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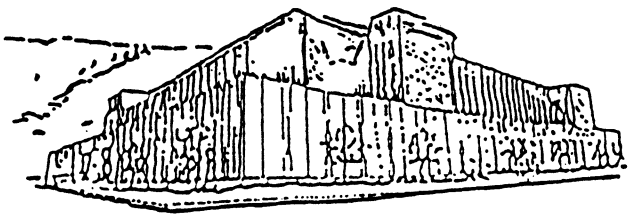
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Moustache

Stories

by

Jon Groebner

B.A. Gonzaga University, 1995

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts


The University of Montana

1999

Approved by:



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Dean, Graduate School

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Contents



She Was So, 1

The Fist Is A Fine Weapon, 8

Two Feet In The Grave: X and Y, 22

Thirty-Two Feet Per Second Squared, 26

What Is Splendid, 48

Spectacle Gets Its Day In The Sun, 57

Gertrude Stein: J'ai Perdu . . . , 60

Point Counterpoint, 63

Mr. Umbrage, 66

The Collector of Ghosts, 69

Funeralisms, 72

The Inconsequence of John Berryman's Bone, 79

Epilogue, 80

*Humid is one of the
many words for steam rooms.
Is it me or is it hot in here?*

—Paul Gydas

She Was So

Listen. I will tell you two things: the first will be a jumble—but quick—while the second you might not even notice. I want to tell you about *sex* and *death*. It is likely this will not be the first time you have heard this story told this way. Of course, as you can imagine, I will use props.

•

Now I am twenty-six. The day I turned ten was the first time I talked with her alone. As I ate some pineapple bundt cake, Mrs. Welsimmons stomped down the stairs of our apartment building, after a phone call from St. Louis, and related to me—because my mother, her Avon Lady, was in the shower—all the ways in which Mr. Welsimmons was, *bar-none*, the dullest man in the world. Do you have any idea how that must be for me? she asked. Yes and no, I told her. She sat down and ate some cake. She touched my shoulder. All at once, Mrs. Welsimmons lit a cigarette and asked me if I wanted one.

•

My mother was an insomniac. To cure herself, she played Albert Collins records at low volumes in the kitchen, at night. Sometimes I danced with her. She drank wine and sashayed in flouncy dresses while my father watched. While I danced with her. You understand, my father was an ugly man, a poor dancer. He sold cigars. Or else he sat in the kitchen chair. He told my mother, you are too pretty for me, Lily. Too pretty for me. Sometimes he clapped along. Before you, she said, I slept with a lot of men, you know. No, he said, I didn't know

that. She kissed him. He kissed her. They groped out of sequence. Now I am an insomniac. Safe to say, though, I would have been a poor seller of cigars. My mouth gets dry and I mix up words when I speak. I sweat. Sometimes at night, though, I think I could sell cars. Mrs. Welsimmons was the Human Razor Blade, so to speak.

•

Didn't my father talk more than most fathers about old American cars: Edsels, Studebaker Hawks, Hudson Hornets, the Nash Rambler? Certainly he missed spots shaving. He hit his head on things. He got fat. For all I know of my father, he might have sold both cigars and cars. He might have done both things secretly, at night.

•

I stole money from my father's wallet and bought a Kodak camera to take pictures of her. I climbed the fire escape through mist. Her bathroom lights were on. On the wet ladder, my hand slipped, my shin slammed the rung, and I dropped the camera, which shattered on the head of a parking meter below. Oh. I held still. My shin bled through my pant leg.

•

I saw Mrs. Welsimmons with her clothes off every night for two years in a row. It was her idea. She asked me—point blank—if I wanted to see her naked, and I said that I did. She just asked, stepped out of the shower, and showed herself to me. Of course, I memorized parts. She had long sandy-blond pubic hair. Her thighs touched. Her belly-button poked out. Wrapped in a towel, Mrs. Welsimmons told me all the things she wanted to cook me for dinner. She offered a quick tour of her apartment. I said I had to go. She said she would call me later. No. Wait. That's wrong. She hemmed my pants. I asked her to undress for me and she said maybe, if I came back around eight o' clock, but maybe not.

•

For years, it seemed, she baited me.

•

He ripped up her favorite dress. He said she would rot in hell. In retaliation, Mrs. Welsimmons threw his golf clubs at him. He called her a slut. O.K., fine, when was the last time you wanted it? she asked. I have no idea, he answered. Answer *this!* she said. She threw the telephone at his head. It missed, broke through a window—the cord jerked tight but held in the wall—and in the pendulum arc of its fall the phone smacked into the side of the building, *exploding*, while the receiver, still swinging from its own cord hooked into the remnants of the phone, smashed through a window in my parents' apartment one floor below. My mother stopped flouncing. What the hell? she said. Then, before she could stop herself, she asked, should *we*—how do you say it?—answer that? My father sat up. Don't move! he shouted. It might be an trick! But I knew. I ran upstairs with a knife and kicked at their front door, which didn't open. Hey, it's dark out here, I said. Let me in.

•

The first time we understood each other, we sat in my parents' kitchen and ate soup. The more she slurped, the more I slurped. I remember the way she slid the spoon into her mouth. Would you like some crackers with that soup? I said. A glass of milk? This orange? She shook her head. She kept tapping her fingernail against her bowl. I just ate soup and waited for her to stop.

•

Invariably, it was the way her hips could swivel that did it to me.

•

This I overheard, later: Mrs. Welsimmons said to Mr. Welsimmons, Henry, where the hell are my panty hose? You said they were on the radiator, but they're not. They're just not. What Mr. Welsimmons said back sounded like *clench, my neck*. I bumped my head on the door. Mr. Welsimmons called out, It's open! Mrs. Welsimmons said, Jesus, Henry, *Christ*. Who is it? Mr. Welsimmons called out, Come in! God-dammit, Henry! Mrs. Welsimmons hissed, whatever you do, don't get up! What? said Mr. Welsimmons. You're deaf, Henry, said Mrs. Welsimmons, Just stay put! *I'm the bare-naked one! I'll go answer the door!* But I ran downstairs. I was too fast. On the fourth step from the bottom, I jumped.

•

At eight o' clock, Mrs. Welsimmons squeezed into my pants and walked like a duck around the kitchen. We both cracked up. Mrs. Welsimmons looked more like a duck than anyone I had ever seen. I told her so.

•

I stood above her at the apartment pool deck, dripping water on her breasts. Hey, she said, cut it out. I shook my head. She hooted, whooped, grabbed my ankles. I tried to hop. To walk through her apartment, it went: hallway, kitchen, hallway, bathroom, bed.

•

Mrs. Welsimmons had the skinniest ankles I had ever seen. How could she stand up? She was pigeon-toed, too. As a consequence, she swaggered. Her kneecaps were perfect circles, her thighs thick. On top, she had heavy, low-slung breasts. In the summer, I made love to her for the first time on the fire escape while my parents watched TV. She licked my ears more than I expected. She said, yes, yes. She was so wet. I came. Later, that night, I was standing on a

chair while she took pins out of the cuffs of my favorite pants.

•

Mrs. Welsimmons taught me a card trick where all the jacks and queens end up face to face, all the kings disappear. After that, I always wanted to play twenty-one. She never did. Instead, she liked to turn the TV on loud. We watched game shows together, before noon. Afternoons, she took naps. In her sleep, she spoke in short bursts of words. *Boot heels*, she'd say, or *Eisenhower*, *panty hose*, *shoot*.

•

In August, unexpectedly, Mr. Welsimmons took his own life.

•

While my mother was in the bathtub, Mrs. Welsimmons asked me to undress for her, but I was too shy. My mother *is* in the bathtub, I said. So what? she said, and tugged at my sleeve. She wore a button-up sweater. She tried to unbutton it. I panicked, grabbed the phone, and ran out of the room. She followed. Later, we kissed on the love seat.

•

I stood with Mr. Welsimmons on the fire escape, pinched between the brick wall and his belly. I found your underpants in my bed, he said. I asked my wife about it. She said to ask you. No she didn't. She wouldn't have. I knew better. Those are your initials written on the waistband, right? he said, pointing. Yep, I said, that's me. The F stands for Frank.

•

Here is a recurrent dream. Dreams are curious only to the dreamer, I know. Still, I sit on a toilet, with a tuxedo on, in the middle of my parents' kitchen during a cocktail party. Mrs. Welsimmons—who looks unexpectedly savvy, her hair is done up, she wears black—sort of

bursts in through the swinging kitchen doors with a parrot in one hand and a platter of vegetables in the other. The whole thing, the whole dream, somehow takes on the trappings of a bad joke. To stop it, I shout—Give me that parrot! or Give it! or Hand it here!—from the toilet. I shout different things. Then, suddenly, it is only her and me. Can you *imagine* being frozen alive? Mrs. Welsimmons asks me. The *slowness* is what she means. The *calm*. I ask again for the parrot. She ignores me. I can, she says. Every time.

•

Mr. Welsimmons' appendix burst in his sleep. In the emergency room, Mrs. Welsimmons told me it was a close call, her husband was a heavy sleeper. I trusted her. She had thick, almost purple lips. We stepped into the shadows.

•

You fidget too much, she told me, stop fidgeting.

•

Once, every summer, there was a heat wave. Everything dripped. In the midst of record-breaking humidity, Mr. Welsimmons' lungs collapsed one night in his sleep and he died soundlessly.

•

In the absence of a good excuse to think otherwise, Mrs. Welsimmons was my lover through the best of my post-pre-pubescent years, even though she told me it was never any good for her. Is that *it?* she would ask me. Is that *all?* I, of course, denied it, and, in turn, now deny my disclaimer. Hurry up, I would tell her. You get there too slow.

•

At my parents' anniversary party, Mrs. Welsimmons sat with her legs crossed in an old wicker

chair I had never seen before. She spoke and smiled with two fat men who hovered over her, eating pretzels, men I had never met. The heel of Mrs. Welsimmons' strappy shoe had slipped off her foot, the foot that she kept pointing, *on purpose*, I thought, at the two men. But now she bobbed this foot distractedly, and sort of shook it, in order to get the strap to slip back on. And she kept failing. The shoe had no hope, no hope whatsoever, no, there was no getting the shoe back on, it was obvious, until, I think, everyone in the room expected Mrs. Welsimmons' ankle to snap.

•

Mr. Welsimmons shattered his clavicle in a car crash. Prior to that he spent hours pacing in front of a church wearing a mis-buttoned coat. Eventually, he was arrested. In turn the local paper ran an article. When he read it, Mr. Welsimmons said, Good Christ, I look fat.

•

Mr. Welsimmons died, it's a shame to say, after losing a long bout to melancholia and old age. The whole apartment building attended the funeral. We will never forget him, we all said, not ever. Night fell. There was a phone call from St. Louis. Hello? said the preacher, Hello? Hello? My father, at a loss, passed out cigars. After a while, he ran out. My mother went downstairs to find another box. The cigars weren't where she thought they would be. Nine times out of ten, they never were. Hold still a minute. Mr. Welsimmons liked to grab me by the elbows. And I hated it. What we're talking about here, kid, he said, is, Look at you.

The Fist Is A Fine Weapon

Two guys, both named Joe—a coincidence, but a common one—walk toward a bar on Dead Horse Street. Joe Pucker and Joe Drudge, men of many masks: convicts, bootleggers, hired-muscle, only-children, thugs. Bruisers. Both have barrel chests. If they had to, these two'd pistol whip their own mothers. If they had to, if you paid them fifty dollars, they'd pistol whip themselves, and like it. The bar has swinging doors. They swing open. This is no joke.

Joe Pucker, the taller Joe—sinewy neck, side-whiskers, a twirly mustache, a forehead scar, a leer—steps in first and immediately spits into a corner, a corner where there is no spittoon. He does this for emphasis. Then he lifts and resettles his ten gallon hat on his head. Meanwhile his spit goes skimming past the shorter Joe's nose and whaps against the floorboards and unsettles some dust. Joe Drudge—greasy face, a wince, a dirt smear on his upper lip. He doesn't blink. No, Drudge doesn't twitch. All he does is slowly run his tongue over his upper teeth, keeping his mouth shut. See, Drudge fancies himself a kind of devil who, after what feels like eons in hell, barely notices it anymore, swaggers around, dead-eyed and dry-skinned, nodding at people because he knows them, not because he likes them, and growing fonder and fonder of the sulphur smell, the burnt flesh, whatever. It takes more than stink to fluster Drudge—that's what his swagger says. Which goes a long way toward accounting for the sick-onion smell both Drudge and Pucker bear with them into the bar, a smell I associate with the influenza that killed my father.

As the stench hits, the patrons look up and over, one after the other. There are at least twenty patrons, thin, pock-marked, woebegone men, piss-ants mostly, a collection of life's stick figures—who all carry knives in their pockets, tucked in their boots, strapped to their thighs, sheathed, scabbarded, wrapped in cloth, knives in all shapes and sizes, the purpose being unfriendly—*Hey, stranger, you want me to stick you with this?* Every once in a while, a patron takes his knife out and picks his teeth with it. Then yawns. Of course this is Texas. But even though this is Texas, only one patron packs a gun. He's got it tucked in his pants: a slim-handled six-shooter with an eight inch barrel. We all know who he is—it's no secret. He's got tight-fitting pants. You can see the gun's outline, right there, the barrel well on its way down one pant leg, the chamber bulging out, the nub of the handle poking up above his belt, next to the buckle. A patron once told me he named his gun. It's the kind of thing you can't ask a man—the name of his gun. You just know it's there, maybe with a name, and don't mention it. Especially when the gun keeps the man from sitting down, like this one does. He smiles, he stands there, he surveys the scene. In some other state, or in Mexico, Canada, Argentina, they'd call him the sharp-shooter or the shootist . . . maybe. But this is Texas. So he's the gunslinger.

"Drudge, Pucker," says the gunslinger, sniffing, doing a hip shift. "Fellas. One of you two dead and don't know it? Eh? Your daddies never teach you boys to wipe your ass?"

