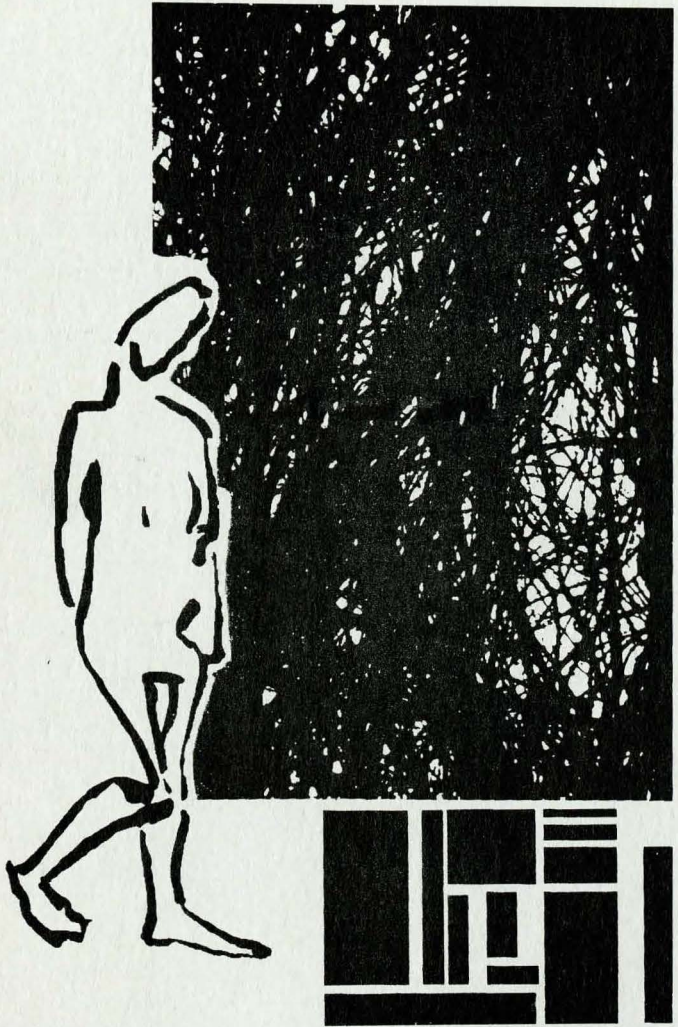


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Manuscripts are discussed with the writer's name masked
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prejudice.

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CONTENTS

Fiction

Dori Ostermiller	
<i>Shoe Box Love</i>	36
Jeanne Cunningham	
<i>Ghost Baby</i>	61

Poetry

Oliver Jones	
<i>Wisconsin</i>	5
John Flynn	
<i>Driving Home from Windyville, Missouri</i>	7
<i>Twilight on the Niagara River</i>	8
Dawn Diez Willis	
<i>Conversion</i>	9
Tim Seibles	
<i>You Damn Right</i>	10
<i>The Debt</i>	12
<i>Dogs</i>	14
Michael Finley	
<i>The Face on the Puerto Juarez Ferry, 1979</i>	17
Michael S. Weaver	
<i>A Snapshot from Oaxaca</i>	18
Gary J. Whitehead	
<i>Locomotion</i>	20
Joyce Odam	
<i>She Tells Me of the Train</i>	21
Gary J. Whitehead	
<i>She Buys a Black Hat</i>	22
Joyce Odam	
<i>Efforts to Please</i>	24
Francine Witte	
<i>Love is Like That</i>	25
<i>Lovers on the Moon</i>	26
<i>The Clock in the Mirror</i>	28

Dannye Romine Powell	
<i>At Every Wedding Someone Stays Home</i>	29
<i>Let's Say We Haven't Seen Each Other Since</i>	
<i>Ninth Grade and We Meet As Adults at a</i>	
<i>Welcome Center in Southside Virginia</i>	31
Jon Tribble	
<i>Changes</i>	32
Julie Dlugi-King	
<i>Second Skin</i>	33
Joan Cusack Handler	
<i>Just Gravy</i>	34
Dana Wildsmith	
<i>Wearing the Night</i>	35
Carrie Etter	
<i>If She Tells Them</i>	53
James Williams	
<i>Nightfall</i>	54
<i>There Is a Season</i>	56
Nancy Kassell	
<i>Hunting and Gathering</i>	57
Gary J. Whitehead	
<i>Digging</i>	58
Craig Challander	
<i>New Swimmer</i>	59
Nancy Peters Hastings	
<i>Near and Far</i>	60
Lynne Hugo deCourcy	
<i>Chances</i>	66
Catherine McLaughlin	
<i>Fogbank</i>	68
Gary J. Whitehead	
<i>The Ell Pond Trail</i>	70
Shoshana T. Daniel	
<i>Spring</i>	72
Contributors' Notes	73

Oliver Jones

WISCONSIN

Who is this muse? She complains of
menstrual cramps; she gets tangled

in her shirt-sleeves. She calls a friend
desperately looking for your number

but she never calls you. She sits
in front of you on a bus making out

a shopping list; she never says
a word. You can draw the naked body

but you can't be naked; she is naked
in a calendar holding up a deck of cards.

Memory couples with inspiration; the muse
buys a car and takes off for Wisconsin.

Memory: you saw a movie with her
in high-school, a French film

on the holocaust; you crushed
a fortune cookie in your tea

and called it soup. She pretended
to be a serial killer in a home-movie—

it's the only time she ever
touched your bare-chest.

Memory: the photograph more significant than the event
—a poem living longer than a girl.

Oliver Jones/Wisconsin

Something lingers with you, a taste
you can't define; she has threatened

suicide so many times that you are dying, holding
an empty prescription. You have been invited

to cocktails by coke addicts, you wonder
if you will find her there,

slumped by a folding chair,
clutching her stomach.

Who is this muse? Have you lost her address?
Given her your cold? Where is she?

She is at the movies in Madison, watching
a documentary on the death of Alaska—

she will write you and tell you to see it.
Or she is there, lying in an empty bathtub,

cutting her hair off with the good kitchen shears,
saying your name over and over again.

John Flynn

DRIVING HOME FROM WINDYVILLE, MISSOURI

Windows down at 103 degrees
August boiling off the Chevy's white hood
a witch hazel steam,
etherized, slow as cattle
as dust fails to cool
the vein ribbing in your neck.

Towns populated by one billboard
for McDonald's some 32 miles away
or a For Sale sign tacked to half a silo.
The road a shoelace to balance upon.
This shaggy heat, this boredom,
a few parched hawks, no evergreens
not one surface polished
except the fiberglass boats
plugged in at occasional marinas
along man-made reservoirs.

Only names, wilting, eternity
to marvel at.
Places marked by a crabapple tree,
derelict combine, abandoned gas pump.
Gristle tough as baling twine
in a roadside smile over a cash register.
Fill her up, Detroit's a day away.

Pleas to Read The Book
to horde and fatten on a front porch
to grow, to produce, to pray
in the town of Coal or Climax Springs
in Bucksaw, or Tightwad, or Halfway.

John Flynn

TWILIGHT ON THE NIAGARA RIVER

Given to effortless waters
suspended within our promise
the wings of our kisses
set free a flock of gulls in silhouette.
Magenta eddies in that broad river
stitched day and night together
as our hands caressed the skies
of all the places we'd been.

A loner downriver savored his last Sunday
cigar, fishing duskwater
for smallmouth and perch,
envy behind the rumple of his tilted cap
as he watched us peel ourselves
down to children again.

When we took time to stop kissing
our eyes looked back at him with guilt
low clouds above the currents suggesting lavender
as he blushed and smoked and worked his reel.
You giggled shyly as the riverbank held
a roaring whisper, green oaks
kneeling under a sudden heavy wind.

Dawn Diez Willis

CONVERSION

This is his chance.
The hooks dance on my skin,
then loop through; he waits with patience.

The porch swing tips in brief,
gentle arcs like a bassinette.
Grief sounds all through my grandmother's
house. It is the sound of people eating.
It is the sound of the sound behind words.

I must have the open, silvery look
of a fish. I must glimmer and twitch
in the patio pool of evening.
My uncle stands, prongs baited in scripture.

He calls up my freshly dead mother
to shine upon the surface, to blind me.
That Catholic lure tastes of the knife
that will clean me and prepare me for the feast.
I will be laid out at the table full of popes,
on Peter's own plate, in the presence of Jesus,
who glows blue without breath
and says nothing.

