard to ignore but Claire did her
best. Robert had suffered through a churchy childhood: there would be no religious crap in his house as long as he was around, he used to say. Now, he had no say. Bob and Robert had never met. Claire liked that part. She wanted to keep it that way. Once when he needed his nine iron on a Thursday night she'd dropped it off for him on her way to work, even though Lenora's house was in a subdivision fifteen minutes beyond the hospital, and Claire would then be twenty minutes late to begin her shift. It was a cold, starry night. Robert answered Lenora's door in his under- wear—unfamiliar, new underwear—boxer shorts with an irregular pattern of plum-sized purple spheres on a bright green background.

He was naked otherwise, same old Robert. The same surprisingly narrow, sloping shoulders (so well camou- flaged in a good suit), the hair graying at the nipples, the muscular, slightly bowed legs. As Claire handed him the club, careful not to let the upper half of her own body cross the threshold into Lenora's living room, he thrust a folded scrap of paper into her hand. Surprised, she stuffed it into the pocket of her coat. A check? She dared not look. They faced each other silently.

His familiar smell rising in her nostrils in that unfamil- iar place with its acres of freshly manicured beige carpet. Lenora must have been in the kitchen cooking; she could hear the tap of pots, a familiar announcer's voice on National Public Radio. There was an odor of onions frying in olive oil and cumin.

The curry, the radio, Robert's bedroom smell. It was like one of those dreams from her childhood where she was walking up and down, up and down her own street, but her house was missing, or if she found her house, the woman inside was not her mother, and then suddenly she realized that she knew—had always known—her mother was gone, lost, and she was alone.

Robert took the nine iron with his free hand. Outside, a breeze rose up sharply. If he was freezing, standing there half-naked in the doorway he didn't let on. He was hold-
ing a glass of red wine in his other hand, and did not invite her in, not that Claire would have accepted, of course, not in a million years. Robert seemed to be sizing her up as she stood stiffly before him in her nursing whites. She had not worn nursing whites since the earliest years of their marriage, since before she was pregnant with Jared, since she was a size 4. Of course he would be assessing and comparing, examining her now, remembering her then.

"Thanks, Buttercup," he said, exhuming a pet name from their earliest days together. She had never liked it; it was the name of a bad-tempered schnauzer that belonged to the old lady who'd shared the common wall of the apartment he lived in the year they met. The dog had yapped all day and night for the better part of a year until the old lady broke her hip on a puddle of ice while walking it and was taken away to a hospital, not Claire's hospital, in an ambulance, never to be seen (by Claire or Robert) again. The dog disappeared; a month later, after Claire's roommate left for graduate school, Robert moved in with her.

I'm called little Buttercup, dear little Buttercup.

Claire glowered; Robert had always known how to get the best of her by making her feel ridiculous. As she picked her way back across Lenora's fussy winding flagstone path, she studied the flashing toes of her sturdy, crepe-soled white-white-white shoes.

("Are you a nurse?" the clerk had asked brightly the day she bought them.) But she was a nurse. And, as comings-down in the world went, it wasn't so bad. In fact, she was looking forward to the brief, cold ride in her messy car followed by the cheery camaraderie of the hospital's night staff. She was looking forward to losing herself in the problems of the Geriatric Floor. In Mr. Zezniak's thrombosis. Mrs. Olicott's pleurisy. Mamie Wiley, age 100, and her end-stage Parkinson's Disease.
Jared and Joseph would be working on their homework now, the two of them spread out at the clean kitchen table beneath the watchful eye of Bob Blaysack, who liked to perch on the countertop (so Joseph had confided in her) methodically chewing Oreos of mysterious origin (he never touched the family’s snack food supply, despite Claire’s repeated invitations), bent over his dog-eared, densely highlighted Oxford Annotated Bible.

It was a cozy scene, she thought, and appalling. How had they spiraled, so quickly, she and the boys, to such immoderate heights of wholesomeness? A year ago she and Robert had allowed their sons to do their homework sprawled on the family room rug with the TV blaring Simpsons reruns in the background. Typical kids, typical family. It was exactly the life they’d aimed for. At the time, last year had seemed like a good year. Robert had bagged his big promotion. He was spending most of his evenings upstairs on the phone sipping glass after glass of jug wine, but at least he was home, an enormous improvement since the office had bought him a laptop. And she’d spent her evenings on the sofa near her sons, contentedly working on a quilt top. Laptop, quilt top—how ludicrous it seemed, now, the idea of Robert tapping away upstairs in his underwear, she downstairs stitching Flying Geese, Bear’s Paw, Jacob’s Ladder. The idea of the four of them, a family. To think she had actually felt adventurous when she sallied out to Stitch Club meetings on Wednesday nights.

“Does he, like, read them the Bible?” was what her friends wanted to know. They were all so curious about Bob.

“I’m sure he wouldn’t get away with much of that. My guys are one tough audience.” Claire’s reply was crisp. She had known her friends forever, ever since Robert and she had bought the house, ever since the children were born, but there was a difference now. She had stopped attending Stitch Club meetings, for one thing; if she saw them at all now it was at the edges of soccer fields, or waiting on line at the deli counter. Their curiosity seemed
morbid, as if they had come out of their houses to gaze at her lying bloodied in a car wreck.

And what if he were reading them the Bible? Worse had happened. They'd survive. She'd been dragged to services at First Presbyterian every Sunday at eleven until she escaped to college and had nary a pious corpuscle to show for it today. Robert had been an altar boy. He had lit candles, swung incense, Dominus vobiscum, and look at him now.

The way Bob Blaysack went off in the morning in his v-neck sweaters and dull ties, frayed briefcase in hand, he might have been a doctoral student in English literature, or even a low-key law student. No clerical collar, no lumpy pewter cross on a knotted leather shoestring, like the others she'd interviewed for the job. Bob did his studying at night while Claire was working; on weekends he disappeared, she supposed, to do his field work, though what mattered was he wasn't trying to lasso them into going along with him to church. Perhaps he visited family sometimes, or a girlfriend, if he had one, but maybe not. No one ever called for him during the day while he was gone. It was hard to imagine Bob having any life outside of the time he spent sleeping, studying, chomping Oreos in her kitchen. Claire wasn't sure why she liked things this way, but she did. If Bob was an enigma, she was content to leave him uncracked. She was alone for the first time in years, that was it, that was why. Her sons were with her, but they were part of her. Together, they were alone. She was jealous of her solitude. It was a lovely thing. Sometimes it seemed that if she held her breath she could almost float. Often, she would hesitate to exhale. She was alone.

Robert shut the door behind his wife, felt the first lock snap into place, and left it at that: his hands were full. Lenora had three locks on the front door. And a motion detector and an alarm. Her Acura, in the driveway, was
outfitted like an armored truck. When his own, far more expensive car had been stolen off the parking lot of his office downtown, she had behaved almost gloatingly. He had not, of course, been making use of the steering wheel lock that she had bought him. Well, he was glad for her, if being right gave her such a big kick. No skin off his nose. It was a company car, two years old; in three weeks he would have the current year’s model to replace it.

The handle of the nine iron was still warm from Claire’s hand. He slipped it into Lenora’s Chinese porcelain umbrella rack. (She wouldn’t like that. She was for everything in its place.)

Robert despised golf; if he’d enjoyed it at all he would’ve made sure to take all his equipment when he moved out of the house. He’d packed his NordicTrac, all three of his squash racquets, and his skis—Claire’s too for that matter, not that she would even miss them; she was no skier. They might fit Lenora.

Though probably not. Lenora was a full head taller than Claire, nearly as tall as Robert, and she was narrow. Not light, but all angles, whereas Claire was round.

Claire had looked especially round tonight—soft was a better word for it. She had put on weight. She would say the white uniform was unflattering, but in truth the extra pounds suited her. And her haircut had grown out; whenever this happened, the curls softened. This was an appealing look on her, Robert had always thought, but he knew she hated it, the feeling of slight but constant dishevelment. In the nurse’s uniform, her hair too long, her cheeks flushed from the cold, she had a girlish quality. He pictured her seated in her car in the driveway, just out of sight, pausing to unfold his note.

It was the affair that was making her attractive, he saw that. Claire was beautiful because she was sleeping with another man.

Bill Blaycock. At first it had got under his skin. He’d wanted to explode. The name was the worst; no, imagining what Bill Blaycock looked like was the worst part: thick
thick hair, still its original color, the color of first manhood. He had felt the rage swelling in his throat when Joseph told him what was going on. The thought of it happening under his sons’ noses. Not, Joseph pointed out, not that Robert wasn’t doing it (the boy’s words) himself. Clearly, Joseph said this to challenge his silence, for Robert had not replied, believing he was guarding his feelings, exercising restraint. But Joseph saw through his parents. He always did. He made them account for everything. Not Jared; the older boy’s head was in the clouds; all he could think about was sports and comic book heroes. Joseph was the sensitive one.

Robert’s lawyer had pointed out that he could hardly accuse his wife of spousal abandonment. Besides, the idea of suing for custody (no, not revenge, but merely to shake her up a little), even an equal-time arrangement, was out of the question at this point, with everything so up in the air, with Lenora as skittish about the boys as Robert was about Lenora. He had no idea where he’d be in five years, frankly. For all he knew, back with Claire. (He was leaving all the options open.) So. For the time being he would have to live with it. Blaycock.

The name began to grow on him, like ivy. He knew Blaycock’s voice from the few times on the phone. It was deep, one of those sonorous high-school drama club baritones. Robert had kept their conversations brief, but the voice rang in his ears for hours.

He took it to bed with him. “This is Bill Blaycock.” It was in there, in bed with him and Lenora. Lenora liked to sit up half the night reading mutual fund prospectuses (it was her idea of how to relax) so he worked on her, “Let me show you my bill blaycock.”

It became their special word. Lenora was more playful than Claire had been. He called her his butterball, a laugh because of her angularity.

Now she was in the kitchen, waiting for him. He drained
his wine glass and padded across the perfect beige carpet. What she actually expected him to do was stand around waiting for orders. If Claire could see him slicing peppers for salad, setting the table, she would die—he had never lifted a finger in the kitchen at home. Maybe that was what had made living with Lenora so appealing, at first. But, truth was, the novelty was slowly draining out of order-taking.

She didn’t pause when he came up behind her. Her sharp elbows moved in time with the cleaver. Chop chop. She had an amazing collection of knives, professional quality (her emphasis.) He would never have imagined a vegetarian could need so many knives.

He reached across her shoulder to refill his wine glass. Chop chop. Okay, so she was pissed off about Claire at the front door. That morning, she’d offered to lend him her own car if it was so important to get the nine iron for his game with Peterson tomorrow, or, she’d said, he could have driven his rental, for God’s sake, if he weren’t so damn insecure. But Lenore was wrong: it wasn’t only that he couldn’t bear to be seen in his old neighborhood in a dowdy car, though that was certainly part of it. What bothered him more was the idea of coming face to face with Bill Blaycock.

Chop chop. He put his free hand on Lenora’s bony shoulder. She did not resist. Pressing against her now. Beneath her ribbed cardigan, the jut of her shoulderblade. He traced the angle with his chin, his stubble catching on the fibers of the sweater. Bill Blaycock, he whispered. Chop chop. Lenora wouldn’t speak or move.