That's good. Two boys: one ass. He's got a sugar tongue, the gunslinger. He's also got a slim-handled six-shooter with an eight inch barrel in his pants—but, I'm sorry, he should have waited to speak. He has broken etiquette here. I speak first. Always. Me. The lone customer. The Oil Baron. The high-roller. I do. I buy all the drinks. I sit in my father's seat,

the fifth generation Appalachian club-footed chair, in the corner, on its little stage—the surrogate throne. In return, I get to speak. And spectate. The patrons respect this.

"Pucker. Drudge." I assume a drawl I don't have and glance at the gunslinger—I could, if I wanted, have his throat cut. "Fellas. I'm glad you came in. We've been drinking since noon. Eddie, Dink, Big Tiny, all of us." I pause, look again at the gunslinger. "Just *sitting* here, drinking, and waiting for a couple of thugs as handsome and sweet-smelling as you two to saunter in here and give us some indication, some clue—whatever you can—as to the whereabouts of our souls. Just a hint." I pat my chest, my pockets, as if searching. "Just the general vicinity." I grin. "We fear we've lost them."

The patrons laugh.

I watch the gunslinger squirm. I've made my point. Besides, it tickles me to vex Pucker. His brow furrows. His lower lip pudges out—a slug with a twirled-up mustache on its back. And a sentence as long as the lost soul sentence I just put together is hard for Pucker to follow. Plus he knows I don't drink. I buy drinks. And usually, I placate—he isn't used to this.

Let me explain my grudge: Pucker, the taller Joe, years ago, after a stint as a Bible thumper, kissed my sister. As far as I know that's it. And she invited him to do it—practically wrote an invitation out. So he obliged her, leaned in, kissed. A consensual kiss, I'll admit. I can't remember how old my sister was, a teenager, twelve, fourteen, seventeen, it doesn't matter. Ever since that kiss she's been a sinner. She sins all the time. She likes it. She even says so. "If it makes my pulse race, I'll do it. Whatever it is," she says. "Why do anything else?" How do you argue with that? I can't. I wish I could. In the shade of a chinaberry tree,

in broad daylight, she said, Pucker, please, do it. And he did. In Texas, it's often this simple. We're simple folk. My sister's life, like all life, is a slippery slope that now she's sitting at the bottom of.

I hate to think of her there, doing whatever she does.

So I mock, and I'm getting bolder. Pucker being who he is, I almost have to. The last time I saw Pucker I offered to have a portrait painted of his mother, who is dead.

Now Pucker spits, unsettles more dust, and hisses, "You limp dick little pinhead." Pucker, too, can be sugary with words: limp dick, pinhead. But this outburst at me, this insult, is a first. I've crossed a line. (It's accurate, too—more or less—his description.) His mouth moves, chews his words, gaining momentum. "Are you making fun of me? Are you laughing? Are you? Because if you are—Are you? You are. Because if you are—Are you laughing?" He looks at Drudge. "Is he laughing?"

Drudge has three weeks of oil on his face. He still hasn't blinked. He says, "He's a pecker."

The patrons freeze. They look at me, the pecker.

I grin. In certain ways, a Texas aristocrat (an Oil Baron, a high-roller) always grins. But I am thin, see-through, flimsy as a chimera. In the right mood, it's laughable. Prod at me long enough and there's nothing there, just air. I'm ghosty. So no one prods. Except Pucker, what he just said, which felt like the proverbial corn cob.

I look at Applesauce, the bartender, whose father my father shot. It's his last name, Applesauce. Our eyes meet. I nod. I have to. These patrons need to see an example set.

Applesauce slowly and smoothly reaches a beer bottle down off of a shelf and whips it

straight at Pucker's head. It pings off his ear, a large fleshy ear the size of an ashtray. A glancing blow. At this point, the bell, so to speak, sounds.

Pucker crouches, spins, and Kung-Fu kicks, flattening the nearest patron's nose—a pug, friendly, freckled, now *flat* nose—with the side of his boot. His boot flies off, an eel in the air. The patron, head askew, mumbling, slides dumbly down a wainscoted wall. Pucker picks him up by the ears and head-butts him, once, twice: the patron's head now makes the piercing, whining, decompressing sound of a clubbed fish. Like fish, life also works in threes: piercing, whining, decompressing.

In the bar's four corners, there is rolling, scuffling, reconfiguration. The cards, plus the card players, scatter.

The shorter Joe, Drudge, springs forward and knocks two patrons off their barstools with a few rapid-fire kidney punches. Bam! Bam! Bam! His fists sink in—stumpy fat fists. Like that, he renders these patrons' kidneys squishy. And squished kidneys can kill you, our bodies being, as they are, delicate containers.

Out the window shines the late afternoon's bright blue taffeta.

As a high-roller (aristocrat, Oil Baron), one of the things I like best is to snip off the tip of a premium Cuban cigar with some scissors. I make a ceremony of it. Snip. Snip. Sniff. A patron crashes through a table in front of me, doe-eyed, hits the floor, but keeps his dukes still undeniably up. *Atta boy, Johnny.* My parents sent his parents to prison, where his parents died. We both grin, as I light the cigar—its nastiness makes my throat constrict. A tooth—one of Drudge's gold teeth, I think—is lodged in Johnny's fist. "Joe?" he says to me, in earnest. "Lick it—eh? Didntsta? Lack-a-lack." I laugh a loud laugh. Johnny is all pluck. Give him a

minute, he'll get back up.

I haven't moved from the surrogate throne, and I won't. I will stay put.

Should there be more of a pretext for this fighting? A full-scale feud, a swampland deal, a proper pederasty of in-laws, something besides a kiss and this haziness about the soul? On its own, a kiss does not trigger the vengeance that, say, a grudge-fuck does—I know. I also don't care. What's worse, he was a formula kisser. She told me. Methodical to a fault. Pucker's tongue formed patterns—reverse figure eights my sister recognized after a while, she couldn't help it, loop-de-loops, making the whole act, once she realized what he was up to, ridiculous.

Big Tiny just got his ass handed to him. Whoa. Words fail. Awful. Sorry, son.

Who's kidding who. We're in a one-sidedly masculine world. I should say male. Maybe twenty men—which isn't easy. No women. Well, one woman—Elaine, but she's in the back room. She often tires of us. At least, I think she does. I overheard her this morning. "If I could be elsewhere," she said, "I would be." "If I could," she said, "I'd be in Illinois." She said this to Applesauce (she does his books) as he poured the gunslinger a drink to fix the gunslinger's hangover. Usually, she avoids me. In fact, we've spoken only once. I said, "Elaine, excuse me, can I ask you—do you ever suffer loneliness?" She looked surprised, by what I don't know. "No. I don't," she said. Her enunciation was flawless, east coast, New England. "To tell you the truth," she said, "I don't put a whole lot of stock in the reality of this." Ah, but hers was a terrifically ambiguous 'this.' She may have meant life, loneliness, Texas, anything.

Then she paused. "Why do you dress like a religious zealot?" This stung. I was

wearing, as I always do, a red satin Moroccan robe and heel-less slippers that accentuate my thin ankles. Usually I don't explain this. It's what I do. No one asks. I started to speak, to distinguish between luxury and zealotry, to explain—and she walked off. She left me there, alone, a stranger.

Out come the knives!

The first, a homemade jobber, an imitation Buffalo Bill Bowie knife, spins nicely through the air and thunks into the fake stuffed rhino's head on the wall, just above the cash register, a little to the left of where Applesauce's head usually is. In two shakes, Applesauce is on a stool, making a grab for the knife. It's stuck. He twists. The rhino's jaw drops off. A cheek falls. He's got it, spins—a metal-flash and his hand is pinned back to the side of the rhino's head by a second, skinnier knife, a Martin Pinkstaff double-sider. A voice taunts old Applesauce: *ah—ah—ah*. The cash register bursts open. Susan B. Anthony dollars clatter everywhere. A few patrons drop to their knees and pinch coins—at least forty dollars on the loose. Applesauce now stands on the bar, waving his skewered hand in the air, in all directions. He's telling us . . . something, I don't know. *See? See?* No, what? It's lowbrow spectacle. Yes. Yes, it is. It's attention-getting. Knives. Fists. The fist is a fine weapon—blunt, knobby, imprecise. A knife is decisive: easier and irrevocable.

Someone jabs a dull, rusty knife deep into Pucker's shoulder—a meaty shoulder—just as he conks a couple of patron heads together. He shoots glances, mumbles, "Ah, man. Huh. Ow. Who? Damn. Who did that?" his voice rising, "Come on—look at me, God damn it, when you stab me." He yanks the knife out of his shoulder, and slings it through the air—at me—but it clanks innocently to the floor amid the cross-traffic of other knives. Truly now, the

bar, in all its dimensions, is being sliced, as it were, by knives.

My own hands make pitiable fists: I have the thin breakable fingers of a piano player, well-manicured, dainty, an aristocrat's hands—all through my childhood, my father used to tell me, *son, you couldn't lick your own lips*. He was right, too. And, if he weren't dead, he'd still say it, and he'd still be right. I couldn't beat my own self up. If I tried to deny it, tell him yes, I could too, then he'd take my wrists and smack me around with my own hands. *Oh, well now, I see I was wrong*, he'd say. *But you need to make a better fist, son*. Smack. *Make a tight fist. There. Good*. Smack. It's hard for me to imagine my father's soul or its vicinity. When I try, I conjure up beef gristle.

Doesn't matter. I was raised to respect a coward's advantage. It's no surprise, then, the physics of a well-hurled knife has always fascinated me—the impersonality of it, the glint, the lurchy line, the way the blade chases its ass over its own teakettle. The wrist flick. The way light licks—how else can you say it?—the shaft. The blur. The hush. The pregnant pause of it, pre-consequence. A mother-of-pearl-handled Pym Dagger, for instance, is something more than gratifying, mid-spin.

My father's neck was as wide as his head. *Stand up*, he'd say. *I'd be a mean bastard if I didn't do this*.

I am now the age my father was when he died. I wear Moroccan robes. I own thousands. Who cares how many. I have no wife, no love. I experience little bliss. In fact, I've noticed, less and less. What bliss I do experience I experience alone—red-faced and huffing like an emphysemic. Why sugar-coat it? I could pay for love, but who'd give it?

As if under hypnosis, Elaine—I mentioned her, the woman who doesn't believe in

this—emerges somnambulistically from the backroom, bare-footed, and hurls a pair of unquestionably elegant high-heel shoes into the fracas, the free-for-all, the fists: the first shoe veers up and hits the rafters—but the sharp heel of the second connects with the tip of Drudge's elbow, chipping it off. He bellows, heartbroken. His face—how could she? Empty-handed, Elaine shrugs and withdraws. Drudge's arm flops dead. His fist convulses.

There is pathos here. Drudge loves Elaine. He loves her because, once, in the street, he saw her whistling. It altered his insides, her whistling did, just as all beautiful things did. Elaine may have taken in her effect: she smiled, at any rate, but then she went on thinking of other things—Illinois. She would never encourage Drudge, a little stumpy-fisted man, no matter what sequence of words, syllables, or susurrances, he might offer her. Such is Drudge's lot in life. Only don't feel sorry for him. He's a bestializer, Drudge is. He thinks of women as creatures—exquisite, light-as-air, nice to pet. Beauty is his highest praise; women smile, and he salivates. He's fathered children, fourteen with four wives. Fistlessness isn't likely to stop him.

I also love her. Pucker loves her. The gunslinger loves her, too. Applesauce loves the idea of her, how she just showed up here, how she has a continuous existence parallel, if indifferent, to his. She tires of our love. One thing certain about Elaine's Illinois is that none of us are in it.

A barstool skids across the floor. Everyone hops over it—a little dance—except for the old patron at the end of the line, Johnny's great-grandfather, who's not *that* old, but who can't hop, who can only huck billiard balls, *bonk! bonk! bonk!* off of the back of Pucker's head, with little effect. The old man's ankles take the barstool full force, buckle, collapse. Quickly, two alert patrons scoop him up—his old arms flapping—and heave him like a battering ram at

Drudge, who he hits in the lower back, a solid blow, but a blow that snaps Johnny's great-grandfather's neck, snap.

I trusted the gunslinger would step in before this. I expected bullets through the roof, a general shut up and sit down. A little violence. A little slapstick. Break this, break that. Then bullets through the roof.

Not this.

A handsome patron, with wavy hair, ducks out through a hidden side door in pursuit of Elaine. If you tweak the rhino's nose, a wall panel slides away—everyone knows this. Let him go. What's he going to say? He'll try, he'll fail, we all fail. There is no place for his hair's waviness, either, in Illinois—or there is. I hear an embrace, a moan, full of pleasure, I think. Although the moan seems pretty quick, to my mind, what with the bodice, the hoop skirts, her stockings, the requisite sweet-nothings, the intricate little rigamarole of it.

(This is terrible. How could she? I love her. Pucker loves her. Applesauce loves the idea of her.)

A keg of beer explodes. Another! Another! Foam spreads across the floor. A patron, an unlikely hero, an Anabaptist or an ex-Anabaptist—he wears an eye patch, his left eye wanders—cracks his fist with tremendous gusto against Drudge's cranium. A death jolt. Something ka-chunks inside Drudge's head, or dislodges, or loses suction—a loud wet echo, a sound that gives me the shivers: a sound not unlike the sound of a casaba melon getting the axe. (I grew up, as a youth, in a valley riddled with casaba melons.) Drudge falls back into a chair with casters, rolls backwards until the chair crumbles underneath him. The attrition of this, the dissolving chair, dead Drudge, his fetishes—whatever they were—gone, all lost. It's too much.