Tim Seibles

YOU DAMN RIGHT

So much light
from one star, and tree shadows
painted on the backs
of squirrels, and one grackle throwing
his meanest voice, an evil one-
man-band with whistles, broken
cymbals and a snuffly
nose, marching back and up scolding
the grass and anyone who passes,
his blue-black bright
as a bad mood on a beautiful day—
like the day he tapped he
chiseled his way out of that
bitter egg to find the sky
a new color too far
away, and his mother stuffing who-
knows-what into his mouth
into his mouth into his mouth and
what was she always squawking about—
about how careful he needed
to be, about the world being impossible
to believe; then the sudden *So long,*
good luck, that bird foot in the butt, him
scrambling for his wings, the green
earth jumping up with all
its jagged teeth, his shoulders
burning as he tried the steep
ladder of air, feathers like
fingers clawing at what appeared
to be nothing at all,
like the light
filling up his eyes and him,
blacker than any five
good nights sewn together;

Tim Seibles/*You Damn Right*

how could he have known
what would be required? How
could he know what a
cat was, what a cloud was, what
a man was—and lightning and
heartburn and hard-falling
sleet? And time
slipping past like a friend
who owes you money, like a
burglar with all your
brand new stuff; and how did he
fit into the scheme anyway,
and if he really didn't
What in the hell
was he doing? Of course,
he's pissed off and *you*
damn right he gonna cop
an attitude and nobody
better say shit about it
neither.

Tim Seibles

THE DEBT

I have the blood of the conquerors in my veins
and the blood of the enslaved and the slaughtered,
so where shall I rest with this
mixed river of blood painting my heart—what city
wants me, which woman will touch my neck?

So the Ivory Coast is sleeping in the angles
of my skull, and maybe two small French towns,
one in each ieg, are also sleeping—and of course,
the first people in this land, with their long
black, black hair, seven of them
are napping along my ribs

and with all these people
adrift in my body, I am asleep as well—
dreaming their good wishes, their strained whispers—
sleepwalking all over America.

But it's all right; in America everyone
is asleep: at the wheel, on the job, even
with their fingers on the trigger, asleep
with their distant continents, the glittering
silence of their shattered histories
and the long pull of a thousand
thousand moons inside them.

They don't remember
how once we swam inside our mothers, that
once our mothers floated inside their mothers,
just as their mothers once waited inside those
before them and before that it was the same—
all the way back to the first mother
in Africa,

that slim, short, quick-tempered woman
whose children crawled
all over the planet, then got big and started

Tim Seibles/The Debt

hurting each other—with the conquerors
in their bright armor, trying to finish everything.

I know where the blame falls. I know
I could twist my brown skin, my mixed nations, my
kinky hair into a fist. I know. I know.

But I hear a stranger music in my bones—
the windy shimmer of long fields, the singular tree
of all blood rising, a quiet of birds stunned by dusk,
the future awake singing from these wounds, and

what is the lesson of history, if not
that we owe each other more bread, more
friendship, fewer lies,
less cruelty.

Tim Seibles

DOGS

for Eduardo Galeano

Dogs know things.

They know the important things come from a person's head.

That's why they look at your face when you're giving commands.

They hear what you say.

They know what time you said you'd take 'em for a walk.
They know.

They see people throwing voices back and forth.
They see you and your pals looking at each other talking.

They see the anchor people burping out news on TV.
They see you watching.

They hear your face bending around sentences.
They see you wink. They know you know they can't
wink back at you.

Dogs know stuff.

They know their names are not *their* names.

And they get tired of hearing NO! all the time.

They know you know you shouldn't stare into their eyes.

Dogs don't wanna play around all the time.

Tim Seibles/Dogs

They know you "throw ball" and do "jump for the treat"
because you feel funny about being mean sometimes.

They know that alotta days you wish they'd shut up and just
STAY!
They know who gets hit with the newspaper.

They know that you know it doesn't matter if they mind.

Dogs know stuff about things.

They know about those *No Dogs Allowed* signs.

They know who domesticated who. They know
who pets who whenever whoever feels like it. They know
who keeps whose food shut up in the pantry next to the broom.

They know who bred who into long-legged, goofy-looking
afghan hounds.
They know who bred who into cute-little, nasty, yip-yapping fur
balls.
They know who takes who to get whose ears cropped.

Dogs know who gets who "fixed."

Wagging a tail is not always a happy sign.

You know how sometimes certain muscles twitch
when certain other muscles wanna be kickin' somebody's ass,
how sometimes you nod your head and say *that's okay*,
while your left hand keeps cramping into a fist.

Dogs deal with things like this.

Tim Seibles/Dogs

They know who gets locked up in the garage.
They know who doesn't get to dig in the garden.
They know who has to shit in public.
They know who puts who "to sleep."

Michael Finley

THE FACE ON THE PUERTO JUAREZ FERRY, 1979

Sitting beside him shames me,
me and my vacation, him and his life

and the donkey path of rings upon his face,
a rattlesnake coiled among thorns,

the rattle maracas spooled along the spine,
the crow pin feathers swimming in his eyes.

The whorls of this thumbprint ask
what thumb has had its way with him

for he's too pregnant with circles, a
target of rings, to be merely a man—

the red in the eye of the matador bull,
one drop of blood in the arena sand.

Michael S. Weaver

A SNAPSHOT FROM OAXACA

for Carmen

Smiling in an archaeological dig,
you look up to me in the snapshot,
holding an artifact and a tool
for playing history's song buried
in the accumulation of earth,
in the reincarnation of language
holding itself to the figuring light.
You smile and return to the words
of the dead and the resurrected.

I give the snapshot back to you,
where we sit in the darkroom
with the enlarger fallen out of itself,
the pans stacked almost neatly around,
the chemicals letting loose their souls,
repulsive and stinking, over
the wish to preserve. You laugh
again, this time without the context
of culture and family, here where
I can dare to follow the lines
of your beauty in your black hair,
in your hope, in your hubris.

On another day walking through books,
in a store that promises translation,
we look for my satisfaction, the joy
of finding a buried icon for myself,
but we unearth nothing. We walk
down to 5th Avenue toward Washington Square,
drawn out and away from the wish
for the proof of a past exalted
by the luck of people discovering
their escape from time, as we

Micheal S. Weaver/A Snapshot from Oaxaca

are soon to see the door—
down the subway stairs at Union Square,
a shadow appears for less than a second,
and we peep in the dark tunnel
leading to where our laughter heals
out mortal wish to be immortal.

Gary J. Whitehead

LOCOMOTION

Rusted train tracks trained
eyes cannot keep parallel
in the distance, and my past
chugging on unseen behind
me, the last rails
could end anywhere.

Is there continuity to
locomotion? I know
there is danger. Lugging
this frame brakes
have jacked, and I've
placed pennies on rails
with oncoming trains. I've
broken huge locks to switch
the direction of the tracks.

When my sister
stepped off the train
at Penn Station with her one
suitcase and twenty-five dollars
was she afraid? A switchman
couldn't have kept her here.

And now I wait for my train.
The tracks stretch in every
direction disappearing into
themselves. I know this
optical illusion;
I've jumped this train before.

Joyce Odam

SHE TELLS ME OF THE TRAIN

she tells me of the train
so loud
moving like eternity
so loud
mov-
ing
like
death
so loud
ever behind her house
on endless tracks
that shine
that shine so loud
in the night
the huge train
shuddering with
its anonymous contents
or
is
it
empty
and only a hull
of aggravation
taking her silence
to another country

Gary J. Whitehead

SHE BUYS A BLACK HAT

On the train into the city
I never let go of her small
hand. She again wears those
false round glasses and her
hair down and the long green
coat from the Salvation Army
she wore on this same trip a
year ago. I watch the people
who sit around us. Inside I
cry at the thin-haired woman
whose nylons bunch up around
her swollen ankles. I try to
hold my breath against the
artificial air the hunched
woman tries so hard to suck
in. She looks at me and at
the floor, opens her bag and
gently places a sad black hat
upon her head. At our stop I
hurry through the automatic
doors, tugging on the small
hand I know so well, and only
let go when we ride the steep
narrow escalator to the street
and the open air. I breathe
as if to forget, and I think
of the cicada, who lives in
the ground for seventeen long
years before screaming against
its few hours spent in the air.
But it is winter, and we stroll
up to Faneuil Hall's open air
market huddled against the wind.
I look at ties while she looks

Gary J. Whitehead / She Buys a Black Hat

at hats, as though we're already
married. Later, after the crowds
she buys the black velvet one.

Joyce Odam

EFFORTS TO PLEASE

I gave you the yellow bowl
and the yellow cup
with the red design,
but still you were unhappy. . .

I put raisins in your oatmeal
with a dash of nutmeg on the milk,
but still you would not give up
your sadness.

I sang a song and made a speech,
but you were still quarrelsome
and your eyes would not
give up my face.

And I went breaking like a dish
slipped out of
failing hands
and I went crashing to a cry,

so angry now
that both of us,
of your dark moodiness,
could die.

