

Fall 1980

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Rose Marie Lowe

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Recommended Citation

Lowe, Rose Marie (1980) "With a Change of Seasons," *CutBank*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 15 , Article 31.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank/vol1/iss15/31>

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WITH A CHANGE OF SEASONS

Frank Cauley loved to fish. Even before he retired at age sixty-three he had tried to fish at least five days a week in the summer months. The Merrimac River, a branch of the Mississippi, was only a mile or so from the outskirts of Bloomfield, and Frank would rise early, putting in a couple of hours on the bank before driving back to change quickly and make it to the courthouse where he worked. Frank was the County Treasurer, or had been the Treasurer for ten years before the cancer. But fishing was still what he thought of first when he woke, not the other. That would come later, when Wilma walked around the kitchen with a long face, or when the pain burned and tore upward from his rectum deep into his body.

Frank pushed back the covers and sat on the edge of the bed. He could smell the heat from the living room furnace. Only September, but the days were already cool. In a few weeks Wilma would turn the heat up high the first thing in the morning and leave it that way, scooting around in her slippers with a sweater clutched to her chest. Summer was over. Across from him the edges of the window around the drapes were dark. It would be cloudy outside, then, going to rain probably and Wilma wouldn't go with him out to the river. She hadn't let him go alone ever since Dr. Massey had said cancer, as if it could suddenly take one big bite out of him and he'd drop into the river. What he could do, now, was tell Wilma he was going over to Dave's, do a little work on those cupboards they were putting in the kitchen. He could take his son's rod and spend the day on the banks. Frank stood and shed the pajamas slowly, drawing on the jeans and shirt he had folded on the chair the night before. He hadn't lost too much weight. He wondered how little he'd get.

"Morning," he said as he rounded from the hall toward the step-down bathroom in the store room, the only place they could fit it in when they had added the plumbing years ago. Wilma's eyes scanned him with her new expression before she smiled.

"You feel like eating?" she asked.

"Sure." He was going to eat every morning, want it or not. It made Wilma's face relax a little when he ate. In the bathroom he shaved the

dark stubble and brushed his hair with the brush his grandson had given him for Christmas. His name was on the back in gold letters. Frank. There wasn't much hair to brush, but the bristles were soft and felt good against his scalp anyway. His skin seemed to have turned gray in the past few months and he recognized the color. It wasn't the cancer. Just what happened to a fair-skinned person who hadn't been moving around enough to keep the blood going under his skin. He rubbed his face, even his forehead, before he went in the kitchen.

Wilma set the plate in front of him. The napkin was there, the juice. Wilma had always done things right. The window to his left showed the clouds dark and moving. Damn.

"How you feeling this morning?"

"Fine. I'm going over to Dave's. Feel like doing a little woodwork."

"You know you shouldn't be doing stuff like that. It wears you out so."

"Does not."

Her sweater was dark blue, stretched out at the cuffs so that it gapped around the wrists. Wilma didn't eat eggs in the morning. Just toast. Still watched her weight as she always had and was still a fine-looking woman. There were creases in her skin, but not bad ones. Just the ones at the sides of her mouth turned downward and they had only deepened lately. He wished she wouldn't change; even if he had to.

"I wish you wouldn't go, Frank. Just stay around the house. Rest up. Dr. Massey said . . ."

"I'm not taking anymore of them anyhow."

Wilma turned the cup in its saucer. There was a part down the middle of her hair and the scalp was white, the hair coiled smoothly as it had always been. "You're supposed to take the whole series," she said. "It don't do no good if you don't take them all."

"Think Dave'd care if I did a little work on my own?"

"No," she said finally. Her eyes were black, small. She loved him a lot; always had. He knew that. "You coming home for lunch?" she asked.

"I'll get something out of their icebox."

He had a key to his son's house. He had helped build that house, taking as much care with it as he had in raising his son. He liked his daughter-in-law, too. She was a lot like Wilma. Quiet, soft-spoken, kept that house shining. Never said one word when he and Dave took

off weekends fishing.

