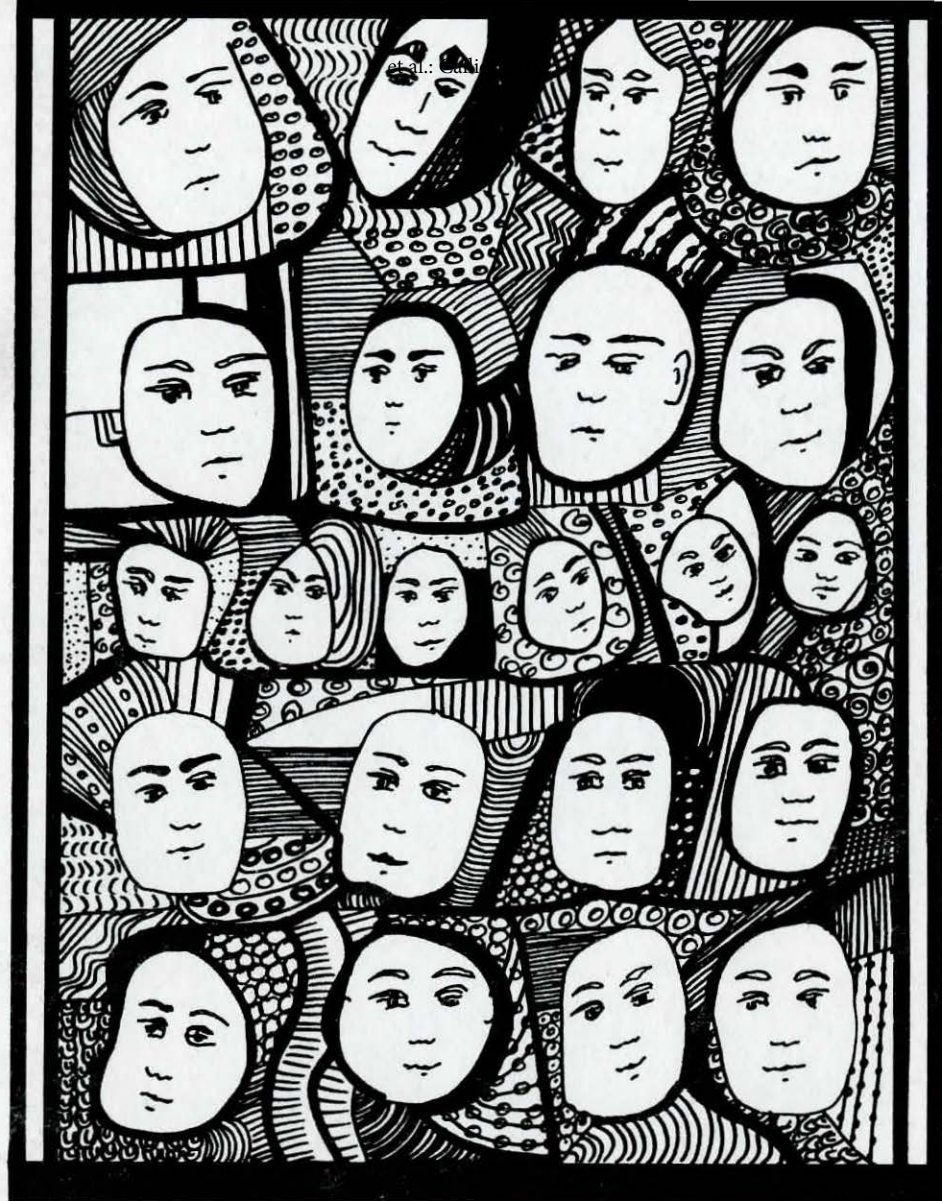


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Manuscripts are discussed with the writer's name masked so that beginning and established writers are read without prejudice.

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Sherry Beasley

SPEECH THERAPY

The rooms of your childhood
home, the small gold den like a cell
of honeycomb, the walnut
shell of a kitchen
were always filled with people, your mother,
father, brother, sisters, the women talking
and everyone coming and going at once: you were little
so you could squeeze into the corner without speaking
no one noticed you.

That was the fifties, but
things change.

Our great room, for instance, the
grand cathedral ceiling and amphitheatre stone-gray
sofas like Roman benches, and behind them,
the windows filled with the gold leaf of the sky--
such space to give you room to breathe!
such calm colors to comfort you--there are

only three of us to fill it. Come out.
Come out and talk to me and our son.

I will not say as another says
that you were a perfect child. I will try
not to intimidate you, remembering the picture
your mother gave me of when you were four
framed in brass and set on my night stand,
your uncut hair like a Royalist child's hair
in the English Civil War, your eyes
looking toward the camera
like the eyes of the racoon baby
that has been snatched by the fox
and carried to the fox's den
and set down among
the fox children who were so much older
and already knew how to be foxes.

Rachel Landrum Crumble

LATE NIGHT LETTER TO NO ONE

I have come to this place of quiet
where the dogs howl at nothing,
where crickets fall silent
after midnight, and I am tired.
Tired of the meaningless artillery of syllables
like rain on a trailer roof.

Give me birds' song before any other music --
the faraway drone of a car on the black top,
or the steady interrogative of the night owl
rather than the muted dialogue from a late
night movie through the screen door.

In a cluttered desk, I save friends' letters,
but write few, timid
as I am of my own incessant loneliness for words.

Always, in my mind, I say all I have to say
write reams, fill the hungry mouths of others.

Silence, a voice from the darkened hall of my childhood,
whispers my name. A scared child in a dark room,
I defy the silence and sing.

I send this out, as Noah's dove; first to find evidence
of solid ground, then to release it to that unknown place.

Gary Fincke

NOT SURPRISED

The street outside. Medicine.
Deep in the lungs a cluster of thorns.

A little before the light changes,
He sees how the collision will be,

Someone vanishing early this morning.
He has been watching for months,

The first AIDS case in this suburb.
On the side of the garage he reads,

Though he's painted over it
A second time: QUEERS DESERVE DEATH.

Like remission, he thinks, and listens
To the lawns where the next vandals

Whisper like handbills, his hand
Covering his mouth when the coughing

Begins, as if to protect
His dim room from danger.

Lynda Sexson

HOPE CHEST

Dolores was waiting to get married. She had been waiting since she was fourteen; blood had come and made her eyes and stomach twitch in surprise and fear, but her mother had said, "Soon you'll be married and then things will be different." Dolores had gone down into that waiting like a fork into gray dishwater. She rested on the bottom of a blank expectancy; and her mother, Mrs. Rasmussen, and her brother Irving who sharpened saws in the shed, waited for Dolores to change their lives.

