

CAKETRAIN

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Ignition

I Joan of Arc Burns in a Living Room

TV trays uphold bowls of peanuts.
Venetian slats wedge out the afternoon.
Old ladies from the building have gathered
to watch a Hallmark special.

Then there's a darkness between light —
Turns itself to blind them.
The darkness, substantial, a web
despite the curtains of everyday radiance.
Joan looks to them.
At first you think you want to know the meaning of everything,
and then it doesn't stop.

II The Wine

As a fox, all that's possible is grapes.
Never the sweet tangy of hidden passageways.
I'm flustered; maybe I should want something else.
The whole forest keeps itself from me
and lovers have left a bottle to spill.

III You

I still know you;
I just know you as gone.

IV Life's Little Spell

Each of us, with a heart crammed into muscle,
 sparkles the knowing out loud.
I claim orange, its ruckus surprise.
As a father, you mended me into cells,
 a bud of your blood,
 then you wondered: chemically,
 I was a daughter starling,
 a daughter of constantly departing affection.
You drew pictures on every brown bag lunch.
My memory presses out crinkles
 as best it can,
 mounts each on an iridescent sky.

V Oops

Thick jade eyes sweat.
Moments of iron fume
and then children appear
wings drawn on.
Dice with snakes' tails.
A storm wraps the sun.
Coals of sound sheltered in an alphabet —

People die for words,
break down to smoke.

VI The Old Ladies Come Back

They open the blinds.
Framed powdered twilight rests on their shoulders.
Clara's dying;
Again. This time it's permanent.
They make all the jokes friendship will allow.
A stranger, from the building across the courtyard,
watches, imagines the wealth of long life.
The Brooklyn Bridge, a crane, flutters beyond
traffic lights, green fallen stars.

VII Don't It

Joan forgot she would get so caught up in coughing.
Shapes boil into colors.
How many strangers do I know?
And what of the millions to come?
One tongue fits its shape into another,
Expressions wilt from fear of being lost.
A small child waves through the bending heat.
She doesn't understand the fire
 in a very different way
I don't understand
 orange hands, hidden wicks.

VIII Stolen Flowers

Gifts of urge.

IX The Bed Tray Glistens

What swallows us is still not what we are.

You whispered, you were no longer afraid
your ardor would consume others —

so what if my heart is a stove?
A pink halo fizzed, calmed my languish for cure.

How at first,

cellophane domed you,
threatened my sense of touch.
But everyday, the vision of seeing through things shined
luminous, rose and risen.

Daniel, I hardly knew

Keep your eyes open; what you imagine is so much worse.
And he was right. The first time around, I feared
the cliffs my body was being torqued along.

The second time, same roller coaster, I forced my eyes to swallow
each blue plummet.
My heart cherried, my whole body blushed.

It was the end of summer. Almond and melon sky swirled.
Carnie bulbs, blisters of twilight. Cotton candy, small pink webs of our
mouths.
This was how I knew him, under popcorn clouds and peppermint striped canopies.

He was found, last week,
along the side of his house. Overdosed.
Snow drifts clung to his nakedness,
eyes locked open

My Roommate's Box of Worms

The cat, Slink, and I sniff the air holes.
Robin tears up strips of newspaper,
feeds them a half a pound of food scraps daily.
Sometimes I will suddenly remember the box;
silent inside, a squirming dark heat.

They eat through the president's haircut, last week's train crash,
Macy's underwear sale.
The dead worms, they eat.

What's wrong with the earth? I ask.
My sister argues for cremation,
Mom doesn't want to lay in a box waiting for crawlers.
And Julie's right.
A clean torch burst in spark under the wild sky...
Susan, it's more like a furnace...and you don't do it outside.

In the middle of night, Slink and I sit by the worms.
Do they ever dream of soil,
shimmying one long hole?

Interview @ Columbine

I was by the water fountain waiting my turn, behind a popular girl.
You see, I was a nobody, like them, but I am
OK with it. I like my world secret.

Nothing flutters when my name is called in home room.
I'd rather watch the pretty girls get their hearts stomped by boys who try too hard;
I wouldn't want to have to come into school and see my boyfriend's arm stretched
up someone else's locker.

Besides, as you can tell from my notebook, I'm hot for the lead singer of Destroyer Farm.
He's ugly, but he's free. No one really gets it. And I don't care.

Your camera is so bright, I'm like, burning.

Yield

Wild honey, wild oats, tall grass, seeds and nuts.
Red squirrel, grey rabbits, mustang, bear, buffalo.
Those who have been hunted, forsaken — it's not your fault.
It's about a vision; it's about how god told only him,
it's about the birds' song rippled from beak to beak.
Sleeping creatures woke to a sudden flood.
Do you know Jonestown, Guyana?

I walked like a shadow looking up at myself.
Skinned blue and you said drink in the kingdom of heaven,
drink your own ash and you will rest beneath a rain of hammers.

Eddie and the Rabbits

In the dream, the rabbits spoke in a strange, slow language.
We need you, who have hands, to build us a palace.

I convinced Eddie, the shyest boy in the neighborhood,
to help me. In the dream, my dolls
sit on mushrooms, and the old rabbit cage, emptied
since last Easter, is pulled open by vines.

The dream bunnies, warm and soft when you held them close,
trusted skin. Their ears, sheer endive leaves rotated towards breath.

We heaped dead leaves on a branch scaffolding, set out food daily
and grew cotton tails. Eddie's ears furred up.
From trees, we focused fresh wet moonlight on the leafy mound.

But never saw the rabbits.
Though they ate our offerings
and perforated winter with tracks of their existence.
What were we hoping for?

Strength

Maw-maw was propped up on that tiny bed
like a large boneless doll, clear tubes and colorful wires
like mapped rivers on her gown. She said,
her voice like door creaking open,
I love you all.

We waited for a punch line. Something sassy.
Something Sophie Tucker. Something so grandma,
a woman of girth and strength.
A woman who hid in sex jokes and crass lies.
Something like, *Except for you, you shit!*

The oxygen mask covered her nose,
mouth, and cheeks. Thick tubes
on either side streaming with mist

My brother lifted his cup and said:
Well, now we know she's drugged.
Cracked his back with an empty chair.

The Same Man

1.

It had only been two months since mom and Maw-maw stopped fighting with every word, their voices drenched with, *I didn't know any better...* and *How could you...*

Maw-maw fell in love young, too young, six years-old young. There were no books or talk shows to explain her neighbor's touch or who was responsible for whom.

There was only a marriage to hide shame.
I was old for twelve, Maw-maw would say,
enough fat to pass for hips and breasts.

2.

My mother, five years-old, waited on her stomach for father. Chubby-four-eyed-monkey-girl.

His night walk to her small bed, his large hands lifting her onto his sex. His unlovable upper lip sweating against her stiffening back.

3.

I do not know if Maw-maw walked the halls
of her tenement home wanting to curl her fists.
If she thought, *He's all I have*.
If she was jealous of her daughter's youth.
The nights she could not sleep.
The sound of footsteps and closing doors.
The routine gasp. Her own young heart
conflicted with jump-rope love.

4.

The nurse told us about Maw-maw's
fall from the bed onto the soiled floor.
The feverish rip of the catheter tube,
howling as if the moon were thinning her blood.

5.

There was relief in the hollow of Maw-maw's stomach.
She has had enough of children and orgasms making
her mouth damp with want.

6.

Maw-maw did not say to my mother,
"I know what your father did to you."

She only, one night after we learned the words
endometrial cancer, stroked my mother's thin hair
and said, *Your dad wasn't always the best.*

7.

I wonder if this was enough.

8.

Maw-maw's fat arms punched at ghosts.
She yelled, *They were terrible to me!*
Like I was a piece of meat!
The morphine suspended in her nauseous blood.
The opening of doors and the sigh of dead foot steps.

Normal

Each morning I pack lunch
for my brother, mother, grandpa
and me: sandwiches, baby carrots,
quartered oranges, hard boiled eggs.

*There she goes, grandpa says,
makin' us a picnic.*

In the afternoon, we walk through
the familiar cafeteria to the back
of the hospital where a section
of the parking lot is fenced in
and bordered with palms.

We choose a patio table in the center,
pull over chairs, wipe their surfaces clean
of bugs and hyacinth leaves.

What years are these that the old drive
back and forth from pharmacies
to waiting rooms in a land that is hardly theirs?
Retirement communities of wheelchair ramps
and air-conditioned rooms. The red flashing light
in the outdoor hall, another heart stopped.

I hand out food wrapped in plastic bags and foil.

Mom puts her arms behind her head
and leans back.

Jay takes a bite of his sandwich
and tells grandpa, again, how
he could get internet on his TV.

I bang a boiled egg against the table
and peel its cracked tan skin.
Inside Maw-maw sleeps in the hospital bed
too small for her frame. When she cries,
I want to go home, we are unsure of where
or of what time, she is speaking.

Grandpa sucks the juice from a sliced orange
as if in fifteen minutes we weren't going
back inside for the rest of the day.
A picnic, he says, a real picnic I tell ya.

The Cellar

For my eighteenth birthday Maw-maw made a pan of vodka Jell-O. Our new All-American frat boy tradition, cherry calves' hooves and food dye, mixed with our "Mother Russia potato water." Before the word abandon came to mind when mom came home drunk with married men, before holding her wiry hair in my hands as she forced herself to throw-up grilled shrimp and bourbon, before my high school morning bodega beers. We lifted our wobbling paper cups.

I thought myself lucky to drink with them.
Lucky we were all so young together.
Congratulations, Maw-maw cheered,
on not being married or knocked-up.
L'chaim!

I swallowed the blood clot shot a year after a man served plum wine until he could pin my arms behind my head and anchor his body inside of mine. A year before the first abortion. My secrets are like my mother's secrets, like her mother's secrets, made into sarcastic jokes or stored like root vegetables in the damp cellar of our bladders, ovaries, and lungs.

Memory of Making Meatloaf

The night before Thanksgiving
when Maw-maw still lived
in New York and cooked large meals
with my mother and I
she dipped her hand into a copper bowl
of egg and chopped meat,
squeezed in the parsley and salt.

When Maw-maw lifted her hand
out of the bowl, the egg dripped
from her short fingers.
She looked into the video camera lens,
winked and said, *Looks like yellow come.*

R a g e

No. Go gentle. Go. Sleep without dreaming
of blood and pain. Go without
a drowning heart. Without malignant cells.

Without worried nails scratching stitches
and picking through sweaty gauze.

Old age should not have to burn.
Do not rage, Maw-maw, brazen, bawdy,
raunchy, Maw-maw. Go without new blood

sprouting from between your thighs, without
legs hurting each time you try to stand.
Go without the fear your dead sister
did not forgive you. That your son
is without your love. That the mortgage
will not be paid. Sleep. Old woman.

Dream of taking your father's hand
and gently picking the paint from his skin.
Make a pot of *tzimmes*. Grate lemons
and ginger. Slice carrots and yams.

You, Maw-maw, grandma, wild woman,
thirteen states away, go without
your eyes blazing in the dying light.

Coca-Cola

Swimming, swimming, swimming,
swimming, swimming, swimming, swimming,

is the compacted beacon of all of America, making no discriminatory
or equivocating gestures towards the lips of Bill Clinton, Madonna,
the bum who farts into the bewildering funk of urban afternoon or his
shadow...

into lunch-boxes held by pre-pubes who smear kisses on Valentines
meant for athlete-bedecked bedroom walls in Illinois suburbs

into studio/lofts of conceptual East Village artists projecting images
of crack babies onto dolls heads for un-classicist art-press to dissect

into adulterous hotel rooms, throats parched from long-awaited fucking
dissolved into post-orgasm remorse & hunger for sugar

into uncertain hands of U.N. ambassadors from remote Asian countries
wishing to penetrate mysteries of bafflingly homogenous consumer culture

into lone ramshackle shacks of New Mexico cowboys thinking to assuage
grief of raising ungrateful cattle to be hacked to bits & served w/ Coke

into pimp's refrigerator, to be mixed w/ Captain Morgan's Rum & Jack
Daniels for lusty ladies working up nervous courage to get fucked

into prosecutor's brief-case for cross-examination breaks & caffeine rush
to stay alert & approach the bar w/ appropriately rabid visage

into churches (Sunday-afternoon teen mixer under auspices of local PTA),
synagogues (Hebrew school classes need carbonation), perhaps not mosques

....and back out again, into trashcans, trashcans, trashcans, such the fate
of America's too-universal essence, to be crushed by fists who live here...

A feast of Halloweens

Tragedy; Scotty's phlegm-hocking grandpa keeled over like a rogue potato sack, clutching white-sheeted arm, 1981.

Farce; gauche attempt at high-heeled androgyny, yours truly, string of pearls donated by pill-popping Becky, State College, 1995.

Drama; gang of us assailed by Marlboro-smoking thugs outside Cheltenham Recreation Center, evoking bad Clint Eastwood imitation, 1989.

Comedy; entire front porch railing collapsed into weedy West Philly yard under pressure from drunken crew of goblins, 1999.

Coming-of-age; nice Jewish boy watches flaming crew strut through midnight screening of Rocky Horror, South Street, 1991.

Romance; feel of Amy's head against suited shoulder following Ouija Board nightmare & too much fruit punch, 1988.

Epic; shooting pedestrians w/ water guns,
schlepping actual electric guitar around,
up all night nitrous-intoxicated, 1992.

Documentary;....you just saw it!

Cathleen Richardson Bailey

Marching Up Seabreeze

Curious neighbors lived across the street from us, casual men and their unhurried women. The men, bare-chested and stumbling, hoisted bottles of Thunderbird in brown paper bags to their lips.

“What’s the word?” they sang. “Thunderbird. What’s the price? Fifty twice.”

The men drank heartily and washed a fleet of broken down, late-model Cadillac cars. They twisted free the fire hydrant’s yellow iron stopper. Water gushed. Children dodged in and out of the hydrant’s spray and giggled at the drunken men, understanding the brown bags as ridiculous camouflage.

