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Manuscripts are discussed with the writer's name masked so that beginning and established writers are read without prejudice.

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Cathy Appel

THE AFFAIR

Bones knocking together, that's how you said
it would be with us,
when for years we padded about like two scrawny cats

searching for a niche. Tentative,
alert to discomfort, we pawed all obstacles
in relative silence until the end came,

and then came again. Betrayal
echoed like shoes dropped to the floor
of a bottomless tower of bedrooms.

It seemed harmless when it began.
Eye contact was consistent, but innocuous
and, finally, such timid lovemaking

not raw enough to impose its will. Though far
from our childhood religion, we were relieved, being
unable to tolerate certain words.

Last night I dreamed you came to me
horribly underweight, possibly dying.
I knew I had to feed you and hastily

selected an overripe peach. As I carved out its bruises
the undamaged slices multiplied
until the blue stoneware dish was heaped with peach.

The veiny threads,
red and glistening at the center of each section
where I'd removed the pit,

looked alive and irresistible,
as if after being swallowed
they could take root.

Cathy Appel

ASHVILLE, NORTH CAROLINA

Sometimes memory envelops
with such vibrancy I can hardly risk
another breath.
Like the fox with his grape-stuffed mouth
staring into the river thinking he sees a tastier meal,
my body quickens unable to recognize itself.
Nothing kind or horrible you ever did
matters—only the stark summer rain,
my yellow dress dampening.
A lushness of grapes fills my mouth and the sheath
of purple skin entices, as I remain
forever about to bite.

Ned Bachus

A BAKER

My Rosalie, the twin who lived, calls during lunch break. I don't get calls, I don't want them when I'm standing here by my machine, whirring mostly natural ingredients into butterscotch krimpets for Philadelphia and vicinity. On the phone, Rosalie offers a ride home. "Beats SEPTA," she says. The car's been fixed, inspected. It's the day before the birthday. Last year notwithstanding, for her, birthdays are joyous. She can't get enough of them. That makes them easier for me to get through.

I explain to the secretary who'd gotten me to the phone that it's not an emergency.

"It was my daughter," I say, "the junior in high school, and shouldn't they know better by that age."

The mixing vat is clean. I clean it myself. Better than the guys on the other shifts. It shines, metallic and smooth. It's empty. Ready for the afternoon batch.

I haul the white flour to my work station and lean the fifty pound sack against the stainless steel vat. Then the sugar. I walk across the floor to the walk-in refrigerator, lift the steel canister of skim milk onto a handtruck and wheel it back to my machine.

My Donald, the twin who died, shares a birthday with me, as well as Rosalie. Angie called when he didn't wake up from his nap. Back when I was new here. I ran from the mixer to the trolley to the hospital lobby.

"Crib death," the guy said. I'd never heard that before. The words didn't go together.

"What can I do?"

The doctor shook his head.

"Where's my baby?" I yelled.

I screamed until they let me into the room where they had him. I held Donald for an hour, crying.

After eighteen years filling the same vat, clocks don't mean much. One ingredient follows another. Every batch finishes on the nose or a few minutes early. I've never left in the middle of a run, except when Angie called that time. The last item, the small packet of preservatives goes in. The lid clangs shut on the vat and I flip the starter switch. I

press my palms against the smooth, reverberating machine. It's mixing nicely. Two floors away, other machines are icing and wrapping morning krimpets.

I realize I am no longer steamed over Rosalie's call. You always think about other things at the machine, but the work carries you along, evens things out by the end of a batch. I remember going back to work a week after running into that damned hospital, the same place they were born. It was easier going back to work than I'd imagined.

Rosalie drives and I direct. She insists on doing it that way.

"What's your route, Daddy? Don't worry, I'm not going to throw you off your routine. We'll go the way you always go, but for once you can relax."

She looks so pleased with herself, I can't argue. I sink back in the passenger seat and tell her where to go.

"Is this a short-cut?"

"No."

Instead of driving towards the neighborhood, we cross the Schuylkill and head towards center city. We pull into a parking area across the river from Hunting Park Avenue and walk to the water's edge. She sits next to me on the stone bank. Three Canada Geese swoop down from the other side of the river and splash to a stop on our right. Rosalie starts talking about the argument she had with her mother last night. I missed it. She doesn't want to ruin the birthday like the year before.

That hadn't been her fault, or Angie's. One screw-up is just that. But you don't want to start something.

I had quit smoking a couple of months before the birthday last year. Or, started quitting. More sticks of gum than smokes.

I opened Rosalie's present after we finished the steaks and half laughed about the Smoke-Enders, the book on how to quit, and the packs of Juicyfruit. Angie went out to the kitchen. I figured she was lighting candles on the cake or something. She yelled for me to go ahead and open her package. I pulled the wrapping off as Rosalie watched. A briar pipe and three packs of tobacco.

"Guess I have to pick my poison," I joked.

I spent the rest of the night refereeing. It couldn't be that bad this year.

Rosalie and I sit watching the lines of cars creeping home on the other side of the Schuylkill. An eight oared shell strokes downstream toward Boathouse Row. Apparently, she and her mother got into it pretty good. I pull the pipe from my jacket pocket and pack it with Prince Albert. She's sorry about the timing. I light the pipe and toss

the match into the river.

"I'm sure Mom's told you about it."

"By the time I dropped the car off and went to Holy Name, you were both asleep. And you know what mornings are like. What was it all about?"

"Like I told Mom, I'm going to be eighteen and there are some things I have to be able to decide on for myself."

"So far, so good," I say. She blows out a long, slow breath. Four more geese land near us.

"I respect your beliefs, Dad. But I'm not going to mass anymore, or any of it."

"Go on," I say.

Her friends' parents don't force them to go. She isn't a kid. It doesn't mean anything to her anymore.

I nod and bite down on the pipe. The geese splash each other. I send a puff of smoke out towards the other side of the river.

"It don't mean nothing to you, so you won't bother with it, right?"

"In so many words."

"And that settles it."

"Yeah. And Mom can't handle it. All she can do is argue, and then argue some more. Like it's going to make a difference."

I bang the pipe against my shoe. The unsmoked tobacco and ash falls to the water.

To our right, a short, stocky man in his late fifties crunches across the gravel towards the water. The flock of geese has grown to about thirty and they squawk at the approach of the man. He feeds them pieces of bread, donuts, and cookies from two large plastic buckets. They clamor over the food. He gives us a wave.

"Hey Tom," he calls.

We nod back. He trots to a white van with empty buckets and drives off. I stand up.

"Do you understand, Dad?"

"Let's go home."

"Do you come here everyday, like this?"

"It's usually a little more peaceful."

I let her drive again. I tell her whatever way she wants to go is fine. She follows the traffic across the Falls bridge and onto Lincoln Drive. I stare out the passenger side window at the wooded hills of the park, the same tree-lined ridges I usually miss for having to steer through the curves on the way home.

Angie is in the kitchen. Stirring pots.

Rosalie stops in the foyer to check the mail and allows me to go in first. I kiss Angie and touch the side of her face.

"Is that Rosalie coming in with you?"

"Yeah. How close are we to eating?"

"Five minutes. You got something to do?"

"No, let's just eat." I point to the largest pot. "Can I peek?"

"Just leftovers. We're cleaning out the refrigerator tonight. A little bit of everything."

She turns the units down to warm and wipes her hands on a towel. "So how was your day," she asks.

"Good," I say and wipe my hands on the towel she's using. She squeezes my fingers through the cloth and winks up at me. She looks tired.

"I'm okay, too," she says and turns to open the refrigerator.

"Rosalie," I call, "let's set the table."

The stew tastes better warmed up than when we had it Monday. We talk about that. And about Mrs. Hillman's heart attack. Nobody has seconds, so we end up with food to put away. We never get to dessert.

Rosalie tries to say something about how red Angie's eyes look and that she doesn't want to cause any more tears in the house. That opens Angie like a poor faucet. The more she cries, the louder Rosalie's voice gets.

"Talk to each other," I shout, holding each one's hand on the table cloth. Rosalie keeps on about making her choices and Angie, who could tell her old boss off any day of the week and who got me through Donald, can't find any more words, she cries like a baby. She's hunched over her dinner plate and looks small to me. Smaller than I've ever seen her.

"Choice," I say to Rosalie, "you think it's a matter of goddamned choice."

"And I didn't think you were going to argue with me."

"We've done better than argue with you about going to church. We brought you to it. Years of it. Whether you want to believe it or not, it's a part of you. You think you can just walk away from something like that?"

"You must be on the same wavelength with God, aren't you Dad? You two know better than I do and of course, you'll always outvote me."

She says she wants more from life than we wanted. She wants to see the Eiffel Tower, write a book. She doesn't want to end up a nervous nag who says the rosary everyday, or a factory hand who pretends to be a baker.

"You've been yelling at me all my life, Mom. And you. Hovering over me. Your precious only child. I may be the only one you can sink your worries into, but I'm an adult."