A woman whistles and he falls in love. Why not? Life is full of silliness. How reversible is this, his death, his love? I don't know. Life is a slippery slope. Ask my sister, she's at the bottom of it. Could Drudge plead for mercy, ask Time to quit moving forward for a second, maybe even back up—he's tired of it, he'd like to rest and re-think all this? Not dead he can't. No. Dead, that's it. No asking favors. Skidding along, his head bumps the velvet-padded foot rest out from underneath my slippared feet. For a second, my feet rest on Drudge's head. He lies still, slumps, coughs, spits a gob. This is pure formality. He's dead, a dead man. Blindly, almost beautifully, he grapples with an ineffable foe menacing him from somewhere around my knees. I entertain the thought of Death, the little leprechaun, crouching under my chair, tapping Drudge on the shoulder. *Hey, Drudge. Tap. Tap. Hey.* He's caught, Drudge is, in a strangle hold beyond his ken. Gaspings, he swallows himself: his oily upper lip, his piggy fists, his fatherhood. Has a substantial change taken place, a soul departed? Does Drudge weigh now, dead, infinitesimally less? It's tough to say. I want to say yes.

In the street, after he heard Elaine whistle, Drudge told her it was the nicest sound he'd ever heard. He said heaven might be like that: a puddly street, a woman whistling on it, blackbirds. He would have liked to go on about it, embellishing, adding detail, except she walked off.

She wore the late afternoon's blue taffeta skirt, Elaine did—walking off.

She smiled; she didn't smile. She whistled. Who remembers this tune as Drudge remembered it? Lovesick Drudge—holding his half-formed details, a tune, any tune, stuck in his head. Blackbirds reflected in taffeta blue puddles on a late afternoon street—

Bah. Drudge was a beast, a fanatic, worse. In his head, Elaine gave him wet slobbery

kisses whether she wanted to or not. She, what, she blew on his ear, gave him the old sugar tongue—who knows what else. She told him . . . what? I have no idea what she told him. I have no wife. No bliss. What can I compare it to? I am a thin, frail man, with no specialized charm. Speaking of which, where is the gunslinger, with his tight pants on? A few knives and he's gone. Where's the grit in that?

On his deathbed, my father asked for a loaded pistol, so he could squeeze off a last round.

A white film coated his lips, the thin white film of the aged and the sick. He could scarcely speak.

The jukebox kicks into the middle of that Marty Robbins' song. Someone stabs the jukebox. The song womp-a-romps to a quick stop but a few patrons go on singing along—*Out in the west Texas town of El Paso, I fell in love with a . . .*” which infuriates Pucker. “El Paso?” he cries, shattering Applesauce's Adam's apple with his fist. “Lousy-ass yodelers. I'll give you a little El Paso.” Applesauce clutches his own throat. He can't breathe.

“Speak, Applesauce,” says Pucker. “Sing us a song.”

Applesauce's poor mouth just hangs open, soundless, astonished. He doesn't sing; he's never sung. He deserves something akin to applause, Applesauce does, for his years and years and years. What can I do? I can denounce Pucker: a mean bastard, a bad kisser, a brute—he isn't a bit funny

“Dammit, Drudge,” Pucker says. “Get up.” But Drudge is still dead.

Undaunted, Pucker busts some more chops. Then he spins, all herky-jerky—now he's bolting, high-stepping, clump-clump-clumping across the floor, a boot on, a boot off, a boot

heel, a bone spur, over the bodies of fallen patrons, over his co-equal, the shorter, deader Drudge, over chairs, tables, the tipped-over spittoon, over other, less identifiable, broken things, squint-eyed, clutching his ten-gallon hat to his head, he's obviously got a hard-on for what comes next: he coils, leaps, uncoils, and forearm shivers the gunslinger across the throat. The gunslinger! My god! There he is—rummaging in his pants, gunless, wide-eyed, over by the swinging doors. Or there he *was*. Now he topples like a trapeze artist, an acrobat, a tumbler, an amateur back-up circus performer, out through the swinging doors and into the street, one hand still thrust in his pants, sloth-like on the draw. The gunslinger has been with us all along, here, frozen in place, struggling to prove himself, and failing. Look—there Pucker lies, sprawled out, face down, in the general vicinity of where the gunslinger stood. His lungs raise his torso like a punctured bellows. Through his linen shirt pokes the blunt end of a pewter-handled—no, no—he's just resting. He's just taking a breather. He just overdid.

The sick, the sad, the sinister—have pity on us. Please.

Somewhere, out of sight, a cowardly patron starts scraping a fork back and forth across a plate. A hideous sound. A surrender. A white flag.

It quiets the singers.

A hush. The same handsome patron as before, with the wavy hair, steps out from behind the secret panel, smiles sweetly at us all, and stabs himself in the belly with a long, serrated, bread knife. Here is the kind of finality, had we thought to, we'd have hoped for. A gesture. A sign. A sudden, unexpected signature. Not easy to elegize, either. He twists . . . he twists? He can't twist—the bartender breaks a bottle! The bartender breaks a bottle . . . he can't break a bottle. His Adam's apple's crushed. He's choking. At last, the gunslinger, his

pants undone, his gun drawn, swaggers back in through the swinging doors, dusts himself off, and eyes the whole bar, even me, no, *especially* me, with malice, through clouds of unsettled dust, and starts pulling the trigger: *click. click. click.* Then BANG, the pistol mis-fires—a light burst, ringing, blue smoke.

What validates this? What else is there? To wait for a thin white film to visit our lips? I don't want to be visited.

The six-shooter slips to the floor. "Hey," he says. "Where's my thumb?" It's gone. "Hey. I'm asking you," he says. "Where's my thumb?"

Two Feet In The Grave: X and Y

Y: Begin.

X: To burn. To choke. To fall, accidentally, off a bridge or a building or a scaffolding.
To drown.

Y: Drowning is supposed to be nice, not so bad.

X: Starving, then. Internal bleeding. To die of thirst. To collide with something big and metal. To suffer an aneurism, or a stroke, or a seizure. To get the wrong medication via some pharmacist's blunder and, due to complications, overdose. A car wreck. An earthquake. A flood. A plane crash.

Y: Yes, well, four minutes—down, down, down. 35,000 feet. But who's brain isn't in a bucket at that point and what can you do anyway? What are we doing at 35,000 feet? That's a question to ask.

X: To drink Drano—by accident. Or on purpose. To expel fluids violently out all orifices. To cook. To freeze. To die of Heat stroke. Or malaria. Or in an avalanche. Or of insomnia. To spontaneously combust. To fall down stairs. To bleed.

Y: You said that.

X: To be trampled. To be torn apart by dogs. Or by jackals. To be eaten, as an infant, by rats. Or by piranhas. Or by those Australian cowfish that can swallow a swimmer whole. To be swallowed whole. To be gored by bulls. To be eaten by insects.

Y: Or by spaniards.

X: To get bitten by a snake. An asp. To get squeezed. To step in the way. To get curbed. To bust a gut.

Y: What?

X: To bust a gut.

Y: No, the other.

X: To get curbed?

Y: Yes. I don't get it.

X: To get mugged, beaten. To be rolled. To lose consciousness in a gutter, wet, oily. To have your teeth propped on the curb. To get your forehead kicked.

Y: In other words, to bleed. Which you said.

X: Fine. To be left behind. To be overlooked. To electrocute. To have your heart break.

Y: That's a metaphor.

X: No, it's not.

Y: Yes, it is.

X: You want to discount heartbreak?

Y: I want to discount metaphors.

X: Alright. To get shot. To explode. To gag. To suffocate. To smother in chemical gas.

Y: Actually, you drown. In gas. Your lungs fill up, you can't breath.

(Pause.)

X: To fall prey to a whim. To die under suspicious circumstances. To be killed by

someone you love. A child. An old man. An aunt. An uncle. Someone you love. A lover.

Y: A woman I love sleepwalks. One night she wanders in her sleep into the kitchen and gets a knife.

X: To get stabbed by a somnambulist.

Y: But is it possible she could stab me and also love me?

X: It is.

(Pause.)

Y: Love is murky, isn't it?

X: To be struck by lightning. To have an organ fail, a kidney, a gallbladder, a pancreas, a ventricle, a larynx, a pharynx, a coccyx, an ovary, a testicle, a liver, a lung, a lymph node, a thyroid gland, an esophagus, an intestine, the colon, the appendix, the stomach, the heart. To succumb to a cancer, brain or bone. Tumors. Tentacles flicking about.

Y: Do self-inflicted wounds count? Masochisms? Suicides?

X: To choose your own door. To step out. To abbreviate. To hurry to a stop.

Y: It seems almost avoidable, sometimes, doesn't it?

X: End of a long day.

(Pause.)

X *(again)*: To hold your breath.

Y: Stop it.

X: To think about dying for years and years and years until you're dead. The floor tips, doesn't it?

Y: I said stop.

(Pause.)

X: One more?

Y: Yes. One last.

X: To get half crushed.

Y: The chest, the rib cage, the heart.

X: Yes. Not the head. You have to be able to see what is happening.

Thirty-Two Feet Per Second

If you live for a while in Wichita, Kansas—say your father is a consultant of some sort—and then you live in Peoria, Illinois, then in Beaumont, Texas, then Duluth, Minnesota, then Teaneck, New Jersey, and then you move, at age fifteen, to Colfax, Washington, well, then you still might not have anything to say for yourself. *Yet.* Maybe you get to looking forward to a new round of fistfights in the next town you move to. New faces. New streets. New girls to look at. Plus, you're getting to where you win most fistfights. You consider yourself tough, a hundred-and-forty-three pound kid, with quick fists. At night, in front of the bathroom mirror, you hit your enemies in the face with combinations until they bleed, unconscious, whimpering—or you do. Girls like it, sometimes, when you bleed. It hasn't occurred to you yet how fragile the human head is, all the various ways you can wind up dead—because dead, it doesn't matter much what girls think. You're *dead*. Soon enough, you'll think of this. You'll think of girls, you'll think of death, you'll think of ways to die. For now, you bob and weave. You are a small town American boy. You watch boxing on TV and you know what weight class you're in. You're a welter weight. You wouldn't mess with you.

It's not dark yet, but it's getting dark. The girl is fifteen, maybe older. Her name is Iris. She stands in a small circle of hard-packed dirt underneath a weeping birch tree and holds on to the tree's lowest branch, its smooth papery bark. Uphill is a shed, downhill is a hotel. The boy is a few feet off, standing on his good foot in the wet wide-bladed grass, jumpy. His other foot is in

a cast. He is pretty sure he is trespassing. He is spying, too, or he will be. *On what*, he doesn't know. *Why*, he doesn't know, yet, either. In his hands, he holds a fancy 35mm camera, last year's Christmas present, the strap hangs around his neck. He fondles the camera, a complicated device, a thing requiring expertise—scientific, mechanical, logo-centric. He feels like an actor who has wandered into a scene, nervous and fidgety, wearing a wardrobe's fanciest prop cast. But the cast is real, the camera is real, his nerves are real, too. He discards his crutches whenever possible. Two snapped metatarsals, no big deal. His crutches are up the hill. He hobbled down.

Iris has drawn the boy into a conversation about metaphysics, more or less. "Nothing is stupider," she says, "than believing in the devil." She shifts her weight from foot to foot, then lunges up, all at once—some bark flakes off. She slips, scratches an elbow, catches her balance, and hooks her left heel over a low branch where, if she can make it, there is a large Y-shaped crook she can sit in. The tail of her shirt—a men's short-sleeved Hawaiian shirt—snags on a twig, untucks, and rips, a small L-shaped rip. "Excuse me, *more stupid*."

Once she is up, Iris straddles a branch. She rocks back and forth, like a gymnast on a pommel horse, then boosts herself up with her hands. "The devil is just a Big Lie," she says, "to keep dumb people from killing each other or having sex with horses."

This strikes the boy as a semi-risky thing to say, devil-wise. Horse-wise, too. "What about possessed people who commit murders," he says, "or do whatever, and then blame the devil?"

"That's when the Big Lie backfires."

The shed next to the tree is an old delapidated-looking thing, older probably than the

tree itself, full of ancient yard tools and old lawnmowers or something. Three feet separate the tree's trunk from the shed's flat overhanging roof. The hotel downhill—twenty, thirty feet—is a large two story frame-and-brick structure, a small hotel, and by appearance vacant, with evenly spaced windows, nailed-down shutters, no curtains, no lights. It reminds the boy of a condemned warehouse in Beaumont where drunks and drug addicts live and into which little boys wander and vanish. Little boys with little lives. The sharpness of the hotel's outline against the bright sunset sky adds to the effect, gives it the two-dimensionality of a saloon front in a Hollywood set—spooky and phantasmal and flimsy. The air itself is flukish, warm like April, though in fact it's late October. Wet and sweet. It's as though the air has sugar in it and for a second the boy feels good in his skin, really good.

This scene is on the outskirts of town. No farmhouses nearby. The boy drove his parent's car to get here. He's got a blanket in the backseat that he may or may not mention. His plan is to wait and see. The lawn, what little lawn there is, you wouldn't want to lie down on. Bumpy, wet, full of weeds. Mown-down Ukrainian cheat grass, pale green and veiny, and getting bluish, now, in the day's last light.

The boy is me, by the way, but there is no reason to dwell on it. It explains how I know what I know, that's all. I was a boy, simple as that—fifteen, new-to-town, antsy. My name is Nick. I was a boy in the American ocean of boys.

"I'm sorry, Nick," says Iris. "You're not some kind of Christian right-wing fundamentalist or something, are you?"

"No," he says. "My dad is Catholic is all." He is trying to act unfazed, as though he's been a few places and done a few things. "I used to pray a lot, though, when I was little." It's

the truth. He prayed like a zealot. The world was spooky; he wanted protection. He is standing oddly, because of the cast, keeping his injured foot's toes a few inches off the wet grass. The tubesock he's got stretched over the cast dangles off, like a deflated fin. "I had this systematized prayer I'd do," he explains, "where I'd say thanks for this and thanks for that, and then I'd finish by saying, "please bless"—followed by this huge list of everyone I knew more or less in the order I liked them."

Iris looks down. "Really?"

The boy laughs, because it's funny, but it's something else, too.

