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CUTBANK 62

where the big fish lie...



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CUTBANK 62

Fall 2004

CutBank 62 Fall 2004

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COVER ART: *Sally, with Friend* by Forrest Formsma

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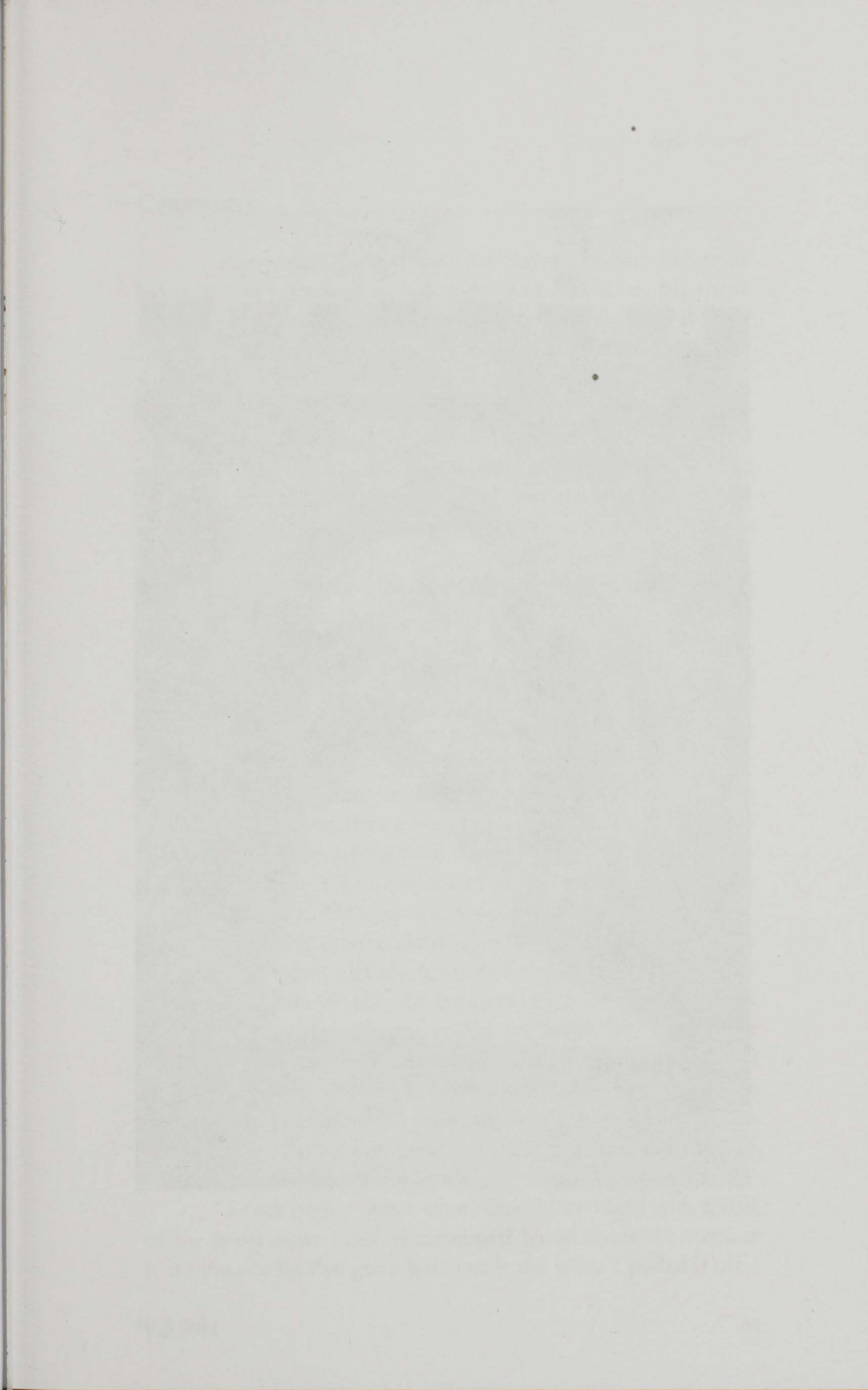
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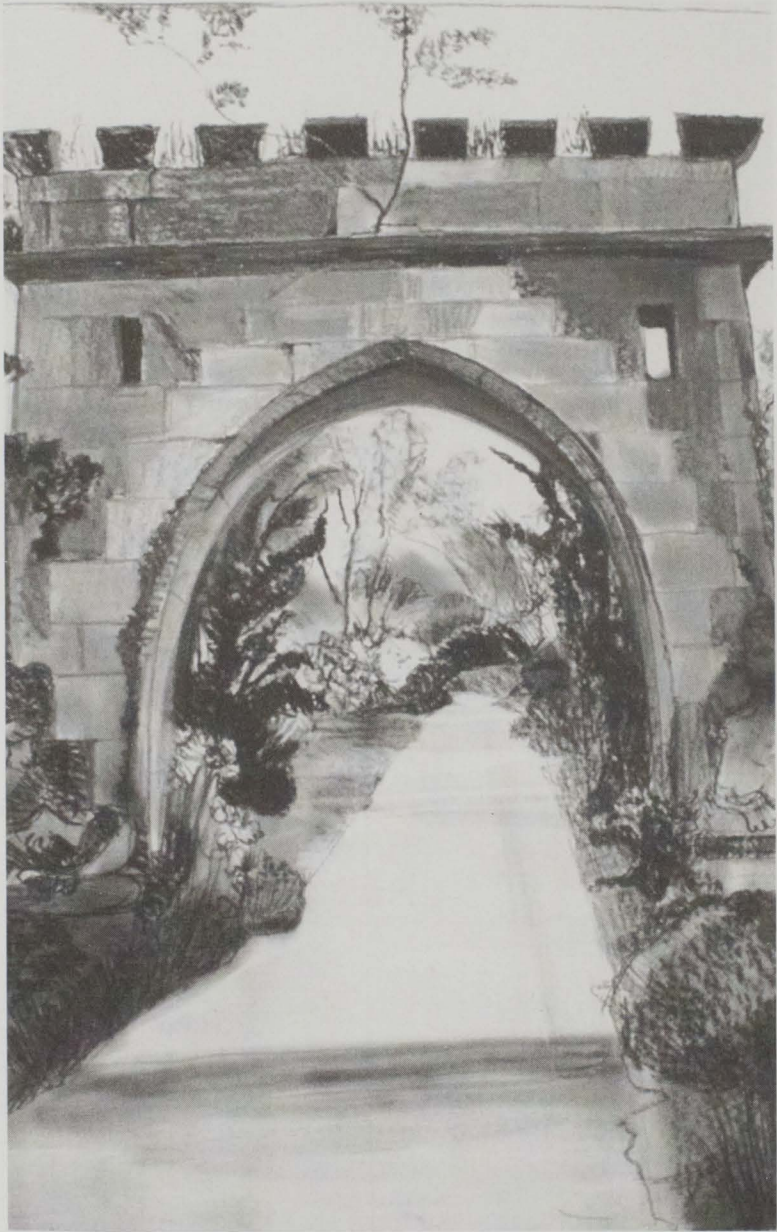
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CEREMONY

Papaw puts a whole can of Coke on the ham before he bakes it. I sit right next to him when he pours it on. My shoes knock against the cabinet door with thud, thank, glud. Rubber bounces off wood and my legs go high like when I bang the funny part of my knee with a spoon handle.

"They slice 'em up before you get 'em, Lil. Coke goes right in. Very little work indeed." He pours it on, fizzing and sliding down the pink back of the ham. I put my finger on and taste it. Salty and sweet, not like the sick and slimy taste of Mom's raw chicken and Papaw doesn't mind me tasting. *A pig ain't like no other animal and that's the truth.*

"Hand me the pineapple, Lil." He holds a hand out and I give him the can. Papaw's clothes don't come in pieces. His tops and bottoms are sewn together with buttons up the middle. "Open it first." He hands the can back to me and I push the ring down and pull it up. I try to be careful—always—but things get away from me and some of that sweet juice is lost on the floor below my legs.

"Durnit." I am the only one that's really *worth a shit* even when I make a mess. Papaw keeps me now that the school won't and while my mom works until she has a headache and needs a sip and wants the TV on and me in my room. Door shut. *Make me a present, Lil, and let's keep it a surprise.*

"Lil," Papaw says, shaking his head at me. "Lil, we'll have to get a rag." Papaw's lonely. All alone since God called Grandma back home again. We take the ham around the neighborhood to the ladies. We share. Sharing makes the lonely less so and the ham makes ladies happy. Always we take the ham around on Sundays when the ladies get back from church. But today is a Tuesday and Tuesdays don't mean anything different from a Sunday to me or Papaw, not now, not this week, not since Papaw keeps me 'cause the school won't.

I suck on my finger where blood has mixed with a little of the sweet juice. I can't remember if blood tastes like metal or if it's the can lid that got a little inside me when I pulled it off.

"You're short, Papaw," I say because I'm taller with my butt on the counter and his feet still on the floor.

"Don't I know it." He pushes chunks of pineapple down into the ham with his fingers that aren't much longer than mine but twice as fat like if you pushed half a pencil up against half a hot dog, that's what our fingers look like together. But I am never quite the same, always taller, seeing as how I am two grades behind and they don't know what they're going to do with me but God has a plan. *He has one for everybody and its best to wait and see what it will be.*

My job is to carry the knife. Papaw carries the ham so I won't drop it. I drop the knife plenty but when I do I jump back, say Wooo and Papaw knows I'm okay.

"You're going to dull it, Lil."

"Ham's cut already, Papaw. You showed me that. I seen it."

Papaw stops walking. "What's the glory in going to a pretty lady's house and pulling a slab of ham off with your fingers? It's a thing called ceremony, Lil. Ceremony is what gets you places in life."

"Out of first grade?"

"Might could." He sets the ham down on a fence post. His hand sneaks up his pant leg to get at an itch. The highway runs right by us. *Watch out for the highway, Lil.* I remember. "There's ceremony in big ways. I been married in one and rested her soul in one. I went into the army with one and got out with one." He wiggled his leg inside his sewn together top and bottom. *Eating all that ham, he won't fit in those things anymore. Then what's he going to do? Be out a wardrobe.* "Birthing is a kind of ceremony but you ain't ready for that. Point is, there's little ceremonies too. The everyday kind, like cutting a ham that's done been cut for the sake of a lady, putting the toilet seat down after a pee, setting a spoon out at dinnertime when there ain't no soup." He pulls a piece of crackling off and sticks it in my mouth where it melts like serious candy, "plastic flowers, thank yous and Christmas trees."

