



10-15-1995

## Burying the Dead

Garnett Kilberg Cohen

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/westview>

---

### Recommended Citation

Cohen, Garnett Kilberg (1995) "Burying the Dead," *Westview*: Vol. 15 : Iss. 1 , Article 4.  
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/westview/vol15/iss1/4>

This Fiction is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at SWOSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Westview by an authorized administrator of SWOSU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu](mailto:phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu).



# BURYING THE DEAD

by Garnett Kilberg Cohen

Geographically, Ohio isn't so terribly far away. Yet, for me, Ohio is a distant land, the place of my childhood: shimmering fields of mustard seed, of rusty trailer parks, developments criss-crossed with streets of 1950's starter homes, of playing outdoors until the streetlights flickered on, catching fireflies, collecting polished buckeyes, of sleepy little towns like ours with starched white houses, and—most of all—of rich Ohio earth, perfect for shaping mud patties (deep brown and pliable), growing corn and wildflowers, and for burying the dead in shady hillside cemeteries.

So as I drive up Mill Road, past fields of weeds and Queen Anne's lace, the sewage treatment plant, the Shell station heralded by the huge glowing saffron-colored half shell atop a pole, it's no wonder I imagine all the old trees, gas pumps, and fence posts rise from the earth like spirits as I approach. I cannot fathom they existed all this time without me. Like me, they must be returning for the funeral, called forth to revisit a distant land. Rounding the corner into town, I imagine all the familiar landmarks following me, ghostly, vaporish skins cast by their former structures, forming a parade behind me up Miller Road. *We're back! We're back!* I veer onto Dressler Street, then straight down to Main, the village green, the row of shops I visited with my mother when I was a girl so she could talk with her friends who were clerks, the soda fountain—*still there!*—where we all hung out as teenagers. As I approach Barberry Lane, my heart races, actually spins, like burning meat on a rotisserie. I take the turn. The row of familiar white houses spring from the earth. My parents' house is among them, third on the left. The old oak still in the front; for the first

time in years I envision the place where the ridges in the bark separate, to bypass a knot, meeting on the other side. How many times did I look at that image and wonder what it meant? What it represented? (For certainly, it was a secret sign.) I see the stump that once held the elm, felled—to the distress and tears of my mother—after the summer of Dutch elm disease. Cars crowd the driveway.

Pulling up to the curb, I notice the paint on the shutters and front door is chipped and peeling. Last time I was here it looked fresh. I feel the house is falling apart before my eyes. How could it age and decay without me? A woman crosses the drive, carrying a Corning Ware casserole, an aluminum foil cover rising like a tin mountain from the rims, glinting in the late afternoon sun. Two younger women accompany her; they resemble each other. Both with blanched red hair, as if it faded in the wash. Yes, of course—my heart stops spinning—Mrs. McIhenny and the McIhenny twins. The recognition calls forth a memory, long suppressed, forgotten. Before me now like it never left: my first funeral, one that would have never taken place without me. I wonder, would I ever have remembered if I hadn't driven up, just now, for my mother's funeral just as Mrs. McIhenny and her daughters marched up the driveway? Or would that memory have remained buried, lost to me forever?

The story of that funeral starts with a fat girl, Debbie Driscoll, and her beautiful mother, Helena Driscoll.

Debbie was always anxious to be popular, even in fourth grade before the popular cliques had formed. Maybe her mother's stunning looks constituted a type of prophecy. Being confronted continually with such glam-

our must have been hard for a little fat girl. So she always planned events to win people over.

For her twelfth birthday, Debbie and her mother took me and Leslie Landham (a girl with cotton candy blond hair who would eventually be voted homecoming queen) to a special restaurant on the top floor of Higbee's Department store in Cleveland. On the hour and a half drive from our little town into Cleveland, Debbie stood on her knees in the front seat, her back twisted to the windshield so she could face Leslie and me. She wore a navy sweater, navy knee socks, and a navy and red kilt with a huge brass safety pin holding the flap in place. Leslie and I wore party dresses. Debbie's hair was cut in a page boy, her bangs slanting as straight as an edge of loose paper across the middle of her brow. I remember the flush of her cheeks as she spoke, her chubby fingers hooked over the back seat. "*Just wait until you see.* You've never seen a meal served like this. Have they mom? *Just wait.* You won't believe it."

