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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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Robert Cooperman

POISON

She wishes
there had been children,
so she could battle
for their hearts
like a scorned witch,
and bring to boiling
a hatred
for their father so poisonous
no antidote would ever work,
the venom never quite
allowing him
the release of death.

She will never forgive him
for finding someone else
after she demanded a divorce:
her right to torment them both
unquestioned
in her claw of a heart
for as long as misery lies
like a dead bird on her chest.

Memories of sweet times
grow dimmer
as she recites
hatred's murderous litany
in the sulphurous light
of her glittering eyes.

Carrie Etter

Though Not His Birthday or Mother's Day

A boy, and the train-rush of grief roars in my ears.
Nothing diminishes the sudden recognition:
a boy, about the same age, my burnished hair or robin-brown eyes.
Or in the idle minutes before a movie begins, the name
Nicholas shoots across the theater like a stray bullet.
Yet I can see a boy and not wince.
I can look at a boy and not recall the last night together,
propped in a hospital bed,
the white walls glowing like sunlight on first snow.
Often there is no boy.
I am scrubbing my reflection into a plate.
I am tossing socks into the dryer.
I am walking home.
The absence of my son is the empty sidewalk,
the groan of a passing car's exhausted muffler,
the whistle of the birds in the trees
that I cannot see.

Michael S. Smith

Summer Waltz

The sequined soybean field shimmied and swished
To the old tune crooned by the wind,
And the corn swayed against the grain,
Tall and graceful, bowing with a wink.

Old trees stood stiffly erect
Around the edge of the dance,
Their leaves pulled up around their necks,
Looking down on the action, brooding.

Birds in black with scarlet-tipped wings
Swooped like dog-fighters in the moist air,
Over the cows swinging their tails
And staring bewildered at the pacing bull.

Our hair blew backwards as we walked by,
And our wet shirts clung to our skin;
The wind wound round our bare legs;
It was too hot to talk or think.

Vivian Shipley

VACANT LIKE HARLAN COUNTY MINE SHAFTS

Coming up to you on the porch, Father,
was the hardest. No band waiting, no need
to punch my hands in my jacket pocket

to hide fingernails chewed to the quick,
I'd return semester break, then late spring
before planting but you acted like I'd never

stepped foot out of the yard. You made me
feel showy if I said hello, tried to bend down
and kiss your cheek. Content to sit, chew,

yell at Queenie when she gnawed through
a squirrel's neck before putting it at your foot,
I was always an attachment, a girl hanging

around useful as a wisdom tooth. Walking home
with you from church, I'd try to hold your hand,
try to start conversation asking whether

mapmakers or historians decide that Spain
will be purple and Germany orange. I'd talk on
about tides, life inconceivable without at least

modest exposure. My words were a needle
on records stacked too near the parlor stove,
my heart, a swallow hitting the kitchen window.

Brian Clements

In a Landscape

I have looked for you in the lillies,
Before the willow furred in moth eggs,
Behind me, in the wilted yellow
Of cocoons, on the new lawn of cabbage wings.

I have looked for you with crickets crying weeks,
Looked in the frosted garden.
Found twigs,
Still, and your red fern growing.

Found the mockingbird, a broken window.
Thought I saw your blue body
Floating in the swollen creek,
A blue bone dropped in the dark.

I have looked for you.
Found you gone.
Found a strand of red hair
And your purple flowers drying.

Brian Clements

TROUBLE

Lovers on a broken bridge
Watch the river curl
Beneath steel-gauze footing.
What do they know

About the bottom
And what a nightgowned mother
Threw there in 1929?
What do they know

About each other—
Lung condition?
Brain cells?
What do they know

About a face like a fist
On the south bank,
About trust?
Just sitting in October,

Wind a surprise
Like good news,
What do they know
About the dangers of breath,

About the tiger in the night?
There are more questions
In this scene
Than lovers.

Brian Clements/Trouble

Water slaps like words
On the bridge.
The troubled stones upstream
Shoot spray from each wave

Further. Beneath them
A dark trout winds
Against the current.
The lovers begin to feel

Like someone else.
The man not like a man.
The woman another woman.
The useless flowers.

Brian Clements

AFTER

for Samarra Khaja

Before you were here the afternoon
light rained through the live oaks
and lay on the pool in the image
of honey. And to say that we bathed

in your image to say you drank us
the way we tasted the woman's laughter
which glazed our thin walls a moment
and reminded us of you before you were

here, laughter of a woman who finally sees her lover
fallible, sweet with weakness. We felt you
before you were here as the wine
which waited in the glass. And when

you arrived all the talk was of
innocence and wonder, and whether anyone
could resist the self, which led us
outside, eventually, into the hot wind

and humidity of arguments you danced
around, intent upon the play of light,
holding out your hand as if to say,
"wait, this isn't as important as you think"

before gliding into the glaze of the surface,
wakeless like the breath of the truth
the light and trees and water had hinted at
before you were here.

Adrie S. Kusserow

WHAT I WANT

More than any other time
perhaps I love you most
when you are in the garden
your body held in the bowls of sun,
the slim throats of the iris
stretching toward you,
the heads of peonies bumping into you.
They want you.
We all want to be touched by you.

From the window I watch
Your hands skate the soil,
smooth the bumps.
Red, yellow and blue skins reach -
Listen: You are opening the earth,
the colors popping like parachutes.
My whole body leans from its hungry axis.
I wait my turn.

Francine Witte

MY FATHER IN LATE SPRING

Evenings, he'd come home, hatful
of half-ideas and broken songs.

Above the clink of supper plates,
we could hear the racket

in his head, botched-up deals,
clients waiting to sue.

Off to the side, my mother,
a still-life pose with lamb chops

and green quiet peas.
Later, he'd jump up and grab

his guitar, sit on the stoop
and strum some simple song.

The neighborhood kids would come,
move around him like metal filings,

everyone singing along.

Now, in late spring
he is quiet, only
the sound of cemetery birds.

There is, right beside him,
a judge, a serious man, who in life

might have needed a laugh
now and then.

And my father?
He is probably making friends.