Dolores was heading toward her three-hundredth menstruation and could fold and pin the rags expertly, and was proud of the way she soaked them dark red and made them beautiful until they dried and stiffened. Her mother had taught her to wrap them carefully in newspaper, almost like little gifts, and put them in the burning barrel. Dolores lit matches to them and the fire took the newspapers first and fast, savoring the cloths that held some other metamorphosis of its own nature. Dolores always watched the fires until they were completely out; "then we know you won't burn up the whole valley," her mother had often repeated. When Dolores watched the fire she tried to understand more about the secret she had found out: blood is like fire. "Blood is like fire," she had said to Mrs. Rasmussen, who responded, "Dolores don't let no one hear you talkin' like that. You're doin' real good." Dolores thought if she did what she should and didn't say the things her mother was able to divine as mistakes, then the marriage would spring up like a surprise.

Dolores was having a birthday. She had learned from Mrs. Rasmussen that birthdays were a sign that the waiting was running out. They didn't bother to count them up any more than they would have counted up the seasons of the blackberries. When they blossomed, it was spring, when they ripened, it was fall. Dolores had her birthday in the spring, Mrs. Rasmussen in the fall. Irving's was in the dead of winter. Nothing was pinned on Irving.

Dolores sat on the wooden chair and watched her mother bake

her birthday cake. She wound a damp strand of hair around her fingers until her mother told her, "Stop playing with your hair, Dolores. You're lucky to have that pretty yellow hair, and lucky to have a momma to brush it for you every day. I'm using my tomato soup recipe. Tomato soup is the surprise ingredient. No one can ever guess," said Mrs. Rasmussen. "I got the recipe from Mrs. Brooks. I copied it out and pasted it in your recipe book in your hope chest." She spoke to Dolores as though she didn't already know these things. "Okay, Dolores, you go run down the road and ask Ethel and Willie to come and have some cake with us after supper."

"They might be busy."

"Go on now, Dolores, you do as I say."

Dolores took the paths through the blackberries higher than their house, around the gully, and came up through the back yard of Ethel and Willie. They had a chicken house and hens always laying; they had fruit trees that never had a bad year; they even had a little bird bath and the birds liked it. "It's a good thing, Ethel likes everything clean," Dolores said aloud, thinking she would have a place like this when she got married.

She stood and looked through the screen door until Ethel saw her and acted pleased to have company. Ethel brought her in saying, "We were just about to have a little toast and coffee. Sure glad you came by."

The kitchen smelled of bleach. Dolores looked in the sink and saw dishrags swirling so slowly, most wouldn't have noticed that they were moving at all. "They look like they're dying."

Ethel said, "Oh, Dolores, I've just been bleachin' out my dishrags. Does it bother you, honey? Here, I'll just let it out," and Ethel wrung out each dishrag and spread them out on her stainless towel rack as the chlorine water complained and disappeared down the drain. She wiped her hands on her big apron, and then pulled Dolores and a chair together.

Willie came in and said, "Well, Dolores, glad you came. Now that means we'll get to have apple butter with our toast."

Dolores knew it was a joke and she laughed. She watched Ethel work like a matter-of-fact magician, spreading a clean cloth on the chrome table, putting out china cups and saucers, glass luncheon plates, a bouquet of daffodils in the center, napkins folded into triangles, silver knives and spoons, butter, two kinds of jelly, cheese, and apple butter, all in painted dishes and little hand-labeled jars. Ethel brought a tray of toast from the oven and buttered them

all before Dolores could have done one. She stacked them up in two rows and sliced them through so they were triangles like the napkins.

"You used to work in a restaurant," said Dolores.

"Yep," said Willie, "that's what I married her for. Good hot food and in a hurry."

Dolores missed this joke, but laughed with them. She knew she couldn't get a job in a restaurant. She knew she'd have to think about this when she was by herself; so she dropped it in the big bin in her mind that held the paraphernalia of her reveries.

Dolores watched Ethel pour the coffee. Her cup was white with violets painted on it; Willie's was green with lily-of-the valley; Ethel's was yellow with gold designs. It looked like the daffodils.

"You should pour coffee in the daffodils," said Dolores.

"That wouldn't be very good, now would it?" said Ethel.

Dolores was unhappy that Ethel didn't see her joke.

Willie, after a long pause, said, "They do look like cups and saucers, don't they, Dolores? I remember once hearing the fairies use 'em to drink from." Ethel and Willie glanced at each other. Dolores was sorry she had come. It was as though people were way up in trees dropping little plums of conversation to her, and she had to run after them and mostly miss.

"I don't believe in fairies," she said, trying to retrieve her dignity and her place at the table.

"Of course not," said Ethel. "We believe in God and His Only Begotten Son, Jesus Christ. Right, sweetheart?"

Willie winked at Dolores. She tried to drop this in, too, into that place for reconstructions and reconsiderations. But Dolores knew to answer yes to questions of that sort.

She tried to bite her toast so as not to reveal the shape of the inside of her mouth. Ethel and Willie seemed unconcerned, making gaping, fluted holes however they pleased. They were onto their third piece while Dolores still worked cautiously on her first.

"Have another, Dolores; have one with cheese. It's good for you."

Dolores dutifully put two little squares of cheese on a triangle, then coated it all with Ethel's dark, luminous blackberry jelly. She looked up at Ethel and saw she had made another error. She wanted to be home. She held the toast in both hands and didn't move.

"Go ahead, honey. You eat any way you like, and if you don't like somethin' you just leave it be."

Then Dolores couldn't figure out if she liked it or didn't; so she sat with the toast in her hands until Willie said, "Dolores likes your jelly as much as I do; I recall she helped me pick these berries." He consulted the label, confirming the vintage. Dolores bit into her cheese and jelly toast and liked it.

By the time Dolores finished, Willie was leaning back on his chair, Ethel resting her red elbows on the white tablecloth, sipping their coffee and discussing when they should stake the peas. Dolores kissed her napkin and said, "I have to go home."

"Well, thanks for comin' over, Dolores. That sure was nice of you." Everyone stood up and scooted chairs. Dolores got to the screen door and remembered.

"After supper is my birthday cake. My mother wants you to come. I want you to come." She quickly looked away and her face burned as they chirped in quick succession,

"Is your birthday today?"

"Happy Birthday, honey."

"Well, Dolores, that's really nice of you. How old are you today?"

"Willie! Shame on you. Don't ever ask a lady her age. Right, Dolores? Dolores don't need to worry none anyway. I swear, she never ages; still looks like a girl. Well, we'll sure try to make it over, sweetheart, but I think my sister's comin' over from Auburn this evenin'. Wants me to help fit a dress to her. They just don't make patterns the same shape as my sister."

Dolores wondered why tears were trying to blind her; she didn't feel unhappy. She thought it would be lots easier if they didn't come.