The women leaned their elbows on pillows from upstairs opened windows without screens. They smoked filterless cigarettes and drank their Thunderbird from tea cups poured from bottles hidden between their legs.

“Throw me down a pack of squares,” one of the men looked up and yelled to his resting woman.

She laughed and tossed down the cigarettes, “Here catch,” and “Need more liquid?”

Mother peeked at the casualness through the living room venetian blinds.

“Little Sister,” Mother said to me. “Look at this mess across the street. Dis-gusting. I tell you...a circus. Drunks...every one. Mr. Gracen! Now, where is that man? Little Sister, go tell your father it’s time to eat.”

I worked after school at Morrey's-On-the-Corner dishing up fabulous ice cream desserts like The North Pole, The Whole Shebang and Banana Hot Chocolate Splits. Mother loved beautiful things and I surprised her with a silver tea service I purchased with my hard earned money.

My sister, Sadie, remained "away dear" for most of my childhood. She came home permanently the year I turned sixteen and began my after school job at Morrey's. Sadie and my relationship happened long before she came home. It was my doing. I simply stared at her photo. It hung over the living room mantel, so I studied her likeness; the crooked grin, the fading dimple; her weak hair pulled back into the severe ponytail, the bump on her forehead protruding. I wondered about the bump. Had she fallen? Mostly, I wondered about Sadie's eyes. How could one person be so sad?

Sadie didn't look like me, or Mr. Gracen.

"I'll get the door," I remember Mother saying one evening when I was five years old.

I lay in bed, excited about tomorrow and my first day of kindergarten.

"Mr. Gracen!" Mother nearly shouted her head off, "It's a telegram...from Shady Pines. Oh, come quick. Do you think it's about Sadie?"

My first day of kindergarten should have been a special day. Mother and I had planned for weeks—what I'd wear, the route we'd take—but Sadie's mysterious telegram changed all that.

"Take her to school, Mr. Gracen," Mother instructed, still clutching Sadie's telegram the next morning. She sat in her bedroom chair and gazed at the unhurried women sweeping clean the sidewalk from last night's festivities. On a normal day, this unusual activity would have produced a comment from Mother. Something

like, “I tell you...it’s about time. Cleanliness is next to godliness.”

But not today.

“Mother,” I whined with kindergarten exasperation, “where is Sadie?”

“Away dear,” Mother answered, not bothering to shift her gaze.

So it had been Mr. Gracen who took me to school that first day of kindergarten. He introduced me to Miss Nublock, the kindergarten teacher. I stared at Miss Nublock’s head that blocked just like her name and at her several dangling grey hairs. At recess, Miss Nublock’s grey hairs wiggled in the breeze.

“Watch out, watch out...here comes the lovely one!”

Grown men and young boys licked their lips and whispered the “lovely one” thing when Mother passed. She wore spiked heels and covered her legs with eleven-long-coffee-bean-sheer-silk-stockings from Parklane’s Fine Hosiery.

Alone in my bedroom on a Saturday afternoon, I daydreamed. One day I’d be a confident woman and stroll into Parklane’s. “Give me two pair eleven long coffee bean, your sheerest please.”

Mother’s sensuality stemmed from her long shapely legs and the gap in her teeth that flashed the same time as her left cheek dimple when she smiled. I loved watching Mother lotion her legs and arms with Nivea, Europe’s #1 moisturizer. I especially wished for a spray of Mother’s intoxicating perfume.

“Ohh...Mother, spray some on me...please.”

“Oh no,” Mother would answer. “I tell you. This perfume is a powerful sex potion, Estée Lauder Youth Dew, not for little girls. You must wait until you’ve grown a little more...wait until maturity. It won’t be long, Little Sister. You’ll see.”

Mother had mountainous bosoms that spilled forth with impunity. I could stick the top of my head into one of Mother’s bra

cups, and couldn't wait until maturity. Then I'd harness up portions of my body, prance around a bedroom and be in command of a powerful sex potion.

Many years separated Sadie and me. Sadie's father had been an old man our Mother had not loved, but for groceries, had been kind to when she was sixteen.

"You're different than me and Sadie," Mother explained admiring her silver tea service, that perfect gift I'd given her the year I turned seventeen, "you've got guts. You go after what you want. Hunger can make a person do just about anything."

Mother looked at me as if examining me for the first time.

"You're growing up Little Sister. Here, open your blouse." She sprayed a tiny drop of Estée Lauder in my cleavage. "Now, how's that feel, Little Sister?"

"Nice," I answered.

"Oh yes," Mother continued. "We girls must always smell nice. And in just the right places."

"Mother," I began tentatively, "tell me about my sister. Tell me about Sadie."

Mother sighed. "Well...Sadie's father was a kind old man. I was lucky to have him when I did. You and Mr. Gracen didn't come until later. It was hard for me and Sadie at first. And don't worry, you'll get to meet Sadie...one day. Look in that top drawer over there. Yes. See that little undershirt? Go on. Pick it up. Lovely, isn't it? Sadie made that for you just after you were born."

I held the tiny undershirt in my hands and caressed Sadie's careful embroidery work, *Little Sister*, stitched across the front in pink thread. I thought about Sadie's sad eyes in the photo. How could someone so sad create something so beautiful.

"May I keep it?"

“Yes,” Mother said. “She made it for you.”

In the midst of bedlam, people crying and stumbling over each other, Mother’s breasts saved my life one year at the annual Sunday School picnic.

“Someone must have bothered those bees,” Mother told Mr. Gracen later, “I tell you...bees don’t just bother people unless they’re bothered first.”

“Little Sister!” Mother had yelled as the swarm grew. The sky blackened from the sheer number of them. She threw me to the ground and lay on top of me. I could feel Mother’s steady heart beat. She remained still. The bees flew past and I concentrated on the pillow softness of Mother’s breasts, on being calmed by the thump, thump of her heart beat on my back.

“I tell you,” Mother whispered in my ear, “nobody messes with anyone in my family...not even angry bees.”

The Madden family lived up the street.

“A corner piece of property,” Mother always complained to Mr. Gracen, “and look what they do to it. *Dis-gusting.*”

The house could have been a showpiece but the Maddens made babies, not showpieces. The youngest Madden girl didn’t smell fresh. Someone always pushed her chubby little body into a too small dress and I felt sorry for her when the big older sister, Lavisha, pushed her into the kindergarten room. Some of the kids teased the little Madden girl. I never did. She had watery eyes and a beautiful singing voice. No one played with her and she sat in the corner by herself. She sang *we are...climbing...Jacob’s...ladder...soldiers...of the...cross.* Sometimes just hearing her voice made my eyes tear.

Taboo meant needing to pee after Miss Nublock’s scheduled bathroom breaks. I tried peeing during bathroom time. I’d sit on the

little toilet and push and push. But not a trickle. About five minutes after returning to Miss Nublock's classroom, I'd have to raise my hand and say, "Miss Nublock, may I please be excused?" She sucked her teeth, shook her big blocked head and wrote out a hall pass with warning, "This is your last chance young lady. You either follow the rules or your mother will have to be notified."

With humility and gratification, I received the hall pass and before leaving the room, peered up and down the hallway, my heart beating wildly. Good. No one around but just as I reached the bathroom door, Lavisha Madden appeared from around the bend in the hallway.

"You sure got big ears," Lavisha said and gave my ear an awful pinch. Then she turned my ear in a three hundred and sixty degree revolution. I didn't cry. The pain did produce tears, but no sound. I saw flashing white lights all around.

Lavisha's torture went on for weeks. She learned my kidney schedule and waited for me, hidden in the dark recesses of the hallway. Lavisha pinched and twisted. I had no defense. Lavisha stood three heads taller and where the youngest Madden girl didn't smell fresh, Lavisha out and out stank. The girl was rank. I couldn't take it any more. So I fought back.

"You're so pretty," I looked up into Lavisha's big face and lied.

"Am I?" Lavisha asked, greedily needing confirmation.

"Yes...I wish I could look like you."

It worked. Lavisha let go of my ear but fear had already claimed a permanent place in my heart.

"My sister's in your room," Lavisha said. "You better be nice to her."

"I already am. Really, I'm the only one in our class who doesn't tease her."

The next morning, Mother cooked breakfast and helped me on with my white sailor dress and tied my Buster Brown shoes. But I couldn't eat, and lay my head on the kitchen table.

"I tell you," Mother said, "Little Sister...what's wrong...better hurry and eat your eggs. Nobody likes cold eggs. You're going to be late for school."

"I can't."

"I tell you...Little Sister...you better tell me what's wrong." I noticed the rise in Mother's voice.

"It's the big girl. She keeps pulling my ear."

"Mr. Gracen!" Mother hollered up the steps, "I'm taking Little Sister to school. Some child has been pulling on Little Sister's ear."

I heard Mr. Gracen's foot hit the floor.

Mother looked up at the ceiling. "See. Mr. Gracen's angry. I tell you. . this is serious family business."

So Mother and I went marching up Seabreeze Road. Mother in her high heels and coffee bean Parklane hosiery. Me in my Buster Browns, a trail of Estée Lauder's Youth Dew billowing behind. The men and young boys pretty near wept from unfulfilled passion. "Here she comes," they whispered, "the lovely one."

"Point this child out to me, Little Sister. I tell you, as soon as you see her, point her out."

"There she is," I said pointing.

"Lavisha dear," Mother said, sugar dripping from her lips. "Why must you pull Little Sister's ear?"

Lavisha looked at Mother and said, "Do you think I'm pretty too?"

Mother touched Lavisha's arm. This time Mother's sugary words seemed genuine. "You can be anything you want. If pretty is what you need, then be pretty. I tell you. . just don't be pulling Little Sister's big ears. Now. . .should we go into the office about

this, or to your house and disturb Mrs. Madden?”

“No ma’am,” Lavisha said.

“It’s been a long day,” Mother said later on, “way past your bedtime. Put her to bed, Mr. Gracen.”

Mr. Gracen tucked me in, bent down and kissed my cheek.

“Don’t be ashamed of your ears Little Sister. My granddaddy Norman had big ears. That’s where it comes from. Your great-grand-daddy Norman. Night Little Sister.” He rubbed my ear.

“Night Mr. Gracen,” I whispered to my father, such a gentle Mr. Gracen.

In that same kindergarten year, Mr. Gracen escorted Mother and me to his cousin’s wedding. We entered the sanctuary and hope filled my heart. I noticed a big ear here and several over there and several more over there and not just on little girls, but on little boys and babies and grown men and women. I was home. A feeling of fondness and familiarity comforted me. These...were my people. I smiled at Mr. Gracen. Mother noticed too, “See Little Sister...these are your people.”

Mr. Gracen brought Sadie home in the spring of my sixteenth year. Mother and I sat on the front porch waiting.

I sang “*We are...climbing...Jacob’s...ladder,*” and tapped the song’s rhythm on the porch rail to calm my excitement.

Poor Mother, so nervous and, “Little Sister!” she spit out, “do you have to tap that rail!”

I stopped tapping and sat quietly like Mother. We waited for Mr. Gracen’s car to round the bend.

Frail Sadie walked with a limp. The fading dimple on her cheek had expired. She wore heavy, industrial, tie-up shoes, like Frankenstein. I looked for the bump on her forehead and noticed it just as she turned to reach for Mr. Gracen’s hand. He helped her up

the steps.

“My Sadie, my Sadie,” Mother said over and over, rocking, looking straight ahead, the casual people across the street a convenient deterrent.

“Mother,” Sadie said as she passed. “Mr. Gracen said I could lay down first, is that all right?”

“Yes, yes.”

Sadie came home with lots of medicine. Tiny brown bottles lined the counter by the kitchen sink; dosage amounts and “when to take” instructions posted on the wall. Mother placed the medicine in Sadie’s opened mouth at each interval.

Mother and Sadie planned a shopping trip and Sadie almost giggled as she modeled her new pink, fluffy slippers for Mr. Gracen and me. The slippers alleviated her limp because they weighed much less than her Frankenstein shoes. I brought Sadie a different dessert home each day from Morrey’s. She decided she liked vanilla shakes the best.

“The other ones might be too big,” Sadie explained quietly. “Not sure what I should do with them.”

Sadie always locked the door to take a shower. I’d sit on the floor facing the bathroom and rest my face against the door; Mr. Gracen and Mother standing behind me. Mr. Gracen put his arm around Mother’s shoulders. He had to hold her up. The three of us listened to Sadie sing. The lilt in her voice gave me goose bumps and made Mother cry.

“Sing Sadie,” I’d whisper to myself.

She did. Clear and strong; but not like Ike and Tina. As if imploring: *won’t somebody please tell me what’s wrong.*

Several times a week Sadie said, “Let me see the undershirt, Little Sister.”

I liked watching Sadie smile as she touched her own embroidery work.

“Thank you, Little Sister for keeping this undershirt so nice. It makes me happy.”

“Sadie,” I said, “why were you away so long?”

“Nerves. Mother says I have a fragile composition. Not like you Little Sister, you’re strong.”

A tear slid down her cheek.

“I’m glad you’re home Sadie. That’s the most important thing. You’re home.”

We sat back and watched the neighbors across the street. Sadie sipped her vanilla shake through a straw and I ate my Whole Shebang.

Sadie burped.

“Wow, that was good,” she said, looking into the empty paper cup.

After that, Sadie and I felt comfortable enough to sit in our chairs on the front porch and hold hands. Sometimes Sadie stared off into nothing. Other times, she smiled and said, “Little Sister... my little sister.”

Brian Patrick Heston

New York

So, I was in front of Van Gogh's *Starry Night*, staring into disfigured chaos, when I had finally understood everything.

When I left the museum, I saw a hotdog vendor on 68th. Told him of the painting, how Van Gogh composed it from a madhouse, eating paint, choking on the universe he watched from his window. Vendor asked me if I wanted kraut. He wasn't crazy, I kept repeating to myself. He was filled with the wisdom of art. It was good I thought about this first, because in words it would have probably sounded pretty silly.

