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The Cauldron would like to thank the English Department of Kalamazoo College for supporting the magazine and encouraging student writers to submit their work. A special member of the department was especially indispensable to the production of The Cauldron and to her we are all deeply grateful: Diane Seuss has been the faculty advisor for The Cauldron for innumerable years, and she has led the magazine to greater standards of quality and design each year. This magazine is very much a product of Di’s energy and unique vision. As a staff, we are lucky to work alongside someone with such creative wisdom and intensity.

For so adeptly choosing three winners for our yearly Cauldron Divine Crow award, Cari Carpenter and Chris Matthews have earned our appreciation. They are our allies and creative friends.

To Lisa Darling in the Office of College Communications, we are pleased to have another outstanding magazine with your support and direction. Each year we look forward to working with you and your professional, talented team, Kristin Butler and Watson Dezin.

We also want to acknowledge the excellent student artists appearing in the magazine. First, to Liz Ketterer for her stunning photograph that graces the cover—what a beautiful, peaceful image you gave us. Thank you also to Kristin Alt, Megan Ender, and Adrienne Goloda for your art that appears throughout the magazine.

Finally, to the writers who took a personal risk and shared their writing with us in hopes of being published, thank you.
Visual artists call it negative space. For poets, it’s the empty page, the so-called blankness that presses in upon the words we manage to carve out of silence. Negation beckons; it haunts all writing, all art. Thus, we begin this year’s Cauldron with none other than “Sound.” “A voice,” writes Stephanie Vibbert, “is song.” Our writing community, and the larger community in which it is nestled, lost Stephanie Vibbert in mid-January as she returned from a peace march in Washington, D.C. As her poems began appearing on the walls of our classroom and community buildings the week after she left us, the power of her voice, of voice, became utterly apparent. The singer had left the stage; her song was everywhere—climbing the worn steps of the library, heading to dinner in Hicks, in the transgressive flames of the candles in chapel. “Power, This.” The second poem in the magazine, Ben Callam’s “Something Lost,” extends the theme. “If I only had another day with…/If only we could have known…/Things probably wouldn’t be any different,/but the thought is on fire.” Grief, regret, threaten to swallow us in negative space. But we press back, and out. A pencil to the page. A word. And. The. Thought. Fire.

And so our theme is Steph’s theme—”silence broken.” She reminds us, (with Emily Dickinson, one of her favorite poets—“this world is not conclusion/a species stands beyond—/invisible as Music—/But Positive, as Sound…”) that our efforts to break silence are, indeed, powerful—“searing spoken/silence broken/ tells each moment—/ till it lasts.” Steph’s poems, appearing on our empty walls overnight as if by magic, attest to that. Searing voices do last. We find ourselves singing her songs as we walk alone across the frozen quad. All that white space. And only ourselves, humming under our breath, pressing the frozen world back.

We dedicate this year’s Cauldron to Stephanie Vibbert. To silence broken. To the song that calls out to us from beyond the edge of the page.
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** Denotes Divine Crow Award Winner **

The Divine Crow Awards are given annually to three outstanding pieces in *The Cauldron*, regardless of genre, and are judged “blind.” This year’s judges were Cari Carpenter and Chris Matthews, Mellon Post-Doctoral Teaching Fellows in the Kalamazoo College English Department.
Power, This.
A voice is song:
I heard it leaping
loud and long—
and dancing just
   beyond the pen,
and wording threads of
   yarn and then

it cartwheeled
from the tangled past,
and froze a bolt of
lightning fast—

searing spoken

silence broken
tells each moment—

till it lasts.
Like a light that someone put out.
Like a piece that someone removed.
This place caves inward from absence,
and shortens your breath like stale air.

What once was familiar,
What once was expected,
Neither are still, and there was no way to know
until it was gone.

In the subconscious there are remnants.
In the back of my mind it’s still feasible.
But outside in the winter there is nothing,
except bare trees and ice.

It will be some time through some process.
And it will take a thousand hugs or more.
Because the sharp vigor of the morning
is only pleasant until you are cold.

If I only had another day with…
If only we could have known…
Things probably wouldn’t be any different,
but the thought is on fire.
I look at your picture
and notice your collarbone,
a barrier of solid bone
pushing up from your chest,
protecting your heart.

I read your poems
and pull on the two knobs
rolling forward from the bottom of your throat,
throbbing, aching to speak.

Your collarbone slides away
from your flesh
and its smooth whiteness
fans out like wings,
or like the curved sea,
raising up two crested waves to touch the sky.

I press my lips to this seashell
and hum my own song,
and the reverberations from your bone
hurt my mouth, make it buzz
with your depths and heights.

I feel my body vibrate,
resonate with this song,
this oceanic hymn to aviation,
and my world becomes round and whole,
but wider.

Your collarbone remains peeking
out of your shirt,
and your smile, slight but visible.
I touch the picture and I feel the bone pulse,
the protector and the speaker now one,
the bone and the heart.
Quiet, Gabriel.
Your tears are cooling the sun.
Your mother loves you like her gun.
You voice is beautiful, boy, like the vice
That grips my hand. Don’t be afraid
Of the lamp-light, son, it’ll disappear
In the morning.

Quiet, Gabriel.
Cockroaches stand guard. Their guns
Are pointed at your face. They’ll
Assassinate your dreams, dear boy.
They’ll cock their shells and fire
Upon you.

Quiet, Gabriel.
Hold on to their glances like images of your
Skin. You’ll hear the panting of coursing dogs,
And the shrieking of small rabbits. But
They won’t tear into your skin, son.
I’ll let them gnaw on my bones,
And drink the milk-blood from
My frozen lungs.

Quiet, Gabriel.
The song is in silence.
The poem is in-between every word.
I never worked for you, my little man.
I only wanted an occupation to blend
The tie around my wrists.

Quiet, Gabriel.
You’ll wake the porcelain in the sink.
Quiet, Gabriel.
Dream of the oceans underneath
Your bed. Your bath is filled with
Salt-water plastic ducks. Your mother
Has fixed your bed with wings.
   Did you climb into her arms son?
   Did you kiss her temple gently?
   Do you hear the records she plays while you sleep?
   Do you hear her reading in bed, next to me?

Quiet, Gabriel.
You have my keys.
Don’t ask what I dreamt of, baby boy.
Don’t ask what I did love, son.

Quiet, Gabriel—-are your covers too tight?
My only achievement
Was you.
Shh.
Listen.
Did you hear that?
Silence.
It’s the sound you hear in the instant after
A light bulb burns out, and the electrons scatter.
A champagne glass drops, hits the floor and shatters.
A tasteless joke is told in a crowded room.
A bride says I don’t to a waiting groom.
It’s the sound you hear that directly follows
The last bird in a flock of swallows,
A buzzer-beating three pointer by Cedric Ceballos,
The setting sun driven out of sight by Apollo.
Shh.
Listen.
Could you hear it just then?
Not yet you say?
It’s time to move on and dispense with the trivial,
It’s not something you would bring in for show and tell:
It’s the sound of a young girl alone in a motel
As she tries to make her baby vanish with a magic spell.
It’s the sound of violence behind closed doors
And the sound it makes when it’s ignored.
It’s towering buildings crumbling to the ground,
It’s thousands dying without making a sound.
It’s a sniper’s bullet from a silenced gun,
Because ending a life can’t be undone.
It’s watching the news from faraway lands
With the TV muted and your face in your hands.
It’s creeping closer, enveloping us like slime,
You’ll find it in Oklahoma City, or Columbine.
Still can’t hear it?
We’ll try one more time . . .
Shh.
Listen.
Can’t you feel that? Maybe it’s just me.
It’s the brief instant between a dream and reality.
The feeling in your chest of mounting apprehension,
A tightly wound spring waiting to be released from the tension.
It’s the never-ending struggle for power and wealth
That creeps up on the unsuspecting with infinite stealth.
It’s the thin line between love and hate,
Between hope and confusion, between church and state.
Yet somehow softly in the face of the violence,
If you listen close and don’t ask for guidance,
You can hear the sound of blooming violets,
That’s silence.
My little sister’ll be cool when she grows up, but I hope it’s the right kind of cool that isn’t close-minded about clothes and minds. I hope that she doesn’t drink too many contraband cocktails and smoke too much with Mary Jane’s lover from down the street. I hope that she does what I didn’t and finds some faith and have faith and be faithful to less than twenty guys. My little sister’ll be cool when she grows up, but I hope she doesn’t grow up in the backseat of a Buick that reeks of cheap wine. I hope that she finds someone to love besides the wrong kind of guy that beats up and demeans her because she deserves so much better. She doesn’t deserve my life, because she’s supposed to grow up cool.
You wouldn’t believe them if they were a watercolor, a sitcom. Young, younger, youngest; blonde, blonder, blondest. They’re the advertising photos you remove when you buy a picture frame. They’re the dolls you stack inside each other, one two three.

This is how I remember them, the only way I know how. This is how they exist to me, as ornaments on some mental mantelpiece. The past is shelved, arranged. Every now and then, it’s dusted. But Kaylee, Hillary, Elizabeth—I’ve let their blonde bobs go gray with dust.

Do they remember me? I was fifteen but they were younger. What would they remember? That I stayed with them while their mom was gone, after their dad was gone. If they don’t remember me, it’s because there are so many other things they’re struggling to remember. Maybe—and I have to admit this—it’s better that way.

Kaylee, Hillary, Elizabeth. Blurred together like one full name. It’s easier to say it when they’re blurred.

It’s summer and I’m sleeping and so I don’t hear the phone ring. I can only imagine, later, my mom, who cries at movie trailers, in the kitchen where she answers. She holds, perhaps, a cup of tea. What happens when she hears the news? Does she set it down? Spill it? I see her hand shaking, the cup tumbling in slow motion towards the tile.

She enters my room, gripping the cordless too tightly. How long does she stand there, watching me sleep? She opens the blinds. Light crawls all over me. I wake up and I’ve been dreaming, I think I’m still dreaming, so at first I don’t believe her. "Mrs. Mueller wants to know if you can baby-sit," she says, and then holds the phone up—an attempt at explanation. "Mr. Mueller’s dead."

Because I’m not dreaming, I sit up. My mom is right next to me. My room is the smallest room in the house. Though I could reach her just by extending an arm, her words leave hollow echoes, like she’s standing some huge distance away.

"What should I tell her?" The night before, my mom got teary-eyed during a soup commercial. This is different: her eyes are swollen and scared.

"Tell her yes," is all I think I say.

She stands there. Time passes and I try to determine the length. But I can’t determine it, even now. I can’t start here.

Distance.
It’s summer and suddenly my picture’s in the paper, then on the fridge, then on the Who’s News bulletin board in the lobby of the local Rec Center. I’m the celebrity babysitter of my subdivision, and it’s all thanks to Nicky Schuman and the renegade squirrel. The caption says "Hometown Hero," though all I did was throw one lousy rodent against a tree. I say this but no one listens; they just want to hear how one moment Nicky and the squirrel are making faces at each other, cocking heads and trading little click-click sounds, and the next its teeth are bared and it’s lunging at the boy, its guttural gymnastics drowned out by the screaming toddler. They ask, what made you think to grab the animal by the tail? Fear, I say, and instinct. They ask, what made you decide to hurl it against the maple? I say, lack of any other ideas, and it was squirming and scratching like crazy. Each time I describe it, I see it again, the way it clung to the trunk for a moment, nearly disappearing against the bark before collapsing in the dirt, a harmless, lifeless mass of fur. I had to stop Nicky from trying to play with it.

My account is short on details. The accompanying article isn’t, saying things like, "The creature foamed at the mouth, beady eyes lolling in its rat-like head." This is because Mr. Schuman is convinced the squirrel was rabid, and he’s a vet, so they have to listen to him. He thanks me, which is fine; he sends the guy to take my picture, and I’m flattered. He gets the Rec Center to hang it next to an ad for their Red Cross childcare course, and my whole body turns red whenever I walk by. I took the course just a month ago. Now I’m its honorary spokesman. What’s worse, you have to pass the picture to get to the pool, and my friends never miss the chance to point it out, make jokes. It’s not cool, then, to be a boy and a babysitter, if indeed it’s ever been. I start high school in the fall. I’m trying my best to keep my reputation untarnished. Suddenly there’s highly damaging counterevidence hanging in the most kid-frequented building in town.

What does this have to do with the girls? It’s prologue, the stuff that sets the scene, or else I’m only stalling because it’s easier to think about Nicky Schuman and the squirrel than Kaylee, Hillary, and Elizabeth Mueller. But what is a beginning but a transition from distance to intimacy? Schuman to Mueller. Squirrels to girls, right?

Besides: as beginnings go, Nicky Schuman is necessary, because however damning the incident is before my peers, it earns me the respect of the neighborhood parents, and, consequently, an embar-
rassing surplus of new babysitting jobs. The Muellers are one of these. Maybe they see the bulletin board while taking Kaylee to swim practice, or maybe they get the story from Mr. Schuman—Nicky and Elizabeth share playtime, I later learn. Whatever the source, when the calls start pouring in, the Mueller family’s is one of the first.

For a while my parents make me stay inside, perhaps not entirely convinced I don’t have rabies. They believe the newspaper more than my protests because the newspaper, they tell me, is objective, whereas I’m biased by wanting to go out with my friends. Three days pass and my mouth is foam-free, my eyes aren’t any beadier than usual. My mom decides I’m safe. "Call your friends, honey," she says, but they’re planning to egg the house of the neighborhood Cat Lady, so I get to work on the list of jobs instead.

On the machine, a message from a Mrs. Mueller. Three girls, eight, five, and three; moved here a few months ago; address one street over. Her and her husband are going to a movie Friday, am I free, could I babysit, would I like to meet the kids first?

I leave a message back: yes, yes, yes, how about tomorrow, three o’clock?

Followed by her message: great, thanks, we’ve got brown shutters and a peapod windsock.

It’s tomorrow and I’m standing on their porch, watching the windsock struggle with the breeze. It’s weighted down with five Velcro peas, each smiling and sporting a Magic Marker nametag. Jeff, says the first. Cathy, Kaylee, Hillary, Elizabeth. The Jeff pea has a mustache, the others have eyelashes and pink puckery lips. At this point I haven’t actually spoken to any of them, but when a man answers the door, I say right away, "Jeff?"

"Robert," he answers, like an exchange of secret passwords. When I nod and smile, he does too, and lets me pass. His handshake is royal, assuredly firm. His head is high, says breadwinner, sole male, and patriarch. What’s strange: of all the Muellers, he’s the one whose image is most vivid, though this was the only time the two of us would ever meet.

"High school?" he asks.

"Not yet—next year, though."

"So that makes you fifteen, sixteen?"

"Fifteen, yeah."

"Well, well. You want something to drink? We got juice, we got pop."

"No, thanks, I’m good."
"Beer?"
"What? No. No."
He laughs, pats me on the back, and winks. "Good answer—that was a test. Come on, the girls are this way."
I’ve passed the interrogation and we’re in the family room. The girls play Don’t Break the Ice, taking turns using the plastic hammer to dislodge the precariously balanced yellow cubes one at a time. On the muted TV, an animated fairy tale explodes into silent song and dance. "Someone’s here," says Mr. Mueller, and the girls look up. He puts one hand on my shoulder and points, slowly, for my benefit. "Kaylee, Hillary, Elizabeth. This is Robert, who’s going to be your babysitter."
When it comes to first impressions, the Red Cross childcare course says being overbearing is the worst mistake a childcare provider can make. The kids will see you as a threat, says the booklet, and you’ll distance them from your trust. I think about this and underplay a wave hello. Hillary, the five year-old, loses interest immediately, but the other two stare on, like I’m the platypus on a nature show. Kaylee, the eight year-old, squints. "You’re a boy."
"I’m a boy."
"That’s cool." She shrugs and offers me the hammer. "You wanna try?"
I sit on my knees and give a middle cube my best boy babysitter tap. The entire structure collapses on contact. Kaylee and Hillary giggle; Elizabeth, the three year-old, gives me a frown.
"I tried," I tell them. The giggles just get bigger but Elizabeth’s frown does, too.
There are footsteps on the stairs. The woman who flies in is Mrs. Mueller. "Robert! You’re here!" She turns up the volume on the movie and takes me by the arm. "I’m just going to borrow him for a minute," she says to the girls.
I follow her into the kitchen; Mr. Mueller follows me. It occurs to me how young they are—I wouldn’t expect them to have even one kid, much less three. Mrs. Mueller has her daughters’ blonde hair, though I later see it’s gray, too, depending on the light. Mr. Mueller’s stubble mustache bridges the gap between bachelorhood and fatherhood. They wear matching fitness club T-shirts. They hold hands and talk about me in the third person.
"He’s met the girls?" Mrs. Mueller asks.
"He’s met them."
"Great. Does he want anything to drink?"
"I offered, he said he’s fine." Mr. Mueller turns to me. "You sure you’re fine?"