Willie said, "Oh, I think we can come, Dolores. If those two old hens can't stop gossipin', do you think it'd be all right if I slip over for a little cake? I just can't pass up birthday cake. Besides, I heard once, if you get a piece of a pretty girl's birthday cake you have good luck for a whole year. I sure could use that luck."

"Okay," said Dolores with a bubble in her mouth, and left. She stopped around the corner of the house to wipe her eyes on her sweater. She didn't mean to hear them, but in early summer it's as easy to hear people through houses as in the same room with them.

"Oh lord, Willie, you know I don't have a mean bone in my body, but I can't eat in that Rasmussen house. I've tried. Food

sticks in my throat. It smells like the Good Will in there."

"Well, Ethel, when someone asks you to be their birthday party, if you don't go, there ain't no party. I'm a goin' whether you come along or not. Will you fix her up a pretty birthday present?"

Ethel sighed, "That's easy. I'll just wrap her up somethin' for one of her hope chests."

"Now, Ethel, I don't want to..."

And Dolores fled past the plastic bird bath, the gray birds flickering in the water. Dolores knew that feathers resisted water, but she guessed the birds didn't know. She wondered if they wanted to be like people, or just who it was who taught them they should bathe.

"Well, you sure were a long time," said Mrs. Rasmussen. "Wait'll you see how pretty my cake is I made for you. I think I won't show you 'til the folks come."

"Ethel's got her sister comin' tonight; they're making a dress. So only Willie will be here."

"Oh, that's too bad. Ethel sure would 'preciate my cake. We'll send a big hunk of it back with Willie."

Dolores went back to her room and shut the door. She cried on her bed and held her hand against the safety pin and the soft folded cloth. It was warm, and a spot was forming through to the outer layer. When she stopped crying and felt relaxed, she took one of the newspapers from under the bed, folded another cloth and changed it. She sat on the floor liking to see her own blood. Only grown-up women did this, but not old ones like her mother. Only marriageable ones. It gave her proof that she was not a child. 'You still look like a girl,' she heard Ethel's echo say. She knew that meant Ethel thought her on past girlhood, and she, without her 'monthlies,' would never know she had a way beyond it. Dolores wrapped the newspaper. Again, it looked like a gift and she was reminded that it was her birthday. This time she tried to recall how old she was. No one ever said anymore. She went into the kitchen and took a couple of wooden matches from the blue tin holder on the wall. Her mother looked at her, nodded and said, "You're gettin' to be a woman. Pretty soon you'll be married. Then things'll change for us."

Dolores went to the burning barrel and lit the package. The paper burned quickly to a crisp negative of itself and went out. Dolores went back into the house, knowing that the cloth was not burned. She'd have to come back and make a hotter, hungrier fire.

She went back to her room and looked at her three hope chests. The first was filled with linens. Mrs. Rasmussen had decorated them, one after the other, until no more could fit.

The second chest was a painted box Dolores had retrieved from the garage. It contained things she had scavenged, things she knew would be needed when she was married. It made her feel like she had made something out of nothing when she looked in it. It was crammed with spatulas, a pan, an egg beater, even one of the salt and peppers from Mrs. Rasmussen's collection. There were six jelly glasses with enameled floral designs, three with clocks. Dolores had been urging Irving to finish off the last bit of jelly in the fourth. There were several beautiful plates without chips. Most she'd found in the garbage when people moved away. It made her feel resourceful to look in her box filled with her domestic potential.

The third chest was an old camel-back trunk, filled with baby clothes, all hand-made by Mrs. Rasmussen--nighties, blankets, and twenty-two embroidered bibs. Dolores liked the bibs best of all. On days like this, when there seemed to be an ant colony under her skin, she'd take them out, arrange them and stack them up.

She took out the bibs now, though she was a little afraid of the guillotine-like lid that sometimes came down with a crisp sound, teasing Dolores for her hand or neck. She carefully closed the trunk so that the lid wouldn't hang over her.

On top was the bib with the fat yellow duck wearing a ribboned bonnet and carrying a basket of purple variegated daisies. That made Dolores feel better. She put them all in her lap, shut her eyes, and tugged at one of the ties. She opened her eyes and saw it was the bird with an umbrella tucked under its wing, standing by two daffodils taller than the bird. She could remember picking it out from the package of transfers, watching her mother iron over it and pull the hot paper from the inked outline left on the cloth. She had asked to iron it on, but her mother had said, "You'd just smudge it. Don't stand so close when I've got a hot iron." Suddenly the picture evoked a queasiness Dolores wanted to escape; she wondered how that picture had changed from the way it used to make her feel.

She drew out one more bib from her lap. It was the one with the little Dutch boy and girl on each side of a windmill. One arm of the windmill looked about to chop through the cap of the Dutch girl. This picture had changed too. She had never seen before the ominous over-hanging blade of the windmill. Dolores opened the

trunk lid and dumped the bibs in, drawing back from the trunk as it crunched shut.

She sat without moving until Mrs. Rasmussen opened the door of her room, stuck in her balding, bony head and said, "You want to pretty up before supper, Dolores? Hurry up."

"When you poked your head around my door your hair looked like cob webs on an old skull," said Dolores.

"Don't act mean, just 'cause it's your birthday, girl. Get cleaned up."

Dolores dabbed at herself with a washcloth. Her mother had warned her against the bathtub during her time. She put on her dress with the violets, brushed her hair herself, and put in her favorite barrettes with the cats.

Mrs. Rasmussen came in the bathroom, took out the cats, rearranged Dolores' hair, and put in the barrettes with the doves.

"You'll like your birthday supper. I made you them seashell macaroni and sliced up a tomato and opened a jar of green beans. All what my little girl likes best."

Dolores wondered if those were what she liked best. Up close like this her mother didn't look like a skull. Dolores wanted to stay close to her.

No one spoke at the dinner table. They never did. Mrs. Rasmussen cleared away the dishes, wiped off the oil cloth. The three of them sat there and waited for Willie, and maybe for Willie and Ethel.

"I got you a present," said Irving.

"Let's see," said Dolores.

"Don't get ants in your pants," the old woman said.

"We gonna get cake?" asked Irving.

"Hold your horses," said their mother.

"Try to guess what I got you," Irving teased.

"Is it red?"

"You two, just sit still 'til company comes. You wear me out."

Irving looked at Dolores and touched a red square on his plaid shirt and shook his head no and grinned.

Dolores understood. She touched the green on the oil-cloth table cover. Irving indicated no. She touched a violet on her dress.

"Don't touch yourself there, Dolores. Irving, hold still."

Irving picked up his cards and played solitaire. Mrs. Rasmussen crocheted. Dolores sat and watched Irving's cards change their minds from row to row.

A knock sent Irving to the door, a sigh from Mrs. Rasmussen's dry mouth, and animals to the edge of the cage inside Dolores.