Jared slipped away while Bob was frowning thoughtfully into the translucent pages of his red-covered Bible. Joseph sat transfixed by a comic book. He was supposed to be doing an extra page of subtraction, a punishment from his teacher for not finishing last night’s page.

It wasn’t Jared’s problem. Bob would have to make Joseph do it if and when he snapped out of his own trance.
Not my lookout, Jared thought. His kid brother’s homework wasn’t his problem, no way.

Though, wasn’t it?

Brother of Jared! At school, Joseph had been kept in from recess three times already. One more time and Mom would get a note. Jared wasn’t sure why, but he didn’t want that to happen. And today the “big kids” of the third grade had started beating on Joseph behind the music building. They were punks, they were squirts, but they were bigger than Joseph. Heavier. Joseph was fast, but not fast enough. A bunch of girls had run for Jared. But what if he hadn’t got there in time? What if Joseph’s glasses had broken?

Jared wandered up the stairs. He opened the door to Bob’s bedroom noiselessly, a skill he’d perfected back when the room was still Dad’s study. He used to boot up Dad’s laptop and play Tetris in the middle of the night.

He slid open the drawer to the desk. Now it had all Bob’s stuff, mostly xeroxes of dull articles, duller index cards, gummy ball point pens and clots of paper clips. Out of habit, he pocketed some change: a quarter, a couple of dimes, not enough to be remarked upon, though Bob would surely notice. Bob’s poverty—far more serious than their own recent deprivation (no skiing out West this year, no hundred dollar sneakers)—made pocket change important. He rifled listlessly through the papers.

He had not known what he was looking for, he never did when he began, but here it was:

What you intended
for evil
God intended for
good, to
accomplish what is
now being done for
the salvation of
many.
Bob’s tidy square handwriting filled the borders of the post-it perfectly. Jared peeled it off the page without glancing at the text below. The post-it stuck like a leaf to the moist palm of his hand.

Back in his own room he undressed efficiently. He avoided looking sideways towards the mirror that was glued to the back of the door as the clothes slid from his body onto the growing pile on his closet floor, smothering the pink soapstone box, protecting. All the stolen scraps, the stolen change, the stolen words. He stood naked in the middle of the room; the plain cold air touching him all over. It was freezing in his room, which was directly above the garage. His mom had made a warm quilt for his bed, Jacob’s Ladder, she called it. It was the only quilt she’d ever finished. Joseph didn’t have one. She’d given it to Jared, she said, because his was the coldest room.

Bob lived with them now, but he, Jared, was the man of the house.

The dark air pressed up against the window. The night was so close. Jared felt shy, as though the night were watching him. But it was thrilling. He could hardly bear to look up towards the window, a giant eye, a giant I.

Any moment the door could open. Joseph might walk in, he never knocked. (Bob would knock, but would he hesitate?)

That made the feeling stronger, better. He couldn’t shake it off if he wanted to. Sometimes you want to turn back, go back where it’s safe, where it’s warm, turn on the lights, go back, interrupt. But there was no stopping.

Outside, the wind sighed at his window. Beside him the mirror was watching. Jared closed his eyes.

Bob was bending over the subtraction page.

“Eleven take away five,” he intoned. Joseph hesitated, raised his fingers.

“No, you’ve got to know,” said Bob. Gently depressing
the small hand.
 "I can’t—"
 "—think—"
 "—wait, six?"

Bob shook his head. "It’s no good counting. Counting doesn’t count. You need to know it cold."

The small boy began to cry. The long white page, acres and acres of virgin, unsolved problems, grew blurry.

It was no fair. It was punishment. Only he—

He hiccuped it back down inside of him, miserable, hot-faced. His glasses were smeared. Earlier today, they had nearly been broken. But, then, he had gotten away. He was fast. Everybody said so. Joseph, he’s the quick one.

He was remembering, suddenly:
"Today in school my teacher, Mrs. Miller, she—"
"Yes?"
"Nothing."
Softly: "What is it, Joseph?"
"Did you ever hear of punishing a whole class for what just one single kid does bad?"
"Hmmm."
"Well, if you was the teacher would you?"
"No."
"Then why? Why did she do it? Because then, at recess everybody’s mad at that kid for the punishment and he gets it double. Then."

Joseph wasn’t saying who the person was.
Bob’s hand was on his shoulder.
"I’m sorry that happened, Joseph."

Joseph nodded. It was late, he was so tired and the numbers wouldn’t go away.

Hours later, as the languid autumn sunrise began to cozy its way up the plate glass corridors of the Geriatric Floor, Claire nodded goodbye to the ward clerk and ducked between the gaping doors of the elevator. In a few weeks it would be dark this time of morning; the thought was both exhilarating and sad.
Her fingers kept fidgeting inside her coat pocket, searching for Robert’s note. There.

In the thin gold light of the parking lot his felt-tipped words looked more strident now than hours earlier in the nurse’s lounge. They practically shouted:

\[
\begin{aligned}
My \text{ dear Claire,} \\
\text{Fuck Bill Blaycock. (I mean, don’t.) Take me back.} \\
(\text{Please.})
\end{aligned}
\]

--Robert

She replayed the imaginary conversation: You couldn’t possibly mean Bob Blaysack?

He: Oh, now there’s two of them?

Slipping into her car. It made her tremble, the idea.

She considered inventing an errand, to give herself time to think. She would buy donuts for the boys at the Wawa, that’s what, or coffee for herself. But, then, she was low on cash; she already had the jitters and, desperately, after a horrendous night on her feet—Mamie Wiley had coded twice; the second time, the resident was nowhere to be found until too late—Claire needed sleep.

She drove straight into the sunrise, squinting. (It was difficult to remember to bring along sunglasses when you left home after dark.)

The first person she would see when she got to the house was Bob. Old reliable Bob, who must have had a habit of waiting for her at the window, for he was always behind the door, briefcase in hand, ready to flit off to morning vespers, or a cafeteria breakfast, or early class—whatever it was he did—clearly without any intention whatsoever.
of dallying with her.

Then she would drop her heavy purse like ballast in the hallway and float upstairs to the bedsides of her sons. First Jared, who was sleeping in the nude these days, draped in the Jacob's Ladder quilt she'd finished for him last year. That quilt was her masterpiece, though she hadn't understood so as she finished it, believing mistakenly, as we always do when we begin a descent, that her stitch career was still ascending, that there were more and finer quilts to follow—Log Cabin. Lone Star. Tumbling Blocks. Now her firstborn slept beneath the only finished quilt, the Jacob's Ladder, naked, in the coldest room of the house—for reasons both obvious (Robert had always slept in the nude) and obscure. When Claire had accidentally uncovered him one warm morning in the waning days of summer, the boy had lashed at her in anger like a snake. Now she was careful of her distance, touching his bare shoulder with her car-chilled fingertip.

Jared's bubblegum-and-gym-socks smell rose up, reassuring. He stirred, but did not wake. He was protected, he was warm.

Joseph's was the tidy room; he was like her, mindful of the small things, the stitches that compose a life, a family, a quilt. His desk, the old rolltop that had been Robert's as a boy, then Jared's until it grew too cluttered and too small—was a monument to his orderly mind. Each cubby so meticulously arranged. The sports cards. The comic books.

The faded school photo of Robert in its tarnished frame cocked just so.

She eased beside his sleeping form, a tiny, rising-and-falling crescent draped beneath the plain blue bedspread that had been Jared's before she finished the Jacob's Ladder quilt. The bedspread was supposed to have been temporary—she had started a bright, ambitious quilt for Joseph: Tumbling Blocks. It was a challenging pattern; even the Stitch Club had been impressed. Coat of Many
Colors, Robert had teased. But she liked that name; she’d stuck with it. The Coat of Many Colors, so difficult and vivid. She’d abandoned the project the month that Robert left. The fabric pieces, half-cut, the templates, scissors, needles and thread had sat ever since in their basket beside the TV couch in the family room. That basket was a reproach. Every few weeks she vacuumed around it in an arc. She ought to have moved it by now, dismantled its contents or carried it whole to the attic where it would be out of the way, but she could not bring herself to go near, let alone to touch it. They were like the wrong ends of two magnets, repelling one another, she and that damn quilting basket.

Soon, any day now, she would resume working on the quilt.

She was through with quilting. There would never be another quilt.

It was a hiatus. No.

It was the end.

Joseph started awake; in an instant he was sitting up in bed, his steady gaze holding her face. He had always been this way, even as a baby, rising rapidly and fluidly from deep sleep to full consciousness.

Without glasses his eyes were so much bigger, shining.

“Is it a school day?” he began.

Claire nodded. Automatically, she raised her hand to his head, sifting his unruly hair through her fingers. The boy seemed ready to go on speaking, then did not. Rather, he flung the bedspread aside, easing his small square feet onto the bare wood floor. He had pulled away from her mildly, but firmly.

Anyway, it was clear that Joseph did not mind about the unfinished quilt. Better put: he did not care. The blue bedspread was a huge promotion from the Ninja Turtles comforter he’d had before. And the bedspread had been his brother’s. There was continuity in that; it was enough for him. That was how his mind worked.
She knew that she would never finish the quilt.

Joseph was padding off towards the bathroom. It was almost seven; the bus would be honking at the curb in forty minutes. It was time for Claire to badger the older boy awake, to inaugurate the daily procession of sweatpants, cheerios, toothpaste, peanut butter sandwiches. The hasty, subdued goodbyes before fifteen pairs of stony, criticizing prepubescent eyes aboard the bus waiting impatiently to yank the fulcrum of her Life towards its other, more compelling center, to leave her with nothing but an evaporating trail of socks, pogs, empty juiceboxes—alone. Alone in the bright clean light of the kitchen. Alone to finger the note in the place where it was designed to be read. Studied. Admired for its passion and fluidity of line.

“Mom?” Joseph, leaning against the door jamb. He was telling her something about a box, a pink, soapstone box. Scraps, money, stolen notes. The note! But there it was, still, in her pocket. She nodded up at Joseph, distracted. Solid little boy, square chinned echo of the child in the tarnished photograph frame. She could not hear what he was mouthing; she was caught. His words spilled out, tumbling blocks, faceted, brilliant, a rainbow, a ladder to the sky. She clutched the dull blue bedspread, but it was no use now. She was caught in the promise of future leaping in his eyes.
Music Box

Under church bells, radio goes yea to our American Anthem.
Hey, the boom crash wing. Fade radio. Church bells. At the top
edge of the rectory steps he our priest, points to dark
cars parked on you our sidewalk askew. That, that,
and that one. His young sidekick,
whitesmocked, wide, nods
of course. Yes, as you say, so yes, so it is. More
bells. Hear the altarboys basketballing
yonder. Say, ought there not be
a ballerina, atop the roof aspinning? Week
in. Week out. Old women only go
in and out the rectory (but for Sundays)
and wear the cloudy pinks, mints, blues of these
our nineteen-forties. So do we. Coming back. Shut, open, shut.
Run-On

These, these you gave me today, these tulips, lurch off the clay stem, on that, my mantel, and give title to the room; they spend themselves at the oasis of their bends, so, and I prose off the yellow probe of them, before unlighting the light:

as to how it made me sad that so many of Van Gogh’s sunflowers—according to certain critics meant-for-lifting and-for-providence, like a house’s special silver—were dud-brown and dead-like, and you say in a twist, in the now-dark, across from me:

sunflowers are like that—grow green forever, then explode orange, and immediately charged by birds—sparrows? and crows?—and so devastated (they are)—and so it went on, following the tulips strict cast on the wall, and so, you say:

you must grow scores to maintain a few—and how is it with loves—or else you cultivate them in some heavy-set greenhouse air, with its wealths and aisles, and harvest seeds for hippies, Anne’s salad—me too? my big mouth?—and you say:

and that’s another thing altogether—but what’s it worth, I could say, what has been hothouse blown—what is spectacular, not tormented up, heckled, nipped at, or crippled in its tophrust show, I don’t say, turning in bed;
Graffiti

I am counting the shovelfuls of snow my neighbor removes from his sidewalk. You are wrong, I have nothing better to do.