He pops a piece of ham into his mouth and shakes his head. "Little piece from the end is tasty, Lil. Sweet Jesus." When

Papaw eats, his whole head moves with his teeth and I imagine that he chews his food the intended way. *Slow down, Lil, and chew your food. You'll choke to death.* I try to be like Papaw when I eat. Down the road a ways comes the first house and the one I hate the most. Papaw says to stick in there and we'll be on our way. There are 1 2 3 houses today. There are more than that but today is Tuesday.

"Have to treat them all the same, Lil. Can't favor pretty ones over ugly ones. That's the most important thing to know about women. As a female yourself, be good for you to know that kind of thing." Ham and bacon and fried pork chops all come from the pig. I kick at the rocks along the road, careful not to lose two legs off the sidewalk when one goes down. Carry the knife tip down always. *Better to hurt what's being fell into than what's falling.* "That's ceremony too, treating pretty and ugly the same." Ugly is a word I try not to use. It's a sharp rock more than a word and pretty isn't for me yet, not until I can use a Tuesday in the right way and not like a Sunday.

"And we don't know about you yet, Lil. You might be pretty, might not. But you're better off knowing which you are, rather than being pretty and thinking you're ugly or being ugly and thinking you're pretty. Try to know for sure." Papaw opens the gate and I scutter in ahead of him, dropping the knife in the grass.

"Wooo." I jump back.

"Watch that knife around my pansies. You're likely to send that blade down to the root again, Lil. You wrecked a whole patch of marigolds last month," That Gladys says to me, not even looking right at me but already squatted down in her lawn, smoothing over the grass where my knife didn't land. *That Gladys shouldn't talk to you that way. You ain't her child. You better thank the Lord for that, Lil.* "I see you bringing that dried up old ham around again." That Gladys looks up at Papaw and just like his face was all chew, now it's smile.

"Hand me the knife, Lil"

"You ain't going to hand me a piece of ham in my front yard like we're a bunch of grease monkeys on lunch. Come in the house." That Gladys pulls herself up from the ground with a

noise like a squeaky door and I change That Gladys to Fat Gladys in my head.

"Now sit," Fat Gladys says when we go inside and points me to a chair in the corner. She brings a roll of paper towels from the kitchen and puts one in my lap.

"I ain't going to eat," I tell her. I don't eat with the ladies.

"You might need it anyhow," I hear *Messy Child* as she turns back toward Papaw on the couch. Her house smells like laundry sheets and I hear her legs rub together when she walks like dried up leaves scratching in the dirt. He sets the ham on the table in front of the couch and offers up a slice to Fat Gladys resting on the blade of the knife. "Mmmm. Mmmm. Mmmm." Fat Gladys chews just barely and I imagine that she's not chewing at all but just sucking on the ham. She's the kind of woman to have teeth running up and down her throat, making everything that comes out of her so nasty and mean.

"What you going to do with Lil? You going to just keep her out of school? That's a shame, you ask me. Child belongs in school with the other children. She'll not straighten out otherwise."

"Might just be what she needs to spend a little time with her Papaw. Right, Lil?" Papaw looks around to me but Fat Gladys' fat back blocks him. "I teach her plenty."

"I'd say her mother drank plenty when she was in the belly."

"My daughter," Papaw says. Mom works hard at the store. All day. Nights too. "Now Gladys." The hot dog fingers spread out on a fat leg and a fat hand pushes them away. "We known each other a long time. Let the girl alone."

"You still think you can be fresh with me." She makes a noise that must be a fat giggle and smooths her hands down her legs. She reaches for the ham and pulls it from the bone with her fingers. "A woman like that don't stop cause she's carrying a baby."

"Alright Gladys. You've had your say." Papaw sits back on the couch to where he can see me and he doesn't look packed full like he usually does, like his body was always too small to pack all of him inside and he was busting at the seams of his own skin, looking for more room, for the body of a giant. He looks little and shrinked up—all loose skin and extra air.

We went to all the houses down along the highway where there was a woman who lived alone. Alone in the way of not having a husband or a boyfriend or a man who was there on a full time basis. We come around with the ham and cut off a few slices for each one of them. One to eat while we were there and another two or three for later, to eat on a biscuit or on a piece of toast with mayonnaise and a slice of tomato. *It gets the two of them out of the house. Lord knows he could use the exercise with his britches as tight as they are.*

“You don’t pay her mind,” Papaw says about Fat Gladys as soon as we leave her house. Every time we leave her house.

“I know not to,” I say. “Fat Gladys.” It feels good outside my head.

“That’s right.”

Lil is just a wisp of a thing. Can’t put any meat on her bones. I know if she’d settle, she’d thicken up a bit, but I can’t get her to settle. It’s a burden of the heart.

Summer was bad when we had to go to May’s because she kept her grandson all summer and he bit me four times. Peter was in my grade last year but I was taller and when he bit me, he left little moons on my arm, purple half moons with edges like the sharp side of a cut can. *You never bit nobody, Lil. They call that boy normal. Shows what money will get you.*

Papaw says I got to be faster to keep from getting bit but school started back and Peter went on while I stayed behind, got taller, beat all the boys at kickball and didn’t get bit. *If he ever breaks your skin, Lil, if you ever see blood—that’s red, Lil, red—you tell your Papaw to get you to the doctor. Tell him I said.* I had to leave the school though, because God has a plan and this world ain’t made for souls like mine. I’d be better off in a *jungle* somewhere. Running naked and wild. Purple half moons up and down my body. I would. Tuesday, Sunday, Monday, Thursday.

May cries when she sees us. She stands in the door of her house while tears well up in her eyes looking like her eyeballs are going to slide right out her head. I walk on tiptoes so I won’t step on them. We’d have to get them back in.

“Now May, what’s got you so worked up?” Papaw puts

the ham on the kitchen counter and we three sit at the table, me with my feet up off the ground. There's already three cups of Pepsi poured when we walk in the house. The cups are thick and plastic and I bite into mine and leave marks all the way around for Peter. Pepsi tastes like Coke poured through a rain cloud, it's sadder and different.

"It's hard to make it through the days," May wipes her eyes with a napkin crunched into one hand and with the other she takes the knife from me and sets it behind her on the counter. "I had my Peter here all summer to keep my mind busy. I miss my Jacob now. All I got to think about."

She sounds like a kitty we had that cried in its sleep. I'd put my nose up close to its nose and watch her eyes shiver and breath in the little crying breaths. That kitty died and I was the one to notice because I did that with our noses pushed together. It's okay though. *God always has a plan, Lil.*

"You got ever thing to be thankful for, May."

"My kids is worthless. They hate me. Jacob loved me."

"We're here for the grandbabies," Papaw pulls the cup from my mouth and looks at the edges where it's bit. "Nobody gets anything right the first time." He puts the cup back in my mouth.

"Peter is my angel now. I got to live another twenty years, alone." May pushes her napkin into her chest and I pick my arms up off the table so I won't crush the eyeballs when they go rolling. I clang the ice against my teeth with no hands on the cup. "Goodness, Lil," she whispers but this isn't church.

"We got to move on before my ham dries up," the cup drops from my mouth and Papaw picks it up. He sets it upright. "This'll be special for Lil when we come by."

May shakes her head and crosses her arms on her chest that is so thin and barely there, her arms don't touch anything. "My Tupperware," she says and I put my arms down because she stopped crying. *Ruined.*

"Get the knife, Lil."

"Just run off," she says. "You hate me too." Her voice is more like the scratch between Fat Gladys' legs than a kitten.

"We'll be back on Sunday," Papaw pats her back and her head moves as he touches her.

"It's Tuesday," I tell him. "Today."

My hands touch the floor before my feet but I pull myself up and take the knife from behind May's head. "Gracious," she says, turning around quickly like I am the kind to drop it on her head. *You'll hurt someone, Lil. You'll hurt yourself.*

We have a new house and where all of the houses we go to have old women in them, sagging and fat and full of air that blows sometimes sweet and sometimes bitter on my cheeks, we have a young one. Anna. A woman like my mother but with pink splotches all up and down the side of her face. *She was born that way, Lil, don't stare.* Sometimes I have to move my face with my hands so I won't look at her for too long and she asks me, *Girl, why do you smack yourself like that? World's going to bounce you around enough the way it is. Don't take to hurting your own self.* And then I sit quiet and still because she talks right to me, right into my eyes and it freezes me somehow. Keeps me still.

Her yard is nothing but grass and if you drop the knife, no one's watching you.

"Anna, it's me and Lil come with a bite of ham," Papaw says into the screen door. He hits the metal with his fist that is full again, so full that I duck, scared he might bust right open.

She comes to the door and the side of her face that is all wrong is covered by a shadow. I think about being her and looking at myself in the kind of light that made me look like everyone else and I wish I was her, having something solid and wrong to cover up.

"The Odd Couple," she calls us and Papaw laughs while I think this is obvious and not funny, maybe funny because she said it and in saying things that are real it can be funny because it's not always that people say what's real. I know that word though, odd. I know *odd* and *weird* and *mean* and *stay the fuck still* and *not right*.

"The house is a mess," she says. "Let's sit on the porch in this nice sunshine."

"Like monkeys," I remember everything.

"Lil," Papaw puts the ham down on the ground and eases himself into a sit on the top step of the porch. He's about to bust again.

“Monkeys eating ham on my porch?” Anna sits down next to Papaw. “Fine with me,” she says. “Long as I can clean it up with a hose.”

Papaw laughs and so do I. *Not so loud, Lil.* Maybe it’s me who is about to bust. Watch the way you look.

Papaw slides the knife down into the ham and pulls the piece out, laid flat on the knife blade. He offers it to Anna.

“Why don’t we use our hands, William?” She puts a finger in front of her lips. “Our little secret that your ham is already cut.”

“It’s ceremony,” I tell her. My arms are above my head and I watch my hands so I won’t stare. I’ve been stared at. I’m the tallest one in my class. I’m *No fair* at recess.

“How’s that, Lil?” Anna holds the ham between her fingers. Papaw doesn’t eat but watches her and I don’t know how but he isn’t staring. He’s looking. He’s soft and his about to bustness is settled for the time.

“Pretty and ugly are the same.” I put my hands on my legs and look down there. I jump backwards down the steps. “And doing things that don’t make sense is ceremony. Papaw taught me.”

Papaw has his hand over his mouth, like he’s holding the words inside there. I jump up the steps and back down again. Eyes on hands. *You are going to hurt yourself, Lil.*

Anna has a *Story* and that is how she came to be here on the highway in our town. She doesn’t work or have a husband and that is part of her *Story*.

