

et al.: Calliope 11.2

Calliope



Published by DOC@WU, 2015

vol. 11

no. 2

\$2

Calliope

Volume 11, Number 2
Spring/Summer 1988

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Cover: detail of lithography print by Lara M. Johnson

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Calliope is published twice a year, in December and May. Single issues are \$2.00; a year's subscription, \$3.50.

Submissions of poetry and short fiction are welcomed from August 15 - October 15 for the December issue and from January 15 - March 15 for the May issue. Manuscripts should be accompanied by a self-addressed, stamped envelope. **No simultaneous submissions, please.**

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

THREE GIRLS

1.

A GIRL WITH A WATERING CAN

Two thirsty daisies droop from one hand as you hold
a watering can primly in the other.
You're so dressed up today
standing on the pebbled walk:
petite boots buttoned above your ankles,
lace pantaloons beneath the hem
of your midnight-blue frock. Such a color for a child.
All that trim around your collar and cuffs
holds you very straight
beside the rosebush. Who tied the red bow
in your wispy gold hair? Was it Grandmother,
or your nurse, in preparation for her visit,
and is it before Nana that you're posing this afternoon
against the tropical green grass? Expensive clothes
rival the drama of this confetti-colored garden,
but nothing equals the rosy-peach hues
glazed on your cheeks,
which any second must be teased
by Grandfather's moustache.

Cathy Appel

2.

LADY CAROLINE HOWARD

Sitting Turkish-style on your heels in the dirt
with your white taffeta skirt ballooned over your knees,
in humility your grey-blue satin cape
rises upward, draping the slight seven-year-old
mound of you—pensive, preposterously capped
in a white tulle bonnet. Evening length gloves
opened to your second row of knuckles
expose fingers that look like birdfeet,
though one hand is barely visible through leaves
of a blossoming rosebush planted
in an urn beside you and the faint
flush on your pale skin
somehow forebodes thorns—a lifetime
of pricked thumbs. Hazel eyes, already myopic,
look sleepy; and the pinnacle of your face
is your pointed chin. Little sparrow,
lost in all that fluff and shine,
like a character out of Dickens
you seem, rather, a London waif
in the doorway of a bakery
begging crusts of stale bread. Nobility
has never suited you, and no amount
of finery can conceal
the impartial pallor of destiny.

Cathy Appel

3.

CHILD IN A STRAW HAT

You're a stubborn little thing—
sturdy arms and a round face—head cocked slightly
as if deciding what's to be done next. In a stoic moment,
your arms hang down in front of your faded-blue jumper,
left hand clasping right wrist; and with a wrinkled brow
you just watch. Are your friends
going home, or telling secrets? Maybe
you're the youngest sister,
and wearing mother's flat-brimmed hat,
robbed of the rest of your costume,
refuse to play.
Whatever's immobilized you in this sulk,
it won't last long—
you'll skip away distracted by your appetite. Shedding
the old hat, your messy hair emerges,
as usual, a highlight of the afternoon.

James Brady

GESTURES

This guy, a barber at the shop I go to, knocks on my door late at night. Swell, I think. Just when the weather and sports are coming on. Possible showers. I catch that much, anyway.

I open the door the length of the chain and there he is. I almost don't recognize him without his white smock. He doesn't look good. His face is sort of gray.

"You know me," he says.

He's right, I guess. I guess I know him.

He moved into one of the first floor rooms the other day. I was watching from my window. A car pulled up and he got out. Then the car drove away, fast. He stood there watching it go. All he had was this one suitcase. This ugly madras suitcase. Now he's here.

"What is it?" I say.

He shrugs. Then he looks down at his feet.

What can I do? This guy's touched my face with his hands. Tickled my ears. I unlatch the door and let him in.

The barber walks to the middle of my room, stops and looks around. I can't remember his name. I turn down the sound on the TV, even though it's the sports.

"Nice room," he says.

Who's he think he's kidding?

"Sit down," I say.

He shrugs, then sits in my easychair.

He's older than I am, this barber. He's fifty, or so. I try to picture him at the barber shop. Their names are stitched on those smocks. But all I can see are his hands, working away with the scissors and comb.

"You want coffee?" I say.

He brushes one of those hands across his crewcut. He shakes his head.

I go over to the hot plate and pour myself a cup. I glance at the TV and catch a few basketball scores.

"You ever married?" he says.

I turn around and look at him. He's serious. I hold up two fingers.

He stares at my fingers, nods.

I get the half & half out and pour some in the coffee. There's a commercial on now. I stir the coffee and watch this girl pout and bat her eyes as she holds up some product. I don't catch the product's name.

"What do they want from us?" the barber says.

I turn back to him. He's all tensed up, sitting forward on the chair. He's got those hands clenched together. I go over and sit on the sofa.

What do they want? I just told him I don't know, didn't I?

"Kids?" I say.

"They'd be gone by now," he says. "If we'd had them." He sits back and folds those hands in his lap. "Thirty years," he says.

I don't want to hear this. I already know this story. I offer him a cigarette. He shakes his head. I light up. Across the room, Johnny's doing his monologue.

"Threw me out," the barber says.

"It happens," I say.

"Thirty years," he says.

"Thirty years, thirty days," I say. "Doesn't matter."

Will you listen to this? Mr. Philosopher.

The barber shakes his head and stares at the TV screen. He's older than I am. He should know this kind of stuff. I go over and turn up the sound on the TV. Ed is kidding Johnny about all his divorces. Johnny winks and mugs for the audience.

"I wish. . ." says the barber. "I wish. . ." He holds one hand out in front of him, like it's going to help him say what he wants to say. He lets his hand hover there, trembling. Then he drops it to his lap.

"Watch the show," I say. Another commercial is on. Trick photography is making this cat do the cha-cha because it's so crazy about some cat food.

The barber gets up and goes to the door. He stops there, with his back to me. I figure he's going to say something, but instead, he shrugs again and walks out.

I'm not exactly heartbroken to see him go. I mean, I feel for him and all. It's not that.

I pull out the sofa bed and turn off the lights. I take off my clothes and get in.

Johnny's got this astronomer on now. The guy's waving his arms around and talking about the vastness of the universe. His eyes gleam. He says the odds are great that there's another planet out there, somewhere, exactly like ours.

Another place like this. And he's smiling?

I get out of bed and turn off the TV. All I'd wanted was to watch the weather and sports. Now I got this barber who thinks I'm his friend and this astronomer clown telling me everything's twice as bad as I'd thought.

I go to the window. The streetlamp throws a circle of light onto the sidewalk. The barber is marching back and forth, in and out of the light. He's making these gestures with his hands. Stabbing at the air.

Francette Cerulli

THE BOTTLE

Back when my father was so small
he was barely walking,
he once tripped and fell on a broken bottle.
Back then he did not lie there screaming.
Back then he was still determined.
He got up and walked to his mother,
who was talking with a friend in her world
way up there,
and yelled, "Mama, Mama," held onto her leg and
pulled on her skirt over and over until she
looked down and saw the blood pumping
out of his neck.
Without a thought she picked him up, clapped him
to her breast, stuck her finger in
the bloody hole, and ran the mile to the doctor
without stopping.

Later, when he grew to be a man,
he loved to tell this story to his children,
of how his mother saved his life, and we could
still see, without being too obvious about looking,
the white scar on his neck.

And later, when he had surrounded himself with
an angry wife and five children all looking to him
to keep them alive,
he fell on some bottle or other every night
until he could barely walk again,
clutching at the clothes of his wife
and the leg of his daughter as we went down
into that baby-place again,
waiting for someone who would pick him up and
carry him the whole distance just for love.

Francette Cerulli

THE SWIMMER

At the community pool my daughter says
open your legs (who else would I take such
instructions from) so I can swim through them.
I brace myself for the shock. I'm sure her hard
noggin will ram my crotch, but she is learning fast
this year, she goes deep enough and
slides through easily front to back.

Stay there, she says, I'm coming back through.
I look down and see her head emerge first, then
without a pause her gold body
in a turquoise suit the same color as the
surrounding water. As her legs and feet shoot through,
my body forms a prayer over her, that her life will
be like this, lightly bumping the sides, causing little harm,
finding other swimmers to nudge up against
and sweetly touch undersides.