Each square that disappears, part of my sorrow lifts. So that later when I row toward sleep to scrape on concrete, I wake to field of tall grass, one patch of bluebell. Even later, to a television in hell, tuned to whatever is on. So that when I wake to my wife in lavender underwear, I am, then, not so sure. A summer is sinking in the middle of a lake, strings of pearls floating to the surface. Scent of tar rising to the window, wild late flowers. So that when the black and gold leaves fall into the water, I am filled with sadness and I do not know why I am crying for images flickering on a screen.
Carvings

Isabel was sick. Not thefluttery, helplesssick that sent her mother panicked to call the doctor—or twice, when Isabel was younger, the ambulance—but a thick, girdle sick that didn’t alarm her mother very much at all when she described it. “I feel like I could play my belly like a banjo,” Isabel finally said when she had exhausted all the things she didn’t feel: she wasn’t nauseous or constipated, she wasn’t hungry. Her mother just smiled and told her that yes, she could stay home from school. Why didn’t she go back to bed and she would bring her some aspirin?

“It isn’t anything bad?” Isabel asked.

Her mother smiled again and said she didn’t think so. When she brought the aspirin she stayed for a while and rubbed Isabel’s lower back. This helped a little.

There was blood on the sheet when she woke up. Not a lot of blood, just a small spot, dry and brown like the stains on her parents’ mattress that were older than she was.

“Don’t worry, honey, it’s perfectly normal,” her mother said. “It means you’re a woman now, now you can have babies.”

Isabel knew what it was, what it meant. She wondered if her mother remembered that she had explained this at least twice before. Besides, she had learned all about it in fifth grade. She just hadn’t thought it would happen to her.

*

It was instead of gym one day that the girls were herded into the school auditorium. It was a big auditorium, big enough to hold all the students and their families and friends during chorus recitals and plays, but there were only 45 girls in the fifth grade. They sat in the first two rows while the gym teacher sat on the edge of the dusty stage swinging her legs like a little girl.

They used to give this talk in sixth grade, the gym teacher explained. But some girls started a little earlier. That was perfectly normal. This was a phrase used very
often in this context, Isabel noticed. Her mother used it, the gym teacher used it. The pamphlets that the gym teacher handed out used it. It was also perfectly normal for some girls to start when they were 14 or 15, the gym teacher continued. It would happen to every single one of them in 45 different ways and they would all be perfectly normal.

"Except to freaks, right?" Lori Crane asked.

A few girls in the class tittered. The gym teacher was new, she didn’t know what Lori was talking about.

"I mean, my mother told me that these scientists did an experiment with monkeys where they put a pregnant monkey in the microwave and then when the monkey had her baby it had two heads. That two-headed baby couldn’t have babies, could it?"

"I don’t think even normal monkeys have periods," the gym teacher said uncertainly.

*

She should be proud, Isabel’s parents told her. "Miracle" was a word her mother especially liked. She had a standard repertoire of lines she would repeat, sometimes word for word, when Isabel pressed her face into her pillow and pulled the covers over her head. She would think about whether she could suffocate herself that way, if she sucked the pink pillowcase back as far as her molars, if she pushed the pillow against her nose until the tip collapsed like a toothpick wedged between two teeth. She didn’t think she could. Her mother always rolled her over, plucked three or four tissues from the box on her nightstand to wipe the tears and the drool off her cheeks and off the pillowcase.

"They don’t mean it, they’re only teasing."

"You’re a miracle. Don’t let anyone tell you differently."

"It wasn’t random. You were the stronger one, it had to be you." (Once her father, walking past her open door and catching just the last part, grabbed hold of the door frame and broke out in his Tony Bennett impersonation: "I wandered a-ROUND, and finally FOUND, somebody WHO—"

"It was all so hideous and Isabel couldn’t block it out, not
by stuffing her blanket in her ears so she screamed "Stop it!" but her father couldn't hear her because her face was still in her pillow and her mother had to say, "Honey." He didn't understand. He thought it was his singing.)

The worst was: "Ivy wouldn't want you to blame yourself. She'd want you to live life for the both of you."

Her mother had scars, too. This is what prevented Isabel from hating her. The scar across her mother's belly was longer than the scar across Isabel's chest. The tiny matchbox casket that Isabel imagined as pure white, with six pallbearers tripping over each other to get just one finger underneath—her mother had been there. Isabel had to keep reminding herself of that when she said again, "Ivy wouldn't want you to blame yourself." Her mother had been there even though anyone could have said these things she said.

*

Isabel was still a twin, people still called her The Twin, even though she was only one. There were other twins in her grade, Leonard and Karl Tripman. People called them The Twins. Isabel couldn't tell them apart. Leonard said that their mother couldn't even tell them apart, that she said she could easily have confused them a hundred times, calling Leonard, Karl, and then Leonard again. "I might have been born Karl," Leonard said. They would sometimes try to switch places in school and then they would change clothes in the bathroom. They even swapped underwear, since their mother wrote their names on the labels with permanent ink. Isabel wondered if she and Ivy would have tried to fool people. Maybe they would have done it once in a while, just a little reminder to everyone who swore they could tell the difference. They would be perfect, Isabel knew that much. They would practice each other's handwriting, memorize each other's favorite jokes, and never keep secrets, since that could be used as evidence.

When Isabel was younger she had a babysitter named Kathleen who showed her how to push her nightgown up and down over her belly until blue sparks crackled and danced in the dark. "This is why balloons stick to the wall,"
Kathleen said. She said she had only shown it to one other person in her whole life, her best friend Lisa who had lived next door since they were babies. Before Kathleen and Lisa went to sleep they used to stand at the window and generate goodnight sparks. Isabel imagined she and Ivy standing on their beds in the middle of the night sending electric messages until their hair stuck straight up at the ceiling. If they couldn’t fall asleep, they would climb into the same bed and whisper to each other in sentences that all started with the initial I.: I., want to have a bowling birthday this year? I., think Mom and Dad would get us a kitten if we cried for one?

*

Every once in a while, usually on her birthday, a couple of reporters came around to ask Isabel questions. They were usually the same questions and then the same articles. Even the headlines: “MIRACLE TWIN CELEBRATES 12TH BIRTHDAY” was the most recent. The one before that was “MIRACLE TWIN CELEBRATES 11TH BIRTHDAY.” At first she hated talking to the reporters. When she was nine, one of them asked, if she could send a message to Ivy, what would it be? She said, “I-ay iss-may ou-yay.” She had just read a book where twins talked to each other in their own language so noone could understand them but the only secret code she knew was Pig Latin.

It was because the reporters came around so regularly that Isabel realized that if she was still so interesting so long afterwards then when it happened there must have been articles in the paper all the time. She asked the librarian to teach her how to use the microfilm and she was right, there had been articles every day. Her parents had always been honest with her and always answered her questions but there were some things she never would have thought to ask that she read in the articles. There was the pink nailpolish, for example, her parents never told her about that. Isabel printed out a copy of this article to add to her scrapbook at home. She would have printed out every article if she had enough money but there were so many and so many of them
were the same. Especially after surgery—there were dozens of articles that said she was in “critical but stable” condition and “funeral services will be held” and then there was only “critical but stable.”

If it was all true, everything her mother and her doctors had always said, then it seemed to Isabel that somehow it should have been obvious. Wasn’t she pinker, bigger, less shriveled? Or if not on the outside, certainly once they cut them open—shouldn’t the doctors have been able to read the tangle of veins and arteries as easily as road signs? But the doctors had to use pink nailpolish. It must have been because they were exactly the same. “It had to be you,” Isabel’s mother said but she never said that the doctors were afraid they wouldn’t be able to tell them apart.

Isabel immediately wanted to know whether they were anesthetized when their nails were painted but the article didn’t say. They were babies, they could have rubbed their hands together while the nailpolish was still wet until it was smeared on both of their hands. Maybe they did and the doctors didn’t notice, just gave it to whichever one they saw first. She knew they had bracelets, her mother still had them in her bureau—why wasn’t that enough? Nailpolish has no intrinsic meaning. What if in the bloody frenzy of cutting and clamping they forgot which one was supposed to get the heart, Nailpolish or No Nailpolish?

If what her mother had told her all along was right then Ivy would have died even if she got the heart. But what if her mother was just telling her that? Would there really have been that much difference? Instead of Isabel there would have been Ivy, turning 12 to the headline “MIRACLE TWIN CELEBRATES 12TH BIRTHDAY,” and lying in bed at night wondering if Isabel had crumpled like cellophane when they pulled out the heart, and if they laid her gently aside or pushed her roughly out of the way in their haste to plug all the broken arteries.

*

Isabel changed her panties and pulled the adhesive strip off the pad her mother gave her, carefully pressed it into
place.

"There's blood—" Isabel called to her mother, who was standing outside the bathroom door.

"Just throw them away," she said.

At dinner that night her father made the typical veiled jokes to show that he knew but that he was sensitive enough to possible embarrassment on her part not to mention anything directly. Mostly they were Boy Jokes.

"We're going to have to watch you now, Isabel," he said. He even shook his head slowly, sadly. "Soon there'll be a line outside the door. You're going to be a real heartbreaker, I've always known it. Ask your mother if I didn't call it when you were six months old."

"I don't think so," Isabel said.

Heartbreak was one word that would never come out of her mouth. She had never gone to the Friday night dances or found anonymous notes clogged in her locker vents. When she was in elementary school she never played Run, Catch, Kiss in the playground, hiding huddled and breathless in the hollow center of the aluminum Swiss cheese, peering out through the rusty holes. And more than she knew she would never break anyone's heart she knew her heart could never be broken. It was new and improved, extra big, extra tough. "As seen on t.v.," her doctor joked. It was a five-cylinder heart, a heart that should have developed into two hearts but never did. Her doctor had drawn a picture of it on the back of a prescription pad, erasing little bits to show where he had to snip some away to make it fit. When she was in fourth grade Isabel's class had gone on a field trip to the science museum and they had walked through a two-story model of the human heart. "Come on, little blood cells," the teacher called them. They walked up and down through the atriums and the ventricles. The narrow plaster tunnels connecting them were covered in graffiti and dried gum. Isabel read the graffiti and ignored the guide. She wondered about TINA 'N TROY: whether they were still together, what they looked like, why they used a green magic marker—were they trying to look like Christmas against the red heart walls? She failed the quiz
but it just wasn’t very interesting, being a blood cell in someone else’s body.