At work in the morning, I shake the last clouds of flour from the sack into the vat. I pour in the preservatives. I remember what it was like loading up the mixer with a hangover. Just bending over hurt. But

even with a hangover, after a while, the ingredients almost emptied themselves in the vat.

I remember exact words Rosalie said the night before and little of what Angie or I said. I can hear her questions and accusations over and over while I lift containers of milk and throw empty sacks into the trash. I hit the starter switch. The machine roars on. I hear my own voice over the din.

"You've never *been* an only child."

The first batch works its way out of my machine. I make sure the equipment is clean and ready for the after lunch load.

I punch out at lunch. Say I'm sick. Drive home and ask Angie to ride with me. We park outside Girls' High and I stand by the car. She sees us on her way to the bus stop.

"Want a ride?" I ask.

She nods. We all squeeze into the front of the Dodge. We drive down Chew to Penn Street. Turn into the hospital lot. I head for the back to the old part of the complex. I park in a space which faces the old entrance and we sit there in the quiet, together, for a long time.

Francette Cerulli

FEEDING THE SECOND FIRE

When fire comes secretly
into our house, the town says, "We can't
imagine it, how it must feel." We say, "Yes,
it was quite a shock." We don't say the truth,
that we can't imagine it either, that our
imaginations have failed us here, that we
are afraid we will never imagine anything again.

But as we walk by the doors of our new rooms,
rooms so new they don't even smell like us yet,
we see her out of the corners of our eyes.
She is a small girl with tangled hair, sitting
in the middle of our bed. Her skin is tired
and dry, her hair, airy as wood shavings.
She has wrapped herself up to the neck in our
bedsheets, lonely little mountain, a science
project volcano waiting for the
heat to build up.

We feed her ice cream and buttered toast,
talking to her in short quiet words:
puddle, map, little sip.

Making no sudden movements,
we unswaddle her turn by turn,
walking around her in measured steps.
Uncovered, her tiny body heats the house.

We unbutton our bellies and show her that
we, too, have small fires inside us.

We feed her blue roses and cool water.
And when we stroke her hair gently
with our careful hands,
it does not ignite.

Slowly, we get close enough to whisper.
We murmur in her ear,
"Come live with us, little one.
You shall be our third daughter."

Francette Cerulli

SECOND FIRE: GOING BACK IN

With spring, things are coming undone.
Frozen water from the firefighters' hoses
that has glued this house together for the
last ten weeks is melting today. This is
the last day to look for things.

I find a steel pendulum, a brass buckle,
a penny, a quarter. Soon we'll knock
the place down and start over.

Outside, the first sap is running, while
on the doorframe of what used to be the
bathroom, a long narrow delta of thick
water bleeds down the smoked woodwork
to the floor. Open to the waves of
cold and warmth now, the wood in this
house finally has an excuse to remember
what it felt like to be a tree in spring.

And I am no longer amazed that this house
built of trees burned so fast and hot and
took so much with it, but that it held itself
still for so long, resisting
the memory of what it was.

For all those hundred years, it got drier and
drier. The water left it, and the memory of
trees got sharper and more rasping until
the house began to heave and remember the
up and down of the sap that was no longer there.
It tried to cry but there was not even enough water
in its cells for a tear. It said to itself,
trust me trust me I won't let anything happen to you,
like any lover to any hot virgin. Let's just
remember once more. And at that moment
it started the trip back.

Robert Cooperman

JUMBO AND ALICE

Jumbo the Elephant was struck and killed by a freight train at St. Thomas, Ontario. He was stuffed and continued to be exhibited with his mate, Alice.

—Historical Products Calendar, Aug.-Oct., 1986

An elephant never forgets his past lives,
or so the Hindu legends say.
One wonders what Jumbo next became,
what soul expansive enough
to house that gently huge body:
at his best graceful as a whippet
or race horse, though in larger slow motion.
One wonders, too, how Alice felt,
to have the facsimile, never the fact,
before her. Did she at first
trumpet a welcome after his absence,
try to unfreeze him with a flirtatious
swaying of her head and shoulders,
a nudge from her more
than comforting hindquarters?

Perhaps she accepted his immobility,
cumbersome as a mountain in maneuvering
around him in their cage or the ring,
no longer a need to shackle his feet
loving to climb the air when children
gaped their mouths wider than his withers.

But perhaps hope thudded dimly
in her heart at the sight of him
in the rain, drops slithering down
his gray forehead she had so loved
to nuzzle. Perhaps she mistook
the water for tears—he too
remembering his last life,
the best one, rolling back to him

behind eyes glittery as marbles
while he waited with the patience
of elephants for his next life to begin.

Scott Coykendall

THE OSPREY

Does anybody else remember
a summer by the lake
when my raft was carried
slick with the efforts of our exertion
to a wrinkled pond
with a float dock

and a diving tree?

I don't suppose you can picture
the perfectly shaped limbs
of boys entering, penetrating, puncturing
the yielding waters
in a full dress rehearsal
for the opera of their lives
and smiling.

And my raft, the Yankee Clipper,
the great shining flagship of our summer fleet
of tan beds and float tubes
holding me back from the water
like the safe arms of a mother
protecting me from the lust
of the hapless "eau claire"
while the others plunged deep
to the rocky bottoms

and surfaced laughing.

I called it The Osprey, my flagship
and she sailed that summer pond
with all the pride and vanity
of the Bismarck and the Titanic
and the breath of my lungs filled her with my life
that she might save me, shelter me, keep me
from deep water.

Since then the waters have risen
and our grand summer fleet
has dispersed to the universities, the slaughterhouses,

and the armed forces of another world
and the Yankee Clipper is folded in a bundle
on a shelf of old tent poles
and bicycle wheels
    having failed to keep me.

Barbara Crooker

LOSING MY WORDS

At age 42, they are flying away,
migrating like autumn warblers
to the Florida keys,
leaving me to open & close my mouth
like a nestling gaping for food.
I say, "Put that milk in the toaster,"
and my children snicker behind their hands.
They have found pickles in the microwave,
yogurt in the pantry, have been called
by each other's names, and the cat's
and the hamster's. What can you expect
from the elderly?
But words are my implements, my carpenter's chisels,
my weaver's fibers, my tempra, my oils—
and, I admit it—my unrequited lovers.
Oh, I have tried to seduce them with
frangipani, honeysuckle; caressed them
with egret down, thistle silk,
the just-shed velvet of a young roe buck;
lured them to my table with marzipan,
confits, salads of green shoots,
crystal flutes of blushing wine. . . .
How they laugh at me behind the bookcase!
How they twitter as they light on the chandelier!
How lightly their windchimes beat as they wing out the
window!
How brightly their velocities sing as they gaily flap by!

Barbara Crooker

TO PRUNE RASPBERRIES IN MARCH,

you must be able to tell the living from the winterkill,
know where the green heart still beats
even though the canes lie lifeless.
You must be bold, put on gloves, gauntlets,
wrestle that tangle of brambles and briar.
Snick, snick, prune and thin,
the cane break's four feet high.
Think of the summer sun on your back
as the March wind creaks and groans.
Think of berries falling in your hands,
your mouth, that carmine wine.
Thorns stick in your hair,
long scratches rake your arms,
who knows which canes will bear?
Who knows what the chambered heart can bear
as it measures again the seasons of loss?
Slowly, rhubarb leaves uncurl towards the sun.
Sooner or later, the sap begins its rise.

Kiernan Davis

TORNADO'S COMING

All my life I've heard of the spiral winds. Tornadoes. Finger of God. Lord's so big, He don't know what He's doing to this little world of His. Like you and me run a finger over the icing of a cake, sweet lick, leave a trail of destruction behind us.

It's okay, Jesus. That's what I say. I'm old, and it's okay with me. I forgave the Lord a long time ago for putting troubles in our lives. Forgave Him for not putting much thought into who He gave those troubles to, how much and why.

Tornado hits the ground, a grey tongue of fury, and it tears up one tree and leaves its neighbor tree sitting pretty, untouched. No reason. Just is.

If you weep, you weep alone. Lord must say, what's wrong with that girl, thinks I'm picking on her. Save your tears for people, they're the same size as you and got better aim.

I'm old, you're young, and, Grandbaby, if you're going to sit on my porch you got to get still and listen. I was once a girl like you, and I know being young's wasted on those that got it. I wouldn't work you up a spit to have it back. The way you fidget, reminds me of all the aches and pains that come with it. Makes the cricks of old age seem like nothing. It's a matter of chance, what you keep and what you don't. Nothing bads ever happened in your small life, maybe, Grandbaby, you think it never will.

Seen me a house once, got hit by a tornado. Lifted the roof off, folded the curtains over the outside of the walls and put the roof back on. Crazy.

Today, the clouds in the sky look like the paps of a dog nursing pups. The underside of a bitch hanging over my house. If a teat drops down, then it's the suckle of death.