Robert Cooperman

FEBRUARY THAW

It's what they call the February thaw,
thirty inches of snow-pack dissolved
in three days, like sugar in hot tea;
fields turned into lakes wind ripples
across broad as the Nile or Missouri;
breezes dance through bare heads,
lifting hair like grain before harvest.

But even with this blessed weather,
this sun making buds swell—
it is only February, the thaw temporary.
Winter has more bite at the ready.

I can feel it waiting, the patience
of wolves, of anything used to killing.
I can hear it stalking, huge and deadly,
moving the wet grass aside
as it creeps closer—before the charge
I expect, which will yet take me
off-balance in the incredible
heat of its frozen rush.

Kiernan Davis

EVENING SIGH THROUGH LAUDERTON

I remember the breath, the breath of it. A cool sigh over a little scrap of earth that baked all day under an August sun. The bricks and stones of the commercial district were the color of hot ash, small mounds of buildings, banked and burning on each side of our one road town, so that every dog, man and leaf caught between them on the sidewalk, wilted in the air clogged to stillness with humidity.

Around the corner in small wooden houses, the women, having laid out the beginnings of a cold supper, came to wait on screened porches in cushioned chairs. Their eyes melted closed, half nodding off; they shifted only when the air shifted and they dreamed of the mountain opening its mouth.

Just beyond town, in the flat stretches, the men disked under their fields, a rolling burial for the brown shafts of a year's crops. The ground released a hot vapor that parboiled the men in their seats, robbing them of breath and the will to ride the requiem to the end.

And we all dripped down in Lauderton, Tennessee, and gasped until nightfall when the wind rolled down from the hilltops that surrounded us, pushing the humidity ahead of it, raking it through the trees with the *shhhhh*, of evening sigh. My mother and I, waiting on the stoop, breathed in to gather strength. We were the first house to catch the air on its way to the valley.

When I was a child I lived in this same house at the nape of the neck of the mountain, at the farthest end of the flat stretch out of town. From our front porch, Lauderton sat like a mirage at the crest of the horizon, its stores and houses so small that at times they seemed to blur out of sight behind the heat waves of August. Quivering in the distance, Lauderton was connected to our house by a long ribbon of road, green and ditched on each side.

Our land was cleared by my father, who shaved the trees in a line, dividing the snarly hair of the wilds from the skin of our acreage. The mountain rose and curved upwards behind us to the brow, a rocky shelf exposed above the trees. Its grey stone summit was all that showed, and you would not think anyone lived there, under the mat of green beneath it.

Until one day, a hillman came to our house as the cool air rolled off the mountain. We were the first house he encountered in the valley and he stood outside our back door, his face grey and wary through the screen. My mother was in the kitchen and I was quite small. What I did not understand then, I do now.

The man came inside our house after many long pauses between him and my mother. He sat on the chair under the calendar in the kitchen. Every line of his hand was inlaid with black, like a finely detailed map. It linked him in my mind to my father, who was still out working in the fields. I had from my mother a love of maps, for she was from Birmingham, which was civilized, and often she unfolded them on the table and marked in pencil for me all the roads back to her home. On those evenings, long after she put her maps away, she spoke less to my father and paced near the windows of the livingroom with her eyes on the dirt street that lead towards town and beyond. I worried that the thin wires of the screens were all that held her, and one day she might punch her way through them and be gone.

The man folded his legs back like wings over the spindles of the chair. He was so starkly colored in blue and plaid that our meek kitchen seemed to drop away to a blankness behind him. He pulled a baby from the dark side of his jacket. The child had been cradled against his chest. He offered it up like strange fruit to the light. Its head fit into his hand and its body sagged to the crook of his elbow.

My mother came close and bent herself in an odd way to look at it. They spoke and my mother seemed to be balancing on tiptoe to have only her head near to them. She was young then, afraid of everything, a woman who held herself just short of dissolving, tense and tired with the effort. All was strange to her in this place, and my father was not wise enough to ease it for her.

The man stared at his sick baby. I know now, labor was his answer for everything, as it was for my father, so he sat in a stupor when there was nothing he could do. My mother looked up and down at their faces, then went to the phone. Her dress was only then beginning to dry from the heat of the day and it puckered, half stuck to the skin of her back. She waited impatiently, fanning herself, until the doctor answered and was told to come.

The man lifted the wrap from the baby's body, crumpling it to his waist, and laid the little boy onto his thigh. He put his fingers on the baby's head and began to blow in circles over the child's hot skin. I remember the baby was terribly thin and his hair was black. The soft spot at the top of his head had sunk deeper from dehydration. His flesh was as chalky as eggshell, showing the blue net of blood vessels beneath. My mother came closer and reached down, touching the child's forehead. As she slipped her hand over his cheek and neck I could feel her hold her breath though I did not see it.

Suddenly the baby jerked, tightening his face. Water came to his pinched lips and his chest heaved. I could not imagine that he had the strength to move like that. My mother yanked her hand away and cried out. The man looked up at her in confusion. All the while the baby's rib cage rose up and snapped back hard, the muscles of his belly

clenched and shrunken against his frail spine. He thrashed as if he would fold himself in two.

My mother pulled the baby off the man's leg. Her strange cries shortened with each breath as the baby contorted itself in her hands. She ran to the sink and hung the child under the water of the tap. She yelled for the man to get some ice, but there wasn't any and he circled the room shouting, *Where? Where?*

I became afraid of him as he caught himself in the billowing curtains that brought the air from the mountain. He slapped at them. I ran to my mother, to cling to her dress. She pushed me away from her and I fell backwards onto the floor.

I crawled under the kitchen table to watch the two of them fill the kitchen. She got the man to hold the child beneath the water and she ran from the room. I whimpered, or perhaps just thought such a noise, that my mother would leave me in the kitchen alone with him. He suddenly seemed not tame at all, like my father, but unfamiliar, being from a high place where winds were made, looking down on those of us who suffered silently on the flat and browning earth.

My mother appeared at the door with a paper box full of medicine and began tossing things onto the floor. A bottle broke, scattering bits of glass and a thick yellow liquid. She stepped over it. On all the other days I had known her, she had been tidy and quiet; now she called God as if to split the air in half. The sound of it shot beyond the baby and me, beyond the house and valley. It shook loose all stillness and rose upwards, as heat does, to where it could be heard. The man looked at her as if for the first time while he held his little boy beneath the faucet.

My mother threw the box onto the floor, splitting it. The medicine rattled across the linoleum. She called to the man and set a bottle of alcohol on the table. He looked back at his child who now hung limp under the water, its mouth open. At the sight of it he lost all control. Scooping the baby into a dish towel, he ran across the room, arms bent, stooped at the waist over the boy as if he were carrying something too heavy. He charged forward to the table, laying the infant there above my head.

I listened to the creak of the oak as my mother rubbed the baby's body, a slow tense rhythm. The man's feet moved in his shoes.

The wind roared through the window sending the white curtains flying up into the room like hands raised, waivering at the tips. It would be a storm then from the mountain, not a cooling but a blasting. The curtains stayed as they were, flying level with the ceiling.

I heard the infant's gasping. Then its high shrill cry.

The man's hand appeared beneath the table and rested like a caress against his thigh. I saw my mother reach down and take the man's baby

blanket from off the chair where he had sat. She wrapped the baby in it to keep him warm.

When the doctor came and took the man and child away, my mother wept at the door and hung onto the man's arm, pushing her face into the folds of his clothing. I had come out to follow her and saw her clinging to him. She stood for a short time watching them drive away, then she ran through the house, scattering the medicine with her feet and thumped out the kitchen door.

I stood inside the kitchen, behind the screen and watched her. Through the mesh she appeared hazy in the yard. Her face was turned towards the mountain. The wind came with a roar, sweeping the trees back and forth. She clenched her fists and hunkered over, squeezing the last bit of power out of herself like one stretches at the end of a day and is ready to be weary. The air filled her dress up the sleeves then rippled across her back. She stood upright and everything about her moved but herself. A can rolled with the dust near the outbuilding, the laundry ballooned on the line, threatening to tear itself free.

The trees leaned with the rise of the wind as the mountain opened its mouth wider and wider with the approaching storm.