The problem was, Frank thought, as he took the dirt road leading back to the Merrimac, what if he caught something? Couldn't throw it away. A man couldn't do that, catch something just to catch it. That was whiling away time. Wasting things. He didn't do that, even if Wilma didn't like fish. She didn't like him scaling them in her back yard either, but even Wilma admitted it was better than wasting them. Of course, the cat got a lot. The old black Tom, battered and mad all the time. It was fall now, and by rights the cat was Glenneth's, but Glenneth wouldn't mind a couple more weeks. Wouldn't be long before she had that cat forever anyway.

Poor Frank, Glenneth thought as she saw the car leave the driveway. She knew about the cancer. Not from Frank, of course. In all the years they had lived side by side, he had been a good neighbor, never nosy, never complaining. He always just talked about the tomatoes in her garden being bigger than his, what kind of flower was that she was planting, things like that. Wilma had told her, sitting in the cluttered living room of Glenneth's house, weeping silently the day after the doctors had told her they couldn't see any reason to even open him up. "He says he won't take the treatments. Says they just drag it out, make you sicker. He's gotta take those treatments, Glenneth, he's just got to." And he had, at first. Glenneth knew that from Wilma and from the fact she hadn't seen Frank taking off with his rod for a long time there. Hadn't seen him puttering around his back yard, straightening the low fence Glenneth had built. Their lots were side by side, stretching back to a drainage ditch and a barren hill beyond. Frank had said they didn't need a fence there, but Glenneth had carefully planted her flower beds on her own side of the property line, bearing in mind Wilma's love of neatness, and had hammered little slats into the soil one day, just to make sure she kept it all straight.

Glenneth opened all the drapes in her house and regretted it wasn't sunnier. Always nicer to start the day off with a little sunshine. She had five more minutes to get the kitchen in order, then she'd have to be off if she wanted to punch in on time. Glenneth had worked thirty-one years in the factory; four more and she could retire. She was round and rosy, loved large prints and wore them. Her house was

filled with knickknacks, everything anyone had ever given her: from Christmases at the factory when they drew names and gave small gifts, from her sister, nieces, even the things her own parents had saved. Glenneth had never married, never loved, unless she counted the boy back in high school. She had believed she would love somebody someday, and marry, but it hadn't happened. Time had kept going and here she was fifty-nine, living in the same house she'd been raised in, with no one she really mattered to. But she was happy enough, she thought. She had her house and her garden and her job. She was a good worker; she had always been a good worker.

Glenneth set out the soup she would have when she came home for lunch, and stepped outside. "Tom?" she called. "Tom?" She could see him in Frank Cauley's back yard, curled up by the chopping block. "Tom, it's September, you old thing." He ignored her, face toward the block. "Suit yourself," she said, and entered the house again. Glenneth had never petted the cat. It owned the two corner lots, hers and Frank's. Glenneth couldn't remember when the cat hadn't been around. It disappeared at times, but it always returned, either at her door or Frank's, depending on the season.

"You seen old Tom?" Frank would call to her from his back yard. "Fed him this morning," she'd answer and Frank would nod. Off and on through the winter months, the same question and answer. Then in summer, when Frank fished, the reverse. Her calling to him and his reassurance that the cat was okay.

Frank took the cushion from the trunk and put it in his favorite spot on the bank. He wished he had his peacoat. Wilma would've known right away, though, and would have been miserable all day. Now she wouldn't know till he got home, if he caught anything, that is. Looked like it might storm. Clouds still blowing fast, wind picking up. The water was darker than usual, churning up mud from the bottom. He probably wouldn't catch a thing. He dropped the line in the water. No more of the treatments. Driving down there, or rather letting Wilma drive him. Fifty miles each way. Walking in for the first few days, then leaning on Wilma the others. Vomiting till he wished he'd die right then, right that minute. Pills for the nausea, pills to counteract the reaction that broke him out in red welts inside and out.

Pills and pills and vomiting. No more. His grandson didn't like to fish, but that was okay. There was enough insurance for Wilma. If that lizard had come out for sunning, he was going to have a long wait. People would miss him. Dave. Wilma. He hadn't done anything good for anyone, maybe, but he hadn't hurt anyone either. Been a good husband and father. Worked in the cleaners till he got the Treasurer's job at the courthouse. Had his own teeth; he wouldn't look too bad maybe, at the funeral. The lizard moved sluggishly away. Frank held the rod with one hand already bluish from the chill. He just watched the water, the dirt, the trees, wondered where the lizard had gone.