I used to dream about twisters, long ago. I'd be running, looking back, crawling under things, like a babe gets under its Mam. Well, we're under it now. Look at that sky. I seen you watching it, your sweet face pointed up to heaven. If the Lord decides to take a lick, we'll be here.

I don't dream about them anymore. One of the few times a twister ever come was when I was a young woman. I was expecting you Mama. I hid in the cellar and prayed for that baby. I tried to keep my mind on God, but I got a terrible yearning for my husband instead, more fierce than any wind. I sat there and watched the water collect on

the crusty joint of a pipe and slide down the wall. Kept glancing to the coil in the lamp bulb that hung to the side of my head. I could hear the churning of the wash machine above me. I didn't want anything in my life to end. Not one sound, nor feeling, nor bitty scrap of living.

That tornado tore up fields and houses in the county next to ours. Some woman, just like me, stopped being. Uprooted, tossed away, she was.

Every one of those things I wanted to keep? Well, they slipped away from me slowly, instead.

They say the old are deaf and blind; it's the young can't hear nor see. If you'd been listening, you wouldn't waste your time looking up at all. I can tell you for certain, girl, a tornado's coming.

Lynne H. deCourcy

HIS GOOD LIFE

We are lurching toward eighteen
with this child, the first, the son
who was born flailing like a boxer
and hardly ever hears
a bell ending rounds. He dances
around us, feinting, ducking;
he has not decided yet
how he's going to turn out
and we are always fighting him
for the slippery chance of his good
life.

His body is wiry, too hard to hold
sorrow yet, and slender
enough to slip sideways through
the casement window of his room.
He escapes us, restlessly dozing
on nights like these,
into a car, waiting for him beneath a ripe, full moon
that seems to hang heavy on a fragile thread
like his good life
looking like it could fall down and break
forever on a night so warm and alive
that nothing can be fixed in place.

Lynne H. deCourcy

JUNE FIRST

June first, fat and ripe with sun as
the strawberries lying on warm earth, waiting
tooth-ready with juice;
the sprinkler flings dazzling arcs into the
light and my daughter plays on the grass
three days before the end of school,
the summer spread before her like a feast.
She prances, teasing herself with the
sprinkler on the first hot, still day, her
bright-striped suit glistening taut and sleek,
and, I am not ready for this, I see
the faintest rising across her chest,
like a suggestion of hills hardly discernable
on the horizon.

But today is just the first, still early,
she is not 10 yet, and she plays and shrieks,
the arc of flashing drops chasing her,
"help me! save me!"
loving the thrill of danger.

The day seems so benignly kind, with
evil napping in some dark thicket far
from this groomed lawn sparkling with
light and water, that I take the risk,
I have to start sometime,
I raise the cool clean water into the
light like her life in my hands, and
tossing it into the air, I call back
"save yourself!"

Kate Dougherty

REFLECTIONS

And he called her, come see now
how the light has changed
in this short time.

And she came, and looked out
past the plum tree, heavy
with fruit, past the reeds,
the fields across the bay
gone salmon-mauve
like the painting in her studio
next to the still life—
eggs in a bowl.

The cows absorbed grays and purple
waterlogged, subdued
she spoke as they moved
up the hill, toward the barn
and its windows of liquid gold.

I have only one
grandmother story, she said
half aloud, not moving
from where she stood,
she used to tell me
about a little girl
who saw windows
windows of gold each eventide
on the mountainside across from hers,
and she wanted to live there
in the palace of gold.

One day she left. Traveled alone,
two nights and a day
and got there at dawn
and saw a cottage much like hers,
just like mine she said,
turning around, to see her home

shimmering light, as if a halo lived inside,
sweeping the floor, waiting
for some kingdom's lost child.

Matt Drummy

PERETUCK, EARLY SEVENTIES

You know I think something went wrong somewhere. I've been living here my whole life and every year I feel more cut-off, but I can't seem to leave. Anyway, I've been thinking a lot lately and I think it must have been Mary Lawson.

I was. . . I don't know, I was pretty lonely-but-normal kid, I guess. Teenaged. I went to Peretuck Catholic, it's. . . horrible, horrible old brickish shit-brown shut-it-down type of thing, it was old even then. And. . . hey, y'know you didn't worry about anything, you just did what you did, most of the Catholics still lived by the mills in those days, just ten, fifteen, well Christ, seventeen years ago. Now it's all. . . the *same*, everybody lives everywhere, y'know I don't think I like it that way. I think Catholics should live by the mills, and the rest of the people should live in the rest of the town and go to the rest of the schools, but. . . that's just not the way it is.

There were I think fifty-two of us in my class. So I played football, nobody gave half a shit really, it was a basketball school at heart. But you know the big game was Thanksgiving, I guess it's like that everywhere, and they came out of the woodwork to see that one. We played Jesuit High from fifteen miles down the road and got the living crap kicked out of us every year. The fans, the parents, the bottles, the cowbells, they'd all be gone by the middle of the third quarter. The game and the season would both wind down in their kinda unique ass-freezing 42-6 way and sophomore and junior years Dwyer threw me and the other scrubs in there in the fourth quarter to die, only goddamn time we'd get all year really and we're out there against these monsters in red, just don't run my way, oh fuck, goddamn and I'm taken out by muck-covered pulling guard, twelve yard gain, icy pain. . . . And afterwards, blurred, forget these stories about the dance and the rosy cheek cheerleaders, D'Addario and I tramped home and fired it around Daley Textile parking lot in the dark, the wind snapping windowpanes. But I liked it, y'know, I wouldn't mind doing it right now.

Senior year I met Mary Lawson. She was from sister school Saint Anne's and was Irish as Irish is, yeah red hair and those sort of forever pudgy cheeks Mary Lawson Mary Lawson say it thirty times make a thousand rhymes. She took my hand on ratty couch in three-story ricket apartment, her father off at the track, her Mum in bed with the crosses and the TV set, and Mary said, slow and whiny and ruminative-like, she said, "Whaddya think of that? Huh? I told her Jesus wouldn't have done

that if he was following the same rules he'd set down in the other place."

"Yeah. Hr-hmmm. Well y'know I think uh. . . Jesus is pretty confusing but uh. . . what he did in general I think was okay."

"Exactly!" And she bounced a little. "That's what I'm telling her, you have to look at the whole picture. She didn't understand." Mary put her other hand on my hand, she bounced the whole hand sandwich on my knee. "I like to talk to you, Mikey."

"Yeah, hmmm, yuh, it's, y'know, kind of a mutual-type situation," I mumbled and stumbled don't wanna let out too much, but oh Mary if I coulda told you then I woulda told you then about sitting there like that, about the crack you made inside of me, the flipperflops and candymelt ooze, down near Daley Textile we skipped two o'clock flatrocks, when cuteyblue jacket wrapped my head around your lint-sweatered breasts and giggled and moaned in the leathery early morning purple-watered battery acid factory mishmash dump all I wanted was your stomach Mary and a kiss on the neck and a whisper in the dark, "I love you, Mikey, I love you," and Peretuck seemed okay.

Mary hated 'my football' and so I skipped most practices to lie and talk and scramble around with her. Dwyer sniggered and lapped me but wouldn't cut me, we only had twenty guys on the team. A week before Thanksgiving we sat on her floor after dinner trying to do her math homework while her plate-clattering little brother went flying around the apartment.

"You gonna score a touchdown for Mary, Mikey?" It was more of a command than a question.

"No, uh. . . I don't think so, kid, I only play defense, y'know, and uh. . . not too often at that."

"Doug. Dougie Packard's brother Stevie plays both ways, off—. . offense, defense, the whole thing!"

"Yeah, well, Steve Packard's an ass—" Mary shot me a warning look, her dull green eyes glinting anger in the darkness. "Stevie's a good ballplayer," I corrected, "but I kinda suck—"

And smack, side of the head and on the ear, Mary was the gentlest soul but she knew how to hit, "Watch your language!"

"Sorry," I woozied out, and lay back for a minute. Mary just held my hand and sat there like an Indian, that long green wool skirt spread out like a picnic table in front of her.

"It's okay. Just be nice."

"Hr-hmmm. Yeah." She scratched my shag of a haircut and I disappeared into her. "Mary Mary, will you come to my game on Thursday please?"

"I hate it. It's horrible."

"I know Mary sweetheart but I'm gonna be all alone, everybody's gonna leave at halftime and I'm gonna freeze to death we'll lose by fifty points and he'll throw me out there in the second half they'll pound me into dust—"

"Why don't you just quit? It's ridiculous!"

"Well. . ." That gave me a bit of pause. "I've only got one game left, y'know. . . ."

"But you hate it! It's—forget it, I don't wanna talk about it, just hold my hand." And I did what she said because Mary was Mary, brooding lip-chewing Mary staring holes in the carpet, staring holes about Jesus and heaven and love while she twiddled my thumbs with hers and I murmured groggily by her lap, "Awww, la-la-la-la. . . ."