My mother seemed without resistance. Gone was the tension that had once made her seem full grown. She wiped her face with the flat palm of her hand, dragging it down her cheek and over the curve of her chin as though she too were feverish. She looked back at me and her grey eyes were focused inwards, withered from the heat. She turned her head slowly, as if it were disconnected from her body, towards the road to town. The wind pushed her forward, smearing her brown hair and skirt. She leaned against it, balancing with tiny jerks of her head.

At last, unable to hold back the flight of her body, she began to run. In an instant, my mother was gone, and she had not looked for me. My heart skittered as I opened the screen. With shaking legs I ran down the stairs of the stoop and followed after her through the yard and around the fence to the dirt road to Lauderton. She ran down the middle of the street. I could see the wild churning of her arms against the grey clots of clouds that hung over the town in the distance. The wind raked across the road on its way to the valley. It made her skirt billow as if she were dropping from the sky, her feet not touching the ground.

The rain came with the sound of a hundred crickets in the branches of the trees that lined the field. It had yet to reach us. She ran, growing smaller and I ran after her. When I called her my feet missed a beat. The rain moved over the road like a sheet of water. It drenched her hair and clothes, flattening them against her body. The weight of it brought her down. I saw her slump onto the grassy edge of the ditch beside the road. By the time I reached her, her crying was so deep it was like a retching. She looked up at me, her face swollen.

My mother pulled me to her, gently rolling us both over into the ditch. She cried, holding me against her chest. We slipped downwards on the wet grass, our eyes shut against the rain and leaned against the steep bank below the road. Cool water rose around my knees and my mother sloshed her legs trying to steady herself.

My father had seen her from the field as he pulled the disker towards the outbuilding. He drove from the far end of the field and when the tractor wasn't fast enough even with the blades hoisted, he deserted it across the rows and ran through the broken cornstalks to where he had seen us slip into the ditch.

Bending on one knee, he leaned over the rim above my mother's head. My father shouted, asking her what was wrong. I looked up at his splattered face. I could see that he was afraid. I dug my hands into my mother's clothes, and hung on. As soon as she heard him she came to her feet and stumbled down the V of the ditch. She moved away from him, holding me in one arm and pushing against the bank with the other. Blades of thick Johnson grass stuck to her hand. As the rain poured down the edges of the side ditch it filled brown water to her shins.

My father, folded on one knee, scooted along the top yelling her name. And though I knew, by the feel of her, that my mother would not leave me, it confused me that she would hunker in the ditch as if ashamed of our going. She cried when she heard the sound of his voice. At that moment I knew that his hold on her was as strong as mine though he did not touch her.

She had only gone a short way when she gave up and squatted on the bottom of the gully. Splayed on her lap, trapped in the fold of her body, I turned my face up into the rain to make room for her head against my chest. I turned and opened my eyes when I heard my father crash into the water of the ditch. He came at us all arms and legs down the green wedge. He put himself around my mother and me as if to shelter us and I felt grateful that I needn't hold her all by myself.

The next morning, my mother and I went to Birmingham. We left my father standing on our front porch like a man who had been struck so senseless that he could not raise his arm to defend his face, leaving it open and waiting. I leaned against the dashboard and watched him.

We drove up the long band of road towards town. When we had passed Lauderton, some madness left my mother, and she became nervous and quiet. Unused to driving long distances alone, she checked her map constantly to find her way and glanced about her for every sign. She was drained by the time we came to my grandmother's house with its potted plants and soft lumps of lawn.

Weeks passed, and my mother seemed in a whirl of movement that wound itself down to sitting in a rocking chair with a doily covered back, arguing with my grandmother. It was then that we came back home again to my father and his fields beneath the mountain.

I think there were many times that she left again, by car or just in her mind. Never with the sudden violence, as it had been on that one day, but slowly, as if to remind herself of something with each returning and to choose bit by bit as she was able. She struggled to stay, and years passed until the pain dwindled and my mother grew most uncivilized, when visits to Birmingham began to vex her with its noise and people.

In the hot season, when the mugginess was unbearable, my mother laid the dinner onto the table and together we rested on the stoop to wait for my father. We sweated with patience, as they did in town and the flat stretches beyond it, knowing that relief would come when it was time. She would rock me, my long legs dangling over the stairs, her voice mixed with the *shhhh* of evening's sigh, saying there was never a day so hard that it did not have an end.

Lynne H. deCourcy

THE WATER POEM

Our own beginnings were swimmings
in the dark and maybe this is why
we find our way flowing in darkness

over each other like water, loosening
the secrets and hardened places
until all that was fearsome

dissolves and streams together
forgiven, and even now I think it could
be this easy to die, falling like rain

into the ocean and lifted as
mist in the early haze
where there are no edges.

Lynne H. deCourcy

DANCING TO GLEN MILLER

The room was beige in the fashion
of the fifties but my father
still believed in Glen Miller,

told me "*This* is music,"
swaying, his feet and hips
and shoulders moving like smooth

oiled parts. My feet were in white
anklets when he set them on top
of his polished black shoes,

and when my body tried to lie
to please him, he barked "*just listen,*
don't *think*." Later I learned

to move like a mirror with him
and he liked me if I didn't
stumble; then he would close his eyes

and lips and hum from another place.
Sometimes the closest someone can get
to love is dipping slowly

to a long note shuddering to a
thin sad end, when the clarinet
is a falling star.

Peter Desy

THE BASEMENT

Soaked, his slick wet fur shows
his frame of bones, and he has muddy paws,
so I send him to the basement to dry.
I forget him for hours,
then let him into the kitchen.
He thinks he's been punished
but I say 'No, I just forgot,'
but the guilt won't let go.
It's in his eyes, his crouch
and slink. 'No, you're a good boy.'
His eyes are mournful,
and now *I'm* feeling guilty.
'Lover,' I say, 'we all spend time
in the basement where the high
small windows barely let in the light.'
And I think of the times I knelt
in the confessional whispering sins,
wanting every Saturday to scream
at the priest 'More light, more light,'
and saw myself climbing stairs to the kitchen
where my mother in her bright apron
cradles my face and tells me 'It's all right,
it's all right, it's only sin.'

Gary Fincke

WAITING FOR THE NAMES

In this wet autumn my father brings
His gift of shrubbery. He digs
After dinner along the borders
Of my lot, lifting the heavy soil
Like the slush of an early snow.
His transplants, he believes, will
Survive like hearts if I am careful.
"None of these need be lost," he says,
When I join him as I must, waiting
For the names, their spring colors,
But he doesn't speak again
To my backyard obedience,
The burden, at forty, of being son,
Indifferent to which of these leaves
Will be lost. Whatever is going wrong,
This evening, has six months to be
Secret, a schoolgirl's pregnancy,
The final loose-bloused weeks
When query turns to sneer, blame
Fixed and permanent. The rumor
Of who we are is overdubbed
On the rippled dark like echoes
Of our voices, impersonal, nomadic,
Drifting here to there, here to there,
Finally quiet or unheard.

Lynn Martin

CHANGING SKINS

It takes so much time to pull it off.
A biting of your own tail,
whip-lash turns in tight places.
Life above your head becomes
mere distraction to brush off.
A mouse could walk across your nose
and you wouldn't even look up.

Finally, the last piece rips free.
Suddenly you're that full of light
you might even swallow the sky,
then realize
creatures of the ground
are vulnerable to drafts.

Your new skin
shiny with surprise
is perfect in its markings,
an unexpected
meeting of yourself again,
a hiss, a flick of the tongue,
tasting the air.

Walter McDonald

ON THE UNCOMPAHGRE

We needed pools, a long slow afternoon
coasting, leaned-back, sipping Coors,
dangling our toes overboard
like hooks trolling for trout.

No one noticed the falls
sheered off by last year's
earthquake. Bobbing, our raft
tipped down and crashed. Drowning,

we clawed for each other, crawled
and dragged the flipped raft
to the bank. Moaning, we felt
no broken bones. We lay a long time

laughing, holding each other,
then hauled the raft to a river
flowing dangerous and swift
in the dark we drifted down.