Helena Driscoll kept her eyes on the road and didn't answer. I watched Debbie's lips. I had a visceral reaction to the way her upper gums showed when she spoke; but I knew such feelings were superficial so I fought them off and forced myself to look directly at her gums and smile.

At the restaurant, the maitre d' escorted us in a winding path between tables. Helena Driscoll's silk dress rustled as she walked. In the center of each table, a miniature lamp with a tiny fluted cup-cake-wrapping shade cast a yellow pool of light. At a table overlooking the blinking lights of Cleveland proper, our guide pulled out a chair for Mrs. Driscoll. She shot the man a closed lip salmon-pink smile. At that moment, I realized that the main reason I like to play at Debbie's house on Skytop Lane—rather than at my own—was her mother. In the same way her presence must have taunted Debbie with a vision of a bleak future, Helena Driscoll provided me

with material for envisioning a glamorous future. For at that time, I believed my womanhood would be a series of expensive nightclubs (like the one where Ricky Riccardo performed), exclusive parties, and glittering gowns. It didn't matter that Helena Driscoll seemed no more interested in me than my own mother; there seemed a chance with her. She was so alone, such a romantic figure, that I imagined there was room for me. I thought that in another life, we could be friends, confidantes even. The glamour of the restaurant and the view seemed a hint of what was to come.

Mrs. Driscoll crossed her legs, opened the huge menu—as big as a child's picture book—and lit a cigarette.

"Order us what I had last time," said Debbie.

Without a word, Mrs. Driscoll closed the menu and placed it back on the table. She looked bored. Her bright salmon lips slipped into a pout, her eyes stared over our heads, out the window. She pulled a sleek black holder from her purse and inserted her smoking cigarette. This gesture transported me to heaven. Debbie was not so moved. It was *her* party and she wanted her mother's attention, her assistance in establishing Debbie's hostess prowess.

When the meal was served, Debbie's promises seemed fulfilled. A grand presentation. The way I remember it—though my recollection seems absurd given we were in Cleveland in the early sixties—three waiters, one behind the other, sashayed across the dining room weaving between tables, supporting silver trays high above their heads on the finger tips of their white-gloved hands. Each tray featured a white cardboard oven suitable in size for a squirrel standing on his hind legs to fry sparrow eggs. With simultaneous flourishes, the individual ovens were placed in front of Debbie, Leslie, and me, perfect replicas of modern 1960 ovens. Each was

constructed of thick and sturdy cardboard. Along a panel at the back of the oven top, knobs and temperature gauges were stamped in black. On the stove surface, printed black burners held miniature sauce pans: one with peas, one with cooked carrots, and one with mashed potatoes. I pulled open my cardboard oven door. Inside sat a tin foil roaster, like a single square lifted from a TV dinner, brimming with three thin turkey slices and congealed gravy.

When we took our first bites, the magnificence of the presentation was eclipsed by the reality of the meal. The feast was sad: the portions tiny (the saucepans yielded no more than two large spoonfuls each) and the quality a notch below the school cafeteria hot lunches. I could barely swallow the mealy yellow-green peas. And on top of this, we were simply too old. The meal was conspicuously babyish.

Helena Driscoll nibbled on shrimp salad without extinguishing her cigarette. Instead, she turned her chair out from the table, so she could smoke between small bites. Despite her obvious indifference to us, I was impressed. I admired her high cheek bones, the manner in which her wavy hair brushed her shoulders, and I simply loved the way she smoked her cigarette—as if the very act of inhaling, each long drag, carried her further away from us three girls. To a land I would someday travel.

Surprisingly the food's quality didn't slow us down. We were greedy little girls. We finished what was edible of our meals in minutes. Leslie actually licked clean one of her saucepans, her tongue quickly swiping the edges. When she placed the pan back on a burner, Mrs. Driscoll came out of her dream world. She looked at our clean saucepans, our empty ovens, and crushed her cigarette out in the sparkling crystal ashtray. The white filter ringed with salmon lipstick.

"In another year, you girls will be too old for this," she said. I marveled at the social skill her remark revealed. In one unapologetic line, she managed to acknowledge both the Lilliputian portions and childish concept without accepting blame. Her statement clearly implied the mistake was not *hers*. She had planned well. *Technically* we were still young enough; we were simply one year ahead of our time. Debbie, however, completely missed her mother's adroitness; she couldn't drop the matter.