Terry L. Persun

IF I SLIP AWAY ALONE

The long wind talks
in words I do not hear.
I sometimes think I understand
though, that they're telling me: freedom.
The fingers of air touch
up and down my spine,
my mind clears, I can see,
but everything is the same
because I have not changed.
The sun holds me with hot arms,
the sounds of birds become as torturous
and monotonous as my own breathing.
If I slip away alone
my body will wilt and fall off
the spirit stem which nourishes it.
Someone will find my carcass
and guess at my occupation,
thinking laborer, bird watcher, soul mate,
and will slip away to find me.

Margaret C. Szumowski

SILHOUETTE OF A MUSIC STAND IN AN EMPTY ROOM

The music stand is empty,
awaiting music, awaiting a musician,

like a shadowy heron
perched on one leg over a twilight marsh

or the bones of a beautiful woman
as yet unfinished by the gods.

Who knows what grace
she could bring to the earth
if they would only finish her.

Silvery skeleton awaits its lyrical flesh---

So much is waiting.
Bare arms of trees against a November sky,

those we loved
gone before they were finished,
beautiful as ghostly herons in a dream lagoon.

I would float out to all these faint ones.

Walter McDonald

LETTERS I MEANT TO WRITE

Widows in wheelchairs
send me jams and homemade bread.
Orphaned, I'm ripe for kindness

in cellophane, and thank them
for all I receive from their tables.
What did I do for years,

our lawn I mowed like a goat,
trash carried out,
letters I meant to write.

I'm stunned to be at the mercy
of others, delivery boys
at the door, the hours I spend

with neighbors' fathers and mothers.
I squeeze their paper fists and hug,
listen while they cry or chuckle

and sigh. I hold them close,
the abandoned parents of others,
but never again my own.

Helen Frost

UNDER A MAT OF OAK LEAVES

1994

Eight turtles hang in the water
So much like brown oak leaves
I can only tell they are turtles
When they lift their nostrils for air.

1954

Under a mat of dark wet leaves
 near a stream
 in Oakwood Park
Sun lit on something other
 than leaves. Not,
 I was sure, a rock—
A rock was never so shapely.
 Not bark from a tree—
 though sometimes so patterned,
Bark was never this smooth.

Five years old, my small hands
 parted the leaves
 pushed back mud.
I reached under edges, around
 the sides, tugging
 with all my strength.
It rocked back and forth
 like a tooth, I thought.
 And then I could lift
Whatever it was—smelly and full of mud.

I let the stream run over my hands
 as I held my treasure,
 my private joy.
I carried it through the woods
 to my father. He knelt

Helen Frost/Under A Mat of Oak Leaves

to see it — “A turtle,
Where did you find it? Look
here are the feet.

When it was alive
They moved like this in the water.”

My mother stood by with a baby.
I know how she felt. I know
how a baby demands
That the world around it be pure.

My mother stepped back,
the tips of her fingers
Restrained the breath that carried
her horror, her words

“Oh, Jack” when my father said “Yes”
I could keep it. I could take it home.

Mark Johnston

EDWARD HOPPER: NIGHTHAWKS (1942)

for Richard R. J. Weidner

Perhaps the cash register gleaming
across the street has rung up
what the couple wants, what the single
diner needs, and what the counter-man

would like to forget. He's worked
late, the urns are almost empty.
How many more glasses can he wash?
How many more times can he circle

the counter with his cloth until it shines?
How many more tales of desolation
can he hope to decipher from the faces
of patrons who talk little, drink

slowly, and stare at the motion
of their spoons in thick white cups.
He wants to go home to his two kids,
to his wife, to some consolation,

if it's that. But most of all
he wants to sleep, to forget about
how bright the streets can be
at night, how filled with eerie light.

"Want another?" he seems about to ask
the single diner who, hat still on,
stares at his hand and wonders whether
the night will ever end if he doesn't

Johnston/Edward Hopper: Nighthawks (1942)

end it. He's a salesman, maybe, down
on his luck, his marriage in tatters,
but not his suit. Will he ever sell
more shirts to hardened buyers about

to show him the door he just walked through?
He's known humiliation today, and loss,
despair, confusion. He knows that
any percent commission on nothing

is not enough to get along much longer.
He stares at the couple in the corner.
She's looking at her nails; he's smoking.
Their hands almost touch upon the counter.

He's all angles: hat-brim, lapels,
the planes of his face. What grim
impasse has he reached, what turning
point? Is he cheating on his wife?

Is the woman with red lips, red hair,
red dress, and pale skin his lover?
Are they about to seal their bond
with crime? Perhaps their hot affair

has cooled like midnight coffee.
The counter-man wants them all to leave,
to disperse, along with him,
to their lonely posts where they'll sit,

not like wise and thoughtful nightowls,
but like hawks, born for fortunes
grander, higher, freer than this,
predators without prey, forced to turn

their beaks inward, on their dreams.

Robert Stothart

VACATION LANTERN

The resevoir wall curves thick as a lens.
Kerosene goes up a flat braid to feed an edge
Of flame. When we lean to the glass our faces
Balloon back moth-eyed and toothy. The wick
In clear liquid looks like something on a museum shelf
Or the eel I keep in a jar after March floods.
With the key, a pressed brass flower,
I turn the flame up and down. When I
Turn it up, the room brightens and night outside
Hunches back over the lake. Fire stays
Contained and dancing. At supper
Someone said these days are getting shorter.
Already, we look from our table
And see ourselves in darkened windows.
It's just seven. I turn the key farther
And flame smokes the neck of the chimney,
Strings of soot drift to the ceiling. If I
Twist it again, will the lamp turn inside out?
Fire turned loose, alive around the room.
Will we be clothed in flame and break through the door
To scatter in the lake, shattering
Water's own last dream of light?

Robin S. Chapman

BEGINNER'S CLASS

Large-sized and small, we straggle in,
Pulling and lunging, open-mouthed,
Nose down, tracking who's been here,
Or leg up, staking our own claims of place.
Some trot importantly, some shy away.
Some cluster together, some sit far off.
We learn to be clear about what we want
And what few things we can ask of each other---
Come, walk with me, sit by me,
Lie down by me, stay.

Matthew Murrey

MEMENTO

Away from you today
I thought of my severed braid
lying on the bookshelf
where I left it.
I thought of wet hair, evenings
when I sat naked
with my back toward your hands,
and you would weave
the limp strands
into a straight, tight cord.
Four years of my hair,
four years of your hands,
four woven years clipped
by scissors in a single snip.
Away from you today
I feared I might die
before coming home to see you
and you would come across my braid
lying like a cut flower,
like love's thin cord,
like a little dead pet
curled up on the shelf
where I left it.