I hold up a hand. "I’m fine."

"Great. Hi, Robert." Mrs. Mueller smiles and grabs a pitcher of juice from the fridge anyway. She unscrews the lid and immediately her husband’s there with four glasses, the plastic fast food giveaway kind. He holds them; she pours.

"Kaylee, she’s the oldest, is the easy one," she tells me. "She’s got her book, her Barbie, she’s set. And Hillary will do, well, whatever Hillary wants to do. Just keep an eye on her—make sure she’s, you know, playing safe."

"She usually does," adds her husband.

"Usually she does. It’s just the age she’s at, though. She’s in her own—uh…"

"She’s in her own world."

"Exactly." She gets out an ice cubetray and hands it to him; he twists it in his hands until the cubes let off a frozen crack. Together they scoop them out and plopthem into the drinks. "And then there’s Elizabeth."

"She’s the youngest," Mr. Mueller explains. "She hasn’t really had many babysitters before."

"She doesn’t like strangers, you know?"

"And she’s never had a, uh, had a boy one before either."

"We haven’t gone out much since the move."

"Actually none of them have."

"Things have been busy, and the kids…"

"But we’ve heard great things, Robert."

"Yes." Mrs. Mueller nods, hands me a cup to carry. "We’ve heard great things, Robert. We’re sure you’ll get along great."

"They seem like really cool kids," I say. "I’m sure they’ll be good."

"Oh, they will be." Mrs. Mueller’s face positively glows. She looks at her husband, who looks at me.

"And if they’re not," he says, "well, we’ve got probably every kid’s movie ever made. I can show you how to work the VCR."

The three of us carry the cups back into the family room. The fourth one, I realize, is for me. It’s fruit punch. It smells like Florida vacations and it’s as red as communion wine. It tastes like sugar water. I drink it down anyway. I don’t want to look out of place.

According to the Red Cross childcare course, the key to succeeding as a childcare provider is to make it clear from the start that they are the kids and you are the adult. I remember I had babysit-
ters who did this—Melanie who dragged me to the park where she coincidentally met her boyfriend; Dan who sent me to bed so he could watch the ball game and sip my parents’ wine. Adult things, they assured me. I hated them. My philosophy is, screw the Red Cross childcare course. I’m fifteen. I am a kid. I’m just taller and know how to dial 911.

The drinks served, the parents retreat, though I catch them peeking in on me every now and then to make sure everything’s okay. I like them for this. The movie is ending; music swells as all the characters who have been turned into animals are restored to their human forms.

There’s an empty chair but I sit on the floor instead. I face the girls. "If you had to be turned into any animal, what would it be?"
"A princess!" says Hillary.
She giggles, Kaylee giggles. That’s what my memory of this initial meeting has become: one constant giggle.
"That’s a good answer," I say.
Later—now—I think about this and realize that, really, it is.

It’s Friday and I’m ready to leave when the phone rings. My mom answers it and catches me as I’m heading out the door.

"It’s Mrs. Mueller," she tells me. She’s met the Muellers before, at a neighborhood grill-out, but she still calls them "Mr." and "Mrs." This is for my sake, I guess, like how she uses "Grandma" and "Grandpa" when she talks to me about her parents. She teaches junior high English but isn’t romantic about it; language, she believes, is largely a matter of avoiding confusion.

I take the phone and, as Mrs. Mueller speaks, I take off my jacket. Jeff’s not home yet, she tells me, she can’t reach him on his work phone and the movie’s starting in half an hour. Can I wait on standby? Yes? That’s great.

I wait and I watch television and she calls a half hour later, saying she’s sorry, Jeff’s still not home. By the way her voice keeps slipping into a higher register, I can tell she’s getting worried—or else I’m telling myself that now, reading into it because we all have foresight after the fact. She’s very polite, I remember, and very apologetic. She keeps saying she feels bad she’s kept me from going out with my friends. She says the girls had a good time with me and now she feels pressure to do voices when she reads them stories. She also says that, for the rest of the day, they insisted on pretending they were animals.
Before she hangs up, she promises she’ll get in touch with me when she and Jeff postpone their date. I put my jacket back on, call my friends, and pass the night with them egging the cars that enter the subdivision. We’re territorial predators staking our turf. We’re about to enter high school and we’re protesting adulthood. There’s dirty poetry in the way the eggs fly—miniature moons that crash and crumble. My aim is reluctant; it’s better than I’d like it to be. Eventually, when the cars are fewer and farther between, I volunteer to go home to get more ammo. My parents are still up watching TV. I contemplate slipping quietly away, but instead I put the poultry products back in the fridge and take a seat next to them on the couch.

My dad turns. "You smell like alcohol."

No, I don’t, I assure him, but I don’t tell him what the smell really is, either. "What’s on?"

"Oh, I don’t know. Nothing. Here—turn it up."

I increase the volume and we stop talking altogether. I never find out what program they’re watching—the only thing that seems to be on is commercials. At some point, I fall asleep. The great thing about our couch is that, no matter how old I get, the upholstery never changes.

It’s night and I dream about the girls, only they’re not girls at all, they’re yellow squirrels and bright red cats. They wear crowns and gowns and swim laps in a house flooded with tears, soda pop, soup. Or else this is really several dreams I’ve since combined into one.

It’s the next morning and my mom wakes me up to tell me about the death.

The hotter the day gets, the more we learn, or think we learn. Rumors solidify into instant facts, melt back into rumors with each new piece of information. Mrs. Mueller called me herself—no, no, says my mom, it was her sister—no, her neighbor. We don’t know for sure because when I call back, the line is busy. Then our line is busy, too, as word travels through the sub with the aimless fatality of a disease.

What’s more terrible, knowing everything or knowing nothing? Both, says my mom, who accepts each piece of news with teary weariness. But I need the facts because they keep me from thinking about the impact, about the girls. Facts are distance. They’re how we turn tragedy into trivia.

What we hear: Mr. Mueller was shot. So it was a mugging! But
it happened in his office. A break-in! A robbery! The building was locked up for the night, we’re told. A suicide, then? We hush our voices at this possibility, disbelieving, and in a way we’re relieved when we later learn that there is indeed a gunman. We’re back to robbery when we learn the gunman was an employee. Disgruntled! Stealing from the company! An embezzler caught in the act! We like the sound of this because we can picture it as a narrative, one in which Mr. Mueller becomes the operative hero. Where these details are coming from, no one thinks to ask. The evening news has a blurb about it later that night, but they don’t confirm or refute any of it. The local paper runs a story later that week, but it’s perfunctory, little more than a glorified obit. Nicky Schuman and the squirrel got more coverage.

What we do discover: Mr. Mueller worked in Detroit, and this serves in part as the final piece of the puzzle. To us, the city is urbania’s last stand. It’s a fallen kingdom steeped in bad voodoo shadows where the sewer pipes never stop steaming—we in Eden know you don’t stay there after dark. And so the murder becomes a cautionary tale, the type of narrative the suburbs were created for, and our phone stops ringing. Good sense and logic have been restored. The "we" can forget and move on.

We—but not me, because tonight at seven I’m watching the girls.

The days may be hot but the nights are always cold—that’s summer here and it’s why I wear a sweatshirt and a jacket when I approach the Mueller’s porch. The temperature’s not the only reason I’m shaking. The peapod is limp in the windless night and the woman who answers the door is not Mrs. Mueller, her sister, or her neighbor, but a cousin, which is how she introduces herself, without so much as a name. Otherwise, the scene is deja vu close to my last visit. Once again, I get a brief question and answer session before I’m ushered into the family room. The television is still on, still mute, and the girls are still on the floor playing a game. This time it’s Clue Jr. In Clue Jr., I recall, you don’t solve a murder but locate a missing pet. I’d bet anything the cousin picked it out.

"Robert!" says Hillary. I’ve been noticed.

Kaylee sweeps the board clean. "C’mon, we gotta start over so Robert can play." When I sit, Elizabeth snatches her purple game piece as if afraid I’m going to claim it for my own.

What’s eerie is not how different this feels but how much it feels the same.
We all look up when we hear the stairs creak. Mrs. Mueller doesn’t fly in this time but takes one slow step after another, like the heroine’s entrance in a silent movie. "Oh, good. Robert," she says. Being warm is an effort and it’s to her credit she pulls it off. "Thank you for, for coming." She’s not wearing black but a gray business suit, with wrinkles that call attention to her own. She’s headed, the cousin has whispered, to answer questions at the station. It seems an overwhelming responsibility and the kind of thing they don’t make clothes for. "You girls be good for Robert, ’kay? I’ll be back, Mommy’ll be back soon, I promise."

They give cheerful waves that seem strangely routine. "Mommy be fast!" says Elizabeth, but it’s no more urgent than if Mrs. Mueller were going for a quick jaunt to the gas station. Don’t they know what’s going on? Can’t they see how drained their mother looks? How pale her skin is, how faded?

"I have a car phone," says the cousin. "The number’s on the fridge." And then they pull away in the Mueller family station wagon. There’s silence in the house, but it radiates from me alone.

"I thought about it," says Hillary. "If I was going to be turned into an animal, I’d definitely want it to be a dolphin."

The Red Cross childcare course says nothing about dealing with the death of a parent. The girls say nothing about it, either, and so I follow their cue. I wonder what they know, if they know—or what and if they understand. But I keep this all on the inside. On the outside, there are games and there are stories, and when it gets later, I figure out how to work the VCR so they can choose a movie. I’ve made macaroni and cheese, with noodles shaped like cartoon characters, and I’m letting them eat it in front of the television. After the dishes are cleared, I’m surprised when Elizabeth crawls across the couch and lays her head on my lap. From the look Kaylee shoots me, I wonder if she did this with her dad. Bedtime rolls around and I purposely don’t say anything. I’m afraid of disturbing the balance I’ve achieved—afraid, really, of leaving this room. The rest of the house is dark and I imagine it filled with ghosts. But I’m the babysitter. I’m not supposed to think things like that, right? So we sit there, and it’s starting to feel like we’ll sit there forever, when suddenly Kaylee stands up to announce she’s tired. I rise. This is my last chance and I feel like I should do something. Do you want a story? No. Want me to tuck you in? No. Do you want to talk about it, do you want to cry, do you want to pound your fists against my chest and ask me why life’s not fair? Do you want a...
The girls are in their beds when the garage door opens. It’s a lot later than I expected and I’ve been getting jumpy. I tried walking around the house but it scared me, all those couple photos everywhere, the Valentine’s Day collage, the wedding picture blown up and hanging over the stairwell. I’ve never known anyone who’s died—at least not anyone I’d talked to so recently—and the way each photographed smile carries a voice, a laugh, is more than I can take by myself. At the sound of the car, I run to the window. The station wagon is just sitting there in the driveway. In the passenger’s seat, Mrs. Mueller is crying. She looks older than when she left, and yet somehow younger than any kid I’ve ever sat for. Her head is in her hands, her hands are in her hair. Her cousin offers her a Kleenex and she takes it and attempts to fix her smudged mascara. I feel suddenly guilty for having seen this and I retreat to the television, where I have trouble concentrating on the syndicated sitcoms. I’m wondering why it is that in all these shows featuring single parents, the missing half is never mentioned after the first episode, and rarely, if ever, given a name. Is this moving on or just bad writing? I’m still wondering when Mrs. Mueller walks in.

"How were they?" she asks. She tries keeping her back to me. She doesn’t want me to see she’s been crying.

"They were great, they’ve been asleep for a while." This is only partially a lie.

"Did they..." She hesitates. "Did they say anything?"

There is something I remember here: it’s during the movie, it’s not yet bedtime, and the phone rings. Elizabeth is on my lap and, because she’s starting to fall asleep, I can’t get up right away, which is why Hillary gets to the kitchen phone before I do.

"Hello?" she says, dutifully, and then pauses, listening. "No, he’s dead."

I’m right behind her when she hangs up. "Who was that?" I ask.

"Some salesguy," she says. "He was asking for Dad." She pads back into the family room and continues to watch the movie. I remember this but don’t believe it happened. I still don’t.

"No," I tell Mrs. Mueller. "No, they didn’t."

She gives at least the imitation of a smile. "Oh, thank God. I told them he was in heaven, you know. I didn’t know if they..."
"They did." I have no idea what I’m saying this about. We stand there, awkwardly, until her cousin comes in from the garage.

"I can drive you home if you want, Robert," says the cousin, whose name I still don’t know. I decline the ride, and when she escorts me to the door, I decline any offers of payment. The walk home is colder than the walk there. When I look back at the house, I see Kaylee on her window seat, reading a book by a little lamp and the moonlight.

Relatives arrive in carloads, and with so many Muellers around, I no longer need to babysit. I do attend the funeral. I show up with my parents and I talk to no one else, not even the girls. They are sitting in a corner, with no supervision but a constant line of mourners who approach them to offer a few carefully selected words. Sometimes, I notice, these mourners get their names wrong. It’s Kaylee Hillary Elizabeth, I silently scream. The girls, for their part, never smile or make eye contact, or even look in the direction of the coffin, which is closed. I wonder if it’s hit them yet, and then I hear a great-aunt talking, saying how just yesterday she was going through a box of Jeff’s things when the girls grabbed a handful of neckties. They draped them around their heads like leashes, and took turns leading each other around the house, pretending to be animals. Fortunately, says the great-aunt, someone took the ties back before their mother saw them—imagine the scene! But I don’t want to imagine it, so I stop listening and tell my parents I want to go home.

On the way back, we pass the Muellers’ and I notice the peapod windsock has been removed.

It’s a week later and a warm night for a change, so after my friends and I go swimming, they come up with the idea to egg some more cars. We camp out behind the stone sign that says welcome to the sub, and we make sure our shoes are laced in case we have to take off in a hurry. The first one’s mine, says Mike, and he pegs a Taurus square between the headlights. The next one’s mine, says Johnny, who winds up to strike a Winnebago. A few more hits and they all turn to me. Robert?

"I’ll take the next one," I say, and I press an egg into my palm. This is not peer pressure. This is an active choice on my part. I do it because I need to. I want to feel some sort of release. I want to feel...childish.
Continued

We wait and before long another pair of headlights slashes through the darkness. I take aim. I’m good at this for some reason, though as far as sports go, I never got past T-Ball. Don’t fire until you see the white of the eyes, I tell myself. And now here comes the car here come the eyes here comes the pitch.

The white of the eyes becomes the white of the egg. The crunch is sickening. Direct hit to the driver’s side window. The station wagon swerves. I freeze.

The station wagon has faces in the backseat. Three of them. They look at me and I don’t think to duck, I just look back. Kaylee hillary elizabeth turn forward, and they’re saying something, almost in unison. Then Mrs. Mueller becomes visible as the yolk drips down the door. She looks at me and I’ve seen her sad before but for some reason this face strikes me as the saddest. Kaylee frowns. Hillary frowns. Elizabeth scrunches up her face and starts to cry.

The station wagon speeds up and drives away.

My celebrity babysitter status is immediately, if quietly, retracted. I don’t say anything to anyone about the incident, but I notice that a few days later, my Who’s News picture at the Rec Center has been taken down. On the same day, the windsock goes back up, only this time the Jeff pea is conspicuously missing. I wonder if it’s been thrown out, or if she’s saved it somewhere, like in the box with the neckties, the photos, and his wedding ring.

The number of calls I get for jobs starts declining. For dramatic effect, I could blame it all on the Muellers, but that would be distorting the facts: it’s around this time that 20/20 runs a heavily publicized segment about the dangers of hiring boys as babysitters. Everyone in my subdivision watches 20/20. Suddenly everyone stops calling.

My friends, on the other hand, are calling more than ever, and though I know I should hang out with them, what with high school starting in a matter of weeks, I tell my mom to take messages and I rarely call them back. The Muellers are just as easy to avoid: they’re kids and I’m sixteen, then seventeen, then eighteen and an official adult.

I survive high school without any squirrel jokes and with mostly new friends. I go to college and I forget I ever babysat. I come home for a weekend, for a haircut, and when I enter the shop, there’s three girls sitting under hair dryers—blonde, blonder,
blondest. One, two, three.