Sandell Morse

A FATHER'S DAUGHTER

It's the day before Alex's graduation. My mother, my father, and I are driving west on the Massachusetts Turnpike. My mother sits beside me while my father takes up the whole back seat. The day is metal gray and cold. It has been raining for nearly a week, and the air feels more like November than May. As the windshield wipers beat their rhythm, my mother smooths her raincoat matching them stroke for stroke. She pulls a woolen hat over her ears. Her hair is thick and white, and the hat will not stay down. I turn up the fan to blow warm air onto our feet.

"I can't get warm," my father says from the back seat.

"I just turned up the heat," I say.

"Florida thins your blood," my mother says. "We can't take the cold anymore."

"If it weren't for Alex, I never would've come," my father says. He is dressed in brown and white checked pants, a tan jacket, and a red bow tie. Over it all he's wearing a topcoat that I recognize from years ago. It's black with an olive green lining. He sighs. "But it isn't every day a grandson graduates from college. Besides, I went to the other one, didn't I?"

Eric's in Maine. Four years ago—before his heart attack. I glance in the rearview mirror. His elbow rests on the back of the seat. "That's right," I say. "Alex can't graduate without you."

He cradles his head in the palm of his hand. "How many more miles is it?" he says. "I didn't think it was this far."

"Another hour." I turn on the radio and search the band. Public radio is playing Hindemith, and the rest is rock or heavy metal. I settle for the swishing sound of tires turning in the rain.

"I'm getting weak," my father says. "One of my spells. I feel it starting, Ruth."

"He gets weak spells," my mother explains.

"I'm starting to sweat," he says.

"Take a deep breath, Sid," my mother says. "Open your tie. Try to relax." She speaks to him as if he were a child.

"Where're my peanuts?" he says. "The doctor says I should carry peanuts." He sits up, leans over the front seat, and then sits back.

My mother opens her purse and begins to rummage through. She lifts a comb, a letter, a date book, and a tube of lipstick. "I must have

left them in the other bag," she says. "It's in the trunk." She closes her purse. "We ate on the plane. He can't be hungry," she says to me.

"For God's sake, Ruth, you always carry my peanuts." And then to me, "I've got hypoglycemia. I have to eat every four hours. It's no joke."

This year it's hypoglycemia, last year tendonitis, before that inexplicable back pain, and the ever present fear of another heart attack. "I'll pull over," I say. "You can get the peanuts."

"No," he says.

"Really, Dad, it's no trouble." I turn on my right directional signal and begin to cross lanes.

"Not here," he says. "We can stop at a restaurant. I don't feel like peanuts anyway. I could use a sandwich."

"We're on the Mass Pike, Dad," I say. "They've turned all the Howard Johnsons into Burger Kings."

"That's all?"

"That's it," I say. What he'd really like is a good corned beef sandwich, one with meat piled three inches high. I picture the deli we used to go to when I was a kid—the slanted glass case filled with rounds of cured meat and trays of salamis, salamis hanging on ropes from the ceiling, and under my nose a pickle barrel. My father would dip his fingers into the brine, pull one out, wrap it in a square of waxed paper, and hand it to me.

"I can't eat that," my father says. "Hamburgers and fries aren't good for me. I can't even eat corned beef any more. Remember the corned beef at the deli?"

I nod. "Do you want me to pull off the highway?"

"We might as well drive," he says. "It's only an hour."

My mother removes her hat, takes out a mirror, and combs her hair. "I think the rain is letting up," she says.

"Where?" he says.

I lower the speed of the wipers. "Did you see the new Woody Allen movie?" I say.

"It's a flop," he says.

"So you saw it?" I say.

"It got terrible reviews."

"Where?"

"The Ft. Lauderdale paper."

The Ft. Lauderdale paper, I repeat, silently, mockingly.

"We never saw it," my mother says.

"Look," he says, "a movie's supposed to make money, right? Isn't that why you make a movie? Well, nobody I know goes to see Woody Allen."

I accelerate and pass a blue Volvo. "Well, everybody I know goes to see Woody Allen," I say. As we drive, our silence grows too thick

to penetrate. Only Alex's voice breaks it. "Hi, Nana. Hi, Pop," he says. "I'm glad you came."

Two weeks pass. It's nine o'clock on a Sunday morning. I let the dog out, and now the house is still except for the sounds I make running water, putting a kettle on the stove to boil, and taking a mug from the shelf. Each sound is like a chime, clear and suspended. The phone rings and I pick it up quickly. The cat lifts her head and jumps from a chair.

"Sarah?"

It's my father's voice.

"It's your mother," he says. "She's not well."

I draw in my breath, catching my words in the back of my throat. Is she in the hospital? Has one of the polyps turned to cancer? This time, I'll wait him out.

There's a long pause before he speaks. "She's been sick a week now, ever since we got back. I don't know what to do. She coughs all night." He whispers into the telephone. "She's sleeping now."

"Has she been to a doctor?" I say.

"A quack. We're going to somebody else tomorrow. She'll be okay. Listen. . . ." He pauses. "That's not what I called about."

So, I say silently.

"Sarah," he says. His voice is tender. "You're my only daughter, my only child. Why can't we get along like a father and daughter are supposed to?"

I pour a mug of coffee and lean against the wall. The liquid is dark and strong, made from beans I ground before the phone interrupted me.

"I don't understand it," he says. "A father and a daughter. Remember how close we used to be? The games at Ebbet's Field?"

And I knew the name of every Dodger—Roy Campanella, catcher; Duke Snyder, right field; Pee Wee Reese, short stop. . . .

"Why must we fight whenever we get together? It doesn't matter whether we go there or you come here."

Outside my kitchen window, a purple finch is standing inside my translucent feeder as if it were a room. His head is made of raspberry colored feathers. With tiny feet buried in seeds, he eats and leaves the shells behind.

"All I want is to get along. Respect," he says. "A daughter should show her father respect."

I remember a day when I was a child. We were on our way to the Jersey shore when I saw a horse galloping across an open field. I tapped my father's shoulder. Traffic was slow, and the windows of the car were open. It was hot, so hot the day had lost its color. Cars were overheating, and whole families sat by the side of the road. I leaned

over the front seat and whispered in his ear. "What's the matter with it?"

He glanced out the window to see what I had seen—a horse cantering first in one direction and then the other, tossing its neck, bucking, kicking its back legs behind, raising dust in the field. A girl lay on the horse's back, somehow hanging on. My father pulled our Studebaker to the side of the road, got out, and stuck his head back inside the window. "Keep her here," he told my mother. As I watched him wade into a field of tall dry grasses and pale blue flowers, I felt my mother's fist turn to a knot in my back as she grabbed the straps of my pinafore. I don't remember how he did it, but he stopped that horse, helped the girl from the saddle, and handed her the reins. And I adored him. That's what he wants now.

"I don't know what it is," he says. "You're the only person I have trouble with. I have friends. Professional people. Doctors. Lawyers. We get along."

I pull out a chair and sit down.

"Sarah," he says, "maybe you were right about Woody Allen."

"It doesn't matter about Woody Allen," I say.

"Whatever I say, you disagree. Now you say it doesn't matter about Woody Allen. Well, maybe it matters to me."

"Okay, Dad. Okay."

"I say black; you say white."

"It doesn't matter, okay?"

"And I suppose it doesn't matter that you sent your parents out in the rain for breakfast?"

"What?" I say.

"Don't what me. You know. After Alex's graduation. We came down for breakfast. You said we should go out."

A second bird waits on a branch of my dogwood tree. It's the female finch, brown without the raspberry colored feathers. What is my father talking about? Suddenly, I remember. For three days they sat huddled in front of a fire in the den. No, they didn't want to go out to a museum, to a shopping mall, or to a movie. I left them there when I went to work and found them there when I came home. Finally, on Saturday, I said, 'Let's go out for waffles. There's a great place around the corner, and they serve real maple syrup.' How does it all get so twisted?

"Can't a daughter fix her father breakfast?"

"I thought you liked the idea. Now, a week later, it's 'You made us go out in the rain for breakfast.'" What else, I wonder, festers like the waffles?

"Why do you make me come there?"

"Dad, it was Alex's graduation, remember? You wanted to come."

"Your mother broke out with Herpes. I'll have to live with it now for three weeks. And she has the cough."