“Is the messes on her face part of her *Story*?” I have asked.

“No,” Papaw told me. “Just part of her life.” So I know that Life and *Story* are different. Tuesday and Sunday can be the same. Pretty and ugly are the same.

Papaw sits close to Anna. With the other ladies, there is a rhythm to the movement that I feel in my watching that they don’t think is watching but moving too much, close to hurting myself always. Papaw touches and they giggle, slap his hand, squeeze on him. Papaw teases and they giggle, slap his hand, squeeze on him. They cry but never over him. They tell him his ham is bad, but their fingers are greasy when we leave. Full bel-

lies and pink puffy cheeks. When Papaw reaches to touch Anna, his hand stops, falls dead beside him, and she notices. She tells him his ham is good. The best she's ever had.

"Lil," Anna picks the ham off herself, without waiting for Papaw's knife. "Why don't you stay with me the afternoon?"

"This house?" I ask. Most houses I am rushed into and out of. Papaw looks at me and I know there has been talking before this walk down the highway, that Anna's words are his too. "Doing what?"

"I used to be a school teacher. Second grade, just like you."

"I'm in first."

"You're smarter than that, Lil."

When Anna talks to me it's hard not to stare. I move my face to the side with my hands.

"Stop acting," Papaw says. "Anna might could help you with your school problems."

"We'll try some writing today and some drawing," Anna's face holds me. I hop up the stairs, two feet at a time, to her. I kick a foot back to try and go back down again but I don't want to. *Lil.* "What did you like best about school? What was your favorite part?"

"The outside parts. I was better than everybody else." I stand so still it's not still at all but shaking. I don't ever know what other people can see.

"Let's see if we can't get you to like the inside parts too. I know you'll be a good speller. I can tell that about you."

My hand comes up from holding onto my ankle and reaches to Anna's face, to the messed up side. She jerks back, quick like a kitten, but she sits still when I touch her. *Lil.* My fingers run down her face and I hear my breathing. I go from top to bottom, just touching. I close my eyes because there is no difference between the messed up side and the perfect side if you are just touching.

"Damn it, Lil, Get your hand off her." Papaw reaches up and has my arm back down at my side. I feel it a little bit. Sting.

Lil. You can't go back, Lil. Why would you even want to? I'll never understand you. Just let me go back for the kickball. I'm taller. What am I going to do? Momma's forehead touches the table and

there are tiny puddles under her eyes. *What am I going to do?* Don't be sad. Don't be sad. I'll squeeze my body so tight, I'll squeeze it right out of me, Momma. The wrong. I'll squeeze so tight.

"Relax, baby girl," Anna's hand pushes into my palm. Her thumb rubs the middle. "Breathe. Breathe."

"We'd better go," Papaw rubs his hands up and down his suit. He stands. "She needs a nap. A snack."

I try to know that I am breathing but it's hard to tell. Anna holds on to both my hands and she pushes her thumbs into my palms, rolling them in circles. *Breathe*. I know that if I breathe I'll be crying too and that's not tight enough. It has to be tighter to squeeze it all out.

"Let it go, baby girl." It's not just my hand now but my whole body. She pulls me into her, right up close to the messes on her face and I make them wet. My whole face is wet, not tight at all. "Go on," she says and I can't help it but I do.

I see Papaw. There is light coming from all around us. Where we have been warm all day, the cool starts to set in. We'll catch cold, all three of us, even though the sun pushes in through Anna's trees, a sun close to carrying us into night. I see Papaw, orange sticks of sun pushing into his eyes, closing them. Love. Let's stay for a while. *I love you*. My arms are wet. My chest is wet. I've been all loose and crying. Let's stay for a while.

PERIPHERY

Not how many angels fit on this pin;
what they do there. Shyest of seraphim,
she taps her foot, waits alone at head's rim,
while the fearless hosts dance wildly, spin
holy selves in a blur of feathers, hair,
sweat. The wings, you know, are iridescent—
the dancers turn all colors; white sails glint
purple, orange, green. Day and night they flare
in this frenzied waltz, never pause to sleep.
Scowling with exertion: servants, lovers,
God's anointed. She however hovers
between devotion and the sudden creep
of claustrophobia. The dark rushes
up the crown, her robes. She even blushes.

LAMENT FOR A LESSER KNOWN HERO

And you shall save your brother from the wolf's bite.
And your family will outlive itself while other families outlive
themselves.

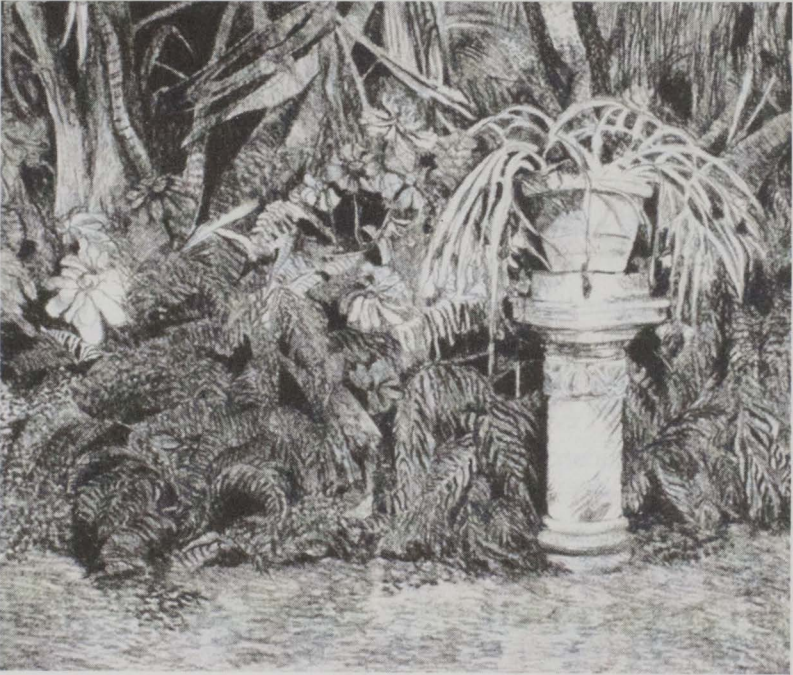
And you will forget to greet life with a sweet jar of honey.
And you will bow to yourself against a mirror,
and you will love your own schemes,
and for that, you will shed outrageous tears

More than not, you will be delirious
like any woman with a child,
any woman with a sword and two feathers.
More than not, you will be beautiful
as your body knots its way through wind like a frayed kite

And you will kill two children.
And you won't love your husband.
But you will save your brother from the wolf's bite.
And that is something.

EASTER GARDEN

It had been weeks since we had spoken.
For once we didn't take ourselves miserably
home where our sister began a long descent
that simply ended on a jail floor and her burial,
on my birthday in Starkville the narcissus in full bloom.
So I asked him and he said yeah
and came but came late and forgot the hoe.
That day it felt good to give up language,
the whole world reduced to transparent
gestures, to grunt, sigh, and pointing.
Sunday of dirt beneath my nails.
Sunday of blue on blue and discovery.
I hardly know what it meant to my brother,
but we fetched the wheelbarrow out of the truck
and hauled some dirt up from the creek.
We found an old loading pallet and broke
the handle off a broom and made a trellis, sort of.
Though I wasn't even going to be around
to watch the cucumber vines rise up each plank,
or sit down with him and eat our vegetables.
Though you could see we were getting tired of each other,
and already the first few hard stars were out,
and the yellow flowers that make me sigh for summer,
for I don't know what, were gone,
leaving only the blood-spit azalea blossoms,
leaving only my brother to say *ah laud*—
half sigh, half why—to nothing in particular.



ONE MARRIAGE LATER

Julie says "what's another word for love? Six letters."

Jack has no idea, having just tipped the bellboy a hundred dollars by mistake.

The same palm trees outside the same Caribbean window. "I thought this would be different." She sighs.

"I heard," Jack says, "that a hundred bucks is like a thousand down here." He picks up the phone and presses O.

"What's another word for liar, cheater, thief?" Julie says, squeezing now into a too-tight bikini.

Totally unaware, Jack fumes on hold. Bach concerto or Olivia freakin' Newton-John.

"You know," she says when the bra doesn't close; "I really hoped this would fit." She tugs and tugs at the lycra spandex. She rearranges her breasts. Finally, she gives up and goes back to her puzzle. "What's another word for another word?"

Jack finally speaks to the phone. "Your bellboy," he says, "I just got robbed."

SLIDE SHOW

The way it comes to me, an occupant
of a black carriage, too ironic to pine over,
the sea's green shrug, the fan of little hands
patting ponies, the cloak of sun worn on clay.
I welcome ghost claws ferrying a volatile sleep --
the toss that's wild like an exclamation. To yearn
fully in a moan. To greet him by overturning tables.
Every scribbled sentence is an eventual peace.
Smile and go in.

COONS, POSSUMS, YUGOSLAVIA

Daddy's carrying a load of shit in his pants and Mama's going around acting like it's all my fault. She says it's the beer we drink whenever I visit that's what confuses him, he's never this bad when I'm not here. Mama's about half out the door when she starts in with the tongue lashing, I laugh and that sets her off some more. I laugh because it's always been like this when we fight—Mama rushing out the door in a hurry to get someplace, then stopping and turning around like she forgot her keys or something.

"I don't have time to argue with you," she says, "you been trying to get me to argue since you drove up. I'll be late for my Bingo if I stand here with you. And you better keep an eye on him, see that he don't walk off."

"Mama," I say, "he done walked off in his mind a long time ago."

Her face turns red like it always does when she's mad. She takes a step toward me and the screen door slams in back of her. "Don't talk about your father like that," she says. "You'll be old one day your own self."

Then she's out the door and I'm yelling after her, "What do you want me to do, put him on a goddamn leash?" I should of let it ride, but we've never been able to do that with each other.

Daddy don't hear any of this because he's busy washing out his drawers in the bathroom sink; that's what Mama told him to do, and he's been scrubbing at them for two hours now. I guess he just don't remember how long he's been at it. That's how he is with the newspaper. Mama says he reads the Knoxville paper front to back, spends three or four hours with it all folded up in his lap. And he don't remember a word of what he's read, not according to Mama. Except for the obituary page, and she thinks he makes that up.