"Glenneth, could you stop by the office on break?" Mr. Phillips, the manager, was an old friend. Glenneth had known him all the years she worked in the factory. They'd had it out over a few things, piece-price goods, bad machines, bad lighting. That sort of thing. She had been one of his best workers. She smiled at him now and nodded. He was a good man, a decent boss. Only once had he pulled in and balked, and that was over the fan. The factory was in a long, low building, non-union for years, and more capable of closing up completely than of meeting the demands of the small union recently formed. Air-conditioning was impossible, and in the humid summer the few slow fans that hung from the ceiling did little but blow lint. Glenneth had had trouble breathing that year. It started slowly, just being a little stuffy in the morning, but it gradually developed till by the end of the day she felt as if she were gasping. Finally she had gone to Mr. Phillips.

"We need a fan down on my line," she told him. "A big one. There's just no air down there and we're choking to death."

"No one else's complained," he told her, smiling as if it were just one of those woman things he ignored at times.

"Well, I'm complaining. I can't breathe. I've worked here twenty-some-odd years and all I'm asking for is a fan."

"I'd have to order it, Glenneth. You know that. By the time it got here, the hot weather'd be over."

"Then give me that one." She pointed to a small fan set on his filing cabinet.

“I thought you wanted a big one.”

“I do. But I’ll just put that one on my machine and it’ll do me till the other one gets here.”

“What about the other women?”

“You just said no one complained but me.”

She got the fan, and if the other women made jokes about her and her funny ways, she didn’t mind. People always talked about women alone, always read meanings, and oddness into normal things. Glenneth tried to treat people fair in spite of who or what they were, and she figured they should do the same with her. The ones who hogged the work paid for it, she figured. The ones who made little remarks about women who didn’t need a man paid for it, too, or would. Maybe she wasn’t close to any of the women. Maybe she wasn’t close to anybody, but where was the rule that said she had to be? Some people were born just not needing anyone.

The big clock hanging on the wall above the machines read 10:00—break time. The noise died down as the machines stopped, the newly-finished pockets or sleeves sliding into the canvas bags behind each machine. Glenneth hurried to the coffee dispenser and took the lukewarm coffee with her to the office. It was closed in by a partition, half-wood, half-glass. Mr. Phillips was waitin behind his desk. He motioned her in.

“How you been, Glenneth?”

“Been fine, like always.”

“You ever been sick?”

“Not so anyone’d know. Why?”

“You’re getting on.” He said it softly, not bantering like usual. Glenneth kept her knees primly together beneath the lavender print dress. She hadn’t given in like some of the older girls, she still wore only dresses to work. Just like she always put on a little sachet at break time. “We’re all getting on,” she said. “You been here as long as I have.”

“Doesn’t show behind a desk.”

Glenneth knew then why she had been called in. She didn’t want to believe it, but she knew. How many years had she managed the piece work? So many she couldn’t remember. Always went above the quota. Still had, hadn’t she? She tried to recall her last check. What had it been? She deposited it without really looking. It didn’t take much to live, the house was paid for, and she had just deposited the

check as usual.

"You call me here to tell me I'm getting on?" She tried to keep her voice light. The manager traced something invisible on the desk blotter with his finger.

"Thinking about moving you to something different."

"I like piece work."

"Everybody likes piece work. Everybody wants it."

"I been on that line for years."

"I know, Glenneth. Too long." He looked up at her. "You haven't met the quota, or just barely met it, for weeks now. Three months, really. Line supervisor is squawking."

Line supervisor. Melba BeCraft. Tall and skinny and thought the title meant she could snicker about a woman's hair or clothes or eating habits. Melba BeCraft.

"I can pick it up. She should've let me know. Should've come to me first." Glenneth tried to sip the coffee, cold now. She couldn't taste it. "You telling me it's final?"

"Yes. Monday. You go to packaging."

Glenneth nodded and pushed up from the chair. He was looking at her. He was a kind man. She wouldn't say anything. Not now. She couldn't. She closed the door behind her and walked back to the line. Packaging. She knew what she'd be doing. Going after the canvas bags on wheels that caught the finished work, leaving an empty one. Keeping the quick hands stocked. Walking, trying to see who needed what. She swallowed. She put a new spool on her machine. She had oiled this machine, cared for it better than the factory mechanic. She never had to call him like some of the girls. In her purse was a small kit of tools, a screwdriver, pliers. When Melba BeCraft walked by, Glenneth didn't look up.