In Duluth, when he was six or seven, he lived next door to a girl, Clara Metcalf, who told him Catholics crossed themselves backwards, left to right, not right to left and, as a consequence, all their prayers were routed the other direction, to the devil. At the time, his grandfather was newly dead, a series of sudden strokes, and the boy didn't want the devil tending his grandfather's soul, whatever his grandfather's soul was. Whatever being dead was. After the first few strokes, his grandfather didn't recognize him or anyone. Visits were terrible. A yellowish head jutted out from a propped-up hospital bed, dull-eyed— "Ah, a nice boy." Then, a few hours later, he was a thin-lipped thing, crumpled-up, dead.

"I ended up with this really long list," says the boy, "I mean, I included people whose names I didn't even know: *Please bless, God, the old guy who mows my grandmother's lawn.* But it's hard to pray for a guy just for mowing a lawn, you know?"

Iris smiles at this. Her face is all adolescent features: puffy lips, unblemished cheeks, freckles—except for a lantern jaw, which gives her something of a nun's determined expression. The boy lived, for a few years, next to nuns. Even though she said *sex with horses*,

Iris looks somehow pious to him, a little cloister-ish. Her black hair is choppy, like a crow's wing. Smiling, she ducks under a branch, saying, "You could have just said, 'God bless everyone,' then gone straight to sleep."

The boy considers it. "It wasn't just before bed," he says. "It was kinda non-stop." More truth. The prayer cycled like a song in his head for years, sometimes loud, sometimes like background noise: *Mrs. Henderson, Sissie Lee, Henry, Uncle Lou, Mrs. Welsimmons, Clyde Overstreet, Mary Claude, the Sistrunk twins*, on and on, until he was sick to death of it. He hops over and steadies himself against a lone fence post or maybe it's an old hitching post. It occurs to the boy that this is what crazy people do, have uncontrollable thoughts. Pointing at the hotel, he says, "Are we here to peek in windows?"

Iris mimics shock. "Nick," she says, "be patient." She steps from branch to branch. "Why don't you come up?"

Of course he can't. His foot is in a blunt, club-like cast that makes the boy think of an amputee's stump, partly because he prefers not to think of his foot in there, weak, pale, losing skin. "Sure. Just a sec," he says, "just give me a minute to telepathically fuse my foot back together. Then I'll be right up."

It was an ugly break, his foot's—three weeks ago, trying something spectacular, a leap, off a stack of park benches. He was alone, adrenaline drunk, on his way home after knocking Bill Moe senseless—an older, bigger kid, who tried to spin kick. One punch, behind the Bill Moe's ear—then squawking, unusual bird noises. Jonestown Park, with its picnic shelter, sits between his house and the high school. The park benches shifted, his foot dropped between slats.

"Let me ask you this," he says, "if my leg miraculously heals, and if I climb up that tree—which I can't, *can't* and *won't*—what happens next? What's the deal?"

"It's a surprise, Nick" Iris says. She pauses to look down at him. Maybe she winks. "Savor it." By now, she is almost level with the shed's roof. Her Hawaiian shirt fits loosely, her arms look thin and otherworldly, like wands. The tree branches bend elastically beneath her feet. She is prettier, if you ask the boy, than all the Colfax's other girls combined—with a few possible exceptions, upper-class girls, girls, in general, he'll never meet.

He tries another tactic. "I like your shirt," he says. "It's pretty. Who lives in the hotel?"

"Nick. Nick." She says it like tsk-tsk. "Think of those an Alfred Hitchcock movie. There's always a scene where a few people sit around, getting tense, right? At a bus stop or a train station or a church. Usually it's Cary Grant or somebody, though—wearing a turtleneck. There's always this long, impossibly suspenseful scene just before whatever happens, happens."

"And then . . . ?"

"Something distracting?"

He looks around. A streetlight down the road blinks on. In the fields, insects that will soon freeze to death, sing. A sign rattles in the drainage ditch next to the highway. The sign reads: *Colfax, Washington. The Pea and Lentil Capital of the World.* Miles in all directions, old dilapidated farmhouses dot the hills. Downtown Colfax is one strip: restaurants, bars, Fonk's Drug, Woolworth's, two banks, the Blue Fox theatre, Big-O Tire, The Uptown Barber, Franklin Five and Dime, a lawyer's, a dentist's, the post office, St. Martin's Church, Sav-More

Drug, Smith's Food King, two used car dealerships, City Hall, and the Tasty Freeze. On the town's back roads, fifteen-year-old farm kids—with brand new driver's permits—speed recklessly, faster and faster. It's maddening trying to find a good place to go.

The boy met Iris, properly—he introduced himself—six days ago, Monday. When he first saw her, she was wearing a *Shining* T-shirt: Jack Nicholson's head wedged in a doorway, the words "Here's Johnny" underneath. A tight shirt, he remembers, revealingly tight. On Monday, he screwed up his courage, walked over, said hi, how're you doing?. After, they talked a few times at school, once at the mini-mart, Friday, and once on the phone, Saturday—after several misdialings. To prepare for the phone call, the boy made a list of questions to ask, then asked them all. She has sisters, older. She was born in Colfax, St. Luke's, December fifth, ten pounds, two ounces. A Sagittarius. She was suspicious, for years, of celery. Her cat's name is Mr. Fibbs. That night at dinner her mother and sisters discussed whether Tammy Wynette got married last week or not. Sound echoes through Iris's house. "Hear that?" she said. "That's one of my sisters in the bathtub. Downstairs." She held the phone up so the boy could listen. "Listen close. She's shaving her legs." The boy heard nothing.

"Who's Tammy Wynette?" he said.

"A lousy singer." Iris laughed. She laughed a lot—quick, sudden laughs. Was there someone else in the room? Something going on?

"Where's your dad?" he asked.

Her father, Iris explained, was gone, incarcerated, locked up. When she was five, they came and carted him off. He was an embezzler; now he's a looney. His synapses misfired. He

snapped. Now he's so drugged up he barely speaks. Iris reported all to this in a matter-of-fact voice. "What am I supposed to do if my father is whacked?" she said. "Cry about it? Hey, time's whizzing past."

The boy didn't know what to think of a lunatic dad. The mention of lunacy makes him edgy. He has a recurring memory, it's an hallucination, or it's a dream, or it's a peek into the other side, a spell like one of the spells crazy people have—who can say? He's at the kitchen table, he's three, maybe four, he's eating bacon, he's eating eggs—out the window, in the backyard, he spies something sickly yellow and electric heave itself across the lawn. A cloud or a lump, prickly, full of bile. It pops into his head all the time; he shivers and it's gone. Did Iris's dad see such things everywhere? He was afraid to ask.

The phone call as a whole was a rollercoaster. One minute Iris was telling him she was in bed, she liked her bed, she would bet five dollars he'd like it, too. Then she'd turn around and say, "It's a mess, my bed. I eat potato chips in it. There's grease all over the sheets."

"Grease?" he said.

"Oil, butter," she said, "whatever it is."

At some point, Iris started asking the questions—personal, pointed, rapid-fire questions—like she had a list of her own. She said, "Listen up. This is a test."

Has he ever seen a person dead?

Yes, his godfather, when he was eight.

Has he killed things?

Fish. Bugs. A hamster, on accident, with a shoe. When he was little, he spent an afternoon beating water-skiippers to death with a stick. Is this what she means?

It is. Did he enjoy it?

No. He can't say he did.

When he hit Bill Moe in the neck, did he like that?

Bill Moe asked for it. He liked giving him what he asked for.

Has he ever overheard his parents having sex?

No. God, please. Has she?

Can he name any porn stars?

Nope. None. (A lie. He's watched a few. Weird, magical, tedious, terrible, breath-taking configurations.) What is this, a pervert test?

Come on. None?

"Okay. Mindy Minx," he said. "She grew up in one of the towns I grew up in."

"See. I was right," said Iris. "Hold on." There was a shuffling sound, a mattress squeak. When she came back her voice was louder. "Hey, do you know what bird lime is? It's a paste you make out of a bark. Holly bark. As in *deck the halls*. There's a jar in the kitchen right now my grandma made. You use it to trap little birds. For bird pie. A few birds, some flour, a little corn starch, butter—"

The boy interrupted. "You could scrape your sheets. Use the grease."

"Oil, butter," Iris said. "It's all over the place."

At some point, earlier, he mentioned his new camera, the 35mm. Iris got excited. How fancy? What features? Zoom lenses? Now, to end the call, she said, Bring that fancy camera. Drive to the end of Eugene Palmerton Road. Sunday night, at six. Palouse Highway east, two miles, bridge, church, barn, silo, left. Crest a hill. Pull off after the city sign, not the Frost

Heaves sign—don't let it trick you. There's a nook, she said, park in it.

A camera, a dirt road, a nook? What to expect? Something sneaky? Something sly? The boy's hopes ran the gamut. He had recently seen *Last Tango in Paris*. A friend's parents rented it and one day after school the boy and his friend fast-forwarded to all the sex scenes. Now his friend is always saying, Go get the butter. Whenever there's a lull: Go get the butter. The boy says it, too. *Oil, butter, whatever it is. Oh dear god.* It's wicked and, in a way no one admits to, wonderful. After he and Iris hung up, the boy spent most of the night—Saturday night—sleeplessly considering all the sins he'd be willing to commit and, in the end, he had to admit it they were nice visions to lose sleep to.

A birch tree, like the willow, is mawkish in so far as it weeps, but it's less woebegone-looking than a willow, less mopey, and better for carving initials—if you're ever so lovesick you can't get over yourself. The boy stands next to the tree, thinking. Over time the bark raises to a scar and there they are, initials, yours and hers. Go ahead, carve them, if you want; feel free to grow old, dodder, and come back to the tree from time to time to grapple with a nostalgia big enough to kill you. If you want to. But who wants to? Ask the boy, he'll tell you it's for sissies. Ask if he's a sissy, he'll say he hopes not. Ask what he wants, he'll tell you Iris, right now, so bad he'd beg.

From the tree she steps gingerly onto the shed's roof. The tin roof dimples. 105 lbs.? 110 lbs.? Iris pushes a branch aside and looks down. "If this shed falls over," Iris says, "catch me."

The boy promises he will, broken leg or not. He quick, he says. He'll lay down and

cushion her landing. He tells her to feel free to fall.

"When I was five, I fell out of a tree like this," she says, scooting back a little from the edge. "Hit the ground and bounced. My dad was still around and he saw it. I only sort of remember."

"Bounced?" says the boy.

"Yep," says Iris, "I guess so. I don't think it was an enormous bounce."

"Anything break?"

"Nope. I hopped right up. I was down. I was up. I kind of remember the impact."

The boy considers this. "Damn." Now and again, it seems, in America's small towns, a girl falls from a tree and bounces. Is it possible? If so, the world is full of surprises. In a world like this you could almost tell a girl, a girl who bounces, about the electric thing in your childhood backyard. You could describe it's galumphing, horrible, yellow, shivering, gone. Blink, you'd say, it's gone. Anyone can show up, speak, accost, get silly, kiss. Yes. And longing feels blessedly longer.

The boy re-checks his position. Shed: five feet. Tree: ten. Thirty downhill feet to the hotel. Iris: twelve feet overhead, perched on the roof's edge. Above her, in the evening's soft blue sky, the moon looks like a semi-circle of chalk. The sky itself is ever paler now, almost blue-white. A breeze picks up. The tree, like an tremendous octopus, lifts in the wind.

"I'm not going to get arrested?" he says, "am I?" He thinks, I scampered. I scurried. I did it all. Appreciate me.

Iris rustles a branch at him, laughs—"Do you want to?" She is prettiest when she laughs or smiles. Yes, mercy, he thinks. The sight of her Hawaiian shirt, its tangly hibiscus

pattern, flowers on top of flowers, untucked, torn, her black crow's wing hair, the birch leaves—all of it, en masse, makes the boy's gut . . . well, it's as if the boy's gut is drunk on its own juices. He lifts up his fine 35mm camera, admiring it. It's almost too dark for pictures. He fiddles with the dials, slows the shutter speed. He knows a few tricks. But his tricks do things he doesn't understand to the depth of field. Big aperture, slow shutter speed, he thinks, means . . . what, exactly? You can't move?

Iris says something he doesn't catch. It sounded like *sit*. Sit? He can't sit. His fibula—the lateral malleolus, whatever that is—is cracked in five places. "What?" He almost shouts.

She says, "I said sit."

How does Iris compare, for instance, to Tali Bevilacqua unscrewing her lipbalm container, routinely, half-hourly, heart-breakingly? Well, Iris bounces. Tali Bevilacqua steps out of a pack of girls, smirking and lip-glossy, blocks your path, and asks: "Wanna screw?" (The boy was alone, at the time, outside the cafeteria doors, during lunch hour. It was silvery hot. Boys were showing other boys tricks with spit. "Sorry," he said to her, as if he were suddenly six, again, in Beaumont, Texas, "Ma'am?") After a pause, she held out to him a shiny gold screw. "Screw?") Tali makes a face he calls the Kissy-kiss. (But she doesn't mean it.) Iris's grandma makes bird lime. Iris snickers through an entire film on the mating rituals of South American amphibians. Tali grimaces. Tali says, sick, to describe a cluster of baby tree frogs. Iris describes her grandma as an "old time vixen." (The boy misunderstands. He thinks a vixen is a female vampire.) Iris says, Saucy and seventy-five. Iris wears Jack Nicholson's grin on her chest. Will Tali Bevilacqua barge unimpeded into the boy's consciousness daily for

the next twenty years? (She will.) Will Iris? (Yes. With pointy fists.)

Out under the tree, other noises rise up: leaves scrapping asphalt, distant motors, insects, the tick of wind-blown dust, power lines buzzing. It's peaceful. Cows in the fields chew their cud, chewing and chewing. Now and again, one lows. The boy for a second thinks of a cow's mouth: murky, hot, black, sticky. The sound of the motor gets closer until the car tires crunch gravel and two dim circles of headlights sweep across the shed, drift through the branches, and hit the hotel. Pale yellow circles. The hotel still looks dead—brick, flat, two-dimensional. Paper-thin. The boy fancies he could poke his finger through it. Car doors click open, slam shut. He can't see who it is. The birch tree's branches hang in the way. Just in case, he makes a fist. Then things get momentarily weird.