Matthew Murrey

MAN OF FIRE

By strength,
by sweat, by the overhead stretch;
by steel by wood,
by the sharpened edge
my neighbor frees himself.
Like a boat crushing
across a frozen lake,
he breaks free of the sky
turning dark with ice,
turning dark with night.
The steam of his breath is full,
and his wheelbarrow fills with wood.
I envy the man of fire.
In the morning,
in the first shivering, brittle light,
I will scrape a back window
to look out
at the frigid stillness
and the smoke rising from his chimney:
smoke of woodfire,
smoke of rest and warm rooms,
smoke of work—the sound
of the axehead striking the wood.

Mark Cox

RAIN

It's a good rain. The kind that soaks into you
and says *sleep* over and over. You start
to melt the least little bit. A good rain. The kind
you can't close your eyes to. It says, Here,
I'll cry for you and there will be no pain!

How does the rain make up its mind like this?
Does it ever think: *Now I will fall,*
or *Now I'm falling?* Or, *Soon I will join*
all the water I've loved most in the world?
Does it fear being hurt when it hits us like this?
Is that thunder I hear saying Stop, you could be killed?

Still, though lightning paces behind the picture window,
though the clouds worry their kleenex to shreds,
the rain must need to be close to us very badly,
because it doesn't mind.

Oh rain, who are these gutters you keep longing for,
these roofs, these poorly sloped sidewalks?
When will you grow up and settle down in jars
like drinking water? When will you stop teasing the air
with that sexy sadness you spray behind your knees?
When will you tell me how unforgettable I am
when soaked to the skin, made naked by your endless kissing.
Rain, wake up and tell me straight--
I have to be at work soon and I can't find my shoes.
Rain, why is it so hard to hold you?

Rain, forgive me, I don't believe you're just water; I believe
in your accomplishments. You fall on palaces and prisons
and never have to worry about a place to stay
and never ask anyone to do anything you wouldn't do for them.

Cox /Rain

Rain, really I just want to stand in you for as long as I can.

I don't want to set out pans anymore.

I want you down in my bones. I want to know what it means
to fall on funerals and farms at the same time,
to know what it is to embrace this world and ask,
where does it hurt, and mean it.

Rain, how could I have ever felt unloved and forgotten?

Rain, here are my two good hands and my opening mouth.

Teach me what to say.

When you gave me a new Mustang
up the cracked driveway
in the last
suburban and chrome,
I watched you
kick your heels,
go-age to car trunk,
as I decided
my crab grass lawn.

When that noseless man
his heart flared
with some late fire,
I you

your gold smile
how old all the neighbors
looked over their fences
to improve the view

Joyce Odam

A HOVERING OF NEWS

Sliced.

Sound and light.

A long afternoon.

Bright.

A hovering of news.

Old and futile.

Late.

Like a sunset at the horizon.

Gone as you see it.

Michael Carrino

SHERRI

I

Old Dog, Paperboy, Crab Grass, Two Secrets
and the Voices of Babylon, New York
Summer, 1967

Sherri, I want
to apologize for that ordeal. The old
dog, weak and bitter,
growled as the paperboy
rolled past, silent
and graceful on a lean ten speed,
growled as I watered the crab grass
at noon, growled
as the phone rang
and it was you, Sherri.

When you gunned a new Mustang
up the cracked driveway
to box the last
silverware and china,
I watched you
click your heels,
garage to car trunk,
as I flooded
my crab grass lawn.

When that homeless mutt,
his heart flushed
with some late fire,
bit you
above your gold ankle
bracelet, all the neighbors
knocked open their screen doors
to improve the view.

Carrino/Sherri

I tried to kick the dog.
You cursed me. The paperboy
circled around in the street,
folded his arms and sneered
as the neighbors tumbled,
babbled, and pushed to see
live, rare, impromptu

suburban melodrama. The dog
died on your red high heels,
the voices of Babylon
too much for a dog heart.
One neighbor,
thick bellied, but fresh shaved,
tried to swing on me,
slipped on wet crab grass
and broke his elbow.
So I guess he'll sue me
and so will you, Sherri, I guess.

It's only fair; you can't
water crab grass
forever. It takes
two when you dance
a fandango
and my half
never went anywhere.

I know you wanted
a pool. I never wanted
a pool. No pool,
no problems. I never wanted
to take you
over to Perry's Fish House.
New men
take you there, I hope.

Carrino/Sherri

Sherri, I want you
to know two secrets.
I'm allergic to seafood.
I can't swim.

Yesterday, I watered the crab grass
at noon. The paperboy flung
heart transplant news over my head.

Carrino/Sherri

II

Aphrodisiacs, The Repo Man, Crab Grass, and Nixon
Summer, 1974

Sherri, aphrodisiacs exist
downtown in Babylon
where Woolworth's five and ten
used to be. Some thick figured
clerk in a tie-dyed T-shirt
fumbled with the cash register
and watched me squat, grab
one red bottle by its slim neck,
the label a crayola
rainbow, off the bottom shelf.
He leaned and told me aphrodisiacs
were monkeys' blood.

I believe the repo man
trailed me home. I crawled
under our bed to read
by dim television light
instructions in a fine print
erotic promise, but Nixon,
murky in black and white,
distracted me as he waved
good-bye, again
and again. You were right.
Another two-bit wiseguy,
no wiser than my uncle
Jo-Jo, the bookie.

How's the mustang? You
ever notice how men skulk around
in a singles bar? I've only been
once or twice. I hope
you're careful, Sherri; still
swallow the pill. The neighbors

Carrino/Sherri

kicked up a petition; want me
to keep up the lawn. I keep
watering crab grass. I like
to watch crab grass spread
as it pleases, like you said -- casual
freedom and surprise. I believe

Mr. Repo man is somewhere
behind the garage and Nixon
still waves and waves.
A helicopter flops
on the White House lawn;
waits to flick him away.
Nixon looks sad. Doomed.
All his monkey blood drained.