The pain had started about 1:00, but Frank stayed. The cushion hadn't helped; nothing had. But it wouldn't have been any different at home. Worse maybe, because he couldn't keep it from his face and then Wilma got frantic. Not in her movements, because there was nothing she could do, but frantic in her eyes and breathing and the shape of her mouth. She was a good woman, Wilma was. Always had been a good wife. But she looked at him now as if she expected

something all the time. Frank laid the fish on the small chopping block he had built in the lower part of the yard. Old Tom had been waiting as if he knew in advance that Frank would bring home fish. He lay now a few feet away, fat, eyes closed, seeming unconcerned.

"Frank. Please come in." Wilma stood on the back steps, her arms over her belly, the blue sweater hugged tight.

"Just a minute." He could have thrown away the fish and she wouldn't have known.

"Frank."

"O.K., I've just got to clean this up." He heard the door close behind her.

"Saw Tom sitting on your side. Figured you'd been out fishing." Glenneth was standing near her fence, the wind whipping the print dress around her thick legs.

"Don't know how he always knows. You like some fish, Glenneth?"

"Don't like it."

They'd been through this before, but he always offered. "How's work?"

"O.K. Bout the same." She looked up at the clouds. "We're gonna have a big one."

"Yeah. Been brewing all day."

The back door slammed and Wilma called again, raising her hand a little to wave. Glenneth waved back and turned toward her own home. She sat at her table as usual, the chicken she had fried turning out golden and crisp. She thought thirty-one years should matter. Always a good worker, on time, didn't spread out the break, didn't make extra runs to the women's room. Didn't cause trouble. Only way she could make it to the pension was by making it the next four years and she didn't know if she could do it. Not in packaging. Pushing, lifting. She laid down the chicken leg. She wasn't even hungry, and she was always hungry. She had never felt old before.

Frank tried to keep it from showing. He ate a little of everything Wilma had fixed, but it didn't work. He saw her watching him, saw the set of her mouth, her eyes changing with the worry.

"It's bad, isn't it?" she asked, and he shook his head. "No. I'm tired. You were right. I should have rested."

"I'm going to call Dr. Massey. Tell him you'll start the treatments

again.”

“No.”

“I’m going to do it. I’m just going to do it, Frank, I can’t just sit here and watch . . .” She buried her face in her hands, slender hands, with only a few dark spots on the skin. She always made gulping noises when she cried. He wanted to comfort her, but he couldn’t. There was nothing he could do. He thought of it again, that nausea deep in the bones, so deep you couldn’t throw it up, throw it out. The pain hit him and he gripped the table, glad Wilma’s face was still buried. Sweat ran down his chest, cold; he thought he would pass out, wished he would pass out, but he sat with no sound coming from his lips till the pain gradually ebbed away.

“I’m going fishing tomorrow,” he said, and left the room.

Glenneth set the timer in the kitchen for thirty minutes and lay on the sofa with her feet propped up. She had never needed to rest after work before, not until bed time, the way it should be. She closed her eyes, seeing the work cart empty, then full, the way the others looked at her as she pushed between the lines, bringing work, taking work. Seeing Melba BeCraft, only forty. When the timer buzzed, Glenneth found her houseslippers, walked into the kitchen. She began peeling potatoes for her dinner. She wouldn’t start snacking, like some people did. She’d eat regular meals, at the table. Through the window she could see Frank in his back yard. He hadn’t given up the fishing yet. She pushed back the curtains with one hand, watching him. Things changed so. One day he wouldn’t be out there. One summer Old Tom would be at her house every day. Wilma would give up the house maybe; new people would move in. She had never been close to Frank and Wilma, but they were good people, good neighbors. Frank had helped Glenneth once when a possum had been caught up in the attic; helped her get the bee hive out of the old chinaberry tree in the front. Some winter mornings he had helped her get her car started.

Outside Frank had leaned suddenly, over the block, his head dipping down till the collar of the heavy coat hid his face. Glenneth dropped the potato and knife into the sink and hurried to the back door. She stopped, looked around her, and grabbed the sack of trash from the basket. In the yard she glanced in his direction as she put the

bag in the barrel by the shed. He still hadn't straightened. She walked toward the low fence she had built, seeing him from the corner of her eye while she called to the cat.