"Mother," she whined, as only a fat girl could. "They used to have more food in these ovens, didn't they?"

Debbie's eyes pleaded with her mother. I winced. I knew Helena Driscoll wasn't going to wink at Debbie and say, *Oh, you're sooo right, Debbie, now I remember, they used to be much bigger, more luscious meals.*

"No, they're the same size. You're just getting older, Debbie, they seemed larger when you were younger."

This was the worst thing she could have said; not only had she failed to fall in with Debbie, she had also suggested that both Debbie's judgment and memory were off. Still, Debbie couldn't let go. Her desperation was a pitiful thing to witness. You could actually see her thinking, groping for ways to save her credibility. At last she remembered something that she hoped would redeem the situation.

"The ovens!" she cried, brandishing hers above her head like a trophy, her eyes wild and anxious. "You can keep them! We have to return the pots and pans, but we can take the ovens home. They're ours, all ours!"

She stared ahead at nothing, her lips parted to reveal her gums. Such a pathetic victory forced me to look away. Debbie was a broken girl.

I saw little of Debbie after that. She never called. We stopped making the trek between her house on Skytop and mine on Barberry. I knew I should make the first

move, but I hadn't yet acquired the necessary tact to dismiss the inadequacy of the meal gracefully. Besides, I sensed the subject was taboo. How could I propose that anything as seemingly inconsequential as mashed potatoes, peas, turkey, and cardboard ovens had placed this strain on us? No, it could not be stated aloud. Never admitted. Yet the tension was palatable. For years, Debbie and I avoided each other. If I was thirsty in the school hall and Debbie was in line at the drinking fountain, I stuck my head under the faucet in the Girls' Room to quench myself. If the only empty locker in gym class was next to mine, she simply left her clothing in a heap on the floor. Not until high school, when her mother ran off with another man, did we begin speaking again. She lost weight revealing attractive features—her gum-revealing smile even acquired a certain charm—but otherwise she was a mess. Frequently drunk or stoned, she had fallen from a straight A student to a druggie. Her bouncy page boy now a stringy tangle, her once clear skin oily and gray. I never attributed Debbie's decline to her mother's abandonment, but rather assumed it was a natural outcome of the birthday fiasco. Who wouldn't need to anesthetize oneself against such a painful memory?

But immediately following the party—regardless of our lack of contact—I felt a staunch loyalty to Debbie. Was I simply atoning for my guilt at using her to be near her mother? Whatever, this loyalty found form in the oven. I couldn't bring myself to throw it away. My heart actually ached to think of the oven in the trash, soiled with coffee grounds and cigarette ashes. So I strove to make use of the mock appliance.

Most often, the oven functioned as a prop. Pretending to be a theater director, I would sit in the center of my pink fluffy bedroom rug with the oven surrounded by my Ginny dolls who served as the actors.

Most of my friends had Barbies, svelte single women dolls with doll boyfriends and doll cars. But I preferred Ginnies. They were chubby little pre-puberty girl dolls, five inches tall with bendable elbows and knees. Though I knew I should be outgrowing them, I loved them so much that I didn't want to give them up. I adored the way the dolls' knees and elbows moved, snapping in and out of place like real-life prosthesis. I revered the delicate little fingers and nails etched on their tiny hands, the blue glass eyes that opened and closed, the banks of thick black lashes that blinked up and down, the little girl swells of their molded plastic bellies. And I particularly loved my favorite Ginny, a flaxen haired beauty whom I called Bonita.

Bonita was the first Ginny I ever owned and it showed. From the way the thin sealer on her face flaked she looked like she was in the final stages of sunburn or suffering from a curious disease. And she was balding. In order to make her walk, I pinched the crown of her acorn-sized head between my fingers. The hair on the spots I held tightest—right above her ears—was becoming unglued. I could still manage to plait one pipe cleaner sized braid down her back (using the rubber band from my brother Tim's retainer), but it looked like a strange Mohawk or a snake dangling from her skull.

Since Bonita was my favorite, I always made her the star of my mini-productions (after the oven, that is). The shows were silly or formulaic: copies of television shows or my own pointless meandering plots. But, of course, my task was enormous considering all I had to work with was a balding doll and a cardboard oven too large for her.