Mary came to the game.

We were 1 and 6, that's one win six losses, Jesuit was only 3 and 4, it meant nothing to nobody but Mary was there in dirty white rainyday rubbercoat, up in the corner of their little one-sideline grandstand all alone she didn't *move*, didn't wave, just sat there shrouded like death, I could hardly even see her as the mist thickened and the snow started down, guilt like a clamp.

The game sucked, flat-out, nobody could do anything but run two-yard plows because of the snow and the goddamn skin-cracking COLD!, it wasn't even remotely glorious, just boring, on the sideline I prayed for it to end as my whole body chiggered except for the toes, frozen banana popsicles, D'Addario and I got in twice for the kickoffs and couldn't even see the ball, just jogged down on our heels, "Show some hustle!" Dwyer growled, "Fuck you!" D'Addario spat back brilliantly, I just tried to survive and search for Mary, she sat motionless, accusing, a gray smudge in the duskish murk. And I remember thinking in my clear-minded revelatory eighteen year-old way, "What a supreme asshole the male species is, what supreme stupidity!"

Twenty seconds left, we're losing six-nothing, maybe fifty people left watching, Mary frozen like a statue in the distant gloom and I'm

standing next to the bench trying to calculate exactly how long it will be until Warmth when smash! massive sickening collision, red shirts in front of me, on top of me, I look up and there goes Little Johnny Lambo, tiny sophomore who wasn't even a half-bad kid, he's spinning like a demon top down the sidelines FREE, I'm on the ground wondering insanely if he's even going the right way but he's in the end zone on his knees WE TIED THE GAME! I actually cared, I actually ran down there and pounded his too-big head, numbers were swirling all around me, "Twenty-two, twenty-two," we hadn't beaten them in twenty-two years, or since 1922, we'd *never* beaten them, they'd enslaved us, murdered our fathers, and now all we had to do was trot Jeffers out there to kick the extra point, glee, glee, but here's confusion, guys running back and forth I can't see but I hear Dwyer, "two, two," the moron wanted us to run it in for two points it made *no sense*, all Jeffers had to do, tall blond spiteful but straight-on Jeffers had to do, was kick it through but Dwyer's got them out there lining up for two and I lost it, I couldn't even feel myself I ran right up helmet off, "What the hell are you doing?" "We're going for two, shut up," and I screamed every word I could think of, "You fucking stupid ugly bastard what the hell are you fucking trying to pull you stink like the pukeass school you old cocksucking shitface—" And he cracked me down, hard, I've often thought I could have sued him, not for hitting me but for that call, heinous it was, (and he never has explained it) they fumbled the try, it ended 6-6, D'Addario dragged me off, half-conscious and I hadn't even played, in the wooden shack of a lockerroom I came to and found a yellow stain on my crotch.

Oh, but Christ, Mary took care of me that night. I thought she'd hate me but she just put her arm around me in her *bedroom*, the door locked, I cried and cried, "I don't know what *happened* out there, Dwyer smacked me and there was cold everywhere and we shoulda won the goddamn game—"

Mary enveloped me, she was so big it seemed, all around me, "Shh. Shhhhh. No, little fool, just, no, just shut up because it doesn't matter, it doesn't matter, none of that matters and you know it, you're all that counts, just be quiet and later you can tell me about my hair, you can tell me about what we're gonna do in the spring, and afterwards, oh Mikey Mikey Mikey you're my little fool, my little fool who I met in school," she sang me a ridiculous little sweetie-pie song,

I snuffled and warbled and felt my wetness on her sweater.

Mary got a scholarship to a school in the city, two hundred miles away, I just went to the state school upriver a bit, but things were okay for a while. I just read and read and read, didn't go to class that much but read all the books, and Mary and I sent five letters a week. She loved me desperately she wrote and I believed her, the letters got wild and bit like little rabbits, she wanted to get married right then, that minute, she'd never sounded so crazed before but what the hell, she loved me. Christmastime we merged in Peretuck, we went down behind the factory, we played with her little brother in those frozen joyous no-school afternoons, we put the tree up all ragged but spangled. Everything was holy. I went back to school and it was Mary Mary Mary and then . . . something went wrong, and Cripes I'm telling this epic boring story of my life and I still can't fingerprint exactly what it was, when the hell or why the hell it happened down there, but something went wrong.

Her letters drifted off, vagueish, all on a sudden. I called her from my beer-drenched hallway hell and she's inaudible and reedy, "I love you, Mikey, I love you, I have to go, tho." I was supposed to make a voyage to her in the spring St. Patrick's Day weekend and I started to headache and sweat about it, of course I'm thinking 'another guy,' but it really shouldn't have been possible, don't you see you have to see, Mary and I came together like a puzzle, like pancakes and butter, two cats curled up, something like that

should not end

I got there whitefaced off the train, she took me to her room and there's five people there, three guys and two girls slopped around and horrible arrogant acrid smoke, "uh, yeah, hi, nice to meet you, I'm Mikey, uh. . . ." The girls had beads in their hair and crap on their eyes, but the guys, ohmyChrist, this is '71 or '72 and I know I've gotta be accepting and I've mind-expanded through a million books before and since, but the guys had earrings, I just, *earrings*, it was too much for me, I guess I was, is, I'm a fricking Peretuck boy at heart.

"Hey, do you indulge?" and one of the guys, he had a bandana and a beard, he passes me some fungus-looking thing I fled to the bathroom and cornered Mary.

"What the hell is this, I though you had one roommate!"

"I do, shh, shh, will you? Angela has a lot of friends, and they're my friends, too. Just be nice."

"You didn't tell me about all of this! What is this shit, who are these guys—" I'd never talked to her like that, it was like discovering my mother was a whore and then stabbing her, stabbing her.

"I didn't tell you because I knew you'd be like this. After—ahhh! After Christmas, being back home, when I got back here, I—arrgh!—I need to grow!"

"Well. . . I don't know what the hell you're talking about, but I just thought we could get some kind of a privacy situation going here, y'know. I mean. . . You're the one who sent me all this stuff about getting married. . . ."

"I know, and I'm sorry about that."

"Well, what the hell is going on? I mean . . .shit! You don't . . . wanna marry me, ohhhh. . . ."

"I don't know! I don't know what's going on, but Mikey, there's other people in the world—"

"Yeah no shit there's other people in the world, you goddamn—"

"Don't talk to me like that."

"Sorry." She was still my Mary, my Mary will always be, always be, but she was lost under some layer, or maybe I was the one who was lost, but anyway I was gone the next night after a vision of her with a needle in her foot and a chilled smile on her lips, Mr. Bandana sucking on her bare middle, "Join the fun, Mikey, join the world," she moaned, her lips purple, sunglasses on her face, her red hair dyed blonde, her red hair dyed blonde, her red hair dyed blonde.

I remember a few months after that, it was summertime supertime, dust dancing in the lightshaft as we ate beans, and it was weird because the TV was busted. Everything was quiet for the first time in history, someone had to talk but no one made the move. Finally Mom said from out of nowhere, "Have you heard from Mary at all?"

The beans tasted like cotton all of a sudden. "Ungh. . . no."

"Mary was a sweet girl. You should call her up, just as a friend."

"Mmmm. No. She's, uh, she's not even around. D'Addario heard

she's livin' in the city with some guy for the summer. She's real—
She's into that city thing."

"Maybe you have to be more like that. I'm not saying you should be a . . .hippy or anything, but maybe you should be a little more modern. You dress just like your father did twenty-five years ago. And his father before that, really. . . ."

"Uh-huh. Yeah. Well maybe I should wear an earring. I remember these guys down in—"

"No son of mine will ever wear an earring. I'll fuckin'. . . cut his ear off."

That was the longest speech Dad ever made at the table. No lie. I shut up.

Linda Dunlap

RAIL WALKING

The day Luellen ran away with the baker, I was perched on the front porch rail with my head between my legs, staring at the world upside down. Everything looked different that way, like a magic rain shower had washed away all the colors on earth and they'd come back brand new. Luellen looked especially different propped against the gate post next door, searching eagerly up and down the street for the baker. She'd piled her hair on top of her head in a jumble of unruly curls and some loose strands, limp from the staggering summer heat, clung to her neck in damp tangled threads. Luellen had a particularly high forehead and with her hair pulled away from her face, her eyes shone saucy and clear as bright green plastic buttons. According to Mama the forehead came from being part Indian, and Lord only knows where the green eyes came from she said.

Luellen's suitcase, the pitiful battered one she'd brought from Atlanta when she married my brother, Dock, was hidden under an azalea bush beside the gate. She'd tried so hard to keep me from seeing it that I decided to accomodate her, pretend a ragged corner wasn't sticking from between the crinkly blossoms in plain sight.