Francine Witte

LOVE IS LIKE THAT

When a man comes, holds you up
from your life, he says "love me
or you'll lose your life, love me
and you'll lose your life." You think
fast. You're a good girl. You give him time.

Never mind the night outside
turning over in its restless sleep,
or the nightmare groan
it lets out as you give up
your heart, everything that made it
pump. You give it while you can.
Soon, even your hands will be useless to you.

There will come that time he stands
over you, his face gone dark, doberman.
The flash of his teeth, the whites
of his eyes, the only light
you will recall. You'll remember
your hands, how they moved
towards prayer, pleading, anything
you thought might work. Still,
he makes off with it all, slipping
out the window, his pockets
a bulge the exact shape of your fists.

Francine Witte

LOVERS ON THE MOON

Way up here, no one talks
about that first mysterious absence

when your man shows up late, with a too-
good excuse. And no one talks about time,

how it sneaks by, smashes the bones
in your neck. Up here, we *expect*

the silence; it's all we've had
from the start. We *know* words

are weightless, that they fly
straight up and are gone.

When *we* rendezvous, we billow
towards each other, a slow

motion scene with our hair
streaming out towards the infinite.

At this very moment, somewhere on Earth
there's a right eye pressed up to a telescope,

making science of it all. Somebody
pulling his wife from the evening

chores. This is as close
as they've been to sex for months,

but she takes it. Their hands spark
when he gives her the scope,

Francine Witte/Lovers on the Moon

but he turns away, things to do,
planets to chart. Meanwhile,

she kicks her foot against
the sureness of the Earth underneath

where love and gravity
are holding everything in place.

Francine Witte

THE CLOCK IN THE MIRROR

is set at twelve, a time that's still
half a face away. It's like other clocks
only sometimes the numerals dim, the hands
don't know which way to turn. And right
now you're tissing lipstick off
your teeth when you've got places to go,
things you want, and only the future
to get them with. Can you think of a time
outside your parents' house when you smeared
lipgloss into your school jacket, too young
to be pouting your idea of an invitation
at some silly boy across the yard?
Of course you can't, you've been too busy
getting here, here where you're too something
else. And maybe that boy is somewhere
staring at the faint line across *his* forehead,
and at the same time you both understand
the joke your parents told you
that you never got till now. And rather
than laughing, you feel like beating
the hell out of every minute
that ever passed you by, running it
down with its own steamroller force,
staring back in its own determined eyes
and saying just once "you could have waited."

Dannye Romine Powell

AT EVERY WEDDING SOMEONE STAYS HOME

This one sits all morning
beside the picture window,
staring out at the lawn
which in these situations
is always under a sheet of ice,
even in June. The girl is wearing
her quilted robe, gloves,
fur-lined slippers. Still she can't
get warm. Her mother gets hot
just watching her, so she goes out
for groceries, makes a great show
when she returns of rattling
the brown paper bags she saves
to line the bird cage.
Now she is running water,
peeling melons, humming, arranging
daisies. We who are watching
want the mother to quit making noise,
to stop chopping fruit, to leave
the kitchen. We want her to walk
down the hall to the closet
where the wool blankets are stored.
We want her to gather five or six,
the solids, the stripes,
the MacGregor plaids and tuck them
under her daughter's legs, saving one
for her feet and one for her thin shoulders.
Now we want her to heat water for tea,
bring in wood and quick
before her daughter freezes
seal all the windows
against the stray, chill peal of bells.

Dannye Romine Powell

**LET'S SAY WE HAVEN'T SEEN EACH OTHER
SINCE NINTH GRADE AND WE MEET
AS ADULTS AT A WELCOME CENTER
IN SOUTHSIDE VIRGINIA**

And we begin to kiss
the way we used to kiss
before you moved
with your parents
to Michigan: after school
out by the chain link fence
near the basketball court
on the sea wall
by the bay
in the church parking lot
after choir practice
flat on our backs
in the grass
at slumber parties
before the boys had to leave
or on the beach at Matheson Hammock
when your sister
would drive us
then go off somewhere else
to work on her tan.

It takes us a few seconds
to adjust our arms
because you are taller now
but it all comes back
how we used to take turns
catching our breath,
where your right ear lobe
is fleshy, how your collar smells
of heather, which tooth protrudes,

Dannye Romine Powell/Let's Say We Haven't Seen...

the scar on your chin
that used to be higher.

I can smell the cream
of gardenias in the purple bowl
on our homeroom teacher's desk,
I can even remember her name—
Mrs. Bleier—and I can see the dance
of mimosas in the patio after lunch,
the hair on my arms standing up
when the sun slid behind clouds
and how you kept them up
until the sun eased out again,
the choir singing deep
and wide, deep and wide,
there is a fountain flowing
deep and wide
and how I always thought of you
instead of Jesus when we sang
I've got joy joy joy joy
down in my heart, down in my heart,
the way I do now, kissing you
at a Welcome Center
just over the state line
in Southside Virginia.

Jon Tribble

CHANGES

Back from the hospital, no longer
a pale old woman in white sheets and a gown
that didn't close in back, my mother acted

as if nothing had changed. Yet at night,
before she pulled on her torn gray sweatshirt
alone in the locked bathroom, I wondered if

she stood in front of the mirror, never
touching her breast, tracing the scar
only with her eyes. Years later, after I'd grown

used to waking with Lisa beside me—
her skin so reliable— I thought
of my father, confused in the dark,

a different body pressed against his chest,
the skin no longer yielding. I see him fighting
his hands as they try to reach up,

stopping his fingers at hair and cheeks,
neck, shoulders, arms and hands,
stomach and legs and thighs.

When my mother called to tell me he had left,
I knew I'd be holding her, and I swore
I'd make it seem like I'd never let her go.

Julie Dlugi-King

SECOND SKIN

She hates her skin. She hates
the way it clings to her
body, outlining each roll
under her uniform. Her skin
betrays her. It allows her
breasts to fall, her forehead
to line, her chin to grow
hairs prickly with years.
It allows her to sweat
when the man she loves comes
in for coffee, and she's afraid
to pour for the moons under
her arms. How can she know
the man she loves marvels
at how her skin holds her
together. How warmth and wetness
threaten to spill with each
fluid motion of her arm. How her
fullness makes his mouth water.

Joan Cusack Handler

JUST GRAVY

I've been living a long time inside myself—
now even the coming together in the first place
is questioned. It's like that at fifty—
forced to listen to the body's sentence
as it hesitates and faults,
you trust its limitations. Even
love isn't enough. You think again
about big things, simple things
like happiness and peace. No longer vague,
they take on a muscularity,
a defined shape like a chest or back
that starts with a feeling that thickens
in the belly then pushes up into the biceps
finally collecting at the bend in the throat.
Life crystallizes and we're not
looking so much for higher purpose
but nuts and bolts: I have it or I don't.
That's where we are now. The love we take
for granted. Strange as it seems, it's gravy.

Dana Wildsmith

WEARING THE NIGHT

Because I sleep nude,
night gets out of bed with me,
dragging like a gown
along the curved
enjoyable places,
catching
in the flaps of damp,
awning out from my breasts,

as close as flannel,
napped,
and just the warmth
of the skin
where my belly dips down,

just the texture
of thought returning
like light
through draperies,

like a suggestion
of something private,

words mumbled
in sleep.

Dori Ostermiller

SHOE BOX LOVE

The summer I turned twelve, I learned Jesus would come on a cloud shaped like a man's fist. I learned this from our Sabbath school teacher, Mrs. Sullivan, who kept her long black hair wrapped around her head helmet-style. My sister Natalie and I called her *Iguana Woman*—she seemed that black and red, skin pale as plaster behind her bright make-up. Her voice was reptile-like, too, as she whispered about the Last Days, about fire and falling boulders as if these things were secrets she wasn't supposed to tell.

Going to Sabbath school was a new ritual—something my mother had invented around the first of the year. Though she and my father had been born and raised Seventh Day Adventists, neither of them had gone to church since they were high-school sweethearts at an Adventist boarding academy. But in the past year or so Elaine had started to attend a plain, white brick church in Tustin. She almost snuck out of the house the first few times, then began attending more frequently until one Saturday morning, a few weeks after Christmas, she woke Natalie and me at dawn exclaiming that she had a surprise—that we had to get out of bed and become a church-going family. We grumbled at first, but it didn't take long for us to realize that we needed to comply, in order to keep Elaine from disappearing: we knew that our mother was capable of going away for hours at a time when she didn't get her way. If she was hurt, or angry, she could seethe all day, like a hail storm brewing on the horizon. Nat and I dreaded Elaine's chilly silences—which were punctuated by lots of nail tapping and heavy, despairing sighs—even more than we dreaded our father's violent bursts of rage. We also knew that Don would have nothing to do with Elaine's new religious fervor, and that if either of us chose to stay home from church, we would be left alone with him. So the only thing was to give in, to roll out of bed Saturday mornings when Elaine woke us with a song.