Over coffee this morning she says, "He reads that obituary page like your grandmother used to read the bible. And he

makes things up. They say that's a sign it's getting worse. He's always telling me so and so died, he read it in the paper. Travis Campbell, you remember old Travis Campbell, he used to claim they named the county after him. Your father had him dead of a heart attack and I saw him in the Piggly Wiggly the very day he was supposed to of died. I told your father I'd seen him, said he looked fine to me. You know your father, he gives me that what-do-you-know-about-anything look and says, 'You might be the last one to of seen him alive.' "

Mama goes into Knoxville for her Bingo; it's to get away from Daddy, but she won't admit it. She thinks she ought to be able to fix the Alzheimer's with prayer and watching over him 24 hours a day. Nothing works, and not getting away makes her short with him. Every time she goes out of the house, she has to make sure the neighbors keep an eye on him. Used to be their kids were over to the house all the time, listening to his stories. Now they stay away. Mama thinks he scares them. She says he's okay for a couple hours, but she's afraid he'd burn the house down if she was gone any longer. One time she come home and all the burners on the stove were going and he was out back wandering around. He don't know what day it is, he don't know what time it is. The last time he mowed the lawn, it didn't get half done; the mower ended up down the hill almost to this little creek that fills up when it rains.

It's always been best when Daddy and I can just sit and look at things. After Mama drives off I go out on the porch, call for him to come and join me. He walks in carrying those scrubbed-up drawers like he don't know how they come to be in his hand or what exactly he's supposed to do with them. He stands there in the doorway looking out at the yard, says, "Something's eating my wrens." Then he cuts a long, lingering fart that has a kind of music to it. I say, "Daddy, you better be careful. You're gonna have you another accident." He says, "A good fart never hurt anybody." And laughs that good laugh of his. I don't know if it's at the fart or his comment. Then he says, "Where'd your mother go?" I have to tell him about a hundred times in the next hour how she went to play Bingo.

Daddy's always been fond of wrens, and he must have six houses out back where they nest in the spring. I bought him this hand crafted wren house when I was up near Lexington a few years ago. It's supposed to be an outhouse and it's made of old wood and has a crescent moon on it, even leans a little to one side. It was his favorite from the day I showed up with it. The only thing he didn't like about it was the hole where the wrens were supposed to go in. He said it was too big, they might not go in there on account of the hole was too big. I guess he could see I was disappointed I'd got him a wren house with the wrong size hole. "What the hell," he said to me, "if the wrens don't like it I can fuck the damn thing."

He never used to talk like that around me, but since he's gotten older he cusses like I was one of the boys he used to go coon hunting with. I guess getting older don't mean much unless it means you're just becoming more of what you already are, and maybe you just care less about hiding it from anybody, even your own son.

"Daddy," I ask, "what do you think it is that's killing the wrens?"

It's like he's forgot all about the wrens. "What?" he says. "The wrens. What's killing them?"

"How do I know? Old age. If I knew I'd set out here with my shotgun." Then he looks at me like I'm some kind of stupid that's new to the human race and he's trying to figure out how to describe it, the kind of stupid I am, or how it is I got that way, where the damn chicken coop fox come from. He's always looked at me like that, and when he does I know I'm about to hear one of his famous Campbell County comments on life.

"I got growin' wild on my ass what you're cultivatin' there on your face," that's what he says. He ain't ever got used to my beard, and I guess it's like the first time whenever he sees it.

I go into the kitchen to get us a couple beers, and he's dozed off in the rocker when I come back. His drawers are in a puddle on the floor, and I notice there's blood and shit under his fingernails. Mama says she's thinking about making him wear gloves to bed—if he ain't up prowling he's scratching at himself. She says it's part of the Alzheimer's, calls it a reverse

clock—he sleeps in the day and walks around like a zombie at night. It was a long time before she'd even talk about it, and she seemed to hold it against me that I was always wanting to know how he was doing with it. I was only kidding about the leash thing, but I shouldn't of said it. It's Mama that's on the leash, the way she has to wait on him hand and foot. Whenever she talks about it she'll say she can't breathe her own air, that he follows her around the house like a puppy. That leash thing ain't nothing to joke about. It was in the paper last time I visited how somebody over in Maynardville actually had put their own father on a rope and tied him up in the back yard. They took his food out to him and hosed him down when he got to stinking too bad. People around here can't afford a nursing home and everyone is quick to raise their eyebrows, but not many know what to do about it when it happens in their own family, the Alzheimer's.

Daddy wakes up and looks over at me like he don't know who I am. I wave to him, he says, "Who the hell you supposed to be?" I give him what's left of his beer, and he starts in with his Yugoslavia story. I've heard it a hundred times, and whenever he tells the damn thing it's like we've been sitting there talking about it for hours.

"The war was almost over," he says, "it was my job to carry whores to the troops that was out in the field. They hadn't seen a woman in so long the colonel was beginning to worry about his own ass. It was a full bird colonel. He called me cracker, he was from some place up north. I don't think he ever met anybody like me."

"There probably wasn't nobody like you in the entire army, Daddy."

"I drove all over Yugoslavia with those whores bouncing around in back of that five ton. I was tenderizing the meat. They got them some black and blue asses on those roads. There weren't a good road in all of Yugoslavia."

"There ain't no Yugoslavia no more. Do you know that, Daddy?"

"What's that you say?"

"There ain't no Yugoslavia. They broke it up."

"Well there was then. They had the sorriest roads you'd

ever want to see. Now get me another beer and shave your damn face while you're gone."

I pick up his drawers on the way out, carry them with me into the kitchen. I figure if I stay gone long enough, maybe he'll fall back asleep and forget the Yugoslavia story. It's always like this when I go back, I mean the way I have to struggle with the Alzheimer's, come to terms with it. And the way Mama has to struggle with me busting up her routine. You can get used to just about anything, long as you don't go around thinking you can fix it. Then you got yourself some real trouble.

When I first seen how bad he had got, I went into my room and cried. This must be five years ago now. I took a bottle of Jack Daniel's in there with me and drank and cried, drank and cried till Mama knocked on the door about noon the next day wanting to know if I was still alive. I remember sitting there propped up in the bed thinking whiskey was about like getting old—Daddy used to say he took it one day at a time whenever you asked how he was doing. Whiskey is one sip at a time, and it don't make you into anything you ain't already been most of your life. It don't fix nothing, whiskey don't. And if you can't fix it, you just got to live with it broken. I decided that night to quit feeling sorry for myself, to concentrate on what was left and not worry so much about how far gone Daddy was with the Alzheimer's.

In the kitchen I make us a couple of baloney sandwiches—nothing but white bread and baloney and mayonnaise, a little bit of lettuce. I sit at the table, figuring I must of eaten at least 2000 baloney sandwiches for lunch when I was a kid. I don't know exactly why Mama and I don't get along. My sister says we flat don't like each other but we think we should. Whenever we're apart we forget we don't like each other, and that makes it worse when we do get together. She lives in Knoxville, Sister does, with an engineer for the TVA. She married out of the holler, I just drove out. She's a good girl and I wouldn't say nothing against her. I know I get to looking forward to seeing Mama whenever it's been awhile, and that first night back home is usually okay.

Then I can't do anything right and it's like I'm a little kid again. It's like there was shit in my britches instead of Daddy's.

Even when I was little, Mama was always fussing with me. Sister says it might have something to do with all the miscarriages; she says Mama and Daddy wanted to have a whole holler full of kids, like in the old days when there wasn't no one in the holler but your own kin. But she never did have another baby after me. They was all born dead. Daddy used to say I was a hard act to follow.

When I go back out with his beer and sandwich, I try to get him off the Yugoslavia and on to something else. He's sitting in the rocker studying his sandwich, holding on with both hands like he's afraid it might run off on him. "Daddy," I say, "something woke me up last night rooting around the grill. What do you think it was?"

He says, "Possums, what do you think. If you barbecue, you have to leave them the grease. They'll tear the damn grill up if you don't. Your mother is too quick to clean things, she's always forgetting to leave the drippings." Then he shuts up and eats his sandwich. It takes about fifteen minutes, and there's pieces of baloney and bread and lettuce in his lap when he's finished. He picks at the pieces of sandwich like he don't know where it come from, like it's lint he's pulling off his pants.

"It was a full bird colonel," he says. "Said he was doing it for the men, the morale. But he had some of those Yugoslav whores himself, that colonel did. There was this one he favored used to ride up front with me. Now don't you be telling your mother any of this. That colonel thought he was smart. He was in some ways, but he was dumb with women."

"You never told me this part before, Daddy. I thought it was laundry and supplies you drove all over Yugoslavia."

"Depends on who I'm talking to what it was I was carrying," he says. "If you shut up and listen, I'll tell you about the whores. It wasn't no regular thing when I first started driving the truck—you come by your truck driving natural, it's in the blood. It was laundry at first. Then it came a rain like I ain't ever seen."

The rivers was up, most of the roads washed out. Whenever the boys had liberty they'd go to the village. Take up with the whores. They weren't whores actually, not real whores. It was the war made them whores. I had the five ton so loaded up with whores that first time we come into compound we got stuck in the mud. There was mud up over the axles. I look up and here come all these boys runnin' out to the truck. Some of them did it right there on the ground. Those whores had mud all over everything they had. The rain smeared the makeup on their faces; it looked like some kid had got loose with his crayons and done a job on them."

Daddy's always drank his beer real fast. I watch him chug the can, put it down, pick it up and chug it again. Mama's always after him to slow down with the drinking. It seems like he takes a drink and then don't remember he took it.

"Daddy," I ask, "what happened to the colonel's whore?"

"What?"

"The colonel's whore."

"What about her?"

"What happened to her?"

"It was a full bird colonel."

"I know that. What happened to his whore riding up front with you in the truck?"

"Get me another beer," he says, "and quit looking like you swallowed something too big to shit back out."

When Mama comes back from Knoxville the crickets and frogs have started up, and Daddy's sleeping in his rocker. Every once in a while he lets out a snore that's more like a bark of an elephant seal, and when he does there's a hush out back, the music stops. That's how loud his snore is. Mama's got this look on her face I've seen before, a look that says she disapproves highly of something. When she sits down with her glass of iced tea, she looks over at Daddy, looks at the beer cans like they're something from outside that snuck in under the door. "I see you two been drinking the beer while I was gone," she says. "He's going to wake up confused again tonight, you wait and see if

don't. I ought to make you clean out his drawers. He thinks I don't know how much he drinks, he's always hiding the beer cans on me. If you ask me, it's the drinking makes the Alzheimer's so bad. Maybe it's even the cause of it. Sister says for you to be sure and come and see her before you leave. I stopped over there after my Bingo."