It was Willie. Alone. He sang "Happy Birthday, Dear Dolores," like he was on the Arthur Godfrey Show, and set three packages on the table.

"Three," said Dolores.

"One from me, one from Ethel, and one from the blackberry vines."

Dolores laughed, "Jelly."

"Might be, might be. You just open and see."

"We'll have cake first," said Mrs. Rasmussen. "I'll go get it. Too blame bad Ethel can't be here to see it."

"Well, she's awful sorry," said Willie.

Dolores thought her mother was mad because Willie brought three presents.

Mrs. Rasmussen emerged from the pantry with a cake topped with green dyed coconut. Stuck in the frosting was a set of her ceramic salt and peppers, a pair of blue jays; colored jelly beans clustered in the middle of the coconut. Seventeen candles ringed the cake. They had been lit before; Mrs. Rasmussen saved things that could be used again.

Irving struck a kitchen match and lit the candles; Dolores knew she had to try to blow them all out. Her breath threatened the flames. Her mother pinched out the ones left burning.

"Seventeen candles. Is that how old she's supposed to be?" asked Irving.

"That's supposed to be how many candles I could find in the drawer," and Mrs. Rasmussen pulled on the birds and cut into the cake.

Willie admired the recipe; Mrs. Rasmussen asked him to guess the secret ingredient. He tried milk.

"Lord, you can't talk to a man about nothin'. I sure wish Ethel'd come too."

"Well, she's sorry she couldn't get over. I'll sure tell her how good this cake was."

"You'll take her a hunk. But that won't do no good for her to see how pretty it was."

"Pretty as a wedding cake," said Irving.

"Sure was a clever cake do," Willie affirmed.

"Dolores has got that recipe. I copied it off for her. It's pasted in her hope chest recipe book."

"How'd you like to meet a friend of mine, Dolores?" asked Willie.

"What?" frowned Irving.

"I got a friend who's comin' over tomorrow. He's sure the nicest guy. He's got a good idea, you know. He's a hard worker and besides he's started raisin' mushrooms in his basement."

"How can he tell if they're not toadstools?" asked Irving critically.

"'Cause he grows 'em all himself. Then sells 'em to the big grocery stores."

"I'd never touch a mushroom with a ten-foot pole," said Mrs. Rasmussen as though she were talking about whiskey.

Dolores knew that Willie was trying to talk about something else.

"Irving, why don't you and your sister come on over tomorrow about four?"

Irving caught on, "He got a wife?"

"Well, he had one. They're divorced."

"Never heard of such a thing," said Mrs. Rasmussen and laid a dish towel over the remaining cake like a shroud.

"Well, that woman he was married to, you never seen nothin' like it. She was so mean, Ben F would..."

"What's his name?" Dolores interrupted.

"Benjamin Franklin Gray."

"I heard of him."

"No, not that one. He's named for him. Well, anyway, Ben'd bring home his pay every week and she'd run off and buy canned hams and apple sauce and soda pop and take it all in Ben's station wagon to her relations. Ben couldn't keep ends meetin' 'cause she kep runnin' off and givin' everything away."

"It was family," protested Mrs. Rasmussen, her mouth drawn up like she had pulled a gathering string.

Willie paused. "Well, she was quite a good-sized, hefty woman. Seems she beat him up. He needs a real sweet-tempered girl."

They all looked at Dolores. "I'm going to bed," she said. "I've got a stomach-ache."

"Not from my tomato-soup cake, you don't. You sit here 'til you open your presents."

"That's okay," said Willie. "I got to be goin'. You open ours tomorrow. Then Irving'll bring you over about four, and you can tell Ethel if you liked 'em."

"She'll like 'em; she's learnin' manners," said Mrs. Rasmussen as though she were defending herself.

"You wear that pretty dress, Dolores."

"Tomorrow's not my birthday. It goes away."

"Yeah but Ethel didn't get to see you in your dress, so you wear it for her." Willie waved to everyone and said goodbye as though they were across a field, and left back through the door with Ethel's piece of cake on a saucer. Dolores thought it might be hard for everyone to go visiting, not just for her.

"Open the presents," said Irving, putting his with Willie's.

"No, I'll do it tomorrow." Dolores went to her room and cried again.

She woke up before dawn and could think only of the presents on the kitchen table. She put on her slippers and went to get them. She was carrying them to her room when her mother said, "What are you doing up at this hour?"

Dolores was startled and dropped the packages. The blackberry jelly broke open and oozed out of the wrapping paper.

"Get back in bed. I'll clean this up. You can just wait a while since you wouldn't do it when you were supposed to."

Dolores waited. After she and Irving had their corn flakes her mother gave her back the packages, minus the broken one.

"Where's the jelly?"

"Where do you think? It's gone. You can't eat broken glass."

Irving put his gift in her hands. She opened it. Blue Waltz perfume and barrettes in the shape of peacocks. They were painted an iridescent enamel.

"I like these best of all."

Her mother told her, "Hurry up and open the other two." One was a dishtowel embroidered with a kitten in a skirt, sweeping the floor.

"That's for your hope chest," said her mother.

The other package contained four large wooden rings. Too big for her fingers, too small for her wrists.

"Those are napkin rings. They're for your hope chest."

Dolores knew that all three of the hope chests were too full. She said to Irving, "The barrettes and this perfume is for me. Not for the hope chests."

Irving said, "I got to sharpen a cross-cut. It's gonna take me awhile," and he left.

Dolores performed her ritual, changing her padded cloth, wrapping it, burning it. Then she went back to her room. She wanted her bibs, but she didn't want to touch the swollen lid of the trunk. Once when she had been sick with the flu, she thought babies were in the trunk. She knew that was silly.

She stayed on the bed all day until her mother said, "You get ready now. But don't let no strange man touch you. They always try to touch girls like you."

Dolores put on her violet dress, some Blue Waltz, and the new barrettes. Her mother took out the barrettes, brushed her long wavy hair again, and re-attached the peacocks where, she told Dolores, they belonged. "It won't be long now," said her mother.

Irving had put on a blue shirt that shined. He had combed his hair with water. Dolores saw little beads of water fall onto the shirt collar. It made him look sweaty, but he smelled cool.

"Let's go," he said. "Now, Dolores, don't try to say nothin' interestin'."

"Dolores," said her mother, "don't touch yourself and leave your hair alone."

"Do you want to put lipstick on her?" asked Irving, looking at her like one of his cards he called a one-eyed Jack.

"No. She looks younger without it."

Dolores started crying and cried so hard that Irving had to play solitaire while Mrs. Rasmussen applied cool wash cloths to bring down the swelling. When she was ready Irving grabbed her wrist and pulled her out the door, letting some of his cards spill on the floor. Dolores saw her mother's black shoe step on one of the red face cards.