She would walk from my room to Natalie's room and

Dori Ostermiller / Shoe Box Love

back again, her high-heels clicking impatiently against the tiled hallway, and sing, *Good morning merry sunshine, how did you wake so soon? You scared away the little stars and frightened off the moon* . . . Her voice was clear as a shard of glass, lovely and intrusive, and I'd pull the covers up further over my head, curl around my pillow like an unborn child, waiting in the darkness. Elaine's heels would click, fading, toward the kitchen. Then silence—I could hear my own heartbeat swishing softly in my ears—until she clicked back again, her morning song less cheerful now and interspersed with "GET UP, Girls! We'll be late!" Still, I wouldn't move, but would wait to feel her nyloned legs sliding against me as she slipped into my bed, her cool hands prying my fingers from the pillow, her mouth giggling against the back of my neck. "It's time to get up, little merry sunshine," she'd laugh as she poked and tickled and stripped the warm sheet from my body.

"No. Go away."

"Come on, honey—it's time. I've given you fifteen extra minutes already."

"But I'm still tired."

"Come on now, Sylvia. Natalie's already in the shower."

"Maawm," I'd wail, "leave me alone."

"Alright then," she'd say coolly, sitting upright on the edge of the bed. "Alright. If you don't want to go, you can stay here with your father."

I'd sit up then, knowing I'd stepped one step too far out of bounds, wondering if there was still time to get her back. She was still in my room, at least, still sitting on the edge of my bed, waiting for me to redeem myself.

"Ok," I'd finally say, rubbing my eyes. "Just give me a second to wake up." Silence. She'd reach down, slip her high-heeled sandals back on, smooth her silk dress over her lap as if she couldn't understand what she'd been doing horsing around with me a minute before, getting all wrinkled and messy. Her profile was proud, delicate, her nose straight and small, and I would find myself thinking that she was certainly the most beautiful woman in California.

Dori Ostermiller / Shoe Box Love

"Ok, Mom. I'm getting up, ok?"

"Of course you are. Now let's decide what you're wearing, shall we?" She'd go to my closet, slide back the door, rifle through the row of dresses, making comments about all the clothes I had and how I never wore anything but a few old pairs of jeans and why was my closet such a mess? How could I live like such a pig? Didn't I know that I'd never find a husband when I grew up unless I learned to clean up after myself? What about this little brown dress with the velvet collar? I'd watch her spread three or four dresses at the foot of my bed. I hated all of them, but I'd keep quiet, biting the inside of my cheek, and point to whichever one I thought *she* liked. Sooner or later she'd turn toward me again, smiling as if I were the most miraculous child she'd ever seen, telling me what a jewel I was and how beautiful I would look in Sabbath school that day. My mother could do that—she could, in a minute or less, make you believe you were the brightest, the most beautiful, the most sparkling gem of a person. She would swoon at the mediocre pictures I brought home from school, the tiny clay sculptures, the half-finished stories. When she was in the mood for it, she would look at me and whatever I'd created with an air of perfect, wide-eyed astonishment and say, "Oh *honey!* Why, it's just something else!" And though I never knew precisely what this meant, I always believed her.

* * *

I'm not sure exactly when it was that I knew she was having an affair. But one day, in the middle of everything else, this man appeared. Elaine had taken Natalie and me to a church pot-luck one Saturday afternoon, and we were giggling and throwing little pieces of veggie-dog from the baked beans across the table at one another, and suddenly this man was sitting down beside us, crooning our names as if he'd known us all along. He was balding and had a long upper lip which he could stick out like a mule's. He wore baggy knickers, like elf pants, and I noticed immediately that his presence there made Elaine

Dori Ostermiller/Shoe Box Love

giddy and uncomfortable—she kept smiling and patting her make-up and tugging at her stockings. She introduced him as her friend, “Mr. Richard,” then later told me that Richard was his first name. I liked him. I liked him because he was kind and funny-looking, because he made the mule face and made my mother laugh, because he asked me questions about my favorite music—something my father had never done. I liked him, and I could see that this pleased Elaine.

A few weeks later, I started getting letters from Mr. Richard. He drew me pictures of cowboy hats and old men with clown noses, called me his “little twerp,” and promised me horse farms and trips to the country. Elaine told me that I had to hide these letters, along with hers. But I wanted to believe that my letters were separate—more remarkable than hers—so I kept them in a Kinny’s shoe box in the top of my closet, taking them out every few days to read them again.

I knew there was something not quite right about all this, but the very wrongness of it thrilled me. And I hated my father so much, I would have done anything for revenge. For a year now, ever since Don had gotten a position as chief cardiovascular surgeon at the hospital, he’d grown more distant and cool, so that Natalie and I could never predict when the violence was going to erupt. In the car on the way to the beach, or at the dinner table on Sunday evenings, we would feel the quick shock of rage as his fist slammed across one of our faces. It wasn’t the physical pain that hurt so much as the surprise of it, the flinching in my limbs, the fast knot in the pit of my stomach when I’d realize that it was too late to get away, that we couldn’t stop him. So I’d cower, cover my face, curl myself into a question mark like a stunt man about to fall from a car so that at the very least, my vital parts wouldn’t be mangled. All this would happen in an instant—the sudden jolt of his hand across my cheek or my chest, in my hair, grabbing me by the arm, twisting my skin, the far away dread that crept over me in these moments, the distancing. I’d have to distance myself, leave my body so that the shame wouldn’t kill me. Because despite the bruises and the shit in my underwear, it was the shame that

Dori Ostermiller / Shoe Box Love

wanted to kill, to eat me alive from the inside out—the creeping dirtiness of being so small and stupid and weak. The anger came later, when I was sitting alone in my room, but by then I had resolved not to cry, never to give him the satisfaction of my tears—my body’s only precious commodity. Instead, I would plot my father’s destruction, reading and re-reading Mr. Richard’s letters. By the time my mother would come into the room, sheepish, and invite me to her bathroom, I had turned myself into a pillar of ice, a calm, self-righteous murderess.

I couldn’t tell if my mother hated him the way I did, but I watched her for signs. Often, I’d watch Elaine getting ready for social occasions—dinner parties or hospital functions with my father. I’d watch as she picked out her dress, her lacy underwear and stockings. I’d sit on the edge of her tub and stare at her reflection in the bathroom mirror as she stretched open her mouth, applying eye-liner and mascara with the swift, sketchy strokes of an artist. We could hear Don rustling through his medical journals in the bedroom, clinking the ice in his drink, and Natalie playing *Rocket Man* for the tenth time. I’d think of the forbidden letters, and it seemed to me that Elaine’s and my secret made us better than the other members of our family. During those evenings, my mother’s love for me seemed as safe and contained, there in her bathroom, as if it were tucked in the Kinny’s shoe box. Sometimes she would let me watch her bathe, laughing and telling me stories as she soaped her stomach and her small breasts. Sometimes I’d sit on the bathroom counter near her and powder my cheeks with a hint of apricot blush—“don’t *ever* apply color right below your eyes,” she’d say, “and never on the chin! Just on the cheekbone, from the center of your eye over to the hairline”

She’d been talking about beauty alot lately, selling Mary Kay cosmetics in their pink plastic containers to Don’s partners’ wives, or to women she’d met at church. Elaine’s friend Sammy had convinced her to sell the make-up as a part-time job, telling my mother that if she sold enough in a year, she would win a trip to Hawaii or Mexico, or a set of pink luggage, or the grand prize—a pink Mary Kay Cadillac. My mother already had a car,

Dori Ostermiller / Shoe Box Love

but Sammy, who had won a cruise to Ensenada, seemed happier since she'd started selling Mary Kay. "Sammy is unattached," Elaine would say in a voice that made me think of loose kite strings and open flies, "and she's doing much better since the Mary Kay thing." So, only a week after we became a "church-going family," Elaine brought home several crates of make-up—eye pencils and cold cream and night cream, skin fresheners and lotions in different sized bottles—and now the small pink boxes were tucked away in almost every cupboard in the house, peering from behind cereal boxes and stacked underneath clean towels and shoved under the hems of our coats. Once, when Elaine's make-up model didn't show up, she took Nat and me with her, made us over in front of a group of middle-aged housewives. She powdered and polished our faces until we looked like pretty drunken clowns, prancing stupidly around the room so the women could see how lovely we were. I felt foolish as the women smiled, patting our cheeks and our backs and saying things like, "Oh, they're so gorgeous, the little angels. Can you imagine having such a flawless complexion?" It made my own skin crawl—it felt like those dreams in which I went to school with my nightgown still on—but Elaine sold more make-up that day than any other.