Vendor awaited my response like a sphinx.

"Sure," I said, finally. "Give me the works."

Letter to the Editor

“Just as the body casts off worn out clothes
and puts on new ones, so the infinite, immortal self
casts off worn out bodies and enters into new ones.”

The Mahabharata (2,22)

In the subway
scuttle,
always this special
sadness
I feel for the reincarnated
Pharaohs;
how disappointed
they seem
in this place
of stone,
awaiting yet another
boat
to ferry them
to paradise.

my five-year-old sister contemplates the
meaning of it all

“I must find a truth that is true for me...
the idea for which I can live or die.”

Soren Kierkegaard

hanging around in silence she stalks me in the morning
heavy silver dollar eyes squint trying to see me
mirage halo of gold about my head
sequin light draping me she asks
where's the skin for the eyes i say
at the retail on third then she skips
through the mud whistling a tune
for a store that never closes

*

on the dance card

she says—
it's on the dance card
(the halo always shines inside the mind)
Jesus asks
is there anymore lightening—

she responds
only when God is sleeping

*

in lamplight
her words within jump rope's embrace

ask the chipmunk how daffodils grow
speak to the eagle about Solomon
rain drips down the sky's elderly face—
the sound of clouds

Rina Ferrarelli

Talking Long Distance

I stare out of the window
at the gap the light company left
in the air above the street,
the unwanted, necessary cuts
that keep the power lines
from igniting the branches,
the joints still white and moist.

“The maple you climbed,”
I tell my daughter when I call,
her “Hello” strong and vibrant,
unlike mine, that has a question at the end.
Voice low, controlled, warm,
she feels in the same room
across thousands of miles.

“I always dream I’m on our street,
in our house,” she said once,
shortly after she left—
an unguarded moment, rare
in this fiercely independent child
who would have liked to pioneer the West,
who’s pioneering herself
as far from home as she can get.

But today, before the inevitable click
severs the connection, the illusion
of presence, her voice sinks, fades,
as if she were walking away,
walking back in time,
waking up the child asleep in the woman
long enough to say goodbye,
a small, "Bye, Mom,"
that resonates for days
in an empty room inside of me.

Photo Toss

I could have been your ex-husband—
the reversed negative in old photos—
but you claimed the moon as a sister
and every star as a silent partner.

We took lemon pledges one night in a bar,
announcing our imminent marriage
to a barrage of free drinks,
then took two hits of speed apiece
to stay up, to follow through. Still,
you fell asleep on the phone to your sister
who wasn't thrilled with the good
news. It sounds as if I'm blaming
you, though I'll take half the blame,
put it into lines and snort.

Sometimes magic dust is just plain
old dust. Even addicts take out the garbage
and vacuum once in a while.
Time slurred its syllables through
our years together, but we emerged
alive. I'm relieved to say we never
married. Not that it made me mint
when I finally did— tied the knot,
bit the bullet. Ate the crow.

Let the snow melt till the air smelled
faintly of spring.

Dust on drugstore photo envelopes.
The attic's steamy but I won't take them
downstairs where my children
are playing War with a dog-eared deck.
What rank would they give
this red-eyed stranger?

I keep a few, like overdue bills I'll never
pay, or receipts for false deductions,
or the useless currency
of a former communist country
that kept adding zeroes—like your eyes
bent over a mirror.

I save you brushing your teeth,
evidence of one ordinary thing.

Logical Explanation

Toenail clippers are larger versions
of fingernail clippers.
Which means my love for you is a larger version
of my love for myself.
Which means the hangnail on my finger
is the square root of my purple toe.
Therefore, the clippings both large
and small of our distinguished career
together can be melted and shaped
into a realistic working model
of the human heart,
etc.
etc.
etc.

Pulse

On the train to Avignon, a child
will not stop sobbing.

We hand up our son's walkman.
Someone loans a hard rubber doll.

Someone makes funny faces, but still,
relentless sobbing. Snow crashes against

windows, our faces tight with strained hours
of whiteout. Will we make it past Lyon?

Will anyone be anywhere to greet us?
Can we dig our cars out, wherever

we parked them? The child wails.
His father frantically rocks him

while a mother in front of us
snaps, smacking her own daughter.

My children tumble into miracle sleep,
heavy and warm against us. The train hurtles

on through the dizzy whirl of snow—then,
finally, silence: the child asleep, rocked

into stiff dreams, surrounded
by our harsh sighs, our pulsing necks.

Kool / Aid

August factory killer heat—gallon jug,
cherry, lots of ice, artificial hope
 five cents a glass on the street—
 a dozen ice cubes, then sugar, powder
 water—plastic pitcher, rusty wagon
the drive, the long rattling over Mound Road's
tar torn loose by winter and salt
 manipulating the bumpy sidewalk
 tilted up by roots emerging
the walk to my machine, my station, my place,
 we were cute kids—the mailman
my permanent footprints. To replenish.
 An easy mark, and anyone's
To save. Blood on the altar
 mother. Sticky coins and thirst.
Of good money, steady work. Staining.
 Sunburn and boredom. Ice
The vessel, draining.
 Melting. Counting.
Red lips. No kiss.

Pittsburgh In The News

A goldfinch bobs on a sunflower's head
picking out seeds behind Uncle Jimmy's Bar
where some guy got killed in a fight Friday night

before the Chinese restaurant next door
burned down. Investigations are taking place.
Details are sketched in chalk, erased by rain.
Graffiti codes indecipherable.

The sunflower, a volunteer from winter seeds,
gracefully allows itself to be picked apart,
gold blending into gold. Even the sparrows
are stunned by this yellow light.

Home

Like a comet streaking across the heavens, it was coming his way. Melvin backpedaled, turned, sprinted, measured the wall with a glance from the corner of his eye, slowed momentarily, sprang from the planet with outstretched hand and returned to earth in the heat of August with a baseball dangling from his glove like the snow cones he'd often purchased at the concession stand. Left field could be a boring existence, not to mention hot as Hades and a favorite hangout for the meanest mosquitoes in west Tennessee. But this time he ran off the field under the banter of teammates and pats on the back that grew in intensity until his body shook in spasms and coughs.

Melvin awoke not concerned about the beads of sweat on his forehead or the phlegm he'd coughed up or the fact that in a few minutes he would urinate on himself, but rather did they win that game. Yes, he made the catch and threw a bullet to second base, nailing the runner who thought the ball was out of the park. But that was more than 20 years ago and he became angry with himself that time had faded color from memory.

"Ma. Ma!"

He dragged himself from the bed, grabbing a bedpost to balance the dizziness in his head, then leaning against bookcase, dresser, doorknob and finally with one hand against the bathroom wall, was able to relieve himself. He steadied himself without any aid and made it back into bed under the power of his own weakness. Melvin stopped before the mirror and examined himself. The sore was still

on his nose. Each excursion threw a different reflection back at him until he wasn't sure if he was who he appeared to be, like those trick mirrors at the county fair. His hair was falling out in clumps, his cheekbones and eye sockets were vacuous and he ached all the time. Ma would help him to the bathroom whenever, but this time of day she was preparing supper and the kitchen was too far away for sound. It was two o'clock in the afternoon.

Melvin pulled the covers around him, clasped his hands across his chest, closed his eyes. He just wanted to breathe. Stumbling from bed to bathroom left him exhausted and breathing was a palliative. Feeling comfort seep into his bones, he used the headboard as a backrest and reached for a copy of *Siddhartha* on the bedside table.

The shadow of a bird diverted Melvin's attention. Outside, the world was a revolving sphere of fall colors with falling leaves under a soft diminishing autumn sun. The sky tumbled and rolled endlessly pastel taking with it warm temperatures and longer days. This was back to school weather. Football weather. October weather. But most of all this was berry picking weather and the very thought of it made his taste buds jump and shout with clandestine teenage forays on Old Man Houston's place to kidnap hidden treasures sparkling like black jewels on overburdened vines. Melvin swallowed, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and was surprised to find his face un-mottled with the stain of berries.

Melvin read intensely until the words began to blur and disappear and he began to nod, dozing off somewhere between plot and character. And the deeper his sleep, the more lucid the voice of his mother called to him on this school morning to get up, breakfast was waiting and he might miss the bus. His mother's words were always tender and warm, like the bed covers you inevitably pulled around your shoulders, rolling over, trying to steal a few moments

more comfort. And Carolyn Davis was reason enough to get out of bed on any morning. Melvin sat next to her on the bus and shared three classes with her. He loved the way she giggled and covered her smile whenever he told her how pretty and fine she was and he loved the way she smelled in the back seat of his father's car on prom night, the fragrance of carnations, body heat and impending adulthood blending into an intoxicating perfume.

He felt feverish this morning and didn't think he could make it to school. Mom was standing over him with aspirins and orange juice and by tomorrow he would be on his feet again. But when Melvin opened his eyes there were no aspirins but AZT, Sustiva and Ziagen and he realized he was wide awake and that tomorrow and the end of time were inextricably linked.

Melvin blinked his eyes, shook his head.

"No pills today Ma."

Helen Watkins had dark eyes and close cropped hair that grayed at the temples. Emerging wrinkles could not hide traces of beauty and youth on her oval face from thirty years prior. Time and age had been emollients for her looks. Her light blue apron was decorated with stains and smudges of countless morning and evening preparations.

"It's time to take your medicine, Melvin. C'mon, here." She prodded him with the glass of juice.

"What for? Medicine is supposed to cure you. They haven't come up with that one yet. No more games."

Helen Watkins balled the medicine into a fist and placed it on her hip. Her lips tightened into a firm line of defiance. "You said you weren't going to give up. Remember? So why you quitting now?"

Melvin's laughter was hollow. "You can't quit when you've already lost, Ma."

“Who said you’ve lost? You’ve had bad days before. That’s what the medicine is for.”

“Yeah, well this is beyond bad days now. Ma, I haven’t been out of bed for a week. I barely could make it to the bathroom a minute ago—”

“—Why didn’t you call me?” Her facial expression reflected the concern of her voice.

“I don’t know.”

She set the glass of juice on the bedside table, laid the pills beside it and smoothed her apron.

“I’m making burgers and milkshakes for supper.” Helen Watkins ended her statement with inflection and arched eyebrows.

Melvin frowned as if the thought of food was sickening. “I’m not very hungry.”

“Since when? Burgers and chocolate shakes have been your favorite since you were 10 years old. What’s wrong with my cooking now?”

“Nothing Ma. I’ll just pick over it, that’s all.”

“Well. As long as you eat something.”

Melvin slammed his hands down on the bed, knocking the book to the floor. “What the hell difference does it make!? What difference does anything make? Whether I eat, sleep, get married, win the lottery, climb Mount Everest, win the Nobel, stop global warming...in a couple of weeks my whole life wouldn’t have amounted a damn thing.”

“Now listen to me.” She picked the book from the floor and sat beside her son on the bed, his hand in hers. “You chose to leave out of this house 12 years ago to follow your dreams to become an actor. You said there wasn’t nothing on the face of the planet that could stop you from making it to Broadway. And your Daddy and I didn’t try to discourage you—”

“—My Daddy? The Right Reverend Thomas Watkins?” The word “daddy” could have been a Latin word, being far away and foreign to Melvin’s vocabulary.

“—Yes, your Daddy... We tried to get you to re-think what you were about to do, but you had to have things your own way. Now, three weeks ago you come back home determined to beat this thing and get back on your feet, how this was your life and that you’d made some mistakes in the past and that you took full responsibility for them. But today all you want to do is feel sorry for yourself and die. How selfish can you be!?”

Melvin shook his head from side to side. “Ma. Can I ask you something? What in the world are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about these past three weeks have been the best time of my life. Its made up for all of those years you were away and we didn’t hear from you and I was worried sick. Some nights I thought I’d never see you again. Now, you took 12 years out of my life already, why do you want to rush the time we have together now? That’s what I mean. You might get better, you might not; I know what the doctors are saying. Life is about quality, not how many days you live, Melvin.” She squeezed his hand.

Melvin repressed an urge to laugh. “You’re not going to let me die, are you?”

“You’re my only child. Whether you’re sick or well, you’ll always be my baby. I love you.”

He clasped his hands behind his head. “Yeah.”

“Some of your playmates called and said they wanted to stop by.”

“Playmates?”

“Greg and Bruce.”

“Ghee Whiz. I hadn’t seen those knuckleheads in 20 years.”

“What do you want me to tell them?”

“I’ll let ’em know.”

“They call every other day.”

“I’ll let ’em know, Ma.”

The irritation in Melvin’s voice cut a deep chasm of silence between he and his mother. Helen Watkins could see fatigue slowly descending over her son like a thick heavy cloud. His chest rose and fell rapidly.

“Alright, son. You rest awhile before supper.” She planted a kiss in the middle of his forehead, allowing her lips to linger as long as it took to say the Lord’s prayer. She pulled the covers closer to his shoulders and started from the room.

“Ma. There’s a record on the machine. Cut it on for me.”

She dropped the needle on the turntable, adjusted the volume of swinging sounds through stereo speakers then stopped and remarked on her way out of the door. “She sings like an instrument. Like a trumpet or saxophone.”

“Yeah, I know. Ma? The days are getting shorter.”

Helen stopped inside the door frame without turning around with her hand over her mouth suppressing silent screams, releasing tumultuous tears. Then, she stepped into the hallway, gently fastening the door and leaning against it.

Melvin reached over grabbing the pills from the bedside table, tossed them into his mouth and washed them down his throat with a thick concentrated orange flavor. Billie Holliday was blowing East of the Sun, West of the Moon.

“Did he tell you?”

“Tell me what Thomas?” She had her back to her husband and her attention over a sizzling skillet of slowly browning catfish.

“You know exactly what I’m talking about Helen,” the Reverend Thomas Watkins boomed, approaching and peering over

her shoulder.