I’d like to say it all comes rushing back to me. But it doesn’t. I sit down for my cut and don’t give them another thought until I hear the woman in the chair behind me call their names. She blurs them together, like it’s a single word, but I understand each one and realize suddenly who they are. I strain for a better look at them in the mirror but I’m at exactly the wrong angle. I can’t see the faces of the girls or their mom. Instead I can only listen as Mrs. Mueller talks to strangers about her daughters, how the oldest one’s getting her hair done for the Homecoming dance and how the others wanted to come along because they’re curious and maybe a little jealous, too. Later, she and Kaylee have a whispered argument about curfew—which they agree to resolve when they’re not in public—and there’s some teasing about the boy she’s going with, who apparently had a mouth appliance recently installed.

I’m out of the chair just in time to see them as they’re leaving the shop. They’re giggling—of course they’re giggling. The heads are blonde, blonder, blondest, and gray. I want to make eye contact, see if they remember me, but they’re talking to each other and then they’re out the door.

I follow them into the parking lot and I watch them get into a van. A man is driving. I walk towards it, slowly, then faster and faster as it pulls away. Through the windows I strain to see a face, any face, but behind the tinted glass they’re only blurry circles, round Velcro peas on which my mind places eyelashes and pink puckery lips. And then the van is on the main road, gaining speed, momentum, turning. I squint against the sunlight. I want to apologize, say something, but the distance between us is too great.
I have a stiff red cotton dress with little brown teddy bears on it. I wear it under a smocked white cotton pinafore with a teddy bear expertly stenciled on the breast. It has opaque black eyes and a bright red heart. My mom made it. I wear it with red cable knit tights and black patent leather maryjanes. My hair (which I am so proud I can sit on) hangs in a perfect horizontal line at the middle of my pleated behind. Two red bows sweep up the front sections, parted in a perfectly straight line down the middle. My teachers always comment on how beautiful my handmade clothes are. The more elderly of the nuns bends down to touch them. They smile as they finger the gathered threads of my smocked bodice. My mother picks out patterns and fabric every week. She never has to ask me if I like her selections. She sees me kissing my Victorian paper dolls. Some little girls in my class, the prettier ones, also like my clothes. I am popular. I am the most popular girl in the morning kindergarten at St. Mary’s. I don’t understand the girls who wear jeans everyday, or the ones whose hair falls to their shoulders in tangles. Don’t their mothers get them ready in the morning? Don’t they want to be pretty?

II.
I hadn’t even wiped yet. He burst open the bathroom door and slammed it shut. I had trouble pulling up my size five bell-bottoms; they caught on my thighs like spandex. His hot, knuckly fingers forced them back down and stabbed themselves inside. He grabbed my wrist and forced my hand to squeeze the ball of sweating mushy flesh between his legs. His big football shoulders and football neck pressed into my push-up bra. You know you want it. Just take a little taste, he said, kneeling me against the wall and pushing the top of my head down to his crotch. I stared at the light under the door.

His girlfriend shoved me up against the brick wall during sixth hour the next day. Her black lined eyes pinned me there.
Facts of the Female
Continued

Slut.
Whore.
Fucking whore.
You walk around like some freshman badass with those tight-ass jeans.
You fucking slut.
I stared out the window.

III.
Mirror, mirror on the wall, I love you.
You show me how to slip into a size zero. You reveal the concavity of my stomach. My tiny breasts finally fit my frame, flat as pancakes with a pink berry in the center. There’s nothing like a pair of thighs with no curve—nothing. I am pinching pieces of soft flesh, dreaming of a laser so hot it could melt them to the bone.
Does my arm curve in like the models? I turn to the side and look. Good, it does. Is the space between my thighs growing like a Gisele’s? Good, it is. I stare long and hard at my cheekbones. Why was I cursed with these round cheeks? With this face flesh. I suck in and out, I pull and prod at the skin, but it will not tighten. This will not do. I must stare at my ribcage for solace. I run my fingers over it, strumming each bone like a guitar. Thank god, mirror. My bones are still visible; no creeping flesh has been allowed.
I will die if your reflection changes. Keep me light, keep me beautiful, keep me perfect. Why do they make a size zero if it is not the goal? If it is not the goal to be nonexistent.
Had we been born in another time or place, we might have been gypsies or cowgirls. We could have been Egyptian princesses with bare feet and gold jewelry, or Greek goddesses with fierce power and furious love. We might have been indicted for witchcraft and burned at the stake, but not before bringing the city of Salem to its knees.

Instead we were born into a stable economy and prestigious school district—a good setting for cheerleaders, a bad one for revolutionaries. We weren’t able to live outside of the system of suburbia, so we stood right in the middle and tried to fuck it up.

We lived three miles apart: thirty six minutes on foot, twenty by bike, five if you dared to hitchhike, as we often did. We met up each morning by any means necessary, joining forces to pool power and access our invincibility; then we took it downtown to Liberty Street, where we turned it loose and set out to follow. Side by side like the paper dolls we left collecting dust on our desks, but paper dolls never moved the way we did: strutting down sidewalks, sashaying the streets, and smirking in the faces of the boys who came sniffing around us like dogs who smelled blood…

That thirteenth summer we learned to synchronize our female rhythms with those of the moon, locking into lunar time, forever to undermine the great grandfather clocks, our contemporary womanhood soaring too far above and running too deep beneath such ancient masculinities to be qualified by the misogynist measurements of testosterone time. Faster than the pace of puberty, we were moving at the speed of sex and the sound waves created by Tori Amos and Ani Difranco, whom we blared from the speakers of the car that we "borrowed" while my mother slept unaware that her daughter and the girl down the street were out breaking laws and hearts and curfew, all with the arrogant adolescent grace of girls growing out of their training bras and coming into their own… We had yet to learn about politics and patriarchy; we just knew Ani and Tori sounded good.

After only two months of practice, we could insert tampons with our eyes closed.
The first thoughts of my father take me to his hands:
Calluses and scars written on his skin tell his life story;
whisper injuries caused by hammers, wood, and glass.
His fingernails are yellowed and cracked, shrouding blood blisters. Plump blue veins form twisted road maps on both sides, the sole pathways to his well-guarded heart.

When my father was born in 1953, his ill-formed heart began to murmur between swooshing beats. I used to place my hands on his chest to feel the irregular thumps, fearing the heart’s sides would someday bulge and burst with pressure. The story my father liked to tell was that his body was a carwash of blood, and Hot Wheels navigated his arteries, wipers beating the reddened glass.

The parts of dad’s Catholic church I really loved were the stained-glass windows that filled the chapel. My favorite scene was the Sacred Heart of the Virgin Mary, flaming and wreathed in roses. I feared the blood that dripped down Christ’s lean body, though—the nails in his hands seemed like a bizarre carpentry project gone wrong. My father told me the story of the crucifixion, and I could feel the same whips lashing my sides.

Roaring snores erupt from his gaping mouth, and I watch his sides inflate with each wet, snorting rumble. The half-full longneck glass beer bottle in his left hand tips alarmingly, but it’s the same story most Thursday nights. He’s missing the game, but I don’t have the heart to wake him for the Red Wings (after all, it’s not the playoffs). Mom hands me a blanket, and I drape it over him carefully. I am his blood.

Under the lead dome of a June sky, dad mows the lawn. Smelling blood, the dog follows my first period, while I wash the dirt from the sides of the house with a long green hose. The nylon feels hot in my hands, since Steve left the hose basking snake-like in the sun. The gleaming glass of the closed windows blinds me momentarily, and the heat causes my heart to flutter. Swaying slightly, I collapse as mom looks out from the second story.
PATER ET FILIA (FOR MY FATHER) - A SESTINA

Continued

My second grade teacher encourages us to express ourselves, so I write a story about dad’s job in the hardware department at the grocery store. Blood drips onto my paper from a sudden nosebleed. I pinch my nostrils, so my heart doesn’t pump all the life out of me. I believe it could, though, so I squeeze the sides of my nose even tighter. Less than a mile away, a small pane of glass shatters as my father drops it in aisle seven, shards biting at his hands.

My life story could be written on a grocery bag—it could cover the sides, and my blood would be the ink. In it, my eyes would be replaced by glass, smudged with fingerprints. But my heart would be the same—in my dad’s hands.
I am a girl. I am a girl who has two mothers. I am a girl who has two mothers and two fathers. I am a girl who has two mothers, two fathers, and only one set of memories. I am a girl who is confused.

I am 10 years old. I am sitting in the office of my favorite therapist, Dr. D., at my adoption group. I have been wondering out loud about my birthmother. "I know a lot about her," he says and my ears perk up, I'm hoping that he holds some key that I've failed to discover before. "Just by looking at you, I know a lot about her. She is bright and funny, beautiful and sad – just like you."

Leaving his office that day, I imagine that my birthmother is a beautiful fairy princess. She has long black hair that floats around her cinnamon smooth face. Her almond shaped eyes sparkle as she spontaneously curves her moth into a smile. She is smiling at me.

When I first expressed my intentions to search for my birthparents my adoptive mother hugged me. "I knew you’d want to one day. I am so proud of you." Without hesitating a single moment, my mother offered her help in any way possible. Despite huge financial sacrifices she’s had to make to pay for my college education, she said that she would cover any search fees I might run into, and above that, she emphasized that no matter what, she’d always love me.

Later, when I decided to start saving up for a trip back to South Korea, I invited my mother. There was no doubt in my mind – I couldn’t go there without her. We needed to see it together and if an opportunity arose, I wanted her to be there when I met my birthparents. When I asked her, she cried. "I would be honored. I have always dreamed of being able to say ‘thank you for the most precious gift’ to your birthparents."

I am in 9th grade. It’s late at night and I’m sitting in my bed writing an imaginary letter to my birthmother. My adoptive parents are downstairs yelling at each other over things I don’t understand and I’m alone. I stop in the middle of writing my letter and set it aside. Why do I always write to her? Why not write to him? I start a new page: To my birthfather...

In my heart I know that he will never receive this letter, but I imagine him looking at it. He’s young with a tan complexion, soft features like mine, closely cropped dark hair. His fingers gently hold the letter, careful not to crease or crumple it – he’s a gentle man. He’s intelligent, smoothly reading the English that I wrote the letter in, so foreign from
his own Korean handwriting. When he’s done reading it, he folds it up in slow, deliberate movements and tucks it in the inside of his jacket.

My mother says that my father’s parents were never able to teach him how to love another person. Sometimes I think that he desperately wants to love and be loved, but something is blocking him. Other times all that I can do is enjoy the little moments when he forgets that he doesn’t know how to and loves me anyway.

He was in China, visiting his new fiancé, when I told him of my plans to start a search. “Julie, that’s amazing!” He sounded genuinely excited and happy for me despite the impersonal feeling of talking over the phone. We talked about it for a while, running up a ridiculous phone bill, because he wanted to know everything. When the conversation finally ended it was with a warm feeling of being loved. We didn’t say goodbye with generic I loves or fake promises of talking again anytime soon, but I found it to be the most satisfying conversation we’d have in a long while.

I am in college. I am afraid of the dark again – because everything beyond my safe world is dark. I am terrified of what I might find.

Chris works through Bethany Adoptions. She is in charge of helping people locate their birthparents in Korea through Holt, the international agency that processed nearly all of the Korean adoptees. We talk on the phone sometimes. She tries to make it sound like a better situation than it is. “I have to be honest with you, Julie. Holt has a policy not to contact birthparents if they were unmarried at the time of the birth. Of course you understand – they have the names in files over there, but if they were to contact your birthmother and she was married and her husband had no idea that she had children before they were married – well, by law he could divorce her and take everything with him. But don’t worry, we’re currently in the process of trying to get that policy changed, and regardless, over 3% of all birthparents try to find their children usually around college age. It’s not nearly as bad as it seems!”

I will be 20 in March. My birthmother was 19 when she gave birth to me. My birthfather was 20. I have the papers that explain how they discussed the adoption with both families, and agreed on it, but it leaves the details out. It’s a silent film in black and white. I need to find the colors and the harmonies of voices. I need it to be a part of me, more than just a daydream.
I picture her walking out of a clinic in a dull, uncomprehending haze. How could this happen to her? How can she tell her boyfriend? How can she tell her parents?

They all meet at her house. They sit around a table with hard-backed chairs, stiff, uncomfortable. They boy and girl must sit across from one another. They are not allowed to sit next to each other. Each of them lowers their eyes in shame. Their parents’ faces are stern, well past the disbelief they felt when they first found out. Now, their expressions are set only to reveal their intense disapproval. They speak in low voices as though the neighbors might hear about their disgrace. My friend knows of a place that takes care of these kinds of problems. The boy’s mother whispers. The girl looks up alarmed. No. I can’t do that. Her mother looks at her and the girl lowers her eyes again. There’s another way. We could give the baby away. Her mother says to the empty silence around the table. We could take care of it. The boy suggests. No. You’re a student and both of you are much too young for a family. All of the adults seem to agree. Giving the baby up will give it a much better chance. It is the right thing to do. Her mother puts her hand lightly on her shoulder and the girl starts to cry.

I’m writing a letter to be placed in my file in Korea, in case they ever want to find me. I’m enclosing photographs of myself throughout my life. Over the weekend my mother and I went through boxes of photographs picking out certain ones for my letter. Here I am at my second birthday with a magician – I was too scared to go up on stage, so I made my very best friend, Susie, go up with me. Here’s a picture of me with the winning ribbon and happy dog at a dog show for elementary school kids. Funny, there are very few middle school pictures. And here’s a picture of me taken on the night of my senior prom. In the next picture I am dressed in a white cap and gown. When the box was empty, my mother’s pile was at least twice the size of my own. Although I complained, I took all the photographs she had picked out to enclose in my letter. "It’s simple," she explained. "I’m your mother. I know what a mother would want to see of her child’s life. Everything."

I am a girl. I am a girl who has two mothers and two fathers.
Between the slightly open door
and the dented door frame, through
that slender, delicate shaft of air I saw the tail
of my mother’s robe flick like a match exploding in heat.

For a moment I imagined her staring in the bathroom
considering her wrinkles and oil glands in the light.
Soon she clamored out, bloated, congealed lipstick
still clinging to her lips, on her feet the knee-high
pantyhose she found herself too tired to peel off
the night before. She peered into my bedroom,
her youngest child staring back at her from sleep.
She came over to me and arranged my sheets
around my neck, tucking them down between my shoulders
and the bed. This is the woman who washed me,
a tiny cloth spreading bubbles across my skin,
a hand shielding my eyes from the soap.

She sits on the floor beside me; I offer her an attentive stare.
She says she’s beginning to understand:
there are husbands and God;
and now there are children and God—

there are husbands and God and children and She.
She says how she did not know my size
when she carried me, how could she?
How could she know how I would fill her?

This is the one who stood with me in the shower
as the urine ran down my legs, after staining
my Halloween costume and the carpet in the living room as
dad dragged me in. We came out of the bathroom clean,

me in a towel, lighter and more comfortable.
She leans against my dresser and assesses me again.
Your eyes, she says, the brown at the bottom of the lake.
And the most incredible hair, so thin, and yet dense.
And then she shows me what it was like to walk away from her husband back in 1988, transferring her weight to her hands and pushing herself up. Her baby blue robe is as delicate as a silk sheet.

I watch her intently:
my mother is silk.
I am silk’s daughter.
There are husbands and God and children and She.
I followed
the brushstrok
d lines of
his lower
torso down
into a place
I believed
I was
familiar with.

And God was
there in his
luscious garden,
pointing
his heated
finger at a
naked man.

There was
religion in his
kiss, a hard
truth I had
been praying
for. It tasted
like salt.
missy cooks up omelets at a diner
her hands valleyed rivered milky grease burns
looks out window for egg of firebird
to feed her husband rot cancer’s wet curse
eddie’s ma drank during the pregnancy
when he beats him flies far away through woods
jacks off atop rust-dead machinery
empty head of light pouring out god’s flood
cowboy dropped out dealt weed fixed up old cars
dad touched him so he grew basilisk scales
crashed his car on acid shattered mirror
blood crowned and didn’t see his father’s face
can’t give you much, my love, it all was burnt
all I got are glass bits found in the dirt
What happens
when she
takes off my
pants and I hers
and I’m looking
but it’s not there
what happens
what do I say
about this girl-girl thing
the thing
that makes me say it’s my
first time for this kinda
hurts my nerves and
helps me there
here
in ways
I’m continuously
denied
lied to
pried into

and it’s my first time
but at least it’s
my time.
I.
Gasp.