"Hey, did the lovebirds hear us?" It's a girl's voice in a fake stage whisper.

Someone else laughs. Also a girl. Or a boy. A zero-inflection alto, like a cigarette smoker's.

The boy—unclenching his fist—thinks for an instant: an orgy? He looks up at Iris; his idea of an orgy—people smoking elaborate pipes, Persian rugs, clouds of smoke, cushions and fruit bowls and long feather ticklers—doesn't fit. No birches, no cheat grass, no sheds. "Hey, Iris," he says. "Who's this?"

Two girls amble down the hill. "Whose Fury III?" asks the stage whisperer. "Ouch. Hey, what's with crutches?" The boy recognizes her, the stage whisperer—a Cindy or Sara or something. Cindy, he's pretty sure. She works at the Tasty Freeze on Main Street. She has sold him a few dip cones. She is older, too, Cindy is: eighteen at least, maybe older than that—and tall, nearly six feet, all bones and odd angles.

Iris looks down from her rooftop perch, her chin on her knees. "This place is booby-trapped," she says. "You could break your momma's back."

Cindy repeats herself. "Whose Fury III?"

The other girl, a shuffler, is wearing a fisherman's cap. She stands a few feet off, smirking. "I like your shirt, Iris," she says. "Festive." This girl, after a closer look, is a boy, and embarrassingly so: a china doll, pint-size and porcelain. The fisherman's cap, as far as the boy can tell, is a sad attempt at looking tougher. "Who's the camera man?" he or she says, pointing. "What is he—mute?" The boy barely registers the insult. He is looking at beauty where it doesn't belong and, for some reason, it repels him. How could he help? A quick fight—a bent nose, a chipped tooth, a scar? Except it *is* a girl. Yes, definitely—a girl. But more boy-pretty than girl-pretty. Sort of a dud as a girl. Hey, okay, he thinks, a *hermaphrodite*, my first. "I'm Nick," he says. "Nice hat."

The hermaphrodite produces an Old Milwaukee and, holding it at chin level, says, "I'm delighted to meet you, Nick." She burps heartily in the boy's direction. The front pocket of her oversized sweatshirt bulges with beer can shapes; she's drunk, or pretending to be. Nice act, the boy thinks, keep it up. Cindy stands hunched, empty-handed; she's looking at the hotel. Up on the roof, Iris pulls her knees closer to her chest, hugging herself. "Don't puke." The hermaphrodite smiles an outlandish porcelain clown smile, and mimics Iris, "*Don't puke.*"

Three weeks ago, at school, a glossy phone sex ad—torn from a magazine—made the rounds, folded into tiny squares. Unfolded, the image was a naked Asian woman, almost a girl, bisected by the words *NICE ODDITIES*, along with 1-900 number. Above, her sad face and A-cup breasts; below, a man's angular hips and flaccid penis. The image re-enters the boy's

head. He saw the picture twice in Algebra and again in Social Science. Everyone treated it like a specimen of something hilarious. Look at that softie, they said, that dangler. Yeah, *nice odd titties*. Yuck—it's sticky. Help, mom, something's *happening* to me. Heh. Heh. Heh. Okay, who's going to call her up? Nick, you into this? Is this what New Jersey girls have under the hood? "No," said Bill Moe, "but his mom does."

"I'm being kept in the dark," the boy tells Cindy, in a low voice. "For suspense purposes."

Cindy says, "I see. Why are you whispering?"

"Shouldn't I?"

The hermaphrodite snorts. "He's whispering for *suspense* purposes." She picks up a pebble and throws it at the hotel, just missing a window. Stumbling back, she shakes the can of Old Milwaukee in her hand and turns it upsidedown. Empty.

"Smash it against your head," says the boy. He makes a mock can-smashing gesture.

Cindy smiles and blinks and smiles. "They're deaf," she says. "The guy who runs the hotel is deaf. It's called the Deaf House."

Cindy quickly fills the boy in. It's Bingo night or something—a busload leaves before dark. The hotel empties. Hence the emptiness. Except for the dancers, who show up. Like clockwork. "Iris discovered it," says the hermaphrodite. "Iris Columbus." Then she dances a little drunken jig. "The d-d-d-dancers are d-d-d-deaf."

"Deaf dancers, Nick," says Iris. "Surprised?" Her voice sounds sad, like she's sucking a stone—or is the boy imagining it? He can see a strip of Iris's back. It's phosphorescent white.

He smiles. "I am."

"*Aaah*. What's the sequence, Iris?" says Cindy, grinning. "Hand-holding begets hugging begets kissing begets dancing begets dry-humping begets . . ."

Iris interrupts. "You left out heavy-petting."

The boy gets the connection; they're parodying a health class handout: the Slippery Slope. He has never believed nor disbelieved this slope, but he's always hoped it was true, some kind of a irresistible force he could set off with a handshake: *Iris, hello, nice to meet you*. Cindy carries on, in a sing-song voice: "Soft-petting leads to groping leads to loud moaning leads to—"

"Goat dance," says the hermaphrodite, flatly. "End of the road." Then, as if hit with a spotlight, the hermaphrodite steps exaggeratedly back, foxtrotting, and does a series of spinning rubber knee moves that culminate in the appearance and opening of another Old Milwaukee. When she stops spinning, she sneers, chinless: a face you wouldn't make if you knew you were making it. "Old Milwaukee?" she offers. "Nick?"

He ignores her. His mind has taken an ugly turn—deformed dancers, lurching at each other, fill his head. A circus act. A freak show. He feels tempted and tricked. Which sin—of the seven cardinal sins—is this?

Noises surge up, again, ebb and tide. A machine like a massive clothes washer churns in the distance, a lonely, mechanical slosh and cars pass by, stirring up dead leaves. The trees on the hilltops have by now receded into silhouette. Moving about the shadows, hermaphrodite accuses Cindy of incest with an older brother, a Marine, a guy worth having incest with, and then she suggests Iris teach her a few tricks—the Scissors, the Butterfly, and the Spider-Swing.

"I need to lock my legs around him," says the hermaphrodite, "until his eyes bug out. Right?" Iris laughs. "Yes," she says. "Till he's blue in the face." Iris? The boy has the sensation of sitting in a sinking boat, poised, upright, an oar in each oarlock; he's never heard girls talk like this. The Spider-Swing? What is it? A contraption with stirrups and little pulleys? "They're probably not even deaf," says the hermaphrodite. "They're probably the night managers or something and they have terrific X-ray hearing and they know we're out here and this is their sicko way of getting off."

Cindy sits down in the grass. She claims to regret being here. This is peeping, she says. It's a felony. Or whatever it is, a misdemeanor. Plus it's what perverts do—peep in people's windows, plain and simple. Which—according to Cindy—makes Iris the Queen Peeper.

"Peeping!" Iris defends herself. "This is *performance*." She leans over the edge and looks down. "It's a gift is what it is. We get to forget. You're so sick of yourself, Cindy—I know you are. *Peeping*."

The boy interrupts. "Iris," he says, and stops. She looks stricken. Her footing, her shoes, her shins, it's hard to say, *something* is transfixing her. It all happens at once. A faint *eeeeek*, the hotel's floor boards creaking. Then a light clicks on upstairs and fills a window, almost level with Iris's head. She ducks down. The boy can see flashes of the aqua blue waistband of her underwear as Iris's Hawaiian shirt, with its small rip, flaps. He snaps the camera out of its leather case, his fingers jitter, the lens uncaps. What's he going to take a picture of? The dark? Confused, he lets the camera drop, dangle. His heart is beating like a sudden flight of birds, an explosion of wings.

A woman appears in the window, beautiful and strange, a helmet of curly red hair. She is occupied undoing the top button of her flimsy white shirt. Finished, she undoes another. And another. The boy thinks of angels in paintings. Underneath the first shirt is a second, also flimsy and white, but sleeveless. The woman drifts past the window, drifts back, busily. She doesn't look deaf. She looks blind; her eyes bear a glazed look, intense and short-sighted, as if she were the victim of hypnotists. Suddenly, she stops, spins and, smiling, flips a wadded-up black cloth against the glass. A skirt? A trick? Silk? The boy can only see her from the waist up; her lower body remains, and will remain, mysterious. The cloth—whatever it is—sticks for a second as if wet, then falls, a soft thud on the window sill. A radio clicks on somewhere, softly. It's a love song the boy half-recognizes. Hey, hey, he thinks, a seduction scene. The red-haired woman reappears taking tiny backward steps, a man follows her—or in any event a man's head, dark features, black hair, bobbing. To the boy, it looks like an ambush almost, snaky and precise—not dancing, exactly. And for an moment he has the awful impression that the man's head is bodiless, severed, a corpse's head, a thing paraded around on a stick. "Iris," he says, "what's going on?" He is spooked now. A conjurer enticing a man's head on a stick? Worse? The woman steps aside, revealing the man's entire torso, intact, naked, hairy. At which point, her second shirt slips off, fingers entwine, tangle, tease, forming symbols, each symbol shifting into the next. This is it, the boy thinks, this is really damn-well it.

"Well, Nick," says Iris. "What do you think?"

An hour later, in the dark, on a mattress, upstairs in Iris's house. The air is thick and hot, like wet lint. In the walls, the radiator pipes knock—little men with hammers, making a racket.

Half-undressed, Iris drapes a scarf draped over a lamp and flips the switch, giving the room a blue-red-green tinge. A big steel hope chest bars the door. Downstairs, Iris's sisters traipse around in their nightgown, clicking cupboards shut.

The boy lies naked on his back, looking up. He is exhaling in flutters. "Do you think they heard us?" The ceiling's plaster, he notices, looks like stars and spiders and stick people. "Let's get dressed."

Iris props herself up on an elbow, smiling. "Slow down, Nick." she says. "How'd you feel?"

"I'm fine," he says. "I'm fine." He looks at Iris, her crow's wing hair brushing its tips on the greasy sheets, her aqua blue underwear low on her hips. She wrinkles her face, wiggles around, and pulls her Hawaiian shirt out from under her hips. "What's this?" she says, poking her finger through the shirts rip.

The boy repeats himself. "Let's get dressed."

"What's the hurry, Nick? My clothes are on . . . mostly." Iris exaggerates a hushed *there-there* voice. "See. Just a little rip. It's okay. I'll show you a few tricks."

"I don't know, Iris," says the boy. And he will always regret this. "I don't think I'm ready for tricks." Under the sheets, he cradles his wet dick discreetly in his hand. Heaven, he thinks, might be like this—raw and pearly. "I mean," he says, "even the floor creaks. Are you sure no one heard us?" When Iris doesn't answer, he asks what he has to ask, "I wasn't like a dog with a balled-up rug, was I?"

"A *what*? No. Well . . . maybe a little," says Iris, needling his ribs with her elbow. "A dog with a balled-up rug? God." She touches his chest, then taps at it. "Thump, thump."

Return to the scene: the tree, the hermaphrodite, the hotel. The boy is reeling. He has the weird sense that he's watching death's harbinger dance—a ritual before a great violence takes place. Bodies swirl, bend, merge. Chests—naked chests—mesh, press. The hermaphrodite says, "Goat dance." Indeed, the red-haired woman, spins, a half-turn and backs into the man, who, as far as the boy is concerned disappears. Her breasts are so pale they glow. He loves this. Her body fills the window, naked and white, her palms against the glass, her hair a red halo on her head—upstairs at the old Hammertoe Hotel, known to everyone as the Deaf House. It is just before dark; everything outside the window—the tree, its branches, the pastures, sky—is blue and turning bluer and about to turn black. In the night's sky, clouds shred across the pale blue, from left to right, west to east.

"Jezziz," says Cindy. "I don't care how nice the beat is, if you're deaf, you can't dance to it."

The hermaphrodite—"Tango funkng fandango."

A radio is playing, a love song. The boy has never felt so alive in his whole life. It's as if his mind is racing down a staircase, its feet flying. He's gone under a wave and risen wet to a world of nods and yeses. This can go and go. Of course, he doesn't recognize what it is—desire's funnel, its myopic lustre, its halo effect, its blur—but he likes it. His isolates the woman's nipples: pink and foremost. Fumbling, he clutches his camera, again—a useless thing. What does he want? To reside here forever? Here? Now? In this wet Ukrainian grass? In Colfax, Washington? Yes. Take a picture of his life? Yes.

He is only fifteen. He has no idea how weak he is.

"Your heart's pounding, isn't it, Nick?" says Iris.

In the window, the red-haired woman's mouth is open, a twist of delight. Her freckly white forehead presses against the glass, now—her palms, too. She is pushing. She is being pushed. The man has been reduced to a force, rhythmic, peripheral. It's like his brother's Penthouse magazine in which a girl tapes, it *wasn't* tape, *ties* herself to a bedpost. It was hardly a girl. It wasn't a bedpost. Why think this? he asks himself. Why think this now? What is wrong with me? "Let's go, Iris," he says, "Let's get out of here." If he is discovered, it occurs to him, he can't run. His leg, no, it won't—at best, he can hop. He is hyperventilating. Above him, Iris laughs an astonished laugh. Iris? The tubesock slips off his cast and bares his boyish toes. A branch above him snaps.

"Yes," Iris says. "Let's." Her foot slips; her hands slam down behind her. A foot catches on the overhang and her shoe flips off. She clammers back, shoeless. "My god," she says. "Whoa. Okay, it's okay. I can get down."

"Yes," says the boy, inaudibly. "Do." The wind picks up, whaps his head. He is aware of his heart kicking itself to death inside his chest. Yes, he loves her, he knows it—the stuff of her, Iris, organs nestled nicely among other organs, in water. He loves she bounces.

Then, above their heads, a window breaks.

Here is the wide-angle lens: House keepers. A man and woman. A new love, maybe not even love at all. A resident's room. They've done this before. They do this when they can. The man plugs in a small portable radio, a love song comes on. They avoid the bed, a stranger's. A new love. Not even love at all. The woman's head tips back. Hands, face, torso, breasts. The window shatters in its frame and the woman—astonished—crashes through.