She put the fork aside the stove, turned and lashed out at him as if his presence was a threat to her. “Why don’t you ask him yourself?!”

He ran his fingers through his hair and walked several feet from her. “Is he gay? Are you telling me my son is gay?” The Reverend was pacing the floor.

“I’m not telling you anything,” she retorted, folding her arms across her chest.

“This disease is a curse from God I tell you,” he pointed his finger at her the way he did his congregation on Sunday mornings. “It’s just plain ungodly. It’s unnatural and immoral. He stay gone for years and years trying to live the high life, there’s no telling what ungodly things he was involved in—”

“—Maybe it was a blood transfusion.”

Reverend Thomas stopped in his tracks. “Blood transfusion?”

“Yes, Thomas. You can get sick through tainted blood or dirty needles or just plain sex with a woman who has been infected...and let me ask you something. Would that make you feel better if he got it from a woman? And how do **you** know what is a curse and what isn’t? Is cancer a curse? Was slavery a curse? Is unemployment a curse? Is police brutality a curse? Is poor healthcare a curse? What about drugs? All of these things are affecting our people more than other people. You have barely spoken to your son since he’s been home. How do you know what he’s been involved?”

Reverend Thomas sat at the kitchen table and buried his hands in his head. “I can’t.” Deep down inside that’s what he really wanted to hear and yes, it would have made a difference if he’d acquired it from a woman, somehow that would have made everything at least halfway right. Even shooting dope was not so bad compared to being gay, he thought.

Helen Watkins set a steaming plate of fish, spaghetti, greens on the table and sat next to her husband. She rested her chin in the palm of her hand, her voice placid like clear spring waters. “Can’t what?”

“I can’t go in there, Helen.” The Reverend rubbed his face as if performing ablutions. “Where did I go wrong? I mean...when will you answer my question: is he gay?”

“And what if he is? Does it matter now? Would he still be your son if he was gay or not and dying?”

He sat upright in his chair as if stunned by a bolt of lightning. “Romans 1:26,27. Does it matter? You’re becoming foolish in your old age woman.”

“I agree,” sarcastic shadows lurked around the corners of her eyes, “but you have drunks, drug users, fornicators in your **very** congregation. Deacon Lane got arrested for embezzlement. Now I could be wrong, but what’s foolish to me is how one sin could be greater than another.”

Thomas Watkins pounded the table. “It’s worst than a sin. It’s an abomination. Don’t you read your Bible anymore for Christ’s sake? Besides, I don’t even know who he is now. What am I to say if I **did** talk to him?”

“Who’s being foolish now?”

“Excuse me?”

Helen’s voice raised an octave building to a crescendo. “Foolish and selfish. Listen to yourself. Everything is about you, how you feel and your interpretation of things. Yes, I read my Bible and in it I read how Christ at with sinners, talked to a whore at a well and even walked among lepers. The question is not who Melvin is, that’s simple. Yes he’s sick and how he got sick I don’t know. But I do know that he’s our son and he’s made in the image of God and he needs our love more than condemnation now. So the question

should be who are **you**, Thomas.”

“Who I am is based upon the word of God Helen and you know that,” he said narrowing his eyes upon her but talking as if he were in the room alone. “God took a Black boy with one shirt, a pair of pants and no shoes and brought him out of the fields of Alabama to Tennessee. I was 28 years old when I started that church in a burnout storefront on South Liberty Street 26 years ago with five members, you being one of ‘em. Remember? And remember how you used to invent new ways to serve beans every night and how we used to keep the windows open to let the house air out from eating beans all the time? Even then we prayed for a big family, but the Lord said no, that Melvin would be our only child and how he promised to follow me into the ministry before all of a sudden jumping up and wanting to be James Earl Jones or somebody. I don’t need anybody to tell me who I am and you shouldn’t either, Helen. Look at this house you live in, the clothes you wear, the cars you drive.” He looked into the distance. “Today we’re in a million dollar structure with 3,000 membership and growing, quarter of a million dollar budget, overseas Missionaries . . .” His voice trailed off, almost as an afterthought. “God has been good and merciful to me. And my church.”

“We’re blessed.” Helen Watkins pushed herself up from the table and poured a tall glass of iced tea and set it before Thomas Watkins. “But I guess the grace of God is not what it was twenty years ago. Back then, seems like it was for everybody. Your supper is getting cold Reverend,” she said pushing the plate under his nose, walking away, leaving him alone in the impending twilight with bowed head giving thanks for food and nourishment of body.

That evening the Reverend started to his son’s room three times (once actually putting his hand on the doorknob) before retracing

his steps back to his study. Each time he sat at his desk, clutched the Bible and pressed it against his forehead trying to summon strength through mumbled prayer. He knew sooner or later that this moment was coming, if not for himself then for the woman he'd called wife for 25 years. So, before leaving his study for the final time, he donned latex gloves, picked up the Bible, crossed himself before knocking and entering to find Melvin scratching a legal pad with the nub of a pencil.

"Pre-cha!," Melvin exclaimed, peering over the top of his writing pad, his gaze trailing from his father's head to his powder-free gloved hands. "I didn't know this was communion day, Reverend."

Reverend Watkins stood over his son with his legs apart as if he were bracing for or against something. He was holding the Bible before him as though it were a shield. His voice was calm but his eyes were nervous jumping from the sore on Melvin's nose to the floor and back again. "You know you can't do that Melvin. That would be like heaping condemnation on yourself. You must examine yourself and ask God to forgive you."

Melvin dropped the pad and pencil by his side. "That's easy . . . examining yourself and asking God to forgive you. What's hard as hell is forgiving yourself. But what I often wondered, Thomas," he furrowed his brow, angled his head and rolled his eyes contemplatively, "why doesn't God have a name? I mean, I don't think it's very complimentary to have a generic God. I guess Yahweh and Allah were already taken, huh?" He looked his father straight in the face.

"Don't be flippant, Melvin."

That was the word his grandmother had used whenever he was out of line. "Flippant?" He savored the word like one of his grandmother's hot buttered rolls that were almost as delicious as her

smile.

“This is serious. God doesn’t want your compliments. He wants your life. He wants you to be saved. Try Jesus.”

“Or what?”

“The wages of sin is death.”

“You sure it’s not the wages of life is death?”

Reverend Watkins let his arms fall by his side, the Bible dangling from his right hand. “Alright. You want to joke your way to hell, fine. But it doesn’t have to be that way, Melvin. You can have peace beyond all understanding right now. Just invite Jesus Christ into your life. That’s the only way we can get to God. There’s no other way. All have sinned and come short of the glory of God.”

“Including Sarah Bowers?”

“What?”

“Skip it.”

Thomas Watkins screamed at his son. “What has my secretary got to do with anything!?”

“Take it easy Reverend,” Melvin held up both hands as if to thwart the verbal onslaught. He had a look in his eyes of someone knowing a deep dark secret about you and you not being certain that they know or not. It was the uncertainty that was about to make the Reverend forget his religion.

“Who in hell do you think you are...you wretched...” He felt a pounding at his temples, hands become sticky with sweat and had to fight a strong impulse to hurl the Holy Bible at his son’s head, sick or no sick. He wanted to fling invectives, as if causing pain would lessen his. But something came to mind. Thomas Watkins closed his eyes to make that something more real, tangible and it spoke to him in still rational tones like the murmur of water over river bed stones cooling the anger rising through his blood. “Father, forgive me.”

When he re-opened his eyes Melvin was smiling as if anticipating his father's return from a long journey. "Sit down, Thomas."

It was incredible. Melvin knew that if he lived to be an old man he would become a duplicate of his father, as if some one had taken generic materials and made copies on a Xerox machine. The protruding forehead, the high cheekbones and broad shoulders, the emerging paunch, brown piercing eyes and a balding spot on the top of the skull camouflaged by strokes of a comb. The resemblance startled Melvin and he shook his head in amazement.

The Reverend pulled up a chair, placed the Bible on the bed and exhaled deep, slow and heavy. He noticed the sore on Melvin's nose but looked past it into his eyes.

"Why haven't you ever called me daddy or father? Pops would've been fine. But it was always Thomas. Why?"

Melvin hunched his shoulders. "Thomas is such a nice name. You look like a Thomas. But daddy just doesn't fit. I guess son never fit me either, huh?"

"I've had no problem calling you son. I've let the world know it. I had such high hopes for you, us. Once you would have finished seminary we would have went into the ministry together, father and son and maybe built a religious dynasty or more churches or whatever the Lord wanted us to do. Why did you not want that? It could've been beautiful." His gaze dropped to the floor with what could have been.

"Well, I found out that there was a difference between religion and God. Big difference. Besides, you have to be called to be a preacher, don'cha? I was called to be an actor. And I made it. Do you want to see me do a monologue from Othello?"

"How did you get this disease, Melvin?"

"Do you..."

“You’re going to die, Melvin?”

“...want to see...”

“I’m gonna have to bury you, Melvin!”

“...*Othello*. Goddammit!?”

Thomas Watkins sprang from his chair. “No. I want to see you live. And the only way is to accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior right now.” He reached his gloved hand out to Melvin. “Please son. You were raised in the church, you know everything I say is true. Before it’s too late, will you say the sinner’s prayer with me and have eternal life this very moment? One day it will be no more pain, no more suffering.”

“I don’t have any gloves on.” Melvin leaned forward, his breath brushing his father’s face. “I don’t want to catch anything you have, daddy.”

Reverend Thomas Watkins’ hand fell through the air like a bird fatally wounded from a shotgun blast. He slid the chair back in its place and began removing the gloves from his hands, the latex snapping in the process.

“Thomas.” Melvin’s voice stopped him from leaving the room. “Who won that game?”

“Game?” He half-turned back towards the bed. “What game?”

“That little league game,” Melvin said, exasperated. “Remember that game where I climbed over the wall and make the catch and then threw the runner out at second. Did we win?”

Reverend Watkins looked at Melvin, smiled benevolently. “I don’t know son. That Bible there,” he pointed to the bed, “that’s yours. From when you graduated high school. I don’t know anything about a game.” He tossed the gloves into a small yellow wastebasket and exited the room.

Nightfall found the Watkins household hushed and pregnant with

the stillness of routine. Helen Watkins had just showered and was now rolling her hair before the bathroom mirror. She had a solo to sing tomorrow and occasionally she hummed the melody or practiced her phrasing to give the same song deeper meaning. Thomas Watkins was in his study behind closed doors pecking computer keys, putting final touches on the morning sermon. After service he was due to meet with church elders about acquiring adjacent property which would be ideal for a fellowship hall or community center.

Before his father entered his bedroom, Melvin had been engrossed in scribbling minute details of his requiem on notebook paper. He had every detail mapped out, from the scripture he wanted read to the kind of flowers on his casket. He even left a footnote requesting that there be not a whole lot of crying and carrying on over him, since he wouldn't know anything about it anyway; they should've done that when they had a chance to. Maybe he would let Greg and Bruce stop by the next time they called. It would be like talking to total strangers, they had so much catching up to do. He wondered what turns their lives had taken, those of circumstance and decisions.

Siddhartha lay on the bedside table next to a half eaten hamburger and a few remaining fries. With a chocolate shake in one hand and the King James Bible in the other Melvin Watkins wanted to read his favorite scripture that he cherished as a kid in Sunday school, about the first being last and the last being first. All he remembered was that it was in the New Testament or was it the old, his mind growing in confusion with the searching of both books. Exhausted from his hunt, he closed the pages of the Bible, laying it across his chest, drank thirstily from his milkshake until hollow slurping sounds echoed from the bottom of the glass, savoring its goodness with short "ahhhs" and the feeling of releasing one long deep breath.

Jeffrey Ethan Lee

autumnal on a day her mother threatened
suicide

the leaves paint fire
loosely in the wind,
their orange-gold sings me
cold — flocks scatter to
the sky like cards
into soundless, colorless clouds —

crossing her too-white ways
my sudden tread falls
through her thread house
softly as a lullaby
crushes spiders and all —
creaking under *chiaroscuro* skies

her eyes sear tv-blues
and mine plead for
mercy, a human spark —
but she irradiates me
and I blacken, oil-slicked,
bruised by raining crude.

but they'll kill you (in bethlehem, p.a.)

Your red-headed neighbor on the stairs passes slurring
“*Eat Chinese*” to your girlfriend.
You just start to react
but his door slams.
You want to hit him,
scream you're *not* Chinese —
but you see, *she's crying again*,
pulling you away from where you're poised
as if to slam his freckles into concrete walls.

And after a long hell-night
when early morning comes
and she's gone to work and you're going,
down the hall he snickers:
“A beautiful blond girl and a Chinese cock!”
His words scald your skin
as he slams his door and runs
and you chase as though
killing could cure his ignorance
and not add to yours.
But his friend in the car is ready
the tires screech away...

Late that night you wander the South-Side.
Blue cold streetlights shine

on a dozen whites in ragged plaids,
torn-up jeans and muddy boots
playing with a stolen shopping cart —
“KUNG FU! Kung Fooooo!” (one howls falsetto)
You feel it this time —
it seizes your whole body
like a wave of sludge
driving you straight at him —
you growl:
“Take it back — motherfucker!”
And a silence like quicksand
sucks all of you in —
you can even hear your shoes shift,
sinking — taking this stand,
and no one moves but you in toxic rage
till sanity chills you:
*‘But they’ll kill you,
and love killing you, too...’*

You exhale slowly — and all hear,
but it’s actually the sound of your breaking heart.
The howler lunges
aiming the criss-cross chrome
of the squeaking cart
straight at you teasing, testing —

*Damn — can’t back out now even if you want to...
Stay focused — go only after the leader.
Now you have no choice.*

Suddenly he thrusts full-force,
but you slam it back with such a solid kick
the wheels squeal hysterical,
all scatter quickly back,
and it stings his hands so hard he shakes them,
lips wrenching apart stifling a cry.

Suddenly they're more afraid than you,
but *you* know the odds.