Carrino/Sherri

III

Finding Canada, Remembering Sherri, How to Leave Babylon,
and Crossing a Border

Summer, 1992

Sherri, I found Canada
at dusk, that dusted light before dark
time when we loved
to swap lies and smoke on the porch.
Later, in Montreal
I nursed a beer, a woman's blue shadow
danced across the bare wall
at Club Chez Paree. I wanted you
Sherri; recalled one moment
I can't forget, your voice
a wild bird demand
I don't forget,
cigarettes and bread,
your list of household needs
already lifted away before I reached
my El Camino. I remembered
some, some I had to guess. I remember
your voice and wild crab grass.

When did you give up
the Mustang? It's a classic
situation, this obsessive,
futile urge to connect
after all these years. I read
books now; found
my self-perception is below
average. So when I get
vacation time I leave
Babylon, leave
my factory job,
neighbors who pray I'll sell,
install a young couple

Carrino/Sherri

who will love
to pull up crab grass,
putter and prune - normal
people they can have
over to barbecue. Me,
I lock every door and window
at high noon and leave
Babylon before the fire,
before a match is struck.

Sherri, I loved
crossing a foreign border.
Every question was harmless and gentle
in a French accent. Slow and easy
I answered every question
in the true north summer dusk, the moon
tin-can pale as I finessed
my El Camino into drive.
That transmission's been a problem
forever, but I let it go.
I was in Canada,
across a border, on the move.

Lewis Bogaty

BLUE HEAVEN

I heard the announcement of my office closing at 6:30. Now, at 7:26, I am still listening to the radio, sitting at the window, wrapped tight in my afghan. Fifty billion schools have closed and been announced. And my office. But so far, nothing of Richard's office.

Out there, in the white seamless world, the flash of red quickens me. One of our pair of cardinals comes right to the feeder, cocks his crested head, first to this side, then to that, takes two quick pecks. He darts away, powdering a mound of snow with his fiery red wings. As he flies off, I first spy the female flying after him.

"The cardinals," I call out.

I hear the sound of running water as Richard sticks his head out of the bathroom. "What's that? Was that us?"

"No, Rick, nothing yet. It was the cardinal." He grunts and the door closes.

"The cardinal came right to the feeder," I call after him. It is rare for either of the cardinals to feed at the feeder.

My leg is falling asleep. I get up and hobble, push open the bathroom door, feel the steam sealing my skin, enclosing me. "I want you home today," I say. He is bent over the sink and I press up against his back, forming myself to him, wrapping my arms around him, tweaking his nipples. I hear the cat's squeak of greeting and feel him rubbing up against my leg. "Hi, Furball," I say into Richard's neck.

"Delbert and I want you to cuddle all day and watch the snow with us," I say to Richard.

Richard rinses the toothpaste out of his mouth and says into the fogged mirror, "You and Bertha, you mean?"

This week, for some inexplicable reason, we started calling the baby all the names we've never understood how any parents could give to a child they loved.

If it's a boy, we are going to call him Daniel. We are having more trouble on the girl's side. I like Deborah. The D's

Bogaty/Blue Heaven

are for my grandfather Donald who died last year. Richard likes Rachel. My grandfather's middle name happened to be Raymond, so Rachel's o.k. too.

Evan, still a friend, once much more, spent an hour on the phone with me yesterday pushing for Michelle or Nicole. He said he'd never seen an unsexy Michelle, and the kinkiest best time he ever had was with a quiet little coquette named Nicole. I said I wasn't sure those were exactly the criteria we were planning to use. And then I was mad at myself for wondering if he thought I had been just Jello; what did they have that I didn't?

Clinging to Richard now, thinking about Evan, I feel for a moment a strangeness that makes me shiver. I press myself tighter to him. The white bathroom tiles are moist, starting to drip. The bright light hurts my eyes. In the beaded mirror, Richard blurs. We have entered, the two of us together, this still, white tunnel nine months long, and when we emerge, everything will be somehow unalterably different. Irrevocably. I feel this. I know this. For ever. In ways I try and try to imagine.

Richard bundles up. He has on the Bean duck boots I bought him. In his down coat, he is a gray form held together by wire-rimmed glasses.

"Be careful," I say. "Gussy and I will worry."

"Wait a minute, is that a boy or a girl, Gussy?"

"Augusta."

"Ah. Well, you and Roscoe shouldn't worry. I'll be careful."

I smudge his glasses with my nose in trying to kiss him under the hood.

At ten, my mother calls to ask how I'm feeling. I've been having good and bad days. Today is good. I'm half asleep when she calls, reading through one of the two dozen baby care books with which we've managed to encumber ourselves. I pull the tangled phone cord and get up to watch the birds at the feeder. A whole flock of chickadees and a few tufted titmice are taking turns sweeping in and flapping off with sunflower seeds clamped tightly in their beaks. The snow isn't so bad where she is, Mom says.

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At eleven, I get an unexpected phone call from Evan. Furball is meowing, so I let him out. He steps gingerly, shakes his foot, then plunges, sinking and hopping, creating a trough as he goes. Evan says he read a novel in which some wrinkled old prune—therefore unquestionably wise, he says—gave the advice that if you set a biscuit on the back of your tongue as soon as you wake up—don't chew it now, just let it sit there and melt—you won't get nauseous. I don't tell him morning sickness is only at the beginning. I tell him I'll try it. He has become unnaturally attentive.

The silent snowfall continues till early afternoon. I watch, entranced, out of the window, listening to the stereo. I imagine our child at ten, at sixteen. It is a girl I find myself picturing. A Michelle, I admit reluctantly, not a Deborah. Zits and too much unevenly applied makeup. I feel my stomach knotting—her kicking—at hungers and guilts and angers she barely understands at sixteen. Will she, her angers, hurt me terribly?

"Furball, where are you?" I want to hold my cat. I open the back door, white prickles of snow on my hand leaving moist, glistening spots. As if I had conjured him, he appears before me with a squeak to announce his presence, and scurries in.

"Hi, Furball," I say. "Had enough of the snow? Did you wipe your feet like a good boy?"

He is stretching lazily, yawning. The fur on his legs is curly wet. As I smile at him, I notice him start to twist his tongue as if something is stuck in his mouth. I see a spot of red under his whiskers. In his mouth. He jumps away from the suddenness of my move.

"Come here, Furball," I say, turning frantic. "Let me see." He is still working his tongue as I bend down to squint at him. Up close, I see that a tiny red feather is caught in the corner of his mouth.