Daddy lets off a few snorts in a row. It's got kind of a machine gun effect, and it's quiet again for a second. "The crickets don't like your Daddy's snoring none, do they. You ain't going to ask me why we don't sleep together I hope. So what did the two of you talk about all day?"

"Yugoslavia, possums, coons, that's about it, Mama. And wrens. He thinks something is eating his wrens."

"There's as many wrens out there as there ever was. I think his eyesight is failing him. Maybe that's part of the Alzheimer's."

"He still hears pretty good though. There was somebody coon hunting across the lake, and Daddy was naming the dogs for me, said he knew them by the sounds they made."

"I think he hears that when it ain't even there," she says. "Oh I hear it sometimes myself, but it don't sound like nothing but a bunch of howling to me. I'd rather watch the TV than listen to that."

Daddy don't go coon hunting no more. It's been years. He couldn't keep up. But we've always sat out on the porch listening to the sounds of the dogs, whenever there was a hunt going on. Like Mama, it was just a bunch of crazy howling to me—I never did do any coon hunting myself. But Daddy can tell you which dog has the scent and which is pretending, which sound is a dog actually following a coon and which is the dogs following that dog that has got the coon in his nose. He can tell you when the coon has been treed and when the coon has outsmarted the dogs, just from the sound of the barking.

Mama and I don't say nothing for a spell, just sit there listening to the summer sounds. It's dark on the porch, but we don't bother turning on the light. "I bet you heard the Yugoslavia story till you was blue in the face," she says. "What did he tell you about possums? He thinks he's some kind of expert on

possums. He won't let me put down poison, says they're here for a reason, got just as much right to be here as we do. He gets all windy with his possum stories he does. Even tried to get me to eat a possum once, and then he laughed so hard I thought he was going to have a stroke. Because I wouldn't go near his possum. He had cooked it up himself, that's how long ago this was. Remember how he used to cook when you was little? I wouldn't talk to him for a week laughing at me like that."

"He says they're good eating, Mama."

"I know what he says. I've been hearing it for years."

"Mama, he says possum tastes just like chicken."

"That's what they say about everything no one wants to eat. If it's disgusting and they're wanting you to eat it, then they say it tastes just like chicken. If I want to eat chicken, I'll cook me up a chicken. You can count on it tasting like chicken. Now quit arguing with me. Did you two eat?"

In the morning I'm sitting out back with my coffee looking for the mysterious disappearing wrens. I don't see any, but then I never have seen any wrens, not even those years when they were supposed to be all over the place. There's some open land stretches out to what Daddy calls Do Nothing Creek. Used to be about a hundred yards of jack-in-the-pulpit, poison ivy, blackberries, the usual assortment of weeds. Seems houses been creeping closer every year and that suits Mama just fine. Daddy says he expects to get up some morning and hear his neighbor fart they're getting so close.

There's a patch of early morning summer fog, so thick in spots it seems to be dripping from things. And there's some kind of dead critter down at the end of the open stretch, just before it drops off down to Daddy's Do Nothing. It's big, whatever it is, and there's a bunch of crows raising hell and hopping around like they do. I know it ain't no deer unless it just now died. You don't see dead deer much around here. The hide and legs and feet you might see, but not the whole body. It ain't the right color for a deer anyway. It's too damn dark, probably a big old dog. I walk outside to see what it is and why the crows are so upset.

I get up closer to it, then stop. It's a big dog all right, a mastiff, something like that, ain't seen many dogs bigger. There is a red smear along the side and it appears to be moving, just a mass of guts and all those crows hopping and fussing. I don't know what it is that dog ate but it's still alive. There's a tiny rat-like tail sticking out from the dog's belly, and that tail is moving along, slow moving but moving. Like a little tug boat. I'm thinking what the fuck is this. You eat something and it don't agree with you and it kills you on the way down, and it's still alive even after you're dead. The crows ain't scared of it so much, it's more like they're mad at it, whatever this thing with the skinny tail is. I can't tell how big it is. There's just a moving mass of red guts and this tail, like some kind of teased up ribbon on a package the way it curls.

I'm up close enough to see better but it's foggy and I can't see shit. One minute I'm about to see it clear as day, the next minute the picture blurs. I'm only a few yards away and I'm a little nervous. There's even more crows now that I'm close up to it, but that ain't really surprising. It's hard to run off a scavenger. They're pretty single minded about the business at hand. I'm about to get seasick there's so god damn many hopping crows.

I get to thinking about when I was a kid and Daddy had bought me a 4-10. It was a beautiful gun, and I think the first thing I ever did shoot was a buzzard. Shot at it anyway. It was standing there in the middle of the road eating at a dead rabbit. That buzzard had its wings spread while it was eating. It was like it didn't want anything else to get a good look at what it was doing, and those wings gave it privacy. I fired my shotgun at that buzzard and nothing happened, it didn't move an inch. I've tried to run over them in the road and it's like playing chicken with a tree. They just won't stop what they're doing.

Daddy is so quiet coming up in back of me, I almost jump when he starts talking. Then it feels like we've been standing there forever, studying what's in front of us.

"They something ain't they," he says. "A possum will eat its way in and eat its way back out. That's what it's got that long nose for. Don't like nothing but the guts, a possum don't. Uses that nose like a compass."

We stand there studying and figuring like it's some kind of jigsaw puzzle and Daddy's got all the pieces we need, all the pieces I can't find.

"This is some serious shit here, ain't it Daddy?"

"What's that?"

"This possum and its business."

"Got the god damnedest pecker you'd ever want to see, a possum does. It's forked. Don't make no sense to me to have equipment like that possum got. What are you going to do with a forked pecker?"

"How is it you know so much about possums?"

"What?"

"Possums, how do you know so much about possums?"

"I live here don't I. That tail is the way it is so they can hang upside down from trees. That's how they sleep. You kill a possum while it's hanging from a tree limb and you'll have to cook that limb with it when you throw it in the pot. What kind of dog you think that is?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know."

"Maybe it's a mastiff."

"A what?"

"A mastiff. Maybe it's a mastiff. I'm not sure. I don't really know."

"What good are you?"

"It's a dead dog, Daddy, that's what it is."

"Hell, a blind man can see that."

Then Mama's voice breaks the early morning quiet. "You boys wanting to eat or are you going to chew the fat all day?"

"Let's go inside and eat, Daddy."

"It's the old ones you don't ever get close to," he says, making a fist of his hand and working one eye, then the other. A little boy just out of bed rubbing sleep from his eyes.

"I wouldn't know, Daddy. I never have had the pleasure."

"The pleasure."

"Right. I never did meet an old possum."

"We're talking possums are we?"

“It’s breakfast time, we—”

“Thinks she’s got me treed don’t she.”

“She just wants us to come eat, she—”

“It’s how they fool you. Blue tick, blue ribbon—”

“That ain’t no coon hound, Daddy.”

“—blue in the face from howling, it don’t matter. They know the only way you can see them is their eyes, the light bouncing off. That’s why they cover their eyes like they do, with their paws.”

Now he’s laughing and I’m seeing a posse of armed and dangerous drunks, a tree full of senior citizen raccoons with their paws over their eyes. I’m asking Daddy how smart they are and do they communicate and he looks at me like why am I asking such stupid questions.

“I don’t reckon I know,” he says. “I guess they’re about as smart as they need to be.”

WOMAN WITH TERATOMA

To the witch she says:

*I leave my window ajar at night
will tie no red strings in my hair
and there is no cross carved in my left boot-heel.*

To the lover she says:

noiseless and from the inside: a renegade eye disapproves.

To the husband she says:

*"tera," Greek for "monster,"
and must you diffuse every bitter thing I say?*

To the priest she says:

*I saw a picture of a white beach,
and protruding from the sand, two hands praying.*

To the physician she says:

and my ovary into a jawbone?

To the ovary she says:

speak.

To the devil she says:

what.



THE IGLOO CARVING CONTEST

The jack pines were like scraggly spindles of mammoth fur. It was noon. The residents emerged from the huts and gathered on the great field. Todd threw his cup of coffee into the ashcan and adjusted his referee's cap. The horn sounded and the teams opened up their boxes, withdrawing the assemblages of slicers and tongs. "Yippeel!" yelled Shauna. Her breasts bulged under the sweater. She was warm as an egg. The wind whipped demonic fairies of ice across the field. Armenian accordion music pumped out of the speakers. The line at the kiosk stretched far with people hungry for Al's tapioca. The second horn sounded. The teams leapt over to the glaciation like schools of long lavender fish. Jim, the two-time champion, swung his saw and gritted his teeth. *Shauna, Shauna...* he kept thinking. His saw clove back and forth through the ice.

THE LUMINOUS BODY

Is still a believer in fluency
Its vellum stretched toward
a locus of vibration The luminous
body welcomes lenders Paint mixers
to the monk's white cloak This
is skin A gauze dizzy at the batting
tips where bone hums with marrow
Where fluency will terrorize It spills
stick & wattle A lender of ropes
threaders throats In need of good
inkings Bleached as the sand
gritted around life-vests Preserve
us Go Ask the pulse to bleed
a red goat We are baying at
hills We are mute no longer

THE LUMINOUS MEMORY

Whatever was said or written
Speck clarities once careful
as blood Each sifts to our throat
Disguised within vocal cords
dug-under These specks are
irretrievable Solid little blokes
They sprout digit wings Veil-fans
Out of the soup and off the keel's
prick Their seals we bruise by
forgetting Like the skull missing
beneath Spearheads or sockets
arrive in their waves

IN MY FORMER LIFE

Several years ago, I fell in love with my pharmacist. He slipped me extras. I found samples of ibuprofen and Neosporin, little packets of vitamins and energy boosters, and twice, I found 40 pills in my 30-day supplies. The most fetching thing, though, was the way he leaned over the counter when he explained the instructions on those little amber bottles. He would look at the labels, and then at me, and in that low voice of his would say things like, "Twice a day. With food."

His name was Troy Donahue, although he didn't look much like a 1950s movie star. He had acne marks on his cheeks and forehead, and a scar that ran from his right temple to the corner of his mouth. He looked a little like a thin Wayne Newton, with stringy black hair that he tucked behind his rather large ears, and an Adam's apple that ran up and down his skinny neck like a mouse in a maze. This was fine by me. I was no prize.