I inched away from her down the rail to the dining room where Mama'd opened the French doors to circulate the breeze. She was prone to discourage railwalking so I was careful to stay out of sight when I overheard her inside pointing out tarnish spots on the flatwear to Marcelle, our everyday cleaning lady. "There's a place where your finger is," Mama said.

"Reach me that cleaning rag," Marcelle answered like she was anxious not to miss a speck.

I wasn't fooled. I knew their business in the dining room wasn't actually the silver. Standing next to the French doors gave them a chance to keep an eye on what was going on at Dock's.

I bent over, imagined I was glued to the ceiling like a chameleon. When I did this the impatiens beside the steps, ordinarily a dusty faded rose, took on such a smash of color, the green leaves seemed to disappear entirely and the bush gleamed like a solid ball of fire.

Edging past the corner post, I tilted my arms back and forth for balance, waltzed to the end of the porch toward Luellen. At eleven I was considered too old for rail walking but I'd started late. Scabs were speckled up and down my arms from where I'd praticed all week.

"You're finally getting the hang of that," Luellen said when I

turned around without falling off.

I knew she was trying to attract my attention yet I went on weaving along the rail, acting as if I hadn't heard her. The gate latch made a click, click sound when she lifted it and dropped it back into place. She took a deep breath. "Jane Lind, come get Crystal so she can stay with ya'll 'til Dock gets home from the meat packing plant," she said.

I missed a step, wound up with one leg dangling. I sat down carefully, propped my chin on my fist. A yellow jacket's nest hung from the ceiling like a clump of dusty pipes. I stared up at it. That was the trouble with rail walking—the slightest thing could break your concentration.

"Now, let me get this straight," I said as if I was carrying on a conversation with yellow jackets darting about overhead. "Yesterday you act like you don't ever want me to set foot in your house again and today you tell me to mind your little girl 'til your husband comes home from work."

I heard the steady click of the latch.

"On top of that," I went on. "You tell me I prop the pillows up so high on your bed they look like they're fixing to march off the foot. And . . . I hang your red kimona in the back of the closet facing the wall where you can't locate it, you say." I wanted to make sure Luellen knew how much she hurt my feelings yesterday. I was short for my age and couldn't reach across a wide double bed no matter how far I stretched.

"Jane Lind. . ." she said, rubbing her hand across the rising mound of stomach that was the whole trouble.

Mama said Luellen's a Barker from Lower Mill Creek even if she had spent time in Atlanta and everybody knew what kind of people the Barkers were—moving through downtown Metter like a herd of turtles on Saturday afternoon in a pick-up loaded to the gills with runny-nose children one could easily see suffered harshly from rickets and other elements of neglect. Dock married Luellen in the first place to torment her, his own mother, she said, who wants only the best for her children, including him. As far as she was concerned, he'd scraped the bottom of the barrel.

"It's common knowledge at the post office how it was Luellen's

idea to move next door," Marcelle told her. "Lomus Till says she wants you to be reminded every time you walk out on your front porch that in spite of all you did to keep them apart, she won."

"That riffraff at the post office, including Lomus Till I might add, will go to any lengths to promote family discord."

"It makes a lot of sense if you ask me."

"If I'm not mistaken, Marcelle, nobody did." Mama said some cleaning ladies know their place and some don't. She was forever having to remind Marcelle where hers was.

I didn't know why Dock had married Luellen or why they'd moved next door but I did know Luellen had been acting peculiar lately.

She'd totally ignored me since the day a month before when I'd strolled Crystal down to Riggs Soda Fountain and brought her back with a long ragged scratch in the shape of a z across the side of her face. She'd leaned over to reach for her ice cream cone and had toppled out of her stroller.

"What if she'd fallen on her head? Why, the soft spot's not even closed up good yet," Luellen had yelled, jabbing her finger in my face. She was an awful finger pointer when she got mad.

"It's only a little place and I cleaned it off good. Mr. Riggs put some salve on it right away, too."

Luellen went on and on and on about how careless I'd been until finally I got mad, too. "I question the remark about the soft spot, Luellen." I said. "In case you haven't noticed, Crystal is two years old. You think it takes the soft spot forever to close? Even I know better than that!" Grown-ups were known for giving kids credit for having no sense at all.

All the while Luellen yelled at me and I yelled back, I was sideglancing over my shoulder to make sure Mama wasn't around to hear me sass Luellen. Mama was strict about that, I don't care who it was I was sassing.

For one solid month Luellen acted as if I had disappeared from the face of the earth for all she knew. Then suddenly last week all of that changed. From the way she acted, you wouldn't have guessed we'd ever had a crossed word.

She had shampooed Crystal's hair, was sitting on their front steps for it to dry. When she saw me on our front porch, painting my toenails, she called, "Jane Lind, honey, why don't you come play with

Crystal?"

I didn't stop to ask myself why she'd decided to be nice. Capping the nail polish bottle, I slid it beneath the bourgainvillea vine to hide it from Mama and dashed across the yard before Luellen could change her mind again. She scooted over to make room for me on the step. Crystal giggled and squirmed, wrinkling her nose like she was about to sneeze. I could tell she was glad to see me.

"Now watch how I fit the strands snug over the curlers at the end," Luellen said while she rolled Crystal's hair. I marvelled at how fast she whipped the damp strands up in those little rolls that looked like sausage links. Luellen's real good when it comes to working with hair.

All the encouragement I needed came the next morning when Crystal, her nightgown tangled around her knees, called, "Jane Lind, Mama says to come tie my shoes for me." After that, I was with Luellen and Crystal from the minute I woke up until I felt my way home through the long spooky shadows that separated our houses at night. Mama said she might as well forget about setting my place at the table. I was never home anyway.

When Luellen let me make up the bed in the big corner room where she and Dock slept, I began to make believe that her house was mine and that Crystal belonged to me.

Then yesterday I was teaching Crystal to stay in the lines as she colored when I caught Luellen staring like she was mad at me for something. Finally she said, "You don't know how to do anything right. Those pillows are about to march off the foot of the bed, they're propped so high. And where is my kimona?" she went on, snatching the crayon from my hand.

I was about to say I didn't think the pillows were different from any other day when I noticed how Luellen stood, clutching the crayon so tight her knuckles were white. Then she covered her face with her hands and started crying, hard. "On top of that," she sobbed, "there are just two classes of people, good and bad."

I was the one to do the staring now, stunned. She threw the crayola across the room as hard as she could and when it landed against the windowsill, splinters of purple crayon flew in every direction. She propped her hands on her hips. "And neither one of them has a darned thing to do with which fork you eat your salad with."

Crystal, who'd been filling in the background on a circus tent,

closed her coloring book when Luellen began yelling. As the crayon bounced off the windowsill, she slid like a slick seal across the linoleum floor and hooked her arms around a leg of the kitchen table, hugging it. She looked up wide-eyed at Luellen, at me. Then she rolled under the table, flat on her stomach with her face to the wall.

"I'm not surprised," Mama said when I came in through the kitchen door crying. "Now that Luellen's sure you've learned to take care of Crystal properly, you've somehow become a part of this awful sin she's committing."

I ran past her without saying a word. Of course, I couldn't feature Mama being much help where Luellen was concerned. They'd hardly exchanged words since the week before last when Mama'd told Luellen what color to paint her kitchen—glossy white—and Luellen had painted it blue with eggshell trim on the cabinets instead.

Lying upstairs on my bed I studied the cobwebs Marcelle had missed over the drapes and tried to figure out what was going on. Luellen had been so nice to me and now she wasn't again. I, for one, wished she'd make up her mind and stick with it so I'd know what to expect. I felt like a yo-yo twirling back and to on its string. And sin! What sin?

Then it dawned on me. Luellen was running away with the baker! She actually planned to leave Dock and Crystal. And for the baker of all people!

The baker was a queer scarecrow of a man who smelled like vanilla extract and fruitcake. Dock was better looking even with the drooping lid from where the rooster had pecked him in the eye when he was nine. Mama said he was lucky he didn't lose his whole eye.

On top of that, even though the baker wasn't even a dwarf, he lived in the tiny house on East Grady which had been built as a winter home for circus midgets. Luellen wouldn't tell me why he'd do a strange thing like that. In fact, she hardly mentioned him at all except to say that he gave her cinnamon buns at ten percent over cost which Mama said she found doubtful.

"Jane Lind, Crystal can't stay by herself," Luellen said now like she hated to beg but would if she had to.

I'll never know what Dock saw in you, I wanted to shout but didn't

when I saw the baker swish around the corner, a white cap crumpled on his head like a mushroom. When Luellen saw him, she stopped fidgeting with the gate latch. She tucked in her blouse, smoothed her skirt down over her hips. Her face broke into a smile, the widest one I'd ever seen her use. Suddenly I knew what it was Dock saw in her. Her chin lost its sharp edge and her face lit up as if the biggest present under the Christmas tree had her name on it.