*

When Isabel couldn’t sleep at night, or when she was upset, she rubbed her chest, slow circles over her breastbone. “It’s perfectly normal for us to touch ourselves,” the gym teacher said, but Isabel had never considered that it might be wrong. She was just surprised to hear that other people did it too. Twice already this year she had gone to the bathroom and sat on the edge of the toilet rubbing her chest under t-shirt—once when she saw two boys throwing rocks at a dead squirrel, once when Brian Keller tried to kiss her on a dare while square-dancing in gym. Rubbing always calmed her down. She couldn’t rub and cry at the same time.

They had used part of Ivy’s skin to close the hole in her chest. This was something else she learned from going through the microfilm, something else she never would have thought to ask. They had pulled her skin tight around her ribs and when it still didn’t fit there was Ivy, and she didn’t need hers anymore anyway. This was how Isabel lost her microfilm privileges for one month, by not rewinding the film, by leaving her chair tipped back on two legs against the table. It was all she could do to make it to the bathroom without clawing through her t-shirt—her chest was crawling like something separate and alive and awakened and she stood in front of the bathroom mirror clutching her shirt in her fists, desperate to lift it up and see if she could tell but afraid she would be able to. She couldn’t stop thinking of deer she saw every autumn, lashed to the hoods of cars, and the softest beaded moccasins, stitched together from leftover scraps.

When she first found out, she thought she should be able to feel a difference, if she focused, if she felt each downy hair, the faintly swollen bumps of her scar. Like running her fingers over her jeans to the corduroy patch over the knee, only far more subtle. But she couldn’t feel any difference—no deadening, no sensitivity. Now it just
soothed her, to think that really they were still attached. She could scrape her nail against Ivy’s skin and feel the slight pain twinge in her own head. It was just like a movie she saw about two sisters who were so close that one couldn’t stub her toe without the other crying out and clutching her foot.

*

Cramps are little contractions, Isabel read. So she lay on her bed with her legs spread and bent at the knee, like pregnant women on t.v., and gave birth to small clots of blood and tissue. There was an egg in there too, somewhere. All the eggs she would ever have were ready and waiting in her ovaries. And they would all pass out the same way, silently, incomplete, smothered in blood. She had been told that identical twins were statistical anomalies, no genetic basis, but that didn’t mean it couldn’t happen again. Her heart was really two hearts intertwined, maybe her eggs were also doubled, gelled together like the twin yolks that sometimes slithered into the frying pan from completely normal looking eggs. “Maybe I can only have siamese twins,” she told her mother, who said she had more of a chance of winning a lottery, getting struck by lightening (her mother even said, getting struck twice by lightening)— “Then why didn’t you have any more kids?” Isabel asked.

Her mother got exasperated then and asked why they were talking about this now, Isabel would change her mind when she was older.

She didn’t tell her mother why she wouldn’t change her mind. That she was afraid if she ever had to make the choice her parents had to make she would take the babies home and let them rub their noses and pat their hands together like happy seals.

Isabel had seen photographs of herself and Ivy and they reminded her of little logic games her teacher had given her once. She could put tracing paper over each picture and go over the outline and never lift her pencil off the paper. Now she was like her grandmother, with her pictures and her loss
and her owl eyes looking only backwards. Everything began for her with a soulmate, she didn’t know what she was supposed to be looking for. “Until God shall separate you by death”—they actually use the word separate, she had heard it herself at her cousin’s wedding. “We just fit, right from the beginning,” Isabel’s mother said, describing how she and Isabel’s father had met when they were in high school. “You mean you liked each other alot,” Isabel said. She hated those expressions—people are puzzle pieces, halves of the same whole—expressions that were just metaphors for everyone else. Isabel knew all about metaphors. She had learned about the difference between metaphors and similes in school and then she had gotten 100% on the test. Metaphor: We are two halves of the same whole. Simile: We are like two halves of the same whole. What if the truth is: We are two halves of the same whole? It didn’t seem right to Isabel, that there was nothing to differentiate truth from metaphor. Similes were much more honest.

*

Isabel had math first period. Leonard Tripman was in her class and if Mr. Beltzer was planning to give a pop quiz he would grill Leonard to make sure he wasn’t Karl. “Who sits two seats behind you? And don’t turn around,” he would say. “What was the name of the substitute teacher you had last Thursday? What door do we go out in case of a fire drill?” Everyone else in the class would be looking through their notes but Isabel would listen to Mr. Beltzer and Leonard/Karl. She liked to hear what questions Mr. Beltzer thought would distinguish between them, what button would pop the top of Leonard/Karl’s head open so Mr. Beltzer could look right inside: “What color chalk do I use to signify a variable?”

Sometimes Isabel didn’t listen. Sometimes she got frustrated with the triviality of the questions and would loop her finger over the swirls of graffiti on her desk until it was blue with ink. They were twins, they knew everything about each other. How could Mr. Beltzer think that asking about the broken ruler he used to prop the door open would
prove anything?

Isabel’s desk was smeared with the names and drawings of students who sat there later periods, sloppy because pens would slip and skitter across the smooth surface. There was a small blue cloud in the bottom corner where someone had written MATH BLOWS and Isabel had rubbed it mostly away with a wet thumb. It was so easy. She could erase everything, or whatever her eraser landed on when she bounced her pencil randomly on her desk, or just names she didn’t like because she had known nasty Kims and Nancys in books and in real life. No one could do that to her. She wondered why no one had figured out what she had, that if she pressed very hard, held her right hand steady with her left and went over each letter countless times she could carve right into the desktop. It was a short name, it had only taken one period before she could rub it with the tips of her fingers and read it like reverse Braille. But she liked the way the pen moved, trapped in the narrow tracks of the letters so she kept going over it. She worked at it until the grooves were deeper than the tip of her pen, until she could stand her pen upright like a flag. While Mr. Beltzer questioned Leonard she would swoop her pen along the track like a roller coaster, sometimes wondering whether there was any real difference between Leonard and Karl, why Mr. Beltzer cared so much. Sometimes she would think about those other students who sat at her desk during later periods of math. They must have seen it, wondered who was so determined that her work not be erased at the end of the term when the desks were washed and polished. Maybe they would take the bathroom pass at various points of the day and wander past the classroom, quickly peer in to see who was at the seat. Sometimes while she was copying notes off the blackboard or taking a test she would start, her skin tingling with being watched, but there was never anyone framed in the gridded glass panels next to the door. She would lower her head, sure she had just missed someone, and picture in her mind a hand clenched around the scratched and scarred wooden pass, mentally overhear the thoughtful conclusion: Yes, that must be her. That looks like an Ivy.
The Most Circumspect Daughter of Icarius

One must emend poetry of wet fragrances, of fresh paint and lilacs on cottages,

To include spigots leaking slowly over decades, without savor, just rust and pressure

Working a theme for every season; so winter infuses spring, and spring summer;

So, cautious gardener, your face works a hard plot in August, when cornflowers

Stand beside wooden pillars before the slaughter of fall, ensured of an unscheduled trickle

From above, from below, and along your cheek, slowly over decades.
Under Strong Light

I’m trying to read
but the sun keeps looking over my shoulder,
washing the page clean with its glare,
trying my patience
because I know that under this shine
is meaning
or, at least, a stab at meaning.
Now I hear a plane
and squint up
but all I see is a buzzard
angling on a thermal.
The plane engine stalls down
then guns
and the buzzard lifts.
The plane is blotted out by the sun
or maybe it’s really the buzzard,
his engine revving on some death he’s devoured.
He banks and now directly beneath him,
glinted out, is the gist, the fact,
the meat I am to him.
business

My varnished desk-top
nothing dull can mar the gloss
if I tear through papers with my pen
the wood remains untouched
still punctuated
with corners of envelopes
and cold eraser flakes.

Wooden obscenity
my fingers hold the paper flat
my ballpoint furrows the white
leaving a black trail.

If you were here
I'd stretch you on the top crashing cups aside
and kiss your lips beside the dictaphone.
Blue, Black and Purple: Hallelujah!

A Note to the Reader: The arrival of tonight's story has been delayed by icing on the tracks east of New Haven. The author apologizes for the delay and urges you to remain seated. We expect to begin shortly.

A Note to the Reader: While we wait, a few words about the characters in this evening's entertainment—for, believe me, your author has spared himself no expense in assembling his cast. On board we have several insecure, Leading Man types and a number of forceful, and astonishingly able, young women. We have oldsters both wise and infantile. We have children naive and world weary. We have a quartet of jazz musicians, an Argentine belly dancer, and a pro bowler with a 220 average. We have a pro-bowler lesbian trapeze artist and her lover, a concert pianist. We have a fastidious coal miner, an artist of the "Joy of Painting" School, and an excessively-hostile $6 barber. Our stripper is utterly without modesty, though her mother, an Episcopal priest, is also on board. Several of our characters feature various strains of mental illness, while among our animal contingent there's Chip, the talking iguana, and Renato, a dog who sings along handsomely with the early recordings of Miles Davis.

Together, they travel on a private train consisting of a coal-fired engine and tender, baggage car, diner, and two Pullmans. The bar in the diner is exceedingly well-stocked. Two characters hold AA meetings in the baggage car.

They are, to be sure, a volatile lot, and living in close quarters has its ups and downs. Recriminations and tears are not uncommon. I do my best to soothe them. And protect them. The company's firearms, for example, are kept under lock and key. Even so, with characters who insist on doing what they will do, occasionally, alas, I end
up losing one.
Excuse me. I am being summoned from off-stage.

A NOTE TO THE READER: It is my unfortunate duty to inform you that a terrible accident has occurred. Just minutes ago the train bearing tonight's story, and the players in that story, plunged off the bridge between Lyme and Old Saybrook, and into the Connecticut River.

That's about all I can say for now, except that there is no report yet of survivors. I'm sorry...

A NOTE TO THE READER: Backstage, a line has been opened to the accident site.

The train is said to have left the bridge at the very center of the span, plunging approximately two hundred feet into sixty feet of water. Strangely, the tracks at that point are severed, bent off at an angle of forty-five degrees. Although no one has stepped forward as a witness to the actual derailment, several now on the scene claim to have heard a great rending of metal just prior to the crash.

Bystanders assert that the train appears to have landed intact and right side up, noting the "eerie" yellow light coming from the windows on each side. There is an unsubstantiated report of air bubbles. All this has raised the hope of rescue teams, although they also report the river's murkiness and unusual turbulence are severely hampering their efforts.

A NOTE TO THE READER: Listen up, folks! I've heard the whispers. Apparently, some of you think maybe I'm responsible for the derailment. Some of you are rather cynical, it seems. Some of you are a bit unkind.

Well, get this: I am not a petty conjurer. I cannot pull a rabbit out of my hat. I can't bend spoons by telepathy. And I did not bend the tracks going over that bridge!

Now I won't deny there's been labor trouble between
my characters and me. Some have argued that I over-direct; others need every gesture blocked out in advance. Some players are constantly forgetting their lines; with others it's nothing but more, more, more! A few complain of inadequate make-up. Others would like to play it in the nude. I've got a lot of prima donnas in the troupe. Many, ironically, suffer from stage fright. My fellow auteurs among the audience will no doubt sympathize.