Natalie was delighted with our mother's new occupation, since it made her more popular with her school friends; she had recently turned fourteen and was one of the first girls in her class to wear both a bra and eye-liner. But to me, the cosmetic boxes seemed ominous—like shiny pink bombs waiting to go off, or like a host of aliens who had planted themselves all over our house and were listening. Also, I wondered if Elaine's make-up mania was making her tired, because more and more often I would come home from school to find her curled up in a corner of the living room, asleep, a sweater bunched under her head. Sometimes she would wake up for long enough to say hello, or to ask me about my day, but before I could answer she would close her eyes again, and soon her mouth would fall open crookedly. I felt a little scared, seeing her twitch unself-consciously on the living room floor—like a cat who had

Dori Ostermiller / Shoe Box Love

squeezed itself into the last patch of afternoon sunlight. I wondered what it meant, and sometimes I would creep into the living room with my shoes in my hand, crouch down beside her and watch her sleep, staring at the tiny rows of blonde hairs on her upper lip, or the moles on her neck, below her right ear. The air around her head shimmered with dust particles, like a swarm of sleepy gnats, and as I watched her, my eyelids would start to feel heavy with sadness. More than once, I wanted to lie down in the corner next to her, but somehow it seemed dangerous to wake her. And I had a strange feeling that once I was curled beside her, we might sleep for days.

It was odd to observe Elaine so still because she was usually fluttering around the house, doing two or three things at once, talking to friends on the phone, laughing in her high, musical laugh. It seemed she was always talking the loudest, singing the loudest. She was the kind of mother who would stop to talk to strangers on the street to comment on the weather or pet someone's dog. She'd say things to people in the super-market like "Goodness, I sure hope this heat lifts in a few days, don't you?" or "It just floors me, how much the price of asparagus has escalated!" or "My, what a lovely dress you have on—do you mind letting me see the back so I can draw a pattern when I get home?" and always, I would walk away from her at these moments, crossing my arms, and moan softly, "oh Maawm." I felt she was exposing herself, that she sounded too transparent, too much like a woman, that the people she talked to could see right through her, and through me, because Elaine and I were the same. It wasn't long after we started going to church that she was asked to sing in the church choir, to speak in committee meetings, to orchestrate groups of children with her exaggerated, melodic voice. It made me proud, but also embarrassed. Sitting in the Sabbath school room, listening to Mrs. Sullivan talk about the Last Days, Natalie and I would occasionally hear Elaine's clear soprano rise above the rest of the church choir in the sanctuary overhead. We would smile, then look away from each other to avoid laughing out loud. Still, it was good to feel the sharp knowledge of Elaine's presence above

Dori Ostermiller/Shoe Box Love

—it kept me from becoming too frightened by Mrs. Sullivan’s gory, apocalyptic stories.

I tried not to look at Iguana Woman’s dry face as she spoke about Jesus on the fisted cloud, focusing instead on the little ripples her pantyhose made below her ankles, her long middle toes hovering on the edges of her sandals like fat drops of water about to spill. This way, her scratchy voice seemed less terrible, although the stories she told sprang to life in my mind, grew there while Nat and I followed the other kids through the velvety church lobby, laughing and talking as if we’d just seen a good movie. By the time we reached the main sanctuary, slid into our second-row pew next to Elaine, my head would be bursting with bright pictures—giant mountains crumbling like cookies, faces melting below hundreds of winged Mrs. Sullivans who circled the dark, holy cloud. More and more often, during the summer of ‘74, I would escape mid-sermon, sneak down the side aisle, tip-toe through the lobby and the huge front doors into a flood of smoggy July sunshine.

Once outside, I’d take off my shoes and stockings, walk barefoot between the rows of empty cars in the parking lot. It was frightening and good to be alone, to feel the rough asphalt against the bottoms of my feet. The parking lot smelled like warm tar, and I could hear the preacher’s words floating down, sliding over slick hoods and windshields. The cars seemed to know some shiny secret about each person in church, and I’d run my finger over their paint, stare into vacant windows, discovering stacks of old sweaters, empty Coke cans, comic books.

* * *

One Saturday during that summer, after fleeing a sermon about the Mark of the Beast, I peered into the tinted window of a white Lincoln, and saw a face staring back at me—a freckled nose, a pair of golden, cat-like eyes. It was a girl I recognized from school, Theresa. Her legs were stretched across the back seat, and she had a book in her hands with a naked

Dori Ostermiller/Shoe Box Love

woman on the cover. She stuck her tongue out at me and I jumped away from the car, wondering if I should try to escape back into the church before she recognized me. But it was too late—she slid across the seat and opened the door, motioning for me to get in.

"Here," she said, "get in."

"What for?"

"Get in—hurry before someone sees."

It seemed I had no choice so I scooted in beside her. The car smelled hot and leathery. My bare legs stuck to the warm seat. She reached over me and grabbed the door handle, slamming it shut.

"Hi," I said feebly. "Can't we crack a window or something?"

"Uh uh—power windows."

"Oh." I nodded. "You look different."

"It's the dress," she said. "I never wear them at school. Have to here, even though they know I sit in the car the whole time. Sylvia, right?" I nodded. "I didn't know you came here."

"I don't. I mean, I didn't used to. My mother wants us to now—" I halted, flapped my skirt against my legs. She raised an eyebrow as if she thought there was more to my story—some dark secret behind my stiff words. "It's just one of her phases," I explained, feeling more sophisticated all of a sudden. I dropped my shoes and stockings on the car floor and looked at Theresa. She looked pretty—her brown bangs were damp with sweat and her cheeks were flushed. She smelled like a combination of Head and Shoulders and cherry lip gloss.

"I know what you mean," she said thoughtfully. "My step-mom makes us go to a new church every couple of months." I forced a knowing smile, wondering whether it would be better or worse to have step-parents. The car's heat was stifling.

"Can't we at least crack the door a little?" I asked.

"Ok. I just didn't want anyone to see me in here. What are you doing looking in people's cars anyway? What were you looking for?"

Dori Ostermiller / Shoe Box Love

"I just—nothing," I stammered, feeling foolish now, and caught. "I should probably go back." I cracked the car door, peeled my right thigh from the seat.

"Wait—it's not even over yet. You can't go back in now." She rolled her eyes at me, then began reading again as if she didn't care whether I stayed or left; as if she wanted to remind me that I was a grade younger and not as popular—that my hair was frizzy instead of slick and parted, that I was quiet and hardly ever got chosen for school plays. I stared at the lacy edge of her dress, her bony, tanned knees. I dangled one foot out of the door.

"Listen to this—*He parted her lips with his strong tongue, and she yielded, felt herself melting onto the bed, felt his hands searching under her sweater*—I'm just getting to the good part."

I pulled my foot back inside, looked at her. She smiled, exposing the gap between her two front teeth, and dangled the book from her fingers as if it were a piece of sweet chocolate. "Well?" she said. "You wanna hear it or not?"

I hesitated, thinking of Elaine sitting in church, fanning herself with the bulletin. *Our father who art in heaven . . .* I pictured her looking up, wide-eyed and clean, smiling gratefully at me as I slipped back into our pew. I remembered the times I'd watched Theresa during lunch-breaks at school; how I'd admired her freckles and her jump-roping technique and her way of talking about boys as if she knew something.

"Does your step-mom know you're reading that?" I felt silly as soon as I'd said it, but I needed to talk for a minute, to figure out what I was on the edge of. Theresa rolled her eyes, then laughed—that impatient kind of laugh parents use.

"No, she thinks I'm reading *Moby Dick*," she said sarcastically. "Does your mom know you're out here looking in people's cars?"

"Right," I said, "read it then." I suddenly realized that being here together, hidden in the church parking lot, made us equals. We had something in common—we preferred the sticky back seat to a velvet pew, the warmth of our guilt to the air-conditioned church. *And lead us not into temptation.* I cringed,

Dori Ostermiller / Shoe Box Love

imagining Elaine catching me here; then I shut my eyes and slouched down in the seat as Theresa began to read. I tried to erase my mother's face from my mind, pictured the heroine's body stretched across the bed, her blonde hair smoothed like a golden fan. I felt the sun press its bright hand over my eyelids. Theresa was a good reader—her words sounded hushed and slick. I tried to imagine the man's face as he undressed the golden-haired woman, his hands touching her skin. Would his hands be gentle or rough? Were his fingers soft as babies' skin, or long and crooked, like my father's? I pictured my father's fingers—quick and treacherous as they stung across my cheek, or delicate and trembling, the way they looked last week when he took the letters from Elaine's desk, examined each one carefully without opening them. I'd watched him from around the corner as he stared at each slip of paper on her desk, as he began to throw open phone books and cook books, growing frantic, stopping finally when he saw me standing there. I knew he was looking for the letters. I went into the bathroom and vomited, and the next day, my mother put all her letters with mine, in my shoe box. What did he know? Why was he coming home later and later each week, so that some weeks I hardly ever saw him, but only heard him late at night while I lay in bed, staring at the grey ceiling; only heard fragmented, dark bits of his voice floating down the hall as he poured himself a drink and talked to Elaine about his day?