You'll have to live with it, I want to scream into the telephone. Whose lip is a mass of tiny, tender blisters? The long distance wires stretch to breaking with our petulance.

"My heart's beating a mile a minute," he says. "I can't take this, you know. The doctor says it's bad for me."

The heart attack. His grandstand play. You can have a goddam heart attack, I want to cry, but swallow the words like stones.

"My heart's beating."

"Good. Everybody's heart beats," I say.

"You never learn, do you, Sarah? Even when you say you're sorry, you don't mean it."

Sorry. Sorry. To this day, you've taken those words from me, for when I say them, I see myself a child again calling from the darkness of my room, begging forgiveness for whatever it was I did against you, and even when I gave the words, you denied them. 'You don't mean it, Sarah,' you'd say.

The birdfeeder is empty now. I didn't see the finch leave. The second one, too, is gone from the branch. "Look, Dad," I say. "There's so much garbage. Why stir it up?"

"You call that garbage?"

Poor choice of word, Sarah, I say to myself.

"What do you mean?" His voice is thick. "Was your growing up so bad? Your mother and I gave up our lives for you." When he talks like this his lips grow narrow and turn white around the edges. Saliva gathers in the corners of his mouth. "Who took you to dancing lessons and sat and waited until it was over?"

"You did," I say.

"And what do we get? A daughter who sends her old parents out for breakfast."

I move the phone away from my ear as if to hang it up.

"I fell in the airport," he says.

"What?" I say bringing the receiver back.

"When we left, I fell in the airport. I couldn't walk for days."

"I suppose that was my fault," I say.

"You shouldn't have left us there like that."

"But you said it was okay."

"What could I say? You had to get to work."

"Didn't you get a Redcap?"

"You think I'm a millionaire like you?"

Silence fills my kitchen and flattens my tongue against the roof of my mouth. I clench my teeth, refusing to speak. He can afford a Redcap.

Finally, he speaks. "I don't have much time left. A man with a

heart attack lives with death."

"We all live with death," I say.

He hangs up, and the connection goes dead. I stare down into my coffee mug where a layer of dark liquid begins to rainbow, and I can almost feel mold starting to form, a colorful fuzz that will cling to sides of the cup and grow there. When I look up, my husband is in the middle of the staircase. "Who was that?" he says.

"My father."

"Oh." He takes a can of frozen orange juice from the freezer.

"Let me make it," I say. "I need something to do."

He pours himself a cup of coffee and sits at the table. "What now?" he says.

"I'm not the dutiful daughter," I pull the lump of frozen juice from the carton and mix it with water.

"Why do you let him get to you?" my husband says.

I open the refrigerator and look inside. "Do you want butter with your coffee cake?" I say.

"It never ends with him," my husband says.

"I know. Let's forget it." I close the refrigerator, take the cake from a cardboard carton on the counter, and slide it onto a plate.

"Where's the butter?" my husband says as I set the cake on the table.

I spend the next few days immersed in work, giving and grading final exams. On Friday afternoon, I sit in the kitchen thinking about my father. The growing darkness has turned the sky the color of sapphires. The trees are shadows, and the birdfeeder shines like a crystal dish on my window. Like my father, I'm tired of fighting. Why must every conversation be a contest? I reach for the phone and dial his number.

"Sarah, I don't want to talk to you," he says.

"How's Mom's cold?"

"What cold?"

"You know, the coughing."

"She went to the doctor. He gave her some medicine with codeine. Here, talk to your mother."

I hear voices in the background, but can't understand what they're saying. Finally, my mother comes to the phone. I know he's standing beside her. "Sarah," my mother says. "It's hard on me, too. It doesn't matter whether its husbands and wives or fathers and daughters; somebody needs to be the peacemaker."

So she's said over the years. And so she's been subsumed. When he drinks Scotch, she drinks Scotch. When he switches to martinis, she switches, too. If he eats fish, she eats fish. They rise together,

retire together, and if they could they'd pee together.

"He's not well," she says. "You don't understand. He tires easily. He's seventy. One day he's good; one day he's bad. When I go to the supermarket, he doesn't even come any more."

So what's he doing, I say silently, sitting around the pool, playing Backgammon?

"Sarah."

It's my father's voice.

"Your mother gets off the subject. You know, I saw Murray Vogel the other day. He always asks for you."

"How's he doing?"

"Not so good. He's had another stroke. Who knows which is the last?"

I hear squirrels in the walls again. Now they're scratching and scurrying across the ceiling. I'll put the cat in the attic. It worked last time. On the other side of my window, the dog barks to come in. My father's waiting for me to speak. "Tell Murray I said hello."

"What are we going to do, Sarah?" my father says.

"I don't know, Dad. I'll be down to visit. We'll talk then." I ask about my mother's herpes, and he tells me about his broken toe. He fell off a chair, and now one toe is taped to another. When I hang up the phone, the kitchen is nearly dark. I sit and imagine my father in a field of grass and flowers. It's summer, and he's holding the reins of a runaway horse. His hair is dark, and his body is thin and strong. When I flip on the light, my kitchen window shines like tar, and in it I see a child running towards him, arms outstretched, the sash of her pinafore trailing behind.

Naomi Myles

HOME PLACE

When I climbed the big tree stump
looked over waist high weeds
passed saplings and cornfield
to where the mountain scored
the far horizon

I heard whisperings,
watched clouds drawn in great rhythms
west to east,
saw fierce sunset pink
beyond the western ridge.

And even as I staked the corners
of my house between oak and hickory
the heap of old chimney stone
and tangle of roses placed history
squarely on my side.

It was like walking the rough earth
with a dowser; waiting for the fork
of willow to twist the tight fist
earthward, insisting
I dig here.

Christian Winslow Puffer

A WIND

Outside, through
glass unwashed
imperfect,
yesterday's
front page skudds
across a slight
hill of March
snow; a dance
gliding. Breath
animates
ink and word
with a life
they never knew.
It tumbles
towards pine
exploding
from a patch
of spring brown
earth, spraying
muted green.
Grace ducking
it cartwheels,
vanishes
among the boughs
and shadows;
and I nod.
Three thousand
troops duty called.
A cloud should
be so light.

Jean Roberts

AUNT SISTER

So I went in there and I took over that family. I was forty-seven years old, living out at the farm still, me, my daddy, and my youngest brother who was still at home, and when Cecille died I was the natural choice to go and lend a hand, being Delbert's only sister and unmarried. That was thirty three years ago.

"It's a lot to ask, Sister, I know," Delbert said. He always called me Sister, even though my real name is Mary Nell. But I looked upon it as an opportunity.

Delbert was just like the light had gone out, two girls left behind and a nearly grown boy—that was Branwell that later got shot down in the Pacific—and the girls were Rachel Marie and Lizzie Louise. Lizzie Louise was only two, but Rachel was just past twelve and so much like her mother that she felt she could just step into Cecille's shoes, but Delbert didn't see eye to eye with her on that so he called for me.

Cecille had been a pusher and a striver. Cecille from Mobile, we called her to tease Delbert when he was going with her, because she was from Mobile, Alabama, and her last name was Carpenter. Well, I gather that whole family of Carpenters were used to having more than a Delbert could easily provide, but he did the best he could.

They had a good enough house to start with, but it wouldn't do just for Cecille to have a house; she had to have one with a fence around it. Then she had to have a walk, and Delbert provided that too; then she needed flower beds beside the walk, trees in her yard, a bell on the gate, so she could lock up before a stranger got to the door, and Delbert was kept running to and fro, and so no wonder he was empty-handed after she died.

Because of her ways and all she was used to I never cared much for Cecille, but I never let on—always with a smile for her—and we could chat about this or that if we needed to, but my heart couldn't warm to her, and I never knew she felt the same until Rachel told me, "My momma never did like you." And I hadn't been in the house a week.

Rachel was jealous, and I was old enough to know that, and to know a lot of things that she couldn't know at that age, though I never could seem to remember any of them when I was talking to her face to face, only later. So I told her I'd not cared for her momma either but that was water under the bridge it seemed to me. Later, I went to her to tell her I hoped we could work together, be friends and make a home together in the house, but I hadn't got my little speech out good before

she said, "Lizzie Louise is mine now, Aunt Sister, she's not yours. Momma wouldn't want you to raise Lizzie Louise because you wouldn't know how, you've never raised any children, you've never even got married."