Frankly, I've always found their demands ambiguous. For example, their recent ultimatum: give us more "creative control" or we strike. Pressed for specifics, they threw up their hands. (Actors!) Yet, as if to flex their muscle, they began a work slowdown, a "blue flu" as it were. Yours truly was forced into the writing of poetry. Strictly a non-union affair.

They knew I had to give in. And give in I did: in fact, tonight's story was to be largely an improvisation (the title was their choice, by the way), with only minimal direction from the author. My leading characters hinted that they had something quite unusual in mind, although, as I've suggested, not everyone appeared game.

A Note to the Reader: Without diminishing the human scale of tonight's tragedy, I think I should also point out that train wrecks are a not-infrequent occurrence in fiction. Statistically, a fiction train is six times more likely to derail than a comparable train operated by Amtrak! Even more significantly, though no dissertation has, to this author's knowledge, yet been completed on the subject, The vast majority of fiction train derailments occur while the train is over water.

Your guess is as good as mine as to why. Though perhaps the real question is whether or not fictional characters are aware of this statistic. Or responsible for it.

A Note to the Reader: Perhaps the finest example of a
derailment in contemporary fiction is to be found in Marilynne Robinson's novel *Housekeeping*. Ms. Robinson's train, "called the Fireball, had pulled more than halfway across the bridge when the engine nosed over toward the lake and then the rest of the train slid after it into the water like a weasel sliding off a rock."

I urge you all now to close your eyes and try to see it, for indeed there is nothing more lovely than a well-imagined tragedy.

**A Note to the Reader:** As the silt settles, the lights of the train are now said to be clearly visible, as are numerous air bubbles rising all along the cars. I frankly don't know what to make of that. Nor of the report that the two divers who've descended to the wreck have not yet come back up.

**A Note to the Reader:** By now, their tanks must be empty, still the divers have not returned. Air bubbles continue, meanwhile, to break the surface of the river, releasing what witnesses describe as a peculiar kind of music.

**A Note to the Reader:** I am definitely smelling a rat.

It's a thankless business, I'll tell you, one that a wiser man would get out of. "Music," indeed! How about the "Hallelujah Chorus"? After all, each and every one of them has a voice coach!

This from the guy you thought had tried to snuff the entire train.

Why voice lessons? Why expensive ear training? Progress, my friends! For it is my belief that in the future all literature will, once again, be sung. No, baby has not cut up all his Camille Paglia. But baby does, to make a living, teach university courses in "Novel into Film." For a writer of fiction, this is an excellent discipline, in the way that barbed wire girdles make an excellent disci-
pline.

Stick with me here a minute.

Recently, I introduced my students to the Flannery O’Connor novel *Wise Blood*. “We don’t like it,” said my students. “We don’t get it.”

I pleaded with them to be patient. Then I showed them the film version, directed by John Huston. “We don’t like it. We don’t get it. It’s boring,” they all said.

But, hey, wasn’t John Huston some kind of genius? That could only mean one thing, they said: Flannery O’Connor was a hack! End of discussion.

Now my motive here is not to disparage the young men and women who will one day become Important Persons, with jobs like Film Producer, Best-Selling Novelist, or Anchor for “The CBS Evening News.” It is, instead, to prepare you for how they changed their minds about Flannery O’Connor. Here is how it happened.

Last week, a student came to me very excited about a song by a band called Ministry. He pressed their CD upon me, saying that “Jesus Built My Hotrod” includes “sampling” from the dialogue track of *Wise Blood*. “Un-real,” he said. “You gotta hear it.”

My student described Ministry’s music as “industrial.” I would describe it as head-banging. If Dante were alive to rewrite his *Inferno*, “Jesus Built My Hotrod” is what would play on the elevator going down.

I listened to “Jesus,” as my student suggested, at high volume, and although the song appears to be about masturbation, one can plainly hear the actor Brad Dourif delivering such Hazel Motes bon mots as “Nobody with a good car needs to be justified!” I played this for the rest of the class and now they think old Flannery is bitchin’. Now they do get the lines, “Where you come from is gone. Where you thought you were goin’ to weren’t never there. And where you are ain’t no good unless you can get away from it!”

(Sage advice, incidentally, for the writer of what is still
called "literary fiction."

God bless the boys in Ministry. True prophets. They know the score. First a novel no one reads. Then a motion picture no one sees. Then a song played at ear-splitting volume, and at last the message is received.

And my point? Maybe my characters think they'll run off to the movies. Maybe they want to star in music videos. But so much, I think it's safe to say, so much for progressive literary ear training!!

Man, I should've learned to play guitar.

A Note to the Reader: Incredible as it may seem to you (though it no longer does to me), the train—my train—has begun to move. Nearly imperceptible at first, and then dismissed as an illusion wrought by the current, the movement has now been confirmed by careful sighting and is estimated at some twenty-five feet and counting. South. And East. In the direction of Long Island Sound.

A Note to the Reader: Regardless of what happens, I will, alas, have to end our evening together very shortly. For one thing, I'm not feeling so great. Second, I am fast approaching two thousand words here, and the proprietor of this establishment insists upon a quick finish. It is, after all, but sound fictional practice—one that was, like so many others, conceived of in the movies.

A well-known truism among exhibitors of theatrical motion pictures is that a movie under ninety minutes will almost always disappoint. The audience feels cheated. They didn't get their money's worth. Conversely, much longer than two hours and the picture will quite likely be a bore. Moreover, you cannot turn six shows a day. And that sixth show makes all the difference for concession sales—concessions being, as we all know, where the money's really at.

In fiction, another dissertation is likely in order, yet it's easy to sketch a rough corollary. A story under a
thousand words is a curiosity, a trick; while one over five or six thousand has all the sex appeal of a truck manual. Too short, you’re a miniaturist; too long, you’re a lunatic. The young writer of novellas might as well put a bullet in his ear.

**A Note to the Reader:** The train is picking up speed, having gone almost out of sight now of the original “accident.” And at this point I’ll be saying goodnight. A helicopter is waiting to take me to a Coast Guard vessel in the Sound. We’ll be trying to head off the train, for I’m told that they seem to be angling for Montauk Point and, after that, the open sea. If they get that far, I’ve lost them, and that I will not allow. I’m going down after them. Over the side in a steel diving helmet. Holding an anvil, if necessary.

I regret any inconvenience you may have suffered in these pages; given the circumstances, I’ve done the best I could. This has been an embarrassing time for me and, as I said, I haven’t been feeling quite right. But no matter. As of this moment, I am ready for battle. It won’t be easy for them to escape. Don’t get me wrong; I’m not out for revenge. I am willing to talk. I am willing to bend. But I *am* going to get back on that train.
The Leaving Speed

Ahoy: my twitching olympic, my battle cry untitled.

And I said I wanted to do this without breaking
All the windows. When I open the closet, only one of us

Will continue to breathe. Let me pound just two
Small things into your passport: I have the nerves

Of a calliope. I am not your perfume.

But you rise, small as fish bones, while I race
A newspaper into the street. I preamble

To the senile airport. Your advice? Don’t jump: get pushed.
And don’t put all of your ashes into one

Jet stream. Too much has already been thrown together.

When I reach the speed of leaving, I tell my seatmate
What the world was like before destinations, before

Finishing touches, and he donates two courageous
Butterflies to my cause. They paint flames on my ribcage.

I will call them Windy and Continued Cold.
Colder Thy Kiss

Her lingereyes were innering my soma
in summersprawl elapsing dong of hours
completely, like the fragranse of a horn
arranging all around its golden daze.

Corner had crept upon us. Olding imps
stood gesture in audience, moldered goathorns
tossed our together tempo lustlessly
while greening scened our wane, its sad slope.

Winter was wrong. Therefore that afternoon
the awningmakers out with other trades
of spring corrected storms, sold patch
and sunset panorama to all sundry.

Our previously beating bones collapsed
like wrongside out umbrella ribs.
Belief left body. Wolfwill died.
Humming of vulture wings was melody.

In that world scented by summer,
contractual, we signed with eyes for ink,
then rose like birdlift to future
dance with similar difference.
Debris

I want to adopt a sibilant city, New Orleans or Tuscaloosa, 
I want the word all to myself, 
have it sleep in my bed, sing sexily to me.

The joys of merlot, lilies, the moment when your lover 
moves his hand down, then moves you up 
to him—your greediness gathers in all this brightness.

Though I wouldn't stand in the blazing path of a comet, 
wouldn't go that far, I don't want to be dust 
poured into an urn; I will be sifted with brilliant debris.

There's always a price for ardor. 
I know what fire leaves: scar tissue 
shiny as the moon, eerie, pitted with experience.
It Could Make You a Little Sick

The bent man leaned on his scythe, sighed and sighed again. "Why am I so tired?" he wondered, while the wheeling dreams of the darkness surrounded him.

In the last days a kind of distinction had befallen him. He seemed separate. He was waiting and very very tired. He was cutting hay and he was sneezing and aching and he was alone. Very. Until Stella.

When the storm arrived, so did Stella. Stella’s finger was bleeding. Stella’s life was bleeding.

"I’m not afraid to do it again," Stella said to no one in particular, but it was the bent man who was there to hear it.

"Is light a virtue or a weight?" asked the bent man.

Way up in the heavens the current ache of the darkest hour was listening to the man in the moon. He was a little sick.

"Why do you ask me that?" said Stella, bleeding more angrily now.

"I’m getting so dusty I can’t shine anymore," said the man.

"We’ll just see about that," said Stella, hiking up her skirt.

The bent man straightened. It was predictable. It was polished. It was too damn easy.

So they struggled for a few years.

So then they set up an antique store in the garage. They tried to find the human in it.

One day a customer with a wooden arm came to pick up a butter churn and he said as he loaded the cracked wooden albatross into his turquoise green Ford Bronco 4x4, "Is light a virtue or a weight?"

Stella beamed.

The bent man said, "Perhaps we should file a petition."

The Bronco galloped away.

Way up in the heavens the old ache of the darkest hour polished the pool of tears the man in the moon had left before escaping to a remote villa in Argentina.

The police were nowhere to be seen.

The scythe was never recovered.

It doesn’t really matter that it’s true.
Danny and the Lesbians

“I think you should meet Sylvia Schuller,” Danny’s sister-in-law, Miriam, said. “So I put you next to each other at table nine.”

Danny looked at her: the face set in an expression of earnest certainty, the lips painted the same shade of red that had been popular among Vassar girls in the fifties.

“You’re not trying to set me up, are you?” he said.

“Sylvia Schuller is an old friend of mine,” she said. “I’ve known her ever since I went back and got my master’s—she and I were in the same program. We were the only two over the age of thirty. And anyway it’s not a set-up. I’m just telling you, because it’s not like there are any secrets around here. I think you’ll enjoy meeting her. It’s time already.” She tapped him once on the chest. “Table nine.”