But you have to anyway...

Don't you — do you — really?...

They'd love to see you try!

Then how can you — what can you — win?

Another taunts: "Ching chong!"

(*mizzling laughter...*) "Long Dong Hong Kong!"

They'll cheer, jeer and jerk you

around their hopes of seeing

The Real Thing happening!

But which is worse —

to stand every insult to honor

or to stand up to them

stand up to slaughter

just to prove you can?...

and then you'll go down in

— or out of — history

as a breaker of laws,

a casualty of a brawl.

No one will care

what led to it all

except you — and her...

After a long silence.
The thought of her fearful conscience
guides you out of this hell
where you have to curse them
to scare them enough to stay still.
Then, one slow backward footfall at a time
showing no fear to the pack
you can just walk slowly away,
but you can never turn your back.

lost hotel in allentown, pennsylvania

I live in a lost hotel, broken
on the paved emptiness lit by lamps
where worn-out whores can eat
near no cheap battles over zippers
(for a district without laws confines).
Time says nothing in the sky
yet I am the steps through locked doors —

3:00 a.m. the old insomniac in anguish
screams, pounding apart his door,
“You SLUT — gimme my clothes back!”
and everyone knows no one’s home.
The moon threads through the gray milk
where howls stray high toward nothing
yet I am the light stretched across the east —

Everyone downstairs is the same
in purling streams of smoke and drink
when my mind staggers behind me:
hotpants and nylons wear haloes
where a face should be, sighing
“love nothing money can’t buy — ”
yet I am the love silently raining fre e—

Hitting Rock Bottom

1.

You know
it's the wrong kind of shoulder to cry on
when it's a *highway* shoulder,
and you're hitting it so hard
it could break your hands,
ripping skin while thunder showers
drown the night waterfall-white
when headlights gleam
passing by your diaphragm-deep screams
arrhythmic as the lightning
or your ragged heart
or your shuddering
when you start to cry in earnest
because you could've broken them —

Bet they'll hurt tomorrow...

The gutter-like stream
breaks over your face,
coats your hands, legs and chest
with cold waves of grit —
and you know,
maybe it isn't such a great idea

to literally “Hit Rock Bottom...”

You just shiver-laugh at first,
but soon you’re shaking so delirious it hurts.
But inevitably she cries from the car: “Jeff!”

*Yes, it’s her again...
Bet she thinks the shaking is crying.*

How did this all happen, anyway?

*Pounded the brakes mid-argument,
pulled over, jumped out —
couldn’t hit a woman
but couldn’t take anymore...*

anymore of her parents’ hate for you tainting her,
wanting her to see other men (*white, of course*),
which is starting to sing to her
like a siren’s song —

speaking of which (*ahem*)
*if a cop cruised by right now
this would be embarrassing...*

Oh, nothing can help you,
whatever was between you
is hopeless as an orchid in a hurricane.
And your poor hands
bleed in freezing rain
like pale clubbed fish,
and again she’s wailing, “Jeff!”

terrified and truly sorry, now,
but worse is yet to come
because once you go back to her,
nothing will last:
every injuring word will recur
almost exactly — except
she'll sound more scared
when she says what she really wants...

Might as well just stay here...

Prone.

Yaaaah... Why not?

Needed a break from her, anyway...

And you may have two, by now, one in each hand.

This isn't funny anymore —

nothing can stop her from leaving.

2. the enlightenment

Actually, the truth was so unbearable — I couldn't even write about it for years. The crux was that while her parents were pushing her to see white guys, it was more than resonating for her...

Once as we argued in the car during a lightning storm, I lost it, pulled over, ran out in the torrent, flung myself down in the grit and white waves of downpour and started punching the highway till my hands were bleeding — I was crying, frustrated, and cars were whizzing by splashing me.

And I only now remember the exact words — what she'd said

that was so unbearable was that she loved me. But by then I'd found out she was already seeing another guy — a white guy — who was my friend before that, someone I'd loved and trusted. I knew she loved him and nothing could stop her...

But that was when I saw it. A light (or maybe just lightning) flashed into my mind. As I lay there I realized I could do nothing, and having literally hit rock bottom, I started to laugh hysterically — though my hands were starting to hurt. And even then I knew that she was much more out of control than me. I saw where she was going more clearly than she could. She was still lost, but at least I knew where I was — I was next to Route 22 in a drenching thundershower lit by my headlights — and I finally knew who I loved — and how futile that was.

**Brooklyn F Train August Duet (for
evangelical ranter and red-faced retiree)**

The violent evangelist makes me ill —
the spite-eyed ranter on the subway is so hostile
any God would be embarrassed:

**“THE LORD WILL PUNISH EVIL-DOERS
THERE WILL BE NOWHERE TO HIDE
MY BROTHERS WHEN HE COMES!”**

But then a retiree reddens,
his whole frail chest heaving
as he starts screaming:

**“FUCK YOU GO FUCKIN
PREACH SOMEBODY ELSE
YOU FUCK! FUCK YOU!”**

Then the ranter rants louder
until they make a spontaneous
F Train August duet:

**“THE
LORD
WILL
PUNISH
EVILDOERS!**

**“FUCK
YOU
GO FUCKIN’
PREACH
SOMEBODY**

THERE
WILL
BE NO-
WHERE
TO HIDE!
MY BROTHERS
WHEN
HE COMES!"

ELSE
YOU
FUCK!
FUCK
YOU!
I HATE
YOU FUCK!
FUCK YOU!"

Half the train laughs, murmur-snickers bloom,
and half the train prays, *Please, God, make them stop!*
And who knows whose curses are worse?

Then innocent strangers walk into the awful pause
when sliding doors and humming lights are heard
deep in the nerves.

Gary Widger

Psychic Flux and Wishbone

Remember the black snow on the street;
that white line showing slightly,
distinguishing the dirty clues the gypsy gave you
from the ordinary, humdrum world?

The snow melted,
leaving the edges of the street
with a thread of filth
and the clues slowly thinned
as the rain spread them for miles.

What was it you said while listening
at the gutter for your father's voice?

Something about running and hiding,
or pulling the blankets over your head
to lose breath and sweat as a child.

Sad that no one noticed
the crow's feet in your young skin.
Sad that there was no kiss goodnight,
no "I love you" whispered in the dark
before you were alone.

Richard Blevins

H o r r o r V a c i

to Peter Temes

And let flatness light up in volume...

Artaud

In the same way as our visual field is without
boundary, our life is endless...

The Tractatus

Angel Heurtebise, in robes of water...

Cocteau

The Allegheny is first and last to speak.

“All wars are immoral.

All wars are one war.

All wars immemorial.

All wars are this one again.”

There was always the one guy on campus who'd run ahead the
otherwise sagging line of demonstrators, snatch up the sizzling can-
ister, and throw it oh so deftly back to the flak-jacket who'd shot it.

Here's to him. To the never-ending next one of them.

SCENE, at the altar within St. Nicholas Croatian Roman Catholic Church, Millvale, Pennsylvania. At the time of the U.S. invasion of Iraq (but easily mistaken for 1916 or 1941 or 1991 or now). As each player speaks in turn, he or she lights a candle or extinguishes a candle or lights a stick of incense, according to his or her notion.

The rituals of war and the rituals of art in arches above my head.

This is not a stage drama, not even a one-act or closet play, but a succession of choruses. The sound is not to be contained by the ceiling and walls of murals.

Dramatis Personae {would have included}:

Pilgrim

Ghost

The Allegheny River

Maxo Vanka

Belgian Red Cross ambulance driver

Mother Mary

Vanka's aristocratic genetic mother

Vanka's peasant adoptive mother

Lady in Blue

Jesus

Father Zagar

Louis Adamic

Margaret Stetten
Douglas Chandler
Labor
Johnstown
Eduard Tubin
Haniel Long
Josh Gibson
Malcolm Cowley
Stan Brakhage

“You will not find him on his back on the scaffolding this time. He leans out, into space and away from his body, as a river can do. His arm is fully extended to touch the ceiling with just the red-hot tip of the flaming tongue of his brush—a pistol shot, already drying. Around him, the neighborhood in slips, all saggy-assed porches off stretch-mark alleyways that shortcut vanishing pointers down the hillside, slide along, spider veins to reach the highway, train tracks, me; the mill and the vale are foreshortened here, as surely as the slender immigrant bride becomes the lace parlor face of her peasant mother—recorded in smiles, but at war with her eyes.

“I see them, without looking,
Instead of dreams. (For a river never sleeps.)
They are the naturalized workers at dusk
Climbing their hill to supper.
Dawn come, they descend again
To mills of greater darkness and light.

“I am called the Allegheny,

Tho I am never the same water

Within the same banks. I am

The strong right arm

Of Pittsburgh's fist."

Capt. James Sample settled on this land in 1789, and built a grist mill. (*Grist for the Mill* will be a title of a book of poems by Haniel Long.) An early resident, H.B. Lyons, named the town for its mills in the vale.

Adamic: This is not Croatia
Old dog, white muzzle
Slobbering weak eyes
Covering the same old
Ground for lost bones.
We have come to Millvale, Pennsylvania, the New World!
(Hitchcock's vertigo
is an immigrant's too.)
The angle of repose needs an angel of repose,
Or it will roll out of town.
Its church is a yellow bird asleep her perch.
But the whole stands up somehow:
Now on one leg, then the other.
From the road below, behold a miracle
To sleep that way!

Black spider crossing the painted battlefield, its path undeterred by the violence, crawls across, without disturbing, the painted smile on

a corpse's face.

In the choir loft, a nun is seen cutting with small, precise scissors
the preRaphaelite virgin's halo!

Driver: We never witness the votive candles replaced. We light them, for other hands to minister. Lines of lit candles, a line of nuns around the coffin in the foreground, to the background of neat lines of soldiers' white markers. Beneath, every corpse facing the sun rising. So young to sleep that way. The sentences of the Tractatus are lines from the trenches. One nun, on her knees beside the open casket beside the open fields of rows of new graves, holds a lighted candle that resembles a bone finger. The joint is the white flame. A line of saints in phosphene gowns and making the same faces of the tenured faculty, eyeless at commencement.

Bunting chose prison. Rilke went to war too quickly. Celine delirious. Apollinaire and Cendrars forever changed. No one escaped it. Now is another war.

This is not a poem you can keep in your head all day, taking notes, taking time. I find I can start it up again for two-hour writing sessions by reading Celan. Other times, Neruda instead. When I save the poem to file, this is what the program makes the title: "Not a painting to hang on someone." From the couplet at the start of the first draft page that read: "Not a painting to hang on someone's wall finally / But the public act of painting on wall and ceiling."

Hard on the eyes, my 'istorin. The murals of Vanka's second commission are. Stan Brakhage will come to Pittsburgh thirty years later t film a trilogy ending at the Allegheny County Morgue and call it "The Act of Seeing with one's own eyes." Films of three days of autopsies I had to walk out on, in front of Brakhage, thirty years ago now.

In February 1952, Celan writes to Ludwig von Ficker: "Sometimes it's as if I were the prisoner of these poems...and sometimes their jailer."

On vacation in Luxembourg, I learned you can still find the detritus of the Great War—tank parts, bunkers, wheels, cogs—it is still lined up in the plowed fields facing the fast freeways to Belgium. (I imagine, closer in, shells, buttons, pocket watches, teeth.) A cason rusting like a shopping cart nobody bothers to return.

In time, we must leave even what is left on a battlefield. The point in coming to a place many hold sacred.

Note the weapon of choice on this modern battlefield.
It is the bayonet.
No light bulb goes off over Guernica. The bayonet is
Strictly low tech.
Born in Bayonne, France
And perfected how long

Before the Romantic revolutions?
To kill with the bayonet is personal.
It requires the fortunate recruit to feel
The loser's death.
(Weight at the end of his brush.)
The navigator's view of the pinpointed city
Is unavailable to the bayoneter, who must suffer
The whole weight of his person forward, then into,
The resistance that was not, after all, a wall at all.

Bayonets lace open
The bodies of saints
And folks
Choir loft gallows
Soup kettle helmets
I, Infidel, look
At the Croatian lace at Mary's neck
And think it holy

A student returned from Rome put on my desk today her
photograph of a statue of a saint, its metal wings more like an
opening rib cage. Hand to hand, feet to feet, man to man, the eyes!
What sound this makes goes unrecorded in the walls.

Driver: The whole point
Of a bayonet
Is the edge.
Priests use it

To lace the wafer
That clogs
The throat making speech
Impossible.
The very whiteness of the wafer is convincing.
Blindness can be black or white. Even blue.

“I was walking in a field in Belgium on a beautiful day in May, and I saw a soldier lying down, looking up at the sky. I stopped and said to him, ‘Good morning. So you too are a lover of clouds!’ He neither answered nor moved, and I saw that he was dead.” Maxo Vanka, recalling his experience as a Red Cross ambulance driver, age 26.

My father once built me a kite, from two sticks and a newspaper. In the manner of the kites over Harold, Kentucky, Appalachia, in 1937. Maybe the bad news (the death of Kennedy) made it too heavy to fly?

The view of the murals is short of iconographic, more personal, freshly discovered, a wound in your side (not his).

Try to find a Lady in Blue. Run into the nun with gas mask and sword, who blocks my way across the wall. Her scales are tipped, heavy gold coins in favor of bread. Dread.

Where in the murals is love? My notes of the visit don't say

There was a tower bell ringing
But I want one in the poem. Where is
The pearling ocean that has left, after unthinkable violence, these smooth
Stones on the Croatian beach?

Maxo Vanka's early portrait, "Lady in Blue," might be by Balthus, whose madness proclaimed the purity of prepubescent girls is not erotic. The observer feels guilty for having looked! At Millvale, female is woman and woman is a peasant Mary thirty-six feet high. In both cases, the viewer must consider himself.

I taught myself to read Pound standing before the ruined walls of the Schifanoia, no cameras allowed, thanks. (Vanka's link to Pound would be thru his in-laws' pursuit of Douglas Chandler.)