Sitting with Theresa in the safe heat of that car, I started to think back, trying to remember when things had gotten so horrible, and why. As far back as I could recall, I had felt frightened by my father's sharp words, my mother's cool looks, things on the stove, boiling water, windows left open, the egg-timer going off—even something that small, it seemed, could send all of us reeling. I knew that without ever screaming or even raising their voices, my parents had been waging a silent war all these years. But with Mr. Richard and the shoe box letters, the stillness had gotten *louder* somehow—more charged, and violent. And I was starting to become afraid—terrified that Don would notice how completely I was my mother's ally.

Dori Ostermiller / Shoe Box Love

"You'd better go." Theresa had stopped reading and was staring out the back window. "They're out." She buried the book beneath her seat, smoothed her skirt along the edge of her knees. "I'll save it, if you want."

"Save what?"

"The book, dummy. If you want, you can come over later. My parents won't be there." She folded her hands carefully in her lap, as if she'd just finished praying.

"Ok. Thanks." I gathered my shoes and stockings from the car floor, held them tight against the pain in my chest. I wanted to say something, and I felt my heart pounding in my neck. I wanted to tell Theresa what I was beginning to think—*my house is too silent, something terrible is going to happen*. "How'll I get there?" I asked.

"You got a bike?"

"Sure, ok. I'll call first to get directions."

"Good," she smiled. "Don't forget."

People were coming out of the church now, drifting in nicely dressed clumps or wandering to their cars alone, shimmering in the heat. They seemed to move in slow motion, talking close to each others' faces, the women touching one another's arms before joining husbands, children. I wondered if they'd heard something in there to make them feel peaceful, or sad, if they'd hold it around them for a while or slip out of it quietly as they drove home. I saw Natalie with two of her high-school friends, and Elaine, talking to Mr. Richard. She was smiling and laughing, her eyes leaving him every few minutes to scan the parking lot.

* * *

Elaine always smelled nice after church—like warm nylons, or warm tea. I thought about this as we drove home from church, down Tustin Avenue; it was almost as if she'd been sitting in a spice shop rather than a cool brick sanctuary.

"What did you do with your good stockings?" she asked, glancing at me in the rear-view mirror.

Dori Ostermiller / Shoe Box Love

"They're here, on the floor." I suddenly felt that taking off my stockings was the worst thing I'd ever done—worse even than sneaking out of church, or hiding letters. "I was hot," I said.

Silence. Warm Saturday sun blasted through the car windows. She clicked on the turn signal, steered us onto 17th Street.

"I didn't feel good," I offered, staring out the window at a German shepherd drooling in the convertible next to us. Elaine tapped her fingers against the steering wheel.

"At least you got to hear Iguana Woman," said Natalie. "That bit about the cloud was awesome."

"Yeah, she's really weird." I forced a laugh, wondering if Natalie ever believed anything she heard in church—wondering if it got into her head and swam there like it did in mine. Nat was sitting in the front seat, tearing pictures from a magazine, looking for the perfect haircut. Her hair was blonde and smooth, and hung symmetrically down both sides of her face.

"Shelly Freedman's going to ski camp next week," she said, gathering her hair in a thick knot with one hand. "Can we, like, turn on the air or something—I'm roasting." Silence. Warm Saturday sun glared through the smog, bounced off shiny store fronts and windows. The hot leather smell of the car mingled with Elaine's smell. Natalie switched on the air—a dry, metallic blast.

"It's up at Pine Lake," Natalie yelled over the whining air. "Bunch of kids from school are going. Shelly said they've got six really cool ski boats. Did you hear about it, Sylvie?"

"No. Sounds neat though." I smiled at the back of her head, felt glad that she'd said my name. Does she know, too? Beads of sweat were drying on my upper lip, cooled by the metallic air. Elaine stopped us at a light, still tapping her fingernails, and I knew I wouldn't get her back for a while. I stared out the window at two women and a man walking arm in arm, linked, their heads bent against the heat. I watched their tanned legs moving together, thought about the golden-haired woman, thought about getting a fever.

Dori Ostermiller / Shoe Box Love

"It doesn't cost that much, Mom," said Natalie.

"Hmm?"

"The camp—the *ski* camp. It'd only be for a week."

"No." Elaine switched off the air, drew in a sigh. "We're not going anywhere this summer." She steered us onto La Loma Street, up the hill, onto our street. I stared at the soft hollow in the back of her neck, wanted to press my nose into it, wanted to scream. *How can you do this?* Silence. Natalie rolled down her window. I thought of how pretty Elaine was, talking to Mr. Richard, how she had smiled and laughed, how her eyes wandered and came back.

"So how was church?" I asked as we pulled into the driveway.

"You've been sick three Saturdays in a row," Elaine snapped. "Sick—*right?*" She held the keys in her lap for a moment, jingling them.

"It's only a week," said Nat. "Shelly's mom's letting her for two weeks."

"Maybe you should just stay home with your father, Sylvia. If you're going to get sick every week, or whatever you do. I just won't bring you anymore, that's all." She sighed, gathering her purse from the floor. I felt the pain in my chest reach up to my throat and tighten, like a hard lump of flour I was supposed to swallow.

"It's just ski camp," whined Natalie. "It's not like I'm asking for a car or something."

"It's a shame, Sylvie. You could at least try to be good." Their dresses rustled as they got out of the car, slammed their doors in unison. I could hear their heels click against the concrete—*click click click*—until they reached the grass, then silence. The car hummed with warmth, and I could feel the lump grow bigger. Just swallow it, I thought.

I sat in the car for what seemed like a long time, my mother's words still ringing in my head—*you could at least try . . .* I cried, vowing to be as hard as she was. I would punish her for her coldness—I would run away, go live with Theresa and her step-mother. Or, at the very least, I'd never speak to her again. I

Dori Ostermiller / Shoe Box Love

wondered how much this would inconvenience me, and I pictured the two of us walking icily past each other every day for six or seven years, turning our faces away, communicating occasionally with a terse note of some kind or hand signal. Still, I knew there was something different in her withdrawal this time—something that included all of us, and I remembered how she had come into my room a few nights ago; I had woken with a start to find her sitting on the edge of my bed, crying. It gave me shivers to picture her sitting there in the dark, and suddenly the thought of her felt like a linen closet, like a gloved hand over my mouth, a slick white suffocation. I gathered my shoes and stockings from the floor.

Inside, the house was dark and cool. All the curtains were drawn except those in the living room—the bright, empty yellow room. The entry-way tiles pressed cold and smooth against my feet, and I heard my parents arguing in the kitchen—her voice quiet and even, his a straining whisper, now fading to almost nothing, now rising, breaking above hers. I felt fascinated, felt the lump spreading through my chest and legs, forcing me toward their voices.

“Shh. It doesn’t matter—it’s not what you think. Can we talk about this later, please.”

“Doesn’t matter? Elaine, I don’t have time for this bullshit—who is this shmuck, and why the hell—”

“Shh. Please, can we just—I can explain. I just don’t want to get into this *now*.”

“Right. I forgot, you enjoy your secrets these days. Well, now you understand then. All those nights when you decide—at 2 in the fucking morning—”

“Don, *please*. You don’t have to curse. If you’ll just let me—” she stopped, saw me standing in the doorway. She touched her forehead with one hand, and I noticed her cheeks looked pink and hot. “What is it, Sylvia?” Now they were both looking at me, staring blankly as if trying to remember who I was. I felt the lump growing bigger, spreading all through me like cement, making me too heavy to move or speak, or breathe.

Dori Ostermiller/Shoe Box Love

"What do you want, honey?" Her hand dropped to the counter, as if to steady herself. Don had a letter in his hand which he slapped onto the counter. Then he pinched his nostrils together, sighed. He knew. He didn't look anything like the man in Theresa's book. My lips and tongue were too heavy to move.

"Christ," he said. He snatched his car keys from the counter and left, rattling the shutters on the back door.

Neither Elaine or I turned to watch him go, but kept our eyes fixed on each other as if trying to find something between us— a ray of light? a trail of rubber cement? a barbed-wire fence? She looked frozen, leaning against the counter like that, and I thought of how she'd woken me that morning, how she'd slid under the covers with me, tickling and laughing. What had happened to us between then and now?

"I just wanted the phone book," I said, feeling the anger and heaviness lift a bit. "My friend Theresa said I could come over."

"I thought you were sick." Her voice sounded slow, and hollow. I shook my head.

"I told her I'd call, either way."