They went around the front way to Ethel and Willie's, where a station wagon with wooden doors was parked by the house. Dolores started to slow down, but Irving dug his fingers into her arm and pushed her toward the house. Ethel came out to meet them. "Oooh, you look pretty. My, you smell good, too."

"I gave her that perfume for her birthday," said Irving. They went into the house to meet the mushroom man. Dolores was trying to remember what that name was he'd been given.

"Well, hi, honey! Hi there, Irving!" Willie sounded like somebody was going to be Queen for a Day. "Glad you kids could stop over. Come on in the livin' room and meet a friend of mine."

Dolores liked the living room. All the furniture was fat and wore little crocheted doilies. It smelled like furniture polish and Ethel. The man stood up. He was short, pale, and seemed very clean; he had a large bald head. He looked like a mushroom himself, wearing gold-rimmed glasses. He looked out the window and down at the rug when he shook hands with Irving and nodded toward Dolores, matching the directions of their own nervous glances. Everyone stood like dancing bears waiting for the music to start until Ethel came in and put Dolores in a chair and then everyone else sat down. Ethel brought in a tray and put it on the coffee table.

"Well..." said Willie, beginning his sentence with the word that always seemed to make the others come after, "well, now, Ben F, tell us how you got started in that mushroom business."

Ben F's voice was high and light, "I guess whenever I went down in my basement the temperature and humidity always felt like the woods in the spring; and one day I said to myself, 'boy if I was a mushroom I'd love to be here.' So there was the idea."

Ethel, Willie, and Ben F laughed. Irving joined them. Dolores did, too, but just as everyone else was stopping. Hearing her voice alone in the middle of the room, she had to keep going, and asked the only question ready-shaped in her mind, "Did you always look like a mushroom, or just after you started growing them?"

Dolores didn't say anything after that. She felt what was happening as surely as Ben F had felt his mushroom enterprise. She couldn't eat her cookies or touch her coffee. She was afraid they'd spill. She traced the pattern of the rug with her eye until Irving pulled her out of the house, down the gully, through the blackberry bushes, and back to their house.

He was angry and began to tell their mother, "She acted like a moron. We just can't fool nobody with her. You shoulda been there. She..."

Dolores shut the door to her room so she wouldn't hear him. She decided to go to sleep and when she woke up it would be far from her birthday and people would leave her alone for awhile. Too many things had happened

Dolores slept through to the next morning. She went out to eat her cereal. Irving was standing in the middle of the kitchen as still as she sometimes stood.

"She can't get up," he said. "I've got to go get somebody with a car. You help her."

When Dolores was little all the things that could hurt her or that she could ruin had been put in her mother's room and Dolores was not allowed to cross the threshold. And Dolores had never broken the rule, and the rule had never changed. But now Dolores went in. Her mother had wet the bed; she couldn't talk but in liquid sounds; it seemed she couldn't move. Dolores looked at her, touched her. Dolores finally realized that her mother couldn't get up and couldn't talk. She moved around the room where she'd never been. A place in her own house, strange and familiar. All the sewing things were there that her mother brought out every day and put back in the bedroom 'so Dolores won't get ahold of anything and mess it up or hurt herself.' Dolores picked up the scissors. Mrs. Rasmussen's noises increased. Dolores held out the lock of hair she'd been sucking and snipped it off. She let the scissors and the coil of wet hair fall into the basket of the threads.

On top of the dresser were objects that had never been carried into the other rooms. Dolores touched them. There was a dried-up starfish. She picked it up. She heard her mother on the bed, but Dolores had quickly come to know the powerlessness of this new mother as easily as she had known the power of yesterday's. But Dolores' eyes stopped at the mirror and met the angry reflection of the old woman behind her; still Dolores held on to the crusty star fish and noticed a few grains of sand had shaken from the center hole onto her palm. Her mother gurgled and Dolores held the star fish up to the mirror to blot out the old woman's reflection; the star fish hit the mirror and an arm cracked off and hit the dresser like chalk.

There was a picture of a man and a woman in a silver frame. A wedding picture. It said 'Dolores and John Rasmussen, 1917. She was confused until she realized that her mother's name had been Dolores when this picture had been taken.

There were too many things to see, so she left the room. She took the picture with her and set it on the kitchen table while she ate her cereal.

Irving came in with Ethel and Willie. "Look," she said, and held up the picture to them. They went past her without a word toward her mother's room. Dolores heard muffled sounds and guessed.

The last time Dolores saw her mother she had been turned into a waxed doll and laid in a satin-lined box. Dolores slipped the wedding photograph under the satin pillow, returning it to the first

and former Dolores, drawing back before the lid might choose to fall and take her in, too.

Dolores didn't mind her mother's absence much. She wouldn't have liked it if it had happened before, but since she was going to be married before long, that's what her mother had said, then things would be different.

Willie had come over a couple of times and talked to Irving about red tape and paperwork. He didn't look at Dolores and say funny things to her; Dolores worried that he was mad at her.

Ethel came to ask her what she wanted to take with her. Dolores thought it was the marriage, coming at last. But everything Dolores suggested packing, Ethel would say, "Oh honey, you won't need that. They'll have all that stuff."

"Is it the mushroom man?" Dolores asked.

"Sit down, sweetheart, let me tell you again, where you'll be."

Dolores forgot to listen because she saw that Ethel's wedding band was too small for her finger. The finger was pink and puffy around the ring. It looked like a little pig with a collar on too tight. "Does the ring hurt your finger?" Dolores wanted to know.

Ethel got up and went to the door, acting like she was looking in the yard, but her apron was crumpled against her eyes. Dolores thought she looked like the plump little animals embroidered on the hope chest dish towels and bibs.

Dolores went into her room and got her bibs out of the trunk. She knew these were the things she would take with her. She looked at the one with the duck carrying a basket of daisies. "When will it be my birthday?" she called out to Ethel.

John Gilgun

THE DEMOCRATIC MUSE

Is armed (with a copy of Leaves of Grass)
And considered
By certain academic critics
Dangerous.
When last seen was wearing: coveralls
And a baseball cap.
Drinks Pabst Blue Ribbon, drives
A Chevrolet.
Has never voted Republican.
Scorns rondels, favors
The brash music
Of the circus and the street.
Phones the poet Roger Kirschbaum
Of St. Jo, Mo, frequently
At four AM and talks
Till the morning light
Breaks
Like the kneecaps of honyaks
Over the stockyards.
Who in hell is Roger Kirschbaum?
And what does 'she see in him?

Shalin Hai-Jew

AT THE JAZZ ALLEY

Hours pile end on end.
We talk in this lonely window
facing the avenue.
Haze of blue smoke,
our talk is crying, worn
and husky as the singer's hum.