Lizzie Louise was at that time playing on the rag rug by the stove with a swatch of red yarn I'd crocheted up for her, and she looked up to watch us talk, a little happy smile on her face. She had slick blonde hair and very little of it for age two, and a blue dress on, and she always was a happy child, without Rachel's complications, but I understand your oldest child often turns business-like, they say it's the pressure of being oldest. For my part I always felt it was a tragedy that Rachel wanted to step right into Cecille's old shoes because it made her impossible for me to warm up to, or mother, which I would have been willing to do. But, I wouldn't tolerate her rudeness, so I told Delbert her exact words later that evening, and he said he would talk to her about it and make her apologize.

"I expect she's grieving," I said to him, "but nevertheless it isn't the right foot to get started out on."

"No, Sister, it isn't, and I'll talk to her." Which I expect he did, being Delbert. But Rachel, being like Cecille, never did apologize—though I kept quiet for some time whenever she came around me, giving her room if she wanted to, which evidently she never did.

And then she began competing with me for Lizzie Louise, who needed a mother's attentions if ever a baby did. She'd hold Lizzie Louise on her lap at the table, instead of putting her in her special chair just to the left of me, and when Lizzie Louise cried she was Johnny-on-the-spot to take care of it, and before you know it Lizzie Louise preferred her to me and began to kick and squall at every little discipline problem we'd run into, and turn to Rachel to take her part, which Rachel would do.

Delbert never noticed a thing in those days, he was too sunk in his sorrow and mainly just sat at the kitchen table when he was home from work, with his head bowed onto his hand, reflecting over the past, only occasionally taking enough interest to read the newspaper. He kept that up until he met Clara and married her, but that was four years later, and Clara never was anything but a poor substitute for Cecille with him, but she was glad enough to get Delbert all the same and under any circumstances, and the two of us stuck together from the first; we hit it off, Clara and me, like sisters.

I stayed on there even then, because my daddy had died by then and my brother at the farm had married and his wife wanted the place to herself. I often wonder if I would have felt the same, had I married and had a place, and I expect I would have. It seems to be human nature to get what you want and hold onto it tight and want for more and try to

push out all the competition. And it all ends in the graveyard, which I am old enough to appreciate; I was eighty years old in July. I wouldn't say this aloud to any living soul, except as a joke, but when I get to the graveyard I expect it will be good just to have a place of my own.

Clara was different. Clara was a sister to me, the one I never had. My momma died early too—Rachel's wasn't the only one—leaving me with a big family of brothers and a daddy that worked like a mule, never stopped, pushing and shoving to make ends meet and when the ends had met he pushed and shoved to build up the farm, and we all had our share to do that he gave us and we did it, and when they all left except me and my youngest brother, he wouldn't hire a man, just expected me to do the inside work and the outside work the same as before only more of it. That was my life until I went to Delbert's and I'm not complaining, but when you're young you always think something will happen to change it all for you, and we used to in my day think that the thing that would happen would be a man. Otherwise, we couldn't imagine a thing, like girls can nowadays.

Both my nieces were independent. Rachel was born that way, or got so, walking around in Cecille's shoes, and Lizzie Louise has had opportunities and a fuss made over her all her life. Whatever the problem, from the time she was four, she would just smile and flounce her way on through it, getting her way, or if she didn't squalling until she did. I soon stepped aside and let Rachel take care of it, whatever it was, and Rachel thrived on that. By the time she was in high school she was already working at the drugstore after school, buying little extras for herself and Lizzie Louise, and she would coach Lizzie Louise on how to dress and how to act, and how many crinolines to wear when they wore the crinolines, and when her bleeding came Rachel took care of that and I didn't know a thing about it until it was time for me to carry out the trash and burn it, and I expect there was a good many things that I would never have had the heart to bring up or mention to Lizzie Louise that Rachel took care of.

I can't imagine having a mother because she died when I was four. I should remember something about her, but it seems I don't. I used to dream about her, but then I'd wake up and know it hadn't been my mother after all, but somebody I knew—all changed and acting out the part in my dream, maybe Rachel, or Lizzie Louise herself. I dreamed about my mother here the other night and I dreamed it was Clara, and Clara never mothered anybody in real life. In fact I mothered Clara.

Clara never would have married, but for Delbert; and I had a big hand in it. I met Clara at Sunday School, which was the one place I mostly went, and when Clara joined the church with her mother we became friends. Clara was forty and never married, and we had things to talk about. Clara had one leg shorter than the other and pretty red hair, but freckles, and she was shy but had a funny humorous way about her

when it was just us girls. Her mother was nothing like Clara. She had men friends, and later married the druggist, after Clara married Delbert.

How it happened was, I invited Clara home for Sunday dinner, and she brought some pie she'd made and I could tell she liked Delbert, and I promoted that every way I could think of, having Clara always around, whenever I could, and making myself scarce so they had to talk, and when he asked her out to a movie and then started coming and sitting in church with us I wasn't surprised, and they went about a little bit, Sunday drives, and then he married her, and I could tell it wasn't the same as Cecille, and his interest waned as soon as they'd had the honeymoon and come back. They went to Mobile of all places and walked around in a park there, where he'd walked with Cecille, and visited some of Cecille's relatives, the Carpenters in Mobile, and Clara came back happy enough because it was just her nature, but Delbert just sank into a chair and read the paper all evening with little to say, though as near as I could tell they never fought. They got along just like pie, and we'd talked it all over before the wedding, how Clara wanted me to stay, to be company and help with the girls. She was always scared to death of Rachel, and she thought Lizzie Louise was just the prettiest sweetest thing she ever saw, but it wasn't Clara's way to try and impress this on Lizzie Louise—she just admired Lizzie Louise's comings and goings, and so if Lizzie Louise had any inkling of Clara's love it would be a surprise to me. She and Rachel just pretty much ignored Clara and me. They had each other. And as for Delbert, he had Clara and me both, but what is it about some wives, they can just take a man into the grave with them, and that's what happened to Delbert through Cecille, though I don't think Clara ever knew enough about how he used to be to feel the difference.

Delbert was a cut-up when we were home together on the farm. He'd ride a mule backwards or run and jump a fence and hog-tie a sow as big as he was. It was a comical business. Or he'd yodel and do a soft-shoe at the same time out on the front porch. And he was the only one of my brothers to go out of the state to marry. They are all dead now, my brothers, and it's hard for me to sometimes imagine what it was all about, all the comings and goings and the work and the marrying and the children. I have twenty-five nieces and nephews and they all call me Aunt Sister, but the only ones that come to visit me are Rachel, and sometimes Lizzie Louise will flounce in and she always causes a stir. She usually comes with Rachel, and the two of them coming down the hall or into the Big room will just take over a place. Lizzie Louise works for an oil company and drives a big black Lincoln car that looks like it's come from Saudi Arabia. It's brand new and last time she came she parked it along the street so I could prop up and with her help lean so that I could see it from my window. She dresses to the nines with ruffy blouses and spike heels and fur collars on near about everything. I

can't imagine Clara or me ever wearing anything like that. But I wish I could. Well, Clara needed a special shoe.

I like to think that whatever Delbert didn't have left to give to Clara I gave her. They had a nice bedroom and I helped paper and paint and choose colors and made curtains and we debated long together over the carpet. We settled on a blue bedspread with palm trees and an ocean and a harvest moon pattern.

My room was on the first floor, near the kitchen. Everybody felt easier having me down there because I was a light sleeper and they knew I'd wake up in case of fire. Clara and I together did the cooking and all the laundry, the cleaning. Pretty soon Delbert turned some of the financial things over to Rachel to train her, and she took to that. She got out of high school and took business courses two towns away, before she married a service man. He came back, which Branwell didn't. Have I mentioned him? But Lizzie Louise never married. She plays the field and lives in Dallas. Rachel still dotes on her; as she gets older she reminds me more and more of how Clara always was with Lizzie Louise, just admiring and doting and with not much of a hand in her goings on anymore. She likes to worry about her, what men she's seeing, and her life-style. She says Lizzie Louise likes clubs and gambling, and would like to see her settle down with one of the men she dates, but Lizzie Louise won't. She never wants children, Lizzie Louise doesn't, so she says, but I still like Lizzie Louise better than I like Rachel. Rachel has five children, all but gone from home now, and I hope she's had her heart's content of raising children. She worked too, like women mostly do, and her husband reminds me of Delbert toward the end of his life, with less and less to say.