"Tom, you fat old thing, why don't you come home. It's almost winter."

Frank rose. His eyes were sunken, the pores of his skin seemed to have enlarged so that the stubble showed more.

"Hi, Glenneth."

She nodded, looked at the sky, back at the cat, but seeing that Frank's face was still blanched.

"You're getting him fat."

"It's getting cold. He needs some weight."

"Guess so. Probably snow before Thanksgiving."

"Yeah. One of those years." Frank slowly pushed all the scraps together on the block and stepped away from it, toward the fence and Glenneth.

"How's work going?"

Glenneth wrapped her arms around her waist. "Fine," she said, "just fine."

"That's good."

They watched Tom jump on the block, his body curving protectively around the scraps.

"He's been a good old Tom, hasn't he, Glenneth."

"He has. Mean. No ears. Half a tail."

"He's been something alright."

They watched the cat quietly. Frank pushed his hands in his pockets, smiled a little. The air had turned cooler, the Missouri night wind beginning. Glenneth pulled her arms closer. Frank's eyes were blue. She didn't remember ever knowing what color they were before.

"They put me in packaging," she said.

"Packaging? Is that good?"

"Where they put old people. Don't bother me much, though." She looked away from him, down. "Thought maybe I'd put some bulbs in here this weekend." She bent, pulled leaves away from the small slats of the fence. "Look nice next spring."

"Thought they had a union down at the factory."

"They do. Piece prices, pension, that sort of thing. Think Wilma'd mind having some tulips along here?"

“No. It’d be nice.”

On Saturday, Frank’s son and his family came. Frank sat in his recliner, watching the game with Dave and the boy. He had never seen his grandson so quiet, just sitting, thin legs awkwardly crossed, finger tapping against the arm of the sofa. Dave didn’t tease Wilma about the over-heated house. They all talked and laughed a little, but it seemed as if they were in a church or a sickroom. Even the murmur of the voices from the kitchen, Wilma and Rosie, seemed different. Frank closed his eyes. When he opened them he caught Dave staring at him with Wilma’s expression. Such dark eyes. The boy had them, too. “I can’t do a goddamn thing about it, Dave,” he said. “Not a goddamn thing.” Then he couldn’t talk anymore.

When they left, Frank wouldn’t go back in the house with Wilma. He sat on the porch swing, hands in his lap, staring at the road in front of his house and the homes across it. Prairie Street. When he had moved here, it hadn’t been paved and had no name. When cars went by dust filtered into the house and settled on the furniture until Wilma had spread cheesecloth across the front windows. They had wanted to live in a small town for Dave, in a good neighborhood, with the same friends. A small place where they still carolled at Christmas, had town raffles for turkeys at Thanksgiving. It had been a good little town.

A door slammed shut next door. Glenneth had stepped down from her porch and was crossing her yard with a cardboard box and trowel. He waved to her. She had on her working clothes: an old dress covered with a gray sweater, black and white oxfords with gray socks, men’s leather gloves and a scarf. She had dressed the same, year in and out, when she worked in the yard in the fall. In the spring it would be only slightly different: no sweater and a hat in place of the scarf. She had knelt and was clearing the soil for the bulbs. He watched her for a while, then walked around to his back yard and took his tools from the rack in the shed.

He talked to her about the bulbs; about the broken slats, if it had been his grandson who broke them; about the lopsided tree, if it should come out or maybe would stand up under the next high wind; if the town was really going to build a housing project on the slope

above and beyond the ditch. Glenneth answered him as she always had, practically, wanting to keep the tree whatever happened, not trusting the town to do what was right, if they built the project the foundations would wash down the slope with the rain. But her voice seemed strained, and she rested often, sitting back on her heels and looking down the fence line at the soil still to be broken.

“How’s work going?”

“Fine,” she said. “Just fine.”

Frank pushed a bulb deep and smoothed the dirt above it. “They still got you in packaging?”

She nodded and moved away, pushing the box of bulbs before her.

“You oughta talk to that union.”

“Can’t.”

“That’s what it’s for.”

She didn’t answer. She shook her head and a few moments later shook it again.