II.
Her breath left her in a gasp. A quick, round, powerful breath, like a marble. It smelled fresh, like mint. Like toothpaste. A scent I could pick up through the smell of coffee and the hand she had pressed against her mouth. When I had kissed her, that mouth had tasted like too much champagne. "Jenny, right? It's Sean," I said, even though I knew she recognized me. "Tom's old roommate? We met at your guys' reception."

III.
The reception is still a blur. I need to see pictures in order to prove to myself I was there. I don’t remember the cake-cutting or the toasts, or even how the hall was decorated. "Right. The reception," I said. I’ve pieced a lot of it together from pictures and I think there are parts I remember, but I might have imagined them. Obviously, the half hour in the limo was not imagined because here was the guy, standing calmly behind me in line with a five dollar bill in those hands.

IV.
I could feel the five dollar bill in my hand getting warm with my sweat. "How is everything working out between you two?" I asked. I hoped for the worst. Divorce maybe. Or that Tom had ended up being abusive and one day she couldn’t take it anymore and cut off his dick before ramming the steak knife into his heart. Maybe she had gotten out of prison just two days ago and was burning for a little action. But no such luck. The gold band, full of promise and fidelity, gleamed on her finger.

V.
My fingers itched to touch him. To slide behind that belt and get tangled up in the almost-black hair I knew was back there. "Good," I replied. "Tom just got a promotion." (continued)
VI.
I needed a job before I could get a promotion. Stupid bastard always gets everything. "Is he still working for Lewermark?" I asked. I remembered when he sent in his resume. Stupid bastard lied and said he graduated Summa Cum Laude when he was really just Cum Laude. I smiled, though, hoping that she would smile back.

VII.
The man behind the counter smiled back at me as I handed him my cash. I wanted that cup of hot coffee to hold on to. I needed something in my hands to hold, to play with, to steady them. Usually I’d twirl my wedding band around my finger, but just feeling its light weight made me want to throw up. "Yes," I said. "Are you going to the reunion in November? Tom is really excited." I leaned against the counter and against my will imagined Sean wrapping his arms around me and fucking me good and hard right there in Starbucks. Maybe I shouldn’t have any caffeine-riddled coffee; my mind was already racing.

VIII.
My mind was racing with memories of her in that white princess dress, what I wanted to do to her right now, and how if I went to the reunion, I could see her again. "I’m thinking about it," I told her. "I’m just freelancing right now, so scheduling around it wouldn’t be a problem." If I did have a job, I would quit it if I couldn’t get the day off. She reached over and took her coffee, her fingers just barely touching the fingers of the cashier. Shivers ran down my back as I remembered what those same fingers did to me. Her nails had been painted a light pink and had scratched my chest lightly as I smeared her lipstick with my kisses. Our hands had been squeezing each other as her feet pounded the floor.

IX.
My heart had stopped pounding so hard and I waited, calmer, until he finished ordering. He left his tie in the limo that night and on our way to the hotel, Tom had asked whose it was. I lied and said it must have been one of my slutty bridesmaids, taking advantage of one of his cousins or something. But give me a break, my bridesmaids were picky and no one in Tom’s entire anal retentive family looked as good as or could fuck as good as Sean. I said, "Freelancing? Anything I’ve read?"
X.
She wants to read my stuff? Fuck me, why don’t I have a job? "Do you read *The New Yorker*?" I asked.

XI.
"Read it?" I said. "Tom and I have a subscription to *The New Yorker.*" Tom thinks it makes us look good if we have *The New Yorker* on the coffee table. One time we had sex on that coffee table. We didn’t even push the magazines off of it. I could have been having sex on Sean’s article. On the picture of him that was next to it.

XII.
I stood next to her, not quite ready to leave. We both had our coffee and she was probably on her way to give Tom a quickie or something at his high-shot Levemarks office. "I was shot down by them nine times," I tell her, smiling. That remark brought out a laugh. It rolled out of her mouth like a waterfall, splashing against my ears and cooling them. I remembered that she laughed when I took off her garter in the limo. She was very ticklish between her thighs. I bet Tom can’t be witty like that; stupid bastard was always too serious. He probably has a tight ass from clenching it so much.

XIII.
I clenched my jaw, because otherwise I would have asked him to go to dinner or to a motel room in an out-lying suburb where we would register under assumed names. I had to get out of there before I used my lips for something I would regret. "Well, it was very nice seeing you again," I said.

XIV.
"Nice seeing you, too," I said. "Tell Tom I say hello." Even though I don’t. Even though I really say for him to fuck off. Even though I hope he slits his throat with his huge paycheck and that Jenny comes running to me for the rebound. I think she would run to me.
Lydia Baxter Earnest walked into the living room of her condominium home with a tray of sliced pineapples and three glasses of lemonade. Stepping carefully with her house sandals on, she passed the sliding glass door that led to her small backyard, and then set the tray on a glass coffee table. Lydia wiped her hands on the front of her long, denim skirt. Just a few feet away was the guest bathroom and as she approached, she picked up the few signs of struggle and forced entry that had strewn themselves from the front door to the bathroom door: a long, tan jacket with the arms pulled inside-out, the white cordless phone that Lydia was holding when she answered the door, and a Living Word Bible lying open and face up to the Book of Job. She picked everything up slowly and then walked to the bathroom, putting her face up to the heavy, closed door. She listened for just one moment.

"Jonathan, I’ve made some lemonade. You can have it if you’ll unlock the door." Lydia pointed her eyes down toward the bottom of the door, looking at nothing in particular, and waited for a response. Her hands were on her hips. Jonathan said nothing.

"Jonathan," she continued, "it’s a tall, sweaty glass of lemonade which I’m sure will be nice after all the walking you’ve done." She waited another moment. She spoke with a smile and she hoped Jonathan could hear it.

"The neighbors brought us the lemons last night. They took their kids to the Hill Valley Citrus Fruit Farm on the south side of the state."

"Which neighbors?" he muttered.

Lydia looked up at the ceiling for just a moment before calling out, "The Teverson family from across the street." She winced, bringing her fingers to her mouth. She waited again.

After a moment of silence, she heard Jonathan pick himself off of the bathroom floor and make his way to the door. His shoes tapped on the tile just three times and then he began to play with the knob. Lydia hustled back over to the table and lifted one enormous glass of lemonade from the tray. The ice cubes tinkled as they hit each side of the deep, square glass. A small, tanned hand slid out from within the bathroom. She could see that he hadn’t even turned the lights on. She placed the glass in his fatty palm and he wrapped his fingers around it and over the long tips of Lydia’s fingernails.

"It really is sweaty," he said. Then he retracted his arm, lemonade in hand, and shut the door, gently this time. She propped her shoulder against the door and crossed her arms.
"Jonathan, I’m not trying to pressure you, but Gregory is going to be home soon, in just a few minutes, in fact. And although I would be happy to have you stay, Gregory doesn’t like to make the trip upstairs to the master bathroom unless he’s actually upstairs. Maybe you should gather yourself together and--"

"I think I’ll stay a little bit longer."

"Well how about you just come out and sit in the living room then? You could watch some TV. I also have a plate of sliced pineapples. They’re the canned kind, but I put them in the refrigerator last night so they’d be cold for today."

"Mr. Simmons threw a lawn chair at me," Jonathan said.
Lydia rested her forehead on the door.
"That sounds terrible," she replied.
"I lifted my arm to protect my head and I ripped the back of the sleeve on my sport coat."

"Well, I’m sure your wife can stitch that up, as long as it tore on the seam."

"Right." He paused. "The Hodges’ kid, the one who’s in a wheelchair, he opened his front door and gave me the finger."

"He’s still young, Jonathan, and hasn’t learned about respect."

"Dr. Lamone threw his junk mail at me and said that he hoped Jehovah’s witnesses have their own restricted zone in heaven so that they can’t bother the other angels."

"Jonathan, please come out of the bathroom--"

The front door opened and Gregory Earnest fumbled in, carrying a manila folder overflowing with white papers and yellow carbon copies. His necktie was loose around his neck. He dropped his briefcase on the foyer floor. Lydia tried to casually step away from the bathroom door, but she didn’t move quickly enough.

"Are you serious?" Gregory said, looking at his wife, now leaning against the wall opposite of the bathroom, fingering the wallpaper.

"I think it’s been a long day for all of us, Gregory. Our dry-cleaning got mixed up with the Esther Family’s and the Hodges boy gave Jonathan the middle finger."

"And the Mendelsonn Building needs to be done two weeks early, so after working since 6:30 this morning, I’d like to come home and relax with my wife!" Gregory raised his voice in an orchestral crescendo. He took heavy steps toward the bathroom door.

"Hey Nut-job," he called out, "get the fuck outta my bathroom. Why can’t you go hide out at mom’s house?"

"Our mom lives 800 miles away."
"So you better hop in the Christ-Mobile and get going before it gets too dark."

"It’s a church van. Jennifer is going to leave me."

Gregory stopped dead in the tracks of his next repartee. Lydia put her perfect hand on his arm. She tried to catch his glance and find mutual concern and good-heartedness there, but Gregory just stared at the door as if he were looking his brother Jonathan right in the eye.

"Let your brother stay in the house," she whispered to her husband. Gregory inhaled. He then pulled out his fist as if from a holster in a high-noon draw, and slammed it against the door with one hard, solid blow. Lydia pulled her hands away from her husband and brought them tightly up to her chest.

"Gregory!" she exclaimed.

"Listen, Nut-job, your wife is going to leave you because you’re a door-to-door evangelist who makes people hate Jesus for creating doorbells and for making lights that shine through the front windows and dogs that bark when someone strange is coming up to the porch. You’re like the anti-evangelist from Satan’s Humid House of Hell Church."

"There’s no such church."

"Get out of my bathroom!"

Lydia returned to Gregory’s side after doing a slow pace around the living room. She brought him a glass of her lemonade.

"Give me your necktie and drink this, Gregory."

Gregory ignored her and looked at the bathroom door as if taking measurements of it with his eyes.

"Lyd. Nut-job cracked the frame of our bathroom door," Gregory said. A tiny split ran up the long side of the wooden frame, something caused by a miniature California earthquake or a frenzied evangelist trying to muscle his way to a safe place in someone else’s home.

"I know, baby. Like I said, that’s what happens when we try to resist him. I opened the front door and saw him standing there. He looked so sad. I told him that he shouldn’t come in if he wasn’t going to leave peacefully but it was just one big, swift movement and all of a sudden the screen door flew open, and he was in the house. I was being showered with pamphlets about Jesus, and then he threw off his coat and ran into the bathroom again. I created a frenzy by not just letting him in. Technically, I broke the door."

"How long has he been here, Lydia?"

"Almost two hours, but he didn’t get in the way. I left him in there while I went to pick up the dry-cleaning. He just needs a
place to stay. It’s too early for him to go home. He feels like Jennifer and the kids look down on him when he gets home too early from evangelizing."

"My thirty-eight year-old big brother is sitting on my bathroom floor, hiding from his Bible-peddling wife and his 6-year-old twins."

"Isaac and Joseph are seven now, honey. Don’t you remember the backyard party your brother and Jennifer threw for them about 6 weeks ago? They went through so much trouble to get permission from their church to throw a birthday party for the boys after everything happened with Jennifer and--"

"Cain and Abel are six, Lydia. Get him out of my bathroom."

"I don’t mean to argue Gregory, but I clearly recall--"

Jonathan spoke up: "We had a huge inflatable number seven in the front yard right next to that sign that Lydia ordered that said, ‘Hooray for Seven!’" Jonathan began again. "The clown painted personified sevens on everybody’s cheeks. It was more a party to celebrate the number seven than it was my kids."

"Really Gregory," Lydia whispered as she leaned in toward her husband, "you don’t remember the sevens at all? Your skin broke out in spots when we tried to wash them off. I used a whole jar of gentle cream cleanser on you, and you still had seven-shaped rashes on your face the next morning."

Gregory placed his tired hand on his forehead, rubbed it side to side, and then dragged it down the length of his face, as if removing a mask of skin to reveal something underneath.

"Lydia," Gregory said, stressing each word and baring his teeth as often as possible, "my eyes and my brain feel like they are competing for space in my skull. I have a deadline wrapped around my neck. There is a Jehovah’s Witness in my bathroom. I need you to stay focused."

"Oh, honey," she replied with crinkled eyebrows as she wrapped her arms around him, still holding his lemonade. She held onto him tightly. They let go of each other and she placed the glass into his hand. He took a large, thirsty gulp.

"Hey." Gregory looked at the lemonade as if it had added something intelligent to the conversation. "That’s pretty good. Is it from the lemons that the neighbors brought over?"

"Yes," she replied.

"Sounds like a lot of work," he said.

"I used Grandma Further’s recipe. First, I made long slices in the lemons’ skin and then rubbed sugar on them. Then I let them soak..."
in water overnight. That way, they’re loose and juicy and perfect for squeezing, but not too tart." Her words grew softer as she spoke, because with each word, her husband took slow steps away from her.

"I’ve never heard of it done that way," a small voice said from the bathroom. "Was Grandma Further your mom’s mom or your dad’s mom?" Lydia looked at the talking bathroom door, then walked over to the coffee table and sat down with her lemonade.

"Preliminary Mendelson blueprints," Gregory announced, shaking a large, cardboard tube and letting it hit his thighs as he spoke. "Listen, if he stays in the bathroom, he can stay for a couple more hours. After dinner, I’m going back to work anyway, so after I leave you can even let him out for some fresh air if he needs it."

"Gregory," Lydia replied.

"What’s for dinner?" Gregory walked past her to the sliding glass door and she followed his eyes into the small garden where she had planted yellow and green baby peppers.

"I brought home take out from the Mediterranean place near the mall," Lydia said, "and I got Lebanese salad and hummus to start. Dr. Cedar’s wife said that the lamb is best there, so I got lamb kabobs and then I thought we could just walk around the neighborhood and drink lemonade for dessert."

Lydia watched Gregory carefully as he turned his back to the sliding glass door to face her. He seemed to be tracing her features with his eyes, and she stood quietly, looking directly at him for the first time since he’d been home. She then closed her eyes and inhaled deeply as he ran his finger, starting at her forehead, down the slope of her round nose. When she opened them, he wasn’t in front of her any longer.

"Hey Lyd," Gregory called out. With her eyes wide open, Lydia saw that he’d made it all the way over to the kitchen. "Let’s get dinner rollin’. Do you want me to start setting the table on the back patio?"

Lydia batted her eyelashes a few times to flip her back into reality. The gold flecks in her eyes swam around as she watched Gregory. "Use the light blue napkin set," she replied. She took light steps into the kitchen.

Lydia walked to the back patio from the bathroom window, holding Jonathan’s dirtied salad bowl and another plate with two wooden skewers from his kabobs. She set them on the white wicker table and took a seat in the chair across from Gregory. Lydia squeezed another lemon wedge over the last of the hummus, and Gregory took a thin slice of powdered pita bread and wiped the
creamy spread from its large, shallow bowl. Then with his lips together, he wiped each of his top teeth with his tongue, starting at the front and then moving to the right and then revisiting the front teeth briefly before doing the teeth on the left. Lydia watched his tongue fatten his pink lips. Gregory tilted his head back and took a deep breath.

"Hey," he said as he exhaled, "I'll make sure the dishes make it into the dishwasher, Lyd, but I have to head back to the office."

"How long will you be gone?" Lydia asked, as she stacked some of the plates.

"Just a couple hours. Ron and I have a meeting with the contractors tomorrow to discuss some things, so we want to be on the same page."

"Sounds exciting," she said. "How big is the Mendelsonn Building going to be when it’s done?"

"Bigger than the last one we put up, that’s for sure. Even the small-scale model can be seen from a mile away." He winked at her and stood up to clear the plates. They clacked together loudly into his hands. Lydia remained seated, wincing at the racket that the plates were making.

"Well, we should have Ron and his wife over for dinner some time. Maybe this weekend?" Lydia said to the back of Gregory’s head.

"That would be nice. I’ll mention it to him today if I remember." Gregory bent over slightly and pushed the sliding door open with his elbow and then stepped inside of the house.

The last of the sunlight shined down on the greasy salad bowls. Lydia left them there for a moment and walked over to the bathroom window.

"Jonathan," she said as she tapped lightly on the glass of the small, open window. There were a few seconds of silence and then the thin, white curtain began favoring the left side of the window. He sat upright on the toilet cover so Lydia could see his eyes.

"Yeah?" he replied.

"I just wanted to check and see if you wanted anything else. We were going to have lemonade for dessert, but there’s also some green tea ice cream that I picked up just to try. I know it sounds a little zany, but it’s actually quite good."

"That’s alright. I’m pretty stuffed."

"Are you sure? Gregory doesn’t care for it, so there’s plenty in the freezer."