Thanks to you, I know where I go when I look. It's the place in the mind where Shelley saw the Witch of Atlas and the same horror Melville knew in the whiteness of the whale. It is annihilation of the self into the blank page.

Horror vaci, the muralist's dread of unfilled spaces.

I am not here.
I come from undistinguished Welsh stock, coal miners there and

here, who were among those easily assimilated, married early and often, into the Cherokee nation and soon displaced, again, with them. Those who stayed hid out in Blue Ridge caves, crouching so near the soldiers' horses they could smell them. Hard scabble farmers, or operating below the notice of the professions. Lots of James and Richards according to the online search, but otherwise and always

I am not here predicted.

I have come as a native stranger

Against my will and better judgment

This is not my fight

Landlocked, inbred, ignorant

No memory of leaving

Or arriving

Lost in America

An immigration so thorough it has left no track back.

"I haven't gone back," a student blurts, meaning no revisions on the poem he is just about, mouth open, to read to us. Could Vanka revise his mural? How does egg tempera on plaster dry?

I return to my Leopold to be certain Vanka returned in order to paint the blank spaces he'd left—to silence the ghost of the mural's white spaces. His second commission. My first visit to the church, house painters were painting the white wall between the murals a less startling blue grey. The smell of paint filled the dome of the chapel like an apt simile.

Maximilian Vanka was born a “fachook,” second-rate, an illegitimate child, perhaps the son of nobility. He was raised by a peasant wet nurse, Dora Jugova, his artistic ideal woman. He met his genetic mother, perhaps, once. Could never return to her.

I’m afraid to eat with them. Their bread is probably His body missing in action. I’m afraid it will become real in my stomach. The word made flesh would kill me. (Ghostly Jesus hovers behind the Croatian family.)

Vanka’s bosom friend Adamic once said: “My grandfather always said that living is like licking honey off a thorn.”

The blood is unseen, unspoken,
Underground among the underclothes of priests and nuns.
Do not spill this wine
This is Christ.
Unwashable blot.
Silvia Pinal
Climbs down
From the cross,
Her wounded crotch,
Into your jittery lap.

“Battlefield,” under the choir loft, depicts the moment after the mustard gas incense has been inhaled.
The odour of death that fills and never leaves their nostrils

Drives them mad,
Jesus and Mary.
Only a mother could stand to
Touch the green skin
Of these slaughtered boys.
The water she secretly bathes them in,
The water no cloud will reclaim,
Constantly rains.
Lachrymose, to borrow Hart Crane's word.

On first entering the church, the grand scope of the murals took adjusting to, after studying photographs for a month. The adjustment of holding up one hand to shield your eyes from the obliterating sun from the windows was easy.

Surprised to find angel's green wings in flames after Blake (or Blake's source, Michelangelo)!

The constant little surprises of the painterly details of the tears of the mourning nuns, the tiny white wild flowers on barbed wire, the tiny white stars on the lapels of the fallen son.

There don't seem to be entrance wounds in the victims he painted.
I search for corpses resembling my father after the machine stopped breathing and he sat upright, blind and suddenly comprehending.
O is the hole,
my father's mouth,

he left thru.
Only an exit wound.

The dead are those among us
Who know
There can be no resurrection.

The painter's aubade escalade.

In the murals
The bullet travels faster
Than sound
Not bang you're dead
Just dead.

All the murals were painted, he recalled, in three levels, each requiring the interruption of the moving of the scaffolding. He would leave an incomplete image still drying on the ceiling, going on to the next—never seeing the whole with his eyes, but keeping—what?—in his head those months of work? Joe Reed writes in a poem he read to a café during the writing of this section of my own poem: “a picture of three things at once, like Christ.”

Bill Shields always wanted me to tell him what sense The Holy Ghost makes.

Curious to be reading Fisher's Hart Crane these early mornings in bed in order to calm down from working on the poem. It took visitations from Vanka's ghost, Adamic tells us, to drive him from the scaffolding each morning. Once, Vanka climbed up the scaffolding, having adopted newspapers for blinders and cotton balls for earplugs. The newspaper is ironic; the murals are news of the bloody war. The detail of the earplugs seems to me the most important. Did his visitor give him instructions, like Hamlet's father, when the natural order of things had run out?

When I was a boy, a friend of my father gave me all his campaign ribbons and medals. I was heavily decorated. In those days, ten years after the peace, I was making a little Eisenhower jacket for war games in the backyards of Seville, Ohio. I remember especially the feel and smell of the infantry badge. Its blue enamel. Rifle like a stroke of lightning against blue sky. In the car driving home, Dad explained quietly in his low voice that his friend did not like to remember the war. Our worst arguments would be over Viet Nam, my refusal to wear the uniform. That Dad had earned a Bronze Star in the Pacific I was to learn forty years later, at his funeral.

Mary is larger than life, the scope of Doris
Day's ass, star set in motion
Across the screen of the dusky drive-ins
Unto dust. Dante employs the word "stars"
As the final word in all three sections
Of the Comedy. Blue Sky Drive-In:
Metal box speakers hang from
Rolled-up again window glass, their

Umbilical chords link each parked car,
All face one way—Miss Day
In the darkening sky without consort stars.

Still another source of the vertigo in the church on the hill: The Byzantine Mary, the Theotokos (whose foot established in the clouds has been painted over!), plus various supporting stiffs for saints...But the swirl of the battle being won and lost by expressionists! Borrowed vision of the first commission as opposed to the mad vision of the second.

In his final state, Artaud believed himself capable of self-combustion.

Who lights the capitalist pig's cigarette, while he sits without appetite
At the end of his long table attended by his black servant?
His top hat begs
To be pulled down, with the statues of Milosevic in the plaza.
Why, naturally,
It is the bones of some missing skeleton's extended right hand—
It comes right out of the corner of one wall—
For his match.

In my reading, the quality most frequently associated with egg tempera painting is "luminosity."

What is the light source

On the livid battlefield?
It would be perpetual midnight
Save for the sudden piercings of flesh trunks, a farmer
Unearths a shard of Roman sun in a far field.
Odysseus was a farmer first.

Artaud at Rodez was preoccupied with pokers and knives. He threatened the visiting Prevel with a knife slammed into the table between them. One walks, he hacked at the trunks of trees.

Irby reminds me that Robert Duncan “long ago pointed out...our victory in WWII was not really to get rid of Nazism but [to] inherit it,” when I complained about George W.

The modern invention of Christ’s barbed-wire crown.

With the brothers van Eyck, the invention of oil painting supercedes egg tempera, tho a Victorian translation of Cennini into English realized a little revival of the technique, and another following the Second War. The egg yolk is the agent binding the artist’s mix of dry pigments. This dries fast.

So the revision is another layer envisioned.

It’s the blind spot, the optic disk, where the nerve connects, eyeball

to brain, makes vision possible. We do not see the horror vaci but because of it. For Duncan's seminar, 1972, we read *Scientific America* on how we see and made connections with the visions of Kit Smart and Blake.

(A revision, after asking: Not egg—they don't know the binder Vanka used—"something cheap.")

This late revision to the poem: "Between *the upstream* (Pastor Russell's pyramid, the grass uncut, since the end of the world, around it; but his black stare from the photograph fused to the headstone, unforgettable), and *what's downstream* (Gertrude Stein's birthplace, still a residence, in a modest brick house on a last-century street that somehow got spared if not for her sake), find Walt's *instream*." And later add: "Burchfield is a tributary. Below's a stream of pissing loss from Kiskiminetas: a kiss then kismet met. Ida Tarbell, Nellie Bly, Rachel Carson contributing to the flood."

A river chorus: A river like me
Is geography; an ocean is the moon.
Hart Crane's train crossing and
Recrossing, thoughtlessly.

A short history of tributaries: Did the waste, the acid and the human piss, from John Brown's business reach the Allegheny? Or did the tannery poison the grave of his wife and the wells of his neighbors? Michelangelo, Vanka's self-portrait as Christ, John

Brown—the self-martyrs' wounds will not heal.

Vanka completed his first commission for Z in the summer before 7 November 1937, Artaud's day for the end of the world. He completed his second commission weeks before 7 December 1941. Time runs only one way between the two dates, like the unnavigatable northern stretch of the Allegheny. Above the locks at Brady's Bend.

Brady was an apostle for the Northwest Territory, a map of a man at home in the wilderness. I lived for a school year directly across the river and the train tracks from Brady's Leap in Kent. "Bend" and "leap" are verbs describing the figure of the man.

Apostle among the throng on the ceiling that is The Last Judgment, Bartholomew sits, holding his own skin in one hand, the one not thumbing a ride (a skinning knife for a thumb!) on Christ's cloud. The leathery face on that skin is the painter's. Robin's egg blue sky all around the figures. Michelangelo's second commission opens the Romantic era.

"In resurrection, there is confusion," H.D. writes in "The Flowering of the Rod," and for weeks I've been trying to keep it out of my poem. She imagines, in that section, what it would be to participate in the annunciation of the faithful. I can't see the chance of it on these walls like looking at the interior of your living skull.

The eyes loll back into the head.

Lean against one wall, hoping to overhear what has never been near to me. What would be the effect, on people my age, parishioners over fifty, who have grown up and lived with the murals? Who have seen, every Sunday, the murals, and been photographed standing stiffly in front of them and underneath them at their weddings and confirmations, or bent for funerals? (At their wedding, Dorn and Jennifer read “Dover Beach.”) Zagar smiles from a frame, smile like Dr. Delmas’, between two cousins. Kids climbing the walls, dads hit the ceiling headlong. What will it be like, this Easter mass, whe they are dismissed by the young priest to return to their homes on the hill with Christ dead? Death is by no means dead; she’s fucking us into oblivion. Even here, she exposes that dark cunt of hers that drains the chapel, making the dark more appealing to some poor sucker putting himself into a crack in the corner. Her children are born of this seed, the kind released by trees only when they are up in flames. Her progeny are wars. Born of lightning between the legs of redwoods tourists drive cars thru.

I ask my guide, Diane Novosel, who has come to the church every day since first grade. Growing up, “I had dreams,” she confides, in the tone my ex-wife took to say, “I have issues.”

Find a wooden bench in the spring sun at the front of St. Nicholas, beneath its twin bell towers. Yellow brick building. Façade spoiled by the additions of glass doors and foyer over the decades. View of

Rt. 28, stone's-throw close, 'spoiled' by billboard for Chevrolets to be read from cars passing. Train goes by, much louder than the constant car traffic in and out of Pittsburgh three miles downstream. Rail tracks on an artificial hill, other side of the highway, mean you'd have to climb the bell tower for a view of the river. All buildings surrounding the church are yellow (a paler brick, later on), a European color. Two other churches up the vale, the same yellow. Street is the same-color brick. Undistinguished stained glass windows. Mostly old ladies but exclusively women emerge from the church basement with covered dishes to wash from afternoon bingo. An old man drives up next; he waits in the shade, at one end of a small dog's leash. We both face the church. The dog looks unfriendly. His owner has arrived with such sense of purpose that I took him for groundskeeper, but the silly, over-indulged pet gave him away. He is wearing a blue dress shirt, like me, but we don't talk. For a time, women continuing to emerge from under the church bell call to the dog. Hand claps echo in the hot breathing space between the yellow buildings. When their cars leave from the asphalt apron around the church, the building looks smaller, hollowed out.

Vanka lived with the priests, during his months of painting the Millvale murals, in the brick residence on the east side. He had a walk of only a few feet from his room to the church each morning and night. This landscape was not in his head, only the battlefields of his youth.

“Whatever I gather, I pass down. Among the locutions of location which you name place, I float you—a secret—to shore. Promise to take it up the hill next you go. The secret is: The ghost is me, Allegheny! My own secret is how to be ancient and always new. Current.

“But a river is a visitation, no kind of guide. Poor Vanka could not hear me from his church on the hill above, so I came to him on those mornings of his greatest disillusionment.

“I’d surfaced in Ruskin’s chapter, Cumae under earth and running over it.

“I told them both, no one is more weary than a river. No one.

“You cannot hear the river from the church, no matter how hard you listen.”

Finished on May 4, 2003

Table of Contents at Zero

This morning, it was the picnic table and two benches set out at the curb. "Take Me" style.

I'm drinking coffee, from one of the mugs she gave me, and wearing a tee from an annual Pow-Wow I did not attend in Wheeling.

I remain ambitious to be a poet as empty as the widow next door, whose only poems are the mail still delivered to the dead, and who has given away the contents of her late husband's closet, down to his last pair of wing-tips and a used tin of shoe polish, both brown. The brand name of the polish is Kiwi.

I wonder if my father, who found himself in New Zealand as a teenaged soldier in the Second War, ever saw a kiwi bird?

Dad's widow spent her mourning year systematically giving away the bags of things he'd left behind ("only going to the hospital").

My father taught me to spit neatly into the cracked-desert surface of old polish to bring it back to life.

P e o l i

The most perfect tomb,
and this includes Poe's
and Malatesta's,
is a green field in Ohio,
where milk cows come up
to graze beside the grave.

I've also never seen
the tomb Cocteau
painted from inside.
Peter Temes dreams
of writing the
small, perfect poem;

I know one, tho
no man is alive
who witnessed it.
It reads, in full:

McKean
To Childs to
Tebeau.

All this was going on
behind Cy Young's back.

May we get out of
trouble so easily.

But things weren't always
so artful. Hayseed,
even on the mound,
out of place in Cleveland,
he remained a farmer.
A strong, fat old man.

And baseball by design
remains a pastoral
conceit. His pasture
fields the perfect place,
childhood's assignation,
to hit the thrown ball
and run all summer.

Bitter Eclogue

“In love’s deep woods,”
George Meredith’s “Modern Love”

The day I left my wife
I told her
keep the house
to live in.
I was thinking

she would need gardens
to work in,
cats for evenings,
and familiar rooms
of furniture.