In my biggest extravaganza, Bonita led a band of Ginnies on a complicated route from Tim's room, along the hall baseboards, through the bathroom, around the dangerous rim of the toilet bowl, back along the base-

board, into my room, through the dustballs swirling like doll tumbleweed under my bed, across the fluffy pink rug to discover hidden treasure—my mother's pearl necklace—inside the oven.

Yet in the end, my attempts to canonize the oven were in vain. As with the dinner, I was simply too old. The Ginnies went up on the shelf, along with the useless cardboard appliance.

This is where the McIhenny twins enter the story. The following summer I began babysitting for them, my first real job. When my mother and Mrs. McIhenny wanted a chance to talk privately at her house, she would give me \$1 to watch the twins at my house. That left only Mrs. McIhenny's three-year-old and her newborn, and they were too young to understand or repeat what they heard. This was important since, unbeknownst to me at the time, most of the conversations were about Mr. McIhenny, a polar bear of a man with carrot red hair. The meanest man on our street. None of us ever cut through his yard of weeds and littered appliances because he would yell or chase us out. A mean drunk. Rumor had it among us children that he killed off unwanted litters of kittens by cramming stones up their anuses. The parents whispered behind closed doors about stranger, more adult crimes. While it seemed my mother had little time for me or my brother, she seemed to have endless concern and time for the women in our neighborhood. The neighborhood crusader, the righter of wrongs, my mother was rarely alone.

The twins, Patsy and Colleen, almost six years old with matching curly red hair (rich and thick rusty then) and freckle smeared-faces, were no problem. Accustomed to the tyranny of their father, they always did exactly what they were told. I liked them. They followed me and seemed to admire everything I did. I particularly enjoyed inventing games for them. The title of

babysitter allowed me to lose myself in the world of childish invention with complete impunity from the criticism of my peers.

That summer afternoon—the one that just returned to me, so lucid among other faded memories—we were searching for something to do when Colleen pulled Bonita and my oven from my shelf.

“Do these go together?” she asked. “The oven seems kinda big for this doll.”

“No,” I said. The phone rang. I left the room to answer it—my mother calling to tell me to give the girls plain Saltines rather than Oreos with their Koolaid, to reseal the wax paper mouth of the cracker wrapping. (Where did my brain ever find space to store such a trivial detail, keep safe to call forth the very feel of the wax wrapping rolling back into place? As clear as Bonita's ice blue eyes.) When I returned to my room, I found the girls had placed the oven in the middle of the rug. They had placed Bonita inside so that only her plastic face and upper chest showed through the open oven door. Her eye lids, designed to shut when she reclined were closed so that the banks of black lashes rested against her cheeks. Like mourners, Colleen and Patsy kneeled on either side of the oven.

Taken by the scene, I paused in the doorway.

“She's dead,” I said. As the words came out, they seemed true. Poor Bonita was dead and the oven, with the solitary door drawn back to reveal only her head and upper torso, was her strange coffin. Even her peeling skin and balding scalp contributed—evidence of long suffering prior to her demise.

“Dead?” asked Patsy, her little girl eyes wide and bright.

“Yes,” I said grimly. “And we must have her funeral.”

Thus our game for the afternoon was born. Since funeral was a new game, it had an organic quality that

made it more compelling than our regular amusements. The activity was more involved, more real. As I invented each new component, I felt driven, controlled by a greater power. We dressed in my mother's clothing like true mourners, in a trance. When we twirled around in front of the mirror, we weren't girls playing dress-up, we were preparing for an event, a solemn, serious event. We wore only black. Patsy wore a black slip skirt, pulled up over her flat breasts. Colleen wore a black camisole that reached her knees. And as leader, high priestess, grand inventor, I wore my mother's short black cocktail dress, trimmed in sparkling black sequins, a dress she only donned on special occasions (with matching sequins sprinkled in her hair, a look that nearly rivaled Helena Driscoll's). I made shawls for the girls out of large swatches of black fabric found near my mother's sewing machine. We all wore long necklaces, and doilies on our heads.

When we were dressed, I instructed the girls to kneel with me around Bonita's coffin.

"We must mourn," I said in my new grim voice.

"What's that?" asked Patsy.

"Cry, act sad over Bonita's death."