The baker opened the gate, flipped aside the end of a red scarf he wore wrapped like a bandage around his neck. A whiff of fruitcake drifted my way when he swept up her suitcase and bounced it against his knee, waiting.

I grabbed the post, pulled myself up on the rail until I was standing. With the toe of my shoe I beat a tap, tap rhythm on the bannister to remind Luellen I was still there to be considered. She glanced over like she was surprised I was still around.

"Crystal wouldn't have to stay by herself if you didn't leave," I said. I caught hold of the rail, startled. The words that popped out of my mouth shocked me practically to death sometimes.

Luellen jerked her head around, looked me straight in the eye. Then so low I could hardly hear the words, she said, "I could take her with me."

I eased toward her, tried to act natural. "You wouldn't do that to Dock. It would surely break his heart in two."

Luellen stood still as a gravestone in Ash Branch Cemetery. She knew what I'd said was the truth. She looked down at the ground, stubbed her toe against a clump of Bermuda grass edging the walk. Her face sagged then like there was something heavy pulling down on each cheek.

If she's ever to be sorry for this sin she's in the middle of, it's now, I thought.

She turned, put her hand up to shade her eyes. The chicken pox scar high up on her cheekbone shone like a new dime in the bright morning sunlight as she gazed behind her where Crystal stood inside the screened door, rubbing the fuzzy skin of a peach against the side of her face. Luellen glanced at the baker, then at Crystal like she was mulling something over in her mind.

The baker tossed his arm across her shoulders, pulled her close. Smiling, he leaned down, whispered in her ear. She reached up, brushed

his cheek with the tips of her fingers. Still looking at him, she said, "There's pimento-cheese sandwiches and tea cakes on the back of the stove for supper, Jane Lind. Tell Dock I didn't have a chance to get his tube of Ipana toothpaste. He can use what's left of mine."

Then with their hands clasped between them, swinging back and forth, Luellen and the baker walked off down the street together.

I leaned limply against the post. I hadn't taken a breath for a long time. I took one and the air made a whistling sound as it seeped out through my lips. I figured I'd been fair about it. She could have changed her mind anytime she wanted to. Yet, all of a sudden, my face felt hot, like I was coming down with something.

When Luellen and the baker reached the fire hydrant, Mama and Marcelle came through the French doors onto the porch. Mama always had something to say about everything that went on but for once, she didn't say a word. Marcelle's mouth was a big gaping O in the middle of her face like she was holding a long high note on a hymn in Sunday School. The only sound was the whispery rustling of the bourgainvillea vine as it stirred in the breeze.

Then Marcelle clamped her mouth shut and turned to Mama. "There she goes, wearing a striped blouse and plaid skirt after you've gone over it with her time and again that you don't wear stripes and plaids together. It's just like her to travel in them mixed," she said.

"Wearing too much lipstick as usual," Mama said slowly like she was deep in thought about something. "It comes down to the same thing in the end—some people can't be taught. At least now Crystal can grow up with some opportunities for refinement. And it's not like Luellen won't have another one to keep her entertained before too long," she went on.

I didn't think Luellen had on too much lipstick. She wore a new shade, ruby-colored, that would've looked better on me with my light complexion but it went nicely with the narrow stripe in her blouse. And I'd never exactly thought of Crystal as entertainment. I thought Mama looked for things sometimes.

Marcelle held a salad fork up to the light. "Aren't they a pair?" she asked, waving the fork toward the street.

"There's fried chicken and deviled eggs on the bottom shelf of my icebox," Mama said. "That's what Dock's having for supper tonight. Luellen's pimento-cheese is much too sweet. Whoever heard of adding

sugar? My recipe calls for salt, pepper and a sprinkle of parsley for contrast. Food that looks good tastes better I always say." She talked too fast, the words came out one on top of the other like her mind wasn't on what she was saying. I was reminded of what Luellen had told me once. "Nobody says what they really mean at your house, Jane Lind. They're famous for covering that up with words."

Crystal hadn't moved from behind the screened door. Juice from the half-eaten peach dribbled down her chin. Any other time she'd bob down the walk dodging the cracks, singing the popcorn man song. She'd be three the second Monday in September and had just learned all the words. Now she didn't make a sound.

"Jane Lind, stop prancing around on that rail and go get her," Marcelle said. "If I don't get that playsuit in to soak right away she'll have a stain on it from now on. Peach juice is next to impossible to wash out of waffle pique."

Crystal tossed the peach pit at me when I reached the steps. I dodged it, leaned against the bannister while she marched up and down the porch, muttering, "You're not my mama. You're not my mama."

I waited patiently for whatever it was she was having to be over. Her steps slowed finally until she stopped in front of me. She bent over and put her head between her legs. "I can't see anything," she whined.

"You can from the rail."

Batting those bright green eyes she'd got from Luellen, she lifted her arms. "Reach me up."

I struggled with her to the top of the rail, held my hands around her waist so she wouldn't fall. When she bent down, her curls, tight as corkscrews, draped over, tangled in her fingers. I'd practiced and was good at working with her hair now, too. I'd roll her hair so the curls wouldn't be so kinky from now on.

As Luellen and the baker rounded the corner at the end of the street, a yellow jacket darted down from the ceiling and lit on the back of Crystal's hand. She screamed, tilted off the rail and spilled into my arms. I caught her, twirled her around and around until I was dizzy from the spinning. We dropped to the floor in a hot sweaty heap.

Mama and Marcelle parted the bourgainvillea, peered through to see what the commotion was about. When Mama saw that we weren't hurt, she said, "Young ladies don't parade around on the front porch rail looking at the world upside down with their underpants showing."

I was busy taking care of Crystal or I'd have told her that sometimes the world makes more sense that way.

I rocked back and forth with Crystal cradled against my chest. She put her hand up to her mouth, sucked on the sting. Then she hiccuped, a soft jerky sound. Her eyelids dropped as she fell asleep in my arms. I brushed the hair away from the nape of her neck where it was matted with perspiration. I'd have to put her in the tub and give her a bath before supper but now I'd sit and hold her.

I'll bet she wouldn't have cried at all if the yellow jacket hadn't stung her.

Traci L. Gourdine

ONLY PART-TIME

Found myself a job workin'
with unskilled women who have watched
their children die in birth
in cars
in ignorance
in anger
A group of us sittin' in a room
no bigger than a rich man's den
shovelin' and tapin'
delinquent notices onto pieces of paper
We send bad news to the poor
We read their tragic misspelt tales
their delinquent too late lies
We borrow them
Remember them
Smellin' their fear as we work
Our fingers begin to cut and bleed
Little scars we accept for \$4.50/hr.
No men in that bank
They work elsewhere
Away from our eyes
We all came alone
Women gathered in nylons
from Napa to Panama
Weeks go
We slide away from our interview selves
Gradually sheddin' nylons
heels
perfume
makeup
We appear to each other
No longer sizin' each other up
Women in holey shoes and lazy socks
Tapin' pennies for good luck to the bad news
and smile the sleep from our eyes

Traci L. Gourdine

EUDORA

Catch me now, she said, I'm gonna jump
Right out this window!
No you aren't Eudora
Yes I am! Don't tell me no

Our Eudora Wilkins of 158th Street
New York, New York
Was liftin' her dress neatly from across the
alleyway
I marked my place in my book
And inched my chair to a window
"That damn cement will crack from your hardhead girl!"

"Catch me now!!" she said.

I see hands of painted nails
Blood red
A perfect job
Scratch at the sill
Her legs skitter out
Her ashy knees peekin'
demurely from her squat

Eudora Wilkins gonna jump!!
They sang across alleyways
Eudora Wilkins narrowed
her black eyes
Settin' her stage
Collectin' her audience

Saturday in Spanish Harlem
Salsa Saturday
The day of suicide
Jump Eudora Wilkins

They cried
Cuz you been jumpin' from that window
half your life

In that instance of preenin' destruction
Her record
Her swansong skipped
Marring her debut in the Daily News
So
Eudora bowed out
Runnin' her stockings
And snaggin' her hair

Gonna be back!! she said
Gonna be back!! she yelled

I heard her right her chair
Backin' into her apartment
Her life and the dangers in it

Eudora Wilkins!! I want to shout sometimes
I'll jump if you do!
But she's never home
or unhappy when my urge hits

Lanky women
With narrowed eyes
And shinin' teeth
We could both paint our nails
And shimmy on out that sill
Together
Lettin' the boys look up
Our dresses

One might whistle
Make a promise
And one of us
Eudora or I
Might find a lame excuse
To go on

Traci L. Gourdine

WHY HE EATS ALONE

Sometimes she could see the food turning in his mouth
when he ate
She would stare directly at it
how it turned like a cement mixture
until she knew what annoyed her most about him

She never pointed it out
letting him irritate her until she refused
to take her meals with him
She ate by the sink
over the pots
with her back to him

There were times when she could not stand the sounds
saliva wetting down his food
lips slick with grease
and with the radio on a bit too, too loud,
she could still see and hear the hole he made in his face
how he rolled food in it
churning meals into a gray paste
She would simply smile at him and wave off his offer to join him
"No, go 'head baby. I'm not hungry."