(I had planned my speech
for months,
driving the car,
sleepless on the couch,
and especially

while reading—
first a biography of Keats
and then, surviving
his death, a book on

Emily Dickinson's passion.)

Things went badly,
as things do. The speech
was a speech.
She never flinched.

(At least I had taken
the precaution of packing
the Robert Duncan
self-portrait, "a drawing

of somebody else appearing
in avoiding
my face in the mirror,"
in the car.)

I drove off the hill
to my new address.

She worked quickly.
Sold first my books,

a car, the house, and then
the tree in the back yard.

Next the cats:
Declawed

before she sentenced them
to the pound.

For months,
when I wasn't working on my speech,
poor Heine writing in bed,
I was imagining

her suicidal reaction
to the news.
Wood to wooden;
would to would then....

No need
to worry:

Any woman who'd sell
a tree for lumber
will live
to buy another house

and fill it
on credit
with new furniture
made from the trees
she's killed.

*

You don't read
Catullus, but

he would say:
Hating me
You despised the tree.

A big tree like that
must be declined
top to bottom,
but its roots
are impossible.

They remain,
a rock in their fist.
Too late
my branches had lately
flowered again,

a laughing daughter.
The tree did not betray you,
it grew
in rings
into circles of outward

on the water's surface
where my children will walk
hand in hand
and carelessly toss
the rock in.

Sue William Silverman

The Tale of Quizzle and the Flying Carpet

1

Quizzle pingpongs balls across wood floors paws
skidding cat claws hoping for traction, Oriental carpet—
inherited from my parents—slows her—purchased 1933,
Jerusalem woven *indican*, madder root, mercury rising
to bleached larkspur yellow as Saharan sand
threads scented tannin, cochineal, lac.

2

Quizzle pauses nose to fringe each time before crossing vast
landscapes, embedded creatures swelling mythical fangs, scales, tails,
interrupting her romp...frozen *Pazyryk* figures melting, flying, swimming
from Altai Siberian mountains to Persia, Anatolia, Turkestan,
Afghanistan, Pakistan, Nepal, India...my carpet flying burro, fig, sandalwood
camel eye from Jerusalem to D.C., Maryland, West Indies, New Jersey,
New York, Minnesota, Georgia, Michigan...

3

Childhood dreams skimming warp and weft of milkweed, pomegranate skin, walnut
husk, lazing on the rug I trace arabesqued spandrels...gripping knotted fringe and flying
right out of my mind along carpeted Venetian streets, gondolas gliding weld

and oak, swirling indigo curtains, Cardinal Wolsey, Hampton Court, onion-skin translucent castles of Catherine de Medici, flowering the Spring Carpet of Chosroes I, saddlebags, wall hangings...traveling tales of ruby-throated hummingbirds sipping nectar to feed gods, pearled mourning doves, nightingales, unicorns in emerald forests, hoopoe crests fanning gold, silver, amethyst, silk...

4

My magic carpet channeling Lands, carrying my nomadic father, weaving, hammering, gluing, stitching, painting to bring me red lacquer trinkets from occupied Japan, Philippine dolls brown as the crown of a royal palm, Hawaiian leis, grass skirts, Alaskan totems, Siamese silver bangly jewelry, papier-mâché dragon masks stamped *Bangkok*, Hong Kong puppets, silk jasmine scarves...flying free of twine tying small girl feet to ranch houses, Bethesda, Maryland.

Epilogue

Quizzle, fear conquered, paw by paw pads the carpet in search of lost pingpong balls, her lush fur, silky tail, shedding summer fuzz across mountain-sheep wool. I gather her gray, amber, white strands—as if I am spinning rain, clouds, resin on spindles, tying Persian *Senneh*, Turkish *Ghiordes*, *Jufti* knots, overcasting, serging, catching yarn, combing, shuttling, heddlng, cutting pile, fingers flying threads of quixotic medallions, weaving my own tales into the heart of the rug.

**For Janice and John on the Occasion of
Adopting Alma from Guatemala,
the Land of Magic Dolls**

You come to us with an ancient smile rising from pyramids,
volcanoes, from Volcan Tajumulco,
Mayan hieroglyphs, you,
from tea-colored San Pedro River, from water hyacinths, mangrove swallows, you
who will teach us of love and past civilizations—a third-eye
showing us treasures of the quetzal, puma, jaguar, ocelot—
your soles knowing black-sand beaches, coral grottoes, jungles of El Peten, you
float along Caribbean waters
to the shiny city on the Hudson river—you
reach us, your mouth of rose petals, hair obsidian, calling you
Alma, our soul, young maiden of carmine sunsets and dawns

from which we dream and awaken, awaken and dream.

From Clay

Six vane cats' eyes gaze at Michelangelos, rumbaing
Picassos, spinning Van Goghs—marbles
rolling, whirling,
skidding, drizzling
strands smudges swirls patches
speckles twirls—raining watercolors
across the floor. Mouths tasting quartz-pink
candy, lemon spumoni, sorbet mint,
lime, amethyst ice, banana swirl
amber gold
acid-washed
blueberry freeze,
cracker jacks.
Spaghetti clear base strands
of orange, iridescent gumballs,
mango twists. Red, yellow fiesta
crystals, chrome black and orange
glass for Halloween. Jungle green,
parrot red, dragon yellow, serpents,
dolphins, orcas aqua wet polish finish,
octopus purple, blue-based neptunes surfing
opal tidal waves at the Jersey shore.
Oily pink pellucids, agates, opaque
old fashioned red, yellow, patriot blue. A garden
of snowflakes, sunflowers,

soapstones, teal-base jays, cobalt
dragonflies, wicked owls, ravens, bumblebees,
scarlet cardinals, roosters, winter lilacs. Purple mummies.
Red devils. Electric greens. Frosted pearls.
Fourth of July confettis.
Steely torpedoes, hurricanes, twisters spinning
atoms, ions.
Black panther eyes tracking
speckled galaxies,
metallic meteors, silver Milky Ways,
Jupiter lusters, transparent stardusts
flung across space.

The Stain

Le Paradis n'est pas artificiel
but is jagged,
For a flash,
for an hour
Then agony
then an hour
then agony...

Ezra Pound, "Canto 92"

I: I Took My Turn with that Pair of Carpenter Jeans

I took my turn with that pair of carpenter jeans, and held them close and closer still, studying the things as hard as I could with everybody watching me. They stood there waiting for my guess, and the nervous laugh they hissed out when the pants flopped heavily in my hands sounded like air escaping from a tire or a balloon.

I admitted my confusion. I said the stain could've been some cherry pie or strawberry jam, or maybe it was that Cran-Grape stuff Len was always drinking. They nodded, and I wanted to hold us all there in that moment, even though it was a moment of not knowing: We hadn't heard anything terrible yet, and we were all home. I wanted us there like that, a family in the kitchen.

But nobody knew what the dumb stain was for sure. All we did know was that Len's wife, Lizzy, found it in her laundry basket

when she came over to do some wash with my mom about a week after he'd shipped out for the Gulf that November.

"I don't know, you guys," I said, feeling my arms go slack when I handed the pants back to Lizzy. "Your guess is as good as mine."

Everyone breathed again, moved again.

"I don't even remember him wearin' these old pants," she held up the jeans, and she and my mom giggled.

It seemed nice to have them joking around as they worked together. They were never that close before. Lizzy was three years younger than Len, and she was from Saltsburg same as we were, and well, I guess with Len being so famous locally, you know, to end up playing football at the Naval Academy and everything, hell, with him being smart enough to be the first kid from Saltsburg High even to get *into* Annapolis, I guess Mom expected something, I don't know, more fancy or classy, especially seeing as how much she adored that one woman Len brought home after his first year at the Academy, that Michelle — she was the daughter of an American ambassador and had actually been with the President the previous weekend.

I don't know. I wasn't really into girls back then. It almost seemed like another me, some kid in a Pirate cap hiding his *Playboy* under the bed, grabbing a *Sports Illustrated*, and running to sit across the dinner table from a woman who spoke four different languages and had spent most every summer of her life in Europe. I mean, she looked like she had just stepped out of one of my mother's *Red Book* or *McCall's* magazines. Yeah, it seemed like it must've been some other squeaky-voiced kid able to look her in the eye, wave his arms, gulp milk, and say really stupid things like, "Where is Romania, anyway?" and "I'll bet Saltsburg high could take theirs any day in football, huh, Lenny?" — say foolish and stupid shit like that and be told to shut up by Len, who was all prim and proper, red-

faced, and shaking his buzz-cut head as he spooned more and more sour cream onto his baked potato.

But it was good to hear Mom and Lizzy downstairs laughing in the laundry room and then talking, really talking the way people do when they like each other. I couldn't hear the exact words; all that mattered were their voices, the way they gave and took. It was nice, almost musical.

And Dad even went down cellar to fix himself a Scotch at the bar we never used. "Do you girls want a drink?" I heard him ask.

"Sure, but one with dinner, Dan," I heard Mom answer.

"Sure, me, too," Lizzy said in a voice so sweet that I wished it could go on forever.

When he came back upstairs, he was laughing, too, clicking his ice, and smacking his lips: "That big lug of a brother of yours must've been usin' his pants for a plate. My guess is grape jelly. That stuff's famous for the stains it leaves. What was your guess again?"

I told him I really didn't have a clue.

II: It Lit Up All Soft and Glowing with Blue Oceans

After Kuwait was invaded, and President Bush's deadline was only days away, we found out that Len would be flying missions from the John F. Kennedy. I thought about it and had to admit a funny thing. Every day, I couldn't go to school or basketball practice or anywhere else without someone asking how Len was doing in the Gulf, and the names of those far away places rang from their voices — Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, or Kuwait.

I said, "He's great" or "Don't worry. He'll be back in no time." I said things like that, said them as fast as I could. Then the hallway went empty, and the light overhead buzzed.

But the more I dealt with it day after day, the more I finally realized I didn't know where the hell those countries were, so I went to the high school library and walked back toward the globe, but there were too many of my classmates around, and I felt dumb. I mean, Lenny Pacone was my brother, and he was as smart as they came, man: I was supposed to be that smart, too; I was supposed to know all of this geographical stuff and a whole lot more. Besides, I thought, how can you possibly be a senior in high school in 1991 and *not* know the difference between Jordan, Israel, Kuwait, Iraq, and all the rest of the pieces of that huge puzzle?

So I went to the public library on night after practice. As I walked across the river, I remembered how back when we were little and the bridge was under construction, Mom made Len promise to hold my hand when we crossed it.

The bridge itself was closed to traffic, and they only opened one side, one covered walkway, at a time. It was scary how you could see the Kiski River all dark green and fast and powerful down under the steel grid. But when we got there, Len didn't hold my hand because I told him people would make fun of me. He understood. He walked really fast ahead of me and yelled back, "Come on, Bobby, keep movin', and don't look down! The bridge wouldn't be here if it didn't go to the other side."

I caught up to him, choked back the urge to extend my hand to him, and stared straight ahead at the swirling snow, knowing it couldn't touch us until we came out on the other side. I heard him say his one-liner about the bridge, repeating it softly under his breath, never letting doubt creep in. Still, when the big township trucks slowly rumbled past shaking the bridge, it seemed like my heart stopped beating, and my feet never touched the grating under them.

I thought about those days as I made my way up High Street to

the library. My legs were sore, and I felt that old rush of needing to catch up to Len, and I guess I felt love, too, seeing him slow down, turn around, and zip up his jacket as he waited for me.

I got inside the library and thawed out by one of the old green radiators. The giant portrait of Andrew Carnegie looked down at me, his white beard full and trimmed, silvery and powerful somehow, his eyes sharp and wise and confident as if he not only knew the location of every city and country in the world but also had actually been there. Hell, how can you ship steel to a place and not know where it is? I nodded back to him like I always did, ever since the day Dad took Lenny and me there and stood us before the big painting, saying, “Boys, if you can look that bastard dead-square in the eyes and nod right back at him, you can do about anything in this life.” I don’t know why he said it, but it stuck.

The flustered librarian told me I only had fifteen minutes. She said they were closing early because KDKA radio in Pittsburgh had moments ago announced that American was bombing Iraq. Her face was flooding red.

“Will you be checking out a book?” She lifted her chin and took a deep breath.

“No,” I said, feeling stupid, confused, and heavy standing there with all of my gear.

“Uh huh,” she said and turned away quickly to some paperwork. She tried to write something, but her hands were shaking. She pulled the paper closer, tried again to write on it, but gave up, looked toward her office, where the radio was softly speaking, and squeezed the pencil in her hand. “We’ll never, ever learn, will we?” Her eyes filled as she walked away.

Back in the corner under the maps of the world, I sat at one of the

long wooden tables and turned on the great electric globe. It lit up all soft and glowing with blue oceans and green, tan, and red countries. When I hit the button at the base, it spun slowly, slowly, so slowly you almost couldn't tell it was moving at all. I sat there and watched it — the Canary Islands and Spain and the Mediterranean Sea and Egypt and the Red Sea and India, all of them inching by.

“I'm very sorry, but we *are* closing early. Could I help you with anything else, then?” The librarian stood composed, suddenly beautiful with the stacks of books behind her.

In the silence she brought, I could hear the overhead lights humming against the soft sound of the globe. I turned off the spin button and held the light switch in my hand. “Well, I'm doing this term project at school. And, uh, I need to know what countries border Kuwait.”

“Oh, okay, hold on,” she said and left to return with her pad and pencil. “Here's Kuwait,” she pointed to a tiny green spot I'd totally missed. She wrote down *Saudi Arabia* and *Iraq* on a piece of paper and told me to come back the next day, and she'd have some books if any were left. There was a sudden stillness in her green eyes: “Now, of course, everyone wants to know where everything is over there. But don't worry, I'll come up with something for you.”

The rest of the way home, I kept stopping under the streetlights to unfold the piece of paper. The names of those places seemed strange and eerie as if they were telling me something or as if they had some mysterious power, glistening with the wet snow.