You thought endings
were all trophies, ribbons,
but after our long sprint,
we are winded, and rest,
legs cramped under this table.

Cadence of wine in your temples,
your eyes are hard and misty
as the ice swirling in my glass.
The tables fill and empty;
voices fade like bass notes.
I smell your sweat, sharp
as cologne, sharp as this glass
if it were to break in
my cool, wet palms.

You shove your wire-rim glasses
higher on your nose, rise clumsily,
teeth marks incised in your fork.
We leave together,
hands held loose as yarn.
Our eyes water;
the streets are so bright.

Shalin Hai-Jew

JOHN, EVEN THE DREAMS

I dream I am picking my way
down a crumbly shell beach
to a motorboat washed up on the peninsula.
Weeds clawing the metal sides
steady the boat as you hitch
your bad leg over, thump into the stern
behind me. As we move from land,
water yawns into rocks
that can rip long hangnails
from the bottom of our boat.

We skip over the waves
in our wake, over glassy sheet water,
blank as fish eyes. Through
a shallow channel, a grove of stooped
weeping willows, you steer us.

Then, slow as sand through an hourglass,
the boat capsizes, spill us overboard.
We sink like feathers in thick air
to the muddy lake floor, rise
swift as corks until our palms
shove some moonless ceiling.
Dream logic. I shake you,
and lose my one breath in a bubble.

I wake, tense for air,
no full recollections,
only a nagging taste in my mouth
like bread gone stale.
My arms grip the pillow
in the shape of your shoulders,
your face vague as bedsheet wrinkles.

Twyla Hansen

MAPLE FLOWERS

You scoffed, I recall, your
Faith thin as March blustery air,
When I mentioned the blooming;

Your reply -- simply high, in the
Studded branches of the huge
Silver maple, the sun brilliant,

Raw in our eyes -- me pointing,
You the constant skeptic.
Oh sure enough, against the

Loose grip of winter, they were
There: clusters -- dowdy, dense,
Reddish. You were hardly impressed,

I recall, but then, was I even trying?
That's the way things always seemed
Between us. Unadorned. Haughty.

Shelved. Hardly, in any late-winter
Chill, cause for a second backward
Glance.

Twyla Hansen

MARCH 20 POEM

Tonight at 9:52 the sun
they say on its tireless path
toward its equinox will cross
the equator and ascend north

and if you believe that
can love and hope and equality
be far behind
that out of this dreary madness
the earth can vernaly rise

intensified by sun and warmth
and knowledge that once again
our restless bodies
will shed their outer skins
and rotate to face each other
in the fleeting promise
of morning light

William Van Wert

THE DEATH OF HOUSEHOLD GODS

Oh it was sometimes good and almost always more peaceful, like walking through a model home you know you'll never buy, but it was never right, never quite totally right, after Jenna left. She had to go, of course. The reasoning remains the right reasoning, even though the necessity falls away like old skin with time. Jenna left, I stayed with Dante, who was two at the time, and the whole thing felt like dry ice. She left because she was going crazy, hallucinating around the kid, in and out of visions of killing him. Her nightmare walking narcissism. We were killing each other at the time, of course. I had a bleeding ulcer. I couldn't eat and bit my nails until they bled. I couldn't sleep at night and couldn't stay awake during the day, stressed out and bone-weary. I had either constipation or diarrhea, and neither one was the relief for the other. Jenna had crying jags that erupted at breakfast, waited for me to come home at night, and carried on from there. She threatened to cut off her nipples with scissors, so ashamed was she of her failed motherhood and the drought in her breasts that followed mother's milk. She would play a record to calm herself, then scratch it, then smash it across her knee, the record instead of the kid. She would go to therapy and come back worse, her doubts confirmed, her ineptitude a passing paid-for fact, her sanity the only thing left up for grabs.

When she left there was no ceremony, no call the next day, no sight of her for three weeks after that. She went poof in the night, and Dante began sleeping through the night, something he had not done in his first two years of life. My insomnia continued. I stayed up through the night, suffering from sudden peace instead of war. No Jenna to fight tooth and nail. The calm was frightening. I heard every noise I'd never heard before: the clanking pipes, the passing trains, police sirens, garbage trucks, street sweepers, crows, owls and cracks in the plaster. Every sound a bruise. And lethargy as long and dull as lightning is quick.

A new neighbor moved in the day after Jenna moved out. A big-boned woman named Susan, into the earth and "natural foods." She brought me cucumbers and green peppers from her garden out back, and she wore T shirts with a V neck. She had big bulging breasts and moles around the dive-line, just like Jenna, and I thought that if I closed my

eyes I could take Susan to bed with me and think it was Jenna. But I never talked as we ate green peppers, watching the sun go down on the back steps. I sighed a lot and offered her wine, but had so little to say that finally her enthusiasm succumbed to my silences. She began leaving the peppers on the back steps and not staying, herself. And then she found someone else, and we never did go to bed together.

There were good times and peaceful times with Dante, and he seemed to thrive on the calm. I looked at him a lot, and sometimes I took him to bed with me at night, cradling him and telling him I was sorry for what happened, but, of course, he didn't seem to understand, and so he fell asleep in my arms and I just kept on talking, more for myself and the big bed I couldn't fill and the calm that was frightening and all the disembodied noises that seemed to be speaking my name.

I knew the loss I was feeling, and sometimes, to get myself out of that, I tried to imagine what Jenna might be feeling or doing. She bought new furniture, signed up for a painting class, continued her therapy, and took her craziness to parties and bars, sleeping with every man who was kind or seemed safe or looked less crazy than she was. I contrasted my asexuality, which felt like a low-grade fever or ongoing flu, with her musical beds, and I couldn't choose which was worse, which was normal. Everything was calm, but nothing felt normal as we moved toward stiff formalities with each other and license everywhere else.

I had to give myself pep talks that reached plague proportions about how bad the marriage had gotten. All that sudden clarity, as total as her absence. I actually imagined that this was what Adam and Eve felt after the fall. Knowing all the things that I never wanted to know about her, about me, about us and a future without any "us" in it, I wished sometimes to be able to go back to that ignorance, where I was still unhappy but still trying to make Jenna happy, and where she was still verging on madness and lashing out with all her little cruelties but also still sleeping with me, still pretending to be a nuclear family, however sham. I wished for the sham again and didn't know how to get back to it.

There were times when the least receptive word from either one of us could have reconciled us to another bout of trying. But we had used up all our options, tried the trial separations, done all the therapies, separately and together. All along, two people like to think they have a choice in these things. But maybe they don't. In retrospect I couldn't see any way that either of us could have saved the marriage. I began to think that Jenna and I had been used: brought together by convoluted needs and insecurities and past family hang-ups, we were only meant to

get Dante into the world. I wondered if other estranged couples felt the same way. Used, I mean.