“Christ Miriam,” he said, but it was too late. She was already off, dissolving into the crowd in a sheath of orange and burgundy—her mother-of-the-bride dress—a cloud of fragrance, a puff of mist. Miriam had always been like that: sure of herself, overly sincere, hard to say “no” to. But if there was one thing he knew, it was that he didn’t want to meet Sylvia Schuller. He didn’t want to meet anyone, not really, not when you got right down to it. But especially not today, the day of his niece’s wedding, when his ex-wife, Beth, and her new live-in lover, Bob, were also invited. He’d look like a caricature of himself: middle-aged, helplessly single, at the mercy of women stronger and more willful than himself.

“Table nine?” he said, more to himself than to anyone else. No one so much as looked at him.

Screw it. There was nothing to be done, and anyway, the wedding was about to begin. He found a seat, four rows from the back, behind various aunts and uncles and cousins who he hadn’t seen since the last family wedding—the wedding of his brother’s eldest boy—in Baltimore. It was a large clan, and they traveled in packs: the women, in the
family's own version of waspy-Jewishness, in brightly colored flower prints, their hair-dos a tad on the dowdy side, their slightly too-big feet unFashionably shod in low-heeled shoes; the men in loafers and horned-rim glasses, drinking martinis and slapping one another on the back.

It was early October: the wedding—in a tent in his brother's back yard in Newton—had a harvest theme. The *chuppah* festooned with ivy and blood red leaves (that was the word his mind chose, *festooned*; he thought of a bustling, over-arch florist with prissy manners); miniature pumpkins nestled at the base. It was fitting enough, he supposed. The bride was already some time past thirty, with laugh lines under her eyes and streaks of gray in her dusty brown, straight hair. An editor or writer of some sort for some concern in Washington—a think tank?—Danny was never really sure. She was marrying a neurologist. Or was he a biologist?

The procession was over in a couple of minutes. And then the two of them, his niece and her neurologist or biologist husband (he, wearing a dark blue suit, standing very still, very straight, she growing misty-eyed) were drinking from the wine cup, and reciting their vows. "How lovely!" he heard someone whisper behind him. Then the wind blew through the trees—a strong gust that made the branches, dancing, let loose a shower of golden leaves—and then he became aware of the sound of tears. All around him, the women were sniffing. The aunts, the cousins, his sister-in-law, Miriam, and her ancient mother: all of them sobbing as if something precious had been forever lost. Danny winced, squirming in his seat. He had always hated the way women cried: movies, funerals, weddings, it was all the same. Was that Sylvia Schuller, even now, padding through her purse for Kleenex? He heard a demure sniffing blow. Beth had been like that, too, shedding tears at the slightest provocation. Once, looking at the sun setting over the Pacific, she'd burst into loud sobs, saying, over and over again, "But isn't it all so beautiful?" That had been
in 1968, summer vacation. The rented cottage in Carmel, the children bored.

He became aware that the weeping had turned a corner, gone into a new phase: now it was quiet, but steady—the women now had their handkerchiefs out, and were steadily dabbing at their cheeks. To the left of the chuppah, a large pale woman in a pale blue dress was singing something about high mountains and flowers in the sun, while the bride and groom, their faces soberly smiling, looked on.

"Raise your flowerlike face, my love, rise and kiss the sky," she sang.

"Isn't it wonderful?" he heard someone say.

He grimaced, looking at his knees, thinking about the scotch-and-soda he would grab as soon as the ceremony was over. Scotch-and-soda: when had he become such a cliché? For it wasn't such a long time ago that he had loved going out—to weddings, to parties, to dinner. Beth sitting next to him, her cleavage, more often than not, showing. The other men admiring; the other women perfumed—the smell of their hair when you danced with them. Now everyone and everything was dull. The women looked like turnips, the men like sticks. And he himself had become a difficulty, a single man some years past middle age, with a "bad" marriage behind him and a present as bland as milk. And yet how vain he had once been! But now his gut, once flat as a board and tight from hours of working out at the gym, hung over his belt like some gaseous old man's.

(Was that Sylvia Schuller, over there, in the dour blue dress, the old-lady buttons shining in the bright October sun?)

When the ceremony was over, Danny went up to kiss the bride. "Darling," he said. "Many happy, happy..." and his voice trailed off. She thanked him, and he wandered over to the bar.

The day was perfect, magnificent, the sky an intense deep blue that made him think of illustrations in children's
books: see this red, this orange, this bright buttercup yellow, this deep book-binding blue, this is autumn. Inhale it. Feel it on your skin and in your blood. He’d left New England, at least in part, because of weather like this: bright, beautiful clear days warmed by perfect yellow suns. They hurt him, with their momentary splendor, their sharp smells, their inevitability. It was weather altogether too violent, too dramatic, for his tastes. It was weather with personality. Days that in their high definition whispered, (in whose voice he now wondered, his mother’s?) Do something. Make us proud. The sunny bland days of southern California, each melding seamlessly into the next, were endlessly sweet in comparison.

Behind him a man and a woman—he in tweed and khaki, she in grammar-school plaid—were talking. “And I told him,” the woman said, “I told him, ‘If we keep giving guns to our children, is it any wonder that they kill each other?’” There was a pause, and then the man made some clicking sounds with his tongue and said: “It’s difficult. Can I get you something from the bar?”

Danny took a swallow from his drink and looked around the tent. There was his entire enormous family, the family that Beth had once described as an octopus, its tentacles reaching from coast to coast: his brother and sister-in-law, his sister and brothers-in-law, cousins, nieces, nephews, and recent additions whose names he couldn’t keep straight. A little cluster had gathered around the bride, whose broad smile made laugh lines jet across her face. The women were fluttering in their party dresses—you could tell, just by glancing, who was from Boston by the way they wore their hair, cropped short and parted, no-nonsense, on the side. The light fell through the white canvas top of the tent, making a kind of collective halo above their heads.

He felt a hand on his shoulder, and turned around to see his cousin Ellen Walzer and her daughter, Carla. Forty years ago, for about two months, when she was tomboyish and wild, with scratches on her legs from where she’d
climbed trees and nicotine on her breath, he'd had a crush on her, and fantasized incessantly about embracing her—her mouth, her face, her breasts—pressing and crushing her into himself. Now she was short, plump, and bossy, married to a CPA; her daughter was a smaller, fairer version of herself. She wore a broad-brimmed straw hat, and squinted.

"Well there," Ellen said, overly cheerful and loud. "Where's the ex?"

"Hello Ellen," he said, kissing her. "Carla. Long time. What's up?"

She smiled at him: a broad, brilliant beam. And then he remembered. At the last wedding, in Baltimore, he'd had too much—way too much—to drink. Drunk, he'd found himself cornered by her for more than an hour, listening to her talk about investing in real estate. He didn't want something like that to happen now. He started to think of some way to exit before anything more was said, when Ellen leaned into him.

"Did you get a load of the lesbian contingent?" she whispered.

"Excuse me?" he said.

"The lesbians," she said in an undertone. Danny shook his head. He didn't have any idea what she was talking about.

"Sorry," he said.

There was silence, and then Ellen's eyes went wide in exaggerated shock.

"You mean you really don't know?" she said.

Again he shook his head. "Don't know what?" he finally said. Instantly he regretted his question. Ellen leaned in, so close that he could smell the just-dry-cleaned scent that came off her silk dress, and hissed:

"About Susan. " She pronounced the bride's name with vigor.

"No," he said, glancing over. What about Susan? She and her neurologist or biologist husband were surrounded
by a hive of guests, laughing. "What’s there to know?"

"I don’t believe it," Ellen said slowly. "Do you mean to tell me that Beth never told you?"

He glanced over at Carla, who was standing mutely by, rolling her eyes. "Ellen," he said. "You’re being far too mysterious for me."

Ellen leaned in. "You mean to say that you really don’t know about it?" she said. "Beth knew all about it. Susan told her everything. You don’t remember? All those jam sessions, or heart-to-hearts, or whatever they’re called nowadays? I can’t believe it."

"What can’t you believe?" he finally said. Except that he did remember: Susan and Beth, the two of them in the kitchen, drinking wine and talking. But that had been years ago, when Susan was an undergraduate at Pomona. She’d come over on occasion, for dinner. Afterwards, the two of them would hunker down. Girl-talk, that’s what Beth, dismissing him, had said. This isn’t for male ears, dear, she’d say. Girl-talk.

"I’m sorry," he said. "But I just don’t know what you’re talking about."

And at that, Ellen relented: "Susan’s old girlfriend is here," she said, making a little motion with her head to indicate a group of young women standing half-in, half-out of the tent. "The tall one? In the pink dress? Do you see her?" Danny glanced over, and nodded. "That’s her, I’m telling you. Susan’s old girlfriend. From college. From Pomona. Don’t you remember? She used to come over to your house for dinner, for God’s sake. That’s just like Beth never to have told you." She broke off in disgust.

"Tell me what?" Danny said.

"Hello in there," Ellen said. "Earth calling Danny. Didn’t you hear a word of what I just said? I swear, Danny. You just don’t listen. You never have. I’m telling you that your niece, Susan, the daughter of your brother, was in love with a woman. You mean to tell me that Beth never told you?"

Danny shook his head.
"Of course," Ellen said, "it was a terrible time for her, too, what with the difficulties the two of you were having in your marriage. But you'd have thought that after all these years she would have told you, especially now, when it's not like it's a secret any more. Not that Miriam would breathe a word of it, not even now. My God I felt sorry for her, her only daughter coming back from California with a lesbian lover, her hair practically shaved off. The girlfriend—her name is Susan, too, isn't that cute, Susan and Susan?—went everywhere with Susan. They took vacations together. They went to Europe together. Susan even brought her home for two weeks one summer. Miriam was out of her mind, not that there was anything she could do about it. But it hurt her, to see her only daughter become so, I don't know. So sloppy, I guess. So combative. So dikey. Finally they graduated, and Miriam thought—well, at least she'll get away from that other Susan. But no: they moved into a house together, the two Susans and a whole bunch of other lesbians, somewhere near campus, I guess. And now they're all here. The other Susan and her new girlfriend, plus the whole bunch of them."

Danny was dumb-struck. When had all this happened? When had his niece, now so clearly past childhood, become so complex, so divided against herself? And why hadn't Beth ever told him?

Ellen tapped him on the shoulder, bringing him back. "Yeah," she said. "Pretty weird, huh? Anyway, it's no secret. The groom knows all about it. After all, Susan's here—the other Susan, that is. It must be hard on her."

Behind her mother, Carla was blushing, the red rising from her neck into her face and up past her hairline. A moment earlier, she'd been opening and closing her mouth, as if deciding to say something and then taking it back.

"Anyway," Ellen said. "Enough of that. It's old news. How have you been, Danny? And where's Beth? Miriam told me that she had r.s.v.p.'d yes at the last minute."

"I don't know where she is," Danny said.
“Well,” Ellen said. “I guess she’ll get here in her own good time.”

Danny took a swallow from his drink. “I guess so,” he said.

He was on his own. He was loose from his moorings, cast adrift on a sea of his own alcohol-enhanced depression. His wife was somewhere between Santa Fe and Boston, hurtling toward a reunion that he had no stomach for. A woman who he’d never laid eyes on and didn’t want to know was waiting to meet him at table nine. His cousin was a pain in the ass. And what was this about Susan? Could it possibly be true—could it be true that she had confided all her terrible confusion to his wife and he did not know the first thing about it? (The two of them, drinking wine, and the sound of Beth’s tired voice late at night: “It’s so hard to be young.”)