Her world has suddenly tipped. Again; hands, face, torso, breasts. But the man catches her, clutches her hips, pulls her back. Shards of glass pepper the leaves. She is shaking, her face white. Was he pushing her? He was and was not. He didn't mean to. It's obvious he didn't mean to. He kisses her cheeks, arms, checks her face for cuts.

Last shot: curly red hair, a helmet, a man's fingers moving fast and furious like the wings of the tiniest birds.

Below, invisible, a boy flees into the American night. He'll come back, he thinks. He likes this. He considers himself lucky. This is lucky life.

It's every boy's dream, isn't it, to be landed on from a great height? A torso, airborne, spinning, a bit of mid-air acrobatics, breasts floating as though submerged in water—nothing of the plastic, pointy nipples of store-front mannequins. No, a real person—lovely, bewildered, free, released from gravity's prison. She is yours to catch. The second before collision, embrace her. Do it. But beware: her forehead, her elbow, her fist—she will crush your heart with whatever strikes you first.

What Is Splendid

I've no intention to dream the drab middle-class dreams of an Austrian crank with a shabby umbrella.
—Vladimir Nabokov

Prologue

It is damp out. A warm wind blows across my bed. It is the best of my middle years. I am a drab middle-class Austrian, a crank. I am a twitchy dreamer, a night-sweater. I wake, frequently, elsewhere: the bathroom, the den, at the base of the stairs. Often I have more or less dressed myself, lacking only, say, a stocking or a waistcoat. On at least one occasion I find myself in the act of wedging my feet into a pair of newly cobbled shoes. I admit, I delight in it. All of it, in fact, pleases me to no end.

I drink tea with an almost dainty precision.

I hold grudges. Handmaids, shopgirls, au pairs—I resent them all.

Better, more sophisticated women drift in and out of my office, my rooms, my bedchamber, and I loosen the laces, sometimes I *undo* the laces of their bodices and together we breathe the gulping, exhilarated breaths of the asthmatic, our clothes—coarse, itchy, woolen—strewn across the floor.

In the spring the streets smell of bloom and coffee and rot. Fishmongers harangue each other, angered, as far as I can tell, by the price of halibut, sword fish, poorly salted salmon.

It is cold at night, dreadful. The air fills with lilies.

Seized by a sudden urge, I drive a horse-drawn carriage at high speed to an inn in Dusseldorf where I descend, draw pistols, and shoot my mother dead, repeatedly. Minutes

later she—my mother, her hair in ribbons or rollers—sashays unscathed across the dining room floor wearing the breeziest of her summer dresses, picks a plum or two from the bowl in the kitchen, and offers it to me, saying, "Plum?" She smiles. She ticks off a list of my faults: frailty, squeamishness, pallor, my unmerited conviction that greatness is my due or, that failing, notoriety is. She mocks my gender, too, calling men catamites. All of us. In our souls of souls.

Is she so wrong? For instance, my butler, who is also my maid, acquiesces to soap my back in a bath sudsy enough to conceal the frailty of my limbs, my scoliosis. But this is business, and briskly done: I, clutching my knees, cold, shaking; he, behind me, wearing gloves, scrubbing me with a bristle brush attached to a slim ivory handle.

I wear overcoats, in summer, as weather permits. I wear a chapeau á huit reflets.

If I go out of an evening, I fashion a waxed moustache.

Bloom

Petunias, azaleas, chrysanthemums, and phlox line the window sills of the wealthier neighborhoods.

Imperial moths mate against walls.

The woman across the street suns herself on her balcony to the scorn and amusement of the visitors gathered in my parlor, sipping tea. Her face, we all agree, lacks a capacity for pleasure, howsoever it is Italian. What do we mean? We mean the throes of passion are unimaginable on her countenance. Actually, Herr Lutt says *countenance* and as he does, we turn our backs to him. I speak with praise of her cheekbone—which is also, rather impossibly, I point out, her cheek bone. Underneath, I say, is *bone*. The same could be said of her swan's neck. Bone and, more to the point, bone.

Secretly, I suffer gout. The throbbing is excruciating, my limp covert.

While I convalesce, I study insects, dipping briefly into Darwinian Debate, then deeper, into Darwinian Sublime. Soon stacks of entomological books flank my bed, dog-eared and splayed. Out of these books, I tally conflicting evidence. Moths, I learn, eat meat. While the female satyrid mates with the unwilling male by backing into him, ostensibly when he least expects it (while, say, he munches a leaf). The female—in other words—instigates.

I develop red blotchy spots on my shoulders and hips and eyelids.

I dread the nighttime.

The polish of my bedchamber floor—a flawless Scandinavian oak—clouds over. My butler talks of wax build-up and carelessness, for which he blames his own ineptitude—more exactly, his failing eyesight, his consequent blind spots. Good night, sir, he often says. Sleep well. End of a long day.

Do not be alarmed, he also says, nothing is sordid. Everything, rather, is delicious.

But I am alarmed. The days are paltry things, discarding themselves. At night, my dreams are full of insects and bones and rain.

Die, murmurs my butler, stooping over. Die, die, die. He has remarkably thin wrists, my butler, my manservant, my friend. Each time he drops a plate, or a saucer, I am struck anew by his *breakable* wrists as he reaches for the pieces.

Ghastly Haste

For weeks, minor aristocrats telegraph other minor aristocrats. Shifts in political alliance require celebration. The clergy disapproves. Nevertheless, new dances are learned, quadrilles, if I remember. My quarters are chosen for a night's clandestine entertainment. I order champagne and the finest liqueurs. A new suit is sent. A great truckload of cigarillos

arrives. On the night of the party, my butler dislocates a disc in his lower lumbar lifting a box of red-label Puerto Rican cigarillos onto an upper shelf. His knee, its patella, the box, all hit the parlor floor at once, amidst balloons, streamers, crêpe paper. I send for a doctor who sends for ice. He leaves tablets. Then he leaves.

I cannot console my butler. I cannot stroke his pale forehead as he would for me. Instead, we wait nervously together, what seems hours.

Are you in pain? I ask.

No.

Do you need assistance?

No, he says. I am fine.

So we wait. Esmé Khondji enters first, fat and flushed, followed by Clive Rhamesdale, a sickle-cell anemic, arm and arm with Liva Orange, the American daguerrotypist. Carlos Rebolledo-Rebolledo, an embezzler, wears a white silk scarf, his assistant, Raul Woo, a thin beard. The irascible virgin, Abigail Elio, arrives drunk, with a sailor who, upon inspection, proves surprisingly tattooless—just the requisite snake encircling a pirate's dagger. Is that enough? Orange asks, tapping the sailor's tattoo. Shouldn't there be something, well, more extravagant? In other words—better? The good host, I insert myself: Has either of you noticed the winds, so warm, so damp? They shake their heads no. I pour drinks. A roomful of eyes turn to the door. . . . A figure, a woman, perfumed, we all know her. As my butler takes her cloak, Vivian Ardlombok (Mademoiselle Condor's lover) shocks and, in a way, blesses us with a sleeveless satin gown, her long pale arms wrapped teasingly around my butler's neck.

Then Mademoiselle Condor bursts through the door, sopping wet. She clutches her chest, gasps, lights a cigarillo. A man, in an overcoat, she says, in a doorway, in plain view, in revolt against all God's laws, has— What sort of overcoat? Woo asks. I don't know, she says,

drab, I suppose.

At that moment, exactly then, I begin to fear the inexpressible—*dreamable*, yes, *dreamable!*—moistness of a woman's tongue, and its infinite uses.

(It is Mademoiselle Condor who later invents, if not the thing, at least the idea of 'pasties,'—defined, formally, as *the small round coverings for a woman's nipples worn especially by a stripteaser*. Stripteasing, though, is not yet fashionable. What Mademoiselle Condor has in mind, in any event, is greater concealment, an *undermost* undergarment— not, it is safe to say, something with propellers.)

The evening wears on. It was, Mademoiselle Condor tells us, *gargantuan*. Orange, giggling, spills her drink. A sculptor, unknown, mustachioed, captures us all for the nonce in what we later discover to be pure silliness. Miss Orange, he says, please, allow. Visions enrapture me. He touches her elbow. Take, he says, H.G. Wells, the Londoner, and meld him, say, with the Italian Vivaldi. He makes grotesque melding gestures. And then throw it all at the canvas! he says. *Floosh!* (A big throwing gesture.) *Floosh!* Rhamesdale and Orange exchange glances. Esmé Khondji blushes demurely, stepping away. Only Mlle. Condor exhales with the proper contempt. Canvas! she says. You sculpt!

There is a knock. A soft knock. A rap. I open the door. There my father stands, on the stoop, declining all invitations to enter, to join us, to step in out of the rain. I take his hat. Gently. The door opens wide, then wider. His drab macintosh is bespattered in blood! His? Mine? Whose? Raul Woo steps aside. My father shakes his fist, or his fist shakes. He enters, tapping his timepiece.

Father, I say, humbled.

Allow me to rest, son, he says. It's the end of a long day.

He dies, my father—the same year—of an aneurism, ambition, and moral rectitude. He

is, in photographs, an unhandsome man, beleaguered and jowly. His hands often shake, though not, of course, in photographs. He dies on a Sunday on a passenger ship crossing the Baltic sea, grinning like an orangutan, his heart in a terrible knot.

Rapid Illness, Rapid Decline

A white sore develops at the back of my throat which, God save us, doesn't last.

Thereafter, I prod all my parts, find lumps, and squishy zones. I lose teeth. At some point, I conclude that I am comprised of tender spots—tell me, who is not?

Recovery

To celebrate the solstice, a large group of us gather at a perfumery and speak of violets, orchids, lilacs. As I mention the powder of the satyrid's wings, a woman in a nearby group chokes violently on a lozenge. Her lips purple. I struggle to reach her, and do, just as her escort, a viscount, or a lesser marquis, claps her a solid blow between her shoulder blades, dislodging the lozenge. Gasping, she misunderstands, and thanks me, *me*—as I hold her wet, limp hand. Later, in my parlor, I try to recreate her gratitude, her labored dry-lipped grin at the instant before she redirects it; I compare her jitteriness to that of the dickcissel, a common migratory black-throated finch (*Spiza americana*) of the central United States, with red-tipped wings—she is a finch, a songbird, I insist.

A finch? someone asks.

A songbird, I say.

That we desiccate instead of deliquesce, after death, unlike, say, the plum, haunts me. Evidence surrounds us. The slightest thing, an insect carcass on a window sill, derails me. Dry, brittle material. One cannot re-animate it. On the dining room table I configure and re-

configure stacks of melons, mangos, apricots, plantains, and pears, until they topple. To speak of a plum's death—as if such a thing occurs!—is inexcusable, I realize, in light of all death. Forgive me.

The sun shines. A bird—there!—on a wet black branch, biting itself.

Museum of Love

As the years pass I swear off declarative statements and for a time I am unable to speak.

Yet how I love the arias! How I love the delicacy of a diminuendo! The impermanence of it all astounds me! The speed, in other words, with which each moment ends. Each note, lo or la, perfect, and then gone, forever gone.

Yes, but the noise of the streets continues to rise, intending, in its own musical-mathematical way, *something*, I am certain.

There is tapping, rattle, chatter. Bone.

In the National Gallery a girl, sixteen, maybe seventeen, speaks at length of what she calls the Beauty of the Stroke. I counter with the Beauty of the Stayed Hand. She invokes the Necessity of the Nudge. I the Droop of Age. She Touching. I Wanting to Touch. She topples me with a kiss, hot, wet, close to my ear. (Numbness, says Mademoiselle Condor, is the true symptom of being Viennese.) Numb, I lead the girl to a painting in the Gallery's west wing entitled *Nude with Loaves*, a masterpiece. It depicts in heavy brushstrokes a woman, enormous and nude, reclining and half-smirking, surrounded by very attractive loaves of unleavened bread. The woman's pink belly ripples like the ripples in the loaves of bread. She reclines. Her mood is inscrutable. A wince? The first twist of a smile? One hand is on her forehead, the other her hip. She is beautiful, nude, among loaves. This painting, I happen to know, will be

slashed by a madman's razor just before I move with my butler and his sister to Prague.

Ah! I might say. Or *Ah-ha!* Or *Don't!* For God's sake. To such a madman.

In Prague, str. Moulíkova 4. Our new lodgings smell of dried fruit and soot.

Ecstasy

Let me linger again at the National Gallery. Let the afternoon drag itself on. Let only clouds darken it. The rooms are high-ceilinged and lit. I am not afraid, there, as I will be after. I am calm. The girl does not, as I remember, introduce herself. Nor does she blush, so uninhibited, so eager, so matter-of-fact is she. If I had the skill, if I had a younger man's steadier hand, I could reproduce her visage for you in charcoal or ink. Her eyebrows, I remember, are thin and haughtily arched, her front teeth overlap.

Which would you prefer, she questions me, infinite time or infinite possibility?

(Infinite Mnemosyne? Infinite memorabilia?) I would prefer, I tell her, bliss.

Bliss? she says.

I invite her home. Our walk—six city blocks, all comfortably downhill—evades me. Her hair smells of the sun, I remember. That is all. In my parlor, alone, we share several expensive wine-based chocolates—this I can swear to—and then the girl takes my hand, kisses me, and initiates an evening of unheard-of sexual practices involving an umbrella, my shabby umbrella, hung in the closet, behind the door, on a hook, at the base of the stairs.

Hold this, she instructs. Lift your knee. Yes. Yes, like this! You like this? Yes, of course. Yes, oh, yes. Yes.

End

I stoop. I dodder. I hunch. I restrict my walks to certain well-cobbled pedestrian streets where I am still at the mercy of the faces that I meet. I encounter my butler, tapping his stick, stone-blind and glaucous-eyed. Sir, he says, step softly, sir. I see my father alone, patting his pockets, looking nervously about himself as if for explanations to arise. I see my mother eating plums. I see the multitudes trundling past, old and young alike, and they, in turn, see through me, an old man, suffering his fits of nostalgia. I turn corners, street to street, city to city. In a dim-lit square in Berlin I meet my old acquaintance, Raul Woo, who accosts me in the doorway of an exotic spice shop. His face is puckered with age. What has become of us? I ask. Poseur, he says, viciously, cripple. I try to back away. He pursues me. On the street, he cuffs my cheek and takes my traveling wallet—and with it, all the photographs I own.