"I don’t know. I didn’t have much of an appetite in the first
place. I just ate because everything smelled so good through the window."

"Well, Gregory is leaving to go back to the office soon, so come on out and I'll scoop you just a little taste. You don't have to finish it if you don't like it."

Jonathan didn't reply. He sat comfortably back on the toilet seat and waited for a long moment. He then lifted his eyes to the window again, apparently expecting Lydia to be halfway back to the patio. He appeared startled to see that she was just standing there, waiting. Lydia smiled at him slightly, with her lips together.

"Come on out," she said again.

"Let me just gather myself," he replied. "I'll be out in a bit."

Lydia nodded, then stepped gingerly over to the patio, stopping first to pick up a plastic sandwich baggie that had found its way into her garden. She held it between the tip of her thumb and index finger and then took it into the house with the rest of the dishes.

Gregory was on the phone. He seemed quite delighted, animating a story with his hands although the person in the other end could not see him. His voice filled every inch of the small kitchen and spread throughout the living room when he walked toward Lydia.

"Hey Lyd, let me take those dishes from you and go give Nut-job the phone. Come by the house," he continued into the receiver.

"We have another bathroom upstairs that's big enough for you and the kids to live in."

"Gregory!" Lydia exclaimed.

"What? She's laughing. And just for the record, she thinks Nut-job is a nut-job, too."

Lydia exchanged the dishes for the phone. "Jennifer? It's Lydia, how are you?" she said with a smile.

"I suppose I'm alright," Jennifer began. Her voice was soft, but hurried, and she spoke with just a hint of a Carolina accent.

"Goodness, I'm so sorry about Jonathan. The good Lord only knows what he could possibly be accomplishin' in your bathroom. He's definitely not doing the Lord's work in there, that's for sure."

"He really hasn't been any problem at all," Lydia said, looking over at the sad bathroom door, and then to her husband. Gregory's face looked like it would crack under the pressure of his smirk.

"I just don't know what to do about him, or about anything these days. Lydia, do you ever feel like things are comin' unraveled in your life? Or like the Lord has given you 5 or 6 basketballs to dribble all at the same time?"

Lydia brought one of her fingers to her mouth and tapped her
lip lightly as she thought. "Well, I suppose I may have felt that way in the past, but I guess all you need is to pass some of the balls over to another player."

"That's exactly what I mean. Before Jonathan leaves the house in the morning, I feel like I have someone else on my team. But I've never heard of any basketball players that sit up in their brother's bathrooms during the game."

"Is there anything that I can do?" Lydia asked, now biting her fingernail although it took quite a while for her to break the childhood habit.

"Honestly, Lydia, I just need my husband. I mean, I think that the twins have started realizing that not many other children have identical replicas of themselves, so they don't want to stand near each other when we're in public. Not only do I think the other kids must be teasing them in school, but their sudden disliking for each other makes it difficult to just pick up some groceries or return a video. When Joseph is in my sight, Isaac is at least 20 feet away. Someone needs to set a sensible example for those boys."

"Then let me pick up some groceries for you, Jennifer."

"No, Lydia." There were a few seconds of silence on the other end. "Listen, I'll come pick up Jonathan first thing, alright?"

"Jennifer, don't feel rushed. Gregory is on his way back to work. Take your time and Jonathan can keep me company until you get here."

"I'll see you soon, Lydia."

Lydia said goodbye to Jennifer and put down the white, cordless phone. She looked over at Gregory who was now done smiling and about ready to head out the door.

"He just needed a place to stay, Gregory," Lydia said as her husband shuffled around the living room, looking for his keys.

"He has a house he can go back to, Lydia."

"He couldn't go back there," Lydia replied. She held her right hand in her left, and began pushing back the cuticles of her short, clean nails. "I thought that you heard me explain that to you."

Gregory had now moved to the part of his search that exhibited desperation: picking up coasters, tipping over the 6-foot standing halogen lamp to peak inside its shade, kneeling down for just a moment in case his keys had wandered into the fireplace. He did not reply to Lydia. A long moment passed and she stood stationary, her house sandals now making a deep impression in the thick, tan area rug.
"Gregory, you have never tried--"
"Damnit!" Gregory exclaimed.
"I'm sorry!" Lydia called out.
"Where are my keys, Lydia?"
Lydia cocked her head to the side and watched Gregory as he frantically stomped into the kitchen.
"Have you seen them at all?"
Lydia said nothing.
"Have you, Lyd?" Gregory raised his voice.
She did not reply. Gregory walked into the living room.
"Lydia! I need my keys, damnit!" Gregory’s face was filling with fumes as he looked in spots that he had searched 3 or 4 times already. Lydia watched him as he helplessly flailed throughout the room. She knew that he had probably left them in his car.
"I need you right now, Lydia," he said as he walked over to her. He put his strong hands on the fatty part of her upper arms. He shook her as if trying to loosen something, the way he would do with the toaster oven when his pizza bites would slip through the metal wire down into the lower pan. "I can't just take my spare keys," he continued. He spoke slowly, apparently trying to nail this thought into her brain, one word at a time. "Lydia, Ron is waiting for me. He can't get into the blueprint cabinet if I'm not there."
Lydia looked at her husband in between the few shakes. She then let her eyes wander over Gregory’s shoulder to the figure that stood by the guest bathroom. Jonathan had decided that it was time to come out.
"You probably left them in your car, Gregory," Jonathan said.
Gregory’s eyes shot through the front window of their condominium and he set his wife down on the tan sofa seat. He gathered his manila folder, his briefcase, and the long tube that held an aerial view of his precious Mendelsonn. Gregory looked at his brother for just a moment.
"Look at yourself," one man said to the other. Gregory walked out the front door.

Lydia stood from her sofa seat and started to rearrange things. She re-stacked the coasters and tucked the heavy leather couch cushions back into place.
"I'm sorry if I was any trouble," Jonathan began. His white dress shirt was now unbuttoned to reveal a t-shirt underneath that read, Jesus is my ROCK n’ He ROLLS my blues away.
"Not at all. Your wife is on her way over with the kids. I told
her that you had the church van, but she was afraid that if we left it up to you, you might stay in our bathroom all night."

Lydia looked at Jonathan and then they both looked down at his shirt. "I'll call my wife," Jonathan said as he approached Lydia, slumping his shoulders awkwardly as if he had a coat hanger in the back of his shirt. His frame was smallish.

"For what?" she asked.

Jonathan picked up his tan jacket and draped it over his arm. He moved in toward Lydia and she closed her eyes. "To tell her that I'm coming home," he replied. He wrapped his arm around Lydia's small waist. He then pressed his face up against hers and his five o'clock shadow, that felt more like 9p.m., scratched at her face. Lydia pressed back, hard, and his skin felt warm like he had been sitting in the sun all day long. Jonathan pulled away slowly. Lydia opened her eyes again, and he stood there before her. She looked at his thin face the way that surgeons look at x-rays, examining him for any peculiarities. All she saw there were steel gray eyes that looked back at her, a slightly sunburned nose, and chapped lips. He looked like a small-scale Gregory, just with an outdoor job.

After Jonathan had gathered his Living Word Bible and his coat, Lydia watched him step out the door. When he was gone, she moved her eyes around the room, looking at the creamy colors that went from tan in the living room to a wood motif in the kitchen. She stood there with all the basic things that make for a warm home: the leather couch, the fireplace, gardening magazines and newspapers on the coffee table, and photos of her and her husband freshly dusted on the mantle. She was all by herself, and now nothing was out of place.

On her way over to lock the sliding glass door, Lydia stopped and turned toward the bathroom. She wondered about the length of time that Jonathan spent in the smallest and least entertaining room of her home. Lydia walked over and stood right outside the wooden frame of the bathroom door. The air smelled more like breath than it did the freshener that was cleverly tucked inside the roll of toilet paper.

She took two steps in and carefully reviewed each inch of her bathroom. There were fingerprints on the door of the medicine cabinet that doubled as a mirror, too wide to be Lydia's and too thin to be Gregory's. The bath beads that sat upon the counter in a small, glass dish seemed to be rearranged. Lydia picked a few of the pearly blue and yellow balls in her hand and moved them around. Their usually firm skin was a little bit soft and some were dented.
Lydia looked in the trashcan and two of the bath beads sat upon some tissues, lifeless and broken. She laughed. She could picture Jonathan tossing the little balls around and fumbling to catch them, possibly breaking a few of the insubordinate ones in his hands. She put down the bath beads and opened the cabinets under the sink. She cocked her head back for just a moment and then extended her neck so that her head was in the cabinet. Several bathroom supplies were now centered in the middle of a small, toilet paper fort. An extra hand soap stood atop what looked to be a tall, paper towel watchtower. The glass cleaner, surrounded by shorter bottles, like liquid clog remover and an unopened hand lotion, was wearing a toilet paper cape and looked as if it were giving a speech within the forts walls. Lydia picked up the fearless glass cleaner and held it in her hands. She looked at it closely. "Jonathan," she read aloud. He had taken a ballpoint pen and written his name across the front of the label above the word Windex. "Jonathan Windex," the bottle now read, "fights grime on your windows with no streaks, just shine." Lydia sat down on the light blue bathmat and ran her fingers over the soft fur as she held Jonathan Windex with her other, small hand.

The phone rang as Lydia sat upon her bathmat. She didn’t rush to answer it, figuring that it was probably Jennifer calling to apologize again and to let her know that Jonathan had made it home safely. Otherwise, it would be Gregory, calling to say he’d be home later than expected.

"Hi, you’ve reached Gregory and Lydia," the answering machine chimed in. "We’re sorry that we missed your call, but please leave a message and we’ll get in touch with you as soon as we can. BEEP."

"Lydia," the voice on the other end said, "I just wanted to call and say thank you. It took me the whole car ride to realize that I didn’t say that to you today." Lydia listened carefully. The voice sounded so much like Gregory’s but then came the remainder of the message. "So anyway, thanks for giving me a place to have a time-out and think about some things. Oh, and I may have re-arranged some stuff in your bathroom. Sorry about that. I’ll see you again soon. Bye."

Lydia sat upon the bathmat and leaned her head back onto the cabinets underneath the sink. Her eyes pointed up at the blue and yellow meanders that made up the wallpaper border in her bathroom. The design was hand painted by the woman who used to own their condominium, but looked flawless and professional. She looked at the yellow lines, the way they appeared to chase the blue
ones around in a perpetual maze that made her dizzy. She planned on getting the border removed when they first moved in to replace it with something less complicated, maybe just soft brush strokes of light blue. She never did it because Gregory had said something about being impressed that even with all the intricate detail, the two colors never crossed to make green.

She thought about the last time Gregory had even mentioned the way the bathroom was decorated, even though she added special details to it every month or so: a new marble towel bowl to set atop the counter, the new towels that had EARNEST embroidered in small cursive letters along the bottom, or the little soaps that he once said had a scent that reminded him of his mother’s house. She wondered if he could point out that flowery scent now.

Lydia stood up and began to reorganize the bathroom. She opened Jonathan Windex’s spray nozzle and leaned into the cabinet to pull the paper towel watchtower apart from the rest of the fortress. She sprayed the glass cleaner onto the mirror and started to wipe up the fingerprints that smudged along the sides. She then stopped to look at her reflection. Some of her hair had come out of the clip that gathered it together at the nape of her neck. She tucked it behind her ears. Her eyebrows were brushed neatly and her lips were soft and peach. She then closed her eyes and imagined Gregory’s voice in her head.

"Hi pretty lady," it said. "I picked up some wine to take to Jonathan and Jennifer’s place tomorrow and I may have picked something up for you, too. You’re the brightest star in the sky, Lydia. I’ll see you tonight."

The words were verbatim from a message he had left her a few years back. It only took her two or three times of listening to it to remember each word he had said. The brightest star in the sky. She kept her eyes tightly shut as she repainted that day in her mind. She knew he couldn’t get enough of her. She remembered when his co-workers would come over to the house and tell her how Gregory would propose her name for the structures he had designed: Central Lydia Post Office of Town Square and Lydia Public Youth Library were her favorites.

She stopped for a moment, set Jonathan Windex down on the counter, and rinsed off her hands. She then took down her hair and sat upon the toilet seat cover. She bowed her head and let the hair make a thin curtain around her face.

About three hours had passed before Gregory returned home. She heard car keys hit the kitchen counter and she heard the refrigerator
door open and close. She was surprised by how much sound she could pick up from within the bathroom. It was just enough so that it didn’t matter that she couldn’t see her husband. She could hear exactly where he was. She heard him sit down on the couch and then heard a weatherman’s deep voice on television, promising warm weather and sunshine for the rest of the week. Gregory sat for about 15 minutes and was apparently flipping through the paper. Lydia heard the weather report come to an abrupt halt, followed by Gregory’s footsteps coming toward the closed bathroom door.

"Hey Nut-job, you still in there? I didn’t see your van out front." He hit his knuckles on the door once or twice.

Lydia pulled her hair away from her face, but did not reply.

"I can hear you moving around, you freak. I’d ask you if you wanted to talk about things, but honestly, I don’t really care what the problem is."

Lydia sat still.

He stood and waited for a response that did not come. "Well whatever," Gregory continued, "I’m gonna go upstairs to fuck my wife now, Nut-job. Pray about that before you go to bed tonight and I guess I’ll see you in the morning."

Lydia sat heavily upon the toilet cover. She set her hands in her lap with the fingertips loosely held together and heard him climb the stairs two at a time, reaching the top in a matter of seconds. She looked up at the bathroom door and then pictured Gregory turning the corner into their bedroom. She sat and waited, for exactly what she wasn’t sure. She could hear his footsteps growing rapid on the hard wood floor in their bedroom. She envisioned him taking off his tie as he looked around, first inside their large, walk-in closet and then peeking his head into their bathroom, possibly checking to see if she was putting on her nighttime moisturizer or taking a warm bubble bath like she usually did. His footsteps then came to a stop for a long, silent moment.

Lydia sat in the bathroom. The air was perfectly still and the floor tiles were cool. She heard Gregory as he took each step down the stairs with a slow pace that had no definite rhythm. She took a deep breath and held it in her chest. She heard him walk up to the bathroom again, and she exhaled quietly, hoping to release the heat that had gathered at her cheeks and on her forehead.

He knocked lightly with one knuckle.

"Lydia." His voice was tight.

"Lydia, are you in there?"
me and jack take off again
putting down miles
the destination is as fluid
as the milky sky we swim under
as the thick soulful fluid that
we call life, even as we feel it
drying up dying inside us—
as the thickest brownest cafe gravy
which tells me we came from
the unholy darkened city
which runs on a furnace
burning angel’s wings
all the way to the
simpleton purity of the midwest
and the people with slow cattle eyes—
i feel that the waitress’s innocence
will burn beneath new york new york. soon
flames will lick away all their ignorance
just as jack licks his spoon
snaps me from my thought with
‘there’s war on, you know
it’s us verses the road.
if we want to have even half a chance
(standing grease palms wiped on pants)
we gotta go.’
I dropped into this city irrationally unexpected. Leaving home felt wrong. I watched the day, feeling all but rejected, small buildings withered from real sand castles to wet memory. Now I am homeless, living only through sensory imagination and a permanent quest for spunk. No, tomorrow I will stay away, an agitated punk lost but content in a dangerous place indifferent to me. It will not become me; but I it, then all of yesterday is debris in my highway, flowers along the beautiful dirt road that is my slow past. The road must be paved, bowed towards the rising sun and a new idiom. Within stark and hastened bleeding I make my presidium of lost schoolboys and eccentric creators. I will live among the ones who cherish, but are called traitors.
The day I fought Kevin Rieflin, there wasn’t a cloud in the sky, though it stormed like hell the night before. It was a Monday, and I’d skipped school and spent the day shooting the windows out of the junkers down at Yup, Still Steve’s salvage yard, which was bordered by the wooded wetlands near my house. My old man had spent the night before smashing all our dishes and scattering empty, half-crushed Blatz cans in our kitchen, which was why I ate Lucky Charms out of a Cool Whip dish that morning. He also punched a hole through the drywall in the bathroom, and broke the glass of the side storm door with my mother’s hip, which was why I cut school, but not Annie. My sister Annie always went to school. Annie was two grades ahead of where she was supposed to be, too. Maybe that’s why I was always so pissed off at her. She was always so smart. She was always so goddamned calm.