When Frank woke in the night now Wilma fixed him hot milk as his mother had done in his childhood illnesses. Wilma bought the candy he liked and kept it in every room of the house. “Eat, Frank, please,” she said. On the kitchen counter was a schedule. Wilma timed the medication, the dosage. He tried not to ask for it and every time he did, it was too soon. Wilma slept in a cot next to his bed at night so he could sleep easier and he couldn’t make her not do it. She had lost weight, wouldn’t go shopping on Mondays as she always had but instead let Rosie do the grocery buying, the small errands. He called Dr. Massey and asked for something to help Wilma relax but she wouldn’t take the pills.

The weather was cold, the wind strong. Wilma closed the drapes against the chill but he made her open them. It seemed to him there was a quickness outside, the cars speeding, the kids running, laughing, the wind blowing. Even the first snow seemed to fall in a hurry, heavy and wet. Only Glenneth moved slowly. He saw how she sat in her car now when she came home from work and placed her hand on the porch post before stepping up. On the morning after the snow, her car wouldn’t start and he had tried to take his peacoat from the closet, but Wilma had stopped him. “She can call the garage,

Frank. You can't do this." He watched the mechanic come, put the jumper cables on. Such a simple thing.

The weather warmed again right before Christmas. Frank used the cane to walk in the back yard. The chopping block had darkened, only a few half-rotted leaves lying on its surface. He brushed them off, leaned against the wood. This summer the Merrimac would flow on, the trees bush out, wild honeysuckle line the roadway. But there would be no fish. Not for Frank Cauley. Maybe Tom would sit under the tree and wait. Maybe for the whole summer. Maybe Glenneth would come get him, take him into her yard. He looked toward her house. The dish was by the back steps. "Tom?" he called. "Hey. Tom." He stepped over the fence and crossed the yard. The dish was empty, a thick ring where the milk had set awhile before Tom had come. But no cat. He stood looking at the back door where white curtains with pink flowers were stretched tight over the glass pane. He knocked.

"Frank. Well I never. You just come in."

"Looking for Tom."

"You come on in here. Sit down. I've gotta get some shoes on. Just put these slippers on for a minute and forgot to change."

Her kitchen smelled like food, a roast, maybe, in the oven. There were plants in the window sills, except above the sink. His daughter-in-law kept plants like that, in every room of the house.

"How's Wilma?" she called from the bedroom.

"Fine."

"Haven't seen you out lately." He heard her pause. "but it's been cold."

"It has. Been a bad one this year."

Glenneth took cups from the cupboard, poured coffee. She wouldn't sit down till she had put out sugar and cream although he wanted neither, and had placed napkins on the table.

"That Tom was here this morning," she said. "Just like always."

"Thought I'd look at him. See how he was doing."

Frank sipped the coffee. The windows of her kitchen were steamy. The wallpaper she had added was yellow, the seams not matching close to the ceiling. She had done it herself, just like she mowed her own yard, pruned her own trees.

"How's work?"

“Fine. Just fine.”

“Glenneth, that union. You paid for it.”

Her hand smoothed against the table. It was a thick hand; looked stronger than Wilma’s.

“They say I can’t do the work anymore. The union can’t do nothing about that.”

“They owe it to you.”

“Don’t anybody owe anybody anything.” She stood, took his cup to the stove and filled it. When she set it in front of him again, it rattled a little against the saucer. “You won’t have them treatments,” she said.

“No.”

She sat back down, her hand brushing against the table again. “It scares me to go to the union.”

“Those treatments make me sick.” Frank shook his head. “So damned sick.”

The winter was a long one, and hard, rain turning to sleet, then freezing solid. It was early April before a warm day came and the same month that Frank’s treatments stopped the final time. Glenneth didn’t visit. It had never been her way to visit. She worked at her machine and tried to make the quota; it seemed to her that the work had become harder. She came home for lunch often. She had expected to hear from Wilma when it happened, but it was Frank’s son who told her, standing on her porch and speaking to her through the screen. When he left, she walked through her house and stepped outside. She would put in a garden again this year, maybe paint the front porch. She pulled her arms tightly against her. Down the yard the old lopsided tree had made it through another winter; the slope beyond had been cleared by the city. She walked toward her fence. The bulbs had pushed up, still small, fragile. Old Tom lay among them, the sun shining against his gray fur, making him look sleek and young. “Tom,” she said and he raised his head. She picked him up and carried him toward the back door. “Tom, it’s summer.”