III: Still Some Cloudy Shade of Faded Purple or Faint Pink

When the Navy released Len's name along with six other allied

pilots who had gone down and were officially MIA, I quit basketball and stayed up nights thinking about a possible draft. I was going to be eighteen in February, and I was scared.

Dad let Mrs. Baker run the shoe store in town by herself, and he began watching TV all of the time. He studied every news broadcast he could. When he slept, he set the VCR on Record. After the phone rang off the hook, Mom disconnected the thing, went into some kind of shell, and didn't speak to anybody. And Lizzy and her friends wrote, called, and constantly tried to get somebody to tell them something, but nobody knew anything. Or at least they weren't saying.

Dad began to speak in blasts as if he were shouting dire conclusions to the world. Emerging from behind one of the newspapers he surrounded himself with, he blurted out, "The bastards always know more than they'll tell. Train the best of the best only to use 'em like pawns. This goddamned war is only about greed. Greed and oil and nothing more." Then as fast as his shaky outbursts were there, they were gone, the room ten times quieter than it was before as he returned to his scholarship of world events, exhausting the local and Pittsburgh papers and then flipping through Brokaw, Rather, Jennings, and CNN.

It was after three o'clock in the morning when I heard the washing machine surge on. Everything about that sound said something strange was happening. I don't know how I knew — I never really had a feeling like that before. But I was certain that everybody in the house heard it, too, and that everything would be different from that point on. I don't know. I just can't forget it.

In the morning, Lizzy was down there folding all of her laundry, everything except those pants. A few days later, we found out that Mom had washed the white jeans over and over that night

and then left them there on top of the dryer, where Lizzy was sure to see them when she came by to pick up her wash.

Why'd Mom do it? Was she trying to say that she could take better care of Len than Lizzy could? Was she tired, scared, up at night doing clothes, and she washed them again by mistake? Was it even true in the first place? I mean, maybe Lizzy left them there, or something else? I don't know. The thing was, the stain was still there, still some cloudy shade of faded purple or faint pink - - it was hard to tell as I studied and studied it myself in the yellowish light of the basement. I looked around: Lizzy's soap, bleach, and dryer sheets were all gone, and I knew she wasn't coming back.

Mom never came with us, but Dad and I went to visit Lizzy out on their farm. Being there was great. As the folding hills leveled out and the dense woodlands became more distant, I rolled down my window and inhaled the fresh smell of the mountaintop above Saltsburg. Lizzy had dozens of yellow ribbons tied around the branches of the maple and oak trees out front. It was fun to wrestle around with Len's Newfoundland dog, Yankee, who otherwise sat quietly in his pen, looking out all sweet-faced and sniffing when our tires started to crunch over the gravel road.

About the third or fourth time out there, we stayed for dinner. There was no official word yet about Len. His F-16 was found in pieces, and the Iraqis had claimed to have captured four more American pilots, promising to execute all of them. Lizzy couldn't turn the TV off fast enough, and we were reminded of it as we sat down to eat.

Dad burst out, "They'd better not torture those boys. That's against the code of the Geneva Convention. They'll have hell to pay if they do." Then he moved his fork around, picking at his ham and sweet potatoes.

I heard Lizzy breathing.

It was on a Sunday when Mom packed some of Len's things in a big box from Dad's store, giving it to us to bring over to Lizzy's. I knew damned well that the white jeans were in there even though Dad put his head down and told me to look anyway on the ride up. Sure enough.

Was Mom trying to apologize or make Lizzy mad or what?

"Those two have got to work this thing out," Dad said. "For Christ's sake, Lizzy doesn't come over to do wash. She doesn't even call." Then he paused and yelled: "Well, I can't take it anymore! That's it, Bobby!"

I could see him start to cry, and I said, "I know, Dad,"

"I mean, all this bullshit when your b-brother is — " his voice broke, and for the first time in my life, watching him gaze out beyond the hood of the Caprice, I knew what helplessness really was.

"I don't need this!" He began to sound as if he were talking to Mom. "I don't need the clamming up and the washing of those damn pants at all hours. It's a crock of shit, Rose, and you know it is. And damn it, Rose, Rosie —" his voice broke again, and he swerved a bit, then got control of the car and stopped it by Marshall's general store. He slammed the door and was outside shouting something about oil and greed into the whipping wind. I turned up the radio to give him his ranting privacy, and I cried, too, against the stupid-ass jingle of the Giant Eagle grocery store commercial.

A few days later, Lizzy came by with Jody McMichaels. Her husband, Tom, was a communications expert in a company that was using something called "smart" cruise missiles. The two of them said

they couldn't stay long, that they had a support-group meeting to go to in Pittsburgh. I don't know if Lizzy planned it on purpose — you know, coming over with somebody else *and* coming over after Dad had driven to the store — but there was that damned box.

“Lenny will need some of these things you sent over for when he comes home,” Lizzy said.

“Yeah, especially when he stays overnight or something,” Jody smiled, but Mom didn't smile back. Lighting a cigarette, she kept her head turned away, studying the blackened match that was curled in the ashtray.

“Especially the alarm clock. You know what a stickler for being on time Len is,” Lizzy's voice quivered. “We already have the two alarm clocks now.”

Her words hovered there like some odd fact that wouldn't change a thing between them even if it had the power to change the whole world.

“Okay. Okay.” Mom spoke fast as she put her cigarette down, took the box, and walked it to the hall closet. I thought she'd come right back. But she didn't. We heard the quiet closing of her bedroom door.

After they left, I looked in the box. There was the alarm clock set for 6:30: That was sure enough Len. There was a pair of pajamas. There was some underwear, some socks, and a sweatshirt. And then, at the bottom, folded neatly, there sat the jeans. I unfolded them, and the stain was gone, the one leg as good as new.

I couldn't believe it as they hung there in front of me. I turned them around again and again. I held them at a distance. It hit me that they were *new* pants. I guess it was instinct or something. I don't know. But I put my hands into the pockets and found a crumpled and faded slip of paper that said INSPECTED BY NO 7.

That Lizzy. Why'd she do it?! She went to all of the trouble to go out and buy a new pair of pants, and then she washed them or something but left the inspection slip in the pocket. But why?

I folded the pants again, put them back into the box, and set it in the closet. I turned on the TV and watched a retired Army General move magnetic pieces across the Iraqi border as he explained how ground forces had to advance despite the new information that captured pilots were being scattered to various locations to act as human shields.

I thought about Tom McMichaels not coming back. I thought about Jody and saw her crying at St. Matthew's. I saw images of crushed cities and dead people all over. I saw the librarian sitting at the globe with her pad and pencil, watching the glowing blue ball in its slow, steady, insistent turning. I saw a million books surround her. I saw the bridge, stark and empty, spanning the dark river that carved through Saltsburg.

The TV rattled on and on, saying things so clearly and yet saying nothing. I saw Lizzy alone forever on the farm, maybe on the day Yankee died with everything going quiet. I saw the yellow ribbons frozen against the maples in the icy wind. I saw Mom in her room lying down with her eyes open, staring at nothing. I saw Dad downtown in his display window, neatly arranging the shiny new shoes but never looking up.

And worst of all, I saw Len, dead and gone, not even a body we'd ever see again, but simply a ghost disappearing one last time into the snowy darkness beyond the bridge. I turned off the TV and walked down the hallway, and it seemed like I'd always been walking down that hallway until I got to Mom's door. I held her so tightly, you know, I thought I was going to hurt her. I cried and told her I was sorry it all happened — and I gave her the inspection slip and told her that we all love Len so much that nobody knew what to do.

“I know, I know, Bobby,” she said as she got up from the bed and moved to her window. She lit a cigarette and looked out over the white landscape. She spoke in a calm voice. I couldn’t tell if it was hope or resignation. I only knew that I’d never heard it before. She said she’d been staring out at the bare trees, trying to picture the apple and pear blossoms, but that she couldn’t.

I told her that some were pink and that some were white. It seemed like such a small thing. I told her how the leaves were green, and the blossoms were soft and curly, fragile and beautiful. I didn’t know what else to say. That was all I could think of to say.

We sat on the edge of the bed until she finished her cigarette. Then she took that inspection slip and put it in the ashtray, too.

She lay back down and closed her eyes. I took the ashtray out into the kitchen and set it in the sink. The house was quiet enough for me to hear the hallway clock ticking and the refrigerator kicking on. After a while, I grabbed Len’s sweatshirt, went outside, and sat in the cold sun, my back pressed into the base of one of the craggy bartlett trees.

Cathleen Richardson Bailey's present young adult and children's projects include *Stacy, the Dancer and the Booger Man*, a novel; and *Sounds Like a Lullaby*, a picture book. Current adult projects include *Redemption*, a novel; *Dance for the Ram*, a play; and *Sing the Life Song*, a collection of short stories. She produced and curated *I Can Still Quilt Without My Glasses* (2000), voted one of Pittsburgh's best 100 art exhibitions by *The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*.

Richard Blevins has taught English literature and Creative Writing at the University of Pittsburgh at Greensburg since 1978. He is the author of three collections of poems (*Castle Tubin, Fogbow Bridge: Selected Poems, 1972-1999*, and *Three Sleeps: A Historomance*) and nine chapbooks. He has work forthcoming in books from Pressed Wafer and Poets & Potes presses. Publications include *Io, Credences, Sagetrieb, Poetry Review* (London), *New Poetry* (Sydney), *Weigh Station, House Organ, atelier*, and *The Redneck Review of Literature*. His work as an editor includes the SUNY-Buffalo edition of George F. Butterick's *Complete Poems*, and volumes 9 and 10 of *Charles Olson & Robert Creeley: The Complete Correspondence*. He was the editor and co-publisher of Zelot Press from 1980 to 1988.

Susan Brennan's poems have been published in *Calabash Journal, Rain Dog Review, MARGIE, Hungers*, and as a chapbook with Lunar Offensive Press. She was awarded a partial scholarship to attend the Squaw Valley Writer's Community. She has organized poetry readings throughout New York City and recently read in the Wax Poetic series, Brooklyn.

James E. Cherry is a published fiction writer whose prose has been featured in *Xavier Review, The Exchange, 360 Degrees, Shooting Star Review*, and others.

Jim Daniels's most recent books include *Show and Tell: New and Selected Poems*, and *Detroit Tales*, short fiction, both published in 2003.

Corie Feiner (formerly Herman), current Pushcart nominee and finalist for the 2000 Randall Jarrell and 1998 Sue Sanieel Elkind Poetry Prizes, has appeared in *Kalliope, Caylx, 5 AM*, and *Phoebe*, among others. Her first collection, *Radishes Into Roses*, was published by Linear Arts

Press. Currently, she is a writer-in-residence in New York City public schools, libraries, and community centers.

Rina Ferrarelli's latest book publications are *Home is a Foreign Country*, a collection of original poetry, and *I Saw The Muses*, translations from the lyrics of Leonardo Sinisgalli. She was awarded an NEA and the Italo Calvino Prize from the Columbia University Translation Center. Her poems have recently appeared in *The Amberst Review*, *The Chariton Review*, *The Cape Rock*, *The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, *Tar River Poetry*, *Via, can we have our ball back?*, and *Pittsburgh Quarterly Online*; and have been anthologized in *Line Drives*, *The Milk of Almonds*, and *Larger than Life*.

Adam Field, a Philadelphian, has been published in *American Writing*, *Hidden River*, *The Philadelphia Independent*, *Siren's Silence* and *Night Rally*.

Brian Patrick Heston grew up in Philadelphia, PA. He has an MFA in fiction from George Mason University and an MA in English and Poetry from the University of New Hampshire. His poems have appeared in such publications as *Pennsylvania English*, *Slipstream*, *Confrontation*, *Poetry Southeast*, and *West Branch*.

Jeffrey Ethan Lee won the \$1,000 prize from the Sow's Ear Poetry Chapbook competition in 2002 for *The Sylf*, and he published a chapbook with Ashland Press in 2001. He also won a generous grant from the Greater Philadelphia Cultural Alliance to perform a full-length dramatic poem with music which was recorded with the support of a Special Opportunities Stipend grant from the PA Council on the Arts by Drimala Records. He also won the first Tupelo Press Prize for literary fiction in 2001. His poems, stories, and essays have appeared in *American Poetry Review*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *Crazyhorse*, *Crosscurrents*, *Green Mountain Review*, *Many Mountains Moving*, *Washington Square*, *Xconnect*, and others. He now teaches at the University of Northern Colorado.

Stephen Murabito's poetry was awarded an NEA grant in 1992, and has appeared in *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Mississippi Review*, *Poet Lore*, *Chiron Review*, and *SAM*. His poetry chapbook, *A Little Dinner Music*, is forthcoming from Parallel Press this May. His fiction has appeared in *North American Review*, *Antietam Review*, *Brooklyn Review*, and

Pittsburgh Quarterly Online. He is an associate professor of English at the University of Pittsburgh at Greensburg.

Sue William Silverman's first memoir, *Because I Remember Terror, Father, I Remember You*, won the AWP Award Series in creative nonfiction and is in its 5th printing. *Love Sick: One Woman's Journey Through Sexual Addiction*, her second memoir, is under development for a Lifetime Television original movie. Her poems and short works have appeared in such places as the *Chicago Tribune*, *Detroit Free Press*, *Redbook*, *Louisville Review*, *Charleston Review*, *WordWrights*, *Nebraska Review*, *Chronicle of Higher Education*, *The Writer's Chronicle*, *Southern Poetry Review*, *Mid-American Poetry Review*, and *Poetry Motel*. She is associate editor of *Fourth Genre*.

Gary Widger is currently enrolled in the University of New Hampshire's MA program in Creative Writing where he has had the pleasure of working with McKeel McBride, Charles Simic, Charlotte Bacon, Paula Salvio, and Romana Huk. He hopes to finish revisions on and publish a manuscript of poems entitled *Perforated Utopias*, as well as a collection of creative non-fiction pieces.

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