"Furball!" I scream at him. He darts under me, gallops across the living room, and slides hard into the brick of the fireplace. Scrambling to his feet, he stands poised, wide-eyed, looking up at me, licking his lips with his pink tongue. He

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meows softly, terrified that I have turned on him. I feel bad for him, but I can't stand to look at him.

On Saturday, the sky has cleared to a deep brilliant blue. Standing on tiptoes, sinking into the snow, wishing, as ever, that I were taller than five foot two, I let the seeds slide from my fist into the feeder. I have never seen Evan turn his eyes on the street to look at a tall woman. Richard, on the other hand, is fond of telling me I am not his type—too short. That's why we'll work out, he says.

I stretch up another fistful, my sunglasses sliding down my nose, which is starting to run. Impatient now, I tip the whole bag of sunflower seeds into the feeder. Seeds tumble and scatter, disappearing into the tiny dark dots in the crust of white. I have not let myself look in the Audubon book, but I know, I remember, cardinals are one of the few birds that mate for life. I have watched the two of them come together so often, him so bright and beautiful, her so plain. I feel that she is nearby, but I can't face looking up at the trees. Shivering suddenly with the cold, I hurry back to the house.

The door clatters closed behind me as I hop, teeter, trying to get my rubber boot off. It's stuck to the heel of my shoe and when it comes off I make a sort of springing dive across the kitchen and into the living room, and end up standing in front of Evan, catching my breath. He is sprawled on the couch playing channel roulette, which he knows I hate. When we lived together, I once tossed his remote control channel changer out our eighth-story window. He came over to drop off that novel—apparently the old woman is a wealth of advice—and now it looks like he's planning to stay for dinner. Richard is very tolerant about Evan, very trusting. I'm not sure why I let him come.

Evan begins crooning at me teasingly, wickedly. And horribly off key. "A smiling face, a fireplace, a cozy room, a little nest that's nestled where the roses bloom. Just Molly and me...."

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My eyes note movement out the window, at the feeder. I feel my breath catch, but it is only the usual sparrows and such. I look back at Evan, who is still singing his song to annoy me. I am struck, as so many times before, by his angel hair, his blond eyelashes, his liquid green eyes I thought once upon a time could float right into me.

"Tell me about marital bliss."

I give him a dramatic sigh of annoyance, but he is in one of his moods. He won't be deterred. He stares, eyebrows raised, waiting, demanding to be told how someone other than him has changed my life.

"It's not that you change, really. It's not even that your life changes. I don't feel less crazy, or that I've escaped from myself. It's more like having a warm blanket around me I can duck my head under. With a pillow to cushion me." I smile at him. "You'll find her, your Nicole, Michelle."

"You *thought* you wanted to marry me."

"It's different."

"How different?" he demands.

As I watch him petulantly flick the channel changer, I feel for just a moment as if I am back in the time three years ago when I was living with him in New York, in our studio apartment, with the loft bed and no place to put things except on top of each other in ever-ascending piles. As hard as I try, I can't recall our ending. The last thing I can recall is the fire, a big apartment-building fire on a bitter cold winter night in a bleak section of Amsterdam Avenue. We were striding up the street in our usual condition of ambiguity—holding hands, mouths squawking ferociously at each other. We turned the corner before we were aware we had been smelling smoke.

"This is amazing," Evan said as flames shot ten feet above the roof. We stood for half an hour in the cold, watching. Everyone had been evacuated, so there was no sense of imminent danger, rather an almost serene sense of viewing art, of spectacular beauty, something akin, I would imagine, to watching a distant volcano exploding heavenward.

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I was the only one who saw the yellow cat perched on a window sill on the eighth floor. His back arched in fear, he looked, from my distance, utterly calm.

I turned to Evan. He was looking furtively at a Spanish woman. It was cold out, but she had no coat. She wore a white tee shirt and her arms were folded very tight below her breasts. It dawned on me that she had probably lived in the building. The cat remained motionless, watchful, unnoticed in the bustle of activity.

For seconds, I could only stare up, my mind fixed on the cat's incongruous stillness.

"Excuse me," I said, finally breaking free of my paralysis, grabbing the arm of the policeman who was leaning on his car, flirting with the Spanish woman. "Do they know about that cat?"

Still grinning at the woman, he looked where I pointed, and, seeing, palmed his walkie talkie, pressed it into his lips, and mumbled. The woman looked at me and smiled politely. She had a tooth missing in the middle.

"They do now," the cop said, nodding at me.

As I stared eagerly upward, the cherry picker of a fire engine—which had been at roof level—began slowly to descend to the eighth floor. Evan, meanwhile, decided it was time to go, and my protests only annoyed him, made him walk faster as he led me away.

I said, "How could someone just leave their cat?" I was looking back over my shoulder as he dragged me, trying to see if they had got it safely. "Why are you pulling me, damn it, I want to see! Let go of me." I watched as the fireman leaned toward the window, a silhouette against the yellow leaping flames, and stretched out his arm gingerly. Some people clapped as the cherry picker descended, with the grinning fireman waving over his head a limp, very unhappy, very alive ball of fur.

"The funniest thing happened," my mother is telling me on the phone. "Your father sent me an anniversary card. He

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didn't write anything, but the postmark was Florida. I guess he's still living in Miami with that strumpet." My mother doesn't know that I talk to my father on the phone almost every week. It's been a secret I've had a hard time keeping. He'll call and then I'll be talking to her and catch myself from saying "Daddy says—" as if it were the old days.

I can hear her moving around in the kitchen. From the sounds, I think she is scrubbing the sink. "Can you believe it? He must have been drunk and thought it would be a good joke, a kick for old time's sake."

"Mom, can't you think that maybe he was just feeling nostalgic, just for a minute, and in a mellow mood, and thinking of you?" I say.

"He's crazy," she says. "'Dear Ida,' he wrote. And signed it 'Jack.' And it wasn't like a card from a husband to a wife. It was—wait, I'll read it to you."

"No, Mom, don't go and get it."

"Oh, all right. It was something like, 'To the two of you on your anniversary. May all the years to come be as blessed with love as this year,' or something like that. You don't see anything the least bit sadistic there? You never did have any idea about what your father was. You never had any idea about men period. I don't know how you managed to find someone as nice as Richard."

Richard is in the bedroom organizing me. He slipped over a pile of my papers in the dark last night and now he is putting up a shelf.