That was why the old man could be screaming and hollering and whizzing bottles of Jim Beam everywhere, and kicking the German Shepherd, and beating on Ma and beating on me, but not Annie. Her he never touched. He’d come home from his job at the mill every night with a brown paper grocery sack full of beer, and a half-empty bottle of bourbon to share with Ma, who’d already be half in the tank herself by then, and it’d start out just fine. But then they’d end up talking about the mill, and before long, the mill was his boss; then, the boss was Ma; then, the mill was us, and he was persecuted; and he was unappreciated; and then it was, "Goddammit you hateful sonsabitches you’ve got me trapped!" or some such nonsense. He’d get lathered up like a rabid animal, this way, all flying spit, bloated neck, and sour breath until you couldn’t even recognize him as a human fucking being, and then he’d start breaking things. Sometimes me and Ma were those things, but never Annie. Annie could come into the room right smack in the path of his rage, her skinny arms to her sides, her eyes wide and blue as the sky, and say, "Daddy I think you should rest, now," and he would. His twisted face would melt all slack jawed and fuzzy, and she’d take his hand and sit next to him on the sectional couch and take his glasses off. She’d speak softly to him and pat the back of his stubby head like she was patching up a wounded dog. And before you knew it he’d be asleep snoring with his head in her lap. Then, Annie would pull a beat-up flannel blanket over him, pull his scuffed Red Wings off, and start cleaning up the mess. My sister Annie was the calmest nine-year-old that ever walked this earth.

So, as I said, that day I skipped school and headed down into the
woods and toward the junkyard with my pellet gun. While I walked the skinny dirt bike trails toward the swamp, and the foul smell of marsh gas filled my head, I thought about killing myself. It’d be easy, I thought. I could tie a cinder block to my ankle and just dive right in. No one would miss me. Without a care, I plugged tadpoles in the shallow brown water and watched them float to the top, exploded and lifeless, just like I felt. I fantasized that a hunter in the trees behind me was drawing a bead on my head, and that it’d be over so quick and then everything would be black, just black. And I imagined what everyone else was doing in school just then, while I was thinking about death and eating beef jerky I’d shoplifted from the Gas ‘N Stop on the way down there. I thought about David Coy and Mark Sikes, and their brand new white Nike high tops, and the way Ginny Cole laughed at all their jokes in science class. I wondered if David’s mother was at work, lying to everyone about why she’d been late and why she was walking funny. I wondered if Ginny’s father was at the paper mill, sneaking hits from a half-pint on cigarette breaks. I walked around thinking thoughts like this all day and feeling the warm breeze on my face and watching the sun burn down on Suicide Hill, where we tobogganed in the wintertime. And while I walked, the cicadas buzzed in metallic waves of sound. The frogs croaked, and the blackbirds cawed, and I got cramps and puked beef jerky and Lucky Charms onto the dust of the trail. And then at some point I found myself on the lip of the ridge that overlooked Yup, Still Steve’s, with my pellet gun slung over my shoulder, and I thought how, staring down into that wasted bowl of gutted wrecks and broken glass, I felt like I could see my future down there.

A few hours later, I snuck back in just before my mother got home from work. Of course, she popped her first pills and cracked her first beer before she bothered starting supper, and as usual, she acted as if nothing had happened the night before. She limped around the kitchen making salmon patties and fried potatoes, and humming along to Patsy Cline on the stereo. I couldn’t stand to be around her. I felt like if I stayed in the house with her, I’d hit her myself. So I grabbed a Coke from the fridge and headed out to the garage.

I was gawking at the Hustler I’d hoisted from the old man’s stash underneath his workbench, when I heard Annie wailing up the driveway. Annie never cried, I thought. I quick stashed the dirty mag and snuck through the shin-length backyard grass to have a listen at the kitchen window screen. Between my mother’s music, the sparrows chirping in the eaves troughs, and the distant buzz of a
lawnmower, I could barely make out what had happened.

"I tried so hard to ignore him, Momma, really I did," Annie sobbed, as my mother pressed an icepack to her leg with a bruise-pocked hand.

"I’m sure you did, baby," said my mother. "I’m sure you did."

"But he called me terrible names," Annie stammered. "And when I asked him to leave me alone, he hit me, Momma, he hit me with a rock." She was obviously stunned. No one ever hit her, and no one ever called her names but me.

My mother was almost no help. In fact, she hardly seemed there at all. She had a blank, dazed, creepy look on her face that made her look like a department store mannequin. Her bra strap showed through the opening in her pink terry bathrobe, and her mascara was on a little crooked. She patted Annie on the back, shushed her two or three times, and folded the icepack into her little hands.

Then, as she took up her cigarette and shuffled into the living room, her robe swishing on the carpet, my mother said, "Dinner’s on the stove, baby." And Patsy Cline sang, "I go walkin’ after midnight searchin’ for you."

I knew it must have been Kevin Rieflin.

Rieflin was the neighborhood gorilla. When he wasn’t smoking dope with his older brother, Jerry, or getting smacked around by his old man, he was antagonizing whatever kid was to hand. He’d been harassing Annie for weeks before this happened. I knew because one of the neighbor kids had told me. He would wait for her at the bus stop and follow her for blocks, saying nothing, but hurling rocks that barely missed her. And Annie would shuffle in through the side door and into our kitchen sniffing and shaking, but she never cried. She never looked me in the eye, or asked me for help, so I just pretended not to know what was going on. After all, Rieflin bothered everyone, I thought, and if she played it cool like I figured she would, he’d get bored and give up. But that day, for whatever reason, she had finally broken down. She gave him his in, and then she paid with a purplish-yellow welt on the back of her calf.

I was enraged. It crept up on me as I watched Annie shake and sob alone at the kitchen table holding that icepack on her leg. We were always fighting, me and Annie. She always wanted to do what I was doing, eat what I was eating, watch what I was watching – she drove me up the frigging wall, that kid. But she was bright, sweet, and independent at the same time. She would often tell me, "Donnie, I’m gonna be a doctor, so I can make us all better. All of us
need to get better." She would ask me, "Donnie, why don’t you want to be smart?" And I would say, "Life is shit, Annie. Why the hell should I care?" or, when the words weren’t there, and all that would come was the rage, I would just scream and curse, and call her a freak – I called her that all the time. I often spat abuse at Annie without thinking twice, but somehow it was intolerable coming from someone else. I found myself stomping around the garage, looking for something to hit Rieflin with.

I went looking for Kevin Rieflin with a stick in my hand. It was suicide, and it was stupid, but I had to do it. I was Annie’s big brother.

***

I was almost in front of Rieflin’s house. I’d been thinking about what I was going to say when I confronted him, but in fifteen minutes I’d come up with exactly nothing. My teeth rattled in my head like maracas. Rieflin had been held back two or three times, and no one really knew how old he was. I only knew that he lived with his old man and his two older brothers in a shabby house that was a mirror image of ours – though green instead of yellow – three blocks away, on Dallard Street. Finally, I stood on the front walk, stick in hand, and screamed at him to come out. A window-mounted air conditioner hummed back at me, beads of condensation dripping from its vents and into the unmowed grass. No one’s home, I thought, as I let the tip of the stick drop to the cement. Good. By that time I’d cooled off enough to begin to second-guess myself, so I headed back home, tapping the stick on the asphalt and thinking about salmon patties and fried potatoes, and how hungry I was. It wasn’t until I was rapping the pavement of my own street that I realized Rieflin had followed me.

"Hey, pussy!" he shouted to my back. "Whyn’t you drop that stick, so I can beat your ass?"

***

It happened on our crunchy yellow front lawn, near the old man’s rust bucket ‘73 Catalina. Since it was suppertime in the late spring, all the windows in the neighborhood were open. Box fans sucked in the hot, damp air but couldn’t drown out Rieflin’s hollering, so before long a crowd had gathered to watch me take my beating.

There were probably about twenty neighbor kids – all former victims of Kevin Rieflin, of course – and there were a few adults, too. But it seemed like there were a lot more. My heart pounded in
my throat and my body began to quake. I could feel a million eyes judging. I could hear those eyes’ voices clucking and cheering and heckling. But the eyes that mattered belonged to my family, and their voices were silent. My old man watched from the front stoop with a Camel in his mouth and a sweaty can of Blatz in his hand. Annie watched from the sidewalk, her blue eyes wet and wide as ponds.

Kevin Rieflin was three or four inches taller than me and probably fifty pounds heavier. His hair was dishwater blonde and coarse like straw. One of his front teeth was chipped at a sharp angle, and his big, dumb face was covered with freckles. He’d rolled up the sleeves of his jean jacket, and his big, manly hands were balled up and menacing.

"Well," he said, "you gonna drop that stick, or what?"
"Yeah, I don’t need it anyway," I said with false bravado, as I tossed the stick into the grass.

We squared off, and it turned out that I was quicker. Before either of us knew what happened, I had Rieflin around his thick neck. His face was flushed, and a thick, purple vein stood out on his ruddy forehead. He grunted a little, and a sound like a kettle whistle escaped between his front teeth. I had only seconds before he threw me like a rodeo clown. His big greasy muskmelon head was pinned under my left arm, and my good fist was free to fly. All I had to do was...

"Hit him, Donnie!" some voices said.
"Kill him, Kevin!" said some others.
"Now, you boys just take it easy," said yet another.
"Give him a smack, Donnie," said my old man, laughing.

But I couldn’t. It felt like my arm was suspended in Jell-O. Instead, we twirled around in jerking, gasping circles. I could feel Rieflin starting to get leverage. I could feel the rage burning through his neck and into my armpit. Suddenly, a hot trail of shame blazed through my body. I shuddered, I slipped, and I let him go.

"Aw, shit, Donnie; what’re you doin’?" barked my old man.

But before I had time to think, Rieflin came up square and blasted me straight in the face with a wicked right. There was a wet smacking sound, a flash of yellow-purple light, and then the sky opened up in front of me. It was as blue as the ocean on television, but somehow more fluid, more peaceful. It was blue as the sky over Yup, Still Steve’s. It was as blue as the sky in a dream. And then Rieflin blotted out the blue, and the sound came back. He was on top of me. His meaty thighs pinned my arms to my side, and I could
smell something like old sweat and dried piss in his jeans. I could
taste the rusty liquid flow in the back of my throat. He hit me again
and again, but I couldn’t feel it anymore. What’s more, I didn’t care.
I didn’t want the blue. I wanted the black.

And then I felt a shock in my leg, and a spear of electricity shot
up my spine and through the black and I opened my eyes and it was
all blue again. Suddenly, I heard what sounded like fuzzy, wet,
cheering. Then, slowly, I could feel the brittle grass itching my back,
and the warm, wet blood on my face. My nose was a throbbing kiel-
basa, and it felt like I’d been stabbed in the leg with a hot poker, but
the air tasted fresh and sweet like ice water. For a moment, I could-
n’t move. I didn’t want to anyway. I just lay there and stared at the
cloudless sky, drinking in the sweet air, and listening to the voices
of the neighborhood kids fading away.

Finally, I heard the old man cackling, he was so amused he could
barely control himself. "Son of a bitch, Annie," he said. "I didn’t
know you had it in you."

I tilted my chin up a bit and into my chest, and there was my
sister, standing over me with my pellet gun in her little hands. She
was backlit by the late sun, so that her sweet, round face was
obscured by shadow, but the fuzzy ringlets of her hair were framed
all in blue, blue sky. "Sorry, Donnie," she said. "I got you by mis-
take, but that asshole won’t bother us again."

Right then, I had the strangest feeling. I didn’t know whether to
laugh or cry. I wanted to tell her I was sorry for being a terrible
brother and for being so goddamned stupid. I wanted to tell her I
was sorry for being pissed off all the time and calling her names.
But most of all, I wanted to tell her that people like Rieflin never go
away, and even if they do, there’s always someone else to take their
place – maybe even us. I wanted to tell her all of these things, and if
I could go back, I would. But the truth is I didn’t tell her any of it. I
just stared up at her like a dumb animal, blinking my eyes and try-
ing to stop my fat, split lip from quivering. And then I said the only
thing I could think of to say.

I said, "Thanks, Annie. Let’s go get some supper."
My father asked why that stupid girl was crying. Gran made eggs and cut my toast in railroad tracks. Mom cried. Dad could do it without trying. Did we want the whip across our legs or back? Grandpa sped up hills and coasted back down. My sister slapped her toast across my face because she said, "Don’t eat it; it’s mine!" I was a clown and I took a big bite to put her in her place. My mother took me to the library where books were held in wooden crates stacked on the floor. My dad took the fairy-tales away and sent me off with harsh looks. My teacher wondered why I didn’t like to read anymore. My favorite candy is circus penises, I slipped, one night at the dinner table with company present. I braided a noose to help me cope while my teacher said I’d complain if they hung me with new rope.
My sister does not like to be alone. They say she had a twin, another girl, perhaps, snuggled in the warm, wet blanket of their mother’s womb, identical cells, blood skin and bone, but only one would survive. I bet my sister was too much for that nameless fetus, her grip too strong as she clutched and grasped with her tiny fingers, claiming all the life for herself, growing and stretching her tall body until there was no room left for another life. That faceless child formed into only blood and excess placenta, a messy afterbirth to the bright red hair, the glowing star of my sister.

Sometimes it seems she wants to adopt me, make me the twin she never really knew but still remembers—the warmth of that body, the calming sound of that breath echoing through the chambered room. I feel those minute fingers, the unbroken nails clinging to the flesh of my arm, using me as a shield against the darkness. I wonder if some day she might cling too hard, stretch too far, and if there is enough to sustain both of us.
He was being taught about the Eye.
The visitor had brought with her,
To the Kindergarten class that day, a single
Naked sheep eye. She dissected it for them,

Carefully following the path a light wave would
Take through the eye. He followed this
Journey closely, wishing it were he
Traveling as a wave of light.

From the external world he would enter,
First, through the sclera, a thin flexible shell
That contains the entire eye. The front part
Of this shell, the cornea, bulges gently

From the spherical mass. He would emerge, then,
From the cornea, and enter a chamber of clear
Watery fluid. This is the aqueous humor. Within
The watery chamber, the iris controls the amount

Of light that enters the opening known as the pupil.
Iris is the Greek word for rainbow, but he
Would not learn that for many years. She tells them
How the iris is important because, in humans,

It governs what color one’s eyes are. His eyes
Are gray. Leaving the aqueous humor through
The opening of the pupil, he would then happen upon
The crystalline lens. This bean shaped elastic membrane

Would focus him through the gel
Of the vitreous humor and deliver him finally onto the 125
Million photoreceptor cells of the retina. There his brain
Would define an image. An image of a young boy.
As a child I spent entire nights sitting awake in my bed on the verge of tears, completely convinced that at any moment the most hideous phantom my mind could devise would come slouching toward me from the shadows of my room. I would slip into my parents’ bed in the middle of the night, rent to bits by these horrible visions. My parents would tell me. "Go to sleep. It’s just your imagination." I hated my imagination. I pictured a small gremlin raking the depths of my mind, poisoning my thoughts and senses, sabotaging my happy grasp upon reality.

This is a story about my imagination.

It is also the story of the weakest moment of my life—of failure and guilt. I don’t especially want to tell it, but it is a heavy moment to bear alone, and it is a story that does not sit well within me. I’d rather it sat within you as well, so as to lessen the load.

My mother’s parents live in an old cottage by Lake Michigan, atop a sand dune, looking out over the water. Every summer from the ages of six to sixteen I left my own cottage at Higgins Lake to visit them for one week. I was always ambivalent toward the visit. I dreaded the roast beef and the cabbage stew—the musty smell of which stings my nostrils even as I write. And I dreaded the inevitable daytrip to Holland, Michigan, to look at old Bibles and visit Grandma’s alma mater, Calvin College. And I did not look forward to days spent with Grandpa and his golf chums, playing a game I was terrible at; or the evenings with Grandma and her bridge chums, playing a game I never properly learned. But I did look forward to time spent alone on the dunes, my feet buried in cool sand while the July sun beat down upon my face, reading a book, or watching steady streams of sand drift along the surface of the dune, watching the wind re-distributing and re-forming that massive wave of dust moment to moment. And I looked forward to time spent with Annie, a very cute girl who lived next door to my grandparents, and Astro, my grandparents’ old and leprous—but durable—Labrador. Astro didn’t move much, and Annie didn’t say much, but it was nice to sit on the dunes, or on the beach, enjoying a fairytale (albeit temporary) boyhood, with a girl and a dog all my own.

I’d had a tentative crush on Annie since I was ten years old. She was two mystique-laden years older than me, and had lovely, cool white skin, long reddish-blond hair, and an unaffected beauty
as a twelve-year-old, which became much more affected as a sixteen-year-old. She was not particularly brilliant company, and played no enduring music on my heartstrings. Most years I would forget her for fifty-one weeks, and my infatuation would resume only upon seeing her once more, reminded of how startlingly pretty she really was. But those reminders were lovely, and our weeks together were, I think, mutually enjoyed.