After he pushed his plate away, a heavy thick tension
rose from her shoulders
Her jaws would go slack
at the thought of
three meals a day
twenty-one meals a week

One day, after lasagna,
she left him abruptly,
saying only that she met someone new
and

how terribly, horribly, sorry she was

He always knew love was complex

She came to know
it was the little things
that mattered

Carole Wood Hardy

AT A HOSPITAL IN PHOENIX

The day has barely lifted
attendants already moving
your bed down corridors.
Switch-blade doors spring open.

In the waiting room, tension
slices into carpets. Sun fingers
a clutter of curled-edged magazines
as people gather in clumps
like misplaced paper cutouts.

It's late when I sit by you
in a white room filled with flowers.
I don't trust this hour
that denies shadows. Outside
a eucalyptus tree lifts branches
up from a concrete bin.

You sigh in your heavy sleep
as if giving up a dream that
could look beyond our frailties
to gather in the light the way
blue leaves drift at dusk.

Claire Keyes

WORLD ENOUGH, AND TIME

I tramp the woods above the brook, looking back
towards the campsite and your startling white head
absorbed in the gathering of wood, the approaching sunset.
Oh my husband, to achieve such newness
and never be young again. Is there world enough,
and time? Beneath my feet, centuries of leaf-mold
pressed by centuries of snow
into what we know as ground.

We make love and sleep on air,
on a carpet of long-leaved ferns and myrtle
where we also cook meals and watch a skunk tiptoe
towards the campfire. We have no neighbors
but the brook and no shield from the rain
pounding on the dome of the tent like hoofbeats
driven across my brain. The noise frightens me,
as I'm never frightened by a city's dark streets,
by cars smashing at brutal intersections.
And I feel more alive in this frisson of fear,
listening to thunder rolls and cracks of lightning
like the tearing apart of our last defenses
against loving each other.

In the morning we search for the well-housing,
bush-whacking across Camel's Hump
through tangles of berry bushes high as my nose.

You've come to mean more to me
than I can bear to lose.

We will build our cabin here,
the pleasure of imagining our lives together
made substantial by the plans you draft.
Soon enough, the golden piles of lumber,

walls erect and trim, broad windows,
an admirable roof.

My ashes, you tell me, sprinkle them
in the brook.

Ann Lundberg-Grunke

LIMITED WARRANTIES

Father,
if they had seen
you at the kitchen table,
tiny transistors sparkling
under your dark, deft hands,
bringing music and voices back
into dead wires. You worked on Formica,
filled the room with the smell of solder
and tobacco. They would understand
if they had seen the countless
cars come down from their
concrete gravestones to hum
again through the village.
I do not argue when they say
you were a simple man.
I do not explain
the complexity of your genius,
that when the furnace
went cold in January and we ate
oatmeal in winter coats,
you descended the stair,
to a world of tools and parts,
and brought the heat up with you
before we'd brushed our teeth.
Maybe,
they would understand,
if they had watched you put the picture
back on the screen.
Crouching behind the cabinet,
"How's that now? Better?"
Yes. Better.
There was no other way.
My mother stands at the head
of the gathering crowd.

She wears the same quick, grey dress
she wore last Sunday
when you coaxed
the zipper into place.
Then left your woman
clipping earrings to her lobes
and erased the shadow on your face
with the one and only Remington
you'd ever owned.
So, if they had lived in your house
where nothing lost usefulness, nor was
discarded, nor was believed beyond repair,
they would understand my own disbelief
that even you can not warm your blood,
to bring the plump-hum back
beneath your stilled breast pocket.

Ann Lundberg-Grunke

THE HEARTH

It is a noisy fire
and curls around the log
like hot surf.
I think about where things go
when they are consumed by heat.
About ash.
How it is finally reduced
to a dark smear.
I think about the moist heat
of mammals, blood and bone and
breath. About
families, radiating out
generation after generation.
Generate. Birth after birth,
small flames.
Heat rising
into the universe.

Ann Lundberg-Grunke

WORKOUT

The bike is spokeless and stationary,
and I am told will take the speed
out of my heart. I have always had
a quick, impulsive heart.
It is not dangerous, just undesirable.
Uncomfortable. This is the extent
of my understanding. So, I pedal air,
and it occurs to me that this is really
an exercise in deception.

My husband shovels snow
on the other side of the window.
We are both flushed and damp and distant.
There has always been something clear
and brittle between us. I puzzle at his
endurance. His even pulse.
As usual we are struggling with different forces.
Developing different sets of muscles.
I watch him push and throw. I admire his ease.
I see the snow catch an air current
and swirl into a brief galaxy of moist air.

Lynn Martin

QUIET CHILD

Child of shadow,
hair like the crow
iridescent, flat, fluffed
only by the wind, you often
fly into the interior of leaves,
lost to the eye, but sensed
in the dark, watching.

You weren't always so.
Tiny, your eyes were bright
with a laughter five pointed
and starry in the day.
Mostly you showed the back of a diaper,
two heels disappearing under a table,
out a door. Returned to a playpen
you sat entranced by the dance
of your own hands silently pouring light
from palm to palm.

At five, an unexpected hospital stay
taught you the indifference of life
how it suddenly melts into terror
not even parents can hold back.
You returned with silence on your back,
little monkey of distance, staring.

On your twenty-fifth birthday
the five year old still remembers.
You greet family, friends, warily.
Poised in the doorway
so tall your head grazes the wood above
you might rise at any moment
and be gone.

Lynn Martin

a kiss on the forehead

I
You stare from the photo
with wide, little boy eyes,
grandpa's grin round your eyelashes,
uncle don's jokes in the shape of your chin
my mom's dimple centered in your cheek.
You do everything but talk,
yet I offer the questions
of my life to your scrutiny:
a small child who died before I was born.

I'm surprised at how close
you follow my life, the knowing
way you hold your head.
Robert, I have only this picture
found one night in an old blue box
taken one week before you left.
You see, it's the mouth,
the same I see in my mirror
every morning on waking
and only the day can answer.

There is something you are about to say
about circles and blue boxes,
a kiss on the forehead in this light.
My son has the same expression
in the moonlight when fever
blurs the edges of the world.
We carry your thin bones into each moment.
My son's hand is sticky with sweat,
your wool sweater rough on my cheek.
Any time now I'll hear your voice
shape this living child's breath
into a smile about to happen
in the picture of Robert

resurrected from darkness and set free.

II

She's my 5 a.m. aunt.
The first ray of light
awakens her, the same at seventy
as at fourteen when a factory whistle blew.
Like Dickinson she rarely travels,
a small village is her world,
its history her tongue.
The stories she gives me.
The dew-eyed shepherd boy on a shelf, and I
both listen among the flowered pillows.

Her voice should be an Irish brogue
but isn't, flows nonetheless in waves
of green. Everything
I know of tragedy and comedy
is in this room. Aunt Allie
is my Shakespeare and my tribal litany,
my now-I-lay-me-down-to-sleep,
the keeper of my children's memories.

*Is it a cup of tea you're wanting again?
Answer a door and you never know
what you'll be finding,
she says, and the two, twelve, twenty-two
and fifty-two year old me walks in.*

III

Rain beads your raincoat
flung on the floor
as you berate me

with today's headline,
the newest tragedy
sitting hunchbacked in your arms.
And no, I don't want tea
you fling at the daisies,
yellow-eyed and silent in the air.
Aunt Allie moves slowly to the door.
You say what you see.
You go on from there,
Robert whispers,
trembling into my hair.

IV

Alaska, Northern Vermont,
an unpronounceable port by the sea,
my children roam farther than I can stand
tall enough to touch, have stories
stuffed in backpacks, a guitar case,
speak in a language all their own.
You, Tad with Filipino eyes.
Ian of the paint smudged hands.
Tarn, my own African dream.
There is something you are about to say
about circles and blue boxes,
a kiss on the forehead in this light.

Paul Nelson

NETS

Where I've mowed the fog-soaked field
overnight spiders
have raised and strung lavender traps
nomadically close. I watch
my dog trot a black pattern.

Back in the house, my wife
gessoes with a broad brush, lightly
over, by my own lights, a flashy herring run,
or sandpipers turning in clouds,
collectively, without grief.
She says her subject is paint.

Something I missed in the field
catches my eye, a foot high, green-gold
tamarack, poking above the swathes
without self. I want to leave it alone.

But where is the sun's reasonable flare
to burn the nets, the fog from the stubble?
Where is the soul's tragedy?

If waste's a sachet for sheets in a drawer,
damn the linen folds. The muslin guoache!

My glasses mist. Half awake, before coffee.
The dog barks, gaits, another
deadly moment in the country.