He was quite a few years older than me – I had just turned 22 that winter – but I always knew I needed someone older, at least that's what Mom told me once in my junior year of high school. The day I was supposed to go back, she found me huddled in my room. I can't go, I told her. Look at me, I said, and I held out my arms. I wasn't what you'd call a svelte teenager. My breasts were big, my bras ill-fitting, the straps always slipping down. I learned early to carry folders, and that day I wore a baggy long-sleeved T-shirt that covered my arms and wrists and hung over my wide hips. Mom set down a basket of laundry and patted my hand. You'll be fine, she told me. And one day, you'll find an older man. Older men don't get hung up on looks, she said.

Troy wasn't from that town, my hometown, where things came in ones: one shopping center, one movie theater, one high school, one nice restaurant – Shane's, with a nautical-Western theme – and one river, a lazy, curling thing that smelled like fish and trees, where the cottonwoods grew thick, setting loose their fluffy-white seeds in the spring and summer. The town had started to change some, with chain eateries cropping up like crab grass, along with a Wal-Mart and a Walgreens, where Troy worked. In

many ways, though, it was still the same. That January, I had watched the president say we were going to war in Iraq, but aside from the gas prices and some yellow ribbons, people went about their business as usual.

The general consensus in that town was that I was mildly retarded, or possibly autistic, or, well, just *not quite right*, on account of my folks had me late in life. When people think you're stupid, they'll say all manner of things in front of you. But I was none of those things. My folks were old, yes, which was the main reason that I had stuck around town so long. What most people didn't seem to understand was that I won an art scholarship to the state university, and I would have gone too, if Mom hadn't gotten sick the summer I was supposed to leave. I did get what you might call *distracted* sometimes, a lot actually, which I suppose didn't help my reputation. Something would catch my eye and I would stop and stare into space, watching the colors and the shapes. It happened at gas stations, the grocery store, parking lots, and before, in the school hallways and the classroom. It was a little like when you see a flash of light from something, the face of a watch, maybe, or a car hood, a hubcap at the bottom of a river. You look until you find the source, right? In my case, it was just that nobody else could see it.

The best I can recall, three things happened to me that winter. The first was that I changed my name. I did it the day I met Troy Donahue, which was in February, about a month after Mom had her second breast removed. The air was dry and cold, and I had this recurring, nagging cough aggravated by allergies. I was sitting in an orange plastic chair at Walgreens waiting for my amoxicillin, thumbing through an outdated style magazine, when I flipped to an article about a Matisse retrospective that was on exhibit in Paris, France. I was remembering words from my high school French class — *gourmand, printemps, rue, mer* — and I was looking at a picture of that lovely *Blue Nude* when I heard my name on the loud speaker. "Evelyn Rae Prentiss, your prescription is ready." I looked up then and got a load of Troy Donahue for the first time. He was behind the glass partition at the long Formica counter, bent over the mike, hair brushing the collar of that white smock. He said my name again, and I looked down at

the glossy magazine, at my red sweatpants, at my torn T-shirt with the coffee dribble. I ran a hand over my unwashed brown hair, my thick hips and round belly, and I thought about all of the names I had been called throughout my life – Tard, Prentiss Dementis, Evelyn Gay, Stupid, Weirdo, Nut Job, Space Case — and I looked up at Troy again. I thought, He knows none of that. I thought, I could be anyone. The name popped into my head right there among the aisles of Q-tips and hemorrhoid treatment.

I went to the counter, and Troy smiled at me. He handed me a bag and said, “There you go, Evelyn Rae.”

“I don’t go by that name,” I said. I tried to stifle a wheezy cough and nearly choked on my throat lozenge.

“Oh?” he said. His hair was starting to recede in half-circles above his temples and he had a piece of fuzz in his eyebrow. I clutched my paper sack.

I said, “It’s Elysée now. Elysée Prentiss. I’m an artist.”

I don’t know why I added that last part. I hadn’t drawn anything since I graduated high school. I rubbed at the fading callous on my right middle finger. The lines of the Matisse flashed in my eye and I blinked.

Troy rubbed his jaw, and he smiled a little. “As in the Champs-Elysées?” he said.

I swallowed, the lozenge residue thick in my throat, and looked at my Keds. “Yeah.”

“The Fields of Bliss,” he said. “I took French in college.”

“Me too,” I said. I shifted my feet and tried to think of something else. “So have you been to Paris?”

“I went on my honeymoon.”

“Oh,” I said. “You’re married.”

“No, that was a long time ago.” He cleared his throat. “So, have you been to Paris?”

“Yes.”

This wasn’t a complete lie. What I meant was that I had read about it and planned to go. Someday. For the past year, I had been socking away cash in a shoebox under my bed, next to my old art supplies, books, and a stack of drawings. I was up to

\$2,000. I kept it in the box with my passport until I could figure out, exactly, what it was that I wanted to do.

“Well, *bonjour*, Elysée,” he said.

I smiled at the sound of my new name in his mouth.

And that’s where it all started. All I knew was, the whole time we were talking, Troy looked me straight in the eye, and that was more than I could say for most people. They looked past me like a memory, or whispered to each other when they saw me coming, their eyes fever-bright with malice or pity. My own parents never really noticed when I, their “whoops,” their “surprise,” was in a room. But not Troy. He saw me.

I worked at the Lazy Daisy Hotel, where I also lived. Mom and Dad had bought the hotel cheap some 10 years back as an investment with the idea that Mom would run it until Dad retired from the cement plant, but I had been pretty much running it since Mom got sick the first time. Dad still worked part-time at the plant, even though he was almost 70, for the benefits. About a year earlier, I had moved out of Mom and Dad’s place and into Room 11, with its king-sized bed, kitchenette, pink-and-turquoise Southwestern art and thick gold curtains with a layer of dust on top. It was the first place I’d had all to myself, but it wasn’t exactly the life that I had dreamed of as a teenager. In those dreams, I got on a Greyhound bus, twenty pounds lighter after a summer of drinking only banana yogurt shakes, and I left that little Arizona town with its cottonwood trees and scrub oaks, dust and cat claws, its slow green river, my old parents in a triple-wide. In my dreams, I sketched drawings and wrote essays and ate lunch on The Quad. I lived in a 15-story dorm with a roommate named Traci, or Renee, or Laurel, a city girl who taught me to put on eyeliner and loaned me her best jeans. I drank beer from kegs and lost my virginity with a boy named Peter, or Alex, or Ryan, a smart boy, an older boy, a philosophy major probably, who knew nothing about me at all. On summer vacation, I backpacked through Europe and smoked Gauloises and drank black coffee, all of the things I had read in books from one library and seen on my parents’ one television and in movies at one theater. Back then, my dreams were as real to me as the river that ran through town, as sure as the square charcoal between my fingers,

the grainy paper under my palm. The summer I graduated, when Mom was being poked by needles and Dad was sleeping at the hospital, those dreams slipped away bit by bit, like air from a leaky tire, until they were gone. Eventually, I stopped drawing altogether. The plain-jane reality was, I ran a saggy hotel. I was a 22-year-old virgin who wasn't going to college, and I had no place else to go.

The hotel was near Old Town, only a few blocks from the river, where the houses were older, the trees thicker, and the tourists more plentiful. I did pretty good business, usually clearing about \$300 week after all was said and done, with people on their way to Tuzigoot Monument or Jerome up on the hill, and the folks who wanted to see Sedona 18 miles away but couldn't afford to stay there. It was a small U-shaped place – 10 rooms plus mine – painted white with turquoise trim, with the parking lot in the center. My days rarely varied. In the mornings, I set up a continental breakfast – donuts, coffee and orange juice. I answered phones, took reservations, balanced the books. Afternoons, I cleaned.

Nights, I visited my folks, cooked, washed dishes, and watched TV with them. My folks weren't what you'd call conversationalists. Dad talked about the cement plant and gas prices, how it was breaking him to fill the truck these days. Mom talked about what was on sale at Bashas' and how tired she was, and she absently rested her hands where her breasts used to be. She didn't have chemo that time, but she said she was more tired than when she did. I had given up trying to join their conversations long ago, but I listened. They loved me, I'm sure — my given name is, after all, a combination of theirs, Evelyn and Ray — and I loved them, but I often felt like background noise. Sometimes they looked at me like I was an alien, or a singing llama or something. They talked about me in the third person a lot. Like that last time Mom was in the hospital. Dad and I were sitting next to her bed after she woke up from surgery. Dad hovered over her, ran his head on her forehead, held her pale fingers. Next door, there was a ruckus, and some nurses rushed past, a swirl of blue scrubs and foot slippers. He's going to code, he's going to code, they said, and I started coughing and scratching at my wrists. Mom

looked at me and frowned, then turned to Dad. This isn't good for Evelyn Rae, she said. Take her home, Ray.

When Mom and Dad fell asleep in their matching recliners, I let myself out and locked them in. Usually I went back to the hotel, crawled into bed, and watched TV, but lately all that was on was footage from the Gulf, which tied me up in knots. Instead I had been driving around town. I drove up and down the one main road, back and forth, past the single-story shops closed for the night, past the high schoolers gathered in the Circle K parking lot. They leaned up against car hoods, snuck sips of wine coolers, blonde, red, brunette, Tracis, Renees, Laurels, Alexes, Peters, Ryans, gleaming like oil under the fluorescent lights. Back at the hotel, sometimes I bundled up in a blanket and climbed up on to the roof of my room, staring at Jerome's tiny blanket of lights, at the Milky Way, at the illuminated smoke billowing from the cement plant. Sometimes I touched myself, my hands on my two good breasts and inside my pants, until my eyes rolled back and the sky washed over me. Then I crawled into my bed alone, my own scent on my hands, thinking about the shoebox underneath of me, shivering in the haze of loneliness that swelled large and gaping in the dark.

The second thing that happened that winter was that I began to hurt myself. The first time was not on purpose. It was a few days after I met Troy, and maybe I was a little moony. I was carrying an arm full of bedding when I got distracted by the sky, where the clouds made shadows on Mingus Mountain. I stepped on the edge of a sheet and, boom, down I went onto the pavement.

I hobbled into my room and sat on the edge of my bed, staring at the blood trickling down my knee. The colors began to shift, as they always did. In the middle of all the red, bright and lovely, I saw my father's gray hair and my mother's blue-green eyes. I remembered that when I was eight years old, I broke my arm after I fell from a sycamore tree. I had been looking at the way the sun filtered through the tree, casting shadows and prisms on the river like a million jumping silver fish, and I lost hold of the branch. Dad carried me the quarter-mile from the river back to the house. He was in his 50s then, and his arms were shaking

by the time he set me in the back of the car. It was one of the few times I had been that close to him. Usually, when he came home from work, he stepped over me as I sat in the middle of the floor, intent on the kitchen, my mother, a cold beer. When he carried me that day, I buried my face into his shirt, smelling dried sweat and fabric softener. Mom sat with me on the way to the hospital. My head was in her lap, and she smoothed my hair, her hands cool and soft, smelling of rose water. The sun glinted silver off her glasses.