I started and they copied me. At first, our cries were tentative, then artificial—"boo hoo's" and "wahh's"—children's mimics of cartoons. But somewhere along the line, our cries became real. At what precise point, I can't say. But gradually we were wailing, howling, shaking, screaming, sobbing. I was consumed by a deep and beautiful anguish I had never before experienced. Anguish over Bonita's death, over the sad little oven, over Debbie Driscoll's future, over the twin's mother, the McIhenny's litters of kittens, over the way my mother ignored me, over how very alone I felt I would always be. The twin's tears were far more disturbing than my own. Rather than spring from vague self-pity or sentimental-

ty, their tears seemed to stem from a real terror. Their faces were puffy and pink, slick with tears. Their little shoulders shook.

I knew that as the babysitter, the responsible party, I should call an end to the game, comfort the girls, restore the situation to normalcy. Yet I was too in love with my tears, my sadness, the luxury of relinquishing all self-control. I had never felt such complete and utter grief, such total self-indulgence, such *ecstasy*. My sobs seized me to the bone, the very marrow; my entire body, my heart, my lungs, every cell, every atom, was crying. I grew scared for myself and the girls. But the pain was too exhilarating to stop—I loved my agony.

Somehow, between retching sobs, I managed to clasp the little coffin between my hands and lift it above my head, as if offering a sacrifice to the gods.

"Agagodoforada," moaned a primitive voice from deep inside me. The rush of sounds emerging from my lips seemed wholly appropriate for the occasion. No real words would have sufficed, could have illustrated my rapture.

Still holding the coffin above my head, I rose. First one foot, then the other. The girls followed my example. "Agaodohafta, megamontee, agodo," I said as I followed my lifted offering out the door. The three of us formed a wailing procession, down the hallway—I stopped briefly in the bathroom to anoint Bonita's brow (it seemed right)—across the living room, out the front door, down the concrete slab steps, across the front yard, the sidewalk, across the tree lawn, the curb, right into the middle of the street, where we turned and headed down the block. Where were the neighbors? The mothers? The other children? Did what we were doing really seem an innocent game not to be disturbed? Or had we managed to tune everything else out so thoroughly that the world around us ceased to exist. We seemed the





ILLUSTRATED BY BRANDON WEBSTER

the drive, I knew this was where I planned to go all along. The Trimble house, a prim white saltbox. Until recently, the house was the smallest on the street, the front almost the same size as the enormous American flag they hung out every Fourth of July and Memorial Day. But a few months ago the Trimbles had started an addition on the rear of their house that was larger than the house itself. The old house looked like a truck cab pulling an enormous load. The back yard was completely obliterated in order to put down the new foundation, then flattened by cement trucks and trampled by workmen. But now that the addition was nearing completion, Mr. Trimble had rototilled the back yard in order—according to my father—to put down “sod.”

We traipsed up their gravel drive, lifting our legs high so that our black garments didn't trip us, around to the backyard, the freshly rototilled dirt. Still sobbing, we fell to our

only living beings on Barberry, beings with a mission.

Our thundering grief propelled us, as if prearranged, to the last house on the block. In fact, as we veered up

knees in the fresh Ohio earth. Where was Mrs. Trimble? Her two sons? The youngest, Albert, had spent the entire summer walking up and down the drive with a



quarter pressed into his bellybutton to train it to become an inny rather than an outy. His older brother, Herm, was so possessive of their property that he charged us to watch the cement trucks pour their thick and gritty batter into the new room's foundation. How could the neighborhood have been so empty, abandoned? Perhaps the memory has been buried so long that the peripheral images have faded, but that doesn't explain why the other details are so vivid, why no one interrupted our bizarre performance.

The ground was loose and easy to move, moist and malleable clumps that I could easily dig and lift. As we dug, my tears subsided. By the time we had a hole a foot deep and a foot wide, my anguish was replaced with anger. Mounting, inexplicable fury. I placed Bonita's coffin in the grave, closed the oven door, and pushed dirt over the cardboard, refilling the hole. Clenching my teeth, I patted the surface into a neatly pressed mound, and sat back on my haunches. The twins were still sobbing. Seeing them shake and cry annoyed me. I was irritated with myself for not stopping the game when it was obviously provoking inappropriate feelings. And I was pained by the state of my mother's garments. I didn't move, just sat there watching Colleen blubber until Patsy managed to choke out an appeal.

"Please, Alice, dig her up. We've got to dig her up. She can't breathe!"

Her desperation snapped me.

"Shut-up!" I yelled, ashamed even as I said it. "She's just a doll, stupid."

The twins immediately quit crying. Colleen gave one final whimper, a little tremor that ran through her body like an aftershock. My tone must have reminded them of their father.