My relationship with Astro was much more sophisticated. I was only three years older than Astro, but I had seen him grow from puppy to leper, and through that journey our emotions had been closely entangled, often in most complicated ways. My earliest memory of Astro, and one of the earliest of all childhood memories, took place at a park in Grand Rapids when he was a newly purchased puppy. I was a typical three-year-old, naturally fascinated by a small black cloud of motion. You can imagine my shock when, as I leaned over for a closer look, the little thing turned on me and began yapping at my heels, chasing me around the park. I ran for my life and Astro pursued me for what seemed like hours, smiling and slavering on my socks. My family did absolutely nothing to deter him. They were happily stretched out on a picnic blanket, eating turkey sandwiches, watching us and laughing. How cute a spectacle we must have seemed to them—Astro and I. But I was really terrified, and even traumatized. From that day on Astro and I shared a common understanding: not a love, but a respect and a morbid intimacy. I was haunted in my dreams by that ankle-biter, and I began—against my conscious will—to concoct various visions and fantasies of a gruesome death for Astro. These visions were harmless enough at first, but as I grew older they gained in intensity, assailing me unexpectedly, day or night, awake or asleep, and it was only in recognizing them and resisting them that I was able to find an eventual affection for Astro. I suppose in the end I could relate much more readily to his puppiness than to my family’s laughter. After all it was the laughter, not the puppy, which had traumatized me.

Astro and I have shared some very meaningful, terrible moments. Among them, we have shared the weakest moment of my life. I think it was a Wednesday. I was fourteen years old. I was with Astro in my grandparents’ cottage, reading on the couch. An afternoon drowsiness weighed my eyelids a little as I read.

Astro lay beside me on the floor. As usual he looked dead. A thin cloud of dust mites and dandruff hung about him, impossible to
see but also impossible to ignore. Just as I began to really flirt with sleep, my book loose in my limpening wrist, Astro shot up with a snort. He took a few tentative steps to get his hind legs beneath him, and began to sniff around the room. I was momentarily awoken, but when I looked around and saw nothing unusual, I went back to my book, and from there back to my torpid state.

By and by I began to notice an odd sound coming from the direction of the bathroom. It sounded to me as though the shower was on, water smacking against porcelain. In my subconscious state I heard nothing unusual in the sound. It merely melted into my little daydreams, or whatever was going on in my head. After a few minutes the sound breached the front of my mind and shook me out of my drowsiness. I sat up on the couch. I turned toward the bathroom door, wondering if I should investigate. A feeling of dread sprang up within me and I was gripped by one of my Astro death visions. I imagined Astro hanging from the shower faucet. His stomach had been split open. And that horrible smacking sound coming from the bathroom, which was growing louder and louder, was the sound of his viscera and blood falling into the bathtub.

I rose from my chair, my body tingling. The bathroom door was open just a crack. I began to walk toward it. The ghastliness of that image clouded my brain, but at the same time lent me a sort of bestial lucidity, a heightened sense of sight and sound. I could feel every cell of my body building to burst into action, if necessary. As I neared the bathroom door I braced myself for the repugnance of my vision. I reached for the doorknob.

Just then Astro pushed his head out of the bathroom door. He licked his chops and whimpered at me. He had been drinking from the toilet. Water dripped from his beard. The shower-sound had not stopped, but continued to build. Astro was whimpering and fretting to himself, turning his head this way and that, sniffing and gnawing at the air, as though trying to catch invisible soap bubbles. He walked out of the bathroom, still fretting to himself. I stepped inside. The toilet seat was up—tufts of silvery-black hair clung to the porcelain. The sound was much louder in the bathroom. It bounced off the tile walls. There was no steam, no moisture, no movement coming from the shower. I whipped aside the shower curtain. Empty, no water. But through a window inside the shower I saw the source of the sound.

Annie’s house was on fire. Actually, Annie’s room was on fire. A large flame leapt out of her second story window. I stared at this
flame, transfixed. No longer braced for action. Merely interested. It did not strike me as unusual that Annie’s house was on fire, staring at that flame leaping out of her window. No more unusual than a fire in a fireplace. No less intentional. No more dangerous. Only softly and gradually did it occur to me that the fire in Annie’s room was really quite peculiar.

"What should I do—?" I thought calmly. Everything was very calm. Like a dream. Like the air I breathed and the space I moved through was some kind of dry water. My mind wafted around like a bubble, brushed about by wisps of reality. I navigated a few wisps of that Astro vision of a few moments passed; I smiled softly at my confusion of the wet slap of water against porcelain for the dry crackle of Annie’s burning bedroom. I felt completely, bloodlessly dismembered. I was not helpless or afraid, but simply disinterested in the tragedy growing next door, even while I was enraptured by the spectacle of its unfolding. I was living in an absurd world where fire sounds like water, and I floated out of the bathroom like a cinder.

This is when I decided to fall back asleep.

I awoke probably fifteen minutes later. The shower-sounds had grown much louder. I walked over to the bathroom and looked out the window. The entire second story of Annie’s house was now in flames. It still hadn’t occurred to me that my own life was possibly in danger, but I thought of Astro. I couldn’t find him.

"Astro, come here… Here boy…" I called. Astro came charging up from the basement. He was berserk, crying, thrashing about. I began to notice sounds outside the cottage. Someone was yelling my name. A crowd was gathering outside Annie’s house. My name grew louder. I recognized the voice—it was Annie’s dad shouting for me. I grabbed hold of Astro’s collar and considered getting out of the cottage.

Just then, my grandma came bursting in through the back porch door. "Oh! Oh, you’re safe! You’re safe! We were all so worried!" She was sobbing. Her breath was loud and heaving between her cries. Annie’s dad rushed in behind her. "What are you doing up here!" he barked. "Come on! That fire might spread!" I thought he was acting awfully clearheaded for a man whose house was on fire.

I left my grandparent’s cottage with my fingers wrapped around Astro’s collar. We used the front door, closest to Annie’s house. As I walked past I was the second story began to buckle. I looked at all the faces of the people around me. Terrified, panic-stricken, tear-streaked faces. I joined the crowd staring up at the fire, trying to
comprehend the loss they were witnessing.

I saw Annie’s mother. She had her head between her hands and was bawling and crying over and over "my books...my books...my books...." Everyone around me was in pieces. I could see how this fire was destroying them, educating them in the ways of cruel, spontaneous injustice. I could not relate. I was still living in my dream-bubble, breathing my dry water. I would have gone back to my nap, had there been a couch convenient.

The firemen arrived fifteen minutes later. Meanwhile everyone just watched Annie’s house burn down. Someone said to me—it might have been Annie’s father—"When a house catches around here, it really goes down quick. There’s no saving it. Firemen won’t get here for a while yet." That’s what he told me. I don’t know if it made anyone feel any better, but it triggered a thought within me. I thought about Annie. I had clearly noticed that Annie’s room was on fire, but I was just beginning to connect Annie to her room. I looked around for her. Search the faces in the crowd. I couldn’t find her. I ran around the back of my grandparent’s cottage, down to the beach; I looked up at the dunes. I couldn’t find her. And very slowly, very quietly, a feeling of sickness began to spread through my stomach and out to my fingertips.

"I killed her," I thought, no longer calmly. I searched for her more and more anxiously, begging Annie to be alive, for her sake and for my sake. When I was absolutely sure she was not around, I walked over to my grandparent’s garden and sat down among the flowers, staring at her burning house. Finally feeling the heat of the fire against my face. Finally realizing what I hadn’t done.

I watched the firemen for nearly an hour. The house had gone up fast; the walls were sagging pathetically. When they had brought the flames down to a manageable size, one of them went into the house to see if anything or anyone could be saved. A few minutes later, he emerged carrying a limp heap of soot and fur. It was Annie’s golden retriever. They set the dog down on the ground and began running cool water over her, washing away some of the soot and grime and revealing her golden coat. The dog sprang suddenly to life, crawling and digging desperately along the ground. She had passed out in the basement, and woke up continuing her attempt at escape. I watched that dog and felt my mind and body crumble.

Within a few minutes Annie drove up. She had been out in her car. I should have known to look for her car. She ran right past her sobbing mother, knelt piously over her dog and bawled into her
golden fur. They raised Annie’s dog onto the fire truck and drove toward town.

That night I went out with my grandparents for dinner. They were very shaken, and didn’t want to be around the smoldering remains of Annie’s house while they ate. My grandfather had a fish sandwich; Grandma just had French fries. "Don’t you think there’s something soothing about French fries?" she asked me. "Especially McDonalds’ French fries. Whenever I’m upset I like to have them." I did not think they were soothing, but I had some of her French fries when she offered.

I fell asleep that night to the hiss and sputter of Annie’s slap-heap house, the wind stirring up harmless little swirls of cinder. The next morning Annie’s house was still smoldering, a water-logged hill of ashen mud, little pockets of slap still glowing and peacefully bursting. By the end of the week, the fire inspector determined that the fire had started in Annie’s room, which of course I had known, but hadn’t told anyone. I certainly couldn’t explain to the firemen my reason for not helping, for taking a nap. I did not know it myself. I told my family that I had slept through the whole thing, and had only awakened when I’d heard my name being yelled outside. They accepted this story with unbearable sympathy, never for a moment doubting it, expressing only disbelief at the nature of events in general. Annie the teenager had been smoking a cigarette in her room, and had left it lit or something foolish, and it had burned down her house.

After her house burned down, I never spoke to Annie again. I do not know why. I felt guilty, that much is clear. I felt like she knew that I thought I had killed her—that I had allowed her house to crumble. Perhaps her skin reminded me too much of ash, and her hair too much of fire. Or is this too seamless? Our parting was just another inexplicability that sprouted from a day just bloated with inexplicabilities. I am not sorry for losing touch with her. Every moment I think of her I am torn between an apology and an explanation. There is no longer any room for sunny days and quiet evenings and not saying much. I don’t believe that I’m physically capable of saying anything at all to her ever again.

Because when I am around her, when I am around her house—her new house—when I even think of her, I am an ash heap. A pile of dust and slag, rolling about in the wind. Re-piling itself, re-distributing itself, re-creating itself, and unable for a moment to escape the fact that I am daily at odds with reality. I am a heaping billion
particles—flesh as fine as ash. Each particle pulled this way and that by this or that breeze, a billowing, dune-like wave, as my mind attempts to hold me together. I was cremated in that fire, and reborn in that fire. I am buried in the foundation of Annie’s new house, and I was born anew in the roils of smoke pouring from her old house. And I am still an infant, and I am still an old man.

So now, every day, I am terrified of myself. I am afraid of my little faraway oceans of imaginings. I feel fundamentally unsound. And even though today, at this moment, I feel my face blister with the heat of Annie’s house, and I feel my lungs filled to my throat with soot and smoke, I cannot trust myself to remember these feelings when I need them most. When I see Annie’s house burning again; when Annie is in her room this time.

Where can I exist now? What is left for me? How can I feel welcome in this mind that drove me back to sleep while Annie’s house was burning? Or in this same mind that sees the wind push trails of sand across the dunes, and feels that it feels the breath of the world, that feels attuned to the aesthetics of living? Perhaps I should tell myself that the fold of brain that would have killed Annie is not the same fold of brain that fills my life with meaning, that is awake to and awakened by countless daily divinities. But it is; it absolutely is. This fold is my imagination, my life and my undoing. It is my strength and my weakness. It is me, entirely me. It is all that is me. And thought I have known searing guilt and self-doubt because of it, though I cannot sleep within it, I cannot exist outside of it.

Astro died last year. His mind finally kicked off. He was walking around in circles and bumping into furniture and people, so Grandpa decided to have him put to sleep. We held a funeral for Astro within that same garden where I had watched Annie’s burning house when I was a murderer. Grandpa held his ashes in a coffee cup, and poured them into a small hole in the ground. He read from the Bible, and I played Amazing Grace on the violin, and we planted him in the garden.

Ashes in a coffee cup, he is planted in the garden.
España: Faces in the Crowd

I take a sip but no coffee reaches my tongue. Ask for the camarera. No last drop to be had. Call for her. I wait patiently at the table for her to pass by. "Quiere algo más?" she'll ask. I sit. If she should come when I am away there is no chance of getting another cup among the throngs of people. The sun is setting behind the edificios. I return to my book. But as I concentrate on the text I imagine the waitress. She is a serpent. She slithers among the masses attacking at will when her prey least expects it. The angel of darkness. An artist of the night. Twirling my cup I see the remote formations of clouds.

An eternal hour passes. I rise from My chair and peer through the billowing smoke, Thick and dark. The smoke causes my mind to flash images of an industrial park near my house. The States. I gaze into the night to see la gente passing by my window. Drab shades of black and gray cut angels on their faces and mask Their sorrows. Slowly, the faces mix into the darkness like cream splashed into rich coffee. I imagine the waitress, wearing a brilliant magenta apron, bringing me another cup. I stare into it. Nameless faces emerge from the haze and cry out for mercy from an eternity of torment. Soul-shocked, I rise from my daydream and order my thoughts in the conscious world. Do I have time for this cup?
During that time in his life we were all just brides, prostitutes, majas, witches or gypsies—I was a maja. Goya had been deaf for 10 years and found the work commissioned by the Spanish royalty limiting. I would lie there, naked, listening to him mumble about "caprice" and "invention" as his paintbrush was absorbing my skin. I, Pepita Tudo, was his favorite nude. Unlike his other women, I flaunted my milkyness. This drove his decrepit wife, Josefa, mad. But she had no reason to be jealous, for it was not I who Goya loved, and I did not love him. My softness was for Manuel. I would lie in his bed and wait for him. At dark he came home with a power driven from the act of oppressing and I would spend my nights trying to conquer and be conquered.

My relationship with Goya was different. He loved the Duchess of Alba and the reality that it was just I lying on his drapery made him angry. He wanted her nakedness on his canvas. But she was of gold and finery, so Goya had to paint her with her ornamental hairnets, braids, and veils. Not me. I was a maja and was granted emotion. I did not pose. I was not standing stiffly with my family behind something that suggested my magnificence. I was placed in scenes: countrysides, beds, selling oranges, dying—I was never stagnant.

In the afternoons, we would entangle ourselves in the okra drapery of his studio and pretend we were each other’s lovers. I would speak to him as though it was Manuel and Goya of course could not hear me. He would whimper softly and I enjoyed being tender. When we were through, we would stand up, I naked, he clothed, and we would resume our positions. He at his easel and me, spread to absorb. He would become angry "Mierda!" Together, we had messed up the fabric, and the reflections of light were no longer the same.

Sometimes I would yell at him. I could do this while lying there, on his drapery, in the sunlight. My black hair was loose, spread all over the pillow and my hands behind my head. I would lie slightly to the right side with my knees together and my breasts touching. While my body was calm and still, I would yell about life. I would scream that I was maja, a mistress, to my lover. I screamed because I could never be more. Goya kept on painting. Once, when we were taking a break, he whispered in my ear that he knew. Although he
could not hear, he understood. He had seen inquisitions, war...death...betrayal. Sometimes we would cry together. One afternoon, he pulled out the plates for his Tauromaquia etchings and softly mumbled to himself while I held his hand. That day I was quiet, but he was not. He took the plates and made them scream. He broke them so they could never be reproduced. Despair carved into metal shattered everywhere. Then we went and lay together on the fabric.

Sometimes King Charles would come into Goya’s studio and demand for him to paint something. It would be a subject that Goya hated—boring and emotionless. But the king had made Goya the first court painter after his Los Caprichos series, and it was an offer Goya couldn’t turn away. The king would speak loudly, rudely, into Goya’s ear.

"I want you to paint Sabasa Garcia for the foreign minister. And Therese-Louise de Sureda for the chief of the royal porcelain works."

Goya would pretend that he didn’t understand. The king would just speak louder. One day while I was laying there, on the drapery, the king barged in. All previous requests were to be halted and Goya was to devote all his time to a painting of the Countess of Chinchon—my lover’s future bride. I tore up from my position—exposed, vulnerable—and ran to the king. He looked at me and spit.