California, where the two of them had gone to “break free”—Beth’s words, (always Beth’s words, her voice, the sound of her phrases, running through his mind like some out-of-control chorus). And there, in Los Angeles, they had broken free. He felt a little spasm of pain as he thought of the endless cocktail parties they’d held, year-long, by the side of the pool. Beth in her hot-pink pantsuits; himself in sideburns, talking about the novels he’d read, Saul Bellow and John Updike and Garcia Marquez. Flirting and winking. Beth’s pinchable rear end.

He grabbed a glass of champagne, his second, and headed for what he instinctively knew would be the lonely hearts table, the table where Sylvia Schuller, even now, would be powdering her nose. He thought about how Miriam would have described him: “About fifty, but young-looking, nice-looking, not so uptight as Joe. They’re brothers, but you’d never really know it.”

He sat down at the one seat left, the seat reserved for him by his sister-in-law, next to a pretty woman with big eyes made bigger by tinted contact lenses. “You must be Danny,”
she said. "I'm Sylvia. Your date-for-the-day."

He said nothing, and saw, reflected in her contact lenses, an image of himself: upside-down, tiny, deformed.

"What is it?" she said.

"What?"

"You're staring at me," she said.

"I am?" he said. God, what a putz he was, what a prize schlemiel. "Sorry."

"No," she said. "It's okay. It's only that you were looking at me so intensely, for a moment I thought I must have come as a shock to you. Didn't Miriam tell you?"

"Tell me?"

"That she was sticking us together." She shrugged.

"Yes," he said. "She told me."

"Look," she said. "I really am happy to meet you. I've known Miriam and Joe for a long time, and really, today is such a happy day for every one."

She smiled, and then reached for her water glass and drank. Danny cleared his throat. It wasn't going to be easy. In fact, it would have been easier if Sylvia had been more his speed: a fellow casualty, a member of the tribe of the walking wounded. But he could see in a glance that Sylvia was better than that: whole, complete. She drank slowly and carefully, like someone who was not particularly thirsty, but merely obeying some unspoken rule of decorum. Her face was round and white, and her features were even: the mouth and nose small, the eyes blue. She wore blue disk earrings that made her look vaguely countercultural, and the kind of dressy suit that women wear to work when they're going out to the theater afterwards. (Beth's voice sang in his head: "You don't really pay attention to me. You don't really see me anymore.") It wouldn't have surprised him to learn that she had married early, and on impulse—the kind of daring girl whom other girls envied.

Sylvia put down her glass. "My husband," she said. "My ex-husband that is, hated weddings. They depressed him.
Such a waste of money, he always said. Why go through all
the rigmarole when their chances of making it to the third
anniversary are only so-so? Isn’t that terrible? Doesn’t
Susan look happy?”

Danny nodded, and glanced over. Susan did look happy.
In fact, she looked as happy as he’d ever seen her—
“radiant,” that was the word that the women would choose.
She and her new husband were still dancing, swaying
somewhat clumsily in place. Her face wore an expression
of almost austere calm; her bearing seemed filled with
light. As Danny watched, her husband—the neurologist?—
leaned over and kissed her cheek.

“Yes,” he said. “She looks very happy.”

“Very happy,” Sylvia whispered. Then—for no reason
that he could make out—she blushed.

In his mind, he had given her until the first course to
show up. But it was already half-past five, and she had not
yet arrived. Where was she? The party was well under way,
and Beth was, if nothing else, true to her word. (“I don’t
make promises that I can’t keep,” she used to say, but that
was before the divorce.) He had managed to keep up some
semblance of dinner party chatter with Sylvia, who was the
kind of woman, obviously much practiced, who was able
to ask a lot of questions without seeming to, but as soon as
there was a sufficient lull in the conversation, Danny had
excused himself and, wandering from table to table, dis-
covered the places that had been reserved for Beth and her
new husband. It didn’t take much figuring. There were two
empty places at table three—where a handful of nieces and
nephews, Susan’s cousins and siblings, were sitting. The
young people’s table, versus his own, the reject table. It was
a table that would please her, make her feel good about her
reception in the family, good about her status. Beth always
got her way that way, making people conform to her own
version of herself—as a free spirit, a perpetual student, a
youthful discoverer of truths.
When the band started up, he turned back to table nine. In addition to himself and Sylvia Schuller, there was a thin young man with a scraggly beard, a business associate of his brother’s and his gray-haired, over-weight, chain-smoking wife, two serious-looking women, both wearing slightly misshapen dark dresses (they were, Danny was sure, friends of Susan’s from Washington), and the rabbi and rebbitzen. Sylvia Schuller, apparently giving up on him, had turned to the young man seated on her left, and as Danny approached them, he heard them talking about Israel. The young man was speaking loudly, his voice rising and falling, and Sylvia was saying: “I agree, I agree.” Ah! It was a difficult business, this being a bachelor, a middle-aged buffoon of a man, unable to so much as make chitchat, let alone court a woman. He was so weary—weary in his bones—that he couldn’t even work up the energy to carry on a conversation with someone as easily pleased (tipsy, he could see that now) as Sylvia Schuller. She’d be the type who would listen to your every word, laugh at your weaknesses, and hold you in bed—but he’d never know, because he’d forgotten how to be with a woman. Back then, with Beth, it had been different. He was just a kid—barely out of diapers—when he’d met her, and they’d found themselves in the throws of an awkward and sweaty passion. The nights spent necking on her Murphy bed in Cambridge; the day she announced that she had procured a diaphragm. How mysterious sex had been, how mysterious and how desirable.

He took his place beside Sylvia, and contemplated the salad before him—a pile of fancy dark greens, carefully arranged on a white plate. It tasted like nothing.

“So? I see you’re settling in? Having a good time?”

It was his cousin Ellen, this time without her daughter. “Sure,” he said. “And you.”

She bent down to whisper in his ear. “Did you get a load of them?” she said.

“Of who?”
She gestured with her head to the dance floor. "Don't look now," she said, "but Susan is out there, the other Susan. I really can't believe this. Dancing with that fat girl who sang. Just look at that ratty-looking blonde hair. She wouldn't be bad looking, really, if she just cut that ratty hair."

"Ellen," he said. "Have you always been so malicious?"
She swallowed, then sighed. "You know me," she said.

The early years of his marriage, it seemed to him now, were paradisiacal: the kids, with their milky breath and plump fingers, jumping on him in their king-sized bed; Beth dancing around the living room, a glass of wine in her hand; the dinners out, with friends, with friends of friends, with too much wine and too much food and too many stupid jokes... the two of them staggering in, after midnight, surprising the sleeping babysitter with their laughter. Los Angeles, home of the free.

But she could be cruel. Cruel as a beast. Even so, he had loved her. Her cruelty had washed over him, no more threatening than drizzle. "My God but you make me sick," she had said, once—when? After a party. Had he had too much to drink? Had he been holding forth? Her mouth, its corners sharply descending. Another time: Beth lying in bed, in a rented bed in a rented room in a rented cottage on the beach. They had just made love; he was lying beside her, one hand resting on her naked, wet belly, drifting to sleep. The sound of the ocean—its salt-scented beating up—and Beth's voice: "I could have made it with him, you know. I could have. He wanted me. God, how he wanted me. You think that I'm invisible, that no one can see me, but you're wrong. Why didn't I do it, that's what I want to know? There was nothing stopping me, not really." And then her tears. "I might have been something, you know."
"I know," he would say. Or sometimes, simply: "Such as?"
She was filled with fantasies: Beth the painter, Beth the writer, Beth the dancer. Beth at forty, in the living room, stretching, in black leotards. Her therapists: Dr. Telford,
Dr. Rosenbaum, and the last one, Anita, whose last name he never knew.

They'd never stopped making love. Even in the end. Her appetite, in retrospect, seemed larger than life. Her moans were louder. Her thrusts more violent, altogether more insistent. Even the various odors that her body put forth became more potent: saltier, damper. He looked around among all the women that he knew, and congratulated himself on his lusty wife. Was it, he wondered, the last gasp before menopause?

When she told him that she was leaving him, he went into the bathroom, where he vomited a heavy stream—linguine and clam sauce, from lunch. Afterwards, he washed himself, carefully, with a cold washcloth, bending over the sink in an effort not to splash too much water. Beth had always hated that—he left the bathroom, towels awry, puddles of water on the counter top surrounding the sink, and now, as he carefully wiped up after himself, he felt that he was making penance, changing things, willing them to be right.

After the second course—some kind of fish in a mustardy sauce, with pristine little vegetables that all tasted the same—Miriam came over and stood behind Danny and, leaning on his chair, said: “So? Everything all right here?” Without waiting for an answer, she went on. “I want everyone to have a good time, you hear me? No moping, no foot-dragging. Everyone’s drinking, I hope.”

There was a chorus of “sure things,” and “uh-huhs,” and Miriam patted Danny’s shoulders. As she did it—a light taptapping with the ends of her fingers—he smelled, or thought he smelled, Beth’s perfume. But no: it was only the fumes of his own champagne-tinged imagination, mingling with the flowers.

“Too-dles,” Miriam said.

When she was gone, Danny turned to Sylvia, mumbled “excuse me,” and got up. He didn’t have any particular
reason to get up, but decided that he might as well go on into the house, maybe call someone—his machine at home? his kids?—or use the toilet. It would give him something to do, while he waited for the cake to be cut, the toasts to be made. Where the hell was she? Beth had always been such a stickler for punctuality, working herself up into a little cyclone of nerves, terrified of being late. She’d had to get to the movies a half an hour early at least, or risk sitting behind someone with too large a head. She packed her bags two or three days in advance of a trip, and then insisted that Danny load up the station wagon before breakfast. And there were other things—trips to the dentist’s office and trips to the museum, PTA meetings, even her dance classes the year that she’d decided to study modern dance.

Skirting the dance floor, he paused to take in the table of the lesbians—yup, there was no doubt about it—and then entered the house through the kitchen. “Lesbians,” he snorted, “Jesus.” You could tell, he thought. The bad hair cuts, the lack of makeup, even the posture betrayed a kind of masculine femaleness that he had never much understood. As far as he knew, his own daughter had no interest in all that sexual exploration that passed for self-knowledge, even religion, now. Thank God. Poetry—that’s what turned her on. T.S. Eliot. Yeats. So Susan had been a lesbian. Jesus. And all along, Beth had known.

He plodded through the kitchen, almost tripping on Max, the family’s golden retriever, before stumbling out into the long hallway that connected the kitchen to the rest of the house. It was a large, long, self-consciously modern house, the house his brother had built. Plate glass windows everywhere: at night you saw yourself reflected in every room. The hall laid in flagstone, the lighting muted, the walls white, hung with large, brightly colored canvases: a red square within a blue circle, or three streaks of yellow darting across a white field. It was big, impressive, only slightly show-offy. His brother, the macher.

He hadn’t been in this house for a long time (last night he
had slept, along with the other out-of-towners, at a hotel in Waltham) but he remembered it well. The house was laid out in four pavilions of equal size. One of them, at the end, was what had once been called “the children’s wing.” He headed there now, thinking vaguely, and without real conviction, about watching the ball game.