Clara died first. Delbert died sitting in the swing on the front porch. Cars were passing, but nobody noticed it. His head fell to one side and he slumped further down, and the paramedics came when I called, but there was nothing they could do.

The day Delbert died I was never so sad, then and after the funeral. All I could think was of him yodeling and riding a mule backwards and being young, and then about Cecille and how she was and how she took Delbert with her. And I came in from the farm to try and help; I was the natural one to come. And it was late September, I believe, or maybe October when they put Cecille in the ground, but that was a happy day. Yes, it was. I was never so happy as that day, though if I'd have been obliged to make the decision and call her back, had I the power, I would have. But my heart was glad, and I had no power. I didn't go to the funeral. Lizzie Louise and I stayed at home because she was croupy, with a stuffed up nose. I crocheted a baby-doll for her out of red yarn and we sat down in a chair drawn right up to the stove, with her on my lap, and we whispered together over the pictures in the almanac; a black

and white picture of the sun boiling down on a corn field, and a later one with Old Man Winter blowing out his cheeks. When I sat her on the floor, on the rag rug, I put a sweater on her; it was a pink sweater that I'd made Rachel for Christmas years before—I don't think Cecille ever had it on her—and I heard the car pull into the yard; Delbert came in first and I opened the door for him. And behind him came Rachel and Branwell. Rachel in a black wool dress that didn't do a thing for her, and she was tall and thin and her hands looked cold. I hurried to throw wood into the stove, and dinner was already out in the kitchen, all the things that neighbors had brought, and Rachel wouldn't look at me, just sat down and pulled Lizzie Louise onto her lap, but Branwell said, "Hi, Aunt Sister. Are you going to be staying with us now?" I looked out into the yard before I shut the door behind us all and a big flight of blackbirds had sat down in the yard, all over the walk, the fenceposts, the gate with the bell.

"This is not your sweater, Lizzie Louise," Rachel says to her. "Where is your sweater? This is not her sweater, Aunt Sister," she says to me.

But Clara. That was different. We'd shell peas and we'd work in the garden, and we'd sew even if nothing was ever as good as store-bought when it came to Rachel and Lizzie Louise. And we'd talk. The biggest hurt in Clara's heart was that she'd never had a child, and never would have, being past forty when she and Delbert came together. Sometimes she'd cry over it. I never did.

On a visit here recently, Rachel joked about Clara that she was just a little soft in the head, that she hadn't any backbone and some other things; well, it was the first words we'd had of a disagreeable and serious nature in all those years since our first when she told me her momma didn't like me and that I couldn't raise Lizzie Louise— and never apologized for the way she said it. And I never brought that subject up again, nor any other sore subject that I could help, though families will all have their disagreeable moments. But I wouldn't sit there, not even in a wheel-chair and have her talk about my Clara. I lit into her. I told her she might as well not come in here to see me if that's all she had to say about Clara that was never anything but kind-hearted and good. She said she was sorry.

"She was just so different from my momma, I guess," and she began to cry. All these years later, and I got tears in my eyes too. It was the sorriest I've ever been able to feel for her or Cecille—who had such a grip on things she even took Delbert with her when she went away. And I said it was all right, and I wished I knew what else to say, but nothing I thought of seemed neither here nor there, and it seemed late in the day to be asking for mothering when me and Clara both would have liked nothing better and me now bed-ridden, but that was water under the bridge too. So I asked about Lizzie Louise and Lizzie

Louise was fine. As for the children, Rachel's, two are married, one is in college, one in the army and one is still at home. It appears all are fine, though Rachel said the married ones stayed away too much. "They all have their own lives and they're busy living them. To the hilt." The boy in the army, she said, never wrote, or at least not nearly enough. Her job was all right.

It may just be that Rachel is having her time of life, and if so there's nothing much to be said about that. Clara and I have talked it over good though and decided how that was when a woman felt all the pains and sorrows that they had stored up, about their dead mother, or no babies, or no houses. About the loved ones who had died, or just stopped laughing and riding the mule backwards. Or is Rachel too young for that yet?

And I remember that day, how I put the baby on the floor and opened the door wide for them all the moment I heard the car and then the bell on the gate. And I told Rachel, her last visit. "There was a flock of blackbirds set down in the yard on that day you came home from your momma's funeral. They sat down everywhere, twittering, chattering, walking around. All over the walk and in the chrysanthemums. It must have been late September. I had a good fire because even when it's warm outdoors at that time of year it takes a house a good long time to warm up and sometimes it never does."

"No, it was October," says Rachel. "Some things you never can forget. It was the middle of October, the fifteenth."

"Branwell gave me a peck on the cheek," I remembered. "He said 'Are you going to stay with us now, Aunt Sister?' I can see him now, because he had on his suit and tie."

Rachel wiped her eyes and blew her nose. She leaned to kiss me when she stood up, a thing she rarely does, always so full of herself and her family's doings, business-like. "I better be going now," she says. But she stopped at the door to smile. "I don't know what gets into me sometimes." And she says, "I'm sorry, Aunt Sister," and then she was gone.

A gift from former Roger Williams faculty member Horace Knight will make possible \$50 awards for the best short story and best poem published in the December 1988 issue.

Kim Roberts

PHOTO WITH WOMAN AT CLOTHES LINE

Drawn to them as if subpoenaed
to give her life to the horizontal,
the ever moving, in innumerable vertical

with its sad expectancy and ignorance
driving its legendary ribs of wind;
compelled by their intricate logic,

their proud barrier stance, she bowed
to their recommendation, hugged
the curve of their deserted houses,

their brittle dependency to weather,
to changes in the air—shirts and coveralls,
dresses and sheets—neighbored,

landscaped, holding immense and empty hands
and waiting, lined up for her blessing,
her obsession, her worship which would

transfigure, her beautiful and necessary
tunnel of devotion to a ship of air:
to the mere, to the daily, to the glorious mundane.

Marlaina Tanny

THE INTERIM

In the new dark
we walk, my children and I;
hooded from the gathered drops,
monks of different statures.

Our sounds are simple;
boots against pavement and
muffled slurs as our legs pass through
the leaves that are everywhere.

The colors are the same
but there is just artificial light now.
The leaves appear as stones underwater,
seeming to move.

On either side of me
each of my children takes one hand;
the shape of their smiles
is memory only in this half-light.

Becky Test

ON LEAVING MARTHA'S VINEYARD

the dawn says you're ready to go back.
you always thought it knew your mind,
until now.

until now you had time
to watch tourists from the Cape
pile off the *Island Queen*,
wander up Seaview to
Ocean Park,

still time left
for South Beach sunsets,
Edgartown shops,
Aquina clam chowder,
special because you
eat ocean with your eyes
as the thick soup cools,

one more
front porch afternoon—
white rockers filled with family,
no other sound but
rocking, rocking
to oceansongs,
breaking, rolling back,
reposed,
nothing to think about
but booksales in Chilmark,
sweet satinet Chicama wine.

last midnight
the beach-plum moon
sank
at Menemsha,

broke into pieces,
washed up at your feet.
you gathered up the gift.

now you have half the moon
in your suitcase.
you wonder
how it will rise tonight

without you there.