In the hotel room, I stared at my leg, at all of the color and pain, and soon enough, Troy Donahue's black hair appeared among the red and gray and blue-green, and I sucked in my breath. I thought, *Oh*.

So I slapped a paper towel on my leg, put a 'Back in 10 minutes' sign on the office door, and headed to Walgreens for antiseptic and gauze bandages. I was shaky but kind of elated too, like I'd just slammed on the car brakes to avoid a cat, then watched it scurry off into the bushes. When I got to the counter, I was a little out of breath, but I didn't see Troy Donahue. Unfortunately, I did see the cashier, Tammy Gibbons. She had been a sophomore when I was a senior. She rang me up, and then put her hand on her hip, cracking her gum.

"Hurt yourself, did you, Evelyn Rae?"

"My name is Elysée now," I said.

"What?" She had a rather large forehead, and her thick eyebrows almost met in the center.

"Elysée," I said. "It's French."

"OK," she said.

"It's a perfectly good name," I said.

"I'm sure it is," she said, and turned her back. "How's your Mom doing, anyhow?"

"She's better," I said. Her blonde braid looked orange in that light, her roots as dark as soil. Someone touched my elbow.

"Hi Elysée," Troy Donahue said, and I jumped. Tammy snorted but I didn't look at her.

"How's the cough?" He looked down. "You hurt your leg." He kneeled and pressed at the paper towel.

"It's nothing." I thought, Lord, please don't let me fall over. I held my bag and looked at Tammy. She had a look in her

too-close-together eyes, like she couldn't wait to tell him all about Evelyn Gay.

Troy stood up, and I averted my face from the counter.

"You see Tammy there?" I said, my voice low. He nodded.

I said, "She's a little ... not right, I guess you'd say. She lies all of the time. Her parents even pulled her out of school once, and she was at a psychiatric ward." I leaned closer. He smelled like damp wool and Brut. "I'm only telling you 'cause I feel kinda bad for her. Sometimes people can be cruel."

Troy nodded. "Yes they can." He glanced at Tammy. "I had heard something like that," he said. He put his hand on my shoulder and pointed at my sack. "You got everything you need? Hold on a sec." He grabbed a box of gauze and more tape. With his back to the counter, he put the items in my bag, and then gave me a little wink. His eyes were deep and dark, like a last warm sip of coffee.

"You're very nice," I said.

He stopped smiling and took a step backward. He touched that scar on his cheek. "No, I'm not. But I'm trying."

"Well, I think you are," I said.

After that, I made sure I was at the Walgreens every few days or so. Sometimes I really was hurt. One day I slammed my left hand in the door of Room 5, and I hollered so loud that the guests in Room 6 came running out in their robes. Troy touched my hand that day, looked at the bruising along the ring finger and pinkie. He picked out a splint and an ACE bandage, and he showed me how to wrap it, not too tight. I'm pretty sure he rubbed his fingers over my knuckles on purpose. Other times I had to fudge a little. One day, I pretended I had twisted my ankle in a pothole. Another time I used makeup to create a reddish-bruise on my forehead, saying a guest had accidentally hit me with the office door. Ice pack. I picked up things on behalf of Mom and Dad: Ben-Gay, Vitamin B, glucosamine, cortisone for a rash. I told him about Mom, and he told me he was sorry, and he looked sorry, shaking his head slowly and rubbing his jaw. Each time Troy threw in a few extras, or wouldn't charge me for everything, or rang in coupons that I didn't have. Each time he looked me in the eye and my heart did a little flip. I also was spending more time up on the roof or in my bed, pretending my hands were

Troy's. I bought myself a silky lavender nightie at Wal-Mart. When I put it on and stared at myself in the mirror, the lavender became phosphorescent, and I became, well, almost pretty. One day, I sat in the parking lot of Walgreens, dumping out fast-food pepper packets into my hand. I imagined Troy walking out for his break and seeing me there. He would knock on my window, make a "roll-it-down" gesture.

He would lean close and say, My name isn't Troy Donahue. He was my mother's favorite actor. The truth is, I haven't been overseas. I got fired from my last job in Phoenix, and my great-aunt lives up here. I got this scar in a fight. So you see, I'm not perfect.

It doesn't matter, I'd say. What's your real name?

It doesn't matter, he'd say.

I would look at him, and then lift up the lock. Come on in, Troy. I'd say, Where should we go?

And he would say, Anywhere. Anywhere you want.

I had a small pile of pepper in my palm, and I licked it and sniffed some, until my nose and eyes burned.

"I've been using a new cleaning solution and I think I'm allergic," I told Troy. He frowned, a thick wrinkle between his brows. He pulled some Triaminicin off the shelf.

"This should help," he said. I pulled out my wallet but he waved me off. He went back behind the glass partition and started to fill orders. No one was in line, so I stayed at the counter. Tammy was at the other side of the room, talking on the phone.

"Do you have a tissue?"

He slid a box down the counter. He kept filling a bottle, so I stood under the "Pick Up" sign, waiting for him to look up. My mouth was dry and the pepper burned at the back of my throat. He looked up finally, and tilted his head. He moved down the counter until he was standing in front of me. That crease was still between his brows.

I said, "I can't believe how expensive gas is these days." I flushed as soon as I said it, and I quickly put my face in a tissue.

Troy nodded. "The Gulf," he said.

I said, "It doesn't really seem like we're at war, does it?" I pointed out over the aisles. "I mean, it's not like we're rationed."

"You should see the gas prices in Chicago. My mom is

howling about it.”

“Is that where you’re from?”

“Yeah.”

“The lake is pretty,” I said. “I visited the Art Institute once.”

“That’s right,” he said, and glanced at his watch. “You’re an artist.”

“Yes.”

“I really don’t know much about art,” he said. He pulled a box from under the counter, and then looked back at Tammy. I saw her raise her eyebrows.

“I could show you sometime,” I said.

He peeled tape off the box, and then glanced at his watch again. “Sure,” he said.

I leaned forward, pushing up my breasts with my forearms. “I’ve been thinking about moving away soon. For a different perspective and all that. But with my mom being sick...”

Tammy walked up and handed Troy a slip of paper. She said, “They want to pick this up in 10 minutes.”

Troy looked at the slip, then at me. “Where would you go?”

I thought of that money in a box under my bed, how I’d never been on an airplane, of all the possible places out there in the world.

Tammy interrupted. “I would go to California. That’s where the action is. I’ve always wanted to be an actress.”

Troy frowned at the prescription slip. Tammy leaned in, and they walked to a shelf behind them. I said, “Bye.” Troy lifted his hand, but he didn’t look back.

After I left Walgreens, I went back to the hotel. I checked-out two families, ate a stale donut, washed sheets, paid bills. I added another \$220 to the box under my bed, and then counted my savings. I was up to \$2,640.

That night at Mom and Dad’s, I reheated some tuna casserole and served it to them on TV trays. They were watching the news, which was showing footage from the Gulf, endless, wind-whipped sand and bombs flaring over the capital.

Dad said, “Goddamn Saddam. Gas was up 3 cents at the Chevron today. \$1.47.”

Mom said, "Mmm-hmm."

I stood at the counter and watched the backs of their heads, which glowed in the light from the TV. On the screen, oil fields were burning.

I said, "I changed my name." They didn't say anything. On the TV, a soldier held up a gas mask, and then it flashed to a group of Iraqi soldiers on their knees, arms lifted. I raised my voice. "I said, I changed my name."

Mom swiveled her recliner to look at me. "What's that?"

"It's Elysée now. I changed my name to Elysée. It's French. And," I said, gripping the edge of the counter, "I've been seeing someone."

Mom glanced at Dad, who then swiveled his recliner. Their feet were almost touching. They both stared at me.

"His name is Troy Donahue. He's a pharmacist."

"Evelyn," Mom said. "I thought we'd gotten past this."

"It's true. He's from Chicago."

They looked at each other again. Dad ran a hand over his face.

He said to Mom, "When did this start again?"

"I'm not making this up," I said. "I'm *not*. Why would I?"

Mom shook her head, and said, "I don't know, why would you?"

"Why aren't you happy for me? Would that be so hard, really, to say, why Elysée, that's a pretty name. We're happy for you. We're proud of you. We wish you the best."

"Little girl," Dad said. He let down the leg rest on the recliner. "Hush now."

"No you hush. You hush." I slapped the counter. "I stayed here. I stayed here for you."

Mom said, "No one asked you to do that, Evelyn. We want you to have your own life."

"I could have gone," I said. "I could have."

Dad said, "Where would you go?"

"Well, I could have gone to art school, for one thing. I had a motherfucking *scholarship*."

They stared at me. "You watch your language, girl," Dad said. He looked at Mom. "What is she talking about?"

Mom shrugged. "She's always had an imagination." She

smiled at me. "And her drawings are beautiful. Evelyn, honey, why don't you stay here tonight?"

"Fine, don't believe me," I said. I turned off the oven and grabbed my purse off the floor. "And it's *Elysée*. It means bliss," I said, and I slammed the door.

I drove up and down the one main road, stopping at the two main lights. It was a Tuesday and the streets were empty. I drove to the river and stopped on the bridge, looking out at deep dark water, at the leaves that had piled in clumps on the banks. The stars were bright as tourmaline, and Jerome flashed like a ghost on the mountain. I drove to the edge of town, where a Giant gas station had gone in. The new station, everyone still called it. I pulled up to one of the pumps and shifted into neutral, idling. The gas gauge was almost empty. I looked at the price sign. \$1.45. "Two cents cheaper," I said aloud, and started laughing. "Here's your two cents' worth," I said, and doubled over onto the passenger seat until my stomach clenched up. I wiped my eyes and sat up. My headlights were reflected in windows of the convenience store, and inside I could see the rows and rows of candy, gum, pork rinds, coolers of soda, the lights bright enough to power a small nation. A clerk sat behind a desk, head bent down, maybe reading, maybe sleeping. The reflection of the headlights refracted into prisms on my windshield. I thought about the times that I spent drawing down by the river, my toes buried into the fertile earth, cottonwood seeds in my hair, my hands moving, creating, alive. I thought about Mom's body disappearing piece by piece, her rose-water hands, and then studied my own hands resting on the steering wheel. They were dry and cracked from cleaning solution, the nails short and ragged. In the deepening lines, I saw Dad's titanium-white dust and pity, in my knuckles were my college dreams, sun-yellow and fading fast. Embedded in my palms were the names, the whispers, the black corners of my life. My love-line forked at the edge of my hand, and trailed off into the veins and scars, and it was red all right, primary red, deep-rooted and primal. I looked at the windshield and the colors stopped. The reality was, I was going nowhere. I took off my seat belt, shifted into first gear, and gunned it, straight into the plate glass window.