I also wondered how other couples stayed together, never had to face the terrified animal in each other. I expected to see the cracks and divisions in other couples, and sometimes I did see them, but the couples seemed to hold, in spite of them.

How did they hold?

Seems like I'm always asking for anchors and getting illusions. Divining rods, runes, rosaries, wishbones. Things in the shape of illusions.

When I left Paul and Dante, they seemed more real than quicksand. But soon they had no more stick and substance than a creek bed in winter. My infant son rose to haunting proportions. My self-righteous husband shrank to the size of a voodoo doll. At first, I missed the ways they filled up my day more than I missed them: feedings for Dante, feedings for Paul, and both overbearing, Dante by lungs and Paul in silences that curled around me at night like accusations. Suddenly, I had no one else to feed but myself. Kid in a candy store.

I used to celebrate things, even my solitude, when there was nothing else. I put out plates for four in my new fourth-floor apartment. I lit a candle and served myself French wines. Chateauneuf-du-Pape. For the lady. I sipped slowly, looked into that swirling pool and celebrated the dark red cellar smells on my breath. Sometimes, I ate naked and crossed my legs for modesty, watching the wine blush like a rash across my breasts. Sometimes, I served myself second helpings. I ate lamb stew, Paul's favorite, and relished the revenge of his absence.

I was manic in those days. Either I was high on a party and picking up men twice my age, my need to be needed again equal to their sober need not to be forgotten, or I was wasted with crying, staying in pajamas and slippers for whole weekends, taking my temperature between sobbing fits because I thought I might explode. The men were mostly kind and grateful, where Paul was always eager and tender and just in his judgments. Like so many circles after years and years of the same right angle. I made no secret of my mercury to these men. They knew from the start that I was wild with separation, fun like a raft on rapids, and unpredictable. I gave them their passion on weekends at resort hotels and left them as quickly as I had picked them up.

Sometimes, I called Paul during my crying fits, and he listened while I cried my shame into the phone. He didn't hang up. To his

credit, he didn't hang up. But I could feel his resistance, his anger at abandonment, his patient defiance of me and my moods in his long-suffering, as though attaining the state of single fatherhood were synonymous with sainthood. Or martyrdom.

We never really talked, though. I rushed a little truth at him, he rushed a little truth at me, but the only calm and common topic was Dante. Dante's moods. Dante's growth spurts. Dante's diseases and medications. I would have stepped in when Dante was down with the flu, but Paul never asked me. Then again, he made a pious point of never asking.

Once Dante almost died, which brought Paul and me back together in our time of worrying and waiting. Dante was always swallowing things. A quarter. Shoestring. Anything that lay unclaimed on the floor. One day he swallowed a Christmas tree ornament and almost choked to death. We were sitting awkward, Paul and I, when it happened. Then both of us pounced on Dante at the same time. I raised up on Dante's rib cage, while Paul pressed down on Dante's tongue and pushed in at Dante's stomach, until finally the boy threw up, and the ornament came flying out: an angel blowing his horn, now broken, for the birth of Christ. Part of the angel's horn stayed down in Dante's stomach and went through his bowels. Paul and I could laugh about that. We were reminded, but never reconciled.

I never wanted to go crazy. Nobody does. But Paul never understood that, and, because he couldn't understand, he took it personally. I can barely remember how I was when I left, and he can't forget.

I know I'm much better now. I could never raise a child by myself, but I could do it with the help of a partner. The hallucinations are gone now when I am around Dante on weekend visits. The migraine headaches have disappeared. I have a house, a good job in advertising and no debts.

I think I'm better now, but I'm sure Paul still thinks it's a delusion. I spent a lot of time proclaiming my mental health in our marriage, so that now he thinks I am crying wolf.

I don't go to gurus anymore. I don't look for plateaus of consciousness, ways of removing myself from the world, trips to take on the inner soul. I'm just there. I think I'm now how Paul had always wanted me to be during our marriage, but, of course, he has changed too. The him he used to be would have liked the me I am now.

I liked him. I liked him a lot. Nothing ever came of it, though. I knew him that first summer of his separation. He was hyper and depressed, half-awake, half-dead, his wounded man's pride all over his face like a coma. He'd cross his legs, uncross them, look at me, look away, always listening for his son and awkward about his parenting. He worried that his son would die, from having been abandoned by his mother. I think the worry was more for him, that he might die, for having been abandoned by his wife.

It was summer and I brought him cucumbers and green peppers from the garden. He got out paper plates and napkins and we ate outside. I can still picture the sheen of salad dressing around his lips as the sun went down. I came casually at first, but later I would dress down for him, wear halter tops and shorts to show off my legs. I saw the way he looked at my breasts, and I knew that he would like nothing better than to bury his face in my breasts. I could smell his need when he crossed his legs, his nervous futility when he uncrossed them. I would have gone to bed with him, I would have given him anything he asked for, and even more, but he had to ask. It was important to me that he ask. He never could.

The tension got transferred to our salads. I have never tasted cucumbers and tomatoes and green peppers so succulent, so sensual, as those I shared with Paul. Sometimes, Dante sat on my lap while we ate, and I could see both pain and gratitude in Paul's eyes.

Sometimes, I lay in his hammock, and he would swing me. The hammock was attached to two cottonwood trees, and sometimes it rubbed against the hydrangea bush when he pushed me, shoving off from my roped buttocks, putting hands on me he never dared to lay without the rope. Sometimes, Dante wanted to crawl into the hammock with me, and Paul would swing both of us, clearing his throat and fighting back the tears.

We talked a lot. At first, to put him at his ease, I talked too much and pretended not to notice too much about him. But gradually, I stopped monopolizing the conversation and asked him questions. When he talked about Dante, he looked me straight in the eyes. When he talked about Jenna, he looked away, as though she were somewhere beyond the train tracks and listening too.

When I talked about myself, I kept it to the present: my social work cases, my running and folk-dancing, my garden. Sometimes, I told him about a record I'd bought or a book I'd read, and often he had read the same book. But I never talked about my past, and I don't think he noticed that, because he was so preoccupied with his own.

Once we hugged, and he apologized for being so morose and said he would like to date me if he could ever get his joy back. It was exactly the kind of moment I had been waiting for, but, when it came, I felt threatened. I sensed that I could never be more than Jenna's stand-in, and I knew that I could easily love him to obsession.

So I backed off, as gently as I could. I started dating again. Other men. Less intense. Less interesting. Less threatening. I never told Paul that I had just come out of a marriage, myself, and that my own daughter, a little younger than Dante, had died and left a hole between me and my ex-husband that we couldn't fill. I don't think Paul would have understood. He didn't have room for people whose problems went deeper than his.