Mimi White

SESTINA

Past Culpeper and Sperryville we drive
deep into the Shenandoah Valley, past pink
wild dogwood that liven Virginia's spring
forests. The youngest sister
of four children, my first visit to cow-
country, to this safe haven my elder brother roams. Map

in hand, I guide my own family along the map's
crease into a ridge of parkland called, "The Skyline Drive."
Here deer graze on strawberry shoots like cows,
in the open, unafraid of hands that hold out pink
blossoms. My daughters in the field like my sister
and myself on swings, when the weather in spring

turns warm and we move about freely. A swollen spring
races along the side, boundary between us and the wild
vegetation our map

does not distinguish. Two sisters
gathering trillium that borders this drive
through the blue cloudless sky. They pick pink
azaleas and braid wreaths for the dark cows,

pink and white halos for the one animal they call "girls," cows
everywhere! I know why my brother moved here. Spring
early and gentle—even after dusk pink
does not leave the sky, as if darkness were not mapped
for this country. The urge to drive
on into West Virginia is strong, into what my sister

calls "deep country," Appalachia: sisters
and brothers on steps, poverty-stunned as cows
that dry up frighteningly overnight. But we drive

down the rural highway to sleep this spring
near my brother's home. We've followed the map's
route through tinted greens and pinks

over the hills of pink
battlefields: brother against brother against sister;
families split like milkweed in wind no map
could clearly guide back home. The cow's
gentleness grazes in the blue grass of spring.
My brother may have been driven here, but our drive

is chosen. More than another turn of the seasons, spring
this year is the Blue Ridge Mountains studded with cows,
each curve and dip the heart's map followed.

Lauren Yaffe

SPARE TIRE

The road flow under the car like black molasses; it go on forever. I like the hum of the engine and driving make me hopeful, like somehow this trip gonna mean something. When I come up to another car I veer into the passing lane and look back to see who driving the blue pontiac or black van with mountains painted on the side. Sometimes they pass me back and I wonder do they look to see who I am too—maybe they don't see no one cause they looking so fast.

No air conditioning in the car but I like the dry heat. I lets my hair blow out the window till it get too scraggly, then I pulls it over to the side of my shoulder and tucks it under the strap of my shift. Not much but dried grass on either side of the road but I sees some mountains waiting tall and proud way up ahead. Feel like I'm really in the west now, I think. It just as fine as Lam say it would be. Lam got his seat tipped back next to me. His eyes is closed and he purring like a cat done a good day's worth of mouse catching. Look sweet.

All a sudden, something start to thumping like a jack rabbit on the side of the car. I pull onto the rubble alongside the road and stop the car. The engine grumble mean as a hungry stomach for a second, then conk out fast as a baby fall to sleep. I shove open the door and get out. Lam start up in his seat and climb out the other side. The door is broke from rust so he have to squeeze out the window. The tire hissing slow and deadly and all the rubber ripped off. All sorts of wires and stuff hanging out like veins. Nasty stuff, looks like to me. I never knowed what kind of shit they stick in there and here I was gliding down the road like I'm riding on jelly rolls.

"How you manage that?" Lam say, spitting on the baked gravel.

"Dunno. Could be the heat. Prob'ly swelled the air up inside."

"Well, we don't got a lug wrench," Lam say.

Lug what?, I think. Sound like something bulky. We got plenty stuff like that packed in the car but I don't say nothing bout it to Lam. He know more bout things like that.

Lam reach inside the window, pull out the road atlas. I guess he looking to see how far we is to a gas station. He staring at the map important-like, rubbing his eyes. I feel bad I woke him.

"What sign you see last?" he say to me. I have trouble answering for a minute cause I'm thinking I got some old rags I been saving for quilts, but I don't think we could make one of them "lug" things with them.

"Last sign say Cheyene, forty-five miles," I say.

"Naw, that cain't be right."

"I think that's what it say. We bout half-hour past Douglas."

Lam look up at me like he just had one of them hell-a-peeing peppers they got out here. "You took the wrong road, woman." He say this slow and deliberate. I know he trying to be soft with me but any woman know he upset. I'm not sure what I should do, but I go stand behind him and reach a hand up to his shoulder.

"I'm sorry, Lam. They was some turn-off back there, but I got confused. Sorry."

"You should've woke me up."

"It be all right. I'll drive back and you can sleep the whole way."

"And what about the flat tire?" He stare hard at me.

"Oh." I suck in my breath, scratch the ground with my foot. Guess he not gonna make love with me tonight, kind of drifts through the back of my mind.

"Sides," Lam mutter as he plop down in the driver's seat, "sorry ain't gonna fix the tire. Don't go sniveling about things."

"What we doing?" I say, wriggling through the window on the passenger side. I tear my shift a little on the door lock.

"We gonna find a gas station to fix the tire. What you think?"

I shut up then. Figure what can I do to help things? Nothing. Best to set here, lips tight, till something useful come into my head. I can't think how the car riding with all them insides coming out of the tire, but we wobbling along somehow. Sort of lop-sided but still moving. Things like that sometimes: so awful and broke down I think nothing to do but stop in my tracks, but I keep trudging along just the same. Don't know why.

Lam keep driving, real slow. Neither of us say nothing. I wish he'd whistle like he do sometimes. I can't see nothing but road ahead of us and the silence make it seem longer.

Seem like hours later we see a sign for a town. Guess only half an hour gone by, but thirty minutes slower than a turtle sometimes. Lam cursing up a tornado by now, saying the wheel riding on the rim, which mean things is worse.

When we turns off the exit ramp we have to ride over a metal grating they got on all the roads here. It meant to keep cows from wandering out on the highway cause they hooves get caught in the grooves. I wonder why the cows can't figure out to walk across some field if they wanna go on the road, but I guess they don't know they got a choice in the matter. Anyway, the grating ain't making the tire ail any less, and Lam curse extra hard for each bump the car struggle over.

There's a gas station up the road a piece, and we pull in next to the pumps. Look like no one been here for years so it startle me when a bell ding in the garage. It just one of them tubes you got to ride over to

let someone know you're there. I don't see no one in there cause it so dark, plus my eyes blurry from the dust we kick up on the road. By the time I squirm out of the window to where Lam kicking the tire, the attendant walking out of the garage and wiping his hands on a grease rag.

"What can I do for you all," he say, pulling his engineer's cap off his head and wiping the sweat and oil off his brow.

"We got a bust tire," Lam say, kicking the bum tire again. "Got no wrench to fix it with,"

"No problem in that. You just get your spare out and we'll have the girl fixed up sure enough," the attendant say, looking at Lam. He don't notice me.

"Unpack the car," Lam say to me. I stand there. Why he want the car unpacked? We not having no picnic. He look at me standing there, then sigh all heavy and say, "The spare's under all our stuff. Unpack it."

I go open the back of the car and start laying bags and blankets in the dirt. Lam and the attendant standing by the Coke machine chatting.

"Seem like a handy thing to keep 'round," the attendant chuckle.

"Yeah," say Lam, "Better'n a mule for doing work and not half as ornery."

They both have a good laugh over that one. I feel all hot and burning in my face, and it not the sun. My shift feel uncomfortable, like it hanging on me too loose, got no shape to it, I just notice. Maybe Lam like a pretty sash on me.

I get all our stuff out of the car and grab a strip of purple rag from the pile. I wrap it around my waist and smooth down my dress. It feel good and soft. Lam come over and pull the tire out of the car. Don't notice my sash and no thank you neither. He over talking with the attendant while they fuss with the tire.

The attendant boosting up the car with some special tool while Lam on his knees getting the bolts off the tire. He get them loose with some gadget, then he unscrew the nuts with one hand while he rest his free palm on the door of the car. I'm thinking Lam take more care handling that old car than he do his woman. He probably rebuild the damn engine fore he ever marry me.

Lam get all them screws off the tire then he lift the whole wheel off the car, smooth as pudding. I thought it would've put up more of a fight, what with all that rust old cars get. Lam toss the bust tire on the ground, it bounce low on the pavement a few times then lie still. Lam and the attendant both kneels down and screws the bolts on the new tire. They stands up, slaps the dirt off they palms and shakes each other's hands.

Lam suddenly ready for travel again. All our bags and stuff is setting in a pile on the side of the car and he looking at me like he want something done about it.

"Come on," he say. "We in a hurry. Better load up."

Why we in a hurry?, I think. Whole day been creeping along like a slug, now he wanna hightail it like we had somewheres special to go. I'm tired. Been riding in the heat and dust till my bones bout to crack, now he say to hurry. That ain't what I'm set on.

My upper lip sweating so hard I'm surprised it ain't dripped off. I stare at the pile of stuff and say real low, "Can you start packing, Lam? I gotta freshen myself up." Then I walks to the washroom.

CONTRIBUTORS

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