"Puta! You are a maja and nothing more." Then he turned his eyes to Goya. The sunlight caught in their prism and for a suspended moment they became the air on a simple blue day. Then, they turned back to stone and he stormed out. I walked back to my spot. Toward the drapery, there was a large canvas. It was a scene after a battle. I was there, lying in the street, dead. Surrounding me was a circle of women, bare and broken—they were mourning for me.
I mean to walk in through this chaos.
When violence has smothered me
to a thin shadow, when my throat
is raw, bleeding from the noise, the dazy
cutters exploding against concrete
in another country, then I may feel the cold, wet
tears of a nation as the sky rains depleted
uranium. Now, carefully I tiptoe, a ghost,
floating into an abandoned city,
clouds of dust, bare earth, where all there is
is pain, the high-pitched wails as missiles collide
scorching a path of burned flesh. Three black
birds pierce the broken sky, but where do they
live? The trees are dead, engulfed in fires,
the other animals missing in action years ago.
The air grows cooler and I can close my eyes,
but a single image remains, terrible light
in the gentle darkness. A mosque full of people,
two smart-bombs guided in through the roof,
pipes burst, no way out, everyone boiled alive.
Their skin is still stuck in human outlines on the walls.
If you were to ask me to picture evil, stinking, horrendous evil incarnate, I would picture Hermann Goering. I would picture his military uniform, with its gaudy baubles, dangling medals, and swastika armband. I would picture his mass; he was a man who could draw all the attention in a room to him, to his kingly girth. I would picture that smile that seemed to hide behind every one of his expressions, the smile of a man who was laughing at a joke only he knew. And that’s the face he wears right now, in my mind, as he sits in his cell at Nuremberg. He’s been denied the opium he once depended on, and the months of prison food in lieu of elaborate feasting have wasted him slightly. I know the pain in his eyes, going cold turkey runs scar tissue through your muscles, leaves them hard and twisted like a knotty old oak. He still dominates the room, standing with the poise of a career soldier. This Goering then, who now lives only in my memory, has deigned to grant me an interview. I ask the obvious question.

"Why? Why did I join the Nazis? What a ridiculous question. You weren’t there, boy. Where is the first of the things I asked of you? Where are those chocolates I asked you to get me?" I pull a box of Swiss chocolates from between the sheet music in my bag and hand it over to him. He tears open the paper and tosses the box lid to his cot. Sitting down, he begins to pluck up the tiny chocolates in his enormous fingers, popping them into his mouth two at a time, mumbling thanks. It’s down next to him, small next to his mass. I feel like a third son in a fairy tale, talking with the Ogre-King in his Castle. Goering holds out a small dark chocolate candy to me, fingers sticky with syrup. I wave it away. He scowls. "It’s impolite to refuse gifts, boy." I accept the chocolate and bite into it. It’s a rum chocolate, it bursts in my mouth like a tiny bomb. He clears his throat and shifts his weight, laying his chocolate box to the side. "I joined the Nazis because I was a revolutionary. You would have too, boy. A country gone to waste and filth because of the democratic fantasies of liberals. I never cared about all that nonsense about the Jews and the Master Race. I cared about power." Goering shifts his weight again, leans back, gives me a wide, proud smile. "You look uncomfortable, boy. What sort of family do you come from? You look like the son of a shopkeeper or a business owner." I nod a little, and run my fingers over my
saxophone case. "You look like it. A common petty-bourgeois, with
common morals. You people disgust me. Squeamish, miserable,
anxious." He snickers to himself, crosses his arms over his chest.
"Easily swayed by the stamp of the marching soldier, the whispering
fears of terrorism, the songs of war. Yet, you squirm when the supe-
rior man lifts the veil and shows you the truth. You think America
fights wars for democracy and freedom? America fights wars for
power, like any country. Only the myth changes. I don’t give a
damn for ideology, but the common people need it. They can’t live
with the truth. You look disgusted. Are you some sort of pacifist?"
He grunts and rises, standing before me. "You’re a coward, stinking
and loathsome. You’re the worst breed of common-born whelp,
spoiled and pathetic. And you people gave us power. You’d do it
again too, you worms. You beg for leaders, for direction. You cry
out for punishment. That’s why the superior man will always seize
power. You’re not worthy of it. You have no culture, no pride.
Only the superior man does. I am what I have always been: the last
Renaissance man. Among my fellow warriors, I argued for the
preservation of art, the old glorious art of the German Lords."
Goering sighs, and sinks back into the cot. "I wonder what will
happen to my paintings. My sculptures." He hangs his head, kicks
the ground with a carefully polished boot. He exhales loudly, and
stands again. Something other than the old cynicism glistens in his
eyes. Goering brushes out the wrinkles in his uniform and cracks a
defiant grin, like the Devil’s. "How do I look?" I smile at him, and
offer him the second gift. He takes the cyanide pill and palms it.
He grins again and pops the pill into his mouth, swallowing it dry.
He slumps a little, mops his forehead with a handkerchief. Goering
eases back into the cot for the last time. "Despite the comments of
my fellow warriors, I have always held a fond spot in my heart for
the folk music of the American Negro. I called you here because
you are a musician in the jazz style. Play me my Requiem." He
closes his eyes.

I look at Hermann Goering, at the defiant face of an evil man. I
briefly try to think of one thing to say to him, some words that will
show the truth to his damned soul. I think of nothing. I open my
case, and wet my reed. I assemble my instrument, put the saxo-
phone to my lips, and play him a blues to carry him into death, my
last gift.
A Makeshift Marabout Contemplates the Nature of Woman while Staring at Breasts

You come from my rib you know. Right here, see my finger? From my rib. If you came from man; you are simply a part of man. Not his equal. Don’t forget that.
I mean, if a man attacked you, I would have to defend you. Tu comprends? You couldn’t. Men know that.
I’m not saying you’re mentally weaker, but that’s not important anyways. I mean, you’re here to be my wife and mother of my children. A good Muslim wife.
Like Mama Diarra. A truly Yaay Fall.
Do you know she once stood outside an entire day in the rain waiting for her husband. While holding a true. Why? Because he asked her to. A true Yaay Fall never challenges her husband. Look to Mame Diarra. Her life was for her husband and her children. And Allah rewarded her with a prophet for a son. She will guide you. Your duty is to please your husband and produce disciples of Mohammed.

So, if I feel, like having relations, I will have relations. You will never say no. And never ask me to put on a preservatif. Or pullout.
Those are acts of dishonor to your husband, and to Allah. A denial of relations is a denial of procreation is a denial of life is a denial of Allah. Allah.
That is why when a woman has reached her age of bleeding she cannot deny her husband. She is like a blossomed flower. You see?
However, if you are very sick you can always ask your husband nicely for pardon and he will usually excuse you from your duties. If you have a headache or something. And never when you are already with child. Or in midst of your bleeding. Especially then. Very unclean.
So don’t worry. Men don’t bother women needlessly for their bodies.

Besides, I wouldn’t want to lose too much of my life force. You know, my sperm.
Every time I lose my seed, you take it in. You grow stronger while I grow weaker. Do you know why some men have grown so weak beneath the power of their wives? They’ve lost too much sperm. Some have even died. Je t’assure. That is why we try to get things over with quickly. I make sure the room is dark so as not to dishonor you with my eyes. And I don’t want my eyes to tempt my body into acts of dishonor. Nor prolong the act. All of this is for the grandeur of the woman. All for her.

Allah tells us we must honor our women as the mothers of his disciples. It wouldn’t be proper to see the naked body of the Mother of God. So my hand should never enter your vagina, let alone my mouth.

Very unclean.

And although I may feel the urge to hold you with both of my hands, I can only touch you with my left. The right is used in prayer, greeting, and meals. . . . I could not possibly touch a woman with the same hand I raise to Allah. I must use the lesser hand, the unclean hand. All is for the grandeur of Allah. All for him.

It may seem like a lot of rules to you, you American. But sex is not for fun. Although once in awhile the urge is too great to know. There’s a woman you really want to have relations with but you don’t intend to ever marry her. You know what I mean. You are American. You can go to Touba and get permission from Serigne Touba. After you’re done with her you have to go back and get pardoned. Both of you. I’ve done it before. It’s the only way not to displease Allah. But most of the time it is not with a good Muslim woman anyways. So, you know. You’re not really dishonoring anybody. You see these women walking around in tight jeans and short skirts? Prostitutes! They are not good Muslim women. With meches down to their waist and no fulaar! What angel wants to descend on the uncovered head of a woman?
A Makeshift Marabout Contemplates the Nature of Woman while Staring at Breasts

And what man can respect them?
You see my wife, she is a good Muslim woman. I only have one, for now. But I want another. She cannot have anymore children.
She produced two sons for me though. Very good woman. She spends most of her time
taking my artwork downtown or to the Thies market and selling it for me. Very good woman. It allows me to do my work here, without being interrupted by business travel.
Very good woman.

You are very beautiful you know.
You don’t wear any make-up and your skirt is long and full. Very nice. Your hair is too long though. You should cover it up. It can excite men you know. Is that why you do it? You know many toubab women want a Baay-fall husband. They convert to Islam for them.
And you? You should think about it.
I once heard these words, perhaps in a movie or a TV sitcom — great morals they’re teaching nowadays — *only if you get caught.* Well then, I’m running, for Pete’s sake, running as fast as these words can take me — but I don’t call it cheating. I’d just rather get to the point, come on already! I know the meaning of life, can I please die now? What do you mean pulling my own plug would be wrong? Would you call it cheating?

Maybe I could make the whole event look like a terrible accident, like now, like what your eyes are following: the chalked outline of my soul, flat on this white cement. Yes, even now, I’d rather just get to the end, my closing clamp, the kill *and* breath of life — the *last line.* I have about 403 last lines (they’re beautiful), but maybe only 20 poems. Make that 404 — my mind never stops. Never stops, so maybe I’ll get to the end quicker than I thought. Oh joy! Oh bliss! Maybe I’ll wake up tomorrow and find St. Peter next to my bed with that familiar, silly-stern look on his face, hands in pocket, juggling his set of keys.

I’ll ask him the important questions first, before he can ask me his: *Is Lorca up there, Pete? Is he happy, riding around those puffy clouds mounted on his stallion? Is Gianni up there? Can you still notice his bullet wounds, or does that type of thing also disappear once I pass the gates? Oh, I hope so, ‘cause I’ve got some scars, and I wouldn’t want to stir up competition among the residents. Ok, last one Pete: how did you get in? I mean, come on, You denied Christ three times! That’s big stuff, from what I hear.*

Ah . . . did you, well, cheat? — wink, wink — Look in your palm. You’ve got the diamond keys, the sun and the moon. How did you do it? After all, weren’t you caught before The 7th day, before Noah navigated us to the World Wide Web of incest, even before your father entered Your mother? You were nailed hard, caught red handed, And you don’t even have pubic hair yet.

And that red hand that once held those bald balls, That once touched the stale body of Christ, Now holds the only set of keys.

Now holds me.
An Evening With the King

The night of September 17, 2002
11:00 PM
Palatine, Illinois
Southeast corner of Rand and Dundee Roads
Elvis plays the Denny's claw machine.
He's grown taller
maybe a little heavier
and now wears a bushy goatee
alongside gigantic sideburns.
He takes off his mirrored aviator sunglasses
holds them in one hand
and works the machine's joystick
with the other.
He sports a black leather jacket
underneath which
is a Bulls Three-Peat jersey.
A black t-shirt
with a picture of his younger self
lies under it all.
He jams at least twenty dollars
into the machine trying to get
a green and purple stuffed frog.
At one point he calls to his groupies
waiting back at his window booth,
"The claw didn't open that time,
it owes me fifty cents."
His once impressive tenor
has been replaced by a nasal,
almost adolescent whine.
After emptying his wallet
of dollar bills and bumming
all of his groupies’ change
he returns to his table
and sits, putting his arm
around a raggedy blonde
in a monogrammed bowling shirt
sitting at his left.
I get up, pay for my coffee
and move to the claw machine.
The frog is mine after two tries.
Beneath his aviators, the King
looks pissed.
Sorry buddy,
Froggy has left the building.
This weekend I’m going on a date with God.
I know! I was surprised too when he said yes.
I mean, I was just lying there in bed praying and everything
And I just said that sometime I’d like to go out with him
And the next thing you know we have a date lined up.
If you think about it, though, it’s not really too shocking.
I think besides me, the only people who’d want to go
Out with him are crazy old women and they’re just married or chicken.
And there are a lot of people out there who just hate him, you know?
Like XTC—that song is awesome! With that cute little British kid.
Speaking of which, I wonder what he sounds like.
Because all I’ve ever heard is my own voice.
I’d like to think that he’ll have a British accent too
And he’ll be smart like—I dunno, someone smart
And funny like Christopher Guest or Stephen Fry.
And he’d be so hot!
I mean, he’s perfect, so how can he be not hot?
He’ll be like Jude Law and pre-Flipper Elijah Wood,
Like combined.
With blue eyes that sparkle when he laughs,
And I think he will laugh a lot
Because laughing makes me feel good,
And he likes making people feel good.
I don’t know where we’re going to go eat—
I mean, where is good enough
When you’re with the Creator of the Universe?
Well, if it were my choice, I would go somewhere classy.
Somewhere where there’s a lot of paparazzi
So that we could be in People and the Enquirer.
But if I know God, and I think I do pretty well,
We’ll go to Yesterdog.
God’s always getting sacrifices and donations and everything,
So I think he would be happy to get out
And eat an Ultradog, minus the pickle.
We’d still get our picture taken
And it’d be put up on the wall next to the cast
Of Sweet Valley High.
The best part is, I wouldn’t have to say a word!
On A Date With God

Continued

I mean, God knows what I’m thinking and so
He will just respond to me and I can eat my dog in peace.
Wait . . . I hope he doesn’t get something on his shirt or
Has bad breath, because I wouldn’t even have time to
Think of a good way to tell him
Because he’ll just know.
And what if he says something he thinks is really witty
About something Michael the Archangel did
And it’s a you-had-to-be-there kind of moment.
Well, he’d know I didn’t think it was funny
And then I’d feel bad and then he might be angry
Because I’m sure that story really gets the angels laughing
But here on earth you could hear a pin drop after he tells it.
He could go Old-Testament ballistic
And destroy the human race and recreate
Civilization with alligators or something.
All because he couldn’t get a laugh out of me.
There are a lot of things to worry about when you’re
On a date with God.
Like, am I supposed to kiss him?
I really don’t love him like that and
It’d be kind of gross since he’s my Father and all.
Or what if I swear?
What if by accident I say “God damn it”
And then he’d get all
Fourth grade nun teacher on me and make me say
The rosary forty times.
Or what if while we’re on the date, I make him miss
Some really important prayer?
Like, some little boy’s mom is dying and all
He wants is for her to see his little league game
And God isn’t there to hear it because he’s
With me seeing Les Miserables in New York.
Does God carry a beeper?
Come to think of it,
It seems sort of weird to be going on a date with God.
Maybe we can just hang out together this weekend.
Catch a movie.
Or maybe rent a couple and sit around in heaven
Watching them and eating potato chips.
I think in a relaxed atmosphere like that
The pressure would be off
And that St. Michael joke might even be funny.
I can just see me and God sitting around on clouds
Watching *The Birdcage.*
Hopefully, that hottie Gabriel will come along
And maybe God will put in a good word for me with him.
Because if God tells you someone’s cool,
You can’t very well argue, can you?
I am Nevada back roads and the city in lights
here are my shoulder blades of sheep skin my
bustier of metallic coins my
sofa of hay barrels fleas
eyes closed mouth open
knees on glass hair in braids
twisted kneecaps press on nails
my cavalry all

look at my breasts dimpling

I am Nevada city of neon tubes
no lights just girlfriends and sex toys
husbands and cherries from the can
  I rub my palms green with stems
my friendly veins with milky clusters
my earlobes stretched
my heavy clitoris excuse me
this is my stream of belly dances of
hair sprayed warts
  I imitate no one

I am Nevada back roads and the city in lights
of the discarded condoms and fragrant pies
give me my horsehair riding boots
my taxi of bible verses
my backstage tour of oil
in my nails of wood shavings
in my pinstriped pony tail
in my nose of raspberry seeds
I watch

I am Nevada
take my faux fur neck of mashed potato
take my orange juice ankles
my eyelashes in drag
and approach me through living
approach me through death
I am Nevada

Back Roads and The City in Lights

Continued

approach me through my dry lips
through my visible love handles     my guffawing cries
approach me through my socks’ holes
half pinkie-tip          half nipple point
photograph me with your silver chest
kick the daisies and fertilizer
of my stone bench         ivy
top down               side up
saw into the current of our footprints

I am Nevada
my ginger ale tonic
my concurrent amusement
Citizens        bathe with me.
Stephanie Vibbert
Photo courtesy of Kensington Welfare Rights Union