My papers have started to spread across the floor since I've been working at home the last month—since a few weeks after the snowstorm. I've seen the cardinal once since I've been home: on the terrace, pecking at the seeds under the feeder, by herself. I am still trying to forgive Furball, trying to tell myself it is his nature.

Richard comes in looking proud of himself. "Done," he says, and wraps me up in his arms, bending so his middle

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doesn't press too hard on my bulging belly. He leads me into the bedroom, and shows me the shelf. It's very nice.

"What's wrong with it?" he asks.

"Nothing," I say. "It's great." It is quite perfect. "It's a shelf."

In the afternoon, rain falls, and then it turns to snow as the day gets colder. The radio says the roads are freezing. I say, "Maybe you shouldn't go to work tomorrow." Richard says he has to.

In the morning, Richard says, "How is Algernon doing?" as he walks into the whiteness, away from me.

"Ok," I say, stepping out with him, pulling my robe tight, then stepping in, holding the door open.

The car leaves thin rings of white smoke behind it. The snowfall is deep and I can hear it rubbing against the bottom of the car as Richard turns off High Street, into Hill Street, which has been blown into drifts by the wind.

The car disappears from view behind the curtain of flakes. But I am still with him. I can't explain it. It feels so real. Richard likes to chew gum when he drives. Half a dozen sticks of Juicy Fruit are scattered across the dashboard. I concentrate on the road, smell the pervasive fragrance of Juicy Fruit. I am having a baby with Richard.

As we descend the hill, I find myself pressing with my brake foot. The light at the bottom of the hill, when we see it flickering through the snowfall, is red, but we are not slowing down. My foot is jamming my nonexistent brake to the floor. Richard's brake is to the floor also. We are sliding slightly from side to side, and accelerating. Now we are starting to spin; suddenly out of control. All at once I know we are going to hurtle through the red light.

Richard is cursing to himself, squinting to try to see out the windshield. Is he panicked? Does he think about me and the baby? I can't tell. I can't know.

I can't speak. I am trying, but only sounds like a deaf person makes come out of my mouth. I squeeze my eyes closed as we fly through the intersection. I hear the wail of a horn, then

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a second one. I brace myself for the impact, thinking horrifying thoughts about losing my baby.

"That was lucky," Richard says to himself as he rolls slowly to a stop.

I am still shaking. I stare out the window at the birds coming and going at the feeder; that sad gray cardinal, I see, is sitting on the ground below the feeder, pecking. I wonder if birds have any feelings. I know they don't have human feelings, but does she know in any way that she is alone now. Does it matter to her? Next Fall, when we put the bird feeder back up after we take it down for the summer, I hope so badly that she won't come alone.

R. J. Olkin

NOTICING

"So we're sitting at the table in this restaurant in Berkeley," Rich continues, walking backwards through the fall leaves on the sidewalk so he can face Laura. "We've had dessert, and are just kind of lingering over our coffee, and the waiter—Bob, I think he said his name was—asks if we want anything else."

Laura walks down the street (frontwards), half listening to Rich, half watching the sidewalk to see if he is going to trip over anything. She hasn't decided yet if this story will be interesting or not.

"So Harry, he says to the waiter, 'Do you have any matches?' and the waiter says—get this—he says 'No, but we have business cards near the exit; you can pick one up on your way out.'" Rich pauses, waiting for the impact of his tale to sink in.

"There's a curb coming up," Laura warns him.

"Don't you get it?"

"I guess not," Laura admits, inwardly sighing because this admission means he'll explain it to her.

"He was just so Berkeley, he couldn't believe we might want matches to do anything so plebian as lighting up a cigarette! He just assumed we wanted them because they were imprinted with the restaurant's address. Do you see?"

"Yes." Laura does see, though she isn't sure she quite sees what Rich seems to want her to see, which is the reason why the story is worth the telling (and probably retelling, she knows from experience). Four or five years ago, in their courting days, she would have found the story endearing because it highlighted an aspect of Rich she'd so enjoyed, the way he was always noticing things, taking everyday occurrences and putting his own bent on them. Nowadays, his version of events seemed more bent, rather twisted around until their shape was something quite other than what she'd thought.

"You have your own version of everything," she'd recently informed him. "You can't see reality."

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"There are four kinds of reality," he'd replied. "Plain reality, meta reality, hyper reality, and virtual reality. Which one do you think I have trouble with?" But Laura had already started to leave the room.

Laura had met Rich through a mutual friend, Bea. She and Bea were in their mid-twenties, with flat stomachs and long hair without split ends. Bea was living with Sam—a computer programmer who fit the stereotype so well that it wasn't even fun to kid him about it—whom she later married. She had this friend named Rich, she told Laura, who was such fun, she just had to get the two of them together.

"If he's such fun why aren't you dating him?" Laura asked.

"He's not my type. Sad, but true. Rich makes me laugh, and really pays attention when I talk, but I can't imagine taking a bath with him in the bathroom with me. No, when it comes to marriage I seem to go for sure and steady."

"He's not steady?"

"I didn't mean that, exactly. Let's just say he's more in touch with his inner child." This was not the kind of expression Bea normally used, which was one reason she and Laura were friends.

"Bea, do you really think I need to meet a man who's in touch with his inner child? Do you?"

"You'll like him. He's a sweet guy, and he'll notice you. You're a bit staid, hon; he'll lighten you up."

Laura looked at Bea and raised an eyebrow.

"Just meet him. Come with us Saturday. He's giving a party."

So she'd gone. The theme of the party was Confronting Death. A mock X-ray machine was set up at the entrance, so that when guests passed through the front door a whirring sound emitted from the "machine," and they were handed a small card that said "You have just been exposed to 50 rads of radiation. The longterm effects of this exposure are unknown." Everything

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edible was wholly or partially dyed with red dye number four, a suspected carcinogen. The air quality in the city that day was posted on the wall along with the chances of developing breast or prostate cancer, and the number of AIDS cases diagnosed since the beginning of that year. But Rich himself, wearing black longjohns printed with a white skeleton, was the embodiment of life. He ran the party like a consummate host, making sure everyone had someone to talk to, enough food and drink, a comfortable chair. He seemed to be everywhere at once, as if the term social butterfly had infused him with a lightness that kept him flitting among his guests. Only once did he alight, next to Laura, and looking into her eyes said, "If I have to confront death I'd rather do it with you. Give me your number. I'll take you out to dinner and we'll drink to life." She left her number written in red lipstick on his bathroom mirror. He called, and on their first date she told him a story she'd never told anyone. It was about how she'd had sex on the living room couch with an older boy from down the street every night for about three months, each time praying that her mother would just once not have passed out from alcohol, and would come out and discover them, and be furious. Rich got tears in his eyes as she told him this. They married one year later.