"Oh." She looked down, ran her finger along the edge of the counter, picked up the letter. For a moment I thought she would cry. "I guess everyone's leaving this afternoon." She took her purse from the kitchen table, walked past me, then stopped, turned around and smiled a little, as if she were too tired to stay away much longer. "You'll have to wait, honey, Natalie's on the phone." I watched her walk down the hallway to the yellow room— *click click click*—until she reached the carpet, then silence. I knew without looking that she would take her shoes off, pad across the livingroom, lie down in the sunny corner like a kitten, still in her silk dress. I knew she'd stay that way, curled and small, until he came back.

I went to her desk and pulled the phone book from her top drawer, noticing a pink Mary Kay box peeking up from the corner. I stared at the book without opening it, wishing I could make myself small enough to fit in that drawer. I listened to the

Dori Ostermiller / Shoe Box Love

garage door opening, heard Don's car backing down the driveway, moving down the street.

A week later, I'd be sitting in the same place, listening. I'd hear Don packing his tools in the garage, hear him loading boxes into his trunk. I'd hear them arguing—his voice low and even, hers a choking moan, like an animal's. I'd watch Natalie run out the back door, hear her scream at both of them, hear her call my mother a whore. I'd listen to his car pop and rumble down the road, hear their voices fading with the engine noise. I'd pick up the phone, call Theresa, tell her I'd be twelve in a few days, tell her that there would be a party.

But this day, the phone was too heavy to pick up. I put the phone book back in Elaine's desk drawer, next to the pink box. The lump was gone now, and in its place, a slow, sleepy dread. *At least you could try to be good.* I thought about Jesus on the cloud, wondering if it was true—would he really come? And if so, what would he do with us once he got here?

I walked down the hall toward my room, saw Elaine on the living room floor, all curled in the corner, like a toy. I watched her for a moment, then went in and knelt beside her, curled into her curl, smaller than her. She sighed and draped her arm over me. We breathed together, fast and then more slowly, her warm nylon smell in my dress, my hair. We disappeared, sank right down into the yellow room, faded quietly like sunlight.

Carrie Etter

IF SHE TELLS THEM

it was not the man
she selected from the many men
on parole for the same crime

committed against her,
if she tells them
that the cool, rubbery hand

snaking up between her new thighs,
wiping off the wet white blanket
on her stomach, feeding her red

licorice, if she tells them
it was her father
and not this other man

after months of slips-of-the-tongue
about a stranger and his red candy,
they'll call her a liar,

they'll ground her for good
to her yellow house
and her father's cool, rubbery hands.

James Williams

NIGHTFALL

The eastern twilight moon
climbs its blue-ribbed sky
to oppose the pink and gaudy light
that sinks
as fire always sinks.
A plane crawls west for Chicago,
scissors the white scar.
Bats shake themselves free
from the forest and its shadowed lies.

Another year passes
since your brother and I shoveled
wet earth down to you.
I'm hear another year
watching the day give in
and my sadness unfold,
quietly now, without anger,
without the old heat of myself.

Stars begin to appear
as color wanes.
They are saying nothing,
the nothing that breaches the light,
the nothing that you turned to
like it was a friend.
I cannot bring myself
to hate stars anymore,
though they watched
like children
as you gave yourself away.

On the hill it gets colder.
I look up to find
the crippled fingers

James Williams/Nightfall

of an ash tree
breaking the moon
into pieces,
that dry bone fruit
that fed you
as it feeds me.

James Williams

THERE IS A SEASON

There is a season when the moon
brings its hard wrath down
to thresh us out, clean.
Storms terrorize the countryside,
knocking the old pine
to the ground. The dark roots
of his skirt laid open perversely,
a giant's shaggy eye watching.

Calm pools breathe beneath the hollows.
The crickets hush any truths
they may speak, though I want
to decipher, need to learn
the cold language of their murmurs.
Perhaps they hold their subterranean tongues
on purpose, knowing that the wet fields
will rise up in flame again,
that each stream will somehow
course itself toward some end.

I had a black story to tell,
but it was lost as the sun climbed
out of the clouds.
The story became its own story
and taught me to hold onto what I have.
Always another chance to rise.
Below the uncertain earth are lakes,
entire seas we can't know.
And there is a season
when joy reaches up like
trees or blades of grass
and even the stranded worms
can't keep from laughing,
the smell of rain is so rich.

Nancy Kassell

HUNTING AND GATHERING

In my dream, you'd been kidnapped and I was inconsolable until two letters arrived. The writing was Arabic, which neither you nor I can read or write and the ink lime-green, the color of the bicycle you were riding when you had your accident. The figure of a woman appeared, dressed in a white robe. She smiled. "Come," she said, holding out her hand. Her light was still with me when I awoke.

Perhaps when the spirit leaves the body, it is disoriented, its atoms dispersed, as Lucretius said, just as your skull was shattered when you hit the van. But in time it re-collects itself—or is re-collected. Are you searching for a way to come together again? I do not know whose job this is, whether we must work together to make each other whole, or must work alone. If we succeed, meet me in some dive in Istanbul for a drink. I'd know your shining anywhere.

Gary J. Whitehead

DIGGING

Days with heavy snowfall
school would cancel and I'd
venture out well-bundled and shovel
the driveway, hurling piles over
the fence into one big hill.
I'd dig the entrance kneeling
and pushing snow between my legs
like a territorial bitch marking
bounds, till inside; then, on my
stomach, shaving and smoothing
out the walls, I'd rebuild
my private domain. A candle lit
for a minute then extinguished
would ice the walls, the shovel
handle poked through would make
the hole for breathing, and
the silence inside forgot its
size and place; and sitting cross-
legged, I was some explorer content
with my life in the outdoors,
or else I was me before I was
me, my mother's world the cold
and what else was on the outside,
those smooth dark walls inside
all that I could touch and know
and exist in because they welcomed me.

Craig Challander

NEW SWIMMER

It's *there*—an ultrasound

blip: two: then
screen's focus hones

in on a tiny skull,

xylophone bones; they dance
your dark ocean

like a tadpole, sperm, fossil

fish, frozen on Polaroid
this winter day

as screen darkens, as doctor says

"It's fine—strong swimmer.
She swims," he grins,

"like a girl." You take

my hand. I see
silver glint under light

as I brush, blow back

wisps from your brow. Tears
merge as we kiss, twist,

trickle our face. . .strange

salt, double helix
of joy.

Nancy Peters Hastings

NEAR AND FAR

How slowly a child awakens.
Each piece of dream comes with her.
The tiny hand for the first time reaches
up to clutch a lock of your hair,
to touch your face, sense
the tension locked in your jaws.

Instead, she rolls back her head
into a laugh, a come-join-me mood.
Her eyes ask of you
why are you so still.
Can one so young know
the depth of depression, of joy?
Her hand holds the moment unopened.
She dreams the room both far and near,
believes she can hold the moon.

You want to save her from this world.
Like sand she slips through your hands
into her own far reaching future.
How can she hear her own heartbeat
so close in confusion to your own?

Jeanne Cunningham

GHOST BABY

It's the night after Halloween. I'm not in much pain any longer, just a dull ache that won't really settle in any one particular place, but roams from my abdomen to my chest to my head. I waited two months, didn't tell Christopher, but this morning he said to me, "Mama, I feel strange."

"How?" I said, not wanting to ask any leading questions.

"I don't know." He shrugged. "Just strange."

"Well, I feel kind of strange myself," I said, and hugged him. He glanced at our closed bathroom door, which is always open, and buried his head in my stomach. I hadn't had the energy to clean the bathroom up yet, and I was afraid the sight of all the blood would frighten him, so I had simply closed the door. Part of him wants to know, and part of him doesn't, I thought; part of me wants to tell him, and part of me wants to shield him. I resolved to play it by ear.

Summoning all my reserves of will, I clean up the dinner dishes and announce I'm going out for a walk. Jack looks at me with mild alarm in his eyes, then nods, understanding. "Be careful," he says, though our neighborhood is as safe as any can be.

"Let me come with you, Mama," Chris says, flinging his arms around my waist.

I had in mind a long, quiet, serene walk, one in which to collect my thoughts, possibly come to some conclusions. But I look at Chris. "Okay."

We start out, the same route we took Halloween night, toward the famous neighborhood house that decorates dramatically for each holiday. Next it'll be Thanksgiving. The people who own the house keep turkeys in their back yard year-round, but a few weeks before Thanksgiving they let them roam around the side yard as part of their decorations. Last year Chris

Jeanne Cunningham/Ghost Baby

had regular conversations with one of them. He'd say, "How're you doing, turkey?" and the turkey would rattle a response. The normally placid turkey would exchange lines with Chris as long as we stood there.