The last thing that happened that winter was that I started to draw again. It happened about a week after the accident, which had left me with a dislocated left shoulder, my arm in a sling, a pretty good bump on my forehead, a smashed-up fender, and a dent in my savings – a \$500 deductible for the window, a \$500 ER bill after insurance. Mom took over the office duties for the week.

Two days after the accident, I woke up in the middle of the night, cotton-mouthed, unsure of where I was. I flipped on the light and sat hunched against the pillows, looking at the dingy walls and the paintings of cactuses and coyotes. And then, I saw something else. I took down the paintings and then dug out my supplies from under the bed — books, drawings, charcoals, oils, acrylic gels, molding paste, solvents, stiff brushes, stained palettes. I flipped through a book until I found Edward Hopper's 'Hotel Room.' With a piece of black charcoal in my unsteady hand, the book open on the bed behind me, a blank wall in front of me, I began to work.

I sketched until morning. I opened up the gold curtains for better light, and then tore them down, rod and all. I opened a window, the air fresh and painful, like the river in spring. Then, I began to paint — standing on a chair, down on my knees, my one good arm aching, the injured one throbbing. It was late afternoon by the time I sat on the bed and looked at what I had done. The basics of the picture were there — woman alone on a bed, suitcase, hat on a dresser — but mine was more angular, the colors sharper, lusher, reds and violets and golds. Instead of looking at her book, the woman looked out the window, which was a deep burning orange. Her knees were slightly farther apart. She was rounder, with full breasts and thick hips. It was the best thing I had ever done.

I ran to the car before realizing I was still in my nightgown, so I threw on a pair of shorts and tied the nightgown around my waist. With my arm slung up, I had a hard time shifting, so I stayed in first gear. The busted fender rattled all the way to Walgreens.

Both Troy and Tammy were at the counter when I

came in.

“What’s with the get-up?” Tammy asked.

I looked up at the security mirror and saw myself for the first time in days. My hair was knotted up and held in place with a paintbrush, and the bump on my forehead was almost purple. The neckline of my nightgown scooped low and my nipples stood out against the thin fabric. Veins and patches of red stood out on my skin, and myriad paint colors streaked my arms, legs, even my feet in their flip-flops. On top of it all was the dirty sling.

“I’ve been working. Drawing, painting.”

“We can see that,” Tammy said.

“You look cold,” Troy said.

I shrugged. I looked at Troy. “I wanted to show you.”

“Oh,” he said, looking down.

“I think Evelyn Rae has a crush,” Tammy said.

Troy said, “Knock it off, Tammy.”

“What,” she said. “I’m not being mean. I think it’s sweet.”

I turned to Tammy. “It’s Elysée,” I said.

“Right, I forgot,” she said. She raised her eyebrows.

I leaned forward on the counter on my good elbow until she looked me in the face.

“Fucking bitch,” I said.

She blinked. “Excuse me?”

“Fucking bitch,” I said, louder.

“Hey,” Troy said. “Hey.”

“You’re crazy,” Tammy said.

I leaned forward until I was on my tip-toes, inches from her face. “It’s what you are and you know it. Everyone knows it. Just look at you. Even I, a crazy retard, know it.”

Without warning, Tammy Gibbons started to cry. Her face turned red and blotchy, and she ran into the back room. Troy said, “Jesus.”

“She earned that,” I said, pointing after her. “I am not crazy.”

“OK,” he said.

“I’m not. I’m not crazy. I’m just—” My voice shook and I stopped talking.

“I believe you. But I think it’s best if you leave.”

"I'm going," I said. I hiked up my nightgown strap. "In fact, I'm leaving town today," I told him. He didn't say anything, so I said, "This'll be the last time you see me."

I hoped for a second that he would say, No, wait, or, I'll come with you, but I saw it in his eyes then, the pity. I don't know how I'd missed it in the first place, as clear and dark and shining as it was.

My nose started to run, and I wiped it on the back of my hand. I flicked his name tag. "Is that even your real name?" He didn't say anything, just looked at the counter. I pointed at his scar. "You're right. You're not nice."

"Just go on now, Evelyn Rae," he said. "Go on."

I know I told you that there were three things that happened that winter, but the truth is, there was a fourth. And it was this: I did leave town that day. It was as much of a surprise to me as anyone. I sat shivering in my dented car in the Walgreens parking lot for I don't know how long, but long enough to watch the sunset. When the sun hit the edge of the sky and erupted, I sat straight up and stared at the colors. They were X-rated, delusional, and they hovered and bled and shifted until I thought that maybe they were real. I whispered to no one, The sky's on fire, and I counted backward from 100, and then, I knew. Where else but this old city with the river at its heart, the artist in its soul?

So I went back to the hotel for the last time. I got my shoebox, packed some clothes, wrote a few notes. I tried not to think of how Mom and Dad would manage, or how I would manage for that matter, as I began this new foreign life. For some reason, I just kept thinking, Spring is coming. *Printemps vient*. Before I locked up for good, I grabbed a paintbrush and I signed that luminous thing on the wall. Elysée Prentiss. Even now, I wonder what people— my parents, locals, strangers passing through — think when they see it. Maybe they tell stories about me, truth, lies, something in between. Maybe they've just painted over it. But maybe a few people lie on the bed and look at the gleaming colors, and wonder what that woman saw out there in the burning sky.



HEADLINES

Ah, it was good to be in the day
instead of walking around the edges
The sun was hot and the fog cooled it.
Up was steep and down was steep.
A garter snake's latter half continued
to wriggle although the rest of the snake
was still. Poison oak grew lovely
russet green along the fireroad. The dog
sat in the mud to cool her belly. She was
glad to be in the day, in the mud. She
was glad for lizards, although
she could not catch one. Hawks
flew overhead, tracking us.

GLADYS, PEAR WOMAN

near 50, wants to break every mirror she sees. She wants to, *needs* to stop looking. Harry, who is only a photograph now, once told her she was made of legs and moonlight and red, red love.

Since then, children and diets and un-diets, till now Gladys sits all day in front of the television. On the shopping channel, tents and tunics to turn her into a secret. Gladys orders one in every shade.

One day, delivering them, the doorman offers Gladys a smile. Ancient reaction -- Gladys is smitten and later, she orders a rowing machine. *How many pounds, she wonders, are standing bewteen me and love?*

When it arrives, she rows and rows till her living room is an ocean.

Her daughter begins to complain. "You haven't seen the baby in weeks" she tells Gladys. To which Gladys answers, "I was busy giving birth to myself."

Finally beautiful again, she and the doorman have dinner. Gladys picks olives out of her salad. She scans the menu for fat.

The doorman sparkles like silverware, and when dessert arrives, he spoons cherry vanilla into Gladys' trusting mouth. They plan their second outing, a wine-tasting, perhaps, and when the doorman opens his wallet to pay the check, Gladys pretends not to see the picture of his wife.

Later, hungry goodnight kiss, and Gladys fumbling to open the door.

"I know all you secrets" the doorman says into her skinny ear and turns the key with a flick.

Once inside, they make slithery love on the carpet, her tiny dress flung across the rowing machine. It is only later, when it's over and the doorman gone, that Gladys remembers his wife, thin as a picture, sitting all day in a wallet right there, in front of his heart.

DEAR MAJOR,

These
are the
days of
memory.
Rain
filtering
through
someone's
glass
slipper,
the mouth
of a
bird
packed with
dirt, its
heart's
throb
in my
hand, the
sun
wakening
by the hour,
the children
painting themselves
with mud, the
wild eye
I give you.

DEAR MAJOR,

In the row of
houses set back
from the road
in my dream
is a fan, each,
an almost empty
bottle
that learns to sing.
I think of it,
my aching arms
and mouth, from
clenching
in my sleep, a
five-lane ramp,
an iceberg, bridge,
island submerged,
wide open boat, when
thinking about
what I would
write to everyone,
to you.



CONTRIBUTORS

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Rachel Losh lives in Michigan. "Woman with Teratoma" is a poem from a sequence of the same name, which won the Theodore Roethke Prize for the Long Poem or Poetic Sequence at the University of Michigan. Her work has appeared in *The Mid-American Review*, *32 Poems*, and other journals.

Diane Kirsten-Martin has lived in San Francisco since 1976. Her work has been published in *New England Review*, *Crazyhorse*, *Bellingham Review*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *ZYZZYVA*, *Blue Mesa Review*, *Five A.M.*, *Third Coast*, *North American Review*, *32 Poems* and *Tar River Review*. She works as a technical writer in the soft-ware industry.

Al Masarik's stories have been published in *Indiana Review*, *High Plains Literary Review*, *American Short Fiction*, *Beloit Fiction Journal*, *Cimarron Review*, and other places. Excerpts from *HERON DANCE*, his first novel, have appeared in *Exquisite Corpse* and *Killing the Buddha*, two online journals. He lives in Northern California.

Katherine McCord's book, *Island*, was published by March Street Press in 2002. *Living Room*, her second book, is forthcoming. She teaches Creative Writing/Poetry at New Mexico Tech.

Rachel Moritz lives in Saint Paul, Minnesota, where she co-edits WinteRed Press (winteredpress.com), a chaplet publisher of innovative poetry. Her work has appeared recently or is forthcoming in *Bombay Gin*, *Blue Mesa Review*, *Diagram*, *Beloit Poetry Journal* and *Word for/Word*. She is the recipient of a 2004 Minnesota State Arts Board Fellowship in Poetry.

Linda Pierce currently lives, writes, and teaches in the Berkshires. Her poetry has appeared in *Blue Mesa Review*, *Flyway*, *The Distillery*, and *Midwest Poetry Review*.

Billy Reynolds lives in Kalamazoo, Michigan, where he is pursuing a Ph.D. in creative writing at Western Michigan University. He has published poems in *Mississippi Review* and *Sycamore Review*.

Francine Witte lives in New York City. She has short fiction on the web (*Doorknobs and Bodypaint*, In Posse Review) as well as in print journals (*Nebraska Review*, *Urban Spaghetti*). Her poetry chapbook, *The Magic in the Streets* was published by Owl Creek Press. She has been nominated twice for a Pushcart Prize. She is a high school English teacher.

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