Joyce Odam

LOSING THE LIGHT

In broken blue light
I arrange my eyes and camera
for the slow exposure.
At twilight
the wild and prettiest hens
roost in the trees.
In summer they were hidden
by leaves.
Now it is winter.
Only my best effort will do.
I must look past the sameness
and confusion to the
strict line of beauty
which is so moody. . .
holding the dark back. . .
holding the moment back. . .
leaning from here to there
for the best angle
to catch my perfection
which is moving away from me.
Why can't I choose?

Joyce Odam

THE SHRINKING TWILIGHT

Alice at lake edge
among the eagles and ducks
and all the overgrown eerie things
with awkward feet and wings
among the reeds and rising waves
the crowded flight and fright
and all so strange
lost here among them
just their size.

Susan Peterson

KIN

(For Father, who knew the blood stories)

Years back, when I built
log cabins with green beans, gravy lakes in potatoes,
I didn't ask. Or listen
as you dished tales
in our kitchen, the bread
and the soup of our history
being served.

What did I need
of old bodies, ancient kin—
I was that young.

We were generations;
like a backyard seesaw
one side up, one down:
so connected, so apart.

Tell me again of tribes
I can't see, of our grandfathers
I can't know, and I'll dream
the kitchen, the bread, your voice
slicing into
the thick warm loaf of memory,
spreading the jam.

Ken Poyner

STATE RELIGION

Myrna on her front porch is speaking in tongues.
This is not the demonstration that in the revival tent
You clap for, dance in your place for,
Believe, and maybe fall yourself
Into possibly holy languages. Not
The demonstration that, as one who did not go,
You laugh about, and wonder
How much the whole affair to the minister
Brought in. It is ten o'clock in the morning.
Good people stand in her front yard.
Gardens are left half weeded. One
Riding lawn mower is still running in idle.
A basket of clothes sits on the ground
By a clothesline leaning to the side
That already has clothes hung on it.
Dogs get out by fence gates left open.
Men stand in the yard with hoes
And grass shears, in shirts they never wear
Outside of their own fences,
Their hands reddened with oil or grass stains
Or the imprints of wrenches. Women
Leave their hands in the pockets of housecoats,
Or hold loosely children, looking
Beyond Myrna and her house, out into the Sound
Where this morning boys are looking to empty
Other people's crabpots. A storm will be up
This afternoon and the boys are never watching.
Myrna's yard then will be half mud.
Who would dare not to come.
Her words sneak along the porch, fall
Down the steps, collapse on the ground between listeners.
The bright red edges of her day dress
Slip away from the breeze and hang at attention.
When will this be over.

To shift a leg is impolite; to go home
Dangerous. Even older children fidget and look back
To houses that are forgetting their occupants.
A car on the state road, above the speed limit,
And the driver not even turning to look.
Myrna is known to be long winded.

Susan Rea

EVENING

In the garden perfect rows
of green lie still, daylight
slipping away from them.
A stand of darkness forms
beneath the evergreens. Soon a line
of shadow will cancel the marigolds.

Wind empties the forest,
the dogwood a net
that has caught three leaves.
My shadow falls among the close black bars
of the trunk, the wire bushes.

A jay's white belly flashes
under pinwheel wings:
when it lands in the pine
beside me, I do not turn my head.
I watch the wild asters
grow fur and vanish.

There, where the sky is torn,
light no longer pours
from the wound. The jay screams,
as if it has something to tell me
before I darken completely.

Susan Rea

TURNING AWAY

Spring again. Webs of fragrance,
and the merciless trees. Somewhere
your hand resting on a tabletop,
cupping a blue mug. A year ago
we merged into one shadow,
flickering against the white door.

* * *

So lightly you plunged
among the bushes' drooping strands,
the small pink flowers
clotting the air with scent.
A ripple of pale lawn
spread unevenly over the lake.
And the children, who knew nothing:
my son, laughing, chased by swans;
your baby in his little chair. I saw
how much could break in our hands.

Now your son's walking; mine can read.
Into these lives we divert
our own, pouring
something the way spring
pours over the trees
after a long blankness.

* * *

Random streaks of cherry blossom
glimpsed through a scrim of evergreens.
My hands open, as if to seize
these white scars. How could I
say good-bye? It is a form

of love—to turn, to walk away
from your house, crossing
this aisle of forsythia,
its swaying arms exchanging gold for leaf.

* * *

Under the flowering crab,
a gray pony grazes.
I break off armloads of blossom
—dark red globes hooked
to the branches in clusters. Inside,
the flowers are flesh-colored, perfect.

We haven't met in a year.
Still the house is filled with flowers
I have picked for you, knowing
how your eyes would darken as you took them:
cowslips, pliant boughs of white lilac,
tulips dropping red and yellow petals
that cling to the fingers like torn silk.

Everywhere birds mingle
cries. A flicker's outraged yielding
cuts harshly through the woods.
In the shellbark the dove's
quivering voice asks
the same question repeatedly.

* * *

This afternoon at the lake
I picnic with my son, feed the fish.
Freshly mown, the grass releases

a crushed sweetness, and the child
leans into the water, its surface
gold with spring. Beneath it
the familiar carp draw near,
dark forms, hundreds of them, waiting
in rows as though they starved. You see,
do you not, why the cherry trees
on the other side bend low
under their burden of blossom? They lie
like snow on the water, weighing
nothing, rooted in that hunger.

Zack Rogow

MONET'S LATE YEARS: GIVERNY

Gone the canvases of locomotives
with headlights drilling into the snow;
no more ice floes on the Seine
cracking like a gun battle;
gone the Normandy summers by the Channel,
a sky so blue it wobbled,
Paris streets drenched with holiday flags,
and the beauty dressed in white
holding a parasol on the green crest of the hill
while the sun ached in the young painter's head.

Now the sky was just a reflection.
His blue leaned toward violet.
With headlights cooling into pale blooms,
the French noon thinned to mere opalescence.
Flags had unravelled into the ropes
of willows, sweeping his pond,
and the woman in white--
cancer at 32. Even the one Monet had cheated
her for, his own friend's wife,
she was gone. The children all tall
and gone.

Now were the decades
of peering deeper and deeper
into the water garden,
past lily pads teased up
by the wind, the painter squinting
to glimpse a sequin of his destination.
The old man in his sun hat
and long beard of shredded light
kept his easel company by the moon bridge
and surveyed his garden.
He called it his true masterpiece.

Before he could die he had to learn
this strange flower
that dwelled in liquid
like goldfish but rooted down
into its home.

Neil Shepard

GIVING IN

(Rye Beach, NH)

Sunset we drive by sea marsh
where the northern harrier
hooks a shimmering fish.
A few rotting shacks
have given into gravity,
their braces snapped,
jutting up.

Late summer the littoral
dries to thigh-deep mud, and marsh gas
fills our heads with going.
Perhaps the summer birds
smell it as well. Something
makes them rise up and wheel
in longer and longer loops,
stretching south.

Cattails lose their stuffing.
And beside them, the blackbirds laze.
No longer the furious chase
through willows, a crow's
caw always ahead of them.
Nothing's left to preserve.

For those who remain,
mist glazes us with a briny cast
like salt-warped boards and green statues.
We are as permanent as
tonight's flaming moon
full above the fishing huts.

We could drive all night
preserving the salt on our lips
as rotting gases rise from the marsh,

or just park and let the moon come up
over the broken sheds.

Neil Shepard

MORNING COMPOSITION

A turning fan, set in the window of a summer's morning,
turned the air all night from darkness into light,
turns me now to my wife's, my own turning forms.
Air moves over our bodies, moves itself invisibly
toward dissolution. We are more visible.
I see my wife's thin shoulder, the rudder
that guides us sleeping into the port
of another day. We wake to darkening bays
circling our eyes, harbors creaking and groaning
for each new odyssey. The mortal condition
bellies our sails and the sculpted goddess
blessing our journies from the bow
begins to weather. Our own forms swell—
a new puffiness of eyes *here*, this morning,
a new wrinkle *here*, a new
network of protruding veins strapping the anklebone
for the long haul. The rheumy eye opening
to this morning, by a trick of vision,
blurs the moving fan to distinction—
each thin blade, separated by the space of an instant,
chops the air as it makes its rounds
in the wards of time,
announcing itself as *now*
and *now*.

William J. Vernon

BY A TENT IN THE WOODS

Evening shadows aren't enough. Bright
knives of the campfire cutting still
air aren't enough. Nor final flights
of birds to roost. Nor the trickle

of the creek. Nor the chorusing tree
frogs and insects. The deer that steps
in sight, then disappears. The squeak
of brakes far off on a road. The specks
of cosmic existence that suddenly
shine through leaves up above. No,

two hands must touch. Fingers must feel
the other. Mouths must open and blow
across the steaming surface of coffee.
The warm words have to be spoken.

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