Save one. It's of a girl I've never met, a stranger, a servant, happy, tossing her head back, laughing—sans pain, sans future, sans past, sans negligence, sans regret. She wears an apron, a chef's outfit. What has she to laugh at? Who takes this photograph? I wish I knew. I wish I were laughing too, alive, there, with her—still plenty of day left, hours still to go, the night itself, the day after, my life, a chance still yet to charm, and dark, dark rows of chives still waiting to be chopped.

Spectacle Gets Its Day In the Sun

Three school girls, Celeste, Paulette, and Marie, rush out and jump rope, in profile. All we need of them is profile, two dimensions, this single gesture for 45 seconds or so. Celeste, the more buxom of the group, gets the higher and, consequently, loftier jumps.

We light the applause sign. We applaud. They scamper off.

After a hush, albeit our *own* hush, the newlyweds step out, both still smirky and dank from the wedding bed's vigorous bland athleticism. Both, too, have souls, not just genitals—else how could they have consummated whole-heartedly?—but the groom, at least, is remarkable most, we are somewhat sorry to say it, for his patent leather shoes. Their exteriors. So shiny! So . . . what? Slippery?

A blue breeze blows through but notice, please, that it is not a blue setting, not a blue backdrop, as we have no need for those. We have no future, as such spectacle would suggest. Nor do we want one. Any possible future would disapprove of us, or, worse, unhinge us. *Not*, in any event, arouse us—which is what we're here for.

A woman in a sleeveless gown strolls past. From somewhere below there is a knock, a hollow, echoless knock. Then Guy De Rouge's head pops up from an until-now-undetected (at least by us) trap door. He has just one eye, but it's a dazzling bicycle wheel eye, with blue, hazel, with amber spokes, so to speak. De Rouge's sidekick, Karl Munt, gooses Klarissa Gleiss-Gander, the woman in the gown; her legs, rather, *leg*, so lithe and a-glisten, how could he hold back? She says *ooh* though her eyes tell us *ahh*, and exits stage left, with a hop, her red

stiletto (what poor taste! A red *stiletto*) high heel shoe left behind—an entity in itself worth examination, in particular, a dime-sized dimple on the shoe's toe which suggests a poke of nostalgia, the sort of poke we might savor, alone, later. (We may have invented Ms. Gleiss-Gander in order that she lose that shoe—but why not?)

The groom's shoes clatter to the stage. Then his pants. Followed by a buzzing hygienic-looking instrument.

Embarrassed, the janitor, a cough drop sucker, quickly clears the stage with his push broom.

Kay Ho storms the stage and gestures skyward, *meaningfully*, into the track lighting, and unfurls an umbrella, *convulsively*, thrashing about with it until a masked saboteur stabs him—first calling him a draft-dodger—straight through with one of those long elegantly curved sabers. Kay Ho's lungs make a crinkly paper bag sound.

This death marks a new sequence.

We sit back, sip sodas.

A tangle of bedclothes descends like a bedraggled bodiless angel from the rafters and flops with some significance over the flood lights, dims the stage, the mood, prepares us for *something*.

Now a blurry ever-so-fleeting procession is born, each member speaks its creed, meager creeds, monosyllabic creeds in most cases, and gets snuffed out center stage, into a pile, also in profile.

A boy, tanned, tow-headed, a wisecracker—*Jack!*

An old man, with a cane, the cane has a duck's head, hoarsely—*Hack!*

An half-man, an ape, ill-figured—*Saw!*

A teenage girl, nubile, in a checkered shirt, nothing else, with a sucker—she sucks
it!—Youth's Miss Heartbreak 1968—*Reynolds!*

Except, this is not enough for us. We want more.

Another blue breeze blows through. This time, however, the Blue Breeze Machine, or
at least its nozzle, is visible.

Crustaceans, vertebrates, cephalopods scuttle past, in fact, circle—which is hard to get
cephalopods, in particular, to do— Margo Mae West, center stage, as she cuckolds a distant ill-
formed Arlo Doug West, who is just a rumor to us now, with the zoo-keeper, the young
saxophonist, the Gooch, who knows who else!, and we think we could watch her do this
forever until suddenly, without warning, we want something else.

Gertrude Stein: J'ai Perdu . . .

Bangkok

A black wet dock. Plus pink. A loftiness what is loftiness establishes itself pinker and sooner than it erects itself. A certain lower-case lover. Excuses recur and foster impediments. And rancor though it is always glossy allows for a glossier gilded rancor lovelier more gossamer than the finest fanciest meat. A ballroom of espionage and dancers and big. If resemblance begot this, if it forgot, if it came back to lambast the precocious, those with a lisp, those who cloy, those who did, did, did, didn't, and did. Fine. Then forfeit it. And suck, excuse me, duck.

The End of Love

What amuses might not amuse the astonisher, the bread-basketeer, the queer. Bangkok and a big cock. Such a rooster is not a dead thing, not a boondoggler, and if it is, it is doubtful, if it is a lollygagger this is not needed or diagramed or in need of a diagrammer. It is stern. A piano. Diagram it.

Its is a poor a sad size, a lack, an oceanliner in a hairdo tossed back with Hart Crane and his twenty-nine tender sandwiches unwrapped, before his jump, his hop, nothing quite flat or dun or—Where is Hart Crane's blue hat Mademoiselle Maggie what is bobbing astray amid foam and famish and rub her faster. It makes butter tastier. A large hop. From a box. A debutante lags in no feelable way, in no way unlike a felt robe, in instances such as this that rule

out circumstance, the bone, like this this and this, while the upswell the urge to change to pop to coalesce to disengage a halter top lightly smoothly nightly a simpler bonier nighttime hop on pop. Plead with her. Forgive

To offer a better means to the cold bobbing sandwicher. The John Berryman of impact prose, the air compressor. Suppose there is a keenly felt oration naughtier than this, suppose there is. Suppose there is a spilling, an overall ignition of the spill the spiller with all the John Berrymans suspended midair. Softness is in snow. Softness is in the average cougher. In dropsy the spice changes its moniker. A thump is cause to write what's pretty.

The End of Lust

An orchestra is a peculiar need.

As an event, noxious. As a weed a mirror in it.

At night, under the eaves, cajole a cigarillo smoker. This is singularly not enough. Is not. No. An Irish beard. A wife. Some bad butcher paper. No. Not. But is more. This.

An accomplice is neither nasty nor an imitation of a finer less mercurial fidelity nor long-lasting. An accomplice could last ten minutes. An accomplice could resemble generally albeit unconvincingly an ill-satisfied daughter, his or hers. Someone to please. To dictate to in the interest of the drowning, the on-fire, those falling from heights no less high than the Washington Bridge of someone else's Great Barrier Reef. Sleep. An accomplice is a conjurer's trick. A hoax. A center piece of a somewhat grander more central scale. A tasty fish.

The Diagnosis

There is the limp and there are those at a loss what is loss for a capital retraction, either abstract or concrete. The limp of this world lose it at the first oh. There is a microphone.

There is embellishment; behind it, the embellisher. There is a tight pair, a poker, *pantalones cortos*, his or hers. This little scene offers savors loathes nothing but the carbuncular, the nifty.

A nice slice. A novice defiler.

This is a grinder. This is the chocolate.

There is always a lover, outside reach, raw, insouciant. The rare disappearance of the last Consequencer.

Point Counterpoint

An old man stepped out of the dressing-room, an old man with bloated long-nailed hands both of which he used to scratch vigorously at his windpipe with.

Does it itch, badly? asked the saleswoman in a thin papery voice, while she pinched and tugged, slyly, though absent-mindedly, at her panties through her Bouclé knit skirt. (*Skirt: Italian wool; fitted, slim, shaped.*)

My windpipe, said the old man, has itched off and on since yesterday morning when my wife cut us each a nice wedge of muskmelon. Though I suppose you meant my sweater (*sweater: grey interlocked lambswool, v-neck collar*) which I've owned and worn, without complaint, since 1978. You ought, miss, to ask me about my pants. (*His pants: red, gabardine, snug. His poker: outlined, sideways, smallish.*)

Has melon always made your throat itch?

It makes it swell. He paused. Shirley, he said. The saleswoman's nametag says Shirley Glass-Manager-Sales. Another longer pause in which the old man developing a faraway wistful expression and the saleswoman smooths her nondescript sweater.

I eat mine, generally, with a fork, said the old man.

Your melon?

Yes.

Does your wife?

No. She picks hers up and bites it if you know what I mean.

That said, the old man exerted himself in unwrapping, and inserting into his mouth, a sweet-scented Echinacea lozenge. He sucked it and smiled, musingly, as if to ask: Where has it

all gone? More pressingly, where did the lozenge come from? If not his pants? These aren't his pants! Look at his windpipe: rash red.

How old are you—if you don't mind me asking? said the saleswoman.

Let's see, by 1978 . . . I was already quite old.

Behind the old man, below waist level, a small Buffalo Bill boy squeezed out through a cracked-open dressing-room door and bumped his forehead into the saleswoman's soft stockinged thigh, a soundless bump, followed by a gentle rustle in the saleswoman's skirts like the visit of a warm Sou'wester breeze to an enrobed and enraptured poet, verses at his tongue's tip.

It's hot, said the boy. Hotter than hot.

Glass, eh? the old man said to Shirley Glass. That wouldn't be the Glasses of Hoboken? Or the Weehawken Glasses?

No, said the saleswoman. Neither. How do you like the fit?

Tight. Bad. Tight on the bum. Perth Amboy Glasses?

Squish-squash, said the boy. O-my-dear squish-squash.

The odds, mister, said the saleswoman, of your guessing even my most minor heritage, my mother's maiden name, for instance, or my hometown—which isn't even *in* New Jersey—is smaller than . . . She faltered, bogged down in the murkiness of analogies; a surprise sob caught, then swallowed.

What I mean to say, continued the saleswoman, after a sigh, her arms now akimbo, is: any ulterior motive in an head, such as yours, an unrealized urge, say, to re-awaken after long cold years some half-forgotten twinge—akin to the primordial squish-squash this boy just

mentioned's (*gestures*) . . . I mean, whatever you're feeling—an urge to taste, to savor something irreversibly sweet, something intangible—is a thing I cannot help you with. I am here, against my will, to sell pants.

Whereupon the boy, gestured-at, ran with exaggerated windmill motion to the hall's end, past numbers, odd numbers, of dressing-rooms, and smacked his sticky hands to the full-size mirror, with mirth, pushed off, stumbled back, and flung open dressing-room nine's door with a flourish. Wherein stood a bent-over, topless, small-bosomed, middle-aged woman, tying and admiring a shoe. (*Her bubs, to the boy: unprecedented. Her bubs, to the old man: bra-d, saggy, heaven-sent. Shoe: shiny, stacked heel; oxford.*)

The boy stood still, gripped by sudden infinite sadness, shame, boyish ineptitude.

The middle-aged woman reared up, monstrous. (*Her intent: fight.*) She frowned, stepped forward, and cuffed the boy's cheek with her pale hand; the boy's head conked the wall. (*The conk: flat, wooden, damp.*) (*Her fist: formidable.*)

Miss, said the old man, please—

Mr. Umbrage

A three-legged race takes place, its participants wearing red, yellow, and blue paper hats.

After a while there is an ordinary knock on the door. An adolescent girl hops up from the floor, spansks dust off her hands and , as the door opens, steps aside. Mr. Umbrage steps in. He and the adolescent girl share a lengthy who-knows-who smirk until Mr. Umbrage breaks it to cross the room, briskly, avoiding the return lap of the three-legged racers, and smacks himself face first into the closed sliding screen door. He nose dimples the screen.

Up from a sunken chaise longue pops Mrs. Ambush, pale, slim, dressed in a peach-colored velour sweat suit, smoking a cigarette. She is alarmed by the first waft of Mr. Umbrage's cologne, which immediately recalls for her—and this in part explains why the romance is floundering—her high school saxophone instructor, who did nothing lewd or illicit, but whose shabby suits bore the scent of one thousand years of cologne and whose breath stank of loneliness and Pall Mall cigarettes. It's a scent that precedes Mr. Umbrage, or, rather, in Mrs. Ambush's words, as she hands Linny Baker a popsicle, *premeditates* him—though that's not quite what she means—an instant before he ever enters a room, or, in this instant, pokes his nose into a screen.

“Chloe!” says Mr. Umbrage, gayly, a little too gayly, through the screen.

“Linny, honey, take this popsicle and eat it or else give it to Stevie Hendrix who asked for it first. Okay? Come in, Henry,” says Mrs. Ambush, astride her chair.

The mutual and endearing peculiarity of their last names (despite their respective name-sharing spouses) —plus the fact that, in certain small towns, the pickings are slim—led them to, as Mrs. Ambush puts it, give it a whirl. Now, sadly, she thinks they might be whirled-out.

Mr. Umbrage whisks open the screen door.