"Bea's invited us to dinner," Laura announces. "Sam's out of town, Sean's spending the night at a friend's, and she's lonely." Rich is sprawled over an easy chair doing the crossword puzzle in the paper. He looks up.

"Okay. What do we bring?" This is one of the qualities that endears him to all their friends, this assumption of participation.

"We're in charge of dessert."

Rich looks at the wall, absently clicking his pen in and out. "Chocolate, *ca va sans dire*," he muses. Laura leaves him to work it out, telling him she is going to take a nap.

On the way to Bea's house Laura drives, while Rich cuddles his chocolate concoction—"Two parts recipe to one part

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inspiration"—in a large round container on his lap.

"Have you ever noticed how sometimes on the freeway, for a sec., you're going the same speed as all the cars next to you? And for just a split second it looks like you and all the other cars are standing still, and the world is moving past you? Did you ever notice that?" Rich looks at Laura waiting for an answer. These things are important to him. Laura, who had noticed this phenomenon, wonders whether a Yes or a No will net the longest response on his part. For some reason it seems important to keep him talking during the drive over. For some reason she is anxious about going to Bea's. For some reason she feels just like that right now, that she is standing still and the whole world is passing by her, only in agonizing, slow motion, as if waiting for her to make a move.

"Look over there. See those two parked cars?" Rich points to a line of cars parked at the sidewalk. They are nearing Bea's neighborhood.

"What about them?"

"It works. The Purkinje effect strikes again!" He waits, looking at her. Laura knows that at some time Rich has told her about the Purkinje effect, and that she'd probably been fascinated, but she can't remember now what it means. But she doesn't want to admit this. Something in her makes her withhold from him lately.

"You know, the Purkinje effect." He waits a bit more, then can't resist. "Remember? In low levels of light, red turns grey before blue does? See, you can see the color of that blue car clearly, even though that red one, which would be much brighter during the day, looks grey."

"How grey can it look if you knew it was red?" She pulls the car into Bea's driveway.

"I'm in here," Bea calls out to them from the kitchen in response to their ring. Rich marches ahead of Laura, and they exchange kisses. Rich puts his dessert on the counter, and immediately exclaims, "The butcher block! You've had it refinished! It looks fabulous." He runs his hand over the wood. Laura says nothing. So often there was nothing left to say when Rich

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was done. He noticed everything, even about “her” friends—minor hair trims, new jeans, loss of three pounds. They loved him. Now Laura wonders if she would have noticed the butcher block if Rich hadn’t said anything. It seems so obvious after he pointed it out, the smoothness, devoid of cuts and nicks, shiny with several new coats of varathane.

At dinner she refuses the wine, picks at her food, and says little. Bea and Rich exchange recipes, as usual, and keep passing her food even when she passes it right back. Rich, who adores Bea (and tolerates Sam, for Bea’s sake), is thrilled to have her undivided attention.

“I think we should move, maybe go to someplace like Portland or Seattle.” Rich reaches across the table for a piece of warm bakery bread. Laura puts out her arm to move the basket of bread closer to him, but he’s already gotten a piece. Bea is looking at him thoughtfully.

“Why do you want to move?”

“They’re putting up walls next to all the freeways,” Rich replies, buttering his bread.

Rich and Laura have had this conversation before. Apparently California had passed a noise abatement law that, when translated into practice, meant the construction of ten-foot brick walls alongside freeways. Walls in tones of sand, beige, and adobe were springing up along highways the way oleander used to line the medians, obscuring the views of rolling hills and sandy shores.

Laura waits for Bea to say something like That’s a stupid reason, you don’t move because they’re putting up walls, or What’s the real reason? Instead she nods and says, “Yeah, I know what you mean.”

“Well, I don’t,” says Laura. “What does that mean, anyway? No one leaves a place just because of the way they build freeways.”

“No, I see just what he means,” says Bea. “It’s sort of symbolic, being hemmed in, not being able to see where you are.”

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"Right," Rich chimes in. "You could be on any freeway anywhere in America, and you wouldn't know where. All you'd see is brick walls."

"And what if we moved to Portland and they passed the same law? What then?"

"They wouldn't." Rich leans back, looking at Laura. "It's a California thing. Only in California would they try to improve the environment by building brick walls. It's California's environmental myopia. Take Yosemite, for instance."

Laura doesn't want to take Yosemite, or any more of this conversation. Bea, on the other hand, seems engrossed in it. Laura plays with her food. The tortellinis in pesto sauce are looking particularly gross. She covers them up with sun-dried tomatoes, making a little hill on her plate, then marching the Greek olives up the side of the hill. She tunes back in to hear Bea saying "No, you'll die when you hear this."

Rich already looks interested. He's leaning casually with one elbow on the table, his chair turned sideways so it faces Bea. She turns her chair toward Rich, clearly telling the story to him, for his benefit.

The story is about Sean, Bea and Sam's five-year old son. Sean was in the back of the car with his friend Andy. When they got to Andy's house Sean stayed in the car in his seatbelt, and Andy got out. Andy remembers he wants to tell Sean something, so he shouts it out but Sean shouts back that he can't hear. Andy tells him to open the window, but Sean can't because he can't reach with his seatbelt on.

"So, get this," Bea starts giggling. "Andy opens the door, but he can't get the window open by himself. So Sean undoes his seatbelt and helps Andy with the window. They finally get it open, and then Andy slams the car door shut again. He still hasn't told Sean what he wanted to say." They're both laughing now. Laura pushes an olive over the precipice of the tortellini mountain.

"Andy starts to tell Sean, but Sean yells 'Don't tell me 'til I have my seatbelt back on!' He refastens his seatbelt, and finally Andy can say what he had to say through the open car window.

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You know what it is, after all that? 'I'll see you in school tomorrow!'" Bea's holding her sides now, and she and Rich are in stitches. Laura doesn't think the story is so funny. Mildly amusing, she rates it to herself; worth a quick telling if you were, say, standing in a movie theatre line, or waiting for you check to be approved.