I'm remarried now, but I still think about him. He was the closest I ever came to friendship with a man. Sex hovered, but didn't interrupt. I think I could have told Paul things I'd never told any other man.

That time we hugged in his kitchen was the only time I ever spent in his apartment. He showed me though the rooms, the tour to break the spell of the hug. Each room showed strippage. Holes where Jenna had taken things. Holes that Paul hadn't been able to fill. A well-worn sofa, minus its coffee table. One ceramic elephant. Makeshift bookcases. A bedspread that didn't match the drapes. Dusty baseboards. No cook books. The rectangle, a different color from the rest of the wall, where a picture used to hang.

I wonder if Paul noticed these vacancies. Religiously, he said. He had tried to remove the ghost and redo all the rooms religiously. Perhaps she had a style all her own. Perhaps they had a compromise style, her plants alternating with his books on the absent shelves. But Paul's renovations were bachelor-botch: things that clashed, things that didn't go, the soreness of missing things, lots of piles. I imagined that his piles were a source of fighting between him and Jenna. Now that she was gone, he was free to stack wherever he wanted: clothes, paper, dishes. Debris.

He should have moved. He didn't. I moved instead.

Jenna made a point of telling me that I was her first. It wasn't said with anger or excitement, but rather with relief, as though she couldn't get on with her life until she had slept with me.

Actually, she asked me. I was burned-out on women, worried about being impotent, and glad to have a friendship. But the more I got to know her, the faster she moved and the more she complicated things

with her confessions. I'm crazy, she said. I'm undependable, she said. I miss my kid so much I've got to touch someone and be touched by someone. Man, woman, animal, someone. I've picked you, but I don't want you to think of this as more than what it really is.

She was full of cautions and aggressions. Don't do this, Frank. Let's do that. Control was important to her. Crazy beyond judgment, but controlled beyond belief.

She talked a lot about Paul, and I felt that I knew Paul better than she would ever know me. The surrogate feeling. Anonymity. There was for me a kind of excitement, knowing that the warmth I received had Paul's name on it. I felt like a thief who would never get caught.

Not responsible.

From the beginning I realized that I was merely the first of many stops on her way, stops that might or might not include Paul at some future time. Jenna didn't seem separated or divorced. She seemed let-loose. A certain slack tension to her line.

I asked her: if it had been the other way around, if Paul had left you with the kid, how would you have managed? She didn't answer exactly. She told me that men were more judgmental about what she had done than women. So I didn't ask after that.

I think what Jenna wanted was to know she was still powerful. Still pretty. Still capable of creating desire in men. I think she wanted the same friendship after sex that I had wanted before sex. We talked a lot on the phone. I helped her move from one apartment to another. We spent a couple of weekends at the shore. But there was something profoundly sad and windblown about her that made it difficult to stay friends. She had these pictures of her son on the wall, and I always felt spied upon when I was at her place. She would assume I knew things about her that I didn't, tell me jokes she thought I should understand, refer to relatives by first names, before realizing that I was unfamiliar with her history. Sometimes, she called me by the wrong name or broke into crying for no reason or suddenly became asexual or tested me or asked me to court her. The more we saw each other, the less I felt I really knew her. There was the facade of a woman, easily pleased and out for her fun. And then there were several women behind the facade, all fighting for attention, all trying to strangle the others.

I found myself wanting to put her and Paul back together again. I never felt like the plants she had were there for me. Her grandmother's quilt on the wall, her "automatic" paintings behind the sofa, the endless rows of self-help books, the crowded neatness of a woman who surrounded herself with charged objects, clothes with a history, pictures

for memories, all of these things excluded me, as though I were walking inside the museum of her psyche instead of her apartment.

Sometimes, she calls me, and I get the feeling she needs to know I'm still over here, haven't vanished, am real. I feed her compliments, we say we'll see each other soon, and then we don't. I don't think she knows that she's the one who vanished.

It's okay. We have no hard feelings.

I like to swallow things. I own the things I swallow. They cannot go away. Quarters, rings, marbles, buttons, I have swallowed all of them. Quarters are my favorite. I can feel them turning and falling, all the way down. I used to tell my Daddy when I swallowed something, but now I don't tell. I wait to see if it will ever come out. This is my game. I swallowed Daddy's finger-ring, the gold one he took off after Mommy left. One day he couldn't find it, and he looked and looked, but he still couldn't find it, and then he got mad at himself for even looking. He said a thing like that was meant to be lost. He never asked me and I never told.

Once I swallowed something off the Christmas tree, and Mommy and Daddy both held me for a long time. Both together. That was nice. I tried to think of other things I could swallow that would make them stay together, but nothing else ever worked. Maybe it was just the Christmas tree. Now I think it was the angel off the Christmas tree they cared about, not me.

When I swallow it is like screaming, without the sound of the scream. I put my head back and open my mouth and throat as wide as I can. I think I am screaming, but then, when I swallow the thing in my hand, I swallow the scream too.

Suzanne M. Levine

CUTTING HAIR ON THE BACK PORCH

You stand on the bottom step so I am taller.
You've brought the blue towel and I stretch
it across your shoulders, smooth out the folds.
Make it good, Mom, you say as the silky ends
mat against my shirt. We hadn't checked
the wind; we shift angles. I lean close
to you, pretending to even the sides
but we both know this is our excuse
to smell what mingled so freely before
you pulled away. Keeping up the pretense,
I wave goodbye shaking the towel out over
the steps and envy the women you will love.

Suzanne M. Levine

EPITHALAMIUM

"We have loved the stars too fondly
to be fearful of the night."
two amateur astronomers

Today the deep sky covers us. We wear
the crown of stars, a spherical cluster
that flickers like the bonfires lovers build

in the sand. Silver meteor showers spill
into the ocean, luminous in the moon's eye.
Connecting the dots, we plot the Big Dipper.
See how bright the anchor star is, where

the handle meets the cup! Stars always
rise in the east you tell me, and set
in the west. There is an order, a soothing

permanence. Of this I am glad to hear as we
look up and see a train of seven stars slide
curving to earth.

for Enid and Jack

Deborah Ward

THE GLADIOLAS

are poised like the women of Gauguin. The orange
saris of their blossoms, green
leotards of limb.

They know their moment.
Having swallowed the sun and wind
their bodies ride
a throb, a breath--though they've been

cut, transported and put into a vase
where darkness waits and wets
their severed ankles. Soothes

warmer at the knee
until the whole cellular spine
is saturated with sea

and their souls collapse
on the barge to another lifetime--

Oh, let them laugh like bells, like
xylophones with their orange
and open notes

on top of the dying
seconds inbetween.

They know the air is humid with fog.
They know the music around them is requiem.
They know the oxygen they weep will mother the world.

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