He found himself in what had once been called the “junk room,” but the bean-bag chairs, the t.v., the built-in butcher’s block desks and cheap-looking bookshelves had all been replaced. Now the room was an alternate kind of study: Danny guessed, by the look of it—the floral prints covering the chairs, the flower-filled vases and dhurrie rug—that this had become Miriam’s sitting room. The place where she made her phone calls, or read the paper.

It was quiet here, the buzz of the party far-off, insubstantial, like the voices he sometimes heard, just before waking from too long a sleep. He stood for a while, idly looking at the family photographs that adorned every surface—weddings, graduations, endless summer vacations—puzzled by the certainty of it all. Generations of his family, framed in simple black or gold. Then he saw it: his own wedding portrait, taken two weeks before his twenty-fifth birthday. The two of them stood, posed before the fireplace at the country club. Beth’s hair was piled, beehive-like, on her head, and her eyebrows, which she’d defiantly let alone, refusing to pluck, jutted across her face: two dark slashes. Beside her, he was plump, white, and doughy, a sheepishly smiling doughy boy with a pink and petulant penis. He’d worn a morning suit, his mother’s idea.

“I’ll be damned,” he said. He sat down and closed his eyes.

He sat there, eye closed, thinking, and then knew that it was time to go back. He had found what he’d apparently been looking for—that proof, proof outside his own memory, of their palpable happiness, their youth and hope and vigor—and now he could go back. Perhaps she’d be there. Perhaps she would not. It didn’t seem to matter so
much now. There was nothing he wanted to tell her any-
way.

He started back toward the other end of the house. But
halfway down the hall, he heard the sound of weeping, and
stopped to listen. Yes, there was no doubt about it. It was
the wet, half-human sound of the overwrought female.
Would it never end? Women and their tears—how easy it
was for them, how easy and how unfair. In a frenzy of
sobbing they could unburden their souls to slumber, while
all he could do was stand stoically by, watching. He lis-
tened carefully. Yes, it was that same, whiny wheeze, of
women crying, crying endlessly, and over nothing.

Woozily, drunkenly, he followed the sound of the cry-
ing until he reached a half-closed door which he recog-
nized—from the outline of an old, stick-on flower-power
sign—as having once been Susan’s. He stood before the
door, listening, then, without so much as tapping on it,
pushed the door in, fully expecting to find one of his female
relatives dabbing her mascara-rimmed eyes with a Kleenex.
Instead he found his niece, Susan, wrapped in the embrace
of her old lover: the woman in the pink dress. The two were
sitting, their backs to him, on the queen-sized bed that
Miriam had installed in here after Susan had gone to
college. They did not see him. The other Susan sat, crying,
with her head buried in his niece’s shoulder, in the lacy
white of her wedding gown.

“I’ll always love you,” she said.

And as she turned her face up to be kissed, Danny felt
himself growing faint. It all rushed upon him now: the two
scotch-and-sodas and the three or four glasses of cham-
pagne, the anxious night in the hotel in Waltham, the
family gathering in on him, again and again and again,
their well-meaning, nonunderstanding faces searching for
something in him, something that would enable them to
reel him back in. Beth in leotards, stretching her middle-
aged body on the living room floor. Beth crying, Beth
yelling. Her leaving.
Now he could hear the music coming from the other side of the house: a jaunty dance tune. He left while he still had the chance.

Perhaps she could forgive him now.

While he was inside, the weather had changed. Now the sky had gone from deep blue to pale, and there were clouds: faces. He glanced up, searching. But there were no faces in the clouds today, just clouds: puffs of watery smoke.

The party, however, had reached its peak. The band was playing "Heard it through the Grapevine," and everyone was up on their feet, dancing, jumping around. He squinted, trying to find Beth. Then he had an inspiration: forget Beth! She would never arrive—she was mist! Vapor! Instead he would go back to table nine, ask Sylvia to dance. Sylvia Schuller, with her pretty blue eyes. But the dancers kept jumping around, and it was hard to make out the people on the other side, the non-dancers, most of them no longer sitting at their assigned tables, but milling around, in the latter stages of celebration. Presently he became aware that the problem wasn't global: the problem came from the middle of the dance floor, which was dominated by women—by the lesbian contingent. It was they who were making it so difficult to see.

They were holding hands, forming a large circle, where they did an awkward, not-quite-right grapevine dance. From the sidelines he watched them, astonished by their grace.

Then one of the lesbians dipped slightly, and he thought he saw his wife—a flash of pale green, a string of pearls. Was it possible? He started in across the dance floor, determined to find out, when he felt a hand on his elbow. A tall, good-looking redhead (he immediately recognized her as one of the lesbians) smiled at him, and the next thing he knew, she had him by the hand, and was leading him towards them—towards the circle of laughing, dancing women.
Tioughnioga River Bottom

Dry summers in the central counties, Cayuga, Tioga, Cortland, New York, the broad creeks drain down clear, and rivers thin to licks and kills painted over sheetrock bottoms. Crows follow gulls onto dry bed recently abandoned by alewives, wary of new ground barren and white as the moon’s. On Fall Creek herons lift their oars and pull hard overhead for deeper water. In hipboots you can walk some rivers for miles, ascending steps and slabs of shale flagged as cleanly as roman roads paving the remotest provinces, now sunken and graffitied with the pebble spits of crawfish. The relic gates and vaults revealed in sunlight through water cider dark that is the last issue of glaciers we know were sealed when the world was younger and latent, though even now strange mouths dimple the river. Often in these late dry days of disclosure, the scattered infidel children of Vandals and Palatines forage these ruins, trying to charm with a caddis of elk hair jewels of prehistory all muscle and light.
Contributors’ Notes

Ulvis Alberts, Latvian born American writer/photographer living at Haven Lake, WA, has been widely exhibited and has been published world-wide in all media: magazines, newspapers, postcards, and now the Internet.

Lee Ballentine’s poems of science and surrealism have been published in Abraxas, Another Chicago Magazine, Exquisite Corpse, Mississippi Mud, Portland Review, and in many other journals. His 1988 anthology POLY was an Anatomy of Wonder “Best Book.” His fourth and latest book is Phase Language, just out from Phantograph Press.

Brett Bennett is currently working toward a painting degree at the University of Washington. In his spare time, he enjoys doing humorous illustrations for children.

Michael Chitwood’s second collection of poetry, Whet, was published by Ohio Review Books in October 1995. His poems have appeared in Poetry, Threepenny Review, Field, Poetry East and others.

Don Cunningham writes about technical topics in the Washington, D.C. area. He grew up in Connecticut. Poems of his soon will be published in The Hiram Poetry Review and Whole Notes.


Amy S. Fisher is an MFA candidate in fiction at Indiana University. Her work has previously appeared in the Schuylkill Valley Journal.

Graham Foust is the editor of Phoebe magazine. His work can be found in No Roses Review, Mockingbird and Spinning Jenny.

Daisy Fried is a journalist in Philadelphia, where she writes about art, politics and people and their work, and edits a monthly column, “Poetry Boat,” which profiles poets in the Philly area. Her poems in PBQ are her first published. She also has poetry forthcoming in American Poetry Review.

Leonard Gontarek’s poetry has appeared recently in American Writing, Poetry Northwest, The Quarterly, and Exquisite Corpse. He was awarded a poetry fellowship from the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts in 1994, and recently published a book of his poems, Van Morrison Can’t Find His Feet (Spring, 1996).
Rich Ives is the editor of Owl Creek Press and has published poetry, fiction, essays, and translations of German poets in numerous magazines. "It Could Make You a Little Sick" is from a recently completed book more than twenty years in the making: Tunneling to the Moon, a Psychological Gardener's Book of Days.

Susanne Kort was born and raised in New York, and lives now in Caracas. Her work (prose, poetry, translations) has appeared recently or is upcoming in the Antioch Review, Passages North, Puerto del Sol, Nimrod, Spoon River Poetry Review, and others.

Mark LaMonda is a writer and painter living in Glendale, California. His work has appeared in The Santa Barbara Review, Excursus, Vol. No, Poetry International, and many other journals.

Kevin Miller is a graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop and has published recent stories in Confrontation and Puerto del Sol.

Jennifer Moses lives in Baton Rouge, Louisiana with her husband and three small children. Her stories have appeared in The Gettysburg Review, Commentary, Mademoiselle, and other magazines.

Ben Passikoff is a retired industrial engineer with poems accepted by over 50 magazines.

Karen Rile is the author of a novel, Winter Music (Little Brown), and is currently at work on a collection of short fiction and a non-fiction memoir. Her stories have appeared in publications such as American Writing, the Southern Review and the Philadelphia Inquirer Magazine Summer Fiction Issue. She lives in Philadelphia with her husband and four small daughters and teaches fiction and creative non-fiction at the University of Pennsylvania.

This is David Staudt's fourth appearance in PBQ. Author of more than 50 published poems and stories, he has poetry forthcoming in Carolina Quarterly, Visions, and Poetry Motel, and fiction forthcoming in Permafrost. He teaches English at Susquehanna University.

Judith Taylor teaches writing and literature in Los Angeles. Her poems have appeared in many journals, most recently in Poetry, Tar River Quarterly, Southern Poetry Review, Mudfish, and The Quarterly.

Jeanie M. Tietjen moved to Washington, D.C just over one year ago to work with AmeriCorps WritersCorps teaching creative writing and literature in areas traditionally underserved by the arts. She is co-writing a book featuring life stories as told by women who have experienced homelessness and incarceration.
Contests

Fourth Annual Poetry Contest
Judge: Stephen Berg
1st place: $50; 2nd place: $25; 3rd place: $15
Winning submissions will appear in an upcoming issue
and online at the PBQ web site.
Reading fee: $3 per poem
Deadline: June 30, 1996

Fourth Annual Chapbook Contest
Judge: Yusef Komunyakaa
Winner receives $50 and 50 copies of his or her chapbook.
Entries should be 16-22 pages.
Reading fee: $10 per submission.
Deadline: July 31, 1996

Fourth Annual Fiction Contest
Judge: Frederick Barthelme
1st place: $50; 2nd place: $25
Maximum length: 15 double-spaced pages. Winning
submissions will appear in an upcoming issue
and online at the PBQ web site.
Reading fee: $8 per story.
Deadline: July 31, 1996

Send manuscripts to:

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In tandem with the 1996 Philadelphia Festival of World Cinema, PBQ seeks to open a critical discussion of contemporary film, its artistry, its cultural impact. PBQ will establish a forum for thoughtful discourse on a variety of cinema-related topics in its upcoming Film Issue and encourages submissions that focus on gender, history and/or politics; interviews with (and studies that concentrate on) an actor, director, or screenwriter’s body of work; close readings and/or explications of current films or films screened in this year’s Philadelphia Festival of World Cinema.

Send submissions to:

Film Issue
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Deadline: July 31, 1996

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Shannon Kueny
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Dr. Watson’s Pub, 216 S 11th St., Philadelphia
Mary Beth Wrenn, The Morning Psychic on The Edge, 95.1 FM, Charlotte, NC

And two very cool bands: Liki Outhaus and Seething Grey
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