The door slides smoothly, hits the end of its track, springs briskly back, and bangs Mr. Umbrage's knee, his bad knee, right in its weak spot. He whistles and shuts his eyes to an all-too-lucid image of his mother-in-law, his estranged mother-in-law?, what was she exactly?, chopping celery, for a soup, and experiences a sudden unprepared-for grief. Images of his mother-in-law haunt him. And this one has the effect of dissembling his rehearsed opening anecdote, designed to amuse, to pave the way for heavier matters, which would have gone along the lines of: *Hello, Lenny Baker. You know, Chloe, the other day the neighbor girl, Lois, who lives across the courtyard, called me over—like I said, the other day—she's eight, or eleven; she's a pudgy little girl with a sort of old woman's face so I can't tell how old she is, and that's compounded by her being named Lois, you know, Lois, who is always an eighty-year-old school marm with a cane and a mean cat; all the same, she called me over, Lois did, while I was checking my mail to show me this humongous—she was saying—spider that was trapped in her bathtub. So I walk over to have a look and there it is, this big reddish spider kind of scrambling a few inches up the bathtub and then skidding right back down and it's acting really pissed off about it and pretty soon I know why because out of nowhere Lois has this stick that I hadn't noticed before and she's poking at the spider with it, kind of jabbing him in the ass, to which I guess I didn't have enough response, I wasn't excited enough, I was starting to feel a little weird being alone with old Lois in her bathroom, because as some kind*

of Grand Finale, Lois bends over and whaps flat the little pissed off spider against the side of the tub with the palm of her—all of which would have been a lie, a fiction, drummed up to amuse, which the vision of his mother-in-law chopping celery somehow destroyed Mr. Umbrage's fanciful mood for. What he says instead is true, albeit fancifully introduced, and as a consequence it lacks symbolic transparency: in other words, Mr. Umbrage cannot, with the truth, represent himself as a spider being mercilessly squashed by a fat girl's hand. Chloe, he says, Listen. Rememeber those eel skin boots? Gone. That bolo tie you gave me? Gone. Stolen out of the back seat. When? Last week, I think, or something. One minute, everything's fine and dandy, next thing you know . . . I might have seen someone scampering off into the lilac bushes, I happened to be standing on my front porch, maybe I should have run after, tried to catch the thief, but I wasn't exactly standing, I was more like hopping, see, because my pants were half on, because my wife just told me she had a pretty good idea of what was going on, Chloe, that she knew in fact exactly what was going on, that she could smell it on me, and when she said 'it,' she meant you. . . . Mr. Umbrage stops. He bites nervously at his mustache. Let's use Mrs. Ambush's words: the thin, blonde caterpillar on his upper lip. Well, Mr. Umbrage says, what are we going to do? Where's Mr. Ambush at?

The Collector of Ghosts

The boy had a neighbor whose American flag flapped and shook. Where the boy grew up—on the Palouse—there was nothing to hinder a windstorm. Winds blew nightly past. The lone willow tree, planted alongside a ditch outside his window, rose and fell like a tremendous octopus. And the neighbor's flag flapped. The same neighbor collected row upon row of crashed cars in a fenced gravel lot behind his house. He was an old guy, the Collector—heavy, asthmatic, stooped—with a face like a walnut, who reveled in the gory details: bloody brake pedal, bloody bumper, bloody dash. The Collector would stomp around with the boy and point. Dark brown stain: blood or mud? Here's an axle split in half. Here's a windshield shattered by a driver's head, but miraculously intact. Here's a Plymouth Fury III, crashed in Nebraska, how'd it get here? The car crash, according to the old man, was an American art. The voice of metal on metal (he said) was a male American voice. Lincolns, Fords, Cadillac Seviles—luxury death machines. 45,000 a year dead. Propel people at each other seventy, eighty miles per hour. . . . What do you expect? A crash? said the boy. That's right, the Collector said, that's America. Get it?

The boy didn't. He thought instead, as boys do, of red-headed girls with their twiggy legs entangled, petting, cupping, writhing. Young red-headed lesbians kissed each other brightly in his head. Tongues and fingers and necks.

This way, said the Collector. He had an ancient-looking Nash Rambler he was particularly fond of. A steering wheel lay in its backseat. Once, a woman's severed head lay there, too, until (said the Collector) the paramedics arrived. De-cap-it-a-tion on impact, he

said. The end of a pretty face. More common, he said, than you'd think. What fascinated the boy indelibly, however, was that the Collector claimed he knew the woman whose head came off. She used to model dresses (so he said) for department stores downtown. They still did that in those days, live models. On Saturdays. Her name was Irene Minx and on Saturdays she stood perfectly still for hours in the Bon Marche window display. *She was a person, with a life, living it.* Irene, the Collector said, in a polka dot dress and a sun hat. The rest of her wasn't even *in* the Nash Rambler, it was elsewhere, in the other car, her car, the car that hit the Nash. Here's the angle of impact. I see, said the boy, not seeing, soaking instead in the garish light of this deadliest of collectors. Was she pretty? How pretty?

How pretty? How answer? How ask?

Like that, damage is irrevocable. The boy will wake up the rest of his life—thousands of times—alone in bed, a sudden sound, a knock, a slap, a distant flag unfurled in the night, snap.

Page 71 omitted in numbering

Funeralisms

—I guess I was one of his girls. There was a handful of us, most of us a lot younger, like daughters.

—I wanted to mention the time I went over to his house and he insisted on making me an enormous pastrami sandwich—*enormity*, he said, makes the sandwich.

—He knew five thousand people. Look at this place.

—I lived next door, but, I don't know, I was going through a tough time, my wife and I weren't getting along, I had this kid in jail—so I didn't meet him for a few months after he moved in, whatever that winter was, the winter everybody's pipes froze. But I was right next door, so I had no excuse not introducing myself. Finally, one day, he came over to borrow pretzels. There was college basketball on, he said, the Final Four I think it was, and he had a bag of potato chips on him. He figured we could trade.

—Yes. We weren't related, but all growing up we thought we were second cousins. It was hilarious to find out we weren't. "This is Cousin Flak," he'd say, after we finally figured it out, "he is nothing to me."

—He had a beautiful mouth, didn't he?

—That was, let's see, my fiftieth birthday—he would have been fifty-two, no, fifty-three. His big idea was to go out and buy ourselves a couple plots. "Joyce," he said, "plots and tombstones." So we went shopping. In the end, we both decided hillside, terraced—but on different slopes. It reminded me of getting tickets to the bullfights—sun, shade, half and

half, view, no view. Not a shabby idea if you think about it, a view. Better than the bottom of a bog, if you hope people will come by once in a while and stand around a bit. A view and some shade in the afternoon.

—You look around a bar and all you see are drunks and you think, well, there is nothing too clever in this, I'm not breaking new ground here.

—I met him in fifth grade—we kissed behind the jungle gym and our teacher Mrs. Jeffries caught us and spanked us both silly with whatever those sticks were called. It must have been Valentine's or St. Patrick's day. All grade school kissing took place on holidays. So he was getting spanked with one of those sticks—a switch—and just grinning. "Mrs. Jeffries," he said, "You don't have to do this. I'm barely noticing. I'm going to forget right after you're finished." It was my first kiss. I don't know if it was his. I hope it was.

—He was like an uncle. I don't have any real uncles.

—Usually in big groups, you know, parties. I liked how he smiled. He used to give these sudden big smiles. He had such terrible crooked teeth for smiling.

—The last time I saw him I lost my temper. "Get out," I told him. "Go." I told him he was always parading his women friends past me. Clare, Janet, Brin—that one with the accent, whatever her name was. I told him it was a nasty thing to do. "Go," I said. "Leave." "That's it?" he said. "That's it," I said. "Go. Get out of here." Of all the things I could have said, why that?

—You bet he'd kick a dead horse. "Hey, Jim, lend me your motorcycle." No, I'd tell him. "Come on, Jim. Lend it to me. I want to learn." *No*. For years he went on like this. But, like I said, he couldn't steer it, I doubt he could have straddled it, no chance at kick-

starting. So I never lent it to him, never gave him the keys. He was sick. What was I supposed to say? No. As far as I know he never rode a motorcycle.

—I married him in the summer of 1963 in my parents' back yard, when I didn't know any better. We were both so straight-forward, so solemn, standing there underneath all this crêpe paper with these little thingy-ma-bobbers dangling down—all of it suspended by this baling wire archway my little sister made, all lop-sided and out-of-kilter. I've got pictures here, somewhere, just a sec.

—I married him in 1987, in Vegas, in one hundred and seven degree heat.

—Sure, there were wedding night nerves. I remember that. But it was the wedding itself that did the number on him, all the relatives and friends, having to play host, uncles to shake hands with, grandparents, plus the hundreds of dollars worth of flowers and decorations and booze and catering and cake. It was just much too much. As a result, the first couple days of our honeymoon he was in such fierce gastro-intestinal, you know, distress, that there was no chance of consoling him.

—I golfed with him, he was fun to golf with. Teed off with his three iron, I remember that. We had some good jokes about that.

—The Parkinson's wasn't easy to watch, its advance. He told me his body started acting like someone else's. He couldn't trust himself, he said—like there were demons in him, I guess. He said it was like being some kind of life-size puppet for a puppeteer who—for reasons no one ever gets to know—hates you. Then his heart up and quits.

—You'd be better off asking Ruthie. She knew him better than I did. Everyone from her office used to go to this bar called the Interlude on Fridays. I went a couple times. To tell

you the truth, I sort of avoided him. He was one of those guys—I never knew if he was kidding or not.

—After my husband left me for another woman, a much younger woman, it turns out, he used to walk past my cubicle and say, "Irene, I've seen her. She's terrible. There's nothing to her. But you—you, Irene, you're statuesque." He probably said that fifty times, statuesque, and I loved him for it, because when he said it, he meant it—but look at me, of course he didn't really mean it, there is just no way he could of.

—He did little dances, twirlings, he called them. Did you ever see these? Like this. With one hand out like this. "Twirl with me, Janet," he'd say. "Come on, twirl." It'd be late. The office dark and locked up. And out he'd come—da-da-da. Hundreds of times. And I never did twirl with him. I just watched him do his own little solitary twirls.

—Yes. I found his body. We had a date to go to the movies. I thought his doorbell wasn't working, so I walked in.

—Man, oh, man. All I did was sell him a car, an old Cadillac beater with a cracked cylinder. You tell me. Who befriends his car salesman?

—It was my first kiss and I think my first spanking, I mean, public spanking.

—God. His hands would shake like motherfuckers. "Just give me a minute," he'd say, then he'd smile his strictly-for-you smile. "Let me just pull myself together here." Then he'd make his whole body shake like a jackhammer. He'd say something like, "There. Good. Back in business."

—We were boys together. He and I once broke into a neighbor's houseboat—I think we were eight—and I peed in the little houseboat-size refrigerator. It was his idea, my peeing

on the houseboat's food. So I did it. Don't ask me why. I was eight. Then, later, he stole my girlfriend in high school, though it's funny—I think I liked him more than I did that girlfriend, who I haven't talked to since, and who is also dead.

—He was a terrific kisser. Light. Nervous. He kissed like kissing was spooky if you did it right.

—Yeah. A prince. A jokester, right? Nothing too serious for him to laugh at.

—Are you kidding me. He looked great in a tuxedo. "My life," he once told me, "would be so much better if I always wore a tuxedo." Good point, right? I mean, whose life wouldn't?

—Our families met for Christmas every year. There was this drink he used to make on Christmas Eves, his ancestral drink, he said. Glüg. It had something like eight liquors in it, vodka, Triple Sec, burgundy, aquavit and I don't know what else—plus cinnamon sticks and orange rind and pecans floating around. He'd make it in this big pot, stirring it around, a dash of this, a dab of that. It tasted just awful, just the sourest, worst, bitterest thing you can imagine. Like drinking candied, I don't know, cranberry cake. He knew it, too. We all knew it. And we all drank it. "Cardamom," he said once. "Can you taste it? That's the trick. Therein lies the subtlety of it."

—When I left him, for Steve—that's Steve's over there, he's got his coat on—I moved to Orcas Island. From then on I was strictly the Orcas Adulteress. If Steve answered the phone, he'd say, "Yeah, hey, Steve—can I talk to the Orcas Adulteress a minute?"

—We played charades on our first date. I think it was my idea, and looking back, it was a terrible date. I had to enact the word *triangulate*.

—You bet. He took me to a Mel Tillis concert. No one else would.

—He had nicknames for us that I forget. I was the *Magistre* or something. It was the year after his first divorce, which was . . . what, 1982? He was into, as he put it, physical distraction. After a while, getting drunk was too obvious, and coke wasn't any good, he didn't like coke, though I kind of did, so we'd go out and eat the most preposterous foods, just the hottest foods alive. We ate Cajun. We ate five-star Thai till our eyes popped out. We ate all the salsas. Man, we had momentum going. We ate jalapeños like the two Mexican-most martyrs you've ever known. "Do you have any idea how many jalapeños we've eaten this week?" he'd ask, eating one—his face shiny wet. "You don't, do you? You have no idea. I don't either. Lord, lord, our poor intestines. I shudder to think."

—Toward the end, he said that a lot. "I shudder to think." A joke, right—like you said.

—He liked poets. Did you know that? If you asked him to, he'd quote you a little. He had this one about a slow dancer. *Three-second rule forever suspended . . . you danced with her, the best slow dancer.* Something like that. "Hey, Janet," he'd say, oh god. "Come twirling." That big false grin of his. "Hey, Janet," he'd say. "I'm scared of dying."

—Glüg? It's a Norwegian drink. Picture a whole roomful of Norwegians looking like him and drinking that bloody red drink.

—He was scared. Sure. He was scared. He was terrified. He was exhausted from being terrified.

—Oh dear god.

—I can say this. Of all the people I've ever known, no one has wanted to die less. No

one. I bet you a million dollars—you'll never find someone. Look everywhere. Scour the whole wicked whatever. I guarantee he's not out there.

The Inconsequence of John Berryman's Bone

Spleen! Or, perhaps not. It's a little off
Isn't it? I mean, isn't it? Maybe—
S'wounds! But that's worse. And fake. Our (his) innards
are of considerable concern. As
an example take the man's mouth. His teeth.
He'd like this. His bicuspid. And suspend
these, in mid-air, in Minneapolis—
periodontal ligament, linked to
jaw, skull, him. All hung from strings. And well-hung.
Because that's the way it is with poets.
There is an inadmissible delight
in the impending smack, the impact, the
rattle of the saint's teeth (*hee!*) on gravel.
(And the verbs involved—chomp, chew, chatter!) It
doesn't really add up to dick, does it?
O it doesn't really matter.

Epilogue

*Could you hand me . . . and, uh, could you hand me
And could you unhand me
And could you give me my jammies.*