Suddenly Laura is tired. She wants to be home in bed, in a dark cool room with a fresh cotton sheet over her, listening to silence.

"I'm sorry, Bea, I'm not feeling well." Laura stands up. Rich and Bea look at her with concern. "Nothing to worry about, I'm sure."

Bea gets Laura's sweater, and kisses each of them on both cheeks. In the car Rich asks her if she's okay, and she says it's probably just a premenstrual headache. He knows she gets those.

Her period doesn't come, however, as she knows it won't. It's the second one she's missed. And if that isn't enough of a clue, the nausea and fatigue clinch it.

Sometime after her fourth missed period Laura goes over to Bea's house for lunch. She leans on the butcher block while Bea makes salad.

"Rich still talking about moving?"

"Not so much. I think he liked the idea of it more than the reality. He's the perennial rebel looking for a cause, and this seemed to fit the bill for awhile, 'til he finds a new thing."

"How about you? How're you doing?" Bea flings a bad piece of cucumber into the sink from across the room.

"I'm pregnant." Laura hadn't intended to tell Bea, but as soon as she says the words she's glad. Bea rushes over and hugs her.

"Congratulations! I'm so pleased for you two! Rich must be ecstatic!"

"Well. Now here's a funny thing. I haven't actually told him yet. He doesn't know."

"He doesn't know." Bea looks at Laura carefully.

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"No."

"What month are you in?"

"Around fourth."

"*Around* fourth? Aren't you sure?"

"Eighteen weeks, actually. I decided not to have amnio. The heartbeat is strong, and the sonograms look good." The words seem to be tumbling out, and even to Laura they sound strange. Bea should not be the first receiver of these words, Laura knows that. She just doesn't know why she hasn't told Rich.

Bea is staring at her, a carrot still in one hand, a paring knife in the other. "You're not thinking of terminating the pregnancy, are you?"

"Oh, no. It's not that. I just haven't found the right time to tell Rich. Or the right way."

"You did just fine telling me. I think that method would work pretty well, don't you? Just say Rich, I'm pregnant. I think the conversation would just sort of flow from there, don't you think?"

"I don't want to tell him." Laura bursts into tears, her nose running and her eyes immediately getting red and blotchy. Bea puts down the things in her hands, grabs a box of tissues from the countertop, and guides Laura into the living room to the couch.

"Let's see," Bea says. "Let's review here a moment. You're eighteen weeks pregnant, you're not thinking of an abortion, you've had a sonogram and heard the heartbeat of your first baby, and you haven't told your husband."

"I know it sounds odd. I can't explain it."

"Hon, he's going to notice any day now. Don't you think he ought to hear it from you first?"

"That's just it. He hasn't noticed." Laura begins to weep again. "He notices everything. He noticed your butcher block. He noticed a scratch on my car so small that even when he showed me where it was I had to bend down to see it. He remembers the names of waiters. He notices everything. Just not me."

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"Surely it's not as bad as all that? Could you possibly be—and mind you I say this as someone who's been there—just a wee bit more sensitive these days?"

"Bea," Laura sighs. "Listen to this. I'm sitting on tub edge in the bathroom, having thrown up. Rich comes in, and he didn't see me vomit, but you could smell it. I'm sitting there, feeling awful, wanting to brush my teeth but I'm afraid if I do the toothpaste will make me sick again. And Rich leans against the door, and you know what he says? He goes 'You know how you can see things out of the corner of your eye but when you look directly at whatever it is it seems to disappear? You know why that is? Because your peripheral vision is better than your regular vision. You know why?' Bea, I couldn't have cared less why. But he has to tell me about rods and cones, how the rods bunch up on the sides of the retina and share data. I don't want to hear it, yet I remember it. Somehow it all goes in, even when I think I'm not listening. He fills me up with this stuff. Did you know there's a theorem about why Macy's is next to Nordstrom's? It's called Hotelling's theorem. Remind me to tell you about it."

"Laura, you have to tell him."

"Maybe."

It is a dry January. California is parched after four years of drought, and the newspapers are warning of water rationing again this summer. But Laura finds that nothing soothes her itchy skin like a hot bath. She emerges from the tub and puts on her baby-blue terry robe, tying the sash loosely around her middle. She is twenty-one weeks pregnant, and has started to wear different clothes. She goes into the bedroom and sits near the foot of the bed. Rich is propped up against the pillows, under the cover, reading, but he looks up at her.

"Premature baldness," he says without preamble. "Now that's an interesting concept. What makes it premature? Take premature ejaculation—if it gets the job done, it isn't premature, is it? What makes baldness premature, then? What's the job of

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hair, anyway?"

Laura stands up and looks directly at Rich. "I haven't had a period since September."

"What's wrong? Something's wrong, isn't it. I've noticed you haven't been eating much the past few months. You know, when women don't eat enough they sometimes stop having their periods. I read about that..."

Laura interrupts him. "Then how come I'm gaining weight?" She opens her robe and takes it off, letting it drop on the floor behind her. "How come? Explain that."

Rich looks at her body, her Rubenesque roundness, her swollen breasts. His look of concern changes to confusion.

"Well," he starts. "I guess...you are gaining weight, I can see that." Laura watches the struggle on his face. She can see he hasn't made the connection. She waits for him to get it.

"Is something wrong? Is that it? Is that what you're trying to tell me?" He's almost in a panic now. She hesitates. She has the power to end his concern, turn it to joy, but still she withholds for just a second longer, wanting so badly for him to figure it out, to notice her with the intensity he used to.

In the end she tells him she's pregnant; she can see that otherwise he just isn't going to get it.

They named the baby Jane. Rich had noticed that Jane was no longer on the list of one hundred most popular names for girls, but had been replaced by Brittany and Tiffany, Heather and Megan. Water rationing started at the first of June, and the ubiquitous California lawns turned brown. Rich stopped talking about moving, and started talking about the sanctity of life and miracle of birth. He noticed everything about Jane, and reveled in her smallest achievements. He cried the day she discovered her hands, and rocked her all night when she had an ear infection. Often Laura would come home and find the two of them on the floor, crawling and discovering. Rich would look up at Laura, as if from a great distance. Then he'd look at Jane, the two of them eye to eye.

CONTRIBUTORS

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