That was hardly unusual though. Chris talked to our English spaniel all the time, especially when either Jack or I had argued with him. He'd sit cross-legged in front of the dog, explaining his view of what had happened. We were always glad to see the two of them commiserating. After all, that's why we had bought the dog.

Of course the neighborhood house had more standard decorations as well—a sort of Thanksgiving nativity scene with figures of the Pilgrims and Indians sharing a dinner of corn and sweet potatoes around a campfire that really glowed.

"Are you feeling better, Mama?" Chris asks, taking my hand.

Thin dark fingers of cloud stretch across the moon.

"A little bit," I say. "What about you? Are you still feeling strange?"

He drops my hand and runs ahead of me, then turns around and starts skipping backwards. "Can you do this?"

I laugh and jog slightly ahead of him before turning around.

"No—no—you can't get ahead of me. Just turn around where you are."

I do, and start skipping backwards. It's hard to move freely when you know at any moment you can slam right into something—anything.

"You can do it," he says, amazed.

"Sure," I say, thinking, I can do it, only not this time.

This time I've already hit a steel wall of unknown proportions.

"Do you think they'll still have the decorations up?"

Chris asks, but before I can answer, goes on. "Remember how that lady dressed like a witch was peering around the side of the house and then disappearing?"

"She was pretty scary." Tonight is placid by comparison. The moon's edges glow from behind a mass of dark clouds, like

Jeanne Cunningham/Ghost Baby

a coin that needs shining but whose edges are still brilliant. We pass the abandoned school, a beautiful old Dutch style building with blue curlique eaves. I've always wondered why they abandon these old buildings.

I start walking fast to catch up with Chris. "My shadow's going to get yours," I call to him.

He giggles and runs ahead. "Be a ghost," he calls back. "You can't get me," he chants.

I hold my arms out in front, wiggle my fingers, and moan.

Chris clenches his fists and darts behind a tall cedar. I reach around it but he's off again. I chase him up to the house.

The cardboard tombstones are still scattered about the yard. The epitaph writers have a bizarre sense of humor. On two tiny identical tombstones placed side by side are the words, "Mona" and "Lisa." Last night the owners of the house had hidden an old stereo behind one of the stones from which blood curdling chuckles and high pitched screams were emanating. Small white kleenex ghosts float from the lower branches of one of the maple trees.

I turn away. A few weeks ago Chris shoved his stuffed bunny under his pajama shirt. "I'm going to have a baby, Mama, just like you are."

I had laughed, but he had persisted. "Are you going to, Mama?"

Jack and I had decided it would be best to wait until the first three months had passed before telling him, to spare him unnecessary worry in case it didn't work out. "Not that I know of," I had said, hating lying to him, and not even sure it was the right thing to be doing. Everything else he had ever asked, we'd told him the truth about. When he'd found a tampax in my purse and wanted to know what it was for, I had told him.

Now it's too late. But maybe not.

We round the block. Chris grabs a fallen branch and bats at the air. "I hit a double at practice today, Mama."

"That's great," I say.

The makeshift bat whooshes through the air. "I kept my

Jeanne Cunningham / Ghost Baby

eye on the ball, like you said."

If only everything were so simple. I read a magazine article which said that miscarriages were most often followed by normal, healthy pregnancies. But when I asked my doctor about it, he said the statistics are the same each time you step up to bat.

Chris runs ahead tossing pine cones in the air and batting them, and I'm left to my thoughts.

About twice a year, from the time Chris was about five, he would stumble into our room early in the morning and look around intently as if searching for something he knew was there but couldn't seem to locate.

"What is it?" I'd ask, propping myself up on my elbows.

"Where's the baby bed?" he would say every time.

Jack and I invariably exchanged looks.

"Your baby bed?" Jack said.

Chris frowned. "No. Where's the baby?"

"Come over here, sweet potato pie," I said, using his baby nickname, and cradled his head to my chest. He allowed me to hug him but kept the rest of his body stiff, a defensive maneuver I recognized as one of my own. He knew if he softened any more he might collapse. "You were dreaming," I said into his hair.

He looked up at me. "It seemed so real."

"I know." Recently, when this happened, I waited a moment, then said, "Maybe one day it will be."

He drew back slightly. "Maybe it will," he said, and then added matter-of-factly, "and maybe it won't."

I looked up to the ceiling to keep from crying.

Now we're coming up on the back of the house. Last night they had rigged up a stuffed man, full size, in the treetop, on a noose. Every time this banshee shrieked on the record, he'd come hurtling down, crashing through the leaves and scaring some of the younger trick-or-treaters so bad they'd run home. I see Chris studying the upper branches. He skips back to me. "He's not there, Mama."

"I would expect not," I say. Then I put my arm around Chris' shoulders. "There's something I want to tell you." I wait

Jeanne Cunningham/Ghost Baby

for him to run off, or shrug my arm away, or change the subject. But he doesn't. "Just because something doesn't work out one time doesn't mean it won't work out the next time."

He's quiet for a minute. The moon finally breaks free of the clouds and shines white through the tranquil thin branches.

"I know that," he finally says. But he follows that with, "What are you talking about, Mom?"

I take a deep breath, but not so that he can hear. "Anything . . ." I say. "Everything."

"Oh." Now he breaks away. "Now I'll be the ghost and chase you," he says.

I laugh. "Okay." I start to walk fast. He circles around ahead of me and ducks behind an oleander bush. I pretend not to have seen him and slow down, looking around and walking on tiptoe. He extends one arm out, wiggling his fingers. I still pretend not to see him, and walk right into his hand. Before I can shriek though, he steps out, his hand still and flat on my stomach now, and whispers, "Ghost baby."

Lynne Hugo deCourcy/Chances

come for us to place the ropes
for the long tow toward hope,
that exuberant calamity, another chance.

Catherine McLaughlin

FOGBANK
(New Bedford, Massachusetts)

1.

The gifts sat in random array on the polished table
all the frail possibilities
still wrapped in recycled paper
and we paid the mechanical waitress well
to clear them away
with the leftovers.

Outside the restaurant thick fog
hushed retreating footfalls on the cobblestones;
it swallowed me whole and untold words hung
dissipating into the mist.

2.

The low and weary horn warns of reefs and jagged rocks
all along the route to the South End:
the polluted beach where we first learned to swim
bounded by hurricane dikes and squat brick mills
with painted windows and blackened smokestacks
rising like icons into a cathedral ceiling.
A father glides by with quick and silent steps,
a wrinkled wad of brown paper tucked under his arm
and penny gumballs in his pocket:
his round shoulders and bent head melt into the scrim,
while somewhere in a crowded tenement
a mother hangs the dampened clothes
on an indoor rack above a Humphrey heater to dry.

Catherine McLaughlin/Fogbank

3.

Back on the interstate cars emerge and fade,
the ghosts of headlamps and taillights
shining briefly like the eyes of demons.
Visibility is zero: the throat constricts
with that devastating love you can only feel
driving into the void
to no home.

Shoshana T. Daniel

SPRING

The dogwood trees do their tree thing again,
black on night. Erupted blossom, ghost-white.

Two college students slurp at each other,
their public kisses glittery with spit.

The boy-cat wants to rub against my face
so I can sniff, acknowledge who's in charge.

Ripe with first child, my friend phones, nonplussed by
tales of monster episiotomies.

[Iris in.] A three-day season. "This is
the first *spring* we've had in years!" [Iris out.]

I will not eat potato salad warm,
nor oysters in a month without an R.

You smuggled foreign seeds in paper twists.
Now teasle takes over your whole garden.

I wish that I were running in the rain,
I wish that I were gulping winter air.

God save me from buying a gardenia
here at the height of allergy season!

I miss you and my fortune cookie says
"For good luck you will have to wait till fall."

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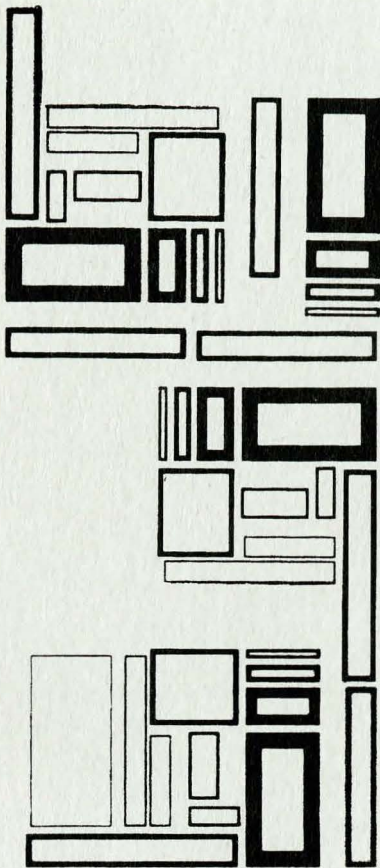
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