"Come on," I said. "We've got to get out of here before the Trimbles get home."

We walked back to my house on the sidewalk. Neighbors roamed the street now. Mothers. Dogs. Cats. Children. The world had returned. I rinsed off my mother's slip and camisole and stuffed them in the washing machine. I scrubbed the damp knee marks I'd made on her dress and hung it back up in the closet, hoping the stains vanished by the next time she needed it. In the bathroom, we scrubbed dirt from our hands, watching the muddy water swirl down the drain, and cleaned beneath our nails with toothpicks. Presentable again, we sat in the kitchen drinking Koolaid and munching Saltines. We were still sitting there when my mother returned with Mrs. McIhenny, one child clinging to her shirt tail, the other riding a hip.

"What did you do?" my mother asked in the perfunctory remote voice she always used with me. I wasn't a woman with problems.

"Nothing," I said.

"You mean Alice didn't think up any of her clever games for you girls?" Mrs. McIhenny asked, a smile plastered on her blotchy face. She had been crying.

Colleen shrugged and took another Saltine. Patsy licked salt off the surface of her cracker.

"Okay, well play deaf and dumb if it makes you happy. But we'd better get a move on if I'm going to have dinner on the table before your father gets home."

At the mention of their father, both girls popped off their chairs. Before Mrs. McIhenny led her brood out the door, my mother touched her arm—such a loving gesture!—and said, "call if you need me. Neil can watch the kids."

Mrs. McIhenny smiled wanly and nodded, but didn't look back once she was out the door.

My mother went about her business as if she was alone which, for her, I'm sure was the case. I was left haunted by memories of the twin's startled faces when I

snapped. Already, I was ashamed of the way I'd treated them, ashamed of what I'd done to Bonita.

I must have planned to go dig her up. I'm sure I did. I could have given her to the twins. They had so few toys. But once the spell dissolved, it was not so easy to think of marching into the Trimble's yard, dealing with Herm Trimble. So as it often is with summers, one day turned into the next and then the next, without any clear demarcation. Yet I'm sure I would have found the right time if it weren't for the sod.

Walking home from swimming lessons one hazy afternoon I spotted the long flatbed truck in front of the Trimble house. Despite instructions, I had worn my wet bathing suit under my clothes. I was damp and uncomfortable. The crotch was riding up my rear end. Yet I stopped to join the circle of children watching the action in the Trimble's backyard. I even paid an extra nickel to shoulder my way to the front. Sod was not what I thought—seeds from pods sprinkled on the ground—rather it was a thick carpet of grass. The yard had been leveled to receive the lush rug. Men rolled it out in strips. My throat tightened.

Bonita gone, buried forever in an unmarked grave.

My brother, Tim, appears at my car window.

"I thought that was you, Alice," he says. His voice is gentle, grown, not the voice of the teasing boy I remember. "What are you doing sitting out here by yourself? Come inside."

Streetlights glow in the dusk. How long have I been

here? Tim opens the door. Stiffly, I stretch my legs and follow him into the house. Both the living room coffee table and the dining room table are covered with dishes: casseroles, salads, breads, pies. The room is so packed with bodies, mostly women, that it's hard to breathe. A broad woman with a head of brillo gray hair hugs me; I feel the reth of her shoulders. The silent crying. "You poor thing," she says. I want to tell her that she probably knew my mother better than I, but I don't. Yes, we talked on the phone: my mother sharing news of her friends' troubles, their illnesses, their husband's deaths, the plights of their grown children. Every few years she flew out to visit me and her grandchildren for a week. But we seldom really talked and she never listened. That doesn't mean I'm bitter. Now that I am a mother myself I know that a person can be good, warm and kind even, without necessarily being a wonderful mother.

I think of the mothers I knew—Mrs. Driscoll, Mrs. McIlhenny, Mrs. Trimble—all buried inside grandmothers. Across the room, I see the McIlhenny twins, their freckles faded so that their little girl faces live only in cracking old photographs now. I think of my mother. Then I think of Bonita. I see the ground cut away, the earth's layers revealed like a side of sliced cake. I see a strip of green green grass, a layer of thick brown dirt, the wall of the oven, and then Bonita inside the oven—the sway of her plastic belly, her blue glass eyes, her tiny fingernails—and find relief that she, at least, is forever preserved.